

5 First Year Writers: Forward Movement, Backward Progress

Kathleen Skomski

Examining the connection between reading and writing for basic or developmental writers entering college as first year freshmen requires instructors to consider the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills they bring with them to the classroom, they need to move forward academically, and also the approaches teachers use in their classrooms to help students make the necessary connections.

UNDERSTANDING THE BASIC WRITER

Clearly, the transition for basic writers from high school to college is more problematic than it is for other first year students. Getting these students to reposition themselves in their freshman writing course by “switch[ing] allegiance from high school cliques to a more universal group of respected thinkers” (Haswell, 1991, p. 323) requires a deft approach by writing instructors who are wise to consider how these students perceive themselves and their own writing abilities. Shaughnessy (1977) explained, in *Errors and Expectations*, that “by the time he reaches college, the BW [basic writing] student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer” (p.7), and is so focused on the errors he knows he makes that concentrating on anything else is a challenge he can do nothing about. With that in mind, Sternglass (1977) maintained that we still must strive to understand the “whole” student to more fully assess existing reading and writing skills and the needs of beginning writers, or those considered “unprepared” or “underprepared.” She proposed examining the external influences that impact learning and writing, such as home life and its connections to

the learning environment, personal finances that influence students' abilities, and working hours that take up, in many instances, much of their free time, to get a clearer picture of these students and what they offer to and gain from the first year classroom. Likewise, Haswell (1991) noted that students are not "beginners, empty urns waiting to be filled, but already experienced, and their experience grows with each step of the course" (pp. 17–18). Flower (1994) refers to their literacy as "cultural capital" (p. 19) that can add to or detract from the learning experience.

Although writing theorists are optimistic about our ability to tap the potential of basic writers if we understand the contexts from which they come, recent research indicates there is much work to be done. The ACT's *Executive Summary* (2006) reports, that "based on 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates, it appears that only about half of our nation's ACT-tested high school students are ready for college-level reading" (p. 1). (For further information about the *Executive Summary*, see Horning and Kraemer's introductory chapter in this book.) Their reading deficiencies put students at an extreme disadvantage because they start out already behind many of their more advanced classmates. Additionally, a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2009) shows that with a plethora of media sources, students ages eight to eighteen favor spending their time playing video games, watching television, and instant and text messaging over reading. In 2004, the number of hours spent on media per day averaged 6.5 hours compared to the number of hours spent reading. Over the past ten years, "every type of media with the exception of reading has increased" and, in fact, "during this same period, time spent reading went from forty-three to thirty-eight minutes a day" (p. 2). Clearly, reading has declined to the point of impacting the basic reading/writing skills beginning students bring with them to the first year experience.

Composition instructors are wise to acknowledge both the pre-existing skills of basic writers and the challenges—particularly in reading and critical thinking—facing these students. By realizing this, instructors are able to construct course outlines, syllabi, and reading and writing assignments that prepare students to tackle the individual stages of cognitive thinking as outlined in the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. Through a steady development of critical thinking that connects reading and writing, students will be prepared with cognitive skills ultimately transferable to the workforce.

THE READING/WRITING CONNECTION

The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (RBT), attributed to Lorin Anderson, a former student of Bloom, and David Krathwohl (2001), emphasizes the importance of engaging students in higher level thinking and that cannot be accomplished by asking simple, knowledge-based questions about readings that require mere recitation of facts, descriptions, and interpretations. Anderson and Krathwohl's revision addresses three broad categories—terminology, structure, and emphasis—to create a taxonomy more reflective of and relevant to students and teachers in the twenty-first century. The RBT moves from the most basic level of thinking—remembering—to the most complex—creating. As students master each level, they progress toward more meaningful and critical thinking. These levels of thinking, and their direct application to basic writers, guide the structure and development of this chapter.

LEVEL I: REMEMBERING

The first, most basic level of the Revised Taxonomy is remembering, the act of retrieving “relevant knowledge from long-term memory” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67). Many basic writers who arrive in their first college writing course often do so with limited reading skills, memories, and stored knowledge. Many admit to finding reading, especially academic reading, a chore and uninspiring. In fact, when we examine the “remembering” level of the RBT, we see that poor or inexperienced readers are challenged by the inability to recall or recognize factual material and terminology they can draw from, think about, and integrate into their own writing. Their writing is generally limited, weakly developed, and unsupported by prior knowledge. Composition instructors who create reading/writing assignments that ask students to recall relevant information from stored memory are likely to be dissatisfied by their responses. Those responses can, in part, be attributed to underdeveloped critical thinking skills. Sternglass (1971) notes this is a way for students “to remember facts and meanings, to analyze concepts, and to construct knowledge that [is] new to them” (p. 26). As is often the case, many of students are unaware of problems in their thinking. As a composition instructor, I have witnessed such frustration show itself in the papers of students who complain they have nothing to say, do not know where to begin,

have not experienced anything worthwhile in their lives to write about, and though frustrated, seem content with those beliefs. However, students in Sternglass's study reported that writing actually helped them remember facts and information, and that writing assisted them in "seeing the relationships among the facts and ideas, thus facilitating the practice of analysis" (p. 30). Despite poor reading skills, basic writers find encouragement in writing when the process stimulates memories, facts, and ideas from past reading. Confidence can be gained, paving the way for further progress in both reading and writing.

LEVEL II: UNDERSTANDING

Basic writers who can master the next level of the RBT are capable of constructing "meaning from . . . oral, written, and graphic communication" through interpretation, exemplification, classification, summarization, inference, comparison, and explanation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67). The mastery of these skills is crucial when it comes to writing and taking exams. Basic writers with limited reading skills are at a disadvantage when required to demonstrate any of the above competencies in their writing. As is often the case, basic writers with limited reading skills struggle to understand vocabulary, among other things, and use it correctly in sentence structure. Shaughnessy (1977) noted that teachers often assume students know words that they do not, and "this deficiency shows up most clearly in their writing, where words outside the basic vocabulary are usually either missing or erroneously used" (p. 216). As a reminder to basic writing instructors, she stresses that "words, for the most part, must be learned in contexts, not before contexts" (p. 217). Language recognition and its various usages are a challenge for basic writers as they struggle to compose text that demonstrates appropriate understanding and syntax.

Haswell (1991) notes "regression [in writing] continues as long as language competence continues to grow" (p. 197). What this suggests is that as new skills are acquired, or as students attempt to demonstrate in their writing new ways of thinking and using language, mistakes and errors occur. Thus, teachers would be wise to focus less on "surface" errors or non-standard usage and instead examine content, message, and organization as indicators of improving literacy. Further problems occur when students take written exams that require a dem-

onstration of remembered facts or written responses to essay questions that ask them to clearly explain or summarize an idea or a concept.

From my own experience as a basic writing instructor, I have often been guilty of making assumptions about the skill sets basic writers bring with them to my classroom. When they arrive as deficient readers, vocabulary is limited and their writing shows a lack of understanding in how to situate language in its proper context. To move students toward improved reading skills that are vital to improved writing skills, instructors must become aware of several factors that occur while students read. Nelson (1998) explained that while reading, the student constructs meaning from the text and also for a possible “to-be-written text” (p. 279). In other words, meaning for what will be written is constructed while the act of reading itself takes place. The student is “in two roles concurrently—the reader building meaning *from* a text and a writer building meaning *for* a text” (emphasis added p. 279). Nancy Morrow (1997) pointed out:

If we want our students to recognize that reading and writing are interconnected processes, it seems only logical that the goal of a composition course should also be to help students compose a theory of reading—or perhaps more specifically to compose *theories* of reading that will help them to understand their relationship to the act of reading in different contexts. (p. 464)

The ability of basic writers to apply any of the competencies Nelson and Morrow suggest requires writing instructors to make students aware of these two separate actions that occur concurrently while reading takes place. Focusing initially on meaning-building from the text itself by examining and discussing content, language, and idea development is one way composition instructors can help students become aware of one of the actions taking place during reading. The other—“building meaning for a text”—can be explained by encouraging students to make personal, community, and/or global connections between what they read and the kind of written text they will ultimately create. Explaining this separation allows students to focus on each process individually. When they can grasp each process, they are in a stronger position to understand how elements of reading can transfer to writing. Additionally, helping students understand this reading-writing connection positions them to have greater success with developing the

competencies required in this second level of the RBT, preparing them to move forward.

Limited language and sub-par reading skills create additional problems. Horning (1978) explained:

[O]ne must not only be able to read in the conventional sense, but also one must be able to develop the highly specialized reading skills needed to write successfully: the skills of proof-reading, of knowing where to look for information on the printed page, or sorting, storing, and analyzing the print for the total message. (p. 265)

These are certainly competencies that must be achieved if basic writers are to experience any level of success in the first year writing classroom and beyond. Once the reading skills of basic writers begin to advance, these students show increased but limited proficiency in their writing, as vocabulary expands and correct usage becomes more noticeable. At this juncture, they may start drawing appropriate inferences from readings and write in ways that show a slowly developing ability to interpret and organize ideas in a genre-specific manner. As they add information to their bank of knowledge, they begin stockpiling material from which to draw. Writing that shows this steady progression of remembering and comprehending produces learning and influences further and more critical thinking—the goal basic writing instructors work hard to have their students achieve.

Improved reading comprehension from a basic writers means that they are beginning to understand a piece of writing and all its component elements as part of, or a as response to, ongoing conversations. Salvatori (1996) noted that a reader's responsibility is to give voice to the text's argument, but writers have a responsibility as well: They must write text that "asks (rather than answers) questions, that proposes (rather than imposes) arguments, and that therefore makes a conversation possible" (p. 441). The writer's contribution to this existing conversation, therefore, means they understand that "conversation requires absorption of what prior speakers have said, consideration of how earlier comments relate to the responder's thoughts, and a response framed to the situation and the responder's purposes" (Bazerman, 1980, p. 657). Understanding those connections, being able to summarize the words and ideas of others, drawing inferences from written, oral, or graphic messages, and explaining, classifying, or inter-

preting what others have said or written is the challenge faced by basic writers. Gaining these competencies can be an empowering feeling for basic writers who are now becoming “participants in an ever changing and ever widening conversation” (Morrow, 1997, p. 462).

LEVEL III: APPLYING

The RBT describes the third level of cognition, applying, as carrying out or using “a procedure in a given situation” through execution or implementation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p.67). This level also includes constructing theories about ideas and issues raised in readings and discussions. At this level, students are expected to apply prior knowledge to existing knowledge for to create new knowledge. Sternglass (1977) noted that when students are able “to translate textbook and lecture jargon into their own language, they develop the ability to use writing as a means to critique existing materials and to develop their own insights” (p. xiv). Certainly this ability does not come easily to basic writers with deficient reading skills. At this level, writing instructors can have significant impact on the critical thinking and writing development of their students.

By assigning more complex readings, writing instructors challenge their students to apply what they have read and already know toward constructing new theories, explanations, and original thoughts about the ideas presented. When I ask my students, for example, to transfer their ideas just read to another genre (e.g., “How would the author’s view on this issue play out on, say, a reality television show?” or “What other person do you know of who might think this way, and why?”), new ideas and connections are likely to emerge, making the process of applying critical thinking strategies less daunting and clearly something within basic writers’ capabilities.

Getting students to actually apply knowledge and create their own theories inevitably leads composition teachers to allocating class time instructing students on how to “read” text. For writing instructors who feel that teaching reading strategies is out of their realm of expertise, Bosley (2008) noted that many scholars (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Elbow, 1993; Flower et al., 1990; Fulkerson, 2005; Lindemann 1993, 1995; Morrow, 1997; Tate, 2000) have researched and written on the “effectiveness of integrating reading and writing instruction in freshman composition courses” (p. 286). Additional-

ly, “numerous studies (Downs, 2000; El-Hindi, 1997; McCormick, 2003; Quinn, 2003; Reither, 2000; Salvatori, 1996; Shanahan, 1993; Tierney & Pearson, 1993) have demonstrated that reading and writing are taught most effectively as integrated processes” (as cited in Bosley, 2008, p. 286). Accepting the idea that reading and writing are vitally connected, composition instructors cannot expect basic writers to improve their reading skills by avoiding spending classroom time in providing critical reading instruction. Asking basic writers to construct theories from what they read, and apply those theories to their writing, is a challenge that often pushes the limits of their abilities.

In fact, Bosley (2008) concluded from her research and from personal experience as an English professor that “many college freshmen have little experience with critical reading and need to be taught explicit strategies for this type of engagement with text” (p. 298). Their early experiences with written text, as Neilson (1993) concluded from her study with school teachers, “is often associated with maternity, nurturing, and sensuality” yet reading at the academic level—the kind of reading expected of our students “requires linear thinking coupled with a knowledge of rituals, rules, and conventions” (p.101). These are conventions that have, in most instances, eluded basic writers. As we now try moving our students forward with text that demands their engagement, we are met with further responsibilities in the composition classroom. Knowing this does not suggest we must exhaust ourselves with reading instruction, but that limited, focused reading strategies can efficiently and effectively be demonstrated to students, where text is presented on an overhead and suggestions offered on ways to approach reading it. Student-instructor interaction with sample text by way of questioning ideas presented, discussing organization, making personal connections, and explaining writing strategies used by an author builds confidence in students who often feel at a loss when confronted with a challenging reading. When I spend this time with my own students, I am able to see attempts at transferring the thinking and reading strategies learned in class to better, more reflective, and more thoughtful writing. Although not always successful, these basic writers are at least beginning to apply these newly-discovered strategies.

LEVEL IV: ANALYZING

Higher levels of thinking, beginning with analyzing, move basic writers toward even deeper, more meaningful thinking and writing. Analyzing—the fourth level of cognition in the RBT—is defined as breaking “material into its constituent parts” and determining “how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose” through differentiation, organization, and attribution” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 68). In addition to these skills, students writing research papers assigned in basic writing courses that demand analysis and synthesis of material from various sources are expected to showcase these competencies; yet, for basic writers who continue to struggle with this level of the RBT, this task is anything but a demonstration of these competencies.

At this part of the reading-thinking-writing connection, students are encouraged to make observations about readings to disassemble ideas, analyzing each idea as a separate entity, making connections between and among the ideas, and then reassemble those ideas into a new whole. Shaughnessey (1977) asks these questions of her students to help “guide their observations” (p. 251):

What are the parts? What gets repeated from one part to the next? What is unexpected or contradictory or missing? If what you are analyzing is part of something larger, how does it connect with the larger unit? (p. 251)

These questions move basic writers from a superficial level of analysis, a level with which they are most familiar, to a more profound level of examination, a place often new and confusing. Here, again, is where reading proficiency becomes necessary when the goal of composition instruction is to guide students toward higher levels of thinking. When basic writers are deficient in reading, getting them to recognize ideas that can be analyzed and connected, and then written about in insightful ways, remains the challenge for both student and instructor. Furthermore, basic writers who have difficulty recognizing effective organizational patterns in reading struggle to prioritize their own ideas clearly and coherently when they write. They often are text-reliant in that they closely stick to the language of the text, and do not venture into creating or formulating their own language that demonstrates their analysis. Shaughnessey (1977) argued that understand-

ing complexity in writing is something often mismanaged by basic writers. Not only do they mismanage complexity, but they generally fail to recognize it. When they realize a text is beyond their abilities, as is frequently the case in the basic writing classroom, they are often quick to give up. This “throwing in the towel” directly relates to poor reading skills: Basic writers have not observed and internalized language patterns and structures because they have neither studied nor processed those patterns often enough. Additionally, they likely have not analyzed or been effectively taught to analyze those patterns to see how they developed. Clearly, basic writers who learn how to engage with written text learn skills that help them throughout college and into their working lives.

LEVEL V: EVALUATING

Evaluating requires basic writers to remember what they have read, understand meaning within the text, construct theories from text, and analyze ideas and structure to make an informed, thoughtful opinion or judgment. The RBT specifically defines this fifth stage in the critical thinking process as making “judgments based on criteria and standards” through checking and critiquing (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 68). When basic writers function at the evaluative level, the belief is that they have already mastered previous levels in the taxonomy, an indicator that critical thinking is improving. Salvatori (1996) explained the process she undertakes with her students to help them see the interconnectedness of reading and writing by providing assignments that require students to demonstrate several competencies, including evaluation. She asks students to first write a response to a text, then to “construct a reflective commentary on the moves they made as readers and the possible reasons for them” (p. 446). Last, she has them assess the text they produced from the reading they did. Salvatori explains that this process and practice makes students consciously aware of the “mental moves” they make, what those moves produce, and learn to “revise or to complicate those moves as they return to them in light of their newly constructed awareness of what those moves did or did not make possible” (p. 447).

This awareness challenges basic writers in several ways. First, as they scaffold through the levels of the RBT, their continued demonstration of advancing thinking skills is put to the test, and the ex-

pectations of writing instructors grow. Second, the texts basic writers are assigned to read and produce become more involved and complicated as students are challenged to continue advancing. Third, as they become more aware of the connection between reading and writing, their thinking often gets “messy.” They have much to sort through and try and make sense of before they begin writing in ways that show the challenges they face and their developing command over reading, thinking, and writing. When students can examine readings to critique ideas, arguments, and use of evidence presented in the text, and when they begin producing their own cogent writing that shows advancing competencies, they are poised to move on to the next level of the RBT. (For further information on evaluation in an ever-increasing digital world, see Drake’s chapter in this book. For information on the role libraries play in research writing, see Haller’s chapter.)

LEVEL VI: CREATING

At this final level of the RBT, students should be putting “elements together to form a coherent or functional whole” and reorganizing “elements into a new pattern or structure” through generating, planning, or producing (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 68). This level has wider implications for students, especially in its application to major-specific courses and future employment. It is here where mastery of the five previous levels has been achieved, and where basic writers should clearly recognize and move with greater fluency between and among reading, critical thinking, and writing. Students should now understand that writing offers flexibility, and stronger decision-making skills are likely more noticeable in the writing they produce. At this level of creating, they can now, more often than not, draw relevant material from text and repackage it in unique and appropriate ways. Basic writers can look at one idea presented through reading and see it through different lenses. They can, for example, see how a narrative can also be expressed as a song, a report, or even a cartoon. They begin not just recognizing but utilizing the movement between and among genres, producing new ways of looking at the same idea. Sternglass’s study (1997) showed that when students “find themselves in more challenging intellectual settings . . . where risk-taking and exploration of new ideas are valued” (p. xv), they rise to the challenge of more “complex reasoning tasks” (p. xv). Of greater significance to

students are the implications this recognition, utilization, and risk-taking have for other course work and future employment.

It helps to look, for example, at the findings of Richard Haswell (1991), who studied basic writers, “advanced” upper-level college writers, and post-college employees working in fields such as engineering, radiology, sales, architecture, nursing, and geology—careers many of our students are likely to work in. These were careers that required a fair amount of writing on the job, and Haswell identified commonalities (if any) and differences among these groups, leading to some surprising and not so surprising findings. Although his study focused on more advanced college writers, the connections between these advanced writers, our basic, first year writers, and post-college employees become clear when noting how Haswell examined specifics, such as identifying significance, structure, analysis, and evaluation in both reading and writing. Haswell studied these non-professional writers (the employees), having them write the same kinds of essays “under similar conditions” (p.73) typically assigned to first year writers. Several areas of writing competence were examined, including: organization, specificity, coherence, diction, syntax, and mechanics—the very same competencies first year writers work on and are expected to master in their composition courses.

These findings revealed that non-professional writers (the employees) seemed less bound by structured organizational patterns. This is not to say their writing was not organized in the traditional sense of chronology or comparison or division of parts, for example, but that it turned more to “incremental patterns always ready for the evolution of further logical points, patterns provided by inferential arguments” (p. 77). Writing competence increased in employees, advanced college writers, and basic writers when they were able to apply problem-solving strategies to organize their writing. The idea of “creating,”—the most advanced level of the RBT—of being experienced enough to generate, plan, or produce text comes from having sufficiently advanced (if not mastered) prior levels of the RBT. Having the writing skills necessary to understand, craft, and modify text is a testament to the competencies we as composition instructors strive to have our students successfully achieve.

With respect to specificity, Haswell (1991) found that advanced writers demonstrated maturity in composing lengthier essays, use “exact and idiomatic language,” preferring first person “I,” restrict-

ing the subjects of sentences, and “deal less in high-level abstractions and generalizations” (p.77) than did their basic writing counterparts, who were accustomed to padding their essays to achieve greater length. What can be observed from specificity in writing as it applies to basic writers is that with improved or improving reading skills, students begin recognizing over-worded sentences and shape their own sentences to reflect conciseness and clearer meaning. This is not to suggest that students are likely to entirely abandon the process of inflating language, but when they begin realizing that “less is more” and that specificity demonstrates to their teacher a greater command and use of language, they feel more capable—maybe even more eager—to continue writing.

Another competency examined in Haswell’s subjects (1991) was coherence, a skill that basic writers often struggle to recognize, let alone utilize, in their own writing. In more advanced writers, Haswell found an ability to use a “more rapid writing style,” a preference for using more nouns as pronouns, attentiveness to starting sentences with simple subjects, and expanding sentences with “logical connectors” like the conjunction “and” rather than using more complex connectors like “rather than” (p.79). The advanced writers’ decision to rely less on “explicit devices of cohesion often recommended by textbooks” is an interesting discovery, showing that advanced writers take what they learn in their writing classes and modify the “rules” and recommended strategies to suit the writing situation (p. 78). This writing maturity allows them to reduce the use of “word repetitions, synonyms, and logical transitions,” but in no way suggests their writing lacks coherence (p.78). Instead, they experimented with other methods of achieving coherence, such as linking the first sentence of a new paragraph to the previous paragraph by rephrasing an idea, or understanding that ideas expressed in a sentence stem from the ideas expressed in the sentence prior. For basic writers, recognizing the skilled strategies and techniques of accomplished writers through analyzing the way they unify their ideas, and then integrating those same strategies into their own writing, is yet another skill they can add to their growing composition toolbox.

Diction and syntax were other competencies evaluated in Haswell’s (1991) study. Haswell noted that the vocabulary of advanced writers and non-professional employees was “broader and more advanced” than the vocabulary of basic writers (p.79). Certainly an expanded

word choice can be directly linked to age and the jargon of the profession, but advancing skills, maturity, and attentiveness to language and usage are also factors worth considering. Advanced writers and post-college employees demonstrate syntactical competency well beyond that of basic writers. Haswell found in his study that employees were more inclined to “construct long series of three or more items,” their sentences were more varied and emphatic, and the length of sentences “increase[ed] over that of [basic writers] by a third” (p.79).

Clearly, the three highest cognitive levels in the RBT—analyzing, evaluating, and creating—are present here. Analyzing and evaluating the ways language is used and structured to create meaning comes from reading, a competency many basic writers lack. Greater, more regular exposure to formal written text, whereby students begin recognizing and understanding that advanced diction and syntax can produce clearly expressed ideas, is one way composition instructors can move their students toward better writing. Basic writers who can evaluate the effectiveness of language, understand its usefulness in developing ideas, and synthesize those new skills into their own writing, are progressing toward elevated levels of thinking.

A final competency examined by Haswell (1991) was mechanics. It was found—not surprisingly—that advanced writers make mistakes (e.g., misplaced commas, sentence fragments, or run-on sentences), but that they are “not ignorant of the rules” (p. 80). They often see “correctness” in their writing as “less worthy of their time and attention than matters such as production and flow” (p.80). This awareness is a clear indicator of maturity in writing, something composition instructors hope their basic writing students will achieve. The focus and seeming confidence of more advanced writers appears to stem from the ability to see their writing from a more “global” perspective, whereby they are able to quickly hone in on the task at hand and make the necessary adjustments to their writing as they go along. Conversely, basic writers with deficient reading skills are often unable to see writing from this global perspective, let alone systematically recognize mechanical errors or make “necessary adjustments” in their own writing.

Haswell (1991) noted that the working world puts a high premium on being concise, fluency, and flexibility—all characteristics that serve advanced writers well but generally elude basic writers, who have yet to develop those competencies. Haswell questions whether a “perspective of maturing can convert the differences into teaching standards” (p.80).

If composition instructors, especially those working with basic writers, expect from their students more “mature competencies” as they set about the task of preparing course objectives and writing assignments, it is possible that more students might be attracted to and see the value in writing. Students need to know that writing instructors have confidence in their growing abilities, and therefore expect those students to “rise to the occasion.” The objectives and assignments that demand students to demonstrate improving skills in sufficiency and relevancy of evidence, examples, description, and detail in writing (among other rhetorical elements), challenge and help advance those maturing competencies. Students are likely to view this approach established by their instructors as more “graspable, more in tune with [their] understanding of their culture, more a part of their vision of their own success in it. As competencies to train for, being productive and adaptable look better than being decorous or emphatic” (Haswell, 1991, p. 84). In viewing Haswell’s findings, it is clear that for basic writers, successfully achieving this final level of the RBT—“creating”—puts into action all that has been accomplished before it, and lays the foundation for further success in college and in a career.

NOW WHAT?

Haswell’s study (1991) sheds light on the ways mature, non-professional writers learn to adjust their skills to real work-world situations, despite what these former students may have learned in their composition classrooms. Therefore, it becomes important to examine actual classroom instruction and how composition teachers often lock themselves into a “lecture-recitation” format, often ignoring the necessity of dedicating some amount of course time to reading activities. As is the case, composition instructors often relegate class time to lecturing on an assigned reading and then ask students questions about the reading to see whether or not they actually did the reading. The questions often center on Level I (Remembering) of the RBT. The main point, specific factual data provided by the reading, and any readily identifiable information are among the types of the questions teachers use to measure their students’ knowledge of that reading. Testing students’ memories has little bearing on the substantive and quantifiable measurement of learning, processing, and analyzing material. Surely we have to wonder how learning occurs under these conditions,

or how this teaching format fosters improvement in furthering critical thinking, reading, and writing. Creating a learning environment that produces more engaged, active learners, or students more willing to take risks in their writing and verbal responses, is an environment most composition instructors wish to establish. If we allow students more say in the classroom “by developing questions for discussion, providing examples from their own experiences to support theories and principles being presented, and working with their professor to understand difficult concepts and problems,” we might more effectively assist these basic writers in becoming more confident and engaged contributors to their own learning process and progress (Sternglass, 1997, p. 165).

Chiseri-Strater (1991) argued that “if learning is accepted as a process rather than a mere transmission of knowledge, students will be better prepared for the critical thinking they will use in writing for the discipline and presumably in all their courses” (as cited in Sternglass, 1997, p. 165). That argument can be further extended to employees like the ones in Haswell’s study, who synthesized what they learned in the classroom to writing that may be expected of them in their jobs. Similarly, as basic writers become more proficient in reading, composition instructors can steer them away from passive learning and reading of text toward more meaningful thinking that demands greater analytic and evaluative writing, and/or writing that demonstrates increasing flexibility. If that means composition instructors must abandon “tried and true” methods of classroom instruction (e.g., reading quizzes and exercises; pointless questions; recitation and learning environments that do less to prepare students for the larger demands of writing in the working world), and instead move students toward deeper insight, comprehension, analysis, and response, we can then feel as though learning competencies are gaining strength and advancing students toward better, more cohesive, and thoughtful writing.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES AND SUGGESTIONS

Haswell’s study is one well worth remembering for basic writing instructors when constructing syllabi and assignments. Our goal should be to prepare basic writers for the more advanced writing they will be required to do during the remainder of college, and, more importantly, for the professional writing they may be required to do once they earn

their degree and become a member of the post-college workforce. An assignment I find particularly useful in evaluating advancing competencies is an informational career project, assigned mid-semester. This assignment requires students to research their major (if undecided, they can pick any major the university offers), to utilize information provided by Career Services at our university, and to examine that major from multiple perspectives, including social, technological, financial, and environmental, to educate themselves more fully about the field and to inform their audience about this major. In addition to learning about their chosen field, they must divide the project into manageable sections that address the specific and detailed requirements of the assignment. Not only are students reading and processing a significant amount of information, but they then must also decide on what to include and where to position information, arrange and organize each section, and attend to the needs of an interested and sympathetic audience.

This assignment challenges students to read and think about the many aspects of a major. Beyond that, the assignment helps students organize material and write about a major in both an informative and in an engaging way. With an assignment like this, composition instructors can be of great service to students by challenging their critical thinking and pre-existing ideas have had about their major and by working collaboratively with basic writers to help them understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create meaningful text from their reading. Doing this requires composition instructors to design assignments aimed at improving how students examine text for future use in creating text. These writing assignments “can help students become more perceptive readers and can help break down the tendency toward vague inarticulateness resulting from purely private reading” (Bazerman, 1980, p. 658). Furthermore, Bazerman explained that when students are required to examine the “technique of writing” to better understand the writer’s purpose, they begin to recognize that the effects of writing “go beyond the overt content” (p. 659).

Additionally, Jolliffe and Harl (2008) suggest ways composition instructors can “think differently about reading in their courses” (p. 611). One suggestion has the instructor read aloud a short passage of about 250 words, pausing at intervals to offer up thoughts or connections the instructor makes to his or her own personal life, work, the world at large, and “to other texts that he or she has read” (p. 613).

This strategy can serve as a model for students, demonstrating that this reading behavior is natural and typical of someone engaging with text. Furthermore, Jolliffe and Harl (2008) suggest that students “list and offer a one-sentence description on an index card of every other class that they are taking” and the purpose of this activity is so composition instructors can help students identify “themes, issues, and motifs being raised in the other classes” that students can then connect to readings and discussions in their writing classes (p. 614).

One final suggestion from Jolliffe and Harl (2008) is that composition instructors ought to consider the integration of more technology “into their reading assignments” (p. 614). Basic writers are technology “natives” who spend a fair amount of time each day reading and posting on Facebook and MySpace, texting, tweeting, and instant messaging. These sources allow students to engage with each other electronically. Incorporating hyperlinked texts into their reading and writing assignments that encourage interaction in more “public spheres” not only taps into the skills and abilities they already possess, but gives composition instructors better chance of engaging them in areas of literacy with which they are already comfortable (p. 614). I find great success designing assignments that require students to engage electronically with each other. Because of their high comfort level with this medium, they are usually more engaged and willing to participate. As an added bonus, I see a dramatic reduction in missing or late assignments.

The fact remains that “reading itself will not improve [a] student’s writing abilities unless the connections between reading and writing are made explicit” (Morrow, 1997, p. 455). When we expect students to examine text more carefully because of the questions we ask and the reading/writing/thinking activities we engage them in, our responsibility becomes ensuring this connection is clear. Surface errors in writing will remain, but deeper, more thoughtfully expressed ideas are certain to develop. As we consider ways to incorporate reading instruction into the composition classroom, or help our students improve their reading comprehension skills, we must do so intending to further their academic development and prepare them to transfer these skills to the work force.

The six levels of the RBT provide composition instructors with valuable guidance and assessment tools to help move students forward in thinking, reading, and writing skills. Providing them with oppor-

tunities to remember material they have read, to interpret that material for its meaning, to mesh prior and existing knowledge to create something new, to break down or take apart ideas and find connections, to judge what they have read, and to reorganize or repackage material to create something unique, are beneficial ways to proceed. Helping students see themselves as weavers of language who can overlay and mesh ideas to create text that is meaningful invites them into the framework of composition that is personal, practical, and professional.