

TEACHING READING IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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I grew up in Ossian, Indiana, a town so small it had no library of its own. Nevertheless, I read. From September to May, I read books from the school library. But during the summer, I had to wait for the weekly bookmobile. Every Tuesday, promptly at 1:00 p.m., the bookmobile pulled up just south of the Post Office. I'd stand waiting, as the librarian/driver slowly climbed out of the cab, unlocked the door to the library, set the wooden steps in place, and seated herself behind the check-out desk. As soon as she was settled, I turned in my seven books from the previous week so I could check out seven more. When I had made my selections, I'd put the books in my bike basket and ride home, all ready to read for another week.

I always believed that my love of reading somehow accounted for my relative ease in English classes when school resumed. Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and composition were never difficult; they almost seemed to come naturally. But I didn't really know why—and I didn't find out until graduate school, when I read Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading*. As Smith described the processes of good and poor readers, I could see a definite link between my reading experience and writing fluency. After I read Smith's *Writing and the Writer* and conducted my own research on the reading-writing relationship, my speculations were confirmed: because reading and writing employ similar cognitive processes and rely upon a common text knowledge, experienced readers are usually proficient writers, while inexperienced readers are almost always basic writers.

This thesis is hardly new. Walter Loban was one of the first

to note the reading-writing relationship following his 1976 longitudinal study of children's language development. Since then, studies of the reading-writing relationship have abounded. (See, for example, Lunsford, 1978; Shanklin, 1981; or Birnbaum, 1982.) The conclusions of much of this research have indicated that, particularly for inexperienced readers and writers, a classroom that emphasizes both reading and writing may be more effective than one which teaches writing alone.

But teaching reading in the writing classroom entails more than merely using a reader. To be effective, teachers must understand that reading and writing involve similar cognitive processes and draw upon a common reservoir of text knowledge. Given this understanding, they need to design a course which gradually builds these cognitive skills and increases the writers' knowledge of language by engaging the students in carefully coordinated reading/writing assignments.

One reason why experienced readers are very often proficient writers is that both tasks employ similar cognitive processes. As Frank Smith points out, experienced readers take in chunks of information—series of words—at one time (*Writing* 142). Similarly, good writers tend to develop their ideas in phrases or sentences. Citing a 1976 study by Perfetti and Goldman, Kintsch and vanDijk contend that as a result of this processing, experienced readers and writers have better developed short-term memory (371). In reading, this ability to retain information aids comprehension; in writing, it increases fluency. Experienced readers and writers also approach a text similarly. Research in reading and writing has demonstrated that both processes are recursive. According to Kenneth Goodman, readers comprehend by simultaneously relying on graphic input and on syntactic and semantic information (131). When the newly processed information is unclear, readers refer to prior text to confirm or clarify meaning. Thus, reading involves a constant interaction between reader and text. Writing is much the same.

For most writers, composing begins before pen is put to paper, as, consciously or unconsciously, they engage in pre-writing activities. When writers put their ideas into words, the process becomes recursive as they rely on prior text to confirm, clarify, and develop their content. Herein lies a very important link between reading and writing experience. In her study of the com-

posing processes of college freshman writers, Sharon Pianko found that while experienced writers almost always stop and re-read their texts to plan or evaluate what they have just written, inexperienced writers seldom do. The experienced writers' reading behavior helps them develop "a clearer conception of the content of their essays, in being more critical about what has just been written and what should be written next, and in making stylistic decisions along the way" (20). Pianko believes that this reading process is what differentiates the two groups of writers.

But reading experience influences more than fluency and comprehension. The other day when I was looking through my son's first grade reader, I saw the old rule, "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." I realized that I had totally forgotten the rule and certainly never consciously applied it when deciding how to pronounce or spell a word. Experienced writers don't need to recall very many specific mechanical rules because they have assimilated this knowledge as a result of their reading experience. According to Smith, readers and writers share a common knowledge of conventions (*Writing* 97). This knowledge applies to language use at all levels, from grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling to sentence, paragraph, and text structure. It follows that the greater the variety of texts readers encounter, the wider their knowledge, which carries over and is applied when they begin to write. Experienced readers/writers have an unconscious reservoir of organizational structures to draw upon to fit the contexts of writing situations.

But what about those students who seldom read and are, consequently, fairly poor writers—dysfluent and lacking knowledge of the conventions of written language? We see them every day in the writing classroom, and their number is growing. According to a recent Barton-Gillet education report, only 29% of 16- to 21-year-olds read books (4). In a classroom, that figure translates to ten out of thirty students; the rest are inexperienced readers. We see the results of their inexperience in their writing.

Like the experienced readers and writers, the inexperienced also employ common reading and writing processes. Inexperienced readers tend to read very slowly, usually word by word. Smith maintains that such a focus and pace preclude comprehension (*Understanding* 39). Consequently, these students often perceive the reading process as meaningless. The same focus, process, and

results can be seen in these students' writing. Inexperienced writers very often compose slowly, one word at a time. Hence, composing becomes a long, drawn-out, tortuously slow process. Moreover, instead of producing ideas, too often these writers are more concerned with correctly transcribing words. So even though they may have a specific idea in mind, it is not always coherently reproduced in their writing. Perfetti and Goldman found that as a result of this surface level focus, the inexperienced reader/writer may have an undeveloped short-term memory, capable of holding only a few words at a time (371). This diminished capacity hampers fluency. Yet despite the slow pace, the inexperienced writers' processes are somewhat recursive: often lacking a sense of text structure and, hence, an organizational plan, they may re-read prior text to decide how to proceed. However, given the focus on words rather than ideas, recursiveness seldom improves or clarifies the text. As Sharon Pianko found, the recursiveness lacks both the duration and the semantic focus of the proficient writer's (20).

As might be expected, the inexperienced writer's lack of reading experience results in a deficiency of knowledge about the conventions of writing. Lacking this kind of knowledge makes understanding and retention of mechanical rules and organizational structures very difficult. Psycholinguist David Ausubel explains: "Potentially meaningful material is always learned in relation to an existing background of relevant concepts, principles, and information, which provide a framework for its reception" (76). Students who have not encountered conventions of language in print will not retain the rules which govern their use, nor will they be able to apply them to their writing. Yet, as Sondra Perl found, they do try. Inexperienced writers usually revise; however, due to their surface level focus, their revision centers on mechanical changes which may hurt more than they help. Unfortunately, this surface level focus is very often reinforced when their written products are returned bleeding red ink.

So what to do? The past five years have heard repeated cries for a reunification of reading and writing. Andrea Lunsford calls it "a consummation devoutly to be wished" (51). But reunification implies, indeed demands, more than merely assigning readings in the writing classroom. If we are to help inexperienced writers, we need to change their perception of reading and writing as meaningless exercises demanding first-time perfection by teaching the

processes involved in each. Equally important, we need to demonstrate the reading-writing relationship and engage the students in the acts of reading and writing so that they not only encounter, but apply and therefore assimilate the conventions of language.

The first step towards producing literate students is to break what Janet Emig calls “magical thinking”—the idea that good writing equals first-time perfection. Correcting this misconception involves teaching the composing process, encouraging students to produce unevaluated freewrites and multiple drafts, having them read and respond in writing to peers’ papers, and, most importantly, evaluating the inexperienced writers’ papers by responding more to content than to form. At the same time, we need to immerse the students in reading and writing and make them aware of the similarities between the two. Thus, every reading assignment should be linked with a related writing assignment. But for this to be effective, the students’ comprehension must be improved.

One strategy for raising comprehension is to give the students a purpose for reading. Marilyn Sternglass suggests that prior to a reading assignment, we have the students write a paragraph predicting the text’s content (2). Following the reading, have them write another paragraph comparing their predictions to what they found in the text. The prediction paragraph aids comprehension by giving the students something to look for while reading; the comparison paragraph helps them retain their newly found information by putting it in writing.

Another way to encourage a focus on meaning is to assign a short story and have the students react to it in writing. For example, in his freshman composition class at Indiana University, David Bleich assigns Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and tells his students to write an essay describing which character they identified or sympathized with and explaining why. The classmates then compare their reactions. This opportunity to justify and explain their choices not only enhances comprehension of the reading assignment, but also makes reading more relevant. These linked exercises are particularly effective for the inexperienced or reluctant reader, for by inviting participation in the literary event, they imply that the reader’s contribution is worthy. Thus, reading comes to be viewed as a meaningful process. Too often, students tend to see reading as a passive experience—a

one-way street, involving little or no input from them. It is this attitude, however, which inhibits comprehension. Linked reading/writing assignments help alleviate this problem.

Mapping conceptual ideas is yet another way of building comprehension by linking reading with writing. This strategy has the students identify a text's main idea, then graphically depict its development. Maps can take any form. Flow charts using boxes and arrows or tree diagrams are two of the more popular, but the map can be as individual as the reader. The teacher can demonstrate the variety of possible maps by producing her conception of a text's structure, then asking students to display theirs. For example, I used E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake" and illustrated his movement from present to past in a series of horizontal zig-zagging lines; one of my students also used zig-zags, but vertically. Both served the same purpose. What's important is that mapping helps students follow the progression of ideas while making the information their own. These maps can be used to analyze assigned readings or to clarify the students' own writing. They can also be used to teach organization.

To recognize and clarify text structures, students can be taught to map the organization and relationship of ideas in a reading or writing assignment. Once they have identified the main idea, they can trace its progression or development and thus *see* how a text is organized. This type of exercise also helps students organize their own texts. Prior to writing, maps can be used to tentatively organize a paper; during group work, they can be used to ascertain if organization is clear or logical. For example, in a linked reading-writing class taught by Jim Anderson and Beth Franklin at Indiana University, students were told to bring their draft and a map of its organization to class. There, they exchanged drafts with a classmate, read them, and mapped the organizational structure as they perceived it. Then the author and "editor" compared maps. This feedback made authors aware of their organizational patterns and their effect on a reader.

Another way to teach organization is by having the students write summaries of their reading assignments. Kintsch and van-Dijk have found that summary writing reveals a reader's level of comprehension and makes the writer aware of text structure. Students soon see that the main ideas of a text are usually contained in the first and last paragraphs as well as in the topic sentence

of each intervening paragraph. Summary writing encourages them to look for these main ideas and paraphrase them, both of which improve comprehension. At the same time, reading with what Frank Smith calls “a writer’s eye” makes the student more aware of the conventions of text structure (195). The next step is for the instructor to explicitly draw these parallels and have the students apply their new-found organizational strategies in a writing assignment. By reading and summarizing a variety of texts throughout the semester, the students will become familiar with a number of text structures; by employing these strategies in their own writing, they will eventually internalize them.

At this stage in the students’ development, they can begin to practice synthesizing material. After summarizing two related articles, the students can be taught to combine the material beneath an over-riding thesis in a third, synthesizing summary, which compares, contrasts, or combines main and supporting ideas from both texts. Synthesis skills can be further developed by having the students write a personal reaction to each article they read. Then they can synthesize personal feelings or experiences with information found in the two texts in an essay comparing the student’s point of view to the authors’. This type of assignment not only builds cognitive skills, but also lays the groundwork for a more sophisticated reading/writing assignment: critique writing.

Regardless of the reading assignment, writing critiques forces students to move beyond identification of thesis and supporting ideas to examine and comment on their validity and effect. As students learn to weigh the arguments of published authors against their own points of view, they clarify and perhaps validate their own opinions and engage in higher level synthesis in order to note points of agreement and disagreement. Again, such “audience participation” can make reading and writing more meaningful. It also prepares the students for research writing.

Obviously, the research paper involves reading and writing; equally important, good research writing requires the ability to read, summarize, and synthesize information from a variety of texts with one’s own knowledge. Once students have chosen topics, they can begin research by reading and summarizing each article. Since they will have had previous summarizing experience, the problem of deliberate or inadvertent plagiarism is considerably diminished. With each subsequent article, the students can summarize and/or

critique it and then synthesize information in conceptual maps which help them organize information and simultaneously show them any holes in their research so that they can see what areas need further development. Throughout this reading and summarizing process, the students should also write personal reaction papers to be synthesized with information from the published material. (Macrorie's "I-Search" provides a good format for doing this.) This last step is particularly important for inexperienced writers, who tend to perceive a research paper as a series of ideas copied from notecards with their only contribution being, at best, an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion.

In my experience, the research paper is the point at which students begin independently to rely on and apply the different reading and writing strategies they've learned throughout the semester. Moreover, continually reading articles on the same subject helps them assimilate a clear organizational structure so that when it is time to write their research papers, there is less uncertainty as to how they should organize it. The quality of the finished papers is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of combining reading with writing instruction.

Teaching reading in the writing classroom is more effective than teaching writing alone. The carry-overs in text knowledge make it easier to learn the conventions of language; the similarities in processing help develop fluency; the focus on meaning teaches writers to become readers and makes them aware of the need to clearly organize and develop their ideas. Frank Smith has stated that "learning is easy when it is meaningful" (*Writing* 169). When we teach reading and writing together in a carefully structured format, we put language into a meaningful context. We make it easier for our students to learn.

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