

Reading Students' Reading

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Identifying the Problem

The question of how best to teach students to read can be broken down into three smaller questions:

1. How *do* students read?
2. How *should* students read?
3. What teaching methods work the best to help them move from how they read to how they should read?

How *do* students read?

- An empirical question about how students actually read
- Requires a means to collect and analyze information about a process in consciousness, either by getting students to tell us about an individual experience or entering into a sustained dialogue with them over how they read

How *should* students read?

- A normative question
- Can be answered with the traditional methods of literary criticism and philosophy

What teaching methods work the best?

- An empirical question (albeit with normative elements)

Used two means to find out how students read

- Read and write exercises: Students were given short poems or prose texts to read and asked to write down an honest record of how they read them (Lendol Calder's work on think-alouds in teaching history and the Georgetown Visible Knowledge Project)
- Optional, short reflective essays on how they read during the course

Directions Given to Students

- Writing Exercise
- Due at the start of the next class
- Read & Write
- Jot down what you **think, feel and imagine** as you read the attached text. It is from a reading for later in the course. The purpose of this exercise is for you to create an honest record of how you read this passage. The best answers are the most thorough, accurate descriptions of what goes through your mind as you read it. Think of this exercise as thinking aloud as you read. Provide a spontaneous, truthful account of how you read, including thoughts which might seem extraneous to you.

Four texts and times

- Selection from *Brothers Karamazov*, given late in a core curriculum course on Russian literature and cultural analysis, Sp 08
- Selection from *S.*, given late in an introductory international studies course, Sp 08
- The “Prologue” from Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, given in the first week of a core curriculum course on Russian history and cultural analysis, F 09
- The chorus on man from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, given in the first week of an introductory international studies course, F 09

Procedure

- Read through the students' responses to determine how to classify them.
- Refined my sense of how they read and how I wanted them to read.
- Developed a simple scale to classify their reactions.
- Read back through all of the responses to mark them for which of the categories they had.
- Looked for trends or discrepancies and thought about what they meant and whether they confirmed my intuitions from the first reading.

Initial normative criteria for proficient literary reading

- Since reading is both an activity in consciousness and the foundation for the ability to do certain things with texts, students should be able both to read works appropriately and to speak and write about them using analysis, interpretation and evaluation.
- Larger goals include growth into an individual for whom reading is an important source of knowledge about world and self, something a citizen does as an active participant in polity and culture.

Classification of Responses

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| ANALYSIS | Simple description, either a list or disorganized | Process or structure |
| INTERPRETATION | “Common sense” | Material and ideas from this or other courses |
| EVALUATION | Personal reactions, judgmental | Justified by some standards or explanation |
| PROCESS OF READING/ MECHANICS OF ASSIGNMENT | Confused or “rote” image of good student | Thought about own reading, had some sense of other possibilities |
| SELF-REFLECTIVE OR SERIOUS THOUGHT ABOUT ASSIGNMENT | Comments asserted without any real reflection | Some thought about why they said what they did and sometimes why other opinions are possible |

Analysis

| Work -Number of responses | Number of simple descriptions | Number with process or structure |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14 | 4 | 5 |
| <i>S.</i> - 17 | 10 | 4 |
| <i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18 | 4 | 3 |
| <i>Antigone</i> - 20 | 6 | 6 |
| Total- 69 | 24 | 18 |

Interpretation

| Work -Number of responses | Number of “common sense” interpretations | Number of interpretations using material from this or other courses (“educated” discourse?) |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14 | 11 | 3 |
| <i>S.</i> - 17 | 12 | 3 |
| <i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18 | 11 | 3 |
| <i>Antigone</i> - 20 | 11 | 5 |
| Total- 69 | 45 | 14 |

Evaluation

| Work -Number of responses | Number of snap judgments or personal reactions | Number of evaluations with some accompanying justification |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14 | 5 | 3 |
| <i>S.</i> - 17 | 0 | 4 |
| <i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18 | 0 | 1 |
| <i>Antigone</i> - 20 | 0 | 2 |
| Total- 69 | 5 | 10 |

Process and Mechanics

| Work -Number of responses | Number of confused or “rote” comments | Number of thoughtful comments |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14 | 1 | 3 |
| <i>S.</i> - 17 | 0 | 1 |
| <i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18 | 5 | 0 |
| <i>Antigone</i> - 20 | 1 | 1 |
| Total- 69 | 7 | 5 |

Self-reflective?

| Work -Number of responses | Number of responses without self-reflection | Number of responses with some evidence of self-reflection |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Brothers Karamazov</i> - 14 | 6 | 8 |
| <i>S.</i> - 17 | 7 | 10 |
| <i>Bronze Horseman</i> -18 | 14 | 4 |
| <i>Antigone</i> - 20 | 15 | 5 |
| Total- 69 | 42 | 27 |

Time in the semester and self-reflection

| Time in the semester- number of responses | Number of responses without self-reflection | Number of responses with some evidence of self- reflection |
|--|--|--|
| Early- 38 | 29 | 9 |
| Late- 31 | 13 | 18 |

Time in the semester and analysis

| Time in the semester- number of responses | Number of responses without analysis | Number of responses with analysis |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Early- 38 | 19 | 19 |
| Late- 31 | 8 | 23 |

Total Numbers of Each Kind of Response

| Type of Response | Number out of 69 |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| Analysis | 42 |
| Interpretation | 59 |
| Evaluation | 15 |
| Process and Mechanics | 12 |
| Self- reflective? | 69 by definition |

Quick summary of how students read based on reading their responses

- Most favor direct interpretation or simple description over complex analysis.
- Most engage in psychological speculation about characters' motivations.
- Most read for a message grounded in common sense moral realism.
- Most avoid evaluation; some judge characters.
- Some refer to the mechanics of the assignment (“I didn't know what you wanted”) or their reading habits
- Aesthetic readings, literary readings, or meta-readings were rare.

Style, not laziness or ignorance

- Likely sources of students' reading styles: nineteenth century realism and "pomo pop". Literature as either consumable entertainment or a means for self-growth and appreciation of others
- Professional critics emphasize meta-awareness of the language in which educated speakers discuss literature and culture, including philosophical issues and knowledge of important texts and authors
- Are these different literary cultures (with their own knowledge, values, competence, and taste), or two stages or groups within one culture?

The two reading styles

- Students' moral realism views language as a neutral representational medium for knowledge about self and world.
- Literary and cultural studies, like history (Sam Wineburg), require students to learn a new way of reading and thinking:
 - Knowledge arises through forms of knowing; media are forms of mediation
 - reading and thought themselves take place in history, including our own historical moment

Tentative conclusions about how this should affect my teaching

- Classes should enable students to:
 - Read with an awareness of how their assumptions are shaping their reading
 - Develop the ability to evaluate those assumptions, an ability which seems fundamental to the larger goals of personal growth and citizenship
 - Become aware of different reading styles and assumptions within our culture
- My teaching should be informed by a sense of how one moves or “translates” from one style to the other.

Optimistic Postscript

- Students' work showed more analysis and more self-reflection when they did the exercises later in the semester. Something is working.
- When asked to write an optional, self-reflective essay at the end of the semester, those who did it showed a real awareness of how their reading had changed.

Student Reflective Essays

- They said (and their words demonstrated to me) that a reflective essay or a serious conversation about how they read makes students more conscious of how they read. They were not previously aware of having been taught how to read at Juniata or of having been asked to think about how they read.
- Identified reading textbooks as the major type of reading they do in college. Read for content (understood as “what can be put into an outline and memorized”) and for what they need to complete a given assignment.
- In my course a major challenge for them was to learn to read differently.
- Provided me with a clearer sense of the challenges facing an interdisciplinary course: students have to learn more than one type of reading and the differences between them.