Students and Textbooks: Which is to be Master?

Margaret Hunsberger
University of Calgary

The interpretation of text, by whatever framework it is explored, is concerned fundamentally with the relationship between reader and text. This relationship gives rise to the question of whether it is the reader or the text that has greater authority. While that is the case for any reader reading anything at all, it has a particular focus and emphasis within the classroom setting when teachers assign textbooks to students. Reading is a key aspect of much of the enterprise of schooling, yet students as readers are under particular constraints that may affect how they read.

The context in which textbooks are used (a context which includes schools, teachers, curricula, and the nature of schooling itself) gives textbooks not only authority, but a kind of autocratic authority which has tended to place them "beyond criticism" by their student readers (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, in press). Thus textbooks tend to carry an authority which is formidable—but not invulnerable. Not only can both teachers and students become, if they wish, good at subversion, but more importantly, the fundamental nature of reading itself calls for an active reader and a dynamic relationship between reader and text. Students, like all readers, do have voices.

I would like to suggest some practical classroom implications of various views of textbook authority. The view of text interpretation, and hence of textbook authority, held by the teacher makes an enormous impact on the nature of the relationship between textbook and student. While I agree that textbooks have too often been beyond criticism, I would like to make a modest proposal whereby some criticism becomes possible. To that end, a discussion of the student-textbook relationship begins by outlining a few of the views on how interpretation is done (Culler, 1985; Hoy, 1978; Suleiman, 1980). Then the nature of the textbook as contrasted with other texts is discussed briefly, and finally some classroom possibilities are explored from the stance of where authority rests and how that influences students.

The word *text* is used throughout the article to indicate any script which a reader reads (from a grocery list to Plato). The

word *textbook* will designate those specific texts which students are directed to read as part of a course of study in school. Thus textbooks are one form of text. In this framework, what makes a text into a textbook is not the purpose for which the text was originally written, but rather the situation of a teacher assigning it to be read by students. Therefore, any text can become a textbook (basal reader, project manual, anthology, laboratory guide, novel) if a teacher makes it so. Even though the text originally had a different purpose, assigning it to students influences the way students read it because they did not freely choose it.

Various Views on the Reader-Text Relationship

Over the centuries in which human beings have been reading and considering what it is that readers actually do, various views have been expressed on the nature of the relationship between reader and text. To illustrate the divergent views on what readers do, several positions are outlined, but it should be noted that this is an illustrative, not exhaustive, list. For students and teachers, the position taken on reading is important because it changes considerably the tasks and expectations of both, as is illustrated later.

One view is that the text exists as an object, perhaps a sacred object, perhaps a work of art (Fisher, 1975). It is complete, self-contained, and unreachable except to the initiated. What is recorded cannot be understood except through the spoken words of an informed teacher. This appears to be the view held by the Ethiopian official whose journey home is recorded in the New Testament. As he rode along, the official read aloud: "When Philip ran up he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He said, 'How can I understand unless someone will give me the clue?'" (Acts 8: 30-31, NEB). The point here is not to explicate this passage, but merely to note the Ethiopian's acknowledgment that, despite his own diligent efforts, there was real benefit to be gained with a good teacher. It is worth observing, however, that Philip's method of giving an explanation was to provide background information to the text—activating the student's prior knowledge is a teaching technique strongly recommended at the present time. The view that text can be comprehended only with a teacher obviously necessitates the presence of a teacher and shifts much of the responsibility for learning to the teacher, making the student dependent and vulnerable to the teacher's views and biases.

Closely related to this position is the idea that the text is a mnemonic device (Olson, 1977). In this case a concept or story is first taught or discussed orally, then, when the teacher is convinced that the student understands, access to the text is permitted in order to aid the memory. Those who have not been properly instructed are not to read for fear that in their ignorance they would misconstrue the meaning. Thus the Roman Catholic Church formerly had a practice of making the scriptures available only to the clergy who had been instructed in matters of faith and doctrine and could then use the text to help them remember what they had been taught. The laity, uninstructed in such matters, were to learn from the priests and not risk independent reading and misinterpretations. With this view a teacher is not only essential to the learning of a student, but is also the carrier of meaning.

A third position admits the reader's ability to understand a text but regards the text as completely authoritative. This is a view which is not so much a theoretical position as a position taken implicitly and practiced by teachers. Accordingly, the reader's job is to accept what is written as suggested by the cliché that if it is in print, it must be right. Modern readers will deny this, if asked overtly, but traces of this stance linger in the way that teachers require students to prove a point by citing from the text, that arguments are often settled by consulting a text authority (such as an atlas or dictionary), or that authors cite each other. This position can lead to interesting situations in classrooms. If students have come to believe that both textbooks and teachers have authority, then students experience a minor crisis when text and teacher disagree. What is to be done when two credible "experts" give conflicting advice? Students put in this position have been ill-served by teachers who have not shown them how to deal with such disagreements.

The fourth and fifth positions are, in some sense, opposite to each other. One holds that the true meaning of the text is that which the author had in mind when writing the text. Therefore, the reader's task is to determine the author's intention and thereby uncover the only acceptable interpretation. This view, championed particularly by Hirsch (1967, 1976), has the practical problem of how a reader can ever be certain of the author's intention. The further that the reader and author are separated in time and culture, the more difficult the problem becomes. Not surprisingly, Hirsch's critics have termed this position *intentional fallacy*, not only because of the practical difficulty, but also because it does not admit the possibility of the reader

generating ideas that go beyond the author's thought at the time of writing.

If author intentionality seems to give too much credence to the author, there is a contrasting view which makes the reader dominant. As advocated by Fish (1980) and others, it suggests that the reader brings meaning to the text to the point that the reader determines the text.

In tracing the development of his own thought, Fish (1980) reports that he used to hold the text to be absolute, by which he presumably meant that the text controlled the encounter and determined the "right" interpretation. When he began to reject that position, he had trouble giving the reader the right to participate in the encounter without swinging to the opposite extreme of subjectivism, whereby the reader has full control and any interpretation the reader might make is thereby acceptable. He eventually took the position that the reader "makes" literature or any other writing, but not one reader individually; rather, the reader is a member of an interpretive community.

The term *interpretive community* is somewhat problematic because it has various meanings to various users. However, it seems to imply, at the very least, a group of people who have something in common and have some shared basis for making text interpretations. When Fish (1980) speaks of interpretive communities, he seems to be referring to any group that has certain assumptions or premises from which to make text interpretations. This could include, for example, those who, by virtue of their training in a specialized academic discipline, subscribe to a particular mode of reasoning or adopt a particular set of givens that to someone outside the group may not seem given at all. The interpretive community determines what is an acceptable strategy and what is accepted as a logical and valid way to proceed. Thus, in Fish's view, readers within a community can disagree on interpretations and discuss or debate them because there is a stability of position within the community, although different communities have different norms and standards. Obviously, then, many interpretations are both possible and acceptable. But if an interpretation is to avoid being idiosyncratic, the presence of the community is necessary.

There are large differences for teachers in the implications of the two positions represented by Hirsch (1967, 1976) and Fish (1980). With the former, there is one right answer. Teachers tend to presume that their own interpretation is the author's intended meaning and teach it as the correct view. In an unguarded moment, this can lead to presumptuous statements

such as, "What Shakespeare was trying to say is...." In the best possible situation within this framework, teacher and students would together seek the author's intention. But it is not clear how they would do that, nor how they would know if they found it. The more usual pattern is that the onus is put on students to ignore their own views and to learn the interpretation given them by the teacher who supposedly speaks for the author. On the other hand, if the text is given too little authority and the reader is allowed to dominate, teachers are tempted to let any student interpretation stand unchallenged and unexamined. This need not be the case, and some lively student discussion can occur in the exploration of ideas if the teacher is a skilled discussion leader. But that still rejects the text's authority and admits the acceptability of any view offered. The possibility of a wide range of interpretations being legitimated is not necessarily reassuring, particularly to teachers who are conscious of the misinterpretations students sometimes make. A classroom in which student readers are given authority over the text could be lively, although the quality of the discussion would remain in doubt.

Dialogue

The foregoing contrasts, with the weight of authority seeming to be shifted heavily toward, or away from, the text, may point toward the desirability of a more evenly balanced position in which both reader and text have a voice. In effect, reader and text engage in dialogue (Palmer, 1969). Just as in oral conversation, the dialogue can proceed smoothly and informatively or go astray in a variety of ways. At its best, the reader "listens" attentively to the voice of the text; considers the ideas, characters, or language being presented; and in turn responds to the text. The trend of the dialogue develops (Sardello, 1975) and in the encounter, the interpretation is formed (Iser, 1978). The dialogue will naturally vary from more heated to cooler, from more intense to more distant, depending on the readers' degree of agreement and involvement with the text.

As with any dialogue, there is always the risk of the conversation turning into a monologue if one participant becomes dominant. If the reader is in complete control, then any meaning can be invented and there is too little checking against the text. The interpretation becomes a matter of "anything goes," a completely idiosyncratic view with which another reader might share nothing. Little can be learned from a text that is not allowed a voice. On the other hand, if the text becomes the master, reducing the reader to submission, again little is learned because the reader does not consider the text thought-

fully, nor does he or she attempt to integrate it into personal thinking. A text-dominated monologue is a real possibility when students and textbooks meet because textbooks are presumed to have considerable authority (Young, 1987). A student may, for example, memorize textbook statements in order to write an examination, but he or she may in fact have minimal comprehension, let alone acceptance, of the concepts. Or if students know that it does not matter what they think because the teacher will give the *correct* interpretation of the text, they may either read it uninterestedly or resist reading at all. Why should they bother if their efforts are of no consequence? Monologues are undesirable.

The metaphor of reading as dialogue suggests implicitly that because each reader is a different person, the dialogue with the text will vary somewhat from one reader to another (Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1978). Each will make a personal interpretation. But because the text has a degree of constancy and each reader must attend to the voice of the text, the interpretations will have some aspects in common and cannot be entirely idiosyncratic. Thus for any text there will be not only one interpretation, but a range of acceptable interpretations (Ricœur, 1976). There will also be parameters beyond which interpretations have to be considered misinterpretations because they ignore or distort the evidence of the text. For teachers and what they accept in the classroom, this is a key point to be pursued later.

The Nature of Textbooks

If there is to be a balanced dialogue, the question naturally arises of what each participant brings to the dialogue. What does the reader contribute? What does the text contribute? And how do textbooks differ from other texts in ways that affect readers? The fact that a text has been assigned, that is, has become a textbook, typically affects how it is read.

Readers approach a text with a store of prior knowledge, the accumulated information and understanding on which new learning must build. They also have a lifetime of experience which has shaped their attitudes, values, and knowledge. All readers begin a new text from this framework, even though readers obviously vary enormously in their amount of knowledge, the type and diversity of experience, their cognitive ability, their capacity for recalling and utilizing appropriate prior knowledge, and their open-mindedness toward new ideas. But from the young child just entering school to the most advanced scholar, readers start with what they have. The difference in readers means not that the approach changes, but

that dialogue which is satisfying to particular readers occurs with different texts. Readers also must be active, willing to become engaged with the text, not passively receiving whatever comes. The experience of living is to some degree a matter of sense making, making as much sense as possible of our own lives and everything in the world around us. So readers come to the act of reading as experienced interpreters.

The form of writing which an author uses is directly related to the purpose of the text and helps to shape the message given to the reader. School textbooks are typically written for the classroom, although some were originally intended for other purposes. For the remainder of this section, I wish to discuss only those textbooks which are written specifically for classroom use, as contrasted with those which were intended for another purpose but have been co-opted as textbooks. (However, it is still the case that, even though a text originally had a different purpose and audience, moving it into a classroom and assigning it to be read influences the dialogue between such text and student readers; hence the view that textbooks are assigned texts.) Textbooks specifically written for the classroom possess certain features not found in other texts such as guided reading questions at the beginning of chapters or sections and comprehension questions at the end of them. These questions and other such features (see Luke, de Castell, & Luke, in press) try to shape students' interpretations. No doubt the purpose of the inclusions is the laudable one of enhancing reader comprehension, but part of the effect is that the textbook exerts further authority over the student. Readers are not left free to generate their own responses and engage in their own dialogue with the text; rather, they must respond to the concepts or details highlighted for them either by textbook or teacher directive. It is worth noting that this factor occurs only in school textbooks or study guides because it works only with a captive audience. Readers who are free to choose rarely stop to compose answers to textbook or teacher questions.

Typically, textbooks are compacted with a high density of concepts compressed into relatively short presentations including the use of definitions which are difficult to read. This density is necessitated by publishing costs and the wish to present as much information as possible, and it is justified by the assumption of the presence of a teacher. That is, while it is recognized that the density increases the difficulty of the text, this is at least partly acceptable because textbooks are meant to be read with the guidance and assistance of a teacher who can give

explanations, examples, elaborations, and alternatives as needed.

In the attempt to simplify complex concepts for beginners in a field of study or to make analogies to familiar ideas, textbooks often have problems with coherence and cohesion. Analogies work only if the reader can determine which features to select and compare. Thus they work much more readily for the author and the teacher who already understand the concept being presented than for the student reader who does not. Explanations, also, are typically more coherent to those with the advantage of more knowledge.

The tone of textbook writing is usually formal and impersonal. This is considered appropriate because textbooks avoid any personal views (though they may take stands on issues) and are authoritative. However, it also means that textbooks lose the unique aspects of individual authors' writing styles, those characteristics which make a good novel or essay enjoyable to read. Textbooks usually read like something written by a committee—as frequently they are.

Also, textbooks are meant to be written at a level that poses some challenge for students, so that the books do not repeat the known but present an opportunity for learning. When a reader is reading text difficult enough to be at the reader's instructional level, some outside assistance will be required at times.

Thus textbooks are not easy reading. Also, the dialogue is usually more difficult for the reader to sustain when the reading has been assigned than it is with a text the reader has voluntarily chosen. There are many opportunities for breakdown unless a perceptive teacher is available.

Balance of Authority

In *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1946), Alice and Humpty Dumpty have a disagreement about the meaning of the word *glory*. Humpty Dumpty uses it to mean "a nice knock-down argument," and when Alice protests that glory does not mean that, he claims scornfully that when he uses a word it means just what he chooses it to mean.

> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

The encounter between student and textbook often seems less a dialogue than a struggle for dominance. It is indeed a question

of which is to be master. Our language frequently reflects this tension. We speak of students having word attack skills, of being defeated by a textbook or an assignment, of having achieved mastery learning, or of having conquered a concept or overcome a problem. The idea of "mastering" a concept or a text is a particularly interesting one. Ironically, what is usually meant by such a term is that the student must accept the text as it stands and respond as required. In some sense, to master a text means to be mastered by it.

Because of the nature and purpose of a textbook, it is easy for it to gain dominance over a student. The textbook has authority, status, expertise, technical information, and formal structure, whereas the student is the novice, expected to sit at the feet of the master and docilely absorb information. The problem is compounded when the student is not well prepared and lacks the relevant prior knowledge needed to comprehend the textbook or is inexperienced in critical reflection. If the student gives up (or is forced to give up) the right to question, challenge, cross-check, respond, or confer with others, the dialogue is doomed. This is not a matter of giving up the right to remain silent, but of giving up the right to a voice. And what happens to the student's voice when it cannot be heard? What recourse does the student have? There are a number of alternatives such as bluff and hope not to get caught, memorize and hope to get by, withdraw (perchance to daydream), become rebellious, or refuse to speak. All these are familiar classroom responses, though none is regarded as desirable nor as an indicator of a successful learning experience. When a student's voice is forced underground, some form of subversion is to be expected.

Also, a textbook can easily be regarded as either an object or a text. As an object, it is merely a thing and can be cared for or treated roughly like any other possession. As a text, it is a voice with a message and must be given consideration. From this latter position comes the attitude toward books as deserving respect. And textbooks are, in certain ways, simultaneously object and voice. But a student who feels at the end of a hard day that the book as text has been too bossy can certainly take revenge by reducing the book to mere object and treating it accordingly.

The teacher, then, needs to be involved in maintaining the dialogue between student and textbook by keeping the balance of power such that exploration of ideas is not only possible but is invited. This requires of the teacher a large measure of sound pedagogic judgment in order to prepare the student appropriately for the reading. The teacher must then step back and let

the student become involved with the textbook but still remain available to assist if the dialogue threatens to break down. The dialogue will frequently become a trialogue including the teacher who is both a participant and a facilitator in the encounter but who must avoid the temptation to take over and speak for either the student or the textbook. The latter situation often happens (Gadamer, 1975). The teacher may take over for the student by making an interpretation and telling it to the student, who is then not allowed a voice but is simply told what it means. Or the teacher may take over for the textbook by putting it aside, presenting information in other forms, and not requiring students to read systematically. This may be a learning experience for the students in the short term, but it does nothing to help them learn how to read within the subject discipline being studied. And teachers need to help students to become independent of them, to be able to read and learn effectively without them. So the challenge is to participate as needed in the trialogue and gradually to withdraw to allow student-textbook dialogue.

The teacher's task is eased somewhat and a helpful learning environment created if the classroom can become an interpretive community. The members of a class have in common the fact that they are all students in the same time and place studying the same topics within the same structures. It is a fine opportunity for them to do what interpretative communities do: discuss their reading, try out interpretations on each other, test and refine them in the discussions of the group. For an interpretation to be considered valid, it must stand up to group examination. This does not mean that everyone in the group will agree on one interpretation. That is unlikely (unless one view is enforced by authority). Consider, for instance, the sharp debates among literary critics over interpretations of a particular poet. An interpretation need not win unanimous support, but it must bear examination. If students learn to support their own arguments, see what can be proved or disproved and what remains a judgment, they will have learned a great deal about learning—and about ambiguity and multiple interpretations. It should also eventually become apparent that there are boundaries between defensible interpretations and those which must be considered misinterpretations because they are not defensible. It is useful for students to learn that one's own interpretation, if carefully thought through, is valid enough to deserve a hearing, but its supremacy cannot be claimed. Others must be able to see the point, and the interpretations of others must be granted the same consideration. Considerable teaching skill is required to facilitate this sort of enlightened class discus-

sion and debate. But the teacher is spared the enormous burden of always having to be the possessor of truth and the giver of the right interpretation and is freed to engage in discussion with students as a fellow reader/interpreter, albeit a more experienced one who still carries the responsibility for conducting the lesson. The students can then become active, participating learners and more involved readers. In this community of interpreters, both students and teacher can take the risk of engaging with text and exploring interpretations and ideas, resulting in a richer discussion, and gradually, in growing student independence from the teacher. The dialogue between the textbook and the individual student is likely to be enhanced by the student's awareness of the opportunity for discussion and the need to be able to justify a viewpoint. This also often leads to a careful rereading as students return to the text to question or verify an interpretation. The concept of interpretive community and its potential in text interpretation is far from fully explored theoretically; the classroom seems a sensible and fruitful place to explore it practically.

In much theoretical discussion of text interpretation and how it is done, the underlying question has frequently seemed to be concerned with the relative authority of text and reader and therefore with which is to be master. Is it too idealistic to hope that in the classrooms of able teachers the answer can be that genuine dialogues thrive with mutual respect and without masters?

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