

LeaRNING Notes

#1: Teaching Critical Reading at the College Level

Brown Bag Discussion: September 27th

Two Key Ideas:

- Devote the last part of class to awakening students' interest in the next reading.
- Create ½ page reading guides that point students to key passages in a text and help them better understand the context or “conversation” the text is part of. Eventually, let students take some responsibility for creating reading guides.

We often assume students should know how to read well when they enter the university. But even well prepared college students—and especially first-year students—encounter some challenges when faced with both the complexity and the volume of reading expected in college courses. Many simply muddle through without developing effective academic reading habits. A 2006 *Washington Post* article states that many school systems stop emphasizing formal reading instruction after the primary grades, resulting in high school and college students who struggle to negotiate the nuances of complex texts and to make the leap to analytical thinking. While students are growing increasingly adept at negotiating on-line texts and large quantities of consumer information, they need more guided practice in critical reading at the college level.

In his book *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean identifies several reasons that college students sometimes struggle with academic reading (the following excerpts are modified from pages 134-137):

Students tend to be quick and “glossy” readers in every context—they don’t adapt their speedy reading process for more complex material. They often have difficulty focusing because they read while multitasking with television, internet, and phone calls.

Students often do not look for the underlying organization of a text (where is the main argument presented? Where is the situating context, the evidence, the opposing view?)

Students (like all people) try to mold what they read into familiar paradigms and experiences, and in the process they may radically misinterpret the nuances of the author’s meaning. As Bean points out, this “turning sea monsters into canned tuna” is neither a sign of stupidity or intellectual laziness. It is “as natural as crawling before walking, and we...need to adopt appropriate strategies for dealing with [it]” (135)

Students often do not recognize the rhetorical context or political bias of texts. They do not see the wider conversation that authors are responding to, the historical place of the text, or even the reputability of different publications.

Students may struggle with the sentence structure and vocabulary of primary sources and scholarly articles. This is one of the most difficult obstacles for teachers, because improving this literacy rests on the student’s *willingness* to keep grappling with new discourse until it becomes more familiar. Gaining this willingness often means finding a workable balance between (1) **doing as much as possible to engage students in the reading**, (2) **making students accountable for the reading**, and (3) **respecting the personal views and experiences they bring to the reading**.

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING READING IN CLASS

Talk about your reading expectations with students at the beginning of the semester. Many have done a very small amount of outside reading in high school classes, so invite them to talk about their concerns with you. Begin the semester with what you imagine will be a challenging but not inaccessible) set of readings. Avoid beginning with “lightweight” readings if the course will generally include a much higher level of reading. Students set their expectations for the time and thought a course will demand in the first week.

Spend time at the beginning of the semester helping students form active reading habits. Give them photocopies of the first couple readings (or part of the reading) and ask them to mark them up with a pen and turn them in. Model this process in class ahead of time, share your own annotations, and ask students to practice in class—perhaps followed by small group sharing and discussion. Encourage them to write questions in the margins and develop their own “feedback” strategies.

Prepare students for the reading ahead of time by anticipating challenges and sparking interest in upcoming readings. Devote the last part of class to an activity that will prepare students for the next reading’s topic and vocabulary and involve them in it personally or emotionally. If possible, have them read an excerpt in class and respond to it. Create ½ page reading guides for students that define technical terms, explain the broader cultural or historical context, and point them to key passages or organizational structures (eventually, students might take over some responsibility for creating reading guides). Another benefit of reading guides is that they integrate the teacher’s familiar voice into an unfamiliar author and text before students read, creating greater incentive and interest.

Read difficult or central passages aloud in class and talk through how you recognize signposts and interpret the material. Then, ask students to do the same thing in class (perhaps in small groups).

Help students create the larger connection of readings. Design several thematic units in the course that each culminate with a unit exam or project that encourages students to draw connections, synthesize, and analyze the issues presented in the readings.

Make students accountable for the reading assignment. As much as teachers sometimes balk at giving quizzes, students readily admit they often need this kind of incentive to keep up with reading assignments (and students accept quizzes they view as consistent and fair). Consider giving short (2-4 questions) closed-book reading responses **in class**, perhaps incorporating student-generated questions. These might occur sporadically, but let students know a quiz could begin class on any day.

Try to avoid giving quizzes only when you believe students aren’t reading. Students should view these as much as possible as a consistent part of facilitating discussion and thought in class—not as punishment. Return these to students with their scores as soon as possible. Effective reading responses incorporate both **summary** and **opinion**. For the summary part, try using **frame statements** (and eventually having students create the frames). e.g. Jones and Smith differed in their beliefs about teen use of prescription drugs. Jones argued....Smith, on the other hand, believed.... (see Bean pg. 126)

Be clear about your evaluation criteria for these reading responses or quizzes, and show examples of strong responses in class.

Resources:

Bean, J. (2001). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McKeachie, W.J. & Svinicki, M. (2006). *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Lunch With LeaRN: Brown Bag Discussions
Thursday, September 27th from 12:00-1:00 in Coe 307.
Please register at www.uwyo.edu/lrn