

# Reading about Reading: Addressing the Challenges of College Readers through an Understanding of the Politics of P-12 Literacy

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This chapter reviews and analyzes current and competing trends in P-12 literacy research and assessment in comparison to efforts to develop and establish reading instruction at the college level. The authors argue that the current push towards “evidence-based” practices in P-12 education privileges instructional methods that produce measurable, short-term gains in student achievement but conflict with efforts to improve students’ college readiness in reading at both the P-12 and college levels. Specifically, this trend contradicts the student-centered approach that will be needed at the P-12 level to enable students to do the complex reading activities required by the “career and college ready” standards of the Common Core. Further, the chapter explores ways that the drive towards producing measurable student improvement via methods such as direct instruction conflicts sharply with concepts of critical literacy that are essential to college reading. The chapter will provide instructional strategies, including metacognitive approaches (i.e., “reading about reading”), for helping students move from a literacy environment focused on short-term gains to a college environment that demands deep understanding and conversation with texts across the disciplines.

Recent efforts to prepare students for college, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), promote the reading of complex texts as essential to success in the college classroom and beyond. Much of the literature surrounding the CCSS suggests that student engagement with the learning process is a crucial step in building college readiness (Conley, 2011). However, this kind of constructivist pedagogical approach has a very complicated relationship to debates in P-12 education over effective reading instruction and the nationwide push towards evidence-based teaching practices. Specifically, the current debate over “balanced literacy” reveals the sharply conflicting epistemological, pedagogical, and ideological perspectives

simultaneously at play in the current effort to improve student literacy at the P-12 level, all in the name of increased college and career readiness. The politics of literacy instruction in P-12 classrooms is divisive, and the embattled discussions about P-12 literacy long precede current efforts like the CCSS.

Higher education faculty and administrators seeking to improve student literacy via reading instruction at the college level must proceed with a clear understanding of the wide range of P-12 pedagogical approaches to literacy. Additionally, an analysis of the pedagogical methods employed to achieve P-12 reading outcomes reveals several interesting conflicts with current and prospective approaches to reading and writing instruction for college students. Moreover, an exploration of P-12 literacy pedagogy and theory helps to explain phenomena like patch writing and “tool users,” noted by reading and writing scholars like Sandra Jamieson (2013) and Steven Pearlman (2013). By connecting the findings of these researchers with the practices and politics of P-12 literacy instruction, higher education faculty and administrators can more successfully understand, assess, and improve the reading skills of college students at all levels.

Our definition of college reading contradicts approaches that treat literacy as an autonomous, repeatable process that can be detached from context and taught formulaically in order to produce quantifiable results via standard assessments. College reading, as we define it, draws on a long tradition of constructivist pedagogy in literacy and in rhetoric that insists upon the crucial role of the historically situated individual reader, whose unique process of reading can only be examined and understood in relation to shifting cultures, ideological systems, and discourses. Such a definition of college reading draws on theories that insist upon the connection between literacy, reading, and the social, cultural, and discursive nature of knowledge and power (Berlin, 2003; Lea & Street, 2006; Horning, 2012; Pearlman, 2013). College reading, in our definition, is a highly situated process in which students engage deeply with a given text, make connections between text and personal experience, values, other texts—both academic and non-academic—and scholarly, cultural, historical, and ideological contexts of the topic and/or text being explored.

This chapter adds to current scholarship on college-level reading by situating the topic within past and current debates over literacy research, policy, and practice *across* the P-16 continuum. Just as we will argue that college reading must be taught as a culturally and politically situated act, we believe that college reading must be defined in relation to the key contexts that surround it. It is essential that both secondary and post-secondary instructors have an understanding of the ideological and pedagogical contexts that shape reading instruction at each level. High school instructors must have a sense of the assumptions and expectations that college instructors bring to the teaching of reading and writing. Likewise, college instructors must know much more about how the politics of the “reading wars,” both past and present, (along with broader shifts in education policy) shape reading and literacy

instruction at the P-12 level. To this end, the chapter will explore additional descriptions and definitions of college reading in order to provide context for our own definition. It will then explore the ways that successful college reading (and college reading instruction), as defined above, may be thwarted by current pedagogical and political movements that value and/or promote autonomous and proscriptive approaches to reading instruction. Finally, we provide potential solutions for college-level instructors looking to improve college reading instruction, offering an example of how “balanced literacy,” a research-based approach to reading instruction used at the P-12 level, can be implemented at the college level.

## Defining College-level Reading Across the Disciplines

Despite current efforts to conduct research on college-level reading, in comparison to the massive amount of literature and theory around developmental psychology and reading in the P-12 environment, relatively few studies and theories have been developed or applied in post-secondary learning. In order to establish our own definition of college reading we will next examine three studies from the Special issue of *Across the Disciplines on Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines* (2013) we believe point to key, specific difficulties faced by college-level readers.

Research college reading indicates that college students, in the effort to produce research-based texts, often fail to adequately comprehend or effectively apply what they have read in academic texts (Jamieson, 2013). Jamieson finds that students do not often cite information from throughout texts they read, instead focusing on brief passages and at times basing entire arguments upon one or two (often misinterpreted) sentences, more often than not found in the first several pages of the cited text. She also observes that students use a strategy Rebecca Moore Howard (1992), the other lead collaborator to their shared “Citation Project,” calls “patch writing,” whereby students “‘borrowed’ phrases, patched together into ‘new’ sentences; they ‘borrowed’ whole sentences, deleting what they consider irrelevant words and phrases; and they ‘borrowed’ a hodgepodge of phrases and sentences in which they changed grammar and syntax, and substituted synonyms straight from Roget’s” (p. 235).

Unlike Jamieson, Pearlman (2013) explicitly develops an argument about college writing from an understanding of adolescent literacy, pointing to a possible explanation for the widespread use of a patch-writing strategy. He explores the difference between literacy and reading, noting that students turn to patch writing because they cannot contextualize what they are reading within the overwhelming volume of related academic literature. His work points to the need to understand literacy across the P-16 continuum, a notion that is essential to our definition of college reading.

Lynne Rhodes (2013) also observes that much of the struggle for college-level readers involves reading comprehension and lack of disciplinary understanding. Like Pearlman, Rhodes connects the struggles of college reading with P-12 practices, suggesting that elementary and secondary teachers, due in part to the Common Core, teach close reading, meta-analysis, and synthesis but often focus on very simple or creative texts. These strategies, in other words, are not applied to complex texts and do not consider context as a key element of reading. Rhodes also suggests that higher education might benefit from more standardized reading instruction.

Taken together, the articles by Perlman (2013), Rhodes (2013), and Jamieson (2013) suggest that the ability to contextualize, critically engage, and authentically apply what is read are all essential elements of college reading. All three articles point to an understanding of college reading as a contextualized act that requires critical abilities and academic discourse knowledge that beginning college students often lack. The articles also highlight some common areas where more research and understanding are needed in order to improve college reading instruction. Although Pearlman engages with developmental psychology and adolescent literacy, he does not offer ways to connect what is learned in P-12 environments with what is learned in the college environment; instead, he offers an intelligent strategy for engaging students in disciplinary understanding. What is missing, however, is potentially the most crucial piece for student success in college reading: how do college-level faculty build from literacy practices of the P-12 environment in order to ensure that students do not experience gaps in understanding, content, and skill? Like Pearlman and Rhodes, Jamieson observes that success as a college-level reader relies on disciplinary comprehension and cautions that pedagogies must be differentiated for varying levels of skill. Given Rhodes' observations about the need to standardize instruction and expectations, how can college-level instructors best understand and differentiate for student ability without compromising these common outcomes?

## The Relationship between P-12 Literacy Practices and College-Level Literacy Practices

One answer to the questions about college reading raised by the above analysis of Jamieson (2013), Perlman (2013), and Rhodes (2013) lies in an understanding of the relationship between P-12 practices and college practices. Without conversation around reading curriculum and outcomes at each level, neither level will adequately achieve goals for reading instruction. Little cross-institution and cross-level conversation occurs between P-12 and college environments, and this lack of communication contributes to a lack of understanding about what and how students are taught. In fact, many of the important details can be community-spe-

cific and therefore difficult to determine based on simply reading the Common Core requirements, for example. Further complicating matters is the reality that the political environments of P-12 and college environments are very different, especially when it comes to literacy. Differences in the political, regulatory, and material environments of P-12 and college have led to differing values and instructional practices in literacy education, and even different definitions of reading itself. At the core of these differences is a mismatch between a legislative, policy-driven focus on short-term outcomes on the P-12 level and the kind of deep, critical reading abilities valued at the college level, which must be taught, learned, and assessed over the long term.

In many cases, college instructors teaching reading operate with much greater individual autonomy in comparison with their P-12 counterparts. While an individual college faculty member may be held accountable primarily by a program director or department chair, a high school teacher is held accountable by a federal system of regulations and policies that legitimize pedagogical practices according to a very narrow definition of knowledge—often, practices are validated and funded based only on the “scientific” evidence provided in their support (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014, para. 2 & 3). Likewise, while college instructors must focus on and are evaluated on the performance of their own students in relation to the university and college as a whole, high school instructors operate within huge state and national systems that seek to measure and compare the performance of students and teachers across the entire country.

The scale of the system in which high school teachers operate is immense in comparison to the environment in which college instructors operate. In a federal education system that involves millions of students and billions of dollars, it should not be a surprise that legislators and education agencies fund only those practices that produce the quickest, most visible learning outcomes. In contrast, college professors have the autonomy to focus on developing students’ ability to do the kind of deep, critical thinking that takes time to teach, learn, and assess. In the case of reading, this means that there is often a mismatch between the kind of direct instruction sometimes used to teach reading in P-12 and the kind of reading skills students need to succeed at the college level. Direct instruction can quickly produce measurable improvements in student reading ability (particularly for those reading below grade level). This approach alone, however, is not compatible with the need to teach students to read and analyze deeply, make connections, and synthesize effectively.

The newest of the P-12 reading wars—between the proponents of a particular version of close reading versus those who advocate a brand of balanced literacy—is a related, more specific version of the general mismatch between approaches to reading instruction at the P-12 and college levels; this discussion is particularly pertinent to the transition from high school to college and the issue of college readiness.

## Reviewing the Politics and Practices of P-12 Literacy Education

In addition to the general observations offered in the previous section, a summary of P-12 literacy theory and practice is helpful for understanding the context for our exploration of the relationship between P-12 reading instruction and our definition of college reading. The conversations around literacy in the P-12 environment are regularly described as “wars” or “battles,” with teachers, school districts, and faculty often endorsing one theory or practice at the expense of others. Debates about scientifically proven practices, direct instruction and phonics, whole language instruction, and balanced literacy all contribute to the political climate in P-12 literacy education. This context is important for instructors of college-level reading and writing as well as reading across the disciplines; depending on the type of practice endorsed in a school district, by a particular administrator, and/or in a specific classroom, a student entering college might have been taught using a dramatically different reading pedagogy.

### Approaches to Literacy Instruction in P-12 Environments

Common pedagogical practices in P-12 literacy instruction include phonics, direct instruction, whole language, constructivism, and balanced literacy. Each strategy is contentious. None has emerged as the preeminent best practice in instruction, and the strategies are not always mutually exclusive. Conversations around these strategies, as well as their scientific value, are what comprise the conflict described as the “reading wars.” Exhaustive bibliographies have been assembled on each of these methods.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, we will provide only a basic overview of the practices and arguments in this chapter.

Direct instruction is a pedagogical practice that involves explicit demonstration and practice of skills in a learning environment. Typically, direct instruction practices are counter to constructivist or discovery models of learning. The What Works Clearinghouse (2007) describes direct instruction practices as “teaching techniques that are fast-paced, teacher-directed, and explicit with opportunities for student response and teacher reinforcement or correction” (p. 1). In the case of literacy, the teaching of phonics is often synonymous with direct instruction practices. National Institution for Direct Instruction (NIFDI, 2015), which publishes the Reading Mastery direct instruction program, outlines several key tenets of direct instruction, which include:

1 *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* by Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers (2014) offers a comprehensive overview of whole language and its relationship to phonics, and the *Handbook of Research on Reading Comprehension* (2009) by Susan Israel and Gerald Duffy explores each method thoroughly. A broad look at issues and trends in reading instruction today can be found in *What Research Has to Say about Reading Instruction* by S. Jay Samuels and Alan Farstrup (2011).

- Low performers and disadvantaged learners must be taught at a faster rate than typically occurs if they are to catch up to their higher-performing peers.
- All details of instruction must be controlled to minimize the chance of students' misinterpreting the information being taught and to maximize the reinforcing effect of instruction (para. 2).

These two tenets cause constructivists and whole language proponents to take issue, some going as far as calling direct instruction “factory learning” (Wheatley, 2015a). Unlike direct instruction, whole language approaches to learning reject the notion that knowledge can be packaged and delivered to students. In fact, some whole language researchers reject the notion of “instruction” altogether, suggesting that education is instead authentically “learner-initiated but teacher-supported” (Wheatley, 2015b, p. 37). As Richards and Rogers (2014) note, whole language is sometimes called a philosophy or belief rather than a method.

It is important to note that those who favor whole language do not necessarily think direct instruction or phonics instruction are “bad.” From the point of view of proponents of whole language or constructivism, direct instruction can be used effectively in specific classroom contexts, and phonics instruction is understood to be an essential component of the process of learning to read. However, whole language suggests that humans learn language as a “meaning-making” system, emerging out of the language acquisition research of Noam Chomsky (2006), and context, semantics, syntax, and meaning are as crucial to language learning as are phonics.

Whole language is one example of a constructivist strategy for literacy instruction. Generally, constructivist methods for teaching reading, according to Brian Cambourne (2002), follow five principles. First, classroom culture should allow for demonstrations of strong or effective reading behavior. Additionally, attempts to teach are explicit, systematic, mindful, and contextualized. Cambourne also suggests that learning is related to “continuous intellectual unrest” (p. 30). Reflection and metatextual understanding of reading processes must be developed. Finally, assignments and assessments should be authentic. Here, Cambourne refers specifically to P-12 practices; as we will suggest, many of these practices can be extrapolated for the college-level reading environment. Constructivist strategies focus heavily on the role of context and self-reflection in comprehension (Kamii et al., 1991; Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000). This type of pedagogy is most closely aligned with common practices in composition and rhetoric (Young & Potter, 2013).

Foundational research in the field of literacy suggests that a balanced approach, which brings together elements from direct instruction/phonics and constructivism/whole language, is necessary (National Reading Panel, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Overall, how-

2 Beginning in 2000, the National Reading Panel Report, *Teaching Children to Read*, sought to end the so-called reading wars by promoting a balanced literacy approach (Kim, 2008). The report

ever, current research suggests that specific instructional approaches consistent with whole language and constructive pedagogy have the support of more experts. “A Focus on Struggling Readers: A Comparative Analysis of Expert Opinions and Empirical Research Recommendations” (Jones, Reutzel, & Smith, 2011) attempts to compare expert consensus on effective and ineffective practices to recommendations derived from empirical research studies on reading instruction. The study examines and compares strategies advocated by the proponents of constructivism with strategies advocated by those in favor of direct instruction. Modeling and scaffolding, approaches consistent with a constructivist approach, are clear winners in this study, as are integrated approaches to literacy that incorporate speaking, writing, and reading. This study also emphasizes the importance of student engagement. Further, Jones, et al. delineated as “ineffective” strategies like “Isolated Instruction,” “Skill Drill and Mastery,” and “Exclusive Teacher Control” (Jones et al., 2012, pp. 278–279). This classification suggests the importance of contextualization and student-centered instruction in teaching reading. Although not at the complete exclusion of approaches that are more direct, we argue that whole language and constructivist approaches offer a level of contextualization and engagement that best prepares students for the work they will do in the college environment.

## Research-Based Practices: The Demand for Scientific Education Solutions

While much of the political furor over the Common Core State Standards and the continued push back towards No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has focused on testing-related issues, another major shift in U.S. education policy and practice has occurred with less outcry or concern. This shift is important, as it is currently leading to the devaluation, at the P-12 level, of the kind of reading instruction that is consistent with approaches advocated by researchers at the college level. No Child Left Behind mandates funding and support of demonstrably “scientific” educational practices (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014, para. 2 & 3). Classroom activities must be “scientifically based” or “research-based,” supported by multiple comparison group studies and cost-benefit analyses (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014, para. 2 & 3). Such requirements can delegitimize qualitative forms of research, while forms of research that can most explicitly—quantitatively—demonstrate the benefit of an educational practice are privileged. On the federal and state level, an educational practice or approach will not be supported (i.e., with funding) unless that practice

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indicated that students must be provided instruction in their early years that addresses phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. These approaches are widely accepted in P-12 education as foundational to effectively teaching children to read.



or approach has been shown to produce demonstrable outcomes in student learning. Student learning growth is quantitatively measured via testing and value-added modeling; meta-analyses of research studies focused on particular classroom practices are then produced, showing the effect size of a given practice on overall student learning growth. Such analyses are often combined with cost/benefit analyses to show the overall practical benefit to the state of the implementation (expressed in tax revenue and/or increased earnings) of a particular practice.

The drive towards scientifically proven instruction is illustrated by Hattie's book *Visible Learning* (2012), a meta-analysis of thousands of meta-analyses of instructional practices. Hattie seeks to evaluate and rank according to effect-size (that is, impact on student learning) all forms of P-12 instruction. The book compiles and analyzes meta-analyses in order to determine and compare the impact on student learning of everything from tutoring to extended learning to professional development. The book endeavors to promote only those instructional practices that promote visible learning, while exposing common practices that show little scientific evidence of effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the scientific approaches to reading instruction that are validated and promoted within this paradigm are those that readily produce short-term, easily measured results. For example, in a particularly telling comparison, the method of direct instruction is one of the most highly ranked practices covered by Hattie. It is shown to produce more significant impacts on student learning than many of the hundreds of practices analyzed in the book (Hattie, 2012, pp. 205–206), and many pages of the book are devoted to this practice.<sup>4</sup> Constructivism, in contrast to direct instruction, does not fare well in Hattie's book. The entire educational paradigm of constructivism is given little coverage, and it is poorly—even misleadingly—defined as a paradigm of pedagogy that involves “minimal guidance” and contrasts teachers who deploy the “current fad” of constructivism as less effective “facilitators” with the more effective teachers who are “activators”

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3 In the case of reading/literacy instruction, this approach is illustrated by the large-scale studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education and distributed through the aforementioned What Works Clearinghouse site. The Clearinghouse website compiles reports on specific approaches to literacy instruction such as instruction on phonics, vocabulary, or comprehension and ranks them according to their scientifically proven impact on student learning. The site provides reviews of particular practices but often focuses on proprietary reading “programs.”

4 As discussed earlier in the chapter, direct instruction is a form of behaviorism that can sometimes involve rote activities like call and response, memorization, and recitation in unison. It's important to note that research does suggest that direct instruction can have positive impacts on student learning, and that, from a constructivist viewpoint, it is a strategy that can be deployed effectively within the context of a classroom that involves a range of different strategies designed to meet the diverse needs of different students. It is not, however, generally the kind of instruction endorsed by college composition teachers, and, when deployed on its own, it is not a form of teaching that enables critical thinking.

(Hattie, 2012, pp. 243–244). Constructivism, as a whole, is thereby abruptly dismissed as having little impact on student learning. This should be a problem for those conducting research on reading instruction at the college level: the instructional approaches advocated by scholars such as Horning (2007), Pearlman (2103), and Jamieson (2013) are, broadly construed, constructivist. Further, the kind of critical academic literacy valued by college reading researchers and instructors is less likely to be taught at the P-12 level if direct instruction is privileged as a scientific teaching method over student-centered, constructivist approaches.

While the reasons for constructivism's dismissal in *Visible Learning* (2012) are arguably arbitrary and certainly ideological, they are by no means definitive. Direct instruction is celebrated, and constructivism dismissed, on the basis of Hattie's algorithm for what constitutes a scientifically proven practice. However, other summaries of the scientific value of a practice like direct instruction might be found, conversely, to be negative, as is the case with the review of direct instruction by the What Works Clearinghouse (2007). These conflicts contribute to the overall climate in literacy education: what, exactly, *is* a scientifically proven practice?

## Balanced Literacy, the Common Core, and Ideology: What Does It Mean for College Reading?

The future of P-12 reading instruction and college reading preparedness may hinge on whatever side prevails in what might be the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the reading wars, which can be represented as a battle between Lucy Calkins and David Coleman. Both figures are high-profile public proponents of the Common Core but advocate for and represent differing approaches to reading instruction. Calkins is perhaps the leading public educator touting a balanced literacy approach as a means to enable students to meet the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA). She argues that the Common Core must be “protected from the documents surrounding it, that are people's interpretations of it” (Wall, 2014). Calkins is referring to the curricular materials developed by David Coleman, the chief architect of the Common Core, and his foundation Student Achievement Partners, which produced curricular models designed to illustrate the central principles of the Common Core and effective approaches to instruction aligned with those principles. On one side of this debate over policy and practice in literacy education and the teaching of reading is Calkins, who argued in a January 2014 speech that the materials designed by Coleman and his foundation “violate principles valued by ‘experienced educators’” (Wall, 2014, para. 31). On the other side of the debate are Coleman and Susan Pimentel, two of the key founders of the Common Core.

Representative of this debate is the controversy over a model reading lesson focused on the Gettysburg Address, designed by David Coleman himself (Student

Achievement Partners, 2013). In Calkins speech she proclaims that the lesson “basically represents horrible teaching.” Calkins criticized the emphasis on completely decontextualized close reading, which forced students to “rely exclusively on the text” (Wall, 2014, para. 31). Calkins takes issue with the lack of student choice, student voice, and contextualization reflected in Student Achievement Partner’s curricular models, typified by this lesson. The analysis of a New York City public high school teacher of this exemplar for instruction adds additional depth to Calkins’ critique:

[The lesson] gives students a text they have never seen and asks them to read it with no preliminary introduction. This mimics the conditions of a standardized test on which students are asked to read material they have never seen and answer multiple-choice questions about the passage. Such pedagogy makes school wildly boring. Students are not asked to connect what they read yesterday to what they are reading today, or what they read in English to what they read in science (Jeremiah Chaffee, qtd. in Strauss, 2013).

Key to the balanced literacy approach promoted by Calkins is the principle that students acquire the ability to read most effectively if they are encouraged to engage with what they are reading. This engagement, which resembles what we describe as college reading, is promoted by giving students some manner of choice in what they read, and the opportunity to respond in personal ways to what they have read. The balanced literacy approach holds that, in order to learn to comprehend, internalize, and synthesize what is being read, reading material must be contextualized; students must be provided the tools and knowledge to make connections between what they are reading and the various contexts that surround that reading.

In contrast to this approach, the “Gettysburg” model lesson plan begins, “The idea here is to plunge students into an independent encounter with this short text. Refrain from giving background context or substantial instructional guidance at the outset” (Student Achievement Partners, 2013, p. 3). This exemplar for instruction runs counter to all of the pedagogical principles just described, as it focuses on the reading and analysis of an *explicitly* decontextualized text. While the lesson eventually does allow for (minimal) discussion of context around the text, such an approach runs directly counter to what would best prepare students for college reading, at least according to current research on the skills students need to be successful college readers. If the focus of this lesson is on prepping high school students for college-level reading, why emphasize decontextualized reading, given the choice?

While those behind the development of the Common Core are obviously committed to the task of producing college-ready students, the curricular approaches

they advocate for reading have more in common with the principles, purposes, and limitations of direct instruction than the kind of critical reading and associated pedagogies advocated by scholars engaging with the issue of college reading. The approach to close reading articulated by Coleman and the Student Achievement Partners focuses on the careful analysis of text to the exclusion of anything that might surround that text: historical or cultural context, the purpose or goals of the text, and reader's own personal experience or perspective. Such an approach to reading instruction, like direct instruction, may produce more effective test takers in the short term. Jeremiah Chafee, the teacher quoted above (in Strauss, 2013) suggests that this kind of reading activity is similar to the conditions of standardized tests themselves: students are asked to read and answer questions about decontextualized passages of text, which are given to students without any introduction. While students may be taught under this close reading model to carefully parse individual pieces of text, they are not taught many of the other skills needed for success in the kind of reading valued at the college level.

The elements of reading instruction absent from both general direct instruction methods and from this specific close reading method are essential parts of the definition of college reading. These missing elements provide insight into the specific weaknesses of beginning college readers (and writers). Students must be able to read individual complex texts deeply and critically; additionally, they must be able to synthesize what they are reading by making connections among a given text, other related texts, historical and cultural contexts, and their own experience and perspective. In this way, reading is essential to participation in any academic discourse community, wherein reading and writing are done in order to engage in scholarly conversations. Students who are taught to read via the kind of functionalist, decontextualized pedagogies of direct instruction and close reading described above will struggle when confronted with college reading tasks. Such students are also likely to struggle when confronted with reading tasks outside of the educational environment.

It is unsurprising, then, that students enter college unable to complete many reading and writing assignments. As Pearlman (2013) suggests, students recognize that they cannot meaningfully engage in the college-level reading necessary to complete researched writing. They therefore resort to using strategies like patch writing in order to complete assignments. Such students may lack practice in engaging with, and making connections among a range of difficult and unfamiliar texts, as Rhodes (2013) suggests. Jamieson's (2013) observations and analysis of the weaknesses common in the reading and research writing behaviors of students correspond with the weaknesses and limitations of direct instruction/close reading pedagogies. Further, Jamieson's research indicates that students write entire arguments on the basis of decontextualized, often incorrectly interpreted sentences, rather than developing claims on the basis of entire texts, understood in relation to

a range of other related texts. This suggests that such students do not have practice with finding ways to connect one text to others, or with strategies for independently developing an understanding of the various contexts that surround a given text.

These descriptions of the common weaknesses of underprepared college readers all point to another crucial missing element in the direct instruction/critical reading approaches used at the P-12 level: personal engagement. Pearlman (2013) and Jamieson (2013) both note, for example, that students resort to patch writing in part because they haven't been able to engage in a deep way with the texts they encounter in the course of completing a research project. In order to meet basic expectations, students use new concepts and terms only as tools to complete an assignment, rather than as building blocks toward greater understanding and skill. Jamieson's work aligns with this analysis, as it demonstrates that students conducting research projects skim for sentences that they believe are important and build entire arguments upon those sentences; she notes those sentences are, more often than not, taken from the first one or two pages of cited articles and chapters. These observations suggest a picture of students who are not personally invested in what they are learning and writing. This may not mean that such students don't care; this portrait of the college reader and writer suggests that such students have not developed the habit of making connections between what is being read in the classroom and what they might actually care about in their individual, personal lives outside of school.

## Reading About Reading: Balanced Literacy at the College Level

Herein lies a key advantage that constructivist, whole language/ balanced literacy approaches have in preparing students to succeed across the college curriculum as readers and writers: all of these approaches hold as essential the role of student engagement as central to the learning process. Interestingly, the documents that make up the official text of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are prefaced with what is termed a "portrait of students who meet the standards set out in this document" (National Governors Association, p. 7). This portrait describes a set of students that are "engaged and open-minded" and who "demonstrate independence," qualities that seem to be aligned with a constructivist, balanced literacy approach to the teaching and learning of reading (National Governors Association, p. 7). The question is: how will students be prepared at the P-12 level so that they match up with the CCSS "portrait" and enter college with the habits of mind that they need to succeed as readers and writers at the college level? As David Conley (2011) notes about the CCSS, "if implemented poorly . . . the standards and assessments could result in accountability on steroids, stifling

meaningful school improvement nationwide” (p. 16). In order to truly meet the standards of the Common Core, Conley argues, educators must “move classroom teaching away from a focus on worksheets, drill-and-memorize activities” towards a pedagogy that promotes active student engagement, through the cultivation of key “cognitive strategies” and habits of mind (p. 16).

This kind of epistemological and pedagogical perspective is also reflected in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a report jointly produced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Council of Teachers of English (2001). The report details the habits of mind that successful college writing students possess in relation to the rhetorical skills taught and valued at the college level. Four of the habits of mind listed by the report are particularly pertinent here:

- Curiosity – the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness – the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement – a sense of investment and involvement in learning (p. 1).
- Metacognition – the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

Students who are taught primarily through a direct instruction and/or close reading model while in P-12 may not, when they get to college, have the habits of mind needed to connect to and explore a range of unfamiliar and difficult academic texts, particularly when working in a discipline that is not their major. According to constructivist pedagogy, learning can only truly occur via a process of internalization within the individual student; students must be taught to connect *and practice connecting* to whatever it is they are learning in school. Students also must learn to reflect meta-cognitively upon how they have learned and how they are currently learning in order to better take personal ownership of the learning process.

In order to achieve success in teaching college reading, college-level instructors must ask students to reflect on the ways they have been taught to engage with language. This kind of approach could be understood as *an extension of balanced literacy into the college classroom*. Such a pedagogy requires students themselves to understand the politics of literacy they experienced in the P-12 environment and to engage with the politics of literacy that inform their college experience. College students (and even high school students) must read about *how* they were taught, engage with their experiences in the classroom, identify the gaps in their learning, and plan for remediating those gaps. Reading about the politics of literacy, learning about direct instruction, whole language, and constructivism as well as the political structures that determine what content is taught and how it is delivered is an important step toward bridging student understanding of college-level expectations.

At the authors’ institution, an example of a balanced literacy approach to

college-level reading and writing instruction is currently implemented as a unit of the university's first-year writing program. The unit is focused on teaching students to read and respond in an exam setting to a range of academic and popular texts focused on the themes of literacy, education, and power. (The content of the unit originated in the University of Oklahoma Composition Program; while the original unit was primarily intended to teach the writing abilities needed to successfully complete a college-level essay exam, the unit has been revised with a central focus on reading skills.) This current curriculum establishes a balanced literacy approach to the teaching of reading and application of academic discourse at the college level. Classroom activities focus on applied strategies for reading, analyzing, retaining and applying complex academic material, along with a focus on engaging students' personal experiences with literacy and classroom learning.

This approach balances the need to teach the functional and critical reading (and writing) skills that are key to success in the college discourse community, with a focus on engaging students' individual personal experiences and encouraging the development of effective habits of mind. For example, activities require students, in preparation for an eventual exam, to annotate articles, find key words and define them. In the classroom, students are engaged in a discussion of key claims and concepts from assigned articles, and guided through an activity that requires the synthesis and application these keywords, claims, and concepts. In this way, students are taught the functional reading skills they will need in order to be successful at the college level. Additionally, these skills are taught within the context of a common college-level assignment—the essay exam; in this way, reading is taught as an applied skill essential to success across the college curriculum. On the other hand, to ensure that students are connecting what they learn to their own personal, diverse experiences, they are asked to read a variety of academic articles that explore literacy as a contested term, dependent upon the goals of those in power who seek to define it (e.g., C.H. Knoblauch's [1990] "Literacy and the Politics of Education," Robert Yagelski's [2000] "Abby's Lament," from his book, *Literacy Matters*, and Lynn Reid's [2015] "The Politics of Remediation"). The students also read about the contested cultures and processes of the institution of education itself (e.g. excerpts from Kozol's [2012] *Savage Inequalities*) as well as the role that language and literacy can play in creating individual identity (e.g., an excerpt of Gloria Anzaldúa's [1987] *Borderlands*).

An effort is made to connect these readings with student experiences. Some of the students at our institution can identify with Abby, the disaffected high school student who doesn't think that she or literacy itself matters much at all in a world where many young people feel powerless. Our institution has a significant population of Chicano migrant workers who may be able to identify with Anzaldúa's struggle to find herself in an American culture that defines literacy narrowly in terms of functionality and performance. All of the reading that students do in this unit, while it is mostly academic, is connected in one way or another, to the

position and experience of the college student him/herself.

When college instructors ask students to have a meta-awareness of the types of literacy instruction being offered (and that students have experienced), those instructors will better be able to assess the types of pedagogies with which students are comfortable and familiar. Once both students and instructors understand this familiarity, they can begin to challenge it with new methods of learning. Students and faculty must both acknowledge the cognitive moves associated with a student moving from a classroom where direct instruction was the primary strategy for relating to texts to a classroom where critical academic literacy is expected.

## Conclusion

The observation that P-12 and college-level faculty need to understand the practices, politics, assumptions, and outcomes of both P-12 and college environments is not a revolutionary one. In fact, this argument seems quite obvious: how can we ensure the success of students-as-students and students-as-citizens if we do not look at the big picture of how they are taught and what they are expected to learn? Nevertheless, communication between the two groups is not common or easy.

One way to address the issue of college readiness collaboratively (in terms of reading or otherwise) is through efforts to establish regional cross-sector professional learning communities that include representatives from the P-12, community college, and university levels. Examples of such initiatives are found in two current Washington State College Spark Grant programs. These efforts, the “Successful Transitions to College” project and the “The Bridge to College” project, seek to bring together educators across the P-16 continuum to collaboratively address the common challenges students face in making the transition from the high school to college level. The Successful Transitions to College initiative is focused on a specific region in the state, bringing together high school teachers from a number of districts, community college instructors, and college faculty together. The group first identifies and defines specific transition to college barriers. Then, the group designs and implements interventions that address those barriers to student success. Participants work in cross-sector teams to develop, class test, and assess these interventions, using the CCSS as a common framework for discussing, defining, and evaluating college readiness. This project provides an alternative to “top-down” and siloed systems of professional learning in education. Instead of the usual hierarchical and static model of professional development, which involves “experts,” often from higher education, delivering knowledge to P-12 teachers, this professional learning community operates as an open network of engaged and supportive K-12 and higher education professionals working collaboratively across sectors and institutions towards the common goal of improving the college readiness of



local students. The “Bridge to College” project operates on a similar, collaborative model, bringing together regional, cross-sector “communities of practice” to develop, implement, and assess a new statewide Grade 12 transition-to-college course designed to support students struggling to meet college readiness standards. The need for these kinds of cross-sector collaboration have become increasingly evident, given the scrutiny that issues like college readiness, success, and retention are receiving from education practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers. The existence of these initiatives, and the enthusiastic participation in them from across the K-16 continuum that we have witnessed, highlight the current disconnect between P-12 and higher education practices, and the desire of teachers, professors, and policy-makers to find innovative ways to bridge these divides.

However, groups of students are not homogenous; even with such professional learning efforts in place, individual instructors may be unprepared to recognize and teach according to the literacy background of every student. While a curious professor might be able to learn about literacy practices and reading wars or even collaborate directly with local P-12 educators, that professor will still not necessarily know whether particular students come from a background favoring direct instruction over whole language. When students become a part of this conversation and are asked to read about and understand the meta-processes shaping their relationship to learning, we are opening a new dimension in this conversation.

Most importantly, we argue that literacy instruction is an example of how the literacy “medium is the message.” If students are taught methods that yield short-term outcomes like direct instruction, students learn to accommodate the direct instruction model. They do not know *how to learn* via other instructional methods without being introduced to them as such and asked to reflect upon the ways they were taught the things they know. If students are taught via direct instruction, they learn discrete literacy behaviors but not critical thinking and engagement. If they learn via whole language, the inverse may be true. In order to bridge the gap between P-12 and college reading expectations and abilities, each member of the academic conversation must understand that the modes of instruction differ greatly across environments. An understanding of those differences and their politics, both by student and instructor, is the first step in creating an effective system for college reading instruction.

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