On the Presumption of Knowing How to Read

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A CARDINAL principle of rhetoric is to know one’s audience; unfortunately, an unhappy effect of our segmented educational system is that those of us who teach in colleges seldom get to know our colleagues in primary and secondary schools, despite our common interests and goals. In this essay I consider a subject of concern to us all, what educational theorists call articulation, or the way in which the exit stage of one level of the school system relates to the entry stage of the next. It would be fair to say that college teachers are troubled by what they see as the failure of articulation between secondary schools and colleges and universities. In my remarks here I no doubt fail to represent the magnitude of the pedagogical challenges faced every day by teachers in primary and secondary schools. It is my sincere hope, however, that these teachers will overlook the distortion produced by my perspective as a university teacher and see instead an opportunity to engage in a conversation about our mutual goal of teaching students how to read.

By titling my essay “On the Presumption of Knowing How to Read,” I mean to suggest first that it is presumptuous to assume that one ever knows how to read, that reading is a skill that can be acquired finally and completely. We might all agree with this assertion inasmuch as it implies modestly that reading skill can always be improved. And yet in my experience, college teachers of English (and of many other subjects as well) exhibit another kind of presumption when they complain that some students enter classes in their freshman year without knowing how to read. Clearly my colleagues don’t mean that students are unable to decode written language or to give a reasonably accurate summary of what they’ve read. What is meant by this complaint is that students lack skill in a more sophisticated practice of reading, beyond the ability to comprehend basic meaning or even respond affectively to a text.

Whether or not students can justly be expected to possess such a hypothetical higher reading skill as a requisite for admission to college, the college professoriat most certainly sees a problem here. Upward of forty percent of college freshmen are directed to remedial classes of some kind in their first year (Deshler and Hock 99). Although the task of remediation is usually oriented toward writing, the difficulty students have with writing often reflects an underlying and much more prevalent difficulty with reading. It also may be that many students who do not need remedial classes in writing nonetheless provoke the familiar complaint among their teachers about the lack of interpretive or analytic reading skills. Like many of my colleagues, I have had students who write correctly and competently but seem only able to paraphrase what they read or to convey an unobjectionable but uninteresting comprehension. The problem some students have in moving beyond simple comprehension strikes their teachers as something like a resistance to reading itself. If the complaint that students can’t read expresses hyperbolically the college teacher’s dismay with an unimaginative competence, the anecdotal complaint is supported by more than a century of well-documented discontent in the college professoriat with the secondary system (Applebee 49). The history of this discontent can be traced all the way back to the formation of the Committee of Ten in 1892, the first attempt by universities to impose a curriculum on secondary schools with the intention of closing the perceived
gap between the skills high school graduates possessed and those college freshmen were expected to demonstrate as a requisite for college work. This struggle between colleges and high schools has continued unabated since the Committee of Ten’s recommendations were published; the emergence of the remedial curriculum in recent decades is only the latest attempt to resolve this problem.

It is not my purpose to address the larger issue of remediation; rather, I attempt a description of the precise reading skill I believe college teachers find lacking in their incoming students. As I have already remarked, this lack refers not to decoding or comprehension but to another level of analytic skill, interpretation. According to the NCTE 1996 standards and the considerable literature that supports these standards, interpretation is something that students do learn at the primary and secondary levels. How does it happen, then, that college professors find this skill absent in so many of their first-year students? I am speaking not only of students who are underperforming but also of many students who are average or better. The comprehension of difficult texts can be a considerable achievement, beyond the capacity of underperforming students, those who have serious problems reading and writing; but comprehension is only the first stage of interpretation. The skill or tacit knowledge of which I am speaking might even be described as a conceptual break with the level of comprehension. With this break, reading begins anew. The text that was thought to be comprehended remains still to be understood. Only at this point, in which reading reverses itself, in which the text at hand becomes suddenly unfamiliar and strange, does interpretation begin. Only when the longtime reader can say, “I don’t yet know how to read” or “I don’t know how to read this text,” does it become possible to make the conceptual break.

Let me try to sharpen what I mean by this conceptual break. Without becoming lost in the great forest of interpretive theories, I instead offer my sense of what this terrain looks like from the vantage of a nearby peak. By interpretation I mean the capacity of a reader to re-understand the words of a text by translating these words into a new frame of reference or intelligibility. How does this happen? Interpretation in this sense means that the reader must first return to the words of the text, ultimately to undertake a translation of these words into a new interpretive frame. The conceptual break means that interpretation asserts the possibility of multiple frames of reference, with no one final correct interpretation. Unfortunately, the latter principle has been so universally accepted, so banalized by the tribute we pay to it, that we often fail to understand what withholding finality from interpretation implies. At the least, I am speaking here of the interminability of the reading process, of the way in which comprehension is achieved and then, at another level, necessarily fails.

What does it mean, then, to say that comprehension fails in order to enable interpretation? I mean something at once familiar and strange: the process of interpretive reading is self-corrective and implies the necessity or inevitability of misreading or misinterpretation. I suggest that this necessary misreading, and the correction of misreading, is the key to understanding the gap between the reading produced at the secondary level and the reading demanded at the college level—the articulation problem with respect to reading. There are two components of a reading procedure that has conceptually passed beyond the model of decoding-comprehension: a return to the words of the text that calls into question our comprehension of the text and a re-understanding of the text by translating the words of the text into a new frame of reference or intelligibility.

To explain the first component, I begin with a simple example drawn from a document produced recently by the NCTE’s Commission on Reading that more or less reaffirms its Standards for the English Language Arts, published in 1996. The authors of this document are concerned with the importance of context in decoding and cite the example of a reader who may misread the word horse as house in a list but read it correctly in a story about cowboys. The advantage of context is obvious: a misreading in the story context results in a failure of sense and calls for correction. The sentence “he rode the house all the way back to the farm” fails to make sense; something like an automatic brake trips up the train of signification and brings it to a momentary halt. This little drama usually takes place silently as a result of the complex scanning procedure that accompanies decoding. The example is modest but telling. A corrective mechanism is built into the decoding-comprehension model that serves the model well.

Let me now raise the stakes. There is a passage in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice in which the
supercilious Mr. Collins describes his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as “all affability and condescension.” He goes on to enumerate Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s many expressions of favor toward him and Mrs. Collins, including biweekly invitations to dinner and the use of one of her ladyship’s carriages for their safe return home. Readers of Austen know very well that Mr. Collins is being skewered here for his vanity and social snobbery, but Austen nowhere tells us explicitly how we should regard Mr. Collins. He is somehow condemned by his own mouth, by words that unwittingly betray him. No other word succeeds so well in achieving this effect than the word *condescension*, which Mr. Collins means literally as a compliment to Lady Catherine de Bourgh but which the good reader knows to be a hint about how Lady Catherine de Bourgh or Austen herself might regard Mr. Collins and so how the reader should regard him as well. This passage offers, I hope, a concise example of interpretive reading. (Not all interpretive reading works in just this way.) How does a reader come to see Mr. Collins as a figure of ridicule? Well, not every reader might see him in this way. It is possible to miss this level of significance because, on the face of it, Mr. Collins would seem to convey nothing but favorable information about his relation to Lady Catherine de Bourgh. A reader who misses the irony in the word *condescension* might well continue on unimpeded in reading the narrative; unlike a misread of decoding, there is no automatic brake bringing the train of significance to a halt.

My example from Austen is a little allegory for a complex process. The reader who does not learn to recognize the cues that would allow us to understand Mr. Collins’s language as bearing a double meaning—one straightforward, the other ironic—has not yet achieved the conceptual break. That break can only be achieved by returning to the words on the page, by reconsidering a word such as *condescension*. Once that word and its many cognates in the novel have been acknowledged, the world of Austenian irony opens up. The book that seemed a kind of soap opera is given a new frame of reference and intelligibility, as figures of speech such as irony and genres such as the romance novel become available to the reader as interpretive frameworks. These frameworks reveal something like a new spatial dimension of the text, its ironization of generic conventions.

Many good teachers in primary and postsecondary schools do indeed attempt to produce this conceptual break, but few students have made it. Equally troubling, there is an aspect of the prevalent standards in the teaching of reading that would seem to militate against a pedagogy that ushers students across this gap. We teachers of literature in colleges know that no student who does not make this conceptual leap will succeed in college. The ability to read beyond comprehension, paraphrase, or personal response is essential to what college students are asked to do—and not only in English courses.

The problem is exacerbated by certain principles that have made their way into the NCTE standards, perhaps for good reasons, though not necessarily with the best long-term effects. The document produced by the Commission on Reading summarizes the findings of reading research in a bulleted list of advice to teachers, from which I quote one especially troubling item: “Focus on the ideas represented by written language rather than the words on the page.” Let us stipulate that this technique probably enables students who have achieved reading fluency to continue to cultivate reading as a pleasurable activity. This is a good thing. But my suspicion is that between the sixth grade and the terminal year of high school an opportunity is often lost to induce students to make the conceptual leap that can only begin, that can only take place, when they pay attention to the words on the page. Only that recursive moment of questioning their former comprehension, with whatever corrective aid the teacher can offer, can inaugurate the reading process as one of interpretation.

When I turn to the 1996 NCTE standards themselves, I find myself troubled again by a conception of interpretation that emphasizes not the words on the page but a move away from the text into the mind of the reader. The standards tell us that for students to interpret texts is “to reflect on textual meaning from their own perspectives”—yes, by all means. But the standards go on to say, “As students interpret and evaluate texts, they explore their own feelings, values, and responses to the ideas presented” (Natl. Council 23). Here the words on the page are displaced by a story or poem that exists nearly independently in the mind of the reader, with no apparent corrective mechanism in place to check or direct those “feelings, values, and responses” by reference back to the words on
the page. However necessary the exploration of the young reader’s feelings might be as a phase in learning how to read, students in college will not be rewarded for conveying this to their teachers. Those teachers will have another set of expectations, and students will succeed or fail as they succeed or fail to meet those expectations.

The question I pose, then, is not to be taken as a complaint about the prevalent standards for the teaching of reading before the college years. Some teachers of reading may feel that students in middle or high school cannot be expected to make the conceptual leap I have described, but that is an issue we would need to discuss further, at another time. Until then, I would like to entertain the hypothesis that we have perhaps expected too little of our secondary students, that we have in a way condescended to them, and that the massive proliferation of remedial courses at the college level is the result of that condescension. It is all the more pressing to consider this possibility because the risk of condescension has so often inhibited the conversation that college and precollege teachers need to have. The teaching of reading is difficult at every level. It is terribly important, then, that we think about keeping that pedagogy moving forward and that we never consider at any level that the job is done, that our students at last know how to read.

Works Cited