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Early in my teaching career, I was in the habit of keeping several readers within easy access so that I could dip happily into an essay or two whenever I had a spare moment. As a novice teacher, I was not concerned with establishing a thematic or generic context for my reading or with assessing the quality of a particular reader. I read merely for professional interest and personal pleasure, and my selections were usually haphazard, a veritable smorgasbord. Occasionally, a particular essay would spark a writing assignment, and once in a while I would note that one essay could be neatly compared to another on a similar topic. But, in general, I was only slightly aware of the notion of assignment sequencing or of the critical issues involved in evaluating a "reader" for a composition course.

If at that point in my career I had been asked to evaluate Patterns Across the Disciplines by Stuart Hirschberg, I would probably have given it my unqualified approval. The selections are all intrinsically interesting, engaging, and refreshingly varied, even to a jaded reader of "readers" such as myself. Excerpts from Aristotle, Twain, Boswell, Hemingway, Freud, Huxley, Sontag, Tuchman, and Sagan are interspersed with lively excerpts from Phyllis McGinley, Simone de Beauvoir, and John McMurtry. They deal with a myriad of subjects, from the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb to contemporary musical taste. As Hirschberg indicates in his introduction, "Patterns Across the Disciplines provides classic, modern, contemporary readings by major writers, scholars, and scientists in the liberal arts, political and social sciences, and sciences." The book has something for everyone, and I am sorely tempted to place it next to my bed or on my kitchen counter.

Despite my own predilection for such essay collections, I have some reservations about using this text in a college composition course. As someone who works with new composition instructors, I would hesitate strongly before handing them Patterns Across the Disciplines with the aim of having them develop a syllabus. My first concern is with its method of organization, which, as the title implies, follows a sequence of traditional rhetorical patterns—readings grouped by discipline according to rhetorical modes. Thus, the book follows a familiar sequence: narration, description, exemplification, comparison and contrast, process analysis, classification, analogy, cause and effect, definition, problem solving, and argumentation. Each chapter begins with a discussion of a rhetorical mode, emphasizing (with examples from the readings which follow) how a particular mode appears in essays across the disciplines.

I find both this sequence and its rationale problematic. As James D. Williams notes in Preparing to Teach Writing (Wadsworth, 1989), "The most
common approach to sequencing assignments—starting with narratives and working through to arguments—may be fundamentally flawed. In fact, it often seems that the repetitive nature of the modes approach and the unavoidable rhetorical practice of presenting modes in isolation actually have a negative effect on student perceptions of writing." Of course, Williams is not referring to reading assignments but to the practice of assigning mode-oriented essay topics. Yet, it seems likely that to assign students to read essays organized exclusively by modes is to invite similarly organized assignments, particularly if the book is used by an inexperienced instructor. Increasingly, composition instructors are recognizing that most writing is concerned with a substantive issue or topic, motivated by a rhetorical aim. Few writers initiate a piece of writing with the sole intention of creating a particular rhetorical pattern. If one believes that form follows function, then simply grouping essays by form has little theoretical validity.

Of course, one could argue that it might be intrinsically interesting, perhaps for advanced writers, to note how different disciplines utilize rhetorical patterns. Yet, neither the selections nor the assigned categories lend themselves to such a comparison. I, myself, found it puzzling that Robert Falcon Scott's narrative, "Scott's Last March," the last entries from the diaries of a British explorer, is categorized under "Liberal Arts," while Howard Carter's "Finding the Tomb," the story of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen, is categorized under "Political and Social Sciences." Although the Scott narrative is written in the form of a diary while the Carter narrative is concerned with archaeology (presumably the rationale for the label "social science"), there are few differences in narrative technique between the two pieces which could be defined as specific to a particular discipline. Does a nonfictional essay in the "liberal arts" use narrative differently than a nonfictional essay in the "social sciences"? This question might well be addressed by a skillful teacher or scholar but is tangential to a typical writing class, for which the book is presumably intended. I found the categories unnecessary and irrelevant for the creation of usable writing assignments.

Moreover, as much as I myself enjoy dipping into essays at random, I question the pedagogical validity of the smorgasbord approach to subject matter. Because the book is organized primarily by form rather than content, the reader must devote considerable effort to discovering thematic links. But since it is generally acknowledged that students write with greater fluency and conviction when they are well-acquainted with a subject, the lack of thematic connection between the excerpts does not facilitate the creation of sequential writing assignments. Although Hirschberg provides an alternative "thematic" table of contents which, he claims, encourages "the perception of multiple perspectives according to themes and topics that differentiate important areas in human experience," the "thematic" links are tenuous at best. For example, under the topic, "The Human Condition," the following
essays are listed: Aristotle’s “Youth and Old Age,” Malthus’ “The Principle of Population,” Frank Nuessel’s “Old Age Needs a New Name: But Don’t Look For It in Webster’s,” Hans Selye’s “What is Stress?” and Mark Twain’s “The Lowest Animal.” Although they are all interesting, these readings do not allow the student to build a knowledge base on a critical issue or to read several perspectives on a given issue.

This difficulty is at least partially addressed by the often creative assignments suggested at the end of each selection. After each essay, the author provides assistance to both instructors and students by indicating links between essays which are not readily apparent from either table of contents. For example, he suggests that an essay concerned with the process by which slavemasters in the South sought to break the spirits of newly arrived blacks be compared with incidents discussed in Frederick Douglass’ account of his flight to freedom. Similarly, another assignment asks the student to compare common attitudes toward death discussed by Kübler-Ross and Jessica Mitford.

A major strength of the book is the many workable assignments such as these.

The question remains, though, how a reader ought to be used in a composition classroom. Are composition readers intended primarily to expose students to a variety of ideas, to serve as a springboard for composition assignments, or to enable students to understand enough about a given subject that they can develop a relatively informed position on which to write? If one emphasizes the first two functions exclusively, then the variety of interesting selections in Patterns Across the Disciplines makes it a usable composition textbook, although I would still have reservations about its modal organization. If, however, one wishes a reader to provide multiple perspectives about substantive issues in order for students to develop a critical position, then the book would not be as appropriate—although, of course, a skilled instructor could create the necessary thematic links.

Patterns Across the Disciplines would be appropriate for teachers who prefer to establish thematic relations between essays on their own; such instructors, who would find the selections challenging and the assignment suggestions helpful. And I might recommend the book to an experienced teacher seeking new resources. However, for novice teachers who are likely to depend more heavily on textbooks for pedagogical guidance, I would be less than enthusiastic.