

---

"A Puzzle to the Rest of Us": Who Is a "Reader" Anyway?

Author(s): Bronwyn T. Williams

Source: *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (May, 2004), pp. 686-689

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Literacy Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40016902>

Accessed: 14-08-2017 20:33 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*International Literacy Association, Wiley* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*

## LITERACY &amp; IDENTITY

# “A puzzle to the rest of us”: Who is a “reader” anyway?

*Bronwyn T. Williams*

After the middle school student walked out of the classroom I turned to his teacher and said, “He must be fun to have in class. He’s so engaged and quick.” “Yes,” his teacher said with a smile. “He is such a *reader*.” I nodded, thinking I knew exactly what she meant.

On a different day, I stood in the hallway of the humanities building at the university where I teach and listened to another teacher vent about the trouble some of her students were having in her writing course. “The problem is, at the bottom of it all, they simply are not *readers*.” Again I nodded, thinking I knew exactly what she meant.

These two moments aren’t isolated instances. I can remember any number of days where I’ve heard teachers, from elementary grades through university, identify students by whether they were or were not “readers.” I have no doubt that I’ve done the same thing countless times in my teaching career. Yet when I think about it, I wonder if we all meant the same thing when we said a student was or was not a reader, not to mention whether any of our definitions would make sense to the students to whom we were referring.

## What does it mean to be a reader?

If literacy is not an autonomous set of skills but rather a concept whose definition is fluid and

always determined by its cultural context, what does it mean to identify our students (or ourselves) as readers? What characteristics do we as teachers assume someone possesses when he or she is (or is not) a reader? And how does that affect what we expect from students when we assign them a text to read?

If by *reading* we mean the ability to recognize letters and decode some words and sentences, we have to recognize that most people in our culture can read. As Barton (2001) found in his ethnographic research, “in all areas of people’s home and community lives there was reading and writing” (p. 24). Although the people Barton studied did not necessarily define themselves as readers, he found that there were multiple and varied vernacular literacies that they used every day, from grocery lists to greeting cards, to bulletin boards full of family information. Yet the people in the study often categorized reading as an activity that they regarded as more focused, literary, and part of high culture, not daily life.

My guess is that the kind of reading that Barton reminded us happens every day is not what most teachers mean when they talk about a student being a reader. In fact other writers, such as Alvermann (2001), have pointed out that we often categorize students as “struggling readers” because of their performance in classroom reading tasks, not recognizing that they may spend much of their time out of the classroom reading

such texts as video game magazines or Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh cards.

Yet when I talk with fellow teachers about whether students are or are not readers, I think we are talking about a specific kind of reading. Beyond decoding words and sentences, we think of a reader as a person who makes particular kinds of intertextual connections, who asks particular kinds of questions of a text, who reads at a particular intellectual distance from the text, who talks about more than the text's meaning and analyzes its nature. Here is how one textbook defines being a reader: "You must be able to read and comprehend. You must be able to perceive the relationships among several pieces of source material. And you must be able to apply your own critical judgments to these various materials" (Behrens & Rosen, 1997, p. xxix).

I think we apply similar definitions to our own identities as readers. When I reach a particularly busy time of the semester and complain to my colleagues that "I don't have time for any of my own reading right now," that doesn't mean that I'm not reading the newspaper or reading student papers or even reading a novel at bedtime. It means that I am not reading with the kind of intent, focus, and detached analytical stance I have learned (and believe are necessary) in the academic world. I might still be reading all day (our lives are filled with print), but I am not thinking of myself as a reader when I use my vernacular literacies. When I think of myself as a reader of serious texts for intellectual purposes, I am taking on a specific identity. When I want my students to talk about a similar readers' identity, I have similar qualities in mind.

## The isolated reader

Most teachers of reading and writing would regard the qualities of reading I have mentioned—focus, intensity, questioning, detached analytical position—as positive attributes. When we compliment students for being great readers we often imply that they have demonstrated such qualities,

and we praise and reward them for it. I wonder, however, if our conception of a reader (and the attributes that accompany such an identity) are shared by those, including our students, who are not teachers.

Being a reader in the larger culture is generally a positive identity for young children. For them, reading is still a matter of pleasure and play and often a communal activity to be shared with parents and friends. For young children, most reading counts toward making them readers, whether done in or out of the classroom. In addition, children identified as readers fulfill certain developmental qualities that parents, teachers, and everyone else want them to have. It is in middle school, as reading becomes more connected to work and the demonstration and assessment of knowledge, that conceptions of the identity of a reader begin to change. By middle school the power to define who is a reader—as opposed to a struggling reader or remedial reader—becomes increasingly the domain of educational institutions (Alvermann, 2001). As a consequence, people acquiesce to these institutional definitions and stop regarding their vernacular literacy practices as those of readers. Far from being laudable, those identified as readers in the broader culture begin to be viewed with some suspicion. They are seen as isolated, alone, engaged in pleasures they aren't sharing, and dangerously out of touch with the "real world."

One way to find evidence of broader cultural perceptions is to see how they are reflected in popular culture. The representations of reading by young children in popular culture are often positive, as in any number of advertisements for products often unconnected with literacy that end with an image such as a mother and child wrapped in a blanket, sharing a favorite book. On the other hand, it is not hard to think of popular culture representations of adolescents or adults reading that are ambivalent at best and often negative. In something as simple as the opening song in the animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991), the character of Belle walks through town, nose in a book, oblivious to

life around her and to what the townspeople are singing.

Look there she goes that girl is so peculiar,  
I wonder if she's feeling well,  
With a dreamy, far-off look,  
And her nose stuck in a book,  
What a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle. (Ashman & Menken, 1991)

### "A puzzle to the rest of us"

At best, deeply engaged adolescent and adult readers are portrayed as absent-minded and out of touch; at worst, they appear solitary, enigmatic, and not entirely to be trusted. They get "lost" in their books, absorbed by the words in front of them, though such absorption does not necessarily imply analysis or intertextual interpretation. When the culture at large identifies someone as a reader, it does not, I would argue, assume that the reader is making critical judgments about the text from a detached analytical stance.

The difference in how teachers construct the identity of a reader and how students do can create conflicts in the classroom. Helmers (2003) pointed out that first-year college students "bring to the classroom a notion of reading that is solitary, escapist, and pleasurable; instructors expect interrogation and demonstration" (p. 18). Such conflicts can be all the more frustrating for students *and* teachers because they are often not articulated. Many teachers, from middle school through university, stop talking about the nature of reading—of the different ways we all read and the different identities we perform as we engage in various reading activities. As a result, the words *reading* and *reader* go unexplored in any explicit, constructive way in the classroom.

I believe it is important that we talk more with our students about what kind of qualities we expect from the people we identify as readers. For one thing, we need to explore with students the multiple and varied nature of reading. We need to remind them that they are constantly being

readers as they go about their lives, and we need to talk with them about all the ways they engage in reading and for what purposes. (We can also remind them that reading is often pleasurable and can be so in school as well as outside of it.)

### The engaged reader

We need to help students think about what identities they assume when they become readers, and to let them in on what qualities we want them to display when they pick up a text. I have a classroom practice I have adapted from a gifted middle school science teacher that I use with adolescent and university students.

In science class, the middle school teacher has her students begin the school year by drawing a picture of a "scientist." The next day, she papers the hall with their drawings, which range from men in lab coats holding test tubes, to undersea explorers, to a good number of crazed figures with hair out of control surrounded by lightning and beastly creations. The purpose of this activity is for students to think about what they believe a scientist is and why they have those perceptions. This exercise opens the way for an ongoing class discussion about the nature of science and the identities of scientists.

My take on this idea begins early in a semester by handing out to students as they come into the classroom a find-the-hidden-pictures puzzle—the kind you find in *Highlights* magazine where you have to find (hidden in a drawing of a family in a kitchen) a shoe, a toothbrush, a butterfly, and so on. I let them work on that for a few minutes and then put it aside. I then simply write the word *reader* on the chalkboard and ask students to provide me with all the words they associate with that term. Words such as *loner*, *nerd*, *boring*, *relaxed*, *escape*, *smart*, and *alone* show up, and we talk about what experiences and cultural values lead them to those words. I show them clips from films such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) and *Dead Poets' Society* (Weir, 1989), and we talk about our impressions of the readers

in those clips and why we think that way. We also talk about other representations of readers the students can recall and what characteristics are implied about those readers.

Then I change things a bit by putting the word *good* in front of the word *reader* and ask for word associations. This time I get words such as *fast*, *smart*, *school*, and *symbolism*. Again I discuss with students what in their experiences and knowledge leads them to such associations. Why do they think good reading is fast? Why do they think good readers are ones who have to read a work only once to understand it?

It is at this point that I am ready to go back to the puzzle they worked on at the start of class. I tell them that reading, at one level, is much like the puzzle. You figure out the puzzle and you move on. If you do it enough you can do it fairly quickly. But being a reader in the way teachers think of it is a different thing. It is not enough to find the hidden pictures. A reader, in the minds of most teachers, would look at the picture and think of more than simply solving the puzzle (or even look for a single set of hidden symbols or deep, hidden meanings). The reader that teachers value would think about this picture in relationship to other pictures he or she has seen—to other puzzles he or she has completed. Such a reader would think about how and why the puzzle was put together and how and why he or she has responded to it in a certain way. A good reader realizes that the answer to such questions and others about the nature of the puzzle might vary from one student to the next and is interested in hearing from and discussing with his or her fellow students their interpretations and analysis.

Good readers, I tell my students, do not necessarily read fast (no matter how standardized tests reward them), do not necessarily understand

what they read the first time, usually read important works more than once, write while they read, and often finish reading with more questions than they started. I tell them what readers need to do in a college classroom in terms of questions, connections, and analysis, and that I will, over the semester, help them with strategies to become those kinds of readers.

To explore the conflicts of how students and teachers identify readers is not a radical idea or a miracle pedagogy. In fact it may seem fairly obvious to want to point out to students that there are multiple ways not only to read but also to be readers. Yet what may seem obvious is often the basis for significant misunderstandings. If we can make clearer to students, as well as to ourselves, what we mean when we ask them to assume the identities of readers, we have taken the first step in demystifying what can for many students be a frustrating, intimidating, and unacknowledged obstacle in the classroom.

## REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D.E. (2001). Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44, 676–690.
- Ashman H. (lyrics), & Menken, A. (music). (1991). *Belle*. In G. Trousdale & K. Wise (Directors), *Beauty and the beast* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Studios.
- Barton, D. (2001). Literacy in everyday contexts. In L. Verhoeven & C. Snow (Eds.), *Literacy and motivation: Reading engagement in individuals and groups* (pp. 23–38). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Behrens, L., & Rosen, L.J. (1997). *Writing and reading across the curriculum* (6th ed.). New York: Longman.
- Helmets, M. (2003). Introduction: Representing reading. In M. Helmets (Ed.), *Intertexts: Reading pedagogy in college writing classrooms* (pp. 3–26). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Trousdale, G., & Wise, K. (Directors). (1991). *Beauty and the beast* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Studios.
- Weir, P. (Director). (1989). *Dead poets' society* [Motion picture]. United States: Touchstone Pictures.

The department editor welcomes reader comments on this column. E-mail [bronwyn.williams@Louisville.edu](mailto:bronwyn.williams@Louisville.edu). Mail Bronwyn T. Williams, University of Louisville, Department of English, Humanities Building, Louisville, KY 40292, USA.