

## ON WRITING, READING, AND TEACHING

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People often insist on rigid dichotomies which stereotype our thinking and, sad to say, even discourage us from thinking. More than a few of us harbor the idea that the writer is not a teacher--because he or she is a writer. And the teacher doesn't need to read because pupils are the ones for whom the books are made. We hardly ever recognize that the writer of a book or a journal article is a teacher--even if the person has neither license nor classroom. Even as you read something like this, it probably doesn't naturally occur to you that the teacher (you?) not only reads but remains a learner--a pupil--forever. Possibly, one of the things which is "wrong" about teaching and those who profess to do it is the ritualistic ways in which we conceptualize the field and the people. Hence this polemic.

Writers don't "study" what they write. Of course, they read the words they write. Indeed, many actually read them with utter devotion, if not always discernment. After all, writers not only write the stuff but edit it. But in a special sense, writers don't "study" what they write; writers don't know their books and papers as their readers know them. Maybe the writer knows his work better than the reader, but he doesn't know it in the same way--or always as comprehensively. He hadn't "studied" his book or paper with the same purposefulness with which he wrote it. An explanation is in order:

1. A writer may later read his work to try to reduce anxieties about what he perpetrated. Or he may read it for special purposes--to find errors, to gloat, to worry. But he hardly ever reads his own work to learn something. That which he

learned had already been expressed in the work itself--which is by way of saying that when a writer reads his own book or paper it's like someone painting by numbers or seeing a movie for the fifth time. He can do it almost mindlessly, for he knows what's coming next.

2. People read for different reasons and with different backgrounds. Even if the writer knew exactly why he wrote the piece, and for whom, or for what end, he can't control the reasons why someone else takes the time and care to unravel it. Everybody brings a different need and experience to the reading act, and the writer himself is no more than merely another reader if he should enter into it.

3. People have various expectations for a book that may cost them 25 dollars (or a subscription that could cost more). The writer's expectation is more personal, but also no more than another party heard from. This is very much like the "in-service training problem": Like most in-service trainers, writers give their readers what they think they need, only coincidentally what they think they want. But, in reality, it matters less what the writer had up his sleeve (insofar as what the reader gets out of the book). It's all a question of what the reader has up his sleeve.

4. When he's writing, the writer must take distance. But when he's reading, he must get involved. There are fundamentally different processes in each act.

5. And lastly, the writer (or a creator of any work) is always a different person from his published words. The writer's words may be serious, but his heart may be frivolous. His substance may be compelling, but his personal interests may be trivial. Notwithstanding, to do any honest work justice, the reader must put in effort, must have interest in the work or put it down until the interest returns--or put it down forever.

What I have been trying to say here relates to the activities of the teacher as well as the writer. The teacher is someone who must be taken into account if

the pupil is to get anything out of the experience. The teacher is someone whose teaching is a vital element of the relationship--not as much the teacher's personality, and not what is in the teacher's "heart of hearts." This is also by way of saying that writers too are teachers, and writers too have a relationship with their readers which is similar to what other teachers have with their pupils. It isn't absolutely necessary for the reader to "know" the writer, and it isn't absolutely necessary for the pupil to "know" the teacher--other than to know that the writer and the teacher are serious about their work and have sincere desires to communicate honestly what's on their minds.

What should you want from your teacher?

1. Someone who has a deep need to unravel certain problems--that is, someone who enjoys learning.
2. Someone who believes those problems are compelling and important.
3. Someone who has become convinced he or she has a capability to share such interests with other people.

A goal of the reader is to find ways to avoid being indifferent to the material. A goal of the writer is to encourage the reader to assume less distance and more involvement in the material. Yet the writer's duty is also to set the story down honestly--with as much detachment as necessary (or possible), with whatever disengagement is required for the material to be adequately presented. The reader has a more demanding if less complex and limited assignment--involvement--at least to the degree that he or she wants the material to be alive and sustain meaning. Both the writer and the reader have certain responsibilities with a work. But for fundamental reasons, these are necessarily different.