

Active and Critical Reading: Verbal and Visual

In these projects, VKP researchers explore how students develop an understanding of reading as a multi-layered activity. Reading a variety of texts-literary, historical, and cultural, and in a variety of genres and modes, verbal and visual-students encounter texts through pedagogies that emphasize annotation, rereading, questioning, and connecting to multiple contexts.

Relevant Questions

- ◆ How do we engage students in reading as a complex, multi-layered activity?
- ◆ Which pedagogies and technologies can help make reading practices visible and best develop students' ability to read actively and critically?
- ◆ How can we introduce students to disciplinary and cross-disciplinary practices of reading?
- ◆ How do we engage students with advanced and difficult texts?
- ◆ How do we lead students to slow down their reading practices and develop self-awareness of their own processes for understanding texts?
- ◆ How do we engage students in complex reading practices developmentally and incrementally?
- ◆ How can we make visible the multiple contexts that enable



Active and critical reading provides students with an opportunity to engage with text through asking questions and becoming aware of reading practices that improve comprehension. To understand the nature of student close reading practices, view an overview description of active and critical reading prepared by faculty members interested in this skill. This poster is the result of discussions and writing from the VKP Summer Institute 2004.

Poster Examples

Sherry Linkon
Youngstown State
University

[Project Overview](#)
[Poster](#)



Susan Oliver
Cerritos College

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Randy Bass
Georgetown University

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and limit reading of texts?

- ◆ How can we teach reading through multiple literacies?

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Patricia O'Connor
Georgetown University

[Project Overview](#)
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David Jaffee
City University New York

[Project Overview](#)
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Wyn Kelley
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology

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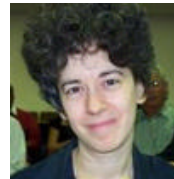
Peter Felten
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Active and Critical Reading

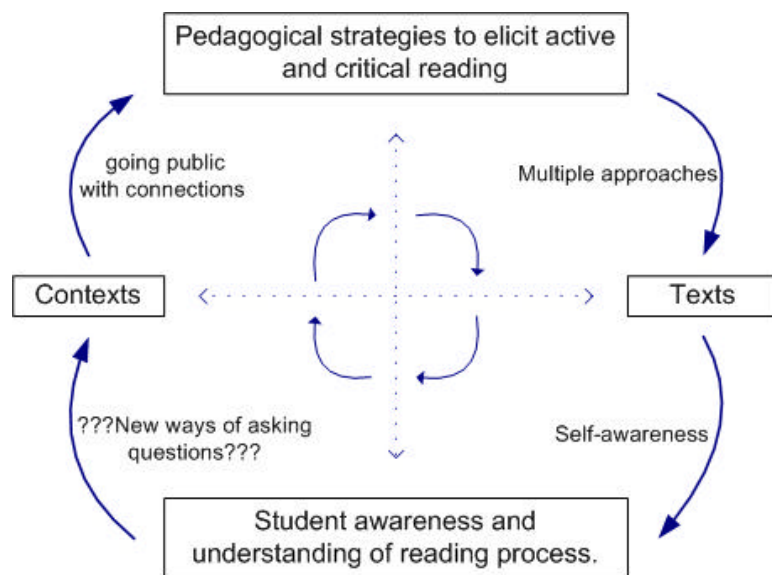
Reading Thematic Group

This poster begins to map the field of active and critical reading as demonstrated in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) projects in the Visible Knowledge Project. It connects, as well, to exhibition posters that synthesize work and methods that cut across projects. We also link to posters of individual SOTL projects up the VKP Gallery.

[Return to VKP Gallery](#)

Student Engagement with Reading

An illustration of what we've learned about active and critical reading.



This diagram illustrates how readers approach texts with ways of reading based on prior contexts, familiar disciplines, and a variety of "comfort" levels.

Readers then work through various intermediate processes to discover multiple ways of reading.

Informed by these models, readers become increasingly aware of their own practices and try out new ways of questioning not only texts, but their readings of texts in a variety of contexts.

Thus readers make critical connections to prior works and to other contexts. They begin to transfer their active methods of readings to new situations, starting the cycle again, internalizing the process.

Questions

Findings

Models

Strategies:

How can we introduce students to disciplinary and cross-disciplinary practices of reading?

How do we engage students with advanced and difficult texts?

"By using Word's Comment feature, students are able to create individualized, written "think-alouds," facilitating both the production and collection of student artifacts as well as providing a record of their reading process. These artifacts can then be studied to see what they reveal about the reading process and about students' reading development over the course of the semester. "

What we've learned about Classroom Practices for Teaching Active/Critical Reading

-- It is possible to change the reading habits students bring to the classroom.

-- Progress comes from a process of rehearsal and strategic instruction.

-- We can break down instruction into developmental and incremental steps.

How VKP researchers model recursivity:

[Rina Benmayor](#) (Professor of Oral History; Latina/o Cultural Studies; Hispanic Literatures) assigns students to critique prior classes' digital stories.

[Sherry Linkon](#) (American Studies Professor) encourages students to make nuanced readings that shift their first impressions.

VKP Researchers use annotation techniques



[Sharona Levy](#) (professor of Education) has students [annotate text](#).

[Randy Bass](#) (Professor of English and American Studies) discusses his [Inquiry into Student Reading Practices](#) in which he assigns verbal think aloud activities.



--Sharona Levy.

Questions

Findings

Models

Self-Awareness:

How do we lead students to slow down their reading practices and develop self-awareness of their own processes for understanding texts?

How do we engage students in complex reading practices developmentally and incrementally?

What we've learned about student awareness and focus on the reading process

-- It is possible for us to identify reading practices.

-- In order to improve students' reading, we have to engage them in the reading process.

-- Students' learning will be enhanced by their awareness of themselves as readers.

In the poster by [Joe Ugoretz](#) he discusses how students make [personal connections](#) to literary themes and life issues.

[Arthur Lau's](#) LaGuardia Community College students use BlackBoard postings, and create their own personal essays to help them understand the autobiographies and biographies of others. Their personal essays at the end of the term show significant adjustment, using many more features of the professional writers and awareness of common struggle as they depict their pasts.

Questions

Findings

Models

Texts and Contexts:

How can we make visible the multiple contexts that enable and limit reading of texts?

How can we teach reading through multiple

What we've learned about Developing Expert Ways of Reading

-- It is only possible for us to help our students make *progress*, not for us to move them from novice to expert readers.

-- Expert ways of reading provide a useful model for students' reading.

-- Texts are in dialogue with

How to relate these ideas to your classroom

Literacies Across Genres

One key way to expose students to the variety of contexts which inform reading of texts is to engage them in learning about reading texts from a variety of genres. Students in these courses learn to read and connect images, sound, and "traditional" texts.

literacies?

historical and cultural contexts.



At USC, in English professor [Alice Gambrell](#)'s class, "Writing Machines: Gender and the Mechanics of Story-Telling," students examine texts as physical objects that are the products of many histories, and of many hands and minds.



Georgetown

University English Professor Patricia E. O'Connor asks her [Appalachian literature](#) students to amplify their readings of novels by creating webpages that connect authors' depictions of the region with historical, cultural, economic, and literary texts.



City

University of New York History professor [David Jaffe's course](#) asks students to read photographs with an eye to learning to think visually as historians.

Open Questions: Plans & Possibilities

- What are the qualitative differences and similarities among reading strategies?
- How do institutional contexts affect our students' learning of reading?

Balancing Structure & Open-endedness

Sherry Linkon

How can we help students learn to read and research cultural texts in meaningful and complex ways? This project explores the difficult balance between structure and open-ended inquiry. The goal is to evaluate whether a structured but open-ended assignment helped students gain understanding of critical reading as a complex, recursive, contextualized process of exploring genuine questions.

The Challenge of Teaching Critical Reading and Research

This project grows out of my on-going research on students' learning in interdisciplinary courses. One of the key challenges I've wrestled with is the difficulty of teaching students to read texts deeply and to do research in meaningful ways. [more...](#)

Key Findings

- The unconventional nature of this project caused some discomfort for students, but for many the clear structure, broken down into manageable steps, and the open-endedness of the project facilitated deeper and more

American Genres: The Immigrant Novel



Photo by Lewis Hine

[ENGL 3780: American Genres--The Immigrant](#)

ENGL 3780: American Genres

American Genres is an upper-division literature course. The students represent several different majors -- English, Integrated Language Arts (for pre-service teachers), Professional Writing and Editing, and even Psychology. The focus of the course is helping students learn how to read and analyze literature as part of a genre. [more...](#)

The Inquiry Project

The major project of the course was a semester-long "inquiry project" in which each student explored his or her own questions about an immigrant novel that we had not read as a class. Students completed a series of

critical analysis. [more...](#)

- The clear structure and opportunities to practice some of the inquiry activities in class provided support and guidance, so that students were able to learn from the project despite their uncertainties. [more...](#)
- The recursive nature of the project encouraged students to rethink their reading of their novels, rather than clinging to their first impression or interpretation. Their work became deeper and more nuanced. [more...](#)
- Even though the project did not explicitly invite students to do so, many used historical and other non-literary resources very well. [more...](#)

[Novel](#)

Links with Other VKP Projects

My project shares some common themes with several other VKP projects. Like Randy Bass and Peter Felten, and my YSU colleagues Stephanie Tingley and Martha Pallante, I'm exploring issues of how students read and how to foster better reading. Like Teresa Goddu, I'm interested in exploring strategies for helping students learn how to pursue complex research in cultural studies. [more...](#)

assigned tasks, but these tasks were designed to allow them to pursue whatever aspects of the book interested them. [more...](#)

Links

[Immigrant Novels Inquiry Project](#)

Defining Critical Reading

As I begin looking at students' portfolios more closely, I have identified several qualities that are central to good critical reading:

- a habit of inquiry, expressed by posing questions throughout the reading and research process
- connectivity, a habit of exploring how an individual text connects with other texts and ideas about a period, theme, or issue
- recursivity, which can mean both rereading a text and revisiting an issue or question
- self-awareness, as in the ability to notice and reflect on one's own experiences and thoughts over time
- the ability to synthesize ideas from the reading and research process while also remaining open to the possibility that further exploration would yield different insights. [more...](#)

Links

[Defining Critical Reading](#)

Pop-up Annotations from Balancing Structure and Open-Endedness

Sherry Linkon

Challenge of Teaching Critical Reading and Research Annotation: As Randy Bass has noted in his work on students' reading of cultural texts, one of the challenges of teaching literature is getting students to shift their focus from reaching conclusions to asking good questions. Engaged critical reading, in which students explore contradictions, tensions, and problems in a text rather than striving to find the answer, requires not only a more complex, recursive, contextualized approach to reading but also an open-ended approach to research. Students must learn to ask and pursue questions but also to revise their questions based on what they learn along the way.

In my previous round of research, I noted that students seemed to see the research process as linear and closed. They wanted to know exactly what steps to take in order to find the right answer or the right amount of material. So even though they were pursuing original research, they seemed to be constrained by their perceptions of what it meant to write a research paper in a college course. As my triad partners pointed out when they read excerpts from students' papers, students were more engaged in the process when they wrote more informally, and their final papers seemed more formulaic and closed.

During the triad conversation about my work, Rina Benmayor asked a great question: What if you didn't have them write a formal paper, but instead designed an assignment that focused on the process? And so I did. This poster reports on what I did and how it worked.

Key Findings Annotation 1: I met with each student about a third of the way into the course, and many of them commented on their uncertainty about what was expected of them. They said that the activities that made up the project were new to them, and several expressed confusion about the lack of a final paper. As one student put it, "If I'm not writing a final paper, then why am I doing all this work?"

By the end of the semester, however, a number of students recognized the value of spreading their reading and research out over time. As Andrea wrote at the end of the course, the "piece-by-piece" structure of the project helped her "get a better view of the big picture. . . . I was able to go back and look at my progress, change things that weren't working, and move forward. Each assignment built on the previous one, and it was helpful to have smaller, concise assignments to work with rather than big, ambiguous ones."

While every student pursued the same basic tasks, the emphasis on inquiry and the lack of a formal final paper encouraged students to explore whatever they found interesting, rather than trying to fit their work into a familiar model of a research paper. As Mark wrote at the end of the course, "I liked doing the portfolio because I got to work at my own pace and take my time to find the answers. I liked how I was able to discover MY answers instead of the answers that I thought Dr. Linkon wanted me to find. . . . I was able to learn more because of this strategy because I had no fear throughout the entire process." As Mark's comments suggest, what began for many students as uncertainty led, ultimately, to a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Key Findings Annotation 2: Without some modeling of these new activities, students would have felt even more uncertain about how to proceed. Even though most of the inquiry activities were unfamiliar, students said they appreciated having it all mapped out at the beginning of the semester and having the work proceed in relatively small chunks.

Key Findings Annotation 3: Rikki's work on John Okada's novel, "No-No Boy," illustrates the relationship between recursivity and cultural analysis especially well. She began with a very literary question about "No-No Boy," trying to understand Okada's style. "Is there some connection between style and subject matter," she asked, "or is this just the way Okada writes?" The question emerged from her experience as a reader, beginning in the reading journal. As she wrote in the tensions assignment, "I liked the way it was written, but there were some parts that were confusing the first time I read them, and I had to go back to make sure I was reading it right." As she began researching, Rikki found very few articles that discussed Okada's style, but she kept finding materials that examined the book as a reflection of the experiences of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Initially, she saw these materials as "background information" that could help her "understand the situations of the book from the characters' points of view." As she looked more closely at her sources for the secondary source comparison, Rikki learned about aspects of Japanese-American culture that intrigued her, and these kept leading her further away from her initial question. When she wrote her first 'Revisiting the Inquiry' piece, she began by reflecting that she hadn't found anything to help her with her initial question, but then she made a crucial critical move: she used the material she had found to look again at the issue of style. As she explained, "The way the book is written seems to emphasize the underlying themes of disconnection and a separated self. Okada separates himself from Ichiro by not using first person, but still allows Ichiro's voice to be heard through various internal conversations he has. . . . The scattered style could be an extension of the split feelings experienced by Ichiro, and many other Japanese living in America at the time." Given a shorter time period, and without the prompt to reflect on what she had learned about her inquiry question, Rikki might well have either written an analysis based on her own initial reading or switched her topic entirely. But the structure of this project and the nature of the revisiting assignment encouraged her to deepen her own analysis by linking it with what she had learned about the cultural context.

Key Findings Annotation 4: This project did not explicitly require or even encourage students to incorporate cultural context (the research assignments focused on locating critical articles, but I didn't define what kind of critical articles they should choose), but it did create conditions that helped students do so. To some extent, simply forcing students to slow down and keep examining one text throughout the semester helped make this possible. The multiple short assignments required students to keep looking at and thinking about the books they were reading. This recursivity, I believe, helped students move toward more culturally-grounded readings. This worked especially well for students whose books had clear political or cultural connections, though on some level, of course, all novels about immigration invite such an approach. Students examining Amy Tan's "The Joy Luck Club" and Frank Chin's "Donald Duk" explored the uses of Chinese mythology in those books as well as in Chinese-American culture. Two students who

examined T. C. Boyle's "Tortilla Curtain" sought out data on the living conditions of illegal Mexican immigrants, in order to assess the novel's realism, and in one case, this led to critical reflections about the purpose of exaggeration in the novel. Students reading John Okada's "No-No Boy" found important insights into the book by reading materials about the experiences of Japanese-Americans in World War II internment camps.

Links with Other VKP Projects Annotation: Randy's work focuses on the reading process, with a strong emphasis on helping students to slow down and put off reaching conclusions. Reading, he suggests, should be contextual and multifaceted, and we can facilitate these habits by helping students become conscious of the process of critical reading. Peter, too, like Stephanie and Martha, is concerned about reading processes, though they are all looking specifically at how students read multiple kinds of texts. In all of these projects, though, the central question is about how we teach new and more complex ways of reading. Teresa uses a web construction project to help students develop their skills in locating and analyzing historical and cultural materials. While the project is different from mine, the challenge of engaging students in the research, asking them to read cultural texts in complex ways, and helping them move beyond familiar strategies to engage in deeper thinking is very similar.

ENGL 3780: American Genres Annotation: The course focused on the Immigrant Novel, exploring the characteristics and boundaries of the genre, considering what we could learn from the genre, and examining the very idea of studying literature in terms of genres.

This was the least overtly interdisciplinary course I've taught in a long while, though we did look at some historical and demographic sources. I think, though, that the question of teaching students to do meaningful research cuts across literature and interdisciplinary studies courses. In some ways, of course, the challenge is easier in this situation. In my next course, I will test this inquiry model in a more interdisciplinary setting.

The Inquiry Project Annotation: Project tasks were designed to help students identify good questions to ask about a text, find resources (both primary and secondary) to help them explore their questions, provide opportunities to think about what they were learning in multiple ways, encourage them to change their questions as the project developed, and challenge them to connect their individual work with the projects completed by other members of a "working group" and the course as a whole.

Inquiry Project

Over the course of the semester, you will explore one immigrant novel, chosen from the list posted on WebCT (under Assignments). Your exploration will involve a series of short assignments and a final reflective essay, all of which will form a project portfolio. The short assignments will parallel activities we're completing with the books we're reading and discussing together, but you may also pursue any other activities that seem worthwhile and interesting to you. Your goal is to learn as much as you can about one novel and to think critically and creatively about the significance of that novel.

The inquiry project involves multiple pieces, all of which will form a portfolio on which I will base the majority of your course grade. You'll receive progress evaluations as you turn in each piece, but only the grade on the completed portfolio counts. That means that you can revise the small pieces as many times as you wish, and that you may in the end argue that some parts of the portfolio should be weighted more heavily than others.

In order to pass the course, you must complete all of the following tasks:

1. Opening statement –January 23
2. Reading journal –February 6
3. Tensions in the text –February 13
4. Framing an inquiry –February 26
5. The perfect set of sources – March 6
6. Secondary source overview – March 18
7. Secondary source comparison – March 27
8. Revisiting the inquiry – April 1
9. Concept map – April 15
10. Revisiting the inquiry – April 22
11. Final portfolio, with reflective notes on what you've learned, key moments in the inquiry process, and possible directions for further research – May 1

I will post notes on each of these tasks to the WebCT discussion board, and we will practice them in class before you complete them on your own.

In evaluating your work on this project, I will look for development and performance in the following areas:

- **Critical thinking and inquiry:** The central focus of this project is the inquiry process, which involves expanding, focusing, and deepening the questions you're asking, gaining understanding of the complexity of your own inquiry, and paying attention to connections and disjunctions that emerge as you dig deeper into the study of a single. I am less interested in your ability to find answers than I am in your ability to ask, develop, and pursue good questions.
- **Making complex connections:** The novel you study connects in some ways to the texts we're studying as a class, but how? Here, I'll look for the links you make – whether through method, theme, or attention to elements of the genre – between the text you're studying and the books we're reading and discussing. I'm also interested in how you identify the connections

between the novel you study and the primary and secondary sources you locate. In both cases, connections are usually very complex – revealing contradictions, complications, and multiple meanings and raising new questions. I'll look for evidence that you not only notice connections but that you can also use them to help deepen your own exploration.

- **Self-awareness:** In order to pursue an inquiry well, you have to be aware of your own thinking process. At several points in this process, I'll ask you to reflect on how your understanding is developing and changing. Being aware of your own processes, habits, and even biases will help you be a better reader, thinker, and researcher. Here, I'll look for evidence that you're taking the time to think clearly and critically about your own process.
- **Effective communication:** While there's a lot of value in pursuing an inquiry for its own sake, most of the time our inquiries lead to forms of communication – to a lesson plan, a paper, or a presentation. Part of the value of an inquiry is that it helps other people think about their own investigations. No researcher or teacher completes the entire study of any text. Rather, we build on, argue with, and question the work done by others. In order for that process to occur, you have to be able to communicate your ideas, both what you've found and what you still want to know. Much of the writing in this course will be informal, but you still need to be able to communicate clearly what you're thinking, and if you can make your work engaging and enjoyable to read, all the better. At minimum, I'm looking for clarity. At best, I hope to enjoy reading your work.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING

One of the core learning goals in nearly all of my courses is helping students develop their abilities as critical readers. The term “reading” may imply the simple task of decoding a text, but I use it in a much broader and more complex sense. Critical reading involves a continuing process of exploring and investigating a text, and it works on multiple levels: the text itself, the reader’s interaction with the text, and the interactions of both the text and the reader with their respective contexts. Thus, a critical reading of a text does not end with the text but is always contextualized, and I approach critical reading with the underlying assumption that the significance and “meaning” of any text is multilayered, shifting, complex, and often contradictory. The study of texts, then, pursues the identification of these multiple layers and meanings.

For students, however, this way of thinking about reading can be challenging, in part because it contradicts the assumption they have been taught about texts: that texts have set meanings that are available for identification by the informed reader, and that the purpose of reading a text is to locate and define its meaning. Too often, students’ inquiries are guided by neither their own interests nor any genuine questions. Rather, they read to find “the answer.” More to the point, students have learned that – to exaggerate just slightly here -- “research” means going out to find a couple of quotes to add to their papers to show that they did research.

One reason for this is the structure of learning in higher education, that is, the boundaries of the semester and the expectation that students will “complete” a project during the 15 week term. In many cases, students study an individual text or a small set of related texts in just a few weeks, moving from first responses to final papers in a very short period. In some cases, this is because relatively little time is allotted for research or interpretation projects, while often even when a project is assigned early on, students don’t get started until a few weeks, days, or even hours before the project is due.

Another reason, equally important, is that students have not had training in or experience with genuine inquiry. For many students, reading has become a task to complete in preparation for class and or the first step in finding an argument for an assigned paper, not a process of exploration, reflection, or contextualization. This project explores another approach, one that builds student inquiry into the course structure, that replaces the usual expectation that students will produce a final coherent argument with the expectation that they will pursue their own questions about a text as far as possible in 15 weeks, and that models and provides support for students as they engage in various critical reading practices.

In my upper-division American Literature course, American Genres: The Immigrant Novel, I assigned an “inquiry project” in which each student explored one immigrant novel. The project consisted of a series of about a dozen activities, beginning with a reading journal and culminating in a series of reflective essays that asked students to identify what they had learned so far about the text they were studying. Along the way, they identified tensions in the text, framed questions to guide their inquiry, found

secondary sources of various kinds, analyzed their sources and how they shed light on the novel, and considered how their novel connected with other books in the genre. The final product was not a paper but a portfolio, including all of the inquiry project pieces, including any rewrites the student chose to complete, and a final reflection on the process of learning. Nearly all of the students reported that they found the assignment engaging, challenging, and rewarding, but the fact that they liked it doesn't tell me whether it fully achieved what I intended.

Further, given the widely-held expectation that a formal paper is the best, or at least standard measure of students' learning, this project raises an important research question: how well does a well-structured but ultimately open-ended assignment that does not end with a conclusive product help students develop critical reading skills?

DEFINING CRITICAL READING PRACTICES

Note that “text” refers to all kinds of written, visual, material, and multimedia materials. These ideas *should* be applicable to reading of literature, photography, visual arts, architecture, music, film, and so on.

Self-awareness

Good critical reading requires that the reader not only observe the text but also observe him or her self. Readers bring a lifetime of experience, previous reading, culture, attitudes, and knowledge with them to every text, and this “toolkit” shapes how they read. Good readers are aware of how their own biases, assumptions, habits, and knowledge shape their reading, and they recognize that their own perspective will change over time. In these portfolios, self-awareness is demonstrated through comments about the reader’s history with a text or a group of texts, the reader’s responses, the reader’s biases, positions, attitudes, etc.

Recursivity

Good critical reading requires rereading. It’s impossible to read a text well with just one reading. Rereading allows the reader to see the text again, to focus on specific features and consider how those features fit into the larger content and arrangement of the text. Recursivity may also take the form of returning to a previous question, outside source, or issue, and the same principle applies. Looking again allows one to see with more complexity, depth, and perspective. In these portfolios, recursivity is demonstrated through comments about rereading, seeing again, and thinking again.

Inquisitiveness

Good critical readers ask questions all the time – about the text, the text’s creator(s), the context, themselves, related texts, ideas, meanings, references, everything related to the text. Ideally, these questions become more focused over time, though they may vary from wide-ranging, almost theoretical questions to very specific questions. But specific “informational” questions get one only so far. Critical questioning means asking why things are the way they are, how readers might respond, how a text does its work, and so on. It also means asking questions about one’s own questions, as in “Am I asking something useful? Is this really what I want to know? Why is it important to know *this*?” In looking for evidence of inquisitiveness, look for places where readers pose questions and places where they comment on their own questions. Look, too, for how questions change over time.

Connectivity

Good critical reading uses connections and comparisons with other texts as tools to reveal elements of the text being studied. These two paired ways of looking, connection and comparison, allow the reader to see an individual text as part of and/or different from larger patterns, which may be textual (among a group of texts), historical (ideas and issues of a particular moment in time), geographical (among different texts from different places), and so on. The patterns revealed through connectivity in turn provide clues about aspects of a text to examine further. Thus, connectivity may guide recursivity,

directing a reader to look again at some aspect of the text, or it may prompt new questions, about why a text differs from others or how it carries out a theme that ties a group of texts together. The easiest way to identify connectivity in these portfolios is to look for references to other novels, to the genre of immigrant literature, and to the history of immigration in the US.

Open-ended Synthesis

Ultimately, good critical reading should lead the reader to new insights into the text, as well as (perhaps) insights into the text's context and the reader's own perspective. Synthesis refers to the way new readings are made possible by the four previous elements of critical reading, or, more specifically, the way that readers pull ideas from multiple resources (their own responses, their questions, multiple rounds of looking at the text, and related texts and materials) and by identifying connections between them, explores possible meanings or conclusions. Yet the nature of the other elements of critical reading should make it impossible for a good critical reader to claim any definitive meaning or conclusion, since there is always the possibility that one's own perspective blinds one to possible meanings, that another look at the text would reveal new information, that further questioning could uncover new layers or aspects of the text, and that other texts might reveal new possibilities. Thus, while we might look for places where readers offer arguments and analyses in these portfolios, we should also be attentive to hypotheses and even questions that emerge from self-awareness, recursivity, etc. And any arguments and analyses should somehow acknowledge the complexity of texts and their contexts, recognize their own limitations, and at least gesture towards the possibility of error or that further investigation would reveal a different view.



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An Inquiry into Student Reading Practices in a 19th-century American Literature course

Randy Bass

POSTER: My Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research Program: *This related poster outlines my broad agenda for the scholarship of teaching and learning over a period of years. The poster you are reading on this page represents the most current work in relation to one course, "Reading the U.S. Cultural Past," and the explorations into student reading I have engaged through teaching that course.*

Summary of the Project

This project stretched over several semesters, through multiple offerings of a course called "Reading the U.S. Cultural Past" (formerly 19th-Century American Literature). The focus of this phase of work was on student reading practices. I became very interested in learning more about how students generate initial meanings from their reading, and how what tools they use (or don't use) in order to make their rereading generative and productive. [more...](#)

Four Features of the Pedagogical

Key Findings

- Students' reading protocols tend to jump from first level observations of form, imagery, and tone, to higher level claims about meaning. [more...](#)
- Students lack a method for proceeding with interpretations under uncertainty. [more...](#)
- Students need to learn (and practice) deferring meaning. I came to call this a "protocol for deferral." [more...](#)

Examples of Student Work: Novice

- This is an example of a "first reader" posting that is "average" or novice. It emphasizes plot and talks about the characters as if they were people. It shows little distance from the text as a cultural construct. (click in "[more...](#)" to see sample.)

Examples of Student Work: Intermediate

- This is an example of a "middle or

Design

- Using Think Alouds as an early diagnostic and pedagogy. [more...](#)
- Shifting from written to oral midterm and final. [more...](#)
- Structured Online Discussion. [more...](#)
- Inquiry in online digital archives. [more...](#)

Some Sources For Ideas that Have Influenced Me



[VKP Glossary](#): I have found the writings on "constructivism" and "cognitive apprenticeship" particularly useful.

[Taking Learning Seriously](#): An excellent and important article about learning by Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation.



Building a Schematic of Student Reading

The schema of reading protocols grew out of an exercise we do at Georgetown with faculty that we call the Learning Activity Breakdown. The idea is to identify a learning activity, however defined, and enumerate all the steps that someone has to do well in order to accomplish the task. Then we ask faculty to identify the obstacles to each of the stages. The schematic is linked below.

[Learning Activity Breakdown](#)

This is a schematic of student reading protocols. On the left you will see the list of steps or stages for the completion of a learning activity I have identified as "reading a literary text in order to generate interesting questions." On the right, you will see what I consider to be key "obstacles" to each of these steps or protocols.

[A Hypertext Course Portfolio in American Literature](#)

An earlier study of American Literature and the use of new media, that I wrote.

intermediate" first reader posting. It works effectively with "imagery" and other textual elements. The student sees the text as constructed aesthetically and formally. The posting is limited by the student's fixation on a single possibility for the text based on the first observation of the pattern. [more...](#)

Examples of Student Work: Advanced

- This is an example of an "advanced" posting. It demonstrates a sense of complexity by looking at multiple elements and possibilities, and working them in relation to each other. There is also a sense in which the text is a cultural construct, paying attention to formal elements of the text but within the broader context of cultural forms and influences. (Click on "[more...](#)" to see sample.)

Pop-Up Annotations from An Inquiry Into Student Reading Practices

Randy Bass

Summary of the Project Annotation: My focus in the examination of reading centered on two main themes: student ability to recognize and formulate productive questions about the text (especially ones that would take them into a digital archive of primary materials to learn more); and student ability to recognize "complexity" (i.e. their ability to recognize more than one theme at a time and to hold multiple themes open together and in tandem. These two themes intersect in meaningful ways, as it is only through the synthesis of the two--holding multiple elements open and generating productive questions for inquiry and rereading--that students can develop what I'm provisionally calling "interrogative authority."

Four Features of the Pedagogical Design Annotation 1: I implemented the first key element of pedagogical design as a scholarship of teaching and learning inquiry activity. I wanted to create a context where I could observe--and they could observe--their processes of reading and unpacking a literary text. Early in the semester, students engage in a three person "think aloud" around a literary passage in a story we're reading. Then they create a transcript outline of the session. Then they write an individual analysis of their think aloud, describing and analyzing the "reading protocols" they and their group were using. This turned out to be a very effective pedagogy as well as an inquiry tool.

Four Features of the Pedagogical Design Annotation 2: Because my goal is "flexible performance capability," I decided that conversation about literature and its contexts was a powerful indicator of flexible performance capability. So, as heretical as it is for an English course, the two largest assessments in the course are oral. Both are video taped. In the case of the midterm, I dub and compress the tape onto a CD, and put my comments on as a Word file. Then students are asked to write a brief response where they look closely at two places in the oral midterm, and reflect on how they might have answered questions better or differently.

Four Features of the Pedagogical Design Annotation 3: It is a very important feature of the course that the online discussion continuously reinforces the stages of reading and rereading, especially in the context of asking questions and holding multiple themes open. In order to accomplish this, I created a three "role" system where each week a different third of the class performs the role of "first reader," "respondent" or "synthesizer." This turned out to be very effective, as it structured their online responses "positionally," and created variation in where in the reading process they were going "public" with their ideas.

Four Features of the Pedagogical Design Annotation 4: Think Alouds: I implemented the first key element of pedagogical design as a scholarship of teaching and learning inquiry activity. I wanted to create a context where I could observe--and they could observe--their processes of

reading and unpacking a literary text. Early in the semester, students engage in a three person "think aloud" around a literary passage in a story we're reading. Then they create a transcript outline of the session. Then they write an individual analysis of their think aloud, describing and analyzing the "reading protocols" they and their group were using. This turned out to be a very effective pedagogy as well as an inquiry tool. Oral midterm and final: Because my goal is "flexible performance capability," I decided that conversation about literature and its contexts was a powerful indicator of flexible performance capability. So, as heretical as it is for an English course, the two largest assessments in the course are oral. Both are video taped. In the case of the midterm, I dub and compress the tape onto a CD, and put my comments on as a Word file. Then students are asked to write a brief response where they look closely at two places in the oral midterm, and reflect on how they might have answered questions better or differently. Structured online discussion: It is a very important feature of the course that the online discussion continuously reinforces the stages of reading and rereading, especially in the context of asking questions and holding multiple themes open. In order to accomplish this, I created a three "role" system where each week a different third of the class performs the role of "first reader," "respondent" or "synthesizer." This turned out to be very effective, as it structured their online responses "positionally," and created variation in where in the reading process they were going "public" with their ideas. Inquiry in online digital archives: It continues to be an important part of the course that students move reciprocally between the text and its historical and cultural contexts. The online archive explorations throughout the course are culminated in the final, where students prepared a "document set" in relation to the literary work on which they focus for the final.

Key Findings Annotation 1: As I studied student think alouds, postings, and oral exams, I could observe for the first time quite clearly, how students make this jump from observation to claim. I think it is a holdover from what Sam Wineburg calls "schoolish" literary analysis skills, where having an answer is rewarded over having questions.

Key Findings Annotation 2: If you look at the three-level reading schematic, linked below as a word document, you will see a middle area of protocols that students need to adopt, in some form, in order to build complexity. These skills are in between observation and claims. They, in essence, protocols of "rereading."

Key Findings Annotation 3: Finally, related to the previous point, I realized for the first time ever in my career that what students lack is not necessarily a method for better interpretations, they lack a method for NOT closing down on interpretation. What students need, I now believe, is a method or protocol for 'deferral.' Learning to read so that they can open up a text and defer meaning in the most productive and generative ways - that is the goal of a course design for 'flexible performance capability.'

Evidence of Student Work (Novice) Annotation: "Rebecca Davis' Life in the Iron Mills illustrates a morbidly dark picture of the stagnant life of a mill worker in the mid 19th century.

Every single detail illustrating the life of Hugh Wolfe is set against a shadow of gloomy, dismal colors from his dark inhabitation to his grimy, unfulfilling work under the light of the mill fires. In the midst of darkness, however, Wolfe finds relaxation and solitude in his extraordinary talent of sculpting korn. Eventually, Wolfe is doomed to spend his dying days in confinement after he is sentenced to nineteen years in jail for stealing money from the mill owner's brother-in-law (Mitchell). Wolfe's sentence brings up many questions pertaining to the injustice of the industrial society of the 1860's. Wolfe had lived a depressing existence from the time he was forced to enter the industrial world as a mill worker. Mill workers were never paid enough to make a decent living and their lives were filled with endlessly monotonous and dreary work. The narrator asks in the denouement of the narrative in reflection of Deborah Wolfe's last dwelling at a Quaker woman's house, "What blame to the meek Quaker, if she took her lost hope to make the hills of heaven more fair?" (73). Likewise, who could blame Hugh Wolfe for wanting a life filled with success and happiness? Just as the hungry woman cut in korn which Wolfe had so meticulously sculpted, he also had a deep-rooted hunger for beauty, meaning and justice in his life."

Example of Student Work (Intermediate) Annotation: "Rebecca Harding Davis is candid in her social commentary and packs her story with emotion, some of which seems to be her own. Like Williams, she provides a biased point of view of a cultural element, but unlike in *Fall River*, there does not seem to be another side to this hellish, industrial existence. Davis' creation of a blatantly honest and passionate narrator serves as the guide through a tour of a life, which as the book mentions, is much like that of Dante's vision of hell. In reading the text, I found myself paying attention to the same things that I do each time I wish to extract cultural significance and context through a piece of literature: the word choice, the tone, the characters, the setting, and any references to other literature that may appear. The most striking element is certainly the behavior of the characters. Wolfe and Deb are characterized endlessly as hopelessly impoverished, and as a reader I found myself looking through Mitchell's eyes. Davis seems to direct this story to every person who is like Mitchell, who might be robbed by a street urchin but at the same time have his own sense of humanity altered dramatically. I wonder what Davis is trying to say as she portrays this dynamic between the powerless intellectual and the hopeless factory worker with squashed genius? Exploring this relationship between Wolfe and Mitchell further, it seems that there is a spiritual connection, turning both of their minds to the metaphysical. The prose reflects this metaphysicality in its references to the scriptures and certainly to Dante's *inferno*. The doctor remarks as Mitchell laments over his spiritual revelation, "You quote Scripture freely" and Mitchell fires back vehemently, "Do I not quote it correctly?" The portrayal of the mill as Hell is very striking and inescapable. The flames, the grasping statue, the half-naked, emaciated bodies, the darkness, and the glaring references to Dante point our minds to this *inferno*-mill connection."

Example of Student Work (Advanced) Annotation: "Our recent discussions have focused on three concepts, objectivity, contextualization, and authenticity. We began to discuss the reciprocating a relationship between reading a text for its meaning and its social/cultural commentary. All this discussion occurred, while focusing on *Fall River* and related texts. However, these ideas carried over into our reading of *Life in the Iron Mills*. When first reading

the text, I began to wonder about the work as a whole and as separate pieces. In reading it there were three fields of questions that I started to formulate. I questioned the confusing parts (mostly language and imagery), the complete text, and the cultural aspects of the work. The opening description of the town and the mills was rather straight forward, but the shift into the narrative and later passages proved challenging. Davis's character introductions were rapid and confusing, until further reading. The phonetic spelling of the dialect also proved challenging. "That was the mystery of life"? This phrase and its variants provided much stimulus for thought and questioning. Why would the author be so direct to include this again and again? While we touched upon them in class, the last two paragraphs are quite confusing. What does the author feel about the sculptures? Does the author believe in hope? Is there any resolution? On the whole the author's narrative technique is interesting and direct. The shifts from recounting interactions and dialogue to direct discussion with the reader are quite interesting. Not only are they interesting, but they immediately provoke questions. First, why this approach? What is the goal in the author's communication with the reader? Aside from the narrative structure, the themes at hand lend themselves to questions. What is the apparent conflict between art and the harsh reality of the industrial labor? Why does the author bring up Deb's deformity? Light and dark are typical subject matters, but what purpose do they serve in this work? In addition to the artistic attributes of the work, the text is clearly grounded in a different culture, about which it offers much commentary. Before we can really begin to understand the authors commentary, we must know the cultural context. What were the conditions of the mills like? Did they resemble those in the text? What was the role of women in the society? How were classes divided? What was the role of Quakers at the time? Only after answering these questions could we begin to draw connections between the work and its culture. We could begin to ask the motives of the author. Was she an authentic narrator? Was she objective or did she have persuasive/critical intentions? How does the conflict between art and the established reality reflect on the culture and vice versa?"

“Learning Activity Breakdown”: reading a text to generate researchable questions

Level One: Reading	Obstacles
<p>Novice close reading strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Figuring out the literal meaning • Focusing on words, language: denotation, connotation • Recognizing imagery, figures, tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on some words and not others. • Privilege what they immediately apprehend as most important. • Employing “schoolish” lit class protocols
<p>Questioning strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify what is difficult or confusing • Identify what seems overdetermined • Capacity to wonder about something. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore things that are puzzling (or construing them as <i>failures of their reading</i>, or that they are too obscure to be bothered with.) • Believe they are reading for meaning not questions.
Level Two: Recognizing Complexity	Obstacles
<p>Close rereading strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize how words point to social and cultural practices (institutional discourse) • See character as “consciousness” embedded in social contexts • Think about absence, silence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not know how to think about words as registers of social discourse. • See literary texts as transparent windows onto historical reality.
<p>Deferral of meaning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify more than one kind of idea and its explicit or implicit tension with other ideas. • Build up multiple variables and hold them open together. • Discriminate among critical moments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not have a method for systematically deferring meaning. • Do not know how to think about elements existing in tension. • Want to jump to a state of certainty. • Assume experts know the answer and look for closure.
Level Three: Generating researchable questions	Obstacles
<p>Strategies Preparing for Inquiry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop researchable questions from critical moments or “moments of difficulty.” • Consider how multiple elements can define the parameters of an inquiry (literally and conceptually). • Formulation of inquiry hypothesis to generate movement from inside the text to outside. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume they have to know everything about context in order to speculate. • Don’t have a sense of (or confidence in) their ability to do reciprocal inquiry between text and context. • Do not have experience forming and pursuing researchable questions, because they don’t know where to look and how to look.