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Teaching Textual Conversations: Intertextuality in the College Reading Classroom

In this article, a model of intertextuality is introduced as an instructional approach for postsecondary developmental reading courses. This model involves a scaffolded, schema-building approach to teaching college reading that aims to link core material (a text, a concept, or specific academic content) with supplementary texts that focus on specific topics associated with that core material. The purpose is to facilitate the building of a knowledge base on topics associated with the core material in order for students to engage on a deeper level with that core material. Two exemplar course designs are described: one at a community college and another in an alternative-admissions program in a university setting. Implications for practice and future research possibilities are included.

For most first-year students the transition to college is not easy. There are obvious adjustments to be made, socially, culturally, personally, and emotionally. In the midst of all these various types of transitions, most beginning college students also face some form of literacy transition (e.g., Armstrong, 2007; Curry, 2003; Sanchez & Paulson, 2008; Shaughnessy, 1977). Especially as students begin to realize that the academic literacy practices expected of them in postsecondary contexts are vastly different from those they are familiar with from their primary schooling, this literacy transition often requires conceptual change related to their views of reading and writing.

Misconceptions about Learning and Reading

Beginning college students often hold on to deeply ingrained misconceptions about learning (e.g., Holschuh, 2003; Simpson & Nist, 2003). For example, Simpson and Nist have argued that "Most college freshmen believe learning is simple, can be accomplished quickly, and that knowledge and learning occur when someone else 'does something to you'" (p. 172). In other words, many students seem to understand their role as learners to be passive recipients of information rather than active constructors of knowledge (e.g., Perry, 1970). Students' epistemological views are particularly relevant for those of us who teach developmental literacy courses, including reading, writing, and study strategies, because it is in these courses that these literacy transitions need to be facilitated.

Not surprisingly, many students also tend to view reading as a passive activity that involves determining a single, correct meaning that is "in" the text, but that they often can't seem to retrieve. According to El-Hindi (2003), "Students tend to read on 'automatic pilot,' and do not realize when they have trouble comprehending or truly digesting text" (p. 360). In terms of the models of reading outlined by Schraw and Bruning (1996), many students hold more of a transmission model than a transactional model (see also Rosenblatt, 1994).

A transmission model of reading is limiting indeed, especially when reading for academic purposes. For one, a link between reader conceptualizations and strategy usage has been well-documented (e.g., Goodman & Marek, 1996; Holschuh, 2003; Schraw & Bruning, 1996). In short, readers whose conceptualizations of reading are transmission-oriented tend to choose surface-level strategies (or none at all) rather than deep-level, active reading strategies (e.g., Newman, 2008). Additionally, a transmission model of reading does not allow for a view of reading as engaging in dialogic conversations with texts, which is more like the view of reading embedded in the expectations of most college-level instruction. Finally, a transmission view implies a universal reading approach to texts, rather than an understanding of the need for strategic, situation-specific approaches to text. Given the variety of text types, purposes, and goals students will face in academia, such a misconception of reading can be detrimental to their success in college.

In addition to the problem of student misconceptions about academic literacy practices, a related transmission model also persists in the field of postsecondary developmental literacy instruction. Such pedagogically based transmission models generally involve a deficit or remediation approach that translates into skill-drill-type instruction; because this type of instruction encourages, rather than dispels students' passive views of

reading, it usually serves to further complicate their literacy transitions. In fact, the intertextual model we describe in this article was born from our frustrations with such approaches, and, on some level, was created as a reaction against skill-drill-type teaching approaches, which we view as ineffective models for preparing students for their academic goals. We came to develop our respective instructional approaches, separately and at different institutions, as a means to help students develop the necessary reading and learning strategies that represent, more realistically, what students will be doing in their college courses. To be fair, we are beginning to see publishers move toward offering more strategies-based developmental reading textbooks such as *Read to Succeed* (Rothman & Warsi, 2010) and *Efficient and Flexible Reading* (McWhorter, 2011); however, we still see few that focus on intertextual reading and writing.

With skill-drill, deficit approaches, generally, the focus is on a single text, and students tend to take what they read in the classroom text as "the truth" (Wineburg, 1991) or the only version of a particular topic. They may not have been trained to consider the fact that what they read is just one author's perspective, or bias, on the matter. Here, students read at a literal level. They read only one source, only one version, take it as truth, then work to gather and memorize facts (Seixas, 1993; Wineburg, 1991). This kind of single-text approach does not adequately reflect the types of reading/studying/writing/thinking requirements that students face in college-level coursework (Hynd, 1999). It is challenging, indeed, to think of a single academic discipline that does not involve intertextual materials and cross-textual synthesis on some level. For that reason, this article introduces intertextuality as an approach to teaching college reading in environments that aim to facilitate and support students' literacy transitions. In the next section, we begin with a brief background on the concept of intertextuality before proceeding to a presentation of our model.

Introduction to Intertextuality

The idea of intertextuality was first introduced by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who is credited with theories of language as a structured system or relationship between the sign (word), the signified (thought), and the signifier (sound). Saussure focused on the role of language in understanding text. Later, the French poststructuralists (e.g., Kristeva, 1967/1986; 1968) discussed the term "intertextuality" as referring to the relationship between the text, the writer, and the reader. With this view, language itself is central. Here, meaning is found in the constantly changing textual relationship, not in an author or a reader. With the poststructural view of intertextuality, little consideration is

given to the reader or to the intertextual relationships among texts that occur without the reader. Consequently, intertextual relationships exist within and between texts alone—apart from the reader.

In addition, many literary definitions of intertextuality tend to be rather narrowly focused on the text itself. For example, one common usage of the term is for situations where a well-known canonical work is retold, usually with a twist (for example, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres,* 1991, is a modern retelling of *King Lear,* 1997). Another common usage occurs in situations where one author's words are directly used in another author's work. Again, for most literary uses of this term, the focus is limited to texts alone, not the reader's interaction with texts.

Spivey (1997) discussed a view of intertextuality that contradicted the poststructural and more literature-specific views. She understood this interaction as a

> constructivist emphasis on human agency, [and thus she] considers intertextuality in terms of intertextual cues made and discerned by people and in terms of intertextual knowledge used by people as individuals and as social groups. Intertextuality is implication on the part of authors and inferences on the part of readers. (p. 86-87)

Building from this definition, in this article we conceptualize intertextuality as an instructional approach where instructors offer multiple texts and materials of a wide variety of genres to give students the opportunity to increase background knowledge; make connections across and among texts; develop multiple perspectives, interpretations, and a broader picture of a topic; and develop their critical thinking skills (Lenski, 1998).

An Intertextual Model for College Reading Instruction

Intertextuality, as we conceptualize it and discuss it in class, involves an analogical process of simultaneously building—and immediately applying—schemata that are introduced by supplemental texts. One metaphor that may be useful in understanding this concept is a block foundation (see Figure 1), which represents a learner's conceptualizations and comprehension of a particular content (this can include a concept, a text, a topic, etc.). When this foundation is strong enough, it can allow a learner a support upon which to continue to build.

A learner's comprehension of a particular text is rarely completely supported by existing schema and prior knowledge (the blocks). For that reason, supplemental texts (understood broadly as including multimedia, ideologies, events, etc.) brought into the discussion at appropriately timed moments anticipate students' gaps in prior knowledge. These supplemental texts provide additional knowledge needed to fill in some

Figure 1. **Foundation Metaphor for the Schema-Building Process**

Supplemental Text			Supplemental Text	

Existing Schema		Existing Schema		Existing Schema
			Existing Schema	
	Existing Schema	Existing Schema		
Existing Schema		Existing Schema		Existing Schema
Existing Schema			Existing Schema	
	Existing Schema			Existing Schema

Supplemental Text	Supplemental Text
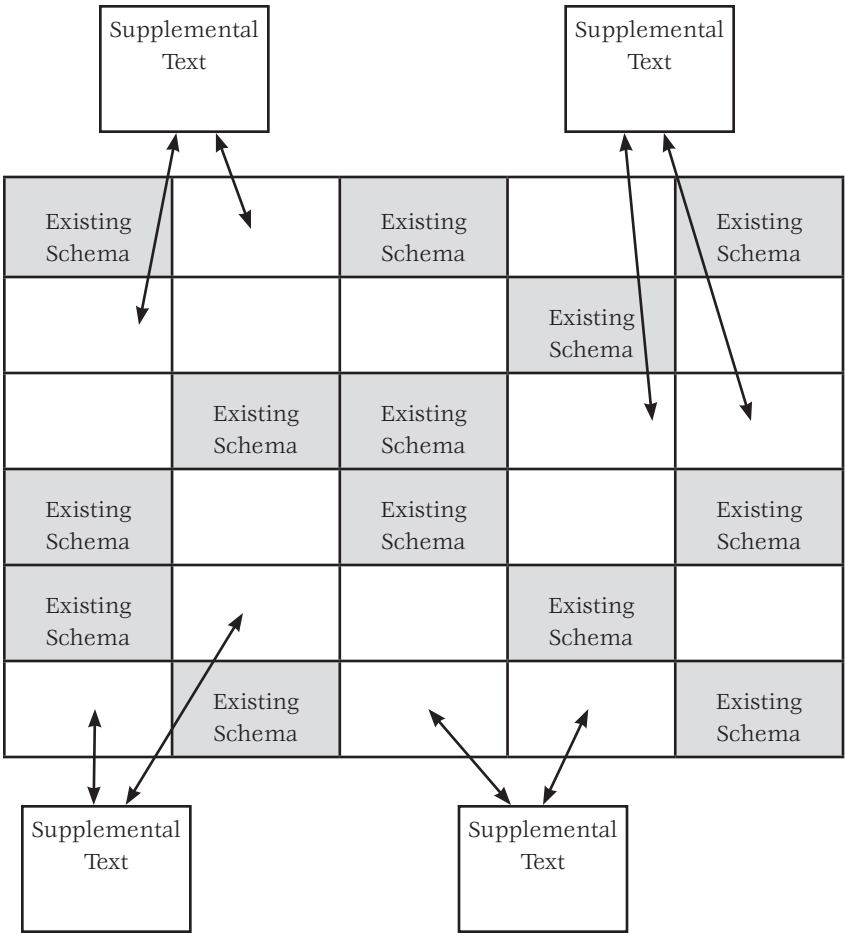
of the gaps in a learner's foundation of comprehension. Although this foundation may not be completely blocked in, even with the support of the supplemental texts, it becomes stronger and sturdier with each additional block of schema.

Intertextuality as an Instructional Approach
   Using intertextuality as an instructional approach in a reading class allows students to practice the process of making connections or re-lationships between what is being read and what has previously been read on a topic. Intertextuality involves the connection—the analogical

linking—of one's prior knowledge on a topic to the new knowledge or experience (Allen, 2000; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Hartman, 1991, 1995; Short, 1992). It is also the synthesis of information among various texts on the same topic (Breiter, 1990; Hartman & Hartman, 1995).

Instructors can teach students that they should make associations (Hartman, 1991) to their existing knowledge, and that they should make mental pictures or maps of a topic and make connections to prior knowledge and experiences (Crouch Shinn & Shaughnessy, 1984). Lenski (1998) described three kinds of intertextual connections the reader can make:

A. Associating: Some past text is linked to a present text;
B. Integrating: Background knowledge is applied to a present text; and
C. Evaluating: Personal judgments, values, conclusions, and generalizations in comparing past and present texts are used by the reader.

Short (1992) reported that the most relevant and meaningful experiences of this nature happen in classrooms where instructors expose students to a variety of print and non-print sources and encourage them to make connections. In addition to reading multiple texts, class discussions should include reflection and critical thought. Initially, instructors should present intertextual reading and learning materials to students in a way that provides background knowledge about the topic and that makes the materials relevant to the students' lives. Students become engaged in the topic when instructors use various pre-reading strategies, such as previewing and predicting, that help students think about what they already know about the topic. During reading, the instructor could allow students time to talk with the class about what they have read. This discussion gives students time to think about their ideas as well as hear ideas they may not have taken into account. And, after reading, students can write about and discuss the ideas presented in the various texts. In this manner, students become more actively engaged in the reading and learning experience (Newman, 2008).

Intertextuality involves a scaffolded, schema-building approach to teaching college reading. The purpose is to facilitate the building of a knowledge base on topics associated with a core text or content topic. Through this method, which is scaffolded over the course of an academic term, students come to recognize this process of linking texts as a comprehension strategy that results in their increased involvement and understanding of the conversations central to the core text. For example, in the next section, we describe a history unit as part of

a developmental reading course; in this unit, students are expected to compare and contrast various and often conflicting views on a particular topic, synthesize that information, and then provide their own interpretation and contribute it to the existing conversation. These practices are not unlike what students would experience in philosophy, literature, biology, psychology, or most other college courses. However, very few professors provide explicit instruction on how to do this kind of reading (Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; Simpson & Nist, 2002). Developmental reading courses are, in theory, designed to help students transition into the literacy practices of the academy. An intertextual approach allows for beginning college students to gain practice that realistically prepares them for the tough reading tasks ahead of them throughout their academic careers.

Research shows that students must learn to direct and control their own cognitive processes if they are to be successful with academic reading and learning. Hadwin and Winne (1996) propose that "it is the element of intent to manipulate one's cognitive processes that distinguishes self regulating from merely using a study tactic" (p. 693). Studies show that to reach their academic goals, students need to learn a variety of reading and learning strategies, or tactics, to learn to adapt those strategies to various tasks and settings, and to transfer such tactics appropriately to other disciplines (Butler & Winne, 1995; Rasnak, 1995; Stahl, Simpson, & Hayes, 1992). Strategic learning occurs when students learn to use the appropriate learning strategies or tactics necessary for the successful completion of a particular academic task (Newman, 2008).

Description of Intertextuality in Two Classroom Exemplars

What follows are descriptions of two practical applications of intertextuality in developmental reading courses, one in a community college setting, and another in an alternative-admission setting at a public university.

Community College Context

The first illustration of intertextuality in a developmental reading course is at a large, Midwestern community college with an open-admissions policy. The college admits all students with a high school degree, but those students who demonstrate unpreparedness for college-level work, based on placement scores received on the Compass Reading Placement Test (ACT, Inc.), are required to take developmental coursework before taking courses for college-level credit. Developmental reading coursework offerings range from courses designed for those demonstrating a very low level of skills to courses for those who test just

below the college level. The highest level of these courses, Preparation for College Reading II, is the focus of this discussion.

Course Context. Preparation for College Reading II is a strategies-based course developed around the concept of intertextuality. A strategies-based text is used during the semester as a core text for explicit instruction in basic reading strategies. At the beginning of the semester, students focus on learning reading strategies such as how to read actively, how to identify the main idea and major supportive detail, and how to develop stronger vocabulary skills. Such instruction helps develop a stronger foundation upon which to incorporate deeper-level reading strategies. By the third or fourth week of the semester, students receive instruction on a strategy developed by Hynd (1999) and Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, and Hubbard (2004) based on the work of Wineburg (1991), which teaches students domain specific reading and learning strategies. This deeper-level reading strategy involves using multiple, conflicting historical texts and engaging students in intertextuality to learn to read and think critically (Newman, 2008). Table 1 includes a listing of the specific texts and materials used during this course.

These materials include a variety of primary and secondary sources of information on the topic of the Tonkin Gulf Incident of the Vietnam War, such as an autobiography from a former Secretary of State, a history book, a book published by a high-ranking military official about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, an editorial written by a history professor published in the *Christian Science Monitor* on the 20th anniversary of the Tonkin Gulf Incident, and a rebuttal to that editorial written by an archivist of historical documents from Indochina. During this unit, students read about the Tonkin Gulf Incident from a variety of perspectives, discuss their views on the various texts in class in small groups paragraph and then as a whole write multiple short essays designed to help them form their own interpretation of the historic event.

Additionally, a teaching method suggested by Nist and Simpson (2000) helps students develop discipline-specific knowledge and deeper-level strategy use. This method includes modeling the processes involved in using these strategies by showing examples on the overhead projector and the board, providing examples of these strategies, building in class time to practice using the strategies, and offering feedback to students on their use of the strategies through teacher evaluation. Students discuss difficult concepts and vocabulary in class discussions and share their responses in class. Moreover, students begin completing various charts and graphic organizers to help them interpret each author's position on the issues related to the Vietnam War and the

Table 1
Texts and Materials Used for Preparation for College Reading II

Source	Context Information
• Dean Rusk (1990), *As I Saw It*	• Former Secretary of State during the Johnson Administration; professor of international law, University of Georgia
• Berkin, Miller, Cherny, & Gormly (1990), *Making America: A History of the United States*	• Historians, a college textbook
• Gareth Porter (1984), Tonkin *Gulf Incident Editorial*	• Professor, City University of New York, a column in the *Christian Science Monitor*
• Phillip B. Davidson (1990), *Secrets of the Vietnam War*	• Former chief of intelligence for the United States Army, later publishing several texts on the Vietnam War; however, this information was withheld from students as part of the lesson on establishing an author's credibility when no information is available
• Douglas Pike (1984), response to Gareth Porter's editorial	• Archivist in the Indochina Archive at the University of California, Berkeley, citing evidence from *Military Events,* a work published by the People's Army of Vietnam Publishing
• Video: "Vietnam Lecture" (Steuck, 1990)	• A lecture on the Tonkin Gulf Incident given by Dr. William Steuck, a history professor at the University of Georgia
• Video: "The American Experience: LBJ" (1991)	• A PBS documentary on Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War

Tonkin Gulf Incident.

The charts and graphic organizers encourage students to use these intertextual learning materials to practice using Wineburg's (1991) heuristic, which includes sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration to arrive at their responses (see Newman, 2008 for a full description of this teaching method as well as the charts and graphic organizers used during this unit). This heuristic teaches students to consider the source of the information (the text), the context in which the text was written (time, space, political and social issues of that time, etc.), and collaboration (the agreement or disagreement among the various authors and texts about issues related to the topic).

University Setting

The second context provided here as an exemplar is a decentralized alternative-admissions developmental program (Johnson & Carpenter, 2000) housed within a Midwestern public university. The program consists of four components, each of which is housed in its respective academic unit: Literacy, English, Communications, and Math.

Students enrolled through this program are typically recruited through target high schools, which are selected based on student populations high in minority and low socio-economic status backgrounds. Typically, these students are identified as being ineligible for "traditional" admission to the university due to high school GPA or ACT scores. Once accepted into the alternative-admission program, students take a battery of placement exams for each area; placement for the Literacy courses includes a combination of ACT Reading Subtest and ACCUPLACER reading comprehension scores. For the literacy component, there is a two-course sequence: College Reading, and Reading and Study Strategies. The focus of the description that follows is on the first course, College Reading.

Course Context. College Reading is a text-based course developed around the theme of intertextuality. Because most students in the program enroll in this course during their first semester, novels are used as the primary, or core, texts as a way to scaffold students into academic reading practices using text genres that are familiar to them. The two core texts serve as the centerpiece and main conversations of the course. Currently, the core texts used in the course are a fictional novel, Jonathan Safran Foer's (2005) *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,* and an autobiographical graphic novel, Marjane Satrapi's (2003) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. In addition to these core texts, numerous supplemental texts are incorporated throughout the course (see Table 2 for examples of supplemental texts used in this course). These supplemental texts

Table 2
Texts and Materials Used for College Reading

Source	Context Information
• Introductory chapter from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*	• The main character in one of the core texts is a fan of Stephen Hawking
• The lead story of *The New York Times* from September 12, 2001	• A major event of one of the core texts is the September 11 tragedy
• An excerpt from a college-level history textbook on Hiroshima	• Another event mentioned in one of the core texts is Hiroshima
• A scholarly chapter on air attacks related to World War II	• Yet another key event in one of the core texts is the Dresden Fire bombings
• Music from the Beatles	• The main character in one of the core texts is a fan of the Beatles
• CNN footage from the Long Island Ferry crash	• This event is mentioned briefly in one of the core texts
• An excerpt of any film version of *Hamlet*	• The main character in one of the core texts is playing Yorick in a school play

connect in some foundational way to the conversations of the core texts; are typically expository and more academic texts; and include college-level textbook chapters, scholarly journal articles, historical chronologies, and primary sources, as well as pop-culture media texts such as songs, video clips, and film.

An illustration of the core-supplemental text relationships may be useful. Within the Foer (2005) novel, there is a textual conversation on the topic of the Dresden fire bombings; this conversation has a high expectation for background knowledge as very little is provided by the novel's author. At the same time students are being introduced to

this conversation within the core text, they are also assigned to read a supplemental text—a brief excerpt from a college-level world history textbook—that provides fundamental information and context on the Dresden fire bombings. As this conversation continues in the core text, students are also assigned to read an excerpt from a scholarly chapter on the use of air attacks in World War II.

The goal is to provide students with exposure to and experience with a variety of text genres, all the while ensuring that the course doesn't become too focused on literary texts, terms, or concepts. Further, the course is designed to welcome discussion about other texts students have read (cultural texts like movies, music, and art, for example). For example, students do usually have some schema related to the events of 9/11; they use their own understanding of the situation to interpret the *New York Times* article from September 12, 2001, as well as the related textual conversation within the core novel.

It is important to note, too, that in order to introduce the concept of intertextuality for first-year students, it is often necessary to first define texts. Some students have a very narrow definition of the term (just textbooks, for example), rather than a definition that includes written texts, cultural experiences, events, people, ideas, and so on. It helps sometimes to also introduce the metaphor of conversations, which we have used throughout this article, to explain intertextuality. That is, a text can be defined as a conversation that is informed by other conversations. The key idea to convey is that, often, if we aren't familiar with certain external conversations, our reading of conversations within a text will be qualitatively different and, potentially, far less rich. Intertextuality is a pedagogical approach to college reading that allows students to recognize when they might need additional information in order to have a richer conversation with a given text.

Final Thoughts

As stated previously, beginning college students often view reading—and learning—as a very passive process. Indeed, they often view reading as something akin to hearing (as distinguished from listening), as though the text author is *telling* and they, as readers, are supposed to sit back and just receive the information. An intertextuality-based course, however, challenges this analogy as students are asked to reconceptualize reading as a conversation—one in which they are active participants.

Future Directions

We have identified three specific foci for future consideration of intertextuality related to both research and practice. First, we are interested

in looking at how students use intertextuality when it is introduced as a reading and studying strategy. Specifically, we are interested in exploring whether and how students transfer this strategy to different learning situations and contexts. Perhaps a longitudinal study that investigates students' use and transfer of intertextual reading and learning strategies—over time and in other academic contexts—would be one way to approach this issue. In addition, we are interested in the writing aspect of intertextuality. We wonder if students who learn with intertextual materials write stronger essay responses and whether they are better able to talk about such texts in class. It would be useful to measure evidence of intertextuality in students' essays and responses to discussions in class. Discourse analysis may be useful in such a situation. Finally, we are interested in continuing to explore intertextuality as a philosophical model beyond the context of developmental reading and writing. For example, we have both incorporated this model in other contexts as well—in writing courses, in graduate-level teaching methods courses, and more.

In the end, through research and classroom-based developments we are looking for a change in the way developmental reading is approached, including the materials being used as well as the instructional philosophy. Intertextuality can help those responsible for curriculum development move toward a more meaningful experience for students. We advocate a curriculum designed to include multiple texts on a variety of topics, intertextual reading and writing about such texts, and authentic practice with critical analysis. In addition, discussion of texts is essential to developing the types of thinking involved when synthesizing, interpreting, and analyzing texts, as this is what is expected of college students at all levels. If the goal of developmental literacy instruction is, as we have argued in this article, to facilitate students' literacy transitions by helping them to reconceptualize academic literacy practices and better prepare them for the types of literacy practices they will be using in their college coursework, we have to move beyond the skill-drill models so widely used in our field.

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