CHAPTER 3.

RESCUING READING: CENTERING REAL READERS

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In 2012, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue published a much-cited analysis of the dramatic "disappearance" of the topic of reading from the composition-rhetoric scholarship of the previous two decades ("What is College English"). Reading, to be sure, has always been central to college writing instruction. What struck these researchers was the waning of reading as a subject of study—especially notable for a field increasingly devoted to inclusively ecological views of student literacy development.

In this chapter, I reconsider the intellectual-institutional habits that, over the last thirty years, have kept the study of reading relegated to this marginal status. Since 2012, scholars have made important strides in starting to better "secure," in Ellen Carillo's terms, "a place for reading" in both the composition classroom and writing support more generally (*Securing a Place*). Yet for all this renewed attention, much of this college reading scholarship continues to hew to a narrowly corrective agenda, one prescriptive rather than descriptive, set only on fixing students' purported reading ills, rather than investigating and revealing more capaciously all that reading is. Writing research assiduously attends to the varied and often still emergent aims, technologies, and social forces that shape the messy work of students' (and, indeed, all writers') textual productions. The reading scholarship, by contrast, remains bound to an essentially remedial framework, upheld by a persistent scholarly neglect of the diverse complexities of the real student reader. Drawing on Anne Ruggles Gere's longstanding commitment to surfacing the agentive power of literacy practices and perspectives traditionally overlooked by the academy, I ask how attention to these real readers—and the more inclusive conceptions of reading this can engender—might rescue reading from the deficit narratives that keep it so stubbornly consigned to the margins of our field.

DOES THE STUDY OF READING BELONG IN WRITING STUDIES?

A number of cases can be made for increased attention to reading in the context

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of higher education. Reading, like writing, is undeniably central to most academic and professional pursuits, not to mention our personal lives. Whether through phones, laptops, Kindles, books, intake forms, menus, or highway billboards, to maintain communication with others in most contemporary spaces is to be awash in running tickertapes of written language.

Reading research, moreover, has long shown that the ability to read effectively does not constitute a one-and-done skill. Especially in the case of the specialized reading tasks of academia, most professions, and civic life, one's ability to make sense of one or another given text in ways that are useful and/or context-appropriate will require of the reader a wide range of processes, knowledge sets, and presuppositions. As Sam Wineburg illustrates in his 1991 study of professional historians' reading of historical artifacts, different forms of reading each entail a "distinctive epistemological stance" (495); for the historians he studies, this includes not only attention to a text's possible "subtexts," but an even more fundamental "belie[f] that [such subtexts] exist" (510). Comparing this historical mode to other forms of reading pushes these distinctions even more into relief. Making sense of an instructional manual requires a very different approach—different knowledge, different kinds of attention, and different beliefs about what texts can tell—than the mode Wineburg describes; as does skimming one's personal newsfeed for updates to some unfolding event; as does critically evaluating an op-ed's nested set of claims. Navigating such tasks and texts, as one needs to in new communities of practice, thus entails what David Jolliffe calls a "continuing education" in new reading processes, presumptions, and attentional resources ("Review Essay").

Yet research also shows that neither college students nor faculty tend to understand the act of reading in these complex ways. Daniel Keller's ethnography of U.S. high school readers demonstrates that, while these students' everyday reading practices were quite rich, school had provided them few metacognitive frameworks with which they might recognize, much less describe and develop, these varied kinds of reading. These students, instead, conceived of reading as a single endeavor, whose demands were intensely felt if little understood: for them, per Keller's description, "Reading was simply reading, and [they] were asked to do a lot of it" (77). Many higher education contexts only further reinscribe such thin conceptions. As Howard Tinberg argues, most college instructors eschew explicit reading instruction, considering it "someone else's business" (247), thus, a number of writing scholars' persistent complaints about the field's striking absence of reading research and pedagogies (e.g. Jolliffe, "Review Essay" and "'Learning to Read'"; Adler-Kassner and Estrem; Horning et al.; Carillo, *Securing a Place*; Del Principe and Ihara; Ihara and Del Principe).

It is hardly surprising, then, that two decades of empirical research also confirm the extent to which students' reading practices little align with higher education's curricular expectations. Studies show that students' reading of course materials is, contrary to many instructors' injunctions, often cursory (e.g. Hoeft); and that few undergraduates recognize the cursory nature of their engagements (e.g. Howard et al.). Few students display much metacognitive knowledge about learning or themselves as learners (Keller; Pintrich) or acknowledge many connections between their engagement with assigned readings and course success (Gorzycki et al.; Del Principe and Ihara).

In many ways, the field has begun to attend more rigorously to these needs. The same year (2012) Salvatori and Donahue published their analysis ("What is College English"), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) launched a special interest group devoted to the role of reading in composition, and in 2021 the organization published an official position statement ("CCCC Position Statement"). In 2014, Carillo made her influential case for a "mindful reading" paradigm (*Securing a Place*) and in 2017 released a textbook on the topic (*A Writer's Guide*). A 2016 special issue of *Pedagogy* edited by Salvatori and Donahue and several edited collections (e.g. Sullivan et al.; Horning et al.) confirm a rising interest in improving college-level reading-writing theory and instruction. In other ways, however, reading remains a footnote to the field's overall project. Adler-Kassner and Estrem note the absence of reading theory and pedagogy in doctoral-level courses on composition theory and teaching preparation (36). The CCCC's 2021 position statement puts it even more pointedly: that "outside of community colleges," there persists a lack of "sustained attention to reading as the counterpart of writing in the construction and negotiation of meaning." Yet perhaps the clearest sign of this continued neglect is the fact that the field's touchstones of reading research and theory—say, Christina Haas and Linda Flower's "Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning," or Charles Bazerman's "Physicists Reading Physics" and "A Relationship between Reading and Writing"—were produced over thirty years ago. That the conditions of reading have since changed so radically—especially regarding the digital platforms on which many of us now read—only makes this time gap all the more glaring.

RECONSIDERING "NEGLECT" AND ITS REMEDIES

For many historians of the field, this neglect results from a thirty-year bias against the topic itself, now baked into the field's disciplinary identity. By Carillo's account, the field's marginalization of reading can be traced to its increased dissociation from literary-cultural studies, that subfield of English studies where the explicit

study of reading has long been presumed to live (*Securing a Place*).[1] During the 1970s and 1980s, to be sure, literary/composition/rhetoric/critical theory scholars ushered into the composition-rhetoric scholarship (as it was then known) a brief flowering of reading-writing theory and pedagogies (think the previously cited Haas and Flower and Bazerman, as well as Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Ann Berthoff, and David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky). At the same time, however, the field was working to establish itself as an independent discipline, with its own doctoral programs and tenure-track positions, prompting comp-rhet scholars to more stringently distinguish their own methods and goals from those espoused by literary studies, the field to which, in many English departments, comp-rhet had long been considered subordinate because merely preparatory. What Salvatori and Donahue call composition-rhetoric's "separatist project" ("What is College English" 201)—the understandable effort to disaggregate investigations of literacy from investigations of the literary—thus also enabled a disaggregation of reading and writing, with the implication that these activities could in fact be dissociated as each belonging to entirely separable programs of study.

For most writing scholars, then, reading quickly lost its status as viable topic of disciplinary inquiry (and even, to many, became disciplinarily suspect—a seemingly retrograde attempt to smuggle back into writing studies the very literary critical concerns from which comp-rhet was so keen to distance itself). By this "great divorce" narrative (Carillo, *Securing a Place* 76), the field's neglect of reading can be understood as a form of collateral damage—damage that, moreover, can be remedied by a mere return of attention to the topic. Indeed, it is the quantity of attention that writing scholars granted to reading that Salvatori and Donahue's analysis uses as its metric for measuring the topic's "neglect" and "revival": specifically, the changing number of reading-related "program categories" offered in CCC's annual calls for papers (which, for much of the 2000s, dropped to zero) ("What is College English" 213, 210).

Yet to focus on this metric alone risks simplifying both the problem and its potential solution. Attending only to changing quantities of reading scholarship—as the C's position statement also does—is to overlook another important feature at play: this scholarship's qualitative nature, including its prevailing aims, methods, presumptions, and blind spots. This observation is not to devalue the reading scholarship as it currently stands; nor to suggest there are no exceptions (e.g. Keller) to the broader trends I here identify. It is, instead, to prompt a recalibration of how we understand the field's widespread "neglect" of reading

1 U.S.-U.K. literary studies arguably took its contemporary form when scholars of the early twentieth century expanded their investigations of literary artifacts to include the forms of reading purportedly required for critical engagement with such artifacts (e.g. Richards; Ransom; Brooks and Warren).

and to ask whether this neglect can indeed be rectified by a current influx of scholarship that mainly functions as a collection of handbook-like injunctions, each applicable only to its own pedagogical context. I thus propose that this scholarship, while in some cases necessary, is still not sufficient for the kind of comprehensive, research-based theory building that would truly "secure" the study of reading, and the reading-writing connection, as fundamental to the study of writing.

Like usage handbooks, of course, the field's current reading injunctions offer crucial support to students working towards specific, predetermined expectations and learning outcomes. Whether aimed at improving readers' open-minded engagement with long-form prose (Sullivan et al.'s "deep reading"), developing rhetorical awareness (e.g. Bean), learning from models (e.g. Bunn) or confirming claims' credibility (e.g. Wineburg and McGrew), current work on college reading-writing provides students with a valuable array of situation-specific strategies. Newer work on digital literacies further taxonomizes the varied approaches beneficial for careful engagement with texts on screens and online (e.g. Cohn; Baron). Yet also like usage handbooks, this reading research—to borrow Jolliffe's astute observation—has "tended more toward the applied and pedagogical than toward the conceptual and theoretical" ("'Learning to Read'" 13). I would go even further. As pure applied pedagogy, such scholarship is also limited by its pervasively corrective aims.

Here the lens of linguistic or grammatical prescriptivism proves useful. As Sidney Greenbaum explains, "[P]rescriptive grammar evaluates and advises" (22), providing guidelines for what one or another grammar expert—say, Bryan Garner, or Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers—considers proper and improper uses of language. I argue the current reading scholarship functions in much the same way. Its aims are directive: to advise how students should read. Methodologically, it tends to draw only from anecdotal or hypothetical-aspirational examples. Because primarily prescriptive, it also frequently leaves its own biases unchecked, presuming its one way of reading ("slow," "deep," "rhetorical," et cetera) to function as the best and only standard. Of course, as linguist Deborah Cameron has argued, a prescriptive agenda can be considered an understandable, even inevitable, form of "hygiene" among members of a community. As Cameron argues, this "urge to improve or 'clean up'" (1) is "part of what language-using is all about" (2).

Yet—as with studies of language use—to reduce our study of reading *only* to the prescriptive is to default to a purely remedial model for how reading is best learned, studied, and reflectively understood. After all, a purely prescriptivist framework tends to position varietal preferences as universal truths and to view those unschooled in these varietal preferences not through the lens of difference, but deficit.

Here, too, the institutional-intellectual history of writing studies offers guidance. College writing research and pedagogy have long been saddled with the institutional mandate of remediating literacy skills that, it is widely presumed, students should already have in hand when they arrive in college. Such a deficit paradigm orients pedagogies around backward-looking correction and resolutely not around forward-looking introduction to, and education in, sets of field-specific knowledge that students could not possibly arrive in college having already learned. As Downs and Wardle have argued, this remedial strain in writing instruction thus rests on a fundamental "misconception" of what college-level literacy knowledge and learning entail, reducing literacy to portable skills, and upholding the presumption—now well debunked (e.g. Anson and Moore)—that such skills, once learned, will transfer wholesale to new contexts. By encouraging this acontextual universalism, this misconception further masks the situation-specific values and behaviors that actually shape all literacy practices and expectations. As Brian Street famously argued, such an "autonomous" view of literacy—as one monolithic skillset learners can apply successfully across all contexts—is a view blinkered by a failure to cop to its own "ideologies," and by an illusory conviction that its particular ways of reading and writing are the only ways to properly communicate (19-38).

For writing studies, it was only by breaking free—or, at the least, by looking more critically upon—these institutional-intellectual habits that the field was able to come fully into its own. Crucial to this evolution was a new refusal to leave unquestioned the very crisis narratives and subsequently universalized fix-it prescriptions that justified the institutionally superimposed mandates by which the field had long been reductively defined. To be sure, alternate theorizations of what it means to study and teach writing and rhetoric can be glimpsed as far back as the turn of the last century, in the work, say, of Fred Newton Scott or Gertrude Buck (as examined by Bordelon); the history of composition instruction is more complex than some disciplinary histories have claimed (see also Gere, "Presidential Address"; Carter and Durst).

Nonetheless, a more comprehensive paradigm shift did not arrive until scholars were able to name and turn explicitly against the mechanistic, acontextual constructs of literacy that long defined "first year comp." Thanks to this social turn, composition-rhetoric expanded from a merely preparatory teaching subject, so-called, to a broadly inclusive, critically informed, research-based "human science," to use Phelps' crucial term (76-77). This evolution entailed a reformation of what writing might mean in and for higher education. No longer only an "activity" requiring the remediations of first-year composition, writing became newly positioned as a complex and far-reaching "subject of study," as Adler-Kassner and Wardle have put it (4).

Also important is how this recalibration was substantiated and enabled by the new methodologies the field came to embrace. As writing scholars grew skeptical of literacy constructs and pedagogies based purely on anecdote and aspiration, research became more empirical, examining not only the diverse expectations writers face, but the real practices, processes, sponsors, and forces that enable and constrain writing. Researchers took up new units of analysis, by which they could challenge longstanding presumptions about the purportedly universal textual and rhetorical features once considered the sole source of writerly efficacy and by which they could attend instead to the diverse human behaviors, contexts, and values whereby texts are produced, circulated, and granted culturally sanctioned meanings and approval. In short, these new methods—ethnographic, qualitative, situation-sensitive—allowed writing scholarship to adopt a newly descriptive approach to the study and teaching of writing. And a newly ecological view of writing emerged, one rejecting prior idealizations of writing and focused instead on a methodologically rigorous research agenda: delineating what real writers, in real communities of practice, actually make when they write, and how.

The field's approach to reading would do well to heed the lessons of this field-history, and especially to its self-scrutinizing revising of its own goals, methods, and disciplinary identity. Compared to writing, reading is, of course, famously difficult to study—it is by definition an act whose traces are elusive and subjective, as much felt as they are thought, so interior are they to an individual's situated, embodied experience. This should not suggest, however, that empirical investigations are impossible. In the early throes of the field's ambitious reinvention of the study of writing, the study of reading seemed poised to keep pace, especially through methodologically innovative inquiries into varied readers' acts of meaning making for specific contexts. Yet this promise faded fast, as much, I argue, due to anxiety over disciplinary boundaries as to a growing skepticism about the very methods (soon maligned as a crude "cognitivism") that make empirical study of reading possible in the first place.

Indeed, one great irony of the reading scholarship is that the more the field embraced its current context-sensitive, ecological paradigm, the less reading itself appeared a disciplinarily appropriate subject of study. Or, put another way, the more reading was confined to its current auxiliary position, as a subject relevant only for classroom-specific remediation. What resulted—albeit tacitly—was that reading was rebranded as a purely pedagogical issue. The "neglect" of reading does not constitute, then, a general failure of interest or attention. It constitutes instead a specific failure to apply to reading the same descriptivist research agenda that has so successfully reshaped the study of writing.

CENTERING REAL READERS IN EXPANDED SITES OF READING

The remediational agenda driving most of the reading-focused writing scholarship has in some ways become so naturalized to writing studies that it can be difficult to imagine alternatives. The US is—and has long been—saturated with literacy crisis narratives, never more so than in our current age, whose practices are so dramatically shaped by the ever-changing digital systems that mediate so many of our textual engagements. But alternatives to remediation and prescriptivism exist. Moreover, these alternatives must—pedagogically and empirically—be embraced in writing studies' reading and reading-writing scholarship.

Salvatori and Donahue rightly observe that some of the most insightful reading-writing scholarship of earlier decades emerged from a then-new focus on the real student reader ("What is College English"). But that research was also enabled by a devotion to empirical study, resisting the field's longstanding mandate to put the pedagogical cart before the horse. The aim of this then-new reading scholarship was not merely to "fix" reading by prescribing better ways of reading, a goal requiring scholars only to delineate idealized guidelines for what they'd like readers to do. The aim of such research instead was to explore, in real scenarios, how the meaning making that reading enables actually gets accomplished—this through a focus on what real readers do, regardless of a scholar's own personal preference about how reading ought to be carried out.

Yet writing studies provides another lesson, showing how understandings of literacy are also limited by overly narrow conceptions of the very sites in which literacy takes place and from which our study of literacy can continue to learn. Reading scholarship, I thus argue, should return its focus not just to real student readers but also to the many diverse contexts in which these readers read and make meanings that matter—and not only to us, but to them. In her crucial "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Anne Ruggles Gere exhorted her field to reconsider its habitually exclusive focus on writing that takes place "inside classroom walls," and to attend more inclusively, more empirically, and, indeed, more empathetically, to writing taking place at many other value-laden sites of meaning construction (78). Only through such investigation, Gere argues, can scholars begin to dismantle the field's longstanding "gatekeeping function" (89). The same "extracurricular" investigations would substantially deepen our own—and our students'—understanding of reading and the reading-writing connection.

Of course, examining what real student readers do outside the classroom forces uncomfortable questions. Such study would prod us to reconsider

whether certain reading practices and aims are really as universally applicable as we might assume and whether our expressed reading values are driven more by wishful thinking or nostalgia than by the realities of most readers' experiences and goals (including our own). Pointing to one such unchecked piety, Doug Downs notes the field's continuing "resistance to screen literacies" (206), despite the reality that digital reading is now most readers' "default" rather than the exception. I would build on Downs' observation to argue that such resistance is only enabled by a body of reading scholarship focused almost exclusively on the controlled context of the college classroom, where such realities can be blithely recommended against, if not outright ignored, and where students are often positioned only as learners whose reading behaviors and conceptions require nothing more than our well-intentioned realignments.

For reading-writing scholars, a central question then remains about what exactly it means in the context of writing studies to teach and study reading. If by teaching and studying reading we mean teaching and theorizing only how readers ought to read, in order to more effectively reach one or another predetermined outcome, our scholarship has made some important strides. If, however—and following the example of writing scholarship—by teaching and studying reading we mean teaching, exploring, and theorizing what reading more fundamentally *is,* across contexts and conditions, the field falls short. The former is most properly understood as a prescriptive project, delineating one or another form of "good reading" that scholars have found useful for meeting specific ends. The latter, by contrast, is an empirical, descriptivist project—exploring and teaching an ontology of reading, and asking, essentially, how reading works, both in and across contexts, and what this study can teach us, as scholars (as much as it can teach our students), about our own ideological and pedagogical presuppositions.

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