



In Pursuit of a Little Understanding?

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Jeff Hynds looks at the Great Debate about Reading.

THE GREAT DEBATE ABOUT READING

'More happens, on one brief walk, to Rosie and to those who read her, than happens to Roger Red Hat in a lifetime.'

By **Jeff Hynds**

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The Great Debate about reading seems to be in no danger of subsiding. On the contrary, I find these days that just a mention of it is quite capable of generating educational apoplexy, or even unleashing unsuspected savagery. For example, it is common to find newspapers, teachers' journals and magazines carrying articles or letters which passionately support or utterly condemn some 'approach' or other (usually referred to as a 'new' approach, or even *the* new approach). Recently an educational psychologist, writing in the national press, roundly denounced those 'dedicated followers of fashion' whom he saw as promoting developmental' reading, the real books' approach, 'emergent', 'shared' or storybook' reading (Turner 1988). In his excitement he lumped together every fashionable term he had heard of, of course, as if they all meant the same, and in his view, of course, they were all wrong.

Then again, another expert, this time in a teachers' journal, found himself able to assert quite confidently that 'there are many enthusiastic and able readers in the world who learned to read through reading schemes'. The term 'real books', he added, was unsatisfactory because apart from anything else fiction cannot be real (sic!), and the term 'apprenticeship approach' was 'another unfortunate slogan' devised by 'zealots' (Beard 1987).

I was in trouble myself earlier this year for daring to express, semi-publicly, a few fairly well-known views on reading.

The London Borough of Bromley, aided and abetted by the Directorate of Thames Polytechnic, got into a fine frenzy about it. For being so bold as to suggest that the process of reading was really quite complex, and that reading tests in general were over-simple and thus unreliable, I was declared a 'misguided individual' and for my pains had myself reported to the Secretary of State for Education and Science. According to press articles I had apparently been advocating a 'new-fangled way' of teaching reading which was, in the view of Bromley's Chief Inspector, in danger of becoming a 'new orthodoxy' Hynds 1988).

Misunderstanding about reading

What I think I detect in all this - amid the emotion and hysteria, and occasional note of venom - is *misunderstanding*.

Reading, I suggest, is much misunderstood. What it involves, what it means, what it can be like, is commonly taken for granted and widely, even wildly, underestimated. Too many people, including many of the so-called experts, make too many assumptions about reading, and jump to too many quick conclusions. Not, of course, that they *realise* they are doing this, and therein lies the source of considerable difficulty for everyone. For some of those who do not realise their own misunderstanding are in positions of authority in education. And, even worse, some wield political power. I do not think reading should be in the hands of politicians anyway; if they do not actually understand it, then the situation is doubly unfortunate. And so, in the pursuit of a little more understanding, I offer these few thoughts.

What's 'new'?

The word 'new' appears frequently - 'new' approach, 'new' fashion, 'new-fangled' way. In fact, there's nothing very new about what is happening in reading. We have some new knowledge nowadays, it is true, but it is new knowledge about *age-old processes*. The way children learn, indeed the way any of us learn, the nature of written language, the processes of literacy - none of these has changed over the years. It is simply that recently we have been finding out more about these things. It's like the circulation of the blood. We didn't always know a great deal about that, and maybe there's still more to find out, but it's always been circulating. Sometimes what we *thought we* understood we didn't understand all that well. We might, as a consequence, have applied inappropriate treatments. Is this blood or reading I'm talking about? It's both. Both have always been the same for a very long time.

But this century, in fact since the 1870 Education Act, we had a problem. We suddenly found we had to bring literacy to the masses. Perfunctorily trained teachers, with huge classes, needed foolproof methods and materials, or so it was believed. Ignoring countless examples of successful learning that lay all around, education panicked, and turned to the newly developing 'science' of psychology, in particular to that branch of psychology called *behaviourism*. Psychologists had been studying the behaviour of animals (like rats) in controlled situations, and observing how they seemed to learn. By taking things a little bit at a time, and by constant repetition, the animals could be trained. Surely this must apply to children too! And so education put its faith in experimental psychology, and thereby backed the wrong horse (Smith 1988).

This is largely the reason why today the teaching of reading is thought of so narrowly, particularly of course by educational psychologists, and why there are so many misunderstandings. It is not that reading itself has changed. It is the same for us as it was for Shakespeare and Bacon, for Jane Austen and Dickens, for Robert Louis Stevenson or Laura Ingalls Wilder. What has to go on, when we read now, *used to go on* when people read years ago. We just know a little more about what goes on. We have been helped by ethnographic studies of children's learning, by psycholinguistic investigations into the processes of literacy, and by the insights of modern literary theory. At least we should have been helped. It's hard to help anyone who is blinkered by behaviourism.

'Look-and-say', phonics and reading

It is still very commonly believed that learning to read basically consists of (a) 'learning' or 'knowing' or 'remembering' words, and (b) learning 'phonics' or 'sound-symbol correspondences'. There used to be a Great Debate about which of these was more important, but nowadays the two are combined. Beginning with 'whole words' (or 'look-and-say'), and then moving on to phonics, is still the most widespread method of teaching reading in our schools. Whatever else, whatever 'new ideas' come along, many teachers, indeed many reading experts, feel that *this is what reading ultimately depends on* - knowing your words and being able to do your phonics.

Recently we have seen the growth of the 'real books' movement. But it is not always well understood. I have met many teachers, themselves declared advocates of a 'real books approach', who subconsciously regard it as simply an alternative way of teaching what really counts in reading - whole words and phonics. It may perhaps be more chancy, but it will be 'more fun'. It will 'take longer' perhaps, but the effect will be more lasting. Naturally, they assume, when you don't learn your words on flash cards, or do phonic exercises (the really safe way to learn to read except that it's so boring), then these skills will take longer to acquire, but it will be worth it in the end because children won't have been put off reading. They will have enjoyed it and will hopefully go on enjoying it, etc., etc.

This would be a persuasive enough reason for 'using real books', except that it is wrong. Whole words and phonics are not fundamental to reading. *They* are not 'the basics'. They, in fact, are ancillary. And if anything 'takes longer', then there is obvious misunderstanding all round.

Reading schemes and learning

Thinking of the rats, well-intentioned educationists (rather than readers), backed up by less well-intentioned publishers, devised reading schemes. Here children's learning could be 'controlled'. Start with something 'easy', repeat it constantly, and then when it's 'learnt', go on to the next bit. (You will not be surprised to know that behaviourist psychology also gave us brain washing!) In fact no-one learns, in any real sense, like this. If you 'control' a learner's learning, you stop the learner doing the learning. The *learner has* to do the controlling, otherwise the learner does not learn. Think of children learning to recognise other people, their mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, numerous friends. No educationist controls this learning, yet at a very early age indeed babies and young children demonstrate amazing 'visual discrimination' in recognising people, and 'auditory discrimination' too when they recognise them by their voice alone. Even more spectacular is the way children learn spoken language, which is highly complex, extensively rule-hound, and involves huge feats of memory. (For example, four-year-old children regularly learn about 20 new words *every day*!) No-one controls this, no-one programmes it. No parent goes out and buys a Talking Scheme.

How do children learn then? They learn because they make sense of the evidence, and construct a theory which informs their understanding and their subsequent learning. If they don't make sense of the evidence in the first place, they don't learn. Reading is an extremely complex activity, but no more complex than learning spoken language, which all children seem to manage. If they are to learn it properly, then they need to experience and make sense of reading as it functions fully and meaningfully in the contexts of their own lives. It is the task of teachers to make sure that these experiences happen, and this is no easy task for those teachers who, under the influence of behaviourism, think they have to teach children one decontextualized bit after another. This is how *not to* teach them. It results in children learning only mechanically, which really means not learning at all.

So will reading schemes do the job? Undoubtedly some reading schemes, up to a point, do teach a kind of reading. But we should not be satisfied with it. We should be very wary indeed of assuming that, if you can read a reading scheme, you can therefore read and that's it. This is a reductionist view of reading and it omits the crucially important dimension of how you read. How you read, and how you *will read* in the future, is profoundly affected by *what* you read, even from the very beginning. Learning to read with reading schemes teaches you to cope with the demands of reading schemes. On the whole the demands are not great.

Real books and real reading

Some kinds of reading make far greater demands on readers than do most of the books in reading schemes. I think few would disagree with me if I suggested that quite considerable demands are made on the reader by the novels of Virginia Woolf, the poetry of T S Eliot, or the philosophy of Bertrand Russell. But it might come as a surprise to some if I suggested that very complex reading behaviour is required to read children's books like McKee's **Not Now, Bernard**, Oram's **In the Attic**, or Burningham's **Granpa**. The demands made are the same, in principle, as those made by Woolf, Eliot and Russell. Books like these - I would be happy to call them 'real books'- make demands that go far beyond the surface text, beyond mere 'comprehension', and of course way beyond remembering the 'words' and the 'phonics'. More happens, on one brief walk, to Rosie and to *those who read about her*, than happens to Roger Red Hat in a lifetime. In other words, what is involved in reading the complex and multi-layered texts and pictures of many children's books, those by accredited writers and artists, is what is ultimately needed in *reading* in any real sense of the word.

If children are to develop into accomplished adult readers, the 'enthusiastic and able readers' that Beard refers to, but which in my view no reading scheme could ever produce, then they need to begin by being accomplished child readers. They need to meet, from the very start, those real books 'where the words mean more than they say' (Meek 1988). These books are the only possible teachers of real reading.

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Jeff Hynds was formerly Director of the Diploma Course in the Teaching of Reading and Writing at Thames Polytechnic. He is now a freelance lecturer and writer, and each year thousands of teachers and others attend his courses at various venues throughout Britain. His forthcoming book, **Real Reading**, will be published by Tadpole Books Ltd later in the year.

See Jill Bennett's 'Books to Make Readers' on page 24.

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