

Value in Disruption: A “Reading is Research” Pedagogy for Library Instruction

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Introduction

Our collaborative project and resulting pedagogy emphasize student-centered learning and critical reading and introduce a disruptive challenge for students to question assumptions, challenge binary thinking, and tolerate ambiguity. Using class readings, library research, and innovative assignments and course design, this project, along with others it has inspired across campus, helps students focus on the reading and critical thinking aspects of research, which are often assumed rather than explicit in a research assignment. With the goal of affecting habits of mind, we measure success in incremental shifts in thinking. Our project aims to get college students to consider research as a conversation rather than a checklist of steps. Recognizing that students need guidance and practice with critical reading, Stephanie Otis, then instruction coordinator at Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, and Dr. Joyce Dalsheim, professor of global studies, developed this pedagogy and programmatic strategy for library instruction called Reading is Research.

In a 1990 conversation with Myles Horton, Paulo Freire suggested that it is important for students to know that “reading is a kind of research.”¹ The goal of our pedagogical approach is to shift the focus of research from information gathering to in-depth reading,

analysis, and construction of knowledge. This focus supports dialogue between students, teachers, and librarians in the learning process. Librarians take the journey through reading with students, struggling through difficult texts, not as experts but learning and discovering new concepts and connections with each reading or analysis. The approach disrupts student expectations by subverting some power-based structures and roles in the classroom and emphasizing the central role of critical reading in successful authentic research. James Elmborg speaks to the value of student autonomy: “By developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them.”²

Through in-depth reading and critical thinking, the classroom becomes the setting for dynamic discussions of information sources and the ideas, questions, and connections they inspire. According to Michelle Reale, “It is through dialogue, relentless questioning, and the decentralization of authority that a level playing field is created where students are encouraged to express their own thoughts and come to their own conclusions.”³ The Reading is Research approach asks students to generate and support those thoughts and conclusions with their critical reading of significant texts. We ask students to accept responsibility and a degree of vulnerability in sharing in the work of critical reading; instructors and librarians must agree to do the same. Emphasizing the challenge of critical reading in library instruction creates opportunities for growth not just for students but for faculty and librarians as well.

Critical Reading Connection

The initial Reading is Research project gave shape to a programmatic approach that prioritizes learners’ agency and research as a conversation. In this context, critical reading provides a foundation and strategies that emphasize reading for a purpose: reading to make connections, reading to develop ways of thinking, and reading to create new knowledge. Students are encouraged not to connect the reading only with their personal experience and existing knowledge but also to work to incorporate what they are reading into a framework for thinking about new content and future questions.

The Reading is Research instructional philosophy involves working with students to build and strengthen their critical reading, critical thinking, and information competency skills so that they can better understand the process of research. They consider readings in relation to each other—who the author is responding to or relying on and who is in turn continuing the conversation with that author. As they read, discuss, and write, students develop higher-level thinking skills, such as evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.

In each of the settings to which this approach has been applied, the critical reading focus means shifting away from research instruction as a how-to demonstration or a keyword-driven search for sources. In the global studies courses, where the project originated, class readings consist of scholarly articles and book chapters that apply theory to world events. With these sometimes-challenging sources, librarians support students as they identify patterns in the text, determine main ideas, make judgments

about how the text is argued, and consider how that argument might apply to other content or contexts. We ask the students, “Is this idea/theory from the reading good for thinking with?” A critical reading focus replaces the cut and paste, Frankenstein-monster assemblage of random sources. Students instead focus on reading and synthesizing a curated collection of sources in order to explore a topic and develop a meaningful research question that is more authentic to the idea of the scholarly conversation.

Teaching Strategies

The Reading is Research project was developed when librarian Stephanie Otis and Professor Joyce Dalsheim discussed their ideas for improving students’ abilities to read deeply and to engage in high-quality, authentic research. They believed that students had difficulty finding and using quality information sources because they lacked critical reading skills and were not motivated to explore at more than a cursory level. Additionally, they were concerned that students struggled with the expectation that they synthesize quality sources and apply theory in their writing. With this serendipitous conversation about shared goals as a starting point, they developed plans to center critical reading in Dalsheim’s sophomore- and junior-level global studies courses.

Two significant departures from traditional research instruction drove the Reading is Research approach. First, the librarian was involved in these courses as an ongoing partner rather than as an occasional expert visitor. This meant that the librarian took part in discussions, completed reading assignments, and was aware of the expectations for the students and their levels of performance. Second, the class began talking about research in connection with the assigned class readings rather than through library database searches or discussions of research topics. Demonstrating for students that each new reading presents a challenge to understand and engage with the scholarly conversation, even for professional academics, sets the tone for the active, shared experience of the course.

As Stephanie assumed the responsibilities of her new position as associate dean for public services, librarian Catherine Tingelstad (chapter co-author) and other librarians took responsibility for leading and expanding the Reading is Research instructional initiative, building on the strategies that had been developed and applying them to new courses. Early each semester, we introduce strategies for reading scholarly literature using a resource titled, “Tips for Reading Academic Material,” created by Professor Dalsheim. Librarians guide students in applying these tips as they work with scholarly articles so that they begin to understand the importance of reading academic materials critically. These guidelines emphasize that critical reading and thinking skills can be developed through instruction and practice. The tips encourage students to read articles multiple times for different outcomes, to identify the main point, the evidence, and the theoretical argument, and to connect the topics to contemporary issues. This document helps set expectations for how students will interact with assigned texts and how their understanding of those texts will translate into discussions and essays.

TABLE 44.1*Tips for reading academic material.*

Steps	Actions
Read actively.	<p>Don't wait for the author to spell everything out for you. Instead, think to yourself: The author's central argument is... How does the author know that?</p> <p>As you read, have a conversation with the text. (This is ridiculous! Wow, what a brilliant thought!) Move your conversation from a general acknowledgment that you are learning new content to a deeper engagement with theory, methods, and ways of thinking.</p>
Read three times.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="413 614 1188 813">1. Overview (about one-tenth of time spent on the reading). Read quickly, scanning for high information content. Your goal is to get a quick and general picture of the writer's purpose (central arguments), methods, and conclusions. Look at the copyright date and flip through the bibliography. <li data-bbox="413 826 1188 1296">2. Read for understanding (about six-tenths of total time). Once you have a general idea, you can read more carefully to gain a critical, thoughtful understanding of the key points. Make sure you understand well enough to explain in your own words. Think about what you have read in light of other readings. How does this author add to or change the scholarly conversation? Focus especially on the beginnings and ends of chapters or introduction and concluding sections of an article. This is often—but not always—where the author will summarize arguments. Look for sentences or paragraphs that summarize the main points. Then go back and read again to make sure you understood those points. <li data-bbox="413 1309 1188 1715">3. Read for note-taking. Write a summary. Look over the reading a third time as you make brief notes about the arguments, evidence, theory, and conclusions. Include just enough detail to let you remember the most important things (about 3 pages of notes per 100 pages of text). Use a system that lets you easily find places in the source (e.g., start each note with a page number). Consider typing notes directly into bibliography entries using citation management software such as Endnote. This way, the notes and the citation information always remain together. Over time, you accumulate a library of notes you can easily search and consult.

Steps	Actions
Enhance your understanding.	Find out more about the broader scholarly conversation in which this reading fits. Who does the author cite? With whom is the author arguing? Look for other authors who cite this article or book. Read related material.
Think critically and deeply about the reading.	First consider the arguments and evidence provided. Are you convinced? Next, think about the reading in relation to other readings. Does this sound familiar? Is it new to you? How does this reading relate to other readings? What ideas does it expand on? Whose ideas does it agree or disagree with?
What is the theoretical argument?	Can you explain the theory used in the reading in your own words? Most importantly, ask yourself, Is the theoretical argument good to think with? Does it help to explain something that would not otherwise be clear? What insights have you gained from the author's use of theory? Is the theory generalizable? Can you apply it to other cases?
How does this article relate to important contemporary issues?	What processes and/or structures are explained in this article? How are those related to current global problems, conflicts, or crises?

A semester-long assignment in the global studies courses is the creation of a Key Terms Journal in which students explore complex concepts that authors analyze, discuss, and debate. The Key Terms Journal, with its network of connections, serves as the basis for the final assignment, which may be a comparative essay or a literature review. Another important assignment in the global studies classes is the Response Paper, in which students respond to the readings through analysis and identifying connections. Response Papers are the foundation for scaffolded work throughout the semester resulting in a final essay. Students are asked to engage with each reading and discuss a concrete argument or a specific quote. They are encouraged to consider a central topic that arises and connect it to other readings in the course, or they can develop a set of questions that could potentially lead to a new research question. The Response Paper provides students with the opportunity to interact with the readings on a more sophisticated level than they would if they were to provide an emotional reflection on the readings.

Outreach and Programmatic Strategies

To introduce the foundational principles of this work to faculty and instructors and connect to other courses to support success at critical reading, Joyce and Stephanie developed a workshop to share their ideas and progress. Held each spring for four years, the workshop invited faculty from all disciplines across campus to consider a version of

Reading is Research for their own teaching. The workshops were both theoretical and practical, covering the pedagogical underpinnings of the project as well as examples of class activities, semester plans, and assignments. Teaching faculty and librarians attended the sessions, and discussions at the workshops yielded new connections, ideas, and insight for critical reading and research instruction. While there were a variety of small shifts and changes reported as a result of the workshops, two significant projects were inspired by the original Reading is Research efforts.

After the first workshop, instructors in the University Writing program were energized by the initial project's focus on reading, student-directed learning, and authentic assignments. They had been discouraged by generic research topics and cobbled-together final papers that relied on ill-chosen and random information sources. To remedy these concerns and to center student choice and autonomy in a productive, supportive way, the writing instructors decided to replace the final research paper with a Readers' Guide assignment. In collaboration with the library, UNC Charlotte University Writing instructors Cat Mahaffey, Linda Hoffman, and Gretchen Pratt developed this innovative assignment along with smaller assignments and class activities building toward the Readers' Guide in the structure of the course. Rather than leaving large portions of the research process and final paper for students to conceptualize and tackle on their own, this supported and scaffolded approach makes critical reading a shared and explicit part of class instruction. The focus on research as a conversation in these courses is based on Kenneth Burke's parlor metaphor.⁴

TABLE 44.2*Reader's Guide assignment*

Overview	You will adapt your Research Logs into a digital Reader's Guide on the line of inquiry (i.e., Guiding Question) you've researched. You'll want to show readers that you have read and understood some of the main issues, concerns, controversies, and viewpoints that are part of the Parlor (conversation) you've been exploring.
Purpose	You will listen in on the Parlor of your topic by gathering a collection of sources that you will read, engage with, and determine to be building blocks to understanding the discussion. Then you will organize and synthesize your sources (voices in the Parlor) so that future researchers can piggyback on your work and build upon rather than duplicate your research.
Audience	Your imagined audience for your Reader's Guide will be future researchers specific to the topic you're exploring. Your real audience is peers in this course and future UWRT students. This is a formal, academic audience.
Genre	The guide will consist of a collection of at least 8 sources that you as the editor choose, categorize, and synthesize for your audience.
Platform	You may choose between using Google Docs or Google Slides to create your ebook.

Smaller assignments leading to the final Reader's Guide include a Guiding Question Infographic and Research Logs to support student success at choosing, critically reading, and synthesizing quality sources throughout the inquiry process. As in the original project, engagement with the library began with the class readings. Students were asked to make connections between two related sources, using critical reading to approach the mechanisms of scholarly conversation, synthesis, and authentic research questions.

Another workshop attendee, the director of the Honors College, also saw potential for revising her course using tenets of the Reading is Research approach. In her Slow Reading class, this professor hoped to deepen the reading-focused strategy to slow down research activities and move students away from a research process that rushed toward binary certainty with simplistic sources. In a course focused on reading a novel one chapter at a time to connect with significant questions and topics of interest, she wanted students to make a comparable effort at developing and exploring a meaningful research question. Rather than establishing the topic and question as the first step in the process, the revised course asked students to critically read secondary sources to slowly build toward an interdisciplinary, complex research question connected to authentic scholarly conversations. Students were asked to explore a secondary source related to a topic or issue in the novel in a weekly blog post. With guidance and feedback from the professor and librarian, students articulated their critical reading of the source in writing. These weekly pieces supported a more nuanced understanding and discussion of the topic by building from one source to the next, shifting direction along the way as necessary. As with the first-year writing courses, this process guarded against the simplistic assemblage of sources that were collected quickly in one search and only cursorily considered for excerpt and defense of a position in the final paper.

Discussion

It has been seven years since the implementation of Reading is Research at UNC Charlotte. Faculty who have incorporated this approach to structuring their classes have reported that their students are challenged to think critically and independently, and that while this is a new class model for them, the students often move beyond uncertainty and frustration as they begin to understand why critical reading is central to the coursework. Instructors also find that students demonstrate higher-level thinking skills and critical thinking in their writing, in part due to the scaffolded work that is incorporated in the Reading is Research course design. One of the greatest benefits for us as instructors is witnessing the transformation that takes place each semester in students' approaches to research and learning along with their growing confidence in their abilities. While the shift for students may be small, we recognize the importance of laying this foundation for their future engagement in the world.

Professor Joyce Dalsheim explains, "Students are sometimes confused at the outset. Having been trained throughout their educational careers to provide the 'correct' answer, or to give back to instructors whatever it is they think the instructor is looking for (Freire's 'banking method'), they often worry that they might not get things 'right.' But once they

start working on these assignments, many students come to appreciate the room they've been given to think. We often find that this approach enables students to innovate, make connections, and come up with ideas that instructors might not have considered. One student, remarking on the Key Terms Journal, said she literally spent hours thinking and writing with it, finding all sorts of ways the material covered in class was interrelated. She found the exercise joyous."

Over the years that this program has developed, and through its various iterations, some best practices have emerged for an ongoing focus on critical reading in library instruction. First, this approach relies on close and significant collaboration with teaching faculty. While this type of instruction can and should be advocated for by librarians, it works best when incorporated thoroughly into a course in response to the needs of students in that discipline or course. Second, this approach requires deep engagement in the course by the librarian. Rather than acting as the "sage on the stage," the librarian is a partner alongside the students as they chart the course of their learning and reading development. Third, a focus on critical reading works best with shared material for students and teachers to work through together. While it may seem counterproductive to spend entire class periods discussing assigned reading, it demonstrates the necessary skills and focus of the course in a supportive way and communicates that good research isn't plucked out of thin air. Finally, rather than making the challenge and purpose of this work a mystery to students, sharing the reading tips early in the course and making the focus on reading transparent from the outset helps set the tone for learning and growth.

To further the success of a critical reading program for research instruction, we would consider placing even greater emphasis on critical reading for improved synthesis of sources and ideas. Even with our extensive work on critical reading with students, this aptitude remains an opportunity for improvement. To achieve this emphasis, it is critical to build a scaffolded program for critical reading skills. When the building blocks are placed in lower-level college courses, students can progress to ever more sophisticated integration in their upper-level work. A year-over-year progression would also soften the surprise and resistance students often demonstrate to this new and disruptive way of thinking about their learning.

Reading is Research asks students to read deeply for a purpose and asks faculty and librarians to take time in their teaching to make critical reading skills explicit, guided, and well-supported. Students read not to memorize content but to gain fluency and confidence in scholarly conversations. Critical reading is reading to think, not reading to repeat. As these examples demonstrate, the approach is most powerful when it happens in a sequence of connected courses, as it emphasizes ongoing development and incremental growth.

Conclusion

Emphasizing student-centered learning and critical reading, Reading is Research has coalesced into an overall approach of iterative instruction that supports dialogue between students and teachers in the learning process. Recognizing students' challenges with critical reading and analytical thinking, this pedagogical strategy creates opportunities

for students to build these skills in the classroom “laboratory” through participation in active reading, discussion of assigned texts, and written assignments that stress connection and synthesis. The various initiatives based on this philosophy, taken together, provide a student-centered model for building on critical reading skills throughout students’ university careers. This approach to information literacy instruction recognizes that library partnerships have the potential to shape curricular change in support of critical reading.

Notes

1. Myles Horton, Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Marshall Peters, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 37.
2. James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 193.
3. Michelle Reale, “Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Library Instruction That Gives Voice to Students and Builds a Community of Scholars,” *Journal of Library Innovation* 3, no. 2 (2012): 86.
4. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 110–11.

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