Russell A. Hunt
Department of English
St. Thomas University

Reading and Writing for Real: Why it Matters for Learning

Abstract

The purpose of traditional reading and writing assignments, in courses across the entire curriculum, is to evaluate the students' and the authors' work. I outline some reasons why this is a crucial problem for student learning. I describe some assignments that all entail creating occasions in which student writing has consequences other than a mark, and offer oppurtunities for learning which include, and go significantly beyond, the learning of "course content"—that help students learn what academic reading and writing is for, how it works, and how to wield its power.

Undergraduate students rarely write anything whose central function isn't to allow them and their work to be evaluated. They have almost no experience of having their own academic writing serve any other purpose, and have extremely limited experience of reading academic writing which exhibits any evidence of authentic human and social motives.

I don't imagine that most people would disagree about student writing. The number of occasions on which students write anything other than reports, term papers and essays, and examinations, is vanishingly small. Even more clearly, the number of those occasions on which the real audience for their paper is anyone other than what British educational writer James Britton (1975) used to call "the teacher as examiner" is even more minuscule.

It may not be so obvious that their academic *reading* is similarly limited, but when you consider how much of a North American student's academic reading material occurs in commercially produced textbooks, and when you consider how little of the actual text in those volumes was generated for any purpose beyond the delivering of information to students, it becomes easy to see how seldom students can have had much experience with texts which actually exhibit the sorts of intellectual and social motives that animate the texts' scholars and others to read and write in the course of their careers. Beyond this, I would argue, based on my own research into student reading patterns and practices, that even when another reader might find a text something more than a load of neatly baled information to be internalized and remembered for the exam, students (out of habit, as well as a reasonably sophisticated understanding of their actual situation) regularly read that way. In our research on literary reading, Doug Vipond and I regularly found students reading fiction, for instance, in what we called an "information-driven" way: focused on remembering what was in the text rather than assembling it into a picture, a story, or a point (Vipond & Hunt, 1984). And the recent trend away from predigested textbook material to "course packs" assembled from published articles and other sources (however good an idea that is) doesn't actually keep students from reading in that way.

Reading is a process shaped partly by the text, partly by the reader's expectations and habits and knowledge, and partly by the situation the reading occurs in. In classroom situations, you tend to read for information. And it is, after all, a great deal easier to read the literature review in the last issue of *Written Communication* or *Sociological Inquiry* or *Annals of Botany* as a compendium of information than it is to read a John Updike story in that way. (In fact, even reading Updike, our student research participants, responding to the "educational" situation and their own expectations of the texts usually encountered in such situations, managed that just fine.) In such situations, it's difficult to promote reading for any other purpose than what Frank Smith used to call "information shunting."

Why is this a problem? After all, surviving university does demand that one develop the skill of processing and retaining information from text, and there've been hundreds of studies aimed at finding ways of helping students get even better at this. What's wrong with it?

Well, rather a lot, really.

I've spent much of my career looking at this problem. I began by observing students regularly failing to understand the ironic stances in many of the writers I asked them to read in my literature classes, and wondering why it was that when Jonathan Swift's earnest accountant proposes using roast baby to address Ireland's famine and overpopulation problems, or when Robert Browning's Duke explains how, well, unsatisfactory his last Duchess was, students rarely find the irony delightful. Usually, they're shocked at the idea of roast yearling child served up at a christening, or want to know where Ferrara is, whether Klaus of Innsbruck actually existed, and whether this is going to be on the exam. It was my dissatisfaction with this, and my attempt to find ways to help them, that originally motivated my research into student literacy, and after a few decades of trying to be as observant a busybody as I can I've come to think that this problem is even more serious and more widespread than I'd at first thought. But I've also come to believe that it can be addressed.

The reason it's more serious is that it isn't just about reading literary irony; it's about understanding the ways in which human voices and human intentions animate all texts (yes, even those two-kilo tomes out of McGraw-Hill and Allyn-Bacon). And that sort of understanding is central to actual learning from texts, as opposed to storing information gleaned from texts. There are a number of areas in which a blindness to the rhetorical motives of texts can lead students to further blindness. I'll just mention a couple.

In recent years I've become very interested in the problem of what's often perceived as the rising tide of student plagiarism. I have a great deal to say about this, which I've said and published elsewhere, but here my central point is that the overwhelming majority of the cases I have ever seen of what we usually call plagiarism are cases where students have no idea whatsoever that the passage or paragraph in question could "belong to" anyone, or could represent anything other than a block of information of the sort you might find in a traditional encyclopedia. Scholars, of course, read quite differently. We know that the literature review is also a way of staking a claim, proclaiming allegiances, and boosting the importance of our own work; we know that the bashful backgrounding

of the author's self-citation and the subtle deprecation of the studies one disagrees with by selecting carefully among verbs of attribution are moves in an elaborate social dance. Thus when you stumble across one of those lumps of undigested text in a term paper you recognize it instantly, almost entirely because it exhibits a coherent rhetorical purpose that student writing doesn't, by definition, have. Students, who can't hear this, are regularly amazed at how easily these examples of what John McPhee (1983) would call "suspect terrain" are identified.

When students read, and write, in the naive ways afforded by the situation they're in, the ideas and arguments are not attached to each other in strings of social embedded argumentation: they are isolated gobbets of data, infochunks to be warehoused as carefully as possible—and which rarely survive the date of the examination, because they're attached to nothing else in the warehouse.

Another place where you can see this is explored in wonderful and scary depth in a series of studies done over seven years at McGill and Carleton Universities, and published in a book called *Worlds Apart* (Dias et al.,1999). In that study, the researchers discovered over and over that students graduating from professional programs found themselves unable to write appropriately in the workplace for which the program had been ostensibly preparing them, and that the primary reason was that the writing in university had never had to function in any way other than to demonstrate that the student knew, or could do, something. New Bank of Canada employees, for example, regularly found themselves participating in an ecology of documents in which texts were passed among many hands to be edited, reshaped, rethought, touched up, repurposed. The ex-students found themselves applying irrelevant and rigid notions of correctness and formal conformity when they wrote and commented, and reading the comments of others the way we all read the marginal red-ink comments of that English teacher we all learned to fear—as final verdict, as acceptance or rejection, as a rationale for a mark, rather than suggestions for repurposing or attempts at assistance.

I believe this blindness to the functions of text beyond transferring information is an artifact of school, that it's *learned*: it's not how texts outside school function, and it's not how language outside school functions. And I don't think it's unavoidable that text inside schools has to function in this way, though I have often had colleagues say that it's not clear to them how writing and reading can be used in ways which foster the restoration of that awareness of the social and rhetorical functions of texts if they're in the situations they find themselves in classrooms. "Too many students, too much text, too little time, too much pressure to cover an information-based curriculum," they say; "you may be right, Russ, but it really doesn't make any difference, does it?"

It's certainly undeniable that traditional writing and reading assignments, in courses across the entire curriculum, fail to address this problem. It's difficult to change the way students read, because the school situation and the nature of the texts in that situation is so powerful a learning environment. It's easier, and more effective, to change the way they write by changing the situations in which the writing occurs and is read, and the functions it serves. It has been known for a long time, mainly by early childhood educators, that just as producing speech leads understanding it, writing comes first, that

the way you read is shaped by your knowledge of what writing can be used for (see, for example, Marie Clay's wonderful *What Did I Write?*).

Let me describe some assignments that I would argue *do* help students learn what academic writing is for, how it works, and how to wield its power—and thus not only how to write, but how to read, as though written text mattered.

These assignments all entail creating occasions in which student writing has consequences other than a mark (and, not at all incidentally, is *not* marked or graded), and offer opportunities for learning which include, but also go significantly beyond, the acquisition of "course content."

One example, from my first year English class; after reading some documents brought in by class members relevant to the ongoing controversy between Reuters & CanWestGlobal about the *National Post*'s "editing" of Reuters news stories to identify Palestinian groups as terrorists, and change the phrase "revolt against Israeli occupation" into "campaign of violence against Israel," students were asked to post proposed questions on the course email list. The purpose here is to persuade the readers—the other members of the class—that the questions you think are important are the ones that should be investigated and discussed. Responses to the assignment ranged from the discursive to the focused.

> . . . Having read the articles surrounding the improper use of the aforementioned word, (the word in the subject line that has the ****'s in it) I noticed that even the "definition of the word itself", varied from one newsagency or individual to another. Note that it's the NEWSAGENCIES that are using their own incoporated definitions. I did not see one bit of reference to any "standard" or "dictionary" definition. And why is it that this word is getting all the attention? i mean, there's a war going on, and we're splitting hairs over "what to call the parties involved"?? Does this seem a little much? And also, remember the old saying... "Ya can't please ALL the people ALL the time"....i think it still applies. How ironic that their "pens are truly mightier than the swords." After all, the news is more about the "news" than the news is. There are ACTUAL WARS going on out there, people. Get a grip.
> Ok, one more thing.(Then I'm done, i swear) I especially liked the "letters from the Globe & Mail" entry from D. Smith and M. Rutman who said in response to this whole thing: "Suicide bombers are 'fighters' and Hitler was a 'Camp Director'. Makes sense to us." - That about sums it up for me. (whew!)
>
> Legally, can the National Post change certain words such as "terrorist" and say that it "is editing for style"? What does

Canadian law state in reference to this?

How are we to know whether or not we can trust news agencies? How do I learn to find the "truth" throughout all of the misleading information that is given to me on a daily basis?

After reading the articles and information on various websites, I'm wondering what the agreement between Reuter's and CanWest Global encompasses (the contract details and whose interests have the most weight)? Just what power does Reuter's (and their writers) have over their subject matter once they sell it? What can a journalist do if they find their writing is being drastically changed from the original intent/subject they had written? Are there any other subject areas that CanWest Global has been known to add a "slant" or inappropriately change the wording to?

What it seems to me is happening here is that the written language is functioning immediately in a social situation, for academic purposes. Is the language polished, edited, revised? Of course not; it's full of asides, functioning pragmatically to shape the social relations underlying the transaction ("then I'm done, I swear," "whew!"), lexical choices working to deformalize the register ("I mean," "Get a grip," "I'm wondering"), and so forth. This language is beginning to function as a way of exploring ideas in an actual social context. Whatever else it is, it's not about fending off accusations of ignorance. And insofar as it (like all real language) is about self-presentation, it's about self-presentation in a context where ideas matter.

A more extensively constructed discourse situation (and one less susceptible to display in limited space), involves what we call "feasibility studies," in which the class decides, through their individual and group research and writing, on foci of study most likely to be rewarding, and "collaborative investigations," in which students report to each other in a bound book or Web site the results of independent investigations into subjects central to the course curriculum. In one recent instance, one student discovered, and wrote a report explaining, a reference to an "acid attack" on an "uppity" woman in Bangladesh; a group assigned to assess the feasibility of finding out more about the incident as a way of coming to understand how people's beliefs function and change wrote a report recommending, on the basis of a preliminary investigation, that the episode would support further investigation; on the basis of that report the class agreed, and another group produced a published (bound and printed) report for the rest of the class exploring the problem in much greater detail. In turn, this report formed the basis of a two-hour class discussion of the issue. All of this writing was read and used by others in the class; none of it was graded or evaluated by the instructors.

Similarly, but at a slightly different level and with a different focus, in my eighteenth century literature class, students posted on the course forum reports on preliminary explorations of textbooks, which were then used to generate questions for exploration (in turn, posted on the forum) and the formation of groups to investigate the questions and

report on them. Extensive examples of this process are accessible through my course Web site.

Subsequently, the same class posted recommendations of writers we would need to know about if we were to be able to identify ourselves as people who knew about the Restoration and eighteenth century. The rule is that you need to invoke the authority of at least one recognized print source (one of the score of textbooks and anthologies I've put on reserve in the library), and anything else you can find, including reports by other students. It should, I think, be clear that motives here are far different from those driving the usual term paper on a given writer.

And finally, in my course "From the Page to the Stage," groups do research on a play to be produced locally (by Theatre New Brunswick, the campus theatre companies, touring companies, or others), present their research to the rest of the class before the play opens, and, on the advice of the rest of the class, another group edits the material down to a four-page "playgoer's guide" which is printed and distributed at the theatre with the programs. Again, examples of these reports and published guides are accessible on my Web site.

There are many other examples of ways in which it is possible to create situations where student's motives for writing, and for reading, go beyond information transfer to achieving membership and identity in a group, amusing and persuading and informing others, and exercising what Robert Scholes used to call "textual power."

The fundamental commonalities here are, I think, that the writing is not aimed at, or even necessarily read by, the course's central authority, the teacher as examiner; that it has a purpose that members of the group involved understand and accept, that the sanctions for not doing it, or doing it poorly, are social rather than institutional (contempt or amusement rather than a C- or a D), admiration and engagement and emulation rather than an A or, as Alfie Kohn would characterize it, some other bribe). That, in other words, it is, and is felt to be, for real.

References

Britton, James, T. Burgess, Nancy Martin, A. McLeod, and Harold Rosen. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan, 1975.

Clay, Marie M. *What Did I Write?* London: Heinemann, 1975.

Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. The Rhetoric, Society and Knowledge Series. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999.

Hunt, Russell A. "Four Reasons to be Happy About Internet Plagiarism." *Teaching Perspectives* (St. Thomas University) 5 December 2002: 1-5. Repr. *Teaching Options Pedagogiques* 6:4 (University of Ottawa) August 2003: 3-5; repr. (abridged) as "Let's Hear it for Internet Plagiarism," *Teaching & Learning Bridges* 2:3 (University of Saskatchewan) November 2003: 2-5.

Hunt, Russell A., and Douglas Vipond. "First, Catch the Rabbit: The Methodological Imperative and the Dramatization of Dialogic Reading." *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Literacy Research*. Eds. R. Beach, R. J. Green, M. Kamil & T. Shanahan. Urbana, Illinois: National Conference on Research in English, 1992. 69-89. Repr. *Poetics* 20 (1991): 577-595.

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

McPhee, John. *In Suspect Terrain*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983.

Scholes, Robert E. *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Smith, Frank. "A Metaphor for Literacy: Creating Worlds or Shunting Information?" *Literacy, Language, and Learning: The Nature and Consequences of Reading and Writing*. Eds. David R. Olson, Nancy Torrance, and Angela Hildyard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 195-213.

Vipond, Douglas, and Russell A. Hunt. "Point-Driven Understanding: Pragmatic and Cognitive Dimensions of Literary Reading." *Poetics* 13 June 1984: 261-277.

Web Sites for Classes:

Truth in Society (English 1006) http://people.stu.ca/~truth/

From the Page to the Stage (English 2223): http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230304/

Restoration and Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose (English 3336): http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/33360405/