

*Book Review*

## College Reading and College Writing: How Far Have We Come?

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Sullivan, Patrick, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau, editors. *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*. NCTE, 2017. 386 pages.

How fundamental is reading instruction for the college writing classroom? Moreover, how fundamental is a reading pedagogy—a set of reading principles and instructional approaches—for the training of college writing instructors? Over the last three decades, a number of scholars have called for more explicit reading instruction in composition courses (e.g., Bartholomae, Brent, Salvatori and Donahue, Adler-Kassner and Estrem, Jolliffe), and the last five years have witnessed a revival of interest in the topic (e.g., Carillo, Keller, Horning and Kraemer). Yet in both composition studies research, and in the training of new composition instructors, reading remains a stubbornly minority concern. As Howard Tinburg notes in *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*, composition studies' default position has long been to consider reading instruction as “someone else's business” (247). This is an abdication of responsibility that *Deep Reading* both critiques and seeks to rectify.

Challenging the presumption that reading can be taught and learned merely through an instructor's thoughtful selection of assigned texts, *Deep Reading* instead forefronts the issue of student engagement—which is to say, the different kinds of attention demanded by different college-level reading tasks and situations. As relates specifically to the college writing classroom, the collection explores the ways these varied kinds of attention can support varied kinds of writing and thinking, and its chapters offer a range of concrete activities and theoretical models by which instructors can help students to recognize and exercise those attentional differences. Setting

out to revise composition studies' longstanding complacency about reading, the collection also brings together a lively variety of perspectives, fields, and methods—from two-year institutions to four-year colleges; from education studies to composition studies; from writing instructors who draw from anecdotal experience to literacy researchers who report on empirical studies to students themselves, reflecting on their own educations as reader-writers.

Of all these approaches, it is the most empirically minded of these chapters that makes the most substantive claims for how and why explicit instruction in reading, and investigation of reading, should be more robustly incorporated into the teaching of writing. These chapters defy our common clichés about reading entailing merely “close” attention and instead expose the breadth of what college-level reading truly requires. In “Device, Display, Read: The Design of Reading and Writing and the Difference Display Makes,” as one example, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Jacob W. Craig, Matthew Davis, and Michael Spooner explore the material qualities of digital reading and writing, the digital being, after all, the medium through which almost all college students now compose and circulate meaning. Through their analysis of how these different “devices” and “displays” shape distinct “interpretive experiences,” habits, and expectations (41), the authors make a persuasive case for raising both writing instructors' and students' awareness of—and their control over—their varied digitally mediated tendencies as both readers and writers. In “Unruly Reading,” Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue, who have long argued for writing classrooms more explicitly committed to activating reading-writing connections, focus on specific in-class activities—in this case, guided reading exercises and students' productively “unruly” responses to paraphrase, summary, and annotation tasks. Their thoughtful, student-centered research sheds new light on what might seem an outdated set of classroom assignments, with the authors showing how such exercises—once freed from their traditionally “mechanical” trappings (325)—can help students realize, and reflect on, the complexities of their text-based constructions of meaning. In “Building Mental Maps,” Rebecca S. Nowacek and Heather G. James attend to the varied schema students bring to reading outside the humanities, expanding on recent scholarship about writing transfer and field-specific epistemologies of knowledge building. Skeptical of a reading paradigm that unquestioningly privileges the close and the sequential, the authors explore instead the kinds of readerly engagement typical for STEM fields—the “nonlinear” and “selective” strategies (297) that these authors further argue are grounded in a student's crucially “personalized map” of a knowledge field (301). As such, this chapter fruitfully complicates the common presumption that an English studies framework can sufficiently explain the many

modes of academic reading (and of academic writing) required of college students; it offers an important counterpoint to writing studies' frequent default to more narrowly literary characterizations of critical engagement with texts. And in "Writing Centers are Also Reading Centers: How Could They Not Be?" Muriel Harris, as a final example, draws on her longtime writing center research to theorize the learning processes through which reading-writing connections are enabled. Defining the three main modes of reading that she sees informing writers' invention and revision processes, Harris offers a useful taxonomy of reading-writing interactions that could apply equally well to the drafting and peer review processes so crucial to the college writing classroom.

Indeed, the secret to these chapters' success lies in the specificity of their inquiries, and their attendant willingness to cut through pieties about what college students need to do to read productively. These authors offer distinctly new frameworks, terms, and concerns: the nature of necessarily "nonlinear" modes of reading, or the roles played by device and display. Along with chapters by Ellen Carillo, Howard Tinburg, David A. Joliffe, and others, these reconsiderations also challenge the presumption that composition instructors—tasked with preparing students for a wide range of future literacy demands—should offer students no direct guidance in how to read in varied deliberative ways. For new writing instructors—and the instructors of those instructors—these chapters both highlight the complexities of college reading, and offer a variety of practical strategies for developing students' awareness of, and skill at leveraging, such complexities.

However, the potential of *Deep Reading* is also hampered by the fact that these varied perspectives never quite cohere. This variegated quality would hardly be worth noting if the book were presented as a map of the many lively debates that currently define this subfield. Indeed, a number of these chapters, perhaps accompanied by Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy* and Doug Brent's still salient *Rhetorical Reading*, would give new instructors of composition a useful grounding in reading-in-the-writing-classroom pedagogy. But the collection also misleadingly suggests, both in its introduction and its title, that its chapters together offer a unified set of recommendations all centered on a single new construct, despite the fact that this is a model to which many individual chapters in themselves do not conform.

This is especially regrettable because a few of the collection's more broad-based claims are quite promising. Perhaps the most suggestive of these is Sullivan's, taken from his chapter, also titled "Deep Reading," in which he argues that the kind of reading demanded of college students—a constructive, inquiry-driven, and often multi-textual exploration—should

in itself be theorized as a “threshold concept” of writing. Such a proposal is provocative for the two category shifts it implies: first, that the study of reading can (and should) be understood by the same complex and intellectually challenging frameworks that writing studies has used to theorize writing and elevate the intellectual status of writing research and teaching (perhaps most vividly in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s edited collection *Naming What We Know*); and second, that the complex and challenging work of reading can and should be theorized as a fundamental dimension of writing, and thus as deserving far more attention not only in the classroom but also in writing studies research and the more general building of composition curricula. Moreover, Sullivan’s proposal is well-supported by a number of other chapters in this volume, all of which show that writing instructors, and writing programs more largely, would do well to recognize reading—once it is acknowledged as a rhetorical, reflective, and multi-perspectival activity—as a core element of students’ writing development.

Unfortunately, however, “deep reading” remains itself too diffusely defined to function persuasively as a threshold concept. As Sullivan himself points out, quoting Jan H. F. Meyer, Ray Land, and Caroline Baillie, a threshold concept “permits a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something . . . without which the learner cannot progress” (ix). Because they are “troublesome,” threshold concepts operate by contrast to more common, outsider assumptions about a specialized practice. Yet Sullivan’s concept of “deep reading” lacks this essential contrastive precision. Following Maryanne Wolf and Kelley Gallagher, Sullivan sets his concept against “memorization, recall, and shallow engagement” (342); by his telling, “deep reading” instead “requires reflection, curiosity, humility, sustained attention, a commitment to rereading, consideration of multiple possibilities, and . . . ‘intellectual generosity’” (342). But this definition, while acceptable enough, also simply reiterates those homilies of critical thinking and habits of mind that statements like the WPA outcomes have long promoted, and which have long excused composition’s view that college writing instructors need give reading no more specific attention than it has ever received in the past. Especially if proposed as a threshold concept, the construct of deep reading needs far sharper elbows than this—distilled into a set of declarative principles sufficiently distinct from—and, indeed, “troublesome” to—some of our more comfortable pieties about what constitutes academic reading. Similarly, and as relates to our existing theorizations of college level reading, I was left wondering what precisely distinguished this mode of “deep reading” from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s concept of “strong reading”; or from Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Dona-

hue's promotion of a reading style that deliberately leans into difficulty; or from Kathleen Blake Yancey's early explorations of how engaged reading and reflection intersect. Perhaps more critical engagement with Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai's own 2009 empirically based investigation of "deep reading" may have helped Sullivan to draw these finer distinctions and to build a stronger case for the specific demands faced by college writers (and subsequently faced by the writing instructors who teach them). But in this volume, the work of Maryanne Wolf is more gestured toward than it is critically leveraged, especially as relates to the new context—the writing classroom—to which Sullivan seeks to apply her claims.

Further, and as noted above, a number of the volume's chapters implicitly challenge the purportedly comprehensive applicability of this "deep reading" concept, thus also challenging the editors' claim that the collection shows consensus on this matter. Indeed, this volume misses a crucial opportunity by leaving obscured and unanalyzed some of the more salient questions that a number of its chapters begin to suggest. Nowacek and James's STEM-specific findings, as one example, contrast with the more universalist, literary-minded construct of reading and engagement that Sheridan Blau and Jason Courtmanch promote, yet this important disagreement goes unremarked upon, both in the chapters themselves and in the volume's introduction. Another unremarked upon flashpoint concerns the seemingly "natural" quality that some of this collection's authors attribute to inquiry-driven reading, and their attendant suggestion that "deep" forms of textual engagement are encouraged by well-chosen texts themselves—and thus their textual features alone—instead of by social collaborations, explication, reflection, or focused instruction. The chapter by the student-author Merideth Ross, for example, reflecting on her experience as a home-schooled reader and writer, implies that the most advanced forms of college-level reading and writing emerge from specifically *unschooled* forms of engagement; and that the unstructured and uninhibited nature of her own reading education resulted in a cross-task fluency once she arrived at college, permitting her "to seamlessly transition from writing poetry to writing basic research papers to writing annotated bibliographies to writing academic articles" (92). Yet such a claim conflicts dramatically with the more explicitly scaffolded, directive pedagogies so assiduously researched and recommended here by Salvatori and Donahue, Carillo, Nowacek, and Katie Hern, among others—in which students are pushed to experiment with and reflect on the kinds of knowledge that can only be coaxed out through reading practices that come less naturally, and that are, indeed, as a threshold concept theory would have it, troublesome and challenging. Much more could have been made of such divergent perspectives and

pedagogical commitments—especially since they illustrate how deeply entrenched and contradictory our ideologies about literacy learning can be, even those that at first sound most mild and unassailable. A truly robust retheorization of college reading needs to put these dueling constructs into dialogue, not imagine such conflicts away.

In this way, Howard Tinberg's chapter—which I read as beginning to articulate an alternate construct to “deep reading”—might have provided a more effective umbrella concept for a collection (and a topic) still teeming with many internal debates. By Tinberg's telling, the most attentive forms of college level reading are marked by their specifically rhetorical sensitivity and flexibility, with the reader constantly and deliberately shifting among a variety of aims, attitudes, contexts and assumptions. Recalling the much-ballyhooed but sorely under-scrutinized work of Louise Rosenblatt—who, along with Wolf, is more of a touchstone for this book than a foundational thinker whose ideas are rigorously engaged—Tinburg argues that students become both “more strategic and self-aware as readers” (251) when they understand text-based meaning as context- and purpose-specific: “fluid, formed and reformed as it performs certain activities within discursive communities and as a product of readers' sensibilities” (248). Tinburg then buttresses this reading model with an inventory of the replicable classroom tasks by which such strategies and self-awareness might be realized and exercised. In useful, teacherly detail, Tinburg shows the way many standby writing-classroom activities—including peer review, talking-back commentary, and rhetorical analyses of scholarly sources—provide instructors with built-in opportunities to help students to recognize and develop such variously “selective and judicious” reading practices (251). For newly minted writing instructors uncertain how to help students navigate new and challenging reading assignments and demands, Tinberg's chapter offers an invaluable crib sheet. Yet the chapter also explains—at that crucial theoretical level—exactly why such practices require classroom explication: because such reading does not come naturally to many readers, nor does it develop in a vacuum, with an individual merely staring hard at a page. Instead, Tinberg argues, read-meaning emerges from what he calls “shared expertise” (253)—which is to say, text-based meaning is communally constructed by readers bound by some common sense of context-specific aims, values and assumptions, or a “discourse community,” as he reminds us, whose rules and beliefs student-newcomers need to be empowered to access. After all, if these aims, values, and assumptions remain invisible or inchoate, student newcomers will have little recourse from their previous habits, mere guesswork, or frustrated disengagement.

If there were a “threshold concept” of writing that concerned the activity of reading, Tinburg seems to be beginning to put his finger on it here. The idea that different kinds of rhetorical, readerly engagement are determined by discourse communities, context knowledge, and readerly purpose, as much as by text and text-type, pushes back on the long-standing educational myth that advanced readers have merely trained themselves how get from a text what a text’s features alone are telling them to get, and that “good reader” status is universal across contexts. Against this myth, Tinburg’s focus on rhetorical flexibility manages to attend to readerly “engagement” but resists capitulating to our field’s more familiar and somewhat vapid recommendations that such engagement entails a kind of all-enveloping affective immersion in texts, a construct which—truth be told—is still overly bound to definitions of reading as primarily sequential, personally inspiring, and overlaid with humanistic virtues (caution, humility, care). As Jolliffe has long pointed out—and some of the other authors included here echo—this reading construct, while appealing to the more literary-minded writing instructors among us, fails to account for the sheer varieties of tasks, contexts, and media that college students must navigate as readers. As a collection, *Deep Reading* gives voice to such arguments and counterclaims, but leaves the internal debates they represent uninterrogated and somewhat submerged. Rich with suggestive research and provocative re-theorizations, the volume also highlights how much more researchers have to investigate and uncover about exactly what constitutes college reading knowledge, and how such knowledge works to supports college writing in turn.

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