

“THIS IS JUST, LIKE, A RANDOM ARTICLE?”:  
THE READING RESOURCES OF SIX  
FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE COMPOSITION STUDENTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

For students enrolled in First-Year Writing courses, reading is an important aspect of the writing process; for this reason, reading has been discussed and researched in a variety of ways by composition scholars. Departing from the long and ongoing debate about what types of texts should be read by composition students, this thesis explores both the ways that students read when they arrive at their first-year composition courses and how they make sense of the new, and often difficult, things they are asked to read there. Using verbal protocols, a research method developed by Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, I analyze the ways that six English 102 students make meaning in an academic text about writing. I find that, because these students are not participants in the academic discourse surrounding writing pedagogy, they must appropriate different types of knowledge and experiences to form “reading resources,” which help them build context for the ideas presented in the text. This need to create context, and the strategies these students use to do so, has implications for how reading is described and presented in composition courses.

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## INTRODUCTION

What role does reading have in the writing process? How difficult should the reading be? Should student texts be read in first-year college writing courses? Should students' texts be read *exclusively*? What should the reading be about? How much reading should be done? These questions have been asked and discussed in writing programs, in journals, at conferences and in English department offices for years.

My interest in these questions formed through my experiences as a Teaching Assistant in the First-Year Writing Program at Boise State University. In designing both English 101 and 102 courses, I've relied heavily on readings to drive classroom discussions, model writing, provoke inquiry, and support various types of research-based writing activities and papers. What my course design and pedagogical approach has lacked, however, is an explicit focus on the teaching of reading. While I've developed numerous ways to help students throughout their writing process, I haven't spent time doing the same for their reading process. I began asking my colleagues about their use of reading in their composition courses and about how they taught their students to go about reading the things they gave them. What I found was an incredible variety of approaches; some instructors had extensive experience teaching reading strategies and had experimented with techniques like modeling reading for their students or having students freewrite and reflect on their multiple readings of a text; one experienced professor likes to threaten to call his students on the phone in the evening in order to intervene in their reading. Others, like me, were less experienced. The common consensus, however, was

that reading strategies are crucial and should somehow be addressed in our composition courses.

This informal survey gave way to some interesting questions, and I soon discovered that others in the field of Rhetoric and Composition had raised interesting questions about reading pedagogy as well. I decided to design a study to address one question in particular: *What reading strategies, conscious and otherwise, do students use to navigate and engage the difficult and complex academic texts they're asked to read and respond to in their college composition courses?* The study described in this thesis enabled me to observe and analyze the ways that six individual composition students read and made sense of the same academic text. This research process has given me greater insight into the position my students are in when I assign reading in my courses. It has also revealed some implications for how reading can be presented and used in productive ways.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I present and consider the relevant literature on reading and reading strategies. I begin with a broad overview of the different ways reading has been discussed in Rhetoric and Composition. I present more recent publications that have both extended from this long conversation and move it in new and helpful directions. I then consider the specific ways that the issue of difficulty has been approached, both as an obstacle in reading and as a didactic tool. My literature review then extends beyond my own field of study to relate some of the research that Education has provided, specifically in terms of metacognition, but also in reading strategies in general.

The second chapter is a description of the research methodology used for this study: verbal protocols. Verbal protocols have been developed and used in a variety of ways to study cognitive processing. This method has frequently been used to study readers, both expert and beginning. I describe the theoretical background to my method and also describe the concerns I had in using it and what measures I took to ensure that the data it produced was relevant and accurate. I also describe how I collected data, and how my reading and analysis of it developed throughout the course of my analysis.

My third chapter presents an extensive analysis of my data. In it I define the phrase “reading resources” which I use to describe the ways I see the students I studied reading the text. These “reading resources” are particularly helpful to the students as they attempt to locate the context for the piece. I demonstrate how these students use “reading resources” in individual profiles of each of the six students. I also explore some of the implications these profiles have for composition instructors.

I conclude my thesis by taking the opportunity to reflect on my experience as a researcher during this project. I also consider potential changes I might have made to this study which may have strengthened the data I gathered or offered different windows into my inquiry.

Included in Appendix A is a conference paper which I hope to present at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in March of 2013. The paper is a brief description of my study and the implications I see it as having for my fellow composition instructors.

My goal in researching and writing this thesis has been to make a contribution, if small, to the First-Year Writing program at Boise State University, as well as to anyone

interested in the difficult and fascinating task of teaching students to read and write at the college level. I hope the things I learned about the six students I studied serve to make me, and others, better equipped for what we do.

## CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Composition studies has taken up the topic of reading in rich and varied ways. Debates over what types of texts should be read in writing classrooms continue, and reading pedagogy has recently received renewed attention, both in writing textbooks and in anthologies. Beyond Rhetoric and Composition, this research project benefits greatly from the work done on metacognition and cognitive psychology in the field of Education, which has frequently been used to study young readers, but has also been used to discover the reading strategies of expert readers. The scholarship presented here serves as a backdrop to my particular study and informs my interest and methods in conducting research.

### **Reading Content in the Composition Classroom**

A defining moment in the field of Rhetoric and Composition and its treatment of reading occurred in 1995 when two prominent scholars, David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, published two articles, and corresponding responses, articulating their approaches to using reading in their composition courses. Bartholomae argues that “there is not writing done in the academy that is not academic writing. To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing” (63). This supports Bartholomae’s position that students should encounter and learn to navigate the writing of the academy in order to be empowered within it. Elbow, on the other hand,

sees a conflict inherent in the differing roles of writer and academic, roles which students must recognize and inhabit differently in their participation in writing courses (72-83).

The main issue at hand in this debate is the content of the readings used in composition courses; for these scholars, the authority and agency available to students is represented in the authorship of the texts used to model and teach writing. For Bartholomae, students can achieve agency by learning to navigate the difficult and foreign terrain of academic writing; by asking students to struggle with, and talk back to, academic texts, writing instructors push students to learn to function in the academy. This approach to using texts that are difficult, and which reflect the types of texts that working academics would read and respond to in their own work, is also reflected in Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," where he writes that students must "learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (605). This reliance on academic texts is also specifically demonstrated in Bartholomae and Petrosky's widely used textbook for basic writers, *Ways of Reading*, which is in its ninth edition.

Elbow's approach is distinctly different. The difference hinges on his belief that "there is a conflict between the role of writer and that of academic" (72). Elbow wants students, first and foremost, to see themselves as writers; seeing themselves as academics is important, but secondary. For this reason, Elbow advocates using student writing as the appropriate texts in writing classrooms; by reading and studying the writing of their peers, students will begin to conceive of themselves as capable and legitimate writers.

For this reason, Elbow publishes a class magazine multiple times throughout the semester which includes pieces from all of the students in his class. Rather than using a textbook like *Ways of Reading*, which is populated with the artifacts of academia, Elbow makes student writing the focus.

These perspectives characterize the debate over what kinds of readings should be studied in composition courses. There are two assumptions inherent in this debate that support the study I've designed. The first, very simply, is that reading is an important element in composition courses; though the appropriate content of the texts is debatable, the use of some sort of assigned reading is not questioned. The second assumption, which opens up room for this research project, is that reading is an important means by which students observe and participate in discourse, whether it be Bartholomae's academic discourse or Elbow's classroom/peer discourse. When students read, they become active discursive participants, just as when they write. My interest, then, is in what tools students reach for when they arrive in their composition classroom and are asked to become participants as readers.

### **Reading Pedagogy in College Composition**

Marguerite Helmers, editor and contributor to *Intertexts: Reading Pedagogy in College Writing Classrooms*, both continues and broadens this conversation to focus less on the content of the texts used in college composition classrooms and more on the pedagogy used to encourage and teach reading. In "Introduction: Representing Reading" Helmers explores the noun/verb division in the use of the term "reading," with the noun being the type of text, and the verb being the act itself. One debate that shaped this division was that of Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate, published in *College English* in

1993. The noun in this debate became “literature,” with Tate arguing that when literature is removed from writing courses students are deprived of lengthy examples of exemplary writing; Lindemann, on the other hand, seeing a focus on texts as distracting and preventing students from focusing on writing (Helmets 7-8).

Helmets encourages instructors to move beyond focusing on the noun; the type, the genre, the content of texts used in college composition courses: “*Reading*, it must be remembered, does not refer to the novel, or the passive consumption of aesthetic literature, but to a process of investigation of and articulation” (20 emphasis in original). This admonition plays out throughout the anthology.

Kathleen McCormick, in “Closer than Close Reading: Historical Analysis, Cultural Analysis, and Symptomatic Reading in the Undergraduate Classroom” challenges college instructors to encourage their students to read texts (as well as advertisements, television shows, movies, etc.) through their own experiences and cultural knowledge. McCormick acknowledges that this is not a new approach, but demonstrates that it can be developed and moved forward into a useful technique called symptomatic reading. Symptomatic reading, which she “[derives] from Pierre Macherey who adapted it from Freud,” is a method where students are asked to read critically by looking for what is absent from, or left out of, a text (39). This allows students to make meaning and build comprehension in texts using means outside of their own experiences. McCormick pushes her students to engage in symptomatic reading to “develop [their] agency in the world” and to “look beyond the literal message of any kind of text and analyze the ways in which it might be attempting to put forth dominant ideological views as natural and normal” (42).



Nancy L. Christiansen, in “The Master Double Frame and Other Lessons from Classical Education,” looks to the educational practices of the ancient Greeks, a system that grew out of the work of Isocrates and served as the basis of all Western education well into the Middle ages. This system had rhetoric, with the goal of eloquence, as a central focus for its students. Christiansen urges teachers to look to this system to see how reading was thought of, how it was taught, and how these conceptions might inform the way reading is taught now. The central idea in this rhetorical education “is that there is a master genre – the declamation – framing all discourse, a genre that is by nature double – both drama and argument” (81). Readers should be encouraged to use these two sides of the master genre to analyze the texts they read; as readers, they perform the text and embody the voice and character of the writer. This performance of the text then allows students to decipher and analyze the argument being made: “[...] a reader/writer, then, seeks to understand and then evaluate all texts as arguments and dramatic performances in order to decide on an appropriate response” (85).

Harin and Sosnoski, in their chapter titled “What Ever Happened to Reader-Response Criticism?” consider the important movement of reader-response theory, prominent in the 1970’s and ‘80s, and trace its distillation into “theoroids,” a term they coin: “When theories become ‘theoroids,’ they become maxims, conceptual proverbs” (103). These proverbs (i.e. “gender is performance,” “we’re all cyborgs”) do not capture the theory of reader-response as a whole, a theory which still has much to say about how students read and make meaning in the texts they’re giving in classrooms (103).

Harin and Sosnoski look to a number of current argument textbooks to see how they describe and instruct students to think about reading. They find that, in general, a

simplistic and insufficient understanding of reader persists, a view reflected in their look at reader-response theory. These textbooks place logic in the center of reading, encouraging students to trace arguments as “textualized artifacts open to investigation” rather than “cultural practices fraught with struggle and pain” (113). The authors doubt that this characterization of argument is acceptable to students whose experience is steeped in television, advertising, political campaigns, and all of the unclear and murky information presented in those forms: “From a cultural context wherein logic is regarded as reductive and oppressive, argument textbooks would seem elitist and complicit with the conservation of the economic status quo” (119). In the end, these authors urge instructors to remember and embrace the complex activity of reading that reader-response theory offers. They do not, however, argue for a “return to [a] ‘pure’” application of that theory, but simply for “more respect for the intelligence students bring” to the texts they’re asked to read (120).

### **Composition Textbooks**

Another way to trace how teachers and scholars think about and use reading in composition courses is to consider the textbooks being published and circulated, and especially those which have a specific emphasis on reading. For instance, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs have recently published *Writing About Writing: A College Reader* which includes academic texts from Rhetoric and Composition with chapter headings like “Texts/Constructs: How Do Readers Read and Writers Write?” and “Literacies: How Have You Become the Reader and Writer you Are Today?” The reader also includes a brief section called “Making Sense of the Readings” which includes

practical advice from the authors, as well as a number of students, for how to approach the difficult texts.

*Reading Critically, Writing Well* by Axelrod, Cooper, and Warriner, which is in its ninth edition, provides a structured framework for students to see, analyze, and text both reading and writing strategies. For each text being read, students are asked to take on two different roles: reading for meaning, and reading like a writer. *The Curious Reader* by Bruce Ballenger and Michelle Payne offers a variety of types of texts, and offers extensive recommendations for how students can shift their reading strategies to the demands of different genres and styles. This book includes a chapter specifically concerned with helping students develop reading strategies for the academic texts they read in their composition courses. Most recently Matthew Parfitt, in *Writing in Response*, offers a rhetoric with a substantial focus on reading.

All of these textbooks offer practical instruction for reading texts critically, and for understanding the unique conventions of academic writing. That reading strategies are a focus in all of these books demonstrates the need for composition students to examine the way they read, and consider the ways in which they need to develop as students.

### **Understanding Difficulty**

The presence of reading in composition courses suggests the need to present students with tools to help them navigate the texts they're asked to read and respond to. The question that follows is, "What strategies do students bring with them as they join the academy, and how are they using them when they are asked to read?" One scholar who has asked this question and used it as a didactic process is Mariolina Salvatori. Salvatori has written extensively on the importance of tracing students' reactions to difficulty in

reading. Her goal in dealing with difficulty so frequently is pedagogical, but also ideological. She warns that if students are not forced to deal with difficulty, instructors “nurture continuous dependence on a hierarchy of experts, most of whom are unwilling or unable to share with others the processes that enabled them to acquire and amass their cultural capital” (“Reading” 202). She argues that acknowledging and exploring the confusing and difficult task of reading is an important step of inclusion for students entering the academy; even the best readers struggle with reading and students must embrace that.

Salvatori’s approach to studying her students’ reaction to difficulty is an assignment she calls a “Difficulty Paper”. In this assignment she asks students to identify “some of the difficulties they have experienced in their interaction with the text” (“Toward” 82). Salvatori states that when “inexperienced readers read complex texts, their ‘difficulties’ consistently identify actual and venerable interpretive cruxes. This, I believe, is a fact worth reflecting on” (82-3). Salvatori uses this technique to highlight the fact that all readers, no matter how experienced, encounter and must navigate difficulty; it is also meant to help students deal with difficulty directly. The difficulty paper is a direct and effective way of making students aware of how they’re struggling and gives them a platform from which to theorize about what strategies might help them in the future.

Salvatori’s ongoing work with the idea of difficulty draws attention to the fact that students inevitably struggle with difficult texts, and that reading strategies are an important aspect of learning for college students. There is some composition scholarship addressing this need. Doug Brent, in *Reading as Rhetorical Invention*, sees reading as

seamlessly tied up with rhetoric, “the art of discourse from the consumer’s point of view” (xii). His book “seeks to build a model of rhetorical invention premised on the idea that reading—that is, being persuaded by other people’s texts—is a vital component of rhetorical invention” (xii). Brent includes one chapter with suggestions for how to teach students to read and “be persuaded” by academic texts (106).

### **Metacognition in Educational Research**

Any discussion of the reading strategies of college composition students logically acknowledges their past education and the corresponding scholarship in the field of K-12 Education. This connection between the fields of Rhetoric and Composition and Education, it turns out, is a full and productive one. Scholarship on reading strategies has, historically, belonged predominantly to the field of Education, and especially to those researchers interested in the metacognitive activity of K-12 students (e.g. Brown, Flavell, Pressley). The methods and focus of this research has varied, as have the age of the readers being studied. Paris and Flukes assert that studying megacognition may be especially important for beginning and struggling readers because these readers are still in the process of developing reading strategies and are generally unaware of the familiar skills and processes that expert readers rely on and take for granted when trying to make sense of a text. However, this extensive research has not frequently been used by scholars in composition studies, whose primary interest is in college writers. First-year writing programs present an opportunity to study students who can again be classified as “beginner” or “struggling” readers as they are asked to read and synthesize the new and foreign genre of academic writing. Though in a sense they’re experienced readers, having years of instruction and practice with reading, they are also beginning readers in specific

ways. The methods and strategies they've developed in their primary education need to stretch and adapt to the new expectations of college reading. This moment in students' metacognitive development presents an opportunity to draw education scholarship into the realm of composition studies.

### **Reading Strategies in Education Studies**

The field of Education is vast enough to include numerous camps of scholars adhering to different, and sometimes seemingly opposing, theories of learning. This is as true for the scholarship on reading as it is for any other subject; for instance, the so-called "Great Debate" between phonics and whole-language approaches to teaching reading has formed and flared in different ways for decades (Chall). Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman, Education scholars who have focused on reading, sidestep this debate in their influential book, *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*. They write: "We consciously avoid the great debate, believing that it divides professionals unnecessarily. Children need to learn letters, sounds, words, sentences, books, and they need to learn to comprehend literally and inferentially" (xv). Their approach is to provide "a mosaic of reading experiences for the adult reader and portraits of classrooms in which explicit comprehension instruction has been successful" (ibid xiv). In so doing they build a reading pedagogy they call Comprehension Strategy Instruction which includes seven metacognitive reading strategies drawn from research done on proficient readers.

There is a growing consensus among those studying reading comprehension that readers who learn and apply useful reading strategies increase in their ability to remember and reapply what they've read; in short, they acquire the traits of proficient

readers. Cathy Collins Block and Michael Pressley are the editors of *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*, a collection that brings together numerous studies on how to teach young readers how to build their comprehension in reading. For instance, Gerald G. Duffy, in “The Case for Direct Explanation of Strategies,” presents findings from a previous study on the effectiveness of explicitly teaching reading strategies to struggling readers, as opposed to modeling reading or simply interrogating students about the content of a text. Though the initial study was published in 1987, Duffy sees the need to re-present the findings due to their apparent lack of impact on the way that teachers are taught to instruct students in reading; Keene and Zimmerman are cited as the only exception to this omission (38). Peter Afflerbach considers the importance of self-assessment in reading and presents studies that show how expert readers rely on monitoring and evaluation in their reading. He then presents practical ways to teach these practices to beginning readers, including checklists, teacher questioning, and metacognitive questions to present to students before, during, and after their reading (“Teaching”).

The wealth of scholarship presented here, which is a broad survey of the research and writing that’s been done on the topic of reading, constitutes the conversation I see my research participating in. First-year writing students arrive in our classrooms with the reading strategies and abilities they’ve developed in their primary education, an education facilitated by teachers who are deeply concerned with understanding how new readers read and how they can develop the skills of expert readers. As composition instructors, we ask our students to draw upon these abilities to read and make sense of the texts we give them, texts which vary in content but which are frequently difficult and

characteristically academic. My interest is in how these students apply their reading skills to these unique texts. Part of this interest has necessarily been concerned with how reading strategies have been studied in the past and how I can apply what's been done to my specific interests. This is the topic of the following chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

### **Theoretical Background**

Studies in metacognition, especially those specifically concerned with reading, have mostly come out of research in the fields of Education and Cognitive Psychology. For this reason, I've found it necessary and beneficial to appropriate research methods from those fields; Rhetoric and Composition simply doesn't have a tradition of studying readers in this way. Because my method, verbal protocols, may not be a familiar means of researching students, I'll spend some time here reviewing what they are and how they've been used to study readers.

Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, educational researchers who specialize in cognitive psychology and the study of reading processes, are largely responsible for legitimizing verbal protocols for the study of reading. Verbal protocols are a method of gaining access to the contents of a person's short term memory. Generally, the research subject is asked to verbalize their thoughts as they perform a mental task. These reports are then analyzed to understand the cognitive activities involved in that mental task.

Pressley and Afflerbach's book, *Verbal Protocols of Reading*, published in 1995, is a meticulously researched summary of all the studies done on readers using some sort of verbal protocols. Pressley and Afflerbach summarize the findings of these 38 studies to support their idea that the act of reading is "constructively responsive"—that readers react to a text as they read it and build their strategies and understandings upon those reactions

(83). More importantly for my interests, the book also explains the history of verbal protocols in reading research and addresses the criticisms and concerns that exist regarding its usefulness and validity. Pressley and Afflerbach conclude that considering their history and the findings they've produced, verbal protocols are indeed an important and valid window into the cognitive activities of readers; they also give recommendations for how the research done in the 38 studies they summarized could have been improved and how the methodology as a whole could be improved for subsequent scholars.

Underpinning the whole of Pressley and Afflerbach's work is *Protocol Analysis* by Ericsson and Simon. *Protocol Analysis*, like *Verbal Protocols of Reading*, summarizes and critiques studies done using types of protocol analysis, mainly from the field of cognitive psychology. Ericsson and Simon provide guidelines for implementing protocol analysis in research and define how and when the method is useful and successful. The book was first published in 1984 and was revised in 1993; though the methods Ericsson and Simon recommend have been tried, critiqued and revised consistently since the book's publication, it still remains a standard reference for researchers using protocol analysis (Pressley and Afflerbach 5).

One difficult aspect of using verbal protocols is the lack of a recent update to the exhaustive methodological work done in both *Verbal Protocols of Reading* and *Protocol Analysis*. However, there have been a number of studies published recently using verbal protocols and citing these guides as fundamental, if modified, to their research methodologies. One such study by Martin and Kragler, published in March, 2011, uses verbal protocols to examine the reading strategies of kindergarten and first-grade students. Another study, published by Schirmer in 2003, looks at the reading strategies of

deaf students. Zhang and Duke used verbal protocols to study the strategies of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reading hyperlinked text on the internet; this study especially highlights the potential for verbal protocols to be used in new and updated ways. The methodologies for these studies are derived predominantly from Ericsson and Simon, as well as from Afflerbach's condensed methodological recommendations based on the findings of *Verbal Protocols of Reading* ("Verbal Reports").

A similar model for studying reading strategies using verbal protocols, by Hilden and Pressley, has been revised and republished in the 2011 edition of *Literary Research Methodologies*. The ongoing use and development of verbal protocols, particularly when readers are the subject of study, reflects its establishment as a valid and useful method of research.

### **Using Verbal Protocols in Reading Research**

Verbal protocols, despite their growing prominence and frequent analysis, are still not a standardized method. Many people have used this method in different ways to suit their needs – it is a method that can be adapted to different goals and situations. Still, it has been my goal to ground my research in previous studies and critiques of those studies. My specific methodology is guided by the recommendations made by Pressley and Afflerbach, which incorporates Ericsson and Simon, and especially Hilden and Pressley's reassessment and recommendations which cite the most recent published work being done with verbal protocols.

### Description of Verbal Protocols:

Ericsson and Simon determined that, due to its limited capacity and length, the contents of an individual's short term memory are quite accessible, and that most people are quite good at reporting what they're thinking about at any given time. This approach is the basis for verbal protocols and why they've become a useful tool for those studying the workings of the human mind. Since Ericsson and Simon, verbal protocols have been widely used in research studying reading processes; they offer reports of what's happening in readers' minds as they work their way through a text. This makes verbal protocols especially suited for studying reading strategies.

### **Applying Reading Research and Verbal Protocols to My Research Question**

For my study, I chose to use verbal protocols assembled through student readings to gain insights into first-year college students' reading processes. This research tool allowed me to gain access to the student's thoughts as they were reading through a text. I was able to record the connections they were making, their moments of confusion, insights, misunderstandings, instances of distraction, and the numerous other activities in their thinking as they read. This data granted me insight into the strategies each student was using, consciously and otherwise, to read and comprehend the text.

I designed a study that included a verbal protocol reading of a brief, academic text and an interview focused on the student's experience as a reader. Because my interest is in composition students, particularly those reading and responding to academic texts, I also intentionally recruited volunteers who were currently enrolled in English 102 at the time of the study. These students were are enrolled in English 102 at the time of the

study; English 102 at Boise State is a research-based composition course in which students are required to find, read, and incorporate academic texts into their own writing.

After seeking IRB approval, I continued with my study in the fall of 2011. I composed a recruitment script, which I asked six English 102 instructors to read to their students. From these classes, six students contacted me to volunteer for the study. I recorded the 45 – 60 minute interviews using a digital recorder, and later transcribed them in full.

#### Retrospective Responses:

For the verbal protocol readings I asked the students to respond retrospectively; that is, at marked places in the text where they should stop reading and report their thoughts (there were 15 blue dots added to the margin of the text to remind the students to stop reading and verbalize their thoughts). The students were working with a text that was intended to be difficult but not impossible and that reflected the level of complexity of the sources they would be required to find and read in their English 102 courses. The complexity of the text was also intended to force the students to use whatever strategies they had available to comprehend the text. For this reason, having them respond at specific intervals was more suitable than having them respond spontaneously, or whenever it occurred to them to speak. Studies of retrospective vs. concurrent reporting (see Kuusela and Paul) show that for less experienced readers, or for readers who are dealing with an unfamiliar or difficult text, “more valid reports might be obtained by signaling them to provide reports of their processing” (Hilden and Pressley 432).

### Direct Reports of Thinking:

The goal of the interviews was not to hear students' interpretations of their processes while they read. Instead, the goal was gain access to any of the thoughts they had about the text or their experience reading. For instance, I was not interested in the students evaluations of themselves as readers or commentary about how they were thinking about reading as they read. This metacommentary would distract from the students actual reading and comprehension of the text. For this reason I encouraged the students to simply report what they were thinking as they read. I explained that their reports could be completely random, and that they should report exactly what was in their mind. None of the students asked for me to further explain or model this technique, so, as intended, I was able to keep my explanation simple.

### Cuing Reports

As a researcher it was important that I didn't limit or direct the reports that the readers were giving. I used simple and open ended prompts like, "Please stop and tell me what you're thinking at the blue dots," or "Don't forget to verbalize your thoughts" when it seemed that they had passed a dot without reporting. These broad cues were intended to yield the most accurate and numerous responses and avoid focusing the reader on certain reading strategies.

### Text Selection

All of the students read and responded to the same text, a piece by Douglas D. Hesse, which is published as a chapter in the anthology *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. I provided a photocopy of the text. My interest involves the reading

strategies students employ when they first encounter academic texts; at Boise State, this is likely to happen in English 102 where students are asked to find, read and synthesize academic sources in their research papers. And, because many English 102 courses at Boise State incorporate some writing pedagogy as course readings, I wanted to use a text from the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Hesse's piece fits these criteria.

### Student information

A frequent criticism of verbal protocols is that the value of the information gained from verbal reports is often lessened by the lack of information about the readers participating. To provide this context, I asked each participating student to fill out a brief descriptive survey about themselves including questions about their age, educational history, reading history and familiarity with academic texts.

### Student participation

Students participated in the verbal protocol interviews on a volunteer basis. To recruit these volunteers, I composed a script that explained the purpose of the study and the format of the interviews. I asked six of my colleagues at Boise State who were teaching English 102 in the Fall of 2011 to read the script to their classes and pass around a sign-up sheet where willing participants could provide their email address. After I responded to these students, I was able to make appointments and meet with six individuals.

## **Data Analysis**

Hilden and Pressley warn that data from verbal protocols can be difficult to quantify, and that coding verbal protocols can sometimes limit the information they

reveal. My task as a researcher has been to look for patterns and trends amongst the verbal reports and to describe, as fully as possible, the strategies and processes each individual participant employs as a reader.

What follows is a detailed description of how I organized and analyzed the raw data from the verbal protocol interviews.

### Transcription

It was clear to me that the only way I'd be able to thoroughly analyze the data from the verbal protocols would be to transcribe them. I had recorded the interviews using a digital audio recorder so I was able to transfer the files onto my computer. This made the transcription process more manageable than if I'd only had the interviews on a separate device; I was able to stop and start the recordings quickly and easily and only had to work with one computer.

That being said, the transcription process was tedious. My general method was to back the audio up so that I had a few seconds of lead up to the section I was transcribing. I'd start typing along with the audio and trying to keep up as long as I could before the recording got ahead of me; this usually meant that I'd get six or seven words down before I'd have to stop the audio and back it up again. I'd go through this process until the student was done reporting for a given section. Then, I'd back the audio up to the very beginning of the section and play it back to check for accuracy. This process took many hours to complete, but it was thorough and complete; I'm confident that my transcriptions are accurate within a very small margin of error.



One unexpected struggle I faced in this capacity as a researcher was my tendency to become frustrated with the students whose reports I was transcribing. Some of the students spoke very quickly, jumping from thought to thought in a very conversational style – this, of course, was exactly what I was asking for and what verbal protocols should produce. Other times, the students would go off on long tangential anecdotes about their educational experiences or lengthy analysis of their thoughts. In both these cases, I found myself frustrated and tempted to leave out portions of the interviews, partially because they seemed irrelevant, but mostly because they were difficult to transcribe. I was able to get past this frustration and temptation, and it's good that I did; often these lengthy reports were very telling and crucial in my later analysis.

#### Organizing and Sorting Data

Having completed the transcriptions, my next task was to begin reading, rereading, sorting, and analyzing the raw data. This was a significant task; the verbal reports alone amounted to 20 pages of single-spaced text. With guidance from my committee, I made the deliberate choice to spend a significant amount of time with the transcripts, allowing patterns to emerge in my reading of them before analyzing them through the lens of other scholarship. I also took notes on the data as I read to trace my thinking; I found the “Comment” feature in Microsoft Word particularly helpful for this. I was able to attach annotations to the reports, from initial observations to potential codes. I layered these annotations over subsequent readings and saved them as a new document.

After reading and annotating the raw data numerous times, I started to recognize some general patterns. I initially began to sort the data according to seven codes I saw immersing in the verbal protocols, which I called categories. This number quickly grew

to ten as I struggled to code certain reports that didn't seem to fit into my initial categories.

To sort the responses into these ten categories, I read through the transcript of each student's responsive reading individually and color-coded each of their reports, which each clearly corresponded to one of the 15 blue dots in the margin on the text. To color code them, I highlighted blocks of text with colors corresponding to each code (red for "Writing Instruction," blue for "Peer Analysis," etc.). Next, I reorganized the data so that I could see how each student responded to the same section of text; again, since the students were prompted to stop and report by blue dots placed in the margin of the text, I was able to organize their reports in a parallel way in order to see all of the students' thoughts on each particular passage. Then, having looked at the data two ways, I compared the transcripts and re-evaluated any report I had coded differently in the two transcripts and made a final decision about which code it represented.

I experienced some difficulty in doing this coding. For instance, here is one report by a student named Alicia<sup>1</sup>:

For the next two I was kinda of thinking about...um...like how I think that we should have more classes required for like English and that sort of thing...um, not only because I'm interested in them but because I think a lot of people my age lack in, um, the ability to write and speak well. And I also thought that it was cool that they, ah, had classes back in early civil, like, ancient civilization. That sort of thing.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the names used to refer to the students studied are pseudonyms.

Here Alicia thinks about the passage through the lens of her own experience in writing courses. However, she also thinks through the lens of a critique of her peers, i.e. that they aren't proficient in reading and writing. The codes are basically combined; so, does it count as both, or should I simply code it as a "Writing Instruction" because, between the two, it seems more accurate?

My initial thought was that the strategies being used by the students would be more or less evenly distributed among them; that is, that all of the students would read the text in a relatively similar way. With this in mind I began writing about the students' reports according to each of the codes. For instance, under the code "Peer Critique," I wrote about the significant instances in the reports where any of the students were thinking about the text in terms criticisms or analysis they had for their peers. Or, under "Writing Instruction," I wrote about the significant reports where students were reading Hesse in terms of what they've learned or experiences they've had in different composition courses.

The next phase of my analysis consisted of rereading and resorting all of the reports, some of which had been broken down into multiple categories (i.e. the first part of the report was category one, the middle was category four, and the end was back to category one). One effect of my struggle to sort the data was that the categories I was using began to appear more clear, and some of the categories I had named began to merge. I was able to revise my list of ten categories to a list of seven, which I've used in my data analysis chapter. These are:

- Writing Instruction;
- Recursive Reading;

- Self-Awareness as a Writer;
- Extracurricular Texts;
- Reading Analysis;
- Peer-Critique;
- Writing Anxiety.

Another important product of this phase is that I started to see the problem of context in the students' reports. This was most clear to me while I was struggling to analyze some seemingly odd reports made by one student, Brianna, at the beginning of the piece. She first confidently reports that she's thinking about *The Da Vinci Code*, a popular mystery novel. She then reports her thinking has moved on to Socrates and Plato. I was confused about how she was connecting these thoughts to the reading – they certainly were not things I could connect to the text. However, by her third report, she seems to have found her bearings and goes on to read and comprehend the piece relatively well. A comment she makes later in the piece helped me to understand these initial reports a little better. She abruptly asks about the genre of the piece and, after an explanation, comments that she's never read "writing theory" before. It occurred to me that I had not given her, or any of the other readers, any context for the piece beyond the fact that it's something they might encounter in a class like English 102. Furthermore, the piece was photocopied from a book, so none of the contextualizing clues offered by the physical attributes of the book are available. So – Brianna is forced to figure these things out as she reads. Her seemingly random thoughts at the beginning illustrate her process of deciphering the context of the piece.

I began to see that all of the students' reports served as reference points in their attempt to make meaning out of the unfamiliar text. This is when I began to think of the categories as "reading resources," a term I thought more fully explained their function than to simply call them strategies.

I began to have trouble writing extensively about each of these reading resources. I had originally thought that I could cite and compare reports from each student under each of the categories. I assumed that this would allow me to focus on the categories and see them working with each individual student. However, for all of the categories except "Writing Instruction" I could only cite two or sometimes three of the students' reports. I realized that none of the students used all of the seven strategies in their reading; furthermore, some of the students used only two or three of the seven codes. This is when I decided that it made more sense to focus on the students instead of the categories. This is why I've arranged my analysis as profiles of each of the students in which I describe how and where they use the reading resources that they do.

Verbal protocols were a productive methodology for this study. I was able to shape my use of them in order to get at my central question about how college composition students read and comprehend academic texts. The interviews produced lots of interesting and relevant data that would have been impossible to collect in any other way. And, as an added benefit, I received positive feedback from the participants of the study, who each seemed interested in their experience and more conscious of the ways they understand the things they read. I would be interested in using a form of these protocols with students as a way to get them thinking about their own reading strategies.

### CHAPTER THREE: DATA ANALYSIS

An analysis of the verbal protocols of the six English 102 students reveals that there are a variety of ways that students read and that each student relies on different fields of knowledge and experience to understand texts, to different degrees of success. Using the methodology described in chapter two, my data analysis revealed that these students were using seven different areas of knowledge and experience, which I call “reading resources.” These reading resources provide the students with the intellectual space to build a context to make sense of “Writing and Learning to Write: A Modest Bit of History and Theory for Writing Students,” a short chapter of writing pedagogy written by Douglas D. Hesse. In general, these students are not capable of reading like experienced or expert readers who are familiar with a particular genre or disciplinary conversation (such as Rhetoric and Composition) and whose reading is what Pressley and Afflerbach call “Constructively Responsive” (82). For this reason, these students need to appropriate the knowledge and experience they do have to form the context for the ideas they’re encountering in the text. Using reading resources allows them to create this context and build their comprehension. In this chapter, I first describe and give examples for each reading resource, which I identified in the data. Then, I analyze how particular student readers navigated the reading.

### Reading Resources

The immediate obstacle that these students encounter is *context*, an obstacle that is inherent in courses like English 102 as well. By context, here, I'm referring to all of the information that surrounds a text and contributes to its meaning. In this case, the context for the chapter includes information like the purpose or occasion for its having been written, Hesse's credentials as an academic, the other scholars who have participated in the conversation regarding reading pedagogy in college composition, widely known debates on the subject within the field (such as Bartholomae and Elbow, as mentioned previously), general pedagogical movements in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, and all of the other information that an expert on this subject would use to make sense of Hesse's piece. Hesse's text is an artifact taken from an academic conversation about writing pedagogy in college composition courses. It is also a part of the general conversation happening in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, which itself is located in the much broader conversation of academia. Participants in these conversations – professors, graduate students, etc. – are aware of this broader context and are able to read a piece like Hesse's with that context in mind, using it as a means to interpret and understand the text. English 102 students, in general, are not participants in these conversations and have very little direct context with which to read. Understanding this context is not essential for reading the text; however, the more the students can figure out about its context, the better equipped they'll be to enter into the conversation it represents and participate in.

This obstacle of context is magnified by the form of the text. The text, which was printed as a book chapter in an anthology of writing pedagogy, is a photocopy. The

photocopy does not include an image of the book cover, or any other information about the origins of the text. The students are left without the contextualizing hints that physical books offer; for instance, if they were given the book in which the chapter appears instead of a photocopy of the chapter, they might begin thinking of the chapter as academic before they begin reading.

The students' verbal protocols reveal that to overcome these obstacles, these students read using particular "reading resources" to create or locate the context for the piece. This accounts for the variety of reports from the students; they look to their individual experiences and knowledge to make sense of Hesse's piece. These reading resources both enable the students to make meaning in the piece and deeply color their understanding of the reading.

### **Descriptions of Reading Resources**

The following are descriptions of the seven resources being employed in the students' reading of Hesse's chapter:

- Writing Instruction;
- Recursive Reading;
- Self-Awareness as a Writer;
- Extracurricular Texts;
- Reading Analysis;
- Peer-Critique;
- Writing Anxiety.



### Writing Instruction

The resource of writing instruction consists of the student's experiences in writing courses, both in high school and in college. This is an important resource in this reading situation, given that the text specifically addresses a brief history of writing instruction and makes some claims about how writing should be taught, and why. Writing instruction is also a very immediate resource for these students because they are all currently enrolled in college composition courses, specifically English 102. Reading the text through their experiences in these courses enables them to test Hesse's ideas against their own recent experiences; it provides the space to agree, disagree, complicate, illustrate, and talk back to the text in productive ways. I see this as the most important resource for these students and for this text.

An example of this resource is when Lana compares the different approaches her English teachers have had to teaching writing. For instance; "Like...when we were young we always were taught a paragraph is seven sentences and things like that. Every single step up that you take, I feel like there's different rules, and there's different ...um, like...just different things that you can do. Different things that are added on and different things that are dropped, and things that...so, each class that you take and at each level that you're at it's...different."

### Recursive Reading

Recursive reading is the ability of the students to understand and elaborate Hesse's argument as they make their way through the text. It is the instances when a concept becomes clearer to them in light of new information. For one student, it is the recognition that Hesse is building upon a particular thesis throughout the chapter; for

another it is disagreeing with a concept and then softening to it as it is explained and illustrated. Recursive reading most resembles the Constructively Responsive reading of experienced readers.

An example of Recursive reading is when Derek says, “He does a really good job always going back to his thesis. I mean, he always makes a point...makes it a point to say there’s no clear, exact formula for writing. And if there were, it’s like he says down here, if there were rules for it we would teach, we would give students those rules.”

### Self-Awareness as a Writer

The student’s self-awareness of their own writing process is helpful to them as they encounter Hesse’s characterization of writing processes in the text. It is a way for some students to visualize the ideas in the text by thinking of their own specific writing experiences. This reading resource is closely related to their experiences in writing instruction – most of the writing experiences they cite in their reading of the text come from writing assignments in English or composition courses.

An example of this resource is when Lana says, “I think has been the most valid sentence so far[...]because for me like everything that I write is either an opinion of mine, or I’ll lean towards, you know, one side of an argument, or I’ll focus on one thing more, just because it’s happened to me or just because I’m passionate about it or can relate to it.”

### Extracurricular Texts

Extracurricular Texts are the texts that students have read outside of writing courses and which they use to contextualize their reading of Hesse. They are useful in

that they provide both ideas and reading experiences for the students to appropriate to this particular reading situation. In this instance, these texts tend to be mostly novels or another form of fiction. Not all of the students use this reading resource; however, those that do use it frequently tend to describe themselves as frequent or avid readers outside of school.

An example of a student using extracurricular texts as a resource is when Briana says, “I’m totally thinking of *The Da Vinci Code* [...] ‘cause it, um, kinda actually applies to what it’s saying. ‘Cause it’s a different way to show something.”

### Reading Analysis

Reading Analysis is the students’ meta-cognitive awareness and commentary on their ability to read the text as they make their way through it. This awareness includes their perception of the text’s genre, their level of interest in it, the effects that the formatting has on their ability to read, the instances when they become distracted from text while reading it, and comments regarding their ability to understand and follow the ideas in the text. Some students focus on these aspects of reading more than others. It is my assumption that those who do focus on their reading analysis do so in part due to the reading situation; the verbal protocol potentially shifts thinking in this direction and possibly resulted in a greater number of these types of responses than would be represented in a more authentic reading.

An example of this resource is when Zane says, “I don’t know if this is a formatting thing or if it’s just how I read, but for some reason when I have quotations and parenthesis all used in the same place I just...it’s like a train wreck. It’s like I’m reading

and, even though I haven't, like...not seen something, I just lose track of where I am on the page.”

### Peer-Critique

Many of the students found it useful to think about the text through their perception of the writing processes and abilities of their peers. The majority of these responses are critical; in all but a few instances, the students see faults in their peers' approaches to writing, seeing them as lacking in the methods and ideas Hesse offers in his chapter. Most of these responses were made in reference to English 102 and especially in regards to experiences with peer-review. Also, most were made in tandem with comments about the student's own abilities as a writer.

An example of this resource is when Alicia says, “And it was interesting to see how, like some people would think that they were doing well in English, and then I would read their papers, and I'd be like, this isn't...like, this is ok but it's not, it's not something that I would want to turn in for a paper...because it's not developed; it's just restating facts, or restating opinion, and that sort of thing.”

### Writing Anxiety

This reading resource is the students' thoughts about their abilities as writers. It is a powerful reading resource in that, when used, it has the potential to magnify and sometimes obscure the text. One student in particular used this resource extensively, sometimes to the hindrance of the understanding or comprehension of the text.

An example of this reading resource is when Rahshia says, “Actually...even in my native language, even in Arabic...I can tell when the writing is good. And, I can tell

when it's bad. And I can analyze a writing; I can understand it, and I can summarize it. But I can't write myself. So, maybe I'm a good reader, but I'm not a good writer."

### Student Profiles

This image shows which reading resources each of these students used while reading the text:

	Writing Instruction	Recursive Reading	Self-Awareness as a Writer	Extracurricular Texts	Reading Analysis	Peer-Critique	Writing Anxiety
Alicia	X		X			X	
Brianna	X			X			
Derek	X	X				X	
Lana	X		X		X		
Rahshia	X						X
Zane	X			X	X		

The function of these reading resources are most clearly illustrated by looking at how each individual student uses them. What follows are profiles of each of the six English 102 students who read the chapter by Douglas D. Hesse entitled "Writing and Learning to Write: A Modest Bit of History and Theory for Writing Students," using verbal protocols. Included in these profiles is an analysis of how these students apply these seven reading resources specifically in their reading of the text.

Alicia

Alicia approaches the text through three primary reading resources: through her self-awareness as a writer and by using peer-critique; these are both thought of in the context of her experiences with Writing Instruction. These resources are facilitated by the uncommonly large amount of experience she has had in the past two years in writing-intensive courses. She took both English 101 and literature classes concurrently at her high school, and as a transfer student, was asked to also take a standard senior English course. She took these three courses the semester before the English 102 course she is currently enrolled in.

Her first response demonstrates her ability to quickly locate some context for the piece through her self-awareness: “So until the first little dot, I was just kind of thinking about the way *I* study things when I go to write. And...how it’s true that you can’t really, there aren’t really...formulas for writing and making it work.” Here she picks up on one of Hesse’s key terms, “formula,” and affirms his basic premise through a description of her own process.

This affirmation of the ideas in the text continues throughout her reading of the chapter. For instance, six of her nine responses begin with some form of the words, “I agree.” Her strategy is to find agreement with what she reads and then illustrate her reasons for agreeing by using evidence from her own experiences both as a writer and as a student in a composition course.

Alicia shifts from thinking about her own writing strategies to an analysis of her peers about two-thirds of the way through the chapter when the topic of formulas and the five-paragraph essay is discussed. Here she thinks through the unique situation she’s been

in as a writing student in multiple writing intensive courses: “[...]my literature class required that we *did* the five-paragraph thing. And, um, my 101 class required that we *didn't*” (her spoken emphasis). She connects this experience to Hesse’s explanation of high school and college writing techniques, and to her peers: “Because I know that we’ve peer-reviewed papers in my classes here, and a lot of them have that basic structure, even if they don’t know what...to put in the paragraphs and stuff, necessarily.”

Alicia continues thinking about the text through her experience of taking writing courses with different expectations simultaneously. This allows her to illustrate Hesse’s claim that “English 101 students frequently report that they earned A’s and B’s in high school, believe they are good writers, and thus are frustrated at the difficulty or standards of English 101” (43). She relates this idea to particular high school students she’s known:

And it was interesting to see how, like some people would think that they were doing well in English, and then I would read their papers, and I’d be like, this isn’t...like, this is ok but it’s not, it’s not something that I would want to turn in for a paper...because it’s not developed, it’s just restating facts, or restating opinion, and that sort of thing.

This critique of her peers gives Alicia an entrance point into Hesse’s argument; she can relate to it by way of her experiences and, in particular, her thoughts about the writing she’s seen from her classmates in her writing courses.

### Brianna

Brianna uses two extracurricular texts together to understand a particular concept in Hesse. Her report seems to be in response to this passage: “One value of reading as a

writer is to see how other authors writing to similar audience in similar situations have organized their writing” (42-3). Brianna responds affirmatively: “That’s actually a good point...this one is actually a point that Stephen King said really well in his book on writing. And, he’s just talking about how...the best writers are the best readers.” She then further traces this concept to another text she’s closely familiar with, a website of amateur writing called Fan Fiction, which she has experience editing. She applies Stephen King, by way of Hesse, to the role that reading plays in the writing of these amateur writers. Her analysis focuses primarily on form, saying that it’s the “the little things no one talks about that catches people;” her example is the conventional use of quotation marks and paragraph breaks to delineate dialogue. Because these conventions are unique to fiction and most students only write “academic papers for school,” those who “read a lot” stand out as proficient in their writing.

Brianna’s use of outside texts to understand Hesse occurs early in her reading in an interesting way. Hesse begins his piece with a broad introduction of what follows in the article, stating that there is no one formula for writing, and that various situations and audiences require different analyses and writing strategies. To this, Brianna remarks, “I’m totally thinking *The Da Vinci Code*... Cause it, um, kinda actually applies to what it’s saying. Cause it’s a different way to show something.” Hesse next moves into a historical explanation for the classical roots of writing course, to which Brianna responds, “Now it’s Plato. And Socrates, I guess. Since technically that’s who actually said the stuff.” Her next report, an opinion that all people need to learn to write well, is more centered on Hesse’s trajectory, and from there Brianna follows relatively closely for the remainder of her reading.



Brianna's initial reference to *The Da Vinci Code* initially seems odd and random. This randomness probably has something to do with the odd circumstances of the verbal protocol. She has little contextual information going into the reading; the article is copied from a book, so it looks like any other copied article. She later admits that she's never encountered writing theory before. She has no close reference to Hesse's introductory paragraph, but somehow she connects it to a popular novel. Her next report responds to the names of classic rhetoricians; she thinks of Plato. By the third paragraph she's found her bearings and begins conversing with Hesse. *The Da Vinci Code* and Plato, then, serve as preliminary, if distant, triangulation points for Brianna as she finds her bearings within the text.

For Brianna, a self-identified avid reader, fiction in general is also an entry point into a somewhat tangential analysis of audience influence in writing. Hesse writes that one major process in writing, especially classroom writing, is to identify an audience and figure out how to write convincingly to them. Brianna responds, "Ok. On this section, I always have wondered what it would be like if writing was more based on what the writer actually wanted to write and less on what the audience they wanted to have read it would want it to be." She orients this thinking to fiction: "When you read a lot of the classics, they imply that things happened, but they can't say it. Cause it doesn't fit the period they're in. So I kinda always wish to see how writing would have developed...if we hadn't had done that." In a sense, Brianna is challenging Hesse (and rhetorical theory in general) by questioning the idea that audience dictates writing to large degrees. Her assumption that the authors of classic texts were constrained by audience demonstrates an already developed thoughtfulness about this role, and her challenge to Hesse seems to

constitute a productive and complicated intellectual struggle. Considering the way she frames her comment (“I have always wondered”), her reading of Hesse is an opportunity to continue and develop her thinking on a concept she finds important in writing.

Brianna also actively reads through the filter of her past experiences with writing instruction. Unlike Alicia, she takes a more skeptical posture towards the text, questioning and defending against perceived attacks on her intelligence.

Brianna misreads certain parts of the text to correspond to a perceived idea in the text, in this case that high school students are to blame for their struggles to adjust to the new intellectual rigors of college writing. When Hesse writes that struggling English 101 students “report that they earned A’s and B’s in high school,” Brianna sees an attack on those students, even though Hesse goes on to emphasize that “college writing puts demands on them they didn’t have to address in high school” and that, “If college writing courses were identical to those in high school, there wouldn’t be a need for them” (43). Brianna responds, “I think it’s kind of funny that they blame the student for that [...] I mean, yes, it’s like a slap of reality but...you have to realize it’s not the student, really, that’s at fault for that.”

The following paragraph of Hesse’s text continues to elaborate on the fact that, like other college courses, college writing presents new challenges for freshman that are intentional and normal. Brianna picks out a sentence that she takes issue with and, interestingly, rewords it to fit her opposition: “Ouch again. Any complex task is difficult for a high school student.” After a pause of a few seconds she continues, “I reworded that. That’s not actually what it says.” The actual sentence from the text reads, “Any complex new task is difficult” (43). Though Hesse is generally talking about the situation

of high school students, Brianna's rewording redirects the comment onto high school students in a way she finds derogatory. This is the opposite of Hesse's intent, but Brianna doesn't see that.

That Brianna admits to rewording the sentence is evidence that she is aware, to some degree, of the overtly critical ways she's reading this section of the text. She also acknowledges that, "This is all very personal 'cause I just got out of high school." This critical lens seems to limit the scope of her reading. She goes on to struggle with the text and eventually references her current experience in English 102 to substantiate her disagreement as she sees it.

Ok. I'll admit that. It's true...they don't expect students...well, I don't know.

They say they don't expect students to know already when they get to the university...but I kind of feel like at the same time they really do. When you're in an English class, like, they aren't going to teach you it, you know. 'Cause I'm in one right now, and we haven't learned almost anything about like how to actually write. It's just more of like, she'll talk about what genre means. Or we'll just read different pieces. But there's not really anything about what they expect in writing until you get your paper and it's covered in, like, this is, should be like this, this should be like this. Like they don't actually *say* it. So I get what they're saying...but at the same time it's...like, you don't actually see it when you go into a class. [pause] Which always seems silly...I don't know (Brianna)

Here she grapples with Hesse, granting him some degree of accuracy while finally deciding that in her experience, what he's saying just isn't true. In the end, Brianna's overtly critical, and at times inaccurate, reading of the portions of the text which overtly

reference high school students enables her to process, reframe and expound upon the text. She talks back to Hesse, at first passionately, and then from the context of her experiences as a college writing student in ways that complicate and critique the piece.

### Derek

Derek also finds his experiences in English 102 to be the most helpful reading resource for understanding Hesse. A common format to his reports is to comment in the spirit of, “This is true,” and then relay an anecdote, most often from his English 102 course, that supports this assessment. He is overwhelmingly positive in his response to the text, beginning with the statement, “I don’t know, from what I can tell he is pretty much spot on,” and reaffirming this agreement throughout. In granting Hesse his trust from the beginning, Derek seems to avoid falling into distracting self-analysis in his reading; he is capable of following Hesse’s line of thinking and finds support for it through his own experiences. For example, Derek twice positively mentions Hesse’s ability to tie each paragraph back to his thesis; these instances represent the use of the recursive reading resource. He does this frequently in his reading: “That’s a good point. If college writing courses were identical to the ones in high school, there wouldn’t be a need for them. That just basically sums up this entire paragraph.” Importantly, Derek is as or more successful as any of the students in articulating what Hesse’s article is about in his summary of the text. His approach to reading the piece begins with deciding that the author has something worthwhile to say and then finding ways of affirming it in his experiences. He carefully traces the development of the text and makes it relevant to his own experience.

Lana

Lana uses her experiences in writing courses to illustrate and challenge the ideas presented in the text. She also uses a reading analysis to characterize the text, making predictions about it based on genre and her level of interest in it.

In paragraph five, Hesse describes the change in writing instruction which occurred in the mid-1960's and in particular how instructors began to realize that, just like those writing outside of school, students need frequent feedback and input in their writing. Lana measures this against her English 102 class: "[...]everyone dreads peer review. And like, you know, I...I personally don't really mind it, but like, kids in our class hate when other people, they're like really private about their writing, and things like that." It's important to note that Hesse makes no mention of peer-input. It occurs to Lana, however, that her classmates' dislike for peer-review demonstrates a point of contention she has with Hesse. She goes on to elaborate this point: "And I feel like students will be like, people will read it and say, this, um, this isn't an 'A' paper. They think the students are looking at it, the students aren't just reading as if it's coming from a magazine, or something like that." This is an interesting report because it challenges the text in a sophisticated way. Lana's opposition to Hesse (or rather Hesse's explanation of the development of the field of Rhetoric and Composition) is that, in her experience, students don't see their writing as public. Peer-review, one possible form of the feedback that Hesse mentions, doesn't work in Lana's experience because the students in her class write with the limited goal of assessment. Unlike the "actual writers" that Hesse references, Lana's classmates write for a grade, and not "as if it's coming from a magazine."

Lana's response demonstrates that she is reading in conversation with the text. She is moving this conversation forward using her experience to say, "Yes, but what about this?" Her understanding of the text in relation to her experiences in her writing course is a productive and helpful way of dealing with the ideas she's encountering.

Lana also uses this reading resource productively by testing the text against illustrations pieced together from her time as a student. Her response to Hesse's assertion that "no single formula is going to work for all writing situations" (42) is a reflection on the progression of her writing instruction:

Every single step up that you take, I feel like there's different rules, and there's different ...um, like...just different things that you can do. Different things that are added on and different things that are dropped, and things that...so, each class that you take and at each level that you're at it's...different. Kind of like how I go back to the math, like...two plus two is always going to be four. A teacher's not going to tell you something differently...than that.

Lana's mention of math demonstrates the construction of meaning taking place in her thinking; math is one way, writing is another. This basic concept is illustrated in the changes in her writing instruction throughout the course of her education. She says that "when we were young we were always taught a paragraph is seven sentences." This, however, has obviously changed. But, unlike math formulas, that rule might have been correct at that time and for her abilities, but is no longer correct. By illustrating this idea by reflecting on her past, and by bringing in the comparison to math instruction, Lana complicates Hesse, making the text more clear and more complex through her reading.

Lana's initial verbal report demonstrates her strategy for contextualizing the reading and making predictions about it. She says, "Well right off the bat, when I'm reading it, like, I can tell that this is like...a academic piece, like the, um...like a teacher would give it to their students to read, and they would be so...uninterested." This observation enables Lana to adjust her expectations and strategies; she acknowledges that the text will not entertain her and that she can't rely on interest alone to encourage her reading.

Lana's first three reports all consist of comments on her metacognitive awareness of her interest and ability to visualize the text. The ability to visualize the Harvard University campus, which Hesse references, for instance, increases her interest in what she's reading as well as her ability to relate to it. This meta-commentary seems to serve the purpose of helping Lana contextualize her reading and settle into it. After her third report, Lana engages with the text and begins conversing with the ideas in it, as seen above.

### Rahshia

Rahshia reads the text primarily using the resource of writing anxiety. Each idea in the text is shaped around her opinion that she is not a good writer. She searches for affirmation in the text, determined to find evidence that though she isn't a good writer, she'll be able to succeed. Near the end of the article, Hesse writes that, "English 101 students frequently report that they earned A's or B's in high school, believe they are good writers, and thus are frustrated at the difficulty or standards of English 101" (43). He goes on to explain that this makes sense, considering the new cognitive challenges students face in college, and that "this new kind of writing is difficult for most students in

the way that college-level calculus or a second language is difficult for them” (43). Rahshia responds, “I like this part, really...I liked it so much ‘cause I can relate to it. I wasn’t a good writer in high school; I was a good communicator. ‘Cause...I could say what I want, but I can’t write it down.” Here she references a previous verbal report in which she describes her method of passing writing assignments in high school by standing in front her class with an empty notebook, reciting off the top of her head and pretending to have written something down. She uses this anecdote to explain that although she can read and think well, she believes she simply cannot write. She goes on to sum up her understanding of the text this way: “And, the last part talks about, um...analyzing a piece of writing. And how that is hard for college students and for, um...second language students.” This again demonstrates Rahshia’s determination to find affirmation in the text. Hesse writes that college writing is similar to learning a new language; Rahshia reads that learning to write is more difficult for second-language learners. Certainly Rahshia’s reading has truth; however, this idea isn’t specifically in the text.

In another earlier report in response to Hesse’s brief historical account of writing instruction and its roots in classical rhetoric, Rahshia says,

[...] one of the paragraphs says that...the two semester writing course is fairly recent development. So I thought, if Aristotle and all other brilliant guys learned without writing, maybe...no not maybe...surely I can survive. Yeah, this is all I have on my mind right now. Why do I need writing?

Her declaration that Aristotle, Isocrates, Quintilian and Cicero didn’t need writing is clearly not supported in the text, but this assertion comforts Rahshia in her writing



abilities. Many of her responses follow this pattern; it is as if she is rewriting a parallel but different text alongside of the text she's reading. She reads through the filter of her own experiences as a writing student and through her negative perceptions of her abilities; this filter obscures the text and hinders her reading of it. Of all the readers, Rahshia focuses on her abilities the most. Her reports all fall into two categories – comments about her personal abilities as a writer and comments about her experiences in writing courses that illustrated her perception of these abilities. Rahshia's writing anxiety plays the primary role in her strategies for reading this text.

### Zane

Zane's primary reading resource for reading the piece is his reading analysis and particularly his perceived awareness of how easy it is to read the text and what formatting characteristics of the text might be changed to make a good reading more possible. He references extracurricular texts to do this. Zane also, at one point, understands a passage in relation to his experience in English 102.

Zane seems to approach the reading with the expectation that he will struggle to focus on the text and relate to it. He mentions this anxiety in his initial report: "So the first thing I'm thinking is actually just how long it's taking me to read it. I'm not a very fast reader but...this section I actually feel like I have to slow down and think about each...little bit." He addresses this anxiety frequently throughout his reading, at times making declarations like, "And this is like it's super easy to read. And I'm like, getting all of it, which is cool," while other times acknowledging his tendency to become distracted or how things like font size are hindering his ability to concentrate.

By the time he's read through half of the text, Zane has focused in on his analysis of the physical attributes of the text. He says, "I don't know if this is a formatting thing, or if it's just how I read, but for some reason when I have quotations and parenthesis all used in the same place I just...it's like a train wreck." His analysis of what formatting features distract him and his thoughts about what formatting changes he would make to the text in front of him dominate his thinking. He does reconnect with the topic of the article in one report near the end, stating that he's interested in the article because it makes him think about his own experience of testing out of English 101 and the difficulty he's experienced in English 102.

Zane's fixation on the text as a physical object helps him to analyze his ability to focus on the ideas in the text and relate to them. While this has the potential to help him enter into a thorough reading of the text, it does not seem to do so in this instance.

### **Implications**

My goal in developing this study has been to better understand the ways that students read the complex, difficult texts they're asked to read in college composition courses like English 102. I've found that one of the greatest challenges the six students I studied face is the problem of context; they are entering and navigating academic discourse whose conventions and assumptions they're unfamiliar with. To overcome this difficulty, students create reading resources from their own knowledge and experiences in order to build comprehension.

My findings, I believe, have implications for composition instructors and how they teach reading to their students. The first implication I see is that, considering the inherent struggle students have in joining and contributing to the academic discourses

represented by the texts they're given in composition courses, instructors should be conscious of the ways they actively strip contextual signals from texts. For instance, the chapter I had each of the six participating students read for their verbal protocol was a photocopy. There were many reasons for why I chose to photocopy the piece: the book it was published in was borrowed; I needed to mark the margins with the blue dots signaling the students to stop and report their thoughts; I wanted them to feel free to highlight and annotate the text; and, simply, it was easier for me to carry a photocopy than a large anthology. Using a copy seemed like the easy, logical thing to do; in fact, I didn't even consider any other way of offering it. However, I now see that the choice had inherent impacts on how the students read the piece and specifically how they could, or couldn't, find its context or its purpose.

I photocopied Hesse's piece from *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, a 626 page anthology of composition pedagogy. The book is specifically geared towards an academic audience – working college composition instructors. The table of contents places Hesse's piece under the heading of "Contexts for Teaching Writing," sandwiched between a chapter about the experience of a Teaching Assistant and a chapter called "The Importance of Framing the Writing Classroom as a Space of Public Discourse." It is one of 90 chapters; the table of contents alone is seven pages long. The topics of these chapters range from practical concerns about how to build a syllabus or respond to students work, to more reflective pieces about the role and function of writing instruction in the University. Previewing the table of contents is something that most experienced readers would do before they began reading, for instance, a chapter from an academic anthology. This previewing yields a lot. So, when

logistics compelled me to photocopy the chapter, I deprived the students who read it of the significant and vital context that's represented in the physical characteristics of the publication. This omission of information explains some of the more random seeming responses, like Brianna's reference to *The Divinci Code* or Zane's fixation on and analysis of the font size and layout of the text. Had the students had the opportunity to preview *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, it seems that they might have gained some important information about the text that could have changed their reading of it significantly.

This is a reality in most composition courses. Many instructors use pdfs or photocopies for the majority of the readings they requires students to read and respond to. Or, there are many instructors who use textbooks or readers which include selected articles, chapters, blog posts, transcripts, short stories, and a variety of other types of texts for students to read. In most cases, these texts are stripped of their contextual clues much like a photocopy is; they are reprinted and bound with numerous other texts, despite their original place of publication. A *New York Times* article, a satirical piece from *theonion.com*, and a excerpted chapter from a book by Michel Foucault might all appear together with few clues about how they differ from one another in their standards for publication or their legitimacy as artifacts from a particular discourse. Composition instructors should be aware of the effect this de-contextualization has on students' ability to comprehend the texts they read, and do what they can to fill in the holes where possible. This might mean bringing in that book by Foucault and comparing it to the online article as it appears on *theonion.com*.

The transformation that a text goes through when it's republished in an anthology is also similar to the transformation that happens when a text is downloaded and read on an electronic reader. It's increasingly common for people to choose the convenience of a reader or tablet over the comparative bulkiness of books, journals, and magazines; like my interviewees with their photocopied chapter, stripped of contextual clues, these people will need to find new ways to decipher the discourse they're participating in.

The second implication I see in this data is that, despite their struggles, students *do* have methods for reading difficult texts, and they have years of experience and knowledge to appropriate in the instances when they are left searching for meaning. Students can certainly benefit from learning methods for becoming a better reader; however, they can also benefit from learning more about the methods they are already using, and how they might be honed or improved upon. One way for instructors to do this is by using verbal protocols as a way for students to study themselves. By having students think aloud as they read difficult texts, instructors can give students the opportunity to gain confidence in the things they're doing well, and understand the ways in which they can develop their strategies. This didactic approach to verbal protocols is not uncommon in elementary school classrooms where students are just beginning to read and are progressing in their abilities; this strategy offers benefits to college composition students who are encountering texts of a greater complexity and difficulty than they may have read before.

In the end, what this data and analysis make clear is that there is plenty left to learn about how students read and how instructors can best encourage them to be more proficient and active readers. The fields of Education, Rhetoric and Composition, and

Cognitive Psychology have rich histories of research to help facilitate the many questions that remain unanswered. And, as always, there are students, who inspire these questions and the ambition to seek them out.

## REFLECTION

In the previous chapters I described the initial question that drew me into this study, the literature and methodologies that informed its development, the data it produced, and some of the implications I see emerging from that data. This has been a large and daunting project for me, as well as a definitive activity in my academic career. I will now offer some reflections on my experience as a researcher, and more generally as a graduate student who dipped his toe into the big waters of academic research and writing for the first time.

I began my graduate school career headed in a very different direction than the one I ended up pursuing. I came to Boise State completely unaware of the field of Rhetoric and Composition; I had focused on creative writing in my undergraduate, was interested in teaching composition, and decided to get my M.A. in Literature. I was encouraged towards, and attracted to, Boise State's option to complete additional coursework in the place of a culminating research project; I assumed that the way to make the most of my experience as a graduate student in English would be to learn as much as possible about as many different things as possible through seminar courses.

For a variety of reasons – the foremost being my introduction to Rhetoric and Composition and the realization that it was a better fit for my interests and goals – I changed my emphasis, a decision that meant the coursework substitution was no longer an option. Basically, I didn't make the decisions I did because I wanted the opportunity to

write a thesis – quite the opposite, in fact. However, having now accomplished what I had found so daunting, and reflecting on all the things I learned and gained through the process, I'm very glad that I was forced to face such a big and unfamiliar task.

There are many ways where I can see that this process has been beneficial. The first is that I consider this accomplishment as a new milestone in my development as a participant in my field. Until I began drafting my thesis proposal I didn't realize how distinct original research is from, for instance, a seminar paper. I assumed that, though longer and more thorough, the practices and requirements were relatively similar to the work I'd already been doing. I was wrong.

At the heart of what makes original research different, I think, is the amount of confidence and self-assuredness it takes to make confident claims, something that needs to be done all throughout the process of research and writing. It was up to me to decide what research method would be appropriate for my goals; I needed to read and code my data with the confidence of someone whose intelligence and insight make their reading of data valid and convincing; and, most difficult of all, I looked at my findings and spoke, as an authority, to my peers in the field and made recommendations for how they, considering my study, can become better teachers. I've been intimidated by the prospect of inhabiting this air of authority; now, having done it, I simply feel like a real player in the conversation I've been observing.

The second way I've benefited from this process is that it allowed me the opportunity to study composition students in a close, careful way. Composition research is full of theoretical situations, anecdotes describing specific students, insightful observations by seasoned professors, etc. This type of work has been very important to



me as I've started teaching and interacting with students. However, anecdotes are, at best, second hand and restricted to the observations of someone other than myself. My study provided me the chance to candidly observe six students and see the interesting and surprising ways they read an academic piece of writing. This is an opportunity I've never had; not as a teacher in a room of 25, and not as a student flipping through *CCC* or *The Norton Anthology of Composition Studies*. It's clear to me that the way I understand my students has been significantly developed by observing those students, and by hearing them speak about what it's like to be asked to read academic work in their composition courses.

A third way I benefited from writing this thesis is, simply, that I learned that I'm capable of searching out answers to the questions I have about teaching writing. I'm proud of the study I designed and satisfied to have learned a few small things about my question. That's not to say that I've answered anything completely or solved any problem; however, I can better see how and why researchers locate and explore their interests.

If this is an honest reflection, I should also mention some of the things I'd do differently if I had the chance to try this all again. To begin with – and perhaps this goes without saying for most graduate students – I wish I'd started earlier and had more time to spend at each stage of the process. The shape of my study didn't really come into focus until September of my second semester; my primary research happened in November; writing began in January. It's been a whirlwind since then. I'll admit that I don't feel that I've mined the data to its fullest extent; I'm sure there are more insights to be had and more knowledge to be gained. However, between time constraints, my other interests and

obligations to coursework, teaching, and life outside of my academic work, I've had to move at a fairly quick pace.

Another thing I'd revise about my process would be the amount of thought I gave to the text I chose for the verbal protocol reading and the location and setting for the interviews. In general I'm very happy with the chapter I asked the students to read. However, I didn't anticipate how deeply its topic would color the way that the students read it. Basically, I had English 102 students reading a piece about college composition. This gave them immediate connections to the material; without such immediate connections, perhaps their reading strategies would have changed. One way to test this would have been to ask them to read a second piece so that I'd be able to compare how their two readings differed.

As far as the location for the interviews – well, I let logistics dictate that choice and I probably shouldn't have. I ended up doing all of the interviews in a small study room in Albertson Library. The rooms contained one desk with a chair, and a second chair facing the desk from the side; these three pieces left little room for people. I had the students sit at the desk and I, at a distance of four feet at the most, sat with my digital recorder and laptop. I'm certain that none of the students would have considered this a “standard” or “authentic” representation for how they normally read their homework. I'm not sure to what extent these circumstances affected my data.

Despite these few missteps, I consider this project a success. I'm glad that I found the energy, determination, support, and time to see it through.

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## APPENDIX

**Conference Paper**



*What follows is a conference paper intended to be submitted and read at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), which will be held in Las Vegas, NV in March of 2013. CCCC is the largest annual conference for the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Many of those in attendance at CCCC will have an interest in composition instruction and will be familiar with many of the scholars I reference and the methods I use in this study. For this reason, and due to time constraints, I do not spend much time here describing my Review of Literature or my process of analyzing my data. I will provide a printed bibliography for those interested in the scholarship that helped shape this study, and will open up time for questions about my processes during the question/answer time at the end of the session.*

**“This Is Just, Like, A Random Article?”:**

### **The Reading Resources of Six First-Year College Composition Students**

A crucial skill for success in the university is the ability to read well: that is, the ability and flexibility to make meaning out of the numerous kinds of texts that are produced and recreated across disciplines. For many students, this ability is first tested and challenged in composition courses. At Boise State University, English 102, or Research Writing, requires students to find, read, and respond to texts, particularly academic texts, in their written projects. For most students, these types of academic texts are new and unfamiliar and require them to test their reading strategies to see if they still apply. From there they develop new strategies to meet the challenges and complexities of reading academic writing.

My interest in the role that reading plays in the writing process led me to ask a logical question: how do students read when they arrive in their First-Year Writing classrooms? To pursue this important question, I conducted a study that would give me access to the cognitive activities of students as they made their way through an academic

text. This study, its findings, and a few implications I can draw from them, is what I'd like to share with you today.

There is some work that's been done in the field of Rhetoric and Composition that is concerned with what students are reading and how they're reading it. A well-known example of this is the Bartholomae/Elbow debate, which came to prominence in the mid-90s and has continued to play out ever since. This conversation has, at its heart, the question of the content of texts that students are given in composition classrooms and how that content contributes to students agency as writers and as academics. In this discussion then, the text is the focus, not the reader.

More recently, Marguerite Helmers has compiled an anthology entitled *Intertexts*, which she describes as a "series of theoretical and pedagogical questions that will inform discussions about how to teach reading to undergraduates in various curricular settings" (ix). In addition to *Intertexts*, a number of composition textbooks address reading strategies in both practical and theoretic ways. *Reading Critically, Writing Well* is one example, a textbook that's currently in its ninth edition. *The Curious Reader* by Bruce Ballenger and Michelle Payne is a collection of readings that focuses specifically on strategies for students who are just beginning to read academic work. Most recently, Matthew Parfitt's *Writing in Response* "presumes a deep connection between reading and writing," and offers "strategies for critical reading as well as for reflection and response" (vi).

One conviction that's come out of my study is that our field has much to gain from our neighbors in the field of Education, a discipline with significant overlapping concerns and, where traditional composition students are concerned, subjects. Education

has long been interested in how developing minds read and comprehend texts; this vast bank of knowledge has much to offer those of us who hope to continue and build upon the learning students do in their primary education. For instance, I'd encourage anyone interested in the cognitive side of reading to take a look at the work of Michael Pressley, a scholar whose research and research methods seem to pop up everywhere that reading is discussed. Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman, authors of *Mosaic of Thought*, have also been influential in shaping the way teachers think about and teach reading to younger students. Their book describes a reading pedagogy they call Comprehension Strategy Instruction, which includes seven metacognitive reading strategies drawn from research done on proficient readers.

When I set out to design this research project, the thing I struggled to find in the intellectual artifacts of my discipline was a research method corresponding to my fundamental question: how do students go about reading the texts we ask them to read? What I found, in the end, is that Education scholars have been asking similar questions and developing means to study them. Specifically, I discovered the work of Michael Pressley and his colleague Peter Afflerbach. Their method for studying these things, which I'll describe, is called Verbal Protocols.

### **My Study**

Cognitive Psychology researchers Ericsson and Simon determined that, due to its limited capacity and length, the contents of an individual's short term memory are fairly accessible and that most people are quite good at reporting what they're thinking about at any given time. This is the basis for verbal protocols in reading research; when prompted, readers are able to verbally report what they're thinking about. This process is the same

as asking someone who seems lost in thought what it is they're thinking about. The report may be completely random (i.e. "I was thinking about what it's like to eat applesauce in outer space") or fairly predictable ("I was thinking about what I want to make for dinner"); either way, people have the ability to name and describe their thoughts in a very limited, immediate capacity. For reading research, this provides a means to make visible the processes and strategies of readers as they make their way through a text.

I used verbal protocols to study the reading strategies of six students enrolled in English 102 courses at Boise State University in the Fall of 2011. I met with each student individually for about an hour; during these hour long sessions, each student read a text, which I provided, and verbally reported their thoughts according to my description. These readings were followed by a brief interview concerning their perceptions of themselves as readers and their familiarity with academic texts.

The text I provided was Douglas D. Hesse's chapter from *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition* entitled "Writing and Learning to Write: A Modest Bit of History and Theory for Writing Students." The format and language in the chapter are distinctly academic; however, the text is not overly difficult. My intention was to use the type of piece that students might encounter in their English 102 class. Considering that Hesse's piece is explicitly written for college composition students, I'd argue that it fits these parameters.

Not surprisingly, the data I compiled during these verbal protocols was varied and sometimes confusing. It's not often that we, as teachers, get explicit access to what's going on in a student's mind; it's a fascinating place to see.

## Findings

The process of analyzing and coding the many pages of raw data produced in these interviews was probably the most interesting and arduous phase in my study. The outcome of my hours spent with the data was that I began to understand the students' various reports not as specific reading strategies per se, but as what I call "reading resources." These reading resources both enable the students to make meaning in the piece and deeply color their understanding of the text. Primarily, they enable the students to overcome the significant problem of context and their position as outsiders in the conversation that the chapter contributes to.

I was able to recognize seven specific reading resources in the verbal reports.

They are:

- Writing Instruction;
- Recursive Reading;
- Self-Awareness as a Writer;
- Extracurricular Texts;
- Reading Analysis;
- Peer-Critique;
- Writing Anxiety.

Each of these reading resources represents an area of knowledge and experience that the students are able to draw upon to help them understand the text.

The clearest way I can think of to describe the use of these reading resources is to share a few profiles of the students' I studied and describe instances where I see specific reading resources being put to use. We'll start with Brianna.

### Student Profiles

Brianna's use of Extracurricular Texts to understand Hesse occurs early in her reading in an interesting way. Hesse begins his piece with a broad introduction of what follows in the article, stating that there is no one formula for writing and that various situations and audiences require different analyses and writing strategies. To this, Brianna remarks, "I'm totally thinking *The Da Vinci Code*... 'Cause it, um, kinda actually applies to what it's saying. 'Cause it's a different way to show something." Hesse next moves into a historical explanation for the classical roots of writing course, to which Brianna responds, "Now it's Plato. And Socrates, I guess. Since technically that's who actually said the stuff." Her next report, an opinion that all people need to learn to write well, is more centered on Hesse's trajectory, and from there Brianna follows Hesse's argument relatively closely for the remainder of her reading.

Brianna's initial reference to *The Da Vinci Code* seemed odd and random. This randomness probably has something do the strange circumstances of the verbal protocol. She has little contextual information going into the reading; the article is copied from a book, so it looks like any other copied article. She later admits that she's never encountered writing theory before. She has no close reference to Hesse's introductory paragraph, but somehow she connects it to a popular novel. Her next report responds to the names of classic rhetoricians; she thinks of Plato. By the third paragraph she's found her bearings and begins conversing with Hesse. *The Da Vinci Code* and Plato, then, serve as preliminary, if distant, triangulation points for Brianna as she finds her bearings within the text.

Another student, Alicia, approaches the text partly through her Self-Awareness as a Writer. The use of this resource is facilitated by the uncommonly large amount of experience she has in the past two years in writing-intensive courses. She took both English 101 and Literature classes concurrently at her high school and as a transfer student, was asked to also take a standard senior English course. She took these three courses the semester before the English 102 course she was currently enrolled in.

Her first response demonstrates her ability to quickly locate the context for the piece through her self-awareness: “So until the first little dot I was just kind of thinking about the way *I* study things when I go to write. And...how it’s true that you can’t really, there aren’t really...formulas for writing and making it work.” Here she picks up on one of Hesse’s key terms, “formula,” and affirms his basic premise through a description of her own process.

This affirmation of the ideas in the text continues throughout her reading of the chapter. For instance, six of her nine responses begin with some form of the words, “I agree.” Her strategy is to find agreement with what she reads and then illustrate her reasons for agreeing by using evidence from her own experiences both as a writer and as a student in a composition course.

These two brief profiles illustrate the interesting ways students rise to the challenge of making sense of academic work.

### **Classroom Implications**

As experienced readers, we look to a variety of things behind the typescript of a text to make meaning and build understanding in academic writing. Experienced readers

know a book by its cover, as well as by its diction, table of context, references to peer review, citation conventions, length and format, image use, and publication venue. In short, we know a lot about a text well before we actually sit down to read it. Our expectations are formed and our analysis of the discourse the text works within is in full function; these pre-reading techniques, most of which are done in routine or without intention, enable and support the thorough and anticipated reading of academic work.

Some composition instructors, myself included, ask our students to participate in this discourse by reading and responding to composition theory and pedagogy. However, it's not uncommon for us to deprive our students of the basic contextual clues that we, as seasoned academics, rely on to make sense of, for instance, the latest issue of *CCC* or *TETYC*. The text I gave the students who participated in my study is a good, and characteristic, example.

I photocopied Hesse's piece from *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, a 626 page anthology of composition pedagogy. The book is specifically geared towards an academic audience – working college composition instructors. The table of contents places Hesse's piece under the heading of "Contexts for Teaching Writing," sandwiched between a chapter about the experience of a Teaching Assistant and a chapter called "The Importance of Framing the Writing Classroom as a Space of Public Discourse." It is one of 90 chapters; the table of contents alone is seven pages long. The topics of these chapters range from practical concerns about how to build to syllabus or respond to students work, to more reflective pieces about the role and function of writing instruction in the University. Previewing the table of contents is something that most experienced readers would do before they begin reading, for



instance, a chapter from an academic anthology. This previewing yields a lot. So, when logistics compel us to photocopy readings, or send them to students as a pdf file, we deprive them of the significant and vital context that's represented in the physical characteristics of the publication. For example: I doubt that Brianna's mind would have jumped initially to *The Da Vinci* code had she seen, held, and previewed *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. It's more likely that, given the academic nature and appearance of the text, she would have recognized a discourse she was not a part of, what she calls "writing theory." This basic recognition might have helped her shape her understanding of the text in fully ways.

This problem of context is not limited to readings that are copied and distributed individually. There are numerous readers available and marketed to composition instructors that gather articles, essays, short stories, and variety of other types of texts and bind them in one uniform volume. For instance, the rhetoric/reader *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writings, and Readings* groups readings under five different categories and offers them as example of the composition moves that are discussed in the rhetoric. These readings are varied; there are articles taken from the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, as well as academic anthologies, articles published in online new magazines like Slate.com, and even blog posts from personal websites.

When republished in *They Say / I Say*, however, traces of these various origins are lost. Each reading looks exactly like the others. Even the few graphics included, which certainly vary in style and content, are all printed in pixilated gray tones.

The transformation that a text goes through when it's republished in an anthology is similar to the transformation that happens when a text is downloaded and read on an

electronic reader. It's increasingly common for people to choose the convenience of a reader or tablet over the comparative bulkiness of books, journals, and magazines; like my interviewees with their photocopied chapter, stripped of contextual clues, these people will need to find new ways to decipher the discourse they're participating in.

With this in mind, I think it's important for composition instructors, and especially those of us that rely on reading as a foundation element of the writing process, to do our best to provide our students with as much of this information as possible. This can start very simply with a focus on the importance of previewing a text and with modeling that process. It may also mean bringing a book like *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition* to class and encouraging students to carefully preview the book before they leave with their photocopied chapter. Or, with readings that have been published online, a simple link in an email could provide the content that certain published readers are forced to leave out.

Another way to help students locate the occasion for the texts they read is to simply tell them. Again, I think that the verbal reports I received from the students involved in my study may have been changed significantly had I taken the time to describe what Hesse's piece was and how it fit into the wider conversation of writing pedagogy and the field of Rhetoric and Composition. In the context of my study, this is insignificant. However, in our composition classrooms, it provides a way to help students succeed in the assignments we give them, and to navigate the world or academic discourse we invite them into.