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Rereading to Enhance Text Understanding in the Secondary Classroom

Samuel A. Perez

*One cannot read a book: one can only reread it.
A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader
is a rereader. Vladimir Nabokov*

Young elementary school children, and especially poor readers, are often given the opportunity to read and reread easy material for the purpose of increasing their reading fluency. This practice is designed to give them the feeling of moving smoothly through text, instead of continuing their habit of labored, word-by-word reading. For teachers this is simply a matter of selecting easier-to-read texts and giving children the chance to develop reading habits more like those of older, better readers. In fact, an instructional procedure, the method of repeated readings, has been developed to promote reading fluency (Samuels, 1979). In the method of repeated readings, children read a short, meaningful passage several times until they can read it fluently. They then move on to a new passage. This procedure enables readers to experience ease in reading and improve their word identification ability. Each time children reread the text, they find it easier and easier to recognize the words. Because little attention is then required for word identification, more attention can be devoted to comprehension. Therefore, Samuels argues, repeated readings can also lead to improved comprehension of text.

But do older, secondary school students who do not have a reading fluency problem ever engage in rereading? Schallert and Tierney (1982) believe that rereading is an uncommon experience in most classrooms. Their observations of secondary students reveal that most readers view reading competency as the ability to read rapidly a single text once with maximum recall. As Tierney and Pearson (1983) state:

It seems that students rarely pause to reflect on their ideas or to judge the quality of their developing interpretations. Nor do they often reread a text either from the same or different perspective. In fact, to suggest that a reader should approach text as a writer who crafts an understanding across several drafts, who pauses, rethinks, and revises, is almost contrary to the well established goals readers proclaim for themselves (e.g., that efficient reading is equivalent to maximum recall based upon a single fast reading). (p. 577)

The value of rereading

If most secondary students do not engage in rereading, and their teachers do not encourage the practice, should this be the case? Several writers and educators believe that rereading should be an integral part of instructional practice, and student behavior, for several reasons. The novelist Vladimir Nabokov (1980) writes the following about the necessity for rereading:

When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not readily enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have one in regard to the eye in a painting) that takes in the whole

picture and then can enjoy the details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave toward a book as we do toward a painting. (p. 62)

Another argument for rereading is provided by Broyard (1985) when he writes how during a first reading of a book we are often distracted by pleasure, excitement or curiosity. The book may actually so seize us that we rush through it in what he refers to as a "kind of delirium." If we only read a book once, we may only remember the main outline of the work. The beautiful sentences and heartbreaking scenes may be either missed or forgotten, not necessarily because we are careless readers but because a book, especially a good or great book, can often be a very subtle, intricate and demanding experience.

New insights through rereading

Perhaps the strongest case for rereading made by educators comes from Tierney and Pearson (1983). They believe that readers are more likely to gain new insights into a variety of perspectives, or in their words: "try out different alignments or stances" as they read. Eleanor Gibson's description of how she approaches the work of Jane Austen provides an example of the different stances a reader may take toward a text:

Her novels are not for airport reading. They are for reading over and over, savoring every phrase, memorizing the best of them, and setting an even deeper understanding of Jane's "sense of human comedy"... As I read the book for perhaps the twenty-fifth time, I consider what point she is trying to make in the similarities and differences between the characters ...I want to discover for myself what this sensitive and perceptive individual is trying to tell me. Sometimes I only want to sink back and enjoy it and laugh myself. (Gibson & Levin, 1975, 458-460)

In order to read in this way, students must take the time to

rethink, reexamine, and review what they read. And this will not happen during a single reading; rather it occurs only after engaging in rereading the text several times.

Tierney and Pearson also suggest that we think of a reader as someone who revises in the same way that a writer is a reviser. They consider revising as important to reading as it is to writing. Students are only able to construct models of meaning for a text if they approach the text with the same degree of deliberation and reflection that writers engage in when they revise a text. Readers should examine their developing interpretations and view the models of meaning they build as draft-like in nature, subject to revision that emerges through subsequent rereading.

Encouraging rereading

David Wyatt (1986), in describing the draft-like quality of our interpretations of a text, notes that we take what we need from what we read, and what we need changes. The meaning of a text should be located less in a particular interpretation than in the history of our return to it. Wyatt is making a point about what he refers to as the “unfixedness” of the reader and the reader’s interpretation which, in Shakespeare’s words, “alters when it alteration finds.” The alteration found is alteration of the reader, and it has the effect of conditioning any interpretation a book has for a reader. As readers, we are only finished reading a book when we stop second-guessing it, and that means that we are probably never finished with it.

Once teachers accept the value of rereading, and students are convinced that they should engage in rereading, how can teachers encourage rereading? Tierney and Pearson (1983) remind us that we should not assume that merely allowing time for rethinking, reexamining, reviewing or rereading will

guarantee that students will revise their readings. Students should receive instructional guidance when they are asked to go through a text a second, third, or fourth time. They need to be given reasons for another reading of a text, such as to get a general feel for the topic, to find specific information, to appreciate the author's use of language or imagery, or to read from another point of view or perspective. And students need the support and feedback that can only come from having an opportunity to share and discuss their different interpretations of the text with thoughtful teachers and interested peers.

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