
May 1972

Observations of a Resurgent Humanist

Theodore L. Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Harris, Theodore L. (1972) "Observations of a Resurgent Humanist," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol6/iss2/2>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Observations of a Resurgent Humanist

By Theodore L. Harris

My former colleague, the late Virgil Herrick of the University of Wisconsin with whom I worked in a closely knit research team for many years, argued in effect in one paper in the slender volume entitled "Strategies of Curriculum Development" that curriculum design and planning must examine three basic questions: "What are the needs of society?" "What are the needs of individuals?" and "How may we evaluate the extent to which the interacting needs of society and the individual are being met?" These three factors — social needs, individual needs, and the evaluation of each as they interact — must still be reckoned with in any consideration of present and future trends in reading. This is certainly true if we are to go beyond a mere cataloging of the extraordinary number and variety of materials flooding the market today, and are to develop a more adequate theory of curriculum and instruction in reading. I propose to examine each of these facets of the curriculum as a frame of reference for discussing future developments and trends in reading.

What are some current and developing social needs relevant to reading? One obvious one is that of adjusting to the increased mobility of our school population. We have the increased flow to urban centers and the counterflow of urbanities to suburban areas. We have the problem of population shift brought about by our integration efforts. We have the rapid flow of transient families, especially in the inner city, from school to school, from school district to school district, as job opportunities wax and wane. It seems very evident that reading programs must be flexible enough to permit children to enter and re-enter programs at various times. We must continue trying, as we are now

belatedly attempting to do, to provide reading processes and content that will meet the needs of a new mix of learning styles, background of experience, language readiness, and ethnic cultures. The effective integration of our school population, bussed or not, demands this. Such mobility requires school readiness to evaluate and to meet pupil readiness to read, realistically and at all levels.

The rapid institutional change in our society is another dramatic social force today. It is apparent in the changing nature and roles of the church, the home, the school, our government, and, as we all know, of sex. Changes in these areas are painful but real. They will assuredly continue, not disappear. Rapid institutional change creates a powerful set of social demands upon the school. While such changes also have some rather predictable influences upon the content of reading, the most critical impact I see upon reading instruction is to continue to force us to focus upon reading as a process. The rather remarkable group of young people who produced *The Whole Earth Catalog* had a happy phrase for this — "access to tools." Reading is in the best sense a tool. We need to gain access to its processes, understand its uses, and apply its processes to problems that are socially relevant and personally satisfying. Only in this way can we use reading to cope effectively with the bewildering institutional changes in our society today. And if we are to use reading effectively in such a social context, it seems doubly apparent that reading instruction must focus upon the clarification of purposes for reading, particularly pupil purposes. We need to do this to develop the flexibility needed in adapting reading processes to an

intelligent examination of the social problems created by changing conditions. Further, as patterns of school organization change, we shall need to make better use of school learning centers and greatly emphasize independent reading and study skills.

The rapid institutional change today and tomorrow is, of course, a reflection of a third social force — the realignment of values in our society. If schools are changing, if government is changing, if the church and the family are changing, this surely means that we are raising such questions as “What is really good in our society?” and “How can we better our way of life?” Perhaps a more pertinent question for us to consider today is “Are values relative or absolute?” This of course is a most difficult question and one upon which a given group of people will almost surely disagree. A distinguished child psychologist remarked recently that for most of his life he believed values were absolute. Then he said, “Now I know they are relative.” He was speaking particularly of the value systems of the Black children versus the white children with whom he worked. He was speaking of how the self-concept of one child — what is important for him to preserve at all costs — is not necessarily the same as that of another child nor of his teacher. We need to understand much more clearly, I believe, his point that there is a great variety of value systems in the democracy we call America. We need to recognize this among and between whites and among and between other ethnic groups. We need to recognize this not only intellectually, but what is more important, emotionally through our attitudes and actions. If we do, then we shall do two very important things in reading instruction: we shall help children utilize reading processes and styles of learning that are appropriate to their personal and social needs. We shall also help children select reading content that gives them insight into the

experience of others and tolerance for the values of other cultures as well as for their own.

The changes we see in institutions and value systems have been forced, in a sense, by a further social phenomenon — rapid technological change. Many persons feel that this is the single most significant factor with which we must come to grips if we are to control our future destiny on this planet. Here, *control* is the key word. Only if we learn to use technology wisely and well can we as teachers preserve the uniquely human enterprise we call education. I submit that a total reading program is far more than the sum of a series of technological modules. It is a complex pattern of attitudes, understandings, and skills. The only really demonstrable contributions of technological systems are in the skill area and possibly to some extent in the development of independent attitudes of study. They are not in the conceptualizing and valuing aspects of reading development. As the reading products of a systems analysis approach become better developed and validated, let us use them for what they can do best — specific skill development. But let us also continue to view these contributions in the perspective of a total reading program in which the conceptual and emotional dimensions of reading development inherent in the pupil-teacher relationship are central. Only in this way can we intelligently meet the challenges of technological change upon education. While I can accept some of the realities of Allan Toffler's “Future Shock,” I cannot accept his implication of a throwaway value-system as a sufficient condition of life.

Turning now to the psychological needs of the individual which must be met with increased vigor in reading instruction, I would select three — the need for individual competence, the need for self-esteem, and the need for

social acceptance — for particular emphasis.

The need for individual competence can be met assuredly only by greater individualization of instruction. One of our most tragic failures in reading instruction is losing the individual in the group. For far too long now we have successfully blocked the learning process by frustrating many a pupil and thus alienating him by inappropriate circle reading practices. Individualization of reading instruction *must* in the last analysis take place if optimal learning is to take place. I believe firmly that individualization of reading instruction can take place regardless of method and materials. It can be done if teachers plan a portion of their time to work closely with individual learners on their particular problems and if they promote effective habits of independent study and personal reading in their pupils. Pupils can be and should be assigned differentiated reading tasks. Pupils can be assigned to proceed at their own pace in self-instructional reading tasks already programmed for them, be they programmed texts, computer-based, or otherwise. Pupils can also be taught to read, following Veatch's model, through a process of self-selection of materials and individual conferencing. Pupils can be grouped much more discretely for reading instruction than is currently done. In each of these approaches, the critical factors are the clear-cut recognition of significant differences in individual reading skills and the provision of appropriate time and effort to meet these differences. As patterns of school organization change, introducing new flexibility in staff and resources to meet individual differences, I believe we can and will do a much better job in meeting individual differences in reading.

Meeting individual differences in reading, if fully met, might be considered tantamount to fulfilling the pupil's basic need for self-esteem. Certainly a basic ingredient in

self-esteem is one's sense of competence. Yet self-esteem is more than that, for we have very competent readers whose self-esteem is indeed low. The need for self-esteem which determines one's self-concept, is indeed a very private world. Heightened self-esteem is best fostered in a learning climate which, is supportive and self-centered. We have magnificent opportunities to do this through reading simply by allowing more time for pupils to read materials of their own choice, for their own purposes, at their own pace. The once-a-week free reading period and the mandatory book report of my early days of teaching is not, however, what I have in mind. The freedom-to-read policies of the open school model are far more appropriate and will, I believe, be used extensively in the future.

Perhaps there is a parallel here in a passage by Pauline Karl in her essay on "Trash, Art and the Movies."

Perhaps the single most intense pleasure of movie-going is this non-aesthetic one of escaping from the responsibilities of having the proper responses required of us in our official (school) culture. And yet this is probably the best and most common basis for developing an aesthetic sense because responsibility to pay attention and to appreciate is anti-art; it makes us too anxious for pleasure, too bored for response. Far from supervision and official culture, in the darkness at the movies where nothing is asked of us and we are left alone, the liberation from duty and constraint allows us to develop our own aesthetic responses. Unsupervised enjoyment is probably not the only kind there is but it may feel like the only kind. Irresponsibility is part of the pleasure of all art; it is the part the schools cannot recognize. I don't like to buy "hard tickets" for a "road show" movie because I hate treating a movie as

an occasion. I don't want to be pinned down days in advance; I enjoy the casualness of movie-going — of going in when I feel like it, when I'm in the mood for a movie. It's the feeling of freedom from respectability we have always enjoyed at the movies that is carried to an extreme by American International Pictures and the Clint Eastwood Italian Westerns; they are stripped of cultural values. We may want more from movies than this negative virtue but we know the feeling from childhood movie-going when we loved the gamblers and pimps and the cons' suggestions of muttered obscenities as the guards walked by. The appeal of movies was in the details of crime and high living and wicked cities and in the language of toughs and urchins; it was in the dirty smile of the city girl who lured the hero away from Janet Gaynor. What draws us to movies in the first place, the opening into other, forbidden or surprising, kinds of experience, and the vitality and corruption and irreverence of that experience are so direct and immediate and have so little connection with what we have been taught is art that many people feel more secure, feel that their tastes are becoming more cultivated when they begin to appreciate foreign films. One foundation executive told me that he was quite upset that his teen-agers had chosen to go to "Bonnie and Clyde" rather than with him to "Closely Watched Trains." He took it as a sign of lack of maturity. I think his kids made an honest choice, and not only because "Bonnie and Clyde" is the better movie, but because it is closer to us, it has some of the qualities of direct involvement that make us care about movies.

One of our most important functions, I would remind you, is to

make children *care about reading*. To find its pleasures, and to celebrate its joys, we must allow children freer access to books of their own choosing in their own private world, a world free from the often constricting demands of schooling.

Related, but quite different, in a sense, to the need for self-esteem is the need for social acceptance. I sometimes think that the strong drive our children and youth have for peer acceptance is still only dimly recognized by teachers and administrators. For how can we possibly explain some of the ridiculous and often contradictory rulings made by school officials with respect to matters of dress, conduct, and book censorship? Be that what it may, books can exert a tremendous vicarious force in meeting a pupil's individual need for social acceptance, again provided that he has the freedom to choose materials to meet this need. Books also can be a potent source of group understanding and solidarity if wisely used by the teacher, not as an inquisition process for detailed recall, but as a platform for debate and exchange of ideas. Reading can be used to directly satisfy each of the three needs I have mentioned. We must recognize this more explicitly in the future and bend our teaching-learning strategies to meet these needs.

The need for individual competence, for self-esteem, for social acceptance may in a sense be subsumed in our search for identity in the world today. It is precisely because our social structures are changing that the sense of identity of all of us — teacher, parent and pupil — is threatened. To preserve that sense, one must have an environment — a culture if you will — to identify with so that the needs of self-esteem and one's individual sense of competence may in turn be fulfilled. I believe we are seeing mounting evidence that the sense of identity is in the long run a

vastly more important consideration than we as teachers in our mobile, technologically-bound, time-compressed society perhaps realize. Yet trying to understand *our* need for identity, that of the *pupils* we teach, and that of their parents and families, is of the greatest importance. I venture to say that the key to this understanding may lie more in the alteration of our value systems and that of our adult society than in those of children and adolescents alone. Our views about private property and the issue of mandatory busing, for example, are directly related to our awareness of the need for a sense of identity.

Central to the recognition and meeting of the interacting social and psychological needs of pupils, is, of course, the question of evaluation. How do we know when and to what extent such needs are being met? Since this is somewhat familiar ground, I shall mention only three points briefly.

I foresee that we shall see greater clarification in the next decade of our reading goals and the priorities we attach to them. A forthcoming IRA book entitled "Administrators in Reading" will, for example, specify ten such goals for a reading program. The reading objectives of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have recently been newly revised and fresh tests devised, both of which will be reported in the near future. There is a strong trend in in-service and pre-service education to clarify goals and determine priorities for particular populations and situations. Each of these trends should lead to a more precise determination of where we are going in reading instruction, whether a school is following an open model or a behavioristic model of instruction, and to what extent the needs of society and the individual are actually being met.

I foresee also that regardless of the

nature and priorities of the ultimate goals, the standards they represent will be couched in more precise statements of behaviors. One reason for this is the admittedly strong behavioral trend in education generally today toward prescriptive teaching. Another reason is the flurry of recent research into reading processes themselves. As we understand better the skill components in reading, for example, we can better specify the behaviors involved and tailor instruction to realize these behaviors. Yet skill behaviors are only one part of the behavioral complex called reading. Equally important will be the specification of affective components to be more consciously and systematically cultivated in reading. I believe we may look forward to a much happier wedding of cognitive skills and emotional commitment to reading than we have observed in the past.

I believe, finally, that we shall see rapid development in specific instruments for the continuing assessment of reading skill development and of feedback mechanisms to inform the learner immediately of his progress. This will lead to new useful tools to make reading instruction more diagnostic, more suited to individual differences, more positive, economical, and rewarding in terms of pupil progress, and more specific to the overall goals of the reading programs. New instruments of appraisal will be designed for teacher use and for pupil use. New instruments will be designed to measure affective as well as cognitive aspects of reading. Such instruments, hopefully, will enable both teacher and pupil to decide better whether or not the social and psychological needs such as I have discussed are truly being met in a reading program.

I have attempted here to suggest some pressing social realities of today and the future — population change, instructional change, change in social

values, and technological change – and some of their implications for reading. I have suggested that the psychological needs of the individual, particularly those of competence, self-esteem, and social acceptance, will, together with the need to preserve a sense of identity, require greater understanding and indeed, acceptance, by teachers of reading. I have emphasized that we must also clarify what it is we are dedicated to in reading instruction and

utilize new and improved means of evaluation of the effectiveness of our reading program in the future. All of these considerations are part of a dynamic whole, the educational process, of which reading is a fundamental part.

Reading is both an art and a science. Let us not forget that science and technology are but handmaidens to serve the needs and aspirations of man, the humanist.

(Theodore L. Harris is President of the International Reading Association and Professor of Education at University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington.)