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What I Learned from Reading the Everglades



ARTICLE BY **GEORGE SHAFER**

We stood in awe among the vast expanse of the Florida Everglades. Among the tropical foliage, the deer, birds, and alligators, we were interpreters of a grand and majestic text. Indeed, as I pedaled my bike along the paved path stopping to observe the pristine character of this world, I began to better appreciate Robert Schole's premise that "the world is a text" and that our dynamic interplay with various settings reveals much about how we read and transact naturally with a piece of literature. Like a novel, the fluttering fields of green and brown stood before us and invited a plethora of interpretations, personal responses, and value judgments. We were empowered to "read" this unique natural phenomenon, knowing that the long Michigan winter we had just endured would affect the elements of the Park that we exulted. And yet, like any active, democratic reading, we knew our response did not have to compete with a canon of privileged theories or that we would be compared to the pantheon of environmentalists who had traveled these roads before us. We would be free to construct our own text, to design out own personal response, and to revel in a reader-response interpretation of the Everglades. For me, it offered insight into reading and its natural process.

As reading teachers, we are all aware of the conflicting theories involving reading and literary interpretation. Whole language and reader-response criticism stress the need for active, personal engagement as one interacts and

transacts with any piece of writing. However, as we also know, much has been written about the efficacy of a teacher-centered curriculum which stresses the accumulation of skills, knowledge, and an aggregate of facts that are deemed to be of special classical value. E.D Hirsch's recent work *The Schools We Need* continues the "core knowledge" argument he began in his 1987 work *Cultural Literacy*. In many ways, Hirsch follows the tradition of Rudolph Flesch and others who advocate information over experience and prescription above personal volition.

Consequently, reading teachers find themselves with a question that is most eloquently articulated in the works of Paulo Freire and his reference to the "banking method" as a way to educate our children. Put simply, do we see them as empty receptacles waiting to be filled with teacher-sanctioned skills and ideas—ones that are frozen in time and impervious to the currents of personal passion—or, do we open the text to a dynamic, evanescent, socially and culturally motivated interpretation. In short, do we believe that a text is ours to discover or to create?

Biking through a national park that is as big as some states, helps put such questions in perspective. Scholes is correct when he refers to an interpretation as a "constructive activity, a kind of writing" (10) that represents a convergence of author and reader, one that is "irreducibly social" (50). As visitors from Michigan, who had labored through six months of subzero wind chills and ice

storms, we were poised and ready to immerse ourselves in the green, lush tropical foliage and to envelope ourselves in the aesthetic and tactile charms of this mysterious land. All literature exists in time, all of it is colored by the readers' transactions as it is transformed into meaning. It is, it seems clear to me not unlike the transaction one experiences with a piece of art, whether it stands on canvas, or in the natural setting of a national park. "Readers," argues Rosenblatt, "may bring to the text experiences, awareness, and needs that have been ignored in traditional criticism" (142). Thus, if reading is a personal response to a text, we must liberate our students to feel ownership as they journey along the wandering paths that it offers.

This means that reading must always be respectful in acknowledging the feelings and subjective reactions our students have as they read and interpret. In the same way that the three of us were empowered to select and ignore the elements of the Everglades we chose to exult, we must also give broad latitude to students as they construct a text. For me, *To Kill a Mockingbird* will forever be a scathing attack on intolerance and racism, but high school students often focus on the intrepid behavior of Scout and her development as a child. While I often feel the obligation to usher them back to more pressing themes, I am also reminded of how important their personally and socially generated responses are. Such responses emanate quite fluidly from their transactions, from their dynamic and unique experience with the text. "The reader needs to realize fully, to honor, what he is living through in his evocation of the work" adds Rosenblatt (143). How long, I am left to wonder, would anyone of us have stayed in the Everglades if we had been limited to unearthing the interpretations of an expert, if we had been usurped by the

"official knowledge" disseminated by scholars? How much investment and intrigue would be lost in making interpretation into inculcation?

My reading of the Florida Everglades led me to other conclusions as well. For instance, I had never considered the profoundly destructive nature of testing and standardized evaluation until I began to see this excursion as a metaphor for reading and response. In addressing the topic of testing, Frank Smith has argued that "tests are imposed for purposes of control, not to facilitate learning" (61). Testing has an inexorable tendency to stifle creativity and narrow one's ability to approach reading constructively. Testing leads invariably to a "what do I need to know" mentality. It is teacher-centered and, in the end, prescriptive. As I rode my trail bike across the Everglades, I designed a text that was clearly different from my sister-in-law, who has been a life-long resident of south Florida. Because each of us traveled the area with varying expectations and values, we centered our attention on different elements. And yet, how often do our tests allow for this natural divergence? "Programs," adds Smith, "are devised to prevent children from employing their own judgement" (56). Smith unfortunately could be talking of tests.

Finally, an aesthetic, transactional, and active reading experience must, I believe, reject the "core knowledge" agenda of E. D. Hirsch, Chester Finn, and others like them. Collectively, they represent a group that reminds me of Miss Caroline, Scout's teacher in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As many of us who have taught the novel remember, Miss Caroline was incredulous in finding that Scout could read and that she didn't know who had taught her. "It's best to begin reading with a fresh mind," Miss Caroline tells Scout. "You tell him I'll take over from here and try to undo the damage."

Of course, there was nothing wrong with Scout's reading, except perhaps that it didn't coincide with Miss Caroline's academic model of how one learned the alphabet and eventually became literate. "Reading was something that just came to me, as learning to fasten the seat of my union suit without looking around, or achieving two bows from a snarl of shoelaces' says Scout as she reflects upon her unconscious acquisition of reading (I 7-18). "I never loved to read," Scout later adds. "One does not love breathing" (18).

And so it is with interpretation and the canons we construct as our cultures and those of the author converge in what Rosenblatt refers to as the creation of a poem (1978). If we are truly reading actively and critically—if we have control over the text—we do not need to be given a culture or to be indoctrinated in official literacy policy. Hirsch labors under the illusion that people are somehow deficient or limited if they fail to embrace his time table and body of content. In his latest book, *The Schools We Need*, Hirsch revisits this premise and the contention that education cheats students by neglecting to give them a "core knowledge" from which to build. Referring to his program as "intellectual capital," Hirsch contends that schools do readers a disservice by failing to teach them a "shared body of common knowledge from which to build and converse." The responsible school, argues Hirsch, is not doing its job unless it is "providing each child the shared intellectual capital that will be needed in each early grade, and needed ultimately in society after graduation" (233). Implied in Hirsch's scholarship is the caveat for programmatic, standardized learning. Like Scout's teacher, he aspires to control learning, define its parameters, and expunge it of its dynamic character.

Such altruistic talk is, of course, quite attractive on the surface. Hirsch's plan

to have all students of every grade learn the same facts, would seem to be a great way to design a system that provides equal opportunity. We all start in the same place, and, as a result, fewer of us fall behind.

Unfortunately, such an approach expunges any hope for individual differences while damning all students to a teacher-driven curriculum. In the process, it denies students an opportunity to their culture, to their own construction of knowledge, and relegates other cores of knowledge to the fringes. Discourses are inherently ideological and each wants to portray itself as privileged and valuable. It is not surprising to see Hirsch trying to define his as the one that is quintessentially literate.

What is especially interesting is to consider Hirsch's mandate in the context of reading and interpreting other texts. His goal to homogenize information would make reading a boring, mechanical, and forever passive act. Rather than creating a text and swing it as an "event in time," Hirsch asks us to treat it as a fossil waiting to be uncovered, always the same, no matter who reads it or where it is read.

How, I am left to wonder, would I have read the Everglades in a Hirschian model of literacy? Would I have been allowed to ignore or subordinate the aspects of the text that were less important to my life? Hirsch tells readers that literacy is an accumulation of specifically prescribed facts. Rosenblatt, in contrast, sees the poem 'as an event in the life of a reader, as embodied in a process resulting from the confluence of reader and text' (I 6). Later, Rosenblatt reminds us that "the relation between reader and text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (16).

Interpretation, as a truly heuristic act, as a completely aesthetic search, can

only be realized in an active, transactional context. I read the terrain and animal life in a way that was clearly colored by my mood, my residence in Michigan, and my desire to escape the icy memories of winter. As I trekked through the humid, sun-drenched park, my reading was aesthetic, reflective, and overwhelmingly emotional. Unlike a resident, who might search the park for a certain variety of plant, I inhaled the entire context as one does a portrait. For me, it was a meaningful transaction—one that would create a foundation for other readings.

Of course, I was one of hundreds of people. Some held books, so as to locate specific areas or to see some of the elusive animals. For them, a transaction was quite different from mine. The key, however, is that we all felt liberated to experience the text in our own way, to apply our personal background, to cull what was precious to us. "Programs," argues Frank Smith, "deprive children to see opportunities to see language and thought used in meaningful contexts..." (56). I would add that Hirsch's goal to tell everyone what they should know at a certain time, is the essence of intellectual despotism usurping true interpretation from the reader and relegating the process to a mechanical, prescriptive routine.

When we acknowledge the fact that all subjects are the joint creations of language and discourse, we accurately begin to reflect the dynamic character of reading as a transactional process. As I read the Everglades, sampling its power and beauty, I gained insight into my own values and feelings. In the process, fortunately, I also learned about reading and the interpretive need for individual autonomy in this artistic, creative act.

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