

The Writing Mentor Project 501: An Invitation to Readers

Rebecca Dawson

Writers Becoming Readers

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

– Richard Steele

What is the place of reading in English 501, given that it is primarily a writing course? This is a question I puzzle over. I am not a literature professor, though I am a writing teacher who couldn't live without reading. And many of the students in English 501 are not English majors. In fact, a number of the students who enter the class do not read books for their own pleasure. Those who do read tend toward popular writers like Stephen King or Michael Crichton. And yet, reading does and should have a place in a writing course, especially as avid readers tend to make better writers. Readers are more aware of the richness of language, and they've seen the many possibilities of putting words together on the page. Second to actually writing on a regular basis, reading variously interesting material is the best way to learn to write.

Recognizing this, the writing program at the University of New Hampshire has expanded the role of reading in the composition classroom. In the 1970's at UNH, the only texts in our composition classes were the ones created by students. Later, the voices of published writers were invited in. And while student writing is still central in English 401 and 501, the added reading has enriched these courses. Now nonfiction, fiction, and

poetry are used in various ways - to generate discussion, engender reflection, trigger writing, model types of writing, and teach specific writing skills. The range of readings has, I think, helped to dispel the notion that essays are dull, dry endeavors. Yet even with all of these positive aspects, teachers still struggle with the challenges of text selection and effective in-class discussions. These concerns led me, and colleagues before me, to approach the course reading differently. We decided to treat our students more like real readers by letting *them* select texts. In my own classes, the writers the students read serve as mentors for the students' own writing. This "Writing Mentor Project," as I have come to call it, has made my students more willing and able readers and more skilled writers.

Learning from Mentors

The 'best advice' I think is in reading good writers, not seeking advice from them for we learn best by emulating the best.

- Gay Talese

People learning a craft, art form, or sport benefit from having mentors. Carpenters begin as apprentices. Guitarists mimic the riffs of Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, or the Assad Brothers. Visual artists copy the drawings of Rembrandt and study the paintings of Velasquez. Tiger Woods learned from the shots of Jack Nicklaus. And writers read other writers and get inspired by the possibilities. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for example, describes a transforming reading experience he had: "One night [at college] a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read *The Metamorphosis*. The first line almost knocked me off the

bed, I was so surprised. The first line reads, ‘As Gregor Samsa awoke that morning from an uneasy dream, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect . . .’

When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago. So, I immediately started writing short stories.” Similarly, Nadine Gordimer explains: “You know what made me want to be a journalist? Reading Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop* when I was eleven. Enough to make anybody want to be a journalist!” Students too can get excited by the expanded possibilities of form modeled by the multi-genre writing of Michael Ondaatje in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* or Charlie Simic’s *Dime Store Alchemy*, a poetic collage-like meditation on the work of Joseph Cornell, or Art Spiegelman’s comic strip memoir *Maus*.

Writers also take lessons from other art forms. Bernard Malamud observes, “As a writer I learned from Charlie Chaplin. Let’s say the rhythm, the snap of comedy; the reserved comic presence – that beautiful distancing; the funny with sad; the surprise of surprise.” And Ernest Hemingway notes, “I learn as much from painters about how to write as from writers.” He adds, “I should think what one learns from composers and from the study of harmony and counterpoint would be obvious.” For students, immersing themselves in the writing of a chosen author helps them to see how a writer makes deliberate choices and hones a particular style. By seeing how Annie Dillard uses similes, James Baldwin dashes, or Tom Wolfe italics, students can expand their writer’s toolbox. Or by reading a particular type of writing, students can recognize the conventions and possibilities of that type of writing. As I tell my students, writing is conceived by passion or inspiration – a strong desire to say something. But it is brought to life through craft –

attention to how the ideas are most effectively expressed. In making choices about craft, students too can be inspired by and borrow from the style and techniques of other artists.

Being a Reader

The greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination.

– Elizabeth Hardwick

Because of all that reading has to offer, it is important to turn students into willing readers, if they are not, and to encourage them on, if they are. By readers I mean people who *choose* to read, make time for reading, ask their friends what they are reading, want to discuss their reading, know what it is to lose themselves in a book, browse bookstores, go to libraries, are compelled to read more works by a favorite author or reread a beloved book. People who have experienced what John Cheever describes: “The books that you really love give the sense, when you first open them, of having been there. It is a creation, almost like a chamber in the memory. Places that one has never been to, things that one has never seen or heard, but their fitness is so sound that you’ve been there somehow.” Or people who agree with Henry Miller’s statement: “I read to be taken out of myself, to become ecstatic. I’m always looking for the author who can lift me out of myself.”

I know what these writers mean. I myself am a compulsive reader – not a day goes by that I don’t read, and I am always grabbing a book or magazine on the way out the door. I’ll read about any subject, as long as I think it is well written for its type and intent. It is

this passion for reading that made me decide to be an English major in college. I believed, and still do, that I could learn about most things by reading, and I am grateful for the richness that reading has added to my life.

Why Students May Not Read

Before I can share this love of reading with my students, I must look at their reading experiences and wonder about why they might *not* be readers. My students know the mechanics of reading and have been in school for many years, so I want to assume that they know *how* to read by the time they reach college. And yet a number of my students may not be very experienced, let alone sophisticated, readers. They may not, for example, have been read to when they were young or grown up around readers. Furthermore, they may have seen little reason to choose a book over the television or the computer. They may also have viewed reading as antisocial at a time when their peers were particularly important. Meanwhile in school, students often know more about plowing through written material than about how to comprehend it, let alone digest it. Indeed, when students have a lot of work, it can be difficult to get them to slow down when they read, just as it is difficult to convince them of the importance of revision when all they want to do is get the required essay out of the way. When students struggle with challenging material, they tend to conclude that they are not very good at reading, which in turn reinforces negative feelings about doing it. It doesn't help that they tend to believe that good writers are inspired and write easily and that good readers read quickly and understand everything on the first go. Literature teachers can perpetuate these myths by coming across like the all-knowing Great Oz – at a distance explicating texts that they've

read multiple times - making it *seem* that reading and analysis are easy. To be genuinely invited into the literary conversation, students need to see behind the screen to where reading is a process, not all the answers are known, and teachers too puzzle through a first reading of a challenging text.

Choice and Being Ripe for Reading

The pleasurable experience of being absorbed by a book, article, short story, or poem is vital to forming a willing reader; choice is another vital ingredient. Indeed, the delight of reading – entertainment, escape, company, solace, inspiration, and education - often involves *choosing* to read and choosing *what* to read. Readiness is another important aspect. I read Faulkner in my English class my senior year of high school before I was ready, and I have been unwilling to return to his work since. By contrast, I relished reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time at 30 years old, and I was grateful that I had been able to decide when I was ripe to appreciate this classic. John Updike, when he spoke here at the University of New Hampshire, also acknowledged the importance of timing in coming upon a work that speaks to you in just the right way. Oddly enough, however, as students progress in school and gain maturity and experience, they can have even less control over the material they read in school. And yet what better way to encourage our students to read than by giving them choice, which acknowledges that all readers have preferences and particular interests. Furthermore, what better time to give them back a sense of control than in college, especially as the spirit with which students approach their work is important. We recognize this in English 401 and 501, when we allow our students to choose their own writing topics. This freedom asks students to

struggle with the writer's challenge of what to address and what to say about that topic. It also lets them find topics in which they can feel invested. Because writing is hard work, students are more willing to do this work if they care about their subject. Indeed, it helps if students see themselves as readers and writers by choice as opposed to reluctant students who are simply fulfilling assignments.

Teachers as Guides

At its best, classroom learning achieves a balance between teacher guidance and student independence. As a result, although choice is an essential component of this project, I still guide my students' selection process. My colleague Sue Wheeler chooses to give her students few limits for this project apart from her approval of student selections. Of course, when students read on their own, it may be harder to keep track of their reading. Sue manages this by asking students to write a weekly letter to her about their reading. In doing so, Sue relies on her vast reading history and capacity to have at least an idea of what each student is reading.

I choose to guide my students' selection by giving them a list of what I consider are talented, accessible, contemporary writers. My recommendations have included Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, James Baldwin, Bill Bryson, Raymond Carver, Ethan Canin, Sandra Cisneros, Cynthia Ozick, Edwidge Danticat, Annie Dillard, Maxine Hong Kingston, Langston Hughes, Milan Kundera, John McPhee, Susan Minot, Joyce Carol Oates, Tim O'Brien, Michael Ondaatje, Scott Russell Sanders, Amy Tan, Ursula Hegi, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Walker, Jeanette Winterson, and Tom Wolfe. I do allow my student to suggest writers who are not on the list, but in a handout to my students, I add

the following restriction: "I will want to okay your suggestion. I am looking to steer you away from popular writers like Stephen King or John Grisham in favor of writers who you may be less familiar with and who can stretch your reading repertoire in new ways." I have tended to recommend contemporary writers partly because other literature classes expose students to "classics" and partly because these are the writers that I now tend to favor as a reader. In college, I remember being awed by Milton and wowed by Dostoyevsky, but after college I was even more thrilled to discover contemporary writers like Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I want my students to make these same types of discoveries about writers.

Another colleague, Clark Knowles, says this to students about picking a writer:

The attached list of writers is pre-approved. Chances are you haven't heard of a lot of them . . . that is okay. It means you have to find some of their work and see if you care to spend an entire semester reading their words. I tried to be as diverse as possible in choosing the list, and I tried to make it comprehensive. However, I don't know every writer writing today. If you have someone else you would like to read . . . you must get him/her approved. I have several guidelines for choosing authors. I don't mean to be picky, and I don't mean to say that some authors are better than other, but I have to have some sort of control over this thing.

Clark adds the proviso that his students must buy at least one book of the writer they select. He explains, "You are going to mark up the book, highlight sentences that shock or amaze you, fold over pages, carry it around with you in your back pocket, study it, and know it inside out, from cover to cover. This is your chance to discover what makes

another writer tick. This is your chance to discover what makes another writer's words work."

I have found *The Reading List Contemporary Fiction*, *Bloomsbury Reading Guide*, *The Salon.com Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors* useful resources when looking for more writers to recommend to students.

The Value of the Search

Although I am guiding their selection process, my students must still investigate the writers I suggest. This search for good, engaging writing is what made me look forward to going to the library when I was a child and propels me into bookstores now. This project is also making me a more diverse reader. To help my students discover writing that can thrill them and to expand my own lending library, I explore writers I am not familiar with. Recently, for example, I spent time at a bookstore introducing myself to works by Denis Johnson, Susan Minot, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and Lorrie Moore. In addition, I have gotten to know the writing of Jeanette Winterson, Sandra Cisneros, and more of the work of Michael Ondaatje. This exploration keeps me fresh and enthused as a reader, a sense I can then pass on to my students as I model my love for reading – the discoveries, the joys, and the struggles. I tell my students that opening books and reading the first paragraph to see if the writing grabs them will test their interest and readiness for a work. And even though the process of selection takes time, it encourages constructive comparison and helps students become more aware of the kinds of writing that attract them. Plus, the search is fun, and I enjoy getting my students started on it. Early in the semester, I bring to class a collection of recommended books and let them spill onto my

desk. Then I invite my students to come up and browse. It's a pleasure to watch them grab books and scatter about the room - making the classroom space less traditional, more informal - and to feel the comfortable, engaged quiet that settles in. In this atmosphere, students become independent readers in a community of other readers – just as they would be in libraries and bookstores.

Trial and Error and the Writing Mentor Project

When I began this project several years ago, I simply had each student choose one writer to read intensively and independently over the course of the semester. Then at the end of the semester, I asked each student to give an oral presentation about his or her mentor. Although I asked students to address the author's style of writing, these presentations remained essentially on the level of plot summary. Intent on getting my students to look more closely at writing style, I asked students to keep an observation journal in which they were supposed to record and reflect on what they were noticing about writing style. However, for many of the students, these journals became limited as they ran out of observations. It did not help that I only checked to see that the students had written in their journals each week. If I had read and responded to their comments, I could have helped the students to be more observant. Apart from the time management issue of reading all the journals on top of the other writing that the students do in the class, I wondered about my ability to respond effectively if I had not read all of the works that my students were reading. As a result, I choose to go a different route giving more structure to the entire project. The major issues within this structure continue to be first, whether the students should choose readings based on skill needs, a content area, or a

particular mentor and second, whether students should read individually or as part of a group.

Reading Choices for the Mentor Project

Any good teacher I've ever had – and the best was John McPhee – stressed the enormity of choice English provides, its capacity for clarity and ambiguity, dullness and thrill. It is the greatest invention ever devised (and re-devised). And, of course, the only way to get anywhere as a writer is to have read ceaselessly and then read some more.

- David Remnick

I can see several ways to structure the reading so that it is linked to writing skills. Students could read a variety of writers based on the skills that they want to improve, for example, Raymond Carver for models of clean, spare writing and effective use of dialogue or Toni Morrison for models of rich description. Sue Wheeler and Becky Rule have a wonderful chapter “Reading to Write” in *Creating the Story* in which they recommend writers based on the style of their description: “Does the writer tend to write full, rich, rather long descriptions like William Faulkner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, Alice Munro, Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty. Or is this a bare-bones writer, a taker-outer-of details like Ernest Hemingway, Joan Didion, Ann Beattie, and Raymond Carver?”

Students could instead read a variety of writers in a particular subject area. Sue Wheeler has had students who chose to read the writing of visual artists or to read

particular sections of several newspapers. One of her students, for instance, compared the sports writing in *The Manchester Union Leader*, the paper this student read regularly, with the sports writing in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Through this reading, the student was able to see the differences in quality of writing. I like this idea because it also highlights the fact that while genres tend to have certain conventions, there can be a great range in style. Think of the difference between the philosophical, closely observed and detailed nature writing of Annie Dillard as compared to the politically passionate nature writing of Edward Abbey or the outdoor adventure based narratives of Jon Krakauer.

These other approaches offer purposeful ways to structure this project. Asking students to concentrate on a particular writer is another effective approach and one that I use. At first, I had students read one writer intensively over the course of the semester so that they could see the range or concentration of that writer's subject matter and style. And while, I am still trying to figure out how much students need to read of a writer in order to understand his/her writing style, I have now added a second mentor to the project. This has been in response to students' eagerness to read more writers and has allowed them to do a comparison of writing styles that shows them a wider range of possibilities for their own writing.

Students Learning and Teaching in Small Groups

An important organizational issue in the writing mentor project is whether students read on their own or as a part of a group. If students read on their own, then they can

individualize their reading projects in the ways discussed above. However, I have opted for the enriching experience of having students be part of a book group.

The first time I truly experienced how productive a literature discussion could be was when I belonged to a very casual faculty book group at the American school where I taught in England. The discussions that our small, willing group had over tea, whiskey, and biscuits started in an ambling fashion moving from chit chat about other things to talk about the book that generally lasted about two hours. In that time, we shared generously – puzzling through questions, reading passages, trying out interpretations, and arguing. And I left those evenings aware of how much these leaderless discussions had added to my reading experience. I want my students to have a similar experience.

This is how I describe the reading groups to my students:

You will be part of a group of 4 people. Each group will choose a writing mentor from the list of suggestions provided. (I would like each group to choose a different writing mentor.) Individually, you will read 100 – 150 pages of a variety of your mentor's writing over the course of the semester, a little each week. The members of your group do not need to read the same pages of reading that you do, except that I would like you to choose one short piece – an essay, short story, or poem to discuss as a group. You should also use each other as a resource.

Over the course of the semester, I periodically give my students about 15 - 20 minutes of class time to meet in their mentor groups. Observing these groups, I have enjoyed hearing students share their enthusiasm for their chosen mentor. I have been encouraged by how they feed off each other's observations about the writing. And I have been thrilled that all of this has been independent of me, the teacher. These mentor groups also

contribute to the class. For example, I invite students to bring in samples of their mentor's use dialogue or his/her method of character development. This gives students the opportunity to contribute in a genuine manner to the class and turns the classroom into a community of readers having a conversation rather than a teacher directed lesson.

In adding a second mentor to this project, asking students to read 100 – 150 pages of this writer in the latter half of the semester, I have also expanded the students' selection options. Students can choose another mentor as a group if their reading group is working well – some do and, of course, some don't. Or they can pick a mentor independent of their group. This option satisfies students like Kelly Gardner who was able to read Sandra Cisneros as her second mentor after agreeing to read Margaret Atwood as her first mentor in order to reach a compromise with her group. Even when students read independently, they continue to share their new mentors with their group in a now widened conversation. This makes the project all the richer.

A More Structured Project

Pound (that rat) says somewhere that it is incredible to him that so many 'poets' simply pick up a pen and start writing verse and call it poetry, while a would-be pianist knows full well how necessary it is to master scales and thousands of exercises before making music worthy of the name. Playing scales, for a writer, means reading. Is here any real writing that has no reading behind it? I don't think so.

- David Remnick