

# Making Reading *Mean*

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# Introduction: The Philosophers' Stone

What is it that readers do as they read? How do they turn those black, unmoving marks on paper into living ideas or stories or information that can enrich and transform a person's thinking? How do they perform the magic that makes reading mean?

Reading, non-fiction as well as fiction, is, I think, a sort of alchemy: an activity of transformation. Just as the alchemists of old worked to turn the basest metals into gold, to bring riches to themselves and their patrons, so the reader has always had to work to turn the base, inky marks of the printer's press into the stuff of imagination and learning: into the untold riches of the mind. The alchemists knew, in theory, how to do this: they knew they had to find the philosophers' stone. So, they spent their days thinking and experimenting: they ground and they mixed; they refined and they distilled. Although no one of them ever actually achieved the stone, they were fortunate in that they knew how to look for it.

With reading it is different. While many, many readers do find their own philosophers' stone – that is, the trick of making reading so much more than the words on the page – few can explain exactly what they do as they read, and fewer still how they found out how to do it. It is as if they came across the stone by accident. This is the difficulty for teachers. They know that it is this transformative understanding of what it is that makes reading worthwhile that they want to pass on to their pupils. The question is, how can they pass it on when the process is so mysterious?

Thousands of years have passed since reading began, and we still don't really know how readers do it. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to teach. Because of this, even in the early twenty-first century, we rely on alchemical methodology to teach it, especially at the early stages of

school. We rely, for example, on the scientific discovery that phonemic awareness is a precursor to learning to read, and so teach phonics systematically (NLS 1998). We measure progress in terms of common sight words recognised out of context, and in quasi-scientific reading ages. We test comprehension, which is countable, rather than interpretation, which is not. It is all rather like the grinding and the mixing of the alchemists: it is useful activity, but it doesn't necessarily achieve the ends we want. Real readers know that this obsession with counting and measuring is merely scratching the surface of what reading is and what readers do. For reading is a habit of mind, not an accumulation of skills. It is a way of thinking, not a portfolio of competencies. We have to hope that somehow, as a result of, or despite, our teaching, the children we teach will find the philosopher's stone – those habits of mind that make reading mean.

This minibook is an attempt to get under the skin of the magic a little, to throw some light on the processes that go on in readers' minds as they read, as they enlarge texts in their imaginations, as they make meaning from text. It is divided into two parts. In part one, I describe, a series of maps or models of reading behaviour that chart the pushes and pulls of thinking that individual readers set into play as they work at making texts mean. These maps are derived from observation of, and conversation with, real readers, both children and adults. The children, who were all aged between six and eight, were regularly observed in various ordinary reading situations in their classrooms in three quite different schools in England over approximately four school terms. They were also interviewed by the researcher (me) about their reading experiences and habits, and encouraged to read and talk about their reading with me and with each other, in small groups. The adults were all taking a module on reading for a masters degree. Most were teachers. Together they read a novel over several weeks and discussed their thinking about it. What these readers, children and adults, showed and said about reading is represented in the models. Four quite different patterns of reading behaviour are identified. Part One goes on to suggest that these models are useful, not only in describing reading behaviour, but also in providing teachers with a diagnostic tool that will help them identify pupils who have adopted unproductive reading behaviours, and understand how to move them on.

In Part Two, the minibook turns its attention to the role of the teacher and texts in the classroom. It stresses the importance of the interpretive community in the classroom and offers practical suggestions as to how such a community might be achieved. It looks at the importance of texts themselves. Following Meek (1988), it suggests that the form and content of the books that readers encounter are instrumental in their learning about how books and reading work. It therefore takes two examples of books for children (one for children near the beginning of primary education (aged 5-7) and one for those nearing the end [7-11] ) and briefly unpacks for teachers some of the lessons in reading that these books afford. Finally, the minibook situates reading within the set of ideas which have become known as critical literacy, and suggests that in a world of rapidly changing textual practices, those readers who can read beyond the words on the page or the screen are the ones who will be equipped to meet the challenges of literacy in the future. The philosopher's stone they learn to use will never be out of date.

## **Part One: Maps and Models**

### **Chapter 1 - A Framework For Reading**

The maps of reading I present here are an attempt to describe the habits of thinking that readers employ in order to make texts mean. Like other habits we pick up during our lives, some are more useful than others. One of the purposes of these models is to help teachers identify good and bad reading habits when they see them in the children in their classes, and so to know how to encourage the good.

In order to understand these maps, some assumptions need to be made clear. The first is that any reader, child or adult, is an active maker of meaning (Wells, 1998; Bruner, 1986). I assume here that reading is not a passive activity: unless a reader actively makes a text mean, it will never be any more than marks on a page or screen. The second assumption follows from the first. Because it is the reader that makes texts mean, then meaning must be the product of the reader's mind, and depend upon that reader's thinking and experience as well as upon the text which guides that thinking (Iser, 1980; Fish, 1980). Meaning in reading, therefore is not fixed. Different readers will find different nuances of meaning in the same text. Thirdly, I assume that the construction of meaning takes place in that fluid imaginative space that Winnicott (1971) called the third area. It is with this idea that the maps begin.