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Cultivating Critical Reading: Using Creative Assignments to Promote Agency, Persistence, and Enjoyment

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Abstract

Skillful and attentive critical reading is crucial for success in college. Research has shown that pedagogies that foreground the transactional nature of reading are more effective than those that frame reading as a process of decoding meanings transmitted in the text. Despite this, existing approaches to reading instruction often reinforce a transmission model of reading that prioritizes the decoding of textual meaning over more active engagement. Assignments that explicitly or implicitly define reading as a process of identifying correct interpretations in this way risk reinforcing the shame and frustration students experience as they struggle to interpret texts. As an alternative, this article advocates for an approach to critical reading instruction that emphasizes what students experience as they read. Drawing together research from the fields of educational psychology, community literacy, developmental reading, and college writing, the author argues that placing students' intuitive, creative responses to texts at the center of reading instruction can help students cultivate the agency, persistence, and enjoyment they need to become attentive critical readers.

Key Words:

Critical reading; literacy instruction; college writing; pedagogy; creativity; engagement; motivation; active learning; student-centered learning.

Introduction

Readers perform at least twelve separate and simultaneous "strategic actions" ranging from simple actions like understanding words and summarizing and synthesizing information to more complex actions like making connections to personal experiences and analyzing and critiquing elements of a text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 273). Learning to execute and align these actions in new and unfamiliar reading situations is crucial to success in college. Students who develop and apply critical

reading skills benefit academically and in terms of gains in non-cognitive dimensions of learning such as agency, persistence and enjoyment (Garcia-Navarrete, Sax & Levine, 2012; Guthrie & Klauda 2014; McLaughlin & Rasinski, 2015). College writing teachers have long emphasized the importance of reading skills (e.g., Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Carillo, 2015; Salvatori & Donahue, 2005). Despite this emphasis, research has shown that many college students struggle to read effectively when faced with complex texts. Students who graduate high school underprepared for college—upwards of 50% of the class of 2016—struggle more than others (ACT, 2016, p. 7).¹ Prepared and underprepared students alike frequently read at a surface level rather than analyzing texts in more detail (Del Principe & Ihara, 2016). Underprepared students are particularly prone to giving up on reading assignments when they lose confidence in their ability to comprehend what they are reading (Lei et al., 2010).

As these findings suggest, developing pedagogical strategies for cultivating college students' critical reading skills has never been more urgent. According to Smith (2012), for example, “[i]f we are ever going to create college-level writers, we must begin by creating college-level readers [...] students [who] read as negotiators engaged in the construction of textual meaning, not [just as] miners of existing meanings” (p. 61). Further, it is important to recognize the ways existing strategies inadvertently reinforce surface-level reading and student avoidance of reading assignments. These strategies include explaining the meaning and significance of texts in lectures rather than expecting students to construct their own understandings and assigning readings that are not “actively drawn on” in class discussions or activities (Del Principe & Ihara, 2016, p. 230). While these strategies are used as a way to support students who are struggling with reading assignments, they often have the effect of demotivating future reading or sending the message that completing reading assignments is inessential (National Center for Education and the Economy, 2013). In addition to identifying these unintended consequences, researchers have begun to question the effectiveness of skills and strategy-based approaches to reading instruction (Douglas et al., 2016; Holschuh & Paulson, 2013; Manarin et al., 2016). By asking students to practice skills and strategies such as scanning a text before reading, defining words according to context, annotating, and summarizing main ideas in isolation from one another these pedagogies frame reading as a means to an end. They make reading “instrumental” rather than “real” by separating the process of obtaining information from a text from the experience of reading (Allen, 2011, p. 99). Even as they underscore the importance of reading, these approaches reinforce students' beliefs that the challenges they encounter in reading complex texts are signs of their own skills deficiencies rather than signals that a given strategy or approach is ineffective (Salvatori & Donahue, 2005; Smith, 2012).

This article advocates for using creative reading assignments to cultivate critical reading skills. Drawing together research from the fields of educational psychology, community literacy, developmental reading, and college writing, I argue that prioritizing

¹ It is important to keep these data in perspective. As Rose (2012) explains, the percentage of underprepared students has remained constant at roughly 50% since the end of 19th century. Further, different students need different kinds of support, including academic skills practice, mentoring, counselling, and other “coordinated social services” (p. 45).

the experience of reading ahead of the information students can obtain from texts can help them read more critically and effectively. Further, I argue that placing creative responses to texts at the center of reading instruction can help students develop the agency, persistence, and enjoyment they need to become attentive critical readers. Research has shown that students who perceive themselves as having control over their learning develop greater confidence in their abilities and are more motivated to persist with complex reading tasks (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; McLaughlin & Rasinski, 2015; Vieira & Grantham, 2011). McLaughlin and Rasinski (2015), for example, identified non-cognitive dimensions of reading such as agency, persistence and belief in one's abilities as being particularly important for struggling readers (p. 37). Vieira and Grantham (2011) found that "readers who perceive choice tend to develop a general interest in reading, and become fully involved in what they read" while "readers who perceive limited control [...] tend to go through the mechanics of readings [and] do not become emotionally invested in what is read" (pp. 335-336).

Inviting students to respond creatively to texts encourages them to approach reading as a transactional process in which their responses to the text are central to its meanings (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1994). In addition, creative reading assignments have been shown to encourage students to develop agency as readers by authorizing them to use preexisting and experiential knowledge—including emotions such as anger, frustration, and delight—"as entryways, rather than endpoints for response" (Wissman, 2011, p. 431). These aspects of creative reading support the goals of promoting comprehension and building reading stamina (Handsfield, 2011; Smith, 2012; Sommer, 2014). In addition to describing actionable insights from existing psychological and pedagogical research, I share examples of creative reading assignments from my college writing classes. I conclude the article by calling for further research into the benefits of creative reading pedagogies.

What is Critical Reading?

Manarin et al. (2015) found that college instructors use the term critical reading to signify different activities in different contexts. In many college classes, for example, critical reading means reading for academic purposes, for example: "identifying patterns of textual elements; distinguishing between main ideas and subordinate ideas; evaluating credibility; making judgments about how a text is argued; [and] making relevant inferences" (Manarin et al., 2015, p. 47). Thorough and accurate comprehension is the primary goal of this kind of reading. By contrast, Manarin et al. (2015) found that in other classes critical reading means reading for social or civic engagement, for example: "placing [a] text within a larger context, evaluating meaning, questioning assumptions, applying concepts, or engaging with the text" (p. 10). When students read for civic and social engagement, they apply their emerging interpretations of texts to reflect on and expand their understanding of the larger world, including local communities and those that are more dispersed. Reading becomes critical according to this view when the academic purpose of deciphering textual meaning is supplemented by broader personal, social, and civic engagement.

Freire (2005) advocated for approaching critical reading as a process of simultaneously “reading the word” and “reading the world” (p. 31). In his view, reading involves readers as coauthors of textual meaning:

When the reader critically achieves an understanding of the object that the author talks about, the reader *knows* the meaning of the text and becomes coauthor of that meaning. [...] The reader has worked and reworked the meaning of the text; thus, it was not there, immobilized, waiting. Here lies the *difficulty* and the *fascination* in the act of reading. (Freire, 2005, pp. 56-57, *italics* in original)

This description is important for several reasons. According to Manarin et al. (2015), it emphasizes the *process* of reading over any particular interpretive *outcome*: the reader works and reworks the meaning of the text and learns from the experience rather than attempting to develop a fixed interpretation. Second, it acknowledges the influence of non-cognitive dimensions of learning on the reading experience: reading involves as much “*difficulty*” as “*fascination*” in the sense that difficulties present opportunities for response rather than challenges to be overcome. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Freire’s (2005) model frames reading as appropriative: students respond to the texts they are reading as coauthors by taking ownership of meaning through activities involving both rewriting and discussion. In this way, their acts of reading extend from the classroom into larger contexts, what Freire (2005) describes as “reading the world” (p. 31). Critical reading enables them to become agentive participants in debates about inequality and injustice.

In addition to noting the differences between reading for academic purposes and reading for civic and social engagement, Manarin et al. (2015) interpreted these approaches in relation to existing research on the ways conceptions of what reading is affect a student’s ability to develop critical reading skills (see Schraw & Bruning, 1999). Applying this research enabled Manarin et al. (2015) to distinguish between pedagogies that reinforce Freire’s model of critical reading from those that reinforce the idea that reading is a process of decoding and comprehending information transmitted in a text. They concluded that pedagogies that focus on the centrality of textual meaning reinforce the “transmission” model of reading whereas those that prioritize the reading process reinforce a “transaction” model (Manarin et al., 2015, pp. 30-32; Schraw & Bruning, 1999). Assignments that employ the transmission model of reading rarely require students to engage in higher-order thinking. In fact, these kinds of assignments sometimes contributed to a “vicious circle where less skilled readers employing a transmission model of reading may try harder, achieve less success, and become less likely to trust their own understanding of content, reinforcing transmission model beliefs at the expense of transactional ones” (Manarin et al., 2015, p. 31). Transactional reading assignments, by contrast, challenge students to move beyond decoding embedded meanings in order to analyze the broader significance of what they are reading. Promoting transactional reading of this kind is difficult because it “requires faculty to give up some control” over the processes and trajectories of meaning students follow as they read (Manarin et al., 2015, p. 99). Encouraging transactional reading requires instructors to trust students’ insights about texts even when they seem incomplete and provisional and to be “genuinely at stake” in the sense of framing their

own responses to the texts we are teaching as provisional rather than authoritative (Allen, 2011, p. 117).

Critical Reading and Reader Response Pedagogies

Scholars have asserted strong arguments for the usefulness of reader response pedagogies for reorienting students' perceptions of reading from the transmission to the transaction model. Informed by reader response theory, these pedagogies frame reading as an "interaction" through which students organize the details they encounter in a text in relation to broader "horizon[s]" of meaning (Iser, 1978, pp. 96-99). Reader response pedagogies promote the development of critical reading skills in three ways. First, they portray reading as an ongoing process that always involves experiences of frustration and confusion. Second, they require students to make choices about how they respond to the challenges they encounter as they read specific texts. Third, they encourage students to trust their emerging responses rather than searching for correct interpretations. As these points suggest, the primary goal of reader response pedagogies is to "teach the reader, not the text" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 280).

One of the most well-developed reader response pedagogies is described in *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*, a college writing textbook by Salvatori and Donahue (2005). The textbook defines reading as a "negotiation" between reader and text that involves "setting up possibilities, testing them, discarding them, and revising them" (p. 127). Further, it contrasts this transactional conception of reading to approaches that frame texts as receptacles "into which everything of importance has already been poured" (Salvatori & Donahue, 2005, p. 126). *The Elements* lays out a sequence of assignments that prompt students to approach the difficulties they encounter while reading as features of texts rather than as signs of their inadequacies as readers (Salvatori & Donahue, 2005, pp. 7-8). The assignments encourage students to use a range of strategies to manage the difficulties of reading, including some that draw on cognitive dimensions of reading, including annotating;" "consulting a dictionary;" and "recognizing hybrid [texts]," and some that draw on non-cognitive dimensions, including "trusting your response;" "slowing down;" and "trying not to do it all at once" (p. 137). Salvatori and Donahue (2005) have argued that the key benefit of focusing on difficulties is that it puts the experience of reading at the forefront. This enables students to take ownership of what they are doing as they read and to see themselves as co-authors of meaning who have the responsibility and authority to integrate personal experiences and preexisting knowledge with textual details.

Carillo (2015) has identified this approach as one of a number of techniques for helping students develop mindful reading practices. Building on Salvatori and Donahue's (2005) insight that moments of difficulty represent opportunities for critical reading, she has argued instructors should invite students to reflect on a series of questions as they read regarding "how far a [given] reading approach takes them, what aspects of the text it allows them to address, and what meanings it enables and prohibits" (Carillo, 2015, p. 124). Carrillo's (2015) questioning approach encourages students to "learn about themselves as readers" and to confront and move beyond the expectation that there is one best way to read (p. 118). As in Salvatori and Donahue's (2005) difficulty-centered approach, Carrillo's (2015) mindful reading pedagogy uses

metacognitive reflection to shape students reading practices (pp. 127-130). Once students recognize that different reading situations call for different strategies, they will be able to transfer their reading skills to new academic and professional contexts.

Reader response pedagogies provide opportunities for students to engage strategically and intentionally with the complexities of reading. To the degree that they prioritize students' emerging responses to texts, they create conditions in which students can "risk, fail, reframe, and try again" without exposing themselves to criticism or judgment (Manarin et al. 2015, p. 95). Even so, recent scholarship suggests that even instructors who implement reader response pedagogies sometimes neglect the non-cognitive challenges and pleasures of the reading process, including those that arise from personal involvement with a text—the "pathos of reading"—and those that emerge through the experience of co-authoring meaning (Favret, 2015, p. 1318; Smith, 2012, p. 64). Instructors have addressed this gap by developing pedagogies that prioritize the reading experience (Handsfield, 2011; Smith, 2012; Sommer, 2014; Wissman, 2011). Their work shows that it is possible to promote classroom cultures in which agentive reading is a norm rather than an exception and in which persistence and enjoyment are preconditions for critical engagement. In the next section of the article, I discuss two examples of transactional reading pedagogies, one from a developmental college writing class and one from community literacy projects underway in South America and the United States. I also share and reflect on assignments I have used in my own college writing classes.

Using Transactional Reading Strategies to Cultivate Agency, Persistence and Enjoyment

Promoting classroom cultures in which students feel comfortable discussing emerging interpretations of texts has been frequently cited as a best practice by researchers and instructors alike. Springer, Wilson, and Dole (2014), for example, argued that "creating a classroom culture that supports and celebrates reading" is the most effective way high school teachers can prepare students for college (p. 305). Similarly, Douglas et al. (2016) found that students recognize the benefits of this kind of classroom culture and suffer from its absence. Smith (2012) has asserted that students "need to have a safe place to feel passionately about and discuss all of their interpretations, even those that might be off the mark" if they are to develop critical reading skills (p. 75). In order to provide such a "safe place" in her classroom, Smith (2012) groups students together for activities in which they read a text, write privately, share their interpretations, discuss, reread the text, write privately (again), and discuss how their interpretations are changing. Grounded in a transactional model of reading, Smith's (2012) activities help underprepared students develop agency and persistence by normalizing the experience of not understanding everything on a first reading and foregrounding the fact that readers can construct different readings from the same text.

Applying Rosenblatt's (1994) notions of "efferent" or informational reading and "aesthetic" or pleasure-oriented reading (pp. 22-47), Smith (2012) found that college students frequently practice "deferent" reading. They focus so much on finding the correct meaning of a text that they abandon reading when they begin to have contravening insights. According to Smith (2012), taking a "deferent stance" makes

reading “an emotionally-numbing prospect for a reader who anticipates a negative outcome and often quits at the first sign of difficulty” (p. 64). To combat these negative outcomes, Smith’s (2012) transactional reading pedagogy nurtures students’ abilities to “face the confusion and insecurity of reading complex texts without internalizing the sometimes destructive feelings that accompany the process of working through the confusion” (p. 64-65). Her activities encourage students to trust their responses to texts whether or not they believe they have accurately identified embedded meanings. By acknowledging and foregrounding the non-cognitive dimensions of reading, Smith’s (2012) activities make it possible for students to take on agency as they read and to persist when difficulties arise. Further, they help students enact the strongest elements of Salvatori and Donahue’s (2005) difficulty-centered pedagogy and Carrillo’s (2015) mindful reading without reinforcing the transmission model.

Like Smith, Sommer (2014) has advocated for using creative and recursive activities to promote the development of critical reading skills. Using research on community literacy projects from Chile, Argentina, and elsewhere, she has argued that “literacy needs [both] critical and creative agility” and that “all texts are open to creative intervention” (Sommer, 2014, pp. 111, 126). The activities Sommer (2014) has described challenge students to respond to texts by making projects of their own. In one activity, for example, participants listened while a text was read aloud then took turns posing questions and writing paragraphs that extended the text. As in Smith’s reading groups, participants read and reread the primary text as the activity proceeded. In another activity, participants listened to fragments of songs after they had read a common text. They annotated the text by marking which song fragments would work as background music to particular sections and then explained their choices to the group. In a third activity, participants read a text in common and then found (or created) texts of their own they believed were related in some way to the primary text. When they shared the texts they had found, they explained and justified the links between them and the group’s primary text. (Sommer, 2014, pp. 130-132) According to Sommer (2014), activities that encourage creative, transactional responses like these have two main benefits: 1) they generate positive affect through experiences of pleasure, freedom, and community and 2) they enable students to “access several levels of learning” simultaneously, including “learning the vocabulary and grammar that had seemed bothersome or out of reach” (p. 125; pp. 113-114).² Importantly, these activities frame reading as a transactional process. As such, they position students as co-authors first and interpreters second and embed the development of critical reading skills in rich experiences.

While it may require more time and energy to develop and assess the kinds of generative reading assignments Smith (2012) and Sommer (2014)—as well as Handsfield (2011) and Wissman (2011)—have proposed, their research shows that the effort can pay off in more engaged and attentive critical reading. In particular, their transactional reading pedagogies nurture supportive classroom communities that make it more likely that students will experience the *difficulty* of reading as *fascination* (Freire, 2005, p. 57). Further, by inviting students to respond to texts in creative and exploratory ways, their assignments and activities integrate the cognitive and non-cognitive

² Additional information about Sommer’s “Pre-Texts” pedagogy is available at <http://www.pre-texts.org/>

dimensions of reading and give students opportunities to cultivate critical reading skills through experiences of agency, persistence, and enjoyment.

Creative Reading Assignments and a Call to Action

As a preliminary conclusion I turn in this section to two creative reading activities I have used to engage students in critical reading: an in-class poem response activity and an out-of-class assignment that asks students to make a map of an essay. The poem response activity invites students to respond to a poem using a creative method of their choice, discuss their responses with each other and submit them for instructor feedback, and then write longer essays expanding on their initial ideas. The map-making assignment asks students to create a map of a text we have read in common and prepare a user's guide. The activities build on Sommer's (2014) creative interventions by requiring students to rewrite the text they are reading and then explain how someone else might use their rewriting to make meaning from the original text. My intention in sharing these activities is not to suggest that they are more effective than pedagogies I have described so far or to argue that they should or even could be adopted wholesale by other instructors. Instead, I want to give specific examples of what I mean when I advocate for activities and assignments that engage students in complex and creative critical reading.

Poem Response Activity.

The poem response activity has five steps and takes about 30 minutes of class time. It can be self-contained or it can lead to longer writing assignments. The activity begins when two students read an assigned poem aloud one after the other. I have had success using straightforward lyric poems such as Walt Whitman's "To a Stranger" and Langston Hughes's "Harlem," as well as more difficult, evocative works like Gwendolyn Brooks's "Second Sermon on the Warpland," and Amina Muñoz's "149th St. Winter." During a second reading of the poem, students respond privately using one of four methods: 1) drawing a diagram or picture that helps them think about something in the poem; 2) listing words from the poem they find and adding words associated with them; 3) paraphrasing the same line or phrase from the poem three different ways; or 4) composing a poem of their own that is a prelude, continuation, or a response. These methods are adapted from Bernstein's longer list of "creative wreading" techniques for responding to difficult poetry.³ Applying the idea that "you can't interpret what you don't experience," Bernstein (2011) has invited students in his contemporary poetry classes to transform texts by translating, erasing, reorganizing, and remaking them in multiple ways. Like Wissman (2011), he has argued that encouraging students to respond creatively enables them to make "more intuitive, even visceral, contact" with a text by providing a means for them to critically "investigate [its] recombinant structure" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 45). Bernstein's (2011) "creative wreading" techniques promote the skills Manarin et al. (2015) have associated with reading for academic purposes while at the same time pressing against the transmission model. His students stretch and modify texts rather than merely decoding textual meanings and reflect on how their responses change as the text itself changes through their engagement.

³ A fuller list is available at <http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/wreading-experiments.html>

As my own poem response activity begins, I encourage students to react to something in the poem that catches their interest—a word, a line, an image—rather than trying to interpret or explain what the poem means as a whole. Students work on their initial responses for 10 minutes. When the time elapses, I invite them to report on their responses by telling and showing the class what words, lines, or images they responded to and describing what happened in their drawing, listing, paraphrasing, or composing. Students discuss each other’s responses for about 15 minutes. The collaborative reading of the poem we construct during this time typically involves as much disagreement as agreement about what is important in the poem and what it might mean. For example, when working with Muñoz’s “149th St. Winter” in a recent class, students debated the roles the Santeria gods Shango and Yemayá play in the neighborhood the poem describes. Some contended that the gods were drug dealers or mob bosses who made the street unsafe for regular residents. Others argued they were heroes who protected the neighborhood from gangs and violent outsiders. As their disagreement suggests, Muñoz’s description of the gods is pointedly ambiguous:

*shango and yemayá
the dispossessed gods
of the neighborhood
were dressed in gray,
their colorful attire
in cold storage as a protest.
they will not be loud and tribal again.
tarzan will have no background music
for a while. not until the sun rises
in sun-kissed faces again.
(Algarin & Piñero, 1975, p. 108)*

The poem’s contradictions—gray clothing as colorful attire; the cult hero Tarzan elevated to the same status as the gods—lend credence to both trajectories of the class’s interpretation. That some students focused on the Muñoz’s characterization of the weather rather than the poem’s characters helped us move from arguments for and against a fixed interpretation to consideration of how various possible interpretations might allow us to account for different combinations of details. In order to guide discussions like these, I ask students to clarify their initial responses by pointing to specific words, phrases, or other elements in the poem. In addition, I suggest similarities and tensions in our emerging responses and remind students to take notes on their copy of the poem while I annotate it on screen or on the board.

My hope for the discussions is that they will make visible the different paths students follow through the poem and reinforce connections we make together between words, lines, and ideas in our responses. After 15 minutes of class discussion, I collect the written or drawn responses and, as soon as practical, write short comments to each student noting what I found interesting and asking questions about what would happen

if they expanded their thinking to account for more elements of the poem. The fifth step in the activity is for students to expand and adapt their initial responses into prose essays that identify elements of the poem that caught their attention and explain how their responses changed and developed during the class discussion and as they reviewed my comments. Depending on the class and context, I ask for essays that place the student's readings of the primary text alongside other students' responses; compare the primary text to other poems or texts by the same or different writers; or/and use academic research to explain the broader significance of the poem, poet, or a related topic or idea. In the case of "149th St. Winter," I might ask students to research the roles Shango and Yemayá play in the Santería religion and then evaluate Muñoz's portrayal of them. Alternatively, I might ask them to compare the poem's portrayal of a Puerto Rican neighborhood to the portrayal of similar neighborhoods in other poem from the same anthology, such as Sandra María Esteves's "i look for peace great graveyard" or Pedro Pietri's "before and after graduation day."

The poem response activity contributes to the development of critical reading skills in two ways. First, like Salvatori and Donahue's (2005) difficulty-centered approach, it slows down the reading process and "makes visible" to the students the "invisible moves" they are making as they read (p. 211). Second, the activity requires students to take an active role in coauthoring meaning rather than dismissing ambiguous or conflicting meanings out of hand. Students are accountable to themselves and each other for bringing the observations and ideas generated in their private responses to the group's attention. They reread the text together in order to support their intuitive grasp of its possible meanings. The "aha!" moments that sometimes occur in our discussions reveal that textual complexity provides opportunities for creative reading rather than an insurmountable barrier to understanding. Some students, of course, resist the idea that their initial responses are sufficient to allow them to develop thorough readings of a given text. Repeating the activity with new texts throughout the semester helps them build confidence in their insights and reinforces the principle that critical reading begins in close attention to textual details and requires more than the decoding of embedded meanings.

Reading by Making a Map.

Like the poem response activity, the map-making assignment requires students to transform the text they are reading in order to generate critical interpretations. Modelled on Sommer's (2014) creative literacy projects, the assignment asks students to rewrite an essay or article we have discussed together in the form of a map and then compose a user's guide that will help someone else use it effectively. The specific instructions are:

Imagine the text as a place, for example: a historical site, a theme park, a city, a country, or something similar. Create a map of the text to help someone navigate its important ideas, key elements, and best and worst uses of language. Your map should be geared toward a specific audience, for example: tourists, hikers, visitors from another planet, shoppers, etc. It should include written instructions for how and why to use it. Think of your map and instructions as the equivalent of a guide to interpreting the essay.

As the instructions suggest, the assignment asks students to practice critical reading by focusing their attention on specific textual details, as well as on the rhetorical elements of audience, purpose, and diction. Unlike a more conventional rhetorical analysis, however, making a map also requires students to reimagine the assigned text as a place and then locate textual details and rhetorical elements as points of interest. As Shipka (2011) has explained, asking students to “remediate” texts in this way helps them develop metacognitive awareness of the choices they are always making as they read and write and critical understanding of the degree to which all acts of communication involve adaptation to specific contexts (p. 64). The user’s guide component of the assignment ensures that the maps students create are grounded in textual details and oriented toward the transactional process of coauthoring meaning. This is important because it reinforces the transactional model of reading: students act as coauthors as they complete the assignment by using details from the assigned text to produce texts of their own.

Students respond to the opportunities of co-authorship in different ways, some more successful than others. For example, when I asked students to make maps of Wendy Walters’s (2015) “Manhattanville, Part One,” a personal essay that describes problems caused by stereotypes and racialized violence in a New York City neighborhood, one student printed a map of the neighborhood from Google Maps, annotated it with quotations from the essay, and wrote a user’s guide that urged visitors to compare their experiences at specific sites to the experiences Walters describes. Another student used a flowchart to highlight the connections Walters makes between the neighborhood’s past, her mixed-race family’s experiences of its present, and their fears about its future. Yet another student drew a mall directory that located ideas from the essay in familiar stores: Costco for stereotypes about economical shoppers; Marshall’s for clothes that might help a stranger fit into a new neighborhood; and Target for home accessories to signal upward mobility.

As these examples suggest, the map-making assignment invites students to integrate their lived knowledge of what it is like to use a map with their responses to Walters’s essay. Regardless of their approach, however, the creative act of converting Walters’s essay “from one semiotic mode to another” requires them to practice a range of critical reading skills, including “inferring, predicting, questioning, [and] connecting” (Handsfield, 2011, pp. 129-130). Further, the assignment allows students to “access several levels of learning” simultaneously, including practicing skills related to reading for academic purposes, such as “identifying patterns of textual elements; distinguishing between main ideas and subordinate ideas; [and] making judgments about how a text is argued” (Manarin et al., 2015, p. 47); as well as skills associated with reading for social or civic engagement, including “placing [a] text within a larger context, evaluating meaning, questioning assumptions, applying concepts, or engaging with the text” (Manarin et al. 2015, p. 10). For example, one student rendered the essay as a theme park complete with a “murderous magic show,” an “ignorance alley,” and an “acceptance river,” among other attractions. The attractions correspond to the positive and negative dimensions of Walters’s reflections on the neighborhood. The park’s “haunted mansion,” for example, consolidates frightening experiences the author describes over the course of the essay, including an interaction when a fellow resident identified her as her son’s nanny instead of his mother and observations of how police

allow privileged white college students to disrupt the neighborhood's peace and quiet while at the same time conducting heavily-armed raids of a predominantly African American housing project nearby. The theme park map also included "dead zones" where visitors to the park may find themselves "having confusing conversations with a stranger [that] might be difficult to decipher" because they do not share a frame of reference. Through its various elements, the theme park map makes different experiences of Walters's essay available in ways that an essay focused on explicating its embedded meaning may not.

Discussion

My underlying concern throughout this article has been to identify pedagogies grounded in the knowledge that responding creatively to texts can help students develop critical reading skills and that students at all levels of preparation are capable of executing sophisticated and interesting transactional acts of critical reading. The poem response activity and map-making assignment are examples of strategies I have used to engage students as active participants in making meaning. The activities draw on a range of precursors, including Handsfield (2011) and Wissman's (2011) high school English pedagogies; Smith's (2012) developmental reading and writing reading group; Manarin et al. (2015) and Shipka's (2011) college writing assignments; Freire (2005) and Sommer's (2014) community literacy projects. As this list of sources suggests, creative critical reading can happen in any context. My sense from exploring these pedagogies in my own classes is that the skills and strategy-based pedagogies most frequently used to support the development of critical reading skills can be enhanced through creative practice. This is especially the case for students who enter our classes underprepared for the complex demands of college-level reading.

I conclude with a call to action: We need a broader understanding of what critical reading involves and more imaginative approaches to involving students in the transactional activities of reading the word in order to read the world (Freire, 2005). And we need research that shows the gains students make when they are asked to read as coauthors rather than receivers of meaning. Finally, we need pedagogical practices that prioritize experiences of agency, persistence, and enjoyment. We will not be any more successful in supporting students' development of critical reading skills until we begin to invite them to respond to texts rather than merely reading them and to construct meaning by using their initial, provisional insights as opportunities to create more and more sophisticated analyses.

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