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More Critical Reading Strategies for the Classroom: Helping Our Students Become Better Critical Readers

John Bird
Winthrop University, birdj@winthrop.edu
Teaching and Learning Center

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Last week, I wrote about the importance of teaching our students how to be better critical readers, focusing on the handout “How to Read Critically.” If all of our students read all of their assignments critically—if they annotated by underlining and writing key words in the margins—they would be more successful, would make better grades, and would learn more. And our teaching would certainly be more effective and enjoyable. Critical reading before they get to class is vital. But there are a number of strategies we can use in the classroom to help them become better critical readers.

A few years ago, I was teaching a text to one of my classes, perhaps a literature course, but possibly a CRTW class. I asked the students to tell me what the author’s point was in the third paragraph of, let’s say, page 47. They sat there, and I stood there. Silence. Crickets. They bowed over their books as if in solemn prayer. I waited.

At first, I thought I had asked such a simple question that I had insulted their intelligence. The answer seemed completely obvious—to me. After much struggling and a group effort, they came up with it. But I realized something profound in that moment: my students could not read a text and paraphrase what they were reading. In other words, they could not read for understanding. As time passed, I realized this was not a problem just for that class, and I suspect it is not a problem just for our students. Something has happened to student reading ability, an erosion of a central reading skill.

I believe this truism: if you cannot paraphrase what you read, if you cannot put what you read into your own words, you are not reading. I think many of us assume that our students have this foundational and vital skill of paraphrasing, that, like us, they unconsciously and automatically paraphrase as they read. My experience tells me that, in general, they do not. If I assume my students can read for understanding, the truth will disappoint me, and my teaching, and their learning, will not be successful.

One strategy I use in class is something I call “point and say.” I point students to a particular paragraph or passage and ask them to read it aloud and put it into their own words. We move, laboriously, from sentence to sentence, reading aloud and paraphrasing. This is hard, and they struggle, but they see the value in paraphrase, and many of them get better at the skill.

I know that I usually do not have to think consciously about paraphrasing as I read most texts; putting the writer’s words into my own words is something I don’t realize I am doing while I do it. However, when I read a really difficult text, critical theory by Derrida or Lacan, for example, I find myself slowing way...
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down, pausing with each sentence, sometimes with just a phrase or a word, and struggling to put these difficult words into my own words. In other words, I am a very skillful reader when I am reading clearer texts, but when a text is really hard and dense, I have to perform that unconscious skill consciously, slowly, laboriously.

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You might think what I am describing is a waste of class time. But I would rather take some class time to help students learn a vital skill than to keep providing material they do not know how to master. Coverage of content is pretty worthless if the vast majority of our students have no idea what the content means. Another strategy I use is called “key passages.” I will pick out what I consider to be key passages in a text, or better yet, I will have students identify those passages. Either as a whole class or in small groups, students move through those passages and identify why they are important, why they are central to the text. In order to do that, they have to understand the passage, which takes them back to the crucial step of paraphrasing.

Another very basic but helpful strategy is to make sure students give page references when they talk about something in the text. I am always surprised when some students do not have their books open when we discuss a reading. If I say, “Look on page 234,” most of them will get those books out and look. When students call out the page number, the response is even more immediate. I find I can train students to cite page numbers: “What page is that on? Where is that on the page?” Students quickly pick up the habit, and it certainly makes a difference in focus and understanding.

Writing is a very powerful tool for reading comprehension. The idea of “three-minute papers” (or whatever short time length), has been around for a long time. The original idea was to stop lecture or discussion and give students three minutes to write about the topic or issue or problem at hand. I have applied this idea to a reading: pause class and ask students to write for three minutes about a point or a passage in the reading. These short papers can be shared in pairs, in small groups, or in class discussion, then you can take them up as a check on reading and comprehension.

Finally, a strategy I took from Writing Analytically, an advanced writing text I have used in CRTW. The authors, Rosenwasser and Stephen, suggest focusing on what is interesting, surprising, or puzzling in a reading. I ask students those questions, and I am almost always pleased at the lively and engaged discussion that follows—and a discussion that is very text-centered. When I first read that idea, I was not sure it would be very effective. I was quite wrong. I realize that these seemingly simple questions are actually very powerful ways to get students to focus on the text and engage with it. They soon begin to read that way from the beginning. Those are my ideas. Please share yours!
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Thought For the Week

“You can find in a text whatever you bring, if you will stand between it and the mirror of your imagination.”
--Mark Twain, “A Fable”