

# Apprenticing in the Disciplines: A Sociocultural Model for Post-secondary Reading Instruction

Maureen Giblin

College students are good readers. They must be; how else could they have gained admission to our institutions of higher learning. Prospective students who cannot read are not able to get into colleges and universities: ACT and SAT requirements in the admissions process screen for reading competency. Additionally, university faculty give reading assignments with the full expectation that their students can pick up textbooks, or journal articles, or readers, and understand what is printed in them. However, those of us who teach composition and college reading courses know that this is not always true. Unfortunately, the materials and methodologies available to help college students understand their readings has altered little since Francis Robinson published his *Diagnostic and Remedial Techniques for Effective Study* in 1941. These materials and methodologies support the prevailing belief that reading is a decontextualized skill, one that students bring to college and that can be used in all activities. This belief is rooted so deeply in the culture of higher education, and reinforced by the reliance on student ACT and SAT scores in college ranking and admission policies, that reading instruction at the college level is still associated with remedial courses and mired in the methodologies of 50 years ago. Fortunately, recent work by scholars in the field of sociocultural literacy, informed by the work of Vygotsky, Heath, Street, Gee, and others, suggests a new direction for helping university students read effectively in the disciplines.

Our campus, as most state schools, serves the sons and daughters of state taxpayers who support the public university system. Our students come from a wide

range of social and economic backgrounds, so some are better prepared for the rigors of college academics than others. In addition to the campus learning center, which houses the writing lab and offers assistance with reading as well as composition, our university also offers, for those who choose to enroll, a course on college success. I taught this course, College Reading and Study Skills (Education 105), for several semesters. As I planned my curriculum for this course, I examined many texts and author-recommended strategies for preparing freshmen for college level reading and found that all the material available offered the same strategy. While methodologies in teaching reading at the pre-school and elementary level are grounded in research and frequently are an outgrowth of political imperatives (National Reading Panel, 1997), and adult literacy instruction focuses on economic or libratory issues (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1985; Apple, 1995), reading instruction at the secondary and post-secondary level has remained, in most cases, skill based and treated as a remedial problem: an outgrowth of poor schooling, or lack of experience and preparation, or insufficient motivation. The courses and materials available, while well intentioned, offer college readers unskilled in the disciplinary specific languages of textbooks a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding what they are reading.

### Current Models

The focus of developmental reading materials for college students currently available from major publishers falls into two categories: the skill-building model, and the immersion/metacognition model. The skill-building model is a system that takes the student step by step through a reading process. The immersion/metacognition model is a process that encourages the student to read literature and be meta-aware of what is

happening during the reading process. Neither of these models addresses the specificity of reading tasks required by academic and professional discourses. Both approaches rely on a developmental perspective, one that assumes that these college students operate from a reading deficit – that they cannot read with comprehension – even though the fact of their admission to institutions of higher learning assumes reading competency. A perusal of materials displayed by publishers at national conferences like Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) results in the following selections for the college study skills/developmental reading instructor: Harcourt Brace's, *Developing Reading Versatility* (1997); *College Decisions: A Practical Guide to Success in College* (1997), and *Handbook for Critical Reading* (1997), Houghton Mifflin's *The Thinker's Guide to College Success* (1999), and the Allyn and Bacon (Simon Schuster) book *Coping with College* (1995). These texts, and all other materials available for introductory reading courses, stress only one method for reading improvement, SQ3R.

SQ3R is a recommended reading strategy that is so ubiquitous that a *Google* web search produces close to 7,000 hits, all listing the buzz words of Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review. This method grew from pre-WWII work in scientific management (Stahl, 1986) and was published in the works of Francis P. Robinson, whose *Effective Reading* (1962) first thoroughly explained the method. Although years of research and mountains of academic papers since the 1960's have argued that reading must be about something, and isolated skill-building tasks do not make strong readers, the one-size fits all of SQ3R, or a modified approach to this method called SQ10R (Shaughnessy, 1994), or disguised as new by phrases such as "becoming an independent learner" (Hamachek,

1995), “active reading strategies” (Meagher, 1997), or “critical reading” (Chaffee, 1999), is the method most described for improving text-book reading ability. An examination of the skill building and immersion/metacognition models finds SQ3R still the base of their recommended reading strategies.

The immersion/metacognition model is represented by Harcourt Brace’s *An Introduction to Critical Reading*, (1997), Boynton/Cook, Heinemann in *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom* (1995), and Mayfield’s *Stepping Stones: Ways to Better Reading* (1993), all of which recommend immersion in the reading experience using literature, poetry, and essays. Macmillan’s *Powerful Reading, Efficient Learning* (1994) discusses SQ3R in the learning strategies section but emphasizes metacognition in the chapters on developing reading skills. Both the skill based and immersion/metacognition approaches promote the same methods that can be found in Walter Pauk’s *How to Study in College* (1962). The covers are glossier and the style, layout and terminology are more 90’s, but the advice is the same: instructional methodology for college students who have difficulty reading academic material has not changed in 40 years.

Current journal articles on the topic of reading instruction for at-risk college students offer suggestions for reading labs where students are encouraged to become involved with reading self-awareness and self-assessment (Maitland, 2000) or promote a methodology called Communicative Reading Strategies (CRS). These programs continue to operate from the assumption that post-secondary reading can be approached from a skill-building model. Proponents of the CRS approach to assisting “remedial” college readers argue that their program is based upon the work of Lev Vygotsky. Promoters of

this approach recommend that “facilitators” give information to the reader prior to reading the chapter (preparatory set), provide guided assistance during reading, mostly “parsing,” to help the reader understand the material within complex sentences, and then provide feedback (Martino, Norris & Hoffmann, 2001). This approach, a guided SQ3R, offers little different than what is found traditional reading/study skills material, and reflects a misunderstanding of Vygotsky. Throughout his work, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argues that human thought is dialogic in nature and teaching is a social activity: however, the directive tutorial methods recommended by the proponents of CRS do not create a truly dialogic forum for discussion of the text with which the student is struggling. All of the programs discussed rely mainly upon the student working alone with the text to make meaning.

### Mediated Reading

For the past several years, I also have been training peer tutors who assist struggling readers at the college level in our learning center, and the successful tutorials that I have observed seem to be pointing in the direction of a Vygotskian approach to facilitating reading as a mediated social practice, but not in the manner recommended by the proponents of CRS. Successful reading tutorials encourage readers to talk about their reading in a contextualized conversational atmosphere, engaging in the social practice that is deconstructing a topic, or subject, in order to reach a deeper level of understanding, and may have implications for dialogic approaches to classroom discussion.

The work of Lev Vygotsky is referenced in most current writing in the field of literacy studies, so it is not surprising that new reading instruction theory would grow from his work. Vygotsky was a theorist who was also, according to the translator and

editor of *Thought and Language* (1986), a man of practice who came from a behavioral approach to the understanding of learning. But Vygotsky moved away from the behaviorists as his research demonstrated that concept formation is creative, not mechanical and passive, and the presence of a condition favoring a mechanical linking of a word to an object does not produce a concept. This is the point that not only seems absent from recent writings on developmental college reading, but is also contrary to current approaches to post-secondary reading instruction. These current approaches heavily rely on skimming to get an idea of what the reading is about, identifying new vocabulary, and activation of prior knowledge in order to understand new material in academic readings, all SQ3R recommended strategies. As Scribner and Cole, editors of a collection of Vygotsky's writings published in *Mind in Society* (1978) write, Vygotsky presents a sophisticated argument demonstrating that language, the very means by which reflection and elaboration of experience takes place, is a highly personal and at the same time a profoundly social human process. This sociocultural approach is moving research in literacy studies away from the cognitivist models used in the past and argues that not only is literacy tied to and driven by social practice, but literacy practices are also deeply imbedded in culture and community (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee 1995, 2000, & 2001).

Vygotsky's theories on language and learning are a common thread running through published works in the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Street, 1984; Gee 1995, 2000, & 2001). Educators, linguists, philosophers and anthropologists who are writing in the area of NLS argue that the acquisition and use of various literacies are grounded in social practice and that the practice frames the event (Scribner and Cole,

1981; Heath, 1983). James Paul Gee (1995, 2000, & 2001) has written extensively on discourse communities, situated meaning and the need to apprentice working class and poor students into academic discourses. My work with peer tutors and learners over the past 15 years, most of whom come from low income and rural backgrounds, has confirmed that successful academic reading is a socially mediated practice in which college reading teachers and peer tutors introduce students to the conventions of academic disciplines. Instructors and peer tutors, using conversation about text and context in tutorial sessions, are successful in helping students develop a contextualized approach to reading in the disciplines.

### The Study

There is a long history of successful intervention by peer tutors in writing lab settings as they use pre-writing techniques such as brainstorming, free-writing, clustering, outlining, mapping, before any formal writing begins. This contextualizing time is when students are selecting a topic, narrowing it down, and formulating a preliminary thesis, working within Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (1978, 1986). It is generally accepted that students who have little or no experience in writing academic papers need direction in order to recognize the writing conventions of the discipline. The interaction in a writing lab or collaborative writing groups is a successful way in which to apprentice developing academic writers. However, this approach has not been explored as a method of helping students with academic reading. On our campus, because of the combination of two separate support programs, we in the tutoring center have been able to begin research in this area.

Over the past several semesters, as the result of combining two academic support programs on our campus, the content-area tutoring program and the reading/writing center, I have been placing students who are having serious problems with humanities courses with peer tutors. These students struggle, primarily because of the amount and difficulty of the reading required. The peer tutors have been trained in assisting students with academic writing and were getting their degrees in the field where the referred students were failing. As I monitored the program I began to see some successful pairings, ones in which learners raised their quiz and exam grades in psychology, history, and sociology, from failing to A's and B's. As I observed these tutorials it was clear that, even though the tutors had received instruction in the SQ3R method for helping developing college readers, the tutors instead were recruiting pre-writing strategies in their reading tutorials. At the end of a semester during which four students who came in for assistance on faculty recommendation because they were failing the courses completed the classes with A's and B's, I interviewed both tutors and learners. Using the results from interviews with one tutor/learner pair, Jonathan and Greg, I'll offer some examples of these conversational pre and post writing strategies in the reading tutorial interactions.

Both students in the tutorial pair that I will discuss are pre-service teachers. At the time of the interviews, Jonathan had completed his Education courses and was preparing to student teach the following semester. The learner in the pair, Greg, is at the beginning of his training as a future teacher and was recently admitted to the School of Education. Both students knew that I was interviewing them to gather information on what happened in the tutorial sessions: what elements of the tutorials were successful.

When Greg began meeting with Jonathan, he had failed a history class in a two-year college and had failed his first quiz of the semester in American History from the Civil War to the Present. Greg knew coming into the tutorial sessions that he had an extremely difficult time understanding his readings and gleaning material to study for tests. Greg and Jonathan met for one hour twice a week for the 12 weeks remaining in the semester. Greg's final grade was a B+.

When I interviewed Greg, the learner, he repeatedly stressed the conversational nature of the tutorial sessions with Jonathan: "It was conversational ...we would throw ideas back and forth...we strategize" (Personal interview, April 2001). At no time did Greg report that he and Jonathan skimmed the book, nor did he report that Jonathan had him read sections and quiz him on his understanding: the methods recommended in developmental reading texts. It is also interesting to note that Jonathan (the tutor) had not even read some of the course material: "It was hard to talk about the readings because he (tutor) hadn't done them so we connected the books and the reading I had to do with the lecture...we talked about the structure of the book and connected it with other information...[so] I knew what to anticipate." What Greg found most valuable was "the conversations making connections to the book." It is in these comments by Greg, the outsider to the discourse of historians, that we see Vygotsky's (1986) argument that concept formation comes as the result of the use of dialog in the solution of a problem. Additionally, we see a clear example of Gee's (2001) point that outsiders to a discourse must be apprenticed because learning a secondary discourse requires social mediation: language within the discourse of historians have situated meanings that are specific to the

actual context of their use. Within the context of Jonathan's conversations are the conventions of the study of history.

Jonathan, the tutor, who, unlike Greg, was aware of the strategies that he was using in the tutorial sessions, poses a clear analysis of Greg's dilemma: "Greg didn't understand the use of the textbook to guide [his] study" (Personal interview, May 2001). Jonathan goes on to say that, for Greg, the textbook was not a resource, but a mountain of data from which he had to glean facts to memorize. So Jonathan began working on concept formation, critical to understanding what his professor expected students to bring from their reading: "we looked at the chapter name and talked about what it encompasses...[then] I'd have him turn the main statement into a question...[and] we'd look at the headings as part of the answer to the initial question...[and] look through the reading to see what backed it up – finding people whose actions proved the statement." As suggested by Vygotsky's work, Jonathan posed problems for Greg to talk through: "We would talk about the cause and effect relationships in what we were finding." Jonathan was showing Greg how to think like an historian.

Jonathan described his method as talking through the chapter with the process of writing an essay exam answer, a composition process, as his model, and they engaged in this dialog **before** Greg had read the chapter, different from the activation of prior knowledge that SQ3R recommends. Greg would then take time, on his own, to do the readings. After a few sessions, Greg would come to the tutorials with the chapter already problematized and prepared to talk about issues that came from his reading. It is clear from Nathan's comments that he is employing the prewriting activities of brainstorming (what the chapter encompasses), replacing free-writing with discussion (free talking?),

encouraging the learner to develop a thesis, and then using the text as a resource for outlining (pose his question and then looking at what in the headings answer it). Greg, then, was accessing the text and making meaning in the same way that a writer composes text: developing his thesis by selecting data that enforces it, and gathering detail to support his points.

Both Greg and Jonathan report that the discussion methods that were used in the tutorial sessions increased Greg's speed and comprehension when he did actually read the text. Greg's success in this class was, in his words, a miracle. More surprising for me than Greg's success was the outcome of a second student whom Jonathan tutored a semester earlier. Lee is an Asian American non-traditional student who was having tremendous difficulty in her American History up to the Civil War class. Lee had the added problems of English being her second language and, having come to the United States as a young adult, no background in American History. She had withdrawn from this class twice prior to the semester when she met with Jonathan, but this time she had to complete and pass the course in order to apply to the School of Education. Lee met with Jonathan three hours a week all semester, and he used the same methodology with her as he did with Greg with one addition. Lee had to do more memorization of names and dates and facts as she had no background knowledge of colonial America; therefore, Jonathan helped her with time lines to supplement the concepts that she was acquiring. Conversation was critical to both Lee and Greg; however, the type of conversation differed as Lee's sessions also included direct instruction on the study strategy of developing time-lines. Lee, to her amazement, also passed this very difficult class with a

B+. During the interview Lee also stressed the conversational approach to the material, strategizing her reading, and making time lines as she and Jonathan discussed the text.

For both of Jonathan's learners, learning how to think like an historian was the key to understanding the textbook and supplemental readings. In subsequent interviews with tutor/learner pairs for other subjects it quickly became apparent that approaches to readings in sociology and psychology were different from the ones that Jonathan used for history. In psychology, the conversation emphasized examples and practical application of theories presented in the text, a diagnostic approach to concepts, and for sociology, the emphasis was on community and global perspectives. The discipline-specificity of reading strategies clearly showed that reading skills acquired for one subject do not automatically transfer to another, and the acquisition of the concepts that a student must acquire to be a successful reader in each discipline are best developed in a dialogic and problem solving social environment. As Jim Gee (2001) argues, reading instruction "must be rooted in the connections of texts to engagement in and simulations of actions, activities, and interactions – to real and imagined material and social worlds" (p.712).

### Conclusion

We are in the early stages of studying peer interactions in a reading tutorial environment and our sampling is small. The results for the students participating in these tutorials lead us to believe that the work of Gee and others in the New Literacy Studies, informed by Vygotsky's theories on language and learning, point us in a new direction when considering what should be done to help students be successful readers at the post-secondary level. For Gee (2001) students must develop a critical literacy. This literacy allows them to understand the social language, situated meaning, and cultural models

operating in the new discourse, as well as identify where the new discourse that they are seeking to acquire is positioned within larger discourses, the language of the discipline as well as that of the greater academic community. In addition to Gee, other researchers in the field of New Literacy Studies posit that academic success is intrinsically bound to understanding the language and ways of thinking within the discipline (Bourdieu, 1991; Street, 1984; Heath, 1984; & Bernstein, 1977). Colin Lankshear (1999) argues that people must be socialized into any practice in order to participate effectively in it, and it is within conversations not only about readings, but also about the larger context of the disciplines, that concept formation occurs. For colleges and universities that serve students who do not come from academically oriented home discourses, the social mediation that grows from conversation is critical to not only reading comprehension, but also to success in college.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Nathan Ugoretz and Jason Griepentrog for generously sharing their time, thoughts, and wisdom. Without their thoughtful reflections on how they teach, mediate, and learn, this small study would not have been possible.

## References

- Adams, W., & Patterson, B. (1997). *Developing reading versatility*. New York: Harcourt Brace College.
- Apple, M. (1995). *Education and power*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Barnwell, R., & McCraney, L. (1997). *An introduction to critical reading (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. New York: Harcourt Brace College.
- Berstein, B. (1996). *Class, codes, and control (2nd Ed.)* London: Routledge
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Chaffee, J. (1999). *The thinker's guide to college success*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children*. New York: The New Press.
- Freire, P. (1985). *Politics of education, culture, power, and liberation*. So. Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gee, J. P. (1995). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Taylor Francis.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Teenagers in new times: A new literacy studies perspective. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 23, 412-422.
- Gee, J. P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive approach. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 44, 714-726.
- Gerow, J., & Gerow, N. (1997). *College decisions: A practical guide to success in*

- college*. New York: Harcourt Brace College.
- Hamachek, A. (1995). *Coping with college: A guide for academic success*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Heath, S. (1984). *Way with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Henry, J. (1995). *If not now: Developmental readers in the college classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.
- Leo, E. (1994). *Powerful reading, efficient learning*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lankshear, C. (1999). Literacy studies in education: Disciplined developments in a post-disciplinary age. In M. Peters (Ed.) *After the disciplines*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press.
- Maitland, L. (2000). Self-regulation and metacognition in the reading lab. *Journal of developmental education*, 24, 26-36.
- Martino, M., Norris, J., & Hoffman, P. (2001). Reading comprehension instruction: Effects of two types. *Journal of developmental education*, 25, 2-12.
- Meagher, D. (1997). *Handbook for critical reading*. New York: Harcourt Brace College.
- McDermid, P. (1993). *Steppingstones: Ways to better reading*. Toronto: Mayfield.
- Paulk, W. (1974). *How to study in college*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Robinson, F. (1941). *Diagnostic and remedial techniques for effective studying*. New York: Harpers.
- Robinson, F. (1962). *Effective reading*. New York: Harpers.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Snow, C., Burns, M., & Griffin, P. (Eds). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Stahl, N & Henk, W. (1986). *Tracing the roots of textbook study systems: An extended historical perspective*. Atlanta: Georgia State University.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.