Critical Thinking...
and the Art of Close Reading (Part II)

By Linda Elder and Richard Paul

In the previous column we introduced the idea of close reading, which is reading with an emphasis on:

- understanding your purpose in reading,
- understanding the author's purpose in writing,
- seeing ideas in a text as being interconnected, and
- looking for and understanding systems of meaning.

In this column, we discuss the art of engaging a text while reading. To read closely, students must get beyond impressionist reading. They must come to see that simply deciphering words on a page and getting some vague sense of what is there does not translate into substantive learning. Instead, they must learn that to read well is to engage in a self-constructed dialog with the author of a text. Really good reading requires *close* reading. It requires one to formulate questions and seek answers to those questions as part of the reading process. It requires connecting new ideas to already learned ideas, correcting mistaken ideas when necessary. In other words, close reading requires specific intellectual work on the part of the reader. This column briefly elaborates the nature of this intellectual work.

Avoiding Impressionistic Reading and Writing

The impressionistic mind follows associations, wandering from paragraph to paragraph and drawing no clear distinction between its own thinking and the author's thinking. Being fragmented, it fragments what it reads. Being uncritical, it judges an author's view to be correct only if that view concurs with its own beliefs. Being self-deceived, it fails to see itself as undisciplined. Being rigid, it does not learn from what it reads. Whatever knowledge the impressionistic mind absorbs is uncritically intermixed with prejudices, biases, myths, and stereotypes. It lacks insight into how minds create meaning and how reflective minds monitor and evaluate as they read.

Reading Reflectively

The reflective mind seeks meaning, monitors what is being said from paragraph to paragraph, and draws a clear distinction between the thinking of an author and its own thinking. The reflective mind, being purposeful, adjusts reading to specific goals. Being integrated, it interrelates ideas in the text with ideas it already commands. Being critical, it assesses what it reads for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. Being open to new ways of thinking, it values new ideas and learns from what it reads.

Thinking About Reading While Reading

The reflective mind improves its thinking by reflecting on its thinking while reading. Likewise, it improves its reading by reflectively thinking about how it is reading. It moves back and forth between the cognitive (thinking) and the metacognitive (thinking about thinking). It moves forward a bit, then loops back upon itself to check on its own operations. It checks its tracks. It makes good its ground. It rises above itself and exercises oversight on itself.

One of the most important abilities that a thinker can have is the ability to monitor and assess his or her own thinking while processing the thinking of others. In reading, the reflective mind monitors how it is reading while it is reading. The foundation for this ability is knowledge of how the mind functions when reading well. For example, if I know that what I am reading is difficult for me to understand, I intentionally slow down and paraphrase each sentence. I put the meaning of each sentence that I read into my own words. If I realize that I am unsympathetic to an author's viewpoint, I suspend judgment about the text's meaning until I have verified that I truly understand what the author is saying. I strive not to commit the common mistake of passing judgement while reading: "I don't really know what this means, but it is wrong, wrong, wrong!" Instead I try to accurately understand the author's viewpoint while reading. I attempt to enter that viewpoint; to be open to it as much as possible; and, even if I don't agree fully with the author's view, I appropriate important ideas whenever possible. I take command of the ideas that I think are worthwhile rather than dismissing all the ideas simply because I don't completely agree with the author's view.

Engaging a Text and Its Teaching Potential

The reflective mind interacts with the author's thinking as reflected in the text. In this interaction, the reader's mind reconstructs the author's thinking. It does this through a process of inner dialogue with the sentences of the text, assessing each sentence for its intelligibility and questioning in a disciplined way.

- Can I summarize the meaning of this text in my own words?
- Can I give examples from my own experience of what the text is saying?
- Can I generate metaphors and diagrams to illustrate what the text is saying?
- What is clear to me and what do I need clarified?
- Can I connect the core ideas in this text to other core ideas I understand?

Every book we read is a potential teacher. Reading is a systematic process for learning the essential meanings of that teacher. When we become good readers, we can learn the essential meanings of an unlimited number of teachers whose teachings live on, ever available, in the books they have written. When we take the core ideas of those teachings into our minds through careful reading, we can productively use them in our lives.

Reading Minds

You have a mind. But do you know how your mind operates? Are you aware of your prejudices and preconceptions? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking mirrors the thinking of those around you? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking has been influenced by the thinking of the culture in which you have been raised and conditioned? To what extent can you step outside your day-to-day mindset and into the mindset of those who think differently from you? Are you able to imagine being "wrong" in some of your beliefs? What criteria would you use to evaluate your personal beliefs? Are you aware of how to upgrade the quality of your own beliefs?

In reading the written work of others, you enter their minds. In coming to terms with the mind of another, you can come to better discover your own mind, both its strengths and its weaknesses. To read your own mind, you must learn how to do second-order thinking: how to think about your thinking while you are thinking from outside your thinking. But how do you get outside your thinking?

To do this, you must recognize that there are eight basic structures in all thinking. Whenever we think, we think for a *purpose* within a *point of view* based on *assumptions* leading to *implications* and conse-

quences. We use *concepts*, ideas, and theories to *interpret information* (data, facts, and experiences) in order to answer *questions*, solve problems, and resolve issues. When we come to understand these eight basic elements, we have powerful intellectual tools that enable us to think better. We understand that whenever we reason about anything whatsoever, these parts of thinking are inherent in our mind's operations.

Thus when you read, you are reasoning through the text; you are reading for a purpose, using concepts or ideas and assumptions of your own, making inferences, and thinking within a personal point of view. At the same time, the text you are reading is the product of someone else's reasoning. You therefore recognize that embedded in the text is the author's purpose: the author's questions, assumptions, concepts, and so forth. The better you are at understanding your own reasoning within your own perspective, the better you can understand the reasoning of others. The better you understand someone else's logic, the better you understand your own.

When you can effectively move back and forth between what you are reading and what you are thinking, you bring what you think to bear upon what you read and what you read to bear upon what you think. You are able to change your thinking when the logic of what you read is an improvement on what you think. And you are able to withhold accepting new ideas when you cannot reconcile them with your own. You realize that you may be wrong in some of your beliefs.

The Work of Reading

Reading is a form of intellectual work. And intellectual work requires willingness to persevere through difficulties. But perhaps even more important, intellectual work requires understanding what such work entails. This is where most students fall short. Consider the chal-

lenge of analyzing, evaluating, and repairing an automobile engine. The biggest challenge is in knowing how to do what needs to be done: how to use the tools of auto mechanics in taking the engine apart and how to run tests on specific systems in it. And learning this requires learning how an automobile engine functions, the internal combustion system it represents.

No one would expect to know how to repair an automobile engine without training, involving both theory and practice. If you learn to "read" without understanding what good reading involves, you learn to read poorly. That is why reading is a fundamentally passive activity for many students. It is as if their theory of reading was something like this: "You let your eye move from left to right, scanning one line at a time, until somehow, in some inexplicable way, meaning automatically and effortlessly happens in the mind."

Conclusion

In this column we have emphasized the fact that close reading, reading that is substantive in nature, requires a particular form of engagement of the mind. It requires intellectual skills that enable the reader to analyze and assess as one reads. It requires the ability to question in special ways while reading. Only when students actively engage their minds in a skilled dialog with the texts they read, disciplining their thinking as they read, are they achieving depth of understanding. (Samples of close reading are available in the referenced reading guide.)

Linda Elder is executive director and Richard Paul is director of research & professional development of the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA 94928.