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# “I Bought the Book and I Didn’t Need It”: What Reading Looks like at an Urban Community College

> Annie Del Principe and Rachel Ihara

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Based on a qualitative study of students’ experiences, we offer a new typology of student reading behaviors across the disciplines at a community college.

Much attention has been paid to the troublesome state of reading abilities and practices in community colleges (CCs). It is no secret that a strong percentage of students in CCs require developmental coursework in reading and continue to struggle with their reading skills as they move into credit-bearing coursework. Much of the scholarship on reading in college looks at reading as an activity that students either do or don’t do and as a requirement from faculty with which students either do or don’t comply. However, through close analysis of data from our qualitative study of students’ reading and writing experiences across the curriculum at our urban CC, we have come to realize that there is a great diversity in the reading behaviors students enact during their tenure in our institution. We’ve learned that the salient question is not whether or not students do the reading for courses but rather to what degree, how, and why they read. Further, the powerful effect that individual faculty have on students’ reading behaviors was impossible to ignore. Based on the analysis of our study of students’ experiences, we’ve constructed a new typology of what student reading behaviors look like at our CC, and perhaps other CCs and institutions as well, because we found that the existing typologies offered in the literature didn’t accurately depict the categories of reading our students reported. This typology has helped us better understand what reading really looks like in our own institutional context and will allow us to better discuss student reading with our colleagues across the disciplines.

## What We Know about Reading in College

Scholars across the disciplines have studied students’ reading behaviors in college courses in an effort to better understand why so many seem to be avoiding reading. Much of the literature on reading compliance focuses on weaknesses on the student end of things, either in their preparation for college or in their studiousness dur-

ing their college courses (Burchfield and Sappington; Clump, Bauer, and Bradley; Joliffe; Joliffe and Harl; Marchant; Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac). Some point to lack of preparation for college-level reading as a primary cause of students' lack of reading, pointing out the mismatches between the types and amount of reading that are typically taught in high schools versus the presumed higher and different reading expectations in college. ACT has done multiple studies ("Reading"; "First Look"; "Condition") of "college readiness" and has found consistently that at most one-half of high school juniors are college ready and that "what appears to differentiate those who are more likely to be ready . . . is their proficiency in understanding complex texts" ("Reading" 16). This lack of skill in reading complex texts may be a result of the texts and pedagogies used in high schools as well as the general decline in reading over the past decades outside of schools, well documented by numerous studies ("To Read"). Whether or not lack of "college readiness" is the most salient causative factor, this problem appears to exist at different types of institutions and "is not limited to any particular disciplines or subset of disciplines" (Starcher and Proffitt 396). Further, there's some evidence that compliance with reading may be decreasing over the decades (Burchfield and Sappington), again trending alongside decreasing rates in adolescent and adult pleasure reading outside of the school context ("To Read").

But, of course, there's another side to this story. As the ones who create the environments for reading in college, faculty play a strong role in fostering students' (non)reading behaviors. Several studies find that students are less likely to do the reading if they know or suspect that there won't be any graded assessment based on the reading, such as a quiz or a writing assignment. Overall it seems that students take an "instrumental" approach to reading, delaying their assigned reading until just before a major exam, often a midterm or final, when they know they'll be called to task, although even the knowledge that faculty will test them on reading content fails to motivate some students to read (Brost and Bradley). The literature provides us with a host of reasons why instructors do not truly require or enforce critical reading of assigned texts. Faculty in many disciplines often do not identify, and aren't encouraged by their departments to identify, *teaching* reading as part of their job and therefore don't take on any role beyond *assigning* reading in the course (Odom, emphasis ours). Often when faculty perceive that students are struggling with a complex text and complex ideas, they tend to solve this problem for the students by stepping in and explaining the text to students. Teachers see this as their assigned role, and "it is simply easier, and more efficient, for a teacher to resolve these problems herself, even if by doing so she encourages dependence and passivity" on the part of her students (Salvatori and Donahue xii). Faculty in many disciplines favor modes of instruction—such as lectures, providing prewritten notes and outlines of important concepts—that, in effect, take the responsibility for reading and processing information out of the hands and minds of the students (Brost and Bradley; Grubb; Lei et al.; "What Does"; Starcher and Proffitt). Further, some faculty assign reading but do not actively draw on it in class, a pattern that, once perceived by students, leads directly to fewer students completing the assigned

reading (Brost and Bradley). Faculty have developed these ways of working around students' reading as a result of their own beliefs about their role, their perception of their students' lack of ability and motivation, and their own concern about receiving low teaching evaluations from students were they to create contexts in which students' grades relied more heavily on doing the reading (Jolliffe; Redding 1998; Sappington, Kinsey, Munsayac).

Although these reading debacles exist in institutions of all levels, the community college is a context with particular literacy characteristics with respect to student preparation and compliance and to the reading environments constructed by faculty. From a demographic point of view, students at two-year colleges have lower rates of prose, document, and quantitative literacy than their peers at four-year institutions ("National Survey" 5). The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) completed a study of the literacy skills required to perform passing work in the first year of community college at seven institutions in seven different states. They found that 1) reading and writing in these community colleges are not very cognitively challenging; 2) the "information load" is higher than in high school, but students aren't asked to do much with the texts they read; 3) performance levels students are asked to achieve are modest; 4) the reading material still presents a challenge to students. In NCEE's study of courses across the disciplines, only English composition classes reliably assigned more complex texts to students and required students to analyze, reflect on, and evaluate what they have read ("What Does" 26). The higher teaching loads and prevalence of large introductory-level classes in community colleges put pressure on faculty to teach a lot of students a lot of content without much additional institutional support or recognition. Faculty in this context often rely on pedagogies that focus on "information transfer," the "lecture/discussion" teaching style being a common approach; the "lecture/discussion" is "a hybrid approach in which the instructor devotes some time to lecture and structures some time for discussion," but often "lecture predominates and . . . discussion is so teacher-directed and formulaic that it merely extends lecture" (61). At the same time, community colleges know that their students struggle with reading and are constantly experimenting with new innovations to inspire students to read more and faculty to assign and expect more critical reading in their classes (Long). For this reason, community colleges offer sites of reading instruction that may aid our understanding of how to improve student reading across the curriculum in various educational settings.

### **Methodology: Capturing Student Perspectives on Reading**

Our research on reading comes out of a larger longitudinal study of student literacy experiences—reading and writing—at our home institution, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, a large urban CC on the East Coast that enrolls on average eighteen thousand students per semester. We recruited students to share their reading and writing experiences across the disciplines with us in interviews over the course of several semesters, between fall 2011 and fall 2013, and to provide us with copies

of all documents related to their literacy learning, such as syllabi, assignments sheets, and written assignments. For each semester of participation in the study, students received a \$50 gift certificate to the college bookstore. Ten students participated in the project on some level, and we have complete records—from their first to their last terms at our CC—for five. We interviewed these five study students at least twice a semester, generating approximately twenty-three hours of interviews. The labor of transcribing these interviews was partially funded by a PSC-CUNY award—a small grant jointly funded by the Professional Staff Congress and the City University of New York.

These study subjects include four students who placed directly into the first-year composition class and one who was placed in a low-level developmental writing class. Of these, one, whom we'll call Joanna, moved the most quickly through the requirements for an associate's degree, maintaining a 4.0 GPA during her two years at CC, earning an associate of arts (AA) in liberal arts in 2013, and transferring to an art school to pursue a degree in toy design. Sam graduated with an associate in applied science (AAS) in business in 2014 and also planned to transfer to a four-year school. Lucian and Boris both expressed interest in psychology, although Lucian was more definite about pursuing a career in social work. Lucian moved through his courses and graduated with an AA in 2013, while Boris transferred to a four-year school after only one year and then returned to our community college, finally graduating with an AA in 2015. Maria, the student who placed into developmental writing, accumulated credits more slowly and took time off from school in order to work, but she remained committed to pursuing a degree in the medical field with the goal of becoming a nurse or physician's assistant. Maria transferred to a four-year college's physician's assistant program in 2015, after completing her core coursework at our CC.

We took a grounded theory approach to data analysis, pouring over the interview data during the initial coding phase, identifying and re-identifying various emergent themes and patterns in the ways students described their reading experiences. It was clear to both of us early in this process that students' comments about reading, as opposed to writing, felt most intriguing and somewhat troubling to us. It seemed as if the students were being encouraged or taught not to read, or *really* read in our English-teacher eyes, in most of their classes. During subsequent focused coding, we both took turns reading over each other's emergent themes and categories, which led more refined and specific themes to take shape and to create the typology of reading behaviors, from the students' perspectives and across the disciplines, that we present below.

## **A Cross-Curricular Typology of Reading**

Scholars in composition and rhetoric have taken approaches similar to ours in their efforts to account for the different approaches to reading in FYC classes. Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem identify three purposes for reading in composition classes: 1) content-based reading; 2) process-based reading; and 3) structure-based

reading. David Jolliffe deploys different terminology in his discussion of reading in composition, identifying practices such as “reading-to-get-the-gist,” “reading to complicate,” the “bounce off” function, and “reading-to-imitate.” Large-scale quantitative studies of reading across the curriculum include a 2013 NCEE study that categorized reading tasks that required students to perform the following operations: access and retrieve, integrate and interpret, reflect and evaluate, while Baer, Cook, and Baldi distinguish between ways of reading required for different types of texts, which it classifies as “prose,” “document,” and “quantitative.”

Our typology is somewhat different from these other analyses of reading in that it derives from students’ accounts of their own experiences and actions. We created categories based on what students said about how they used reading in their classes and what they did (or didn’t do) with the assigned reading rather than on imagined ways of reading or what was ostensibly required by the teacher or by the assignment. For instance, students might be assigned a chapter to read to “get the gist” (Jolliffe), but their actual reading practices in response to that assignment could vary considerably. In addition, what assignment language truly means and asks for varies according to the particular classroom environment. An assignment might call for students to “reflect and evaluate” (“What Does?”), but reflection and evaluation might mean, and elicit, very different things in different class settings.

During our close analysis of the transcripts, five themes emerged in the ways students interact with course texts across the curriculum. These are listed below based on the frequency in which they appeared, with the most common approach listed first.

1. “Supplementing lecture with reading”—Students occasionally used reading to aid their understanding of material presented via lecture. They did not learn new information from this reading; rather, it repeated or elaborated on what they previously learned in class.
2. “Listening and taking notes as text”—Either there was no assigned reading for a class, or the texts listed on the syllabi were never assigned or used in the course.
3. “Reading to complete a task”—Students used the text to obtain specific information (i.e., definition of a term) or to complete a discrete task but not for overall “comprehension” purposes. Much reading for research projects fell into this category.
4. “Analyzing text”—Students read closely, considering elements of style and form, or read to understand the author’s argument.
5. “Reflecting on text”—Students responded to texts using personal experiences or opinions.

This typology allowed us to get a better sense of the larger reading environment at our CC, as well as the range of approaches to reading that students took from one class to the next. In comparing our student experience-based typology with those previously mentioned, one will notice many differences. In contrast to Adler-Kassner and Estrem’s or Jolliffe’s categories, the five types of actions students perform with reading in our study reflect the actions the students were taking with the reading

presented in their classes across the curriculum rather than only in their composition courses. In contrast with NCEE and Pew, our typology is more nuanced and detailed and captures, again, what students report actually doing with the reading presented to them in their CC courses.

### **1. Supplementing Lecture with Reading**

The first two types of reading listed above occurred in “content” (non-English) courses that used lecture as the primary pedagogical mode in the classroom; taken together, students used these types of reading in 58 percent (48) of the courses they took during their tenure at our CC. It is worth noting that all of these courses typically listed textbooks as required for the course even though students did not have to rely on their reading of these books for new information. Instead, students read selectively, “supplementing lecture with reading” in 37 percent of the classes they took. In courses where lectures predominated, students sometimes saw strategic reading of the textbook as a useful activity, when doing so helped them to better understand concepts covered in a lecture, or when they found lectures alone inadequate. Boris described referring to his book in two different psychology classes in order to deepen his understanding of difficult concepts. “[H]er slides give you important details,” he explained, “[but] in the book there might be some examples and go further into it. So if I don’t fully understand something, then I read it.” Maria reported that she did some reading for her psychology and biology classes in order to deepen her understanding of the lecture material. “At least we have to have a little reading to understand,” she explained, referring to her psychology class. While most of the information from her biology was available through lectures and slides posted online, Maria felt the textbook was still helpful “because we need the explanation to understand it more completely.” In other instances, referring to the textbook was deemed necessary because the lectures were lacking in some way. With reference to his computer science class, Boris said that he “learn[ed] from the textbook more than [he] did from the teacher,” although it was unclear whether this stemmed from his own inability to pay attention or because, as he claimed, the teacher would “go off topic.” Lucian said something similar in reference to his math class, describing a situation in which the math instructor did not demonstrate problems on the board but simply lectured. “That’s why I had to read my book” Lucian explained, “to make sure I knew what the chapter was talking about and to do some problems.” In only one instance did a student describe completing reading that wasn’t explicitly monitored simply because of personal interest. Boris said he didn’t usually finish the reading before his psychology class as assigned, because “I usually get carried away doing other stuff,” but often he would “still do it afterwards [. . .] ’cause it’s interesting stuff.”

### **2. Listening and Taking Notes as Text**

In the second most prevalent type of reading, “listening and taking notes as text,” class lectures entirely, or nearly, replaced the course textbook, if it even existed. In

some classes, there was no text assigned; in others, students were told to read the book listed on the syllabus but were given no incentive to do so since regular reading was not monitored in any way and tests were drawn entirely from lectures; in a few classes, students were explicitly told to ignore the book in favor of lecture notes. Thus, lecture notes, either created by the student or supplied by the teacher, served as an alternative “text.” This marginalization of long-form reading was pervasive, evident in 35 percent of the classes our study students took, resulting in a pattern of nonreading behavior across a range of classes.

Although most classes did list some assigned texts on the syllabus, some did not. Boris described one economics course in which there was no textbook, no homework, and no assigned reading. Instead the instructor would provide the class with handouts of key terms and events that would appear on the tests, which consisted entirely of true/false questions. “[T]he whole class was kind of very easy,” Boris admitted, “it was pretty hard to take it really serious, like a college class.” Maria’s music experience class also did not assign any textbook, assessing students solely on the basis of their understanding of class lectures.

More often, “assigned” texts were listed on the syllabus but were implicitly subordinated to instructor lectures and notes, leading students to readily perceive reading as optional. Boris’s comment about his introductory psychology class is representative of students’ observations for these courses: “You don’t really have to get the textbook,” he explained, “I mean she gives us all the information. The textbook is just, like, for you, if you want.” As a result of this practical marginalization of reading, courses that seemed to require substantial reading according to the course syllabus did not actually result in any reading by students. This was clearly the case for one history of New York class Boris described, in which students were ostensibly responsible for reading several full-length scholarly books, including one he described as a “700-page” history of the Brooklyn Bridge, but were not tested on this material in any way. Joanna described another history class where reading assignments dropped out midway into the semester. “Well, he didn’t formally say, ‘don’t do the reading,’” she recalled, “but he just stopped giving out the chapters.” Similarly, her American government class seemed to require reading because students were told that they would need to read at the beginning of the semester, but it was soon evident that the exams tested students on material covered in lectures. “[I]t was just all straight from the notes,” she explained. “Each test was 25 multiple choice questions. I mean, really easy stuff.”

In other classes, instructors were more explicit about the unimportance of textbook reading, informing students that the textbook listed on the syllabus was not actually required or making it clear that textbook reading was unnecessary. After Joanna had rented a textbook for her astronomy class for \$60, she was told that they didn’t need it. Instead she created her own “text” from the instructor’s PowerPoint lecture notes, copying and pasting the online lecture notes into a Word document, “so that it’s more cohesive to read,” and then adding to this document during the lectures, “because sometimes he adds information.” While students in Lucian’s biology of women class weren’t told not to buy the book, his account suggests that the

instructor recognized that few if any students would do so, since she periodically brought her copy to circulate in class. Instead students relied on the PowerPoint notes, which were posted on Blackboard, a pervasive instructional practice.

### 3. Reading to Complete a Task

Students approached texts by “reading to complete a task” in 24 percent of the courses when assigned to complete specific tasks or assignments. Generally, tasks making use of reading in this way fell into three categories: in-class assignments asking students to use supplied texts to answer specific questions, discrete homework assignments, and more involved projects asking students to find reading material through outside research to use in a report or research project. Across these assignments, it was evident that students completed this type of reading strategically, reading only what they needed to read for the task at hand.

For instance, several students described completing work in science classes that required reference to supplied texts. In Boris’s astronomy “lab,” students worked in groups to answer questions about a given topic using a handout. “The last one we had was the moon,” he explained. “It was like a little packet, a three-page packet. You just had to read it and answer some questions.” In discussing her biology class, Maria informed the interviewer that she didn’t “really read the textbook except for the lab.” Since the lab involved tasks such as labeling body parts in a diagram, answering questions in a few sentences, and making sketches of human anatomy, the relevant information was easily obtained by referencing the textbook.

Sam described an interesting variation on this kind of reading in his criminal justice class, in which students worked in groups on “quizzes” using their books as reference. This was different from the independent “reading for information” tasks Boris and Maria described because of the emphasis on collaboration and because the questions were not always straightforward but sometimes required debate and discussion. According to Sam, the task was explicitly presented as an exercise in “teamwork”: “[The instructor] says, if you are a detective or on the force it’s all about working together. Whether you’re in business or with your doctor, you’re always going to have to use teamwork.” Because the answers weren’t “always so straight out of the book,” groups didn’t simply divvy up the questions with students working independently. Instead, “We all try to find the answer. And it happened several times on these two quizzes that we had so far, one kid would say, ‘I think the answer is A.’ And the other two kids would say, ‘No, I found on page 6 that the answer would be D.’ So I think he’s trying to train us not only to take a quiz but to always work as a team. You know, try to debate things out among ourselves.”

In some cases, students cracked open their textbooks because homework required it. For instance, Maria used her algebra textbook to complete the assigned homework, even though this work was not collected or reviewed in class. “He says that he believes it’s just each student doing their own work and if we don’t do it we can’t pass the class,” she explained. The answers to these questions were in the back of the book, but if she still didn’t understand the textbook explanation, Maria would

have to ask the teacher to explain before or after class. Sam described a similar use of an online textbook in his accounting class, explaining that if students got stuck on a particular problem, “they have a link and it sends you straight to the textbook and it shows you where in the textbook it’s written how to figure it out. So if you don’t understand it you would have to do some reading.”

Texts were also used to complete tasks in assignments involving reporting on research. Joanna described a presentation assignment in a psychology class that required reading and summarizing textbook information supplemented with information from related academic articles students located on their own. When asked how she handled the challenging academic texts, Joanna indicated that her previous experience in an English class had helped. “I’ve gotten the hang of it,” she explained. “The articles were a little dense. Like I skimmed through a little bit of it and didn’t bother reading other parts. Just what was important.” Boris described a similar approach to reading for a research paper in English in which he critiqued the Occupy Wall Street movement. Since he had already written about some of his own reservations about the movement, he turned to library research to find outside sources reiterating his position. “[L]ike if they’re making fun of the way that they have no leader,” he explained, “I’ve already written about it a little, so I just have to like edit it and put much more material in, and cite some of the works.”

We should note that it was difficult to determine precisely how much reading was involved in these types of tasks, particularly when students were given little direction about the appropriate resources to read or how to use that reading. For instance, Joanna describes a history course with several take-home essay exams that allowed students to use any resources they wanted. Given this situation, Joanna speculated that most students simply turned to online sources, possibly copying and pasting what they read rather than really reading, processing, and integrating information obtained from online reading. “I got the sense that [the instructor] was not so technologically advanced and would have no clue if something came straight from Wikipedia or not,” she noted wryly, observing that a student earned an “A” on the take-home test and then failed the next in-class test. Lucian described a group report in which students created a PowerPoint presentation providing basic information about a spacecraft or space mission, and Sam described a report on Homeland Security for his criminal justice class. In both cases, there were no restrictions on sources (meaning that students relied entirely on Internet sources), and it was unclear how students went about reading, evaluating, and using the information they found. Lucian did not say anything about citing or quoting the online information used in the report. Sam noted that he steered clear of Wikipedia in favor of government websites; but he didn’t say anything about how he handled direct quotations, and he admitted that he didn’t really remember how to create a works cited page. While these may seem more like “writing” issues, they indicate the range of possible activities included in our category of “reading for information,” from strategic and selective reading of academic texts to copying and pasting from dubious Internet sources.

#### 4. Analyzing Texts

The last two types of reading our students reported were found almost exclusively in English classes. To be more precise, students reported “analyzing texts” in thirteen courses (15 percent), only two of which were not English classes (psychology and history); and students further reported “reflecting on text” in six courses (7 percent), only one of which was not an English class (history). Instances when students were “analyzing texts” or reading texts with an eye to the form, style, and argument of the text were generally prompted by a particular assignment. This might be a task promoting a particular reading practice, such as the requirement that students complete summaries of their assigned reading, as Sam described for his first-year composition class. Joanna described an annotation assignment in her FYC class that asked students to read and reread a given text using different colored pens to identify points in the texts they found “confusing,” locate the “writer’s central main points/ideas,” note “guiding questions,” and provide their own “perspective.” Incidentally, for Joanna this was, “A little bit impractical. I mean, if you have the time, I’m sure it’s great. But realistically, it doesn’t really work.” She particularly objected to the instruction to read the text three times for each type of annotation, a direction she ignored.

This kind of attention to particular lines and ideas in a text was evident in formal assignments for other English classes as well. Lucian described going “off track” in a writing assignment for his FYC class that asked students to focus on a single quote from a text, explain the author’s position, summarize the quote, and respond. Instead, Lucian wrote about a number of quotes and had to revise for a subsequent draft. Maria’s FYC class asked students to engage in comparative analysis by exploring a common theme in two or more texts of different genres, using readings centered on topics such as childhood or family.

While these assignments guided students toward particular approaches to reading, in a few instances students determined on their own that they needed to read more slowly and carefully in order to understand what they were reading. Here, too, careful reading was mostly limited to English classes. Sam and Maria both said they had to slow down, reread, and consult a dictionary to comprehend certain texts assigned in writing classes. Maria struggled with some of the vocabulary while reading two plays, *Medea* and *Oleanna*, for her developmental writing class. She found that she had to read passages more than once and that what helped was both “talking about it and taking time on my own to think about it.” Sam also spoke of rereading paragraphs and using a dictionary, although, as he put it, “sometimes with a dictionary you still don’t understand, cause in the dictionary you need a dictionary to understand the dictionary words.” Later, he found that looking at the posted questions on Blackboard helped him figure out when to “really start focusing.”

While writing instructors are likely to recognize these kinds of approaches to reading, it is worth noting how rare and isolated they were within the broader context of students’ reading experiences across their classes. Like reading to reflect on text discussed below, reading closely, analyzing the structure of a text, and forming

connections across texts constituted rhetorical approaches to reading out of synch with the dominant approaches to texts students reported.

## 5. Reflecting on Text

Reading that involved personal reflection, such as forming opinions about a text or making connections between reading and personal experience, was the least common approach to reading our study students described, something they did in only 7 percent of their courses, as mentioned above. This more subjective and reflective approach to reading was almost exclusively limited to reading in English classes. To be more precise, of the eighty-three classes our study students discussed with us, only six asked them to respond personally to material they read, and only one of these instances occurred in a subject other than English.

Students in our study described reflecting on their reading when prompted to do so by a low-stakes writing assignment or class discussion, although it was unclear how much, or how thoroughly, students in their classes read when they were asked to “reflect on text” in this informal way. The annotation exercise Joanna described required students to identify points in the reading that sparked a personal response, and she also discussed a short fiction class in which students were asked to write personal responses to the stories they read. In addition, both Joanna and Maria talked about literature teachers seeking to elicit students’ opinions on assigned reading through classroom discussion. However, both were skeptical about the degree to which this pedagogical approach to reading prompted real reading and reflection. According to Joanna, in the short fiction class, “Nobody [did] the reading,” and discussion consisted of “back and forth between me, the teacher, and two other students.” Moreover, since the informal written responses included “[a]nything, any feelings about the story, comments, basically anything at all, as long as it relates to the story [, . . .] you can pretty much get away with anything.” Maria described one teacher reading the assigned stories in class aloud and then asking questions to prompt students to “compare the stories to their own experience,” but she noted that only a few students actually took part in this discussion.

### **A Key Pedagogical Factor: Following Up**

In all of these types of reading, a pedagogical practice that strongly influenced students’ reading behaviors was whether or not, and to what degree, instructors “followed up” in any way on the reading assignments they gave students. We define “following up” on reading as giving an assignment, quiz, or test that requires students to draw information or ideas directly from their own independent reading in order to be successful. Teachers followed up on reading in only fourteen out of the eighty-three classes taken by our subjects during the course of the study, and six of those fourteen were English courses.

Following up appeared in many different ways in our students’ experiences and in different disciplines. In English courses, students reported regular homework assignments—journals, Blackboard reading response assignments, among others—

that required them to draw directly on the assigned reading in their writing. Sam recalls the routine assignments he was given in his FYC course:

Yeah, we have informal assignments every time, every time we had, we had to read, uh, we had to read and annotate, and then we had to come in and, I mean, that night or whatever, we had to put in a thing on Blackboard about informal writing assignments. And then the next day we would have met, we would talk about it in class a little, whether we would have a quiz or we'd just have discussion in class, and that night again we would have a, another reading and then writing assignment, like an informal writing assignment. We had like, I think, ten or something to write.

Other students report similar daily reading response assignments. Sam had to write summaries of reading in his FYC course, and Joanna was asked to write personal responses after reading stories in her short fiction course. In addition to small daily reading response assignments, students in English classes were expected to incorporate quotations, information, and ideas from assigned course reading into their more extensive essay writing assignments. Maria reports having to draw on reading in two of the essays she wrote for her FYC class: in the first essay she had to compare the story to an experience in her own life, and for the second essay she had to compare and contrast some aspect two stories. Similarly, Sam, Lucian, Boris, and Joanna all report having had to draw directly from reading in the essays they wrote in their FYC courses. None of this was surprising to us since reading, interpreting, and analyzing texts is the bread and butter of most college-level English courses.

What was somewhat surprising and discouraging to us was the small number of courses (eight) outside of English that included any follow-up to assigned reading. Students reported on only a few classes in which instructors encouraged regular reading in preparation for class through quizzes. Boris described one class (developmental psychology) in which quizzes on assigned chapters preceded the lecture. For Lucian, sociology, math, and ancient Greek philosophy were all courses with regular quizzes on reading that truly required him to have read and comprehended the reading independent of class lectures. Sam mentioned only one criminal justice course in which students worked together on collaborative in-class quizzes on reading every two weeks. Joanna described a classical philosophy class where the instructor used daily oral interrogation to assess students' reading compliance and used these responses to determine fully 50 percent of the final grade for the course. In addition to various types of reading quizzes, several of the eight courses outside of English had midterm or final exams that required students to have comprehended some assigned reading and retained information from that reading on their own. In Joanna's psychology course there was a final exam that covered the entire textbook, much of which had not been explicitly taught by the professor in lectures. Boris's computer science and cognitive psychology classes and Sam's philosophy course similarly had midterm and final exams that included content from independent reading.

It's important to remember that the fourteen courses referenced in this section were very much the exception—not the rule. Most classes outside of English

did not include any type of follow-up on assigned reading. The norm was that any reading listed on the syllabus or course calendar was either ignored entirely or completely covered in lectures. In these situations, there was absolutely no follow-up to the reading, and not surprisingly, students typically did not do the reading in these classes.

### **Where to Go from Here**

These findings confirm that the cross-curricular reading experiences of students in our CC are more or less in line with the NCEE's broad 2013 study of literacy skills required in community colleges: lectures and notes often replace reading; students tend to do some reading when they are quizzed or asked to be accountable for what they read; very few classes ask students to read closely or assign texts that necessitate careful reading. As English professors ourselves, we, of course, find this to be disappointing and problematic. After all, aren't all faculty across the curriculum dedicated to helping students become stronger independent readers? Don't our colleagues feel that it's our collective responsibility as faculty members to teach and expect strong reading skills? We feel we can remember doing a tremendous amount of independent, close reading in all of our classes as undergraduates, and we feel that this experience is central to what it means to have a high-quality college education.

After the smoke of these discipline-biased initial reactions had cleared, we began to think a bit differently about what this data had shown us. From one angle, our typology shows us that reading—successful, functional reading—looks very different in different disciplinary and classroom contexts from the perspective of an undergraduate. In one course, reading might be tacitly defined as close, careful English-style reading with great attention to nuances of argument, word choice, and style, while in another course reading might mean looking up a series of terms and reviewing points from lectures with reference to a rarely opened textbook when a high-stakes test looms on the horizon. Further, this isn't just a linear spectrum between more and less reading in different classes; the purpose and function of reading varied among classes, which adds to the complexity of the situation. In some classes, English classes in particular, the texts themselves are the entire "content" of the class, whereas in most other disciplines they are simply a means of communicating information in a straightforward way.

As English/composition faculty, we are often called upon to act as local institutional experts and consultants when troublesome issues involving reading and writing emerge. We are often the ones who coordinate WAC/RAC programs and run workshops and professional development sessions on integrating reading and writing into "content" classes. Given our findings, we are concerned that English/composition faculty very likely view and understand reading through a very specific disciplinary lens—often without even realizing it. We know what we think good reading looks like when it's happening, and we feel safe assuming that most English/composition faculty wouldn't consider much of the reading behavior we found in our study to be "good" reading. However, we think it's very important

for our field to examine and understand nonjudgmentally the ways students utilize texts in all of their classes. Only by doing this will we truly understand the full spectrum of actual reading behaviors that comprise our students' experiences as undergraduates in our institutions.

We do think that it's important for faculty across the curriculum to reflect on findings such as ours and think about how and why they present and use reading in their classes the ways they do. For instance, we found it somewhat duplicitous for faculty to list texts on their syllabi as "required" and then never integrate them into their classes in any substantive way. Instead, faculty in these courses could explicitly present texts as "references" to be used in certain discrete ways by students at different moments in the course. They could also occasionally discuss openly with students how the reading plays a part in the course, various ways readings might be used by students, or how reading assignments in the course vary, even if these nuances aren't immediately apparent to the students themselves. We do feel our colleagues should reflect on the importance of following up on reading if they really do want their students to do the reading, and we intend to look into faculty members' thoughts and intentions about required reading in their courses to better understand the strange and common situation of a required book that is literally never actually required by a course. Following up definitely takes time and adds labor to the course, for students and teachers alike, which might be one of the reasons many faculty avoid it. However, we've learned that it's delusional to think that students are doing any reading just because we've assigned it.

We also want to challenge our colleagues in different disciplines to occasionally break away from the comprehensive efficiency of the textbook. We realize that these giant books have their allure—sadly, they do in our own field as well. However, we almost never saw a student in our study read their textbook in a way or to an extent that justified the price and weight of the book itself. Perhaps offering a small, curated selection of primary texts from different genres in a given field, along with prewritten lecture notes provided by the instructor, could be an alternative standard model for these classes.

Finally, we hope that this research is just the beginning of an institutional inquiry into the place of reading in our students' CC experiences. We will present these general findings in an interdisciplinary faculty forum at our own CC and will tailor that presentation to spur interest in a faculty committee or interest group on studying and improving reading practices across the curriculum. We have a vibrant and successful WAC program on our campus, but we feel, along with Alice S. Horning, that reading needs its own independent program to truly gain faculty and administrative attention. We don't think the focus of this faculty interest group should be simply to "improve" the way reading is taught and used across the curriculum; instead, we want to encourage—in our colleagues and in other scholars—an openness to the variety and range of reading practices that are functional and desirable in different classroom settings. This will allow faculty the space to identify the ways that their own classes are and are not fostering the kinds of critical reading practices they want to see grow and flourish in their students' lives. ◀

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