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Toward Horizons of Reading in the Aerospace Age

By *Barbara F. Edwards*

Auburn University

The Situation in Reading at Auburn University

1. *Milieu.* We live in an age when reading is a subject of concern to the man on the street as well as to the scholar. The "This Week" section of recent Sunday newspapers serves as only one indication of the public interest in our subject. We live also in a time when scientific reasoning by a staff or team of administrators, teachers, and researchers is not only possible, but encouraged. We live at a time when the factors of group dynamics and individual counseling (6) are being considered as important elements in learning processes. In these things, all of us have cause to rejoice.

More specifically, we at the land-grant university of Alabama have reason to feel that our state is a land of high potential. Auburn University's growth in total enrollment for the past few years parallels that of Western Michigan University. Three-fourths of those enrolling at Auburn are men, and the same proportion enroll in our Reading Improvement program, Psychology 310. We have drawn students from curricula in all undergraduate schools of the University—Engineering, Science and Literature, Education, Architecture and the Arts, Home Economics, Agriculture, Chemistry, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine.

During the last decade, our Student Guidance Service reported that only 45 per cent of entering Auburn freshmen attained the national Type III median for entering freshmen on the Cooperative English Test C2: Reading Comprehension, while only 26 per cent attained the national Type II median on that test. To meet this problem, a non-credit reading improvement course was begun in the department of psychology on a volunteer basis in Spring, 1951. The professors who planned and carried through this course wisely sought to attract primarily juniors, seniors, and graduate students, who were in a position to advertise the course. Later an assistant dean enrolled. This program continued with one class of 20 students meeting for one

hour per day for from three to five hours each week, until in the spring of 1953 an official course awarding three hours of general elective credit was admitted to the catalog of Auburn University. Beginning in the Fall, 1954, PG 310 was expanded from three to seven sections; it has continued to grow until today we serve from 650 to 800 students each year. We never seem to catch up with the demand demonstrated by our waiting list.

In our efforts we have been encouraged by a campus-wide Faculty Council Committee on Reading Improvement. Here is a quotation from one of their reports to demonstrate the breadth of their interest:

We recommend that all freshmen be re-tested for reading efficiency at the end of two or three quarters to discover relative progress in reading under the present program and under special reading improvement programs.

We consider that reading improvement is a responsibility of all departments of instruction. No special program should replace the instructor's contribution to his students' improvement in reading efficiency. We recommend that each department of instruction give attention to ways of encouraging better reading and study skills among its students by:

- (1) selection of texts that are well-written and appropriate in reading difficulty;
- (2) assignments that help students use text and references effectively;
- (3) systematic way of identifying and mastering the special vocabulary of the subject;
- (4) encouragement of related and wide reading;
- (5) encouragement of reading in professional journals. (3:6)

Perhaps you would wish to consider the formation of such a committee in your school.

Within the school of education, of which we are formally a part, a committee on Reading coordinates our consulting functions with those of our embryo Reading Clinic and the classes in teacher education which lead to a master's degree in curriculum and teaching with concentration in the area of reading. We hope to consult increasingly with the school's coordinator of student personnel for initial and followup testing of education underclassmen as an element in our new program of selective admission to teacher education.

As for consulting outside Auburn University, Mrs. Barbara Sanders and the writer have demonstrated our reading laboratory to numerous public school teachers and several college teachers, advised on reading

problems of several Alabama and Georgia counties, and spent several days to lead in-service training for the initiation of reading programs in all high schools of Mobile, Alabama. The guidance director in the state department of education has requested from us a bibliography of materials and equipment used in our reading laboratory. Two further opportunities came when the author was asked to serve as reading consultant to a NDEA Guidance and Counseling Institute convened at Auburn University in the summer of 1960 and as a consultant at the Conference on College Reading for Junior College Faculties at the University of Florida in January, 1962.

2. *Subject-Matter*. We view our subject with Strang as not only a physical, but also a psychological process:

Our perception of the new reading situation not only determines our approach to the book, chapter, or article; it also influences our selection of which book to read, which parts to read, what we get out of the reading, and what we remember. This perception guides our reading at every stage of the process. (10)

3. *Teachers*. The staff of our reading program has developed to include two faculty members plus from three to five graduate teaching assistants with undergraduate majors in psychology or education. The writer serves as supervisor. We work as a staff, meeting weekly, but teaching in varied styles within the general frame of reference described later. The fact that sections taught by graduate assistants secure test gains nearly as great as do those taught by faculty of higher rank may be due in some measure to our continuing cooperation and interchange of ideas.

4. *Learners*. We feel the greatest strength of our reading program is that every student enters by his own choice. For several years, each class in the university has contributed about equally to our enrollment, until in 1960-61 the number of freshmen increased to one-third of our total. Some faculty advisors and Student Guidance advisors recommend our course but we find that by far our most effective advertisers are the students who have completed the class.

A Student-Centered Program in Developmental Reading

The foregoing facts of our milieu coupled with current concern to provide for individual differences (7) and the 1960 IRA "new frontiers"—differentiating instruction to provide for the needs of

learners, reading and mental health, and reading in relation to the total curriculum (4)—have led us to evolve an approach to our teaching which Carl Rogers might claim as “student-centered.” Dr. Rogers has written:

We may state briefly our present concept of the role of the leader in an educational situation when the aim is to center the process in the developing aims of the students.

Initially the leader has much to do with setting the mood or climate of the group experience by his own basic philosophy of trust in the group, which is communicated in many subtle ways.

The leader helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the members of the class, accepting all aims.

He relies upon the student's desire to implement these purposes as the motivational force behind learning.

He endeavors to organize and make easily available all resources which the students may wish to use for their own learning.

He regards himself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group in the ways which seem most meaningful to them, in so far as he can be comfortable operating in these ways . . . (8)

To this concept of a leader-teacher Carter and McGinnis have added a useful complement in their “principles governing the reading workshop:”

1. Every student should know how well he reads and should select for himself the specific reading abilities he needs to acquire.
2. The student must understand that he can improve his reading ability and that the responsibility for doing so rests with him.
3. Each student should be given an opportunity to set up his own reading objectives and to attain them at his own rate and in accordance with his own plan.
4. Instructional materials should be simple, direct and specific.
5. The student should improve his reading ability as he does his regular academic work. “Busy work” should be avoided entirely.
6. Attention should be given to physical, emotional, and background factors which may affect reading performance.
7. The student should evaluate his own achievement at the beginning and end of the laboratory activity. (1:147)

In PG 310 Reading Improvement, we strive to provide a small group situation with intensive testing, interviewing, and guidance. This

ten-week course meets one hour a day, four days each week. We aim to help each student discover the specific weaknesses and strengths in his reading then to aid him to select, from a number of resources, materials at his reading level in various content fields, whether that level is fifth-grade or seventeenth. Each student continually re-evaluates and advances to ever more difficult materials at his own pace. We consider the greatest assets of our program to be threefold: (1) Every student enters by his own choice; (2) each student may tailor the course to his or her interests, needs and objectives; and (3) we are continually building a library of materials and equipment for a vast range of reading levels and skills, all immediately available to the student during classes.

As you are aware, when a teacher intends to individualize instruction within any class, even when the major responsibility of learning is impressed upon the student himself, some tools must be available to save time of both teacher and student. We feel much of our success is due to our development of two major tools. The first of these is a device called "My Reading Improvement Record," directed toward the second objective in the previous paragraph. In this Record each student keeps a log of his daily work—his objectives, his materials, and his daily evaluation of his progress toward his goals. Additional space is provided for the student to indicate and/or check items such as certain biographical information, reasons for taking the reading course, persons who most influenced him to enter the course, opinion as to his reading weaknesses, his current academic and employment (if any) schedules, self-evaluation scales for improvement and effort during the quarter, diagnosed or suspected visual difficulties, self-ranking of reading status, occasion for using guidance services, outside magazine and book reading, statement of easy and difficult subjects, and plan for continuing to improve his reading after the course has ended. We have found that this record, filed in a folder together with other materials used throughout the quarter, compiles essential data for the teacher and seems to arouse initiative in the student, serving him as a continuing means to evaluate both his aims and the materials he chooses toward those aims.

Our reading laboratory contains about 250 kinds of aids—books, pamphlets, magazines, and equipment—acquired in an order similar to that suggested by Staiger (9). How does our student choose? Here our second tool is introduced; this we consider to be the chief contri-

bution we have so far made to the reading profession. This index, "Your Index to the Auburn Reading Laboratory," is kept in the student's folder for daily use and has been published in 1961 revision elsewhere (2). It enables us to send two sections of PG 310 to our laboratory simultaneously. It is organized so that each student may look through its table of contents to find the aims he has chosen for work, then find quickly a listing of materials which will help him toward those aims. The table of contents reads as follows:

- I. What "Reading" is All About
- II. What "Language" is All About
- III. Study Skills
 - A. How to Get Interested in What I'm Reading
 - B. How to Concentrate
 - C. How to Take or Make Notes
 - D. How to Remember What I've Read
 - E. How to Prepare for and Take a Test
 - F. How to Use the Library
 - G. Location of Information
- IV. Comprehension
 - A. How to Develop Flexibility of Rate
 - B. How to Correct Word-by-Word Reading or "Going Back"; to Read for Ideas
 - C. How to Improve Study-Type Reading
 - D. Directed Reading (Reading to Answer Questions)
 - E. Poetry Comprehension
 - F. Sentence Meaning
 - G. Paragraph Comprehension
 1. How to Develop Ability to Grasp Main Ideas as Against Details
 2. How to Find Organizational Pattern in the Material
 - H. Selection of Key Words—How to Select Key Words in Material
 - I. How to Read to Solve a Problem
 - J. How to Improve Skimming Techniques
 - K. How to Develop Ability to Read Critically
 - L. How to Learn to Follow Directions
- V. Word Meaning (Vocabulary)
 - A. Introduction to Methods of Building Vocabulary

- B. How to Build Word-Power
 - 1. Using Context Clues and Understanding Connotations
 - 2. Analyzing Words into Prefixes, Roots, and Suffixes
 - 3. Learning Synonyms and Antonyms, Homonyms, Homographs
 - 4. Using a Dictionary
 - 5. Improving Spelling
 - 6. Learning Basic Vocabulary in Special Fields
 - 7. Learning Words from Other Languages
 - 8. Learning Idioms
- VI. Rates of Reading
 - A. See Comprehension, Sections 1, 2, and 10
 - B. How to Increase Rates of Reading
- VII. Reading in Special Subjects
 - A. How to Read in Social Sciences
 - B. How to Read in History
 - C. How to Read in Science
 - D. How to Read in Mathematics
 - E. How to Read in Literature
 - F. How to Read in Fine Arts
 - G. How to Read in Foreign Languages
 - H. How to Read in Business
 - I. How to Read in Law
 - J. How to Read Current Events (Newspapers, magazines)
- VIII. Developing Broader Interest in Reading

Our Index has opened many gates. It serves as incentive to select books for various purposes. It helps the student realize the variety and number of aims he might set in this huge area of reading. It implicitly emphasizes the notion of flexibility of rate. It provides extensive help in the problem of concentration—one of our most prevalent problems. It helps develop an awareness of various possible approaches to vocabulary. It opens the door for use of texts and dictionaries in many content areas. It is a constant, unreprimanding guide to help the student lift his head to horizons of reading.

Do these tools work? We have evidence that they do, from tests and from student reports of improvement in other subjects. Two of our studies have demonstrated that scores of students enrolled in PG 310 increased from beginning to end on reading tests to a statistically

significant degree. Furthermore, Donald L. Horne (5) has shown in his 1961 investigation of degree of progress in Reading Improvement related to subsequent academic performance that the group of students selected in his study made significant increases in mean grade-point standing subsequent to the reading course. As for student evaluation, only a month ago one young man exclaimed to our delight, "Reading Improvement grows—well, it doesn't grow on you—it grabs you!" Our students as well as graduate assistants are active in suggesting ways we may improve our laboratory. For example, we have been pleased to add a number of paperback science fiction books at the suggestion of one superior student. We seek such constructive criticism each quarter.

Far from satisfied, our staff is planning research into a number of areas. At the moment L. E. Barrington is in process of composing a thesis designed to measure correlations between attitude of the teacher as perceived by the student and (1) the student's gains in reading, (2) changes in his measured discrepancy between self-concept and self-ideal. Some studies envisioned for the future include evaluation of various study habits and skills we do not yet test, such as listening and library usage. We plan to evaluate critical reading, skimming, and reading flexibility. We hope also to determine the readability of all materials listed in our Index. We hold continuing interest in therapeutic dimensions of reading improvement. We would like to try out certain teaching machines. We are about to investigate four methods of teaching vocabulary in college. Broadly, we wish to evaluate at the end of instruction general academic achievement, changes in personality and perception, changes in supplementary reading for other classes, and changes in leisure reading. We would be glad to cooperate with any of you at the high school level who undertake research in these areas.

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