

Freedom and Faith in Reading

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Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

Metaphors We Live By, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

Over the past fifteen years, I have taught primarily introductory courses in writing and in literature, and I commonly encounter students who dislike reading, but I am most frustrated when they blame texts for their own difficulties. They say that a reading assignment is boring or hard to understand. They indicate that the novel, story, poem, or play is acting in a way they don't like. Some talk about texts as if they were human, and then blame them for acting badly. In other words, these students are reading passively, asking that the text perform for them, rather than seeing themselves as the actual performers of the drama we call reading.

In response to these frequent encounters, and on the advice of a colleague, I reached out to Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*. In this book, a classic in the field of reader-response criticism and pedagogy, Rosenblatt argues for the democratic values of teaching literature because the English classroom is particularly well suited to develop the self-awareness, critical thinking, and imaginative abilities necessary in a free society. I also thought that her transactional theory of reading would be useful to my students, especially because it acknowledges the relationship a reader builds with a literary text and how that relationship produces the experience of the text. But more importantly, I found value in Rosenblatt's theory

because it helped me talk to my students about their own contributions to and responsibilities toward that relationship, such as their experiences, emotions, knowledge, and attitudes.

I then decided that Rosenblatt's ideas would be even more useful to my students if I could represent them visually. So I began to sketch out a process to show students what commonly happens when we read.

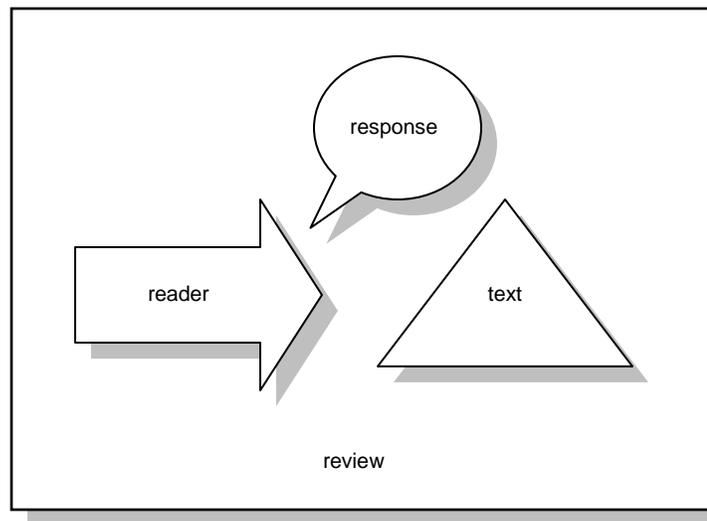


Fig. 1. What happens when we read

I drew an arrow to represent all of the things the reader brings to reading, a triangle to represent the world of the text—its author, form, topic, and audience, a speech bubble to represent possible responses, and a box around these three figures to represent the opportunity for review.

With this drawing, I meant to highlight how the reader is ultimately responsible for building a relationship with a text and how every response points back to what the reader brings to that relationship. The overall process is contained in the box to represent the reader's further responsibility to review the correctness, appropriateness, and quality of the response and the relationship that created it.¹

Reading Portraits

After studying my drawing further, I realized that one of the most influential things students bring to the act of reading is their own idea of what happens when they read; that is, their assumptions about reading and the relationships they have built with books in the past. So, before showing my students my drawing, I decided to ask them to draw pictures of their own. First, I asked them to consider their histories as readers, how they felt about reading in school, where they like to read, and the kinds of things they enjoyed reading most. I also asked to think about their attitudes toward reading.

I even thought I would make a study of their drawings and develop some scholarly conclusions. I surveyed educational research to see what else was going on in this area, and could not find anything similar to what I had in mind. I quickly developed a research project design that I named “The Picturing Reading Project” and decided to take a grounded theory approach. According to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin in *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*:

In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind (unless his or her purpose is to elaborate and extend existing theory). Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the “reality” than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work). Grounded theories, because they are drawn from

data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action. (12)

Because I had no real idea where my study would lead me, I chose this flexible research method because it would allow me to pose an initial hypothesis and then as the analysis of my data matured and my findings emerged, I would be able to adjust my hypothesis, data collection, and coding as necessary. So to begin, I created a simple survey form for collecting drawings of first-year college students. I also included a space on the reverse for students to write a short paragraph describing their drawings and to include a simple survey of their attitudes toward reading. Would they say their attitudes were negative, positive, or neutral toward reading?

Initially, I hypothesized that I would find a common vocabulary of images, and that these images would relate in some way with students' experiences with and attitudes toward reading. I also assumed that my findings would provide other English teachers with ways to help their students improve as readers. I started my research in the fall of 2001 by collecting drawings from one of my first-year English classes. The next fall semester, I asked colleagues who were also teaching first-year English to join my project. Over the next several years, I expanded my study to secondary school students, and contacted friends who were middle school and high school teachers to participate.²

In all, I collected about 1500 student drawings. As I slowly began to code each drawing according the kinds of images students used in their drawings, I discovered that the most common images included a reader, an untitled book, a speech or thought bubble, a bed, and Z's to signify the snoring of a sleeping reader. Yet, as I poured over the drawings, I couldn't help thinking that I was missing the forest for the trees. So I changed my focus and began to look at the drawings as fuller portraits of readers in action rather than at the images in isolation.

Immediately, patterns emerged, and common among these were seven types of portraits.

1. the reader in the text
2. the text in the reader
3. the sleeping reader
4. the happy/sad reader
5. the secluded reader
6. the traveling reader
7. the picturing reader

The reader in the text depicts the reader entering into or occupying the text. My favorite of these is a reader poised at the top of a high diving board above an open book.

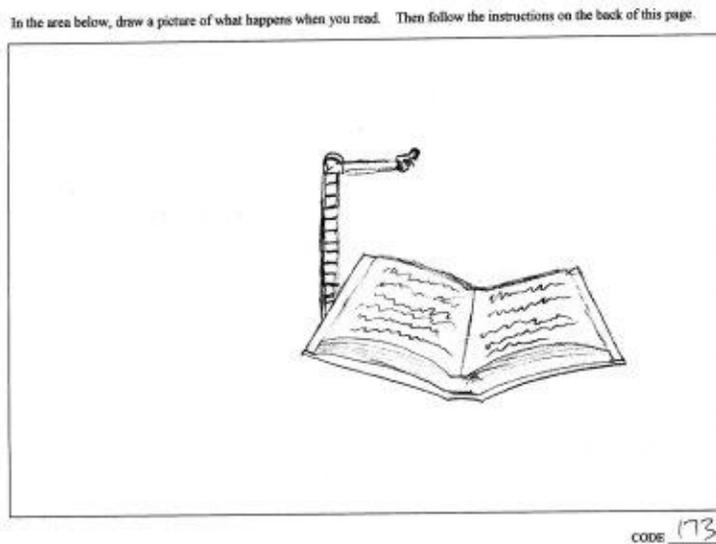


Fig. 2. The reader in the text

The text in the reader shows the text being consumed or absorbed in some way by the reader. One of the earliest drawings I received shows the student's hands open like a book with writing across the both palms.

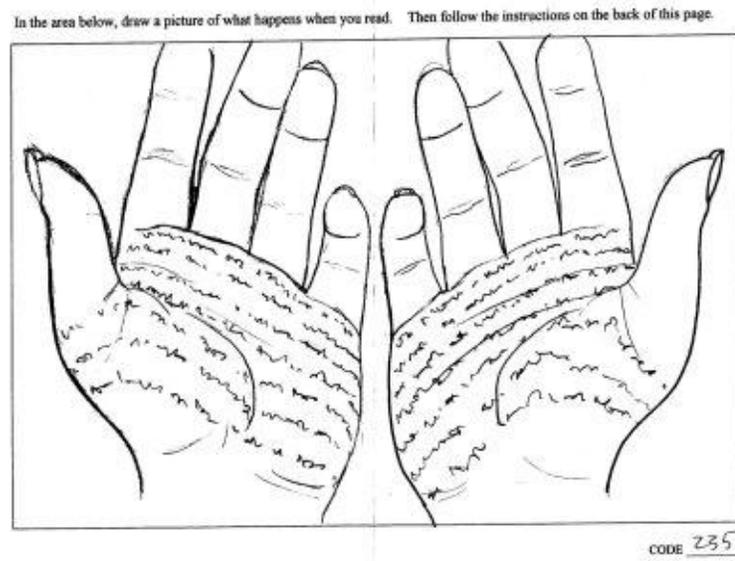


Fig. 3. The text in the reader

Another common image type is *the sleeping reader* in bed with a series of Z's overhead.

Sometimes, the reader is asleep in school, hunched over a desk.

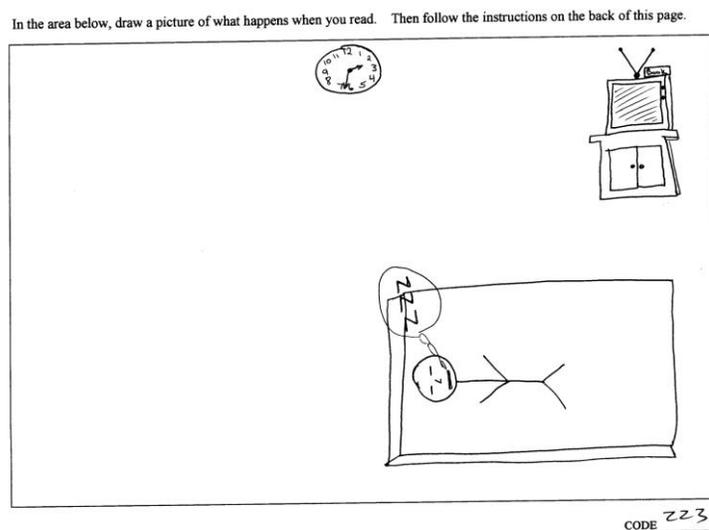


Fig. 4. The sleeping reader

The happy/sad reader is one of the portraits that surprised me most. In this drawing, the student draws a line down the middle of the page and draws two readers. The one on the left is usually smiling, and the one on the right is usually frowning, crying, or angry. Also on the left are books the student likes to read, and on the right are books assigned in school. Sometimes the student will include descriptive detail, such as “when I get to choose what I read vs. when I don’t get to choose” or “my books vs. school books.” While there are drawings that show happy readers or drawings that show sad (and sometimes very angry) readers, these were not as common as the combination of *the happy/sad reader*.

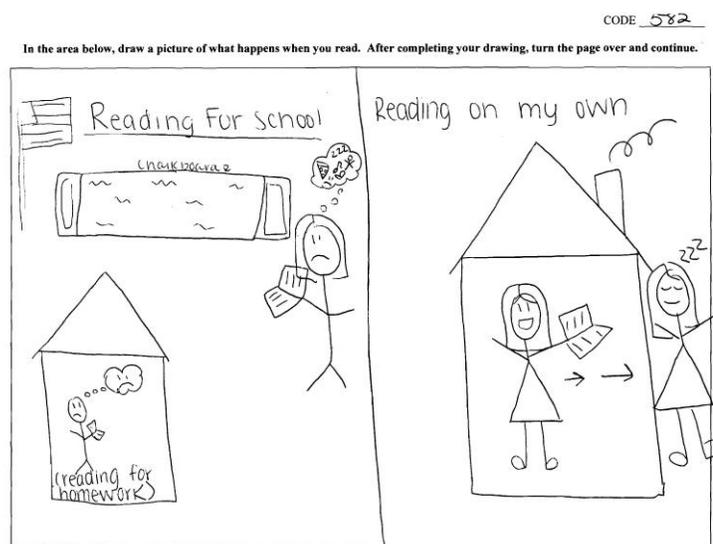


Fig. 5. The happy/sad reader

Drawings depicting *the secluded reader* are distinguished by their emphasis on the insulated nature of reading. The reader is shown on a small, deserted island or in an enclosed space, like a closet, or on a soft cozy bed, couch, or comfortable chair in a world of his or her own.

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In the area below, draw a picture of what happens when you read. After completing your drawing, turn the page over and continue.

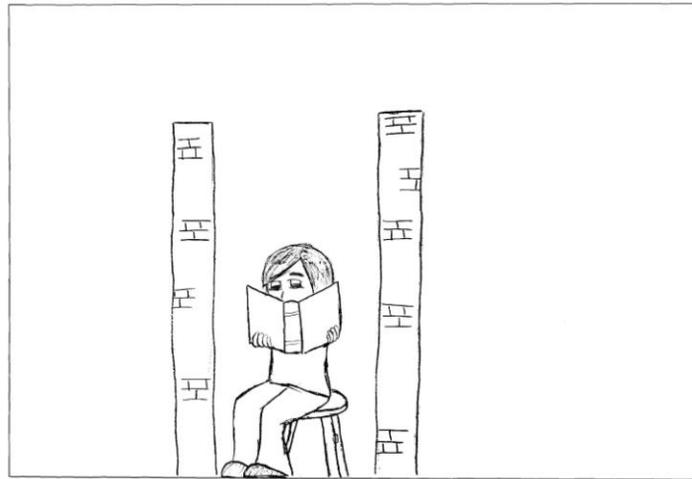


Fig. 6. The secluded reader

Another common type of portrait shows *the traveling reader*. These drawings usually include a map or globe or landscape, and sometimes they depict the reader actually traveling through space or standing on a path or climbing a mountain. In this case, the student is not representing the reader going into the world of the text, but more generally, the path reading offers to new destinations.

In the area below, draw a picture of what happens when you read. Then follow the instructions on the back of this page.

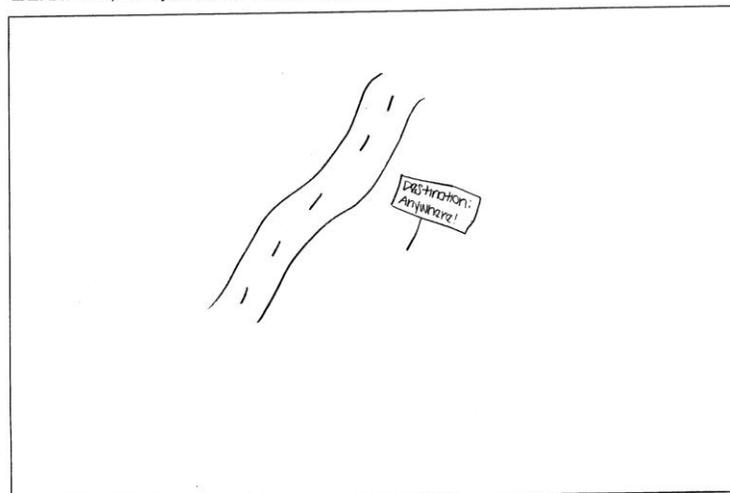
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Fig. 7. The traveling reader

The final type of drawing depicts *the picturing reader*. In these portraits, the reader is shown visualizing what is happening in the text, usually in thought bubbles. Sometimes, students describe the process of reading as if they are watching movies in their heads.

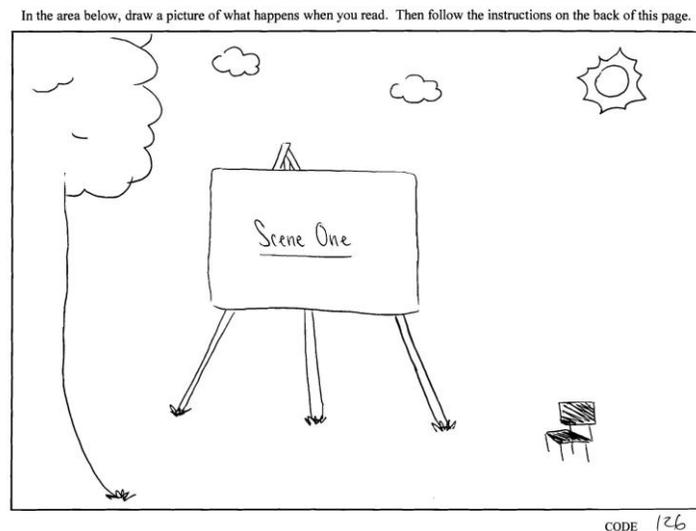


Fig. 8. The picturing reader

Reading Metaphors

As I continued my study of these drawings, I became interested in tracking not only the kinds of images and self-portraits students used to depict their reading, but also the metaphors they might be including as well. While some students were drawing more or less realistic images of themselves (sleeping in bed, for instance, or happy and sad experiences), others were representing their relationships symbolically (like *the text in the reader* and *the traveling reader*). I then shifted my research agenda a third time and developed a system to identify, record, and tally the metaphors these students were using.

This new effort led me to investigate a number of resources on metaphor, particularly George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. I was immediately taken with their claim from the perspective of cognitive science that our thinking and valuing processes are substantially, unconsciously, and often culturally grounded in metaphor. In other words, the relationships we create with the world are structured by concepts that are themselves metaphorical:

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. (3)

For example, to say that reading is a relationship that we create with texts depends on the conceptual metaphor *reading is a relationship*. In this sense, we may think of reading involving two equal parties, the reader and the text contributing equally to the experience. Alternatively, we may conceive of reading as a relationship where one party has more power than the other: the reader controls the relationship or the book determines what's possible. There are other ways to conceive of reading, such as *reading is a ritual* or *reading is deciphering* or *reading is a waste of time*, and each of these metaphors will shape how we perceive, work with, and relate to reading.

Upon further examination of the drawings, I soon realized that each drawing—no matter how realistic—could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of reading. *The sleeping reader*, for example, depicted a reader who conceptualized reading as a sleeping pill or a lullaby

or a knockout punch. *The happy/sad reader* represented a reader who understood reading as an expression of liberation or enslavement.

While I continued to collect drawings in many of my writing and literature classes, I soon came to three conclusions about my ongoing research project. First, even though I discovered that students did use a common vocabulary of images evident in the seven patterns of drawings mentioned above, I realized that I had no real interest in accumulating and analyzing the amount of evidence that might satisfy questions about representative sampling. There were just too many variables within each student population. Second, while I was initially interested in studying the distinctions between drawings from different age groups and from students with different abilities, it became clear to me that the differences were not as significant as the similarities. The same portraits just kept popping up. Finally, I concluded that while student drawings can have some value in prompting students to reflect upon their reading habits and attitudes, my real interest would be in collecting and sharing the reading metaphors these drawings first helped me discover.

My exploration of reading metaphors was further bolstered by my encounter with Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*. In a chapter titled "Metaphors of Reading," Manguel reviews a number of metaphors commonly assigned to authors, readers, and books (163-73). More relevant to my study, he noted in Ezekiel one of the first recorded instances of the *reading is consumption* metaphor:

II. 9 And when I looked, behold, an hand was sent vnto mee, and, loe, a roule of a booke was therein. 10 And he spread it before me, and it was written within and without, and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe.

III. 1 Moreouer he said vnto me, Sonne of man, eate that thou findest: eate this roule, and goe speake vnto the house of Israel. 2 So I opened my mouth, and hee caused me to eate that roule. 3 And he said vnto mee; Sonne of man, cause thy belly to eate, and fill thy bowels with this roule that I giue thee. Then did I eate it; and it was in my mouth as honie for sweetnesse. 4 And he said vnto me, Sonne of man, goe, get thee vnto the house of Israel, and speake with my words vnto them. (*The Holy Bible: King James Version* Ezek. 2:9-10, 3:1-4)

Armed with this new evidence and Manguel's brief account of metaphors of reading, I felt my study confirmed and pressed forward confidently.

Next, I turned to Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Reading*.

Therein Booth claims the foundation of all reading is metaphorical *and* relational:

All criticism depends on basic metaphors, often unstated, for our relation to _____?

As soon as I conclude the sentence with 'to the words on the page,' 'to stories,' 'to characters dramatized,' 'to the text,' 'to the author,' or to any other term, I have already implied my choice of a metaphorical mode. As we have seen, many critics today talk of solving puzzles, deciphering codes, wandering through mazes, untangling webs, or dismantling ramshackle structures. Others may imply slightly warmer relations: 'texts' become worlds to be entered or prized objects to be analyzed or admired. Each of these rival metaphors bears *some* relation to what we do when we read or listen. (170)

And for Booth, the supreme and most ethical metaphor for reading is personal engagement, a meeting of minds and hearts, people sharing stories they are reading, and people sharing stories of their readings.

Subsequently, I began to encounter metaphors for reading in all kinds of places: in the books I was reading, in how friends talked about what they were reading, in scholarly journals and criticism, in book reviews, and in what my students were writing in response to their reading assignments. Therefore, I decided to cast a wider net and expand my research of reading metaphors to include these sources as well.

Reading as Movement

Eventually, I found the metaphorical talk about reading was so ubiquitous, I wondered whether a comprehensive project of collecting reading metaphors would be possible. Further, if the metaphors were so easily found, so often among us, I wondered if such a project would find an interested audience. Finally, after testing out a number of ways to catalog and organize my collection, I realized that any organizing principle I would propose would find its ultimate source in a single core metaphor: *reading is movement*.

Because reading is an activity, it's obvious that movement and reading go hand-in-hand. Moving is what readers easily and unconsciously do. We walk to the library, bookstore, or magazine rack. We reach up to grab a book. We turn it over to inspect its cover. We spread the book open. Weigh it in our hands. We flip through the pages. We slap it shut.

We fold a newspaper over to better frame the crossword puzzle or editorial. We thumb through a magazine and lick a finger to turn the page. We run a finger down the small print. We underline a sentence, highlight a passage, or write a note in the margin. We scroll up and down pages on a computer while fingering a keyboard, touchpad, or control wheel. We tap the screen at the airport kiosk to confirm our itinerary and find our gate. Some readers finger Braille.

We move our eyes to scan a page in a book, look up a word in a dictionary, or skim back through the pages to find where we left off. We look backward or up the page to re-read a sentence. We rub our eyes, blink, and keep on reading. We squint. We move our lips as we read to ourselves. We smell the sour odor of the yellowing book. We laugh aloud. We wipe our tears. We synchronize our breathing to the rhythm of the poem.

We sit in our parents' laps, their arms encircling us, and they hold the wide, colorful storybook before us. They point to big letters. We ask them to read the book again. We toddle off to bring back another. It's not unlike a toy. But unlike enough. Those letters, those words, those pictures. The opening and the closing and the turning. The soft, warm lap. The sharp, hard corner of the book cover. The voice of the page that resonates in our ears.

Bodily movement and sensation drive reading. We access the materials of reading through and with our bodies whether we are conscious of these experiences or not. And in most cases, we are not. That is, if we read comfortably, freely, and confidently, we are usually not conscious of the movements we make when reading.

However, for those of us who are just learning to read or who struggle with reading, physical awkwardness and frustration may be all too real. And for those of us who are not allowed to read what we wish or who are forced to read what we do not, the physical barriers, intellectual hunger, and cruelty are very real as well.

As I was thinking about the many ways we engage reading physically, I began to see how the metaphors we use to talk and think about reading are also grounded in physical movement. For example, we often say that we *gained* a new insight or *wrestled* with a passage or *felt transported*. These concepts and descriptions are metaphorically physical. We take language from other ways we move and work in the world and apply them to reading. Other examples of

these conceptual metaphors include *getting into a story*, *feeling comforted*, *losing our place*, and *taking an argument apart*.

At this point in my study, I remembered that Lakoff and Johnson had also written *Philosophy in the Flesh: Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, and I hoped it might be a source on the connections between reading and physical metaphors. They begin their book with three claims:

1. The mind is inherently embodied.
2. Thought is mostly unconscious.
3. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. (3)

In short, they claim that the human capacity to reason is not founded on the traditional mind-body split, but it has evolved from our sensorimotor engagement of the world. In other words, the ways we commonly use our bodies to sense and move have provided the conceptual vocabulary for how we think and talk about other aspects of our lives.

Thus, reading is not simply physical movement. We use embodied conceptual metaphors to describe what happens when we read. We *picture in our minds* what a character might look like, we *grasp* an idea, we *follow* the clues, we *unpack* the argument, we *get absorbed* in the story, we are *forced* to read a text by a teacher, we *resist* what we don't like, we *embrace* what we do.

Steven Mailloux also recognizes the conceptual embodiment of reading in "The Rhetorical Use and Abuse of Fiction: Eating Books in Late Nineteenth-Century America." To highlight "the widely held social belief in the actual positive or negative effects of reading on the nineteenth-century reader," Mailloux acknowledges "the physicality of the tropes of reading" (136) and focuses his study on the *reading as consumption* metaphor.

Reading Categories

After reviewing my collection of metaphors in the context of embodied concepts, I realized how I could organize my list of metaphors into five categories of movement: immersion, transportation, accumulation, manipulation, and transformation.

The category of *immersion* captures all the ways we talk about moving into or occupying a text. We open the cover of a book as if it is a door. We dive down into a book, and we read between the lines. We read closely. We insert ourselves into the story. In *The House of Paper*, a short novel by Carlos Maria Dominguez, Delgado describes his relationship with reading using the immersion metaphor:

For me the greatest joy is to be able to submerge myself for a few hours every day in a human time that otherwise would be alien to me. A lifetime is not enough. If I may purloin half of a sentence by Borges: ‘a library is a door in time.’ (42)

Examples such as this one from Dominguez are potentially limitless. Multiple instances of the immersion category of metaphors (as well as the other four categories) are easily available in a broad range of literature, literary criticism, and educational theory. I have selected my examples because they are relatively close at hand.

Reading as immersion is also a result of the gravitational pull of a text. The attraction is so strong, we feel sucked down into a text. In *The Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafon, the main character Daniel describes his first encounter with the book he has taken from the Cemetery of Forgotten Books:

That afternoon, back in the apartment on Calle Santa Ana, I barricaded myself in my room to read the first few lines. Before I knew what was happening, I had fallen right

into it. ... Under the warm light cast by the reading lamp, I was plunged into a new world of images and sensations, peopled by characters who seemed as real to me as my room.

(7)

In this sort of reading relationships, we go inside books, we dig in, we tunnel, we mine for riches, we unwrap the gift of the text, we explore. We're spelunkers. We're archeologists. We're buried in the text. We're embraced by its cocoon. We feel protected. But sometimes we just want a little taste. We take a sample. We dip a toe in. Books are like mirrors, too. We look inside and see our reflections.

We also find that as we are pulled in, we also are pushed out again and led to new places.

Peter Turchi in *Maps of the Imagination* writes,

A reader enters the world of the poem, or story, realistic or otherwise, willing, at least for a short time, to believe it and to accept its terms. An enormous amount of popular art, or entertainment, asks us to inhabit its world in order to escape from our own. More ambitious art invites us to inhabit its world but also to see around it and beyond it—to see our world through it. It draws the imagination outward. (67)

Robert Scholes in *Protocols of Reading* describes this going in and going out as the centripetal and centrifugal impulses of the reader, both focusing in on the text and then exploring the horizon of possible contexts and meanings (7-9).

But we also say when confronted with a difficult text that it's impenetrable. We say that a book is hard, it's a tough nut to crack. It resists our understanding. We just don't have the key to unlock its meaning. We just can't get into it. On the other hand, we can envision reading as resistance, a caution against uncritical immersion into the author's point-of-view.

Immersion, like the other four categories of reading metaphors, leak, overlap, and spill into one another. We must become immersed in a story before we can become transported or transformed by it. Likewise, if we're not immersed in the text, we won't be able to accumulate its contents or manipulate them for our purposes. Additionally, we sometimes say that reading is like seeing, that we picture in our minds what is taking place on the page. The *reading as seeing* metaphor is contained by both the accumulation and manipulation categories because seeing what we read is also picturing it—that is, we take in the image described and create an image we can easily visualize.

The second category of metaphors is *transportation*, and it frames all of the ways we talk about being moved by a text. We find sanctuary or safety in reading, we are transported to other times and places, we feel secluded, separated, and isolated as if we were alone on a private island with no distractions. We may also think of a book like a lifeguard rescuing us from drowning. A book may set us on a new path we would never have imagined before. We are carried along on its stream of consciousness. We escape from despair. In *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, the narrator Amir says that he found solace in reading when he could not find it in his father's love: "That was how I escaped my father's aloofness, in my dead mother's books" (19). The *transportation* metaphor also appears in Andre Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name* when the narrator Elio describes how he takes his friend Oliver to his favorite place to read: "Here I would come to escape the known world and seek another of my own invention; I was basically introducing him to my launchpad. All I had to do was list the works I'd read here and he'd know all the places I'd traveled to" (77). In reading, we leave our present circumstances behind. We visit the past. We enter the future. Our books map our excursions.

We also know that we sometimes lose our way when reading and drift off into reflections or daydream even as our eyes continue moving down the page. We get lost, we circle back, and find our place again. We also ride the rollercoaster of twists and turns in the plot. We are led by the hand of the author's imagination. We become disembodied. We take flight. The language of the book can be a magic spell that sends us reeling. Readers are like trackers; we follow the author's path. We join the chase. The book is a compass, and we follow its lead. Emily Dickinson employs the transportation metaphor when she writes:

There is no Frigate like a Book
 To take us Lands away
 Nor any Coursers like a Page
 Of prancing Poetry –
 This Travers may the poorest take
 Without oppress of Toll –
 How frugal is the Chariot
 That bears the Human soul. (553)

But reading can be torture, too. We feel like we're in prison. We're doing time. We count how many pages are left. It's a chore. It's punishing. We can't wait until it's over. We suffer through. We would rather be somewhere else. We're being "sentenced" to death.

Metaphors in the *accumulation* category are those we use to describe how we move what is in texts into us. We soak up knowledge from books. They speak to us. Reading is like listening. We take it in, we grasp the meaning, we comprehend, we hold on to what we've learned. We absorbed it. We "got it." Using the consumption metaphor, we can be nourished (or poisoned) by reading. We devour books; we read voraciously. Reading can also be like

dating. We take in one genre at a time or the work of one author or on one topic, often reading an entire series before moving on. Sometimes the breakup can be hard.

And sometimes we confuse collecting with reading, as in Richard Rodriguez's acknowledgement early in *Hunger for Memory*: "But I was not a good reader. Merely bookish, I lacked a point of view. I vacuumed books for epigrams, scraps of information, ideas, themes — anything to fill the hollow within me and make me feel educated" (64). Reading can be cherry-picking. Reading can also be thievery; we take ideas, make them our own, and use them for other purposes. The female student I encountered copying highlighted text from one book to another was enacting this metaphor. I wonder if it would go so far to analogize this kind of reading to an eating disorder? That is, perhaps there is a *reading as bulimia* metaphor available to describe the reader who crams or binges on information solely for the purposes of taking a test and purging that information again.

Still, many of us believe reading is a good investment and our efforts will pay off. We gather the seeds of ideas and harvest further understanding. A new book becomes our new companion or a nurse to suckle us. Reading is also chemistry, mixing samples from one text together with another to create a new text. At other times, we think of reading as a vitamin—we prefer the condensed or notes version of the book as a replacement for the real experience. For some readers who want a quick read, they wish reading was like microwaving, an easy snack.

We also use reading to accumulate friends. We join book clubs. We recommend, we share, we loan, we give books away. Reading is also competing and winning prizes. Who can read the most? Who has the largest collection? And reading is courting, pumping ourselves up, displaying our libraries, our titles, our latest purchases to attract another, to impress, to seduce.

The *manipulation* category contains all of the metaphors we use to describe how we work with texts. One of the most common of these is the dismantling metaphor. Reading is analysis, taking the book apart, dividing it up, seeing how it is put together, maybe for imitation, maybe for the pleasure of puzzling it out. But reading can also be violence: butchering, gutting, or abusing the text in order to achieve other ends.

Censorship arises out of the concern that certain texts have the power to manipulate readers in ways that threaten shared values, societal norms, or political authority. Therefore, they must be manipulated so that they don't manipulate. They must be kept out of the hands of those who may be harmed, put on a special shelf, condemned, ripped up, destroyed, and burned. We take them away from those who are not ready, and we hide them from those who would take them away.

When we engage in criticism, we manipulate texts by stamping them into different shapes. We work on the assembly-line of reading, repeating the same interpretation again and again. We fashion. We filter. We dismiss authors. We murder them. We resurrect the book and restore its reputation. We give it new life. We popularize it. Illustrate it. Film it. Translate it. We broaden its appeal. Help it find a new audience.

We also weigh what we read, putting it on a scales of value or justice to determine its worth. We decode and decipher. We skim. We survey the landscape. We gloss and highlight and underline. We enter a dialogue. We ask questions. We interrogate. We disagree. We argue. We wrestle with the text. It's a shoot-out.

It may also be possible to claim that manipulation is the central metaphor for all reading—that is, all of our relationships with books depend upon shaping what we find so that they fit our preconceived beliefs or desires. From this point of view, all reading is application.

A top-down approach. We apply rules of behavior to books in order to make them obey us. Certainly, they can't speak for themselves. In "Understanding and Overstanding: Religious Reading in Historical Perspective," John Sullivan argues that manipulation can also turn into "overstanding." "Overstanding" does not require us to commit to learning or transformation, only to mine a text for our own purposes—a consumer approach. "Understanding" on the other hand

considers reading an exercise in change, part of a personal journey which could be described as a pilgrimage, or as an ascent. It is not just like scanning a map; it goes beyond a passive observation of the words and thoughts of another. Serious reading prompts us to reach up to the thought of another, to clamber onto the path they offer us, to cross a threshold, to enter into an idea, a tradition, a form of conduct or way of life. This more expansive appreciation of reading combines inwardness, commitment and openness to transcendence. It engages the personal life of readers. It presses them to decide, to judge and in light of this to give themselves, to adhere to a concept, a skill, a virtue, a practice. In doing so, it reveals illusions which are to be left behind, it exposes bad practices which are to be given up and it paves the way to a receptive openness to change. (27)

To be transformed by reading, we must set ourselves aside, to become texts ourselves, and be willing to be revised.

The final category of *transformation* contains metaphors that indicate how we are changed by reading. Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in This Class?* claims that reading "is a method which processes its user, who is also its only instrument. It is self-sharpening and what it sharpens is *you*. It does not organize materials, but transforms minds" (66). Books inspire us.

They light the fire of our imaginations. We are re-energized. Books can be like storms, resulting in new clarity of vision.

Reading can also comfort us. We are soothed. We are healed. Our thirst is quenched. In “An Atlas of the Difficult World, XIII,” Adrienne Rich speaks to her reader: “I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove / warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand / because life is short and you too are thirsty” (26). This is another example of categories spilling over into one another: satisfying a thirst is both drinking (accumulation) and remedy (transformation).

Books can make us slow down, too. Pace ourselves. Prompt us to reflect and consider. They also arouse us; our blood rises; we are stimulated. We laugh. We cry. We are very scared. We get goose bumps and chills. Books can be lullabies and sleeping pills, too.

Reading is also ventriloquism. We try on different roles. Books are like dressing rooms. We become actors in the drama. We perform. We imitate. We fall in love with people and places and ideas we would have never encountered otherwise. We leave ourselves behind. We acquire new habits and desires. We become the author’s lover, slave, and tool. We dedicate ourselves to no one else, infatuated, obsessed, and mimicking ideas blindly.

Reading can also confuse and disorient us. In the final moments of his life, Don Quixote thanks God for His mercies and claims that his mind is at last liberated from madness:

My judgment is restored, free and clear of the dark shadows of ignorance imposed on it by my grievous and constant reading of detestable books of chivalry. I now recognize their absurdities and deceptions, and my sole regret is that this realization has come so late it does not leave me time to compensate by reading other books that can be a light to the soul. (935)

Here several metaphors of reading collide. Initially, Don Quixote was transformed and literally transported by his desire to become a conquering knight, but at the end of his life, he wishes to be healed and transformed once again by a different kind of reading that would illuminate his path toward heaven.

Freedom in Reading

Beyond the five categories of reading metaphors, freedom is particularly relevant in its connection to reading and movement. One of the most common drawings I encountered from my students was *the happy/sad reader*. These students understood reading as an expression of freedom, and they depicted the emotional and physical consequences of reading on one's own versus reading according to the demands of teachers. In other self-portraits, students expressed how they felt tortured by reading.

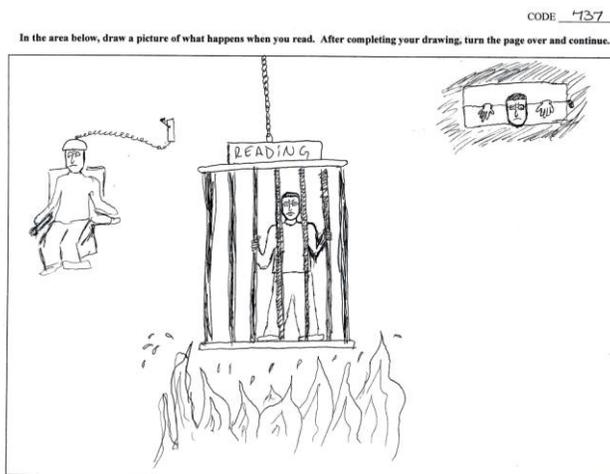


Fig. 9. The tortured reader

In others, students showed themselves fighting with books or setting bookshelves on fire.

Reading can be an instrument of tyranny and violence as well.

In *The Underachieving School* of 1969, John Holt describes the moment he began to revise his teaching philosophy. His nephew was assigned to read James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer* by his seventh grade English teacher. Not only did Holt believe the novel a bad choice, the instructional methods were inappropriate as well.

But to make matters worse, this teacher had decided to give the book the microscope and x-ray treatment. He made the students look up and memorize not only the definitions but the derivations of every big word that came along—and there were plenty. Every chapter was followed by close questioning and testing to make sure the students “understood” everything. (55)

After forty years, this extreme form of close reading pedagogy may be a thing of the past. Still, reading as immersion can be a positive way of conceptualizing reading. But not when students feel they are being plunged headfirst by teachers into the deep and chilly waters of reading.

Freedom is a powerful metaphor for readers. Freedom to choose what we read, freedom to criticize what we read, freedom to interpret. Libraries and schools are intended to support these freedoms. The degree to which these free movements are available and exercised are evidence of other free movements within a society. The freedoms to think, to resist, and to move where one wishes. Freedom to experience reading can also highlight and relieve the oppressions, restrictions, or enslavements we feel in other aspects of our lives. In her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Asar Nafisi describes the central aim of gathering several of her women students into a reading group in her home: “We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to. I remember reading to my girls Nabokov’s claim that ‘readers were born free and ought to remain free’” (19).

Acquiring the ability to read can be a permanent achievement. All text becomes available, and all books and libraries await us. In his autobiography of 1845, Frederick Douglass explains how even though his mistress terminated his reading instruction, it was too late to quench his thirst: “The first step had been taken. Mistress in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*” (38). All expressions of freedom (and oppression) are also ours for the taking—only to be halted by idleness, censorship, disability, or death. Or re-enslavement.

One of the most famous examples of the *reading is freedom* metaphor is illustrated in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. In Bradbury’s vision of some distant, dystopian future, firemen, such as the main character Montag and his commander, Captain Beatty, are on the frontlines of mind control. Books present conflicting visions of truth that upset universal and uniform happiness, so they must be destroyed. According to Beatty,

We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man in the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man’s mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won’t stomach it for a minute. (58)

Reading can be dangerous precisely because it offers practice in unfettered thinking. Reading is embodied mental exercise, freely chosen movements of immersion, accumulation, transportation, manipulation, and transformation—all in direct conflict with totalitarian authority and its desire to round us up, incarcerate us, make us obey, and do as we’re told. “Put your hands where we can see them and don’t move,” they say.

Faith in Reading

Those who practice and benefit from the freedoms of reading also have faith in reading. We are drawn to books and feel transported by them. We look forward to the next immersion, the next baptism in pages. We have faith in the transformative nature of reading, faith that the next book will bring us new ideas, instill hope, or confirm our beliefs. We have faith that we will encounter once again joy and pleasure in reading. We also have faith that reading will move us closer to others, provide us entrance to a larger community of readers. We ask others to have faith in us when we recommend a book to them. Browsing a bookstore with no particular goal in mind, we have faith that our efforts will be rewarded. All of those volumes lined up and stacked high on our bookshelves stand witness to our faith in reading.

In his poem “The Reader,” Franz Wright describes how faith in reading is a relationship that offers pure understanding and communion.

The mask was gone now, burned away

(from inside)

by God’s gaze

There was no

I, there

was no he—

finally

there was no text, only
what the words stood for;
and then

what all things stand for. (44)

Faithful readers know what do to with poems and what poems can do for them. In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, I. A. Richards argues that readers often confuse literary craft with value. He writes, “We pay attention to externals when we do not know what else to do with a poem” (24). Faithful readers also know the satisfactions of aesthetic immersion. They know that not all readers find the same pleasure in the same poems or stories. They understand the ecumenical nature of reading. We may be unified in our faith in reading, but each of us makes our own way and our witness differently. Our faiths in reading arise from free and individual pursuits. What we have in common is the belief that reading has value and will return value repeatedly. What we do not and cannot share is the same journey to that value.

Reading as faith journey was also depicted in the drawings I collected. In one common version, a series of smiling self-portraits increase in age and size, from a beginning reader to the present self. This *maturing reader*, a combination of both the accumulation and transformation metaphors, shows the consequences of a life of faithful and free reading.

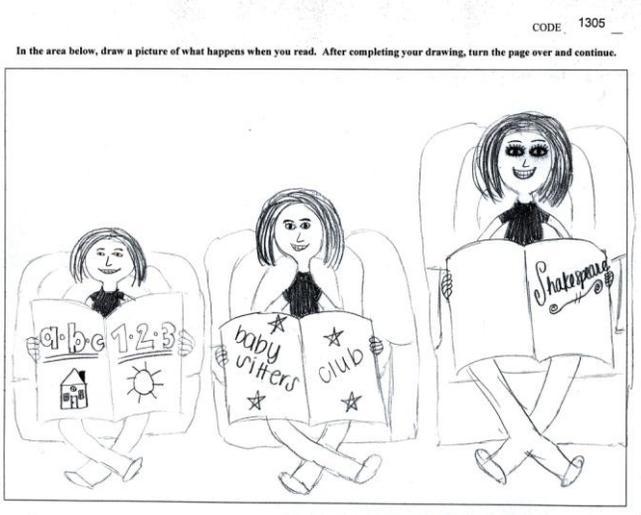


Fig. 10. The maturing reader

Other versions of *the maturing reader* included an expanding brain and a growing tree. But another version of the reading journey illustrated a loss of faith. I call this *the mourning reader*. As in *the maturing reader* drawing, one student drew a series of progressively aging self-portraits, but in this narrative her smile is transformed into a frown, her faith slowly extinguished in school.

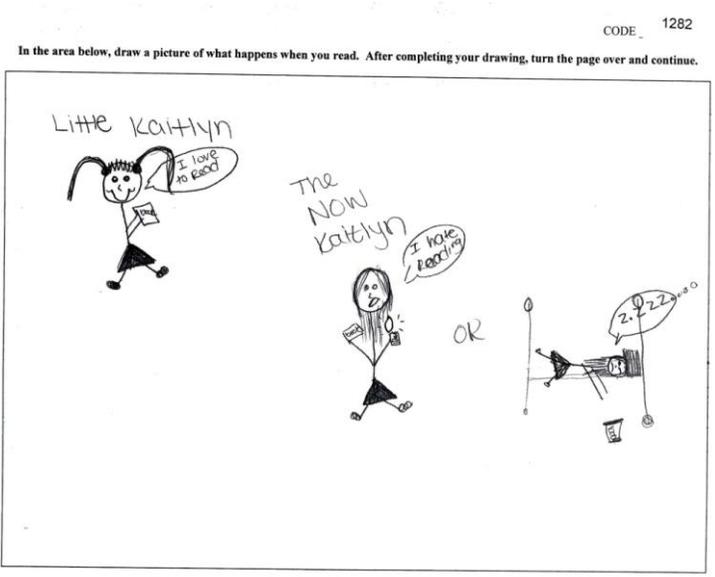


Fig. 11. The mourning reader

Students who treasure reading know how freedom and reading become disconnected. They know when their faith journeys in reading are ignored. They know when reading becomes forced labor.

The End of Reading

In *Walden*, Thoreau describes in the chapter “Reading” the kind of literary education many of today’s students still receive:

Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing; yet this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.

(102)

The long and winding path of my study of reading metaphors suggests that reading is best understood as a conceptual embodiment of free and faithful living, of stretching one’s imagination, of standing on tip-toe. I believe all free and faithful readers know this, consciously or not. I want my students to know this, too. I want them to have faithful relationships with reading. I want to foster their continuing or renewed faith in reading by helping them reflect upon their histories as readers, examine the various portraits of readers I have collected, practice the metaphors for reading I have outlined here, and rehearse various freedoms in reading.

Now I know that when my students say that a book I have chosen for them is boring, they are responding viscerally, expressing how it feels to be oppressed by choices I have made for them. I can no longer dismiss these feelings. Therefore, teaching students to make choices in reading has to be one of my primary tasks—both in what they choose to read and in what they choose to do with what they are reading. Just as importantly, I realize I have to make better arguments for the value and pleasures of what I am asking students to read. I have to clarify aims and methods. The potential end of reading is freedom and faith, but the journey depends on the metaphors we read by.

Endnotes

¹ See my article “What Happens When We Read: Picturing a Reader’s Responsibilities” for an extended discussion of the development of this visual representation and its support for teaching reader-response criticism.

² See my online piece “Metaphors We Read By” for an initial discussion of this research and its relevance to teaching reading across the curriculum.

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