

# **What is a Reader?**

## **A White Paper on Undergraduate Literacy and the Future of Literary Studies**

Prepared for the Teagle Foundation

by

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## Table of Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements.....	3
1. New Literacies Meet Old Curricula.....	4
2. Reading: the State of Practice.....	6
3. The Reading Self and its Transformation.....	9
4. What was and is Reading?.....	12
5. What is Literary Reading?.....	15
6. Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Proposals and Areas for Further Consideration.....	18

## Introduction and Acknowledgements

In 2009, with the generous support of the Teagle Foundation, a group of literature department chairs and faculty from four campuses in Northern California (University of California, Berkeley, Mills College, University of California, Santa Cruz, and Stanford University) began meeting to consider the future of their discipline in light of the new media and its transformation of literacy. The conversation expanded to include colleagues, administrators, staff, and students from within and beyond the four original campuses, drawn together through public lectures, informal workshops, student surveys, and a website ([www.whatisareader.stanford.edu](http://www.whatisareader.stanford.edu)). Following nearly five years of discussion, debate, and collaboration, the conveners of the research project prepared this white paper to share their work and spell out its implications for the discipline more broadly.

Over the space of five years, many colleagues helped shape our discussions with their valuable contributions: of these, we wish to acknowledge in particular Mariatte Denman, Pam Grossman, Kirsten Gruesz, Andrea Lunsford, Geoffrey Nunberg, Micah Perks, and Namwalli Serpell. We were especially fortunate to have the participation and aid of graduate students who have gone on to make important professional contributions in their own right: Jillian Hess, Lynn Huang, Ruth Kaplan, Natalie Phillips, Laurel Peacock, Shannon Sears. With the Teagle Foundation's support, we were able to sponsor public events featuring scholars and practitioners who have helped define what we mean by reading: Alan Liu, Katherine Hayles, Paul Duguid, Heidi Brayman Hackel, Alberto Manguel, Mary Murrow, Elisabeth Remak-Honnef, Katherine Rowe, Leslie Santee Siskin, and Clifford Siskin. We are also grateful to David Laurence and the Associated Departments of English (ADE) for inviting us to share our work at its 2011 Summer Chairs' Seminar.

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The working group consisted of Catherine Gallagher (UC Berkeley), Dorothy J. Hale (UC Berkeley), Danielle Igra (Stanford), Tyrus Miller (UC Santa Cruz), Juan Poblete (UC Santa Cruz), Deanna Shemek (UC Santa Cruz), Cynthia Scheinberg (Mills College), Juliana Spahr (Mills College), Jennifer Summit (Stanford).

## 1. New literacies meet old curricula

Reading is changing. Not only the things we read but the way we read—and the place of reading in our lives—have been transformed by the advent of new technologies of literacy and the social practices that accompany them. Many have considered the implications of this transformation for books and the social institutions that support them, such as libraries, bookstores, and publishers. But what do shifts in reading modes, media, and practices mean for college literature departments, for which reading has been and remains a central concern? By extension, how should college and university courses and curricula register the fact that today’s young people are reading in ways that their professors couldn’t have imagined when they were students themselves?

New literacies challenge literature departments to rethink their traditional materials and methods by redefining the places, purposes, and objects of reading. This external challenge comes at an already volatile time in the history of the discipline, joining challenges that have unsettled the undergraduate literature major from within. As the traditional nucleus of undergraduate liberal education, the literature major was once organized around a coherent object and method of study. A canon of great works structured course offerings from medieval to modern, while “close reading” and the short critical essay formed the twin pedagogical pillars of the undergraduate literature classroom. This basic framework remained remarkably stable for decades, accommodating the broadening of the curriculum and the emergence of literary theory in the undergraduate classroom. But today, both the destabilization of the traditional canon and the declining influence of literary theory have left the methods and objects of undergraduate literary study in need of redefinition.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, undergraduate students seek new rationales for studying literature. At the same time, fresh concerns about literacy and the literate citizenry are voiced with an urgency and regularity that teachers of undergraduate literature cannot afford to ignore. Well-publicized reports from the NEA in 2004 and 2007, joined by numerous studies and popular publications in their wake, have diagnosed a precipitous decline in literary reading, particularly among the young. At the same time, never before have so many people exercised literacy nor have more books (traditional and electronic) been available or read. A thriving culture of educated writing and reading is also booming on line. Both the possible decline of literary reading and the significant displacement of literacy to other sites and practices should constitute important new horizons for undergraduate literary study.

Bringing together the challenges posed to reading by the new literacies, the important questions raised by recent reports on the state of literary reading, and the internal displacement of the structuring content of our discipline, we have conducted a broad-scale, multi-campus examination of undergraduate reading and readers in the context of general literacy, seen from both contemporary and historical perspectives. The “What is a Reader?” project convened a set of scholars and teachers from four university English and literature departments to consider what is happening to our students’ reading in the twenty-first century, to ask if we should be concerned about what might be happening to our students’ reading, and to explore how we might adapt our practices in English and Literature departments and larger university settings to take account of these changes. Finally, our long discussion has challenged us to consider how we may

take advantage of the opportunities opened by our new technological and social context to deepen and diversify our understanding of what we do as scholars and educators at work in literary studies.

Given that literature departments are now less likely to define themselves around content, this is an ideal time, we assert, for literary scholars to reclaim our discipline's historical commitment to reading as a practice worthy of scrutiny and analysis. Our students' changing reading practices prompted us to ask the question that animates our study: "what is a reader?" Embedded in this question is an intention to probe the current status of reading, particularly among young adults, and particularly of literary reading and the reading of literature, given the changing forms, modes, and media of literacy today. A further intention is to reconsider the way we teach reading in our classrooms, and to make those processes self-conscious, visible, and alive to their practitioners in our classrooms and beyond.

Readers today are reading in forms, modes, and places that trouble traditional understandings of reading as a social practice, prompting journalists and popular authors to speculate about the transformation—and even "fall"—of reading as we have known it. No target has attracted more histrionic attention than young adults, who now populate our classrooms and, by virtue of their alleged preference for video and electronic media over traditional print, have been called "the dumbest generation."<sup>1</sup> At the same time, no one has a greater responsibility to understand and respond to those changing reading practices—and, we believe, to defy such insulting oversimplifications—than do we, their teachers. Rather than seeing the transformation of reading as a threat, we take it as a challenge—with potentially vivifying effects—to our practice as teachers of literature and thus of reading at the most advanced levels.

Over five years of discussion, from 2009-2014, we have identified and explored a number of important challenges to the traditional literary curriculum, from the rise of new literacies to the changing demographics of college students and the professoriate. We reached a strong consensus about the need to rethink and transform college literary studies in response to these challenges. While it is salutary to imagine the literary curriculum of the future pursuing a range of possible directions and forms, we believe that it will need to take reading as its defining focus. Doing so offers college literature majors and their curricula a compelling rationale in our age of omnipresent textuality. Given the increased focus on informational literacy at the secondary level in the new Common Core State Standards, we see a new role for college literature departments to enrich and multiply the forms of reading to which our students are exposed. This includes emphasizing the importance of pleasure—an important feature of any imaginative literature and one that plays a key role in engaging students, particularly those who are struggling readers. Focusing on reading demands that we make our work as readers visible to our students, in order to help them understand that reading is a multi-faceted and iterative skill, and that skilled readers know how to apply different reading practices to serve different meaning-making goals. Acknowledging the importance of reading across registers means also better understanding reading across the disciplines: while literature departments don't have exclusive rights over

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Bauerlien, The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

reading, they can serve as homes for meta-literacy that reach out to, and learn from, other departments.

Literature departments may declare that we already teach reading. After all, this is what literature classes and majors do: they read literary texts, for which they are held accountable through the exams and papers that assess the accuracy and ingenuity of their “readings.” But we contend that there is a difference between assigning reading and teaching reading: where assigning texts makes reading the means to an end (producing analytical, interpretive “readings”), teaching reading marshals self-consciousness about the practices that we enact and ask our students to master by asking what these particular acts are, and how we teach them effectively through engagement with rich and complex texts.

## **2. Reading: the state of practice**

How do we teach reading in the literature classroom? Right now, if we ask ourselves the question at all, we may believe that we teach reading by modeling it—by showing students, through our own example, what expert academic literacy looks like. Yet students learn poorly through models that are not made explicit or broken down into steps.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of context and explanation, we give students the wrong message about what academic literacy is when we present it “as a set of objective skills that can be generalized across various contexts,” rather than as a highly specific practice, with its own particular function and history, among many others, including those that our students practice in other contexts.<sup>3</sup> Teaching reading in the self-conscious latter mode would mean expanding our understanding of the specific literacy of academic literary study and its place within the array of literacies that our students must master to become responsible citizens of the digital age. But to do so, we must step outside our disciplinary comfort zone of literary study into a broad array of fields—including neuropsychology, sociology, and above all, education—that can broaden and enrich our understanding of reading as a process and a practice. This leads to the first question of our analysis: how do our students read?

By first examining our students’ literacies, we follow Donna E. Alvermann and Amy Alexandra Wilson, who contend that “teachers must familiarize themselves with their students’ interests and their communities”—including their “vernacular literacies”—“so that these can be integrated into academic curricula” (6). Along similar lines, David A. Jolliffe and Allison Harl argue:

More than our colleagues in other departments, English department faculty members and administrators need to know what, how, and why students read. . . . We need to know how students are learning to read before they come to college, how we continue to foster

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<sup>2</sup> Saranne Weller, “Comparing Lecturer and Student Accounts of Reading in the Humanities,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 9.1 (2010): 87-106.

<sup>3</sup> See Donna E. Alvermann and Amy Alexandra Wilson, “Redefining Adolescent Literacy Instruction,” in *Literacy for the New Millennium, Volume 3: Adolescent Literacy*, ed. Barbara J. Guzzetti (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 5-7.

close, critical reading throughout the college years, and how our students develop reading abilities and practices that they will continue to inhabit and improve after college.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, we began our work together by undertaking a series of surveys at Stanford, Mills and UC Santa Cruz, which revealed that students are in fact reading more, and more regularly, than is suggested by more negative but attention-grabbing assessments. A survey of 1500 members of the Stanford Class of 2013 revealed that 74% “read a novel, play, or short story for pleasure” 1-2 times a week or more; similarly, a survey of 336 students at UCSC revealed that 68% “read a novel, play, or short fiction for pleasure” 1-2 times a week or more; and at Mills College, a survey of 865 undergraduate students revealed that nearly 79% of students read for pleasure 1-2 times a week or more, and over 64% of that reading was a book of fiction, poetry or nonfiction, as opposed to online reading, blogging, newspapers or graphic media.<sup>5</sup>

These findings are consistent with research showing that students are not turning away from reading, even in its traditional forms.<sup>6</sup> One study recently showed that “Generation Y, those born between 1979 and 1989, spent the most money on books in 2011, taking over long-held book-buying leadership from Baby Boomers.”<sup>7</sup> Predictably, literacy practices of the young are also taking new forms. A recent Pew study on e-reading revealed that those in the 18-25 age demographic are most likely to own and read e-books; the same study showed that readers of e-books also read more, not less, than those who read print exclusively.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is no longer plausible to argue that the rise of electronic media is leading to a decline in either reading or literary reading. However, the new literacies of the young also challenge traditional assumptions about the forms, practices, and places of literacy. Focusing closely on a small sample, Jolliffe and Harl studied 21 college freshmen and discovered that they spent a great deal of time reading online, particularly social media, and most multi-tasked while reading. Altogether, they spent an average of 54 minutes a day on nonacademic reading online, 25 minutes a day on nonacademic reading in print, and 1 hour and 24 minutes on academic reading,

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<sup>4</sup> David A. Jolliffe and Allison Harl, “Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Studying the ‘Reading Transition’ from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?” *College English* 70: 6 (2008): 599-617; 599.

<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to the Offices of Institutional Research at Stanford University and Mills College, especially Jenny Bergeron and Talia Friedman for sharing this data with us; the UC Santa Cruz survey was conducted through Survey Monkey.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Julie Gilbert and Barbara Fister, “Reading, Risk, and Reality: College Students and Reading for Pleasure,” *College and Research Libraries* 72.5 (2011): 474-495; Melanie Parlette and Vivian Howard, “Pleasure Reading Among First-year University Students,” *Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice* 5.4 (2010): 53-69, as well as the sources collected on the “What is a Reader?” website:

<http://whatisareader.stanford.edu/materials.html#bibliography1>

<sup>7</sup> Bowker Market Research, *2012 U.S. Book Consumer Demographics and Buying Behaviors Annual Review* (August 10, 2012), cited in *Publisher’s Weekly* (August 15, 2012):

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/53573-generation-y-leads-in-book-buying.html>

<sup>8</sup> Pew Internet’s new report, *The Rise of E-Reading* (April 5, 2012), appears to confirm this.

totaling 2 hours, 43 minutes on all kinds of reading each day. The students' nonacademic reading in print included novels, nonfiction, devotional materials, and magazines. For the students in their survey, literacy showed no sign of decline and played an important role in identity formation and social connection. As this study can show us, literature shares space with nonliterary genres, both in the attention of young readers and in the places in which it is pursued, often in conjunction with other activities and shared with other readers.

These findings contradict expectations that reading is necessarily a solitary, individual experience ideally carried out in privacy and perfect quiet. They also suggest the contingency and historicity of such normative models. Armando Petrucci, for example, traces the origins of modern protocols of reading to early modern subject formation. Such protocols "proclaimed that the reader must be seated in an erect position with his arms resting on a table and the book in front of him. Reading must be done with maximum attention, without moving, making noise, annoying others or taking up too much space."<sup>9</sup> Such depictions of reading contrast with pre-modern reading practices that were marked, as Joyce Coleman shows, by sociality and aurality.<sup>10</sup> The modern practice of reading, Petrucci finds, is a technique for disciplining the reader.

But we must also ask what disciplining techniques are present in the contemporary pedagogies of close reading, critical reading, and interpretive reading practices in the modern academy. In our working group discussions, for example, member Juliana Spahr asked whether reading conventions such as close reading emerged out of classroom structures that were specific to the twentieth century, a question that resonates with Alex Reid's linkage of "the 'close reading' model that dominates English . . . with the specific industrial modes of attention that dominated the last century."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Michael Warner observes that "critical reading is the folk ideology of a learned profession, so close that we seldom feel the need to explain it," and asks, "what does it mean to teach critical reading, as opposed to all other kinds of reading? Are there any other kinds that can or should be taught?"<sup>12</sup> Literary interpretation itself bears further analysis along these lines: in our working group discussions Juan Poblete challenged us to explore the meanings and uses of interpretation, asking what kind of knowledge interpretation produces, and whom it serves. In an early presentation to the working group, Alan Liu reflected on his own effort to uncover alternatives to interpretation by asking his classes to explore non-interpretive forms of

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<sup>9</sup> Petrucci, "Reading to Read: A Future For Reading," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 345-367; 363.

<sup>10</sup> "Aurality" is the term that Joyce Coleman usefully gives to medieval oral literary culture in *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Alex Reid, "Robot Graders, New Aesthetic, and the End of the Close Reading Industry," *Digital Digs* (<http://www.alex-reid.net/2012/04/robot-graders-new-aesthetic-and-the-end-of-the-close-reading-industry.html> )

<sup>12</sup> Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004): 13-38; 14, 13. See also John Guillory, "The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29-49.



reading. Are we prepared to advance our own teaching, study, and practice of literacy in ways that acknowledge the multi-modal and social literacies that our students are practicing today?

As Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier have observed, “Reading is not a solely abstract intellectual operation; it involves the body, is inscribed within a space, and implies a relationship to oneself or to others.”<sup>13</sup> This observation offers a useful corrective to the modern paradigm of the solitary reader: it also opens a social dimension of literacy that is closer to our students’ experiences today. Focusing on that social dimension challenges us to rethink the classification of reading practices, starting with the subjects and objects of reading themselves.

Cognitive models of reading comprehension observe that reading is fundamentally a “dynamic interchange” among four elements—reader, text, activity, and context—a model that online reading expands to six elements: reader, text, author, activity, context, and technology.<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing plural literacies over a single “literacy” inaugurates a taxonomy that can differentiate reading practices and places according to their social meanings and functions.<sup>15</sup> One historical model for such a taxonomy comes from M. T. Clanchy, who, describing the Middle Ages, distinguishes the multiple forms of medieval literacy by place: “sacred,” “learned,” and “bureaucratic.”<sup>16</sup> Another comes from Louise Rosenblatt’s four forms of literacy: informational; ludic (pleasure); rhetorical (action-directed); and aesthetic (deeply hermeneutical).<sup>17</sup> One further model comes from Douglas K. Hartman, Paul Mark Morsink, and Jinie Zheng, who classify the forms of knowledge required by online literacy into three distinct categories: *identity knowledge* (knowing who, i.e., who constructed the text—authors, editors, or other agents—what their interests are, and how these are registered); *locational knowledge* (knowing where, i.e., familiarizing oneself with the online equivalents of page numbers, including scroll bars, cursors, site maps, etc., which orient the reader in relation to the text and allow her to navigate it); and *goal knowledge* (knowing why, i.e., recognizing and articulating one’s reading goals, which allow the reader to organize and evaluate her reading practice and monitor her progress toward those goals).<sup>18</sup> Developing from this last category—which Hartman, Morsink, and Zheng call the most important of all—we observe that becoming aware of our reading goals may also involve recognizing the multiple desires that we bring to reading at different times.

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<sup>13</sup> Cavallo and Chartier, Introduction, *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Cochrane, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas K. Hartman, Paul Mark Morsink, and Jinie Zheng, “From Print to Pixels: the Evolution of Cognitive Conceptions of Reading Comprehension,” in *The New Literacies: Multiple Perspectives on Research and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth A. Baker (NY: Guilford Press, 2010), 136, 140.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of multiple literacies has been developed by anthropologist Brian Street; see his *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and *Social Literacies* (London: Longman, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> M. T. Clanchy, “Looking Back from the Invention of Printing,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 39:3 (1982): 168-183.

<sup>17</sup> See Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: the Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Hartman, Morsink, and Zheng, “From Print to Pixels: the Evolution of Cognitive Conceptions of Reading Comprehension,” in *The New Literacies*.

When we taxonomize reading in light of changing forms of literacy, we draw closer to understanding the reading practices that we ask our students to perform and better recognizing the skills they may already possess.

### 3. The reading self and its transformation

Literary scholars are professional readers, and this expertise has featured centrally in the discipline's defining critical movements: the role that close reading played for New Criticism was replaced by the hermeneutic reading of Iser, the rhetorical reading of de Manian deconstruction, and the reader response criticism of Fish, which was ultimately less influential in the academy than in secondary-level teaching methods.<sup>19</sup> The history of reading itself bloomed into a thriving critical subfield in the 90s under the intellectual leadership of Roger Chartier.<sup>20</sup>

Yet our understanding of reading as a social practice is riven with contradiction, as the contrast between two passages can show:

It is important to read generously and carefully and to learn to submit to projects that others have begun. But it is also important to know what you are doing—to understand where this work comes from, whose interests it serves, how and where it is kept together by will rather than desire, and what it might have to do with you. To fail to ask the fundamental questions—Where am I in this? How can I make my mark? Whose interests are represented? What can I learn by reading with or against the grain?—to fail to ask these questions is to mistake skill for understanding, and it is to misunderstand the goals of a liberal education.<sup>21</sup>

No one of us wakes up in the morning and . . . reinvents poetry or thinks up a new educational system or decides to reject seriality in favor of some other, wholly original, form of organization. We do not do these things because we could not do them, because the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make. Thus while it is true to say that we create poetry (and assignments and lists), we create it through interpretive strategies that are finally not our own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On the evolution of reader-response criticism, see Stanley Fish, Is there a Text in the Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). See also the essays collected in Reading De Man Reading, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> See Chartier and Cavallo, A History of Reading in the West.

<sup>21</sup> Introduction, Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," in Is There a Text in This Class?

The two passages above come from larger works that were both deeply influential for many academics who came of age in the nineteen eighties and nineties. The first, arguing for a questioning and embodied reader, appears in what is arguably the most influential text book for teaching first-year college composition published in the later twentieth century. The second passage is from one of the spokesmen of 80s-era theory who helped create a powerful vision of the inherently constructed nature of our reading selves. Though one addresses the bottom of the academic hierarchy (first-year expository writers) and the other supposes readers at a higher rung on that ladder (scholars and professors talking about their graduate students and English majors), each text offers a distinct view of academic readers. Their juxtaposition reflects a tension between two visions of academic reading: one that privileges the powerful creative role of the individual reader, and another that privileges the educated reader as one who is institutionally constructed.

Thus, on the one hand, the Ways of Reading passage seeks to instill in students the sense that their individual and material selves—who they are—matters in their reading practices. Its authors presume that good academic readers can ask new questions of texts, questions that come out of our own specific lived identities and may in fact use identity to challenge dominant conventions or institutional power.

On the other hand, Fish's text represents students and scholars as readers whose practices are ultimately defined by the institutions in which they are embedded, circumscribed as readers by "the publicly available system of intelligibility." Where the Ways of Reading authors ask students to interrogate and resist the text's own claims, Fish suggests that academic readers never really can "reinvent poetry" because their thinking is limited by their institutional constructions. Offering two very different (and possibly dated) visions of academic literary reading, these texts help articulate what assumptions about reading might have guided the "before" that was implicit in our "what is a reader (now)" project, though both recognize the central role of identity formation in academic reading as a practice.

How does this identity-making project look different in light of virtual reading and some of the many e-writing communities emerging online? In a virtual reading and writing world, embodied selves become disembodied; you can be whoever you wish to be, and the distinctive characteristics of your identity are not necessarily relevant unless you share them intentionally. Surely this ability to become virtual reshapes your ability to "make a mark" on a reading and engenders a reading "I" that occupies several different registers. Refracting if not refuting Fish's notion of the constructed reader, novel venues that have emerged for readers in the digital age include blog culture, in which individuals can write to an entire internet of readers, and fanzines, where readers of books can interact with and write their own versions of shared texts—these represent emergent institutions that construct our reading identities and texts in very new ways. Given the role that reading has played in the construction of the discipline, in works like Ways of Reading and Fish's Is There a Text in This Class?, it is time for a new understanding of reading that registers the effects of new literacies on the capacity of identity formation.

While both Fish and Ways of Reading postulate a unitary ideal reader, credible theorists of academic reading today must acknowledge the diversity of student readers—and with it, the impossibility of imagining "the reader" as a uniform type. It may have been easier to envision a

single, ideal reader when the college-going population was smaller and more homogeneous, but the picture is very different today. In the 1960s, about 30% of high school graduates enrolled in degree-granting institutions. By 2009, that number grew to 48%.<sup>23</sup> The increase in the college population included higher proportions of minority students, students from low-income families, first-generation college students, students from immigrant families, and women (whose enrollment increased over that of men).

Further, this growth is not reflected in the numbers of majors in literary studies. This number has been declining despite the fairly significant increase in the numbers of BAs awarded. In 1970, 849,000 BAs were awarded; 63,000 of those were English majors. In 2010, 1,650,000 BAs were awarded; 53,000 were English majors.<sup>24</sup> Yet the “Humanities” major shows a more complicated picture: in 1970, 143,000 students were “Humanities” majors; in 2010, 280,000.<sup>25</sup> It may be that the “Literature” or “English” major has been splintered by more specialized Humanities majors. And it may be that what appears anecdotally as a decline in reading ability in our classrooms is simply a reflection of a larger and more diverse college-going population.

Not only are the demographics of the student population changing—so too are the demographics of the professoriate, in ways that may have profound effects on the teaching of reading. For as much as close reading came out of the institution of the university as a fairly elite and coherent student body, so close reading emerged in an institutional era with a fairly elite and coherently educated full time faculty. That faculty no longer exists. Younger professors are less and less likely to be tenured and more than half of higher education classes are now taught by provisional labor. English departments have often relied on junior faculty to be a driving force in changing theories about literature, reading, and English department curricula. Yet, as tenure-track junior faculty positions are increasingly replaced by contingent adjunct positions, will the dwindling numbers of junior faculty maintain this powerful influence on curricula and pedagogy?

Given that junior faculty are more likely to share the plural literacies of our students, the current trend in higher education’s hiring practices seems especially relevant in conjunction with the technological transformation that universities have seen in recent years. In this changing institutional environment, the seminar structure of the classroom, which has allowed close reading methodologies of all sorts to proliferate, is at risk. Though online education is not new, it is moving from the margins to the mainstream through the growth of for-profit entities like Coursera. The resulting massification of higher education will have dramatic impacts on the ability of a literature classroom to train students in the labor-intensive practices of close reading.

#### **4. What was and is reading?**

New reading and publication technologies born of the digital age have motivated us to reconsider the practices that have historically defined the role of reading, and more specifically, of literary reading in our culture. We seek to reconsider reading as a practice involving cognitive functions,

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<sup>23</sup> The figures for the following discussion are taken from the National Center for Education Statistics: see <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>

<sup>24</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11\\_286.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_286.asp)

<sup>25</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11\\_289.asp?referrer=list](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_289.asp?referrer=list)

the body of the reader, and enabling technologies and social institutions. To frame this reevaluation, we ask three key questions: first, what is reading as such, as an activity involving cognitive functions and the body? What has reading been historically, how has it evolved, how has it been used by whom and in what settings? And how should we best characterize the present and future condition of reading?

Following Maryanne Wolf's Proust and the Squid. The Story and Science of the Reading Brain (2007), we can conceptualize reading as a cognitive process with important consequences (neurological, cognitive, informational) at both the individual and social levels.<sup>26</sup>

For Wolf reading is defined by its generative capacity to go beyond the given. Reading reproduces and depends on the plasticity of the brain—its open architecture, its capacity to transform its own circuitry and go “beyond the original design of its structures” (15). Reading, Wolf argues, has allowed the human species to rearrange “the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think [of ourselves and others], which in turn altered the intellectual evolution of our species” (3). This generative neurological capacity depends on the three principles of brain architecture exploited by reading: “the capacity to make new connections among older structures, the capacity to form areas of exquisitely precise specialization for recognizing patterns in information; and the ability to learn to recruit and connect information from these areas automatically” (12).

Unlike the visual and speech acts, for which we are hardwired genetically, reading must create its own neurological connections between the visual, conceptual and linguistic activities involved. As these connections form in young readers, they automate fundamental skills—the visual recognition of letters and words, the cognition of syntax and semantics —so that reading trains the learning brain to read with ever-greater proficiency and complexity. By exploiting increased efficiency, the reading brain makes possible better and more new thoughts for more people and at an earlier age. In showing the impact of reading on the human brain's neurological and cognitive development and its corollary impact on human society and culture—that is, on human civilization—Wolf depicts reading and the book as crucial technologies for the production, storage, use, and transmission of human memory. In this light, reading is the central instrument in the transformation and fruitful cultivation of our brain's capacity to innovate.

If it is thus the foundational practice for the human brain, what effects does reading have on the rest of our bodies and ourselves? The question is particularly relevant if we consider reading in relation to the forms of attention and bodily engagement generated by new electronic media. In Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania Karin Littau explores this question from two methodological premises: first, that modern literary theory has had a mentalist bias that, in considerations of reading as a practice, has systematically privileged making sense over feeling, interpretation over sensation.<sup>27</sup> Littau instead pursues a history of literary reading that accounts for the body and its affects and conceives of literature as much an occasion for feeling as for

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<sup>26</sup> Maryanne Wolf, Proust and the Squid. The Story and Science of the Reading Brain (New York: HarperCollins, 2007)

<sup>27</sup> Karin Littau, Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006)

interpretation. The second premise derives from the first: the study of literature and reading belongs not just in the text-centered tradition of the historical humanities, but in the history of media and their effects—or more precisely, where the history of media meets material history and the history of technology.

Littau reclaims an alternate history of reading by outlining a tradition dating at least to classical Greek rhetoric and reaching through Nietzsche's "aesthetics-as-physiology" (6) all the way to hypertext, a tradition she contrasts with the depiction of reading through the lens of "the Kantian aesthetics of rational disinterestedness" and formal contemplation. If Kant proposes a relation to art based on "cognitive apatheia and not pathos," the Greek rhetorical tradition teaches the poet "how best to incite such passions," while Nietzsche "celebrates rapture" and the "physiological danger of art" (8). Littau situates reading as the cultural nexus of "the physiological, the material, and the technological" (3) by reframing bibliomania—the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century denunciation of novel-reading as a diseased hunger for sensations—as one period in the history of readerly attention. This is a history of readers' affective attention to media technologies including not only the printing press but also cinema and the computer/Internet. These technologies share the power to shape "not just our relation to reading and writing but our perception of the world, and perhaps even [...] perception itself." (3) Following in the critical tradition of Benjamin, Simmel and Kracauer, Littau connects the "socio-physiological" conditions of modernity and urban life and the forms of perception and experience stimulated by reading novels, cinema and the hypertext. By acknowledging that "readers are not just sense-makers but read for sensations," Littau shows that technological media from the book to the screen "determine practices of reading," thereby "reorganiz[ing] our cognitive and perceptual modalities" (58). In thus recasting the history of reading, Littau's key concepts become distraction, multiple stimulations, and the full engagement of the body, as opposed to simply cognition or interpretation.

In this revised history, literary reading in modernity remains fundamentally a practice of subject formation, dependent upon and shaped by intellectual as well as emotional capacities. As such, reading remains a central social practice, as well, in which several agents—the individual, the state, the church, and economic and technological agents—all have a stake.

To consider the present and future of reading, then, is to consider the cognitive and affective history, of reading as well as its contingency upon enabling technologies, institutions, and social practices. Instead of opposing literature to the distraction and overstimulation purportedly produced by new media, we conceive literary reading as a practice inscribed in the broader field of attention and sensory stimulation in modernity. Is there a form of specifically literary affective reaction, or bodily attention, that can be rescued along with the preferred form of cognitive attentional concentration we tend to favor in defenses of the literary and its reading?

For some, the new digital culture's "emphases on immediacy, information loading, and a media-driven cognitive set that embraces speed and discourages deliberation" is a clear departure from,

and perhaps a threat to, the forms of understanding promoted by “deep reading.”<sup>28</sup> These authors recommend both a new training in deep reading for online purposes as well as a recommitment to traditional book-based reading, yet this position neglects the opportunity represented by hyper-reading and other reading modes that, not being academic, do not necessarily engage the same skills. Other observers embrace this opportunity. Katherine Hayles, for example, argues that “we are in the midst of a generational shift in cognitive styles that poses challenges to education at all levels,” moving from a culture that has fostered and valued deep attention to a one that produces and promotes hyper attention.<sup>29</sup> Rather than lamenting this development, Hayles asserts both that hyper attention may be better suited to many tasks in our contemporary world and that digital media could be marshaled pedagogically in “a synergistic combination of hyper and deep attention” (193).

Similarly, Jim Collins diagnoses a changing media ecology “shaped by the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures” in which “the conflation of reading, the book, and literary fiction is indeed unraveling.”<sup>30</sup> Developing from the contention “that the shift from wood pulp to e-reader is a change in delivery system” but not in medium (literature), Collins proposes separating the different elements of the literary experience (“an object called a book, an extended narrative format; a degree of engagement called close or deep reading; and a literary culture that judges what belongs in that category” [210]) in order to see their different outcomes in a digital culture. The book may be replaced by e-readers but the long form, for example, may thrive in such long televisual series as those produced by HBO and AMC. By the same token, Collins notes, “reading as self-transformation” does not depend on the book and in fact may be enhanced by the forms of individual curating or “playlisting” that in digital culture mix “socialization and intimacy,” offering “the reader the pleasures of both hypersocialization and hyperpersonalization” (211).

Clearly, the cultural ecology within which reading, literary and otherwise, takes place has changed significantly as a result of the new technologies and media. This change has occurred prominently at the level of consumption, where reading increasingly occurs on screens and vies constantly for the reader’s attention against other media and other discourses. New technologies have also changed reading at the level of production, as writing is no longer restricted to professionalized creators and institutionalized venues. Moreover, this new cultural ecology challenges the presumptive legitimacy of the literary and of reading by destabilizing Literature as a dominant form of cultural capital and thus its preeminence as a channel for individual self-fashioning.

Literary reading and academic conceptions of reading must adapt to this ecology. As we have argued, successful adaptation will entail embracing a world of multiple literacies rather than

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<sup>28</sup> Wolf and Barzillai, “The Importance of Deep Reading,” in *Challenging the Whole Child: Reflections on Best Practices in Learning, Teaching, and Leadership*, ed. Marge Scherer (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009), 131.

<sup>29</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession* (2007): 187-199; 187.

<sup>30</sup> Jim Collins, “Reading, in a Digital Archive of One’s Own,” *PMLA* 128 (2013): 207-121; 207-8.

asserting the primacy of academic reading, and reclaiming reading in all its varieties (not just close or critical reading but also the ethical and practical). It could also mean placing reading—the practice of attention to writing, to the written form, and to meaning—at the very center of the new ecology of attention and information. Instead of bemoaning the alleged end of literary reading we can claim it, now broadened and diversified, as a particularly effective and empowering practice of attention to attention in all its complexity.

## 5. What is literary reading?

Based on this richer understanding of reading in general, we can pursue a more specific interrogation of “literary reading” and its relation to “literature” by introducing a theoretical framework both to clarify these terms and to justify the particular reciprocity of literature and literary reading, among the wide variety of reading practices and types of texts. In doing so, we draw especially on the work of the neo-Frankfurt School thinker, Albrecht Wellmer.<sup>31</sup> Wellmer takes as his starting-point Theodore W. Adorno’s strong connection, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, between art’s validity and both conceptual truth and social emancipation. Wellmer offers a useful perspective for focusing a set of specific claims about literary reading in a “critical” vein: critical in the philosophical sense of establishing the ways literary reading may have ethical, political, conceptual, and existential efficacy, and in establishing the limits within which literature exerts its effects.

We formulate the notion of “literary reading” here in relation to the more general questions of aesthetic reception that Wellmer’s theoretical framework considers. To read in a “literary” manner is to treat a verbal artifact in ways analogous to the reception of other sorts of artistic objects—visual, musical, performative, etc.—within a broader aesthetic regime of art.<sup>32</sup> The explication of the potential *aesthetic* specificity of a type of reading is crucial to understanding what might justify treating literary reading as a practice distinct from literacy or “reading” broadly conceived.

Wellmer starts from the everyday communicative competencies of both makers and receivers of artworks—and we could specify the latter as “literary readers” for our purposes. Their everyday competencies include a range of functions, from pragmatic, instrumental uses to aesthetically and emotionally expressive uses of language, images, performative acts, and other signs. Their

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<sup>31</sup> In what follows, we will be referring primarily to Albrecht Wellmer, “Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno’s Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity” in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991) 1-35. Other relevant sources from Wellmer include his *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998); *Wie Worte Sinn machen: Aufsätze zur Sprachphilosophie* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007); and *Versuch über Musik und Sprache* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> We borrow this useful term from Jacques Rancière. See, for example, his “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art,” *Art and Research* 2/1 (2008): 1-15. Online at <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html>, accessed 17 April 2013.



multifaceted participation in everyday communication will have shaped their abilities to use discourse consciously and make deliberative judgments about the discourse of others. In the course of performing everyday communication, in particular, they will have become competent in evaluating discursive claims to “truth” in different dimensions: the *factual dimension* (how well a statement representing a state of affairs conforms to our experience of it); the *expressive dimension* (how authentically a statement relates to a speaker’s personal beliefs, feelings, and way of life); and *the dimension of moral, practical, and emotional “rightness”* (how aptly a statement may describe a concrete situation, measured against shared values and norms). Moreover, it is not only that participants gain competence in thus assessing truth claims; they may also have become aware of the potential for dissonance between these different dimensions of truth: What we know to be true factually may, for example, be repugnant to us morally. Finally, as part of their own personal and professional biographies, individuals may have succeeded in composing and integrating these different truth-dimensions into larger, more coherent wholes that are characteristic of their characters and lives. Everyday discourse, however, tends to shift sequentially between these dimensions and connect them at most in only loosely coordinated ways. It tolerates great margins for dissonance, bad faith, lack of awareness, and outright contradiction in the relations between such domains of truth.

In asking how art relates to these different dimensions of truth, Wellmer makes two specifications. First, he suggests, art does not so much literally represent truth as mobilize a *potential* for truth: “The truth content of works of art would then be the epitome of the potential effects of works of art that are *relevant* to the truth, or of their potential for *disclosing* truth” (Wellmer 24). This potential for truth in artworks is, however, related to a second specification: The claims to truth that artworks make are related to their claims to aesthetic validity. To put it otherwise, only insofar as a work is aesthetically “right” does it realize its potential relevance to other sorts of truth; the aesthetically valid work allows us to focus on and evaluate some potential truth that previously was imperceptible. Wellmer goes on to suggest that insofar as art mediates its relation to truth through aesthetic validity, it is particularly suited to reveal the interactions and interferences of the different sorts of truth (factual, moral, and expressive) comprised in everyday communication.

It is important to note that the possibilities embodied by literary reading may be taken up reflexively by producers of works of literary art aimed at literary readers and their specific aesthetic competencies. Writers not only produce verbal texts in general; they may also produce works of “literature” intentionally designed for literary reading. Through its reflexive formalization of literary reading within textual production, literature bears a defining aesthetic concentration and coordination of discursive situations, which follows from its compositional impulse, lending literary works a formal coordination that is absent or far weaker in most everyday situations. Literature foregrounds the potential dissonances and contradictions between discursive truth claims, their interferences in the fabric of our encounters with ourselves and others. Moreover, in holding together dissonant truths—even unreconciled, contradictory ones, as in tragic plots or in the plural truth claims of a “polyphonic” novel—within a compositional whole, literature may also foreground a definitive capacity of the aesthetic in general by modeling ways to encounter and coordinate differences without stronger forms of conceptual, ideological, or moral synthesis. Literature may model particular hypothetical articulations of a plurality of truths in ways that can inform and reorient readers in a wider context of discursive

situations. This is one reason why literary reading has historically been considered a crucial component of training in critical thinking.

Literary reading seeks to reveal how aesthetic validity shapes a particular complex vision of truth—the possible interferences of factual, subjective, and moral truths in human situations, and the ways in which these interferences may be negotiated. This conception of literary reading helps us to interpret in a more rigorous light certain aspects and motivations of literary pedagogy. For example, it helps illuminate the uses of history in the study of literature: literary texts are historical objects and historical context is necessary to understanding the relation of a text’s representations to factual veracity; proficiency in literary reading also engenders an historical apprehension of the text’s conformation with or divergence from commonly shared conceptions of personhood and morality in a given period. So it is not just that history is applied as a pedagogical instrument; history is one of the dimensions through which certain types of coordinating truth are put in perspective. Another feature of literary pedagogy advanced by this conception of literary reading is its characteristic focus on genres. Genres, arguably, structure the particular emphases on different dimensions of truth within the complex weave of literary discourse, and literary reading attends to this feature of genres. Finally, this conception of literary reading also reframes the question of the aesthetic, in ways that avoid the dichotomous trap of whether reading for personal pleasure and edification or reading “critically” constitutes the primary task of literary reading. This conception of literary reading suggests that both have been falsely reified into end goals rather than seen as complementary, counterpointed means towards the actual goal of engaging with literature: reorienting ourselves within the structure of everyday communication to seek insights not always accessible within that realm.

Studying and teaching reading as a social practice, and literary reading as one of its manifestations, encompasses thus an extended field that goes from the broad and sustained “attention to attention” (or more specifically, the practice of attention to writing, to the written form, and to meaning and feeling-making) to the more specialized claims Wellmer makes for literary reading as an aesthetic experience, different from but crucial to the quality of our everyday communications. We must always straddle the distance between considering literary reading as one of many forms of reading, and understanding what is truly at stake in its specific contribution to our ways of being in the world.

## **6. Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Proposals and Areas for Future Consideration**

Our questions and conversations have presupposed that the practice of reading has changed from some prior state in ways that we can observe and to which we can meaningfully respond. Our inquiry was prompted by the observation that our students had deep engagements with new electronic technologies that differentiated them from prior generations of students; in turn, those of us who came of age under a different regime of literacy felt that we needed to revise our theories and practices of academic reading to account for that change. In our ongoing discussions, we often found ourselves defending (or challenging) our own preconceptions about reading and its practice before the digital revolution. We had to work past our often-unstated assumptions about the unimpeachable value of close or interpretive reading and seek a way to name what we meant by “literary” reading. In turn, we learned about the complexity and value of the hyper and the virtual, and have perhaps overcome our fear of new or unfamiliar forms of literacy—a fear

that may have partially motivated our study. In bringing our work to a close, we identify several areas that will redefine the practice of literacy for a new generation of students and that bear close consideration by educators attuned to the dynamism of our students' literacies.

### ***Literature and the common core***

The next generation of university students, starting in 2018, will have been educated in primary school through the new Common Core State Standards, which will privilege (though perhaps not as radically as some fear) informational texts over imaginative ones. Will this changing approach to the role of imaginative literature in K-12 classrooms change the shape and role of university literature departments? Will the university become the primary site of the imaginative text, and how will this affect the important role cultural studies has played in decentering the purely "literary" from academic reading lists and canons? Can we harness information technologies to foster new engagements with creative and literary texts, engagements we may have assumed previous generations of students would have received in their K-12 education? When audiovisual narratives are predominant in our culture, how might a new concept of literary reading exploit the familiarity of this form of narrative and how might literary reading contribute to this meaning-making practice of cultural consumption?

### ***Virtualization and identity***

Virtual identities allow individuals to interact in ways impossible in a university classroom—that is, without a material self. The increasing diversity of the university has already led the field of literary studies to ask fruitful questions about how to teach reading: how to create a collective academic practice for individuals with radically different experiences, relationships to dominant cultures, and relationships to majority/minority identities. How have virtual identities changed how our students think about themselves and the role their embodied selves play in their intellectual development?

### ***Reading in the changing classroom***

Communal reading is one of the central organizing functions in the academy. The notion of and space for shared inquiry lies at the heart of academic institutions. How do new models of communal reading and virtual teaching affect this vision of the university classroom as a privileged place where diverse readers learn from each other? If virtual reading communities also do this, what changes in students' vision of a reading community? Do we need to cling to the communal classroom space as an essential site for shared critical reading? Can online communities replicate the diverse learning power of the academic community? And, how do virtual reading groups, e-readers, and other social networks and digital communities create a collective reading identity for our students even before they enter university? How can we recognize that our students may be embedded in many more reading and interpretative communities than ever before, and does that change how we approach reading as a solitary and communal practice at the university level?

### ***Toward a new curriculum for literary studies***

We propose that departments of literature make reading an explicit focus not only of research but also of our teaching and core curricula for majors. A new reading module for literature students and majors could focus not on texts and authors, arrayed by period or genre, but on *modes of reading*. This module could be a place to teach literary theory—one example of reading reflecting on itself in a highly self-conscious way—and might also have a historical element, but its perspective would be comparative.<sup>33</sup> For example, courses might compare reading in the past with the present, or reading print with reading online: the aim would not be historical coverage (the aim of the traditional literature curriculum) but discerning literacy’s multiple modalities and the conditions that give rise to them.

Fundamentally, such a module would prompt us to reconsider what reading is. In our working group discussions, Tyrus Miller articulated a useful definition of reading as an act of “dynamic disembedding that allows communication to be moved from one context to another.” Beatriz Sarlo develops a similar understanding of reading as decontextualized communication to capture the specific function of literary reading: “Literature is socially meaningful because something [...] endures in texts and can be activated once more once the text’s social functions have been exhausted.” Because reading literature reactivates meaning despite the loss of context, Sarlo observes, it forges dynamic networks across time, “making new connections with the texts of the past in a rich process of migration as [...] old texts come to inhabit new symbolic landscapes.”<sup>34</sup>

But if the practice of reading has the power to dislodge texts from their original social functions, that practice is itself always embodied and situated—as are readers. The reading curriculum that we are proposing should aim to recognize and explore the cultural ecology of literacy by examining how literacy is unevenly distributed by geography, language, class, gender, and institutional access (which includes schools, public libraries, internet access, etc.). Illiteracy is inevitably bound up in a complex of social and historical phenomena, but so is literacy. For example, mass literacy campaigns in the 20<sup>th</sup> century deliberately emphasized reading over writing, and thus, as Armando Petrucci observes, “fostered the democratic ideology of public reading” as a “means for diffusing values and ideologies.”<sup>35</sup> Post-secondary reading could expand students’ understanding of the reading process to include a broader range of contexts—historical, political, and technological, that would productively challenge them to progress beyond any vision of an idealized reader to better see the pluralities of readers and reading practices that exist today, in prior periods, or in other cultures.

Our aim would be to foster not only students’ self-consciousness about their own reading but also their analytical understanding of multiple reading practices. We would hope to make the “difficulty” of reading not just a challenge to be overcome (or rejected) but a focus of inquiry in its own right. In the process, we can encourage students to pursue questions such as the

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<sup>33</sup> We owe this suggestion to Katherine Rowe, who served as respondent to the 2011 ADE Chairs’ Seminar roundtable at which we shared our work.

<sup>34</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, “Cultural Studies and Literary Criticism at the Crossroads of Values,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 8: 1 (1999): 115-124; 119, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Armando Petrucci, “Reading to Read: A Future for Reading,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, 345-367; 349.

following: what makes reading hard? Why are some texts more challenging than others? In what ways do they challenge us? What's the difference between a beginning reader and a practiced one? Can we imagine a literacy of the future that could be called "reflective reading" (versus "close reading")—reading that takes itself as its object?<sup>36</sup>

Such a curriculum would necessarily recognize reading as a multi-modal, multi-lingual, and multi-media experience, which involves forms of production as well as consumption, writing as well as reading, images and video as well as texts, and texts as both written and spoken. Finally, it should encourage pedagogical self-consciousness about the use of class time and space. As working group member Cynthia Scheinberg asserted at the 2011 ADE Summer Chairs' Seminar, the literature classroom makes solitary reading social: how do we make the most of that social space? What do we do in the classroom, and how do we integrate it with the reading students are doing outside? What online components might we imagine that would mobilize students' current online literacies to further encourage them to pursue challenging reading and meaningful social engagement around texts? Gail E. Hawisher and her colleagues, for example, find that students can use "technological gateways" for developing advanced literacies around their classes; they also worry that by ignoring online environments, "we fail to build on the literacies students already have."<sup>37</sup>

A curricular unit such as we are proposing might include courses that take the practices, places, and objects of reading as their explicit focus, such as the following:

- "What is a Book?" focuses on historic changes in form and media (from books to cell-phone novels), encouraging students to consider and analyze today's media in a historic continuum.
- "What is a Reader?" relates the current landscape of literacy to the deep history of reading, focusing on the transformational effects that literacy has exerted on readers throughout history and continues to exert today.
- "Reading for Writers" appeals especially to creative writing students, addressing the vital role that reading (potentially including new media—including graphics, texts, blogs, and other digital forms—as well as traditional media) plays in the formation of writers of all kinds.

These three courses fundamentally rethink the traditional literary core from the perspective of reading and readers: rather than focus on a set of canonical texts or a range of given literary-historical periods (the features of the traditional literature department), these courses foreground the act of reading itself as a historically dynamic, multi-dimensional, and socially significant act. In so doing, they cut across the artificial boundary separating "content" and "skill" by inviting self-conscious reflection on how today's practices participate in deep and dynamic histories. In

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<sup>36</sup> The utility of the term "reflective reading" was suggested by Alex Woloch in one of our early discussions.

<sup>37</sup> Gail E. Hawisher, Cynthia L. Selfe, Brittney Moraski, and Melissa Pearson, "Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies and the Literacies of Technology," *College Composition and Communication* 55(4) (2004): 642-92; 676.

keeping with the findings of “What is a Reader?” they encourage multi-dimensional perspectives on literacy as never simply a cognitive act but also a social, affective, and bodily practice through which the work of academic English and Literature departments can become alive and deeply relevant. Their focus on multiple literacies, moreover, challenges the temptation to naturalize academic reading as the ultimate but unspoken goal of advanced literary study and invites reflection instead on the range of possible practices that a skilled reader might put into play. Most of all, they frustrate efforts to dismiss our students’ literacy within a decline and fall narrative or to place book literacy and digital literacy in dramatic and oppositional terms. Instead, by seeking to understand the new landscape of literacy that our students inhabit, courses like these offer the opportunity to meet students where they are, to write them into the histories and present-day contexts that we study, and thereby to open our own academic literacies—some of them so habitual as to resist identification and naming as such—to new scrutiny, and new possibility.

