

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



Reading, Reduction, and Reciprocity

In a number of our editorials, we have explored the question, What features characterize the research most likely to have an impact on the field? Our intention in probing this question has been to think the issue through for ourselves and to invite the field to think along with us. As part of this continuing effort, we have discussed the importance of research that is rigorously conducted, that is well-written, and that has archival quality. In this editorial we would like to consider another feature of the research we find most compelling, one brought to our attention in a recent talk by Gerald Graff (1999). Graff's argument drew our attention to something that has influenced our response to articles but that we hadn't clearly articulated for ourselves.

Graff (1999) contended that the arguments that have the most influence on the field are those that can be memorably reduced. On the surface Graff's contention may seem to advocate simplicity at the cost of sophistication, but he made a persuasive argument that such is not the case. He illustrated his idea with reference to Jameson's (1981) *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.

As anyone who has read it can attest, Jameson's work is extremely complex. Yet Jameson provides a way for readers to reduce it meaningfully by offering what he calls a moral or slogan as the first sentence of his preface: "Always historicize!"

Jameson's (1981) opening is rhetorically effective, we think, because it makes it easier for readers to do what they must do to make sense of a text. As Rabinowitz (1987) argues, "Whether sitting on a beach or in a library, a reader can only make sense of a text in the same way he or she makes sense of anything else in the world: by applying a series of strategies to simplify it—by highlighting, by making symbolic, and by otherwise patterning it" (p. 19). He argues further that doing so necessarily requires readers to reduce a text in some principled way.

Rabinowitz's ideas resonate with Rosenblatt's (1978) discussion of what she calls the *evocation* of a literary text. She argues that in order to respond, readers must generate images of what they're reading. These images distill characters and their actions in such a way as to enable readers to construct a provisional meaning for the text. The evocation—a reader's imagistic reduc-

tion of the text—is what Rosenblatt argues is the basis for literary response and the construction of literary meaning.

Rabinowitz (1987) and Rosenblatt (1978) focus on literary texts, but Gee (1993) makes a similar argument with regard to all texts, including “poems, essays, stories, descriptions, and warnings on aspirin bottles” (p. 13). To understand any of these texts, according to Gee, a reader has to produce “a *translation* of the first text into a ‘language’ (our ‘own words’ or our mental representation) that we take to somehow give the meaning of the first text” (p. 13; emphasis in original).

It has become a commonplace to note that reading is a constructive act. What these theorists also establish is that regardless of whether a text is argumentative (Graff), literary (Rabinowitz, Rosenblatt), or of a different mode (Gee), reading is also a reductive act. Jameson’s opening is effective because it helps readers make a principled reduction of his work.

That effective writers anticipate what readers must do when they read is no surprise. Nystrand (1986) argues that such anticipation depends on what he calls *reciprocity*, the degree to which writers and readers are in tune with one another. Nystrand’s notion of reciprocity requires a kind of intersubjectivity between writers and their readers so that they operate according to shared understandings. Any text, he argues, “must strike a balance between the expressive needs of the writer and the comprehension needs of the reader” (p. 47).

Yet writers who publish their work for broad audiences will not easily establish reciprocal relationships with the presumably varied attitudes, levels of knowledge, conceptual vocabularies, and other attributes found across a range of potential readers. Therefore, it’s especially important for writers to consider processes in which experienced readers are likely to engage. Reduction is one such process. Writers who assist readers in that process by infusing their writing with axioms, phrasings, images, metaphors, or other compendia for their complex ideas make it far more likely that readers will construct versions of their texts that are in tune with their intended versions.

In this issue we offer three articles whose power derives in part from the authors’ use of devices that help readers respectfully reduce their work. In their article on the role of genre in preschoolers’ response to picture books, Stephanie Shine and Nancy Roser present a number of complex and careful analyses of the kind of discourse preschoolers engaged in when they talked with an adult reader about different genres of children’s books. Their qualitative analysis of their data focuses on the different stances the preschoolers took when they talked about fantasy books, realistic books, information books, and poetic texts. To characterize these stances, Shine and Roser label them “I imagine,” “I recognize,” “I know,” and “I appropriate.” By providing these memorable labels, they have reduced their work in a way that will help readers recall the well-wrought details of the study.

In his article Bill Johnston develops the metaphor of the expatriate ESL teacher as postmodern paladin. The strength of the article resides in the power of the metaphor to communicate complex ideas in very few words. Johnston uses the metaphor to read the life history interviews of three experienced expatriate ESL teachers. His analysis is cogent and complex, yet it distills well to the memorable image of the postmodern paladin. Because it reduces his argument to a memorable image, we think that Johnston's metaphor is one upon which other scholars will draw when they think about the life histories of teachers.

In the final article of this issue, Penny Oldfather and Sally Thomas report on a collaborative, longitudinal research project they engaged in with their co-authors Lizz Eckert, Florencia Garcia, Nicki Grannis, John Kilgore, Andy Newman-Gonchar, Brian Petersen, Paul Rodriguez, and Marcel Tjioe, all of whom were secondary school students at the time of the study. In their article they illustrate the four

key theoretical strands upon which the project was based—social constructivist epistemology, Bakhtinian theory, feminist thought, and participatory action research—through what they call mini-cases of individual students, characters whom readers come to know through the article. By linking their ideas to such memorable characters, we think that Oldfather et al. have made it far more likely that their ideas will be respectfully reduced than if they were presented without such powerful links.

One of the features of our editorship has been the publication of longer and more complex articles. As we have argued in previous editorials, we think that the richness of detail that these articles provide benefits the field. Yet we have come to realize that they place additional burdens on our readers, not the least of which is the burden that we have discussed here, that of meaningfully reducing texts. In this editorial we're encouraging writers to help their readers with this complex interpretive task.

P.S. M.W.S.

References

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Research Assembly Midwinter Conference February 25-27, 2000

The annual midwinter conference sponsored by the NCTE Assembly for Research will take place February 25-27, 2000, in Seattle, Washington, at the Edmund Meany Hotel. For program details and registration information, contact Sheila Valencia, University of Washington, 122 Miller Hall, Box 353600, Seattle, WA 98195-3600; e-mail: valencia@u.washington.edu. Registration deadline is **February 1, 2000**. For hotel reservations, call the Edmund Meany Hotel at (800) 899-0251 and ask for in-house reservations. You must reserve a room by **January 24, 2000**, to receive the special conference rate.

African American Read-In Scheduled for February, Black History Month

On Sunday and Monday, February 6 and 7, NCTE will join the NCTE Black Caucus in sponsoring the eleventh national African American Read-In Chain. This year's goal is to have at least one million Americans across the nation reading works by African American writers on February 6 at the designated hour of 4:00 p.m. EST, 3:00 CST, 2:00 MST, and 1:00 PST. Monday, February 7, is the date designated for read-ins in schools.

The event is an opportunity for schools, libraries, community organizations, businesses, and interested citizens to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating read-ins. These activities may range from bringing together family and friends to share a book to staging public readings and media presentations featuring African American writers.

For further information, write Dr. Jerrie C. Scott, National Coordinator, African American Read-In Chain, 322 Administration Bldg., University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152; or Dr. Sandra E. Gibbs, NCTE Coordinator, NCTE Director of Special Programs, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.