

Reading Between and Beyond the Lines

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Rather than be bound by traditional assumptions about reading—e.g., that learning to read is a difficult task for a child and counter to his natural learning processes—we should view reading holistically. A child's earliest attempts at handling visible language symbols parallel his earliest efforts to speak and to listen, and these attempts emerge naturally as a part of normal human development. We can teach reading only indirectly. Our efforts should nurture the spontaneous nature of language learning and should provide the climate and opportunity for a child to write and to read in the broadest possible context—including the "reading" of symbols, gestures, works of art, etc.

The forty-year existence of this Conference is testimony that the original purpose for calling it into being has not been met. That purpose has been to view reading holistically: to see reading in its broadest possible context, to encourage thinking about its nature, and to derive applications for schools and elsewhere that encourage the better development of reading abilities. The simple truth of the matter is, of course, that the problem of reading is very much with us and the holistic idea is still waiting in the wings to be given a serious tryout. Despite all the technological advances—a factor which clouds today's picture as to what is real and what is myth in reading—responses to the problem of literacy in this country remain singularly unchanged.

Read if you will Edmund Burke Huey's *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, originally published in 1908 and recently republished.¹ Huey's book, loaded with ideas that today are still considered radical, serves as an especially good example to demonstrate to us that things

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may look quite different but, in fact, they are not. In school, advocates of holistic conceptions of learning and behavior remain a small minority. Just how small, it is difficult to tell because there are many more who agree with holistic ideas than practice them in teaching. In major part, I think this is because teachers have by and large lost control over what they do in the classroom, at least in reading. They have become, instead, purveyors of curricula designed in places far removed from their own classrooms and their own students.

When one examines these “new” programs in any detail, it is amazing how much they are like all that has come before. At their base is the notion that reading is a subject in the school curriculum. We teach that subject matter with the underlying presumption that mastering it is *the* premier avenue to a child’s becoming a fluent and critical reader. There is no agreement as to what constitutes the subject matter of reading; every set of materials is different both in terms of total content and in the sequence in which it is presented. Nevertheless, the notion remains that one must study reading to read, and the best insurance against teaching failure is the purchase of, now, very expensive sets of materials.

We also believe that reading is something that is hard to learn; that it is somehow going against human nature when we set out to teach a child to read. As well, we accept the idea that there will be failure. America produces more “problem readers” per thousand population than any other reasonably literate society. At the same time, we teach reading longer—both by the day and by the year—than any other nation. It is surprising more people aren’t shouting “Stop this self-fulfilling prophecy, I want to get off!”

Tradition has strong allies as well as strengths of its own. There are good reasons why holistic conceptions of reading behavior have not been received more openly and given a major try-out in our schools. We have been distracted by wars, by internal violence, by shifting moral and ethical codes and behavior. Little energy has been left to try to bring about change in our schools. Even if the energy had been available, the will deliberately to change the schools has been lacking, and the schools themselves have always been extremely effective in blocking change.

The most important set of controlling factors, however, remains the continuing domination of a traditional point of view about the

nature of knowledge and ways of knowing, which in turn is reflected in our views about the nature of reading and how that is learned. Those roots can be traced back to the Calvinistic teachings of some of our forefathers: reading provided the means by which God revealed himself to the individual—reading the Bible, that is. Anything done in the name of God could not, of course, be frivolous, or fun, or easy. Ergo, the work-ethic of reading and the beginnings of the idea that reading ran at cross-purposes to human nature. In addition, that tradition has since been supported by a particular psychological position about learning processes.

A major reason why so little movement has occurred in reading remains largely unrecognized, and that, surprisingly, is that we know so very little about it. Literally billions of words have been written about reading, and thousands upon thousands of research studies reported, but they tell us very little about how one becomes a reader or what reading behavior is like. Virtually all of the studies are predicated upon assumptions about the nature of the reading process which remain open to criticism and even attack. However, there is now on the horizon a growing body of information that we may find extremely useful in helping us better understand what conditions appear to be most important in the learning-to-read process. It provides very specific descriptions of child language behavior, and while it does not tell us how a child learns to read or even how he learns his oral language, it does at last provide us with the capability for generating inferences. I will develop some meanings that I derive from this newer kind of information about reading.

The problem of reading is not in reading the lines of characters—as is our usual way of going about the business of teaching. Instead, it is the problem of reading between and beyond the lines, simply because reading behavior is apparently not taught directly. Rather, an environment exists—hopefully, arranged with care and understanding—where reading and other language learnings are encouraged to emerge. Not only is reading *not* a separate entity, it appears as if it emerges quite naturally as a part of normal human development and that it grows and expands along with other forms of language and knowing generally, if properly nurtured, primarily as a consequence of practice. Like learning to speak and to listen, the ability to read

and to write is, in action, far more complex than our simplistic systems have, so far, been able to describe with any satisfaction. Additionally, teaching so that those complexities are mastered seems not to be the analytic, logical thing we have thought it to be.

We know that listening and speaking come into being in the first few months of life and that they experience their greatest growth and expansion during the first four to five years—or before the child enters school. *We do not know how the child learns his language*; all we have are the beginnings of descriptions of what he appears to be doing at various stages of development. As the amount of that information expands, we are seeing more and more clearly how adults model the “grown up” language for the child; how he seems, voluntarily, to practice what he is learning, how his language emerges and grows. We see each child putting together combinations of words in ways he has never heard before, without ever having to be taught—in fact, we find we cannot teach the child to modify his oral language, apparently only he can do that. Our conclusion is that whatever is happening is very complex, that it appears to be internally directed, and that he utilizes clues from the environment in a fashion that cannot be clearly explained. Understanding the growth of listening also remains very obscure, partly because the whole hearing apparatus is hidden from direct observation and because, like reading print itself, it is a silent, interior kind of activity beyond our ability to describe exactly, simply because it is impossible to establish common standards for the purpose of making comparisons.

Many linguists argue that this proclivity for language is innate. There appears to be an inborn language capacity, and it is certainly true that all hearing children who grow up around other people learn to speak and to listen. However, the thing that is peculiar or unique about humans in relation to other animals is their ability to manipulate those words in strings of language symbols so as to create an infinite number of different meanings. But just how that manipulation occurs, how the child masters the language rules that govern what goes with what, remains a mystery. He appears to do it very much on his own—with some help from his friends—but how he utilizes that help we do not know.

Why it is we would think that such natural symbol-using should stop with oral language also qualifies as a mystery. It would appear

that the human organism is in fact incapable of stopping, or delaying significantly, comprehension of other symbol systems, including printed and written words. The only major restriction would seem to be opportunity. We see many pre-school children who very early on engage in something that might be called "pretend writing" as a precursor to what you and I might call "real writing." Just as the infant presages the oral production of "real words" by babbling, it is not surprising that we might see two- and three-year-olds producing squiggles which can be repeated, or "read" back, with amazing accuracy. Likewise, we see very young children "pretend reading." Not all children engage in such processes. Whether they do or not seems to depend upon such things as the availability of pencil and paper, opportunities to see others writing or reading, and (possibly most important of all) being around other people who recognize the effort as something worthwhile that is noticed and praised.

On what grounds do we separate reading and writing from other language activity and, in fact, from other ways of knowing? Man is a symbol-using and symbol-creating animal. And as the child is father to the man, it is not surprising that by the time the child reaches school age he is already speaking fluently and beginning to develop the ability to create meaning for print (which is reading) and to devise symbols to accompany his oral language (which is writing). There are those who will argue that the ability to identify the Cheerios box, or Channel 7, or any other common symbol around the house is not reading. But to exclude this ability as a beginning stage of reading is like demanding that we only think of speaking as when a child can put two or three or more words together. We commonly consider speaking to be at its beginning stages when a child can utter one word as an expression of a holistic meaning—it is called holophrastic speech. Why not accept this definition for beginning reading when the child responds to one symbol (like Cheerios, to mean: breakfast, good, hungry, now, etc.)?

If we can accept the holophrastic response of a child to a printed stimulus as a legitimate first stage in reading, then we can see that reading in its conventional sense begins for all children around the age of three or so. And we can perhaps get used to the idea that responding to visible symbols is quite a natural event in a child's life. It might help us also to explain how it is possible for some children at

three and four, with a minimum of instruction, to become quite competent readers and writers, given their intellectual maturity.

Lying behind what I have been saying, of course, is the question: Is it possible to teach reading? I think the answer is: Only indirectly. Just as the linguist would say that it is not possible directly to teach a child to speak or listen, then, if there is any truth in the idea that reading and writing are directly related to oral language, the development of those abilities would occur in a very similar circumstance. As I have pointed out earlier, we have very little data to prove that teaching the subject matter of reading in fact leads to proficiency in reading. We have assumed a great deal in this regard without ever seriously questioning whether cause leads to effect. For example, Clymer² and others have done a great deal of research into the "utility" of phonics generalizations (but not into the ability of the child to utilize generalizations in "unlocking" new words). He does point out, however, that many of the generalizations teachers' manuals include seem only to be useful *after* the child can already say the word! It would appear highly possible that even those few generalizations which have wide applicability will be applied only in those cases where the child already knows the word. In any case, given the great variation in word structure vs. pronunciation, it is very clear that the learning of phonic generalizations could be applied only with respect to the smallest fraction of one's vocabulary. Without commenting on the efficiency of such activity, it seems quite clear that the child is using other strategies to decode words, and we know next to nothing of what those strategies may be. At the same time, we elect to teach strategies based on an adult logic of what the problem of reading appears to be, in the face of further evidence from such people as Piaget and other cognitive psychologists who point to the fact that child logic is something quite different from that of the adult. That one form of behavior (reading) emerges as a consequence of certain other kinds of learning (acquiring knowledge of phonic generalizations, learning the alphabet, etc.) is a matter that must be seriously questioned. Imagine the outcome, if you will, were speaking to be taught as reading is usually taught. The result would very likely be speaking-impaired people, would it not?

Let me bring out two other examples that suggest children appear

to learn to read by rather indirect methods as far as we teachers are concerned. First, it is the experience of every remedial teacher I know that children who somehow do make a leap forward in reading—this usually occurs only after months and even years of very intensive instruction—make that leap apparently not as a consequence of any special bit of information or acquaintance with rules, particular skills, and the like. Somehow, such children manage to, at last, put it all together. There may have been a critical piece of information, but we rarely can say we know with any surety what it was. Thus, again, the question of efficiency; just what do remedial procedures produce per hour of instruction and what else is there in the situation that affects the result? We also find that some children blossom when special medicines are prescribed, such as thyroid medication. Progress in such cases can only be described as “spontaneous,” since it is usually observed to have happened without any change in instruction.

A second batch of evidence about the spontaneous nature of reading growth is contained in the experience of other countries. I have recently had the opportunity to study reading programs in Russia and England, as well as Norway. And through my students and colleagues I’ve been able to learn about experiences with reading development in a number of Asian and African nations. The fact is that no other country with a comprehensive school system experiences the difficulties we do. Most seem to find beginning reading problems in about five percent of the school population. This figure is reduced to one or two percent within the first few years of schooling. This is the result in the face of a minimum of instruction. In Norway—and I believe this holds true for the other Scandinavian countries—directed teaching of reading lasts at most for two years, and usually one. In the USSR, children enter the equivalent of our elementary school already reading (they have an extensive educational program for younger children and efforts to instill this ability appear to be concentrated in the fifth to sixth year of that experience). In Vietnam and Korea most children learn to read at home, before they go to school. In Sierra Leone the problem seems to be finding something worthwhile to read rather than learning to read itself.

The meanings in these situations are many and varied. Let me mention only a few. First, there is no continuation of “reading instruction” as we know it beyond the point of reasonable fluency, whether

learning takes place before formal schooling begins or at its very outset. After that, there is a heavy use of books, but these are books that relate to the subject areas of the curriculum. Reading ability grows, evidently, as a consequence of practice in reading about things, in reading for the joy of it, or reading the great literature in the country's heritage. Note, too, that as far as normal instruction itself is concerned, the methods of teaching are, by our standards, old-fashioned and the instructional materials minimal. We would find those standards unacceptable here. Just as we have found with the Co-operative Reading Studies, it appears that the methods and materials used make little difference; whole word procedures work as well as phonics, in other words.

There are some things that do make a difference, however, and which may have special meaning for us in understanding our "reading problem." One is that formal instruction in reading in these other countries usually does not begin until a year or two later than it does in the United States. I would have to revise that to two or three years where our kindergarten programs have become involved in formal instruction. The modal beginning age where formal instruction is very rigidly applied is the seventh year. Also, it is important to note that the cultures with the least amount of difficulty are the more homogeneous ones. There, values are more completely shared between child, teacher, parent, and community. Enculturation is a powerful factor, but so is the commonly held belief that all will learn to read, in due time, and probably sooner than later. "Failure" is not a concept Norwegian teachers know about as far as their classroom experience is concerned, nor does one find it often in terms of early developmental problems anywhere else. We seem to have a corner on that idea.

Here, then, is one more set of examples demonstrating that reading probably emerges very spontaneously. If children are old enough to think logically—this begins at about age 7 or 8—we can probably utilize some of the subject matter of reading to get them started if we wish, although that may not be necessary. In any event, once started, the process of reading evidently develops primarily as a function of practice.

The reading curriculum in schools thus is much broader than we commonly assume. In fact, what we call reading instruction may in actuality be only a very small—and not critically important—part of

the reading curriculum. To extend the daily or weekly time devoted to formal teaching of reading may therefore be accomplishing just the opposite of our intent by reducing the amount of more potent learning experiences. It may also be true that our unwillingness to let the culture of the community be represented in the school (except where that community represents the dominant middle-class) puts such a strain on differing value systems that it will be impossible for a child to learn to use his natural inclination to utilize symbol systems. Thwarting innate structures, if they do indeed exist, can possibly lead to some very serious problems.

If what I have been saying makes any sense at all, then it follows that the formal reading program ought to be the *least* expensive effort in the school curriculum. This is because it need not require fancy materials, and the formal program itself could be shortened greatly. A wiser place to put our resources would be into school libraries and the content curriculum. We would also need to buy a lot more blank sheets of paper and more pens and pencils. Less time would be spent on correcting workbooks and grading tests; more time in reading what children were writing and talking and reading about. Teaching would be harder work. And, we could still state our objectives. We would be searching for the youngster who "reads independently," "selects a book to keep at his desk to read when all other work is done," or who "uses research materials, such as the classroom encyclopedia, independently." We will see how valid such objectives are as more information about reading behavior and the nature of the reading process becomes available.

I have largely limited our definition of reading to the sense of creating meaning for words, usually as they are found in their printed or written form. That is actually not the broadest possible context for viewing reading behavior. The generic meaning of the term "reading" has to do with the process by which an individual creates meaning for anything in his environment for which he is able to develop an awareness. Because reading is a silent, interior act, the exact nature of the stimulus—e.g., printed words, symbols, gestures—is irrelevant to reading. As one tries to think how it is that a person can learn and then remember forever that a word stands for a certain set of ideas—all of this accomplished without ever having to think

about the processes involved in remembering—he becomes aware that getting the hang of a particular symbol system or complex of signals is not the important thing in reading at all. Experience, including of course the ideas that come into being as a consequence of experience, is the central aspect in reading. And while language as we conventionally view it is a most powerful tool for thinking, it is not difficult to imagine how other means for knowing—reading a television screen or a work of art—are also powerful in learning, if we can learn to read them critically. We can also perhaps see that symbol systems appear to be quite easily apprehended once experience is appropriate to the kind of reading that we wish to engage in.

I think there is great power in this very broad perception of reading behavior. The “literature” of reading conceived in this context is to be found in many different places. Linguists tell us of language development, social scientists of the milieu that affects values, attitudes, economics, and the like. From the arts and literature we find guides for setting standards of excellence, and from medicine and its allied arts and sciences we learn of the optimal functioning of the organism itself. Educationists will, I believe, find these to be primary sources for understanding reading behavior, for therein lies the information we can use to read between and beyond the lines.

1. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968. xlix + 469 pages, \$3.95 (paper). New introduction by Paul A. Kolars.

2. Theodore Clymer, “The Utility of Phonic Generalizations in the Primary Grades,” *The Reading Teacher* (January 1963), pp. 252–258.