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The Design of the Reader in Educational Settings

By Susanne V. Knudsen & Bente Aamotsbakken, Vestfold University College, Norway

In Norway a new curricular reform was implemented in 2006; a reform characterized by inclusiveness (all school levels up to university level) and a particular focus on five cross-disciplinary basic skills. The skills in question are: reading, writing, numeracy, oral skills and the use of digital media. The reform entails that teachers in all school subjects need an awareness of these skills when teaching their specific curriculum subject. A teacher in mathematics, for example, needs to ensure that the pupils are able to read the mathematical text and write according to the textbook’s goals.

Introduction

At Vestfold University College, Norway the project “Lesing av fagtekster som grunnleggende ferdighet i fagene” (The Reading of Expository Texts as a Basic Skill in Curricular Subjects) is conducted from 2006–2009. The project deals with four curricular subjects: religion, mother tongue, mathematics and science. In this article we will give examples from observations and interviews carried out in a 5th grade class during mother tongue tuition.

The observarions were carried out whilst the 5th grade class was occupied with reading the text “Philosophers”. In the text “Philosophers” from the textbook Ord for alt 5 (Eide et al., 2006) (Words for Everything 5), used in the teaching of Norwegian as mother tongue, the principles of the new Norwegian curriculum are implemented and integrated. The curriculum focuses on the pupil’s reading of different modalities (meaning illustrations in the shape of paintings, drawings or verbal text), but what is really new in the curriculum is an increased awareness of reading as a basic skill. This new awareness of reading as a skill to be developed is reflected in the heading of one of the chapters in “Philosophers”: “Read and learn!” Reading in the new curriculum is not just about decoding a text, but is also about developing vital reading strategies such as gathering information and interpretation. Finally, and most importantly, the curriculum stipulates that the pupil should be able to carry out the basic exercise of collecting information from the text, but that he or she is also to develop his or her abilities of interpretation and reflection until he or she becomes a competent and critical reader. “Philosophers” contains the following elements: illustrations, captions, a verbal text, exercises, a simple drawing and a fact box. The changes in the Norwegian curriculum are reflected in the meta-level of the text, in which pupils are encouraged to reflect more broadly on the major existential questions posed by the philosophers they are studying.

Figure 1. The text “Philosophers” from the textbook Ord for alt 5 (Eide et al., 2006).

In the text “Philosophers”, an excellent demonstration of the curriculum guidelines can be found. We find it in key words such as “reflection,” “interpretation” and “questioning”, all of which are strongly emphasised in the curriculum. The text urges the pupil to think about existential questions such as “How is the earth created?” and “How should a community be governed?” The exercises encourage interpretation by asking the pupil to explain why the text can be classified as non-fiction. These exercises also fulfil the curriculum’s emphasis on the development of pupils’ critical reading competence.

The text shows that reading requires skills, strategies and competence. Literacy as a skill is connected to a close reading of the text. Literacy as strategy is connected to interpretation. Literacy as competence is connected to the combination of skills and strategies with an awareness of potential reader positions.

Our introduction focuses on the significance of reading. Reading is not only a matter of decoding a text, but is also about gaining a deeper understanding of the text. In the second part of this article we will introduce definitions of reading skills, strategies and competence. The third and fourth parts present the theoretical obligations to develop concepts of three reader positions (inspired by Iser and Gestalt-theory) and a theory of an ‘extra-text’ (inspired by Fish, 1980 & Eco, 1979). The fifth part deals with the resistant reader and cultural practices (inspired by Corcoran, 1994).
Reading skills are required for a first reading, which can be done using various methods. In this context reading skills are understood as close reading, skim reading and finding key words. These skills are functional tools. However, the skills can also be connected to reading strategies. In the 2000 PISA-study, reading strategies are divided into three categories: gathering information, interpretation and drawing conclusions, and the pupil’s final reflection on the text she has read (Lie et al., 2001, p. 42). Anne-Beate Mortensen-Buan has surveyed the pupil’s strategies before reading, during reading and after reading (Mortensen-Buan, 2006). Strategies used before reading are linked to the goal of the reading and the activation of previous knowledge. During the reading the pupil can make notes, stop to review his or her understanding of the text and formulate questions. Strategies used after reading may include writing a short summary of the text, doing exercises, and discussing the attitudes and values expressed in the text.

Competence is a broader concept than the word qualification in the sense that qualifications about how elements are connected. The word competence has a broader meaning than the word qualification in the sense that qualifications about how elements are connected. The word competence includes knowledge and discernment in a number of textual genres and multimodal texts (verbal and non-verbal, written texts, pictures and sounds). Furthermore, reading competence implies a cultural competence which enables the pupil to decipher the meaning inherent in the educational text. This is stated in the new curricular reform in Norway for mother tongue tuition. Competence implies both skills and strategies. Furthermore, reading competence also implies a cultural competence which enables the pupil to decipher the meaning inherent in the educational text.

In the Nordic countries, reader-response theories have inspired several studies of reading competence. In particular, the theories of Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco and Stanley Fish have been used to develop new concepts for analyzing textbooks and their practical use. Iser’s concept of interaction has proved particularly useful (Iser, 1974; 1978). He has inspired the study of readers’ responses to literary texts as interactions between texts and readers, and also the study of educational texts (Tønnessen & Maagerø, 1999; Bäckman, 2002). Eco’s study of fictional texts and his theoretical reflections on the reading processes and the open and closed text have been adapted to analyzing textbooks and their practical use. Iser’s concept of interaction has proved particularly useful (Iser, 1974; 1978). He has inspired the study of readers’ responses to literary texts as interactions between texts and readers, and also the study of educational texts (Tønnessen & Maagerø, 1999; Bäckman, 2002). Eco’s study of fictional texts and his theoretical reflections on the reading processes and the open and closed text have been adapted to analyzing textbooks and their practical use.

Wolfgang Iser studies the process of reading by stressing the interaction between the text and the reader: “The consistent interpretation” or gestalt is a product of the interaction between text and reader, and so it cannot be exclusively traced back either to the written text or to the disposition of the reader.” (Iser, 1978, p.119). Susanne V. Knudsen elaborates on Iser’s theory of the interaction between the text and the reader by studying the concept of projection (Knudsen, 1994; 2008). In the projection the reader draws on his or her experience of the reading of the text. However, the reader cannot interpret the text in whatever way she likes, because the text itself limits the reading. Some texts are open for several readings (i.e. the texts have gaps, open endings) whereas other texts are closed texts telling the readers what and how to read, thus ensuring that the intended message is communicated. The most obvious example of closed texts are textbooks, which provide information using one-way communication. Knudsen (2008) has introduced three reader positions by establishing an imaginative axis between the text and its potential readers. On both sides of the axis there is a projection; various positions are offered to the reader in the text, and the authentic reader can take place as one of the three readers. The confirming reader belongs to the text, whereas the authentic reader is both the confirming reader when he or she is in the reading process, and the confirmed reader having read the text. The exploring reader can be found both in the text and in the authentic reader meeting with this text. The confronting reader belongs to the text, whereas the confronted reader is the authentic reader meeting with this text. The axis of the text and its potential three readers can be illustrated by the following model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>confirming</td>
<td>confirming and confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploring</td>
<td>exploring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confronting</td>
<td>confronted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three reader positions

Which of the positions the authentic reader will enter into, depends on his or her potential as a reader, his or her knowledge, interest and competence. The confirming reader in “Philosophers” is mirrored in existential and philo-
sophisticated questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” and “Why do people become ill?” These questions are characterized by their universal validity. They are of significance to all individuals independent of cultural or religious background. The following examples are taken from a recent interview connected to a research project. The first is related to a confirmed reader. Lisa, a ten year old pupil in the 5th grade, studied the text and responded to the question “How was the earth created?” with: “Something crashed (clapping her hands). Stars were created and died. Our earth was born because of the Big Bang. After a few hundred years the earth was formed.” These utterances reveal that Lisa is a confirmed reader. She recognizes existential phenomena about life in general, and identifies herself with the contents of the questions in the body text. However, when she introduces the Big Bang into her reflections, she is also the exploring reader. Lisa incorporates a phenomenon from science by talking about the Big Bang. She also refers to her leisure time activity, namely watching the National Geographic Channel. Lisa thereby incorporates the exploring reader in her response. The sequence with the exercises contains the confirming reader by giving closed questions; i.e. questions that can be answered by quoting a sentence from the body text (the text can be viewed in the end of the article). However, the final task is oriented towards the exploring reader by challenging the pupil to explain why the excerpt in the body text is non-fiction. The pupil is encouraged to gather information and reflect upon previous knowledge. The text presupposes the confirming reader, when it implies a reading based on previous knowledge about philosophy, Greek mythology and renaissance pictorial art. When it comes to the authentic reader, the painting challenges the reader. The exploring reader must be able to make inferences, and the following experience from another interview will demonstrate this. Petter, aged ten years and a 5th grade pupil, says that the painting represents “God and Jesus”. He continues: “Somebody is thrown out. The figure in the middle looks like a boss.” His classmate, Ivar, adds by saying: “I don’t think that the boss, the old greybeard, smiles very often.” After reading the text Ivar adds: “It is about philosophers. They like to pose questions. They ask questions about how the earth has been created, how things should be governed.” Petter interrupts by saying: “Those are stupid questions.” Ivar says: “They are clever questions.”

In the course of the conversation Petter has moved from the exploring to the confronted reader. The fact that he sees a picture of God and Jesus instead of Greek philosophers indicates that he acts as a confronted reader. Ivar pushes him in the direction of becoming even more confronted when he claims that the painting portrays philosophers. The text then breaks down for Petter, and he rejects the total content by stating that the questions are stupid. We could say that Petter has moved into the process of the confronting reader. The confronting reader is not an intrinsic part of the text. The authentic reader might get confused by the exploring reader in the text in ways that can open for a variety of readings, resistance against some readings and reflections upon possibilities of reading. However, in the “Philosophers”, the text only includes the confirming reader and the exploring reader, not the confronting reader. The text presupposes the confirming reader, when it implies a reading based on experience, a reading which creates identification, and a reading with the text as a mirror. The exploring reader is in action when the pupils are challenged to gather information, select knowledge and reflect critically upon the questions. When Petter acts as a confronting reader he moves into a process which takes him beyond the text as the frame of what to read (Iser, 1978).

The three reader positions can overlap each other in a classroom with different authentic readers, i.e. the pupils have different backgrounds and experiences. Consequently, they may in the process meet the educational texts as confirming readers and confirmed readers after the reading in one context, and as exploring and confronted or confronting readers in other situations and contexts. Also, one pupil can read a textbook as a confirmed reader, whereas the same pupil will be the exploring reader meeting the web site accompanying the textbook. In a classroom some pupils may encounter confirmed readers, whereas other pupils will meet the same text as confronted readers. Furthermore, some pupils may adjust other pupils’ readings; they can shift reader positions.

The “extra-text”

The observations in the classroom have been made with a new concept in mind: the concept of the extra-text (Aamotsbakken, 2006). Aamotsbakken is influenced by Stanley Fish’s claim that the only interesting texts are the readers’ interpretations. Fish’s argument demonstrates how the pupils create a text different from the text they have been assigned (Fish, 1980). This kind of reading can be a subjective matter, but it can also be the result of a co-operation between pupils in “interpretative communities.” This extra-text tends to be multiple and diverse as there could be as many texts as the number of pupils in a group. Instead of the concept of interaction the concept of transaction can underscore the “ongoing process” between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1993, p.17; Aamotsbakken & Knudsen, 2009).

In the example of Petter and Ivar, who are reading “Philosophers,” it is evident that two extra-texts emerge from their readings. In the case of Petter, the extra-text demonstrates what he has learned in religious education in school. His classmate, Ivar, creates a very different extra-text because he is “closer” to the text and reads it with no references to biblical myths. We may postulate that Ivar is a “better” reader in the sense that he copes with the text’s intention. Petter uses his imagination and combines his reading with more tangential impressions. The two extra-texts turn out to be different, but this variation can be used as a resource in interpretive communities. Fish (1980) emphasises that his interest is in what interpretative communities do with the text, rather than what the text does with the reader. For Fish, the real reading is done by interpretative communities, because the individual
readers interpret the texts according to the conventions of the community.

Eco’s concept of the model-reader has been a source of inspiration in the development of the model of the extra-text. The extra-text is created during the transition between the authentic reader’s situation, in which he or she confronts the text, and his or her attempt to “meet” the text. Here we see a distinction between the confronted reader and the confronting reader. The confronted reader is passive in the sense that he or she is dependent on the textual framework, whereas the confronting reader is the active creator of a text which differs from the original text. Petter is an example of the confronting reader because he interprets the picture as representing God and Jesus instead of the Greek philosophers. Nevertheless, Petter’s extra-text contributes to a meaningful discussion in the classroom.

In some cases the text can be too advanced for the reader. For instance, if a reader merely decodes a text with no further understanding, there will hardly be any extra-text. In this case the text will be abandoned, and thus extra-text will be restricted to the point of being worthless. However, when the text shows itself worth while struggling with the opposite reaction is likely to be the result. The codes can then be shared by the readers, and their competence is sufficient for understanding references and hints in the text. In an educational setting, some texts may appear too complex and almost meaningless for some pupils, whilst other pupils will find that the same texts contain an exciting challenge to discover new knowledge. This is evident in the example of the two male pupils reading “Philosophers.”

Educational texts contain different kinds of model-readers. In some educational texts the model-reader is very inviting and addresses the pupil with an appropriate number of codes. Other parts of the text may be filled with too complex and almost meaningless for some pupils, whilst other pupils will find that the extra-text will be restricted to the point of being worthless. However, when the text shows itself worth while struggling with the opposite reaction is likely to be the result. The codes can then be shared by the readers, and their competence is sufficient for understanding references and hints in the text. In an educational setting, some texts may appear too complex and almost meaningless for some pupils, whilst other pupils will find that the same texts contain an exciting challenge to discover new knowledge. This is evident in the example of the two male pupils reading “Philosophers.”

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In an educational context the authentic readers are a complex group with varying interests, abilities and motivation. Consequently, educational texts struggle to adjust the reader positions and their relation to the group of authentic readers. The number of extra-texts produced by a given text is unpredictable. Corcoran (1994) argues for a response linked to culturally oriented practices. In his view, both readers and texts are deeply influenced by cultural practices. He therefore proposes to contextualize all readings and to question the pupil’s opinion more often. Instead of concentrating on textual qualities, he wants to find out what could provoke the pupils’ feelings, perceptions and associations by reading a certain text. His term “the resistant reader” is vital to this argument and is commented on in this way:

“...What is at issue for the resistant reader is an attempt to recognize, challenge and change predetermined roles or subjectivities. What readers need is some assistance in understanding how the elements of an already constructed perspective, of gender, family, or class background, age difference, or historical placement are helpful in a particular reading, and those that hinder a particular reading.” (Corcoran, 1994, p.16).

Corcoran’s ideas of culturally oriented practices and resistant cultural re-
Lisa represents a more ‘sympathetic reader’ than Petter, Ivar and Mohammed. She reaches the potential of both the confirming and the exploring reader. She reads the painting concomitantly with the body text and the exercises as the whole ‘text wants her to read it’. She says: “We got some facts about the philosophers. I have heard about Socrates before … The painting reminds me of the Greeks, the way they act in the painting, I have seen it on National Geographic.”

The concept of intersectionality has proved useful when analyzing marginal positions represented in textbooks (Knudsen, 2006). In expository texts, minority groups are often presented from the point of view of the majority. Intersectuality can also be useful in analyses of reader positions in the majority culture. The reading of the marginal positions illustrates how ethnicity and gender are presented as a minority group with its own rules closely linked to religion. In the textbook, the categories of ethnicity and gender are represented through filters with pupils brought up in a Western culture as the model readers.

Corcoran (1994) divides resistant responses into an “active/personal response” and an “intersubjective/ resistant/associative” response. When it comes to cultural resistance, he points towards feelings and associations. From a personal point of view the question which arises during the reading is “What feelings did the text arouse in you?”, whereas the cultural response is “What aspects of your age, sex, race, or family background would help to explain why you reacted that way?” (ibid., p. 16). Both questions are oriented towards feelings, and it is the confirming reader in the text and the authentic confirmed reader of the text who are active. The exploring reader is used, asking from the personal point of view: “What memories or attitudes did the text bring to mind?”, and from the cultural response: “What aspects of your gender, race or class make these memories or attitudes difficult for you?” (ibid., p. 17). Other responses concern the intertextual level and function through association. They are the responses of the interpreting reader, who asks from the personal point of view: “Does this text call to mind any other works you have read recently or earlier? What particular references or textual features connect the works”, and from the cultural point of view “What intertextual patterns (and therefore beliefs and ideologies) do you find problematic in this range of texts?” (ibid.). Furthermore, the confronting reader is activated when Corcoran proposes that the pupils’ responses are to be used as a cultural reader: “Which of the other readings of your group or class provides the biggest challenges to your reading? Why?” (ibid.)

The extra-text can then be the challenge in an interpretative community.

In Corcoran’s concept of multiple reading positions there is a potential for every pupil to take part in the reading of the text. However, the didactic practices in educational cultures often have as their goal to reach a consensus of what the text represents. Teachers are trained to create a basic interpretative frame acceptable for most pupils in a group. Consequently, the variation of extra-text is not always regarded as a fascinating expression of creativity. On the contrary, the textbooks with their exercises and their practical use in the classroom encourage simple solutions which express consensus. By sticking
to consensus oriented readings and failing to understand the resources hidden in pupils, the interpretative communities are neglected. The resources of intertextuality and intersectionality are made invisible and remain an untapped resource for the teacher. Teachers aware of multiple reading positions (understood in concordance with theories of the three reader positions and the extra-text) can, together with their pupils, open for greater diversity in the classroom.

The text in figure 1 (translated).

Philosophers

\*Among the Greeks some individuals liked to pose questions and find answers. They were called the philosophers. The word "philosopher" means "somebody who loves wisdom". The philosophers would ask questions like:

- What is the earth made of?
- What is the meaning of life?
- Why do people become ill?
- How should a country be governed?

The most well-known philosopher in Athens was Socrates. He walked the streets and the squares and talked with people. He wanted to make people think for themselves and not accept what other people believed. Socrates wanted people to fight for what they thought was the most important thing in life. Everybody should be fair, stick to the truth and behave kindly to each other.*

Writings

You are going to do a close reading of "Philosophers" and test yourself to see if you understand the content.

Please answer the following questions:

a What does the word philosopher mean?

b What kind of tasks did the philosophers have?

c What is the name of the most well-known philosopher in Athens?

d Why did Socrates think that it was important for human beings to think for themselves?

e How did Socrates make contact with people?

f Write a sentence describing what Socrates regarded as the most important issue in life. Everybody should be fair, stick to the truth and behave kindly to each other.*

g Explain why the excerpt can be classified as non-fiction.

* Bill Corcoran uses the expression "political and ideological discourses", a concept we wish to avoid using. The reason is that this concept has reminiscences of the 1970s' ideology critique.

** When it comes to a precision of the categories "open text" and "closed text" these are developed by Eco and defined in The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts (Eco, 1979).

3 Our translation here and in the following of the interviews.

4 Today there is an increasing awareness of the importance of reading as a cooperative activity. This is seen in the many neologisms with the prefix 'sam-' in the Danish and Norwegian languages, for instance 'samlesning' (joint reading). In English language the prefix co- functions in the same way, i.e. co-reading, co-operation. The focus is on the historic and cultural meaning of interpretative communities rather than the individual reader.

5 The concept of the 'sympathetic reader' is used by semiotic literature researchers in opposition to the 'symptomal reader'. The Norwegian professor of literature, Alette Kittang, has elaborated on these concepts.