

READING AND WRITING ARE NOT CONNECTED

Ellen C. Carillo

Since the 1950s we have been hearing that Johnny can't read. In 1975, *Newsweek* informed us that Johnny can't write, either. Over the years, a range of reasons for Johnny's illiteracy have been offered. Most recently, technology has been named one of the culprits. Johnny spends too much time on the computer and not enough time reading books. He spends so much time texting and tweeting that he has forgotten how to write correctly, how to spell, how to develop ideas in more than 140 characters. Public outcries about literacy (or lack thereof) often lead to a closer look at the education system. The public raises questions surrounding why colleges and universities in particular—where Johnny would be expected to gain in-depth and comprehensive literacy skills—are not doing a better job. What is often neglected in these public debates about the best way to teach literacy at the college level is that reading and writing are connected practices and, as such, the best way to teach them is together. It is a bad idea to continue privileging writing at the expense of reading.

This problematic separation of the connected practices of reading and writing is no longer an issue in students' early schooling, where they are taught reading and writing simultaneously. Although it took decades for elementary school teachers and curricula developers to realize that young children need not learn how to read before they learned how to write, language arts instructors now teach reading and writing alongside each other. They do so because research has shown that students learn to read and write better when they are instructed in both simultaneously. This research, for example, shows that students' phonic skills are reinforced when children practice both reading and writing the same

words. As they get a little older, students begin to develop an awareness of genres or types of text, which, like the study of phonics, is also further reinforced by a concurrent focus on reading and writing. As students read (or are read to) they learn to recognize typical elements of fiction, which they then imitate in their own writing and stories. Even a two-year-old who has been read to consistently will recognize that “once upon a time” indicates the beginning of a story, and will often begin that same way when asked to make up his or her own.

By the time students arrive in college, stories beginning with “once upon a time” are long gone, and in their place are difficult and dense texts—often multimedia texts— from a range of fields each with its own set of conventions. Instead of drawing on models of early literacy education that focus on teaching reading and writing simultaneously, college and universities largely privilege writing over reading. This hierarchy is evidenced by the universal first-year writing requirement in American colleges and universities, as well as by writing across the curriculum programs. The integrated approach to teaching reading and writing falls away to students’ peril and causes great frustration in the professors who often attribute students’ struggles in their courses to poor writing ability, when these problems are often related to students’ reading difficulties. While students’ eyes may make their way over every word, that does not mean that students have comprehended a text or that they are prepared to successfully complete the writing tasks associated with the reading, which often involve summary, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

More importantly, if students are not given the opportunity to continue working on their reading throughout their college careers, they may struggle analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating all that surrounds them since comprehension is a crucial step toward these more advanced interpretive practices. Students may lack the ability to read the world around them because they do not have the tools to recognize the values and assumptions that inform the images, advertisements, news stories, political campaigns, and ideas with which they come into contact on a daily basis. By not focusing on reading as an equally creative and active enterprise as writing—very much writing’s counterpart in the creation of meaning—colleges and universities are potentially producing students, or citizens, who think reading is passive. These students might blindly accept whatever comes their way rather than actively engaging ideas, asking questions, and seeking out multiple perspectives.

Although writing is more often thought of as a creative act, reading is just as creative. When one writes, one is creating meaning by putting words and ideas together. When one reads, the same thing is happening. Although someone else has already put the words and ideas together, the reader interacts with those and creates meaning by bringing her perspective, personal experiences, and background to what literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt has called the transaction between the text and reader. This is why a few people might read the same novel but each take something different from it. That personal transaction with the text has affected how each reader creates meaning. When reading and writing are taught alongside each other in the college-level classroom, students can gain practice experiencing and relishing in opportunities to create meaning not just through writing, but through reading everything from print texts to art to websites to national news events, all of which they will continue to engage beyond school. Focusing on active reading approaches, including everything from comprehension strategies to ways of determining something's inherent values and biases to productive methods of responding, is crucial if students are going to leave postsecondary institutions prepared to be informed, aware, and engaged citizens.

Unfortunately, there is still a great deal of work to be done since recent studies such as The Citation Project, a multi-institutional, and empirical research project show that students' reading abilities are largely underdeveloped. This research seeks to understand how students read sources and use them in their writing. With less than 10% of students using summary in their writing (as opposed to paraphrasing, copying, and citing), scholar Rebecca Moore Howard and her colleagues noted that their findings raise questions about students' abilities to understand what they are reading. Recent studies from Education Testing Services have corroborated these findings as did findings from studies conducted by ACT, Inc. and the Pew Charitable Trust, which found that close to half of the college students in their samples did not meet minimum benchmarks for literacy or lacked reading proficiency. These deficiencies are major problems particularly in this digital age for, as literacy scholar Donald Leu and his colleagues have pointed out, foundational literacies such as reading and writing print text will continue to play a crucial role—and maybe even a more essential role—in this digital age because of the proliferation of information.

Because there is so much at stake, educators and the public must keep the connections between reading and writing in mind as

we continue to engage in debates about the best practices for teaching literacy. The value of literacy undoubtedly extends far beyond school. To read and to write is to create, to interpret. If education is, in fact, a means to preparing citizens to function and participate within a democracy then reading and writing—and the interpretive skills they inculcate—are crucial. As research has shown, teaching them alongside each other reinforces both skills.

Even if we want to be a bit cynical and argue that postsecondary education has become nothing more than a necessary, but burdensome, step to gaining employment, both reading and writing are still just as important. A 2011 survey found that 86% of corporate recruiters said strong communication skills were a priority—well ahead of the next skill. In a 2013 survey of 318 employers published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 80% of employers said colleges should focus more on written and oral communication. In these and similar studies, communication is defined by reading and writing abilities. Employers want to hire people who can communicate effectively, and despite our culture's recent celebration of all things STEM, many employers continue to vocalize the importance of effective communication skills. Teaching reading and writing together will help students become more proficient in both.

Developing those communication skills means that those of us within education should look at the curricula we teach and/or administer and ask ourselves if we have fallen into the trap of compartmentalizing reading and writing to the detriment of our students. If we have, we must ask ourselves: how might we better integrate attention to both reading and writing in order to enrich the literacy education we are providing? We must not assume that simply exposing students to texts of all kinds and across all media will automatically result in comprehension. Instructors must deliberately teach students how to actively read the words and images and, by extension, the world around them. Instructors must do so not only so students can succeed in their courses, but so that students can be prepared to actively engage in the complex interpretive work that is expected of citizens in an information-rich culture.

We are all encountering more text and visual images than ever before. There is a great deal at stake if we don't take the opportunity to teach active reading alongside writing. Instructors need to teach students different strategies for reading the complex texts they will encounter throughout their academic careers and

in the world. One of these strategies might be rhetorical reading wherein readers pay particular attention to how a text is working on them, persuading them. A better understanding of this as a reader can also support students' writing as they develop their own arguments. Instructors might also provide a strategy such as reading like a writer, wherein readers notice the choices a writer has made and understands the relevance of those choices to their own writing. Without explicit attention to reading and the relationship between reading and writing, students will not have strategies for making sense of new or difficult texts, arguments, images, and ideas they encounter. Denying students the richness of an education that considers reading and writing alongside each other means denying them the opportunity to become as proficient as possible in these connected practices and, therefore, experience and practice the interpretive work that is specifically human.

Further Reading

For the media's contemporary coverage of the ongoing literacy crisis, see Sofia Westin's "Social Media Eroding Skills?" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), the *Bloomberg News* report "U.S. Teens Report Decline in Writing Skills," and Michael Rosenwald's "Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming" (*The Washington Post*). For historical coverage of this phenomenon see Rudolf Fleisch's *Why Can't Johnny Read?* and Merrill Sheils's "Why Johnny Can't Write" (*Newsweek*).

For contemporary, scholarly approaches that emphasize the importance of simultaneous instruction in reading and writing, particularly at the postsecondary level, see Robert Scholes's "The Transition to College Reading," Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem's "Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom," Alice S. Horning and Elizabeth Kraemer's *Reconnecting Reading and Writing*, David Jolliffe's "Learning to Read as Continuing Education," David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's "Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?," and Mike Bunn's "Motivation and Connection: Teaching Reading (and Writing) in the Composition Classroom."

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