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Bringing Reading into the Classroom: Using Active Learning to Practice the Invisible Skill

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Reading is an "invisible" skill, making it challenging to address in a college classroom. Yet, it is fundamental to disciplinary thought. Inspired by the "signature pedagogies" conversation, I wanted to find ways to make more visible in my classroom what I do when I work with readings. This gave rise to several questions: How can I make reading practices in my discipline more transparent to students? How can they develop the habits of mind necessary to link this particular way of reading to a particular way of disciplinary thinking? In fact, how can students be held accountable for doing the reading in the first place? This article reflects on how I placed reading at the core of my class design. I include discussion of the overall purpose of reading, assessment of reading, the reading list, reading logs, and in-class active learning exercises that engage with the readings.

College-level reading is, as Pat Hutchings (2015, p. vii) puts it, "mostly invisible." It is invisible institutionally, in the lack of reading programs as opposed to writing programs. It is invisible in the classroom in the sense that instructors do not see student reading in the same way that we see their written pieces. It is also largely invisible as a skill set to college-level students themselves, as highlighted in a study by Karen Manarin (2012, p. 281). She found that only 40% of students surveyed agreed with the statement, "I am good at writing," likely as a result of faculty feedback identifying areas in need of improvement. However, almost 80% agreed with the statement, "I am good at reading." This may be because the students had *not* received faculty feedback on reading and had not developed metacognitive awareness around it, thus seeing little need to be concerned with this skill. Another recent study found that over one third of undergraduate students scored at or below 50% on critical reading skills, and there was no significant improvement across class levels, i.e., from first-year students to seniors (Gorzycki, Howard, Allen, Desa, & Rosegard, 2016). This study also notes that the lack of mature reading abilities may indirectly contribute to student attrition, insofar as it prevents students from working effectively in different disciplines. We still lack a critical mass of SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) work in which instructors discuss college-level reading in their own classrooms, as pointed out by Karen Manarin, Miriam Carey, Melanie Rathburn, & Glen Ryland (2015, p. xi), and there is only a weakly developed conversation around instructional strategies for teaching advanced reading skills to undergraduates (though see Gamel, 2015; Horning, Gollnitz & Haller, 2017).

This lack of visibility, however, does not mean that reading is absent from higher education. On the contrary, college instruction is usually based on the assumption that students will intuit how to use reading proficiently across disciplines. Undergraduate students are expected to engage critically with texts as diverse as historical narratives, theoretical articles, novels, experiment methodologies, mathematical proofs, and statistical overviews, as well as textbooks. Across all disciplines students are expected to employ the skills that make up critical, active reading (or "transactional" reading, using the classic label suggested by Louise Rosenblatt, 1994). They are expected to do what expert readers do, namely to construct an ongoing conversation between themselves, different aspects of a text, other texts, and other readers, that results in deeper and more nuanced reasoning *about* the text. Without these skills, otherwise competent students in college may still approach each reading passively or uncritically and simply take it as the last word (as found by Sam Wineburg, 2001). Mature reading may function, in this sense, as a "threshold concept" (Meyer & Land, 2006) or a disciplinary "bottleneck" (Middendorf & Pace, 2004) that is not an immediately obvious activity, even to competent beginners. If students do not cross this threshold, they fail to enter into the habit of mind that fluently links reading and thinking in their particular discipline.

Against this background, I have become interested in the productive "problem" of college reading (cf. Bass, 1999), and I have wanted to make reading more visible—to students and myself—in the classroom. One of my inspirations has been the conversation around "signature pedagogies" (e.g. Calder, 2006; Gurung, Chick, & Haynie, 2009; Shulman, 2005). The animating idea behind this conversation is the insight that content-focused instruction will be more effective if it is embedded in a broader pedagogical framework that seeks to teach students how to see, think, and act within the discipline—rather than expecting students to intuit this on their own. This instructional article will take the form of a guided tour of how I have sought to place reading at the core of my class design and make it more transparent to students. I will focus here on the teaching side of the equation; elsewhere I have explored the other side, namely the learning side, to describe whether or not my students have been able to use this focus on reading to build more complex thought (Hovland, 2019b).

The article will draw material from a SoTL project that I conducted in one of my classes at the University of Georgia in Spring 2018 in order to reflect more systematically on student reading in the classroom. I obtained IRB approval for the study and the consent of all the student participants. I used the same class design in all my classes during Spring 2018, including my 40-person introductory religion survey classes, but the class in which I conducted the study and from which I will draw examples was an upper-level 11-student seminar titled "Christianity and Colonialism in Africa." I taught the seminar from the angle of my own disciplinary field, the anthropology of religion. While my discussion here therefore centers on texts that are most commonly used in the humanities and social sciences (academic monographs, articles, and archival sources), my underlying concern—namely to facilitate engaged student reading practices—may find resonance across a diverse range of disciplines.

Starting from the End: What Is the Purpose Of Reading?

Let me follow L. Dee Fink's (2003) suggestion on course design to start from the end and consider the question: What kind of significant learning experience do I want reading to produce? Different instructors will necessarily arrive at different answers to this question. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has developed a VALUE rubric devoted to reading that highlights a list of skills to aim for: comprehension, understanding of genres, relationship to text, analysis, interpretation, and reader's voice. Manarin et al. (2015) move beyond listing of elements and discuss two overarching goals: academic reading and reading for social engagement. In other words, they emphasize both the development of critical reading skills and the importance of allowing students to draw connections between what they read and what they encounter in their daily lives.

I have found that the term "complex thinking" best captures my cluster of aims, and so I shall concentrate on that here, but with the acknowledgement that it has considerable overlap with other labels such as critical thinking and creative thinking. Others have described similar aims. For example, Anthony Ciccone, Renee Meyers, and Stephanie Waldmann (2008) sought to foster "complex thinking" in a class on humor by asking students to dig deeper into the linked layers of meaning in a humorous piece. Similarly, Nancy Chick, Holly Hassel, & Aeron Haynie (2009) have described how they wanted to encourage students to see "complexity" in a poem by asking them to draw out different possible patterns of meaning, allowing students to grapple with the insight that some of the patterns stood in tension with each other, even as they were integrated in the poem. My own contribution as a teacher, drawing on my field of the anthropology of religion, is to teach students the steps involved in describing and analyzing others' perspectives on the world, as well as to take these other perspectives into account as students describe and analyze their own perspective. This is what constitutes complex thinking in my class, given the intersection of my discipline, my own research approach, and the topic of the class. In other words, I want student reading transactions in my classes to be part of the cognitive development of more complex thinking, which correlates with the development of more complex moral reasoning about the self, the other, and the world. Other instructors may draw on their own disciplinary research and teaching approach to articulate other aims for reading in their classes.

While this brief outline of complex thinking may sound deceptively simple, it requires work that is quite complicated for a traditional-age student. Since this form of mature thought is a goal that students will not reach in the course of a single semester, and perhaps not during their college career as a whole (cf. Magolda 1992; Perry 1998), I break the overall goal into smaller steps that can be made visible in class, as described below. This gives students the opportunity to practice facets of complex thinking and to practice them at a level that corresponds with the cognitive problems they are working on at that moment, in the midst of their overall cognitive trajectory. It seems important to me as an instructor, however, not to lose sight of the eventual goal of mature thinking (for further discussion of this issue, see Hovland, 2019b).

Making it Matter: Assessing Reading

Starting from the end also means starting with assessment, since the structure of assessment is what will guide our students' work in the class. First, I incorporated significant space for informal feedback in the class. I used a flipped class model, which meant that students were introduced to foundational content through pre-class readings and then came to class to work with these readings. As opposed to a traditional lecture model, no new content was introduced during the actual class periods. Instead, class time was devoted to working through reading exercises (which I will describe below). As students worked with these exercises they thought aloud about the readings and shared their evolving analytical arguments with each other in small groups and with me as I walked around during the exercises, and also with the whole group at the end of the exercises. They thus received continuous informal feedback from their peers and me in relation to their comprehension of the reading as well as their ability to construct analytical lines of thought based on the reading. They continuously refined their reading and thinking skills in class in response to this ongoing feedback.

I also sought to tie reading to formal assessment in a number of ways. First, I made a "workbook" for the class, which students bought from our local print shop. It contained all the reading log forms and pages for our in-class reading exercises for the semester. The students brought their workbooks to class each day, and at the end of each unit (roughly every four-six weeks), I collected the workbooks to look over the logs and exercises. In the interest of grading efficiency, I did not evaluate their quality, but simply checked that they were completed. If they were, I gave 25 points for the logs, and 25 points for the exercises. If only half the questions on the logs were filled in, only half the points were given, and so on. Second, I am still working on assignments that emphasize to the students the importance of formulating their own analyses of the issues in the readings. Toward this end, this semester I included one "quiz" and one "analysis" at the end of each unit, and these were also worth 25 points each. The quiz was open-book, and I gave students ten of the key concepts that we had worked on in that unit and asked them to write one or two descriptive sentences and one or two analytical sentences about each concept. For the analysis I asked students to write a 500-word "analysis for a friend," in which they selected one issue from one or several readings that they had been struck by. I especially asked them to explain to their friend how the issue was presented in the reading, questions about their own assumptions and perspectives regarding this issue, and questions about others' perspectives on this issue.

Finally, for the last unit of the semester I wanted to incorporate a culminating assignment (Fink, 2003). However, as Manarin et al. (2015) have shown, one obstacle to work on reading in higher education is the difficulty of designing effective reading-based large assignments. They found that the assignments that are meant to incorporate reading—especially research papers—are in reality completed by many of the students without engagement in critical reading skills. This was true even for assigned research papers that explicitly asked for literature synthesis and references and which were otherwise well written and coherently argued (for a good discussion of this problem, see Manarin et al., 2015, p. 55-63). As an alternative, I decided to opt this semester for what I called a "book project." During the final unit, students each chose a book to read on Christianity in Africa. They filled out reading logs before each class as they read through their books, and in class we did reading exercises during which they worked on their own books while in conversation with the other students. During this unit they chose most of the "quizzable" key concepts themselves, based on their book. Toward the end of the unit they each presented their preliminary thoughts on their book in the form of a poster (following the outline in Manarin, 2016). I asked them to include the following elements on their posters: their own title, one key concept that they thought captured what was most important to the people described in the book, a brief explanation of this concept, a visual illustration (such as a diagram, concept map, or picture), some relevant quotes from the book, and some of their own questions. They also wrote a 500-word "analysis for a friend" based on one issue from their book, and they described and analyzed a number of key concepts from their book for the open-book quiz. Instead of a final exam, they wrote a longer 2,000-word "book paper" that presented their final analysis of the book in relation to the other readings and themes of the class and building on their staged work with the book through reading logs, in-class exercises, poster, quiz, and analysis. From both my and their perspectives, this chance to dive into one book proved productive for their thinking, and it seemed to present the right level of challenge as the final project of the class.

The Backbone of the Class: The Reading List

Having considered the goal and assessment of reading, the next question is which readings to assign since the reading list will form the backbone of the class. This was especially important to me because of the flipped classroom format I used, which meant that the readings constituted the foundational content knowledge that students would be introduced to. I therefore put some thought into the selection of readings. One of my sources of inspiration on this front was the work of Gerald Graff (1993), who has argued for the benefits of "teaching the conflicts." The term "conflict" has raised some discussion, as Chick (2009, p. 47) points out, but I will take it to refer broadly to the principle of placing differing perspectives alongside each other. For example, one might pair readings that take different theoretical approaches, address different historical periods, employ different genres, or come from "inside" and "outside" the canon. I found this suggestion useful in my class, as I used different types of reading in each unit of the semester. In the first unit I introduced my own research, and we read through my monograph-length case study of a group of Christian mission stations in Southern Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. The case study has some light theoretical framing, but it is mostly concerned with discussing archival sources from this group of

European Christians and their interactions with the Africans around them, seeking to draw out various European and African perspectives on events as they unfolded in the early colonial period.

In the second unit we read a sequence of three scholars who present markedly different interpretations of the impact of Christian mission in colonial Africa, framing the process variously as missionary imperialism, colonization of consciousness, or a more benignly inflected transfer of knowledge. In my view as instructor, this reading sequence was one of the most generative of the semester in terms of facilitating complex thinking. Reading the articles after the case study allowed students to assess the theoretical arguments based on their own knowledge of one particular case, which they continuously referred back to. The three theoretical interpretations also proved sufficiently challenging that students took some time in evaluating them against each other and reaching their own conclusion about the extent to which they agreed and disagreed with each. The students' own response to this sequence of conflicting readings was somewhat mixed, a point we discussed at the end of the semester when I reviewed the reading list with them in order to seek their suggestions on which readings to keep. Most of them had found the differing theoretical interpretations to be among the most important readings of the semester. However, a minority of students were left with the impression that this reading sequence had been "confusing" (even though these same students had, in my view, developed their thinking based on these readings). This mixed student response alerted me to the importance of including more explanation in future classes of why we read texts that conflict with each other and how experts approach this type of "conflict" productively without becoming overwhelmed or paralyzed by confusion.

Another source of inspiration for me was the work of Sam Wineburg (2001), who has argued for the importance of incorporating the discipline's primary source material—the type of material that experts work with—in the classroom. In history classes, for example, he suggests we should allow undergraduates to grapple with the difficulties of interpreting archival sources that necessarily frame selected events in certain ways and leave out other events. In my class I chose to incorporate selections of primary sources—in this case, excerpts from nineteenth-century missionary letters (translated into English)—in the second unit. The letters were among those I had worked with in my own research, and so the students had already been introduced to the context of these texts. We read these sources in class alongside the theoretical material. During this unit we also read an overview of African traditional religions that, while being a secondary source, incorporated descriptions of myths and rituals that differed considerably from missionary references.In the third unit, I tried an approach that, in my view, did not work as effectively in linking reading to complex thinking, though again, student feedback differed somewhat from my own assessment. I asked each student to choose a different chapter-length historical overview of the development of a Christian tradition in Africa (such as the historical evolution of a particular Protestant or Catholic mission-based church, or the history of an independent African church). I then asked each student to present their reading in class. The students completed the task itself well, summarizing the content of their chapter proficiently and presenting it clearly. However, this took away from the time we would usually have spent on in-class exercises based on the readings, and, from my perspective, they did not reach the same levels of complex thinking in this unit as in the others. In our end-of-semester review, the students themselves did not register a difference in their cognitive work in this unit. They did, however, flag that they had not found it as satisfactory to be the only person working through a reading, thus not having the chance to discuss it in class as they had been used to in the first two units. In hindsight, I also wondered whether some of the historical overviews I had chosen were not as well written, as well as whether some of them were too long to be used productively as a reading assignment. While I would acknowledge that there are some benefits to assigning long readings (such as giving students practice in strategic prioritization, a useful skill in any career), my own tendency is to err on the side of readings that can realistically be completed before each class period (bearing in mind that students require more time than experts to complete a reading), so as to provide a more reliable basis for collaborative in-class exercises.

In the fourth and final unit we did the "book project." As mentioned above, in this unit the students each chose a book to read on Christianity in Africa, choosing from a list that contained a range of genres (e.g., ethnographies, novels, biographies, collections of academic essays). In this unit the readings were in fact longer, as I asked students to read through their book in two weeks, and in class we discussed the mature reading skills of scanning, skimming, and skipping (drawing on Gamel, 2015, p. 53-54). Roughly half the students read books that others were also reading. The students who had selected books that nobody else read suggested that they had missed the opportunity to read it together with someone, and in the future, I plan to organize the unit so that at least two students read the same book.

Accountability: Reading Logs

For each reading the students completed an individual reading log at home. In considering the format for structuring the students' reading process, I chose not to use the popular 3R format—read, recite, review—that is primarily focused on retrieval (e.g.

McDaniel, Howard, & Einstein, 2009; sometimes it is expanded to SQ3R: survey, question, read, recite, review). I considered adapting Manarin's (2012) reflective log, for which she asked students to write a paragraph once a week in class describing how they read one reading that week, and reflecting on the specific reading strategies they chose (such as predicting, monitoring, questioning, creating mental images, inferring, summarizing, or evaluating). I also considered a format, centered on social engagement, which asks students to write one paragraph about the reading that answers the three questions: "What (is the reading about)? So what (does it mean)? Now what (are you going to do with this information)?" (Manarin et al., 2015, p. 23); though Manarin et al. observe that one drawback of this format is that it does not ask students to make connections (pp. 53-54).

In the end I chose a humanities-oriented format that I thought might scaffold a back-and-forth interaction between the student reader, the text, other texts, and other student readers in the class. I called it an ICE QQ reading log. This is a loose adaptation of the ICE format—ideas, connections, extension (Young & Wilson, 2000)—though I replaced "extension" with "experience" as a more easily accessible term to undergraduate students. I asked students in their logs to note down three ideas from the reading, one connection to something in or outside the course, one experience (either their own or one that is evident in the text), one quote that they found striking, disturbing, important, or similar, and one question (see Figure 1; cf. Hovland 2019a).

Students frequently used the reading logs to develop their thinking. For example, in one of the readings for my Christianity and Colonialism seminar, in which we covered some of the early British colonial claims to land in Southern Africa, one of the students noted in her reading log a connection to what she had previously learned about the Spanish conquest of Latin America, which was also tied to the establishment of missions. Under "experience" she noted, "Native Americans experienced their land being taken away." Another student wrote under experience, "The idea of land and its ties to race still resonate. Society asks itself, who is truly allowed to live where?" Yet another wrote, "If I experienced colonialism, I would be in shock." They are beginning to move away here from viewing the reading as a collection of discrete pieces of information and instead are beginning to place the reading into a connected web of knowledge, whether that knowledge concerns similar processes in other historical periods, a resonance with contemporary issues, or the personal knowledge of what it feels like to have something of yours taken away and how you might respond.

Student responses to the reading logs have been positive on pragmatic grounds. As one student in the Christianity and Colonialism seminar noted at the end of the semester, when I asked them to choose which learning activity had helped them the most: "The reading logs helped me stay on track with my readings and forced me to pay attention to what I was learning." Another wrote, "The reason that the reading logs helped me so much is they forced me to think deeper about what I was reading in order to make a connection to things I had read as opposed to just writing down things that seemed important." Students have generally had the same favorable and practically-oriented response across my classes. No doubt the action itself—the tactile element of holding a pencil in hand and jotting down notes while reading—is helpful to some. More importantly, I think students—like all of us—would like to feel that they are working toward competency, and the logs give them a concrete path to do so in otherwise unfamiliar terrain. While scholars may take for granted the need to consider ideas, connections, experiences, quotes, and questions while reading, most students in my classes would not be able to come up with these prompts on their own since they do not have any obvious means of assessing whether this is the way experts read in the academic study of religion.

During the first ten minutes of each class period, the students then shared points from their reading logs with each other in their small groups (in my seminar, in pairs or threes, and in my larger classes, in groups of four or five). I asked them to note down points raised by their peers during this time in a section at the bottom of their own reading log form (see Figure. 1). Again, this is to strengthen the sense that the interaction between themselves and other readers can enhance their own reading. I circulated among the students during this time to listen to their conversations, but for the most part the students were in the "privacy" of their own groups and could use this time to ask questions and voice thoughts that they might not feel free to do in the class as a whole (or even with me).

Working with the Readings: Seven Types of In-Class Exercises

After students had talked about their reading logs at the start of class, I usually planned two in-class exercises lasting roughly twenty minutes each. These are adaptations of various active learning exercises, and needless to say a great many more exercises can be found and adapted depending on the instructor's preferences (e.g., Angelo & Cross, 1993; Barkley, 2009; Gamel, 2015; Graff & Birkenstein, 2014). In this section I will discuss the seven types of exercises I used most often in the Christianity and Colonialism seminar, beginning with those oriented more toward description, continuing on to those oriented more toward analysis, and ending with exercises oriented toward

Figure 1

Reading log.

READING LOG Author, pages: ________________ Topic: _______________________

Three important and/or interesting IDEAS in the reading (write them out, or use summary keywords, or draw them, etc.):

*

*

*

A CONNECTION to the reading
(connecting to something else in the class, in another class, in your life, in the world, etc.):

*

An EXPERIENCE related to the reading
(your own experience, or someone you know, or the experience of the people in the reading):

*

A QUOTE from the reading
(that you like, or dislike, or don't understand, or agree with, or find striking, or strange, etc. –
just write the page number and first words):

*

A QUESTION related to the reading:

*

IN CLASS - Important and/or interesting points raised by others:

*

metacognitive awareness of this process. The first, third, and fourth exercises (concept maps on the board, student-made illustrations, and close reading) were the ones that students most often explicitly told me that they found helpful. Again, it is useful to explain early and regularly to students what the reasoning is behind these kinds of active learning exercises (cf. Smith, 2008).

Concept Maps

A first type of exercise is a simple version of a concept map. I write one of our key concepts for the day in the middle of the board. I then ask each student (or, in larger classes, each small group) to think about one interesting or important thing from the reading they would like to say about the key concept, and I give them a minute to share ideas in their groups or, alternatively, to write individually for a minute. Then, as each student (or each small group) shares their point, I write it on the board around the key concept, using their own wording as much as possible. I draw connections such as lines or arrows between different points when relevant. For example, for one class period in the Christianity and Colonialism seminar we had read an article which argued that missionaries contributed to changes in some of the most basic categories of African life, including what it meant to be a person. We had also read some excerpts from missionary letters that touched on what the missionary author thought it meant to be a Christian. In the middle of the board, I wrote the key concept "Christian personhood." The students shared a range of points from the readings they had found interesting or important, from "sitting like a European" through "steadfast" and "outcast" to "all or nothing." Usually, I would write their points on the board, but as a variation this time I asked the students to come up to the board and write down their points themselves around the key concept. We then had a visible map of the readings on the board. Many students find that this visual representation makes the reading seem more clear in their mind.

From my perspective as an instructor the visible concept map also provides a springboard for deeper analysis. Once we see the concept map on the board, we can take a minute to consider it as a whole and to formulate further questions. For the concept map about Christian personhood, for example, at the end of the exercise one student realized that the point she had written on the board actually contradicted a quote from one of the missionary letters, causing us all to look at the letter again. We were also able to consider to what extent the range of points from the colonial period differed from current understandings of Christian personhood. These types of observations and questions fed into later analytical thinking in the class about historical sources and historical contexts.

Muddiest Point (Extended)

The second type of exercise is an adaptation of what is sometimes called "the muddiest point" exercise. In my adaptation, I ask students to work in their small groups to decide which is the most important paragraph (or point) in the reading, and which is the most confusing paragraph (or point), and why. I ask them to note down the first words of the paragraphs in their workbooks, along with some keywords from each paragraph, and some of the group's thoughts about each. I then ask each group to turn to their neighbor group and explain why they chose each paragraph and to see if their neighbor group can provide a satisfactory explanation of the confusing paragraph. I ask them to note down their neighbor group's thoughts about the confusing paragraph in their own workbooks. If, at the end of this exercise, there are confusing passages that have not been cleared up, we address them in the class as a whole.

For example, following a reading on some of the first Zulus who decided to convert to Christianity at the nineteenth-century mission stations, one student noted down during her small group work that the most important point in the reading was related to the missionaries' sense that they were getting their "job" done. The most confusing point, she noted, was how to "figure out the sincerity," or, in other words, the European missionaries' sense that they found it difficult to judge whether Africans were thinking, feeling, and believing the same things as them. She wrote at the top of the page: "pietistic perspective." Meanwhile, a student in another group noted down that the most important paragraph was one that discussed how the African converts, from their own perspective, might have framed their move to the mission stations as a "shift in spiritual allegiance." The most confusing point raised by the reading, she noted, was the question of why it took so long before Africans converted to Christianity. One of the keywords she noted down was "Zulu culture." While the first group sought to understand the missionaries' perspective, the second group was drawn to trying to understand the Africans' perspective, thus opening up for a productive conversation afterwards about the concept of "conversion" in the reading and what it might have meant for different actors involved in this historical context. We see here how the exercise, while primarily focused on understanding the reading (and producing descriptive thinking), provides a basis for approaching analytical thinking.

Illustrate-a-Concept

A third type of exercise I use involves different forms of two- or three-dimensional illustrations of key concepts from the reading. To begin, I provide students with a key concept from the reading or ask them to select a key concept from the reading in their small groups. In one version of the exercise, I then ask students to draw a diagram of the concept in their workbook. For example, after a reading on indigenous religious practices in Africa, I asked students to draw a diagram of the key concept "African traditional religions" in their workbook, resulting in a range of different representations, which students then shared with each other. In another version of the exercise, I ask students to work together in their group to "build" the key concept using pipe cleaners or Legos (I hand out bags with some pipe cleaners or Legos to each group). A few students find this activity unnecessarily childish, and I have found it helpful to explain that some people, like me, think better when we work with our hands. I ask them to bear with us, sit back and focus on thinking, and leave the actual building to those of their peers whose eyes have already lit up at the sight of the legos. Other students enjoy it greatly and select it as the best learning activity of the semester.

In one such exercise in my Christianity and Colonialism seminar, I asked each small group to select their own key concept based on a series of readings and then to build it. One small group sought to represent the mission station. They built a house with a wide pipe cleaner arc running over it to indicate how its influence spread far beyond the physical site of the buildings. Another small group built a pipe cleaner person who was trying to reach for a golden star with an object weighing down their foot, thus representing how the missionaries were unsuccessfully trying to reach for some sense of control on the stations. A third group took one gold and one black pipe cleaner and wound them tightly around each other, indicating that the missionaries on the stations were not able to separate Christianity from European culture. As students were discussing and building these visual representations, they were simultaneously working out some of the central lines of thought in the readings. Similar to the muddiest point exercise, this activity too is mainly oriented toward descriptive thinking, but it introduces analytical concerns and forms a basis for later analysis.

Close Reading

A fourth type of exercise emphasizes a classic humanities methodology, namely close reading. Carolyn Medine (2016) has provided a rich description of how this exercise can draw out deeper student thinking about literary texts. She also describes how she sometimes does the same exercise twice, providing a layered understanding of the same text over time. In my classes, I reproduce a few excerpted paragraphs from the reading for that day or some excerpts from a primary source. I then briefly explain a few simple annotation marks the students might use, such as circling key words, drawing arrows between similar thematic terms, drawing question marks and exclamation points in the margin, or jotting down questions or quick comments. I also explain the reason for doing annotation in my class, namely that it focuses our attention on the surface of the text in order to get beneath it. I ask them to read silently through the excerpt and annotate it. This introduces silence into the classroom, offering a different mode of working. Once the majority of students are done, I ask them to explain whatever annotations they have so far to each other in their small groups. I then ask each group to decide on one or two key concepts that, in their view, capture an important underlying concern or pattern in the events described by the text. Each group tells the class which key concept(s) they chose and why.

For example, during one class period in the Christianity and Colonialism seminar I gave the students excerpts from some nineteenth-century missionary letters and asked them to annotate them. A theme in one of the letters was the missionary author's description of the "spiritual dryness" of Southern Africa and his own resulting "dryness." One student noted in the margin, "In order to pour out you must be full," and another jotted down, "Lars [the missionary] is struggling as well." While they had previously raised several critical points in relation to the missionaries' practices, this close reading of one of the missionaries' own words provided a moment of trying to understand this missionary himself and his layered motives, as well as how these impacted the situation.

Bloom's Questions

A fifth type of exercise is one I have called "Bloom's Questions." It involves formulating both descriptive and analytical questions about the reading using the revised Bloom's taxonomy. I make sure to include this exercise during the first few weeks of class in order to begin explaining what I mean by "description" and "analysis" (and to clarify that "analysis" may differ across different classes). I print the revised Bloom's taxonomy in the students' workbook with examples of question prompts at each level (see Figure 2). I ask the students to work in groups to construct six questions about the reading—one at each level of Bloom's taxonomy—and then to answer their own questions. I also explain that in my class the first two levels of Bloom's ("remember" and "understand") are considered descriptive, the third level ("apply") is the turning point between descriptive and analytical, and the last three ("analyze," "evaluate," and "create") are considered analytical. In other words, in humanities classes, descriptive questions are concerned with presenting or synthesizing evidence from the reading, and have reasonably clear and agreed upon answers, while analytical questions are concerned with picking apart the evidence in the reading and assembling it into a pattern that the student has to argue makes sense amidst multiple possible patterns. At the end of the exercise I ask each group to share one descriptive question and one analytical question about the reading.

Students are sometimes not as fond of this exercise, partly, I think, because the distinction between descriptive and analytical thinking is still opaque to many of them at the beginning of my class. If I comment that one of their analytical questions seems to me to be more descriptive, it may take some time and work before they understand what I mean. As Chick (2009, p. 44) observes, an instructor's expert commentary may sometimes seem like "hocus-pocus" to students. At the same time, many students find the Bloom's taxonomy question prompts helpful as a first step toward trying to emulate expert thinking about the reading, and some students get into the habit of referring to the Bloom's diagram quite frequently throughout the semester. From an instructor

Figure 2
Bloom's questions.

REMEMBER: Identify and recall information
> Who...? What...? When…? Where...?
How…? [if the answer is mostly clear and agreed upon]
Why… ? [if the answer is mostly clear and agreed upon]

UNDERSTAND: Organize and explain information
> Clarify...
Outline...
Summarize…

APPLY: Use information
> Give an example…
Show…
How…? [if the answer is not obvious]

ANALYZE: Think about what is going on at a deeper level
> CLASSIFY: Compare and contrast… Categorize… What is the relationship between…?
> DISSECT: What is the problem… or the underlying theme… or the non-intentional function… or the hidden motive… or the root causes… or the deeper dynamics?
Why…? [if there are multiple possible answers and they could be contested]

EVALUATE: Critically examine information & develop informed judgments
> WEIGH: What is most important and least important…? Decide whether… Which solution is better…?
> SHIFT BETWEEN PERSPECTIVES: Do you agree/disagree with…? What are the objections to your position…? What are the limitations of your position…? What are the different perspectives (and what does that tell us)…?

CREATE: Combine information to make a new whole
> How would you change…?
What is a better solution…?
What is your plan for…?
Make a…

perspective, it is clear to me that with some practice the students do formulate questions that are substantively different at the "descriptive" and "analytical" levels. For example, in my seminar we did this exercise several times. One of these times was after a reading addressing the broader political impact of Western missionaries in colonial Africa. One small group began with the descriptive question, "Who were the chiefs?" and ended with the analytical questions, "What led to missionaries having greater superiority [than chiefs]?," and, "Can you be loyal to the chief and missionaries?" Another small group similarly began with the descriptive question: "What is a chief?" and worked their way down to the analytical questions: "What is the relationship between the missionaries and the chiefs, and how did this affect the African people? If you could change the nature of that relationship, how would you?"

Integration: 4 Statements, Lesson Plan, and Reflection on Learning

A sixth type of exercise involves integrating learning across several readings. I use these exercises at the end of each unit. In one integrative exercise, "4 statements," I ask students to work in groups to come up with four statements about the material in that unit.

As students work together to reconcile the points they consider important, they sometimes attempt to summarize across the readings, e.g., “There is a spectrum of African responses to Christianity.” At other times they try to assess what was most important, e.g. “Land was an important factor to increase the sphere of influence of the mission station.” Or, in further cases, their conversation results in a type of abstraction that might provide some basis for further analysis, e.g., “Colonialism is a very hard topic to define.”

For the exercise that I have called “lesson plan,” I ask students to imagine that they have been tasked with teaching the material from that unit to someone else (they can choose whom), but they have only been given two hours. They work in groups to come up with a name for their lesson, a list of three points that they choose to prioritize, and suggestions for learning activities they might use to teach these three points.

In yet another integrative exercise I ask students to work in silence for five minutes as they write answers to the following questions: “What is the most important thing you have learned in this unit, and why?,” and, “Which learning activity helped you learn the most, and what is your one-word learning plan for the next unit?” I then ask them to share their answers with the person next to them. This gives students the chance to pull together and articulate a line of thought that has been important to them. For example, one student wrote, “I think discussing Western culture’s influence [on colonialism] is important because it’s such a tough call to see if it could have been avoided.” Another noted, “The idea of a spectrum of responses in general because I think it says a lot about human nature and how differing worldviews and upbringings lead to very different responses.” Some students like this opportunity to pause, reflect, and pull together the unit coherently in their minds.

Reading Interviews

Finally, a seventh type of exercise I use are “reading interviews”: exercises that aim to facilitate metacognitive reflection around student reading practices. In one of these exercises in my Christianity and Colonialism seminar, I asked students to jot down for themselves the first word or phrase they thought of when they heard the term “reading” and then to compare with the person next to them. In another, students asked the person next to them: “How has your reading changed from middle and high school to college?” This gave rise to a productive conversation about which aspects of reading they felt they had improved in (such as greater ability to assess and compare readings), as well as how they still struggled with some texts (such as dense academic arguments). Following on from this last point, I asked the whole group, “What is most challenging about college reading?” The first student to respond said emphatically, “Time!,” which led us on to a useful discussion about scanning and skimming, whether and how they use these mature reading skills, and how they use different reading skills for different classes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to some of the questions that I started out with and were inspired by the literature on signature pedagogies: How can I teach students to do what I do? How can I make reading practices in my discipline more transparent to students? How can they develop the habits of mind necessary to link this particular way of reading to a particular way of disciplinary thinking? In fact, how can students be held accountable for doing the reading in the first place?

In my class, the combination of pre-class reading logs together with in-class exercises centered on quizzable key concepts (which presuppose that students have done the reading), seemed to effectively address the issue of the students doing the reading. Moreover, even if reading itself is still an “invisible” skill, some practices around reading became more visible in my class. The reading logs made visible some ways to read—such as looking for ideas, connections, experiences, quotes, and questions—and then attending to other people’s readings of the same text. In class, we mapped out visual representations of the readings on the board. Student responses to readings were part of the classroom space, whether in small group discussions, whole class conversations, or in the various representations—diagrams, legos, posters—that they created. I tried to make visible the reasoning behind the exercises we did (though I still need to incorporate more explanations). I sought to make visible one way of thinking about the mysterious term “analysis” through a visual representation of Bloom’s diagram. The SoTL project has also helped me to bring student voices and student knowledge into the classroom space more effectively than I was doing previously, including to some extent making students’ own thinking about their reading practices explicit (though this too is a point that I wish to incorporate more in future classes).

A final question concerns whether or not the students in this seminar actually improved in their reading skills and to what extent this helped them to move toward the overarching goal of complex thinking. As mentioned in the introduction, in this instructional article I have focused on the teaching side of the equation, though in my SoTL project it was critical to also include the learning side. In brief, my conclusion at the end of the semester was that the sheer impact of sustained and engaged reading over four months made many students address the material and place it in relation to their own knowledge in ways that began to approach aspects of complex thought. For a full discussion of how some students developed over the course of the semester in the seminar, and the implications for how we can introduce novice thinkers to expert modes of thought, see Hovland (2019b).

Having now unpacked how I sought to bring reading into my classroom—and how this is intertwined with my discipline, my research, and my class topic—I am aware that it will, and must, look different in other classrooms. However, what I hope instructors from across all disciplines might take away from this discussion is the perspective of seeing reading as a productive classroom "problem" (Bass, 1999), in other words a problem that it is possible to work on.

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