

Introduction

Investigating reading

This is an introduction to a theory of reading. Our concern is to produce the possibility of reading as a structured, productive practice. Many people read without any structure. They read, but no worthwhile conversation emerges. They do not expand their possibilities, enrich the background out of which they listen to possibilities, or formulate new actions. They lack competence in designing the conversation with a text that reading can be.

Our comments concern reading all kinds of texts. We produce no mechanical procedures that guarantee effective reading. We produce a discourse that allows you to design what you do when you read — to design the conversation that reading is for you.

What Is Reading?

Learning to read is crucial to the possibility of historical design of our lives

Today, most Americans know how to read. We can pass our eyes across a text and recognize words and sentences. But knowing how to recognize words and sentences does not guarantee that we can understand a text and make it valuable.

Reading is a matter of designing ourselves — our concerns, capacities, and narratives. In this light, gathering facts, information, or opinions is incidental. Learning to read is crucial to the possibility of the historical design of our lives.

Our identity emerges in our historical conversations about ourselves. This includes historical narratives we are all born into without being specifically aware of them. Through reading we can recover these narratives and design who we are now against their background.

When we read of Ancient Greece, Medieval Europe, the American Colonies, or the Vietnam War, we do not read about what has happened. These are our histories, the historical background of our concerns and identities today.

We do not read commentaries on apartheid in South Africa, or on abortion and the right to life, to pass judgment or to agree or disagree. We join a conversation with regard to our own concerns and possibilities. When we read manuals on household repair or on applying for a government loan, we are not gathering information; we are introducing ourselves to new concerns and possible actions.

What Is a Narrative?

*A narrative is a story
that someone tells*

Every person has concerns, sees possibilities, and acts out of a historical background. We constantly create new interpretations of our background in new narratives about the past.

A narrative is a story that someone tells. Narratives are not accounts of events. People build them as stories to explain, justify, and give coherence over time to themselves and their world.

In a sense, we live in these narratives. Our historical interpretations influence our “values,” “concerns,” and standards. As Americans, we live in historical narratives about the search for religious freedom, settlement through hard work and independence, and the founding of our government on guarantees of personal freedom. We rarely think about these narratives, but we act according to standards that they embody.

These narratives are not our personal stories. They are social and historical discussions. An individual finds himself in the midst of narratives that have preceded him and that are larger than life. We do not choose many of our ambitions, dreams, fears, desires and plans for the future. They derive from the historical background that we bring to everything we read. For example, your concern for your own health makes reading a book on nutrition valuable. Your concern for political rights and protection might make a book on the power of the federal government particularly interesting.

Preparing Yourself to Read

The question of information

Becoming a more effective reader means learning to observe and enrich your historical background and to produce a new interpretation of your concerns for the future.

Most of us have been trained to read for information. In school, we read geography texts to find out about other places and peoples. We read novels for the story. We read to find out facts, and we try to remember what we read to repeat it in conversations or apply it in actions.

We always have some concern behind our interpretation of a text

Of course, we read for something; we always have some concern behind our interpretation of a text. That is part of the history of our own concerns with which we approach a text. But let's try to reconstruct what we read for in light of what we have already said about the conversation of reading a text.

Ultimately we read for ourselves — our histories of concerns and opportunities. But not all this history bears on every text that we read. You can single out a particular concern that you anticipate addressing as you read a particular text. This may be a familiar problem or opportunity, or an introduction to a new domain.

Examples for reading with special questions

The concern may be a very specific question: when you sit down with an electrician's manual to fix a lamp, you are asking, "How do I make this lamp work?" Or you may sit down to read a history of the American Civil War with no practical question in mind. But you are going to produce a conversation within some concern. Perhaps you are taking a stand on racial issues today. Your political affiliation might be the result of the history of tensions between regional and federal authorities.

Your reading may not answer your concern in the sense of producing a solution to some problem. It may shift what the concern is. It may alter your listening to your possibilities for dealing with the concern. Or it may allow the concern to disappear. Reading may produce nothing you recognize as "practical" at all. It may produce a shift in your mood.

Reading starts with the concerns that you are

Reading starts with the concerns that you are. Preparing yourself to read will produce a conversation about concerns that you can address by reading a particular text.

We offer several suggestions for that preparation:

Ask yourself, “What concerns do I bring to the text I am about to read?”

Often, you have no immediate answer. For example, you may decide to read a novel that appeals to you or that someone has recommended. Take time to ask what concerns you bring to the book. The novel may deal with marriage, or making a career change, or your standards for assessing yourself and other people. It may present a hero, someone who acts on some concern that we share today; perhaps it can stimulate your own conversation for acting on that concern.

Ask yourself what you anticipate the text will say in response to your concerns. Formulate your anticipations in terms of new domains of action, opportunities, or assessments.

We always anticipate something from a conversation we are about to enter: others’ opinions, new opportunities, breakdowns. They may prompt us to form, give up, or modify our opinions. The same is true when we read a text because reading is a conversation.

Preview

Preview the text by reading the title, table of contents, first paragraph or two, and whatever else you find to orient yourself.

Anticipation

If you are about to read a newspaper editorial on unemployment, you can anticipate opening a domain of political assessment (and perhaps action) with regard to new opinions or revisions of old ones. As you begin a text on low-calorie cooking, you may anticipate a new domain of action and opportunities—managing and cooking your own diet.

Ask yourself what opinions, assessments, or beliefs you already hold in the domain you are about to enter.

Prejudices as background for learning

We are all prejudiced, with beliefs about domains in which we can claim no knowledge or facility. We already know something about computers before reading the manual, even if it is only that we don’t like them.

These prejudices do not necessarily obstruct learning. They originate in our own histories and past conversations. Our capacity to enter

Pretensions of knowing already

new conversations depends on those histories: the necessary background to learning in new domains.

The danger of prejudice is that we often close off opportunities for learning with our pretensions to knowledge. We close conversations where we have already decided what is true or false, right or wrong.

Prejudices work unseen, unless they become explicit in your conversation for interpreting the text. Then you can question, reject or confirm them when you confront them with the text.

Reading and Interpreting Texts

Interpretation starts before the reading of the text

Reading and interpreting begins before you've read the first word of the text itself. Interpretation of this text is continuous with the history, including the historical narrative, in which all of your concerns, possibilities, prejudices, and beliefs were born.

In preparing to read the text, you made yourself aware of the conversations of concerns, anticipations, and prejudices in your background. Now, as you begin to read the text itself, you can carry the conversations forward.

As you begin to read the text, ask yourself what domain of action or opportunities the author is addressing.

A text can be an invention of a new domain

You may not be clear yet on the domain. But no domain is entirely unfamiliar; it always appears in terms of concerns, opportunities, breakdowns, or actions with which you are already familiar. The same is true of any invention, and a text can be an invention of a new domain for you. Reconstruct the domain for yourself in terms of familiar concerns, breakdowns, capacities, and opportunities.

For example, you may be reading a text in which the author talks about what she calls "the modern Prometheus." You may not know exactly what the author means. But if you are familiar with the Greek legend of Prometheus (whom the Gods punished for bringing the

knowledge of fire to man), you can begin to formulate the new domain of your conversation with the text. You may see it in terms of new moral questions about modern technology.

As you read and after you have finished the text, ask yourself, “Does the text depend on particular linguistic distinctions that the author has made? If so, what are these?”

System of distinctions

Linguistic distinctions are the elements that make a conversation intelligible. Before you can participate in that conversation, you must construct for yourself the system of distinctions that makes the conversation possible.

Examples

For example, a philosophical essay on truth may rest on certain distinctions: evidence, confirmation, justification. A manual on investment banking may be founded on distinctions of loans, interests, returns, etc. None of these distinctions is a label for some real object. All are grounded in what the author says in her text. When she says that evidence is whatever someone may produce to convince someone else that an assertion is true, the author is not describing evidence. The author is producing the linguistic distinction called “evidence”; she is establishing what we say is “evidence” in the conversation with you, the reader.

Produce this system of distinctions for yourself in terms with which you are already familiar. Thus you produce the banker’s distinction of loans in terms of promises and conditions of satisfaction (if you already have facility with the distinctions called “promises” and “conditions of satisfaction”). Or you produce the philosopher’s distinction of justification in terms of assertions and judgments.

Construction of linguistic distinctions

You rarely find an explicit system of linguistic distinctions in a text. You construct them yourself by reading for them. Only then can you join the author’s conversation. But this requires that you first reconstruct the system of distinctions upon which the conversation depends. Read the text for this system of distinctions before reading for what the author says with that system: the opinion the author offers, the action recommended, the opportunity opened, etc.

After you have read the text, ask what conversations the text has enabled you to continue yourself.

*Practical
conversations*

These new conversations may be practical new requests and promises you are now competent to make in a new domain of action. For example, after reading and interpreting a text on real estate, you may say that you are competent to begin making loan requests of bankers, or specific requests of real estate agents.

*Speculative
conversations*

The new conversations may not be so narrowly practical. They may open up new areas of speculation or reveal prejudices you have not seen in yourself before. They may be conversations about new moods that are possible, as when reading a book fills you with a sense of wonder, or peace, or adventure.

Reading and Interpreting Texts

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