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Scaffolding Critical Reading

ABSTRACT

Teachers in any discipline where reading matters should practice a robust scaffolding pedagogy to teach critical reading, in contrast to the more common but less direct approaches that often leave students to learn or not learn these skills themselves. In this essay, I describe how to adapt established methods for teaching writing (including templates) to teaching reading. To answer critics who might find the approach too "reductive," I turn to scaffolding theory, which calls for purposefully—but temporarily—reductive teaching. Finally, I present qualitative and quantitative evidence from three years of an American literature course to show how a scaffolding approach can help students read critically.

Titus Reed sat at the small wooden table in my office reading Robert Hass's (2010) prose poem "A Story about the Body." He spent close to three minutes on the half page of text, more than half of the time in silence. Three times I gently prompted him to tell me what he was thinking or doing. On these occasions, and occasionally without prompting, he described wondering what the text would be about based on the title, rereading one sentence that did not make sense, liking another sentence, imagining the scene being presented, underlining a word he did not know, identifying where he was lost, and "wrestling through" a passage that confused him. I recognize all of these as important reading skills. But what interested me most was the rest of the time—the almost two minutes of silence. In "The Transition to College Reading," Robert Scholes (2002) observes that the reading our students do is invisible to us: "we do not see reading. We see some writing about reading, to be sure, but we do not see reading" (166). Although specifically designed to allow me to get as close to the act of reading as possible, the think-aloud protocol I conducted with Reed, along with dozens of other students and professors, still highlights just how invisible reading is. What was happening in the silence? What was not happening? Most importantly, what could I do as a teacher to help Reed and other students read better, more critically?

Even as such questions are particularly pressing for me as a teacher of literature—since literary studies is reading—critical reading is also, less visibly but no less vitally, key to most disciplines. In *Critical Reading in Higher Education*, Karen Manarin, Miriam Carey, Melanie Rathbun, and Glen Ryland (2015) describe critical reading as one of the most widely shared concerns for "faculty across the disciplines" (xi). As professors of English, political science, biology, and history, the authors share a common desire for students to go beyond merely "being able to comprehend all the words in order" and to "get" the texts they read in some "deeper" way (47). Such a deeper "getting" not only allows students to access content in difficult disciplinary texts but also to practice disciplinary forms of thinking and analysis with those texts. For that reason, in *Rethinking Reading in College: An Across-the-Curriculum*

Approach, Arlene Wilner (2020) argues that "support for reading on this level is, in effect, support for the deepest kind of learning in the relevant discipline" (8). In "Note Launchers: Promoting Active Reading of Mathematics Textbooks," Josh W. Helms and Kimberly Turner Helms (2010) offer an example in a discipline particularly far afield from English: "learning to think mathematically," they write, requires "being able to read mathematically" (109). Critical reading matters for deeper learning, even with numbers.

At the same time, English studies, with its specific history with reading, has much to contribute to the larger discussions. Although attention to reading in English studies has waxed and waned since I. A. Richards (1929) and Louise Rosenblatt (1933) broke ground on the matter in the early twentieth century, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue (2012) observe that English studies scholars and teachers have begun again asking questions like mine, looking for ways to make reading visible and to help students read more deeply and critically. After noting teachers' inability to see our students' reading, Scholes (2002) goes on to speculate, "I am certain, though, that if we could see it, we would be appalled" (166). Unfortunately, recent studies do little to contradict his guess. According to evidence emerging on a number of fronts, many college students do not read much at all (Arum and Roksa 2011; Hoeft 2012; Nathan 2006), never mind in ways we would call critical (Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue 2010; Jamieson 2013; Manarin et al. 2015). If we recognize critical reading as a subset of critical thinking, we should not be entirely surprised, since, as Tim van Gelder (2005) writes, the "first, and perhaps most important, lesson" on the matter from the cognitive sciences is that "critical thinking is hard . . . and most people are just not very good at it" (42). Hard as it may be, more and more scholars—from all corners of English studies, including literature (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 2009; Corrigan 2013/14; Corrigan 2017; Linkon 2011; Weissman 2016; Wolfe and Wilder 2016), composition (Carillo 2015; Carillo 2021; Carillo and Horning 2021; Kalbfleisch 2016; Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau 2017), and creative writing (Adsit 2017)—have been looking for ways to help students read more critically. My present thesis builds on these bodies of work: we, teachers in any discipline where reading matters, should adopt a robust scaffolding pedagogy for teaching critical reading.

The term "scaffolding" refers to the well-known principle of providing concrete supports for learning, especially when students are trying to learn complex skills. The pedagogical supports are figuratively akin to the physical "scaffolds" set up to support builders working at construction sites. Broadly speaking, a robust scaffolding pedagogy means we make significant efforts to teach students to read critically and to support them in the learning process. More specifically, the approach I propose means we talk with students overtly about critical reading; break critical reading down for students into its component moves; devise materials and activities to help students understand and practice those moves; and, finally, ask students to reflect metacognitively on the entire process. To illustrate what such a pedagogy could look like in this essay, I describe how I taught critical reading in an undergraduate survey course in American literature, adapting established methods from the teaching of writing and applying them to the teaching of reading (as others have done in other contexts; e.g., Blau 2003; Salvatori and Donahue 2005; Yancey 2004; Young and Fulwiler 1995). After describing the course, I explain its theoretical rationale and present qualitative and quantitative evidence of its effectiveness that I collected over three years, including a reading of one student's work over a semester, surveys over two semesters, and scores on traits of critical reading in final essays over five semesters. Although the course described here is a literature course, I purposefully designed and taught it with a definition of critical

reading that is broadly applicable beyond literary studies. As a result, the scaffolding pedagogy the course illustrates offers much not only for other literature or other English courses but also for any teachers who want students to read critically.

PRACTICE: AMERICAN LITERATURE (2013–2016)

I taught American literature at a small, private, open-enrollment school in central Florida for six consecutive terms, from fall 2013 through spring 2016. A requirement for English majors and secondary English education majors, the course also served as an option for students across the curriculum to fulfill a general education literature requirement. In each iteration of the course, as I taught it semester after semester, I made more intensive use of scaffolding to teach critical reading, which I considered my primary aim in the course—alongside engaging students in the content of American literature, particularly including texts on the theme of "liberty and justice for all." I describe my course here in detail to provide context for subsequent discussions of scaffolding theory and of the data that emerged from the course. I mean to imply not that the following specific details should be applied in other courses wholesale but rather that, whatever the context, scaffolding exists in details. Any robust scaffolding pedagogy will require specific, concrete supports.

From the start of the course, I talked with students about critical reading and assigned regular, low-stakes writing about course texts, specifically asking students to:

- pose an interpretive problem,
- consider multiple possible interpretations, and
- weigh competing textual evidence.

In the first iteration of the course, the final essay asked students to apply these same three moves, but more formally and in greater depth, to any three readings in the course. In that first semester, I found myself giving students extensive feedback on their work, both in writing and during class, nudging them toward accomplishing those three tasks. As time went on, in subsequent semesters, I gave less feedback as I shifted my efforts to add other supports—writing and discussing with students models of the kind of work I hoped to see, requiring students to annotate texts as they read, and giving students repeated practice in and outside of class in journaling and writing questions about texts. After the first semester, I narrowed the focus of the final essay so that students would write about just one text, not three. After a year of teaching the course, I made the largest revision, designing a new sequence of low-stakes writing assignments that made extensive use of a template I created to guide students through writing an entire short essay about a literary text:

> In [name text], [name writer] [introduce topic]. On one hand, [explain one aspect of the text]. But, on the other hand, [explain another aspect of the text that is in tension with the first aspect, creating some sort of interpretive problem]. The question, the interpretive problem, that this raises is [state a question raised by the tension in the text]. This question is problematic because [explain what makes the answer to the question not obvious]. Moreover, this question is significant because [explain why answering the question will shed light on the meaning of the overall text].

One possible way of answering this question is [explain answer]. Some details that support this interpretation include [present evidence, using a mix of paraphrase and brief quotation]. The reason that these details support this interpretation is [explain evidence]. However, some reasons to question this interpretation are [explain reasons].

Another possible way of answering this question is . . .

The template proceeds in the same manner, with additional paragraphs for two more interpretations and a conclusion.

Another significant revision I made to the course at that time was to write and assign to my students to read an essay, "On Interpreting Literature Critically" (Corrigan 2014). This essay told students what critical reading is and why and how to practice it. It also explained the template. Although the "highly structured format" does not reflect how scholars usually write, I wrote, the template "makes sure to ask readers to make certain essential moves" scholars usually perform when reading (275). The point was to let students "focus all of their energy on performing the intellectual tasks of critical interpretation without having to attend to how to organize or structure the writing." I stressed that the template was a developmental tool, "like training wheels." It was "too formulaic to rely on permanently." I encouraged them "to explore more creative and flexible ways of structuring" their writing as they grew "more and more comfortable with the intellectual moves" the template asked for. The grand idea was that these moves, rather than the particular phrasing, "should eventually become internalized."

I also provided students an example essay, applying the template in a critical reading of Phillis Wheatley's "An Hymn to Morning" (1773), posing an interpretive problem about the poem's abrupt shift in tone (celebrating dawn one moment, lamenting the hot sun the next) and unpacking textual evidence related to possible explanations (the shift could signal mere whimsy, a lesson on the fleetingness of life, or a veiled critique of slavery). After studying this example essay, students worked through a sequence of low-stakes writing assignments—addressing Emily Dickinson's invocation of an unnamed "Species" in "This World is not Conclusion" (c. 1862), Walt Whitman's use of parentheses in "The Wound-Dresser" (1865), Mark Twain's attack on war in "The War Prayer" (1905), and the students' choice of either law, nature, language, or time in Sui Sin Far's "In the Land of the Free" (1890). Each assignment provided students with a version of the template that was already partially completed and asked them to do the rest of the work. The successive assignments each came with a version of the template that had less completed than the assignment before, requiring students to do more and more work for themselves at each step: first weighing given evidence for possible interpretations, then finding and presenting evidence for given interpretations, then generating possible interpretations for a given question, then posing a question for a given topic. One final assignment gave students a virtually empty template, with nothing but the text to be read already filled in, Maria Cristina Mena's "The Gold Vanity Set" (1913). Students then undertook all the work themselves.

Once students completed this sequence of assignments, they had finished moving through the major scaffolding for the course. We moved forward reading and discussing course texts and contexts, while also reviewing the earlier reading skills, for good measure. At the end of the course, I asked students to write a final interpretive essay, longer (1000–1500 words), more developed, and more polished than the low-stakes writing throughout the semester (although I gave them the option to build on some earlier writing they had done). For this assignment, I did not direct students to use the

template. But I did ask them to practice the same reading moves and provided written criteria for how I would assess the essay (e.g., "Does the writing offer details from the text as evidence? Are the details explained? Are the explanations complex and convincing?"). The idea for this final essay was that students would now do all of the work of critical reading on their own, drawing on what they had internalized throughout the semester.

THEORY: SCAFFOLDING, TEMPLATES, AND CRITICAL READING

The design of my American literature course implements insights from scholarship on teaching and learning in English studies and beyond, starting with theories of critical reading. Although critical reading may be "so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it," as Michael Warner writes (2004, 14), a growing number of scholars advocate taking time to identify the aspects of critical reading (Fahnestock and Secor 1991; Warren 2006; Wilder 2012) and directly teach critical reading to students (Banting 2014; Carillo 2015; Heinert and Chick 2016; Saxton and Mance 2011; Scholes 2011; Wolfe 2003). Whereas indirect approaches to critical reading have often been found inadequate—including "implicitly" modeling for students the kind of reading we would like them to do (Herrington 1988), commenting on student work after they have written about what they have read (Schreibersdorf 2014), and hoping students will absorb critical reading on their own through exposure to complex texts (Manarin et al. 2015)—a growing body of empirical evidence indicates that the direct and overt teaching of critical reading skills can lead to growth in students' critical reading ability (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 2009; Manarin 2012; Tinkle et al. 2013; Wilder 2012; Wilder and Wolfe 2009).

One of the most important tools for teaching critical reading is writing. When students write about what they read, they make their reading at least partially visible, putting it on the table so it can be reflected on (Salvatori and Donahue 2005). A form of active learning, writing helps students read more deeply by getting them to participate in producing meaning out of the texts they read (Anson 2017; Bean 2011; Blau 2003). The time and attention required to put reading into words can extend and deepen the experience of reading (Bruns 2011). Scholars such as Patricia Donahue (1987) argue we should "design writing assignments that instruct students in the processes of critical thinking and close analysis" (4). The parameters of well-designed writing assignments direct students to pay particular kinds of attention to texts and require students to perform particular intellectual moves in order to produce the sort of writing the assignment calls for (Diaz 2012; Hutchings and O'Rourke 2002; Wilner 2005).

Such writing assignments are a clear form of scaffolding. For best results, in addition to being carefully designed, these assignments should be clearly explained. In *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing,* Dan Melzer (2014) finds writing assignments in the humanities often ask students to "interpret" and "analyze" without defining those tasks (4). Since those terms often mean something different to teachers than to students (Heinert and Chick 2016, 4), many students will need help understanding what their teachers are looking for (Corrigan 2019). Some students will undoubtedly do just fine when left to their own devices, figuring out how to produce the kind of reading and writing we want by inference or by trial and error. But as Kim Hensley Owens (2009) writes, most "in the real student population" stand to benefit from more intentional and intensive guidance (390). Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2006) put it well: "many students will never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves" of academic writing and, I would add, of critical reading (xv). "While

seasoned writers"—and, again, readers—"pick up on these moves unconsciously through their reading, many students do not" (xv). Although scaffolding can help all students, for those coming into college with fewer academic advantages, the support that scaffolding provides can be a matter of access and equity, leveling the educational playing field (Broekhoff 2008).

One particularly concrete way to provide students with guidance and structure for writing about texts is through the use of templates. In English studies, the use of templates as a tool for scaffolding cognitive development has been advocated most prominently by John Bean (2011) in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* and by Graff and Birkenstein (2006) in *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. Templates provide students with predetermined phrases and blank spaces into which they plug their own content. In his classic essay "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae (1985) provides an example he learned as a student: "whenever we were stuck for something to say," his teacher told him and his classmates, "we should use the following as a 'machine' for producing a paper: 'While most readers of _____ have said _____, a close and careful reading shows that _____'" (153; see also and Graff 2004, 54, 169, and Rose 1989, 189).

Although those books by Bean (2011) and Graff and Birkenstein (2006) have been read and taught widely, templates remain hotly contested (Frey and Fisher 2011; Grow 2008; Hollrah and Farmer 2007). One concern Zak Lancaster (2016) raises in "Do Academics Really Write This Way?" is that scholars do not typically use the phrases in the *They Say/I Say* templates. Of course, since the best scholarly writers try *not* to write predictably, no predetermined set of phrases could teach what Helen Sword (2012) calls "stylish academic writing" (7). However, an important feature of templates is that they are not about style but substance. Templates make "intellectual moves" "explicit" (Graff and Birkenstein 2006, xv). Templates teach a discipline's ways of critical thinking (Bean 2011, 141–42, 155, 191). What matters are not the specific phrases (which Graff and Birkenstein [2006] invite students to improvise on anyway) but the underlying moves. Style is another lesson for another time. The point of templates is not that scholars write like this but that scholars think like this.

Which brings us to the second and more pressing concern: that scholars do not, in fact, think like this. Many folks fear that templates oversimplify, that they reduce irreducible intellectual skills. P. L. Thomas (2017) "reject[s] completely the template approach to the essay," urging teachers to be "wary of reducing the process to a script." Academic work, Amy Lynch-Biniek (2009) stresses, is "more unruly than filling in blanks" (7). Some worry templates could lead students to mimic intellectual work without actually understanding (Benay 2008) or even actually accomplishing it (Arthur and Case-Halferty 2008). Several of the scholars who do advocate overtly teaching critical reading nonetheless shy away from "a rigid set of templates" (Wilder 2012, 120) and "fill-in-the-blank equations" (Wolfe 2003, 421). Indeed, even those teachers who find value in templates implicitly acknowledge templates could be used reductively by cautioning teachers to use them in flexible and contextual ways (Birkenstein and Graff 2008; Edlund 2008; Hollrah and Farmer 2007).

Scaffolding theory answers this concern. In his classic work *Mind in Society*, Lev Vygotsky (1978) observed that students can accomplish more working with others than alone (86). Building on that idea, Jerome Bruner and others later used the term scaffolding to describe ways teachers can help students complete a task that "requires a degree of skill that is initially beyond them" (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976, 89). Teachers provide scaffolding by "controlling" some aspects of a task so students can

focus on other aspects (Wood, Bruner, Ross 1976, 90). In *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School,* John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking (2000) describe scaffolding in terms of "reducing" and "simplifying" complex tasks (104). They liken scaffolding to "training wheels" for "advanced thinking and problem solving" (214). Actual training wheels reduce bicycling to steering and peddling, saving balance for another time. In the same way, Cindy E. Hmelo-Silver, Ravit Golan Duncan, and Clark A. Chinn (2007) write, "scaffolding can reduce cognitive load" (101). What makes this reduction crucial is that we have hard biological limits on how much our minds can do at once (Eyler 2018, 193). Thankfully, not all aspects of a complex task are equally important at any given moment. "Scaffolding can . . . allow the learner to focus on aspects of the task that are relevant to the learning goals" (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn 2007, 102). As Graff puts it, "students need reductive simplifications before they can move on to the complications" (2006, 137). In short, scaffolding is reductive on purpose.

But just as scaffolding requires reducing complexity up front, it also requires reducing support as students learn to deal with complexity. Of particular importance to scaffolding theory is the "fading" of support over time (Pea 2004, 431; Puntambekar and Hübscher 2005, 2). In a typical sequence, first a teacher "models" a task while a student watches. Then the student tries the task while the teacher offers "advice and examples." Then, as the student develops ability, the teacher "gradually tapers off support and guidance until the [student] can do it alone" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, 214). As Sadhana Puntambekar and Roland Hübscher (2005) stress, "There is a transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner and the scaffolding can be removed, as the learner moves toward independent activity" (3). The idea is that, by completing the task with help, students can learn to do the task without support much faster than they would if they had struggled on their own the whole time (Wood, Bruner, Ross 1976, 90). A large and growing body of empirical evidence, note Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007), shows that scaffolding can foster substantial learning (99). Scaffolding is particularly suited, they write, to teach "complex tasks," "make disciplinary strategies explicit," and "help students acquire disciplinary ways of thinking and acting" (100–01).

There are many possible methods of scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) envisioned "guidance" from a teacher and "collaboration with more capable peers" (86). Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) add getting students interested in a task, "simplifying the task," helping students stay on task, showing students what "features of the task" are most relevant, modeling the task for students, and helping students avoid undue frustration (98). To those, Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007) add "models of expert performance for students to emulate," "prompts to use particular reasoning strategies," "structures for students to follow or fill in," and "*templates*" (101, emphasis added). Though controversial in English studies, the temporary use of templates—purposefully reducing the complexity of critical reading by guiding students step by step through the intellectual moves required and then gradually reducing that support as students develop—falls squarely within established scaffolding theory and practice in the larger body of educational research outside the discipline. Nonetheless, even while scaffolding theory clearly justifies the use of templates, I want to clarify that my larger point is that templates illustrate scaffolding theory. Teachers who remain wary of templates may still be convinced by my larger argument and look for alternative, but equally robust, methods for scaffolding critical reading.

Whatever method is used to scaffold critical reading, a particular way of describing or codifying critical reading as a series of practical, intellectual moves will be necessary. In my American literature

course, I broke critical reading down into the three specific moves described above—posing a problem, considering possibilities, and weighing evidence. I adapted these from Sheridan Blau (2003), who in *The Literature Workshop* describes asking literature students "to take on an interpretive difficulty . . . and write a brief paper presenting the interpretive problem and exploring possible solutions" (176). Sharing Blau's (2003, 57, 78) hope that literature courses might teach skills useful far beyond literature, I purposefully selected this conceptualization of critical reading because of its broad applicability, not only getting to the heart of literary analysis but also reflecting fundamental aspects of critical thinking itself. Indeed, scholars have stressed the importance of each of these three aspects in both critical reading specifically and critical thinking broadly (Hutchings and O'Rourke 2002; Luxon 2018, 5; Scholes 2011, 61; van Gelder 2005, 41–42; Wilder 2012, 34, 82, 120; Wilner 2005, 84; Wolfe 2003, 407). Still, I do not want to reify any one way of reading as "the" way. I hope teachers who adopt the sort of rigorous scaffolding pedagogy I argue for will name the parts of critical reading in a wide variety of ways, according to varying contexts and purposes.

Having described both the teaching approach in my American literature course as well as the theory behind it, I turn now to present the qualitative and quantitative data I collected from that course, evidence such an approach can indeed help students read more critically.

DATA: ONE STUDENT'S READING

Reading my student Mary Moretti's work in American literature over the course of the fall 2015 semester shows the critical reading and specifically the "growth" in critical reading that scaffolding can promote. A sophomore at the time, Moretti took the course to fulfill a general education literature requirement. Undoubtedly, she brought strengths as a student, writer, and reader into the course. Yet her strong performance in the course was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. When I talked with her a few months after the course, she described herself as a "good writer" but also noted that she sometimes did not "enjoy school since it's an obligation," that "assignments in general have a negative connotation" for her, and that she's "pretty good at fluffing" or writing words more to meet a required word count than to do intellectual work (quotes from my notes taken during the conversation). She recalled coming into the course with a bit of skepticism, anticipating "learn[ing] a lot of history I don't care about." She added, "sometimes I don't want to be challenged." I have selected her work to examine here not to "prove" what was typical for the course, but to illustrate what is possible with a scaffolding pedagogy.

Early in the course, Moretti's work did contain some signs of fluff. She began her first journaling assignment, about William Apess's "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" (1833) with an enthusiastic but superficial appreciation for the text. She affirmed his message against oppression and noted her own surprise at the forthrightness with which he communicated that message but did little else to make sense of what he had written:

> First of all, WOW. This passage is so eye-opening to the cultural oppressions the Indians faced. And it's so BOLD. I understand that the injustices were great but it is surprising that someone would write this to the white man because it sounds like it is meant to shame them. Of course, they deserve fame and I do believe it is right to speak out against the injustice they faced. (Writing 4)

Given that many students resist texts arguing for social justice, particularly from Indigenous perspectives (Luckenbill 2019), I do not want to discount the possible personal and political significance for Moretti, as a white woman, of affirming Apess's challenge to white supremacy. At the same time, these comments lack the sort of critical reading that could have taken her deeper into what Apess had written. Still, a few other comments in the same journal entry may suggest a nascent practice of critical reading, which she may either have brought with her into the course or picked up in its first weeks. For instance, she asked whether Apess writes "to just the oppressors, or those on his side, or both," and she noted certain aspects of the text that might take on different significance in light of one answer or another. She also quoted specific details from the text along the way. Such moves gesture toward critical reading because they go beyond noting (or even affirming) what is said and begin trying to consider the text, however briefly, in the context of multiple possible audiences and doing so with reference to, if not yet examination of, textual evidence.

A couple weeks later, in an assignment asking her to select passages from Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and write questions about them, Moretti had already sharpened her critical reading. One passage she selected comes from near the end of the novella. Moretti quoted Davis's vivid description of the mills, highlighting the sound and temperature of the engines and fires:

> By night and day the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of metal boil and surge. Only for a day in the week, in half-courtesy to public censure, the fires are partially veiled; but as soon as the clock strikes midnight, the great furnaces break forth with renewed fury, the clamor begins with fresh, breathless vigor, the engines sob and shriek like "gods in pain." (Davis 1861, 156)

About these two sentences, Moretti generated 16 questions, worth quoting at length because the full import to her developing reading skills can best be seen not just in any one particularly insightful question but rather from the cumulative total of all of her questions, as they demonstrate her ability to stay with and examine at length and in detail a short passage for its potential richness of meaning:

- What is the author's purpose in personifying the engines? Does this invoke a more emotional response from readers? One of more fear and greater understanding of the fear and hatred the men might have toward their work?
- Are the "fiery pools" an allusion to hell?
- What does it mean that the "fires are partially veiled"? Are they covered up? Or is the meaning less literal?
- Is the phrase "clock strikes midnight" taken from Cinderella? Is the author implying that the nightmare, just like Cinderella's life with her step family, was briefly interrupted, like Cinderella's time at the ball, but then resumed again?
- Why is " 'gods in pain' " in quotes? Is this taken from another work? Is it a common saying? What does this phrase mean? Does it perhaps mean the like gods, the engines are massive and powerful and so are their actions?
- Why does the author pair verbs together when talking about the engines ("groan and shriek," "boil and surge," "sob and shriek")?

- Why does she repeat the word "shriek"? Is this to begin and end the description of the engines with the same action? (Writing 8)

These questions give careful attention to details of the text, probe possibilities, draw on intertextual knowledge, and begin prying beneath the surface of the text for meaning. She is not taking things at face value or skipping what she does not understand but rather pushing further deeper to make sense of what Davis has written, how she has written it, and why. Had the assignment asked her to develop an interpretation, to begin answering some of her questions, she would have had a lot to work with.

Over the next several weeks—the portion of the course involving the templates described above—Moretti followed through on those same impulses, moving from gestures of critical reading to carefully structured and sustained inquiry, meaningfully completing every task the templates called for. In the first of the assignments that asked her to complete the entire template on her own, she wrote a solid essay unpacking possibilities about the theme of religion in Maria Cristina Mena's "The Gold Vanity Set" (1913) (Writing 15). However, as we might expect since learning is messy, her work does not always show linear progress. A week later her essay on Claude McKay's "Romance" (1922) performed all the key moves but lacked the depth and insight of some of her other work (Writing 17). The questions she wrote about the first two chapters of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) similarly lacked the detailed engagement with the text seen in some of her other work (Writing 18). But before long, as with her questions on John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1978) (Writing 22 and Writing 25), her work once again took note of key details of texts and imagined multiple possibilities about their significance.

Moretti's most striking instance of critical reading came at the end of the course. In her interpretive essay, titled "Shedding Light on the Sun: Uncovering Steinbeck's Purpose of Sun Imagery in *Of Mice and Men,*" she took what had been a general, surface-level question she raised earlier—"What is the significance of the repeated sun description? Is it used as a symbol to tell time or something else?" (Writing 18)—and developed it into a genuine interpretive problem, one that could only emerge from careful attention to the details of the text and from a desire to peel back the layers of those details for deeper meaning:

> Issues such as justice, the death penalty, racism, and prejudice are all grappled with by readers who engage the text. Because of the pull to focus on these big-scale issues, the simple literary techniques Steinbeck employs often go unnoticed. One such technique is Steinbeck's use of the sun. Throughout the short hundred-page novella, over ten descriptions of the sun's position are given. This begs the interpretive question: What is the significance of the repetitive detail given to the sun? While this question may appear elementary, or even insignificant, the sheer number of times the description is repeated proves otherwise. Yet it is not apparently obvious why this detail to the sun is given, making the question problematic. Understanding the purpose of this imagery will shed light on the overall tone of the text.

Here Moretti established how sun imagery could be easily overlooked (since it is a simple literary technique, not a larger theme like justice) but also how that the sun imagery nonetheless demands attention (since it appears so often). It is this contrast, something normally unimportant seeming

significant, that elevated her question about the sun imagery into a complex and meaningful interpretive problem. After setting up her essay in this way, Moretti raised three possible interpretations to answer the problem. The sun could "simply mark the passing of time." The sun could be "foreshadowing," since "a negative event" often follows its "fading." The sun could serve as "irony" because, although the sun setting does often precede negative events, that happens only in a reversal of it first appearing as "a symbol of light." These readings show a flexible mind at work, able to entertain opposite possible meanings (somber versus satiric) as well as the possibility of no particular deeper meaning at all.

Moretti went on to present evidence in favor of each interpretation as well as evidence that could call each interpretation into question. That the sun might serve to mark the passing of time is supported by the historical observation that workers in the context of the novel would not always have had watches and by the textual observation that mentions of the sun in the text often accompany mentions of time, such as "ten o'clock in the morning," "afternoon," and "The day was going fast now" (Moretti quotes Steinbeck 1937, 18, 82, and 9). But this reading is challenged by Moretti's intertextual understanding that in literature "the sun is often used a symbol for something more." The next possibility, that the sun's setting might foreshadow death, is supported by quotes about the setting sun that come right before each of the novella's three deaths—"it was dusk," "the sun went down," and "the evening came fast" (Moretti quotes Steinbeck 38, 87, and 102). What challenges this reading is that the pattern "fails to apply to other instances in which a negative event does not follow the sun imagery." That failure leads Moretti to her third reading, the most complex part of her analysis.

The exceptions to the pattern—once the sun appears before a death but is not setting and once the sun sets but does not appear before a death—pushed Moretti to construct an alternative understanding. Incorporating both pattern and exceptions, Moretti went on to suggest that the significance of the sun "changes" as the text progresses, shifting from its traditional positive connotation to the predominantly negative connotation it accrues in the novella. She wrote:

> On page 82, "The afternoon sun slices in through the cracks of the barn walls and lay in bright lines on the hay." This sun imagery sets up a beautiful and calm atmosphere, until just a few lines later the mood changes when we learn that Lennie has killed a puppy. In other instances, the sun is described as fading, but no negative event follows. If we take the beginning of the story, where "Only the tops of the Gabilan mountains flamed with the light of the sun that had gone from the valley" (9) and "dusk came into the valley" (11), we see that the sun is used for description of the time and setting. No events of great consequence follow, but as the story progresses the sun imagery becomes more frequent and as negative events begin to follow the imagery takes on new meaning. The contrast between the sun imagery in the beginning of the story with the sun imagery throughout the story establishes irony. The inclusion of the routinely normal patterns of the sun contrasted with the horrifically out-of-place events are quite ironic.

In her conclusion, Moretti decided that this final reading "makes the most sense" in accounting for the evidence of the text, the ironic sun highlighting "the unfortunate truth that events can play out opposite from the way we may hope." Her use of textual evidence throughout the essay shows her ability to look at details of a text from multiple perspectives, link details to larger claims of meaning, and see where those links hold up and where they do not.

Shortly after her interpretive essay, Moretti wrote a reflection on what she learned in the course: "I learned more, or at least engaged more in critical interpretation, in this literature course than in any other literature course I have taken." Her experience had been that teachers often "claim to" "encourage critical thinking on the students' parts" but that this course actually gave her "the opportunity to voice my own opinions, and dig into the text, discovering meanings on my own." She continued, "I have also learned how to examine different sides of issues, searching for deeper meanings than what appears on the surface of the text. I often want to jump to one conclusion about the text and hold fast to that idea, but this course has taught me how to think about other interpretations."

When I talked with her later about her experience, she described how the structures of the course "encouraged, kind of forced, though in a good way, [her] to look at other perspectives" instead of just sticking with her initial "gut feeling" about a text. She elaborated, "It's not just that I read different views but had to formulate them and in formulating found I believed something different than I thought." She also expressed appreciation for "the way the template was set up." "Without the structure," she "would be inclined to write fluff to fill up the page." But "having the template forced [her] to keep thinking about" the texts even after she reached a point where she did not "know what else to write about." She did find aspects of the template "a bit forced," "especially transitions and conclusion." Still, she found "progressively doing it on our own"—where, through the sequence of templates, she took on more and more of the work—"was really key." Despite the constraints of the assignments, she felt "a lot of liberty with *what* we wrote about, which [she] liked a lot." Observing she had used the word "forced" several times to describe the course, she chose to revise her comments: "that sounds awful. *Challenged*. That's better."

In both her comments about the course and in her written work over time, Moretti demonstrated just what the scaffolding approach can accomplish: significant growth in those skills and habits of mind that mark authentic critical reading. Her earliest work, although it showed promise, demonstrated a lack of critical reading, just as we would expect from most students entering a college literature course, not least a sophomore taking a literature course to meet a general education requirement. By the end of the course, she described and demonstrated a sophisticated practice and understanding of critical reading and attributed it to the scaffolding provided in the course.

DATA: SURVEYS AND SCORES

Because Mary Moretti clearly put more into and got more out of American literature than most students do in most college courses, it is important to ask how her experience compared with that of other students in the course, to what degree it was anomalous or representative. To get a sense of the larger picture, I gathered anonymous survey responses from students on the last day of the course in the fall 2015 and spring 2016 semesters. I also collected and scored for traits of critical reading all of the final interpretive essays students wrote in the course in the fall 2013 through fall 2015 semesters. While Moretti's experience does still stand out as exceptional (hers was one of the highest scoring essays), these two sets of data show that almost all of the students not only "felt" that they had grown as critical readers but also "demonstrated" critical reading skills in their final work for the course—especially after I substantially expanded the scaffolding in the course in fall 2014, adding the template assignments and other supports described above.

Responding to my survey, all or nearly all (95–100%) of the students (n=39) either agreed or strongly agreed (on a five-point Likert scale) that, through the course, they learned to interpret texts more carefully and critically, that they developed in the ability to go beyond the surface, ask questions, appreciate complexity, and notice details, and that the assignments involving templates specifically helped them grow. While students may not recognize or report with perfect accuracy what and how well they are learning, these responses show that most of these students thought they had grown as critical readers through the course.

Their impressions are corroborated by evidence from their written work. I removed the names and dates from all of the final interpretive essays written over five semesters (n=70), shuffled them into a random order, and had each essay scored by three separate readers—me and two other English professors from my university. We used a rubric I created that asked how well each essay "poses an interpretive question or problem," "considers multiple possible interpretations," and "uses textual details as evidence." We scored each trait as 0 points for absent ("does not clearly do so"), 1 point for nascent ("does so in an underdeveloped way"), 2 points for present ("does so"), or 3 points for skillful ("does so with some skill or sophistication"). Before scoring, the three of us met to discuss the traits and the scale and to practice reading and scoring an essay together. We found the "present" and "absent" levels readily apparent. But we did not try to precisely define the "nascent" and "skillful" levels, respecting that students might accomplish each trait "in an underdeveloped way" or "with some skill or sophistication" in unpredictable ways and that we as literary scholars may tacitly recognize distinctions difficult to put into words (Wood and Petriglieri 2005, 33). Nonetheless, we still ended up independently coming to the same score or within one point of the same score as each other 88% of the time for each trait in each essay, suggesting we were roughly in agreement most of the time.

A bird's eye view of the resulting scores shows that across all five semesters virtually all students' essays posed interpretive questions, considered multiple possible interpretations, and used textual evidence on at least some level—with 99%, 99%, and 100% of the final essays receiving an average score of 1 point ("nascent") or greater on those respective traits. With a closer and more detailed look at the scores, additional findings emerge. While virtually all students demonstrated the traits of critical reading at some level across all semesters, in the first two semesters that level was fairly limited for many students—with only 47% receiving an average score of 2 points ("present") or greater on posing an interpretive question or problem, only 13% on considering multiple possible interpretations, and only 47% on using textual details as evidence. In those two semesters, no student earned an average score as high as 3 points ("skillful") on any of the traits. In contrast, in the three following semesters, after I added the additional scaffolding to the course, the number of students accomplishing these tasks well enough to receive average scores of 2 points ("present") or greater rose to 69%, 71%, and 75%—striking gains of 22, 58, and 28 percentage-points respectively. Additionally, instead of none, 11%, 11%, and 9% of students received average scores as high as 3 points ("skillful") in those three respective traits. In sum, in all iterations of the course, almost all students demonstrated critical reading at some level. In the iterations with more robust scaffolding, more students demonstrated critical reading at higher levels.

Of course, this data has limitations. Pedagogical and institutional constraints made it impractical to pretest students on their critical reading before the course to get a baseline to measure growth from or to teach other sections of the course without the scaffolding approach as a control group to compare how much more or less critical reading resulted. Additionally, I have no way to factor in the small

number of students who enrolled in the course but withdrew before writing the final essay—including at least one student who told me they were withdrawing because the course required too much work—which introduces a small degree of "survivor" selection bias (i.e., if those students had made it through the end of the course, they may not have performed as well as others, thus lowering the average scores). These limitations make it impossible for me to document students' growth in this course with any precision. Nonetheless, conjectures based on what we know about college students' abilities in general are reasonable. Since most undergraduates do not have strong critical reading or thinking skills—in part simply because cognitive development is slow in general (Belenky et al. 1986; Perry 1999; van Gelder 2005)—it appears very likely that many of the students who were able to demonstrate critical reading skills at a significant level by the end of my American literature course developed these skills in a meaningful way during and because of the course. So, although not proof, this data supports the argument that a robust scaffolding approach can help students develop critical reading skills.

CONCLUSION

When students learn to read critically, they can engage more deeply and meaningfully in college, as well as in life. "If students can move beyond simple comprehension to analyze, synthesize and evaluate . . . in every discipline," offers Alice Horning (2007), "they will be better readers, writers, students, and citizens of the . . . global society they will join" (2). Advocating for reading across the curriculum, Horning goes so far as to propose that critical reading "should be *the real goal* of *all* courses" (11, emphasis added). While I might not go quite that far, I do argue that all of us who teach in disciplines where reading matters should adopt robust scaffolding pedagogies to teach critical reading. The data from my American literature course contributes to a growing body of evidence showing scaffolding can help students develop these skills.

But the scaffolding is in the details. While the specific supports I developed for the course worked in that context, Manarin et al. (2015) are right to note that "our [different] disciplines require different types of reading" (10). While some teachers might simply borrow the specifics of my scaffolding, others will do well to construct parallel supports to teach critical reading from other angles—perhaps helping students, to name just a few options, situate texts in historical or disciplinary contexts, assess texts' credibility or reasoning, or apply to texts feminist or antiracist theoretical lenses. Which critical reading skills will be best to teach will not always be immediately apparent, because, as Manarin et al. (2015) also write, "Most of us are so close to our disciplines that we cannot easily articulate the ways we read in those disciplines" (11). Some "disciplinary introspection" will be in order, stepping back, reflecting on our disciplines' ways of thinking, analyzing, and reading, considering what from those ways will be most achievable and useful for our students (Corrigan 2019, 14).

The work of developing scaffolding pedagogies seems worthwhile to me when I contrast the experience of my student Mary Moretti, whose reading I examined in such detail, with the experience of my student Titus Reed, whose reading—and silence—I described at the beginning of this essay. In the end, Reed, who had not taken the American literature course that Moretti had, did not come to a satisfactory reading of that text. He knew he was stuck but did not know what to do about it. He was not able to name the difficulty, turn it into a question, and proceed from there. He may well go on to pick up these skills on his own, since the skills he did already demonstrate do bode well for continued growth. But if he has to work this out without help, he might waste a lot of unnecessary effort and frustration

along the way. Meanwhile, other students stuck in a similar spot, if they are not quite as sharp or persevering or passionate as I happen to know Reed to be, may not get there at all. In either case, some scaffolding could do a lot of good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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