Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop
24 February 2001
For Rockford School District Participants in the
National Science Foundation Grant

Workshop facilitators: Susan Callahan, Michael Day, Brad Peters

In this workshop, we’ll:

- Observe the differences between reading & writing in our own & others’ subject areas.
- Compose a number of activities that enhance the connections between reading & writing.
- Discuss ideas about reading & writing activities with our colleagues.
- Work with resources that facilitate reading & writing skills on the Internet.
- Experience the principles of portfolio assessment by assembling mini-portfolios of our own.

Please be prepared to read and write together!

8-8:15—Arrival, distribution of materials, & getting into mixed subject-area groups. Overview of the day.

8:15-8:45—Greetings & exchange: introducing ourselves by celebrating a successful “teaching moment” of the week.

8:45-9:15—Approaching a challenging text.

9:15-10:00—Selecting & planning a reading-strategies exercise with a text that challenges students.

10:00-10:15—Break.

10:15-11:00—Designing & doing an exercise that strengthens the reading/writing connection.

11:00-11:45—Some portfolio assessment techniques for short writing assignments; assessing our own reading & writing activities.

11:45-Noon—Checkpoint: questions, answers, & trouble-shooting on classroom applications.

Noon-1:00—Lunch.

1:00-1:45—Interactive discussions about texts: designing an “open prompt” & getting conversational responses using technology.

1:45-2:30—Evaluating and using internet resources: website critique.

2:30-2:45—Break.

2:45-3:30—Assembling & assessing our portfolios: reflecting on our work & gathering others’ response.

3:30-3:50—A discussion about uses of technology: anticipating problems, voicing concerns, adapting to issues of access.

3:50-4:00—Workshop evaluation.
READING A CHALLENGING TEXT

We’ll start off today’s activities by examining our own reading processes as we work with a challenging text. Please choose one of the two excerpts below. When you’ve chosen and worked through your choice of text, write a couple of paragraphs in response to these questions:


This essay seeks to describe the state of the hermeneutical problem, such as I receive and perceive it, before offering my own contribution to the debate. In this preliminary discussion, I shall restrict myself to identifying not only the elements of a conviction, but the terms of an unresolved problem. For I wish to lead hermeneutical reflection to the point where it calls, by an internal *aporia*, for an important reorientation which will enable it to enter seriously into discussion with the sciences of the text, from semiology to exegesis.

I shall adopt the following working definition of hermeneutics: hermeneutics is the theory of operations of understanding, in their relation to the interpretation of texts. So the key idea will be the realization of a discourse as a text; and the elaboration of the categories of the text will be the concern of a subsequent study. The way will thereby be prepared for an attempt to resolve the central problem of hermeneutics presented at the end of this essay: namely the opposition, disastrous in my view, between explanation and understanding. The search for a complementarity between these two attitudes, which Romantic hermeneutics tends to dissociate, will thus express on the epistemological plane the hermeneutical reorientation demanded by the notion of the text.

1. From regional hermeneutics to general hermeneutics

The appraisal of hermeneutics which I propose converges towards the formulation of an *aporia*, which is the very *aporia* that has instigated my own research. The presentation which follows is therefore not neutral in the sense of being free from presuppositions. Indeed, hermeneutics itself puts us on guard against the illusion of neutrality.

I see the recent history of hermeneutics dominated by two preoccupations. The first tends progressively to enlarge the aim of hermeneutics, in such a way that all regional hermeneutics are incorporated into one general hermeneutics. But this movement of *deregionalisation* cannot be pressed to the end unless at the same time the properly *epistemological* concerns of hermeneutics—its efforts to achieve a scientific status—are subordinated to ontological preoccupations, whereby understanding ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being* and a way of relating to beings and to being. The movement of deregionalisation is thus accompanied by a movement of *radicalization*, by which hermeneutics becomes not only general but *fundamental*. Let us follow each of these movements in turn.

1. The first locus of interpretation

The first ‘locality’ which hermeneutics undertakes to lay bare is certainly language, and more particularly written language. It is important to grasp the contours of this locality, since my own enterprise could be seen as an attempt to ‘re-regionalise’ hermeneutics by means of the notion of the text. It is therefore important to be precise about why hermeneutics has a privileged relation to questions of language. We can begin, it seems to me, with a quite remarkable characteristic of natural languages, a characteristic which calls for a work of interpretation at the most elementary and banal level of conversation. This characteristic is polysemy, that is, the feature by which our words have more than one meaning when considered outside of their use in a determinate context. Here I shall not be concerned with the questions of economy that justify the recourse to a lexical code which presents such a singular characteristic. What is important for the present discussion is that polysemy of words calls forth its counterpart the selective role of contexts for determining the current value which words assume in a determinate message, addressed by a definite speaker to a hearer placed in a particular situation. Sensitivity to context is the necessary complement and ineluctable counterpart of polysemy. But the use of contexts involves, in turn, an activity of discernment which is exercised in the concrete exchange of messages between interlocutors, and which is not modeled on the interplay of question and answer. This
activity of discernment is properly called interpretation; it consists in recognizing which relatively univocal message the speaker has constructed on the polysemic basis of the common lexicon. To produce a relatively univocal discourse with polysemic words, and to identify this intention of univocality in the reception of messages: such is the first and most elementary work of interpretation.

Within this vast circle of exchanged messages, writing carves out a limited domain which Dilthey, to whom I shall return at length below, calls the expression of life fixed by writing. These expressions demand a specific work of interpretation, a work which stems precisely from the realization of discourse as a text. Let us say provisionally that with writing, the conditions of direct interpretation through the interplay of question and answer, hence through dialogue, are no longer fulfilled. Specific techniques are therefore required in order to raise the chain of written signs to discourse and to discern the message through the superimposed codifications peculiar to the realization of discourse as a text.
Reading a Challenging Text

Comprehension Questions for “First Choice” (Paul Ricoeur)

Once you have completed your reading assignment, answer the following comprehension questions:

1. Circle the letter before the word that best explains what is meant by *hermeneutics*:
   A. Hermeneutics is the response to an *aporia*
   B. Hermeneutics attempts to interpret ontology and epistemology.
   C. Hermeneutics seeks to unite polysemy and univocity
   D. Hermeneutics attempts to interpret the ineluctable interplay of polysemy and context.

2. Circle the letter before the word that most clearly expresses the meaning of *exegesis*:
   A. definition
   B. interpretation
   C. analysis
   D. discussion

3. Answer each of the following questions either T for true or F for false:
   ______ A. Hermeneutics has something to do with understanding written texts.
   ______ B. This article is a good introduction to reading theory.
   ______ C. This article was written for a reader who has already studied philosophy and rhetorical theory.

4. In your own words, can you briefly explain the hermeneutical problem as Ricoeur sees it? You do not have to write out this answer, but could you? Why or why not?
Reflective Questions

After you have answered the “comprehension” questions, answer the following questions about your reading experience.

1. How did you feel as you began reading this text?

2. Did your feelings change as you kept reading?

3. What made this a difficult text to read? (Think about specific elements of the text itself; think about personal emotional, physical, and cognitive elements that affected you as an individual reader; and think about the way the reading assignment was presented)

4. What reading strategies did you use to help you try to make sense of this text?

5. What could the instructor have done to make this reading experience more successful for you?

6. Teaching students to read difficult texts takes more time than just assigning the material and then using class discussion time to explain it. How might this fact affect the way you structure your classes?
### Strategies to Help Students Improve as Readers

Students often feel that reading is a passive activity. How can we get them to become more active readers?

- Explain how our own reading process varies with material & purpose.
- Show our own note-taking & responses to a passage.
- Demonstrate how we extract key words in texts & use dictionaries.
- Write “what it says” (topic sentence) & “what it does” statements (purpose/function) for paragraphs.
- Find & share supplemental materials related to class texts—use the Web or newspapers & magazines.
- Play the “believing & doubting” game with a text (what’s fact, what’s opinion?)
- Create reading guides (key questions to survey beforehand).
- Show how we diagram, draw, or outline ideas & relationships when we read.
- Model how we read and “say back” what we read in our own language.
- Read the 1st sentence of each paragraph on a page & predict what’s to come.

---

### Strengthening the Reading/Writing Connection

Writing about reading assignments helps students to create a “companion text.” Students see that a critical reader is a kind of author. We can invite students to experiment with a variety of companion texts:

- **“Talk-back” notes**: jotting down important points, confusing spots, places of disagreement as if talking to the author.
- **Reading logs**: making regular, free-choice responses that link personal experiences with the content of texts.
- **Focused reading notes**: tracking a key theme or concept in a flow chart or under column headings.
- **Summary/response notebooks**: dividing a page in half to summarize on one side and to comment on the other.
- **Interviews**: inventing questions & using a text to provide the “interview responses.”
- **Genre switching**: responding creatively to a traditional text format, e.g. the autobiography of a pancreas, a poem about an isosceles triangle.
- **Microthemes**: summarizing reading assignments concisely on note cards.
- **Translations**: writing a difficult passage in one’s own words, deliberately avoiding any language that the author uses.
- **Explications of visual aids**: interpreting the meaning of a graph, map, table, image, etc.—or designing a visual aid to clarify a particularly challenging textual passage.
- **Multiple-choice or short-essay questions**: turning in weekly questions on reading assignments that become part of an exam the next week.
- **Headline essays**: Collecting newspaper or magazine headlines on a topic (e.g. math in the news) and writing a short summary of how those headlines add up.
- **Visual to Verbal Mini-projects**: Putting together posters, power-point slides, or handouts that summarize a reading assignment. Students orally present, then write reflections on what they learned.

---

### Let’s do it: Reading Strategies

Look over excerpts on our green handout. Let’s list at least 3-4 ways that reading in our own subject area differs from other areas.

Next, we have two choices: 1) Choose a text from another subject area and “translate” it into the style of our own subject area, OR 2) rewrite the text that most resembles our own subject area and rewrite it in a style that resembles a very different subject area.

Reflect: what do our students experience?

---

### Let’s do it: Writing/Reading

Look again at the green handout. From suggestions above and in the left column, let’s choose one that we could apply to the excerpt that most closely resembles our subject areas.

1) Let’s write an assignment prompt for that text. 2) Then we’ll each exchange our prompt with someone else at our table (from another subject area) who will write a response to our prompt. 3) When everyone at our table finishes, each of us will describe the prompt and read our written responses.

---

Footnotes:

Interactive Discussions about Texts

Students learn from each other. Web boards, newsgroups, listservs, chat rooms, etc. facilitate principles of interactive learning enormously. But the same principles work well even when students record responses in group journals or write a conversation by passing a sheet of paper from one to the other. Students can use written discussions to:

- Write and share answers to questions we assign about a text.
- Raise their own questions about a text, make observations, and get others to respond.
- Share their drafts of a response to a reading assignment and get suggestions from classmates for revising.
- Come up with a group interpretation of a text.
- Exchange resources for purposes of group evaluation and research.
- Collaborate on solving a problem we assign them.

We’ll look at one electronic site for written discussions by going to <http://www.engl.niu.edu:88/~Writing_center>. This web board enables interaction for tutors-in-training at the Northern Illinois University Writing Center. If our Internet connection permits, we’ll experiment with written discussions ourselves. Let’s log on as a “New User” and click on the conference titled “Reading & Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop.” Click on the “PLEASE READ” prompt and follow instructions. They’re also found in the prompt below ▼

Let’s do it: Web-Talk

1) Let’s write an open-ended prompt that would encourage discussion and invite questions about a text that we use in our own subject area.

2) We’ll read other colleagues’ prompts and provide a response to theirs. Remember, we’re reading the prompt, considering the corresponding texts, and taking part in a conversation. We have to cross over to other subject areas.

Evaluating and Using Internet Resources

The World Wide Web has also been termed the “World Wide Wastebasket” because of the hastily crafted websites and opinion-based junk that anyone can post. How can we help students develop as critical readers of the Web?

Students more readily benefit from reading and using Internet sources if we help them generate their own criteria for evaluating websites. Generating criteria helps them to achieve ownership, so they will use the criteria more responsibly and consistently.

We’ll go to the following URL to develop criteria: <http://www.engl.niu.edu/mday/web/wmc.html>

Let’s do it: A Web-based Activity

Let’s locate, read, and write about a Web source that students could investigate in our subject area. We have handouts of websites for national organizations in our subject areas, if we want a place to start.

We’ll use the criteria we develop to write a short critique of the web page, touching on as many of the criteria as are relevant. Then we’ll use our evaluation to support a claim about whether the page would provide a good resource for a written project in our subject area. Please do not make a list; create a short argument of a paragraph or two.

Assembling and Assessing Our Portfolios

At the end of today’s workshop, we’ll have done 5 pieces of writing: our response to a challenging text, a reading-strategies activity, an assignment making the reading/writing connection, a written discussion, & a web-based activity.

Let’s each choose the 3 pieces we think best illustrate what we’ve gained from our work together. Then we’ll write a short cover letter explaining why we chose these 3 pieces. Include the following: What value have these 3 pieces had in helping us think about the kinds of reading & writing activities we want our students to do? How do these 3 pieces represent new or changed ideas we now have about the link between reading & writing? How do these 3 pieces reflect insights we’ve gained about other subject areas?

When we’ve each assembled our portfolios & placed the cover letters together with the 3 pieces, let’s each ask a colleagues to read & fill out the gray portfolio assessment form. Again, we all might get the most out of this exchange if we find colleagues from other subject areas to serve as our readers.
Evaluating Internet Sources
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource4.html>

Internet sources can be very timely and very useful, but they should not be your sole source of information because there are also books, journals, government publications, brochures, newspapers, etc. to read, and knowledgeable people to interview.

Evaluating Internet sources is particularly difficult because anyone can put up anything he or she wants to on the Internet. There is no way to monitor what’s there and no fact checking, though there are some site ratings you can check. See Hope Tillman’s "Evaluating Quality on the Net" (http://www.tiac.net/users/hope/findqual.html). Scroll down to the last part of her essay for a discussion of some sites that review and rate Web sites.

Be sure to document what you find on the Internet in such a way that others can locate what you found. This is most easily done when you accessed the data. Include the date you accessed the material since it can be changed or updated later on. Be sure to browse around on the Web site to be sure you know who the author is, what the sponsoring organization is, and so on so that you can cite the source fully and so that you can evaluate it properly before including it in your paper.

Authorship

--Is there an author or organization clearly indicated?

If there’s an author, go back to the questions listed above about authors and ask yourself how reputable this person is. Can the author be contacted? (If an e-mail address is given, you can contact that person or look up the address by using the "finger" command.)

--What can you find out about the author?

If there is no information on the site, use a search engine or search Usenet. You may find the author’s homepage or other documents which mention this person. Or look up the person on the Internet Directory of Published Writers (http://www.writers.net). If the person is associated with a university, look at the university Web site.

--If there is an organization sponsoring the page, what can you learn about the organization and who they are?

You can search the site by following links to its home page or going back to a previous level on the site by eliminating the last part of the address, after a “/” mark or a period. Another way to find the organization is to go to the View menu at the top of your Web browser and open the Document Information window where the owner of the document is listed.

Does the organization take responsibility for what’s on the site? Does it monitor or review what’s on the site? Look at the address for the site. Does it end in .edu, indicating that it’s an educational institution? If it has .gov, it should be fairly objective government-sponsored material. Addresses with .org are usually non-profit organizations that are advocacy groups. (The Sierra Club is an example of an advocacy group. Their postings will conform to their goals of environmental preservation. Information posted by advocacy groups may be accurate but not entirely objective.) If the site has a .com address, it’s most likely promoting or selling something.

Accuracy of information

--Is there documentation to indicate the source of the information? There may be a link to the original source of the information.

--Can you tell how well researched the information is?

--Are criteria for including information offered?

--Is there a bibliography or links to other useful sites? Has the author considered information on those sites or considered viewpoints represented there?

--Is the information current? When was it updated? (You can check at the bottom for a "last revised" date and/or notice if there are numerous dead links on the site.)

--Is there any indication of bias on the site?
--Does the site have any credentials such as being rated by a reputable rating group? If you see a high rating, is that because of the soundness of the content or the quality of the design? (An attractive page is not a reason for accepting its information as reliable.)

**Goals of the site**

--What is the purpose of the site? To provide information? Advertise? Persuade?

--Are the goals of the site clearly indicated?

--Who is the intended audience?

--Are there a lot of flash and color and gimmicks to attract attention? Is that masking a lack of sound information or a blatant attempt to get you to do or buy something?

**Access**

--How did you find the site? Were there links from reputable sites? From ads? If you found the site through a search engine, that means only that the site has the words in the topic you are researching prominently placed or used with great frequency. If you found the site by browsing through a subject directory, that may mean only that someone at that site registered it with that directory.
Some General Information about Portfolios

What elements are necessary for something to be called a “portfolio”?
1. Collection of diverse materials over time
2. Purposeful selection of illustrative items from the collection
3. Honest reflection (commentary on the work) by the portfolio creator

How can portfolios be used?
1. They can be used to show a student’s development over time. They can provide a system to encourage student reading, writing, and thinking. A learning portfolio does not have to be formally graded, but it may be graded if “effort” or “improvement” is part of a student’s overall grade. Criteria for evidence of hard work and progress are quite different from evidence of skill level or achievement, which can be demonstrated by showcase portfolios.
2. Learning portfolios can serve as a collection device from which students select work to develop into more formal pieces of writing.
3. Showcase or presentation portfolios are designed to present the student to the wider world. They should contain the students’ best work, work that has been carefully revised and polished. These portfolios are assessed and graded by the teacher (and sometimes by the student as well). Often such portfolios are also read and responded to by other students, parents, and, sometimes, administrators or other teachers.

What can portfolios do?
1. They can help students see their own progress.
2. They can help students take responsibility for their own learning by requiring them to reflect on the evidence in the portfolio and what it reveals about their participation in the class.
3. They can take the emphasis off grades and put the emphasis on good work habits.
4. They can give students the opportunity for regular practice of reading and writing in all classes.
5. They allow teachers to function as coaches and guides for most of the class.
6. They can help students learn how they learn by requiring evidence of reading and/or writing practice and metacognitive writing about these practices. (What have I done? How did I do it? What do I know that I didn’t know before? What can I do now that I couldn’t do before? What does this work mean to me or say about me?)
7. They can help teachers see where students need additional instruction and which kinds of learning activities are most useful for students.
8. They can allow the teacher to set higher standards.
9. They are flexible; teachers can ask students to create different kinds of portfolios in different classes for different purposes. They can evolve in response to classroom needs.
10. They provide “authentic” assessment—a way of seeing student achievement more completely than is possible by adding up test and paper grades. In fact, in many cases portfolios can replace tests.

How can portfolios be graded?
1. Rubrics can be as simple or complex as the teacher wishes, but each rubric should be created after the teacher has answered the following questions: What do I want my students to demonstrate? How will I recognize an exemplary response when I see it?
2. There is no one perfect rubric; the “best” rubric is the one that best fits the needs of a particular class or program.
3. Rubrics should be given to students when they begin assembling their portfolios so they will know exactly what is expected of them.
4. Students regularly should be shown models of good work, and the teacher should discuss these models with the class.