

# TEXTS OF OUR INSTITUTIONAL LIVES: Studying the “Reading Transition” from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?

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**M**ore than our colleagues in other departments, English department faculty members and administrators need to know what, how, and why students read. Most composition programs and assignments are grounded in reading, and, of course, so are English majors’ curriculums. English department faculty members are nearly always major players in general education, most of which requires substantial reading. We need to know how students are learning to read before they come to college, how we continue to foster close, critical reading throughout the college years, and how our students develop reading abilities and practices that they will continue to inhabit and improve after college.

If the scuttlebutt about reading is true, the Visigoths are at the door. An array of national surveys and studies suggests that neither high school nor college students spend much time preparing for class, the central activity of which we presume to be reading assigned articles, chapters, and books. Similar studies argue that college students spend little to no time reading for pleasure and that adults in the United States are devoting less and less of their free time to reading fiction, poetry, and drama. Books lamenting the decline in the reading of great literature in our culture<sup>1</sup> find an eager and ardent audience. The water-cooler conversation in English departments and indeed throughout the university seems to confirm the reports and corroborate the end-of-reading treatises and memoirs: legions of students apparently come to class ill prepared, not having done the assigned reading at all or having given it only cursory attention. Professors admit that students can actually pass

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*College English*, Volume 70, Number 6, July 2008

exams if they come to the lectures and take (or buy) good notes, whether or not they have read the assigned material. In short, careful reading seems have become a smaller blip on the higher educational radar screen or dropped off it altogether.

Despite the attention paid to student reading in the national surveys, relatively little scholarship has examined empirically what, how, and whether college students actually do read and how reading thus figures in the transition from high school to college. We set out to address this knowledge gap in a local way during a recent fall semester at our institution, the University of Arkansas. We wanted to know how our first-year students taking college composition, a course in which students mostly write about their reading, perceived and effected the transition from high school to college as readers. Therefore, we studied the reading habits and practices of twenty-one first-year composition students during the first two weeks of October, at which time they were in their sixth and seventh weeks of a fifteen-week semester. In some ways, our study provides a remarkably accurate local representation of the data about student reading as reported in the national surveys: first-year students at the University of Arkansas spend just about the same amount of time reading and preparing for class as students at other research universities—probably not as much time as their instructors and institutional administrators think they should. In other ways, however, our study offers insights into the reading environments of first-year college students that neither the national surveys nor the status-quo chatter hints at. We found students who were actively involved in their own programs of reading aimed at values clarification, personal enrichment, and career preparation. In short, we discovered students who were extremely engaged with their reading, but not with the reading that their classes required.

We offer our study as an example of local institutional research, aimed at helping our faculty understand salient aspects of our students' reading experiences and develop key strategies for addressing our students' reading histories. We hope, however, that what we found might help other institutions' faculty members and administrators think more carefully about how they meet and understand their students as readers.

#### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT READING?: HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE, AND THE TRANSITION

Any faculty member who wonders how and whether students prepare for class can probably find sources of consternation and concern in two national surveys. Since its inception in 1999, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), directed by George Kuh at Indiana University, has provided valuable data to college and university administrators and faculties about first-year and senior-year students' practices and beliefs as related to the survey organization's five "national benchmarks of

effective educational practice”: “level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments” (12). Although the answers to questions engendered by each of the benchmark categories might interest faculty members who want to understand their students better, we believe that the questions generated under the rubric of “levels of academic challenge” are most germane to anyone concerned about student reading. The eleven questions in this category ask students about the number of textbooks, books, and book-length packs of course readings that they were required to read; the number and length of the papers that they were required to write; their perceptions of course emphases (for example, analyzing, synthesizing, making judgments, and applying theories or concepts); and the amount of time that they spent preparing for class.

Under the traditional rule of thumb of two hours’ preparation time for every one hour in class, this average full-time student should be devoting 24 hours per week to studying, reading, writing, and so on. However, in the 2005 NSSE, taken by about 130,000 first-year students and a similar number of seniors from 523 colleges and universities, 66 percent of first-year students and 64 percent of seniors at all participating colleges and universities reported spending fewer than sixteen hours during a typical seven-day week preparing for class—“studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities.”<sup>2</sup>

If one concludes that college students are spending too little time preparing for class, one would also have to deduce that the situation in high school is even more dire. In 2004, five years after NSSE’s debut, the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) emerged from the same organization. In the inaugural HSSSE, over 90,000 high school students from grades 9 through 12 completed the survey, providing information about who is planning to go to college and how well students are prepared for college (“Getting Students Ready for College” 3). Among the seniors completing the survey, 94 percent of all respondents and 90 percent of respondents taking “college credit/prep/honors” courses reported spending six hours or fewer per week on “assigned reading.” These data notwithstanding, a large majority of all of the respondents agreed with the statement, “I have the skills and abilities to complete my work.” (“What We Can Learn from High School Students” 12). In other words, although the large majority of high school students spend less than one hour a day on assigned reading, they feel as though they are good enough readers to get by—perhaps *because* their schoolwork does not challenge them very much.

The NSSE and HSSSE data find an ominous counterpart in a study reported by Alvin Sanoff in 2006. Nearly 800 high school teachers and about 1,100 college faculty members were surveyed to determine their perceptions of how well students were prepared for college in reading, writing, science, mathematics, and oral com-

munication, as well as in more attitudinal domains such as “motivation to work hard,” “study habits,” and “ability to seek and use support services.” Only one-quarter of high school teachers and one-tenth of college faculty members thought that entering first-year students were “very well prepared” to read and understand difficult materials.

Consider the NSSE, HSSSE, and Sanoff data alongside two widely hailed studies of adult reading in the United States and the situation seems even more portentous. The 2004 report *Reading at Risk* from the National Endowment for the Arts found that literary reading among adult readers in the United States declined by ten percentage points between 1982 and 2002, representing a loss of 20 million readers, a decline mirrored, somewhat less precipitously, in the diminishing numbers of adults who read books of any kind (ix).<sup>3</sup> More recently, the NEA’s 2007 report, *To Read or Not to Read*, maintained that “Americans are spending less time reading, reading comprehension skills are eroding,” and “[t]hese declines have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications” (5).

Although the NSSE, the HSSSE, and NEA studies provide fodder for the perception that college-bound and college students can’t and/or don’t read extensively, critically, or even sufficiently, the surveys and reports did not provide us with a rich enough perspective as we planned how to engage in conversations with our institution’s faculty members about designing, adjusting, and delivering reading-based composition and general-education curricula to our students. Very few scholars have actually investigated the quality or quantity of college students’ reading.<sup>4</sup> We wanted to know more about the reading lives of our students.

### HOW WE STUDIED STUDENT READING

In that semester, we randomly selected twenty-one full-time freshmen from a volunteer pool of about one hundred students and paid the participants to complete three tasks. First, they filled out a questionnaire about their perceptions of their own reading abilities and habits in high school and college. Students provided information and opinions in response to the following questions:

- Approximately how many hours per week did you spend reading in your senior year of high school?
- Approximately what percentage of those hours were devoted to reading for your courses, in contrast to reading for your own interest or pleasure?
- Did you consider the amount of time you spent reading during your senior year in high school excessively high, moderately high, moderately low, or excessively low? Explain why.
- Did you consider yourself an excellent, above average, below average, or poor reader in high school? Explain why.

- So far this year [as of October 2], approximately how many hours per week are you spending on reading?
- Approximately what percentage of those hours are devoted to reading for your courses, in contrast to reading for your own interest or pleasure?
- Do you consider the amount of time you spend reading this year excessively high, moderately high, moderately low, or excessively low? Explain why.
- Do you now consider yourself an excellent, above average, below average, or poor reader? Explain why.

The second task required them to keep a reading journal for two consecutive weeks. We asked them to write for at least thirty minutes daily, describing in detail everything they read that day, and to produce at least ten full entries over the two weeks. For each entry, we asked the students to provide the title and author and the number of pages of each reading, indicating whether each text was read for a class, for a job, or for their interest or pleasure. Additionally, we asked students to indicate approximately how many minutes they spent reading during each day. Finally, we asked participants to focus specifically on *one* of the texts they read for each day and write about that text, responding to a series of questions. These questions were divided into five major categories: 1.) Focusing on One Specific Text, 2.) Reading Critically 3.) Drawing Relationships: Text to Self, 4.) Drawing Relationships: Text to Text, and 5.) Drawing Relationships: Text to World.<sup>5</sup> The following are the actual questions that we asked students to answer in response to their one “chosen” text:

#### *Focusing on One Specific Text*

1. What was the title of the text you read?
2. What was the purpose of reading this text? Why did you read it?
3. Did you choose to read this text or was it assigned? If assigned, who assigned it?
4. If assigned the text, did whoever assigned it give you instructions on how to read it? If so, what were the instructions?
5. If you chose this text for pleasure, why did you choose it?
6. How long did it take you to read the text?
7. Were you engaged in any other activity as you read the text (cooking, watching TV, etc.)?
8. Did you take a break or read straight through?

#### *Reading Critically*

1. What was the most important point the text made?
2. What were its most important secondary or supporting points?
3. Did you agree or disagree with the writer on any points?

4. Did you draw any inferences or conclusions that weren't directly stated in the text?
5. How difficult was the text to read?
6. Did you underline, highlight, or make comments in the margins? If so, describe the kinds of things you noted.
7. Did you ask questions of the text as you read? If so, describe your questions.
8. Did you look at headings and subtitles before you began to read? If so, what did they teach you?
9. What part of the reading, if any, did you skip over?
10. Why did you skip over this part, if you did?

*Drawing Relationships: Text to Self*

1. Did you find that what you read relates to your life in any way? If so, how?
2. Did this work inspire you in any way or stimulate your creativity? If so, how?
3. Did the text relate to your current job or a future job in any way? If so, how?
4. Did you discover anything new about your personal opinions, beliefs, or values in response to reading this text? If so, how?
5. How do you think your life experiences influence the way you read the text?

*Drawing Relationships: Text to Text*

1. Did you make any connections between this text and other texts you have read?
2. Does this text relate to other texts assigned in your classes? If so, how?
3. Does this text relate to other texts you have read outside of class? If so, how?
4. Did reading other texts help you understand this one? Or do you feel you needed more background information to understand the material?
5. How do you foresee this text helping you understand texts you expect to read in the future?

*Drawing Relationships: Text to World*

1. Did you discuss what you read with anyone? If so, with whom?
2. Who else read this text?
3. How is others' response similar to or different from your own?
4. How does this text relate to the world, to the 'bigger picture' in general?

For the third task in the study, students participated in an exit interview, in which they provided a think-aloud protocol about a self-selected 250-word portion of a textbook that they were currently reading for one of their classes. In the remainder of this article, after a brief comment on data from the intake questionnaires, we focus on what the students' reading journals taught us.

The data generated by the intake questionnaires did not suggest that the students see the reading transition from high school to college as all that dramatic. The first-year students at the University of Arkansas were reading a bit more in college than they did during their last year of high school, and they were reading a bit less for pleasure than they did during the previous year.

Students characterized the time that they spent reading during their senior year in high school as “moderately low,” about 7.6 hours per week, 70 percent of which was for their classes. Nevertheless, their general perception of their reading abilities in high school was in the “above average” range.<sup>6</sup> Not much seemed to change for these students when they came to college. According to the intake questionnaires, as first-year students they were still spending what they characterized as a moderately low amount of time reading, about 12.9 hours per week, 84 percent of which was for their classes, and they still perceived themselves as above-average readers.

#### WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE JOURNALS, PART I: TOEING THE NSSE LINE

The students’ two-week intensive journals in some ways fleshed out the students’ self-perceptions from the intake questionnaires, but in other ways they contradicted them. Above all else, the journals offered a considerably richer picture of the students’ reading lives than we had anticipated—the journals turned out to be a bountiful data source. One could certainly drop into them like an anthropologist and find several aspects of the late-adolescent reading culture that are worthy of note and, from an educationally conservative viewpoint, perplexing. For example,

- All of the students spent lots of time reading online documents.
- A substantial majority of them read their Facebook sites almost daily, sometimes for extended periods.
- Most of them read while doing something else: listening to music, checking emails and sending instant messages, watching television, and so on.

But, as fascinated as we were by the minutiae of the students’ rituals, we wanted to look for bigger patterns in the journals. Initially, we simply wanted to see how our first-year students stacked up against the national numbers reported in the NSSE.

For each journal entry, we asked the participants not only to list everything they read during the course of each day but also to estimate the amount of time they had spent reading each item. All of the participants provided at least ten full entries, but only half of them were faithful recorders of texts and time. As we made a first pass through the journals of these accurate respondents, we tried to categorize the texts that they read as either “academic”—that is, texts that they read for their

courses—or “nonacademic”—that is, texts that they read for pleasure, leisure, personal interest, or work. Given our interest in technologically mediated writing, moreover, we found it interesting to subdivide the “nonacademic” category into “nonacademic/technological”—reading done on a computer screen—and “nonacademic/nontechnological.” The students who were faithful recorders of their texts and time spent an average of 1 hour and 24 minutes per day on academic reading, some of which—a surprisingly small proportion—was done using technology. The faithful recorders devoted an average of 54 minutes a day to nonacademic reading involving technology—Facebook profiles, emails, instant messages, Internet sites, and so on. They spent an average of 25 minutes per day on nonacademic reading that did not involve technology—magazines, books, newspapers, and so on. Thus, the faithful, categorizing respondents reported spending an average of 2 hours and 43 minutes per day on all types of reading, almost evenly divided between academic and nonacademic reading.<sup>7</sup>

If we assume, however, that the faithfully categorizing respondents and the summative respondents were devoting roughly the same proportion of time to academic and nonacademic reading, their reports place these University of Arkansas first-year students right smack in the middle of that 66 percent of first-year students in the NSSE who spent fewer than 16 hours per week “preparing for class.”<sup>8</sup>

#### WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE JOURNALS, PART II: HINTS OF A READING LIFE

In addition to telling us how much and roughly what kinds of reading our students did, the journals also provided a fascinating window into why and how they read. Because we asked students to include in their journal entries everything that they read during the course of a day and gave them the freedom to write their “focusing-on-one-specific-text” entry in response to anything they might choose, we were quite interested in the types of texts that they selected. We found an abundant and varied array.

The journals contained a grand total of 210 daily entries. Within this number, about half of the “focused” entries were about texts that students were reading for their classes, and the other half were about texts that we categorized as “nonacademic.” Among the nonacademic responses, the large majority were about texts that students were reading for their personal pleasure or interest, such as employee manuals and job instructions. A smaller number were about texts they were reading either for work or for personal “business” as a student, such as documents about academic advising, academic progress, and so on. Another small percentage of nonacademic responses dealt with texts that students were reading as part of a personal program to support and, in some cases, explore their religious faith.

Considering that all of the participants in the study were full-time students, one might expect the reading that they were doing for their courses to occupy the top position in their list of intellectual priorities. Moreover, considering that the participants had reported spending 84 percent of their reading time during the first six weeks of the semester occupied with academic reading, one might expect that their nonacademic reading was done primarily for rest and relaxation.

The journal entries do not support these presumptions. Like the students in the Stanford Study of Writing, who reported having actively “performative” writing lives that transcended the writing they must do for courses (Fishman et al.), many of the students in our study described having regular, steady, full reading lives in which they engaged with a wide variety of texts for reasons both academic and nonacademic. We encountered students who, during the two-week period, were reading novels (examples: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *A Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Angels and Demons*), nonfiction books (*Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Under the Banner of Heaven*), magazines (*Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* were favorites among the females; exercise and hunting magazines prevailed among the males), and newspapers (both the campus paper and the statewide one) for personal interest and pleasure. We found students, perhaps because of our prompting, drawing solid connections between the texts that they were reading and their emerging sense of themselves as adults in the world. One student unpacked her connection to a magazine article about the untimely death of young woman who had had an unresolved argument with her father; the journal entry described the student’s own estrangement from her father following her parents’ divorce. Another student noted that she connected to *The Diary of Anne Frank* because, as a Jew, she had experienced racial slurs herself. A third student described her memory of training a puppy to help her connect to part of her psychology textbook about behavioral conditioning. A fourth student explained his connection between Plato’s *Republic* and Marxist governments: “Karl Marx and socialist and communist societies tried to use many of Plato’s ideas in their writings and governments, but they all consistently failed, while democracy thrived and continues to spread today.”

The following three brief case studies offer slightly more extended profiles of students who defy the status-quo thinking that portrays first-year college students as incapable of and uninterested in reading. Angela, Pauline, and Corey have come to college as readers of texts that speak to their own exigencies and interests.

Angela Ivy<sup>9</sup> was taking four courses during the study—Italian, algebra, composition, and sociology—and she devoted some reading time to each of them. But the reading activity that occupied most of her time during the two weeks involved the Bible, plus books and articles from the popular press about contemporary issues of Christian faith. Her reports of reading experiences showed, on the one hand, a young person who was looking for confirmation of religious principles that she grew up

with but, on the other hand, questioning how these principles fit into the new culture in which she was immersed at the university.

The number of minutes that Angela devoted to reading for her four courses is interesting in itself. Over the two weeks, she reported spending 325 minutes reading and studying for algebra, 215 minutes reading and studying vocabulary items for her composition class, 175 minutes reading and studying Italian, and 35 minutes reading for sociology. Compare these times with her reports for three other activities: she spent 345 minutes reading the *Bible* and books and articles dealing with Christian faith—texts that she chose to read for “interest/personal benefit.” She devoted 330 minutes to reading email messages, websites (at least one of which was related to her coursework), and *Facebook* entries. She spent 210 minutes reading articles in magazines and newspapers for “personal interest,” but at least three of these articles were about topics that frequently emerge in contemporary discussions of religion and faith: creationism versus intelligent design, homosexuality and tolerance, and the legalization of marijuana

Angela’s journal opened with a long, questioning entry on a book called *Show Me, God* by Fred Heeren, a text that Angela says she read “by choice.” The main point of the text, she wrote, “was concerning the Law of Cause and Effect—that logic demands a cause for every effect and that world/universe is an effect that demands a very great cause.” She added:

The sun, moon, and stars could not have come from nothing—that’s irrational. Every observable fact around us can be explained in terms of something else that caused it, but when the question is about the existence of the universe itself, there is nothing in the universe to explain it—no natural explanation. I understood where the author was coming from, but just because we haven’t found a natural explanation for creation doesn’t mean we should just throw up our hands and say ‘God did it.’ (Emphasis in original)

Angela’s last journal entry provided a fascinating summary of her commentary on reading texts that lead to theological questioning. She read an article entitled “The Bible Is Still Number One” in a magazine called *A Matter of Fact*. She encapsulated the main point of the article: “Prophecy and scientific foreknowledge are repeated in the Bible—giving evidence of its credibility as The Word of God.” She drew a powerful connection between this text and herself: “If I could go into apologetics for a career,” she wrote, “it [the article] would definitely relate to my future job.” Tacitly conceding that she probably won’t have this option as a career, she added, “Regardless, it’s good to have a rational foundation in what you’re trying to put your trust in.” She saw possible connections between this text and others she might read for courses or personal interest: “The more I read about this, the more I’ll have to implement into other texts I have read. It helps to have a well-rounded approach so you can look at things more objectively.”

Pauline Rosario offers a powerful counterexample to those who believe that first-year students don't engage with their reading. Pauline had become fluent in English, her second language, but read regularly in her first language, Spanish, to maintain her fluency in it. She belonged to a book club, undertook a considerable amount of reading outside of class, and showed a strong ability to draw connections between her reading and her growing sense of self, the texts she has previously read, and the larger world beyond academia.

During the two-week journaling period, Pauline spent a lot of her spare time reading for pleasure. For instance, she read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Spanish, her native language, for the book club that she belonged to as an extracurricular activity. She commented that she read it slowly because she had difficulty with reading Spanish now that she was used to reading in English. Apparently, Pauline still valued her first language enough to put forth the effort to read the text in Spanish rather than in its translated form. She wrote, "There is one factor that is hindering my reading speed and comprehension, the book is in Spanish. Spanish was my first language but after 12 years in school, using English, it has become difficult to understand Spanish as I read it. In total I spent about an hour and a half reading the book and accomplished one and a half chapters."

Pauline even saw possibilities for drawing connections in her reading using technology. Commenting on reading emails and Web logs, she wrote, "This text obviously does not involve any academic reward, but it is very important as far as my social life goes. I did make connections with other texts (e-mails) that I've read, though, mainly because e-mails are an ongoing conversation with friends that I do not see as often. Reading this text did in fact make me understand other e-mails a little better." Pauline did not discredit the value of her personal reading or the use of electronic media because she believes that they help her explore her ideas. "As far as discovering anything about my personal opinions, this text succeeded. Because these e-mails were of a personal subject, they did relate to my life 100%. After reading these e-mails, I called a friend, so I did discuss the reading with someone else."

Finally, Pauline included this note at the end of her journal:

I am aware that this study is to figure out the "jump" from high school to college reading; however the fact is that most of my required reading (which is not much) has nothing to do with this "jump" because what is different is not the amount of reading, but the level and wording of the text. The college text jumps to a level of reading exponentially higher than high school texts, and this is what causes the struggles for the students.

Corey Essene was enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences Honors Program at the time of our study, and, as such, was the type of student that one might expect to take his class preparation very seriously. A superficial reading of his journal entries might lead one to question that expectation. In short, Corey seemed to blow

off his required reading. On the other hand, however, his journal entries show a young man devoted to reading fantasy fiction and learning French—not so much to do well in his French class, but instead to communicate with a friend he met while traveling the previous summer and to fulfill his goal of getting a job working in the American Embassy in Paris.

Corey's first journal entry was one of only two in which he had anything substantial—or positive—to say about his assigned reading. He described his admittedly superficial reading of an essay, "The Genocidal Killer in the Mirror," simply because he and some classmates in his Honors Composition class had to meet and collectively come up with a thesis statement for an essay about it. In his next entry, however, he focused at some length on a chapter entitled "Celbedeil" in a book called *Eldest* by Christopher Paolini, which he chose to spend thirty minutes reading "to break the monotony of studying and doing homework for all of my classes." *Eldest* is clearly mainstream fantasy, the second book in a trilogy, Corey reported: "It's a story about dragons in a mythical setting. It is kind of like books I have read including Tolkien's books because it has many of the same mythical races and similar settings." Corey offered a connection-filled thought to conclude this entry: "This really relates to the real world because this symbolizes bigotry that still exists across the planet. I think that because I am aware of bigotry in society that I was able to see Paolini's throw back and symbology [sic] of these ancient grudges and beliefs. This text basically reaffirmed my passion against the ignorance of bigotry, whether it be in fiction novels, or real life and history."

In another entry, Corey turned his attention to French and made an explicit text-to-self connection, referring directly to his employment goal. He reported studying his French textbook for "about a half an hour" in his dorm room: "I read this because I am currently learning French as my second language and it is my minor. I read this also for pleasure because I enjoy learning the French language. This relates to me personally because I hope to get a job at the American embassy in Paris." Two entries later, Corey returned to the French project, describing his reading of a "long email from a friend in Paris." He added, "I read the entire text in French and it took me about ten minutes. I understood most of the letter, but I was forced to look up a few words that were not in my French vocabulary." Corey explained that he had struck a deal with Axel, a French friend whom he met traveling last summer. They agreed they would write to each other only in French: "I actually made this arrangement with Axel, most importantly, for educational purposes. Axel is fluent in English, so he is doing this as a favor to me to strengthen my French vocabulary and grammar."

In his next-to-last entry, Corey returned to some assigned reading, this time for his Fundamentals of Communication class: "The text was the basic dry, boring textbook type text, but it was highly informative. I read it in about an hour. This

relates to me because I know it will help me give my assigned speech and later speeches I am to give throughout my college career and life.”

We don't want to argue that Angela, Pauline, and Corey are necessarily representative of any particular population, but they do evince a strong interest in personal reading, something that status-quo thinking would assert that college students lack. Angela, Pauline, and Corey engage thoughtfully with texts; however, most of the texts that they value and connect with are not those assigned in their courses.

### RETHINKING READING IN COLLEGE COURSES

Although neither of us had Angela, Pauline, or Corey as a student in class, when we read their journals, we tended to think we might like to. Here were three students, all engaged readers, all capable to some degree of connecting their reading to their own growing sense of self and to the world around them. We venture, however, that, although Pauline might be seen as a successful college student reader, many instructors would find Angela and Corey to represent the kinds of students that they normally encounter in their courses—not very interested in the assigned course readings, not eager to “participate” in a discussion, not inclined to read any more deeply than the assignment requires.

So what did we learn about these kinds of students by reading their journals? What kinds of readers are these randomly selected University of Arkansas students? Let us unpack those questions before turning to the issue of how we urged faculty members and program administrators at our institution to think differently about reading in their courses.

First of all, our students were reading, but they were not reading studiously, either in terms of the texts they were engaging with or the manner in which they read them. Like the high school boys whose literate practices Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm describe in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, the University of Arkansas students often manifested a passion for reading that was not connected to their courses. Instead, they saw the reading that they had to do for school as uninspiring, dull, and painfully required. Here was Angela's response to her sociology text: “I completely agree” with it and it “raises no questions.” Corey assessed his Fundamentals of Communication reading as being self-evident, and said that he rapidly perused “The Genocidal Killer in the Mirror” just in order to generate a thesis about it. Although Angela's and Corey's responses to school-based reading, typical of those of many of the participants, were rather neutrally dismissive, other students were more adamantly critical. One student, Jennifer Respighi, described how she took only five minutes to read a sample biology lab report “because it was so boring.” Another student, Katherine Quick, characterized her psychology textbook as “a brutally boring overwad” and wrote that she skipped sections “because there was

no reason to read a bunch of bullshit.” A third student, Walter Hope, simply opined that “my chemistry book sucks.”

Many of the participants clearly rushed through their required reading simply to get it done and then move on to reading that they found more engaging. In the journals, we found daily reading schedules such as the following:

- Andrea Less, Day 5: 30 minutes reading an article for an English assignment, 20 minutes reading email and Ebay ads.
- Kathy Gravette, Day 1: 30 minutes total for reading an English assignment and the essay it required her to read, plus her art assignment, and *Cosmopolitan* magazine; Day 5: 30 minutes total for reading her English assignment (“It was difficult to read”) plus *Cosmopolitan* and the newspaper.
- Fred Borg, Day 1: 45 minutes reading a selection from Descartes’s *First Meditation*, during a lecture in a math class; Day 3: 20 minutes reading an essay for English.
- Tony Richardson, Day 2: 30 minutes reading an essay for English; Day 5: 96 minutes reading *The Boater’s Handbook*.

In many of these reports, we would be hard pressed to find reading experiences that we would characterize as focused and contemplative.

Second, although the students generally showed some ability to draw the three types of connections that we urged them to create with our leading questions, their reported connections were not evenly distributed among the three categories. Our students seemed quite capable of making text-to-self connections—Lindsey James, for example, related her response to an article about cults to her own religious upbringing—and text-to-world connections—recall Angela’s repeated connections between texts that she was reading and campus/community/world events. But it was the rare student who, like Pauline, would draw connections between and among texts that she was reading for her classes, or like William Hope, who described the connections that he drew between *Helter Skelter* and *Under the Banner of Heaven*, two books that he read for his own pleasure and interest.

Third, students are motivated by and engaged with reading, but the texts that they interact with most enthusiastically are technologically based. In addition, students have become proficient in the art of multitasking as they navigate in and out of electronic media. Virtually all of the students indicate in their journals that they spend a substantial amount of time reading online. Although some of the students’ academic assignments require online research or reading on the computer, their journal entries indicate that they interact with electronic media primarily when reading for pleasure. The majority of their time reading for pleasure is spent reading and writing emails, instant messaging, or creating and perusing Facebook and MySpace profiles. In these examples, technology encourages reading for personal communication and social networking, and these purposes overlap in many ways that relate to

academic study. For instance, Corey became inspired to learn French, so he emailed back and forth with a friend in France to help him acquire and enhance his reading skills. Without this incentive, Corey may not have pursued his study of French with the same enthusiasm. Pauline wrote in her journal that the significant amounts of time she spends blogging and networking with friends may have no academic reward; nevertheless, she values this kind of reading for its ability to help her network and stay connected socially. As a result of the amount of time that students spend with electronic media, their reading practices and habits have shifted with influence of these technologies. Their journal entries consistently refer to the myriad ways in which they multitask as they read. For instance, many students email and instant message their friends while surfing the Internet and reading texts on the computer. Many watch television, listen to music, or talk on their cell phones as they read their textbooks.

Given that our students seem to engage with some types of reading, what did we suggest that faculty members the University of Arkansas do to help their students engage more fully with, and read more critically, the material that they need to read for their classes? Both in campus forums sponsored by our university's Teaching and Learning Center and in internal publications, we suggested three avenues.

First, we argued that faculty members need to teach students explicitly how to draw the kinds of connections that lead to engaged reading, particularly text-to-world and text-to-text connections. It's not that we think text-to-self connections are not important. We do think, however, that, as valuable as these kinds of personal connections are for initiating engaged reading, students ultimately need to be stretched beyond the boundaries of their own personal reactions. As Wayne Booth contended in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, one major function of college is to drag students "kicking and screaming, out of infantile solipsism into adult membership in an inquiring community" (13). As they read, students need to be walked through demonstrations of mature, committed, adult readers who draw connections to the world around them, both historical and current, and to other texts. One relatively easy teaching technique, the think-aloud protocol, is particularly useful. The instructor simply focuses on a passage—say, 250 words or so—from the required reading and reads it aloud to students, pausing regularly to explain to the students what connections he or she is making to his or her own life and work, to the world beyond the text, and, most important, to other texts that he or she has read. (For more on the think-aloud protocol, see Daniels and Zemelman, Chapter 5.)

Second, we suggested that faculty members and administrators need to create curriculums, co-curriculums, and extra-curriculums that invite students to engage in their reading and to connect texts that they read to their lives, their worlds, and other texts. Certainly, learning-community programs—in which students are taking two or three courses together, focusing on a common theme—foster this kind of

curricular connectivity, as do service-learning and community-outreach programs, in which students accomplish necessary and useful projects that reflect principles and ideas from their reading. But even in the absence of such curricular innovations, instructors can take relatively simple steps to foster students' making connections between their courses. An instructor might ask his or her students to list and offer a one-sentence description on an index card of every other class that they are taking. Perusing the other subjects that his or her students are studying, the instructor could make an explicit effort to show how the class readings might evoke themes, issues, and motifs being raised in the other classes. In addition, the instructor might adapt and follow guidelines developed by Christopher Thaiss for first-year writing courses with a writing-across-the-curriculum orientation ("A Rubric for Understanding Writing in Different Classes and Disciplines"; see also Thaiss and Zawacki). An instructor dedicated to improving connected, engaged reading throughout the curriculum could explain explicitly to students how the documents that they must read relate directly to the aims and methods of learning that are most valued in the course environment, show clearly how the students' reading for the course should be manifest in projects and examinations, and demonstrate specifically *how* students should read the course material.

Third, we urged faculty members to look for ways to incorporate more technology into their reading assignments. It is becoming common knowledge that students engage effectively with reading done in interactive electronic contexts. For example, Gail E. Hawisher and her colleagues point out that all students have different "cultural ecologies" and therefore experience different "technological gateways" for acquiring and developing literacy, but many students have developed literacies in electronic contexts that instructors overlook or ignore. "As a result," according to Hawisher et al., "we fail to build on the literacies students already have" (676). We suggested that faculty members could enhance student learning through better engagement with reading by incorporating assignments that achieved two primary goals:

- They would provide students with opportunities to interact with electronic hyperlinked texts.
- They would engage student readers through reflection in electronic public spheres.

We urged faculty to consider incorporating such components as discussion forums through WebCT or Blackboard to help students reflect on and respond to reading assignments with their classmates, and we argued that students could also benefit from online conversations with larger discourse communities and professionals in the field of study to enhance their reading about certain topics. Setting up a Web blog or posting to an established Usenet group could help get students interested. In short, we noted that supplementing course instruction with technological mate-

rials would allow students to navigate information and to multitask in ways that would ultimately enhance their reading.

Although our study was most useful for motivating and shaping discussions at our own institution, we see merit in faculty members and administrators conducting similar studies on their own campuses; reporting the results to groups of students, instructors, and administrators; and discussing the implications of the results for teaching and learning on the campus. Indeed, we would urge any college or university serious about improving undergraduate composition and general education to examine student reading on its own campus. While the outcomes of such studies would vary according to context and region—some of our conclusions are related to the high number of fundamentalist evangelicals who attend our university—the results would generate very useful intra- and inter-institutional discussions about teaching and learning.

Should the English department take the lead in conducting such studies? Not necessarily. Every English department faculty member who has been involved with writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-in-the-disciplines programs knows that they succeed best when faculty members throughout the university buy into the notion of improving learning by increasing the amount and complexity of student writing and by teaching writing consciously and explicitly in all courses. The same must be true in efforts to examine and improve student reading.

There will be resistance to such efforts. People will wonder why colleges and universities admit students who “can’t read.” Faculty members will opine that they lack time to teach students how to read material carefully in their courses “because there is so much I have to cover already.” To anticipate and counter this resistance, any institutional effort to study whether, how, how much, and why students read must be initiated and championed by faculty members and administrators directly responsible for overseeing curriculum, instruction, and assessment of general education.

There’s no need for any college or university to be apologetic about looking at students’ reading habits and practices. The transition from high school to college must entail a transition to different types of reading, different amounts of reading, and different approaches to success with reading. If we intend to continue basing assignments, syllabi, and entire academic programs on student reading, then we need to know more about it.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Sven Birkerts’s *The Gutenberg Elegies* and Mark Edmundson’s *Why Read?*
2. The responses about the “number of assigned textbooks, books, or book-length packs of course readings” that students reported reading are also instructive: 64 percent of first-year students and 56

percent of seniors reported reading ten or fewer textbooks, books, or course packs during the academic year (38).

3. *Reading at Risk* was not without its naysayers. In *Black Issues Book Review*, Wayne Dawkins questions the “dire picture” painted by the NEA.

4. A 1991 study by Charlene Blackwood and her colleagues examined the pleasure reading habits of 333 college seniors in a small, public liberal arts university. Although 88 percent of the respondents reported that they read for pleasure, they did so for only about two and a half hours per week while school was in session and slightly more during vacations. In 1999, Jude Gallik surveyed the recreational reading habits of 139 first-year and upper-level students at a private, liberal arts college in Texas. Gallik found that 87 percent of the respondents devoted fewer than six hours per week to recreational reading while school was in session, a number that dropped to 75 percent during school vacations. A 1994 study by Ravi Sheorey and Kouider Mokhtari investigated the reading habits of 85 college students enrolled in an elective developmental reading course at a large public university, finding that the students read about 4.75 hours per week. In a study conducted in 2000 at Texas A&M Corpus Christi, but never published, Richard Haswell and his graduate students examined practices of, and attitudes toward, “self-sponsored” and “school-sponsored” reading among 100 ninth-graders and 100 first-year college students. Haswell found that the two groups spent slightly different amounts of time each week on reading and writing: The ninth-graders reported reading 163 pages and spending 23 hours per week; the first-semester college students read 141 pages and devoted 18 hours per week. However, the ninth-graders reported reading almost twice as many pages per week of self-chosen material than did the college students, although the college students said they read one-fifth more pages of school-sponsored material per week than the ninth-graders (5). Under the auspices of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Victoria Rideout, Donald Roberts, and Ulla Foehr studied the daily media use of more than 2,000 8- to 18-year-olds. The researchers found that subjects spent an average of 6.5 hours daily with “media”: 4 hours and 16 minutes watching television and/or movies, 1 hour and 44 minutes listening to music, 1 hour and 2 minutes using the computer, and 49 minutes playing video games. Although three-quarters of the survey participants reported reading something for pleasure every day, the average time spent daily reading books, magazines, and newspapers was 43 minutes.

5. The “drawing-relationships” questions were motivated by the types of connections that Ellin Keene Oliver and Susan Zimmerman teach students to draw in *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*, a widely used resource for teacher-development programs in high schools.

6. When examining the students’ evaluations of how much time they devoted to reading in high school and college, we coded a response of “excessively high” as a 4, “moderately high” as a 3, “moderately low” as a 2, and “excessively low” as a 1. When examining the students’ perceptions of their own abilities as readers, we coded a response of “excellent” as a 4, “above average” as a 3, “below average” as a 2, and “poor” as a 1.

7. Over a seven-day week, therefore, these students devoted about 19 hours per week to reading—in other words, somewhat more than they had reported on their intake questionnaires, perhaps because the act of listing *everything* that they read during a day turned “reading” into a larger activity for these students. In contrast, the students who did not record how much time they spent reading each item, but simply provided a total number of minutes of reading per day, reported spending an average of 1 hour and 41 minutes daily on all types of reading, or about 11.8 hours per week—a bit less than they had reported on their intake questionnaires.

8. The largest subgroup within that 66 percent is the students who reported spending 6 to 10 hours per week preparing for class—27 percent. Because the participants in our study included *everything* that they read in their daily tallies, we think it’s safe to assume that the amount of time that they spent on reading *in preparation for class* probably lies within this 6- to-10-hours-per-week category.

9. By agreement with the participants, all names have been changed to pseudonyms.

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