Teaching First-Year Writers to Use Texts: Scholarly Readings in Writing-about-Writing in First-Year Comp

Doug Downs
Montana State University

This issue of Reader premises the need for, the viability, and the importance of disciplinary reading instruction. If we take as given that reading is embedded in communities of practice, so that making meaning of texts requires readers to construct representations of a text with reference to the activity the text is a tool in mediating, then the question is begged: what role is there for reading in general-education courses whose function is not to enculturate students in a given community of practice, but to introduce students to a community they probably won’t join so as to teach broadly transferable knowledge developed by that community for non-specialists?

Often gen-ed courses are indeed tasked with teaching general critical reading skills such as analysis and synthesis, particularly if the courses are “skills” or communication-based, such as first-year writing. But by premising the importance of reading instruction situated in specific communities of practice, we challenge the possibility of simple instruction in such general skills. To name categories of cognitive operations simply begs the question, what kind of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation is it that we intend to teach—the kind used in literary criticism, in political science, in chemistry, in music? The theory and research that demonstrate the necessity of disciplinary writing instruction undermine the likelihood
of effective general instruction in these “skills.” So from this perspective, too, the question persists: what place is there for reading instruction in general-education courses such as first-year writing?

In this article, I suggest that one answer is using gen-ed first-year writing courses to set the stage for effective reading instruction in later disciplinary courses by helping students fundamentally reconceive the nature of reading as they encounter it in university settings. Taught from a particular approach, first-year writing courses can provide situatedness in a scholarly community of practice while honoring the gen-ed ethic of teaching about a discipline to “outsiders” rather than enculturating “insiders.” Specifically, the approach to first-year writing that I suggest which uses a disciplinary encounter to teach transferable knowledge about reading, is a relatively new and increasingly popular pedagogy called writing-about-writing.

In writing-about-writing courses, students study and perform disciplinary research in the field of Writing Studies (or Rhetoric & Composition) in order to build transferable knowledge about and experience with writing. Writing-about-writing (WAW) is a way of aligning the object of study in writing courses—writing—with what students read and write in the course, by making the expert, researched knowledge of the field of Writing Studies the studied and written content of the course (Wardle and Downs 13). The approach includes helping students use scholarly Writing Studies articles (such as those published in College Composition and Communication, Written Communication, and College English) to build declarative and procedural knowledge about writing, writers, writing processes, discourse, textuality, and literacy. Teachers and students pose questions about these subjects and read articles that address them. Students write a variety of genres that facilitate reflection on their literacy experiences, help them put readings in conversation with each other, and conduct original research on their own questions about writing. Downs and Wardle, in a 2007 CCC article, and then Wardle in a 2009 CCC article (“Mutt Genres”), have theorized and described such curricula in greatest detail.

The community now experimenting with a variety of WAW approaches seems to center on the following rationales for the curricula:

- Rendering writing "study-able" to help demystify it for students, removing it from the realm of pure gift or talent, and making it "knowable";
- Emphasizing transfer, including teaching metacognition and knowledge of the nature of writing that spans disciplines and activities;
- Challenging conceptions of writing as a universal, fundamental, basic skill of transcription of language to print;
- Teaching conceptions and functions of academic inquiry (e.g., posing research questions);
- Apprenticing (temporarily) students to a community of practice (Wenger, Alexander) of which writing teachers themselves are members, so as to be better readers, facilitators, and evaluators of students' community-situated reading and writing;
- Introducing and teaching "authentic," rather than "simulated" (Freedman, Adam, and Smart) or "mutt" (Wardle) genres of writing;
- Building students' experience in reading scholarly writing.

These rationale can be summarized thus: we're not teaching students "how to write" generally (and neither can any other version of FYC if the field believes its own research); we're teaching students how to learn to write (in specific sites of writing activity when they reach them).

In these courses, then, we teach nearly as much about reading as about writing, and WAW therefore makes the notion of effective reading instruction in general-education courses possible even in a paradigm valuing discipline-specific instruction. I make that argument in this article by first reviewing popular misconceptions of reading and shortcomings in psycholinguistic theories of reading, along with improved explanations offered by various sociocultural theories of discourse; these also offer theoretical groundwork for the WAW approach. Having established these rationales,
I examine the disciplinary texts students actually read in writing-about-writing courses, the demands those texts place on students, and how students are challenged by the readings. I then explain a variety of approaches, both conceptual and concrete, that teachers use to facilitate students’ use of these disciplinary texts, concluding by thinking again about what constitutes transference knowledge for disciplinary reading.

Textual Paradigms: Information Transmission versus Community-based Use

The intellectual path to a writing-about-writing pedagogy, and to teaching students the reading practices that make it work, begins in recognizing a fundamental conceptual problem which has long inhered in popular and academic cultural imaginations, and therefore in college writing and reading instruction: the understanding of reading and writing as the skill-based transmission and comprehension of information, independent of content and context of use. In stark contrast, current socio-cultural theory finds that texts have meaning only in their use in mediating particular activities situated in specific communities of practice. These communities supply contexts and knowledges that reach beyond the text-processing and syntactic work that appears on the surface of reading and writing activities, with far-reaching implications for reading and writing instruction.

Popular and Academic Misconceptions of Writing and Reading

In both popular and most academic imaginations, writing (verb) is a universal, fundamental, basic skill of printing existing thought. Writing (noun) is understood as an empty container capable of holding any “content” equally well, and as a transparent conduit capable of transmitting meaning without alteration from a sending writer to a receiving reader. (See Lakoff and Johnson for more on these metaphors.)

First-year composition was conceived to ensure that college students possess the necessary writing (and reading) skills to manage this transmission of information, skills that then “transfer” to other courses. A settled belief in the need for and possibility of this transfer is the main reason for higher-ed’s massive expenditure on college composition instruction. Similarly, the culturally dominant model of reading instruction, drawing from psycholinguistic, schema-based theories of cognitive text processing, assumes that readers need comprehension skills that work equally well in any setting, independent of contextual factors such as the reasons the text exists or how it is to be used.

In Nancy Wood’s summary of this psycholinguistic theory of reading, reading can be taught as an interactive process, that reading is thinking, that prior knowledge is the basis of comprehension and that, as a result, not everyone comprehends in identical ways. Predicting and questioning are critical to comprehension, and understanding writing conventions helps readers find their way through a text. This theory suggests that reading is a social activity, and it values collaborative and peer group reading activities. It also recognizes reading as a purposeful activity; it insists that students apply what they read in contexts meaningful to them, and it tests comprehension with writing and discussion as opposed to multiple choice questions. (par. 29)

Here, Wood demonstrates a constructivist understanding of reading, much more advanced than a pure information-processing model that it’s still possible to find among some reading researchers. That research is important to understanding how reading works, but doesn’t factor in Wood’s sense of reading as a not-completely-cognitive, private activity of text processing. Her constructivist psycholinguistic model understands reading as a social activity in which meaning is constructed with at least some eye to other readers and writers.

Still, when compared with actual practices of readers and writers, the thinking on reading that Wood compiles seems incomplete: Texts and readers seem to come “out of nowhere,” with no histories, backgrounds, or reasons for being. Current
psycholinguistic reading research focuses entirely on what people do when presented with texts, seeming to ignore that how people make sense of texts might vary strongly with what activity the text is a tool in mediating, and with a reader’s sense of where the texts came from. The research reduces reading to an essentially momentary interaction of reader and text as if both could be frozen out of time and space, lacking a sense of history.

Such assumptions about the nature of reading also align with a presumption that the only background or prior knowledge which influences how readers understand a text pertains to the text’s subject matter—so that rhetorical knowledge, for example, or understandings of why the text was written to begin with, don’t factor in to making meaning of it. Only a few studies in the constructivist psycholinguistic tradition have considered ways experienced readers are in fact thinking very rhetorically—especially Charles Bazerman’s study of physicists reading physics, which found that their broad sense of “the field” shaped their readings of the texts they encountered (3). (Other notable studies on rhetorical knowledge used to construct texts include Christina Haas and Linda Flower’s “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning,” Richard Haswell et al.’s replication of Haas and Flower’s study 11 years later, and Cheryl Geisler’s rhetorical study of expertise.) Beyond rhetorical knowledge, other prior knowledge readers bring to texts include emotional knowledge (DiPardo and Schnack), relational and teleological knowledge (Bazerman “Physicists”), genre knowledge (Mathison), and epistemic knowledge.

Together, these two principles—that texts have “trajectories” before and after readers encounter them, and that readers draw on more kinds of prior knowledge than just subject-matter—suggest that we need to focus on how readers and texts are both embedded in communities of social practice, rather than readers having private, autonomous encounters with texts-in-isolation. It’s a presumption of private autonomy that lets researchers study, for example, how readers make sense of metadiscourse without asking where the metadiscourse comes from or understanding it as an indicator of those broader ways of knowing to begin with (see Jalalifar and Alipour’s study on this subject). In the psycholinguistic account of reading, even when culture is acknowledged as a source of prior knowledge, it tends to be spoken of as a relatively fixed “package,” as in the way cultural schema are handled in Ismail Erten and Salim Razvi’s study of how cultural knowledge influences text comprehension. Culture is not understood as ongoing, material, embodied knowing, in ways that surely shape research results. In other words, psycholinguistic theory and research seem to lack a curiosity about how texts come to be the way they are, yet such a “social” perspective (far beyond what Wood proposes as meaningful) seems central to knowing how readers are actually handling texts, and thus to teaching students in general-education courses about how reading and writing actually work.

Reading and Writing as Social Use-Acts

We can summarize these shortcomings in constructivist psycholinguistic theories of reading by saying they lack a sense that a text would be used by writers and readers to accomplish some work or end. Rather, reading is posed as a cognitive exercise in comprehension, where a text is “applied” and where the “social” is simply an aid. We need a theory of reading with a principle of use to move us from a purely comprehension-based view of reading to a socio-cultural view. This notion of use is readily available in several socio-cultural-historical theories of writing including dialogism (Bakhtin), rhetorical genre theory (Miller, Swales, Bawarshi), activity theory (Engeström, Russel “Rethinking”), new literacy studies (Gee Introduction), and situated learning/communities of practice (CoP) theory (Lave and Wenger, Wenger). Together, these theories describe writing and reading
as social activities situated in, drawing on, and constituting recurrent but dynamic semiotic patterns that serve as tools to accomplish some activity or practice undertaken by a community which is itself constituted by those discursive patterns and activities. Per CoP theory, people learn through improvisation and *peripheral legitimate participation*, "the cooperative activity in which old-timers train newcomers" to the community's practices (Artemeva 170), so that learning is "gradually increasing participation in a community of practice" (Artemeva 171). By this principle, reading and writing should be taught as reading and writing the particular genres of particular activity systems, through an apprenticeship process that sees not "right or wrong," but "more or less expert."

The implications of rhetorical, activity, genre, and CoP theories initially seem troubling for reading instruction in general education courses. Constructivist psycholinguistic models of reading suggest that gen-ed courses could teach a set of skills for textual comprehension and analysis that would allow students to read any text in any discipline with little additional preparation beyond the subject-matter knowledge delivered by classes in a major. Socio-cultural theories, in contrast, all suggest that because reading and writing do not exist independent of particular communities of practice, they cannot be learned independent of them either. It is through this theoretical route, then, that we reach the realization that a general education course must teach transferable knowledge about reading and writing, but cannot do so without centering on disciplinary texts. The question of which discipline would turn us again to the question of use: disciplines (or, in the case of Writing Studies, interdisciplines) that use texts to facilitate the study of written communication would, in principle, be among the most effective to use in the teaching of reading and writing. Since one role of Writing Studies and its texts is to understand how reading and writing work in various disciplines, basing reading instruction on the texts of that interdiscipline creates real possibilities for creating the transferable knowledge that is a raison d'etre of general education.

**Reading and Reading Challenges in Writing-about-Writing Courses**

With that rationale for a disciplinary, Writing-Studies focus in general-education first-year writing courses, ensuing considerations include selecting readings and meeting the instructional challenges presented by "millennial" reading habits now common to incoming college students.

**Reading Challenges for Students in WAW Courses**

From different directions, Alice Horning and Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem have recently issued calls for greater attention to reading instruction in FYC. Horning argues from deficit: students' "critical" reading suffers from "lack of instruction, lack of practice, and a mythic view that reading is less important because of computers" (par. 11). And students, she notes, complete few if any assigned readings (par. 17). Adler-Kassner and Estrem, meanwhile, call into question teachers' purposes and habits in assigning readings. They argue "the need for more theorized reading pedagogy in the context of first-year writing programs" (39) based on cultural misconceptions of reading as passive (38-39) and teachers' habits of telling students what readings are about (39). Assigning readings is a problem when students read passively in the expectation that instructors will simply tell them "what it means." Both critiques suggest we'll face some difficulty in asking first-year students to read scholarly texts in gen-ed courses. These difficulties hinge mostly on the distance between the reading to which students of the 2000s are acculturated and the nature and shape of scholarly texts (which is why some would accept Horning's claim of a problem in general critical reading skills quite readily: reading in support of the broad activity of scholarly inquiry shares
many features across disciplines.)

Scholarly texts are of a sort to be everything that research suggests students don’t like about reading. Scholarly argument, even in fields like Writing Studies, which value closing (“compacting”) problems rather than sustaining problems as do the humanities (MacDonald, Professional ch 5), will never feel as factual, informational, and comprehensible as student readers are likely to desire (Saumell, Hughes, and Lopate par. 9). (Nor will discipline-specific, technical languages.) Scholarly texts will rarely be as short as students desire, or as visually approachable; Patrick McCabe et al.’s research shows that the textual features students are most quickly deterred by are the long chunks of text (paragraphs and sections) and small print (32) characteristic of scholarly work in the humanities and social sciences. Cohen and Snowden’s study of document design found that familiar designs for presenting information visually correlate strongly with reading performance—unfamiliar textual features hampered readers’ performance (18). Combined with students’ values for rapid reading (Saumell, Hughes, and Lopate par. 17), which can be difficult when working with the layered, nuanced, complex argument characteristic of scholarly inquiry broadly, the conflicts between student preferences and the realities of scholarly texts are apparent.

These conflicts become clearer when we look carefully at how students who now live in visually-driven, multi-modal, online reading environments are most accustomed to reading. There could hardly be a wider difference in types of texts than those we read in producing print-driven scholarship and the multimodal texts that now, in sheer numbers, must be taken to represent the norm in textuality and reading. Even more than two decades ago, in assessing the impact of visual texts, Steven Bernhardt wrote that “though classroom teaching often assumes essay organization as the norm, outside the classroom visually informative prose is pervasive, and not just in scientific or technical fields” (67). The same is only truer now with the broad ubiquity of gaming (e.g. Gee, Video Games) and comic (Jacobs) literacies. And the different ways of reading prompted by traditional print text in contrast with multimodal texts are stark, even startling. James Sosnoski calls the reading style prompted by digital multi-modal environments and texts “hyper-reading”, which includes the following features:

1. Filtering: a higher degree of selectivity in reading [and therefore]
2. Skimming: less text actually read
3. Pecking: a less linear sequencing of passages read
4. Imposing: less contextualization derived from the text and more from readerly intention
5. Filming—the “...but I saw the film” response which implies that significant meaning is derived more from graphical elements than from verbal elements of the text
6. Trespassing: loosening of textual boundaries
7. De-authorizing: lessening sense of authorship and authority intention
8. Fragmenting: breaking texts into notes rather than regarding them as essays, articles, or books. (163)

Sosnoski notes how much the last three items resemble writing (163), all the more true today with the user-generated mash-up content of Web 2.0 and beyond.

More recently, Carmen Luke summarizes the differences between how we are asking students to read when we present them with scholarly articles, and how they have now grown up reading in digital settings:

Although the fundamental principles of reading and writing have not changed, the process has shifted from the serial cognitive processing of linear print text to parallel processing of multimodal text-image information sources. ... Text and meaning are no longer embedded exclusively in a linear sequence of alphabetic characters combined in a logical sequence of phrase, sentence, paragraph, and narrative units dictated by author intent or formatting demands of a page or book” (399).

General education courses, expected to accompany but not comprise students’ enculturation into the particular activities represented by specific majors, have a significant role to play in socializing students not simply to the
conventions of a new activity system, but in being among their first college level experiences with an entirely different textual paradigm. Where students in the past might have been merely uncomfortable with scholarly texts, increasingly these texts (should scholarly writing continue not evolving with web-generated content, as it mostly has not so far) will seem to student to be actual oddities, much the way that we look on original wax cylinder phonograph recordings now. We might in fact look at the problem in terms of culture shocks. Students reading scholarly articles in Writing Studies confront, by my count, a minimum of seven culture shocks, some general to scholarly texts in the humanities, some activity-specific:

- modality (print-only rather than image-driven multi-modal)
- text processing (blocks of linear text in long sentences versus Sosnowski’s hyper-reading)
- episteme (texts’ contributions to knowledge are rhetorical rather than informational)
- activity system (broadly speaking, scholarly inquiry rather than studently reception)
- domain (particularly with respect to writing, subject and conceptual knowledge is radically different from students’ previous encounters)
- discourse (for first-years in particular, any academic discipline is a new discourse; this category blends with the domain category to include new, specialized language)
- application (engagement in using the text to the activity and discipline’s ends versus relatively passively reading for and absorbing information)

We can anticipate some student confusion as they enter not only this new community of practice, but encounter kinds of texts they’ve never seen before. And it seems one role of general education classes is to ameliorate some such confusion apart from the additional displacement of learning new activity systems; yet reading cannot be taught apart from some activity system. Given this conundrum and these challenges students bring us, a first-year writing course has its work cut out. Given such challenges, what texts do we assign

and how do we teach this reading?

What to Read?

Two kinds of texts dominate traditions of professional writing in Writing Studies. The most obvious are scholarly articles, research-based texts addressed by scholars to other scholars. Writing Studies also includes a tradition of “craft”-based texts addressed by writers or writing scholars to writers in general. The latter include, for example, Anne Lamott’s extremely popular “Shitty First Drafts” from Bird by Bird, a self-help book for aspiring creative writers. The key difference, from a CoP perspective, is what communities the texts position student readers in. Craft-based readings engage students as “writers” broadly—usually with expressivist, creative-writing aesthetics and genres including personal essays, memoirs, and other reflective writings—by offering writerly perspectives on writing and what it’s like to be a writer. Such texts are the basis of an approach to first-year writing pioneered by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff in their textbook Being a Writer and then by Wendy Bishop (On Writing: The Subject is Writing) and continued in M. Elizabeth Sargent and Cornelia Paraskevas’ Conversations about Writing.

If the goal of first-year composition, though, is assisting students in “college writing,” CoP theory suggests that those Writing Studies texts which address students as peripheral legitimate participants in scholarship will be more productive. By engaging students in the community of practice of those learning about writing by researching it, we help them better understand the workings of the university and how writing functions within it. Again, then, we return to the notion of studying a particular discipline in a general-education course, not for the purpose of learning that discipline, but for the purpose of improving students’ understandings of how written communication across the university works, rather than how written communication in just one discipline does. This purpose requires scholarly texts. Some examples of such...
texts include these:
- Carol Berkeley’s “Decisions and Revisions: The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer,” which studied Donald Murray at work on three different writing projects.
- Susan Peck MacDonald's “Problem Definition in Academic Writing,” which compares the problems that literary criticism and psychology take up, and how.
- James Porter's “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community,” which studies sourcing in the Declaration of Independence to demonstrate intertextuality.
- Mike Rose’s “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language,” which uses interviews to find how writers block can result from rules and prescriptions for writing.

Such selections support the key rationales of WAW first-year writing: teaching scholarly inquiry, apprenticing writers to a specific community of practice while honoring a general-education mission, and challenging cultural misconceptions of writing as purely skill-based transmission of information. The roles such articles play are threefold: proffering some declarative knowledge about writing for students to test against their own experience and observations; spurring students' examination and research of their own literacy experiences and the world of literacy around them; and showing students a community's research methods. Such articles are data-driven, "real" but accessible to students, demonstrate the community's epistemology and research methods, and are activity- rather than information-based. That is, these articles demonstrate the work of an inquiry-based activity system rather than transmit information that students are meant to accept as fact. Students are positioned as peripheral legitimate participants in part because they are a secondary, not primary, audience for these texts. In fact, because writing research so often focuses on students and classrooms, WAW students will often find themselves the subject of these texts, and thus find themselves reading from (consciously) multiple subject positions—students,

Researchers, and research participants.

Students are positioned as legitimate participants because these texts are accessible to them, for two reasons. First, each addresses questions about reading and writing that students connect to and care about—questions involving writer's block and procrastination, writing processes, research methods, challenges and difficulties with writing, problems with error, and other real-world writing issues that students encounter. The first question in selecting texts for WAW courses is always: can students concretely relate (from personal experience) to some aspect of what this text discusses? The answer has to be yes. Second, such texts are often older, more "settled" texts both in terms of findings and methods, and they often draw on the field's earlier, more accessible language. This relative accessibility also allows students to question and challenge the work, especially its methods. To be a participant in Writing Studies would be to join in making knowledge about written communication and related subjects; WAW courses focus on texts that students can reasonably participate in.

Writing Studies is marked by a free mix of research methodologies from the humanities and social sciences—or in Michael Carter's terms, the meta-genres of research-from-sources and empirical inquiry (396-98). The resulting variety of research values and methods students encounter in Writing Studies texts offers another advantage to using those texts for reading instruction in a general education course. Despite its positioning in English departments, Writing Studies also often behaves like a social science. While showing discomfort with positivist empirical epistemology (or a humanist's fear of parametric statistics), the field was born in and continues to value data-driven rather than only or purely theoretical analysis, as exemplified by Richard Haswell's call for RAD (replicable, aggregable, data-driven) research (“NCTE/CCCC”). Resulting from this blended epistemology, a given article may work across multiple fields and take methods
as it finds them, even though such practice can lead to methodological “looseness” that the fields originating the methods might take issue with. Writing Studies texts also tend to valorize personal experience and believe that more can accurately be said about the experiences of a small number of writers discussed in detail (as through ethnography, case study, longitudinal study, and interview) than about larger datasets generated through experiment with only limited control of variables. At the same time, drawing from their humanities and literary-studies roots, scholars in the field read and analyze textual discourse with unusual sensitivity. Unlike those fields, however, Writing Studies finds as much value in reading unfinished student texts in this fashion as it does literary texts—a distinction Robert Scholes has argued strongly distinguishes the values of Literary Criticism and Writing Studies.

Finally, these texts show students argument and provisionality in action, and are difficult to mistake for factual information. Students can see the texts as tools that mediate the activity of scholarly inquiry into writing, discourse, and literacy. As such, the texts are not the “center” of the course in the same sense that literary texts are the center of literature courses. While in literature courses the texts are the object of study, in a WAW first-year comp curriculum, the texts serve as tools to support the study of writing, which is itself at the heart of the course. Teachers, students, texts—all are studying writing. Thus, the purpose of the course is not to have students “learn” the texts but rather to encounter the texts and their ideas. Students thus read critically but participatorily.

Reshaping Students’ Reading Conceptions and Practices

The preceding arguments make clear that college educators, no matter their field, must teach students, foremost, a way of thinking about texts, understanding the work they do as tools in activity systems, and using them to participate in those systems. Changing how students read—which most people focused on college students’ reading are invested in—requires not simply teaching the comprehension-based general “skills” of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis that Horning imagines (par. 4), but rather entire new concepts of what reading is, why people read, why there is a text to begin with, and the work that texts do for the people they were written for and by. Trying to incorporate this teaching into disciplinary courses across campus would both create tremendous redundancy and a major “time-sink” as courses devoted to subject-matter instruction could get bogged down in these more general principles of textual communication; but in contrast, locating this instruction in first-year writing courses, which most university students encounter, both creates a “home” for this more general non-disciplinary reading instruction and centers the course on what it is already supposed to be about, aspects of written communication. Yet at the same time, to teach these new principles we still must teach the rhetorical situations or activity systems in which the texts themselves originate—trusting that the reading we want to see will emerge from participation in the activity system itself—in this case, the scholarship of Writing Studies. It is in this way that we are teaching students to use texts rather than simply to read texts. Because it is in using the texts—simultaneously the harder and easier thing to do—that the texts become read.

Meeting Students Where They Are with Reading

The research just reviewed suggests that we know students aren’t going to read carefully, or for long, or with patience. They won’t understand what, or how to the extent we wish they might. And yet class experience shows that most students in WAW courses try hard and get surprisingly much from readings, especially given their reading backgrounds. Unlike what we see demonstrated in Horning’s and similar reactions to students’ reading, WAW teachers anticipate and accept the difficulties students have working with scholarly texts. We
believe that there is in fact much commendable about hyper-reading. For example, as scholars are increasingly pressed by diminished reading time and increasing reading loads, research suggests that they too are being forced to adopt what we would now recognize as selective and skimming habits resembling hyper-reading (see Berkenkotter and Huckin).

Rather than outlining universal rules of reading, we aim to show students what the activity of scholarly inquiry, as reflected in the Writing Studies community of practice, means for how readers use texts. How, for example, some readers of scholarly texts proceed through a text not by reading every word, but by reading titles, headings, introductions, and conclusions. Even curricula that don’t explicitly name and address the seven “culture shocks” will nonetheless be helping students adjust to them. In short, WAW classes and their reading require teachers not only to remember where students are coming from, but to embrace the idea that it is by no means an unnatural place.

Another reflection of this accommodation to students’ existing reading habits lies in WAW teachers’ expectations for the meaning their students can actually make of scholarly texts: we anticipate that it will be limited and that students won’t understand many of the key points in a text. In contrast to reading instruction that demands high “comprehension” of what a text “means,” reading instruction in WAW courses actually embraces the principle that readers construct the meanings of their texts. We strive to help students talk about what they can understand about a text, usually by relating it to personal experience, rather than worrying too much about what they don’t understand. This is a luxury we can afford in a course where the text is not the point of the course, but rather simply a starting point to investigation of writing and how it works.

*Scholarly Activity Systems and Students’ Conceptions of Scholarly Texts*

Given the rhetoric in “rhetoric and composition,” most rhet/comp scholars who study reading take for granted the social, contextual element of reading that fuels comprehension. As such, their rhetoric-based gen-ed courses should recognize the importance of changing students’ conceptions of the purpose, role, and function of scholarly texts. In activity systems across the university, scholarly texts foster conversation rather than simply transmitting information as students are used to texts doing. Most scholarly texts are understood to offer only provisionality, not the certainty or closure (McCormick 101) that students are accustomed to. This lack of closure relates to another shift, from the facts students seek to claims that the texts attempt to support; and correspondingly, a shift from objectivity to argument in scholarly texts. As Margaret Kantz entertainingly summarizes the typical first-year epistemology, a student “believes that you can either agree or disagree with issues and opinions, but you can only accept the so-called facts. She believes that facts are what you learn from textbooks, opinions are what you have about clothes, and arguments are what you have with your mother when you want to stay out late at night” (81). Shifting these conceptions is the work of the entire course, not a few days or weeks.

Students in WAW courses encounter the conversational nature of scholarly texts by, first, reading about the principle itself (usually in Stuart Greene’s “Argument as Conversation: The Role of Inquiry in Writing a Researched Argument”) which raises the questions: How can we define argument? What is the principle of “conversation” in texts? Students read examples of famous scholarly conversations such as the exchange between Lloyd Bitzer, Scott Consigny, and Richard Vatz on defining “rhetorical situation” or David Bartholomae’s oral and print interchange with Peter Elbow (“Being a Writer”) on whether university students should be taught to write for the university. It is then possible to show students less literal conversations across time and space, and ultimately,
how the conversation is in fact in the reader's head—that it is readers who place texts in conversation with each other. By having students write reviews of literature on a given question, we can show them how writers construct accounts of the conversation.

The notion of provisionality can be addressed straight out of students' frustrations with writers who refuse to "just answer the question" or draw a simple conclusion. When we've read, for example, Haas and Flower's article on rhetorical reading, students are quick to point out that the writers don't do what they say they want to, which is tell how to teach rhetorical reading. The writers' "failure" feeds conversations about writers' purposes, goals, and responsibilities to other scholars. These discussions (usually fostered by small-group discussion of the needs, values, and expectations of the article's audience) can lead into conversations about the activity system that Haas and Flower's work constitutes, so that students can begin considering it too.

Discussions of claims, argument, and partiality usually start with the problem of objectivity and language. A class can proceed by picking words out of an article and having students list synonyms, and then asking: Why did the author choose this word and not that one? How did it shape the text? When students see language as inevitably selective and partial, it becomes possible to question objectivity, and from there to help students see scholarly texts as more and less objective but always claim-based, not fact-based. So, again, one reading focus for a given text is to find its partial language and open arguments from what may look like straightforward fact. One means of doing this work is a style of reading in Writing studies that Thomas Huckin calls "content analysis," a kind of critical discourse analysis. While it is somewhat analogous to what literary scholars describe as "close reading," content analysis is a way of getting at "what texts talk about" by combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of textual features that let researchers draw conclusions about the foci of texts and how they use particular language to establish those foci.

Teaching Activity and Genre Knowledge

It's easy to overlook the most basic knowledge that students immediately need to use scholarly texts: they don't know what scholarly articles are, or what work these articles accomplish for their users. Not knowing what articles accomplish, students don't know why articles take the shape they do—and in fact are unlikely to notice the "shape" at all, apart from "long, dry, and repetitive." This lack of understanding extends to deep underlying conceptions of how scholars generate, disseminate, organize, and draw on domain knowledge in their fields. Students don't know what journals are (much less understand continuous pagination). They don't understand the difference between articles, journals, and books, why a writer would choose to publish one or another, or what a reader would look for in an article versus in a book. Ultimately, students don't know what "scholars" are, in the sense of communities of researchers collaborating on expanding the knowledge in a field of study. I mean not a hint of censure in pointing out these gaps in students' knowledge; from an activity perspective; it would be irrational to expect students to know any of this. It's our job to introduce them. This work, as I am suggesting, seems a fitting role for gen-ed writing classes: using the community of practice that studies textual communication to teach about what students will need to learn about reading and writing when they join their disciplines.

In WAW courses we can begin such instruction with the very first reading in the class. We can walk students through "the system" by looking at what journals are and why they exist (paper and electronic), reviewing titles with them, and showing how journals have themes and "personalities," how scholars choose where to publish, and how journals provide
spaces for conversation. My classes have an in-class reading lesson about how to make one’s way most quickly and efficiently through a research article—looking explicitly for its functions (which vary by discipline in directness, clarity, and order) of research question, background, theoretical framework, methods, and findings and implications. As an interdiscipline, again, a Writing-Studies-based writing course allows students to read scholarship from humanities and social science domains. Students practice finding statements that answer the critical universal questions “so what?” and “who cares?”—and we look at how to skip around in an article, so students see how articles are designed to be “taken over” by readers who may read only specific parts or functions. I sometimes assign Berkenkotter and Huckin’s study on how the format and design of journal articles have evolved in response to the heavy reading load that researchers face, so that the articles can now be quickly scanned for their news value by way of selecting which to read more closely..

We go into particular detail with how research introductions function, using John Swales’ research on introductions and his CARS (Create A Research Space) model: establish a territory, establish a niche, and occupy the niche (140-41). Students can learn to make sense of the articles they encounter by looking for these moves. First, a writer has to establish a territory by raising an issue and establishing the status quo of knowledge on it. Then, the writer identifies a shortcoming in the status quo knowledge by (in Swales’ analysis) counter-claiming, indicating a gap, raising a question, or adding to a tradition, thereby establishing a niche in the territory (141). Combined with the first move, its most basic expression is “While others have argued X, the reality is Y.” “Occupying” the now established niche is the introductory move of saying how one will use the article to address, solve, or answer the question or problem. While giving students further accessible strategies for making meaning of the articles they encounter, these teaching approaches also address the broader conceptions of activity that we’re trying to help students understand.

Teaching Rhetorical Reading

Probably the most “grounded” reading technique I teach students for both making sense of scholarly texts and helping them learn how to participate in the activity system is what Christina Haas calls rhetorical reading, “constructing a rhetorical frame which includes authors, readers, motives, relationships, and contexts” by rhetorically “moving beyond an ‘autonomous’ text and trying to account for a number of situational or rhetorical elements—author, authorial intent, reader identity, and historical, cultural, and situational context—to ‘frame’ or support the discourse” (“‘Learning’ 48-49). Rhetorical reading lends itself nicely to activity and community-of-practice frameworks. Artehova points out that “context” actually simply means the activity system itself that a text originates from and in turn constitutes (172). From a rhetorical perspective, it is easy to teach students some ground rules of understanding the work of scholarly texts: texts are people talking, and therefore texts are always motivated and have an agenda. Few realizations more quickly help shift student conceptions of texts from “fact” to “argument” than those of rhetorical reading.

Of particular classroom help to teachers are concrete contextual features that prompt and facilitate rhetorical reading: publication date and venue, and author name and credentials. From the journal name can be derived, via web search, the article’s audience, as most journal “About” pages explicitly state the journal’s audience as well as the service it intends to provide. These elements can converge to help students deduce why an audience might read the article in question. In this way, students can build a sense of the needs, values, and expectations a journal’s readers are likely to bring to the article in question, comparing those elements to their own positions as readers. Author names can likewise be
googled for fuller biographical and professional background, even whole research arcs, and from these students can infer more about authorial motivation. Lastly, the article date and the author's institutional affiliation (place) help students build a sense of historical context, and from that, a better understanding of reasons a writer might say what they do.

By combining inferences about audience, author, the activity system represented by the journal, and setting in time-space, students can snap articles into focus and transform texts into action.

In rhetorical reading, students learn to ask not simply “what does it say” or “what does it mean,” but what does it DO? They try to make a claim about what the article is meant to accomplish for its specific readers in its specific activity system. Such a move distinguishes reading instruction in a gen-ed written communication course from that in disciplinary courses focused, for example, on literary or historical interpretation, where “what it means” usually takes precedence. Often students are unable to say with certainty whether an article actually accomplished what it appears to have tried; but other times they can: a student might say, “Murray [in “All Writing is Autobiography”] is telling teachers that writing is personal and to let students write personally—but that was back in 1991, and last year my high school teacher told me that you can't use “I” in a research paper.” Such insights are why we teach rhetorical reading, and once students are reading rhetorically, such insights are frequent.

I begin teaching such reading by having students read research that points to the need for it—particularly Haas and Flower’s “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning,” which provokes excellent class discussions about how to read rhetorically; and Kantz’s “Helping Students Use Textual Sources Persuasively,” which helps students see the stark distinction between a high school view of texts as factual rather than as arguments. With a sense of what they're to be trying to do in reading, students practice, in class and through homework assignments, the “physics” of rhetorical reading—googling journal names, developing author bios, trying to locate the text, writer, and readers in time and space. After short assignments with individual articles, I'll assign a “rhetorical summary” where students summarize an article in order to argue a claim about what it does. Students do not intuit, and, thus require explicit instruction that it will not be a rhetorical summary if it does not directly state where the article appeared, when, who wrote it, and who its audience was.

It's also important to help students see the difference between the reading styles Peter Elbow calls “doubting” and “believing” (339). Many first-year students are very good doubters—they easily criticize a study's methods (not enough participants, not naturalistic enough), analysis of findings (way too much generalizing based on the data actually shown), or even entire projects. Students are much given to rejecting entire articles because of disagreement with a single line, no matter how inconsequential to the overall argument. Students' quickness to criticize, however, opens important discussion of scholarly publication and peer review. That goes like, “So why did peer reviewers think it was worth publishing, then?” Students also learn about the process by which articles are produced—which is our first discussion of serious, real-world revision. Students are usually stunned to learn of—but for the first time understand the reason behind—revision so extensive that a small number of drafts for an article would be three or four distinct versions. Rhetorical reading again helps them understand the production and reading of scholarly texts as a cooperative activity among many different people—an aspect few have seen in school careers where writing is mostly between teacher and student.

My suggestions for teaching various aspects and conceptions of reading scholarly texts only scratch the surface of what's available, and at the same time leave many
unanswered questions. What else do students need to know about reading? Is there any way to accelerate the enculturation such reading depends on, so that students can achieve more or understand better in their four years in school? And in reverse, can the reading itself that students do enhance or accelerate their disciplinary enculturation? And if so—how does it help students to be partially encultured in disciplines they won’t go on to join?

Disciplinary Reading in General Education Courses:
Implications for Transfer

That final question is most interesting when we consider the initial premise of gen-ed first-year writing courses: transfer. If we buy this theory and research about the community-connected nature of reading practices, then we cannot hope to teach reading well outside of disciplinary contexts. Yet first-year writing, where students might reasonably receive instruction in “college-level” reading, are explicitly not predicated on discipline-specific teaching. Writing-about-writing courses alter that equation, on the principle that if students must always work within some activity system, then gen-ed courses perforce must work within an activity system while specifically making students mindful of how to do the same work in their “own” activity systems later on. Anne Beaufort, studying transfer of learning about writing, finds that metacognitive mindfulness of how one performs an activity (Writing) and rhetorical awareness and problem solving (College 151) are the greatest influences in whether students who write well in one situation then do so in another. As Wardle explains, transfer happens through generalization, not through a one-to-one shifting of skills, so we need to consider ways students’ broader knowledge of reading in support of scholarly activities will appear in their later courses. Wardle argues that “Focusing on a limited search for ‘skills’ is the reason we do not recognize more evidence of ‘transfer’; we are looking for apples when those apples are now part of an apple pie” (“Understanding” 69). It seems to me, then, that we teach for transfer by teaching questions, functions, and activities that help students learn how to more successfully become encultured in those other sites and communities when they get there. Although we can’t teach reading apart from specific disciplines, we can nonetheless make general-education writing courses a useful home for helping new college students see reading in brand new ways.
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**Marginalia: Teaching Texts, Teaching Readers, Teaching Writers**

**Mary Goldschmidt**

The College of New Jersey

Seeing reading as a constructive act encourages us as teachers to move from merely teaching texts to teaching readers.

*From Christina Haas and Linda Flower, “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning”*

Whether it’s called “rhetorical” (Haas and Flower), “introspective” (Salvatori), or “practice-based” (Adler-Kassner and Estrem), reading has been an important undercurrent in the past three decades of composition scholarship. But there are multi-faceted challenges in incorporating explicit attention to reading in first-year composition, ranging from theoretical concerns about the values that get reproduced in certain conceptions of reading (Adler-Kassner and Estrem), to even thornier debates about the very nature and goals of reading and writing in our courses (Wardle and Downs). Indeed, in the debate over whether first year composition should become an introduction to “writing studies” course, these issues take center stage. And while the question of the proper subject of composition courses is not new (e.g., Hairston, Lazere, Berlin), recent considerations have moved from appropriate content matter to doubts about the very transferability of what’s learned to other courses in the college curriculum (see Wardle and Downs, Bergman and Zepernick, and Dively and Nelms).

My own interest in students-as-readers has developed both from my own teaching, and from conducting faculty...