Shunting information or *making contact?:* *Assumptions for research* on *aesthetic reading*[1]

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Abstract. Whereas the traditional metaphor for written language is information-exchange—moving chunks of knowledge from one mind to another—we argue that it is more appropriately viewed as a social process in which writers and readers attempt to make contact. Investigating how readers with simplified motives acquire information from simple texts, therefore, does not necessarily shed much light on the ways people engage with authentic discourse outside the reading laboratory. Nevertheless, we believe that it is possible to study reading transactions—specifically, literary ones—empirically. In this paper we outline the central assumptions underlying our research into aesthetic reading.

How can we study aesthetic reading? For that matter, how can we study any complex human activity?

There seem to be two basic ways. We can take what Dewey and Bentley (1949) call an *interactional* approach, in which the constituents of a phenomenon are "analyzed out," considered in isolation from each other and from their contexts. Dewey and Bentley themselves, however, recommend a *transactional* stance. In essence this means that an effort is made to study the phenomenon as a whole, inextricably engaged with its contexts.

The latter approach has been applied to reading by Louise Rosenblatt (1969, 1978, 1985). She argues that any instance of reading is, and must be understood as, a transaction: "a unique coming-together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time and place under particular circumstances" (1985, p. 104).

To many people, this transactional view of reading seems to entail casting loose from empirically quantifiable certainties—jettisoning such readily definable entities as "text," "reader," and "content" —and launching out onto a tossing sea of vague and unpredictable transformations. That is, no matter how comfortable a transactional model may be for a humanist like Rosenblatt, to many people it seems an unlikely basis on which to generate strategies for empirical investigation.

Nevertheless, we believe it is not only necessary, but possible to conceptualize reading as a transaction without sacrificing all the useful tools and techniques of empirical research. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some assumptions about reading that in our view make it possible to conduct research into reading transactions. In a later paper we will discuss, more concretely, some implications for actual research practice.

Understanding reading: Linear vs. transactional metaphors

As we have suggested, the transactional metaphor is not the most common way to view reading. More frequently, a "linear" metaphor rules, one which holds, as Frank Smith (1985) phrases it, that written language is "the means by which information is shunted from one person to another" (p. 195). But as Smith points out, metaphors constrain as well as enable thought. By using such an Information-exchange or "conduit" metaphor for written language (Reddy, 1979), we constrain ourselves to think of reading as linear, as a process through which the reader to some measurable extent *acquires* from print what the writer originally *put into* it.

Many people who hold such a view readily admit that when you proceed as though reading occurred in that sort of neat, mechanical way, what you are investigating is an activity that happens only in research situations. It is only a slice of a more rich and complex reading process. Nevertheless, they argue, what justifies that approach is that It is necessary to understand the simpler, "stripped down" model of reading first, before tackling the more complicated kinds of reading that occur "naturally," when a reader skims a *Chatelaine* article, settles down with *War and Peace,* or lingers over a poem in *The New Yorker.* The unspoken assumption is that the richer and more complex activity engaged in by "real world" readers is no more than a particularly elaborate form of the information-shunting practiced in reading laboratories.

On the other hand, it has been argued (convincingly, in our view) that the reading that usually occurs in research situations is a peculiar, atypical and skewed activity, one that is radically different from "natural" reading, and one that does not necessarily illuminate natural reading much at all (Beaugrande, 1982; Bleich, 1984; Dillon, 1980).

We do not mean to suggest that the difference alluded to here between "laboratory" and "natural" reading is the difference between "context-free" and "context-sensitive" reading events. Just as there can be no decontextualized texts (see Wieler's insightful analysis, 1985), there can be no decontextualized research situations. The reading that occurs In laboratories is far from context-free: it is contextualized by the research situation itself. And in our view, the most important difference between research contexts and natural ones has to do with *motives— why* a specific person is reading a certain text in a given situation.

Motives for reading

It is not a trivial problem that natural motives for reading cannot be artificially generated in the laboratory, and that the motives that *do* obtain in the lab are, to say the least, unusual. Virtually nowhere except in reading research laboratories (and, sometimes, in classrooms) do people actually read with purposes as general, depersonalized, and ineffective as "learn the information in this text" or "remember the structure of this story." Outside of such situations, to read with these kinds of purposes would seem

bizarre and pointless, or at the very least remarkably inefficient. People generally read for more specific, more personal, more powerful motives. This is true not only of the archetypal "general reader" curled up in front of the fireplace with a bestselling novel, but of the scientist perusing a technical paper, the computer owner studying a word processing manual, the lawyer reading a precedent in preparing a case, and even the critic looking for patterns of binary opposition in Proust.

Reading that happens outside the laboratory is driven by specific motives and expectations. It is an active, exploratory, predictive process. The reader decides what to read; determines, according to a private agenda, the value of bits of data, pieces of information, phrases and ideas; chunks them into patterns according to pre-existing expectations of what is likely to be useful for the task at hand; disregards much that seems irrelevant to the immediate purpose; waits for—and strives for—closure according to patterns of expectation and need. Particular aspects of the text and certain processes are foregrounded, others ignored or less actively attended to, according to the immediate, specific intentions that seem appropriate to the concrete situation, and also according to the reader's characteristic reading "style" (Dillon, 1982).

Furthermore, the kinds of simple motives that are imputed to reading in the laboratory, and the strategies they entail, are quite unworkable with the texts people actually read voluntarily. Not only does no one read *If On a Winter's Night A Traveller* in order to "learn it," no one outside a lab reads a scientific paper, a computer manual, a legal precedent, or even a medicine bottle label in such a way. And when a discourse gets more complex or longer than the kinds of artificial and truncated "textoids" (Hunt, in press) that are used in most reading research, an instruction such as "learn this material" becomes very difficult to implement in any practical way.

In short, there is good reason to doubt the assumption that if we can understand the "simple" processing of "simple" texts in simplified situations, driven by artificially simplified motives, then we must be making progress towards understanding reading in general.

The alternative is to acknowledge the strategic and intentional richness of real-world reading, and get on with trying to understand it. Particularly important, we believe, is to understand what Rosenblatt (1978) calls "aesthetic" reading: the overwhelmingly complex, warm, organic process that might even—turning things around entirely—be the fundamental or basic model of the reading process, as Rosenblatt herself (1981) has suggested.

There are, however, some serious difficulties in studying aesthetic reading. Because it is not an inevitable consequence of an encounter with a "literary" text—specific readers in specific situations may read any given text in quite different ways—aesthetic reading is difficult to produce on demand. Moreover, as aesthetic reading becomes self-conscious, it tends to slide into something that might be called "professional" reading, in which involvement and engagement virtually vanish, to be replaced by an analytic, evaluative, and judgmental stance.

Are we, then, forced to the conclusion that since aesthetic reading doesn't occur on demand we can't investigate it? Does all this mean that the read-

ing we can understand as researchers has very little to do with the reading we *need* to understand as teachers?

Investigating aesthetic reading: Assumptions

We think not. For the past several years, using a range of empirical strategies, we have been working out ways to study aesthetic, or what we call "literary," reading. In general, we've found that if one adopts the premise that what must be understood first is complexity rather than simplicity, human motives rather than information-processing stages, ways can be found to move towards a fuller understanding of what readers of literary discourse—as opposed to consumers of textoids—are doing. In other words, it does seem possible to hold a transactional model and at the same time to conduct empirically defensible investigations of reading. In what follows, we outline some of the main assumptions that have guided our research to date.

The first assumption is that reading is not a uniform phenomenon, but is profoundly variable. The nature of any given instance of reading is a complex function of the reader, of the text, and—perhaps most powerfully—of the situation in which the reading occurs. What this assumption means in practice is that we must be careful that the situation doesn't conspire to produce a misleading uniformity among readings; that the texts used don't put artificial limits on the types of readings that can occur; and that we don't study only one kind of reader.

The second assumption is that this variation in reading is not random, but is patterned and principled. It seems possible, and useful, to group readings into three general kinds, according to the predominant intention of the reader. When the reader's motive is primarily to carry away information from a text, we categorize the reading as "information-driven" (Rosenblatt, 1978 calls this "efferent" reading). When, in contrast, the reader's primary motive is "aesthetic" (Rosenblatt, 1978), we think that one of two modes may be at work. On the one hand, readers might be interested in living through a vicarious experience, immersing themselves in a story-world of characters and events; we call this "story-driven" reading. On the other hand, someone might be reading in a way analogous to the way one listens to a person telling a story in conversation, in order to *make contact* with the storyteller, to see what the storyteller is "getting at," to construct or negotiate a possible "point" for the story. We call this kind of reading "point driven." (For a more extended discussion of these three modes, see Vipond & Hunt, 1984.)

It should be stressed that what we mean by "point" is not what psychologists mean by "gist," nor is it what English teachers mean by "theme." Also, as noted by Reid (1985), point should not be equated with "moral." As we use it, point is not something that is "in" the story at all; rather, the term refers to an activity—a pragmatic, inherently social activity. To read in a point-driven way is to collaborate, to attempt to "make contact," with a narrator or writer.

The interpersonal basis of point is underscored by the fact that the term was originally used in the study of conversational storytelling. Although sociolinguists such as William Labov (1972) and Livia Polanyi (1979, 1985) have been more concerned to understand the activity of the teller than that of the listener, many of their ideas about these conversational transactions seem to illuminate what the engaged reader of literary discourse is doing. Particularly important are their suggestions that storytelling is normally "pointed" — that is, there are motives both for telling and listening to stories in specific social situations—and that tellers avoid having their stories labelled "pointless" by including *evaluations.* Indications of how the teller feels about the events and characters of the story, which serve as invitations to the listener to share those feelings and ideas.

We have discussed the analogy between conversational listening and literary reading in greater detail elsewhere (Hunt & Vipond, 1986). Here it is enough to say that the patterns of evaluation that Polanyi and Labov find in conversational narratives appear in literary texts as well, and that sensitivity to evaluations, triggered by an awareness of the author as intending and purposeful, may be one of the characteristics of engaged literary reading.

Conclusions and implications for research

In this paper we have tried to spell out some basic assumptions that make it possible to investigate aesthetic reading transactions empirically. Briefly, these are:

* Aesthetic reading is more appropriately viewed as a social process, in which reader and writer make contact, than as an information-shunting process, in which the reader acquires knowledge.

* Each reader-text transaction is powerfully shaped by the reader's motives and the situation in which the text is encountered.

* Reading transactions can be grouped into general patterns or modes depending on the predominant intention of the reader.

* Complex, real-world reading is qualitatively different from artificially simplified laboratory reading.

It makes a difference for research which metaphor—"information-shunting" or "making contact"—one holds about reading. If reading is transferring information from one mind to another, it follows that the general research strategy will be to measure the extent to which the reader "gets out" what the writer "put in." In practice, this usually means that some measure of "comprehension" will be used. If, however, reading is "making contact," rather different measures must be used. As we will explain in a separate paper, the contact metaphor leads to measures of "engagement" instead of "comprehension," and, in general, to rather different strategies for research on aesthetic reading.

Notes

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