

### **Introduction**

Faculty often complain that students are either unwilling or unable to do the reading for classes. Faculty speak of assigning less material, lowering the complexity of what they assign, spending more time reviewing the content of assigned readings in class and having correspondingly less time to explore the issues raised by the reading in more creative ways. The National Endowment for the Arts’ report *To Read or Not To Read* revealed this as a national problem, showing both that Americans are spending less time reading and that national reading comprehension skills are declining. The authors of the report went on to argue that this is becoming a new class divide with serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications. As a professor of Russian language, literature and general education at a small liberal arts college with a tradition of serving the kinds of students for whom college is a means of crossing such class divides, I wanted to see how I could use the perspectives offered by my school’s recent SoTL initiatives to get a better understanding of how my students read and how I might help them to read better. The question for me was whether I could combine my own background in philosophical thought and interpretative technique with some of the empirical techniques used in the social sciences to take a snapshot of how my students are reading the literary texts I assign and then think about their responses in a consistent manner (Huber). This paper represents my initial attempt at determining how my students read and some suggestions for further work and changes that might improve how I teach reading.

### **Identifying the Problem**

The first step was to clarify the problem and decide what methods could be used for each part of it. The question of how best to teach students to read better can be broken down into three smaller questions:

1. How do students read?
2. How should students read?
3. What teaching methods work the best to help them move from how they read to how they should read?

The first question is an empirical one about how students actually read and requires a means to collect and analyze information about a process in consciousness. It means either getting them to tell us about an individual experience or entering into a more sustained dialogue with them over how they read. The second question is a normative one and can be answered with the traditional methods of literary criticism and philosophy. The third question again seems to be an empirical one (albeit with normative elements) and remains beyond the scope of this study although I make some suggestions based on what I found out while pursuing the first two questions.

### **Normative Goals for Student Reading**

The second, normative question is the easiest for a trained literary critic to address. Our disciplinary techniques have developed to find and evaluate the meanings available in different ways of writing and reading literature (Ingarden; Iser). My

own experience as a teacher and critic allowed me to describe how I wanted students to read. Because we want students not only to read works but also to perform academic tasks on the basis of their reading, students need to learn both to read works as literature and to perform scholarly operations with them. We should therefore distinguish between aesthetic reading and scholarly analysis. Aesthetic reading is the primary experience of reading a literary text; scholarly analysis is the means by which we acquire data for scholarly work.

Aesthetic reading is a holistic process, involving trained intuition, emotions and reason. It takes place in the mind of the reader and can only be communicated to others by talking and writing about our individual experiences with works. This aesthetic reading is how people do and will read novels outside of the classroom. A reasonable goal is: Students should be able to read a variety of works from different genres and traditions and learn how to remain open to the text, allowing it to take them where it wants and experiencing it as a whole.

Scholarly reading is a more self-conscious, generally academic form of reading. When teachers talk about reading, we often mean something other than the aesthetic reading described above. We generally want students not only to read and appreciate works but also to do things with them, either obtain useful information or perform scholarly operations on them. We want them to think, speak and write about texts in particular ways. Following the traditional distinction (Sławiński), I expect students to answer three kinds of questions, involving analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

- **Analysis:** What is in this text?

Students must learn to suspend judgment, avoid jumping to the interpretative level, and train themselves to sense and record what is in the text. They should record what they see as they read. The challenge is to note what is there rather than what you want or expect to be there. More advanced forms of analysis should describe the structure of the text and the process by which it unfolds as one reads it.

- **Interpretation:** What does this text mean?

This involves assigning meanings to the elements and processes found in the text. In practice analysis and interpretation develop together. However, students should be aware that they are making a correspondence between what is explicit or implicit in the texts they read and other systems of meaning. Many meanings are possible: biographical, historical, cultural, social, human, gender, class, pure aesthetic, etc. Students should learn how they create meaning by choosing the conceptual scheme they use in interpreting the text. Advanced students should be aware of conflicts between the meaning they find, their analysis, and their original reading. They should be aware of how the conceptual schemes they choose limit the meanings they can find.

- **Evaluation** Is this text good? Is it worth reading? Should I recommend it to others? Why, or why not?

Students need to be aware of how their evaluations might cause them to reject certain kinds of works. They also should understand why literary evaluation is

not purely a matter of opinion. Advanced students should know the difference between evaluating the actions and characteristics of a character in a literary work and evaluating either the depiction of that character or the work itself as whole.

In all of these cases, there is a difference between knowledge (knowing how others from your culture or group within the culture have interpreted and evaluated works) and competence (being able to encounter a new work and evaluate it on your own or, even more importantly, being able to produce new interpretations and evaluations while justifying them in your own words). Since I want my students to become active, individual participants in our culture, the ultimate goal is not knowledge but competence. Of course, this rests on a view of responsible citizenship.

One can summarize this normative view in the following way. Since reading is both an activity in consciousness and the foundation for the ability to do certain things with texts, students should be able both to read works appropriately and to speak and write about them through analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Larger goals include growth into an individual for whom reading is an important source of knowledge about world and self, something a citizen does as an active participant in polity and culture. After first describing how I addressed the empirical question of how students read by collecting information on student reading I will describe the simple rubric based on these goals I used to classify their responses.

### **Getting Information on How Students Read**

The first, empirical question requires solving the paradox inherent in the title of this essay. Since reading is a process in consciousness and therefore not accessible through direct observation, how can one actually read students’ reading? The answer is that one cannot. We can only find means of entering into dialogue with students about how they read and what they see and think as they read. This should not surprise us. Literary criticism is simply a developed form of such a conversation.

Lendol Calder’s work on think-alouds (Calder and Carlson; Farr and Conner) and the Georgetown Visible Knowledge Project provide models for how faculty can understand how students think. By adapting their work to suit the needs of my classes and my available resources, I used short writing exercises to get students to tell me how they read and then used the normative assumptions described above to provide simple rubrics to classify their responses. Students were given short poems or prose texts to read and asked to write down an honest record of how they read them. Here are the instructions they were given:

#### **Read & Write**

Jot down what you **think, feel and imagine** as you read the attached text. It is from a reading for later in the course. The purpose of this exercise is for you to create an honest record of how you read this passage. The best answers are the most thorough, accurate descriptions of what goes through

your mind as you read it. Think of it as thinking aloud as you read. Provide a spontaneous, truthful account of how you read, including thoughts which might seem extraneous to you.

This exercise on reading can be used either to assess student reading or as a stimulus to in-class discussion. The exercise could also be done orally with tape recorders or other means to record student responses. Such exercises were developed in cognitive psychology as a means to get to deep thought. They have been used in history and elsewhere to try to distinguish between problems in thinking historically, problems in basic reading, and problems in writing. They are a useful means of discussing or assessing the difference between understanding and being able to communicate that understanding to others in formal or informal manners. My purpose was to get an initial picture of how my students read.

I first used the exercise two times late in the semester in classes taught in the spring of 2008: a selection from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* in an upper level Russian literature and general education course and a selection from Slavenka Drakulic’s *S*. (a novel about victims of Serbian rape camps), in an introductory course on international studies. I then used it two more times early in the fall of 2009: the “Prologue” from Alexander Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman* in the first week of Russian history and general education course and the chorus on man from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in an introductory course on international studies.

The directions were left intentionally vague since this was an initial study and I wanted students to respond in a variety of ways. However, I did mention “think, feel, or imagine” in order to emphasize that I did not want them to treat this simply as a short essay for the class. I made it clear that I wanted to know how they read not how they write an essay for the class. When I received the essays, I read them all once in order to get a sense of what was in them and then used a simple rubric, based on my normative model and on what seemed interesting in the initial reading, to read through them again in order to classify the types of comments students were making. I decided that it made more sense to list each comment made rather than to try to place each response (some of which were a couple of pages long) in a single category. This gave me two sources of information: my interpretative sense of the details of what the students had said about their reading and the numerical list of their responses. Fortunately, the two supported each other. I then used them to develop an initial model of how my students read. The following tables describe the results; I will then offer that tentative model of how they read.

### **Analyzing the Students’ Responses**

The following simple rubric allowed me to classify the examples of student reading I collected. I distinguished between four types of responses (analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and mechanics of the assignment or process), added a category on whether each response as a whole showed evidence of self-reflection, and divided each response into a simple and more advanced variation. In each case, the more advanced version is the goal I hoped my students would attain. I placed responses in

the advanced column if they showed minimal evidence of reading in that manner. I was not demanding very sophisticated responses.

Table One: Classification of Responses

Type	Simple	More Advanced
Analysis	Simple description, either a list or disorganized observations	Some sense of structure or of the movement of the reading (aware of process)
Interpretation	“Common sense”- based on everyday assumptions about how people behave, why they do things, and right and wrong; more focused on the characters as people than on the work	Uses intellectual ideas and educated speech; shows active use of material acquired in this or other courses; aware that this is a work of art
Evaluation	Personal reaction, judgmental; more focused on the characters as people than on the work	Justified by some standards or explanation
Process of reading or the mechanics of the assignment	Confused, scattered observations; empty or “rote” image of a good student	Thought about own reading; some sense of other possibilities
Self-reflective or serious thought about assignment; reading informed by reflective thought	Comments asserted without any real reflection	Some thought about why they said what they did and/or why other opinions or reactions are possible

Comments: When I classified the sixty-nine responses I received, I marked each one for what types were present and whether it was simple or advanced. I also decided whether each response was itself either non-reflective or reflective. The following charts indicate the responses.

Table Two: Analysis

Work -Number of responses	Number of simple descriptions	Number with process or structure
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14	4	5
<i>S.</i> - 17	10	4
<i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18	4	3
<i>Antigone</i> - 20	6	6
Total- 69	24	18

Comments: Analysis is the means by which an educated reader is attuned to what is in the text. One of the major goals of my teaching is to make students aware of the need to read analytically. Although the overall number is not close to the 100% I would love to see, there is some indication that the number of people reading analytically is higher among the responses from later in the semester (see Table Seven). The large number of simple responses to the Drakulic piece might have something to do with the sheer intensity and accessibility of her journalistic prose. Students seemed to feel a need to summarize the events. Under a third of the students seemed to be reading with an awareness of the structure or development of the text they were reading.

Table Three: Interpretation

Work -Number of responses	Number of common sense interpretations	Number of interpretations using material from this or other courses (educated discourse)
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14	11	3
<i>S.</i> - 17	12	3
<i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18	11	3
<i>Antigone</i> - 20	11	5
Total- 69	45	14

Comments: Most student responses included some interpretative comments. This suggests that they are jumping to conclusions and deciding meanings more often than stopping to notice the details of what it is they are interpreting. It is also striking that many more responses involve common-sense judgments rather than intellectual interpretations or making use of material from the course in which the exercise was given or other courses. These results were consistent throughout all four exercises. They suggest that one important goal is either not being attained or does not show up in this type of assignment.

Table Four: Evaluation

Work -Number of responses	Number of snap judgments or personal reactions	Number of justified evaluations
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14	5	3
<i>S.</i> - 17	0	4
<i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18	0	1
<i>Antigone</i> - 20	0	2
Total- 69	5	10

Comments: In this case, the numerical tabulation corrected my impression when I read the text. I had thought there were a large number of snap evaluations. However, they were all in regard to the text by Dostoevsky and almost all involved a

strong reaction to two of Dostoevsky’s characters: Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov. Several students did not like them and reacted strongly to what they said and did. The other responses show that students do not evaluate that often and usually offered some reason for why when they did.

Table Five: Process and Mechanics

Work -Number of responses	Number of confused or “rote” comments	Number of thoughtful comments
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14	1	3
<i>S.</i> - 17	0	1
<i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18	5	0
<i>Antigone</i> - 20	1	1
Total- 69	7	5

Comments: This category is interesting even though there were few responses. The majority of responses came from the two upper-level classes with older students. The responses at the beginning of the semester tended to be about an unclear assignment and to involve comments about the physical setting of the reading: in bed, interruptions by phone calls, etc. Some of the other responses were quite thoughtful. One student even noted a flaw in the nature of the assignment, revealing an awareness of how aesthetic reading works by noting that stopping to write about how he reads broke the flow of the text he was creating in his head as he read.

Table Six: Self-reflective or not?

Work -Number of responses	Number of responses without self-reflection	Number of responses with some evidence of self-reflection
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14	6	8
<i>S.</i> - 17	7	10
<i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18	14	4
<i>Antigone</i> - 20	15	5
Total- 69	42	27

Comments: I classified every response as one or the other. Since becoming self-reflection is one of the widely accepted goals of a liberal arts education, I was disappointed to see how many responses were not reflective. However, the clear shift (see Table Seven) between the exercises done earlier in the semester and those done later in the semester suggests that something in the course is increasing the likelihood that students will be self-reflective. Either they are learning to read better or they are learning what kind of responses I want and producing them. Table Seven shows the two categories in which the differences between when the exercise was completed are the largest.

Table Seven: Time in the semester

Time in the semester- number of responses	Number of responses without self-reflection	Number of responses with some evidence of self-reflection	Number of responses without analysis	Number of responses with analysis
Early- 38	29	9	19	19
Late- 31	13	18	8	23

Comments: I added this table when it became obvious that some of the results were different depending on when in the semester the exercises was given. It suggests that something about the course or the exercise meant that students who had spent an additional couple of months working with the materials and exercises in the course were more likely to read analytically, even if not in as sophisticated manner as one would like, and more likely to provide reflective responses. Since classroom activities and out-of-class assignments are designed to develop such abilities, this is a positive result. On the other hand, there was no difference in whether student interpretations or analyses were less or more sophisticated. This suggests to me that although the classes are making them more likely to do something, they are not having as much impact on how they complete the activity as I would like. More study is needed.

Table Eight: Total Numbers of Types of Response

Type of Response	Number out of 69
Analysis	42
Interpretation	59
Evaluation	15
Process and Mechanics	12
Self- reflective?	69 by definition

Comments: Analysis and interpretation were more common than either evaluation or comments on the process of reading or the assignment. The lack of evaluation and the fact that most evaluations were of the characters’ behavior suggests either that students are less likely to evaluate what they are assigned in class or that the students completing these exercises knew that they were reading recognized classics in Sophocles, Dostoevsky, and Pushkin. Drakulic’s writing, although the events she depicts are traumatic, is designed for a mass audience and easy to follow. The preponderance of interpretation over analysis suggests that students are more likely to have an opinion or assign meaning as they read than they are to pay attention to the details of what they are reading or the evidence for that opinion as it evolves. As noted in the comment on earlier tables, there are changes as the semester develops. However, the fact that most of the interpretations and analyses were not advanced suggests that they are still reading in a “common-sense”, opinionated manner.

### **Summary Model of How Students Read Literature**

After two semesters of analyzing these four exercises and also reading the actual responses as a literary critic with a knowledge of historical reading styles, I have two sources of information about how students read: the data contained in the tables described above and the hermeneutic sense I have of what kind of reading would produce the responses I got. By combining these, I can form some tentative conclusions about how my students read. The preponderance of impressionistic analysis over more structured accounts and the preference for simple interpretation over more complex interpretation or analysis suggest that they are reading for content over form and equating “serious” literature with the conventions of nineteenth century moral realism. The assumption is that literature serves as a means of insight into human character and an entertaining form for the consideration of moral judgments. Authors are supposed to teach us to be better people by showing us examples of human thought and action in a dramatic form. Those thoughts and behaviors are related to the students’ own common-sense notions of normal motivations and feelings. Both analysis and interpretation are done in terms of such notions of “normality” rather than in the book’s own terms or in the intellectual ways of thinking we teach at the college. For the most part, students did not seem very aware either of the aesthetic aspects of literary form or of the kind of ironic self-awareness found in postmodern criticism. There was little use of cultural and literary theories. They were most likely to speculate on characters’ motivations and feelings, summarize events, and describe their own feelings and beliefs about the value of the depicted feelings and acts. They thought of the literary works as slices of life rather than as created images or depictions of life.

Such a reading style is neither a surprise nor necessarily a bad thing. Insight into human behavior is one of the functions of literature and one of the motivations for reading. However, the lack of consideration of literature as a representational medium, the corresponding lack of a sense of irony, and the preference for surface summary or immediate expression of one’s opinions suggest the kinds of problems we face in teaching literature. If students are to learn to read in preparation for the kind of analysis we want, they must learn to suspend judgment, avoid jumping to the interpretative level, and train themselves to sense, and eventually record, what is in the text. The challenge is to teach them to note what is there rather than what they want or expect to be there. When they interpret, they should be aware of conflicts between the meaning they find, their analysis, and their original reading. Evaluation presents similar problems.

The challenges described in the preceding paragraph are the literary equivalent of those found in Samuel Wineburg’s study of history students (Calder, Cutler, and Kelly; Wineburg). His conclusion was that history students tend to view history as content (the information contained in the textbook and paraphrasable in other forms) while historians view history as an epistemological inquiry into the past. Students ask: what happened? Historians ask: Why, and how can we find out? In a similar manner, students tend to read literature for content and real-life lessons. Literary scholars tend either to be cultural historians and therefore similar to other

historians or to read with a greater awareness of literary form and a desire to expand its possibilities and horizons. They are accordingly more concerned with epistemological issues as reflected in their emphasis on the particular qualities of literature as a means of artistic expression. We can perhaps summarize these similarities by saying that historians and critics differ from students in being more self-reflective, particularly about the role of language as a form of knowledge and about how underlying assumptions affect how they read and think. They also tend to view these underlying assumptions as possible topics for discussion and debate and subject to revision as a result of study and reading. The category of self-reflection was added to my rubric to cover this aspect of reading.

Although self-reflection was greater among the students part way through the semester, there is still a need for much improvement. Whether students are self-reflective about their reading might be more important than what aspect (analysis, interpretation, evaluation, or process) they emphasize. I need to develop techniques to make students more aware of how their assumptions are shaping their reading and help them develop the ability to evaluate those assumptions. This requires a full awareness that one is making choices when reading and writing about reading and that these choices might be better or worse. This might be the crucial change that allows for the change from the simple to the more advanced forms of reading in my simple rubric.

The next time I teach my course I intend not only to continue to collect the kinds of information I have but also to incorporate the models and even these exercises into the course organization. My hypothesis is that a more explicit use and discussion of the categories in the rubric and what they mean will lead to a greater awareness on the part of students as to how they do and could read literature and that more self-conscious reading will result in better learning. I intend to measure this by collecting information in a more organized manner at different times in the semester.

### **Postscript: Reflective essays and other types of reading**

At the end of the semester in which the last two exercises described in the body of the study were given, I tried an experiment to see whether another approach would result in different student responses. The read and write exercises are one-time, quick responses that ask students to describe a process and then classify their responses. I wondered what would happen if I asked students themselves to reflect on how they read and how they solved some of the problems they encountered. I gave about sixty students the opportunity to write an extra credit essay either on how they read one book or how they read two different books which presented them with different kinds of difficulties. This is a more direct form of dialogue, asking the students to provide me with the analysis of how they read. Only eleven students responded, most of them among the best students in their respective classes, and most of them in the one class with a later due date. I was surprised by the quality of the responses and by students’ ability to describe how they read and what problems they had with the kinds of materials they met in courses on

literature and culture. They unanimously indicated that they had neither been explicitly taught how to read in college nor been asked to think about how they read. They also asserted both that most of their reading in college was textbook reading focused on obtaining information for assignments and that when they read other materials they used a similar approach, trying to determine what information they needed from the assigned materials in order to complete the academic assignments for the course. One criticized long novels as being inefficient means of conveying information. Several expressed frustration at having to care about the language of a text instead of what it contained and maintained that these culture courses were the only ones in which they had to reread works in order to understand them, not simply memorize the information in them. These results provided a useful perspective on the information in the read and write exercises, and I intend to explore further ways in which I can enter into more direct dialogues with students about how they read.

The other benefit of this reflective essay was that students revealed their awareness both of how they developed during the semester and of how one kind of reading differs from another. This made me think about my teaching technique and reinforced my sense that I need to introduce more open discussion of the kinds of reading I want. Students wrote (and their words demonstrated to me) that a reflective essay or a serious conversation about how they read makes students more conscious of how they read.

#### Some Points made by Students

- They were not previously aware of having been taught how to read at Juniata or of having been asked to think about how they read.
- They were not used to reading novels and poems for serious purposes and were often uncertain about what they “needed” from the books.
- They had never read “difficult” philosophy before and were both intimidated and uncertain how to proceed at first.
- Their normal reading is very goal-driven. They read books in order to be able to do an assignment. “Needed” means necessary for a particular class or assignment.
- One said he could enjoy a novel only when he read it for leisure and not for information. A college class, driven by assignments given to students whose time is limited by the demands of this and other classes, is the wrong place to read a novel. He claimed he could enjoy the assigned novel only when he went to a private place and got lost in his reading.
- Some said they like to read in small segments or short periods of time. One student disliked a novel until she decided to switch from reading a few pages at a time to reading 40 pages at a sitting. She suggested that it was unusual for her to devote this much uninterrupted time to a single task.
- Most of them claim to reread difficult material, highlight, outline, and mark questions in hard books.

- They generally expressed satisfaction at having struggled with the readings and learned to use different types of reading. A couple added that this new ability would help them on MCATS or in other courses. (Remember these are good students, and they are writing an essay to be read by the one giving them their grades.)
- A couple of students wrote about how my interdisciplinary courses required them to learn to read difficult works of different kinds, especially primary sources such as philosophical essays, poems, plays, and novels.

One student’s thoughtful response, when combined with the read and write exercises, gave me a much better understanding of what is involved in syllabus construction, the choice of reading materials, and interdisciplinary courses in general. She wrote that she generally reads in order to find and memorize the necessary information in a textbook. “When I began reading literature for the course, I read it in a way similar to the textbooks I read for my major. I read the text lightly, taking notes on the important points. Then, I set my book aside and rely heavily on the abridged version I’ve made in my notes. For works by writers like Baudrillard, this exercise did not work well. I found it very important to read the passage multiple times.” (Student Essay, Interdisciplinary Colloquium 205, F 2009) She said that she overcame her initial frustration at having to reread sections of books and essays several times in order to understand them only by realizing what was not needed for this course and how the information would be used in assignments. She also had to realize that essays and novels should not be read in exactly the same way.

Three points about her reflective essay seem especially important to my continuing study of reading and how it should be taught:

1. She is describing an interdisciplinary course in which students have to read different kinds of materials. I choose them to make them learn to read and use primary sources. However, I teach the hardest book of moderate length I use by doing what the student did. I wrote an outline of the main content of the book and give it to students in pieces. Is it worth the pain of reading the book, or should I just give them the concepts in outline form? How does one take into account both stages of development and ultimate goals when working with students of different abilities and levels of interest? How can the read and write essays and reflective essays allow one to make more informed choices of materials and techniques?
2. She solved her problems by determining the function of these materials in the class she was taking. The larger goals of reading instruction involve reading beyond the classroom as citizens seeking perspectives on public issues. How can we structure classes and assignments to broaden students’ perspective beyond the academic goals in a given course? Can we use their willingness to “work for a grade” to engage them in activities that will do this? Can read and writes and reflective essays do this, or do we need other activities?

3. Can explicit consideration of reading provide a good means of stating the goal of an interdisciplinary course? My normative model includes the two-fold assumption that reading is a form of inquiry and that educated individuals do more than one form of reading because they want more than one form of knowledge about the world: scientific and narrative. Should the conscious development of these two reading abilities be the explicit goal of my interdisciplinary courses? If so, how can syllabus construction, choice of assignments, classroom and out-class- activities foreground reading to make students more aware of what abilities they are developing, and why? (Vess and Linkon)

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