



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 18, No. 2

October 1, 2005

Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem

In *Thinking About Teaching and Learning*, Robert Leamnson locates the epicenter of teaching and learning in brain chemistry and asserts that it is not enough to lead students to use their brains; teachers must help students change neural pathways.

In his Preface, Leamnson says that effective teaching depends on "Knowing Where to Strike," and he counsels us to "find a 'nodal problem,'" or "some deficiency that blocks all the other skills we would hope to find in first-year students." Leamnson says, "my candidate for a nodal problem is language use. The typical beginning college student is marginally equipped to deal with the language in any discipline at the college level, whether in verbal discourse, reading, or writing. The language obstacle is central to all the arguments I present in this book." Leamnson goes on to focus on student writing as the most crucial nodal problem.

This is, of course, music to the ears of anyone in the English Department. We teach Composition I and Composition II to nearly all first-year students, and the skill level they bring to us from high school makes our job very difficult. For decades, we have been saying that we can't create highly skilled writers in two 15-week semesters. First, we have to break down many very counterproductive high school habits and attitudes before we can make progress, and then we have to build new habits very quickly. As Leamnson points out, creating new neural pathways in the brain is stressful, difficult, and time-consuming. To succeed in our Herculean labor, we need everyone in the university to help reinforce writing skill, if only by requiring students to write as much as possible to earn their grades in every course they take.

However, many of our colleagues are reluctant to tackle student writing, either believing that they owe allegiance first to disciplinary content, that writing instruction requires expertise they lack, or that "grading" papers would be too labor-intensive. Whatever the validity of this hesitancy to help teach writing, I believe that there might be an even more crucial nodal problem that we might all agree to focus on. Our first-year students cannot read effectively. However, I believe that our students can learn to read more effectively and that all faculty can help improve student reading skills without sacrificing course content coverage or creating excessive labor.

We all ask students to read textbooks and supplementary reading and we are frequently disappointed when they don't do the reading at all or seem to do it badly. I

believe that if our students are reading reluctantly or badly, we have a responsibility to find out why. The usual pedagogical strategy is the reading quiz—elementary recall questions that teachers consider “simple” and students often consider “simple-minded,” arbitrary, and autocratic. I’ve seen students who seem willing to risk their grade rather than knuckle under to a forced march through a reading assignment.

I am no reading specialist, but I expect that we can come up with better ideas. Let me offer some to get us started:

1. Start each class by asking students to write a three-sentence summary of their reading, perhaps on a 3 x 5 note card. This should take no more than 5 minutes. Once this assignment becomes a tradition, the students will more likely do their reading so as to not embarrass themselves. In reading their summaries, you will probably be able to tell who is faking, who has read superficially, and who has read deeply. In this process, you will enhance student comprehension of course content. The students will need some instruction in how to write an effective summary. The issue of whether or not to assign credit for this writing is another issue for us to analyze and discuss.
2. Do the same as above but make the writing a personal response, which is much easier for students, much more engaging for them, and, unfortunately, easier for them to fake. However, you should still be able to discern levels of quality in the responses, and, in sharing these levels of quality with your students, you can encourage more engaged and pertinent responses.
3. At various times either during class, or as homework, ask students to do a paraphrase of small sections of selected text. Leamnson believes that paraphrasing is a superior diagnostic and educational tool because students must reproduce an accurate account of a text’s meaning using their own words. One of the advantages of the paraphrase, according to Leamnson, is that it can be longer than the original text and does not put as much pressure on a student’s burgeoning writing skill. The expansiveness of a paraphrase might lead to less quality in student writing but more quality in student understanding.

If you have other strategies to share, send your suggestions as responses to this Faculty Forum. The byproduct of better reading is better writing, speaking, note-taking, and listening. We cannot simply assign a lot of reading and expect students to do it well. There has to be teacher intervention to get the learning process started, feedback to inspire student self motivation, and evaluation of the learning success.

Terry Nienhuis, English

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem" by Terry Nienhuis, 10/1/05

In his Faculty Forum essay, Terry Nienhuis makes a profound point about the reading abilities of students. It is indeed unfortunate that so many of our students come to college unprepared to read for comprehension, and I'm sure that Leamnson would include reading as part of the nodal problem in language use. While we could complain about this sad state of affairs, we must, as Leamnson says, "play the hand we are dealt." These reading and writing (and speaking) skill sets are so critical to all of our disciplines that it is grossly unfair to ask our colleagues in English and CDTA to "fix it" with nine semester hours of Liberal Studies courses that are detached from the rest of the students' college learning. I hope nobody in English or CDTA is offended by my use of the word "detached." It's just that, as far as I know, there is no formal connection between ENGL 101/2 (or CMHC 201) and any other non-English course in the university.

Though Terry focused on reading, I am more intrigued by a statement he made about writing: "we have to break down many very counterproductive high school habits and attitudes before we can make progress, and then we have to build new habits very quickly." It would be interesting for those of us outside the English department to know precisely what those bad habits and attitudes are and what new habits need to be instilled (I can guess, but I would appreciate an English professor's perspective). To take this a step further, when those of us who teach in other disciplines attempt to work on students' writing skills, I'm guessing most of us do it independently of whatever the students learned in ENGL101/2. If I knew precisely what went on in those composition classes, I might be able to design writing experiences that reinforce the learning from those classes.

This integrative approach could actually work in both directions. Here's an interesting idea: instead of two three-hour composition courses in the first year or so, what about three (or dare I say, four) two-hour composition classes, one for each year? In each year, the writing would be more specific to the student's course of study. In this way, the integration could be more real-time and bidirectional.

As for developing reading skills, one suggestion I have is to approach how we assign readings in a more systematic manner, from simpler to more complex, thus paralleling the student's evolving grasp of language at the college level. Textbooks in general are of no help here (well, that's true at least for Computer Science), since the complexity of language in a textbook is "flat" from start to finish.

It would be better if students came to college prepared for the level of reading, writing, and speaking that we all expect. They don't. That means we as a faculty will have to take on collectively more responsibility to ensure they have the necessary communication and comprehension skills to succeed in our courses.

David Luginbuhl, Math and Computer Science

Thanks, Terry, for your ideas about promoting better student reading (or let's face it, promoting the students to read at all). I'll add one. I've used this system in my COUN 440: Leadership and Facilitation class for two years now. I like it and students tell me that they do as well. The course

Responses to “Student Reading Skill: Another Nodal Problem” by Terry Nienhuis, 10/1/05

uses two texts, one they get through the rental system and one they buy. We use the two books back-and-forth throughout the semester. The for-purchase book is a workbook that has a series of ready-made sections called “Your Turn.” As students read, they pause at each “Your Turn” and hand-write responses to the authors’ inquiries, always aimed at getting the reader to think more deeply about the issues at hand. Because this system was already in place for the one book, I have extended it myself to the rental book. I’ve created my own “Your Turn” handout for each chapter. It’s a one-page (front-to-back) handout with questions set to particular sections of the corresponding chapter (“At the bottom of p. 32, the author states... Give an example of this in your own...”). But then all of these “Your Turns” are too much for me to read and grade. To simplify, I assign each student a number and at the start of each class session, I pull (actually I have a student volunteer pull) eight or so numbers randomly. Only those students whose number is called submit their “Your Turn” work. Students never know when their number will come up, so they must bring this reading reflection to class every session. I further encourage reading (and reflection on it) by sometimes using the “Your Turn” responses to kick-off our discussions.

Lisen Roberts, Human Services

Terry Nienhuis paraphrases Robert Leamnson, “creating new neural pathways in the brain is stressful, difficult, and time-consuming,” and this is true not only for students but for their instructors. Rethinking how we teach can be excruciating. The good news is the mental work we undergo to become more effective teachers will be as beneficial for our brains as the mental work we require of our students will be for theirs. Counter to conventional wisdom, there is no more demanding or rewarding a calling than being a good teacher.

Barbara Hardie, Director, Writing Center

Leamnson is talking about how human beings (not just “students”) use language. Thanks, Terry, for bringing it to our faculty’s attention. A nodal issue in faculty development, we assert, is gaining a theoretically sound, pragmatic concept of what language use is and what effects it has on curricula and pedagogy. Writing and reading are far more than skills students need to master or at least get the hang of prior to entering other academic or professional endeavors. Human beings learn through acts of writing and reading. Knowledge is constructed through use of language. Students of science learn how and what scientists write/read from other scientists. Students of history learn how and what historians write from other historians. Young entrepreneurs learn. . .and so it goes. Education and life are shot through with use of language and its learning. In our discipline, we call it rhetoric, broadly defined as the use of, and study of the use of, language. Course content cannot be completely taught or effectively learned without studying its discipline’s rhetoric.

Marsha Lee Baker and Liz Kelly, English