

Reading

ROGER FARR

"Owning" a Text May Mean Understanding Its Literal Intentions

An emphasis in recent years on the use of literature as a base for reading instruction has led teachers to accept—and to encourage—widely varied student reactions to and interpretations of what is read. Among the more attractive arguments for this is the notion that children should take or have "ownership" of their reading experiences. In some reading lessons, forming critical reactions, personal interpretations, and creations of alternative meanings for a text now take precedence over determining what the author meant by the text. Literal comprehension and focusing on a text for meaning are being de-emphasized.

This trend in reading and language arts instruction has a positive effect that is long overdue: it encourages the development and appreciation of one's own ideas. This reflects an interest that has been emerging for many years on the relationships among a reader's interests and background experiences, the reader's purpose for reading, and his or her comprehension of particular texts.

The encouragement of a child's ownership of the meaning he or she takes from a text is also related to the well-established concern for developing "higher levels of comprehension." We now understand that what a reader comprehends, infers, remembers, and employs will relate directly to these personal factors.

However, like many concepts in reading education, the notion of reader ownership can be carried to an extreme. At its best, it can be regarded as a useful and powerful notion that moderates the past decade's almost intemperate national focus on the mastering of the minimum essentials of reading, with its encouragement of fragmented, short-answer responses

to texts that are themselves frequently distressingly limited.

At the same time, advocates of the reader ownership approach seem to disregard the fact that literal reading comprehension is still demanded of citizens on a daily basis. Sign and map reading, program reading, written directions and instructions (for filling out income tax forms and job applications, for example), and any text meant primarily to organize and present a quantity of specific data are types of reading with primarily *public*, not *private*, meanings. This seems worth stressing, since a quantity of written material used in education to impart information is of this type; and to be a successful student, a young reader needs to comprehend a reasonable portion of such material literally.

While a stubbornly personal approach to comprehending such texts does not often serve a learner well, the best educational experiences do indeed lead students to employ literal information in personally relevant ways. If we train readers to comprehend literal text without questioning and challenging, we do not develop the kind of citizens who will appreciate and defend democracy. We want critical readers. We want citizens who identify writer biases as they read. We want our students to note the omission of important facts, to challenge

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simplistic causal analyses and sequences, to identify, in comparisons used to make decisions and establish categories, the factors overlooked.

Oddly enough, these powerful critical reading abilities require the keenest attention to *author intent!* They are less apt to develop from reading instruction that praises *only* highly personalized responses to factually oriented material.

We want readers who can infer from even the most dreary literal text. The high degree of technology in today's society affords an excellent example: There are few among us who have not encountered inadequate manuals and directions. Many computer manuals, for example, lead the critical reader to assume that their writers are so immersed in their specialties that they are incapable of visualizing a major portion of the audience who will need, read, and use the manual. Some cooking recipes and sewing instructions have always required an almost intuitive ability to infer omitted steps. More and more of the products we buy require extensive assembly, and the instructions for doing so and for operating them are frequently cryptic, contradictory, and even illiterate.

It is personal experience—either accrued or immediate—that permits the kind of comprehension that "rounds out" or "fills in" the omitted or contorted essentials of such essential texts. But again, it is interesting to note that to engage such inferring, the reader needs initially to read the material closely and literally.

This is not to say that young readers who read only to "take ownership" and who restructure intended meaning in the process are not sometimes brilliantly creative and do not sometimes structure ideas more intriguing than those an author intended. But the youngsters who are capable of such wonderful responses will probably re-

spond even more brilliantly if they create a personal supply of useful information. That supply will need to be gathered with reasonable attention to the intended literal meaning of many writers and even to inferences that some writers thought probable.

The ability to judge whether some texts are accurate or inaccurate, complete or incomplete, biased or unbiased, and to put them to effective personal use will often depend on a developed ability to attend to and

comprehend the literal intentions of the author. That comprehension of the literal can only add to the reader's "ownership" of ideas. □

Roger Farr is Director, Center for Reading and Language Studies, and Associate Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (whose resources were used to locate background information for this article), Smith Research Center, Indiana University, School of Education, Bloomington, IN 47408.

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