"You are asking me to do more than just read a book": Student Reading in a General Literature Course

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"[T]here are no honors college kids and there are no English majors in those classes…so you've already really reduced the identity of 'reader' in that class."

— A teacher of a general college literature course

In the 1970s, the College English Association Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum took up the task of reenvisioning literature studies in ways that work for all college students—English majors and non-majors alike. The committee argued that faculty should pay attention to students' interests and expectations in designing literature courses that will appeal to non-majors (Foulke

and Hartman 474-75). Prior to this conversation, little attention in English studies had been paid since the 1950s to the subject of teaching literature effectively to non-majors. At that time, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) formed a Committee on College English for Non-Major Students and surveyed students and teachers to gauge attitudes toward the learning and teaching of non-majors in composition and literature courses (Foster 387). Other scholars publishing in the field at the time explored the value of literature for non-majors as well (see Christensen; King; Robbins; Schutte and Steinberg). Little attention would be paid to the subject again until much more recently, with scholars such as Charles J. Nolan suggesting that non-majors' discussion of literature is effective when it is located within students' emotional responses to texts (8) and Richard C. Gebhardt drawing similarly on reader response theory in proposing how non-majors can effectively be taught literature.

In this article, we carry the conversation of how literature is taught to non-English majors a step further. As our epigraph indicates, working with non-majors in a course that demands a great deal of students as readers is quite different from working with students who are perhaps more drawn to the task of reading literature. Driven by the goal of learning about ways that non-majors read literature and ways that teachers facilitate such reading, we conducted a study of students' reading practices within a general literature course at a public, mid-sized American university. We identified the values that students and teachers perceive reading within the course to hold by studying writing in which students discuss their reading practices and conducting interviews with teachers of the course. Study findings indicate that both students and teachers find students to be most engaged in literature when given some autonomy to direct their reading choices and when prompted to identify the relevance of texts to their lived experiences; that a

literature course for non-majors offers opportunities for students to develop or reclaim reading habits; and that both students and teachers perceive such a course to offer students opportunities to learn transferrable reading and writing skills.

Study Design

We collected student and teacher data related to the general literature course during a two-year period. All steps of data collection were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the study site, at which the course in question is a general education requirement for undergraduates. We interviewed six teachers, all of whom were either teaching sections of the course or had taught the course recently. Teacher participants were identified via purposeful, "snowball" sampling (Mertens 322); we began by interviewing one teacher, asking that teacher to identify other potential participants, then asking subsequent participants to identify additional teachers interested in the conversation at hand. In interviews, our aim was to understand teachers' individual approaches to the course, including their course structure, their methods of discussing or modeling reading, and their goals for students' reading in the course. Five of the six interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded, and the sixth was conducted via e-mail per the participant's preference.

We asked teacher participants to identify writing assignments that would enable us to understand students' ways of reading within the course. One teacher did not teach the course during the time we collected data, but we considered this individual's perspective to be valuable and chose to include it within the teacher data set. Among the assignments the remaining five

teachers identified, one asks students to discuss the work of a particular author; one to give advice about reading to future students of the course; two to design an assignment for the course, discussing what texts should be taught and how students should work with these texts; and three to reflect on their learning in the course, including what they read and what they learned from it.

We made announcements within teachers' courses to explain the nature of the study and to ask students to consider sharing their writing with us, and, as a result, we received student writing from four teachers' classes. In one teacher's classes, no students elected to share their writing for reasons unknown to us. In cases where teachers had identified more than one writing assignment related to the study, we collected multiple assignments from individual students. In total, we collected 246 pieces of student writing representing 148 unique students and seven different writing assignments.

We began our data analysis by conducting a pilot study of a small sample of student writing from one teacher's classes. In this pilot study, data was analyzed according to Mark A. Pike's six modes of reader response (65) and an additional type of response—reflexive reading—that we identified in this section of the data. Using our pilot data as a starting point, we read samples of student and teacher data recursively, then identified themes present across the entire data set and developed a coding scheme of ten categories to represent students' and teachers' ways of talking about reading (see table 1). Categories labeled *Ways of reading* were used to analyze what students and teachers pay attention to and value when they read, and categories labeled *Roles of reading* helped us categorize other notable ways that both groups discuss reading, by discussing their personal reading habits and those of others and by forwarding opinions on the role that literature should serve within a college curriculum.

In the coding process, we used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code student writing samples and transcripts of teacher interviews. We did not use a set t-unit for coding data and coded segments of student text or interviews that varied in length, such as a few words, a sentence, or a group of sentences. Additionally, we did not code all of the text available in each data sample but only coded that which was relevant to the aims of the study. Among the 246 student samples, thirty did not demonstrate evidence of the ten coding categories; text segments within 216 samples were coded as a result. Text segments from all six teacher interviews were coded. Following the coding of the entire body of data, one author of this study, who was not involved in the initial coding, re-coded 10% of the data set, resulting in 82% inter-coder reliability.

Student and Teacher Values in Reading

Analyzing students' perspectives in conjunction with those of teachers enables us to identify commonalities that exist among both groups' values when it comes to reading. As Table 1 shows, the ways of reading students discuss most frequently were reading for knowledge acquisition, entertainment, or exposure to new people, places, or issues. Our teacher participants have less to say on these topics. While students speak frequently of what Louise Rosenblatt calls efferent gains of reading literary texts, or reading for information-gathering purposes (269), none of the six teachers mention this as a goal or byproduct of reading in the course. And, while many student writing samples make some mention of reading to be entertained—this category arises 130 times across the student data set—mention of reading for entertainment purposes is only

made three times, in total, by two teachers. Whereas students most frequently touch on acquiring knowledge and being entertained as the byproducts they value in reading literature, teachers most frequently comment on promoting students' attention to literary elements within a text and exposing students to new people, places, or ideas through reading as the primary values of reading literature in the course.

Table 1: Frequency of coding categories across student writing samples and teacher interviews.

Category	Definition	Student samples coded (of 216 total)	Student sample segments coded	Teacher interviews coded (of 6 total)	Teacher interview segments coded
Ways of reading					
Acquiring knowledge	Acquiring knowledge or gaining information from a text.	94	134	0	0
Analyzing	Analyzing a text's meaning, including asking questions of a text.	42	56	1	6
Emotional response	Experiencing an emotional response when reading.	55	74	1	1
Entertainment	Being entertained by a text, including reading to escape reality or to relax.	85	130	2	3

Exposure	Being exposed to new things by reading, including to new ideas, places, and cultural or social issues.	83	125	4	10
Literary elements	Attending to literary elements while reading, including plot, characters, themes, and symbols.	47	72	5	20
Message	Taking a message from a text, including learning a lesson or values.	63	108	1	3
Relating	Relating to some aspect of a text, including connecting a text to own experiences.	49	80	3	10
Roles of reading					
Reading habits	Discussion of own or another's reading habits, including self-identification as a reader or non-reader and discussion of connections between reading and writing.	116	277	6	35

Reading in education	Discussion of the role of reading literature in education.	42	61	6	54

Taken in aggregate, these results may seem to depict vast differences between the values that students and teachers place on reading literature. However, attention to the ways each group describes student reading reveals a point of commonality. Both groups place value on giving students some freedom to choose the literary texts they read, and both make connections between this freedom and students' ability to perceive value in the reading they do.

Students speak frequently of their preference to read about subjects they already find to be interesting: for forty-nine students, this value lies in the ability to relate to what they read. One student writes that prior to the course, he or she "did not like reading" and explains, "I was reading the wrong kind of books and was judging books and reading only on the material that I have had to read in the past for school that were never appealing to *me*".[1] Another student writes, "I know that I was not interested in reading until the summer after I graduated high school, because in high school I was forced to read books that I wasn't interested in. When I chose [a] book that I found interesting it was much easier to focus and I learned a lot more from the book." In contrast, students who speak about enjoying or being engaged in what they read often connect these experiences to their being able to read texts they consider to be interesting or to which they can relate.

In many ways, these statements are obvious, as most readers are drawn to texts focused on their existing interest areas. Yet the types of texts students identify as interesting to them go

beyond those we may suspect. Comments coded for *Reading in education* show that students identify values beyond entertainment in discussing literary texts they read. Students cite Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as texts that left a lasting impact on them and texts they would choose for other students to read.

One student comments on T. C. Boyle's short story "The Love of My Life" by writing, "The story illustrated decisions and consequences that are imperative to a young adult's life and opens the floor for discussion without biases which can profoundly help someone that could be in the same situation as the characters in the story." For many traditionally aged college students, the characters in Boyle's story are likely familiar: two high schoolers in love, a girl and a boy ensconced in a feverish physical and emotional relationship as they get ready to go off to college. Readers may relate to the young couple telling each other "a hundred times a day … 'I love you. I love you'" or to the girl studying at all hours to compete for a higher GPA and the boy saying, "You'll only be a high-school senior once in your life. Relax. Enjoy it." Ronald LaConte suggests that to help students see the relevance of literature to their lives, teachers can position texts as a record of humans' analysis of life experience, a perspective he argues can foster students' analysis of their own life experiences (128-30). When Boyle's characters leave each other for separate colleges, then meet halfway between their schools to spend the night together in a motel room, student readers may call to mind their own relationships. In the same way that the defamiliarization in literature allows readers to see ordinary experiences in new ways (Shklovsky 12-13), LaConte argues that literature presents an analysis of ordinary experiences that can offer readers some "shock of recognition" upon seeing their own experiences discussed

on the page (126). We imagine a "shock of recognition" may come in stages for a young reader of Boyle's text. Each step of the story may narrow the number of readers who have shared these experiences—when the girl finds out she is pregnant, when she wears baggy clothes to hide her growing shape, when the boy tells her, "Go to a clinic … I'll find the money"—yet student readers may still relate to the possibilities, even if they themselves have not been in the same situation.

Several other students talk about what they read in a similar manner by identifying the lessons they derive from certain texts. One student cites Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* as a book that "taught me a lot about life and how to live life to the fullest." Another references Emily Giffin's *Something Borrowed,* writing, "Although this was an entertaining book it did give me a lot to think about in terms of what it means to be a good friend." A third student reflects that upon reading Barbie Bohrman's teen romance *Promise Me,* "I realized like the main character … I tried to avoid things that I didn't want to deal with by making myself 'too' busy to deal with them. … Like Alex, I was scared that I would make the wrong decision or scared to face what ever it was. It's such a weird feeling when you realize something like this for the first time." These perspectives highlight a sort of educational awakening in which an individual comes to college believing he or she does not like required reading, only to discover, within the boundaries of a required course, ways to become interested in and even relate to literature. Identifying any potential causal links between students' realizations along these lines and particular texts or particular teachers' approaches is beyond the scope of our study. Rather, our positioning of student and teacher perspectives within the same conversation allows us insight into each group's

views on student reading and how what may appear at first to be disparate perspectives in fact have a great deal in common with one another.

Teachers, too, say they recognize that students perceive more value in the course when they have some freedom to choose their readings, yet teachers do not equate autonomy with a free-for-all in choosing texts to read. The teachers who allow for such autonomy do so within reason by guiding students to choose texts that align with particular reading goals for the course, such as reading authors of different genders, cultural orientations, or time periods. One teacher describes starting the semester with common readings so the class can develop "a common working vocabulary" for discussing literature while reading the same texts.[2] Then, roughly one-third into the semester, the teacher starts to allow small groups of students to choose their own texts to read and discuss. This teacher says that when students reach the point in the semester where they are given the chance to choose their own texts, "that's when [they] really love what they're doing." Another teacher takes a similar approach: "[W]hen I design assignments, I try to give students options about the literature they would like to choose. I give some guidance about authors, but many times students will not follow that guidance and will come up with authors they prefer, and I don't penalize students for this. Secretly, I am happy they are finding authors they consider more worthy than the ones I suggest." This teacher prefers for students' encounters with literature in the course to emerge from their own directives to connect with texts they deem meaningful or important in some way.

Our data show that students share this value of setting some parameters when choosing texts. One student writes, "I understand that there are certain influential authors that should be recognized in a classroom and credited for all of the wonderful things that their work did, but I

think that kids should be able to choose works from these authors that interests them." This student's position represents a middle ground between standards—or expectations of what a literature course will cover—and students' own interests, achieved by having teachers assign authors and allowing students to choose from among those authors' works. Louis T. Milic addresses this middle ground, arguing for more student-centered literature classrooms. He writes that students who bring knowledge of their own preferred reading genres to a literature class are often unable to relate to older literary texts. Milic suggests starting a course with contemporary texts written in modern prose that students will connect with, then working backward into historical texts in order to introduce students to a wider range of literature (218-19). Similarly, one teacher we spoke with guides students into older texts by pairing them with their contemporary film reworkings, such as *10 Things I Hate About You* and *The Taming of the Shrew* or *O* and *Othello*. This same teacher directs students to read texts based on pairings with their own preferred reading choices outside of class: "If they pick a Nicholas Sparks book, I try to push them towards some Victorian literature," the teacher explains. The teacher adds that students who read James Patterson on their own time are directed to Edgar Allan Poe's tales, *The Red Badge of Courage*, or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Teaching a large class of students who are all reading different texts does present logistic challenges. The teachers who allow students some freedom in choosing what to read explain that they overcome the challenge of not always having whole classes of students reading the same texts by relying on small-group interaction among students. In some teachers' classes, a small group of students chooses a text to read, discusses it within the group, and then presents their

work to the class. In other teachers' classes, individual students read their own texts, then give presentations on those texts to small peer groups.

Creating Life-Long Readers

Along with teachers' and students' shared desire to engage students in literature by allowing for some choice in choosing texts, both groups place value on being "readers," or developing a habit of reading that extends beyond the course. Comments in both student writing and teacher interviews touch on students' past experiences with reading and the fact that not all students come to the course positioning themselves as readers by choice. We can attribute this reality, in part, to the non-English major demographic in the general literature course. As the teacher we quote in our epigraph explains:

> [T]here are no honors college kids and there are no English majors in those classes, and those are two major reading populations, so you've already really reduced the identity of 'reader' in that class. … [T]here are students in there who definitely love reading, but, I just read a [student] paper … in which someone said, you know, you really should teach *The Road* more often, it was the first book I've ever read.

At the university where this course is taught, the course fulfills a general education requirement for undergraduates who are required to take a literature course within the humanities. English majors, though, fulfill this requirement by taking a different course, one geared toward them specifically. The same is true of Honors College students. An examination of the course

description for the general literature course in comparison with that of the course that English majors take to fulfill the same requirement shows that the former places emphasis on introducing students to and facilitating their analysis of a range of literary texts, while the latter places a heavier emphasis on analysis and on students' understanding of critical interpretations of texts within the discipline of English studies.[3] When read together, these course descriptions imply that non-English majors need to be introduced to literary texts prior to learning college-level literary analysis, while English majors do not need such an introduction. Our teacher interviews support this implication, as evident in the teacher we quote here, who juxtaposes non-English major students against "two major reading populations" he or she has encountered at the university, English majors and Honors College students.

Other teachers also say that teaching specifically to non-English majors presents a challenge: the teacher must convey to some students the value of reading literature in the first place before a deeper conversation about literary texts can occur. As with the teacher who had a student cite *The Road* as the first book he or she had read, another teacher notes that students' identification as non-readers in the course is common. This teacher explains, "[I]f you ask students at the beginning of the term how many of them have read a book before, very few will raise their hand, and if you ask them how many hate reading, a bunch of them will raise their hand. [If] you ask them how many of them got through English class without reading anything that was assigned, again, a pretty fair number will raise their hand." The teacher notes that he or she has determined that "continuing to force down their throat stuff that they'd already experienced wasn't very useful. … You're just repeating their prior experience, you're not really helping them to take a different look at things that they've been doing." These teacher comments

do not suggest that all students in the course are non-readers or that all students have had past experiences in school that have turned them off to reading literature. In fact, we hear from a few students in the data set who call themselves readers—a few write things like "I have always been an avid reader" and "Ever since I was a little girl, I have enjoyed reading," indicating that the label "reader" has always applied to them. Yet these student voices do not occur as frequently in the data set as those from students who say they have resisted reading in the past.

Among the 116 students whose writing was coded for *Reading habits*—those students who mention their own or another's reading habits, including self-identification as a reader or non-reader and discussion of connections between reading and writing—eight students called themselves readers, while twenty-three characterized themselves as non-readers, or as having been non-readers prior to the course. From this latter group of students, we read comments such as "Before this class, I never read many books or put much effort into finding the right one" and "I used to loathe reading, partially because I didn't have the patience and partially because I didn't have the time." Students use verbs like "required" and "forced" in describing their past struggles to read what they were expected to for school. One student who discusses the subject in general without giving him or herself a label writes, "People who hate reading were probably forced to read terrible books throughout school." Another writes that prior to taking the literature course, "I believed that the world was made up of two types of people; those who like to read, and those who don't like to read. Although I knew many people who enjoyed reading, I was not one of them." These students describe such experiences in the past tense, with many explaining that the course caused them to change their view of themselves as non-readers. A pattern emerges among these students' writing samples, in which students say they read only what they had to

prior to the course, then found, in the course, that they wanted to read. One student writes, "This semester, I decided it was time to learn to enjoy reading and I did!" Another notes, "I personally feel that after taking this class it has made me want to read literature." Most who comment on this topic say they are readers *now*, as a result of the course.

When teachers discuss the challenge of teaching non-majors, many of whom are self-described non-readers, two teachers say they approach the challenge by showing students the value of reading and of cultivating reading habits outside of school contexts. As one teacher notes, his or her goal for the course is students' "getting outside of themselves, looking at what's going on in what they're reading and understanding that there's a relationship between the world, themselves, and the novel that they read." This teacher wants students to learn "that there's a bigger world out there." He or she describes having students read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. The teacher says that in class "some women respond to it by saying, She's a horrible mother, how could she abandon her children?" Others, the teacher says, "begin to see the feminist issues that emerge in it … and I think that's a reflection of the sophistication of their reading." In this and other texts, the teacher says he or she wants to prompt students to think about questions that arise in literature, how they may respond, and how a larger historical or societal context might shape a particular character's response.

We hear in these approaches that the teachers we spoke with value students' perspectives on what they read, a stance Lois P. Tucker calls liberatory. She writes that giving students some autonomy in directing their reading and "encourag[ing] their own literary interpretation" creates a general literature course in which students "invest more of themselves in the process." Tucker adds, "They leave the class remembering the stances they passionately defended and the

perspectives they accepted from their colleagues. The literary experience emerges as a more memorable one for them." Our teacher participants share similar hopes for promoting lifelong reading habits within the course. Teachers say:

- "I hope they will be exposed to many different authors and genres and that they can find some pleasure in reading that will continue after college."
- "[T]he approach I use … encourage[s] students to be lifelong readers rather than to necessarily force them to read works of literature that may not interest them."
- "[F]or me [reading is about] the intersections of one's own identity and culture and how literature is a space where that comes together. I want students to see that as not a dead thing that they have to find symbols in but something that is living."

These teachers share students' desire to connect with what they read in some way, but the means of connection they refer to go beyond, say, connecting student readers to entertaining texts. The teachers we spoke with touch on ways that reading literature takes students outside of themselves to be exposed to, or even come to understand, ideas and ways of living beyond their own.

One teacher asks students to "think of someone in your family who's a scapegoat, who everyone blames for all the problems in the family" and connects this discussion to *A Raisin in the Sun*; this teacher lets students know that they are not expected to understand literature on a first pass. Instead, the teacher encourages students to either find ways to connect to what they read or to recognize value in a text without connecting to it. This teacher explains:

> My example is always *Moby Dick*, which I've read three times. I think it's an amazing book. I don't particularly like it. And three times later, I still can totally appreciate how interesting it is, and I don't connect to it. … I really kind of

> emphasize to them that connecting is important and find what you can to connect but you can also recognize what something's doing and not have lived that experience.

This teacher's comments, taken in combination with those that speak to exposing students to reading habits and new ideas through texts, present an approach to literature grounded in who students are as individuals not necessarily predisposed to read for pleasure.

Student comments indicate that their teachers' aims of creating reading habits are taking effect. Along with those students who say the course has caused them to be readers, a number of students say the course caused them to develop reading habits they perceive as lasting. One student notes, "I'm finished with all my reading [for the course], but now I still read every night" and another writes, "I cannot wait for the summer so that I can read this book." Yet another student explains that as a result of reading in the course, students will "get to appreciate reading in a better light." He or she continues, "I know for me personally, I wanted to get into reading again after awhile of being too busy and the class kind of forces you to get into a habit of reading." Perhaps the most positive response in light of the reading habits teachers say they hope to cultivate comes from the student who writes:

> This class also brought up an experience in my life that has never happened. One day I was just sitting in my apartment watching television. There were some interesting shows on, but something in my head was telling me that I was bored. Then I was thinking I'm bored watching television, I would rather read my book. Until this class I never really found enjoyment in reading books. Now that I have found enjoyment in it, I plan to continue reading as much as possible.

A small victory—a book wins over television!—but perhaps a significant one for the teacher who hopes students will come to love reading through the course. In its grandest sense, teachers' work of fostering reading habits may lead students toward important, critical discoveries about themselves or the world through literature or even toward further academic study of texts. In a simpler sense, teachers are reminding students of the wealth of knowledge and experiences texts afford to even casual readers—a worthwhile aim. The reading habits students describe are a starting point: students see themselves discovering or reclaiming an affinity for reading that will carry beyond the course, and teachers hope to link this habit of reading to discovery of the world through its texts.

Transferrable Skills and the Reading-Writing Connection

A number of students say they value autonomy in choosing texts in the course, and a number also say the course led them to value reading in general—to develop reading habits they will continue to exercise after the course ends. Some students also identify benefits of the course specific to their academic careers. It is interesting to note here that the course in question is a general literature course and has no explicit writing designation. Teachers of the course are tasked with covering texts that match certain criteria—interviewees explain that they are expected to have students read a historical and cultural range of literature—and with fostering students' critical understanding of literature, including understanding the use of language within a text and the position of the text within its historical and cultural context. Yet the teachers we spoke with also choose to foreground writing as an important element in the course. Most of the

writing assignments students shared with us were two or three typed, double-spaced pages in length; students in the course sections we studied were being asked to write often and in small doses about what they read. Also of note: Each section of the course is capped at forty-five students, and it was common for the teachers we interviewed to teach multiple sections of the course in a given semester. The extent of student writing produced indicates that teachers place a value on writing within the course. Furthermore, the study data indicate that students perceive the value of composing this writing within the context of the course.

Many students highlight the fact that writing about what they read enhances the reading they do, including by prompting them to engage with what they read more deeply than they would otherwise. Gebhardt addresses the connections between reading and writing that emerge in student writing here. He suggests that writing-to-learn approaches can be utilized in the classroom to make literature studies more accessible to non-English majors, and our data support this argument. One student writes, "If I did not have to keep a journal throughout this class, I would have a completely different view of everything I've read this semester. By asking me to keep this journal, you are asking me to do more than just read a book. You are asking me to analyze the book I read, and apply it to something in my life." This student argues that being required to write in conjunction with reading literature led him or her to develop new ideas about reading assignments by analyzing or connecting literature to his or her life experiences.

Another student wrote a compelling reflection on how writing helped in the process of sorting out his or her reactions to texts. The student explains how he or she wrote in a journal in conjunction with reading *Night, A Child Called "It," Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, Angela's Ashes,* and *A Time to Kill.* The student writes that in some cases, "I could truly discover

and appreciate the meaning of the book because I did more than just read the book, I reflected back on the emotions I encountered while reading." In other cases, the journal was a space for the student to sort out his or her own position in relation to events in the text. The student continues, writing that the journal "allowed me to discover parts of myself that were hidden … values, morals, and beliefs were unveiled through writing in my journal. I could separate my thoughts and feelings, and decide what I believed to be correct, fair, and true. I also clarified beliefs and values that I was struggling with through writing my feelings and thoughts in my journal." This student's comments highlight the value of journaling or other types of reflective writing in helping readers sort out the ideas they encounter in literature. As LaConte notes, students will often come to see how literature is relevant to their lives when they perceive texts as a catalyst to self-analysis (128-30), be that analysis of one's experiences or of one's "values, morals, and beliefs," as we hear from this student.

The student data reveal that students recognize the development of some of these skills, specifically in relation to their development as writers. Many students who write about reading practices within the course comment on the connection between reading and writing. One writes, "The more books I read, I gain different kinds of ideas expressing my way of writing" and another writes, "[K]eeping a journal th[r]ough out this semester is what made me really think about the literature and what I was reading and question what I was reading." While some students lament the amount they are asked to write in connection with what they read, many others comment on ways that writing enhances their reading. Also, several who reflected on how future students should work with texts in the course share strategies they devised specifically for writing about literature, such as journaling about questions they have or emotions they

experience while reading. The connection between reading literature and the development of writing skills is one area in which students perceive the benefit of a general literature course to their development of overall academic abilities.

For teachers, the reading and writing that occur in the course have benefits beyond the course itself. Several of the teachers we spoke with say they promote students' awareness of how the literacy abilities they develop in the course will carry into other settings. One teacher stresses communication skills as an aspect of learning in the course that he or she makes students aware of: "[A]nytime I teach that class, I'm definitely advertising … by the time you're done with this class, you're going to be a better reader, for sure. You are going to be a better speaker, no doubt about it. You are going to be a better writer, for sure." This teacher explains that such skills can be developed in a variety of courses, but that developing these skills is a positive byproduct of the general literature course that students recognize as valuable within their overall education. The teacher argues that making students aware of how they are developing as communicators within the course can help them understand why the course is a general education requirement.

Other teachers comment on reading in particular—they prompt students to see that the ability to read carefully and critically will be required of them again and again, in both academic and work settings. One teacher connects students' development of reading habits to their later learning in college, explaining, "I'm trying to work toward some explicit connections between what you can take from this course and use in other courses now as a lover of reading. I hope they can find a way to enjoy something also, but at the very least I want them to be able to realize that there are strategies that readers use, not just in lit classes." One strategy the teacher uses to "make the reading accessible" is "to do something before we read [a text] to activate

prior knowledge." For example, the teacher assigns students to watch a news clip related to the plane crash that Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief" addresses. The teacher explains that doing so prompts students to engage with the wider context of this story before reading and shows students that they can make unfamiliar texts more familiar by learning a bit about their context first, a strategy students can draw on in a range of other classes. This teacher says that many students enter the general literature course unaware of how it connects to their overall college education, so he or she guides students to connect their reading practices within the course to reading practices common in the disciplines in which they are majoring.

This same teacher notes that he or she takes strides to promote critical inquiry within students' reading practices. This aim is supported by Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd's stance on student reading; the authors argue that teachers have a responsibility to promote students' critical reading of texts in order to foster student development of critical inquiry habits overall (53-54). This particular teacher does so by assigning students to conduct interviews of professionals working or teaching in their major area of study and to question these individuals about how they read in their professions. The teacher explains that the goal of this interview assignment is for students to learn "about the reading that's expected in that field and the skills that are required in that field. … [For example,] you have to read journals, but then what do you do with the information?" This teacher says that many of the practices students engage in in a literature course—such as synthesizing ideas from multiple texts—are common to the reading that occurs in most professional disciplines, yet students are not necessarily aware of these commonalities. By talking with professionals, the teacher explains, students can broaden their understanding of reading beyond the literature in the course to understand how academic

reading abilities are applied in situations on the job. As part of this assignment, the teacher groups students by major to share their findings and write about the role of reading in their intended professions.

Another teacher also notes the benefit that reading skills developed in the course can have beyond the course itself, explaining that students can develop critical thinking skills in connection with reading literature. This teacher argues that literature allows readers to "think about the world, to think about our relationship to it and through that thinking [to] recogniz[e] the complexities, insufficiencies, possibilities, [and] limits" of the manner in which ideas are represented in a text. The teacher further explains that "literature is able to … capture complexity [and enable readers to] think of mutual opposites, think through paradox, [and] not be paralyzed by paradox." In discussing approaches to reading within the course, this teacher shares concern that some pedagogies espoused when teaching non-majors fall short in attempting to "meet students where they are." As Cynthia Lewis writes, in attempting to make literature easily accessible to readers, teachers may emphasize readers' personal reactions to a text at the expense of other, more critical responses (255). The teacher we spoke with prompts all students, regardless of their intention to pursue further literary study, to recognize the ideological context of a text, following Lewis's suggestion that reading discussions be expanded beyond readers' individual responses "to include the text as social and political construct" (261). The teacher notes that he or she accomplishes this in part by having students ask "critical questions" of the texts they read, then promoting the habit of asking such questions so students might carry this habit into reading other literary and non-literary texts.

A Proposal for Engaging Non-Majors in Reading Literature

Teachers tasked with teaching a literature course for non-majors—particularly one with a high course cap as that described here—face the challenges we hear from our teacher interviewees. Some students may come to the course without perceiving reading, or reading literature, as a preferred or frequent activity in their lives. Some students may find older or traditionally canonized texts difficult to relate to. Drawing on our interviews with teachers and the writing we received from students, we propose the following guidelines for teaching such a course.

1. Encourage student autonomy in selecting some readings, and provide transparent boundaries for this autonomy. As we see in the study data, students value being given agency to direct their reading according to their existing interests and perceived relatability of texts. We suggest starting a course with common texts and then giving students, either individually or in small groups, a list of approved texts to select from with brief annotations for each. When possible, talk with students about their reading interests and help them identify connections between these interests and available reading choices.
2. Facilitate students' critical thinking about what they read. As one teacher notes, conversations about gearing literary study to non-majors run the risk of watering down literary pedagogy. Our data from both teacher and student participants remind us to maintain high standards in asking students to wrestle with the complex historical and cultural contexts of the literature they read.

3. Promote students' awareness of transfer through reflective writing. We support having students write often in a general literature course; such writing can be low-stakes and need not be evaluated. One teacher we spoke with assigns students to write one hundred pages in a reading journal during the course of the semester, and he or she periodically collects journals to check on students' progress. Teachers can guide students to write about what they have learned from their reading and writing in the course and how they can apply that learning to reading or writing assignments in other courses.

We remind teachers, finally, to be encouraged by the student voices contained in this study. While many students do see themselves as non-readers, many say the general literature course changed their minds. We hear in these comments the potential for students pursuing any college degree to be transformed by literary study, and we encourage teachers to continue the conversation of how we can best educate non-English majors in a literature course.

Notes

[1] All examples from student data are presented as written, except where material is added in brackets for clarification. No changes have been made to spelling, language usage, or sentence mechanics. The term *sic* is not used to indicate misspellings or non-standard sentence construction.

[2] In presenting examples from teacher data, we have removed verbal hedges such as "um" and "you know" from transcribed interviews when this material is not relevant to the ideas being discussed. Additionally, we have removed gendered pronouns from the discussion of interview data so that teacher participants remain unidentifiable.

[3] In order to maintain anonymity of the study site, we have paraphrased these course descriptions rather than quoting them directly.

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