



4-1995

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Recommended Citation

Garber, Marilyn (1995) "What I Tell my Students About Reading," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol9/iss2/6>

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What I Tell My Students About Reading

by

Marilyn Garber

I. Prologue

Each year my new students read less and less, few even bothering with newspapers. Movies show them what is current, hot, and peer approved. Television's preselected and censored pabulum shapes their minds with odd combinations of myth, romance, and nostalgia, the lies and truths of our society and times. As a result, my students, victimized by collective cliché, defensively incline to superficial acceptance of fad and platitude. They know little about making a book their own by developing a relationship with an author in order to reach the works' deepest meanings and structures or authenticating their personal frameworks of response. These abilities, the core of education, become my central propaedeutic. I position my students to notice and accept books' offers of endless possibilities for creative thought and insight, freedom and communication, exploration of the self and the world. In a practical sense, I try to convince them that the more they read, the better and more easily they will read, and that books will teach them more about reading and writing than any person can. In this essay, I take no theoretical position on the debates as to the existence of texts apart from readers and falling trees in the forests, or on the power structure controlling systems of knowledge acquisition.¹ My concern is to engage my students actively in their reading process.

Active reading, leaping beyond mere mechanical literacy, is analogous to active worship. It is not a kneeling in silent prayer, hoping for holiness to permeate the diaphanous curtain of spirit blowing in the wind, but it is like Shakers, dancing to music and songs they have written, and Pentecostals, shouting, crying, and speaking in tongues. Students who learn strategies and tactics of reading in the disciplinary context develop, hone, and retain skills in thinking, argument, analysis, and criticism long after the passage of years and the fading of names, dates, and places. They amaze themselves, realizing that education is not something teachers give, but is what learners take.

II. Imagination

The experience of reading is like standing in the sun, a universal yet personal pleasure, but a dangerous enterprise. Reading is a voyage, a spur to imagination, a steppingstone into worlds not born to. There are ways to read never imagined, which, with practice, will lead to amazing results. Reading is sometimes condemned as escapist. One should not undervalue a moment's drifting away from squalor, tedium, and the ordinary into the structured visions of other minds. What some call escape may be the road to new knowledge, a shining of light on hope away from pain, the way from chaos to reason, order and balance, through the artist's eye into another realm. For the imagination, reading opens windows on inaccessible existences, illuminating the lives of readers. Though experienced readers may suspend disbelief, their minds remain alert on an ever-evolving journey in search of text and themselves. Surprising thoughts and feelings become

¹For a thorough review and usable, common sense set of solutions to the problems raised in those debates, see Daniel R. Schwarz, 1991, *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

landmarks, new words and images monuments to learning and understanding, inevitably embracing the reader.

III. Reading as Discourse

Reading should be a dialogue between author and reader, an intense and private relationship. Writers exhibit their minds and thoughts, and the reader must see, capture, experience, evaluate, and expand upon in order to germinate new ideas.

Not all writers agree that reading is an active, creative enterprise. Cynthia Ozick wrote "readers of fiction are forcibly dispossessed of a will of their own, and are made to think and feel whatever the writer commands ... Readers are docile in succumbing to the responses prescribed for them, or else the book uncompromisingly closes its gates and shuts them out. In either case the writer is master."² Ozick's view does not describe my reading process even with respect to her fiction. When I read, I speak to the author, communing with his/her infinite voices. I hear, think, and converse; my mind engages itself, me, and the author, in a three-way conversation. I speak to the writing, hear and respond to myself as reader, all the while moderating the rich conversation.

Discourse in reading is bargaining, negotiating meanings, connection, and significance. On rereading a work, the reader haggles to reestablish and regain some of the terms of the original experience. S/He wants to check out what may have been missed, to transform the original reading into a new one, and to connect it to larger contexts of knowledge. The reader may set aside a discussion with the author for a while in order to have one with an interesting or important character. For these characters, too, participate, engaging in an issue or entering another fantasy or thought complex.

As the discourse proceeds, sometimes the grandest matter, one of heightened spiritual magnetism, provokes a thread of reflection. At other times, the tiniest phrase, a transitional collection of words, a minimal description of a minor event, opens the gates of imagination. After reading the reader converses with others to enlarge reactions, understandings, and gleanings from the book. Then we can return to it enlightened by our community of understanding, our personal dialogue intensified even more in the new reading.

IV. Reader as Critic

Become critics, I demand of my students, despite their diffident assumption that critics are an elite expert corps whose special passports to knowledge and learning entitle them to the final judgment on a text. I urge students to notice the variety of approaches and results within the community of interpretation and scholarship. Critics learn, as they do, and share a body of intelligence, but, as learned students, they often diverge radically from one another while appearing to address objective norms, rules, or standards. They are relieved or reassured when other critics agree with them (e.g., Robert Alter, 1985, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, New York: Basic Books, p. xi); at the same time, none wants to be just part of the pack, merely repeating the work and conclusions of others. They struggle to find new angles, perspectives, and points of departure, and to creatively explore texts. One of the ways they do that is by building into their discussion

²Cynthia Ozick, 1989, Portrait of the artist as a bad character, *Metaphor and Memory*, p. 99, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

critiques (explicit, implied, or subtly embedded in the apparatus, such as footnotes, of prior work and thought), thus coupling their own judgments with the critical community of dialogue.

Accomplished critics are alert, confident readers who bare connections and articulate relationships, searching for hidden intentions, meanings, and structures. Students, too, as critics, must watch story, writer, characters fictional and historical, and the flow of ideas and concepts. If they pay attention to and value their own thinking, then, in a sense, every such reading can lead them to the writing of a new book.

In my courses, I use fiction, literature, and cultural and legal documents which students must dissect and make their own. My disciplinary subject matter, history, requires reading many nonfiction books, which present special problems of analysis and generate distinct teaching insights. One should not read these in linear mode, but ought to move forward and backward, working the pages as terrain to be explored or farmed. Unlike dramatists, poets, and fiction writers, scholars explicitly situate themselves in the framework of a disciplinary corpus where they will be tested and evaluated. They structure their explicit point of view while sometimes hiding conclusions with crediting footnotes and the subtle use of documents. In scholarly books, critics have special problems. Authors partially provide the critical apparatus with which to judge their work. Notes (end, foot, and head) reveal sources to substantiate claims and arguments so that readers can independently weigh credibility and reliability. Indexes, prologues, introductions, and conclusions serve as angles on the author's thinking, guides, decoders, and maps to the text itself. Students, too, can learn to move in and out of text and apparatus, maturing their perspectives in the process.

V. Vocabulary

Vocabulary lies at the heart of life, and reading will dramatically transform your vocabularies, I explain. In one sense reading is acquisition of vocabulary. Accompanied by a dictionary, reading explodes the size of word power, generating a new speaking, thinking, and writing fluency and precision. Revealing, expressive, and powerful words will help readers explore and gain new perspective on the familiar. Vocabulary will grow from reading until it becomes integral. What one uses and learns cannot be taken away. New words will invest fresh meanings and visions into one's world.

In daily life language hides itself, reluctant to flaunt its extravagances of form and beauty, as it performs the tasks of our existence. Ordinary speakers rarely notice it, but act as though language is as commonplace as the circumstance in which it is used, not to be marveled at or appreciated. But when it is called to our attention, we quickly take pleasure in language beyond the mundane and the banal. We see it fashioned into memorable formulations. This new language enriches and enlarges our world view long after the initial reading.

VI. Art Talks to Art

Art provokes art. If one reads while writing and creating a character, story, poem, paper or book, history or fiction, or painting, photographing or filming, the page, the work becomes a fertile field. Books stimulate ideas, opening new possibilities of thinking. Well beyond style, syntax, or strategy, images excite and prompt new insights; theories arouse and inspire new notions. Recently, some critics have published a new essay form called "Afterreading." These written

dialogic, creative responses to reading are now being published to open further opportunities for the effective reader.

Conclusion

Reading is thinking, the opportunity to dream, to create, to argue, to fight, to laugh. One can observe oneself grow and change in the process. Critical readers are not mentally alone but read among the voices of mind and experience which speak to them as they read. All major modes of reading are interconnected, all used and useful at the same time. Reading is communing with the gods and with the devil, with the past and with the future.