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Book Review: Critical Reading in Higher Education

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Book Review: Critical Reading in Higher Education

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Manarin, K., Carey, M., Rathburn, M., & Ryland, G. (2015). *Critical reading in higher education: Academic goals and social engagement*. Indiana University Press.

Many educators have had an opportunity to wonder why students didn't do their assigned readings or why students do not "get" the reading they did do. We know that analysis, interpretation, and application are all tasks that are challenging for students to grasp. And yet, critical reading skills often take a back seat to other markers of learning in our undergraduate classes. These concerns prompted four educators from Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta to engage in *Critical Reading in Higher Education*, a project that blends the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) with critical reading and writing studies. Starting with the question "Can students read?," Karen Manarin (English), Miriam Carey (Political Studies), Melanie Rathburn (Biology), and Glen Ryland (History) worked collaboratively to produce a multi-disciplinary answer.

More specifically, this book asks: How do 72 undergraduate students read critically and in socially engaged ways in four first-year general education classes at Mount Royal University in Winter 2011? Though this question is context-specific, its answer has implications for the larger field of SoTL in the way that we teach and design assessments to support critical reading skills. In particular, this book helps readers grapple with how to support students in their reading for academic purposes and for social engagement. It also reveals some critical blind spots in the ways instructors interpret evidence of reading in student writing (e.g., research papers). To make the most of this book, readers should pay close attention to the critical reflection offered by the authors on how their practices changed based on their findings.

Critical Reading grounded its inquiry in The Association of American Colleges and Universities Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics. These comprehensive rubrics, first released in 2009, identified learning outcomes that are core to the undergraduate experience in three key areas: intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning. The criteria for the *Critical Reading* project were selected from across the VALUE rubrics, including categories that came from the reading, information literacy, integrative learning, and civic engagement rubrics. *Critical Reading* defines critical reading as "reading for academic success" (p. 4), which the authors suggest generally includes "identifying patterns of textual elements, distinguishing between main and subordinate ideas, evaluating credibility, making judgments about how a text is argued, [and] making relevant inferences about the text" (p. 4). The authors also develop a concrete distinction between transmission and transactional models of readings. To summarize, the transmission model assumes that through reading, a meaning is transmitted from the text to a reader; the transactional model assumes that through the reading process, a reader constructs meaning themselves. Of these two models, the transactional model allows for a deeper critical engagement with a text and with the reading experience and process.

To assess the extent to which students read critically, the authors used reading logs, writing assignments, and research papers. They divided the reading tasks in their courses into "reading to learn" (p. 50) and "reading to integrate" (p. 50) activities. The authors used reading logs to capture the formative reading to learn process, and primarily used cumulative research essays to capture the summative reading to integrate process. The consistent prompts the authors used across all four classes' reading logs were: "What (is this reading about)?" "So what (does it mean)?" and "Now what (are you going to do with this information?)." These questions prompt students to summarize, provide interpretation and analysis, and make connections as they read to material outside of the

text. The research paper assignments were not aligned across the four courses, and each was designed to suit the context of the discipline.

The book is organized into five main sections. The first chapter “Different Courses, Common Concern” is a lengthy description of the courses included in the study, the general education context and program at Mount Royal, as well as the methodology and SoTL context. The second chapter, “Can Students Read?,” summarizes the main findings from the reading logs based on the VALUE rubric criteria. The third chapter, “Critical Reading for Academic Purposes,” looks closely at the research integration activities and their implications. The fourth chapter, “Critical Reading for Social Engagement,” focuses on the absence of social engagement in student writing and how this can be rectified. The fifth chapter, “So Now What?,” offers critical reflections on the project as a whole and includes the next steps the authors took based on their findings.

The main findings to the prompt “Can students read?” were mixed. Overall, the authors determined that the majority of students were able to comprehend readings at a minimal benchmark level. When it came to interpretation and analysis, there were also positive results with most students meeting the benchmark level for interpretation across all four courses, and most students meeting the benchmark level for analysis across three of the four courses. The authors note, however, that these activities required prompting and were often not applied to other contexts. When it came to evaluation of reading materials, students consistently performed poorly, with fewer students actively acknowledging their own assumptions. Finally, the authors did not uncover a developmental pattern, meaning students did not improve their critical reading skills over the course of the term, even with explicit instruction and prompting.

The authors admitted to surprising discoveries for both critical reading for academic purposes and critical reading for social engagement. They found that when writing research papers, few students read more than they had to. In most cases, students were able to master the form of a research paper without reading their sources deeply. The authors determined that summary and synthesis of readings should be more explicitly prioritized when assignments are created to see deeper evidence of those skills. Similarly, they found that reading for academic purposes discouraged reading for social engagement. Again, the assignment type impacted the degree to which social engagement took place. Reflective reading produced more social engagement than research papers. The authors usefully noted that, again, explicit prompting made a difference. In particular, by asking students to connect their work to their non-academic lives, there was a clear uptick in social engagement and more application took place.

By far the best chapter in the book is its final chapter “So Now What?,” where the authors reflect on their findings at length and discuss the broader implications and changes they have made in their instruction. They recognized that “many of the issues we complain about are of our own making,” (p. 87) such as encouraging superficial reading practices, valuing the number of references, and discouraging sustained engagement with other voices. They found that the assumptions they had about student reading did not hold up under scrutiny. As instructors, this discovery pushed them to: make students more accountable for their readings, focus on aligning their assessment tasks with their desired reading outcomes, and prompt students to make connections between their courses and their non-academic lives. The authors determined that students also need to write, particularly about readings, and engage in skills like summary writing that are often not prioritized in assessment schemes.

One pleasant surprise was the thoughtful “Coda on Collaboration.” One of the significant features of this four-author volume is that it is entirely co-written, with all of the sections adopting a single voice and narrative throughout the book’s chapters. In the coda, the authors discuss the

challenges of collaborative scholarship, including planning for changes in participation, acknowledging different degrees of contribution, and ensuring consistency across the project. They emphasize the importance of relationship management and agreed upon roles and responsibilities, as well as the value of working through small pieces. All of these lessons are integral for those working in cross-disciplinary SoTL projects.

There is much that we might take away from the findings in *Critical Reading*. Perhaps most important is that students' level of engagement with the texts they read is closely tied to instruction. Repeatedly, prompting is identified as an essential determining factor in the degree to which students meet critical reading criteria. The authors observed that "students can be coached to display particular traits in writing about their reading," but conversely, that "prompted levels of engagement did not remain when the prompts were removed" (p. 46). For instructors, this may mean reconsidering tasks associated with readings, including opportunities for students to write and reflect on the reading. Similarly, for educational developers and instructors alike, this may mean spending more time on constructive alignment between outcomes and assessments, as well as asking more questions about the role that readings play in a course's overall design. *Critical Reading in Higher Education* prompts necessary SoTL questions about the assumptions instructors make about their students and ourselves when it comes to the core skill of critical reading. Take this book as a call to action to reassess the way that reading is structured in your course.