The First Principle is to awaken oneself. Once that is realized you can accomplish anything with ease.
—Awa Kenzo, Archery Teacher (trans. John Stevens)

In the case of the smallest or of the greatest happiness . . . it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”

I know.

The words of a Japanese archery teacher who lived at the turn of the last century and a German philosopher best known for his aphoristic paradoxes and a massive moustache make for an odd opening to a discussion of developmental reading.

But I want you to try and forget what you know about developmental students, what you know from years of disciplinary study, from retention initiatives for at-risk populations, from philosophies that emerged from open enrollment policies, from the students you saw struggle with language last week while balancing a schedule with too many non-credit hours and too little time for reflection. Even try and forget what you know from the successes of giving students more attention and engaging them while they simply read and write more. This will be hard because we intuitively and experientially know that context and memory are keys to understanding sites of developmental education. Try anyway.

Why?

Because I really don’t know.

I don’t know what a developmental student is, and I haven’t since I started my teaching life in a basic writing class in 1994 with some good training, some supportive colleagues, and a closely read copy of Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations (1977) to pick me up whenever I got down. I still don’t have a profile in my head of what a developmental student is, how s/he differs from a freshman who begins college life without mandated supplemental instruction. I’ve never believed or worked well with deficiency models of learning, so I’m resistant to defining any student population (especially since I now work at an Hispanic-Serving Institution1) by an assumed common lack, educational background, or environmentally shaped attitude towards learning.

Forgetting Developmental English: Re-Reading College Reading Curricula
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This sense of my own lack and my resistance to deficiency models, which I think combine to
create in me an active forgetfulness, is heightened by the state context that will emerge and
demand my attention as a developmental coordinator in the coming years. By 2012, the
developmental landscape of Texas higher education will change. Currently in the works are
initiatives by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency
that will create an End-of-Course Exam system for high school students, one that will establish
two sets of standards by which to determine (1) whether students can graduate from high school
and (2) whether they are “Career and College Ready.” In effect, the developmental program that
I coordinate will have to come to terms with a re-categorization of entering students. This may be
a subtle shift to the student population for whom I design curriculum—same people, just “not
college ready” instead of “not Texas Success Initiative (TSI) compliant.” Or we could welcome a
new generation of high school graduates that have a more diverse range of reading, writing, and
rhetorical experiences, students who help us morph developmental education into voluntary
supplemental offerings for across-the-core-curriculum classes. Or a new articulation may be
hiding behind the Magic 8 Ball’s ambiguity, challenging us to re-imagine the sites we set up
where learning, reading, and writing can happen.

Whatever the consequences of End-of-Course Exams, and however incremental any change will
likely be, I am reflecting more and more on what I think I know about the space my current
developmental students occupy when they show up for the first day of English 1310-Reading
Strategies\(^2\). What do they need to be more successful and confident readers, more comfortable
with the continuous cycle of discomfort that learning will entail, regardless of how ready we
determine them to be in high school?

The simple answer: They need to learn to forget what they think they know about college
reading. Students need to come to know and engage reading in its most complicated context, as a
continuously interpretive act we experience as we try to make sense of the world we are a part
of; as a structured act we categorize and practice in formal educational situations that we give
names to like “college reading”; and as a potential activator of theories that connect our college
courses to each other and to extra-curricular contexts. In other words, a reading class that is both
potential exit and entrance to higher education is the perfect place to model synthesis and
dissonance negotiation, the necessary place where student survival will depend on, not reading
critically in the popular yet illusive sense of thinking critically, but critically reading the univer-
sity as quickly as possible. Echoing what Elizabeth Wardle says about teaching writing in “‘Mutt
Genres’ and the Goal of FYC” (765-67), I can’t teach students exactly how to read in college, but
I can expose them to and discuss with them our understandings of reading and college student
readers. I want to suggest here that we should take on the challenge of re-reading a
developmental reading course in terms of its interstitial space—as a threshold between the
assumed past known of high school and the unknown of college. I want to explore how my
colleagues and I took our version of a first-year writing studies curriculum and created a reading
studies curriculum that is both practical and theoretical. And I want to argue that both the
challenges and benefits of such a meta(peda)gogy are desirable, even preferable, to more
traditional strategies-based approaches if we want to spark student engagement and increase student confidence in unfamiliar reading contexts.

TEXTURE: LISTENING TO INTERSTITIAL VOICES
While describing the reading curriculum we piloted, assessed, and are subsequently adjusting, I want to make room for what my students said about reading in general, about our first shared reading, and about how they compared voluntary and required reading.

Here’s the quick and dirty of our first three weeks together:

- I found out student schedules, majors, and interests;
- I asked students to write about and discuss their relationship(s) to different types of reading;
- we practiced reading, summarizing, and responding to Deborah Brandt’s “Remembering Reading, Remembering Writing”; and
- we listened and responded to individual discussion-starter presentations about texts that students chose to read and their approaches to reading them. Examples included how a bilingual student reads a Spanish-only sports magazine, how a graffiti artist re-reads *Twilight* before she watches the movie for the first time, how an ambitious student reads an Amy Tan essay to impress her first-year writing teacher who actually gives feedback on all her writing, and how students read my body language when I walk into our 7:45 am class.

After these opening activities, we generated a chart that compared reading Brandt to reading the variety of texts that students chose outside of school requirements. We kept adding to and revising the chart throughout the semester as we added more student readings. We also worked in assigned readings like David Jolliffe and Allison Harl’s “Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Studying the ‘Reading Transition’ From High School to College: What are Our Students Reading and Why?” and Christina Haas and Linda Flower’s “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and Constructing Meaning.” And we watched a video interview between Bill Moyers and Mike Rose.

Here is a sampling of our initial comparative stab (I’ve changed all the names but mine):

- Sophia: popular fashion magazine with Harold and Kumar on the cover; read it when I’m bored (in my house), or when I’m going somewhere. Attention getter: celebrity picture. Comparison to Brandt: I read the pictures first, and the magazine gets flipped, and I know what to look for on the page, where things should be; with Brandt, there is no flipping, and there are just words on the page.

- Lettie: *US* magazine; read it whether it’s quiet or loud. Attention getter: cover. Comparison to Brandt (or something for class): With the magazine, I jump around. Brandt is quiet. Even with *US*, I avoid the long articles. Brandt doesn’t stop. *US* uses images and notes to tell us what the written text is about.
Colin: *Frog Belly Rat Bone* by Timothy Basil Ering; read it out loud to my kids and I do different voices for all the characters. Attention getter: the art—messy and beautiful, and we always notice something new. Comparison to Brandt: I wouldn’t do voices with Brandt, even though she has quotes. That would be weird (but why?).

Robert: *Eurosport* (Spanish); read reports of multiple soccer teams and look at the pictures. Attention getter: look for team jerseys in two-page spreads. Comparison to Brandt: I take notes on something like Brandt. I wouldn’t take notes on the magazine, but I talk about it with friends.

Oscar: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*; read it in my room with music on, and other people can be around. Attention getter: I saw the movie before, so I’m reading for more details, and I want to compare it to the film. Comparison to Brandt: I’m much slower with non-fiction, and I don’t read the books in order. Brandt is start to finish.

Veronica: Celebrity magazine borrowed from a friend; read it when I get a break; Attention getter: someone I recognize; Comparison to Brandt: When an article is “boring,” and there are no pictures, the content isn’t interesting. And I just can’t deal with the fact that Brandt’s long.

Perhaps, through these examples, we start to see why I’m drawn to developmental education. There may be something similar in our attention spans. But that’s first shine. I do get bored quickly, and I really get bored when everyone starts using the same words like “boring” and “long” and “no pictures.” So I pushed the students to tell me more about the how. Turns out, they make my habits of skipping all around an article or randomly pulling passages from where a book falls open seem sedate.

Veronica knows when her friends pick up new issues, and she waits a day or two so they can talk about what they find, often using this interaction to break the tedium of school work, and their talk is always in public loud places (performance). Oscar has never talked about how he only reads novels after he sees the movies because someone once acted weird about it, like he was backwards. But Oscar can tell you exactly what details are missing from the film’s opening that are important to understanding the story (comparative literature), and they all laugh at me when I spell Azkaban wrong. Robert knows how to quickly read the overwhelming stats columns for his favorite soccer teams, and comments on how the magazine’s glossy shots are cool but not the “pivotal” points of the game (visual narrative). Lettie likes clues to lead her through a magazine (mystery) and Sophia needs to move around often in her magazine (kinesthetic) to stay involved.

Students can call themselves bored or lazy, and we can reflect that projection right back (if we’re not guilty of perpetuating it), but these people are complicated and struggling to be engaged. This is one consequence of not rigorously contradicting real world/higher education assumptions. My students are systematic readers waiting for a lens through which they can see their abilities, a theory to help them build bridges between reading situations.
COLOR: DESIGNING A READING STUDIES CURRICULUM

You can get a detailed look at an entire semester’s sequence for the class by looking through the documents we’ve made public on Google Docs (“English 1310: Reading Strategies”). We use a small set of readings about reading by teachers and reading specialists. We ask students to bring in readings from other classes and extra-curricular interests. We require short, revisable writings built around a question, summary, and response to every reading. We ask for a weekly vocabulary journal that prompts students to explain words in academic, non-academic, and real but incorrect contexts. We’ve recently added a teaching dimension. Each person has to bring in a text and teach us in fifteen minutes a “meaningful” way to read it, coupled with an explanation of why. We’re also currently experimenting with “cold readings” on the subjects of reading and college students, in which we’re asking students to respond rhetorically to a variety of new texts throughout the semester, as a way to build their stamina with the unfamiliar and to balance the potential and fluidity of our particular class with the pressure and demands of other high-stakes reading situations they are facing in their classes. In short, I and the teachers I work with try to establish an immersive reading environment that is . . . well, impossible to navigate with guarantees of destination. An object lesson about reading can’t get much clearer.

I want to draw attention to one intention that played out for us in our curriculum before offering concluding thoughts about how we are re-reading reading in developmentally labeled spaces. I specifically wanted to challenge students to develop a vocabulary—not of big words, and not through suffix and prefix lists—but a vocabulary of reading. Ambitious, but I wanted to see what student theories of reading would look like when you asked the people on the threshold to thoughtfully straddle the divide. People like James told me to keep at it and offered blog reflections like this:

This semester has been crazy with reading and summaries and articles which seemed like they would never stop coming. It’s such a relief now that I am able to understand what I am doing. Before the semester had started I read, but didn’t know there were different types of structured reading. This class has taught me how to focus on the reading and understand the different types and understand what kind of reader that I am. When starting the semester, the first reading was by Deborah Brandt, and I was like what the hell—I won’t be able to read this, even though I have read articles which are about history, hunting, fishing, and four by fours. But nothing like this. As the time has progressed, it felt like the articles would never stop coming and coming, but as they came I found myself being able to read it a little bit easier than I thought I would have before. I never realized that there were at least four types of reading levels—content, informational, rhetorical, and texted. Before this class I knew how to read but I didn’t know that I was an informational reader. And I never thought I would end up being a content reader. I am able to read and formulate in my mind what have I just read. In other classes, I was told to read, but it was never explained to me the purpose and the ways of reading.
James still sees what he’s gone through as a story of lack being filled, and we’ve talked about that. We’ll keep talking about it as long as he comes around to talk about school and get feedback. But what stands out is the language he uses to talk about reading, the way he’s expanded on Haas and Flower’s informational and rhetorical frame to add “content” from Jolliffe and Harl and “texted” from a week long discussion about student reading and writing that happens under the radar, that proves students are reading and engaged, just not always with a paper book and a windowless classroom. He’s building a language for talking and thinking about reading; he’s analyzing his past and present acts; he’s getting meta- and he’s beginning to see more potentials for connection and less for boredom (his signature word for Brandt’s article, which he eventually read three times in the first five weeks of class).

James isn’t a model for the outcome of this curriculum, and that is the most exciting part. Each student became a very different reader, with very different strategies, and unique perspectives on how they would approach their future classes. And some disappeared—from class, some from the university. But the threshold seems a bit more permeable and a bit more transparent now, and I occasionally hear past developmental reading students who are in my 1302 this semester talk about how they’re reading an assignment or each other’s writing projects. I hope what I hear is the sound of a network forming. For now, that’s what I’ll read into it.

**JUXTAPOSITION: REFLECTING TOWARDS READING META(peda)GOGIES**

At the end of piloting a reading curriculum that takes reading, reading contexts, and human relationships to reading as its objects of study, our greatest success was in shifting the terms of our engagement with reading. We also never let Brandt’s concern with reading-writing connections go, always writing and talking about how our ideas about each were and weren’t affecting each other. We collected a lot of new words in our vocabulary journals, and we created a lot of charts with comparisons of readings, reading strategies, and reading goals. But the satisfaction came in the language of the culminating portfolio cover letters students wrote (like James’ blog). In my class, we honestly spent the first two weeks discussing boredom, its characteristics, its causes, its relationship to understanding, and even how we assume its connection to apathy and slacker or lazy behavior.

And instead of tuning it out, I forgot to get bored and started to listen. I’ve heard about Amy Tan in new ways. I started reading my student’s responses as someone with little connection to their contexts. I even took on the challenge of reading *Twilight*, though I couldn’t make it sing like the graffiti artist did. I asked a lot of questions. I depended on them to summarize and respond to a text, to fill in the gaps, to help me understand what they do and what they think they do as readers.

Reading about reading also shifted our awareness of reading expertise. The language of reading was the water we drowned in from day one, and we learned to breathe it relatively quickly to spark confidence in our developmental students—confidence in their reading, in their writing, in their complicated lives as students. In the coming years, we will tap that confidence and begin to re-imagine the often-debilitating notion of expertise with our reading and writing students, creat-
ing a culture of *becoming readers* that isn’t just romantic or practical, hidden or necessary. Students can take a reading and develop its significance from one course to another. By continuing to develop reading-about-reading curricula, I think we become more capable of forgetting to “essentialize personal experience” (Horner and Lu 202-03)—better able to offer a space for reading where students can interpret their experiences, intervene in them critically, and begin to understand the personal as theoretical, as inventive, as anything *but* basic.
NOTES

1. For an introduction to the contested territory of HSI’s, see the variety of perspectives in Cristina Kirklighter, Diana Cárdenas, and Susan Wolff Murphy’s edited collection, *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned at Hispanic-Serving Institutions* (2007) and “The Illusion of Transparency at an HSI: Rethinking Service and Public Identity in a South Texas Writing Program” (Charlton and Charlton).

2. Because of the developmental curricula we’ve developed in conjunction with our total first-year program and the timing of several systemic events—the THECB’s attempts to take stock of programs and practices through the Developmental Education Program Survey, the College and Career Readiness Standards high-school and college alignment initiatives, and the THECB’s move to rearticulate developmental programs in Texas with initiatives like the 2010-11 Developmental Education Demonstration Projects for Public Universities grant—our writing program will be discussing and revising our developmental course titles, catalogue descriptions, and student learning outcomes throughout the coming year. We will eventually have on the books some version of the “Reading Strategies” course I discuss here, one that combines the study of reading theory and college student reading experiences with supplemental work designed around students’ outside-course readings/concerns. The course is currently titled English 1310-Reading & Vocabulary and has the following course description: This course offers students the opportunity to develop their ability to read college-level materials. Emphasis on vocabulary and word recognition skills, comprehension skills, study skills, and efficiency in content area reading. Required of students with reading skills below college level. Course does not satisfy general education requirements.

3. I have in mind here the overused or mis-used “master student” understanding of strategic learning. Our awareness of drawbacks to skills-based strategy models (Simpson and Nist 528-29) have not eliminated them. They still play out in a variety of threshold learning contexts such as learning centers, introduction to university studies classes, and writing programs staffed by adjuncts or long-term lecturers who may not have the time or desire for professional development and mentoring related to learning-to-learn pedagogies.

4. While one of my over-riding programmatic concerns was to create a reading curriculum that would set the stage for our credit-bearing first-year writing classes, the people I worked with over the last two years were invested more in creating productive student-teacher interactions. I am indebted to the teaching assistants and the over two-hundred students in our pilot Reading Strategies courses for their work, their input, and their general willingness to balance resistance with experimentation. I have to remind myself every semester that, for both new developmental students and teachers, a sense of not belonging pervades the course before we ever meet. The largest contributor to this sense, I’m convinced, is the culture of deficiency promoted by placement tests, the non-credit status of our “college preparation” courses, complicated advis-ing systems, and *What Color Is Your Parachute?* diagnostic testing in introduction to university studies courses. For more of what teachers and students in this curriculum think, please visit our public [English 1310 Feedback folder](#) at Google Docs.
WORKS CITED


Wardle, Elizabeth. “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?” CCC 60 (June 2009): 765-89. Print.