Teaching Reading Methods: How do Pre-Service Teachers Understand the Experience of Learning to Read?

MARGARET HUNSBERGER
University of Calgary

In Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout graphically describes her first day in school. One of her various misadventures that day occurred when Miss Caroline discovered that Scout could already read:

> I suppose she chose me because she knew my name; as I read the alphabet a faint line appeared between her eyebrows, and after making me read most of *My First Reader* and the stock-market quotations from *The Mobile Register* aloud, she discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading (Lee, 1960, p. 21).

Scout protested that her father hadn't taught her, but the teacher waved away that suggestion saying,

> "Now tell your father not to teach you anymore. It's best to begin reading with a fresh mind. You tell him I'll take over from here and try to undo the damage" (Lee, 1960, p. 21).

An interesting and amusing comment in view of the emphasis now placed on prior knowledge and on building on what the student already knows. But to Scout the comment was not only inexplicable, but potentially disastrous, as she suddenly realized she could be denied something she had come to take for granted.

> I never deliberately learned to read . . . I could not remember when the lines above Atticus's moving finger separated into words, but I had stared at them all the evenings in my memory, listening to the news of the day, Bills To Be Enacted into Laws, the diaries of Lorenzo Dow — anything Atticus happened to be reading when I crawled into his lap every night. Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing (Lee, 1960, p. 22).

Scout had found a natural and enjoyable way to learn to read. For her reading was very much a practical understanding, an experience she valued. But such is

not always the case. Many children learn to read in school, in the structured lessons offered by teachers who are charged by society with the responsibility of making children literate. Society puts great stress on this aspect of teaching, as shown by the articles and arguments in popular magazines and on television about the ideal way to teach reading, the reasons for failure, and whether children are poorer readers now than in the past, in addition to the question of teacher accountability — even in a court of law — for a school graduate who is not a fluent reader. This message is not lost on university students in teacher education programs. They want very much to know how to teach children to read and write.

It is common in teacher education programs to require a course in language arts (including reading) methods, at least for students preparing to be elementary teachers. Not all students approach such a course enthusiastically, but generally they acknowledge its importance and so are there fairly willingly. The question, obviously, for those of us who teach these methods courses, is how we can best prepare students to be teachers of reading.

I would like first to sketch two approaches to the study of reading, one a traditional approach and the other, a more experience-based stance toward reading. That is followed by a discussion of the possible contributions which the insights of reading experience can give to methods teaching.

Methods Courses

When university students enter their first reading methods course, they are certainly able to read, but usually they have not thought at all about what reading is, or how they do it. They are acutely aware of societal pressure on teachers to make children "good" readers, but they have only the vaguest idea of what constitutes "good" in reading. Without considering that question, they would like to be told exactly what to do in their classrooms so that the children they teach will all become able readers, and they will be regarded as good teachers. Professors, recognizing the legitimacy of this concern, feel the need to address it.

And there certainly is a body of information about reading. It is sometimes said that reading is not a discipline, merely a skill used in studying the true subject disciplines, such as science or art. But discipline or not, it has content which prospective teachers need to know. This includes what a basal reading series is, what its strengths and weaknesses are, what controlled vocabulary is, how many ways there are to decode words, whether readers use all of them, how they are learned, and what phonics is. And we have not yet touched upon the important and interesting questions of comprehension, critical reading, and integration of reading with the other language arts. While it is easy to dismiss such concerns as mundane and not truly a part of what readers do when they read, they are nevertheless very much a part of the body of knowledge a reading teacher needs.

Further, students are typically very concerned with practical teaching ideas. Since they would like to learn the right way to teach reading, it is sometimes an unpleasant surprise to hear that there is no one right way to teach reading, no

fool-proof method that will be entirely suitable for all children. And so the temptation for the professor, who knows by hard experience what the students want to hear, is to select one approach, present it as a final answer and flesh it out with endless lists and mini- demonstrations of classroom activities. Students usually appreciate hands-on material, activity cards, sources for films and puppets, and lists of ways to drill spelling words. This desire is both understandable and legitimate. That is the reality students will be facing, and they have thus far had very little experience in creating classroom activities, or translating theory into teaching procedures which logically follow from the theory.

In their attempts to be helpful, professors run the risk of reducing reading to a series of skills and concepts, presenting each in turn with a few instructional strategies, and leaving the impression that reading is a matter of techniques to be mastered. Reading has typically been presented, both to university students and hence to elementary school children, as a series of skills and/or concepts. Sometimes heavy emphasis has been placed on small bits of technical information, such as parts of the phonological or graphemic system which is valid information in certain circumstances, but has little personal relevance to a child and no apparent connection to any worthwhile activity. In that sense, schooling is dealing in technical knowledge, since for the child it is not only a foreign approach to learning, but also has an invisible ultimate purpose.

Not all approaches to reading instruction are so mechanistic. The more recent psycholinguistic approach, for example, has reduced the distance between child and knowledge to be learned, although typically there is still a sense of striving to present the knowledge and schematized concepts the child needs. What has been largely neglected is the realization that reading as a whole is something of an art which is much greater than the sum of its parts, and which in its wholeness can strongly influence the reader's life. Thus the influence of a technical knowledge stance has been ameliorated, but not entirely abandoned.

A Phenomenological View

A more phenomenological view of reading, on the other hand, begins from a very different stance. In phenomenology the concern is to understand what reading is, what it is that we do when we read, what the experience of reading is, and what difference reading makes in our lives. The understanding sought is a pre-theoretic, experientially-based desire to see what it is that makes readers return to texts, seek again and again this experience of being lost in a book. How is it that ink on a page becomes a human voice that challenges us, inspires us, disgusts us, comforts us? Such a question cannot be answered by a technical description of word identification strategies or comprehension concepts. It must start with what readers say happens to them as they read and uncover the underlying significance of the meeting between reader and text.

And so reading is seen as a dialogue, with the text a voice "that asks to be heard and that requests a response" (Sardello, 1975, p. 275). The text not only speaks, it listens for a reply. It invites the reader to participate in the search for

insight. Since text and reader need each other for the dialogue to be possible, the text is, in that sense, incomplete. Sardello (1975) describes all creative works as incomplete. The text presupposes a reader who will establish a dialogue and supply the other half of the conversation. But it is not a matter of filling in blanks, like sticking missing pieces into a jigsaw puzzle or making necessary inferences. The reader helps to shape and guide the flow and direction of the conversation just as a good listener influences and responds to a speaker.

Any dialogue depends upon the contribution of each participant. The nature of each person affects the relationship and hence the conversation between them. In the same way, each reader holds a slightly different dialogue with a text, and it is to be expected that interpretations will vary from one reader to another.

As with any dialogue, both participants, reader and text, are necessary.

> On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object (Barthes, 1975, p. 16).

On stage the play goes on, even though a viewer falls asleep or otherwise ceases to attend. If the whole audience is unresponsive, the performance may be less inspired than usual, but everyone knows that the show must go on. Not so, the reading. There is no adage that it must go on. If the reader ceases to be attentive, it stops immediately. There are no footlights to separate reader and text, simultaneously illuminating and blinding the text. The illumination is the reader's attentiveness and understanding. Without it the stage darkens and there is no play. Dialogue is the light of the reading encounter.

This view of reading as dialogue affects our approach to literary text and literary criticism. "Dialogue, not dissection, opens up the world of a literary work" (Palmer, 1969, p. 7). The distinction between dialogue and dissection is vital. Dissection connotes text as an object to be put on a laboratory table, cut into pieces, microscopically analysed and probed. Dialogue implies an intelligent exchange between living beings, quite a different relationship.

A phenomenological view of reading also encompasses exploration of the new world created by the reading, of the way reality and imagination are experienced in reading, and of how time shifts and flees or stands still. Themes such as intentionality, corporeality, and temporality are fundamental concerns in phenomenology.

Examination of Experience

Reading as typically approached in methods courses and reading as viewed phenomenologically seem, then, to be quite different, virtually two different worlds. It is very easy to hold one stance and be cynical about the other. Merely giving teaching suggestions can be dismissed as an empty "bag of tricks," a "cook book" approach in which prospective teachers are given ways of keeping children busy, but no rationale for their selection and no basis for pedagogical decision-making. By the same token, concern with the nature of the reading

experience such as temporality in reading can be regarded as esoteric and useless, telling a teacher nothing about how to turn non-reading six-year-olds into proficient readers. Even the language of the two positions has little in common. Consider the terms *proficiency*, *competency*, *skill*, *strategy*, *concept*, *decoding* and *comprehension* versus *experience*, *essence*, *dialogue*, *reflection*, *thoughtfulness* and *understanding*. If there is a term used by both groups, it is certain to have different nuances and connotations in the two contexts.

For professors of reading who are dissatisfied with the rather mechanistic and fragmented approach to reading instruction, the question arises of how students' understanding of reading can be enriched. What we cannot do, so it seems to me, is completely abandon the usual framework, at least not in the immediate future. Students, in their student teaching and professional careers, will encounter that first set of terminology and need to be familiar with it. So if that view must be taught but is not seen as completely satisfactory, it becomes a matter of how an experiential view of reading can be combined with it to give students a more enlightened vision of what reading is. I am aware that this is a position of compromise which will not please the firm holders of either view, but it seems realistic and, perhaps, signals the beginning of change. In the remainder of the paper, I would like to explore practical ways that a phenomenological approach to reading can contribute to prospective teachers' understanding of the experience of learning to read.

Since students can all read, a logical starting point is the examination of their own experience as readers. In a typical university class there is a mixture of avid, confident readers and those more reluctant who either doubt their own ability or frankly would rather go skiing. But they may well not have thought beyond that about how they, as adults, experience reading. One possibility to help them begin such reflection is to provide a few questions:

1. Do you write in books as you read?
2. When you don't understand what you are reading, what do you do about it?
3. How is re-reading a text a different experience from reading it the first time?
4. When reading a novel, do you ever "read ahead," i.e. read the ending early on?
5. "The reader comes with answers and the text asks questions of the reader." How is this so?
6. In continued reading, how do we know if the text has heard our part of the conversation?
7. Do you think about the text, or respond to it, any differently after finishing the reading than you did during the reading?
8. In what ways is reading solitary? not solitary?
9. When you have finished reading a text, do you want to talk it over with someone? Why or why not?
10. How do you choose when more than one interpretation presents itself?

The purpose of the questions is not to encompass the whole experience for them but to start thinking and discussion, and starting fairly straightforwardly often helps them move on to deeper probing. Small group discussions provide a useful forum both because ideas trigger ideas and because students seem to value — and, to some extent be reassured by — their peers' experience. They often express relief when another student "confesses" to a practice they thought was pecularily their own. One minor example of this is checking to see how many pages there are to read and what the conclusion is before beginning a reading assignment. This practice seems to strike students as unscholarly and therefore unworthy; that does not keep them from doing it, but they do refrain from broadcasting the fact. Here is an opportunity for them to realize that such a practice is common, to consider why we so regularly do it, and further to discuss at a deeper level what it shows us about the experience of reading an assigned text.

Gadamer's statement that "the reader comes with answers and the text asks questions of the reader" (1975, p. 307) bears careful examination since it leads toward exploration of the idea that readers do not merely dip into a text to select a handful of facts like peanuts from a bowl; rather a text, if read thoughtfully, challenges what we thought we knew, questions our certainty, and presents alternatives or elaboration. A certain vulnerability is required of the reader.

How many such questions are to be examined and in what depth is determined by the instructor and the thoughtfulness of the students, influenced no doubt by the time constraints of the course. These are meant to serve simply as a few examples of how to ask students to begin reflecting upon their own reading. A variation on the same idea is to assign different types of text, such as a journal article, a poem, and a short story for students to read keeping careful notes of their own actions and reactions. Experiences can then be compared.

Along with reflecting on their own reading, prospective teachers must begin to consider what reading is like for the children being taught. Understanding the experience of another is never an easy matter. It is not helped by the fact that teachers have had years of reading practice, so that print shapes itself instantly in our minds as words and ideas. We find it virtually impossible to look at print and not read. That feeling can be demonstrated in part by such a device as an artificial alphabet which because of its unfamiliarity, once again makes decoding hard work. Making the familiar strange can be very illuminating.

While such a strategy may help us break from our usual mode of thinking, it is obviously not sufficient for truly understanding the child's experience. There is no substitute for observing and listening to children. They can be most informative. One bright-eyed six-year-old was asked whether she would rather read a story herself or have an adult read to her. She replied, "I like to read myself, because adults go too fast. I say, 'Read me a story,' and they say, 'I already did.'" For adults who have become impatient with children's requests for repeated readings, this comment is most enlightening. The reading goes by too quickly. One reading is not enough. What seems apparent to the adult still seems to the child to need

reflection. And this child has touched upon one of the real advantages of personal silent reading, namely that the reader controls the pace. Freedom to linger, or hurry, as we choose, to pause and reflect if we wish, marks a distinct difference from oral language in which the speaker sets the pace. Reading may be the only form of dialogue in which we can ask for a repetition any number of times without risk of personal embarrassment or speaker irritation. And as the child who made this comment has apparently realized, opportunity to linger in and live in a text is a reader's delight.

Another entrance to the child's world is provided by literature. Authors, by whatever mixture of memory, insight and imagination, allow us to see through the eyes of others, and since all authors were once children, revelations of child life abound. We began with the first school day of Scout Finch, a trying experience for her that provides a reason for reflection by teachers. According to Scout's big brother, speaking with the certain knowledge of already being in the fifth grade, Scout's teacher had just learned a new teaching method called the Dewey Decimal System. "The Dewey Decimal System consisted, in part, of Miss Caroline waving cards at us on which were printed 'the,' 'cat,' 'rat,' 'man,' and 'you.' No comment seemed to be expected of us, and the class received these revelations in silence. I was bored so I began a letter to Dill" (Lee, 1960, p. 23). Of course, Scout was caught writing and scolded for it. While such a description is amusing, it is also a forceful comment on the sorts of conceptions and misconceptions students develop about what their teachers are trying to do. The reading that Scout so loved at home was alien and mindless in school. That, in itself, is very harsh criticism of her teacher. The question of what it is like to be a student in their classes is one that teachers need to take seriously.

Reflection upon experience, both our personal experience and that of others we know or find in literature, is of utmost importance.

Discovering Story

Experience seems to lead naturally into telling about it, into story. One of the contributions phenomenology has made is to emphasize the importance of the story. In some sense the method of phenomenology is simply to tell the story, let the story itself speak.

What is the attraction of stories? What do we experience with them that gives us such an insatiable appetite for more? It seems that every human society that ever existed has had its stories; even though they differ greatly in structure and content and may be oral or written, they are still stories that are widely enjoyed. Stories typically deal with human personality or personifications in action with others or with the environment and people are forever interested in people and what happens to them. From the most superficial gossip and people-watching to the most profound insights into the human heart, we are, each of us, very much "involved in mankind," and we will turn again and again for another look at the beings we and our neighbours are.

Also stories not only allow, but encourage, multiple responses. A story is written on several levels and a reader can respond on any of them. All sorts of attributes of the reader — age, personal background, current interests, maturity, personality — will determine the level at which the reader understands. Since these attributes change over time, we may respond differently in re-reading a story than we did initially. But, the same variation in response is available for different readers.

Another fascination of stories is that they are not *about* life, but rather they plunge us directly into it. *The Chosen* is not a sociological analysis of how Jewish boys are educated in New York City, nor a treatise on the variables involved in selecting a profession; rather it is an opportunity to live with Reuven and Danny, share their friendship and their education and participate in their choices. The reader experiences the story of two boys living their way into manhood without having that experience processed through an analytical filter of the issues involved in maturation. Stories reveal life in a microcosm, reduced to manageable proportions, but with a satisfying completeness and complexity. They provide all the experiences of life, vicariously and safely. Each human society has its great stories, its myths and legends, which are the heart of the culture, which are told and retold, thus retaining and communicating the truths and values that matter. They entertain and teach, passing on a heritage in a form that people are eager to drink in. The young are enthralled by the newness and intrigue of the tale; the old are at ease with a return to the loved and familiar. Good stories bear repeating.

Why all this emphasis on stories? Our understanding of their significance will very much affect a reading program and how we advise our students to plan theirs. First and perhaps most obviously, it will involve very extensive use of children's literature. The basal readers with their contrived language and constrained vocabulary will give way to the wealth of well-written and evocative children's stories, whether these are included in newer basals or published under separate cover. A story with impact, meaning and quality is not merely preferable, but essential. For us at the university that means that we will not only seek to show the impact and importance of stories, but we will find ways of extending our students' familiarity with children's books. They cannot use in their teaching what they do not know, so it may be that an important part of our courses will involve the wide reading of this literature, which will foster critical judgment and aesthetic appreciation. Students need also to be shown how they can plan and run a school reading program based on this literature.

A second effect of emphasis on story and literature will be to examine how stories are interpreted and why variations in interpretation are expected. If reading is seen as a dialogue between reader and text, then it is surely the case that each reader holds a somewhat different dialogue with the text. Each reader brings individual experience and understanding to the story and takes away what seems significant. If different children value and treasure in the story something different from that which appeals to the teacher, so be it. This is a break from the concept

of the single right answer, with every child expected to find it. In text interpretation, if everybody in the class reaches exactly the same conclusion, it is usually the teacher's. Certainly misinterpretations are both possible and common, and teachers need to learn to distinguish between those caused by misreading and a legitimate range of alternate interpretations. Doing so requires some sensitivity and judgment from the teacher, since we all have a natural tendency to think that our own view must be the correct one.

A third effect of emphasizing stories is to reconsider the importance of quality in what is read. The traditional view that it does not matter *what* children read, as long as they *do* read, that anything is better than nothing must be re-evaluated. If stories are a source that nourishes our inner life, helps create our vision of the world and influences the values and ideals we hold, then surely the quality is of the essence. Saying that it does not matter what children read as long as they read seems about as sensible as saying it does not matter what they eat as long as they eat. If prospective teachers are to help children select books and discuss them with the criteria of "good nourishment" in mind, we in our methods courses will have to help them become sensitive and able at literary and aesthetic judgements.

Reflecting Forward

I would like to raise a final potential effect of phenomenology on reading study, namely that it could become a basis for a critique of the ways reading has typically been studied. The study of reading has often been from a cognitivist position with emphasis on being able to graph the process. One current example is schema theory which attempts to lay out how text is structured, how information is structured in the mind, and how the appropriate structures are activated during the reading process. A phenomenological perspective suggests that the dialogue, the power not only to convey ideas but to trigger them, the involvement that makes us laugh or weep as we read are all missing. In short, a very special human endeavour has lost its humanness. This possibility of a radical critique is the subject for another paper, and I mention it here only as a matter for further thought.

Northrop Frye once told an interviewer: "All methods of criticism and teaching are bad if they encourage the persisting separation of student and literary work; all methods are good if they try to overcome it" (Dillon, 1980, p. 205). Phenomenology with its emphasis on the human dimensions — the person, the experience, the story — strives for exactly that.

To return, in conclusion, to the question of the title, the answer is that pre-service teachers probably do not understand the experience of learning to read — not unless their methods course is presented in a way which helps them to realize the importance of such an understanding and to begin to reflect upon the experience of reading. Given such a foundation, our hope is that they will be able to continue observing, learning and reflecting in such a way that enables them to act with insightful pedagogic wisdom and with genuine understanding of their students' experience.

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