Aesthetic reading: Some strategies for research

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Abstract. Viewing aesthetic reading as a process whereby readers and writers attempt to "make contact, " to collaborate in making meaning, forces one to adopt research strategies that go beyond measuring the degree to which readers comprehend texts. Reader-text transactions are always situated in specific social contexts, shaped by motive and task. Therefore it is necessary to study variations in readers, in texts, and in situations, using a range of tasks and measures. Two recent studies serve to illustrate some of these ideas.

Because metaphors constrain as well as enable thought, they need to care. So, for example, if we think of reading as a matter of "shunting one mind to another, it influences not only our theories about what also our ideas about what kinds of research will best help us to ling processes. The shunting metaphor leads directly to studies of text information acquisition, learning from text: the research problem is to xtent to which the reader "gets out" what the writer "put in." On the other of reading as the means by which writers and readers "make contact," ces the types of research that appear fruitful, and leads to other kinds of gies.[1] Following Dewey and Bentley (1949), we take a "transactional" study of complex human activity. Louise Rosenblatt—who introduced transaction in the context of reading—suggests that any instance of que coming-together of a particular personality and a particular text at a nd place under particular circumstances" (1985, p. 104). In a previous Hunt, 1987), we discussed a number of assumptions about aesthetic em to be necessary if one adopts the "making contact" metaphor. For es the most important of these assumptions are: a) each reader-text owerfully shaped by the reader's motives and the situation in which the red; b) reading transactions can be grouped into general patterns or ng on the predominant intention of the reader; and c) complex, real-world atively different from artificially simplified laboratory reading.

These assumptions lead in turn to a number of fairly specific research strategies. Our central approach has been to try to create different reading situations and then see whether this affects the way readers engage with the texts we offer them. However, over time it has become clear that readers are highly sensitive to situation—-to the *actual* situation, that is, rather than to the superficial variations we can introduce by instructing them to adopt pretend tasks and fantasy motives. A continuing dilemma for our research, then, is that when readers perceive themselves to be in a testing situation (as they usually do from the time they sign up for an experiment),

they tend to read in ways appropriate to such a situation, producing the artifact we've been calling "laboratory reading." Although it would seem that laboratory reading is a logical consequence of studying reading in the laboratory, we try to reduce its likelihood by paying close attention to the wording of instructions and the physical design of the room (e.g., seating and lighting arrangements), but more importantly by creating tasks and measures that do not privilege information exchange.

For the same reason, we use only naturally-occurring and reasonably long, whole texts. The question of what kinds of texts can or should be used in reading research is a complex one, of course—a good deal more complex, perhaps, than is usually recognized. It is true that any text can be read in a variety of ways. Rosenblatt (1980) has observed that a poem can be read for "what it teaches us"; similarly, a telephone book can be read for its pragmatic implications. But it is also true that particular texts invite—or, in J. J. Gibson's (1979) term, "afford" —certain kinds of reading. The kind of text that Beaugrande (1982) calls "fragmentary and inane" (what we call a "textoid") does not readily afford aesthetic—or any naturally-occurring—reading.

Finally, it is important to use a variety of readers. Like most researchers, we rely greatly on that most studied of all groups of human beings, introductory psychology students, but we have also studied literature students and university faculty members and plan to extend our research to children and to published writers. We are also watching with interest the work that Siegfried Schmidt and his colleagues in West Germany are doing with nonacademic, working-class readers (e.g., Meutsch & Schmidt, 1985).

Research strategies for aesthetic reading are problematic, we believe, partly because what readers say, both during reading and retrospectively, tends to be contaminated by preconceptions about what they *ought* to say about literature. For this reason we do not rely solely on what they say but try to observe what they *do* as well. Similarly, we do not rely solely on measures of memory as a tool for investigating reading, but try to find out what goes on *during* the actual, physical act of reading. This leads to an important distinction between the kinds of cognitive processes that occur during reading and those that occur later, as the experience "settles" and is chewed over and understood. Traditional post-reading measures of "comprehension" (e.g., summarization, free recall) assess—but also tend to promote — information-shunting; therefore we are trying to develop alternative measures such as "literary engagement" (Vipond, Hunt, & Wheeler, in press).

What all this means in practice is that it is necessary to use a variety of tasks and measurements, and that consequently we are involved willy-nilly in a tradeoff between intervention and observation. Any intervention tends to make the situation more like "laboratory" reading; on the other hand, no intervention probably means no data.

In brief, investigating aesthetic reading empirically is a ticklish, complex, and risky business. Results are often equivocal and it is necessary to be profoundly skeptical about them. Still, we don't believe there is any real choice: We agree with Smith (1985) that to study reading as though it were a matter of shunting information is to be constrained by a metaphor that is

not just ineffective but "wholly inappropriate and misleading" (p. 195). Reading must be studied as though it were what it is—a transaction.

Some Illustrative research

Let us describe briefly some studies that exemplify our imperfect attempts to put these noble principles into practice. We choose these particular projects because they represent a wide range of strategies among the work we've done, not necessarily because they produced the most interesting or "best" results.

One study involved a sequence of relatively short stories: a vignette by Hemingway called "Old Man at the Bridge," a story by the Irish writer Maeve Brennan, "The Day We Got Our Own Back," and a classic Hemingway, the Nick Adams story "Indian Camp." Undergraduates were asked, after reading each page, to talk with an interviewer about their reading and to answer some questions. The readers were divided into three groups. During the in-process interviews, the first group was asked about specific details of the stories—for instance, "what color was the kitchen floor?" The second group was asked about events in the storyworld—to predict, for example, what might happen next.

The third group, however, was treated differently. Before reading each story, they were given what could be called a "pragmatic frame": that is, they were handed a fictitious letter in which the letter writer recommended the story to a recipient, as illuminating the situation the recipient was living in. During the reading, our students were asked whether they saw any connections developing between the story and this "framing" letter, any reasons why the letter writer might have thought the story was appropriate to the recipient's situation. (For more details, see Hunt & Vipond, 1985.)

In a similar experiment (Vipond & Hunt, in press), undergraduates read "The Day We Got Our Own Back" in either a "story" or a "pragmatic frame" condition. We also had twelve university faculty members, from different disciplines, participate in the pragmatic frame condition.

In all this research a range of tasks and measures was used in order to detect possible differences in the ways the various groups read, and reflected on their reading. For example, we kept track of how long it took the readers to read each section of the story. In addition, at each pause, we asked them to select from a list those phrases that seemed most striking. After reading, the readers were asked, among other things, to respond to "probes"—things "other people have said" about the text. We also asked them to use a marker to highlight words or phrases that seemed especially striking.

Here we shall mention just a couple of things we think we've learned from this work. One is that readers who are asked to connect a story to some sort of context appear to exhibit different patterns of reading speed, slowing down significantly (compared to the other readers) in later stages of the reading. There is also evidence that the pragmatic frame tends to make the readings of the students more like those of the faculty readers, who are presumed to be more sophisticated; both groups were, for exam-

ple, more likely to respond to the probes in ways that seemed to indicate a greater concern for narrative point and for evaluations.

It is important that we not overestimate the significance of these results, however: the numbers have not been of the kind that reach up and hit you over the head. In fact, one of our recurrent problems has been to account for the slenderness of the differences between the various groups. Primarily, we suspect, it has been due to the power of the actual laboratory situation to override any superficial differences we can introduce by manipulating tasks. That is, it has become increasingly clear that it is *situations* with which we need to be centrally concerned.

Therefore, in a study conducted recently with our student Lynwood Wheeler (Vipond, Hunt, & Wheeler, in press), we tried to increase the extent to which the situation readers were in would help them take ownership of the story and treat it as meaningful. We offered undergraduates three stories and gave them a few minutes to read them over and pick the one they preferred to work with further. (Three-quarters of the students chose Shirley Jackson's "Charles", and so far we have studied only those readers.)

Half the time, after choosing the story the reader went on to read it aloud to another student. We explained that we were interested in whether the two of them would tend to feel the same way about the story afterward, and emphasized that the readers should try to convey their feelings about the story to the listener through their reading. The other half of the readers read the story with no listener present. They were told that the purpose of the experiment was to see how people understand and remember stories they have read aloud.

We were particularly interested in the extent of the readers' "literary engagement" and in the quality of their oral readings. The measure of literary engagement was a set of post-reading probes to which the readers responded; for example, they were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "I think I can see why the author might have wanted to write this story," or "The story has too many details—too much stuff that doesn't really have to be there." Oral reading quality was assessed by analyzing" oral reading miscues (cf. K. Goodman, 1969; Y. Goodman, Watson, & Burke, in press). Specifically, we looked for patterns of meaning preservation and meaning loss in corrected and uncorrected miscues.

The expectation was that the readers who were trying to convey meaning to someone else—the "social readers" —would, relative to the "nonsocial readers," tend to correct their unacceptable miscues and leave uncorrected their acceptable ones. We also expected that the social readers would respond to the probes in ways that suggested deeper literary engagement. It turned out that the social readers did, as expected, produce "better" oral readings than their nonsocial counterparts. Unexpectedly, however, the social readers seemed to be less engaged with the work as literary discourse. It remains to be seen whether this is the result of "performance anxiety" caused by reading aloud to an unfamiliar peer; in any case, it again demonstrates that response to literature can be affected by where and how the reading is situated.

Conclusion

The work described here is of course only a beginning; still, we think the basic line of argument that underlies it is a promising one. That is, if it is assumed that reading needs to be understood not as information-shunting but rather as a rich, complex transaction, then it is plausible that the instances of reading that are most truly "basic," the ones we need most urgently to understand, are those that are the richest, most complex, and most context-specific. This is the reason, finally, for studying literary transactions, in which writers and engaged readers collaborate in the making of meaning.

Acknowledgments

Notes

' The tenacity of the shunting metaphor is amusingly illustrated by the printer's error in our previous article *(EQ, 20, 2*, p. 133, para. 3), in which "motives *imputed"* becomes "motives *inputted."* We trust that readers of this Journal, in their effort to make contact with us, either silently corrected, or didn't even notice, the error.

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