

What Are Your Moral Duties as a Reader and as a Teacher of Reading?

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From the psychology of Bruner (1997) to the literary analyses of Hardy (1977), theorists of mind have argued that we learn, and we live, through narrative. Both asserted that through the deep engagement that comes with encountering new narratives, we inhabit new worlds, we cross borders that have no walls, and in fact, we become ourselves. If reading constitutes a vital route to self-actualization, then it becomes important to ask what moral responsibilities come with the role of being a teacher of reading.

What are the moral responsibilities of a reading teacher? I tried asking this question to a number of friends and colleagues, and their answers were remarkably consistent. They tended to feel that a reading teacher does not have any particular moral duties. Yet, I want to suggest that teachers do indeed have three moral duties: to read to their students, to read with their students, and to read for themselves.

Reading to Our Students

To be able to listen to the reading of another person is an important freedom. Where did reading aloud begin? The answer is about 3 thousand years ago, in the Greco-Roman period of Jewish history, when the public reading of laws was thought to have taken place not in a synagogue but at the city walls (Fine, 1997). Of course, poetry is older than this: The earliest poem we know about, the story of the first superhero, “The Epic of Gilgamesh” is about 5 thousand years old, and it was thought to have been shared for centuries through oral retellings before being written down on clay tablets about 3000 BCE (George, 2003). For millennia, listening to the reading of another person has been an important feature of civilization and of social life.

Since the third century, the person who reads the Bible aloud in church, the lector, has been regarded as a respected and important person in Christian communities. In Muslim communities, the public reading aloud from the Koran has for centuries been an important socially unifying and liturgical act. Terkel (1970) argued

that reading aloud can be a political and social activity, citing as an example the Tampa cigar makers’ strike of 1931. The cigar makers, most of whom were illiterate, gave part of their wages each week to a man who read to them from a raised platform in the factory for four hours a day. Thanks to these readings, the factory workers knew the novels of Émile Zola, Charles Dickens, and Leo Tolstoy. However, the lector also read from *The Daily Worker* and other socialist newspapers, and as a result, the bosses tore down the platform and banned the readings. The bosses were aware of the power of the written word.

Illich and Sanders (1988) went so far as to suggest that what we call civilization is fundamentally related to the written rather than the spoken word. When the written word came into being, history replaced myth, traditions became laws, and superstitions were superseded by science. Just as important, the invention of the alphabet, which only happened once and from which all phonetic scripts are derived, led directly to the democratization of literacy. Phoenician traders traveled all over the Mediterranean, and wherever they traveled, they shared their writing system, variants of which appeared in Egypt, Israel, and Greece. Gradually, alphabetic languages that could in principle be read by anyone became widespread, and all the accumulated wisdom of the world became accessible to anyone who had been taught to read.

Being able to listen to someone reading aloud confers massive benefits on the hearer. The *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report stated unequivocally that reading aloud to children is “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). This being so, I argue that teachers have a moral duty to read to their students so those who have not been read to before can share some of its benefits. Does this principle apply just as importantly to older readers? Certainly. We know, for example, that students are more likely to encounter a word that is outside their current vocabulary from reading a book than from either watching television or engaging in conversation with a college-educated adult (Corson, 1995).

Reading, therefore, is the best route to enhancing both vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

Yet, reading aloud to older students can have other powerful effects, as Pennac (1994) demonstrated in his account of teaching disaffected teenagers in Paris, France. Listening to oral readings can stimulate the desire to read for oneself. If a teacher drops the role of inquisitor and instead adopts the role of a guide who is starting people off on a pilgrimage, even reluctant readers can find themselves demanding more and asking to borrow a book so they can find out what happens next. Pennac's students came to forget that they hated reading. They forgot that they hated books. They had been trapped, as Pennac put it, "by the very ancient fear of not understanding" (p. 114). Once the teacher began to read aloud to these media-obsessed teenagers, a love of story—of narrative, of humor, of suspense—was kindled (or reignited) by stories that were not flashed for an evanescent moment on a screen but were written and shared with a personal style, from an author, and seemingly addressed to them alone! For example, they came to know that they might be deeply moved by the words and thoughts of a man who, in the first sentence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (1970), is facing a firing squad but thinking about a walk with his father many years before, remembering stones in the river that "were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs":

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point. (p. 1)

The teenagers came to realize that words and images from a book could somehow be even more powerful than words and images on a screen. Does not every teacher have a moral duty to read to his or her students and to help develop the imagination and depth of human response that Pennac (1994) evoked in his classroom?

Reading With Our Students

Reading to our students is important, but if we want to try to take Pennac's (1994) advice and sidestep the teacherly roles of analyst, critic, and inquisitor, what approaches should we adopt to deepen our students' response to what they have read or listened to? Perhaps the key is to delay as long as possible assessing understanding

and instead focus on activities that encourage students to engage with, rather than understand, the texts. It's worth stressing that such interactive approaches are not only less intimidating for the reader but also position the teacher as a coinvestigator, someone who is on a journey with the students rather than a scholar with all the answers. To share reading with students in this way is, I suggest, a moral responsibility that reading teachers already accept, implicitly if not explicitly.

In a landmark study, Fisher, Flood, Lapp, and Frey (2004) looked at the strategies that teachers who had been nominated by their district as outstanding used when they were reading to and with their students. Fisher and his colleagues observed 25 teachers, randomly chosen from the 45 who had been nominated, and found that reading aloud was clearly only one component of their expertise. Each of these expert teachers also emphasized the following: reading high-quality texts, practicing and previewing the chosen text, having a clear purpose for reading, pausing for questions and especially for predictions, previewing difficult vocabulary, encouraging personal connections with the text, and ensuring careful integration of these discussions with subsequent reading and writing.

The teachers were skilled at involving every student in reflecting on a text. For example, one teacher gave each of the students a yes and a no card, and they had to hold one of those up when another student made a prediction about what might happen next in the story. Rather than inviting just one student to answer, expert teachers were much more likely to ask the students to turn to a partner and discuss. Clearly, there is much more to say about possible pedagogy, but the key point to note is that these expert teachers all had high student engagement, with focused and productive class discussions, and outcomes that included not only improved vocabulary and writing but also increased enjoyment of reading.

Reading for Ourselves "in Order to Live"

In the hurly-burly of school and college life, it is easy to forget what a precious gift it is to be able to read. Many teachers were avid readers at different points in their lives, but the demands of teaching and responsibilities outside the walls of the school may crowd teachers' waking lives and leave little or no time for reading. Yet, Flaubert's (1857/1974) famous advice reminds us of the importance of finding time to read for ourselves. He wrote to a friend, "*Mais ne lisez pas, comme les enfants lisent, pour vous amuser, ni comme les ambitieux lisent,*

pour vous instruire. Non, lisez pour vivre” (“Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read *in order to live*”; p. 588). Was Flaubert serious? Is reading a matter of life and death? In these days of fake news, when many people’s lives are governed by the need to be liked on Facebook, and most digital advertising is owned by just two companies (Facebook and Google), all readers are going to face a serious decision. Unless they make a conscious choice to read something different, the only content that many people will see will be that which is fed to them by the internet, whose primary goal is not to inform but to sell, with advertising tailored uniquely to the individual user.

William Shakespeare (2012) has Hamlet say that the aim of a play is “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (p. 137), to show the truth without distortion. Updating the technology, we might say that a book is not so much a mirror as a selfie stick; it is a tool with which, for better or worse, we can more clearly see ourselves, our place in the world, and our relationship to others. The selfie stick has been called “the wand of narcissism” by many, but I argue that this is too harsh; it is a tool for enabling us to see ourselves in relation to our world more clearly, which is exactly what a book can do. In *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction*, Josipovici (1971) suggested that Marcel Proust wrote the 3,000-page *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (In Search of Lost Time) with a single aim: to explore the concept of self in relation to the world—both the author’s self and that of his or her narrator. I argue that in fact all readers are engaged in that same quest. Reading a book is a much deeper and more complex experience than watching a scene from a movie: Reading Proust involves building a world and remembering not only words but also people, tastes and smells, and feelings of loss, of affection, and of distant pleasure. It’s simple really: We give more of ourselves to a book than we give to a movie or a Facebook posting, and in return, the book repays us in ways that are profound and lasting. Not everyone will share my view, but I suggest that all teachers have a moral duty to read for themselves, to keep their imaginations fertile, and to maintain and renew the mental and spiritual energy that brings vitality to their professional and personal lives.

A Conclusion: The Most Important Job in the World

How do we view the stories that we value most and that have changed us most? We see them in many respects as true, as representing some important aspects of our world and of our emotional and social lives, because they have informed us and deepened our understandings. In

Owl Babies, an apparently simple children’s book that 2-year-olds can understand, author Martin Waddell (1992) and illustrator Patrick Benson capture with wonderful sensitivity the anxiety and pain of separation and the joy of reunion, but in a gentle way the book also offers models of sibling solidarity, of sisterly care, and of love. The book’s message is clear: Separation brings anguish, and reunion brings joy. Surely, this is as true as any fact in a textbook. If the texts of science attempt to explain the laws of the universe, then perhaps narratives offer us maps with which we can better understand not only those laws but also ourselves, our world, our place within it, and our relationship to it.

Reading *Owl Babies* to a kindergarten class is a privilege and a delight, and many teachers would gladly agree that at the deepest level, sharing that book is in subtle ways teaching children how to live. Teachers of older students could say the same about reading *Holes* by Louis Sachar or Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Books teach us to imagine and to feel the emotions of others. Illich and Sanders (1988) argued that civilization really began when the phonetic alphabet made reading and writing available, potentially at least, to everyone. It was at that point that teachers of reading became the midwives and trustees of civilization. If teachers of reading really are the trustees of civilization, then surely they have moral responsibilities: They are doing the most important job in the world.

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The department editors welcome reader comments.



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