
The New Literacy and Reading Workshop: How Comfortable is Too Comfortable?

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Since 1990, I have organized my entry-level college developmental reading courses around the reading workshop approach designed by Nancie Atwell and described in her book, *In the Middle: Reading and Writing With Adolescents* (1987). I think I was the first college teacher to use Atwell's approach, but at any rate, I was the first to write about the incredible journey college students and I took into real reading, for real pleasure, and for real purposes that the workshop allows. The book is called *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom* (Henry, 1995).

We college reading teachers have been churning out well-intentioned shortcuts to improved reading, such as identifying main ideas, summary writing, SQ3R, and developing semantic organizers since the 1960s. Our goal was to get the underprepared college reader quickly up to speed. But during the period between 1985 and 1990, I had become disenchanted with these techniques. When they "worked," although I was never sure what that meant, I could see that students still were starting over with each new piece they read. The lack of transfer value was apparent. I also became increasingly convinced that these instructional approaches distorted reading and further distanced my students from whatever pleasure and purposes reading might hold for them. Yes, they got good grades in my class and complied with my assignments, but they were becoming even more entrenched as nonreaders.

By the end of the 1980s, I had become steadfast in my conviction that the only way for students to improve their reading was through reading. Since finding that perspective in a typical college reading textbook was about as likely as finding a doctor who would swear that smoking was good for me, I feared I would have to strike out alone to put that belief into practice. And the more pressing problem was how could I get my students to read when they hated reading and rated it right up there with, oh, I don't know, having to take a standardized test with a hangover? Moving a sleeper sofa up three flights of stairs? Seeing an ignorantly dogmatic, elitist colleague get tenure? Pick your poison. But then I discovered Atwell (1987). Her solution was simple. Let students explore reading on their own terms and for their own purposes so that they might discover what pleasures, if any, reading held for them. Why in the world hadn't I thought of that?

The critical feature of my Atwell-inspired reading workshop is that the choice of what to read is left entirely to the students themselves. And this is why my students, who have tumbled into class, some still edgy from New York traffic, and others, still somnolent, just having rolled out of bed in the residence halls (telltale pillow creases still embossed on their cheeks) are immersed in their books by the time I reach the classroom. They read all through class, except during my minilesson (well, some read through that too). They tell me about reading at home, through the noise and tumult of aggressively hyperactive suburban households, or in the close quarters of overpriced NYC apartments, or wrapped up in a blanket in their anonymous high-rise college dormitories. Sometimes I'll see one or two of my students at a time sitting around this fabulous Henry Moore sculpture outside of our classroom building. I see them there because that spot, along with a water garden on the south side of my office building, is where I go during the day to read.

I run into my students, say in the campus deli, and they launch into rapid-fire New York youthese: "Ohmigod, I'm telling you, this book was, like you know, the BEST! I was so relieved when the killer got caught before he killed the little girl. You gotta read it. D'ja gottanotha one by her? Sorry. I see you're having lunch there with your friend. G'head and eat. I'll see you in class." And they are gone. Thirty seconds later my Kentucky ears finally register and fully comprehend what has just been said to me. In *If Not Now*, I wrote about my experiences with reading workshop at an open admissions institution in Kentucky. It is gratifying to finally learn that a claim I made in the book—that workshop will work anywhere—is actually true. Although my students at Hofstra, a private, selective admissions, liberal arts institution, are more able readers than my Kentuckians were, they still

started the class hating to read. Their enthusiasm, once they discovered reading for themselves, has a different accent and syntax, but it is no less enthusiastic than one of my Kentuckian's proud proclamations that "I read right regular now." On average, my Hofstra students read 1800 pages each last semester. I can't think of any other college reading approach that accomplishes that kind of volume (and every page of it read willingly). Appendix A contains a list of the books my students read last fall, organized chronologically, by reader.

While no one has ever used the phrase "reading for reading's sake," to disparage what I want to accomplish with reading workshop, the term has been used to provide a concise, sound-byte, sort of summary of why I do what I do. But it's an oversimplification. Like Atwell, I see all this high volume pleasure reading as a means of helping students come to love reading, but like her, I also see it as a vehicle for modeling, encouraging, and identifying the kinds of literate behaviors that research tells us good readers employ. The students select the course content when they choose the books they will read, but as the expert, the teacher, I'm responsible for determining the course objectives, what I want students to accomplish beyond high-volume, fully engaged reading. Workshop is indeed a student-centered approach, but I think some have given it a very shallow reading in terms of its pedagogical goals. To address that misconception, I have included in Appendix B a description of the course objectives as I explain them to teachers to whom I am introducing the approach.

What I consider the other critical feature of reading workshop is the letters. Literary letters, Atwell (1987) calls them. Each student writes to me, about once a week, and I write back. Students also write to each other, selecting a different classmate to write to each week. In these letters I see how students make sense of what they read. They draw upon their knowledge of pop psychology, for example, speculating that all adult deviance stems from childhood abuse. Or they may see connections between their own lives and what they read. One of my current New York students drew riveting parallels between Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, the story of a young man's decision to flee his family and live off the land in the Alaskan wilderness, and his own flight from a privileged Long Island life to wander for weeks in Manhattan with little money and even less street sense.

Students use their letters (and their reading) to try out their values, often ping-ponging back and forth about issues like capital punishment when they read a book like *Dead Man Walking*. At times, they become fixated on aspects of their books that might strike me as minor at best. In reading *Eight Bullets: One Woman's Story of Surviving Anti-Gay*

Violence, Elizabeth focused on a sentence in which it was reported that an EMT was so worried about starting treatment immediately that he did not take the time to put on rubber gloves before caring for a gay gunshot victim. She wrote pages in which she compared this to an emergency room observation done for another class in which she had seen doctors treat a woman with full-blown AIDS as if she were "dirt, like a disease instead of a person. They should be careful but did they have to hate her for being sick?"

What never fails to astonish me is the many purposes to which students put their reading. Never could I dream up all of these reasons for reading, not to mention developing a teacher-driven curriculum that could make them happen. Tina wrote that she exchanged books with her best friend from home, who had chosen another college, to stay connected, to have "something in common to talk about." Like many of my students, Eva used her new pleasure in reading to try to get her boyfriend to read more. She wrote:

For the second year my goal is to read 5 hours a week. This is a promise my boyfriend and I made. We went to a bookstore and I told him he should buy *Red Dragon* because you said it was good (what you really said what that I'd like it but he doesn't have to know that). I bought *Sleepers* because I want to read the book before I see the movie. Right now he's on page 50 something. But as soon as we both finish the book we're going to switch. He likes *Red Dragon* and told me I would love it (what a surprise!).

My students have learned, and have taught me, that reading is a means of keeping in touch with friends, getting answers, a defense against loneliness, or a way of getting through tense moments like the long wait in an OB/GYN's office before she asks you to do things an intimate would never dream of suggesting, as Michelle wrote in a literary letter last fall semester:

I just had my first pelvic. I was sweating bullets. I was sitting in the waiting room going crazy that everyone was staring at me. Is she knocked up? Has she got a VD? I thought I would throw up. So I got out my book to pretend to read so I wouldn't get looked at. Like when my cat thinks if she can't see me I can't see her. But then I got caught up in MHC [Mary Higgins Clark]. It passed the time but it didn't help when the nurse called my name though. Even MHC can't get you through a gyno.

Admittedly, reading does have limits as a panacea.

Having a reason to read is what keeps us reading. A test may get students to read. An assignment for reading class may get them to read. But coming to understand that reading answers questions, solves problems, and meets needs that others have not imposed upon them is a revelation to my students. And among the many blessings reading workshop bestows, I think it is this freedom to discover what reading can do for them that makes my students turn the page and to move forward as engaged, enthusiastic, and interested readers.

Having told you about the content of *If Not Now* and how reading workshop continues to develop at my new institution in New York, let me turn to the reaction the book has received. Almost immediately after publication I began to hear from teachers all over the country who were in various stages of readiness to adopt Atwell's workshop approach in their college reading classrooms. I am currently mentoring many of them, and encouraging them to mentor each other via the Internet. At the college level, reading workshop is now being used in ten states, including Texas, California, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont. In the tenth state, Kentucky, workshop has become the norm for college developmental reading courses at both two- and four-year institutions. The published reviews of *If Not Now* have been affirming. One reviewer called the book "a significant addition to the literature on revolutionizing reading" (Daane, 1996, p. 237).

And so, now that reading workshop is reputable at the college level, it's time for me to start making trouble again, or at least jumping on the bandwagon of the trouble-makers John Willinsky (1990) has dubbed the "New Literacy." I'm not about to abandon workshop, whole language, or student-centered approaches to literacy learning, but I have found good cause to interrogate my work and to initiate the next round of inquiry into my beliefs and practices. One of those trouble-makers is Margaret J. Finders. In her book, *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (1997), Finders discusses how whole-language teachers, and others who embrace student-centered approaches, see themselves as providing classrooms in which students feel comfortable exploring literacy. But after a year-long study of students in such a classroom, Finders saw little change in students' perspectives, risk-taking, or growth in their reading and writing. She then asks, "How much comfort is too much comfort?" (p. 119).

Alarm bells went off. Was my classroom a playpen of teacherly indulgence? Think about it. Why should my students risk reading a difficult book when "Teacher" is just as gushing and enthusiastic when they finish a Mary Higgins Clark novel? Why not go ahead and say the

first reactionary thing that comes to your head in a literary letter, when Teacher's reply will be just as breathless, encouraging, and attentive even if she is, on some level, deeply offended by what you have written? I have listened to students canonize Rush Limbaugh and his hate-mongering, enthusiastically quote Howard Stern's homophobic humor, and attest to the veracity of Fitzgerald's anti-semitism in *The Great Gatsby*. I see much more compassion than I do contempt for humanity in my students, but I do get a glimpse of the heart of darkness from time to time. My tendency simply has been to ignore what I didn't want to see, for fear of shooting down my students' newfound love of reading if I took aim at what I considered despicable sentiments.

When it comes to getting my non-readers to read, I put the reading principle far above any other principle. Some of my students read books in which women are tortured for entertainment, African-American characters are limited to the roles of rapist, pimp, or dealer, and other books in which women are dormant and depressed until "Mr. Right" comes along to give life meaning. But you would never hear a word of criticism out of me. Here's how I rationalized my stance in *If Not Now*:

Pat O'Reilly, one of my dissertation committee members, asked me during my defense how I managed to rein in my own reaction to some of the books my students read. A good question. My answer is that I have situational integrity. In the women's studies course I teach, I serve up moral indignation baked, broiled, and fried about the way violence against women is portrayed as entertaining in the media. But in reading workshop, I am just grateful my students will read. My principles shift when my priorities do. I have celebrated buckets full of blood and super jumbo body counts with the best of them. (Henry, 1995, p. 55)

Then, as now, I am reluctant to problematize a book my students are happily reading for the sake of any principle not related to the fact that they are reading willingly, especially when these are my principles and not theirs. My justification has always been that my students are vulnerable because they are new readers. If I challenge their books too assertively, I fear that they will once again withdraw from the world of reading and readers, back into what is for them the most comfortable of all places: illiteracy. How comfortable is too comfortable? Well the option of not reading is very comfortable for my students. It has worked for them, more or less, for 18 years, and it is a familiar means of coping with a literate world that calls what they are willing to read "trash."

In my opinion, calling a book trash is a breath away from calling its reader trash. So even when my students have read, they haven't been legitimized. They not only hate to read, their relationship with reading is filled with resentment, disappointment, frustration, and failure. I must never forget that when I ask students to give reading another chance, I am asking them to revisit a place filled with self-doubt, distrust, and sometimes rage. To compare it, imagine proposing to a woman who was battered by her first two husbands and trying to persuade her that this time it will be different. Imagine the gentleness, patience, and unconditional approval you would want to convey in that circumstance.

My students have been battered and, in fact, continue to be. These underprepared students are demonized throughout much of the current writing about higher education, blamed for everything from low faculty morale to the decline of Western civilization. If I am overly protective of my students, if I err toward comfort rather than challenge, and I admit that I do, well, I do come by it righteously. And even though Margaret Finders might be the first to say that the girls she studied, average learners, were unlike my own at-risk students, I still suspect she or anyone would urge me to respond intelligently, despite my students' fragility, to comments like the one I read in a letter today. Melissa wrote: "The book I started has a lot of gay characters and so I'm going to hate it. I'm a Christian and so I know right from wrong. I follow the Bible and so I don't hold with homosexuality."

Where to begin? Where would you begin? I could get logical and point out that Melissa's syllogism—I am a Christian; Christians hate homos; therefore I hate homos—is flawed in that not all Christians hate homosexuals, and some homosexuals are Christians. But coming at it from an intellectual distance doesn't ring true for me. So how about I tackle another troubling aspect of her remark by pointing out that lots of Jewish people (like me) know right from wrong too, as do Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Wiccans, to name a few. Well, that doesn't get at the issue of intra-faith dissent regarding the subject of homosexuality. I could write that, as much as it pains me, many Jews are homophobic too; Christians don't have a monopoly on intolerance, but then that wouldn't go over so well either. Thirty minutes and five drafts later, I finally wrote to Melissa about the book I was reading and ignored the content of her letter. Coward!

As if all this weren't enough, while doing some random reading, I once again came across a passage by one of the biggest troublemakers of all time, Michael Apple. Within five pages of Apple's introduction to the John Willinsky's *The New Literacy* (1990), I found the question of

"how much comfort is too much comfort?" staring me in the face again. Apple wrote:

Yet what if self-directed reading leads to a "self" we don't like? What if many girls choose only to read adolescent romance novels with their visions of women as only finding fulfillment in romance and their gender, race, and class stereotypes? How do we cope with the politics of pleasure (after all some girls may choose these books) and what might be called the politics of emancipation (aren't we supposed to take them beyond such stereotypes)? (Apple, 1990, p. xiii).

As a reading teacher, I want my students to find whatever pleasures reading might hold for them. But I also want them to read with an understanding of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which books get written and read; yet, as Finders (1997) asks, "how can one expect a critical stance when there is no suggestion of any alternative readings?" (p. 127). It is not my business to convince students to embrace feminism, since that is the example at hand, but I do feel an obligation to let them know that other perspectives are out there. But before I return to this theme, I want to detour just a moment to upset the "Applecart."

Many students enjoy the escapist aspects of teen romances, or horror stories, to name a couple of popular Gen X genres, without buying into them. Let's look at the question from another point of view. Mattel provided millions of little girls with a doll called Barbie. Many have demonized Barbie, saying that she teaches anorexia and dumb-blondness. But as Barbie "biographer" M. G. Lord (1994) points out, Mattel may have a plan for how little girls play with Barbie, but little girls have their own ideas. Lord cross-dressed her Ken doll as a child. I was into gender-bending of a different sort: I dressed my Barbie in G. I. Joe clothes and made her into a female action figure. Other little girls I knew joined with their brothers in putting Barbie and G. I. Joe into either his Jeep or her Corvette, attaching dozens of firecrackers, and then, with a stolen kitchen match, blowing both archetypes to kingdom come. Just as we cannot assume children will play with toys the way they are "intended," we can't assume our students will read a book from the point of view of the publisher's target audience. Since it is my practice to ask students what their books mean to them, I have been privy to a number of surprises.

But back to the dilemma: How do I show my students—those who do subscribe to racism, classism, or sexism of the books to which they

are drawn—alternative reactions or understandings of the books they read without so problematizing the book that students no longer enjoy it? How do I avoid subjecting them to the same judgments they have experienced in the past as readers? How can I get my students out of their comfort zones, or raise uncomfortable questions about their books without leaving them feeling betrayed? “Read whatever you want, as long as you read,” I tell them. Should I then add an aside saying, “and be prepared for me to then imply just how simple-minded, or bigoted, or primitive I think you are for liking what you like?”

For now, I have more questions than answers. But I have chosen to take, and to study, a cautious approach. I have decided to let reading do the work, to let good books confront the issues. I will use reading itself to generate more critical readings. I believe in reading, and readers, and so I will let them do their work. Instead of telling my students that I think Rush Limbaugh is simply a commercial enterprise, a vehicle for profiting on white males’ most reactionary fears, I will flow with their interest in the whitest of privileged white men and recommend that they read and rebuke *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot* in order to inflict an alternative point of view. To those who enjoy horror and suspense novels in which women are mutilated and degraded for entertainment, I will recommend Joy Fielding’s *See Jane Run*, or Nancy Price’s *Sleeping With the Enemy*, or Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne* or *Rose Madder*, all of which are irresistible thrillers in which victimized women summon the strength to confront and to outwit their villains. I will suggest my teen romance fans read Maeve Binchey’s *Circle of Friends* or Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone* as an alternative means of meeting their need to devour books about teen love and teen experience. I might suggest my racist male students read *Hoop Dreams*, since they unconsciously suspend some degree of their racism when the topic is sports and this book speaks to the exploitation of African American athletes. And for my female students who see African Americans as inferior, I might suggest a book few women, like them, who are looking for suitable love but not willing to sell themselves short can fail to relate to, Terry McMillen’s *Waiting to Exhale*.

I haven’t read enough books to always have a recommendation, and I can’t always get my students to read the books that I recommend, but using reading to produce critical readings is the best nonconfrontational plan I can come up with at this time. I’ll keep everyone posted.

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Appendix A

Fall 1996 Titles

- Rachel: *The Sacrifice of Tamar*, Naomi Regan
Circle of Friends, Maeve Binchey
Light a Penny Candle, Maeve Binchey
Jepthe's Daughter, Naomi Regan
The Five Books of Miriam, Ellen Frankel
- Julia: *Mama*, Terry McMillen
How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, Julia Alvarez
Paula, Isabel Allende
Waiting to Exhale, Terry McMillen
Like Water for Chocolate, Laura Esquivel
- Marcus: *Sein Language*, Jerry Seinfeld
Don't Stand Too Close to a Naked Man, Tim Allen
The Ghost and the Darkness, Dewey Gramm
In Defense of Mumia (poetry collection)
Makes Me Wanna Holler, Nathan McCall
- Elizabeth: *Henry in Love*, Marian Thurm
Communion, Whitley Streiber
Eight Bullets, Claudia Brenner and Hannah Ashley
Sleepers, Lorenzo Carcaterra
The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison
Dead Man Walking, Sister Helen Prejean
Eve's Tatoo, Emily Prager
Schindler's List, Thomas Kennealy
- Aleksandr: *Outbreak*, Robin Cook
Outbreak, Robert Tine
Carriers, Patrick Lynch
The Hot Zone, Richard Preston
- Michelle: *Rudy*, James Elison
School Ties, William Boyd
Silent Night, Mary Higgins Clark
A Stranger is Watching, Mary Higgins Clark
Not Without My Daughter, Betty Mamoody
- Tina: *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
Turtle Moon, Alice Hoffman
Slow Waltz at Cedar Bend, Robert James Waller

Like Water for Chocolate, Laura Esquivel
The Ghost and the Darkness, Dewey Gramm
Sleepers, Lorenzo Carcaterra

- Angie: *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
Carriers, Patrick Lynch
Sounder, William Howard Armstrong
All Around the Town, Mary Higgins Clark
Red Scream, Mary Willis Walker
Presumed Innocent, Scott Turow
Waiting to Exhale, Terry McMillen
Silent Night, Mary Higgins Clark
Relic, Douglas J. Preston
- Eva: *Rose Madder*, Stephen King
Second Child, John Saul
Dirty White Boys, Stephen Hunter
Gerald's Game, Stephen King
Sleepers, Lorenzo Carcaterra
Delores Claiborne, Stephen King
- Jesus: *Die Hard*, Screenplay by Roderick Thorpe
Last Man Standing, Screenplay by Walter Hill
Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton
The Lost World, Michael Crichton
- Patty: *All Around the Town*, Mary Higgins Clark
Let Me Call you Sweetheart, Mary Higgins Clark
Melody, V. C. Andrews
Vanished, Danielle Steel
Accident, Danielle Steel
Ellen Foster, Kaye Gibbons
See Jane Run, Joy Fielding

Appendix B

Reading Workshop Objectives (for teachers)

What follows is an admittedly partial and evolving list of reading behaviors workshop teachers could be monitoring, modeling, and encouraging as they work with students in class and respond to their literary letters.

Please remember, you will lose your ever-loving minds if you attempt to “teach” the items on this list. Instead, look for opportunities. If Jose says he saw the movie after reading the book, ask him to compare the two. If Maria Teresa reports that she has read two books by the same author, ask her to compare them. If Tim wants to know more about a subject, give him some ideas for where to look and encourage him to follow through. If a student makes the connection between book events and her life experiences, make note of it. You might want to use this to help you pose questions in your literary letters to students. Or, if you’re feeling ambitious, you might use this list as a starting point for developing either a pre/post inventory or a self-evaluation tool for students, or how about a teacher research project?

Reading Process

Does the student discuss his or her:

- strengths as a reader
- weaknesses as a reader
- environmental reading preferences
- social reading preferences
- physical reading preferences
- lifelong development as a reader
- short-term goals as a reader
- long-term goals as a reader
- genre/author preferences
- pleasure/displeasure with a book

Writing About Reading

Can the student:

- provide a coherent plot synopsis
- anticipate reader’s informational needs in literary letters
- recommend books effectively to other readers
- express and explain a personal evaluation of a book

Meaning Making

Does the student:

- make connections between texts (intertextuality)
- compare books to their film counterparts
- make connections between book events and personal experience
- make connections between book events and world events
- go "beyond text" to speculate about characters' motives, influences
- go "beyond text" to speculate about authors' motives, influences
- differentiate between understanding a text and not
- identifying personal beliefs that influence his or her meaning-making
- generate visual imagery from text

Affective Elements of Reading

Does the student discuss or exhibit:

- emotional responses to text
- emotional responses to the act of reading
- cognitive dissonance as a result of reading
- affirmation of cherished views as a result of reading
- changes in attitude toward reading
- pride in reading accomplishments
- positive/negative response to family/peer attitudes toward his or her reading
- feelings of competence and/or control (or lack of confidence/control)
- avoidance behaviors (choosing easy books, making little progress)

Strategic Reading

Does the student:

- ask questions while he or she reads
- monitor comprehension
- predict outcomes
- confirm or disconfirm predicted outcomes
- identify text difficulty
- adjust reading rate to text difficulty
- select appropriately difficult texts
- knowingly attempt to read increasingly difficult texts
- generate personal goals for reading improvement
- preview reading material (cover, blurb, etc.)
- inspect text (skimming, skipping ahead, rereading)

- continue "processing" text after reading session
- apply prior knowledge to meaning-making
- seek out further information about a text (either to sustain reading or to further pursue a topic)

Literate Behaviors

Has the student:

- selected enjoyable books with assistance from friends, family, teachers
- selected enjoyable books without assistance
- purchased or procured a book independently
- checked out book from campus/community library
- talked about books with family/friends
- read outside of class in "spare time"
- stayed up "too late" reading a good book
- gone to a reading and/or book signing
- used reading to answer personal/professional questions
- recommended books to others
- identified a favorite author
- identified a favorite genre (type of book)
- started keeping a "to read" list

*Student's names are pseudonyms and their work is used with their permission.