

# **MAKING THE JUMP: the Need for a Phenomenological Shift through the Literature Experience in the Adult Literacy Classroom**

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**E**xamination of reading by individuals in an Adult Education program relies upon certain notions of literacy and its relationship to reading. Literacy has been defined by various stakeholders and organizations using specific criteria such as being able to read and fill out a form or interpreting instructions for taking medicine. One way of thinking of literacy is: “a condition of being-with-language in a particular way—that is, of being possessed of the letter—and for this reason literacy is most often linked to the history of writing in its formal and restrictive sense” (Armand, 2006, p. 201). The definitions share the characteristic of emphasis on the more technical elements necessary to the deciphering of texts; with an emphasis on the societal benefits of literacy rates (employment, etc.). Adult literacy is usually framed in such terms (employment or lack of) and as such, education of the non-reading adult, through the school system, is described in terms of functional ability.

Looking at literacy as an agent of change in the individual—the way that it affects thinking and sense of being—gives researchers and teachers a meaningful way to grapple with adult literacy. However, the two views of literacy (functional skill versus reading for pleasure or transcendence) do not always mesh well in the classroom. A curriculum which focuses on workplace readiness—which schools that function with federal funding generally do—is one obstacle. Another obstacle is the students themselves, some of whom are there not on their own accord, others who read at varying speeds and have different interests.

This paper seeks to deepen an understanding of the experience of reading fiction for the adult new reader. Expert readers, those who have been reading for many years, understand what it means to ‘get lost in a book.’ Interviews and classroom observations in an adult basic education classroom revealed some obstacles for the students with literacy. The participants all discussed their feelings about education and learning how to read as an adult, and some of their observations were keen and heartbreaking. The goal of the paper is to show that reading fiction in the adult education classroom is valuable for the adult new reader. While reading fiction might not directly affect their employability, their descriptions of reading and

how it has affected their lives were positive. They also demonstrated their potential to engage with the text in a varied and meaningful way. Perhaps the biggest surprise was one new reader's description of transcendence through reading, which we might not expect in a person who tests at a second grade reading level. Her revealing interview gave birth to an idea involving phenomenology and the reading brain, and when and how it might occur in a new adult reader.

### *Reading and the Brain*

Decoding skills necessarily precede fluency, which is required to become 'a reader'—that is, "possessed of the letter" so that he might consider picking up a book for entertainment's sake or escapism. There are other avenues for this type of escapism through words which might appeal to new readers, such as listening to or reading along with audio books. The classroom gives the new reader a place to discuss textual meanings, and it can help him understand references to experiences which he has not had in life or previous reading experiences. A positive classroom experience can provide the new reader a means of escaping into a text, engaging them, and encouraging them to continue with their difficult journey.

Wolf (2007) has studied the reading brain extensively. She contends that the human brain was not actually made to read—it is an unnatural act. In describing how children learn to read, she points out the problems that can occur on the road to fluency. Some children experience the shift from verbal to written communication seamlessly, as their brains are rearranged and recircuited. Some children do not learn to read easily, because their brains are not wired to translate lines and squiggles to sound. We know of this as dyslexia. Another factor affecting a child's reading ability is home life. The child who is not read to, who has little exposure to print, begins school with a deficit, or what Wolf refers to as word poverty: "By five years of age, some children from impoverished-language environments have heard 32 million fewer words spoken to them than the average middle-class child...and "the sheer unavailability of books will have a crushing effect on the word knowledge and world knowledge that should be learned in these early years" (p. 102 – 103).

### *Wolf's Stages of Reading Acquisition*

Stage 1. The Emerging Pre-Reader. The young child listens to stories; "emerging reading arises out of years of perceptions, increasing conceptual and social development, and cumulative exposures to oral and written language" (p. 115).

Stage 2. The Novice Reader. The child learns how to decode words on a page and learns that those words tell a story (p. 116). In this stage, the reader cracks the alphabetic code—"Learning all the grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules in decoding...involves one part discovery and many

parts hard work. Aiding both are three code-cracking capacities: the phonological, orthographic, and semantic areas of language learning” (p. 117). If one of these capacities is not properly functioning, reading is very difficult.

Stage 3. The Decoding Reader. At this stage, Wolf explains that the word-poor child “has consequences for their oral and their written language... precious little explicit vocabulary instruction goes on in most classrooms” (p. 129). The child who has been read to and has a large vocabulary is able to build upon it at this stage, and is poised for reading fluency.

Stage 4: Fluent Comprehending Reader. Wolf says that “Fluency is not a matter of speed; it is a matter of being able to utilize all the special knowledge a child has about a word—its letters, letter patterns, meaning, grammatical functions, roots, and endings—fast enough to have time to think and comprehend” (p. 130 – 131). The brain has to be able to draw upon past knowledge at the same time that it decodes the phonemes and vocabulary; it is able to make sense of words quickly enough to sustain a train of thought. This enables the reader to become a reader—to engage with a text in the way that we are calling the “phenomenological shift.”

Stage 5: Expert Reader. At this stage, the reader is able to read any word without thinking about meaning.

Based on the description of the stages of reading above, we can see that there is equal weight on nature and nurture in reading development, and deficiencies in either can result in low reading skills. Fortunately both can be overcome in children, but interventions in the classroom and home are necessary.

#### *Challenges to Literacy; an aside*

There are some personal and societal realities related to reading that functional literacy addresses and with which literacy teachers must contend in order to help their students be successful. Personal experiences and exposure to standard uses of the language determine how people interpret questions on tests and what words they are able to use and understand. Users of nonstandard English are at a disadvantage in standardized testing situations. They also may not enjoy reading texts that do not reflect their experiences of reality, which can be a determinant factor in how well they do in school. The language used in coursework and testing in public schools provides evidence of another way that the dominant culture maintains control over education; it is effectively a form of indoctrination.

Though control has a negative connotation, the reality is that the ability to communicate effectively using the dominant language enhances the ability to participate in public discourse. Hofstetter et. al. (1999) quantified ways that higher-level reading habits correspond to greater political awareness and involvement. By learning how to read students are not only able to

gain better employment but they also become more socially powerful. They said that “knowledge is the key to establishing and maintaining power relationships. Furthermore...literacy is a key, possibly the key, to acquisition of knowledge” (p. 59). Schooling, public libraries, and literacy education have the potential to work together to produce citizens who are able to solve problems and are able to be engaged in the decisions which affect his or her life. Literacy is, therefore, the means to participate in society, but it is not the same as reading. Literary reading is a higher-level activity which depends upon literacy.

Why, then, discuss phenomenology? The phenomenological approach is particularly apt for describing the experiences of individuals involved in an institutionally affiliated program, such as a community reading program. Sanders explained, “When...one understands consciousness as awareness of what accounts for managerial excellence or a description of organizational myths, cultures, and symbols, then the possibilities of phenomenology as an organizational research methodology begin to emerge” (p. 353).

#### *Phenomenology and Reading*

While phenomenology and reading have been connected in the past, a set of assumptions have underlain those applications of phenomenology. Readers, according to the conceptualizations of Poulet, Iser, and others, are presumed to be literate. Their reader possesses the fundamental skills that enable reading, so the phenomenological examination emphasizes the relation of reading texts to readers' Being. Those literate readers are potentially open to an intersubjective experience based on an ability to exercise intuition and reflection regarding the work read. The assumptions transcend the technical elements of literacy; readers do not have innate ability to reach the deeper level of reading. The practices of intuition and reflection must be learned and require effort and study to master. There is the need for phenomenological growth for a certain kind of reading to be possible. The necessary growth is an integral idea that informs the research presented here, and its nature requires some description. A first step toward understanding reading in the phenomenological sense is to recognize “that there is a distinction between mental act—a part of consciousness—and the object, which is not a real part of consciousness is always real, even if the object is real. While the act of consciousness is always real, the object of this act can be real or unreal” (Velarde-Mayol, p. 33).

The act of reading has been explicitly described as a phenomenological act (see Librach, etc.). However, the act of learning to read, especially as an adult, is a step which has seldom been explored using the phenomenological construct as the theorists noted here have applied it. Adults who are learning how to read experience a shift in thinking, as they learn to see the world in a different way, as we begin to see the world through another's eyes. The act of reading is both a means and an end in this change. Librach suggests that reading introduces doubt (p. 55) of one's own naturalistic viewpoint:

“attempt to doubt introduces...the phenomenological neutralization of our intentions.” The suggestion is an important one that begs for examination. Books themselves can be viewed as an intersubjective agent in that they embody a voice and an expression of some self. Agency also assumes a consciousness that exercises some volition, so the creation of the text is an act of will. Granted, the volitional consciousness inherent in a book is static; the author imposed the agency during writing and the reader interprets the knowable elements of the agency.

Where might the doubt Librach expresses come from? It can arise as part of a process of growth and transition; the interstice between less-than-complete literacy and the ability to perceive self and other in a text can be a source of uncertainty and unease. The interstice has an analogy in space between the natural and the phenomenological attitude (see Sokolowski, 2000). The path of a person’s life necessarily begins with experience in, perception of, and an attitude towards the natural world. “The natural life, whether it is universal unthematic horizon. The horizon is, in the natural attitude, precisely the world always pregiven as that which exists” (Husserl, 1970, p. 145). Our understanding of the world is grounded, in large part, in reaction—reaction to, and learning of, the occurrences of daily life, including the linguistic, physical, and affective relations with other people. “When we live in the natural—the nontranscendental—attitude, different thematic directions, and thus different directions of theoretical interest, open themselves to us in accord with the structure of the pregiven world—the latter being given to us as our communal surrounding world and, through this, as objective world” (Husserl, 1970, p. 329). The natural attitude lacks certain intersubjective and reflective aspects, aspects that cannot be possible until there is a transcendence beyond immediate and immanent experience. Reading—that is, literary reading—is not entirely impossible within the realm of the natural attitude, but it is definitely limited.

Contrast the natural attitude with the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude is, by its nature, situated immanently. A person’s being is located in the world of immediacy, particular kinds of perception, and some frames that define action. The experiences of a person are examined in light of a consciousness that is bound by the natural world. The natural attitude is necessary for the fundamental functioning in the world. Husserl explains the natural attitude succinctly and fully: “When we live in the natural—the nontranscendental—attitude, different thematic directions, and thus directions of theoretical interest, open themselves to us in accord with the structure of the pregiven world—the latter being given to us as our communal surrounding world and, through this, as objective world” (Husserl, 1970, p. 329). The phenomenological attitude enables a different life-world (in fact, the natural attitude is described by Husserl as world-life to differentiate that life in the objective world) orientation. This attitude neither negates nor replaces the natural attitude; it is a difference in being. As such it creates potential for a new understanding through critical, rational reflection.

In short, mastering technical elements of reading is, of course, necessary to reading; immanence has to precede transcendence. If, however, the definition of reading is broadened to include literary reading, mastery of the technical elements may not be sufficient for expert reading. Sokolowski (2000) explains the obstruction the ego presents in the development of imagination:

Memory and imagination are structurally very similar, and one easily slips into the other. The same sort of displacement of the ego or the self that we find in memory also occurs in imagination. In both forms of intentionality, I here and now can mentally live in another place and time: In memory the there and then is specific and past, but in imagination it is in a kind of nowhere and ‘nowhen,’ but even in imagination it is different from the here and now I actually inhabit (p. 71).

The implications for the present study are clear. For adult learners, the techniques and mechanics of reading are essential; they must occur prior to any interpretative perception of texts. To state this requirement another way, the fundamentals of reading ability have to be developed so that adult learners may experience Being in another way, so that their life-world can be enriched by literature and the relation between self and other can be apprehended more fully. In part, the examination presented here analyzes growth of a phenomenological attitude in the adult learners.

#### *Why things might go wrong*

So why might some adults have difficulties learning to read in the sense meant here? Wolf describes what might go wrong as a result of both dyslexia or language disorders and a home life in which the young child is not exposed to the complexities of language through books. Either of those will result in a delay, although those may be overcome with intensive educational interventions in the early years. One other reason that must be mentioned in regards to this study: limited intelligence, which will affect the reader’s ability to become an expert reader, or one who is able to inhabit another world through reading, or making the phenomenological shift. The important thing to realize is that adults who did not learn to read as children might have any of, or a combination of these problems; limited intelligence is not always the issue, but early and intensive interventions usually are.

The problem that has the greatest likelihood of preventing acquisition of a phenomenological attitude is limited intelligence. Sokolowski explains:

...our transcendental ego is that part of us that is the agent of reason and truth...Our rationality...involves...the intentionalities by which we identify things in both their presence and their absence, the intentionalities by which we introduce syntax and part-whole

compositions in what we experience, the specifically human ways of remembering, imagining, and anticipating, and the forms of evidence and verification that we can carry out (p. 117 – 118).

It involves power over faculties. This is a necessary part of what it takes to think philosophically, to see oneself as a part of the whole. This is the expanding effect of reading: it enables the reader to expand his vision, to identify things which are not present, which have not been physically experienced—i.e., “the armchair traveler.” The phenomenological reader would contemplate what it means to do such traveling: “In the natural attitude we have a world, we exercise rationality, we identify across presence and absence, we confirm and disconfirm, and we also lie, deceive, and fall into error; but in the phenomenological attitude we clarify what it is to do all these things” (Sokolowski, 123). However, because learning how to read might be caused by other issues, there is a good chance that the new reader might become aware of a shift in thinking as fluency increases.

The reader who can adopt the phenomenological attitude is able to apply *epoch*, or reduction. This reduction does not lead to elimination or diminution; it refers to a skepticism, a withholding. It is not only reality that is suspended, judgment is suspended while the reduction is applied. It is natural intentions that are suspended; the perceived thing is not taken for granted, is not located simply within the objective world. In order to accomplish epoch\_ the reader has to bracket some things. The things, in reading, can be excerpts of text, but they may also be more complex—characterizations, narrative style, motivation, morality, kinds of speech, etc. Reading in the phenomenological attitude entails a degree of doubt. That is, the text, as langue, is read with some skepticism; the literal meaning of a text is necessary, but it not sufficient. Husserl, again, explains:

In transcendental-phenomenological reflection we deliver ourselves from this footing [of the world given to us], by universal *epoch* with respect to the being or non-being of the world. The experience as thus modified, the transcendental experience, consists then, we can say, in our looking at and describing the particular transcendently reduced *cogito*, but without participating, as reflective subjects, in the natural existence-positing that the originally straightforward perception (or other *cogito*) contains or that the Ego, as immersing himself straightforwardly in the world, actually executed (Husserl, 1999, p. 34).

#### *The study*

The ideas explained above regarding phenomenology emerged during conversations with students in one classroom about their experiences with reading. This paper focuses on reading and phenomenology, but a brief explanation of the entire project is called for in order to contextualize the conversations. Interviews were conducted with both new readers and

other community members who read the book and/or participated in events connected to a One Book experience. Interview selections from both types of readers are explored in order to find out some of the similarities and differences in the participants' experiences.

Many libraries have utilized a One Book project to engage citizens in a common reading project. A particular book is chosen, and everyone is encouraged to read it and take part in various discussions and activities related to the book. These are basically locally grown, but nationally sanctioned programs which encourage reading and civic participation – the National Endowment for the Arts gives monetary and other support to the projects. The focus of this study stems from an interest in adult new readers; the new readers read the book along with experienced readers and thus became participants in the civic reading project.

Prior interviews with the participants indicated that the students had very negative and demeaning past educational experiences. They often connected humiliating peer and educational experiences with shyness and a lack of positive social opportunities. The literacy class was a step for them towards making amends with their past—they all found that it was a supportive and understanding environment. They had little to say about their personal experiences of literature or why they enjoyed reading, but they did all say that they enjoyed reading as a group project. It enabled them to finish a book, which in itself was a large step; various other reasons were given, which will be explained below.

There were some similarities between the literacy students' answers and expert readers' answers, and some differences, although most of the data which was gathered concerning the literacy students' interaction with the text was only available through observations. The interviews were less productive for any information regarding their perception of the book and more productive for data concerning their lives, while interviews with the expert readers were very successful in regards to their purposes of reading. They enjoyed talking about books, their perceptions of the literature experience, and One Book. For the most part, talking about literature took the students out of their comfort zone, and the advanced readers into their comfort zone.

All of the literacy students said that they enjoyed taking part in the One Book events, and one of them specifically said that participating in it was an important step for her, personally, because she was able to read what the rest of the community was reading. Low literacy is often cited as a cause of social isolation. Negative school experiences were recalled by all of the students. Their teacher indicated that she believed that they were fairly isolated, based on casual classroom conversations. The combination of reading and discussion literature with the community was a way to help them become engaged in both ways:

I: Do you think that—do your students ever talk to you about being active in other community or other social events?

T1: No, in fact, they're probably not. They're generally isolated from the community. I have one student who is politically active and he belongs to a political organization, is very active. Other than that, no, I think that they may go to work, I think that one student volunteers, he does not go to work, I have another few students who work, but generally it is work, and home. There generally are not planned activities outside of home. I have one student that had never been to a restaurant until we took her.

As Wolf said, students from underprivileged backgrounds are often deprived of not just books, but also experiences that allow them to understand books.

Fundamental to this study is a question, though: why read? There has to be a desire to pick up a book; there is a transaction that takes place between a reader and that which he is reading that fulfills some need. Interviews with all of the readers (both new and expert) began with some general questions about the One Book selection, which asked the participants to reflect upon their feelings regarding the book. Next they were asked about what they generally like to read. Iser's (1978) idea that the reader must be a participant in the act of reading is central to the idea that was produced by the interview participants:

The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate...boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game (p. 108).

When the reader is lacking this creative activity, enjoyment is lost. The relationship, or intersubjectivity, between the text and the reader is lost because of inability to create the connections between the past and the future of the text. Likewise, there should be an intersubjectivity between the book and the reader's own conception of self. In the following extracts, we can see that the readers' description of this intersubjectivity, when I asked the participants to describe what makes a good book. There are several main categories that the users describe: it must be believable (in other words, it needs to connect to reality in some way), and it has to hold the readers' attention. In the following excerpt, the literacy teacher described these qualities:

T1: So a lot of the description in that story—I think it was very good for them to read that story because they were able to visualize what was going on in the story; it was very descriptive. But for [last year's book], to compare the two, one was very current, in

the news, in their own lives they probably know people who are immigrants, maybe illegal immigrants, and maybe they can relate to the main characters. Whereas, I'm not sure they could really relate or see themselves as the main character in this book.

In the following passage, one of the students described a connection that she made between a book and her life experiences. She described speaking up at one of the events the previous year (this was the second year the teacher had done this). Her feelings of marginality echoed those of the books' protagonist; the connection was significant because the book was about the immigrants' experiences of isolation through language and culture, which she transferred to disability, demonstrating figurative interpretation. The community reading event deepened her understanding of the text, when another attendee discussed his experiences with marginalization as a racial minority:

S1: That was really interesting because it wasn't only people in the class, it was people in the community. And one thing I really identified with him when he said, have you ever been in a room and you still feel like you're invisible—like nobody sees you, and you have something you want to say, want to express, and it's like nobody sees you, it's like you're not there, it's like, you want to say, "I've got something to say!" and they look over you as if you're not there? That stuck out.

T1: And as I recall, you did have something to say.

S1: I did!...

S1: It's because they were different. It's like with me, when people first look at me, they do not look at me as a person, they look at me as a person in a chair. It's like, I'm different. I stand out. They look at the chair first and the person second. And I think that's how the migrants must have felt, because it's like if you come from a different country, if you've been taught different things, and you're not a part of...you're in a different place where people do things differently,

I: And they've got the language barrier, too.

S1: I think that's how the migrants in the book felt.

This passage demonstrated how the book, and the event, enabled the literacy student to see herself in a new light and to connect with others.

#### *New Readers' Construction of Self through Literacy*

Dee, (S1) one of the new readers, brought up an interesting point: a good book should be unpredictable. She also said that she likes the book to remove her from her physical constraints; she has paraplegia. She compared reading to watching a ballet. She lives in a nursing home, so imagining doing ballet or living as a pioneer woman (her favorite genre is Westerns) must be very liberating. In the following excerpt she discussed

the experience of reading as transcendental. She seemed to revel in being able to talk about her literature experiences, which contrasts sharply with the other students' discomfort when discussing reading and books:

S1: ...it takes me from where I am now to the story in the book, or I can be watching a movie, I'm so involved in the book or the movie that I do not think about where I'm at, or that I'm disabled or that I can't do this, or I can't do that...you know, it's like when I watch...different styles of dance, like ballet, it's like, in my mind, I'm doing that. You know? I'm not here, it's not here, it's not now, it's like, in my mind, I'm the one on the floor. So...

I: Yeah...

S1: And books have that way of taking you from where you are, right now, into a totally different time, a totally different period, and you're out of yourself for the time that you're reading the book. You know, you're a person in the book, and the more you read, the more you want to know about that time period, it's just awesome. It takes you somewhere else besides in the present.

Dee was the only new reader who described reading as liberating. Her almost constant physical discomfort makes reading in class extremely difficult; she tires easily when reading out loud, and usually prefers to listen. However, it is apparent from her description of the act of reading that she is sometimes able to read at above her second grade testing level. Perhaps she actually listened to the books; I didn't want to press her on this issue because she is identifying herself as a reader.

One of the common themes among the students was that they all expressed joy and gratitude for the help they have received through the literacy program. In the following extract, Terrence (S4) equates reading with 'normalcy.' He did not enjoy talking about the book. During class, he couldn't remember what had occurred during the previous day's reading, but he did enjoy listening to the story. He said that he really does enjoy being able to read. Literacy made him feel like a 'normal' person because he was able to pick up a book or a magazine at the doctor's office:

S4: Since I started coming to the Adult Center, I have enjoyed reading more. Before I started coming here, I could care less about reading. You know, reading just wasn't something I would sit down and do like a normal person would do every day on their spare time.

I: And now you do.

S4: Yes, now I will pick up a book and read it, read for a while, even if I go to a doctor's office, they have magazines laying out, I will go through the front, every one of the magazines, and I will sit there and read maybe 2 or 3 pages of the article until the doctor calls me back. And now I really enjoy reading.

I: What about talking about books?

S4: I'm not very good in that part of...I do not know, I've always been kind of shy. And you know, I do not like talking to a lot of people.

When asked about One Book participation, he said that it did help him to be less shy, but he immediately turned the conversation back to his school and family experiences. This shift often happened during interviews – when asked about the text, the students usually returned to their lived experiences. The following extract demonstrates this shift:

I: Do you think that programs like this, having all of these different types of people—help people feel more comfortable in talking to a wider range of people? That's one of the goals of the program, is to bridge gaps between people.

S4: Yeah, you know, it helps me. I used to get...well, when I was going to school, I would just sit back, wouldn't, I would listen but wouldn't participate, wouldn't give them my opinion on anything. That's just how, during that time, I guess I could just care less about the darn book. And just wanted to move on.

I: Yeah, wanted to be having fun, not in the classroom. Yeah, I remember those days.

S4: And, but now, and I guess it also kind of helps having a teacher that really understands. When I was going to school I took seven different classes, and all seven of them, I maybe had one teacher that would really sit down and work with me one-on-one, you know, really help me, like on a math problem, and the rest of them said, just do the best you can. And to me, I do not think that's right.

I: No, it's not.

S4: And they are there to help. Help the students achieve their goals. And there was one time, I can even remember, when I was living in the foster home, I, there was a bunch of kids at school would make fun of me because I was slow learning, would call me dummy, stupid...

In the following excerpt Dee, the student who so reveled in the transcendental literature experience, recalled the dim days of her schooling. She contrasted the literacy classroom with her demeaning childhood experiences:

S1: And almost every classroom experience I've had I've been singled out as being different, not being accepted for who I was, not because of the disability, but because I was slower, I didn't pick up on things as fast as other students. And I felt like I was always being singled out for that, like there was something wrong with me. You know, if you do not want to be like she is, you need to do 'this, this, this, and this.' Otherwise you'll be where she is for the rest of your life. And that's one of the things I admire about Telyn still to this day, is she does not come across as that kind of person. She treats you as an equal and not every classroom environment is like that—you get pointed at and stared at if you're the least bit different.

It would be nice to think that taking the new readers to the library would help them to overcome some of their social isolation and their reading difficulties, but they often have problems getting to the library because of time or practical constraints. In the following excerpt Tim (S3), explained

that he does not go to the library often because he is so busy. He, also, turns back to his past (perceived) failures in school, and why he is in school again:

S3: I do not go to the library that much because I'm busy and working, working two jobs, and going to school here...

I: That would keep you busy.

S3: Yeah, maybe some day I will go to the library, if I have free time.

I: Do you have much time to read outside of class?

S3: Well, right now I'm still working on reading, and writing, so that's what I'm doing right now. I'm happy about that, I'm glad I go to school here because back in...back around the '80's, I was going to school out there (unintell.) and I ain't learned nothing out there, I ain't never learned to read or write, or nothing, so what I did, I said, well, I know I'm too old, but I decided I'm going to go to school, I'm going to go to night class.

#### *New Readers and the Phenomenological Attitude*

The meaning of participation for the new readers was quite different from that of the confident readers, which was apparent through both interviews and observations. The literacy students had very little experience with reading for enjoyment. While experienced readers often pointed out that they used the community reading book as a 'seal of approval', the new readers read the book because their teacher bought it for them. They had a difficult time reading it — each time they started reading it, the teacher recapped the previous days' readings and the basic plot.

At public events, the new readers were shy about participating—their body language was very reserved or even stiff, and they did not talk amongst themselves as many other audience members did, although they later said that they enjoyed the events. The more confident readers were more likely to talk to each other—both strangers and friends.

Observations and interviews also indicated that the confident readers were able to make more connections between the book and the events in their own lives. Literature gives people another lens through which to view their own lives, and the confident readers had developed this lens. They also had more finely developed communication skills to describe their experience of literature, while the literacy students generally avoided talking about the book.

Despite the literacy students' low skills in communicating about literature, simply being a part of the experience gave them a new way to think about literature. As Dee pointed out, she enjoyed going to the events of the previous year because she was able to see that everyone interpreted the book differently. She also expressed a confidence which the other students lacked—when the conversation was about 'being on the outside,' she was able to speak up. She knew exactly what it was like to be on the outside,

and she had the confidence to tell people about it. She demonstrated that the new readers are not always too shy to speak, and that they can make connections between the literature experience and their own lives. She shares a common trait with the other literacy students, in that reading is extremely difficult for her. However, she also shows that not all literacy students are too shy to participate, and that they can experience the transcendent experience of reading.

New adult readers tend to have experienced the world in a particular way. The natural attitude, at best, characterizes the experiences. “At best” is used here because there may be some absence of reflection on the immanent nature of the objective world. It is apparent that these readers do not engage in *noesis*; they are not prepared to approach intentionality from the phenomenological attitude. The readers certainly demonstrate some reflection, but reading, as some may take for granted, is not part of the life-world of these individuals. The interpretations that are illustrated above indicate the situatedness of the interviewees, their perceptions of the reading experience in terms of experience in the world. The readers do accept that there may be some benefits, some usefulness to reading, but the phenomenological attitude has not been created. As Husserl says, “This reflection of knowledge, however, was not transcendental reflection but rather a reflection on the praxis of knowledge and was thus similar to the reflection carried out by one who works in any other practical sphere of interest, the kind which is expressed in the general propositions of a technology” (Husserl, 1970, p. 92).

*What does this mean for libraries?*

First of all, we must remember that there are many reasons for illiteracy or low literacy. Some brains are wired to easily acquire literacy; for others it is a struggle. If a child’s home and educational life does not provide extensive interventions, acquisition of the written word will be very difficult. Librarians should avoid making assumptions about literacy levels, taking cues from patrons, displaying compassion and understanding towards patrons of all ages regarding reading ability. Low literacy is often hidden, and a patron who lacks reading skills has probably experienced intense humiliation and frustration.

Second, research has shown that there is a correlation between reading and civic participation. The scenario in which the students took part in community-wide events engaged the students in both, because they had the opportunity to be part of the community through the act of reading. This suggests that libraries can be an avenue for civic engagement for new readers and experienced readers in One Read events. However, as the above interviews indicated, many new readers are not likely to go to the library due to time constraints and negative past experiences. The library might have more success partnering with literacy groups and other existing organizations. Providing these groups with book club suggestions which might speak to the students—that speak their language—might also help

engage the students. Connecting with adult education and literacy classes and bringing the new readers into the library can enrich the conversation for all participants and might be especially meaningful and helpful for the new readers when they see how experienced readers connect with literature.

We know the value of becoming “one” with a text, and this research has shown that it might be possible for new readers. However, there are other ways to engage new readers with books in such a way that they can experience the phenomenological shift; as indicated above, one student who only tested at a second grade level was able to describe this shift. Providing the students with opportunities to listen to the books and discuss the meanings of difficult words and concepts can help them to experience this shift. This process feeds on itself as a love of reading develops. This research has shown several benefits of participating in community reading events for new readers: it can help them connect to the community and widen their perspective. The research also demonstrates the value of moving beyond a functional definition of literacy in the classroom. Realizing the value of literature in adult education could give librarians a unique and valued position in adult literacy; developing relationships with new readers through partnerships can reinforce this role.

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