

Review Essay

Critical Reading: Attention Needed!

Alice Horning

Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*. Utah State UP / UP of Colorado, 2015. 199 pages.

Keller, Daniel. *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*. Utah State UP / UP of Colorado, 2014. 193 pages.

Wan, Amy J. *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2014. 218 pages.

According to members of the CCCC Special Interest Group on The Role of Reading in Composition Studies—and some members of the reading research community—the need for WPAs and writing instructors to pay more attention to reading is urgent and growing. Interest in reading has also increased in the last few years with the publication of more books and articles and the continued interest in the SIG. The constantly growing pile of studies showing students' reading difficulties (ACT, Inc.; Jamieson; NAEP; Stanford) points to the need for WPAs and the rest of the faculty to pay attention to reading. There is general agreement that reading and writing are complex and integrated processes reflecting cognitive processing; plenty of research supports this view (Dehaene; Douglas). Moreover, it is surely a commonplace to observe that reading processes are changing in response to new technology, with significant implications for the teaching and learning of writing. However, the foundational skills of reading, including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of materials from any kind of source, remain essential components of instruction that these books all address to some degree. These points frame the usefulness of these three volumes for all WPAs and writing teachers generally. The message for writ-

ing programs is clear: Pay more attention to the critical reading of extended nonfiction prose in every class, every term.

These three volumes work from this integrated view of reading and writing, albeit in different areas of inquiry and different time frames as their starting points. Wan takes up literacy teaching and learning in the early twentieth century. She approaches literacy work through the lens of citizenship teaching and learning as it was offered through unions, other workplace settings, schools, and higher education. A summary of the main ideas reveals how Wan's approach addresses a number of key concerns for WPAs, particularly as classrooms become increasingly diverse on every dimension.

In the introduction, Wan sets the stage for her discussion. Her main claim is that citizenship's flexible definitions and its promise of equality and mobility connect to literacy's role as supporter of a citizenship "habit" (Wan 24). Although this claim suggests that she will use a compare/contrast strategy, she does not actually do so. Instead, she suggests that the book as a whole will show the complementary roles of literacy and citizenship: Americanization citizenship programs, labor-based educational programs, and college composition courses, taken together, show how literacy and citizenship have worked in concert to address society's needs.

The first chapter takes up the challenge of defining citizenship, considering both people's legal standing (by birthplace or residency) and their cultural connection to their country of residence. Wan points out that education in general and literacy training in particular is commonly thought of historically as a key method to "cultivate a more participatory democratic citizenship, a more literate citizenship, a more active citizenship" (2). This view was and still is shared by teachers in both school and non-school settings. However, citizenship itself has a variety of definitions beyond the legal and cultural, and these all need to be kept in mind. While Wan offers these varied definitions of citizenship from the outset, she never formally defines literacy. Discussion of the Immigration Act of 1917 (a test of literacy) might have helped, but its details are also not presented (cf. Elliot 17). It is this lack of definitions and specific information that makes this book difficult to read.

The core of the book is in chapters 2, 3, and 4, where Wan discusses "three sites of citizenship production—federal Americanization programs, union education, and university English classes, all from the period 1920–29" (13). The second chapter begins the discussion, examining educational programs for immigrants. In the early 1900s, immigrants found literacy both a barrier, in the form of required English tests to limit numbers, and a resource for economic and social success. Despite some obvious connections to the contemporary situation of American immigrants (cf. Jan. 27,

2017 Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States [White House]), Wan does not mention the relevance of the historical situation for the contemporary immigrant population, but she was writing before the current focus on immigration arose, and making this connection is not obligatory.

In chapter 3, a study of union-based education programs shows that in the early 1900s, unions offered worker education in ways that connected “intelligent citizenship” (Wan 84) through English literacy, yielding productive workers and active union members. The concept of “literacy hope,” mentioned at various points in the book, was part of why these efforts were made at all. Despite scholars’ views to the contrary (notably, such highly regarded researchers as Brandt, Crowley, and Graff), Wan points out, correctly in my view, that literacy hope continued to shape the instruction provided in these settings (7). The idea of literacy hope—that literacy offers a solution to major social problems—persisted then and now. As unions provided worker education and literacy development, literacy hope also played a role in addressing issues of the transition to manufacturing and the marginalizing of women and immigrants (partly due to fear of Communism) in a variety of work situations (Wan 42). Although these chapters do not address writing programs, they raise issues faced in college classes, particularly in writing.

Chapter 4 brings the discussion specifically to higher education as yet another place where literacy instruction for citizenship purposes (directly and indirectly) was provided. Wan uses City College of New York (CCNY) as a kind of case study for the literacy work offered by post-secondary institutions. As is the case with immigrant and labor education, higher education aspired to produce “useful” (Wan 131), prepared, working citizens through English instruction, led and supported by NCTE (founded in 1911) and others. Though City College was not exactly an open admissions school as it would later become in a formal way, it did welcome immigrants and made a specific, concerted effort to address their literacy needs (130–31). In addition, CCNY wanted, like the immigration and workplace programs, to produce literate citizens (131).

In her last chapter, Wan takes up the implications of her historical study for the contemporary situation. With immigration from such hotspots as the Middle East and Central America continuing to grow, America is once again at an anxious time that is only slightly different than the anxious times of the early twentieth century. More young people are here and going to college as a byproduct of President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy put in place in 2012 and the proposed DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors), so

there are more students who need literacy help and the literacy hope that goes with it (Hing); the status of these students is under review (at the time this book review is being written) under the new administration beginning in January 2017. Wan ends by saying teachers in higher education can use their understanding from this book to help contemporary students become critically literate, engaged citizens. Despite some weaknesses in the writing that made the book a challenge to read, I think Wan has an important point to make: then and now, literacy generally and reading particularly are both keys to an informed, engaged citizenry, a view she shares with Keller and Carillo. She offers close analysis of the literacy work in and beyond college classrooms of the early twentieth century to support her claims; the historical discussion provides a useful perspective on literacy instruction.

Unlike Amy Wan, Daniel Keller is focused on the necessary role of reading in college composition courses. He uses case study research to look at contemporary literacy in the technological environment that leads to new kinds of reading. He aims to help composition instruction in two ways: by looking at reading in multimodal composition and by investigating how the canon of *delivery* (emphasis added) is informed by reading. The new kinds of reading require that instructors address the fact that there is more to read now and different ways to read it, resulting in “accumulation,” drawn from Brandt’s work. In her highly regarded study of literacy development over the course of the twentieth century, Brandt suggested that different forms of literacy are piled one on top of another, with newer ones relying on and adding to earlier forms (73–104). In addition, reading must address acceleration—the increased speed needed to deal with the pile up of material. Acceleration makes adapting to these developments hard because speed means constant pressure for faster work in general and faster or different reading in particular. Students need to learn to deal with accumulation and acceleration with variable and flexible reading and writing skills.

To study these issues, Keller looked at students in high school, in college, and at home. The case studies he reports in *Chasing* were done in 2006. Nine students Keller followed were in high school; four of them remained in the study as they moved on to college. Each case includes multiple interviews with students in home and school settings, plus interviews with a high school librarian and a senior English teacher, along with students’ family members. These are generally good students at a good high school. Students’ home interviews suggest they think carefully about reading and their practices, especially online.

Keller presents this data with helpful, specific definitions of his terms. His definition of reading, for example, includes alphabetic text, but not

only that kind of traditional text. He expands reading to literacy, giving this definition:

Literacy is a means for creating and interpreting meaning, an act of semiotic communication. . . . When words and images combined to make meaning, I considered that reading. If a video game screen had no textual accompaniment, I did not consider that reading.

Acts of reading and writing are shaped by their social contexts.
(Keller 11)

To set up the social context for his research, Keller uses the opening chapter to explore the status of reading research in composition studies with a brief review of the literature. In this discussion, he offers some key ideas, but some of his claims make me wonder how he conducted his review of the work that has been done on reading. His observations appear to miss the research and publications of such scholars as Chris Anson, Michael Bunn, and Debrah Huffman. Keller claims, for instance, that much of the work on reading is in the field of education, and that it addresses the needs of developmental students rather than all students. This observation about reading is fair enough; it also helps to account for why so many faculty members in composition and elsewhere see working on reading as either a K–12 issue or as remedial/developmental.

Keller concedes that reading is an essential counterpart of teaching writing, a point consistent with that taken in the work of the scholars mentioned just above. In getting to this point, Keller notes that reading is in composition instruction because new literacy requires it, but at the same time, seems to be largely excluded from writing classes because faculty think students should be able to do it well without instruction. Similarly, in discussing the overall situation of reading in composition, he notes that the CCCC added reading as a proposal category in 2008 after some years of omitting it; for 2018, a new system for proposals does not include a separate hashtag for it. The earlier change is a good thing since he correctly observes that the findings of the Citation Project show students' minimal engagement with sources, suggesting reading problems (Jamieson; full disclosure: Jamieson's work appeared in a special issue of *Across the Disciplines* on reading and writing across the curriculum for which I was the guest editor). Against this complex background, the main question he set out to answer is this one: What is reading in the twenty-first century?

Keller's third chapter provides the major finding of his study, which is that widespread speed and overloading of information plus competition and work expansion have changed literacy practices. He begins by explaining how he drew his participants and collected his data. The details of his

approach appear in an appendix with key information about the project: the high school setting, the participants (nine students, one teacher, and the director of the high school library), and his “exploratory” method, including the interviews with all participants and some family members. The appendix includes this useful information but omits the list of questions that he used; some of these are included in the discussion of the results, but they are integrated in the text and a little hard to find. The chapter deals with perceptions of literacy on the part of both teachers and students. Much of the reading students do, if they do it, is fast, unfocused, and not strategic. The result is, according to Keller, that “Acceleration reinforces literate behaviors and rhetorical choices that value speed and efficiency” (88). Although reading helps provide models for their own writing, students feel forced to read fast due to the accumulation online. Ultimately, students need both fast and slow rhetorics—fast for online communication and slow or slower for school work. Teachers need to teach the full range of these rhetorics (Keller 96); writing program administrators can make good use of this advice.

Chapter 4 examines three key concepts that bear on students’ attention to reading in the contemporary environment: multitasking, foraging, and oscillating. For the students, directing attention depends on context and purpose, so complex multitasking, foraging, and oscillating between deep and superficial reading may be appropriate depending on “hyper” and “deep” attention. These are variable choices according to Keller’s sources. While multitasking is common and not necessarily a bad thing, students spend a lot of time oscillating, or moving between fast and slow reading, depending on their needs. If they are “foraging,” (i.e., purposely looking across sites to find items of interest or use (117), multitasking is not bad, since they will return to what they find through this process in order to read more slowly. But then, readers may use “oscillating,” defined as “reading at shallow levels as they quickly skimmed and scanned the screen, sometimes skipping across the surface; and reading deeply, not necessarily the whole text, maybe just a fragment” (118). This approach for reading is not so valuable despite Keller’s claim to the contrary. And when Keller states that “Most of the scholarship on multitasking bears little relation to our concerns as teachers of reading and writing” (103), I wrote “REALLY?” in the margin. I think multitasking and oscillating are quite problematic; research on these and other superficial reading practices, which result, for example, in the “quote mining” strategy found in the Citation Project research discussed by Jamieson, must continue to address the concerns these strategies raise. For teachers and writing program administrators,

Keller says the findings suggest they need to teach students to be strategic in how they use their attention and various rhetorics.

Exploring the troubles students have with reading and writing in and out of school, Keller presents a more detailed look at several of his participants in chapter 5. Students have multiple opportunities for imitation and remix, but then they feel somewhat confused. Imitation, discussed at length here as a teaching approach, has a mixed past and present as it has had good and bad uses in teaching, discussed extensively at a 2007 conference at the University of Michigan and in a subsequent book including many papers on the pros and cons of imitation (Eisner and Vicinus). Imitation of frames and forms occurs in *Wikipedia* and in fan fiction; this imitation is a byproduct of acceleration, accumulation, and the social life on the web. Computers also allow students, and everyone else, to switch quickly between reading and writing, leading to remixing, use of memes, and various complex rhetorical options. Keller's research shows that students have little sense of reading strategies. They do not appear to know or be able to address these complex options effectively. Thus, Keller says, the field needs a "more nuanced understanding" (152) of these issues.

Using his case studies, Keller proposes several areas for further research in his conclusion. I found this section not as focused as it could be, since he has a good overall point to make: Accumulation leads to acceleration as readers must use fast and slow literacy technology strategies (such as multitasking, foraging, and oscillating) in a situation-defined literacy environment. The cases show that print and digital are mixed, as are the roles of reader and writer, much more now than in earlier times; reading pedagogy can help students be better readers and writers by focusing on four areas for additional research: accumulation/acceleration, variation in context, fast versus slow rhetorics, and multitasking.

Because everyone is involved in "chasing" literacy, Keller's case studies shed useful light on what students are actually doing with reading and writing on and offline now. These insights can help WPAs upgrade their programs' approaches to reading in the present environment. While Keller does not specifically address the need to teach students how to read and understand extended nonfiction prose, his analysis of contemporary reading practices taken together with Wan's explanation of the importance of reading and literacy for citizenship will help WPAs understand why more and better attention to reading is needed.

Among the three books discussed here, Carillo offers a volume that addresses writing teachers directly; unlike both Wan and Keller, she presents a way for administrators and teachers to help students with reading, specifically in writing classes. To support her view, she has three goals: to

explore what we know about the problematic reading/writing relationship historically; to understand the problems and potential of prior research on reading; and to clarify the current place of reading in first-year composition. Carillo makes clear that she is not concerned with the impact of digital technology on reading; instead she cites the claim of respected University of Connecticut reading scholar Donald Leu that “foundational literacy” is becoming more important in the face of the changing literacy landscape (15). In her introduction, the goals are stated clearly, as is her definition of reading: “a deliberate intellectual practice that helps us make sense of—interpret—that which surrounds us” (6).

Because the history of reading in composition is pertinent to the goals of the book, and because there will be an exploration of this history, Carillo provides a brief overview, noting that reading has lost its place in composition for a variety of reasons. Among other things, faculty see the need to teach reading per se as “remedial” work, with all the pejorative implications of that word. Like Keller, she cites the desire of composition to separate itself as a discipline from literature, wanting to establish a distinct field of composition studies. Two other developments—the field’s use of “literacy” to subsume reading and the field’s acceptance of the “social turn”—both served to move composition studies away from a clear focus on reading. But Carillo’s review of the literature on transfer (102–16) and the need for “mindful reading” make clear that reading *is* essential to student success (21–44) and warrants a place in the writing classroom (hence the title) and elsewhere in higher education.

The second chapter reports on a survey Carillo completed under the auspices of a major research grant from CCCC. She used the WPA listserv as a source of her sample population for the survey (full disclosure: I was a participant in the survey and follow-up interview process). In the 2012 survey, she had 100 WPA-L subscriber volunteers self-reporting on reading, plus 93 students via instructors. The results show 48% teaching “rhetorical reading” and 15% teaching “critical reading,” both variously defined by the participants. Carillo is appropriately cautious with her small sample of self-selected volunteers and her reliance on self-report answers to the survey questions (presented in an appendix). She did follow-up interviews in person or by phone with both faculty and students. Her bar graphs show that her participants are a thoroughly experienced and educated faculty, drawn mostly from four-year institutions. She points out, correctly in my view, that while faculty call what they do with reading by various names, they are all working to help students focus on reading together with writing. However, about half (51%) of the faculty said they were “not secure” (32) in their

knowledge of and ability to teach reading per se. In classroom practice, a majority use some form of modeling or imitation (39-42).

To get at the history of the role of reading in the teaching of writing, Carillo provides a retrospective survey in her third chapter. This overview includes the development of New Criticism in literary studies in the early 1940s, the founding of CCCC in 1949, the first Dartmouth Seminar in 1966, and reader-response theory in the last few decades; these are four developments that provide context for how reading relates to composition now (53). This overview begins by noting a point that Wan also makes about the fact that college enrollments grew significantly in the period 1890–1910 and publishers provided texts intended to support teaching writing to less-prepared students by less-prepared teachers. Rhetorically based composition is separated from reading; it draws on personal experience, not sources (Carillo 50). Carillo draws on Salvatori and Donahue to support the claim that over time, the idea that students might learn to write through reading was discredited. However, some more recent research on what psychologists call implicit learning suggests that this claim is not correct (see the work of Reber and Berry).

In chapter 4, Carillo expands her discussion of the work published between 1980 and 1993. Overall, reading fell out of composition studies as a byproduct of separating from literature and of being caught in the crossfire of the field in a quest for self-definition. Scholars and researchers agreed that reading and writing are related or connected complex processes that both entail the construction of meaning. They also agreed on the need to focus on “*how* texts mean rather than *what* they mean” (Carillo 94). (Cross-media reading now is reviving interest because it allows for the complexity of the process.) Based on the work of Haas and Flower, according to Carillo, reading involves cognition. This chapter reviews much of the published work of this period, albeit from a composition and literature or literary criticism point of view, overlooking the work from a psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspective, such as that done by Troyka, Sternglass, Jolliffe, and others. Carillo devotes a few pages to a strong textbook with a reading focus: Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading* (95–100). With this historical review complete, she devotes the rest of the book to providing teachers with the resources to teach reading.

In the fifth chapter, Carillo applies her survey findings to the usefulness of taking up new work on transfer. The chapter reviews work that shows metacognition and transfer come from education and psychology; teaching of reading requires use of these concepts so students learn to recognize and generalize mindful reading. In this chapter and the next, she explains the work that has been done on transfer of learning, largely focused on writing,

rather than on reading. But transfer studies reveal some key points equally useful to reading. In particular, although transfer is hard to teach, it is clear that students can learn to recognize key principles and to generalize strategies and principles of reading (Carillo 105). To teach students to read, any approach must have a metacognitive/transfer framework. Carillo's proposal is "mindful reading," which provides a framework with contextual awareness; it is not an approach or teaching strategy.

She defines mindful reading more fully in the final chapter, observing that mindful reading requires students know about reading, context, and their own strategies, so they can learn and transfer reading abilities through assignments like the passage-based paper (PBP), reading journals, and reading about reading (RAR). The formal definition of mindful reading is reading with "intentional awareness of context and perspective" (Carillo 118). It is clear from the work of the Citation Project that students do not read in this way, so Carillo's approach is definitely needed. The goal of mindful reading is to help students develop knowledge about reading per se as well as an understanding of a variety of types of reading and strategies for reading effectively. Ways of reaching this goal can vary a lot, as also suggested by Keller, but understanding the context of reading is essential. Carillo argues students should also read about reading, but at the same time, will benefit from practice with a reading journal (135) and with passage-based papers (132) to help them achieve the goal.

In the epilogue, Carillo sums up the findings from her survey and historical explorations, leading to five main recommendations. These focus on expanding work on reading in composition classes and beyond. One essential step will be to include background and preparation in reading in graduate programs in composition studies. More studies of transfer that attend to reading and do not get side-tracked on matters of text selection will also be useful. The professional organizations for writing instructors can also help by revising major policy statements to include reading as well as writing to a much greater extent than they currently do. These recommendations are all quite sound and completely warranted; if anything, Carillo might have pounded the table a bit more strongly to demand, encourage, or require that WPAs and other leaders adopt these moves and others to enhance students' reading abilities in first-year writing and across the curriculum. The book ends with three very useful appendices: an annotated bibliography of recommended readings; handouts from Carillo's own professional development workshops; and finally, her survey questions and a description of her methodology.

All three of these authors have thought-provoking messages for writing program administrators. In particular, WPAs might use what is in these

books to make more intentional choices about their programs of classroom instruction; WPAs will need to continue to address the complexity of reading and writing in the face of the changing technological landscape and the ongoing need for the foundational skills in every course. Students' use of technology is not going away and neither is the diversity of our society as shown by Wan's exploration of the situation in the early twentieth century in the US and its similarity to present-day American society. Students then and now need to understand a wide range of opinions, but they can be taught to make more intentional use of technology to address contemporary "anxious times" and achieve effective literacy. In particular, students can learn to read extended nonfiction prose effectively as they become engaged citizens; such reading can help them understand not only one another but also the writers of detailed arguments with which they may or may not agree. Students can also be taught to deal more effectively with accumulation, acceleration, and their habits of multitasking, foraging, and oscillating as they read on paper and on screens and as they write in response to what they read. However, social networking, text messaging, and other online literacy practices are not the answer to everything; writing classes, and libraries are good places to "chase literacy" in order to learn how to find and follow a full argument about a topic or issue, as Keller suggests. Achieving these goals warrants the application of Carillo's "mindful" framework in program leadership and in the classroom because all of us need to understand what is happening as technology plays an increasing role in our literacy activities, our relationships, and our lives. There are various ways to achieve the outcome of intentional critical literacy as these books suggest; each makes clear the responsibility of writing program administrators to move programs in this direction.

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