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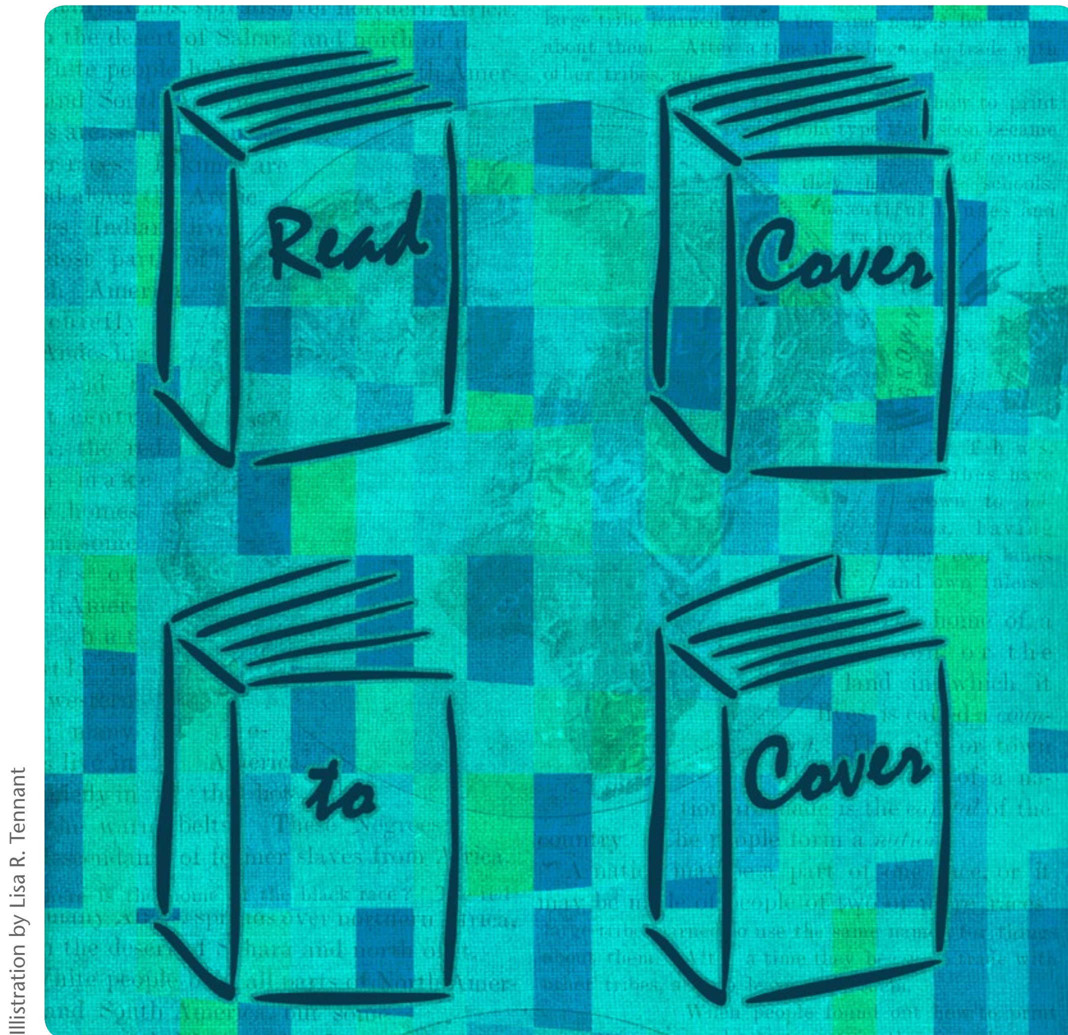

Illustration by Lisa R. Tennant

Reading: A Definition that Supports Instruction

By Nancy Patterson, GVSU Faculty

We lived in a tiny bungalow on a shady street in Flint, Michigan, a house with two bedrooms, a large room that served as a living room, dining room, and an old-fashioned kitchen that might be considered charming today, but back then was just out of style.

Mornings have never been the best time of day for me. That morning was no different. In front of me was a bowl of rapidly wilting cereal, a glass of orange juice made too sour by the sugary goop in my bowl, and a cereal box. On the back of the box were comic book characters playing. It was late fall and because we moved often that year, I was in my third consecutive first grade classroom. I knew my alphabet, and I knew the sounds of that alphabet. It was the 1950s and my current school district used the Dick and Jane reading series coupled with something called "whole word" (not to be confused with "whole language").

Understand that I was an offbeat kid fascinated by language. At the age of four I would talk to my playground

friends about the fact that some people said "in-ter-esting" and others said "in-chrest-ing." And sometimes I would say a word over and over so that it lost meaning, so I could focus on the sound of the word.

Suddenly, on that chilly morning in Flint, I was finally able to read what those characters on that cereal box were saying. One character was jumping and I realized that the bubble above another character's head said "JUMP!" The picture connected with the words and I had just read both and understood what was happening on that cereal box. I pulled the box closer to me and picked out the beginnings and endings of words and right there at that birch dining table that I am now sitting at as I write this article, I became a reader. I used my innate inferring skills, the context of the images, and read the short narrative contained in those comic book boxes.

I had just joined what Frank Smith (1987) calls the literacy club.

> *"...reading relies on both cognitive and social processes and embraces a beautiful complexity, one that sometimes gets lost in our attempts to efficiently teach children to read."*

The Michigan definition of reading

The state of Michigan, drawing from the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, defines reading as "the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation". (2002, Michigan Board of Education) This well-worded definition recognizes that the act of reading relies on both cognitive and social processes and embraces a beautiful complexity, one that sometimes gets lost in our attempts to efficiently teach children to read.

But what does Michigan's definition of reading mean for children, teachers, administrators, and policy makers?

The process of constructing meaning

Frank Smith, a cognitive psychologist who founded a new school of thought on reading, psycholinguistics, reminds us that human beings are driven to understand the world around them (2011). From the moment we are born we begin to feel, smell, see, hear, and taste the world; with these senses comes a lifelong quest to understand the world around us. We bring that same need to make sense, or construct meaning, to not only print text, but to the auditory and visual texts we encounter on a daily basis. The ability to understand is innate, yet the ability to read text is not. We have to be taught to read.

According to Smith, constructing meaning involves accessing what we already know, predicting what is to come, and adjusting our predictions based on new information. When we read print text, we access what we know about phonics, vocabulary, and syntax. We also assess what we know about information organization, narrative structure, and other text structures. And, we access our knowledge about the topic of the text. When we read something that we haven't predicted, we tend to back up and reread either a word or a phrase or whatever it takes to understand. This holds true for reading print text as well as reading other forms. The next time you go to a movie, notice how you cognitively anticipate the story. Chances are that if a couple falls in love at the beginning of a movie, something will go wrong. Your knowledge of the romantic genre tells you what's to come.

Furthermore, our knowledge of English syntax tells us that *"cat tree up is the the"* is not how English sentences work. Ironically, our syntactic knowledge also allows us to unravel those words and rearrange them into something that makes sense. By the age of five or six children are fluent in

> *"When we read print text, we access what we know about phonics, vocabulary, and syntax. We also assess what we know about information organization, narrative structure, and other text structures."*

their home language and able to use that language to make statements, ask questions, make demands, and provide exclamations (Bruner, 1996). Children infer what grammatical structure is necessary for them to satisfy whatever their immediate need is. New studies conclude that children as young as four months are capable of inferring (Denison, Reed & Xu, 2013). This process involves prediction and happens in a cognitive environment of uncertainty. In other words, infants use their innate powers of prediction even when they do not have very much information.

Readers do the same thing.

The complexities of children's predictive and inferring processes have been explored by recent eye movement studies. Using computerized eye tracking devices, researchers discovered that reading does not happen in a linear, letter-by-letter, line-by-line progression, Instead, children's eyes travel across text, skipping letters, words, and sometimes lines. Their eyes move down to a lower line and then back and to the end of line back to the beginning. When pictures are available, readers' eyes travel to the picture and then to words that directly refer to the image. Readers use visual cues to predict and confirm the emerging meanings of the texts (Duckett, 2008; Kim, Duckett,& Brown, 2010).

Context and dynamic interaction

Remember when you had to read a novel in your English class and the teacher assigned a couple of chapters and announced there would be a quiz on those chapters the next day? How did you read those chapters? Did you read them thinking that you were being introduced to individuals who inhabited a different time and place? Or did you read in order to pick out concrete details that were likely to appear on the quiz?

Context plays a critical role in the meaning we construct.

The purpose for reading is part of the context we bring to the act of reading. If we are going to be quizzed on a piece of text, we read it differently than if we are wading into a text—getting a feel for characters' lives, conflicts, and surroundings. The same is true for installing a new printer or assembling a model airplane. We don't read those instructions the same way we read a poem or a letter from a loved one living far away.

When we were assigned a chapter in a history book and asked to answer the questions at the end, most of us went straight to the questions and searched for the answers without reading the whole chapter. The context of the questions established the purpose for reading and we read the chapter differently.

I love to use Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" to show how prior knowledge shapes the context of our reading. Most graduate students believe the poem is about a boy who is abused by his father. They interpret lines like "The whiskey on your breath" and "I hung on like death" as evidence of abuse. But scholar Karl Malkoff (1966) says the poem is simply about Roethke's father, whom young Ted adored, dancing him around the kitchen when he got home from working in the Saginaw, Michigan greenhouses the family owned. Teachers, however, trained to detect signs of child abuse, come from a different context and, therefore, create a different meaning for the poem. Teachers in my class are not wrong in their interpretation. They bring their own background knowledge to the poem and construct their own meaning.

We can simply look at the way people of faith all over the world interpret religious texts. Some interpret those texts one way, others interpret those same texts very differently. Though the meaning teachers construct isn't the same as the Roethke's, who was born in 1908. Literary critics today would affirm that the meaning and the processes that teachers used to arrive at that interpretation demon-

strated a rational conclusion to the evidence represented in the text (Auckerman, 2007). Once we have discussed the poem, and I have provided more information about Roethke, the meaning they constructed shifts a bit. This, too, is common among readers, even very young ones.

Lev Vygotsky (1980), the Russian linguist and psychologist who has greatly influenced how we think about language, culture, and their roles in learning, argues that it is our dynamic interactions with others that shape how we understand. Language, he says, is a catalyst for thought, which in turn urges us to represent emerging thoughts through language, which then becomes a catalyst for even more thought. It is a wonderfully complex cycle.

This is what "social process" means in Michigan's definition of reading. We bring our knowledge of how the world works to the act of reading. We bring our experience with other texts, including those that are oral and visual, to the act of meaning making (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). We bring to the act of reading, from the moment we first begin to realize that text has meaning, our oral language skills (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). It is why even our youngest readers need to share their emerging meanings through oral and written language.

That dining room table where I sat, wrapped in a flannel bathrobe and a cloak of sleepiness in front of a bowl of soggy cereal began more than 60 years of reading the word and the world. Yet, it wasn't an easy path; I didn't love reading until I bumped into my first Nancy Drew book in sixth grade, and school reading tasks were incredibly boring for me. Later in my graduate program, I experienced life as a struggling reader when I had to read the likes of Jacque Derrida, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthe. But my brain always, always did what Michigan's definition of reading continues to describe. It brought all of my phonemic, syntactic, semantic, and world knowledge to the text at hand.

So, how does all this fit with Michigan's definition of reading? It all has to do with meaning. Reading is meaning. At the heart of every curriculum and literacy lesson there should be something full of meaning that connects to students' experiences with the language they speak and the experiences they have through that language. If the literacy tasks are not full of meaning, then it is difficult to truly join the literacy club. Membership in that club involves a lifelong journey. We can never truly master reading. We simply travel further along a continuum that involves our everyday lives, the texts we read, and the conversations we engage in.

Every day my own literacy club membership strengthens and rewards me. And it all started on a chilly November morning in Flint, Michigan.

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