

# Writing Across the Curriculum Report: Close Reading Pilot Project

Submitted by Gregory B. Sadler, Pilot Project Coordinator to Sonya Brown, WAC Activity Director,  
June 28 2011

## **1. Executive Summary**

A Pilot program focused on improving student performance in carrying out Close Readings in humanities-based discipline courses was developed and implemented under the auspices of Writing Across the Curriculum and Title III at Fayetteville State University in Winter and Spring 2011. Five faculty were involved in the Pilot, myself as the coordinator, and four other faculty from four different disciplines as participants.

The central idea behind the Pilot was that by focusing on the lower-order skills which are scaffolded as components into the higher-order activity of Close Reading of texts, and redesigning courses to emphasize development of these lower-order skills, student performances in Close Readings would also be improved. This did turn out to be the case. Most of the supporting data is qualitative rather than quantitative.

It is recommended that similar activities be continued, but that participating faculty be required to provide much more prescriptively structured and detailed assessment data and information about their course design.

## **2. Narrative of Motivation of the Close Reading Pilot**

The most fundamental reason for the Close Reading Pilot group was to improve student learning in pedagogical activities of Close Readings at Fayetteville State University through faculty development, course redesign, and faculty collaboration.

I had participated in Writing Across the Curriculum course redesigns and associated faculty development activities (directed by S. Brown) applied to two different Philosophy courses in Fall 2009 and Spring 2010. In both of these courses, the centerpiece writing activity to which Writing Across the Curriculum practices and pedagogical theory were applied were the genre of writing called "Close Reading" (see section 3 below), which is a common type of assignment in both the discipline of Philosophy and in disciplines within or oriented by the humanities in general. Learning to carry out a Close Reading of a philosophical text mean learning one of the characteristic activities of Philosophy, i.e. learning how to "do philosophy" as a philosopher.

I developed detailed assignment sheets and grading rubrics to provide students much fuller guidance in producing close reading papers. I also drew explicit connections, both in course materials and in classroom sessions, between the other writing intensive activities incorporated within the redesigned classes and close readings. The assignment sheets, rubrics and associated writing activities were improved from the first writing intensive course to the second, and additional drafts and peer review sessions were added in the second course.

With a few exceptions, student performance in these writing intensive courses was very disappointing, and very few of the papers fit within the genre of Close Reading. Engagement with the text and the

author, searching within and using portions of the text to better understand other sections of the text, reconstructing and evaluating the claims and arguments made in the text, or focusing on and elaborating a main theme or concept remained for the most part rudimentary and inconsistent.

In a series of discussions with S. Brown about these results, we determined that one possible explanation for the poor student performance resided in the nature of the Close Reading Genre and the pedagogical situation of FSU students. A Close Reading is a high-order activity which requires considerable consistent development, practice, and integration of a number of lower-order activities and skills, most of which are Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking skills. For many of the students at FSU, these skills are weak, underdeveloped, and not put into practice as often as one would like. Many students also do not seem to grasp how these various lower-order skills and dispositions (which they are supposed to be developing in their core education at FSU) mesh into higher-order, more complex activities required of them as they progress in their education.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that if we “lowered expectations” about students’ abilities and performance with respect to higher-order Close Readings, and shifted the focus instead to the lower-order skills which are components integrated into Close Readings, this would result in improved student performance. Before FSU students would be able to effectively carry out Close Readings, they would need to work more intensively on lower-order component skills, and they would need sketched out for them how the products of these lower-order skills are to be synthesized into more complex, higher-order skills, activities, and products, eventually leading to students’ being able to produce Close Readings.

To use a building metaphor, the shift was from framework to scaffolding. The previous approach I had taken provided students with a fully developed framework for a Close Reading (along with engagement with many examples), and expected of students that they would not only decide on the specific content studied, but also bring to the building the components required, and then assemble them. The new approach would start with the lower-order skills, exercised through application to texts, and would “scaffold” higher-order skills and activities upon well-developed and understood lower-order skills.

One risk of this, of course, was that students would not attain to the level of effectively carried out Close Readings in the course of a semester-long class. Another risk was that by focusing so intensively on lower-order skills, students would get the message that it did not really matter whether they were able to produce a good Close Reading, so long as they developed the lower-order skills. However, FSU students (at least in my Philosophy classes, as well as in classes of other faculty who we spoke with) were already not producing even adequate Close Reading papers. If we made explicit to students connections between the lower order skills and the higher-order Close Reading, using the same texts for both, and indicating how the lower-order skills possessed their relative value as components of larger higher-order activities, the risks could be minimized

S. Brown proposed that I coordinate a small group of FSU faculty of different, complementary disciplines who would modify their courses along the lines suggested by our hypothesis, meet at least monthly, and then report results. I accepted, recruited the faculty, and began planning for the Pilot to be carried out in Spring Semester, 2011.

### 3. The Nature of a Close Reading

A Close Reading is one typical and classic genre of writing in a number of disciplines in the humanities and humanities-based disciplines e.g. English, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Religious Studies, Theatre), employed both in primary texts and in secondary literature.

A Close Reading is both a genre of writing and a way of reading. The reading and the writing are interconnected and continuous processes. In the process of producing a Close Reading, a student should expect to go back and forth numerous times from the author's text being read and their paper being written. The reading and rereading involves paying close attention to the text, the ideas contained in its passages, and the context of the passages and ideas. The writing represents the student's careful reading and thinking about the text. In successful Close Reading, the process of the student's own thinking about the text and its ideas is guided by, and makes use of, the text and its ideas.

Put in simple terms, in writing about a text, a student uses some parts of the text to better understand other parts of the text, and then to understand the text as a whole. At a more advanced level, a close reading may incorporate what other readers of that particular text have written about it, i.e., its ideas, passages, contexts, and so on.

For many students, a Close Reading is not a genre of writing which they have learned how to do in previous classes. It involves and develops intellectual habits, skills, and attitudes which are not generally cultivated by other ways of reading and writing which they may have been taught in their past education. It is also a sort of initiation or component of apprenticeship in the way of reading, writing, questioning, reasoning, and imagining characteristic of the humanities. Put another way, by learning how to carry out a Close Reading in Philosophy, a student is learning a central aspect of the craft of Philosophy, how to "do Philosophy" in the way a practitioner does.

### 4. Preparation for the Pilot

#### 4a. Faculty Member Selection Classes, Materials, Instructions

A group of four faculty members, drawn from four different but related disciplines, was selected. All of these were experienced faculty who had taught courses for a number of years, and who had participated in earlier faculty development programs at FSU. They were Micki Nyman (English), Phoebe Hall (Theatre), Linda Tomlinson (History), and Richard Hall (Philosophy). The faculty included a mix of tenured and tenure-track faculty. All of these faculty members employed some variety of Close Reading assignments in their previous courses, and had carried out close readings both as an essential component of their graduate studies and in their professional publications. They were therefore all conversant with the norms and some of the literature pertaining to Close Readings within their disciplines.

The courses selected by the faculty members for inclusion in the Pilot were as follows:

Faculty Member	Course	Title	Students	Notes
M. Nyman	ENGL 120	English Composition II	17 finished	Required Course
P. Hall	THEA 203	Introduction to Theatre	17 finished	Elective Course, satisfies THEA minor
L. Tomlinson	HIST 210	African-American History	16 finished	CORE course
R. Hall	PHIL 310	Philosophy of Religion	8 finished	Elective course, satisfies PHIL minor

As this listing indicates, the courses were a good mix of required and elective, mostly lower-level courses. Writing skills play different roles in these courses. In ENGL 120, it is the thematic object of study in numerous modes. In the other three classes, writing was also integral to the courses, to provide evidence of engagement with and reflection upon the course material. All of the courses required persuasive writing in a broad sense of the term, i.e. requiring students to do the following in their writing assignments

- Distinguish claims made by the author or by other voices within the text
- Distinguish arguments made the author or by other voices within the text
- Make claims and arguments about concepts, claims, arguments, or characters within the text
- Interpret claims and arguments
- Appropriately cite (i.e. correctly quote or paraphrase portions of the text)
- Compare or connect portions of the text to other portions

#### **4b. Planning for the Pilot**

There were some delays in planning for the Pilot having to do with delays in authorization of funding by the Title III office at FSU. This significantly shortened the time available before the Spring Semester for planning, and precluded the possibility of developing and facilitating and workshop specifically on Close Readings and course development for the selected faculty members in a timely manner. Instead of this, a Blackboard site was developed and populated over the Winter break. The site included documents pertaining to close readings, instructions for the faculty members, and some discussion questions associated with Blackboard components.

The faculty members were provided with a short textbook on Close Readings chosen by myself and S. Brown, *Techniques of Close Reading* by Barry Brummet. This book was selected because it was sufficiently generic enough to use with faculty of different disciplines, both for gleaning ideas for classroom work and course design, and to provide common material for discussion in our monthly meetings. 5 copies of the book were ordered.

Faculty members were provided with a list of requirements. Specifically, they had to:

- Provide copies of their old version of the syllabus for the course and a new version incorporating an emphasis on developing lower-order skills to be scaffolded into Close Readings
- Decide which particular lower-order skills their redesigned course would focus upon as learning outcomes.
- Develop activities to introduce students to these skills, provide them practice and feedback, and (hopefully) demonstrate some improvement in these skills
- Incorporate at least one higher-order Close Reading assignment within the class
- Grade the higher-order Close Reading using a common rubric (which they were free to adapt and add to for their courses)
- Provide quantitative as well as qualitative data for assessment of student learning in at least one of the lower-order skills and assessment of student scores in a Close Reading assignment, graded using the common rubric
- Meet at least monthly to discuss the courses, student performance, the assignments, and the nature of Close Readings.

The faculty members were supplied with a generic Close Reading Rubric. They were also provided with my previous two Writing Across the Curriculum Reports and the Close Reading Assignment Sheet I had developed, to use as models. A full template for their final report was provided to them as well.

## **5. Close Reading Skill-Developing Activities**

Each faculty member developed learning activities designed to develop student lower-order skills which would contribute to developing higher-order Close Reading skills in the course of the class.

### **5a. Close Reading Component Skills**

For ENGL 120, the lower-order skills focused upon were identifying signs, formulating effective questions, distinguishing connotative and denotative meanings, summarizing passages from texts, evaluating claims and arguments made in texts.

For THEA 203, the lower-order skills focused upon were identifying key dramatic concepts, distinguishing emotional states and motivations of characters in plays, evaluating claims and arguments made by characters in plays, identifying relationships between the theme of the play and images created on stage

For HIST 210, the lower-order skills focused upon were: Identifying key passages in a text relevant to given ideas, themes, concepts, characters, or distinctions, interpreting meaning of textual passages in relation to other passages from that same text, evaluating claims and arguments made in texts, arguing for correctness, reasonableness, or plausibility of interpretations by reference to the text.

For PHIL 310, the lower order skills focused upon were identifying claims and arguments made in textual passages, evaluating claims and arguments made in texts, identifying the position an author articulates on issues in philosophy of religion in textual passages, identifying assumptions made but unstated by an author in textual passages.

### **5b. Close Reading Component Skills Building Activities**

ENGL 120 included 4 Close Reading development activities, which were well-resigned to progressively build upon each other. Students were supplied with assignment sheets and rubrics. Students were required to engage with selected essays contained the course text book, to carry out interpretation and justification of their interpretations, building towards attributing, integrating, and synthesizing source material. Supporting all of these skill development exercises were a number of different writing strategies, with instructions provided to the students in Blackboard, including an anticipation guide, dense questioning, frame of reference, inferential reading, interactive notebook, key concept synthesis, metaphor analysis, parallel note taking, and reciprocal teaching.

THEA 203 included structured short in-class writing assignments focused on texts in which they had to address questions guiding them into the text. Students also had to collaborate on a scenic design assignment, in which they applied close reading skills to passages from a play, then express it with merged color collages, then explained to the other students in the class.

HIST 210 included four online Close Reading assignments dealing with various aspects of African American History. Each required students to analyze various texts for meaning, arguments and ideology and write a written summary analysis uploaded to Blackboard. These analyses were then the objects of classroom discussions to promote reflection on their learning experiences .

PHIL 310 included two main types of activities. Students were asked in class discussions to interpret particular passages and were quizzed about the meanings of specific words. Students were also assigned presentations oriented by discussion questions focused on texts under discussion in that class session. They then revised their written presentation in light of the ensuing classroom discussion.

**5c. Close Reading Assignments .**

Each course required at least one Close Reading assignment of the students, in which they were not only to incorporate some content from previous Close Reading component skills assignments, but were also to use and further develop the component skills in their close readings.

In the ENGL 120 and HIST 210 courses, the close reading assignments were papers completed outside of class and then handed in for grading. The THEA 203 course required students to produce a guidebook to Oedipus Rex with some reference to passages from Aristotle’s Poetics. The PHIL 310 course required students to carry out close readings in class as their final examination.

**6. Student Performance Data**

The quality of the data provided to me by the faculty members varied considerably in quality and quantity. I suspect that several of the faculty members may have either not fully understood the instructions pertaining to the assessment needed. Another factor which may have contributed to this is that all of the faculty members were also involved in a number of other new and demanding departmental, college, and university assessment matters at FSU.

Three of the final reports were turned in prior to my departure from Fayetteville, but one of them, though containing much qualitative information, did not contain sufficiently articulated quantitative assessment information. Another report was turned in later, and also did not contain sufficiently articulated quantitative assessment information. I contacted those faculty members to clarify the types of information needed for reporting, who responded with additional data, but at the time of the writing of this report, have not been supplied with all of the data I might wish to have.

A pretest and post-test was incorporated by several of the course redesigns, but they did not provide particularly useful assessment data in some cases because they focused on course content material measures rather than on measures of the lower-order more generic and fundamental skills scaffolded into higher-order Close Readings.

**6a. Quantitative Assessment Data**

All of the courses provided some data for student performance on the Close Reading assignment. Unfortunately, although all of the courses used the common rubric to determine the final grade for the assignment, none of the faculty provided data about specific scoring areas in the rubric, so the data provided is rather rough. All but one of the faculty members provided some data for the lower-order skill-building assignments.

Course	Title	Assessed Skill Building Activity	Assessed Close Reading
ENGL 120	English Composition II	Various skill-building exercises both text and in class:  data not supplied	Close Reading Paper 2:  79% % of students good (B-A) performance
THEA 203	Introduction to	Scenic design collaborative	Oedipus Guidebook:

	Theatre	assignment: 40% of students good (B-A) performance	10% of students good (B-A) performance
HIST 210	African-American History	Close Reading component assignments with classroom discussion  data not supplied	Close Reading Paper:  46% of students good (B-A) performance  80% of students satisfactory (C-A) performance
PHIL 310	Philosophy of Religion	In-Class Student Presentations and Revisions:  data not supplied	Final Examination In-Class Close Reading: 63% of students good (B-A) performance  100 % students satisfactory (C-A) performance

Somewhat more detailed information about student performance and grading is found in several of the faculty reports attached here as appendixes.

#### 6a. Qualitative Assessment Data

Although they did not provide quantitative data tracking progress in student performance from the Close reading component skill-building assignments to the later Close Reading assignment(s), all of the faculty reported that they observed a strong and not-surprising correlation between student performance on the skill-building assignments and their performance on the Close Reading assignment(s). Students who completed the skill-building assignments to the standards required tended to produce better Close Reading work according to the standards provided in the assignment sheets and rubrics. Conversely, students who did substandard work, or who did not attempt, the skill-building work, did poorly on the Close Reading assignments

P. Hall noted one unforeseen factor which skewed the performance results for the main THEA 203 Close Reading assignment. The assignment required students to explore the moral of Oedipus Rex: “the students were all over the map on what they thought was important. It became less about pride and ego and more about sleeping with your mother. They just couldn't get past that. . . . They found it boring and 'icky' (their words, not mine) because of the oedipal relationship.”

M. Nyman and L. Tomlinson both employed Blackboard as a locus for housing student skill-building work, and all of the faculty required some student skill-building work to be subjected to in-class or out of class discussion and critique. This thereby not only introduced the dimension of peer-review of student work, but also promoted (in R. Hall’s case, explicitly required. M. Nyman, for instance reported: “Students experienced the most success in building critical writing skills on the class Discussion Board site, where students practiced what was introduced in class.”

L. Tomlinson also highlighted an important affective dimension to student learning which was promoted through the structured focus on Close Reading: “The assignments incorporated in the course this past semester created enthusiasm, curiosity and commitment among the students.”

## 7. Faculty Meetings and Reflections

We held four monthly meetings over the course of the semester. I also engaged in numerous less planned conversations over the course of the semester in which we discussed the Pilot and our classes.

During the first meeting, I provided the faculty with copies of *Techniques of Close Reading*, went over all of the requirements of the Close Reading Pilot, and we discussed the nature of close reading as practiced within each of our disciplines and how best to structure courses to lead students towards being able to produce adequate Close Readings. I

In the following meetings, we discussed particular themes and tools from chapters of *Techniques of Close Reading*, strategies for building student lower-order skills, the specific demands imposed by the educational situation of FSU students, the different disciplinary perspectives which can be adopted and articulated towards texts, and how to scaffold or integrate lower-order skills into higher-order Close Readings.

The last meeting was devoted to wrap-up, i.e. having the faculty share reflections on how the skill-building and Close Reading Assignments had worked in their classes, and providing instructions on what data and information was needed for their final reports.

All of the participating faculty members expressed that they found the Pilot program on the whole to have been very useful or themselves and for their students. While none of the faculty reported dramatic improvement in the student Close Reading work, they did note that student work improved on the whole. All of the faculty reported that because of their participation in the Pilot (particularly, because of the explicit emphasis on structuring lower-order skill-building activities in order to lead students into Close Reading assignments) they had developed a fuller understanding not only of the genre of Close Reading, but of how to structure courses well to assist students to produce adequate Close Readings.

Key to this was being able to provide students with clear standards for performance, and to be able to provide them a sort of “map” so that they could gradually develop an understanding of how the lower-order skills applied to course texts are scaffolded into higher-order activities, ultimately into Close Readings. It turns out to be very useful for instructors who are to lead students through this teleological process, to themselves go through a process of making all of this explicit in order for instructors to develop a fuller ‘guide-like” understanding of the process, all of its components, and their relations.

All of the faculty who participated in this assignment were reinforced in their views of Close Reading as valuable educational activities essential to the practice of humanities-based disciplines. They all also expressed a higher degree of confidence in being able to progressively lead students through carrying out Close Readings. All of the faculty participants not only plan to continue use of Close Readings in their courses, but to apply what they have learned through the Pilot, add more skill-building activities, and refine their Close Reading assignments, assignment sheets, and rubrics.

Through this Pilot, we were able to share a number of specific assignments or techniques, whether they worked well or not, what conditions were required for their success, and to discuss how they might be adapted from one discipline to another. This raises another important point.

The faculty members also expressed the view that working with faculty members from other disciplines was very helpful in a number of ways. There are relatively few opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration or even interaction at FSU, and it has been long noted in a number of contexts that, aside from committee work, faculty development activities are one of the main ways faculty from a variety of disciplines are brought together for the type of intensive and focused interaction necessary for substantive interdisciplinary work or even scholarly exchange of the sort carried out in this Pilot.

Drama, Writing, Literature, History, and Philosophy are taught as separate subjects and housed in different academic units. But, these disciplines not only involve many similar intellectual skills and characteristic activities, they also share a long, rich and complex history of interactions and mutual borrowings and fertilizations. When Philosophy is done well (and thereby modeled to students), for example, the practitioner cannot confine her- or himself to what counts as the present discipline of philosophy. A significantly broader background and field of interactions is required, one which engages particularly with the allied disciplines which focus particularly on texts, i.e. the humanities-based disciplines. Studying Close Readings thematically, applying knowledge about them in courses, and discussing how we understand and implement them within our disciplines allowed the faculty participants (and myself as well) to reconsider from multiple complementary perspectives a common type of activity which we often take for granted.

## **8. Recommendations**

My recommendations are of two main sorts, and bear on four connected but distinct issues:

- the main hypothesis governing the basic approach adopted in this Pilot
- the educational value of the activities carried out in this Pilot
- the degree of perscriptiveness required for the course redesign involved in this Pilot
- assessment of any improvements in student learning through this Pilot

### **8.1. The Basic Approach to the Pilot.**

The governing hypothesis was this: Since a Close Reading is a higher-order activity and product requiring integration of well-developed lower-order skills, and since FSU students tend to be weak in these lower-order skills, focusing on improving those skills as applied to course texts which would be later the objects of Close Readings would result in better student performance on Close Reading Assignments. This improvement in student learning would occur partly because of students' acquisition of the lower order skills, partly because they would be applying the lower-order skills and the Close Reading to a similar set of texts within the discipline, and partly because they would be provided some instruction in how the lower-order skills which they have acquired fit into Close Readings.

The validity of this approach appears to be borne out by the information provided by the faculty members involved in the Pilot. This is not surprising, since it is fairly intuitive that, given the model we are working with, improving the lower-order skills ought to have some bearing on the higher-order activity integrating those skills. My recommendations are therefore that this approach ought to be publicized if possible so it can be studied and adopted by other faculty who use or who would be expected to use Close Reading assignments. I also recommend that if another Pilot pertaining to close readings be carried out, much more structured course redesign and assessment be required of the participating faculty.

### **8.2 Educational Value of the Activities.**

It is clear that the activities used in the redesigned courses in this Pilot are of considerable value in an FSU education. Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking skills and the sorts of activities which develop

them are necessary not only for students in the humanities to be able to learn the discipline which they are studying, but also more broadly provide a foundation needed by all students, regardless of discipline. An emphasis on developing these skills through activities which lead into Close Readings aligns very closely with the current FSU QEP, and also with the recent findings of the study *Academically Adrift*.

The concept that lower-order skills feed into and find their full value in the scope of integrative higher-order activities is not one that many students have been introduced to, and leading them into this through actually carrying out such an integrative process over the course of a semester would seem to have considerable value as a model as well.

### **8.3 Prescriptiveness of Course Redesign**

Since the faculty who I selected for the Pilot were experienced not only in teaching but also in course design, I was unduly confident in their capacities to design into their courses the sorts of activities, outcomes, and assessments involved and to report on the results in a comprehensive manner. This assumption on my part turned out to be unfounded. Admittedly, this was an extraordinarily busy and full semester for all, and due to the Title III Office's delay in approving funding, planning was done much later and quickly than desirable. I still take full responsibility for not having provided much more detailedly prescriptive instructions and templates to the faculty participating in the Pilot. I also did not engage in as much direct oversight as I could have, feeling that would impinge too heavily upon the autonomy of the faculty.

Were I or anyone else to coordinate this Pilot again, I would recommend the following:

- faculty continue to incorporate a common rubric for close readings, to which they could add categories and criteria
- faculty document all student performances – including on earlier drafts – on all scoring areas of the rubric, so that these can be compared across classes, and any trends or areas for improvement can be discerned
- faculty fill out a set of course development worksheets, to be shared with each other and provided to the coordinator, in which they
  - clearly identify 2-3 low-order skills, component to Close Readings, and to be applied to course texts
  - link these low-order skills to learning outcomes
  - develop learning activities which will provide students practice in and feedback about these skills
  - provide means of assessment, using rubrics, for these skills
- Faculty employ one of the activities assessing lower-order skills as a pretest. This would be used in place of any content-specific pretest
- Faculty employ another similar activity assessing lower-order skills as a posttest.
- Faculty be provided with a comprehensive listing of lower-order skills which are scaffolded into close readings
- A survey be developed to ascertain student impression about the skills-development and Close Readings assignments. The survey would be used across all of the participating faculty's courses.
- Faculty be required to report detailed assessment data on each skills-building or Close Reading Assignment in a standard form within two weeks of grading those assignments

- A more detailed Final Report Template be developed in which faculty would incorporate all of their information gathered over the course of the semester as well as their reflections and recommendations

#### **8.4 Assessment of Student Learning**

Quantitative assessment of student learning, except in a very crude form was hampered by the lack of data provided by some of the faculty about student performance in the skills-building or Close Reading assignments. Again, as coordinator, I take responsibility for the paucity of data. It does not appear that all of the faculty fully understood their instructions or used the models provided for them.

My recommendation is that, if such a Close Reading Pilot be carried out again, standardized forms be developed for the faculty participants to use in designing, structuring, and assessing their course and assignments. These should be as detailed as they can possibly be without impinging on a reasonable degree of flexibility allowed the faculty participants. Faculty should be required to report all assessment data continuously through the semester, with this information being filed in a central location (preferably with the coordinator), with no more than a two week gap between assessment and reporting of assessment.

## Appendix A: Micki Nyman WAC Intensive Writing Course Completion Report

### COURSE INFORMATION

This WAC Intensive Writing Course, ENGL 120.14, English Composition II, was completed on May 5, 2011. The class began with 20 freshman; three withdrew by the required time frame, thus the final count was 17. Since the course is structured on the premise of practice, practicing the skills in class that are being assessed through out-of-class assignments and rewrites, students are allowed to resubmit all written work. All assignments could have been rewritten and resubmitted by e-mail. Both students who received D grades did so because of the amount of work submitted, however their writing skills did improve. Two students attended class approximately five times but did not turn in any assignments; they receive a FN grade.

The course textbook was *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (2009), by Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, Eds.

Instruction was supplemented by material uploaded to Blackboard. Materials include informational data on APA, how to use sources, mechanics review sheets, content essays.

We met twice a week in a Smart Classroom, but met as needed in a computer lab, less at the beginning of the semester and more towards the ending.

### MODIFICATIONS TO CLASS ASSIGNMENTS FROM PREVIOUS COURSES

This is the first semester at FSU where I have taught ENGL 120, though I have taught many research/argument based composition courses at other institutions. The premise for composition courses I teach are based on the principle that students must practice the requisite skills in and away from class meetings that are required in submitted papers. The major difference in this particular course is the application of this principle of “practice” to the close reading focus.

Another significant adaptation would be the role technology would play in this scenario. Toward this end, close reading strategies were developed and implemented particularly for this course. These strategies, applied one at a time, were as follows: anticipation guide, dense questioning, frame of reference, inferential reading, interactive notebook, key concept synthesis, metaphor analysis, parallel note taking, and reciprocal teaching. We would practice these techniques in class, and I would assess their application of skills on the discussion tab (blackboard) to follow-up. All work would be assessed points; models were provided for students needing additional help or for students missing class meetings. These skills would then build upon each other so students would have a greater chance at success on their close reading assignments (4) which would then be used as pre-writing assignments for three formal essays and one term paper. All written work functioned as platforms for skill mastery. Class notes and class conversations were uploaded unto Blackboard so students could review key concepts from our class meetings. Instructor and student samples of major and minor assignments were uploaded to and kept current on Blackboard.

The student learning outcomes of special interest were the following:

#### Communication

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| • Evaluate effectiveness of various forms of communication | Master |
| • Create written and spoken communication: organization    | Master |
| • Create written and spoken communication: clarity         | Master |

### Inquiry Skills

- Formulate effective questions Emphasize
- Organize, sort, evaluate, retrieve academic information Emphasize
- Cite sources appropriately Emphasize

### **CLOSE READING SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

The purpose of these assignments was to help students think critically about class readings, to practice the skills worked on in class and on discussion board assignments, as well as to help students explore topics for their longer essays.

The first close reading assignment focused on an exploration of the textbook's chapter on methodology and included such focusing questions or topics as "What is the meaning of a sign?" What is the difference between connotative and denotative meanings? What is a cultural construct? For this close reading assignment and others, students could veer off assignment suggestions with instructor approval. Rubrics available on blackboard were required to be cut and pasted to the end of each assignment.

The second assignment guided students toward particular topics as well: "I am suggesting specific choices for this assignment but the parameters (see Rubric) must be met. Choose one topic: 1) Summarize and comment on Scott Jaschik's ideas concerning Wikipedia and respond to this synthesis through using a word or topic of one's own on Wikipedia 2) Summarize and evaluate Dana Mariano's essay, "Patrons of the Arts". 3) Summarize and evaluate Amy Lin's essay "Barbie: Queen of Dolls and Consumerism." 4) Summarize and evaluate Josua Keim's essay "Nostalgia Mongering at City Walk."

The third close reading activity required students to choose one of the articles from the textbook's "Consuming Passions" chapter and to write about the idea that struck them as most significant to the overall meaning in the essay. We began to focus more strictly on using parenthetical expressions. Students were also required to adhere to a structured format in their writing. For example, the first sentence of the assignment needed to include the author's name, name of article, and the main idea. Two examples were provided on blackboard for students to follow. For all close reading assignments, a minimum word count of 350 was required.

The final formal close reading assignment of the semester focused on the chapter called "The Signs of Advertising," and allowed students with the opportunity to extend concepts from the textbook out to newspaper, magazine, and television ads. The content focus was on ideas and values and desires that advertisers seek to exploit and the mechanic focus was on how to attribute, integrate, and synthesize source material.

As we began research paper process work, we again practiced some of the close reading strategies that were previously introduced.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

Students experienced the most success in building critical writing skills on the class Discussion Board site, where students practiced what was introduced in class. Most assignments have been thoroughly completed by 15 – 17 students. Tasks for these activity were individually based and students could look at other student work and typically, were required to respond to (2) two other students' work. For example, an early assignment called "What we are to advertisers," reads: "Consult the VALS2 network chart on page 195 and write a journal entry in which you place yourself on the chart. To what extent do you see yourself reflected in the VALS2 paradigm? What is your attitude toward being stereotyped by marketers?" A later assignment titled "Wikipedia" reads: "Choose a word or concept to look up on

Wikipedia! Go to the Wikipedia web site and type one's word or concept! Read it over and write a paragraph--minimum 100 words--that respond to these questions: What new information do I know now? Why is this knowledge interesting to me? How reliable is this information? Where will I look next for more information on this word or concept? One may attach a paragraph or write it straight on the screen. Use academic discourse in one's responses, answer the prompts in one's paragraph, and respond to three other student's writings."

In this latter type of assignment including a critical one where topics were generated for research papers, students were not allowed repeat responses or choices of other students. Students experienced success in these activities because they had many models to think about before writing their own entries. Points were awarded for the parameters described in advance. For example in the discussion board assignment called "The Democracy of Good," taken from one of the textbook's chapters, the closing part of the assignment reads: "The breakdown of points to be awarded for this assignment is as follows: 10 points for correct spelling, punctuation, subject/verb agreement, correct referent to pronoun; 10 points for clear, interesting definition of word; 15 points for connecting the word accurately to the remainder of the paragraph."

### **CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

The Close Reading writing assignments were based on the semiotics focus of the class. The four close reading assignments are as follows:

1) Read pages 1-32 in our textbook. Choose a main idea that one can explore in 200 words or more. Be sure to explain the idea well through putting the main idea and sub ideas in one's own words. Be sure to use parenthetical expressions if one quotes directly. One should use the questions on page 21 to organize one's thoughts on any particular aspect of the initial chapter or the short "Portfolio" that follows. What is the meaning of a sign? What is the difference between connotative and denotative meanings? What is a cultural construct? These questions can help one to think about some object, person, place, or ideology that has presented itself in this early reading. If one wants to use something else to write on, one may, but keep in mind the three questions of page 21 must be answered with this alternative choice.

2) I am assigning specific choices for this assignment but the parameters (see Rubric) must be met. Choose one topic: 1) Summarize and comment on Scott Jaschik's ideas concerning Wikipedia and respond to them through using a word or topic of one's own on Wikipedia 2) Summarize and evaluate Dana Mariano's essay, "Patrons of the Arts". 3) Summarize and evaluate Amy Lin's essay "Barbie: Queen of Dolls and Consumerism." 4) Summarize and evaluate Josua Keim's essay "Nostalgia Mongering at City Walk." Minimum length: 350 words.

3) Choose one of the articles in "Consuming Passions," and write about the idea that strikes one as most significant to the overall meaning in the essay. One must use parenthetical expressions if one would like to cite directly from the text, but one must include the author's name and article along with the main idea in the first sentence. One must also balance abstract ideas with concrete detail, transition from one sub-idea to the next, write clearly and in Standard English, and move from general to specific. I will provide an example on the "Required Readings" tab on Blackboard. Minimum Word count: 350

4) To do well on this close reading, read over one of the selections in Chapter 2, "The Signs of Advertising" and try to discover what the author is saying about advertising, "for ads work characteristically by substituting signs for things, and by reading those signs one can discover the values and desires that advertisers seek to exploit" (177). Considering what one's own ideas and values are and

what one purchases that reflect these same values might be useful in this short paper. One must paraphrase, cite, or summarize from at least once from the relevant article, make sure those ideas are mechanically correct, and synthesize those ideas with one's own.

The formal essays (3) and the research paper students wrote became the standards of measure for close reading skill-building components. The essays contain the formal elements required by Standard English and academic prose dictates, particularly those emphasizing organization and clarity.

### **CLOSE READING WRITING RUBRICS**

Rubrics were used for the close reading, essay, and research paper assignments. Examples have been attached to this report.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Students' written work was linked incrementally to reading assignments and close reading activities in class. 18 students turned in the first Close Reading writing assignment. 17 students turned in the second one. 9 students turned in the third assignment and 6 turned in the final one. Increased difficulty of the assignment is one reason for the drop of completion; another might be attendance. More students attended class during the first two months of the semester; attendance dropped off in the last eight weeks.

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE or OUTCOMES**

What emerged early in the semester as the most decisive element concerning whether or not the class as a whole met outcomes (above) was whether or not students practiced skill building exercises. Fifteen students out of the 19 enrolled-at the time when the second close reading assignment was due—received B or better on their Second Close Reading Assignment. The assignment was worth 50 points; the breakdown follows: 50 (2) 49 (1) 48 (3) 47 (2) 45 (3) 44 (1) 43 (2) 40 (1). Four of the students enrolled at that time did not turn in an assignment; two of those dropped the class by midterm; the student who earned 40 was absent the day of the post-reading/pre-writing activity. This activity was implemented on Thursday, 1/27/2011; the particular assignment that corresponded to it was due by midnight Sunday, 1/30/2011; students were divided into groups; they re-read chapters, came up with questions that would foster understanding, and presented orally their findings to the class.

Another strategy to help student meet desired skill outcomes was linking the close reading assignment to the essay which followed it. These correspondences were put into place for students' Third Close Reading Assignment and First Essay Assignment titled "Consuming Passions," and for their Fourth Close Reading Assignment and Second Essay Assignment titled "Signs of Advertising."

The final breakdown of grades for this class: A—2; B—6; C—4; D—2; F—1; FN—2; WU—3.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Practicing the measurable skills on scoring sheets--rubrics that are linked to student outcomes is extremely important. The grades students have earned do not necessarily reflect their mastery of skill. However, the class is structured to reward attendance, practice, and re-writes.

The grades students earned for this section of English 120-14 are the ones they have chosen. Students were allowed the option to rewrite all work. In addition, students were given generous points for discussion board entries. Rewriting an essay/term paper resulted in the re-formulation of the grade to the higher one earned.

## **Appendix B: Linda Tomlinson WAC Intensive Writing Course Completion Report**

### **COURSE INFORMATION**

The course used to introduce the Close Reading Pilot into was my HIS 210.03: African American History course which meet on Tuesday/Thursday from 8:00-9:15 a.m. in JKSA 206 beginning January, 2011 and ending on April 29, 2011. There were a total of 18 initially registered for the course. Two of those students eventually withdrew. Of the remaining 16 students, most of them (except for two) attended the class sessions, took the required tests and exams, and submitted the required assignments.

### **MODIFICATIONS TO CLASS ASSIGNMENTS FROM PREVIOUS COURSES**

After reading *Techniques of Close Reading* by Barry Brummet, I decided to focus on three of the three specific skills: meaning, argument and ideology. Basically, I took a problem-posing approach to the course which promoted the idea that all history is argument and that the arguments claims and decisions the students made had to be evidence-based. Pedagogically, I introduced small group discussions and projects, document analysis worksheets and grading rubrics into this section of African American history. In addition, new terms and concepts were posted to Blackboard as well as primary and secondary sources for student examination.

The following close-reading student learning outcomes were added to the syllabus:

1. Identify key passages in a text relevant to a given idea, theme, concept, character, or distinction important in that text.
2. Interpret the meaning of a significance of textual passages in relation to or in light of other passages from that same text.
3. Argue for the correctness, reasonableness, or plausibility of the student's selected interpretation by reference to the text.

### **CLOSE READING SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

I incorporated four online Close Reading assignments dealing with various aspects of African American History. Each of these assignments required students to analyze various texts (not all were written texts) for meaning, arguments and ideology and write a written summary analysis which they must upload to Blackboard for Class Participation points. In addition, there were classroom discussions "after" the deadlines for the written assignments in order for students to "reflect" on their learning experiences with these assignments.

There was also a major Close Reading Paper which counted 15% of the students' final grade. They had to analyze three "different" texts on the abolitionist John Brown (a journal article, two pictures and two cartoons). Again, they were asked to focus on meaning, arguments, and ideology and write a paper identifying these aspects as well as creating an argument claim as to their perception of John Brown's contribution to African American history in general and abolitionism in particular.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

As mentioned earlier, most of the students submitted the online close reading assignments on the following themes: #1—"Scarred Walls of Stone" and "The Death of A Slave Captain"—theme: the slave-trade; #2—"The U.S. Constitution and Slavery"—theme: slavery in the U.S; #3—"The Underground Railroad"—theme: abolitionism; and #4—"The Dred Scott Decision"—theme: abolitionism. Because we discussed the concepts: meaning, arguments and ideology as outlined in the Brummet book in class and students had the Document Analysis Worksheets to utilize in their examination of the various texts and website, most of them were able to at least attain 70 out of the 100 points allowed for each

assignment. Students who did not receive 70 points were basically the ones who did not follow the instructions of the prompt in Blackboard or did not submit one or two of these Class Participation assignments. These online assignments were used to build the skills necessary for them to complete the major Close Reading assignment on John Brown, the abolitionist. These mini-assignments provided students with the practice they needed in identifying meaning, arguments and ideology within texts and forced them to perform these tasks within a time-frame.

### **CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

My close reading writing assignments were combined with examination of the texts. On the online assignments, they had to write a 1-2 page summary analysis of the various texts. These written assignments had to follow all the mechanical dictates of college writings. They were assessed for thesis, content analysis, mechanics and appropriate and correct citations (Turabian/Chicago style formatting).

The major CR assignment counted 15% of the students' final grade. Students had to examine closely three varied (texts) on John Brown [journal article, two cartoons and two pictures of Mr. Brown] for their meanings, arguments, and ideologies. They had to develop an essay identifying these aspects, document any similarities and differences among the various texts and include their perspective regarding Mr. Brown's abolitionism.

### **CLOSE READING WRITING RUBRICS**

I utilized the general grading rubric agreed on by the pilot group without making any adjustments.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

15 students were counted in terms of the major close reading papers:

The breakdown of scores was as follows according to the generic grading rubric:

Ideal (A)	2 students
Good (B)	5 students
Satisfactory (C)	5 students
Poor (D)	1 student
No submission (F)	2 students

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE or OUTCOMES**

It is my belief that students did acquire the skills required to identify meaning, arguments and ideology within texts. Because I came into this project late, I did not develop a pre and post survey instrument. These pre- and post-surveys are vital in being able to assess the whether or not student learning outcomes were achieved and to what degree. This course also had other assignments which constituted their final grade in the course. These assignments included class participation, three in-class tests, an exemplar argument essay, and a final exam.

The final results for this section of HIS 210 were:

4 A's  
6 B's  
3 C's

1 D  
2 FNs  
2 W's

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I strongly believe in Close Reading Techniques. The assignments incorporated in the course this past semester created enthusiasm, curiosity and commitment among the students. There is so much intense reading of various texts in History, any techniques that will facilitate this process for students is needed. As mentioned above, it is vital for the instructor to administer pre-and post-surveys in order to accurately measure and compare where students are coming into the course and when they leave it.

I would certainly continue to connect the close reading assignments to the major themes in the course because that allows students to stay focused and reinforces that information. Although I utilized the generic rubric without change this semester, some amending will be necessary in order to achieve the kind of cohesion among my student learning outcomes, activities and assessments I am looking for.

It is my desire to develop assignments and assessments that help students apply, integrate and self-assess the materials they learn in this course. Students must move beyond the foundational knowledge level (remembering and repeating information) to the higher level student learning outcome categories. Having students work with techniques of meaning, ideology, and arguments proved to push students towards those levels.

## **Appendix C: Phoebe Hall WAC Intensive Writing Course Completion Report**

### **COURSE INFORMATION**

My THEA 203, Introduction to Theatre, Close Reading assignments were completed on April 27, 2010. The class consisted of 12 Freshmen, 4 Transfers, 2 Special Visiting students, and 3 Readmits for a total of 21 students. Only 17 of the 21 students enrolled actually finished the class. 2 students had withdrawn, 1 had simply stopped attending by Midterm, and the other 2 students did not complete most of the assignments, and did not show up the last 3 weeks of class.

### **INTENSIVE READING ASSIGNMENTS**

My class had 3 sets of closed reading assignments.

- 1) each student had to take a pre-test providing me with information on the level of knowledge they had before they began studying theatre,
- 2) students had to complete short in-class writing assignments dealing with topics and concepts based on readings for class. They were given specific instructions. Attached please find examples of these assignments. (Quotes, Oedipus Guidebook, Poetics, Doll's House, etc.)
- 3) each student had to take the same pre-test again at the end of the semester to measure knowledge based growth.

### **CLOSED READING RUBRICS**

I did use a rubric for grading the in-class assignments. It is attached.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK**

The amount and quality of work varied considerably among students. Of those who completed the class, all did the scenic design assignment, all turned in their production critiques, and most participated in the in-class writing assignments. Only a few of them took the pre-test and/or post-test.

I had a very difficult time getting students to take the pre-test or post-test seriously since they knew there was no grade attached to it. Perhaps next time, I will have to assign a grade component to motivate them to complete them.

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE or OUTCOMES**

I cannot make a direct comparison between classes, as I have not taught THEA203 at FSU in several years. The Close Reading did seem to make a difference in the types of concrete ideas students had for abstract ideas, though, based on my using a similar assignment in another class NOT using the Close Reading skills.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I plan to use Close Reading in future Theatre classes, and to create similar assignments for those courses. I will review and if needed revise the Close Reading assignment sheets, and I am already in the process of revising the Grading Rubric. It seems clear that I need to find ways to make students pay closer attention and invest themselves more in the process of reading carefully and analyzing critically those things that make theatre audiences much more informed audience members.

I plan to create new in-class creative assignments and to provide students models of good student in-class assignments. I may incorporate Blackboard by scanning and uploading some of those 'good' assignments.

## **Appendix D: Richard Hall WAC Intensive Writing Course Completion Report**

### **COURSE INFORMATION**

I turned my course in the Philosophy of Religion (PHIL 310) an exercise in close reading. The course was well adapted to that insofar as its texts were complete, primary sources. These texts, dating from the late eighteenth century and the early and mid twentieth century, exhibited a variety of writing styles with complex syntax and large vocabularies. I discussed in class the differences among these styles and their significance. During our class discussions, I asked them to interpret particular passages and quizzed them about the meanings of specific words.

### **MODIFICATIONS TO CLASS ASSIGNMENTS FROM PREVIOUS COURSES**

What I did was to adapt what I had done in previous courses, which included the following procedures:

1. The students were assigned a primary source to read. They were given questions geared to their reading to answer both orally and in writing. They presented their oral reports in class and then given an opportunity to revise them in light of class discussion; these reports were then submitted for a grade. (I've appended a sample of the questions and the assigned reading.
2. Later, for the sake of variety, I developed a series of multiple choice reading comprehension quizzes to test their understanding of the assigned readings. Again, I've appended a sample quiz. On the whole, the questions worked better than the quizzes and so I shall continue with them.
3. The students sat for two examinations, a mid-term and final, which required them to make comparisons among the three texts of the course.

### **CLOSE READING SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

These skills of interpreting complex texts are summarized above. In particular, I urged the students to draw out the implications of these texts for their own lives. Moreover, they were invited to raise objections to the arguments presented in the texts. In brief, they were encouraged to become active and critical readers.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR SKILL-BUILDING ASSIGNMENTS**

The students answered (orally and on paper) the questions on the readings reasonably well. No one earned less than the grade of C.

### **CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Please see above.

### **CLOSE READING WRITING RUBRICS**

I evaluated the students' reading comprehension by evaluating their answers to the questions on the assigned readings. The criteria I used were writing style including grammar and spelling; the cogency of their answers both written and spoken.

### **GENERATED STUDENT WORK FOR CLOSE READING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

The students' written and oral answers to the reading questions were uniform throughout. In the quizzes, on the other hand, they generally showed improvement in their scores.

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE or OUTCOMES**

Please see above.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I shall continue using the technique of having students prepare answers to questions based on the readings from primary resources and requiring them to give their answers both orally in class and on paper. This I found to be an effective way of covering the material and prompting class discussion. Next time, though, I shall say more about vocabulary building.