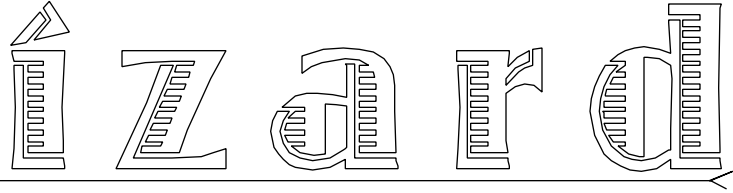


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Teaching Our Students to Read

adapted from *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, by John C. Bean

Teachers bemoan their students' lack of basic skills in many areas of academic work — reading texts, thinking critically or writing well. Whose responsibility is it to bridge these skill gaps? Who has time to include skill building in their overloaded class period? How will our students ever improve without these essential skills?

John Bean discusses why students struggle with one of these basic skills — reading their texts — and gives some good suggestions for how teachers can help.

Causes of Students' Reading Difficulties

Misunderstanding of the reading process

Experts read difficult texts slowly and reread often. They hold confusing passages in mental suspension, having faith that later parts of the essay will clarify earlier parts. They "nutshell" passages as they proceed, writing gist statements in the margins. They interact with the text by asking questions, expressing disagreements, linking the text with other readings or with personal experience.

In contrast, our students imagine that expert readers are "speed readers." If they do not understand the text on first reading, they assume that it is the teacher's job to explain the text to them. Since teachers regularly do so, the students' reading difficulty initiates a vicious circle: the teacher's willingness to explain the text ("I have to lecture on this material because students are such poor readers") deprives students of the very practice and challenge they need to grow as readers.

Failure to adjust reading strategies

Besides understanding how skilled readers read difficult texts, students need to know that a good reader's reading process will vary extensively, depending on the reader's purpose. Students face enormous amounts of reading and must learn to distinguish among different reading purposes. Some reading tasks require only skimming for gist, while others require the closest scrutiny of detail. Poor readers do not discriminate in their reading time as a function of reading purpose.



Students face enormous amounts of reading and must learn to distinguish among different reading purposes.

Difficulty in perceiving the structure of an argument as they read

Unlike experts, inexperienced readers are less apt to chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions. Their often indiscriminate, almost random use of the yellow highlighter suggests that they are not representing the text in their minds as a hierarchical structure.

Difficulty in assimilating the unfamiliar

New college students have trouble walking in the shoes of persons with unfamiliar views and values. No matter what the author really means, students translate those meanings into ideas that they are comfortable with. The more unfamiliar or more threatening a new idea is, the more students transform it into something from their own psychological neighborhoods.

Difficulty in seeing a text's rhetorical context

Students do not see what conversation a text belongs to. They do not understand what question is being addressed or why the writer was troubled by it. They have difficulty perceiving a real author writing for some important reason out of a real historical context.

They do not appreciate the political biases of different magazines and newspapers, the varying degrees of scholarly prestige of different journals and presses, and the significance that skilled readers often give to the reputation of the author. These problems are closely related to the following one.

Difficulty in seeing themselves in conversation with the author

Inexperienced readers do not interact with the texts they read. Readers must will themselves to play two opposing roles: an open-minded believer who can succumb to the text's power, and a skeptical doubter who can find weaknesses in the text. In playing these roles, an experienced reader carries on a silent conversation with the text's author.

Lack of cultural literacy assumed by the text's author

Students do not have access to the cultural codes of the text—background information, allusions, common knowledge that the author assumed that the reading audience would know.

Inadequate vocabulary

Using a dictionary helps considerably, but often students do not appreciate how context affects word meanings, nor do they have a good ear for irony or humor. Moreover, the texts they read often contain technical terms, terms used in unusual ways, or terms that have undergone meaning changes over time.

Difficulty in tracking complete syntax

Although students may be skilled enough reading today's college textbooks, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of primary sources. When they are asked to read a complex sentence aloud, their errors in inflection reveal their difficulty in chunking grammatical units; they have trouble isolating main clauses, distinguishing them from attached and embedded subordinate clauses and phrases.

Difficulty in adjusting reading strategies to the varieties of academic discourse

Students do not understand that prose styles, discourse structures, and argumentative strategies differ from discipline to discipline or from historical period to historical period. They do not understand, for example, that scientists often read the introduction and discussion sections of scientific reports quite carefully but skip the methodology section and only skim the findings. To take another example, they do not understand that historians read primary sources quite differently from the way they read journal articles. They also do not understand why some writers labor to make themselves clear through highly mapped, thesis-up-front structures while others seem to seek obscurity through a difficult style and complex, organic organization. They have particular trouble with exploratory, digressive, process-oriented styles or with highly metaphorical or allusive styles.

Strategies for helping students become better readers

Explain to students how your reading process varies with your purpose

Take some class time to discuss with students your own reading processes. When do you skim texts? When do you read for gist but not for detail? When do you read carefully? Under what circumstances do you take notes on a text or write in the margins? How much are you influenced by the credentials of an author? How much does the political bias of a magazine or newspaper affect the way you read a text?

Show students your own note-taping/responding process when you read

Just as it helps students to see a skilled writer's rough drafts, it helps them to see a skilled reader's marked-up text, marginal notations, and note card entries. Explain what you underline and why. If your reading is part of a scholarly project, show them how you take notes and how you distinguish between what the author is saying and your own reflections on the material.

Teach students how to write "what it says" and "what it does" statements

Show students how to write "what it says" and "what it does" statements for each paragraph.

A "what it says" statement is a summary of the paragraph's content – the paragraph's stated or implied topic sentence. A "what it does" statement describes the paragraph's purpose or function within the essay.

Examples:

-Provides evidence for the author's first main reason

-Summarizes an opposing view

-Provides statistical data to support a point

-Uses an analogy to clarify the idea in the previous paragraph

-This paragraph gives another strategy for improving reading

Teach students about structure by having them write "what it says" and "what it does" statements. Asking students to write out "what it says" and "what it does" statements for each paragraph in a scholarly article in your field will ensure not only careful reading of the article but also

increased awareness of structure.

Develop ways to awaken student interest in upcoming readings

Students' reading comprehension increases when they are already engaged with the problem or issue that a reading addresses or are otherwise interested in the subject matter. The trick is to arouse students' interest in a text before they read it, so they are already participating in the conversation that the text belongs to. Here are two strategies that might work:

1) Devise interest-arousing pretests

Students will get a preview of the content of the reading, as well as an awareness of their own gaps in knowledge. If the test can make the content seem interesting or important, it may help awaken curiosity.

2) Assign an exploratory writing task or a collaborative group task on a problem to be addressed in the reading

Prior to assigning a reading, ask students to do their own thinking about a problem or question that the reading will address. For example, prior to assigning Plato's *Crito*, the teacher could present the following problem:

In Crito, Socrates has been sentenced to death and waits for his execution. The state, perhaps embarrassed by its decision to kill Socrates, has made it easy for him to escape from prison. In this dialogue, Socrates' friend Crito urges Socrates to escape and go into exile. Socrates argues that his right action is to stay in prison and accept execution. Try to predict the arguments that both Crito and Socrates will make. Give at least three good reasons for

escaping and three good reasons for staying and dying.

Having role-played the dialogue in advance (as either an at-home journal assignment or an in-class group task), students will be interested in comparing Plato's actual argument to the ones they predicted.

3) Help students see that all texts are trying to change their view of something

If students become more aware that texts are trying to change their views in some way, they can become more active in their desire to interrogate the text by deciding what to accept and what to doubt. Ask students to freewrite responses to the following trigger questions:

a. **Before I read this text, the author assumed that I believed ... [fill in].**

b. **After I finished reading this text, the author wanted me to believe ... [fill in].**

c. **The author was/was not successful in changing my view. How so? Why or why not?**

Teach students to play the "believing and doubting" game

The "believing and doubting game" teaches students the reader's double role of being simultaneously open to texts and skeptical of them. To help students practice believing and doubting, the instructor can design exploratory writing tasks, in-class debates, or small group tasks to encourage students to see both strengths and weaknesses in any author's stance.

The crucial habit that critical thinkers must develop is the active disposition

to seek out views different from their own. Students must be taught to argue for and against each important point of view, belief or conclusion that they are to take seriously.

Scholarly articles are voices in a conversation that students need to join. Writing in the margins or otherwise responding to texts will begin to make sense when they see their responsibility to imagine and consider alternative points of view and thus to evaluate an author's thesis, reasons, and evidence.

Focused reading notes

Have students take reading notes on sheets of paper divided into four or five columns. For a heading at the top of each column, give students a key word identifying a theme or concept that you want them to be aware of as they read. For example, in assigning *Crito*, the instructor might give students headings such as "Crito's Values," "Socrates's Values," "Use of Analogies," "City or Family versus the Individual," and "Your Own Questions or Responses." Students then enter reading notes in the appropriate columns. Students find that guidance such as this gives them a focusing strategy for their reading. Once students learn this system, teachers can provide new "note headings" for each course reading. As students become skilled at discovering key issues and values in a reading, they can begin developing their own headings.

Summary/response notebooks

A summary/response notebook is a more structured version of a reading log. It requires that students make two opposing responses to a text: first to represent the text to themselves in their own words and then to respond to it. The following instructions are typical:

For each of the readings marked with an asterisk on the syllabus, you will write at least two pages in your notebooks. The first page will be a restatement of the text's argument in your own words. You can write a summary, make an outline, draw a flowchart or a diagram of the reading, or simply take careful notes. The purpose of this page is to help you understand as fully as possible the structure and details of the author's argument. This page should help you recall the article in some detail several weeks later. Your next page is to be your own personal reflections on or reactions to the

article. Analyze it, illustrate it through your own experience, refute it, get mad at it, question it, believe it, doubt it, go beyond it. I will skim your notebooks looking for evidence of serious effort and engaged thought.

Imagined interviews with the author

A change-of-pace strategy is to ask students to write dialogues in which they interview the author or otherwise engage the author in arguments with several antagonists (Francoz, 1979). Often the instructor asks the student, as interviewer, to play devil's advocate, arguing against the author's views and then inventing the author's response. Students generally enjoy the creativity afforded by this assignment, as well as the mind-stretching task of role-playing different views. Some teachers ask groups to conduct mock panel discussions in which one group member plays the author of the article and others play people with different views.

If you're interested in trying any of these ideas and need help adapting them to your class, TEP would be glad to work with you on this. Contact Georganne Cooper, 346-2177, gcooper@oregon.



Field Work & Telecommunications

Mary Wack, Professor of English
Center for Teaching and Learning
Washington State University

The Freshman Seminar program at Washington State University has developed something like vicarious fieldwork in its Interdisciplinary Participant Investigation Project.

Cedar Mesa, Utah was the field site where several graduate student "field operatives" went with a digital video camera, a laptop, and a modem. They sent back a variety of information from the field of interest to the approximately 18 disciplines (360 students) participating in the project through linked classes, from Anthropology to Zoology.

The operatives sent back stills, text, and digital video (including several minutes' interview with a European hitchhiker).



This information was posted to the IPIP Website to which each Seminar was linked through its Virtual Classroom. Each class could then send down requests for further data to the operatives, as they developed theses/hypotheses that they wished to investigate further. The operatives sent back stills, text, and digital video (including several minutes' interview with a European hitchhiker, as well as interviews with locals). This

material is now being incorporated into the students' ongoing assignments in the Freshman Seminar Virtual Classrooms: making "knowledge" out of "data" within the framework of a discipline.

The Website can be viewed at:

<http://www.salc.wsu.edu/ipip.html>

Five Good Reasons to Be Videotaped

Usually there is a look of horror on instructors' faces when I suggest they consider being videotaped in their classrooms. Some explain that the fear is based in the idea of being "found out." It will be discovered that they haven't a clue about teaching. While they know this may be irrational, the fear remains nonetheless.

In spite of this, I'd like to suggest some important reasons to visit or revisit the idea of having your teaching videotaped.

Number One

The Teaching Effectiveness Program staff can help you most when they have a concrete idea of what is happening in your classroom. Videotaping provides this focus. General and theoretical discussions of teaching are useful and handouts provide some ideas, but the accurate and specific information a videotaping supplies

allows the instructor and the faculty development consultant to deal with the unique teaching issues involved in that particular course. We'll see both strengths and weaknesses and be able to talk about specific things that can be done to improve your teaching. In this way, it is more likely that changes will occur.

Number Two

Videotaping is a unique form of feedback. It is the opportunity to become a student in our own classroom and to experience our own teaching as our students do. It helps bring our assumptions about what we are doing and the reality together in revealing and helpful ways.

Number Three

Videotaping provides a record of our teaching. This can be reviewed as often as necessary and used as a benchmark to monitor changes over time. This record can also be included in a teaching application (a teaching portfolio). It is not uncommon these days for institutions to request a classroom videotape as part of the application materials for teaching positions.

(Continued on p. 7)



Lecturing Clearly

A Review of Basic Strategies

Provide a preview of information prior to an explanation.

The overview should be short and precise, providing a statement of the overall idea to be presented, the importance of the information to be learned, and a statement that outlines the structure of the content to be presented.

Give students an introductory analogy.

This technique allows students to link unfamiliar material with a concept they already understand. This approach encourages student involvement, creates a positive student perception of the lecture, and increases student achievement with regard to both short term and long term retention.

Organize information within a step-by-step lesson sequence.

When exposed to too much material at one time, student learning is reduced. Structure the lecture sequentially, arranging information logically, and breaking down material into clear, coherent, and explicit steps.

Assess student learning when information is being given.

The instructor should actively and frequently determine if students understand the material that has been presented. Specific strategies to engage students could include discussion questions, written responses, summaries, analytical lists, what didn't you understand?, in-class journals, formative (ungraded) quizzes, thumbs up/thumbs down, written problems, etc. Whatever the technique, the goal is systematically and explicitly to see if students understood what was being presented.

Signal transitions between information.

Transitions allow students to switch attention between topics, maintain focus and reduce confusion. The key is to make the transition explicit, then to relate the previous information to the new information.

Use multiple examples to illustrate information points.

Well chosen examples illustrate and clarify the conceptual material being presented by making the abstract concrete and understandable. Multiple examples lead to increased student learning and retention of material. When providing examples, teachers should 1) use examples that are appropriate for the level of the student; 2) carefully explain why the example is significant and relevant; 3) use examples in close proximity to the conceptual material being presented, and 4) obtain student feedback to see if the examples are understood.

Stress important points during explanations.

Lecturers need to draw students' attention to the material that is most crucial. It is particularly important to stress anticipated difficult points, because detailed, redundant explanations for difficult concepts can lead to increased student learning. Other techniques include 1) writing and underlining key concepts on the blackboard; 2) enumerating points; 3) using voice inflection or pausing after a point; or employing verbal signals such as "It is important to remember."

Provide for brief pauses at appropriate times during the lecture.

As a result of rapid teacher-talk, students often are not given adequate time to process information. This has two consequences: 1) students have trouble taking good notes and 2) they often cannot make sense of what is being said. The amount of notes a student takes correlates positively with achievement. Yet, while teachers talk at a rate of 120-240 words per minute, many students are only capable of taking notes at a rate of 20 words per minute. Pausing periodically for a much

as two minutes leads to a significant increase in both short-term and long-term recall.

Review information frequently.

Periodically during a presentation, but particularly at the end of difficult material, review and summarize the main points. In addition, reviewing the entire presentation at its end, summarizing main points, is particularly effective.

While teachers talk at a rate of 120-240 words per minute, many students are only capable of taking notes at a rate of 20 words per minute.



Five Good Reasons to Be
Videotaped
(Continued from p. 5)

Number Four

We rarely have time to spend in fellow instructor's classrooms. These days technology has allowed us to at least peek at each other's websites and borrow ideas and resources. The same kind of sharing could happen with a departmental video library. This could be a particularly useful resource for beginning teachers and graduate teaching fellows. Experienced professors who are looking for new approaches and teaching strategies could learn a great deal from their colleagues.

Number Five

Let your friends and family see you in action!

Monopolizers

Barbara Gross Davis, Tools for Teaching, offers some suggestions for ways to handle dominating students in your classes.

- Break the class into small groups or assign tasks to pairs of students.
- Ask everyone to jot down a response to your question and then choose someone to speak.
- If only the dominant students raise their hands, restate your desire for greater student participation: "I'd like to hear from others in the class."
- Avoid making eye contact with the talkative.
- If one student has been dominating the discussion, ask other students whether they agree or disagree with that student.
- Explain that the discussion has become one-sided and ask the monopolizer to help by remaining silent: "Larry, since we must move on, would you briefly summarize your remarks, and then we'll hear the reactions of other group members."
- Assign a specific role that limits participation to the dominant student (for example, periodic summarizer).
- Acknowledge the time constraints: "Jon, I notice that our time is running out. Let's set a 30 sec. limit on comments from now on."
- If the monopolizer is a serious problem, speak to him or her after class or during office hours. Tell the student that you value his or her participation and wish more students

contributed. If this student's comments are good, say so; but point out that learning results from give-and-take and that everyone benefits from hearing a range of opinions and views.

TEP would like to add the following:

- *At the beginning of the term, collaboratively construct some "discussion guidelines" with your class and address the issue of how to handle people who monopolize the discussion.*
- *Remind students at the beginning of the discussion that sharing the "air time" is an important element of a successful discussion*
- *Spend some time helping your students understand that in a good discussion there are many roles to play beyond having your say and many important skills to develop like - learning to become a good listener*
- *Ask new questions that take the discussion in a fresh direction*
- *Challenge someone's contribution with a provocative question to the group*
- *Help clarify the contribution of a classmate who is having difficulty expressing him/herself.*
- *Invite someone who has not yet spoken into the conversation.*



Do we fail to realize what we are teaching?

From Walden Two, B.F. Skinner, The MacMillan Co.

Professor Burriss, is thinking to himself:

"For several years the conviction had been forcing itself upon me that I was unable to contemplate my former students without emotion. The plain fact was that they frightened me. I avoided them upon every occasion and tried to forget them. So far as I could see, their pitiful display of erudition was all I had to show for my life as a teacher, and I looked upon that handiwork not only without satisfaction, but with actual dismay.

What distressed me was the clear evidence that my teaching had missed the mark. I could understand why young and irresponsible spirits might forget much of what I had taught them, but I could never reconcile

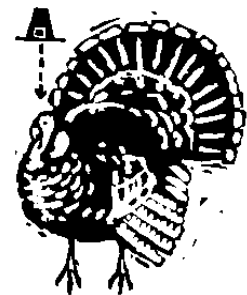
myself to the uncanny precision with which they recalled unimportant details. My visitors, returning at commencement time, would gape with ignorance when I alluded to a field that we had once explored together—or so I thought—but they would gleefully remind me, word for word, of my smart reply to some question from the class or the impromptu digression with which I had once filled out a miscalculated hour. I would have been glad to agree to let them all proceed henceforth in complete ignorance of the science of psychology, if they would forget my opinion of chocolate sodas or the story of the amusing episode on a Spanish streetcar.

I came to wait for these irrelevancies as a guilty man must wait for references to his crime."



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Contributors: J. Bean, M. Wack,
B. Davis, B. Skinner, G. Cooper



Have a restful, rejuvenating break!