Reading in a New Age: How Do Students Read Assignment Prompts?

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This SoTL-driven study used Read Aloud Protocols (RAPs) to explore the question, how do students read assignments? Reading theory suggests that students will draw on schema in order to make sense of what they are reading. This study explored the strategies that students used to read and interpret an assignment and examined the ways that schema contributed to their understanding of the prompt. Participants in a second-year college class focused on interdisciplinary liberal arts read an assignment aloud and articulated their thought processes as they recorded themselves. Results suggest that students limit themselves to the most easily accessible schema rather than reaching for more depth from less immediate schema. This finding has bearing for faculty in how they construct their assignments and the assumptions they make about what students bring to an assignment.

In the wake of a mass and abrupt switch to remote learning in higher education in the spring of 2020, the need is more pressing than ever to understand not only how students read but also how they read assignments. Because of the transition to remote learning, more communication is taking place through writing. While in a traditional classroom environment students can ask clarifying questions about assignments and faculty can explain the details of assignments, much of this standardized face-to-face interaction is now mediated through learning management systems that require sophisticated literacy skills. The challenge with this shift in learning is that to date few studies exist related to how students read assignments (Rank & Pool, 2016); and the limited research we do have suggests that prompts often have shortcomings that impact student comprehension. For example, Shaver (2007) argued that students often regard assignment prompts as confusing, continuously moving targets that leave them unsure of what is expected. Andersen (2016) maintained that even the way students visually approach assignments can affect how they are able to read and interpret them.

Just as the literature about how students read an assignment is minimal, students' college-level reading comprehension abilities have been the subject of minimal scholarship. Indeed, as Joliffe and Harl (2008) asserted, "despite the attention paid to student reading in the national surveys, relatively little scholarship has examined empirically what, how, and whether college students actually do read and how reading thus figures in the transition from high school to college" (p. 600). In other words, more research that explores the student reading experience is necessary, especially when it comes to the ways students read assignments. While more insight has been achieved in the years since Joliffe and Harl made their argument (see, for example, the substantial work of Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, & Ryland, 2015), specific exploration of how college students read assignments is still warranted. This study used a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

framework, drawing upon read-aloud protocols that consider student reading processes.

According to Ericsson and Simon (1987), read-aloud protocols (RAPs) access information from students' short-term memories. Following Ericsson and Simon's RAP methodology, I asked students to verbalize the thoughts that came to mind while reading an assignment out loud. This activity verbalizes the cognitive process of reading. Researchers like Witte and Cherry (1994) and Smagorinsky (1998, 2001) have argued that RAPs are socially situated and therefore dependent upon the social construct in which they take place. While Ericsson and Simon maintained that the RAP should not be a deliberate communication between the subjects and the researchers (i.e., it should simply be an expression of thought processes), the students with whom I worked clearly understood the social situatedness of the endeavor. Some students saw RAPs as direct communication with me, as they occasionally addressed me by name and asked specific questions, even though I was not present during the reading, processing, and recording. While the students' need to communicate directly with me points to the value of social context, the scope of the study did not include exploration of the dialogic nature of the process. Despite the inseparability of the cognitive and the social, the goal of the study was to better understand what confuses students in their reading of assignments, how they approach a text (even if they feel the author is present), and what they are missing in terms of strategies to negotiate the text so that faculty can write assignments that are accessible to students and instruct students in how to read the assignments.

To limit the scope of this study, I approached it by acknowledging particular assumptions I had about how students would read an assignment for the RAP. In retrospect, I recognize that the assumptions may have been optimistic. In the assignment, for example, I quoted the learning outcomes from the syllabus that the assignment was designed to meet. I then developed the content of the assignment around the outcomes and used

the same language from the outcomes in the rubric for assessment. I assumed that students were familiar with and understood the learning outcomes that were cited; it was also assumed that students would be able to follow the line of thinking and see the connections between the learning outcomes, content, and rubric. Furthermore, it was assumed that students would be familiar with the vocabulary used and that they would be able to break down what was asked of them into smaller, more manageable pieces in order to complete the assignment.

Literature Review

As colleges and universities face increasing criticism over student literacy skills (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008) and everyone must navigate the emergence of "fake news" (Hessan & Bernoff, 2019), student literacy skills demand attention. Current research suggests that expectations of our students' reading skills greatly exceed the traditional capacity to find information and summarize and identify the main idea (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012). In addition to mastering traditional reading skills, students must be able to critique a text, analyze it, and synthesize ideas across multiple texts. They also must be able to "detect bias, missing points of view, misleading slants and economic influences" (Jazynka, 2017, p. A25). In the classroom, reading theory underlies what we know about how students read. The way students apply reading skills to assignments may shed light on the effectiveness of their skills.

Manarin et al. (2015) defined four reading characteristics that exceed symbol decoding, arguing that reading, regardless of its purpose, requires four basic skills: comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. As their descriptors, Manarin et al. (2015) used ideas from the VALUE rubrics (AAC&U, 2009), defining the four terms as follows:

- Comprehension: the ability to summarize text and recognize its implications
- Analysis: the ability to recognize and use features of a text to support understanding
- Interpretation: the ability to construe meaning from a text and recognize different ways of reading
- Evaluation: the ability to identify and analyze one's own and others' assumptions. (p. 30)

Manarin et al.'s (2015) research shows that first-year college students were able to comprehend, analyze, and interpret with little difficulty, in part because the interactions taking place were more aligned with the transmission of knowledge; however, these researchers also found that the students struggled with evaluation, which is a more transactional approach.

Rosenblatt (1994) explained the difference between transmission and transaction. In transmission, students read for specific information: a dissemination of information from one party to another. In transactional reading, on the other hand, readers read to make meaning. The meaning does not exist solely in the text but is a negotiation of meaning between text and reader.

It is also not surprising that Manarin et al.'s (2015) students struggled to evaluate or "identify and analyze one's own and others' assumptions" (p. 30); doing so requires relativistic thinking as described by Perry (1970), who argued that college students move through stages of cognitive development with evaluative skills developing as part of relativistic thinking.

The work of linguists in the 1980s and 1990s underscored how students were able to interact with a text, maintaining that students rely on their schema. Early work by Piaget (1952) laid the groundwork for schema theory. Piaget's model of development suggests that learners incorporate new information into their existing knowledge base as they develop, or adjust, their knowledge base/schema to accommodate new information. In essence, schema theory is a constructivist paradigm suggesting that individuals learn in relation to what they already know and in the contexts in which they know them (Gee, 1989; McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005). Schemas provide structures through which learners can see and interpret the world (Johnson, 1987). By drawing on pre-existing knowledge and the circumstances in which this knowledge occurs, readers comprehend, analyze, interpret, and evaluate texts.

Methodology

To answer the research question, *how do students read assignments, and, by extension, what reading skills do they tap into?*, I tried to understand what was happening cognitively as they read the assignment. How did they interpret the words on the page? What did they understand? Where were the disconnects? What worked? How did they manifest their comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation?

Following Ericsson and Simon's work (1998) on protocol analysis, I enlisted the assistance of six volunteer students from a second-year college liberal arts course on literary criticism within a framework of heroines and heroes as applied to the film *Star Wars*. I both modeled and gave students instructions (orally and in writing) for a RAP. I asked the students to read the assignment out loud and articulate what was going on in their head as they read. I modeled what this stage of research looked like and provided instructions in writing as well as a sample. Students read and recorded their protocols outside of class time and sent them to me. I then transcribed and coded them first for

synonyms, as per Ericsson and Simon (1993), and then for general themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) around schema and connections to background knowledge. The synonym analysis looked for specific instances in which students restated language in the prompt with a synonym of their own in order to gauge the comprehension that Manarin et al. (2015) identified as essential to reading. The synonym analysis also showed how students interpreted what they were reading. Attention to schema elucidates the scaffolding that has happened (or needs to happen) in order to read the assignment effectively.

Findings

Synonyms

Using anonymized transcriptions of the RAPs, I first compared the RAP to the original assignment prompt and looked for synonyms. Ericsson and Simon (1993) explained that this low-level RAP analysis provides insight into what students have understood. I looked at the ways that students paraphrased or restated what was in the original assignment prompt; from the six subjects, I coded 22 instances of synonym use. The most commonly synonymized word was "framework". The assignment asked students to choose a framework in which to examine a text. Students provided synonyms for the term "framework" by drawing on class knowledge, offering terms, such as "like from Jung, the archetypes", and "hero's journey". Both of these examples draw from language and concepts covered in the class curriculum. Similarly, when asked to think about "multiple contexts" in the same assignment, students paraphrased with synonyms such as "different things that we've looked at, like Star Wars, in this case"; "supporting evidence (class discussion, class readings, etc.)" was translated into "so in-class stuff or out of class stuff", "supporting evidence as in like what we read", and "talking about the context of a Star Wars story and evidencing it with our readings".

Schema

For the second round of analysis, I looked for evidence of schema that informed student understanding. Students often referred specifically to their classroom experiences to make sense of the reading. For example, they used phrases such as "frameworks that we studied in class", "I remember that day in class we talked about the chicken and the egg example", and "I remember in class we talked about how main characters are all human". Each of these examples points to specific memories or experiences in this class that shaped the participants' interpretation. Other references to prior knowledge include citation of a specific assignment and a specific

text. For example, "we touched on that in our assignment with the slide show" and "different things we've looked at, in this case, Star Wars". As these examples show, a particular schema was specific only to class and the activities and language that students drew upon. In other instances, there was a complete lack of schema, suggesting that, at times, the students simply did not have the background knowledge, either from this specific class or elsewhere, to navigate the assignment and its expectations. Responses that indicated this include, "I don't remember us ever going over something called a cultural dependence". In this case, the student pointed to a concept they did not recognize (cultural dependence) and reframed it as a noun outside of their schema.

Furthermore, expressions of confusion around vocabulary seemed to be linked to students' schema or lack thereof. For example, students stated, "not sure what they mean exactly by context", "I'm a bit confused on what context is referring to here", and "I have no earthly idea what a cultural dependency is and what that would do on the portrayal". Each of these three expressions of confusion about vocabulary refers to vocabulary used in class multiple times. This uncertainty suggests an inability to make the connection between class material and the assignment itself. In other words, these samples indicate an incapacity to transfer understanding and comprehension from one setting to another or to draw upon background knowledge.

In addition to queries about schema and background, questions and points of confusion emerged. Students probed for further explanation or for a restatement of what they thought was expected of them. For example, students posed the following clarifying questions:

> Okay, now I'm wondering if we have to choose a Star Wars movie or if it's the one we're studying for the whole semester . . . so I'm wondering if we have to choose one or if we have to talk about that one.

> So that means we need to be analyzing in a modern sense? Or if it was 1970s, are we thinking about it in sense of that? What does that mean?

> Would we be only going over the episode or the entire series in general?

> So I'm guessing that if we choose the thousands of stories, we can choose either Campbell or Hudson's approach to see what the egg is within the chicken.

As these examples indicate, students sought clarification about the difference in temporal framework as a reference to what they were expected to

represent, and attempted to clarify what text or framework they were expected to use. In other words, their questions focused on obtaining the right answer or finding the exact information that was expected. They did not ask, in comparison, higher-order thinking questions or questions that took the assignment as an opportunity to go beyond meeting basic expectations. They engaged in transmission rather than transaction.

Finally, the RAPs demonstrated an element of self-doubt. At times, the students simply did not understand or lacked confidence. Phrases like the following illustrate this trend: "Sorry. I'm confused", "maybe I'm just misunderstanding the question", and "I don't 100% understand what that was saying".

In summary, then, students used synonyms to restate and process their information using other language from class to do so. Analysis of the RAPs for evidence of schema revealed that participants drew upon material from class but also had some gaps in their understanding of class material, as evidenced by expressions of confusion. They also asked questions that sought to find what they deemed as the "right" way to do the assignment and in doing so expressed a lack of confidence.

Discussion

Synonyms

Synonyms are important because they illustrate how a reader understands words and, therefore, ideas. Each one of the synonyms identified in this study signals a specific connection to language already used either in the assignment or repetitively in class. Such choices of expression suggest that students had developed some understanding of class material. This finding aligns with that of Manarin et al. (2015), who found that the students they worked with had a baseline level of comprehension. However, the evidence in this study suggests that they did not interpret these words and ideas to understand them more broadly or to connect them in ways beyond the immediately obvious. Reuse of the very language they had just read indicates that students did not interpret the prompt beyond the specific, initial meaning or effectively decode the words. This observation raises questions about evidence of the schema that the students brought with them and their ability to access it, as manifested by their RAPs.

The students' experiences with synonyms and the examples of how they tapped into a schema signals that, despite having a baseline understanding, they did not have a complete understanding of some of the vocabulary in the assignment and therefore may have only had a baseline understanding of the assignment. Thus, while the synonyms support Manarin et al.'s (2015) finding about baseline comprehension, examining them from the perspective of schema

evinces some gaps. In this case, the schema necessary to get to baseline comprehension is either lacking or circular, leaving students to define words with the words themselves. This finding connects directly to the assumption that I made about students understanding the learning outcomes and the language being used across the syllabus and assignment. It appears that students did not understand the language I assumed they knew or the connection between ideas. Instead, they were stuck at surface-level interpretations.

Background Schema

Schema is the background knowledge that students bring to their reading in order to make sense of it; it is the tool with which they make meaning. While students need reading skills like decoding and syntactic analysis, Ozura, Kempsey, & McNamara, (2009) argue that the ability to connect new ideas from a text to those already part of the schema is the most important element of reading. Prior knowledge typically helps text comprehension because it accommodates for gaps in the text (Ozura et al., 2009). The data, in this case, suggest that although they drew on insights they gained in class (as suggested with the synonyms "the hero's journey" or "Jung's archetypes" for the word "framework"), students did not forge connections beyond class to other ideas they might use to interpret or inform their understanding. Given that the setting was a second-year liberal arts course designed around integrative thinking and making connections from diverse places, the findings demonstrate that when reading assignments, students were unable to, or chose not to, go beyond the immediate ideas presented or to draw from their schema to interpret what was being asked in more complex ways. They seemed, instead, to be caught in Perry's (1970) stage of dualism, trying to find the "right" answer.

Close examination of this model of schema and reading characteristics as applied to the challenge of reading college-level assignments introduced some interesting challenges. First, the reading experience was expected to be a transaction or transmission of information, which raises the following questions: what schema do the students have in place to be able to receive and interpret the information? How much room for interpretation is there? Should students be evaluating their assumptions as they read an assignment (as suggested by the VALUE rubrics used by Manarin et al., 2015), or are they trying to interpret the text within new or nonexistent schema? Second, do the students have the schema necessary to comprehend, analyze, interpret, and evaluate? I have always written my assignments assuming the answer is yes.

But the answer is more complex than initially thought, in part because one of the learning outcomes

for the program that is highlighted every semester in every course is "the ability to critically and thoroughly examine one's own assumptions and the assumptions of others" (Champlain.edu). Manarin et al. (2015) posited that one issue students must contend with is the different genres in which they are asked to read. When it comes to actual written assignments that faculty prepare for the students, students may be reading an assignment from a professor in their disciplinary field or from a professor in a required general education class in which they do not have expertise: they lack the schema to understand what they are reading, and the assignment becomes almost impossible to follow. Shaver (2007) explained that assignments are complicated and students lose out even if the content appears to be explicit. Students will do better if faculty name assignments in ways that draw upon previous knowledge and expertise. In other words, intentionally build on the schema students are expected to have.

The third challenge in applying Manarin et al.'s (2015) breakdown of reading skills to college writing assignments is that part of reading consists of the visual cues of space, white space, order, and so on. Andersen (2016) argued that students need to be taught how to read in different ways, stating that "research on information and document design has long shown that visual cues increase readers' ability to find the information they need and to understand and act on that information" (p. 15). Anderson (2016) added that understanding the role of visual cues is particularly important when trying to understand assignments that are dense and "prose-heavy" (p. 15).

Finally, there is a persistent argument that students simply are not ready for the kind of reading expected of them at the college level. For example, Bosley (2008) argued that students do not have experience with complex texts and do not understand how to construct knowledge during the reading process (i.e., engage in a transaction with the text). They do not know how to bring questions to texts, and as a result read at a surface level, giving up if the task is too hard (Manarin et al., 2015). This response may also apply to the assignments that students read.

Transaction or Transmission

Students in this study often did not see reading an assignment as a transaction or negotiation of information. They saw it strictly as a transmission of information. In other words, they approached the assignment as if there was one correct way to read it and no room for variance, suggesting that they were in Perry's dualistic stage of development (1970). For example, some students addressed me directly, saying things like, "I'll ask you about this, Professor", making the reading of the text an interaction between faculty and student rather than a negotiation of ideas. This

finding supports Smagorinsky's (2001) assertion that the "study of cognition, from this perspective, cannot be isolated from its social and cultural relationships" (p. 234). However, this conclusion contrasts to Ericsson and Simon (1984, 1998), who argued that a RAP is a pure representation of a cognitive process divorced from the context in which it occurs. The meaning-making that takes place is restricted to synonyms that draw directly upon language from class rather than from a broader scope of ideas; that is, there is no apparent negotiation or struggle to find meaning. Meaning is a regurgitation of someone else's language, like "the hero's journey" or "Jung's archetypes" for the word "framework". This connection to language that comes directly from class readings, discussions, and assignments is connected to students' schema.

Assumptions

Going into this study, I tried to identify the assumptions that I had about the students and their processes in reading assignments (Bernstein, 2018). I assumed that students would be able to follow my line of thinking and see the connections between the learning outcomes, content, and rubric. Whether students actually saw the connections was not clear, as they did not make any overt associations between the outcomes, the content, and the assessment. At the very least, they were not recursive in their thinking (i.e., going back and forth between the ideas) or in rereading parts of the assignment. They were purely linear: start at the beginning, read, then finish. They did not go back to clarify or make connections to what was written.

I also assumed that students would be familiar with the vocabulary that I used in writing the assignment. It was vocabulary that I had used in class and vocabulary that I assumed was, if not active, at least a familiar part of their lexicon. I found that the language I thought was common and clear was too vague and needed clarification. For example, I used the word "context" frequently and assumed that from repeated class discussions about structural analysis, they would understand that I was referring to the situation in which the text occurred (their job was to determine if it was the social situation, the cultural situation, and so on).

Finally, I presumed that students would be able to break down what was asked of them into smaller, more manageable pieces in order to complete the assignment. The data, however, suggest that students were not drawing on the connections that I assumed they would be able to manage. This outcome may simply be because making connections was an assumed rather than articulated part of the reading process. Some of the recursivity and breakdown into smaller pieces may have happened during the writing process. In the future, it may be useful to do RAPs not only of the reading assignment but also of the writing

assignment, which may mean that when students sit down to respond to the prompt, they revisit the original prompt with more purpose.

Conclusion

While the scope of this study was small with only six volunteer participants, it set out to explore assignments for my own teaching practice. I wanted to understand how students approach an assignment and the strategies they use to decode and work through it. I also wanted to apply my findings to my teaching. To that end, the data are informative. They require that I consider my assumptions about what students do as they read an assignment. They further suggest that I make my assignments clearer in terms of vocabulary, but that, depending on the goal of the assignment, I also have room to help students draw on more background schema in order to broaden their thinking. Doing so means that assignments will need to be more intentional.

If students are to be successful in the move to remote learning (regardless of how enduring it may be), they will be required to read more. Understanding those reading processes, particularly how they change from one professor to another, will help students gain the skills they need to meet some of the changing demands of higher education and beyond. While this study primarily sought to understand how my students process information in order to facilitate my own teaching, I am confident that a broader study of how students read assignments (particularly how they adapt to the demands of various assignments or shift between genres) would benefit faculty everywhere as they attempt to write assignments that get at the best thinking and draw out students' best work.

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