Reading: The Bridge to Everywhere

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As educators of college students, we look to our students' writing as evidence of the expertise they have gained in their disciplines. In planning our course objectives, we set writing assignments, lab reports, case analyses, written tests, or projects as the principal markers that will determine how successfully students have met these objectives. All of this focus on writing is well-intended. However, we may need to be reminded that writing and reading are intertwined in the learning process and cannot be separated cognitively (El Hindi 2003, 340). Together they form a "single act of literacy" (341). Because student writing—and in essence, student learning—cannot improve unless student reading improves, reading merits attention.

When students tell us that their reading is a waste of time—that it is boring or frustrating--they may betray that they are "both underprepared and misprepared" (Johnson and Carpenter 2000, 325). Students may be underprepared in a variety of ways, ranging from inadequate preparation in basic subject matter to a lack of writing proficiency. More critical for our purposes is the notion of "misprepared." True, they have been prepared in certain ways to do certain tasks and acquire certain skills. The critical question is whether these tasks and skills equip students sufficiently for college work. What if "passive, linear reading," together with memorization and recall, are the core learning strategies for which students in such a curriculum have repeatedly been rewarded through their high school years ? (Hjortshoj 2009, 36)

Passive, linear reading and memorization are examples of surface-learning approaches in which students move their eyes across words and sentences from the beginning to the end of a text but process little cognitively. In *The Learning Paradigm College*, John Tagg (2003) defines surface learning as "learning for the sake of reproducing the signs; it is by definition *superficial*, in every sense of that word, both literal and figurative" (69, emphasis in original). Surface learners can memorize discreet, fragmentary bits of information from a reading, but the information lacks the connections that create understanding. In contrast, deep learning is "learning for the sake of understanding meaning" (69). Deep learners create rich meaning by integrating the information from texts with the questions, problems, and possibilities within a discipline (Bain 2004, 87).

Understandably, too many first-year college students assume that their surface-learning reading strategies, applied in college courses, will result in success, which they (and truth be told, their parents and instructors) virtually always measure by grades. Professors and learning center specialists are familiar with the bewildered student who received A's and B's in high school yet finds herself thoroughly flummoxed by the college classroom. And while students tend to locate the cause of their anxiety in specific assignments or tests, often thought of as end products, they and we must not overlook the role of reading in the learning experience.

In analyzing the reading process, we have found that some of the barriers relate to the student's attitude toward reading, while a good part of the challenge relates to the student's lack of metacognitive activity while reading. In covering these areas, we will focus on four main barriers

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to effective reading at the college level, and for each, we will provide strategies and approaches to help students read more productively and critically.

Problem One: Students Discount the Importance of Reading

The first reading challenge concerns the student's assumptions about the assignment. She sees it as an obligatory first step, rather than as a means by which she will learn new concepts that build her expertise in her discipline. In fact, a surprising number of students approach their assigned reading as if it does not count at all; it means little compared to the "real" graded work of papers or tests: No grade, no serious assignment. Thus motivating students to read is the first challenge the professor must address. Students in English 101 at Quinnipiac University (2012) expressed frustration with challenging reading assignments in a metacognitive writing assignment, as seen in this sample of responses:

- "I always found reading as an assignment and something I never wanted to complete."
- "I barely pay close attention when I do read."
- "I panicked at first because I had a lot of difficulty understanding the readings."
- "Before college when I would read, I would close my mind as soon as I became confused with the text."

To compound these challenges, we teach a generation of multitaskers who are accustomed to exerting only short spurts of attention for Facebook, YouTube or text messages. How can we expect the children of the Digital Age, easily distracted by myriad electronic media, to sustain their attention through an entire reading when they "haven't thought about anything hard," as MIT Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology Sherry Turkle puts it? (Turkle 2010)

Requiring annotations—a record of observations, reactions, connections, and conclusions that a student writes in the margins of her textbook while reading—is instrumental in motivating students to read actively. Likewise, evaluating annotations is key to assessing students' understanding of what they read. Quinnipiac University's Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy is based on a "concentric thinking" model that identifies three critical thinking skills in student reading:

Prioritizing is "the gateway task" for critical thinking (3). Students must choose which are the key ideas in the text and explain why.
Translating means summarizing ideas in one's own words. Translating can reveal limitations in students' understanding—what they know versus what they have not yet discovered.
Analogizing is the process of making connections between ideas in different texts or realms. Because it is based on students' recognition of like patterns and themes, it goes beyond simple comparison (Smart et al, 2011, 3-6).

When the reading is particularly difficult and dense, students who are developing reading proficiency will benefit from a simple system of classifying annotations: *yes, no,* and *maybe.* This approach can help generate the critical thinking processes outlined above:

Yes: Which passages resonate the most with you and why? How does the piece connect to your own experience or knowledge? How would this writer agree with another philosopher or theorist whom you have read? (prioritizing, translating, analogizing)
No: With which passages do you disagree and why? How would this writer disagree with another philosopher or theorist whom you have read? What are the limitations of this writer's point of view? What points has he or she not considered? (translating, analogizing)
Maybe: What in the passage remains unresolved? What still confuses you or leaves you feeling uncertain? (translating)

The challenge, of course, is how to assess a student's annotations. What if they are abundant but show only surface understanding; that is, the fragmentary facts about what happens in the text or what was mentioned minus the connections to other parts of the text, to other texts, or to important questions about the discipline at large? Alternatively, what if the annotations are incisive and thoughtful but sparse? Yet another challenge may be the professor's lack of time (much less the muscle power to carry all those books home for grading.). Some creativity is required in the assessment process, as is a clarification of objectives early in the course. Instructors may assess annotations in a number of ways: graded discussion; "lightning rounds" in which each student shares his or her most valuable annotation[1]; spot checks of annotated books; mini-quizzes on the key ideas; rotating annotation checks where a group of students is called upon at random to present annotations; or informal rubrics. Regardless of the specific assessment method used, we have found that formative assessment that allows readers the space to construct deeper learning over time is highly effective when annotations are evaluated. What usually works well is a clarification of objectives for the annotations early in the course. The following passage appears in the syllabus for Professor Mark Hoffman's first-year QU Seminar Series course, QU 101, The Individual in the Community, an interdisciplinary course that eases the transition to the university culture as it tackles questions regarding personal character and collective identity:

> **Annotated Readings and Class Discussions**: You read course texts to build an understanding of the author's intended argument and to build a connection to the six course questions. To aid in accomplishing the first goal you need to annotate as you read. That is, you need to make marginal notes that help you understand and recall significant ideas from the text. To facilitate building connections to the six course questions, you need to annotate passages that apply to each. For example, you might simply place a "1" in the margin where a passage applies to course question "1." Whatever annotation method you choose, it must be clear and consistent, and you must be able to explain it. Periodically during the semester your course texts will be checked for marginal notes and course question annotations.

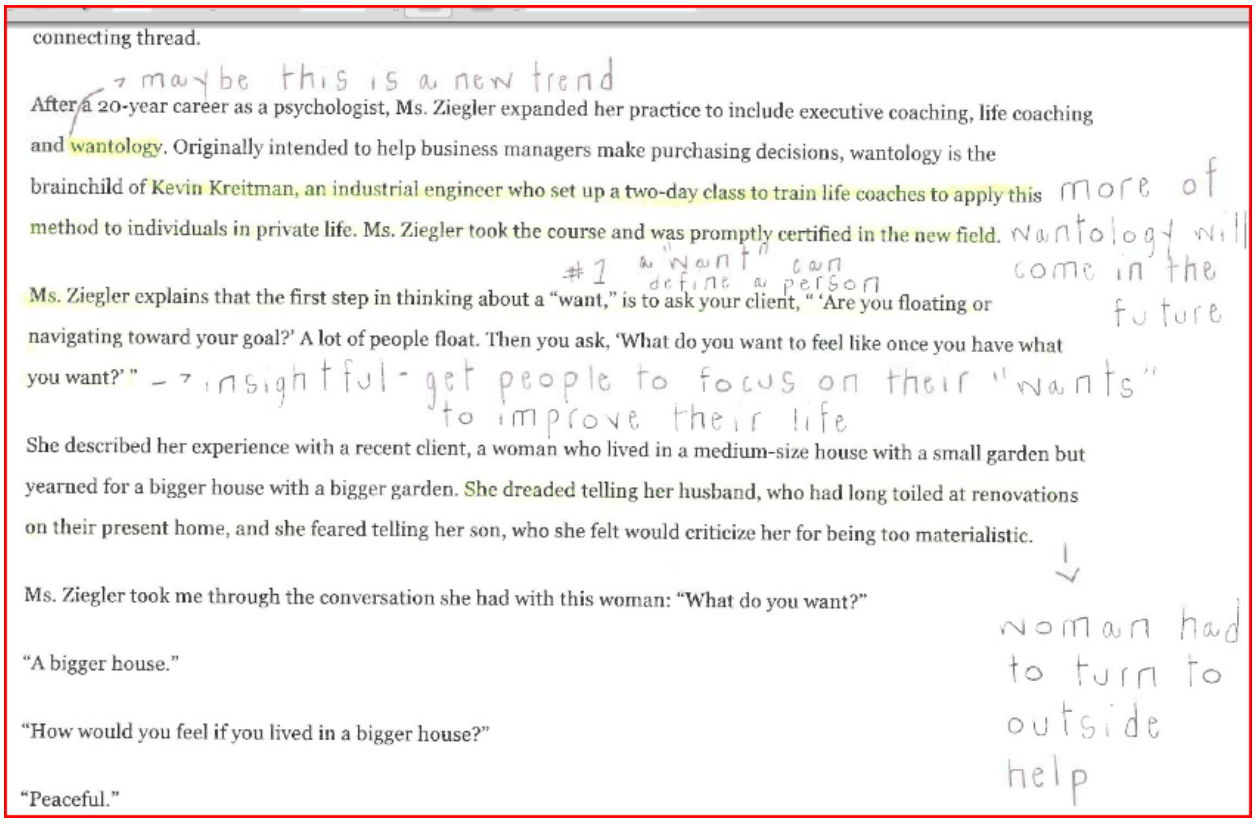
[1] We acknowledge Adjunct Professor of Journalism Kenneth Venit for this technique.

> Useful in-class discussion is built on your personal work to understand the course texts and how they connect to the course questions. This work creates a common base of knowledge on which useful discussion may thrive. Otherwise, discussion devolves into opinion and unsupportable speculation. Therefore, for each class discussion (most classes) you need to bring your annotated texts for reference.
>
> … Annotations are written. Annotations are not underlining or highlighting. Annotations provide an index and a note explaining why you underlined or highlighted.

From the outset, Hoffman provides a purpose for annotating the texts: annotations solidify understanding of the author's arguments (translating the reading) and help the students to recall significant ideas (prioritizing the reading). In addition, they connect to the QU 101 Seminar's six core questions (facilitating analogizing).[2] Hoffman holds students responsible for their annotations by checking students' books for marginal notes and by requiring thoughtful class discussion based on the annotations. Though the content of annotations will vary by discipline, instructors can elicit active and thoughtful reading by making the objectives for annotations clear within the syllabus and by periodically reinforcing those objectives in class.

To further encourage student annotation of texts, peer mentors (called "peer catalysts" in the QU Seminar Series) who were once exemplary QU 101 students themselves are employed by the Quinnipiac University Learning Commons to attend QU 101 with the current students and to help facilitate annotation-based discussion and other learning activities. Peer catalysts are explicitly trained to offer suggestions for annotations and to provide examples of their own successful annotations. Here is an example from QU 101 student Melissa Boscarino, whose annotations show evidence of active reading:

[2] 1.*What defines and locates an individual? 2. How is individual identity formed and sustained? 3. What defines and locates a community? 4. How is a sense of community formed and sustained? 5. How do individuals deal with tensions and conflicts between personal interests and community interests? 6. How do perceptions of individual difference and diversity affect community?*


connecting thread.

→ maybe this is a new trend

After a 20-year career as a psychologist, Ms. Ziegler expanded her practice to include executive coaching, life coaching and wantology. Originally intended to help business managers make purchasing decisions, wantology is the brainchild of Kevin Kreitman, an industrial engineer who set up a two-day class to train life coaches to apply this method to individuals in private life. Ms. Ziegler took the course and was promptly certified in the new field.

more of wantology will come in the future

#1 a "want" can define a person

Ms. Ziegler explains that the first step in thinking about a "want," is to ask your client, " 'Are you floating or navigating toward your goal?' A lot of people float. Then you ask, 'What do you want to feel like once you have what you want?' "

→ insightful - get people to focus on their "wants" to improve their life

She described her experience with a recent client, a woman who lived in a medium-size house with a small garden but yearned for a bigger house with a bigger garden. She dreaded telling her husband, who had long toiled at renovations on their present home, and she feared telling her son, who she felt would criticize her for being too materialistic.

Ms. Ziegler took me through the conversation she had with this woman: "What do you want?"

woman had to turn to outside help

"A bigger house."

"How would you feel if you lived in a bigger house?"

"Peaceful."

We find that peer catalysts who model effective annotations are valuable assets to our students. These mentors are in a unique position to make a lasting impact when they coach students in how to engage actively with their textbooks.

Problem Two: Students Get Stuck in the Weeds

When they focus merely on task completion rather than on making meaning, students get stuck in the weeds—entangled in irrelevant, disconnected details from their reading. Unfortunately, this orientation toward the reading lends itself to verbatim recall or rote memorization (Holschuh 2009, 318). Students employ this recall of the disconnected facts found on the surface of a text while they fall short of the more strenuous mental work of finding the big picture, or the unified thematic whole that underlies these fragmented bits of information.

Recall—often distilled to rote memory—is at the base of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives, a scale of increasingly sophisticated learning goals that helps educators to promote higher-order thinking. Memorization is an easy default for students who have relied on the strategy since elementary school. Recall of discreet, disconnected details with little sense of a thematic whole results when students lack the periodic comprehension checks and other metacognitive strategies that more successful readers employ (El Hindi 2003, 340). When concepts are absorbed piecemeal, the student has difficulty understanding which material in the text is the most important (prioritizing) or applying the concept to a new situation (analogizing).

We can compare this strained learning experience to the act of memorizing the position of individual jigsaw puzzle pieces scattered on the floor.

In contrast, skilled readers create a big picture from the text by remaining conscious of their own thinking and learning and by regulating these processes (El Hindi 2003, 341). Through metacognition, or thinking about one's thinking, successful readers keep short accounts of their deficits in understanding. The reader does not allow gaps in her comprehension to accumulate as she progresses through a text. Rather, her consciousness of these gaps creates an uneasiness that she tends to tackle and resolve before moving on to the next passage. For instance, a metacognitive reader will not skip by an unfamiliar vocabulary word. Instead, fully aware of the limits of her understanding and beneficially irritated by them, she will use surrounding words and sentences and a dictionary to define the word and connect it to its context, thus gaining understanding of a difficult passage before moving on to the next.

To regulate her thinking when faced with a challenging paragraph, she will also employ the technique of airplane pilots whose instruments have failed. Employing situational awareness, the pilot looks carefully for points of reference that she understands from experience: the position of the sun or stars; land contours that match maps she has seen; the direction of currents or the position of lights in the distance. Similarly, the metacognitive reader searches herself for prior knowledge or experiences that she can connect to the passage at hand. She then stops to annotate such a connection, thereby locating herself relative to the ideas in the reading, much as the pilot has done when faced with unfamiliar surroundings. This approach contrasts sharply with the unsuccessful reader's heap of disconnected information from the text and, thus, unmet opportunities for understanding.

Overall, as a result of the successful reader's metacognitive work, she will grasp a coherent whole, or a big picture, more readily. This outcome allows her to understand and appropriately place the details in the text. To invoke our first metaphor, she is much like one who completes the jigsaw puzzle by referencing the picture on the box.

To encourage metacognition during difficult readings, instructors can break down the process into the following basic questions:

1. What am I being asked to do in this reading?
2. What do I already know about this subject matter that I can use to help me get started?
3. Where are the limits of my understanding? What should I do about them?
4. How can I monitor myself through this reading task? How am I processing information and what self-testing strategies will help me stay on task?
5. How can I evaluate or appraise my understanding of the passage once I'm done?

(Modified from Erskine, 2009)

Each of these steps can be tailored to the discipline at hand. For instance, in Step 4, a chemistry student can use a word problem as a self-testing strategy for assessing his understanding of how to work a formula from his reading. In all, it is important for instructors to stress to their students that reading comprehension is not based upon students being good readers or bad readers, but that successful readers strategize their way through difficulty. This point can be especially encouraging for readers with learning disabilities, for whom comprehension does not come naturally but can be achieved through annotation and metacognitive work.[3]

Problem Three: Students' Over-Reliance on Memory Results in Commonplaces

Occasionally, however, one of the metacognitive tasks—students' reliance on prior knowledge (number two in our list of basic questions, above)—may get students into trouble, especially when they passively accept prior knowledge that is untested and imprecise. Inaccurate prior knowledge can have a negative effect, as it "can distort new knowledge by predisposing students to ignore, discount, or resist evidence that conflicts with what they believe to be true" (Ambrose *et al.,* 2010, 23-24). To illustrate how this effect of prior knowledge works, in *What the Best College Teachers Do,* Kenneth Bain (2004) describes the experience of college physics students in a 1980s study who, at the conclusion of their course, still clung to primitive assumptions about motion—"a cross between Aristotelian and 14th-century impetus ideas"—even when their hands-on experiments contradicted those misconceptions and reinforced more enlightened Newtonian theories (22).

In a similar way, when students meet a new problem in their reading or approach the cusp of new knowledge formulation, they can fall into over-reliance on "commonplaces" from their prior knowledge. A commonplace is a trite, ready-made conclusion that circulates in common discourse—"A college education is necessary to get a good job," "Drugs are bad,"—and according to David Bartholomae, "reduces the world to a storehouse of examples to prove or support that commonplace" (203). Students try to force statements or assertions like these into their college work not only because, in their experience, commonplaces are rarely challenged, but especially because of the way the brain works. It is easier to seize on truisms readily available from memory than to reason one's way from problem to solution. Bartholomae suggests that forming conclusions from commonplaces is "the natural or ad hoc heuristic students bring to most writing tasks—where their primary motive is to make the world manageable, and not to make it dense and distracting, rich with contradiction and clutter" (203).

The mental flexibility required to disrupt commonplaces is hard-won. In an attempt to oversimplify ideas and ignore messy contradictions, possibilities, and implications, the brain continually defaults to memory, however flawed. In *Why Students Don't Like School,* cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham (2009) points out that to save precious energy, the brain devotes most of its effort to managing the really difficult work done by the visual cortex: regulating movement and balance based on visual perception (4). According to Willingham, all of this

[3] At Quinnipiac University, students with learning disabilities are invited to the Learning Commons to discuss their program with the Learning Services Coordinator, to have ADA accommodations put in place for their classes, and to consult with an academic specialist for reading and writing strategies.

effort spent negotiating movement in spatially intricate surroundings means that our brains are uncomfortable when challenged to perform genuine reasoning or complex problem-solving:

> Shakespeare extolled our cognitive ability in *Hamlet*: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason!" Some three hundred years later, Henry Ford more cynically observed, "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably why so few people engage in it." They both had a point. Humans are good at certain types of reasoning, particularly in comparison to other animals, but we exercise those abilities infrequently. A cognitive scientist would add another observation: Humans don't think very often because our brains are designed not for thought but for the avoidance of thought. Thinking is not only effortful, as Ford noted, it's also slow and unreliable (4-5).

Because "thinking is the hardest work there is," students experience peak frustration at the very point we require them to reason their way from problem to solution in their reading. The commonplace is a painless means for evading such frustration. Our experience with trite essays or with commonsense but incorrect answers on tests illustrates that memory is not necessarily problem-solving and can actually short-circuit the process. Interestingly, research by Bain (2004) suggests the best college teachers are those who recall similar frustrations from their own years as students and who expertly guide students through the same processes they used to resolve their difficulties. Though keenly aware of where students' existing mental models will fail, such teachers do not simply transmit answers to students. Rather, they give students "safe space" to learn from their mistakes (28). With Bain's conclusions in mind, the instructor who has assigned a difficult reading could have students target the point in the text where they felt the most frustrated and then "safely" test their commonplace conclusions, only to see them fall short.

As an example of this process at work, consider the experience of students in a Quinnipiac University English course who are asked to explain why a literary villain qualifies as a "monster." Students' favorite strategy is to rely on their commonplace definitions of "monster"—which can suspiciously echo online dictionaries—and to force the antagonist to fit the inadequate definitions. Essays based on this strategy tend to be weak, since they leave the substance of the author's characterization behind. Each author the students encounter in the course—from Edgar Allen Poe to Joyce Carol Oates—has provided an intricate and astonishing variation of human evil to which the common definition simply does not apply.[4] However, when students are given "safe space" to test their assumptions or dictionary definition alongside the character's many manifestations of a unique, surprising form of evil, they see where the commonplaces fall short and instead adopt a new strategy for the assignment. This exercise renders student frustration not as a dead end where all viable answers have been exhausted, but as a turning point where the student has the opportunity to employ new knowledge instead of commonplace discourse.

[4] We acknowledge Monica Bauer, Adjunct Professor of English at Quinnipiac, for this assignment.

Problem Four: Students Fail to Complete Reading Assignments

At the point of frustration, students may feel that they have exhausted all of their efforts and there is no reason to go on. Though frustration continually threatens to curtail learning, it is actually a valuable moment. Frustration is the very point where, if the student persists, he will turn from his reliance on memory and instead begin to reason his way through a problem. Students are motivated to persist when they experience success solving the problems that are found throughout their reading. In fact, cognitive scientists have observed small surges of dopamine in the brain when a problem is successfully solved, bringing more pleasure than when a subject is given the answer outright or, alternatively, has too many hints for finding the answer (Willingham 2009, 10). A recent WNPR segment informed listeners that some educators are rethinking the Western habit of rescuing students from frustration in the classroom (Spiegel 2012). In contrast to the American model, in which struggling students are spared embarrassing exposure at the chalkboard, in many Asian schools, it is the frustrated students who are called upon to engage in the challenging problem. Yet they are encouraged and applauded as they undergo the steps necessary to solve it, which results in a rich learning experience (Spiegel 2012).

The key is to pose problems that are moderately difficult—neither too easy nor too complex, as the first extreme tends to bore students, and the second tends to overwhelm them (Willingham 2009, 13). A moderately difficult cognitive challenge could be a cleverly crafted question posed to students at the beginning of a reading. Such questions tend to provide a purpose for the reading and are thus good motivators. Indeed, exploring content as a *story* that frames the question is likely to motivate students, even in disciplines that do not examine narrative as explicitly as literature courses do. .

Cognitive studies have found stories to be "psychologically privileged, meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material" (Willingham 2009, 67). Concluding that storytelling is one of the common threads connecting the most effective professors he has observed, Willingham suggests structuring lessons with the "four C's" of narrative structure in mind: "causality, conflict, complication, and character"[5] (69). Human beings are naturally curious, and these elements fuel that curiosity. We want to know what happened and why it happened (causality); what was at stake if the battle was lost (conflict); what was in the way of the goal (complication); and who was involved (character) (Willingham 2009, 71).

Following are two examples of lessons that use story to catalyze the moderately difficult problem-solving that learners experience as pleasurable and rewarding. After the professor tells the story in class, students can refer to their assigned readings not just for recalling content , but for determining cause and effect, creating inferences, and applying knowledge to new situations, which are deeper-level (rather than surface) learning strategies**:**

> Physicist Richard Feynman once introduced the concept of light waves by narrating from his easy chair: Imagine […] that you are sitting next to a swimming pool and someone dives in, creating waves in the water. "It is possible," he explained, "that in those waves

[5] Willingham's surveys of college students also led to the conclusion that students see the best professor as a "nice person" who is also "well-organized."

> there's a clue as to what's happening in that pool." It is also possible, Feynman continued, that some sort of insect…with sufficient cleverness could sit in a corner of the pool and could be disturbed by the waves and by the nature of the irregularities and bumping of the waves [and] figure out who jumped in where and when and what's happening all over the pool (in Bain 2004, 123-124).

In this example, we see **causality** in the chain of events as someone dives into the pool, causing an insect to be disturbed by the waves, resulting in the insect determining the properties of the waves. **Conflict** occurs in the insect (or **character**) which is addled by the waves. **Complication** could involve the challenge the insect has in determining the properties of the waves, and thus in planning its escape or survival strategy. These are the elements that keep students interested. But students are not done just because they've heard the story. A moderate-level problem based on the story would require them to think critically and ask the question: *How is it that our eyes' response to light is just like the bug's response to the water?* Students would then read an assigned text for the content that would facilitate solving the problem; in this case, they would read about how light waves interact with the human eye. Success in moderate-level problem-solving not only creates pleasure for the student but also functions as scaffolding upon which the students can build new knowledge. For instance, the above process might lead to another question: *Aside from its wave properties, what other physical properties does light have?*

Sometimes story can disrupt assumptions and prompt students to think more flexibly. In Daniel Willingham's next example from a World War II history class, the most compelling point of view on the attack on Pearl Harbor is not the United States' but Japan's:

> Suppose you thought of the four C's when you were telling the story […]. From the perspective of the Japanese], the United States is not the strong character. Japan is, because she had the goal that propelled events forward—regional domination—and she had significant obstacles to this goal—she lacked natural resources and she was embroiled in a protracted war with China (71).

In this lesson, the professor structures the story in such a way that students must reason logically from the Japanese point of view. A question to prompt critical thinking might be to ask how attacking Pearl Harbor could gain Japan advantage over her enemies in Europe. As students tackle the moderate-level problem, their solutions become scaffolds for new knowledge. For example, after they reason that Japan had much more to gain from seizing Pacific European colonies than from attacking Europe outright, students might then learn from their reading which of these colonies were targeted and why.

In presenting stories, we should be wary of "attention-grabbers"—entertaining yet pedagogically empty anecdotes that distract students and postpone meaningful learning (Willingham 2009, 80). Fifth-graders in an Earth Science class could likely fixate on an exploding model volcano in their teacher's demonstration but learn nothing about why the eruption occurs, unless the teacher holds them responsible for the concept—preferably *before* the dramatic demonstration (82). In the same way, an attention-grabbing story could distract college students with drama when they should be drawing meaningful connections between the story and the concept that they should learn from it (82). Willingham points out that we learn what we reflect upon (61). Therefore, in

fostering learning from reading assignments, instructors do well to puzzle students just so they will reflect on possible solutions that emerge through a careful reading of the text. That way, attention is on the problem, not on a distracting anecdote.

As educators, we must be aware that learning through reading is an incremental experience that grows through a series of stops and starts that include frustration, but that these hurdles are necessary for the learning to occur. Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donohue, in *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*, refer to reading as "a transaction between *reader and text,* where both play a role in the construction of meaning, and where both are understood as participants in a process that must be initiated and negotiated" (2005, 6). As testimony to the value of just this kind of attention to reading, some of those same students who expressed their frustrations with college-level reading (see paragraph six above) expressed varying degrees of satisfaction in their final metacognitive reflection at the end of the term:

- "I realized that I felt more lost than I truly was."
- "Once my reading began to improve, I was also able to improve my writing."
- "One thing I learned the first day of this course is that you can't become a better writer without becoming a better reader first."
- "Challenging myself as a reader this year has increased my views on reading as a tool to help me become successful in college."

The best reading experiences create meaning that solidifies concepts and builds new knowledge. Through reading, students form a bridge—one concept at a time—that connects not only the ideas in their disciplines, but those between disciplines. Building a durable bridge takes time, yet powerful tools can help the process along: writing annotations that require interaction with the reading, asking metacognitive questions to monitor thinking, harnessing frustration as an opportunity for learning, and applying story as a scaffold for moderate-level problem solving. Built with these tools, the bridge can be sturdy indeed.

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