Introduction

A Rationale For Establishing A Process of Reading to Learn

Too Many Students Struggle to Learn from Reading

Ten years ago I was tutoring Sage, a twelfth grade student who struggled with reading. On this particular occasion, Sage was getting frustrated. Recognizing he needed to take a break, I asked him to explain what was bothering him. He looked at me and sighed. He said, "You know...when I look at an engine I get it. When someone brings me their car I can fix it because I know how it works. This reading stuff...I can't fix it, because I don't get how it works."

In the years since I worked with Sage, I have met many students like him who struggle with reading. However, unlike Sage, many of these do not have the benefit of tutors or reading specialists. Although their struggles with reading may not be as severe as someone with dyslexia, they still have difficulties learning from texts. For example, if you ask most students if they have ever been unable to remember anything after reading a text for school, most will raise their hand. If you ask them to keep their hand raised if this happens frequently, most keep their hands aloft. Students who lower their hand often comment with sarcasm that they no longer have this problem because they stopped reading assigned material.

Sage's words continue to worry me. I am concerned because so many students struggle to read texts that challenge them. Unfortunately, because many students struggle to read difficult material, too often we give them easier texts. This arguably makes the problem worse. Appendix A of the Common Core Standards points out that there is substantial "evidence that current standards, curriculum, and instructional practice have not done enough to foster the independent reading of complex texts so crucial for college and career readiness, particularly in the case of informational texts." The standards also state that "[d]espite steady or growing reading demands from various sources, K–12 reading texts have actually trended downward in difficulty in the last half century (p. 2). This suggests that many teachers and schools struggle with helping students develop the skills they need to comprehend complex and challenging texts. Consider the following scenarios.

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As the students in Mr. Cesario's chemistry class entered the classroom he reminded them to get a textbook from the bookshelf before sitting down. When the bell rang, he addressed the class.

"Good afternoon everyone. As you probably remember, we have a lab today. We have a lot to accomplish in a short time, so we are going to get started right away. Before we can begin the lab, I would like you to read pages one hundred and forty-two to one-hundred a forty-five. These pages have information that will be helpful during the lab. I will give you fifteen minutes. I'll check in at that time to see where you are at. As always, take notes in your journals. You may also want to jot down any questions you have. We will take a little time before the lab to answer any questions you may have. Go ahead. You can start reading. Please read silently so that you don't disturb students who need quiet to read."

The students opened up their textbooks and started reading. A few students in the back started chatting softly. Mr. Cesario walked over to them. "Sally and Bill, please stop talking and start reading."

Sally rolled her eyes and smiled. "Okay Mr.Cesario."

Mr. Cesario returned to his desk. Every few minutes some students would chat softly at their desks. Twice the sound of chatter increased to the point that Mr. Cesario put his index fingers to his lips and softly "shushed" the students. The third time students began talking, Mr. Cesario addressed the class again. "Hey guys, I know most of you have not finished reading. Why is there so much talking?"

A boy near the windows raised his hand. "Jeremy, what do you have for me?"

Jeremy lowered his hand and sighed. "Mr. Cesario, reading this book is like reading a foreign language. Can't you just tell us what we need to know?" Jeremy looked at his classmates. "Don't you all agree?" Many students nodded their heads and a few answered with "yes". Once student slapped his hands on his desk with exasperation and said, "Yes! This book sucks!"

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The students in Mr. Valentine's sophomore English class were reading and discussing books in small groups. Each group had selected a book from a short list that Mr. Valentine had provided a few days before. Every book was intended to provide a moderate challenge for the students in each group. All was going well, until Billy slammed his book down on his desk causing all the students to stop working. This was Mr. Valentine's most advanced group. Concerned, he walk over to Billy. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Billy frowned and held up his copy of The Canterbury Tales. "Why do we have to read this. It's stupid. I don't understand a word Chaucer is using! When are we ever going to have to read something like this in real life?" The rest of the group nodded in agreement with Billy.

Mr. Valentine attempted to rally the group. "Guys, you are excellent readers. I see you reading all the time. This is a challenging book. But, once you get past the style, you'll find the stories really interesting. Use the glossary and just take your time. You can do it!"

Billy and his classmates did not look convinced, but agreed to keep working at it. As he walked away, Mr. Valentine could not help thinking his answer was insufficient. However, he could not think of anything else to say.

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Every fall, winter, and spring the students at North Woods Middle School take a school-wide reading assessment. It was the beginning of June and Ms. Keller was comparing the fall and spring results of her students. The more she looked at the data, the more disappointed she became. Although many of her students had made slight gains in reading, many had not. She could not understand why. This year the students had read more books than ever before. A lot of time had been devoted to reading and discussion in class. Ms. Keller was confident that most of the students had read what she had assigned. Why then did they make such little improvement?

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Mr. and Mrs. Jackson were sitting at a table across from Mrs. Smith, the case manager for their daughter Allie. Allie was in fifth grade and had been receiving special education services since first grade. Mrs. Jackson, who was reviewing Allie's recent progress report

expressed concern. "I just don't get it. Why isn't Allie doing better in reading? She reads all the time at home. I know she is still reading books below her grade level, but she reads all the time and enjoys it. You would think she would be doing better in class with all the reading she is doing. What can we do?"

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The anecdotes above represent situations that are not uncommon. In the first scenario, many of the students display frustration with the chemistry textbook. They do not see it as a useful tool for learning. They want the teacher to give them the information rather than read about it. The second scenario depicts advanced readers who are reading a text that is very challenging for them. Because they are not used to such challenge, they are in the process of 'shutting down'. The next scenario describes a classroom where students made very little gains in reading, despite having read a lot in class throughout the year. The fourth anecdote describes a struggling reader who has not given up on reading, yet who continues to struggle in class.

Although the situations above are very different, they illustrate two important aspects about reading to learn. The first is that most students struggle with school reading at some time or other. They struggle not because they are 'bad readers'. Any reader will struggle when a text that challenges his or her current level of skill. This can happen to students who read above and below grade level. The second aspect about reading to learn is that for many readers, the act of reading by itself does guarantee that students will improve the skills needed to learn from reading challenging texts.

Teachers and Students Need Better Resources

Over the past twenty years, many experiences like those described above have convinced me that content teachers need better resources to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to read challenging, content-specific material. It is also clear that teachers are doing everything they can and using the resources they have to help students become more sophisticated readers, but to little or no avail. This is apparent almost any place you look. For example, reading achievement in the United States has arguably changed very little over the past two decades. In addition, most teachers tell me that they do not feel confident in their ability to

teach students how to become better readers of the kinds of texts that are so important in their classrooms.

A need for additional resources on reading exists despite an increased focus on literacy during the past twenty years. Myriad research studies and reports have been written, and many resources have been published that offer literacy strategies designed to support students' reading development. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that most content teachers still do not use literacy strategies. When they do, the tendency is for literacy strategies to be treated as additional content that teachers must cover. Or, teachers may tend to over-rely on a small set of strategies. Teachers need a better way to make sense of it all.

National Standards Have Increased Expectations Around Text Complexity

The advent of the Common Core State Standards and national standards in science and social studies has also increased the need for resources and approaches to support learning from texts in all disciplines. For example, the Common Core State Standards were created, in part, to encourage important shifts around literacy development and instruction. One of these shifts is the significant increase in expectations around text complexity. Similarly, the inclusion of reading standards in disciplines outside of English Language Arts, through the CCSS Literacy Standards for History/Social Studies, Science and the Technical Subjects (2010), the Next Generation Science Standards (2013), and the C3 Framework for Social Studies (2013) expect teachers in all of these disciplines to prepare students to read and learn from challenging texts. In other words, a key assumption within the reading standards of all of these frameworks is the expectation that students will be able to read and learn from complex text-based materials.

There is No Current Definition of A Reading Process

A large part of the challenge with text-based learning in the content areas is that there is no clear and simple definition of how reading to learn works. Nor is there a widely-accepted process that teachers can use to teach students how to read strategically. This lack of clarity about reading is apparent within the reading research community. For example, a Kindle search through the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Reading Research (2010)* for the phrase "reading process" yields very few references to a process of reading. The few occasions when a

process is mentioned suggests that reading experts do believe that good readers use a process when they read. For example, one contributor writes that "reading fluency appears to be an important aspect of the reading process" (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, and Linan Thompson, 2010). Another suggests that "problem solving is considered part of the reading process" (Afflerbach and Cho, 2010). Despite references to part of a process, a clear definition is never provided. Similarly, a perusal of current literature will find a lack of a commonly accepted definition of a reading process. When a process of reading is discussed in any detail it usually refers to the process or set of processes for *learning to read*. There are no clear or common definitions for a process that readers use when they are *reading to learn*.

The fact that a clear definition of a process for reading to learn has yet to be established in the literature on reading is odd when we consider another important facet of literacy: writing. When you ask students and teachers to describe the writing process, many can identify the following parts of a writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. In fact, the National Writing Project is an organization that has effectively advocated for effective writing instruction, much of which has been framed by an understanding that when complex writing work needs to be completed, the process can help writers accomplish this work. A similar framework does not exist for reading. In short, writing instruction and student learning about how to be a writer, are substantially informed by the understanding that having a process helps make writing work successful. Why has a reading process not emerged to help students engage in reading work?

Why a Reading Process Has Not Been Defined

There are a variety of possible reasons why an explicit process of reading that teachers and schools can use to support reading to learn has yet to emerge. One fundamental reason is the difficulty reading experts have had defining comprehension. Some experts (Randi, Grigorenko, and Sternberg, 2005) demonstrate that reading comprehension is a complex process or series of processes that "is difficult to define, much less teach and assess (Location 713). These experts continue to state that defining "these processes, however, risks reducing reading to an algorithm that may not be appropriate for different situations and different purposes" (Location 748). In short, many researchers believe reading comprehensions processes differ from context to context.

Our challenge is to define a process that is broad enough to be useful in any academic context, yet specific enough to be useful to teachers and students.

Another potential factor complicating the issue is that there is no visible product when a person reads. Having a concrete product helps teach the processes involved in creating it. For example, when students are working to improve their writing skills, we are able to analyze the writing they produce and make suggestions about how they can improve their process. Since there is no direct and visible product of reading, it is difficult to analyze the outcome and, subsequently, the effectiveness of the process used to achieve it. Thus, there is nothing that requires us to go back and modify whatever process was used.

A third reason is the general perception that reading comes, or should come, intuitively. It is widely accepted that writing is something most of us need to work at in order to improve. Evidence for this can be found in the numerous examples of published authors describing their own writing process. For example, I was recently in a classroom where middle school students were exploring the writing process of their favorite authors. I saw one student looking at Judy Blume's website. The student was reading a section where the author describes and gives examples of the process she uses to craft her stories. As Blume, and others state, writing is difficult work that takes practice and perseverance.

While it is easy to find experts describing how they engage in the writing process, it is difficult to find expert readers describing how they read. This in itself is somewhat strange since it can be argued that there are more expert readers than writers. For example, most professionals must read to stay informed of advances in their field. Professionals read journals, researcher read research and primary documents, engineers and architects read schematics, etc. Nonetheless, despite the vast numbers of individuals for whom reading is essential to their profession, there is little discussion or description of how they work at reading. This sends the message that reading is intuitive and should be easy. This is a dangerous message for students to receive.

When students, especially struggling readers, believe that reading should come easy it can encourage self-defeating attitudes about their own abilities as readers. My experience has convinced me that too many students who struggle with reading think they will never be good at

it. Some even believe struggling to read is an indicator of poor academic ability. In other words, they believe they are dumb if they struggle to learn from reading. The bottom line is that students should be given the message that reading, like writing, is hard work and to get good at it takes practice. It requires dedication to a process and the perseverance to learn how to use the process strategically. However, we cannot encourage students to practice or master a process of reading without making it clear what this process is.

The Lack of a Defined Reading Process is Problematic

The lack of a clearly defined reading process creates many challenges for students, teachers, and institutions. The challenges for students are particularly poignant because students often lack a clear understanding of what they need to do when they struggle to read a challenging text. In other words, they are not able to approach reading in a strategic manner. This is true for all types of readers. For example, when struggling readers begin to understand how reading works, and when they learn strategies for improving their process of reading, they realize they have control over how well they read. The same is true for advanced readers. On multiple occasions, I have spoken with college students who excelled at reading in high school. Many comment on struggling when required to read challenging texts in college. Many of these students describe not knowing what to do when they were tested by texts assigned by their professors. Some of these students developed processes that worked for them; others did not. When I press further, I find out that the students who figured it out adopted a similar process.

The lack of having a defined reading process poses a similar problem for teachers. This is true for teachers in all content areas, not just teachers in English Language Arts. Middle school and high school teachers tend to consider themselves experts of specific content knowledge. Even though being able to read content specific texts is an essential skill in almost every discipline, many content area teachers do not know how to help students who struggle to read content materials. A common, but ineffective approach is to find easier texts for students. This has two drawbacks. First, when we give students easier texts, we water down the information. Second, when we select easier reading for students we do not help students become better readers of the type of information we are expecting them to be able to comprehend independently. However, when teachers become familiar with the process for reading to learn,

they are able to use it to scaffold instruction and teach students specific strategies to read strategically. When teachers do this, they are able to give students increasingly difficult text. The result is twofold: students get better at reading and they learn more content.

Schools also suffer by not defining a reading process that teachers and students can use to develop strategic approaches for working with challenging texts. The lack of a process means that teachers are left with little guidance about how to support students' reading development. Additionally, this mean teachers are left to their own devices when students struggle to comprehend texts. The lack of a common framework perpetuates confusion about how to help students when they are asked to read challenging content. As a result, many teachers avoid assigning sufficient amounts of reading needed for students to practice and develop reading skills. The evidence of this is easy to find. A visit to almost any school quickly reveals that there are common approaches for teaching writing and research - yet no clear frameworks for supporting reading. Dig a little deeper and visit classrooms and you will typically find very little reading of challenging texts taking place. You may find it difficult to find any sustained or strategic reading taking place at all.

It is important to note that in the past decade many teachers and schools have embraced and used literacy strategies in an attempt to improve reading instruction. For example, it is not uncommon for schools to adopt specific strategies, like reciprocal teaching or knowledge rating guides, and require all teachers to use them. Such practices are problematic. First of all, when schools or departments mandate the use of specific strategies, teachers treat reading strategies like content. Teachers are already burdened with too much content to teach. Adding literacy strategies to this list compounds a current problem without addressing the issue of helping students become increasingly capable readers of content material. Second, very few literacy strategies can be used ubiquitously. Most strategies work well in some contexts, but less well in others. Therefore, mandating the use of literacy strategies is poor practice. Finally, strategies are tools or techniques to support the implementation or execution of a process. Teaching strategies without an understanding of the process they are designed to support makes little sense.

Confusion About Deep Reading

Since the Common Core State Standards were published in 2010, many reading experts have discussed the importance of deep reading as an important method to support student mastery of the reading standards (c.f.). David Coleman, a principal architect of the Common Core State Standards in ELA, has publically stated that he believes "reading is fairly simple, that there is no reason to make more complicated than it is the task of teaching reading, of paying close attention, of gathering evidence from what you read" (NYSED, 2011). In short, Coleman argues that the only thing teachers need to do to help students comprehend challenging texts is to ask text-dependent questions and to encourage students to re-read until they understand. This is akin to telling someone who is struggling to try again. And, when he or she struggles even more, to continue saying, "Just keep trying". Very soon this approach becomes ineffective at best, and insensitive and dangerous at worst. Reading experts have criticized Coleman's over-simplification of reading (e.g. Shanahan, 2012). However, to be fair, Coleman points out that many popular literacy strategies are too often used as a method to help students bypass the hard work of reading. While this may be true, I argue that the answer is not to ignore or neglect the usefulness of research-based literacy strategies, but rather to help teachers teach students a process students can use to strategically support deep and close reading of texts.

The Power of a Process-Centered Approach to Reading

Identifying a concrete process of reading to learn helps overcome many of the challenges described above. When students understand that effective readers use a process when they read, students can begin to practice skills that are part of the process and become more strategic in their reading. It makes the entire endeavor less obscure to students, it allows them to identify and achieve clear reading goals, and ultimately can give them control to get better at reading. Lastly, having a process helps students be strategic and make a useful plan when struggling to read something that is challenging. This benefits struggling readers because it helps them see that reading is like any other skill from learning to ride a bike to writing. It also supports intuitive readers by helping them understand how the process works and what they do well so they too can be strategic when the demands of reading increase and test the level of skills they already have.

Similarly, when teachers have a clear understanding of a process for reading, they can demystify it. Having a defined process helps teachers design lessons to teach it to students and helps them develop activities for students to practice it. Likewise, defining the process allows teachers to set reading goals with students and show them that they can take ownership of this process.

Finally, when schools and institutions adopt and define a clear process of reading to learn, they are able to offer guidance to teachers and students alike. Teachers are no longer left to their own devices. Departments can work together to develop common instructional tools and assessment to support teachers. With the development and provision of such supports, teachers are more likely to use reading as a frequent tool to support content learning. This will result in more opportunities for students to practice and improve their skills.

Purpose of this Book

The purpose of this book is simple. This book describes an explicit process of reading that teachers and schools can use to improve reading instruction *and* content learning in all content areas. It is specifically designed to be used by practicing teachers and pre-service teachers who have students that already know how to read at a basic level and have skills that allow them to learn by reading. This book is also intended to be useful to literacy coaches, curriculum coordinators, department leaders, and administrators who are interested in developing consistent reading curricula and frameworks designed to support students' content learning and reading development.

It is important to point out that this book operates under the assumption that reading constitutes a process with a set of skills that ranges on a continuum from novice to expert. A related assumption is that once students learn the rudiments of reading (e.g. they have a coherent foundation of decoding skills and the phonological awareness that allows them to make meaning from texts), they are at the novice end of the spectrum of a reader who can learn from reading. These assumptions imply that readers can increase their reading skills and that there is a continuum of levels where at the beginning end you have novice readers who are able to read

and comprehend simple texts to the other end where readers are able to comprehend, dense, information-rich, and highly technical materials.

Another important point is that this book is focused on academic reading. It does not address reading for pleasure. When we read for pleasure, it can be argued that we do not use any specific process, or that a very different process or set of processes is involved. This is because the outcomes of pleasure reading and academic reading are often different. When we engage in leisure reading, the goal is entertainment and pleasure. On the other hand, academic reading is designed with a purpose in mind. Perhaps students are expected to learn something; perhaps, they are expected to use information learned from reading to do something else. As mentioned earlier, academic reading is work. Such reading is often construed as a type of work by itself. It is also a type of work needed in order to complete some additional and often more complex work.

This distinction of reading as work, deserves a little more explication. This introduction began by illustrating the importance of students being able to read complex texts by the time they graduate. Participating in society in an informed manner, and competing in a complex, global economy requires the need for individuals to address and solve complex problems, many of which do not even exist yet. Solving such problems will very likely demand the ability to comprehend confusing and complex information. In order to do this, students need lots of practice engaging in work that requires reading and comprehending complex material. They cannot hope to develop the necessary skills without understanding the processes involved. For them to understand the processes involved, we must teach them and give them a many opportunities to practice and develop the necessary skills.

In sum, this book defines a process of reading that educators can use to support students' reading development. It provides a variety of tools to help teachers design and implement effective text-based lessons that have been framed by the reading process. Chapter One provides an overview of the reading process. Chapter Two describes how to design effective text-based lessons around the reading process. Chapters Three through Ten are divided into three sections,that describe the three phases of the Reading Process: Preparing to Reading, Reading to Learn, and Demonstrating Learning. Each section describes important elements of the three

phases of the reading process. Every chapter offers multiple strategies that teachers can teach to students and that students can apply independently when reading. Chapter Eleven discusses issues and ideas for implementing the reading process at the school level.