

## White Paper: Defining College-level Reading

In comparison to the massive amount of literature and theory around developmental psychology and reading in the P-12 environment, very few reading studies and theories have been developed or applied in post-secondary learning. In 2007, Alice Horning made one of the first and most compelling arguments for understanding and teaching reading at the college-level. She outlines the difficulty of college students in working with rhetorical text and outlines several strategies for colleges interested in teaching reading across the curriculum: understanding reading, overt teaching of critical reading skills, providing opportunities for practice, and learning to read in specific disciplines. With writing across the curriculum strategies as a foundation, she also addresses digital texts and issues of plagiarism. Nevertheless, her study observes the lack of focus on post-secondary reading ability and the need to better understand the ways that reading contributes to competence and success across all civic situations, disciplines, and professions. As Horning (2012) explains, students can read many digital texts because they are short and shallow; they lack what she defines as “academic critical literacy.” She describes the concepts as the “psycholinguistic processes” developed in schools and beyond of determining meaning from all types of texts for “analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application” and are “essential to human functioning in a democratic society” (Horning, 2012, p. 14).

With Michael Pemberton, Horning (2013) edited a special issue of the journal, *Across the Disciplines*, focused on reading across the curriculum. From this collection, one can gather many insights related to the P-20 continuum and reading competency; these insights can help us begin to better understand the differences between college-

ready reading and college-level reading. Specifically, this white paper will focus on the insights of three of the articles found in Horning and Pemberton's collection. Steven J. Pearlman (2013) discusses the issues of citizenship and democracy as they relate to reading in, "It's Not that They Can't *Read*; It's that They *Can't* Read: Can We Create "Citizen Experts" Through Interactive Assessment?" Lynn Rhodes (2013), in "When is Writing Also Reading?" addresses specific skills that might be taught in college classrooms, suggesting that college-level instructors engaged in teaching reading should offer a coordinated curriculum or effort. Finally, Sandra Jamieson (2013), notable for her work with citation in the field of composition and rhetoric, applies her work to the reading environment in "Reading and Engaging Sources: What Students' Use of Sources Reveals About Advanced Reading Skills."

Pearlman explicitly develops his argument about college writing from an understanding of adolescent literacy. He explores the difference between literacy and "reading," arguing "students turn to patchwriting because they intuitively understand that they cannot engage the subject matter in a truly meaningful way." Vygotsky's notions of sign and tool underpin Pearlman's argument, and Pearlman is engaged deeply with notions of human development as central to the processes of reading and understanding. Pearlman applies his theories in a writing course, finding that, "Teaching students to understand the conventions of a discipline, though inarguably valuable, might not go far enough; if we really want students to comprehend in that word's deeper meanings, we need to *involve* students in the practices of the discipline."

Like Pearlman, Rhodes also observes that much of the struggle for

college-level readers involves reading comprehension and lack of disciplinary understanding. Rhodes connects this with P-12 practices, suggesting that elementary and secondary teachers, due in part to the Common Core, teach close reading, meta-analysis, and synthesis but often focus on very simple or creative texts. Additionally, she argues, at the college-level, instructors have less flexibility to accommodate students who might have weaker skills or need additional, differentiated instruction. Rhodes uses these observations to describe a college-level reading program and assessment at one institution. Her primary finding is that common expectations for college reading must be outcomes-based and centralized in order for faculty and students to succeed.

Sandra Jamieson has produced a large body of research around issues of citation and literacy. The Citation Project findings include many interesting observations about how students work with texts. For example, Jamieson finds that students do not often cite information from throughout the text and instead focus only on a sentence or two. Students also frequently only cite the first or second page of sources. She also observes that students use a strategy Rebecca Moore Howard (1992), a collaborator on the project, calls “patchwriting,” whereby students “‘borrowed’ phrases, patched together into ‘new’ sentences; they ‘borrowed’ whole sentences, deleting what they consider irrelevant words and phrases; and they ‘borrowed’ a hodgepodge of phrases and sentences in which they changed grammar and syntax, and substituted synonyms straight from *Roget's*.” (p. 235)

Jamieson uses the work of The Citation Project in the *ATD* special issue on reading across the curriculum to make an argument about college-level reading instruction. Her main contention is simple: colleges must understand that students need help with reading. Colleges cannot assume that students already possess this skill at a

level that is appropriate for most college-level work, and their lack of facility with citation demonstrates an inability to meaningfully engage with texts. Jamieson recommends that first-year writing instructors must understand the skills their students possess when entering the class and suggests a strategy offered by Horning (2011) that involves offering short assessments of student ability to paraphrase and summarize in order to determine their ability to engage with texts as they read.

While we have not provided an exhaustive review of the current research on college reading, we chose a focused approach in order to highlight some common areas where more research and understanding are needed in order to understand college-level reading improve instruction. Although Pearlman engages with developmental psychology and adolescent literacy, he does not offer ways to connect what is learned in P-12 environments with what is learned in the college environment; instead, he offers an intelligent strategy for engaging students in disciplinary understanding. What is missing, however, is potentially the most crucial piece for student success in college reading: how do college-level faculty build from literacy practices of the P-12 environment in order to ensure that students do not experience gaps in understanding, content, and skill?

Although P-12 experts would suggest that Rhodes' argument regarding *less* flexibility at the college-level is questionable, they would not find her observations about text type contentious. As suggested in the previous section, the Common Core has moved to focus on informational texts; this does not mean, however, that the texts are more complex. Like Pearlman and Rhodes, Jamieson observes that success as a college-level reader relies on disciplinary comprehension. Jamieson cautions that pedagogies must be differentiated for varying levels of skill. Given Rhodes observations about the need to

standardize instruction and expectations, how can college-level instructors best understand and differentiate for student ability without compromising these common outcomes?

More research is needed to accurately define college-level reading in contrast to college-ready reading. The review of this limited sampling of articles on college-level reading does, however, begin to offer a starting point for this work, by providing a picture of the kinds of challenges faced by students transitioning into college-level reading. To operate as effective college-level readers students need to be able comfortably read texts from a wide range of academic disciplines, and apply to reading tasks an understanding of the conventions of academic research and discourse (Pearlman 2013). College-level readers also need to be able to effectively read, comprehend, and apply complex texts, while understanding how those texts function in a range of disciplinary environments. (Rhodes 2013). Finally, in order to become effective contributors to the academic discourse community, college-level readers must be able to conduct research, find appropriate sources, and summarize, analyze, synthesize, and cite these sources; tasks that aren't possible without the ability to meaningfully engage with complex, scholarly texts (Jamieson 2013).

### References

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