

PROMISING PRACTICE

Leaning Into Difficulty: A Way of Building Knowledge in a Developmental Reading and Writing Course

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barrie McGee is a PhD student in developmental education at Texas State University with a concentration in literacy. She holds an MA in rhetoric and composition and a BA in English (writing and rhetoric concentration). Her research interests include terminology/discourses referencing the field of developmental education and its effects on professional identity, pedagogy, and attitudes of practitioners in the field.

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Recognition of the interconnectedness of the reading and writing processes is not a new concept. Indeed, the developmental nature of reading and writing is shown to have evolved over time (Nelson & Calfee, 1998) and has been the focus of empirical research grounded on three basic theoretical models: shared cognition (two buckets drawing water from a common well), sociocognitive (envisioned as a conversation), and combined-use model (tools that can be used together to build something) (Shanahan, 2016). I am particularly intrigued by the sociocognitive model of reading and writing as a conversation as both mirror closely the spirit of Rosenblatt's (2013) transactional view of the relationship among the text, the reader, and the author. The theory Rosenblatt promoted requires a paradigm shift that problematizes the dualistic notion of subject-object, individual-social, and stimulus-response that are insufficient to represent the recursive, "one process" that the knower, the knowing, and the known enact, each conditioning the other in linguistic activities (pp. 926–927). For example, when a student transacts with a text, they draw from linguistic and

experiential knowledge bases (reservoirs) to derive an interpretation. Difficulties can arise when knowledge bases are inadequate to form a clear understanding of a text, yet working through the difficulties results in structuring new meaning. The work involved in the struggle is generative (Bartholemae & Petrosky, 1986). Rather than an interaction that may close off the opportunity for students to build new knowledge, "meaning" happens during the transaction" (p. 929). Rosenblatt and others (i.e., Bakhtin, 1981; Gadamer, 1975; Iser, 1978) provided sound theories to justify designing fully integrated reading and writing (IRW) courses. To clarify, fully integrated as I use it here is distinct in that it references Rosenblatt's notion of the similar processes that reading and writing share as well as the ideal instruction in which neither reading nor writing are privileged in service to the other but are considered interconnected literacy practices in a dialogically centered classroom. Such instruction, however, is another matter.

As an instructor of the developmental reading and writing course at Texas State University, I am required per state mandate to design the course as an accelerated version of the IRW. Furthermore, I am uniquely positioned as a student enrolled in the program in developmental education to access literature on theory and research relevant to integrating reading and writing to help inform my instructional choices. For example, Bartholemae and Petrosky's (1986) seminal work, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, has done much to help me envision what such a course would look like including, assignments and reflections on student writing and insights of the difficulty underprepared students have imagining themselves as readers and writers. However, it is Salvatori's (1996) difficulty paper assignment, the topic discussed in her article, "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition," which resonates with me as paving a way for students to engage in conversation with the text and to prepare for class discussions by writing a one-page description of any difficulty they noted in a given reading. Drawing from Salvatori's (1996) article, I argue that the difficulty paper assignment provides a flexible framework for instruction in the IRW course that reflects the features of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading and writing and which perceives what I term *leaning into difficulty* as a way to build new knowledge. In the following, I begin broadly with a short discussion on the fundamentals of an IRW course according to Bartholemae and Petrosky

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(1986), and then move into a more specific focus on Salvatori's (1996) rationale for and particulars of the difficulty paper assignment. I expand this view of the difficulty paper by examining its use in Sweeney and McBride's (2015) study to further highlight the flexibility of the assignment to gain insight into student experiences with reading. Final thoughts conclude the essay.

To Begin at the Beginning: The Integrated Reading and Writing Course

Intentionally connecting reading and writing in an IRW course is "to reclaim reading and writing from those who choose to limit the activities to the retrieval of information" in favor of questioning the text through verbal or written responses (Bartholemae & Petrosky, 1986, p. 4). Through such methods of instruction (i.e., questioning the text), teachers offer ways for students to see what they have said, interrogate it, reflect upon it, and revise the representations of their discourse, thereby empowering students through the use of their voices (Freire, 1968) and the active participation in their reading, writing, and thinking processes. The dialectical nature of such a course invites the student to engage in discussions of ideas, which in itself requires a difficult paradigmatic shift in students perceiving themselves no longer as passive receivers of information but as problem-posing actors. Reimagining themselves as readers and writers via their textual performances in the context of college or university is one of the course's goals—and good instruction gets them there.

Specifically, Salvatori (1996) based her conceptualization of the connection between reading and writing as a conversation or dialogue; thus her argument for proposing the use of reading as a means of teaching writing for the composition classroom. Adapting Gadamer's (1975) notion of the dialectical nature of conversation in which "texts...have to be understood, and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, is expressed only through the other partner, the interpreter" (p. 440), her teaching approach views the "act of reading" as interconnected to writing and, therefore, employs relevant introspective reading strategies that make this apparent to the student. While some of her strategies depend upon a specific context, I wish to focus on her more generally applicable strategy, the difficulty paper.

The Difficulty Paper: A Way to Start and Expand the Conversation

Salvatori (1996) prefaced the description of her difficulty paper assignment by referencing Bartholemae and Petrosky's (1986) series of assignments as perhaps an affirmation for privileging the challenging areas of readings that students encounter as a starting point for discussion. Before the collective discussion, Salvatori assigned the difficulty paper, which directed students to write a one-page description of any difficulty with the assigned reading that they had from which she chose a representative sample for distribution. Following, she attempted to guide discussion towards students' assessment of the text feature that deems the reading difficult. For example, are readers unable to recognize text clues, are the reading methods ill-matched for the text, do readers perceive the difficulty as due to being poor readers? The purpose underlying this assessment is to introduce a reflexive strategy that helps students recognize that what they first perceive as difficult is indeed a feature of the text that requires critical engagement. Salvatori finds that the approach often reveals that the students' descriptions of difficulties frequently identify an accurate assessment of the text's argument, such as stating irreconcilable differences with a position on an issue (hence the difficulty with the text).

Another focus Salvatori suggested is using the difficulty to bring students' attention to a possible reading of a text. In her example, students are asked to reflect upon the framing of the argument that the assignment invites, and contrary-wise, what kinds of arguments are then closed off, highlighting the difficulty of adequately representing the multiple perspectives of a complex text in response. The exercise can raise critical attention to the care necessary in reading others' positions and to one's representations of them.

Another use of the difficulty paper is to exercise recursive and self-monitoring reading practices that help to make thinking more visible to students. Should a student begin composing a reading of a text, the instructor may find that an additional, more attentive reading is advisable due to a rushed generalization or unexamined bias that affected her conclusion about the argument of the text. The purpose is not to glean a more correct reading of the text necessarily, but by conducting a review of the steps taken to compose the reading, for example, by marking the areas she

The journey begins with silence from the teacher as students learn to not only find their voice but also to realize they have a voice.

read deeply and areas she scanned can demonstrate for the student how easy it is for a text's argument to be erased due to inattentiveness to its construction.

Previously, I have used the difficulty paper as an assignment for the students enrolled in the developmental reading and writing course. Having only a cursory understanding of the assignment at the time and none of the theory and purpose as proposed by Salvatori, the assignment fell well short of its potential. However, following the Bartholemae/Petrosky and Salvatori models, I hope to work through the difficulty of learning how to implement instruction of the difficulty paper assignment and related exercises in the future. I may also recognize opportunities to adapt the assignment for other purposes. In the following section, I discuss how the difficulty paper was used to examine students' experiences when reading in the composition classroom as an exemplar of such an expansion of the assignment.

Expanding the Use of the Difficulty Paper

Sweeney and McBride's (2015) relied on a variation of Salvatori's (1996) difficulty paper to illuminate the struggles that basic writing students confront while reading for a reading course. The reading course was grouped with a composition course and an editing-for-style course which provided students with additional scaffolding in reading and writing and offered teachers a way to examine the relationship between reading and writing more fully. In preparation for the new course, Sweeney and McBride read both Salvatori and Donahue's (2005) *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* and chose the difficulty paper as an assignment to help support students' reading. Based on discussions in the new course's focus groups, the authors decided to design a more formal inquiry into the students' reading experience using a corpus of 209 difficulty papers collected over 2 years. Sweeney and McBride used grounded theory to analyze the data, which helped them better understand what expectations the students brought to the reading class and the difficulty students experienced in the new context of college. The goal of the study was for the faculty to become better informed on how to respond to the ways students interacted with the critical reading curriculum. The findings of the study fell under the main category, mismatch between reader and writer expectations.

After examining the difficulty papers about the two reading assignments, the findings revealed that students' difficulty was explicitly based on a mismatch between how they were taught to write in the first-year composition course and how the texts were written. For example, the organization of *The New Yorker* piece moved from narration to exposition with no transitions except paragraph breaks. This reading assignment challenged one students' reading

expectation for coherence, unity, and directness, contradicting the instruction of writing with the reader in mind. Another example is the difficulty due to a lack of a clear thesis, another clear directive for beginning writers in a first-year composition class. The expectation for a thesis was framed by writing instruction rather than the reading experience. Finally, the third difficulty that the students had with the reading centered around the length of the article, which delayed locating the point. Sweeney and McBride (2015) noted the sense of frustration of comments in the difficulty paper such as, "there were an excess amount of quotes used from people who I really don't care about and were not of any importance so continuing to read became very tedious...no matter how interesting the subject; the length is something that could make anyone identify as difficult" (p. 600). Overall, a mismatch occurred between instruction—how students were taught to write with the reader in mind—and the writing style of the reading assignments and, therefore, the reading experience for the students.

The implications of the study showed that Salvatori's (1996) difficulty paper was a valuable resource in finding that what students identify as difficult in a rhetorical and critical reading course illuminated aspects of the reading process that typically go unseen: students struggle with a mismatch of expectations they bring to the reading (p. 607). For one, students had difficulty engaging with texts in which there were cultural disconnects and that text-to-self and text-to-world connections were compromised. Secondly, students expect the texts that they read to follow the same pattern as their writing assignments. In this case, Sweeney and McBride recommend telling students when a reading will act differently than their writing but is intended to extend their critical or rhetorical reading practices.

Through the difficulty paper research, Sweeney and McBride (2015) became more aware of how students attempt to assign purpose to the readings they encounter in their reading course, seek to connect the reading, composition, and editing-for-style courses, and how cultural mismatch causes difficulty. In the spirit of Salvatori, they discovered that bringing those connections to class discussions provided a way for students to make stronger reading and writing connections. I found key takeaways from Sweeney and McBride's (2015) difficulty paper research study relevant for the developmental reading and writing course I teach, which include scaffolding expectations for how to read an assignment, folding in instructor reading purpose, and providing class time to discuss the reading process as well as the difficulties. Locating the difficulties of reading assignments offers instructors a chance to make explicit reading and writing connections for students and to emphasize

the value of reading rhetorically and critically.

In their concluding statements, Sweeney and McBride (2015) stated that the study confirmed the benefits of integrating reading and writing while it also revealed ways that it also complicated student expectations but “not in ways that indicate the need for separation” (p. 611). Wisely choosing readings that best suit the purpose of the developmental IRW course remains a concern for me, so I take to heart their reminder to instructors and supervisors to examine the purpose of the readings and the strategies for teaching those readings in support of basic writing students in their reading endeavors.

Conclusion

I have attentively followed the political and policy movements in Texas that led to the mandated implementation of a corequisite model for pairing reading courses with a content-area course at 2- and 4-year institutions and the simultaneous invocation of an accelerated version of the IRW course. I have also observed the responses of instructors and their supervisors to adapt the IRW course at our institution to our legislature’s expectations. While I have been part of that transition for the last 2 years, I acknowledge that the mandate has done much to distract me from knowing where to put my energy in preparation for teaching. Learning on the run has been tough. However, I find that the history of IRW, its theoretical justifications, and the models for course design and assignments has brought the purpose back into focus. Bartholomae and Petrosky’s Pittsburg model, though the impetus of its conception came from concerns for underprepared students at the departmental level of their institution, explicates the possibilities of designing curriculum and instruction that demonstrates a “how-to” practical application of interconnecting reading and writing (and thinking) in the college context. The shift students make from bystander to participant in their learning process through conversing with reading and writing assignments relies heavily upon good instruction. The journey begins with silence from the teacher as students learn to not only find their voice but also to realize they have a voice. How to initiate the conversation, I learned, is possible through the difficulty paper, which Salvatori described as a way to get individual students talking about and recognizing their reading process and to start a dialogue as a community of learners to interrogate the difficulties, to revise them, and to build knowledge from the exercise. The flexibility of the assignment provides instructors with an outline to adapt for their unique dynamic of students, contexts, and purposes and gives instructors a way to encourage students to lean into difficulty as a means to make meaning from their reading, writing, and thinking practices.

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