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THE QUESTION OF LEARNING
TO
READ AND WRITE

BLAIR KOEFOED

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education,
The University of Auckland, 2003
This thesis is an investigation into learning to read and write. It is also an investigation into how learning to read and write is investigated.

THE PRESENTING PROBLEM
Despite literacy being highly valued by every member of a modern society and the immense personal and social effort directed towards bringing it within the grasp of all, its universal occurrence, it remains an elusive goal.

INVESTIGATING LITERACY
As with many other valued human endeavours, *science*, with its refined and disciplined way of looking, is enlisted to help improve the achievement of ends, and *research* is designed and undertaken with the aim of increasing our control over its manifestation in the world. Yet it is the claim of this thesis that by leaving uninvestigated the nature of learning to read and write itself the gains will never be complete.

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS
To open different lines of investigation, into things themselves, questioning must free itself of socially driven exigencies and the patterns of the established disciplines of thought and become self-reflexive. Self-referential questioning is traditionally and essentially philosophical and insight is sought from three well known modern representatives of the field.

- Heidegger offers reflections on the importance of how questioning is undertaken, and, with his discussions on the nature of truth and how with 'revealing' comes 'concealing' hints at the darker side of literacy as an activity that 'opens' the world.

- Wittgenstein's intense thought on language/world relationships potentially clarifies the dissension so characteristic of literacy acquisition research and provides a construct of language that would allow misrepresentations of literacy to occur.

- Foucault's historical analyses provide concepts useful when considering the origins of literacy, and 'power' becomes a better explanation for the literacy fervour than the production of finer human beings.

THE FINAL QUESTION
Finally their amalgamated insights are used to discuss the phenomenon of illiteracy as it is portrayed in a recent novel by Bernard Schlink, *The Reader*. In this study of post-war Germany, the way literacy is deeply entwined into our social structures becomes clear, but more crucially we learn this about illiteracy – the highly destructive, exaggerated, and excessive reaction to its occurrence has no ready explanation.
This study is to fulfil the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The topic is the "...to contribute to the body of knowledge..." (a verbal quote from Marie Clay when asked 'what is the purpose of a PhD?')

question of learning to read and write. The general requirement of work at this level is, broadly speaking, to contribute to the body of knowledge that is available on the selected topic, as given by the traditions and standards of research or scholarship of the arbitrating body that mandates or validates this study, the University network and in particular the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

At times however there must be a place for a deeper question, the question of what this means - what it means to contribute to the body of knowledge on or about something, in this case learning to read and write. What is it to have knowledge of learning to read and write? The phrasing of the title The question of learning to read and write in all its awkwardness tries to hold open this possibility of this deeper question, and it means that this study has two strands of thought. It is not just about learning to read and write, about literacy; it is also about philosophy.

Philosophy

With the question, 'what does it mean to contribute to the body of knowledge' the discussion has become philosophical, because only this
discipline has traditionally tried to answer questions like this – to ask questions about itself.

To explore this three twentieth century philosophers were chosen both for their similarities and their differences - Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault - with a special section for an earlier thinker, Frederich Nietschze, within the chapters on Foucault. Each is a major figure in modern thought, respected for his originality, and each a 'social' philosopher in that the social construction of knowledge, and the relationships within the knowledge/world/language amalgam is a major theme in their works - an important feature given the social nature of literacy. Asking questions of knowledge in very different ways they present a vast and varied territory to traverse, but this increases the richness and breadth of the possibilities and means that where there is convergence there could be something of import. Each philosopher has a dedicated chapter. The chapter on Foucault is broken into three bites partly because it is his work that, on first encounter, most engages specifically with a social enterprises similar to learning to read and write.

The aim of these readings is to provide clear and relatively uncontroversial interpretations of these complex, much-discussed thinkers, with an eye on what might be useful with respect to literacy acquisition. The interpretations are demonstrably based upon quoted excerpts as much as practicable with two or three of each philosophers' major works identified in the text and drawn upon heavily. The interpretation sought is one that is structured around the actual words of the author, contemplated in themselves and with their evident semantic and syntactic import, rather than the respoken words and extracted abstractions at one remove or further from the authoring process.
Thus in Chapters 2 and 3, on Heidegger and Wittgenstein, there is very little reference to any secondary commentary. This is deliberate, for a number of reasons:

- The original works themselves are rich and complex, needing and deserving of much attention. Engaging with the primary work would always seem to be the preferred first step.
- Working across two such virtuoso thinkers at once, the aim was to accurately yet broadly capture the major and more well-established themes of their thought.
- The primary sources have proved themselves and their authors over time and across many institutions whereas the secondary sources have not.
- Secondary sources both good and bad are often as complex as the work they are commenting on, and can involve one in fruitlessly complex dead-ends.
- Deciding which of the many secondary sources to use is itself an exercise of interpretation.

In the case of Foucault it is a little different. There is more reference to secondary sources and extensive use has been made of two commentators. As mentioned earlier, his work lends itself very readily to a topic like learning to read and write, so the discussion around his writings is much longer and more detailed. Commentators assist attempts to come to grips with the huge range and variability of his corpus. Certain issues, particularly those around history, are foregrounded in Foucault, partly because of his willingness to address real-world topics and thus put the 'theories' to the test. He becomes contentious at these points and commentators are useful. Finally, Foucault still seems to be standing in wait for a decision as to the importance of his place in the philosophy hall of fame. Commentators provide some back line support.

Over and above the dedicated chapters, there are various points where the ideas of the philosophers so far discussed are gathered together
and compared, and to some extent blended together or squared off, in an attempt to provide a broad strong blended philosophical base with the potential to give foundational impetus and support to our reconsidering our thoughts about learning to read and write.

**Literacy**

The chapters on the philosophers are preceded by two chapters dedicated to interpretive descriptions of literacy learning. These chapters *Reviewing the Field* and *Literacy Visions Research Realities* are to set the scene. A series of 'snapshots' with running comment, they construct interpretations around some field study objects gathered in - pieces of text, a letter, a presidential speech and the usual array of books, and their covers - and some of the ideas of some prominent people. They are not intended to be a critique so much as a set of facts that the later more abstract concepts of the philosophers can be explained through and measured against or will exploit.

An essay called *Literate Beings and Being Illiterate; a meditation on learning to read and write*, looking closely and critically at the problematic notion of illiteracy concludes the thesis. Bernard Schlink's *The Reader* spreads out before its readers a drama with all the full thick themes of life and death, love and hate, loyalty, treachery and weapons of mass destruction, yet pivoted on the fulcrum of a lighter theme, literacy - or rather illiteracy - and it is argued that an examination of the concept of illiteracy has much to offer the question of learning to read and write.

It is from Heidegger that the argument regarding the 'concealing' nature of literacy, manifested as illiteracy, can be extrapolated. Illiteracy is both concealed and concealing. Wittgenstein, by persistently examining many instances of language-in-real-use as opposed to language-in-assumed-
use assembles a portrait of the petty deceits of language, with its suppressed features of cognitive slippage and conceptual errancy. Words hide their origins behind their surface similarities, and try to say more than they can. These deceits are a natural breeding place for shallow thinking, self-deception and believable lying, or, in Foucault's terms, such falsehoods as the myth of historical continuity or the myth of the forward progress of history.

These are the kind of falsehoods surrounding literacy throughout The Reader and the upshot is an illiteracy that makes no sense. Literacy when looked at in itself is merely a socially learned skill that requires regulating linguistic responses to the input of visual information, and both useful and complex as this skill is, it does not warrant its opposite, illiteracy. Illiteracy might be better understood if we can look through Foucaultian/Nietzschean lenses at reading and writing, viewing them as historically evolved social technologies that have at least some lowly origins marked by jealousies, greed, pride and self-concern. The appeal of modern literacy education may reside in the way that learning to read and write extensively disciplines the higher functioning of the nervous system, binding the movement of the eyes, calling on an expanded awareness of the sounds of speech, forcing the isolation and control of language by received and ritualised patterns, and through the sheer complexity of the processing involved absorb unto itself all the attentional capacity an individual has available for dealing with the world. These disciplinary aspects of literacy functioning may help explain its universal insistence. They help explain why illiteracy has become the modern leprosy and the post-modern madness.
Acknowledgments

A major portion of this study was written during a period of leave made possible by an Auckland College of Education Tertiary Study Grant.

I wish to acknowledge the faith and leadership of Jim Marshall and the silent mentoring of Marie Clay.

Warmest thanks to Peter Peyer for permission to use two of his works – the witty Double Feature, with its transposed syntax from a bygone era, the language game of the advertising of the matinee, and The Owl, looking all the world like a cloaked German philosopher.

Note: Referencing has been kept as simple as possible to keep information flowing through the text. This should create more linear transparent prose and avoid the confusion that comes from breaking into the text with lists of names or dates, or having to flick up and down or to and fro.
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