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Using freewriting to assess reading comprehension

William P. Bintz
University of Kentucky

No two experiences with a text are ever the same, even for the same reader. (Hynds, 1989).

Our theories of literacy determine what we see and what we value. (Harste, 1989).

ABSTRACT

Building on recent advances in holistic writing assessment, this article reports on an attempt to use freewriting as a tool to assess reading comprehension. It begins by situating this project within several recent efforts to reform reading comprehension assessment. Next, it discusses freewriting as a form of written retelling, a procedure used historically as an alternative form of reading assessment. Then, it presents a taxonomy that illustrates several patterns constructed from using freewriting with proficient readers (graduate students). Finally, implications of this project for thinking differently about reading theory and reading assessment are provided.

This article reports on a research project exploring the use of freewriting to assess reading comprehension. The purpose of this project was to explore a new potential for solving an old problem in reading comprehension assessment; namely, that traditional forms of reading comprehension assessment, specifically multiple-choice questions on standardized tests, do not accurately reflect the best we currently know

about reading (Krashen, 1999, 1997; McQuillan, 1998; Flippo, 1997; Lipson and Wixson, 1997; Routman, 1996; Valencia and Pearson, 1987); and yet, recent trends indicate that the use of formal and informal standardized tests in reading assessment is both increasing and expanding (Bintz and Harste, 1991; see Harste, 1990; see also, Valencia, et.al., 1989). In response, increasing numbers of reading educators are looking not only to reading, but also to recent advances in holistic writing assessment to explore new potentials for assessing reading comprehension (Cooper and Odell, 1977). One powerful potential is freewriting.

I begin by identifying several recent efforts to reform reading comprehension assessment. Next, I describe the use of written retellings as a tool to support reading, as well as alternative form of reading assessment. Finally, I present a taxonomy that illustrates several patterns constructed from using freewriting with proficient readers. Implications of this research suggest the need to think differently about reading theory, reading assessment, and reading instruction.

RECENT ATTEMPTS TO REFORM READING COMPREHENSION ASSESSMENT

Many educators, most prominently reading educators, are responding to calls for reforms in assessment by proposing a variety of alternatives to standardized testing (Krashen, 1999; Flippo, 1997; Lipson and Wixson, 1997). Reading educators from all over the world are developing alternatives to formal and informal standardized testing that better reflect recent advances in reading theory. These alternatives include altering what standardized tests test, developing literacy portfolio approaches, and combining portfolio data with standardized test data (For a more complete discussion of these alternatives see Bintz and Harste, 1991).

Altering what standardized tests test

Over the past two decades, reading assessment has lagged behind recent advances in reading theory (Flippo, 1997; Routman, 1996; Valencia and Pearson, 1987). As a result, a significant gap has developed between our current understandings of reading and the standardized tests we use to assess reading comprehension (Valencia, Pearson, Peters, Wixson, 1989; see also, Durkin, 1987; Johnston, 1990). Many educators

believe that the best way to close this gap is to alter what standardized tests test.

In Australia educators have developed TORCH, a test of reading comprehension. This test includes a wide variety of reading materials representing multiple genres, and assesses reading comprehension through analysis of written retellings. In Great Britain, educators have developed the Effective Reading Tests, a series of tests filled with high-interest stories which students read and record answers to specific questions in a separate booklet, looking back to the passages as needed (see Pikulski, 1990).

Developing literacy portfolio approaches

In addition to altering what standardized tests test, an increasing number of educators are developing literacy portfolio approaches to trace the long-term evolution of student thinking or growth over time (Farr and Tone, 1998; Valencia, 1998; Wiener, 1997). These educators believe that developing more informed portfolio approaches, not altering what standardized tests test, better reflect recent advances in reading theory and function as powerful tools for teachers to document and monitor student learning over time (Valencia, 1990; Wolf, 1987/88). These approaches view a portfolio as a "living document of change" (Krest, 1990) and consists of a chronologically sequenced collection of work that includes writing samples, audio and video tapes, anecdotal records, observational notes, descriptions of reading strategies, and personal reactions.

Combining portfolio data with standardized test data

Similarly, much research is currently being conducted that attempts to combine literacy portfolio data with standardized test data for the purpose of constructing a more holistic assessment of student learning. Farr and Farr (1990), for example, have developed an integrated language arts portfolio system for classroom use that combines reading and writing in a single assessment. This system consists of personal, self-selected instances of reading and writing, as well as pieces of writing based on teacher-selected prompted activities. When combined, assessments on personal as well as prompted activities provide a highly contextualized, informative, and accurate profile of student reading and writing abilities.

WRITTEN RETELLING AS TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT

Written retelling of text has an extensive history in educational research. For at least the past sixty years, written retelling has been used in language-based research for a wide variety of purposes (see Johnston, 1993). For example, retellings have been used to explore children's conception of time, study children's memory processes, investigate differences between oral and written retellings, inquire into how individuals from different cultures retell stories differently, and determine to what extent student verbal and written rehearsal of reading results in improved reading comprehension performance (see Brown and Cambourne, 1987; see also, Kalmbach, 1986; Koskinen, et.al., 1988).

In addition, written retelling has been used as a tool for reading comprehension assessment since formal testing was initiated in the United States around the turn of the century. Specifically, written retellings have been used to explore: 1) the extent to which frequent practice in retellings with guidance can significantly improve reading comprehension of kindergarten students (Morrow, 1985a; 1985b), 2) the effects of retelling on reading comprehension processes (Gambrell, et.al., 1991), 3) the effects of retelling on comprehension and recall of text information (Gambrell, et.al., 1985), 4) the efficacy of frequent story retellings with structural guidance to improve student ability to dictate an original story (Morrow, 1986), and 5) the use of retellings by proficient readers as a means for identifying reading comprehension processes (Chandler, et.al., 1989).

FREEWITING DEFINED

Freewriting is similar to written retellings in that both represent written responses to text. They are dissimilar in that freewriting is practice in automatic writing; it involves writing quickly without stopping for a specified length of time, and without editing for quality or correctness (Elbow, 1973). In freewriting, students write for a predetermined period of time, usually at least ten minutes. They can write on whatever topics come into their mind, on specified topics, or on topics from earlier freewrites.

Conceptually, freewriting is an organic alternative to traditional models of composition in which the writing process is a matter of first getting thoughts straight (outlining) and then finding the right words to write (composing). In general, freewriting aims to help students: a) develop fluency in writing, b) understand and experience a concept before attempting to deal with it on an abstract level in writing, c) overcome the immediate editing of mistakes, d) make decisions about what to keep and what to omit, and e) avoid writer's block (see Rose, 1984; 1985; see also, Baxter, 1987; Tompkins, 1988; Stover, 1988).

FREEWITING AS TOOL TO SUPPORT WRITING

Typically, freewriting has been used as an instructional, prewriting activity with different populations and across different disciplines. For example, it has been used in the following college-level composition courses: 1) English as a Second Language to encourage students to develop writing fluency (Nelson, 1985); 2) introduction to basic writing classes to help students prepare for the written essay part of GED examinations (ABE Project, 1987); 3) freshman composition classes at two-year colleges (Reynolds, 1984; Dodd, 1987); and 4) learning skills courses with college students at major universities (Stahl, et.al., 1991).

In addition, freewriting has been used as a writing heuristic across traditional academic disciplines. For instance, it has been used as a writing technique in music classes to help students appreciate and understand the process of musical composition (Duke, 1987), in computer assisted instruction for remediation in reading and writing (Doyle, 1988), in journalism classes (Averill, 1988), in social studies classrooms (Tamura and Harstad, 1987; Goggin, 1985), as well as in business education and communication (Sills, 1985), and advertising copywriting courses (Pearce, 1988).

FREEWITING AS A TOOL TO ASSESS READING

Although researchers conducted studies on the use of freewriting to support the writing process, very little research looked at the use of freewriting to assess reading comprehension. This inquiry, then, was an attempt to recast freewriting from a tool to support writing to a procedure to assess reading comprehension. More specifically, I viewed freewriting

less as an instructional strategy for teaching writing, and more as an open-ended potential for assessing reading comprehension. I proposed that freewriting not only supported continuous and unedited writing but also encouraged and supported continuous and unedited personal responses to text. Moreover, freewriting was a potential to identify, understand, and come to appreciate the personal stances readers take on text, as well as the personal meanings readers construct from text.

Data sources

A total of 22 individuals participated in this study. At the time these individuals were graduate students in the School of Education at a major Midwestern university, and therefore assumed to be proficient readers. All students were enrolled in a semester long doctoral seminar designed to explore possibilities for developing alternative models of reading, reading instruction, and reading assessment.

One of the curricular invitations offered by the professor in this course was for students to collaborate on using different protocols for assessing reading comprehension holistically. These protocols included think-alouds, oral retellings, and freewriting. A total of fourteen students explored think-alouds; four selected oral retellings; and four others, including myself, chose freewriting.

Data collection

In this study, all participants read a chapter from a professional publication. In this instance, the chapter (total pages = 10) was "Current Thinking on Critical Thinking" in Critical Thinking: A Semiotic Perspective (Siegel and Carey, 1989). The following is a precise of this chapter.

Educators take different perspectives on the nature and function of critical thinking. Two conflicting perspectives, in particular, appear to dominate. One is represented by Robert Ennis' paper "A Concept of Critical Thinking" (1962) in which critical thinking is conceptualized in terms of basic skills, that is, as a set of context-free discrete skills that can be used to evaluate statements in any discipline. Drawing from the literature on informal logic, Ennis argues that logic provides the rules for correct reasoning, and proposes 12 "aspects" of critical thinking that should be used to make judgments about the worth of statements,

and thus “avoid pitfalls” in assessing statements. The aim of these aspects is to simplify the various aspects of critical thinking into some basic rules that people can follow to correctly judge statements.

The other perspective is represented by the work of John McPeck (1981) who challenges the analysis of Ennis, claiming that critical thinking is not a collection of context-free skills, but rather is more an attitude where domain-specific knowledge and social context is primary, not secondary. Simply stated, critical thinking is not a static and decontextualized activity used to derive truth, but a dynamic, deeply contextualized, and reflective way of constructing understanding.

According to the instructor, this chapter was selected for several reasons.

- The concept of critical thinking has been, and continues to be, an important topic in reading education, especially in reading assessment. Thus, some of the major inquiry questions driving this seminar were: *What is meant by critical thinking? What are some different conceptions of critical thinking? What is the relationship between different conceptions of critical thinking and recent advances in reading theory? What implications does this relationship have for developing new procedures for reading assessment?*
- The article discusses semiotics as a perspective on critical thinking. Semiotics is a knowledge domain that deals with the notion of “sign systems”, and builds primarily on the work of C.S. Peirce (see Siegel and Carey, 1989), as well as John Deely (1981; 1982), Umberto Eco (1976; 1979; 1983; 1984), Thomas Sebeok, (1977; 1986), and Charles Suhor (1982; 1984). Simply stated, from a semiotic perspective language, mathematics, and art, to name just a few, are sign systems. Each represents a constellation or system of signs, or symbols, that enable individuals to create, represent, and critically reflect on their understandings of the world. Since reading is an instance of language use, and language is a sign system, this article was selected to provide a semiotic perspective on reading, as well as on critical thinking.
- Although all of the students in this class were familiar with the term *critical thinking*, based on an informal conversation

between the instructor and class members at the beginning of the course, few, if any, were aware of different conceptions of critical thinking. Thus, this article was selected to introduce students to two different and conflicting perspectives on critical thinking.

After distributing the chapter in class, participants were asked by the instructor to read the selection, and complete the following instructions immediately after reading the selection.

Read this chapter. When you finish reading, use writing to explore what this chapter gets you to think about. Don't worry about spelling, revision, or finishing thoughts. Just keep writing. Write for 10 minutes. When you finish writing, read back over what you have written and underline parts that you particularly like - words, phrases, whole sentences - then share these with other members of your group. Afterwards, look to see what you can say about who you are as a reader on the basis of your freewriting. Share these with other members of your group, and prepare a list of the patterns of reading response that appeared to you.

All freewritings were completed and collected during one class session. The data consisted of a total of 22 handwritten freewrites (44 total pages). Over the next two months, this data set was analyzed collaboratively by the four member research team.

Data analysis

Data analysis focused specifically on developing categories based on identifying recurring patterns in the data (Glaser, and Strauss, 1967; see also, Glaser, 1978). For example, collaborative analysis took place at a total of 8 weekly meetings. The research team proceeded through a three-step process. First, each member of the research team read non-stop through the entire data set, recording no comments and not stopping for any long period of time to discuss and reflect on what we were reading. At this point, we were simply trying to familiarize ourselves with the data. That is, we were trying to get some preliminary understandings of and intuitive feelings for the data by reading and constantly asking

ourselves, *What are these (free)writers really saying?* Later, we met to share some of our first impressions of the data.

Second, we read through the entire data set again, only this time we read more critically and reflectively, in an effort to collaboratively construct working hypotheses from the data. At these meetings, we exchanged and discussed what we perceived were some preliminary categories in the data. Then, based on any overlapping in categories across members, we generated some preliminary patterns in the data by rereading the data set and asking ourselves *What are these (free)writers saying or doing that is similar?* And third, keeping in mind our current preliminary patterns, we read through the entire data set once again. This time, however, we focused on testing and refining emerging patterns by comparing them against the data. Here, we asked ourselves *What are these (free)writers saying or doing collectively?* and *What evidence in the data negates or refutes our emerging patterns?* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; see also, Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

Based on data analysis, the research team collaboratively developed a taxonomy which included five major categories: Voice, Generativity, Risk-taking, Reflexivity, Anomalies.

1. Voice: This category describes attempts by learners to establish a voice or take a perspective in the freewrite (e.g. the voice of the reader, the voice of the author, the voice of the instructor).

Examples:

1.1 The Voice of the Reader: "My concept of critical thinking is dialectical thinking. From my point of view, readers should not be satisfied with their own perspectives."

1.2 The Voice of the Author: "Critical thinking is an important skill that every student should have. Education should be meant to train students to think critically, therefore, the curriculum should reflect the acquisition of critical thinking. I agree with Ennis' definition of critical thinking in this regard."

1.3 The Voice of the Instructor: "I must say that the teacher in this class is giving me a lot of ideas, not just to think about in the context of my current classes, but in thinking about what I would like to do different and how I intend to write my book...it would have to be a whole

language, broad based one which would help the student learn to think rather than learn to fill in the blanks.”

2. **Generativity:** This category describes attempts by learners to generate ideas that go beyond the text by making intertextual links and personal connections, as well as speculating, synthesizing, extending, and analyzing.

2.1 **Making Intertextual Links:** “Afterwards I started to think about what Ennis’ twelve aspects had to do with semiotics. It seems to me that Ennis’ position is consistent with a realistic ontology endemic to semiotics.”

“Based on this article, I now want to go back and look at Louise Rosenblatt’s volume.”

2.2 **Making Personal Connections:** “We know that teaching pieces of fragments in isolation presents problems. When Siegel and Carey mentioned the Friday spelling test, it reminded me of the student who can fill in correct verb forms for days but cannot utter a simple complete sentence.”

“In high school teachers were always inserting into their lesson plans some activity that purportedly required critical thinking. These activities were most often excruciatingly boring and dull. This reflection back to my high school days was perhaps responsible for why I moderately enjoyed this piece.”

2.3 **Speculating:** “For me, reflection and skepticism are not enough. Critical thinking involves much more than that. For me, critical thinking strikes at the heart of a person’s ideological assumptions about his/her social world. Thus, I am very interested in seeing what relationship, if any, semiotics has with ideology.”

“Perhaps McPeck and Cornbleth can turn all of this into more specific strategies for teaching critical thinking.”

“We may be doing the wrong thing, and I can see now, as I write this, that we may be using a skills approach to teaching reading and writing.”

2.4 **Synthesizing:** “Siegel and Carey are mounting a challenge to Ennis’ conceptualization of critical thinking, alleging that it is skills-based, interactional in nature, and not context specific. In order to formulate an alternative definition, they draw on semiotics pointing that

it is instead strategy-based, transactional in nature, and highly context-specific.”

2.5 Extending: “So there is an issue for me that recurs in many contexts as I think about education. It centers on what is sometimes referred to as the conventions. Logical thinking/critical thinking have some cultural norms, historical baggage from their passage through our society and our society’s educational roots in the English grammar school.”

“In some respects this distinction between thinking and critical thinking is similar to the distinction my English teachers made between writing and creative writing.”

2.6 Analyzing: “In the area of reading, critical thinking means reading between and beyond the lines. One might claim that critical thinking is an essential part of comprehension. I think the opposite is also very important. Comprehension is essential for critical thinking, too.”

3. Risk-Taking: This category describes ways in which readers make themselves and their knowledge vulnerable by questioning, taking a stance, shifting interpretive stances, and rethinking the self as a reader.

3.1 Questioning: “Another aspect of critical thinking that I see is that it is creative. It’s a very creative act. But given that, what are the implications for teaching?”

3.2 Taking a Stance: “I fully agree with McPeck’s and the current view of critical thinking as a broad spectrum of knowledge and skill which come together to enable a person to raise their level of thinking beyond the superficial.”

3.3 Shifting Interpretive Stances: “What’s interesting to me is to see that I changed my thinking strategies as I read about the two perspectives on critical thinking. I became Ennis when I read about him and I felt myself in the company of McPeck when he argued for an alternative.”

“I had never thought about the necessity for including context as a prerequisite for thinking, but it’s true!”

3.4 Rethinking the Self as a Reader: “I am irritated by my lower ability of reading comprehension. I am also frustrated that I cannot see the connection, and tell the author’s ideas logically.”

4. Reflexivity: This category describes how learners used themselves and others as instruments for learning.

“I think from my discussion with others in my group, I found out what people, like Ennis, think while they believe in finding out precise and universal principles. For example, one student in my group is majoring in general linguistics. I think he believes in the traditional scientific method to systematically analyze a set of data. He thinks that the idea and logical analysis is a good way to train one’s mind.”

5. Anomalies: This category describes the points of tension or uneasiness the learner expresses toward the text; the onset of patterns that don’t connect.

5.1 Points of Tension: “I thought I knew the meaning of critical thinking. Now, I realize it is very hard to really understand what critical thinking really is.”

5.2 Patterns That Don’t Connect: “The twelve aspects represented by Ennis are very interesting. But my concept of critical thinking and his concept are a little bit different.”

IMPLICATIONS

Before discussing implications, it is important to note that this study, like most, if not all, research, has limitations. Some of these limitations include the following:

- This study involved a highly selected population. Participants were doctoral students, and therefore had intensive interest in and extensive knowledge about teaching, learning, and schooling.
- This study involved a highly specialized single text. Participants were asked to read a selection that was not self-selected, but assigned, and on a subject (critical thinking from a *semiotic* perspective) that was outside their personal experience and professional education.
- This study involved a less than authentic context. Participants were asked to read a selection, and then create a freewrite within a specified period of time and without discussing the selection with other readers.

With these limitations in mind, this study nevertheless suggests several implications for reforming reading comprehension assessment.

These implications include the notions that real reform in reading assessment will take place when: 1) the criteria used to assess reading comprehension significantly changes, 2) criteria used to assess reading comprehension liberates, rather than constrains, what readers can know and what we can know about readers, and 3) reading educators use criteria to continually reposition themselves as teachers and learners.

In many ways the taxonomy presented here represents a metaphor for proficient reading because it identifies reading processes and interpretive stances used by proficient readers. As a metaphor, it offers educators an alternative way of knowing about reading by providing a different perspective for thinking about comprehension, and a different set of criteria for assessing reading comprehension.

For instance, criteria such as the following typically have been, and continue to be, used on formal and informal standardized tests, commercially produced materials, and teacher made tests as measures or benchmarks for assessing reading comprehension:

- *Building Sight Vocabulary*
- *Recognizing Text Structures, e.g., Cause and Effect, Most Important to Least Important, Chronological Order*
- *Distinguishing Main Ideas from Supporting Ideas*
- *Recognizing Context Clues*
- *Organizing Ideas*
- *Making Inferences*
- *Sequencing Major Events*
- *Recalling Important Facts and Specific Details*

These criteria, and others like them, have been used primarily to determine to what extent individual readers comprehend text. In this traditional perspective, reading comprehension is seen as the reader's ability to demonstrate comprehension of a predetermined set of propositions that test makers assume already exist in a specific text. The extent to which readers can identify and recall this predetermined information is how they are assessed and subsequently placed at some point along a continuum ranging from a novice to an expert reader.

Criteria for assessment, however, like theories of learning, can be constraining or liberating. Specifically, they can constrain or liberate what readers can come to know from text and what teachers can come to know about readers. For example, requiring individuals to read and

answer a set of multiple choice questions at the end constrains not only what personal meanings readers can create and express from a text, but also what we, as reading educators, can know about thinking processes readers use to create personal meanings. Simply stated, criteria can constrain when they focus on verifying what readers *should* be comprehending; criteria can liberate when they focus on inquiring into what and how readers *are* comprehending. The taxonomy previously described significantly changes some of the criteria typically used to assess reading comprehension. These criteria illustrate that proficient readers in this study used a set of open-ended or liberating (rather than closed-ended or constraining) processes to construct meaning from text. The categories of voice, risk-taking are illustrative examples.

All too often, reading comprehension has been assessed based on individual readers' ability to hear author voices, or understand and recall author intended meanings of text. In this study, however, reading comprehension appeared more "plurivocal" (Polkinghorne, 1983) than monovocal in nature in that readers didn't privilege author voices over all others. Rather, readers heard and reflected on a variety of voices (e.g., the voice of the author, the voice of the instructor, and the voice of the reader). Each of these voices gave readers very different perspectives on, and therefore different interpretations of, the same text. As such, freewriting appeared to function as a potential for readers to not only hear multiple voices, but in the process of hearing these voices, they were able to hear their own voices as well. In this sense, reading comprehension seems to be enriched or enhanced.

The category of risk-taking is another change in criteria. Risk-taking is inextricably linked to the notion of voice. Freewriting enabled readers not only to hear different voices, including their own, but also to assume a position or take a stance. That is, freewriting allowed them to better understand what they currently know, how they came to know it, and why they continue to believe it. At the same time, readers used freewriting as a tool to generate questions, construct anomalies, and consider alternatives that actually put their current knowledge to the test. As a result, freewriting enabled readers to actively participate in a process of meaning making that involved taking stances, shifting stances, and taking new stances as they reflected on their own voices, as well as the voices of others.

Similarly, the categories of generativity and anomalies are changes in criteria. Unlike criteria such as *Building Sight Vocabulary*, *Recognizing Text Structures*, *Distinguishing Main Ideas from Supporting Ideas*, and *Recalling Important Facts and Specific Details*, which characterize comprehension in terms of propositions, generativity and anomalies are categories which conceptualize comprehension in terms of potentials that readers use to construct and extend ideas. These categories view reading comprehension as involving a variety of thinking processes which readers strategically use not only to create meaning from a text, but also recreate meaning beyond a text. Stated differently, these criteria suggest that reading comprehension does not stop with propositional meanings; rather, it starts with meaning potentials and continues indefinitely both onward and outward. Unlike traditional multiple choice question formats, freewriting functioned as an open-ended meaning making potential that gave students access to a variety of different thinking processes and interpretive stances which created personal meaning from text.

Finally, this study offers reading educators a vision of assessment as a potential to reposition ourselves. By repositioning, I mean continually taking a new stance or developing a new set of eyes through which to see reading, readers, and reading assessment. Freewriting is just one potential that enables reading educators to continually investigate and interrogate not only our beliefs about reading and readers, but also the criteria we use to assess reading comprehension. As such, it offers us a tool to put our criteria continually to the test, and in the process allows us to outgrow what we currently believe. As both teachers and learners, it's a win-win situation.

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