

Reading comprehension:

What does it look like in the correctional classroom?

By Suzanne Wilde

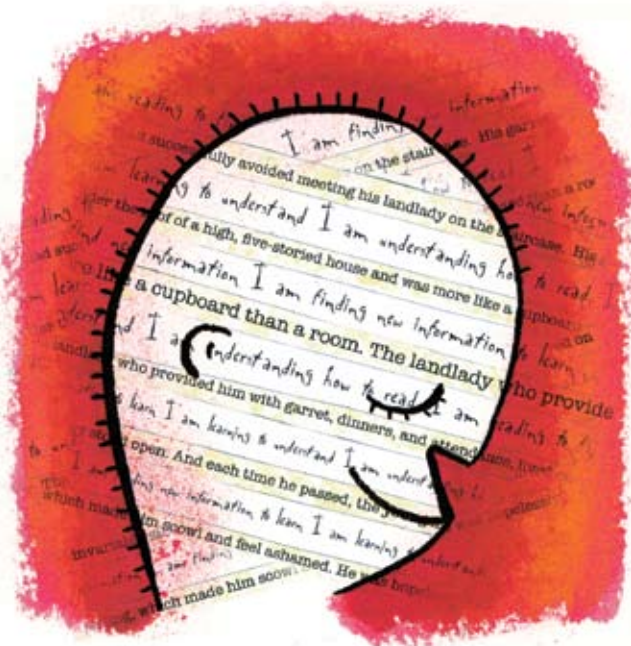
Many of my students are men who, for a variety of reasons, have not completed school, now want to gain a higher level of education than they currently possess, and have been identified as needing increased literacy skills. I have discovered that my perception of reading comprehension often differs from theirs, as does my perception of reading. Many of my students see reading as decoding, and comprehension as literal comprehension, and have not realised that there are other layers to these domains.

It is common for students to say during initial assessments, "I read but I don't remember what I've read". In the past I have interpreted these comments as meaning that when the student reads, his mind wanders, he loses concentration, and does not process the information, just as sometimes happens to proficient readers when we are not fully engaged with the text. However what these men often mean is that they don't remember every literal detail, and that therefore they believe that they don't remember the text. They may, for example, be able to recount the main features of the Irish potato blight but not remember the year of the famine. They see this as *not remembering* the text. Their beliefs of what reading is about are actually preventing them from becoming better readers by continually reinforcing their notion of failure.

Allied to this notion that readers need to remember every detail of text is the idea, held by many of the students, that readers must read every word in order to have properly read the text. They recognise their roles as code breakers and identify reading as a process of decoding every word. On encountering a new word many of them are unable to proceed to the next word until they have decoded it and found its meaning.

A third area of dispute between my perceptions of reading and that of some of my students surrounds the use of predictive skills to find meaning. When I ask students to guess what a text will be about they can usually respond, but when I ask them what they 'think' will be in the text they have difficulty drawing a connection between their prior knowledge and the specific text. When relating this to the previous two areas of concern it appears that they are taking each text in isolation and not drawing relationships between texts, or between texts and experience.

The adult learners with whom I work are



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largely from what Lankshear *et al.* refer to as "subordinate social groups" (1997, p 29) who have been denied the types of textual interactions to which dominant social groups have access. Their perceptions of reading may have been formed early in their school lives where there was emphasis on graphophonic decoding and on remembering events from texts. Since they have largely missed out on further textual experience these perceptions have not had the opportunity to develop and change. My students generally see looking back over a text to find additional information as 'cheating'. However they see me as a proficient reader, and have been astonished when I have told them that I consider looking back to find facts a good strategy, and even more astonished when I have told them that it is a strategy which I, personally, use. In sharing my strategies with them I am allowing them to share in information which is normally restricted to my own group.

We do not read just to find information. We read to find information which we need for a specific purpose. Therefore it is important to be able to translate the text into action. Students who tell me that they don't read or that they don't like to read are actually functioning as text users on a regular basis. They read the television guide in order to select their viewing; they read the form guide in

order to place their bets; they read recipes in order to create meals. However their reading is largely restricted to these transactional and instructional texts. They do not read more widely in either non-fiction or fiction than to satisfy their immediate needs.

The problem that my inexperienced readers have is that they perceive reading as a collection of independent skills. While more experienced readers have a range of strategies to call on, they attempt to decode and to memorise.

Recently I have begun to read aloud to a group of English-speaking background students. This is an activity which I normally reserve for non-English speaking background students but I wanted to try to increase the pace of their reading and so I read aloud while

they followed the text. I have found that not only does this help them increase pace but that it also helps in two other ways. It helps them to identify unknown words and it demonstrates that I, an experienced reader, make mistakes in my oral reading. I consider

this to be important information as we go about demystifying the reading process. Since their perception of me is also part of what influences their beliefs about reading I believe that it is important that I talk to them about my own reading practices.

My students need to develop new perceptions of reading if they are to be successful. They need to understand that comprehension is about making meaning and using it, that they don't have to read every word and that they don't have to understand every word in order to understand what they are reading. Most of all they need to know that they have the ability to succeed.

By using their personal motivation and by incorporating deliberate strategies to teach what reading is really about we, as adult educators, have the opportunity to change lives. ❖

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References

Lankshear, C., Gee, J., Knobel, M. and Searl, C. (1997) 'Language and Cultural Process', in *Changing Literacies*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.