

Learning to Read

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I was a precocious and promiscuous reader. This was partly a function of there always being books and literary material lying around—a consequence of there being an unreasonable number of teachers in my family tree as well as my father's affinity for the spy/action novel genre. I was one of those “delinquent” children represented on television reading well past their bedtime with a flashlight under the covers. As a child I read everything I could lay my hands on that interested me. As a teenager I loved libraries and revelled in unexpected discoveries and delights when I picked up a title that sounded interesting. This is how I first encountered those authors, titles, and disciplines that I would later come to know more intimately within sociology, psychology, philosophy, mathematics, science, art and literature.

As a very young academic, I am always conscious that I have not had the wealth and diversity of experiences in education as my peers/colleagues who have spent significant time within schools and elsewhere performing different roles and crafting diverse identities. However, in examining my own story I realize I began to *read* education from a very early age. I think John Holt's *How Children Learn* and *How Children Fail* were the first two education books I read, somewhere around age 14. From these I learnt about the “game of school” and how to play it successfully. Knowing this allowed me to get on with really educating myself about teaching by scrutinising my teachers' pedagogical practices. This was soon followed by books on the psychology and sociology of education, which though conceptually interesting were literarily insipid. Sometime in Lower Six I began reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a masterpiece, but well above my then level of understanding. I left it and returned to more approachable material.

At 28 I learnt to read, again. And once again found excitement and intrigue. Following the post-structuralist turn in literature and the social sciences I learnt that one could read almost anything as a “text.” Coming from the *hard* and *natural* sciences this was a challenge. I attempted to read the then (perhaps still) popular multimedia phenomenon *Yugioh* as a pedagogical text. This required that I learn how to read and interpret the form and content of graphic novels and Manga as *more than* mere comic books. Once again I found and fell in love with “scholarly” books like *The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, *Understanding Comics*, and *Superheroes and Philosophy*, as well as more serious graphic novels including the Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*, the acclaimed *King* (a biography of Martin Luther King), and the poignant *Faxes from Sarajevo*. Learning to read different textual forms opened my interests to cultural and critical theorists in art, cinema, and popular culture; and philosophers and educators who had been reading and writing in/about these forms for quite a while. This encouraged me to begin to re-read “familiar texts” such as *Carnival*, or rather what Minshall calls “the mas” pedagogically. Learning to read is liberating.

This semester, as a mathematics teacher educator, I have selected *Reading and Writing the World with Mathematics* by Eric Gutstein as a text to be read by my final year students. Gutstein reacquaints me with Freire, who uses “*reading the world*” to mean “understanding the sociopolitical, cultural-historical conditions of one's life, community, society and world” as a gateway into *reading the word* (textual/functional literacy), and as a position from which to Write and re-write the world, that is, to positively transform the world. It is my hope that these teachers will come, as did Gutstein's students, to “use mathematics to understand relations of power, resource inequities, and disparate opportunities between different social groups and to understand explicit discrimination based on race, class, gender, language, and other differences...[as well as] dissect and deconstruct media and other forms of representation.”

Learning to “read” media is of urgent importance. We must teach children to read their “massively multimedia mashup” world. Unfortunately their world is less understood and frequently feared by adults. We must however encourage them to draw on and share their funds of knowledge. We must be especially concerned with teaching our children to critically read (resist and transform) what Benjamin Barber, author of *Consumed*, calls consumer culture’s “seductive infantilist ethos,” which threatens our (and our children’s) liberty, citizenship, health, and well-being and undermines democracy’s foundations worldwide.

To other bibliophiles out there: draw deeply from your funds of knowledge, learn *for* the purpose of reading the world. Read across boundaries, anywhere, everywhere. Be promiscuous readers...change the world.

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