



What is College Reading?

Horning, Alice S.; Gollnitz, Deborah-Lee; Haller, Cynthia R. (eds)
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Book Review

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What is college reading? As college teachers we may assume that it is a process of comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. But, as this edited volume overwhelmingly demonstrates, that is often not what it is for college students. How then can college teachers help students practice advanced reading skills? The problem is compounded by the fact that even college teachers who actively want to encourage students to read may unwittingly discourage advanced reading skills by, for example, giving reading quizzes in class (as discussed by Mary Lou Odom in this volume). This edited volume is a great resource for anyone wishing to engage questions about how to improve college reading.

Some chapters provide useful practical suggestions. For example, Chris Anson shows how to formulate reading log prompts that require students to engage with the underlying ideas in the reading. Other chapters describe exercises such as in-class annotations (Davies) and says-does columns (Huffman). The volume also contains several insightful discussions of other factors influencing college reading that are more difficult to address, but no less important. For example, some of the authors observe that reading, which we may think of as an individual activity, is a “complex sociolinguistic task” (Hollander et al., 59), and “a collective and holistic enterprise” (Maloy et al., 71). Brian Gogan provides a thoughtful reflection on reading in relation to “threshold concepts” (concepts that students need to grasp in order to move forward in a given disciplinary context). College teachers may use these insights to make reading part of building an intellectual community in the class.

The chapter by Young and Potter discusses how students are taught to read in K-12, where

students are commonly given a decontextualized passage and then tested on their ability to understand inferences at the level of sentences or paragraphs. These students also commonly learn that for each question asked about the text, there is one correct answer in a multiple-choice format. They receive comparably little training in the advanced reading skills required for college, such as learning how to place a particular text into a connected web of texts that make up an ongoing disciplinary conversation, or asking their own higher-order questions and working with others' questions that do not have a single "correct" answer. When students start college, therefore, they will commonly think of reading as looking for answers in a decontextualized excerpt; they are not accustomed to looking instead for interesting, productive problems in a web of texts (as also discussed in the afterword by Sullivan and Tinberg).

Other authors discuss the importance of instructors connecting reading with writing, drawing on both the writing-to-read and reading-to-write conversations (Anson; Freedman). Some chapters refer to the by now widely known finding that the majority of students do not do what their instructors think they do when completing a research paper assignment, and how to address the implications of this for formulating new types of writing assignments (Horning; Young and Potter). Related to this, Laura Davies points out in her chapter that students who write poorly are usually referred to the university's writing center, rather than asked about their reading skills, which underlie their writing. Several chapters also touch on how reading might be given a stronger institutional footing through, for example, being explicitly incorporated into writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives (Odom), linking courses (Sturtz et al.), or providing a reading-across-the-curriculum community on campus (Hollander et al.).

In sum, as Leonora Freedman observes in her chapter, stronger responses to the problem of how to teach college reading skills can lead to increased student engagement as well as increased faculty morale. This edited volume is a very good place to start. It deserves a wide readership among college faculty and administrators, and this goal will no doubt be made easier by the fact that the publishers have made it free to download at wac.colostate.edu.

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