*Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, theoretical, and practical background readings*

Armstrong et al.

*Notes*

Chapter 1: Introduction

Teaching of reading to underprepared college students has been a fixture of American higher education since the 1800s---Hunter Boylan reminds us of this and what a great way to start this volume.

I didn’t actually know about Martha Maxwell and her pioneering work and her influence on such organizations as CRLA and NADE. I liked Maxwell’s ideas of making developmental courses more like learning centers---open to any student.

The volume’s first chapter is dedicated to some of the most important figures in reading studies such as the aforementioned Martha Maxwell, Walter Pauk, and Norman Stahl. In fact, the latter author provides selected references for further reading. This reference list includes some of the most influential and seminal scholarship in the field of reading and learning and it is my goal over the next year to make myself familiar with as many of these publications as possible. I believe starting with the 1990s up until present would be the most useful and then perhaps some of the earlier works.

Chapter 2: Cross-Level Conversations

Unsurprisingly for me, a general argument that has existed since at least the 1940s is that college students do not read widely, often, or critically. The call has long been for post-secondary reading programs to help students meet the reading demands of college. After reading this section it got me thinking about the extent to which we are providing the means to raise the overall reading literacy rate of our students in the integrated reading and writing course.

One of the principal theoretical foundations for the concept of developmental reading instruction comes from Patricia A. Alexander who, based on her research, put forward six characteristics of lifespan reading development:

1. Readers’ knowledge of language and knowledge of content domains are critical forces in developing competence.
2. Readers’ personal interest in reading becomes a driving force in their development as competence is achieved.
3. Lifespan development involves systematic changes in readers’ strategic processing.
4. Reading development is a lifelong journey that unfolds in multiple stages.
5. Profiles of successful and struggling readers are reflective of developmental forces.
6. Readers in acclimation are especially vulnerable and in need of appropriate scaffolding.

For me these principals underpin much of how we should go about thinking about reading and reading instruction. Essentially, much of the discussion here is comparing two dominant perspectives on reading development: emergent literacy and the long-term development process.

Chapter 3: Student Population and Diversity

Naturally this chapter caught my attention as I deal with such a diverse group of students every semester. William S. Gray, often referred to as the father of the modern field of reading pedagogy and research, echoes the concerns already mentioned, i.e., that college students are generally not adequate readers. What strikes me is how this same issue has not gone away. I would guess there is a larger systemic or social problem that seems intractable.

Articles in this chapter on minorities indicate that a large percentage of developmental classes are populated by minorities. This is not a surprise. Research indicates that these students have problems with textual analysis, problem solving, and critical thinking---again these issues have roots in the secondary school system. One of the calls to action that resonated with me was the need for literacy support. The ALC at SLCC is a step in that direction, but needs to be expanded.

Failure to acquire academic literacy has many causes, such as:

1. Reading instruction stops once students move into middle school.
2. Students with poor single-word decoding skills or poor fluency read far less than their reading-enabled peers, which results in deprivation of background knowledge. Poverty of background knowledge limits future learning.
3. A lack of prior reading experience affects a student’s ability to learn academic writing.

Chapter 4: Structuring Postsecondary Reading

In this chapter I focused on a model for structuring developmental reading instruction that provides students with experiences making connections across texts. This model emphasizes intertextuality, i.e., an approach that teaches students to link unfamiliar texts or ideas with prior knowledge. This, I believe, is one of the key strategies for helping students in the freshman courses. Although some disagree with the strategy, I have found that exposing students to sample readings from various disciplines is beneficial as they can get an idea of the various styles and conventions of writing while also making those important connections.

I also liked the article on accelerated courses. The basic argument presented in an acceleration model:

1. Reduction in the number of stacked courses in order to move students into college courses sooner.
2. A reduction in the use of high-stakes standardized placement assessments
3. Contextualized, authentic, and supported developmental curricula.

I would comment that placement testing is a tricky issue and we are seeing this now at SLCC. There is a real need to overhaul our placement system so it is more accurate. Also, the need to support developmental students is again emphasized, i.e., learning centers.

I want to quote the following because I think it’s important to remember: “Postsecondary institutions have stubbornly enacted policies based on the belief that learning to read should have been accomplished by third grade, and learning to write by twelfth. Accordingly, there remains a prevailing attitude at many institutions that any postsecondary instruction in reading and writing is *de facto* “remedial,” and, thus, vulnerable to political and educational forces aimed at its removal.”

The above quote is from the article on IRW and was related to the argument to protect developmental reading and writing by integrating. Moreover, IRW is arguably the best model. I have always agreed that the courses at SLCC should be combined, especially since I’ve taught both.

Other models offer interesting ideas, e.g., learning communities and contextualized teaching and learning.

Chapter 5: Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

Here are five areas to consider when teaching reading:

1. Locus of instruction: in essence, there are two choices: direct skills-centered instruction, or functional, content-centered instruction. (I favor content-centered)
2. Reading demands of various subjects
3. Study, i.e., helping students learn to study effectively
4. Reading materials: how to balance the type and amount of student reading selections
5. Age focus: reading instruction should be at all ages as reading abilities have no upper limit

Other authors in this chapter emphasize a disciplinary literacy model as appropriate arguing that explicit instruction is needed to help students recognize the specific literacy practices inherent in various disciplines. Again, I totally agree and this should be a strong element in IRW.

A rather long article that was a report of a qualitative study on students in a history course produced the following insightful conclusion: reflection coupled with authentic activity is the key to effective reading and critical thinking. The question for me is how do I encourage my students to effectively reflect on what they read and what kinds of authentic activities can I come up with? For now, I think the journal assignment I already use is a step in the right direction.

Chapter 6: Instruction: From Vocabulary to Comprehension

Do we teach vocabulary? In ESL, without doubt, how about developmental classes? Another way of asking the question is does vocabulary instruction directly improve reading comprehension skill? According to some scholars, two factors are necessary to make vocabulary teaching effective:

1. Large percentages of the words in the reading musts be taught
2. The words must be learned well

I was aware of #2, but not so much #1. I never wanted to overburden the students with new words. However, more is better it would seem. When I think about teaching words well I have used the methods of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan in their book *Bringing Words to Life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. This book revolutionized the way I taught vocabulary and the article in this chapter shares many of the same techniques. Also, I see vocabulary instruction only in ESL now, which I think is unfortunate. As the author remarks, “With so much to cover and so little time, vocabulary instruction remains dispensable in the minds of many developmental educators. Unless the instructor has actually studied the research in detail, he or she does not realize the long-term importance of this significant literacy component. Once college reading professionals gain a better awareness of the need for dynamic vocabulary instruction, they will be passionate about their students’ vocabulary development.”

I was so happy to see the article at the end of this chapter by Eric J. Paulson who argues that college reading programs should prepare students for a lifetime of reading. I agree with Paulson that there is great value in a course where students self-select readings for enjoyment. Paulson’s research demonstrates the benefits that I have also observed and confirmed some of my assumptions about wide reading and deep reading.

Chapter 7: Placement and Assessment

Again, the need to seriously revise our placement system at SLCC, I’m looking forward to seeing the results of our efforts to create a 6-level ESL program that will lead to Engl1010, removing most ELLs from developmental courses and redesigning the dev courses to properly accommodate mostly native speakers who need college preparation.

The authors in this chapter offer their own models of assessment, but since I’m not an expert in this area it is hard to draw any real conclusions as to what might work for SLCC. I’m hoping those who are experts will be influential and overcome political issues.

Chapter 8: Professional Development, Training, and Credentialing

The first article in this chapter was rather intimidating: a checklist of competencies for college reading specialists. However, it demonstrated areas where I believe I am strong, which was encouraging, but also areas I need to work on, which is a call to action. Where I score high on the checklist: reads well, broad academic knowledge especially in humanities and social sciences; where I need to improve: theories and models of learning and reading.

The final sections relate to areas of teacher preparation including research on best practices and support for part-time faculty.