The Reading Practices of Preservice Teachers:  
On Becoming Critical Consumers  

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Abstract  

The purpose of this study was to catalogue and analyze the reading practices of a group of 36 language arts methods students. The study found that although these preservice language arts teachers considered themselves readers, they engaged in very little self-initiated leisure reading, they spent significantly more time watching movies than reading, they implemented very few of the reading strategies they learned in their content reading course, and they were relatively unaware of the reading strategies they do use. Implications for teacher education are discussed.  

Developing a Context for the Study  

Preservice language arts teachers use a variety of reading strategies in their daily reading practices, but are often unaware of how these strategies function, or how to teach their students to develop their own reading strategies. Current research in preservice teachers’ attitudes, practices, and beliefs reveal that many of them either struggle with their own reading practices, or do not value the reading strategies they are taught in content reading courses during their university studies (Dynak, 1996; Bean, 2001; Wolf, 2001; Barry, 2002; Griffin, 2003; Lesley, 2004). As a result, they don’t put those practices and strategies into effect in their teaching. In addition, researchers have found that unless preservice teachers experience effective teacher education programs that challenge them to reflect and reshape their teaching beliefs, they will revert to teaching their students using literacy practices, strategies, and learning styles they already know (Haar, Hall, Schoepp, & Smith, 2002; Sloan, Daane, & Giesen, 2004; Hoffman et al., 2005).  

In my language arts methods courses, I had seen just enough of this disconnect—students’ lack of awareness of the strategies they invoked as they read, and their inability or reluctance to use content reading strategies in their actual classroom teaching—that I wanted to research it more fully in order to provide my students opportunities to be effective reading and language arts teachers in their student teaching placements, and on into their teaching careers. Initially, I wanted to find out more about my students’ reading and writing practices, and how they actually might use these practices in their teaching. I also wanted to know more about the strategies they learned in their content reading course, and how they might put them to use in their teaching. In order to shape my own study, I turned to a couple of other studies of preservice and new teachers. Gupta (2004) for instance, borrowed Manna & Misheff’s (1987) categories of Transactional Readers and Reduced Readers to characterize students in a teacher training institute in Singapore. Transactional Readers “interact with the text to create meaning and enjoy reading” (p. 69). Reduced Readers “perceive reading as painful and are reluctant readers” (p. 69). Gupta found that out of 29 participants in the study, only three characterized themselves as Transactional Readers, while 26 characterized themselves as Reduced Readers (Gupta, 2004).
In another study—of former intern teachers in their first five years of teaching—Barry (2002) found that although many former intern teachers valued the reading strategies they were exposed to in content reading courses, several found that they had little time or motivation to implement such strategies in their content area classrooms. One chemistry teacher noted, “With 110 kids, I only do [writing] when I have lots of time” (p. 140). In addition, Barry cited a second-year biology teacher who “loved the theory behind” concept maps, but found that “Kids hate them. I find them difficult to assess” (p. 140). In addition, Bean’s (2001) study also looked at how preservice teachers implemented content reading strategies in their field placement sites. His findings suggest that preservice teachers often put aside the strategies they learned in content reading as a result of the influence of their cooperating teacher. They lack the ability to adapt content reading strategies to the dynamic sociocultural context of the field site classroom.

Before proceeding further, however, the terms literacy practices, reading practices, and reading strategies need to be clarified, lest it seem that they are interchangeable. They do not mean the same thing. Literacy practices are the reading, writing, speaking, listening, presenting, and thinking practices that members engage in as a function of being in a particular group or setting. Reading practices are one subset of literacy practices. They are all the different ways that one might engage in reading. For instance, reading alone is one particular reading practice. Further still, reading fiction alone is a different reading practice than reading a textbook alone; they engage different thought processes, different purposes. etc. Reading within a reading circle or book club is another reading practice. Reading aloud to children is yet another reading practice. There are dozens of other examples of reading practices, but these should suffice to illustrate the point.

Within each of these reading practices, there are particular reading strategies that one employs in order to engage in particular reading practice. A strategy, to borrow Barry (2002) borrowing from Harris & Hodges (1995), is “a systematic plan, consciously adapted and monitored to improve one’s performance in learning” (p. 132). For instance, when one reads aloud to a child, there are any number of strategies at one’s disposal to make the reading event meaningful. Reading out loud with vocal inflection is one strategy; by doing so, the reader helps to bring particular characters, emotions, and situations to life for the child. The child in that setting engages in particular reading strategies too, that include a great deal of active listening, and perhaps vocal participation as well. However, when one reads alone, rarely is a read-aloud strategy invoked. In this setting, the reader engages other strategies. Furthermore, in a book club setting, readers invoke other strategies, such as oral reading, discussion, journaling, thinking out loud, and choral reading. In a literature circle format—a particular type of book club—participants engage the reading of a text using role-specific strategies such as question master, passage picker, word wizard, or connector. These examples illustrate the difference between practices and strategies, and hint at the range of strategies available to readers within various literacy practices.

The Study

Among my other roles in our reading program, I teach an integrated language arts methods course to secondary English majors, in the semester before they do their student
teaching. During the semester that I enacted this study, I taught two sections of this course, with a total population of 39 students: 20 in one class, and 19 in another class. Of these 39, 36 chose to participate in the study. It is important to note that during this semester, students not only take their final set of university classes—including content reading and this language arts methods course—but they engage in a 4-week field-based practicum as well. This means that they design units and lessons in this language arts course, and then teach those lessons to students in real classrooms. This provides students the opportunity (in theory) to make connections from their course work to their field work, and it provides the teacher-researcher the opportunity to see how well students actually make these connections. The purpose of this study was to explore just how students engaged reading practices and strategies and implemented them in their own teaching practices.

Like Gupta, I was interested in how my students perceived themselves as readers. I wondered whether most of them would label themselves as reduced readers, or transactional readers? And like Barry and Bean, I was interested in the relationship between reading strategies learned in content reading, and the practices they actually implemented in their field sites and first year teaching. Building from these studies, I developed a cluster of driving questions which I hoped to address in some form: a) Do my secondary language arts majors consider themselves readers?, b) What are their reading and writing practices, and what patterns emerge from a systematic study of their literacy backgrounds?, c) When they read, what strategies do they employ, and what connection do these preservice teachers make between their own reading and the reading practices they will engage in with their students?, d) Do preservice teachers actually use the reading strategies they learn in content reading?, and e) If not, why not? What can be done in the language arts methods course to make those connections?

Grounded in these questions, and the studies of Gupta, Barry, and Bean, I developed a three-step approach to data collection. First, I developed a survey designed to gather information about my students’ current reading and writing practices, and their literacy upbringing—the Literacy Self-Assessment (see Figure 1). Second, I developed a graphic organizer—the Reading Strategies Self-Assessment—which asked students to articulate the types of reading they engaged in, and the strategies they employed in these contexts (see Figure 2). Third, I analyzed the language arts units students created for my course, and which they would be teaching out in their field site, in order to assess their use of content reading strategies in their actual teaching.

The Literacy-Self Assessment

My desire to survey my students’ literacy practices was not purely for research purposes; I also wanted to model for them a survey strategy that they might use to gather background information about the literacy practices of their own students. Using a simple model outlined in one of the textbooks we were using for the course (Strickland & Strickland, 2002, p. 37, 39), I developed my Literacy Self-Assessment and asked students to complete it in as great a detail as they could. While the Stricklands’ survey was only ten questions long—a good model for my preservice teachers to use with their students—I was interested in obtaining greater details about my students’ literacy practices. My survey consisted of 25 questions about students’ current literacy practices—reading, writing, viewing, etc.—and the literacy environment in which they grew up. The survey was distributed in paper form, but also in electronic form as an attachment.
to email, in order to enable students to type right on their form in greater detail than provided on paper. This survey was deliberately designed as an open-ended questionnaire to provide students the opportunity to offer details about their literacy experiences, rather than to elicit only a number on a likert scale. It was, however, possible to code the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in such a way so as to convert student responses to number codes that would provide similarly quantitative data.

The Reading Strategies Self-Assessment

In order to understand how preservice teachers engage reading strategies in the units that they design and implement during their methods field experience, I first needed to establish a baseline regarding their own use of reading strategies. With this in mind, I developed the Reading Strategies Self Assessment, which asked students to articulate the strategies they use when they read (see Figure 2). The top half of the tool asked students to simply write about the strategies they use; it functioned as a free-write journal. The bottom half of the tool was divided into two columns—leisure reading and academic reading. After free-writing about their own reading strategies, students were to categorize those strategies into at least these two domains. This dichotomy was borrowed from Gupta’s study, but it seemed to fit my project as well.

Integrated Language Arts Units

Students in my methods course are not English majors, but Integrated Language Arts majors. This may be semantic two-step to some, but for us it was a significant distinction. While these students took a great number of courses in the English department, they also studied journalism, theatre and film, media and communications, and pop culture and folklore. Furthermore, in my class, we prepared ourselves to teach the six language arts—reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing—in an integrated structure. The culminating project for the course was to design an integrated language arts unit. This meant that it could not simply be a unit on “The Noun,” or “Grammar,” or even a unit focused solely on a single novel. It needed to integrate these six language arts. It needed to provide their students opportunities to read, write, listen, speak, view, and visually represent. Within this constraint, my methods students were relatively free to operate. For instance, I did not demand that they specifically incorporate reading strategies from their content reading course; however, by the end of the semester, after having begun to see patterns in their literacy practices, I was very interested in the extent to which they actually did make connections from content reading to the units they were designing in my course and implementing with students in their field sites.

Findings

While there were 25 questions to the survey, the findings could be synthesized into a few categories. Furthermore, not all of the findings could be gathered from the survey alone, but also from the Reading Strategies Self Assessment, as well as an analysis of the units that the methods students produced. The analysis revealed insights into preservice teachers’ beliefs about themselves as readers, their reading practices, their reading strategies, their movie viewing practices, their use of writing practices and strategies, and the extent to which they incorporated any specific reading strategies learned in their content reading course.
Students as Readers

Students almost unanimously saw themselves as readers; however the reading in which they engaged was almost exclusively academic reading. When asked: Do you consider yourself a reader? in question #7 of the Literacy Self-Assessment, nearly all of the students did consider themselves readers, as opposed to Gupta’s study, where most students considered themselves reduced readers. Of the 36 participants in the study, 33 students (92%) considered themselves a strong or very strong reader. Two students (6%) considered themselves average readers. One student (2%) considered himself a below average reader. These students read on average 10-15 hours a week. Most of this reading was for school. This school reading fell into two categories: 1) academic reading, such as textbooks and articles, and 2) quasi-leisure reading, characterized by novels they had to read for school.

Quasi-leisure Reading

In order to explore the reading strategies students employed, I created the Reading Strategy Self Assessment, which broke reading practices into a simple dichotomy: academic reading vs. leisure reading. It was a dichotomy borrowed from Gupta’s study, but it seemed to fit my project when I began. However, this simple dichotomy fell apart as the study proceeded. Despite considering themselves readers, students engaged in very little self-initiated leisure reading; when asked to discuss and characterize their leisure reading, 29 students (81%) described only leisure reading that was initiated by their university coursework. As a result, I generated a new category—quasi-leisure reading—to describe their situation. In general, these students considered themselves readers mainly because they had so much required reading for school. However, outside of school, other activities competed for their leisure time.

Reading Alone or with Others

For the most part, these students do not read in groups; they prefer to read alone. Of the 36 participants, 33 (92%) preferred to read on their own. Two participants (6%) were comfortable reading either alone or with others. Only one (2%) said that she preferred to read with her best friend. This is interesting, in light of the fact that cooperative reading group settings such as literacy circles have worked their way into the mainstream of constructivist and social constructivist pedagogy. For preservice teachers who will soon be expected to teach their students to read in groups, they do very little of it themselves.

Books and Movies

While these students characterize themselves as readers, their responses about movies offer a complex and contrasting picture. When asked: Would you rather read a book or watch a movie?, ten students (28%) preferred movies, 16 (44%) preferred books, and ten (28%) said that it depended on circumstances, such as their mood. While this might suggest that students lean toward preferring books over movies, other statistics reveal something else. While students read on the average 2-3 novels every 10 weeks, they watched 2-3 movies every week. One student
responded that she watched one movie per day in her home, and three every month at the movie theatre.

Growing Up with Reading & Writing

In the childhood homes of these preservice teachers, when reading did take place, it was confined for the most part to newspapers or magazines. In 33 of these homes (92%), the family received the newspaper daily, although it was not necessarily read on a daily basis. In 15 of these homes (42%), the family received regular magazine subscriptions. In 3 of these homes (8%), the Bible was read regularly. In 8 of these homes (22%), fiction was read by at least one parent on a regular basis. Beyond these examples, very little other reading was reported, with a few exceptions. One student reported that her father was “always reading”—biographies, novels, the *New York Times*. Another student reported that she remembered her father reading and writing a great deal during the time he was in college. One other student reported that her dad and sister “read different books all of the time.” Finally, one other student reported that the family read *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, and “all kinds of literature.” Furthermore, in these same 36 homes, students reported that even less writing occurred than reading, and consisted of little more than grocery lists, cards, and letters.

Students as Writers

Students explained that they spent on average 4 hours per week writing; however, time spent writing ranged from 1 hour per week, to 12 hours per week. Most of this writing was academic in nature—papers and projects for classes. After papers, journals and emails constituted most of their other writing. It was unclear how many of the journal responses were personal, or represented required writing for courses; however, it can be assumed that some of these journalings were in response to academic assignments, since journals were part of the course requirements for my class. All writing was not academic, however. Of the 36 students in the study, 11 students (31%) articulated that they wrote some type of creative writing. Poetry was listed six times. Other types of creative writing included screenplays, songs, and short stories. In addition, when asked, *What were the last three things you have written?*, one student responded “homework, emails, and wedding vows.”

The Writing Process

How students engaged the writing process was interesting as well. Of the 36 students in the study, 15 (42%) responded that they wrote only one draft, and then edited that draft. Of the 36 students, 14 (39%) clearly articulated that they engaged the writing process by writing multiple drafts of essays. Seven students gave various responses, ranging from “it depends” to “whatever is necessary.” Again, this is compelling in light of the fact that these preservice teachers will soon be expected to teach writing to their students within a writing process approach.
Reading Strategies

When students were asked to list the reading strategies they actually use when they engage in reading practices, few could articulate clear strategies. Most of the responses fell into categories such as: “take notes,” “write a brief summary,” “skim,” “write down interesting thoughts,” “underline,” “highlight,” “re-read,” and “read aloud.” Beyond these types of responses, none of the students invoked specific reading strategies studied in their content reading course. Furthermore, in the units they created for my language arts methods class, very few preservice teachers included reading strategies taught in their content reading course. The most common, and they were each used only twice, were: 1) the Anticipation Guide, and 2) a RAFT activity. The one large exception was that several students incorporated Literature Circles in their unit plans. However, this was one strategy that we explored in great detail in my class, so it cannot serve as clear evidence that students brought content reading strategies into the units they created and taught.

Summary of Findings

The study found that although these preservice language arts teachers considered themselves readers, they engaged in very little self-initiated leisure reading, they spent significantly more time watching movies than reading, they implemented very few of the reading strategies they learned in their content reading course, and they were relatively unaware of the reading strategies they do use. All of these findings pose significant implications for the teaching of language arts methods.

Conclusions & Implications

Similar to the findings of many of the studies I read, there is a significant disconnect between the reading strategies these preservice teachers value in theory, and the reading strategies they put into practice in their own reading or in the reading they assign in their classrooms. In response to this disconnect, many researchers (Moje, Young, Readance, and Moore, 2000; Bean, 2001; Lesley, 2004) argue that content reading methods courses need to present these reading strategies in greater context. As the language arts methods instructor, however, I recognize the valuable role that my course—and other content methods courses—can play in addressing this disconnect. My course can and should be a conduit—a connector—between the often decontextualized strategies learned in content methods, and the real world contexts of the field site classroom. As the language arts methods instructor, I have the opportunity to engage students to consider the reading practices they already enact, and to make meaningful use of the strategies they learn in content reading. If it doesn’t happen in my methods course, then when will preservice teachers learn to really engage the principals and practices learned in their content literacy course? However, because these language arts majors have difficulty seeing the connections between content reading and language arts, I am deeply concerned that intern teachers in other content areas will have an exponentially more difficult time drawing these connections. If I can’t figure out how to help my preservice teachers
incorporate literacy practices into their language arts units, how can we expect a science or math teacher to do the same?

Having said this, however, finding ways to engage content reading strategies meaningfully within the larger goals of the language arts methods course is not as simple as finding places for methods students to insert content reading strategies into their lesson plans. My secondary language arts methods students clearly struggle with the task of turning their reading strategies, or their lack of awareness of their reading strategies, into useful practices for their own students. Moje, Young, Readance, and Moore (2000) argue that effective literacy instruction happens when teachers become critical consumers. “Critical consumers situate recommendations, determining where they are coming from and where they would like us to go. Critical consumers continually question claims, analyzing, comparing, and evaluating what is said” (p. 403). Developing the use of content reading strategies in the language arts methods course is not simply about finding insertion points for reading strategies. It begins by making preservice teachers more critically aware of the role these reading strategies play in the overall task of educating students, and by giving them opportunities to confront their own reading practices as they begin to shape the reading practices of their own classrooms.

In response to the challenge of making my students critical consumers of literacy practices, I have begun to reshape my language arts methods course to give preservice students opportunities to confront their own reading practices and to engage content reading strategies in their teaching and planning. First, I have begun to find places where students can meaningfully incorporate content reading strategies into their language arts work. Midway through the semester students must bring in one lesson from the unit they are developing, and teach that lesson in a micro-teaching setting. Within this lesson, students must incorporate one reading or literacy strategy they have learned in their content reading course.

In addition to such small insertion strategies, however, I have been developing ways for these preservice teachers to be critical consumers—to think about literacy practices, and the literacy expectations we place on students out in schools—in more critical ways. First, we enact a Literacy Culture Project, in which preservice teachers study the literacy culture of the school they have been assigned for methods and student teaching. They gather general demographic data about the school and community, and specific data about the literacy culture of the school—its test scores in reading and writing, and attitudes and practices surrounding reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. My preservice students also interview at least one student in their new school to find out more about this student’s literacy background and practices. With all of this data gathered, they create a powerpoint presentation and write a short paper addressing how they will teach literacy within this school literacy culture.

In addition to this project, we have incorporated “new” texts into the course: Jim Burke’s (2003) *The English Teacher’s Companion* and Patrick Finn’s (1999) *Literacy with an Attitude*. Using these two texts, we confront the critical literacy issues at stake for students. We lay our own literacy practices and upbringings on the table, and compare/contrast them to the students we encounter in our schools. In this way, preservice teachers engage literacy beyond just playing with decontextualized, one-size-fits-all reading strategies. Instead of simply figuring out ways to
insert content reading strategies into their units, they are reconceptualizing their units to address the literacy needs of their particular student populations.

Beyond my class however, the real challenge lies in encouraging other content methods instructors to re-envision their courses to address the critical literacy issues at stake for their preservice teachers. If language arts methods students have difficulty engaging content literacy principles and practices, one can only wonder what challenges face math, science, and social studies preservice teachers.
References


Figure 1

Literacy Self Assessment

Directions: The Stricklands (2002) text suggested that teachers develop and implement some kind of literacy survey, of no more than 10 questions, designed to allow you some insight into the literacy background, beliefs, and practices of your students. I thought we might try that here, although I have created a slightly expanded list of 25 questions. I am sending this electronically. I want you to respond to each question in as much detail as you care to. This will help me understand more about your literacy backgrounds, and it gives us some things to work on and develop throughout the semester. Bring a copy to class, but send an electronic copy back to me as well.

1. How much time do you spend reading each week?
2. What kinds of things do you like to read?
3. What were the last three things you have read? Why did you read each one?
4. Do you read on your own, or in conjunction with others, such as in a reading discussion group?
5. Would you rather read a book or watch a movie?
6. When you read a book, do you ever discuss it afterwards with friends? When you watch a movie, do you ever discuss it afterwards with friends? Describe to some extent the kinds of things you discuss.
7. Do you consider yourself a “reader”? How would you define that?
8. What’s the best book you ever read or one of your favorites? When did you read it and why was it memorable?
9. What would you consider a “good” book?
10. Do you ever go to libraries or bookstores? How often? For what purpose?
11. Is reading important in your life? Explain a bit.
12. How much time do you spend writing each week?
13. What kinds of things do you tend to write?
14. What were the last three things you have written?
15. When you write, do you write multiple drafts? Do others read your drafts and offer you feedback? In other words, to what extent do you actually engage in the writing process?
16. How often do you go out to the movies?
17. How often do you watch movies at home or at someone’s home?
18. Growing up, to what extent did you read on your own outside of school?
19. Would you consider yourself a strong reader in elementary school? High school?
20. Do you consider yourself a strong reader now? Explain.
21. Growing up, to what extent did you write on your own outside of school?
22. Would you consider yourself a strong writer in elementary school? High school?
23. Do you consider yourself a strong writer now? Explain.
24. What kind of reading took place in your home growing up? Did your family have daily newspaper delivery, or weekly news magazines? Who read those texts? How often?
25. What kind of writing took place in your home growing up? Who did this writing? To what extent was it done willing, and to what extent was it done as a necessity, or a requirement?
**Reading Strategies Self Assessment**

Directions:
When you read, what do you do? In particular, what strategies do you use? Do you use different strategies for leisure reading than for academic reading? When the reading gets difficult, what do you do? Write about this in as much detail as possible in the lined space below. During our discussion, we’ll extract the key points into these two columns.

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