

## READING FOR COMPETENCE OR FOR EMANCIPATION?

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Hartvig Nissen, one of the major figures of nineteenth century Norwegian educational politics, visited Scotland in 1852, and observed an examination in the Normal School in Edinburgh, of which he wrote:

In English some pieces were read from the reading book. All, without exception, read well, some remarkably finely. Thus, there was a lively thirteen-year-old boy, who had to read a short rhetorical piece, whose opening was:  
'Liberty is commensurate with and inseparable from British soil; British law proclaims even to the stranger and the sojourner, the moment he sets his foot upon British earth, that the ground on which he treads is holy, and consecrated by the genius of Universal Emancipation!'  
He read with absolute certainty, with strong and true intonation and with an expression in which deep and noble British self-esteem proclaimed itself, and he carried away all the people who were present to such an extent that an involuntary burst of applause broke out.(1)

Nissen, who could not as a Norwegian visitor, share the sentiment of the piece, commented:

And even looked at in the light of reflection, such a scene has its deep meaning. Here the common school shows its power to implant a feeling for freedom and nationality in its pupils' breasts: the love of the fatherland is strengthened and nourished by the power of sympathy, and, when the simplest working man's son in the common school is thus through the employment of the materials of instruction which are prescribed for him, in a position to strike the very heartstrings of his superiors and carry them with him in the stream

of emotion, then one not only understands, but feels, that this people is one and that education, though its levels be different, yet, is similar and common for all sections of the people.(2)

Nissen's portrayal of this unfashionable scene and his comments on it occupied my mind from time to time over some years, demanding, as he put it, to be 'looked at in the light of reflection'. To a post-colonial Britisher the sentiments of the reading book rang false. To a twentieth-century teacher the vocabulary and syntax seemed inappropriate to a thirteen-year-old and called up the description of nineteenth century schoolchildren 'barking' at the words of schoolbooks quite beyond their powers of comprehension. And the notion of patriotic indoctrination by moral readings was not one to which I was sympathetic.

And yet....Teaching in a Scottish school in the 1950s pupils of thirteen and fourteen who could not read easily, I found the books I was given to use in class contained nothing of such substance or of a contemporary meaning as clear as that piece from the nineteenth century reader. Absurd it might be in some respects, but it was not trivial. And there rang in my mind Nissen's remark that the under-privileged child was 'through the employment of the materials of instruction which are prescribed for him, in a position to strike the very heartstrings of his superiors and carry them with him'. The materials of instruction given to less academic pupils in my twentieth century school afforded no such prospect of power to the pupil: they patronised the reader.

To give pupils powers - not merely competence - through reading, it seemed necessary that they should read significant and important material; yet such material tended to be difficult to understand. And so we fell back

on stories in a world in which simple stories could no longer carry the moral content which Plato assigned to them. Indeed, in the 1950s pupils read, in school as well as at leisure, the stories which had emerged from the Second World War.

The idea was that development beyond the elementary stages of reading would best be achieved by setting students to read a progressive succession of materials so graded for 'linguistic' difficulty as to be almost within their powers of comprehension. Each exercise advanced them a little without making too great a demand: the advance was achieved by guiding them in the teaching of each piece read from modest comprehension to thorough comprehension. Motivation, in so far as it was intrinsic to the materials rather than dependent on the pressure of the teacher, was seen to depend upon finding materials which interested the pupils. The problem of enlisting the interests of the pupils was construed as calling for interesting materials rather than interesting issues for thought and discussion. And the result was, as it is in mass communication, a conception of interest as stemming from entertainment. If pupils read war stories spontaneously, then a good policy for teaching reading was to use war stories whose vocabulary and syntax were a little more advanced than was typical in their spontaneous reading.

Yet this entertainment reading had moral force. When I asked pupils to write on 'Why boys read war stories?', I received scripts of which the following is not untypical:

The books about the war have been very popular because they bring us the hardships of our soldiers and their bravery in many front lines. The books have also been popular because the majority of people think that war is more or less a good thing. They think it can bring

great wealth to our country and so they buy the books to see what the actual fighting was like. The books sell well because they are written in a language that the common people understand with very often rough talk of the soldiers taking up the best part of it. Some people just buy them for the filth that is in them, but this is just fact. One cannot blame the soldiers for their attitude to the opposite sex when they probably had not seen a woman for possibly a year or two.

It seemed to me clear that pupils would be more likely to progress in thinking and in reading if they read, as students read, books they could not fully comprehend but which they tackled because they were engaged in the desire to understand their meaning. But the problem of how to motivate pupils to face intellectual struggle as they read seemed - except in the case of the academically motivated - to be difficult to solve.

The opportunity to attempt a solution came with the directorship of the Schools Council and Nuffield Foundation Humanities Project in 1967. In this project we were able to validate the enterprise by means of two passages from the Schools Council's Working Paper on the Raising of the School Leaving Age. There the teaching of 'Humanities' is seen in these terms:

The problem is to give every man some access to a complex cultural inheritance, some hold on his personal life and on his relationships with the various communities to which he belongs, some extension of his understanding of, and sensitivity towards, other human beings. The aim is to forward understanding, discrimination and judgement in the human field - it will involve reliable factual knowledge, where this is appropriate, direct experience, imaginative experience, some appreciation of the dilemmas of the human condition, of the rough hewn nature of many of our institutions, and some rational thought about them. (3)

This seems to me a rendering of the aim of that humanistic education which has been historically reserved for the elite. And it is, I think, a perception that the serious personal use of reading (and experience of all the media) is seen by teachers as a characteristic of an academic elite that leads the Working Paper to this comment on the aspiration quoted above.

All of this may seem to some teachers like a programme for people who have both mental ability and maturity beyond the reach of most who will leave at the age of sixteen. The Council, however, thinks it is important not to assume that this is so, but rather to probe by experiment in the classroom how far ordinary pupils can in fact be taken. (4)

The task of the Humanities Project was to probe this by experiment.

But how was this adventure towards a popular humanism to be motivated? The Working Paper warned, as we have noted, that teachers would not readily believe in these pupils; and later it noted that the pupils would not readily believe in the teachers:

But adult procedures in the classrooms....will not be successful if a different kind of relationship between teacher and pupils obtains in the corridor or in extra-curricular activity. If the teacher emphasises, in the classroom, his common humanity with the pupils, and his common uncertainty in the face of many problems, the pupils will not take kindly to being demoted to the status of children in other relationships within the same institution. Indeed, they might write off the classroom relationship as a 'soft-sell'. (5)

I had shared with many young teachers the experience of being 'taken to bits' by pupils with whom I had tried to deal through 'adult procedures'.

What was needed was a setting in which adult procedures, such as would be appropriate to adult education, could be instituted in the classroom in a formal and contractual way which gave the prospect of orderly and disciplined procedures. Only within such an orderly framework could the teacher-pupil relationship be modified so that pupils could make the transition to students.(6) And it was studentship-learning by study rather than instruction-which might be expected to associate improvement in reading with the liberation of personal powers.

Our way through was to define 'humanities' as a 'human issues curriculum'. Human issues are empirically the subject of controversy in our society, so that parents, pupils and teachers disagree about them. The rights and wrongs of the Arab-Israeli War, the various strategies against poverty, the responsibility for care of the elderly or sex before marriage are not a matter of agreement in our society, and within certain limits ours is a society which endorses the right to differ. On the basis that schools are accountable to parents we argued that some teachers would no doubt wish, if they taught about controversial human issues, to reassure parents that they were not using their position of power in the school to advance their own views, which might be opposed to those of the home. In short, teachers might wish to teach to the criterion of neutrality.

We knew of no teachers who were doing this. It appeared to call for a technical innovation in teaching, and it was this technical innovation, the evolution of the role of neutral chairman, which lay at the centre of the project. It was of course an innovation which was itself highly controversial, but its progress is well documented and it is not the centre of our concern here. (7)

Crucial in our present context is the idea that a teacher cannot be a source of information if he is to be neutral, since all information is biased. Thus, a group of students will rely for information on evidence, which the teacher will encourage them to criticise. Seen as evidence and handled in a group where the teacher is a neutral chairman, what Nissen called 'the materials of instruction' are no longer vouched for and endorsed by school or teacher. Now the piece on Emancipation would not be recited, but would be seen as evidence of the manner in which patriotic sentiments were disseminated hand in hand with reading skills in the nineteenth century.

There are now on the British market many anthologies of evidence on human issues and many resource collections, but these follow from the Humanities Project and did not then exist. Accordingly, to get teachers started on the exploration of the neutral chairman role, the Project produced 'starter packs' - loose leaf collections of resources amounting to about 200 items each - on War and Society, Education, The Family, Relations between the Sexes, People and Work, Poverty, Law and Order and Living in Cities.(8)

The first of these to be compiled was War and Society and the task of compiling it fell to John Elliott, a teacher who joined the project from a secondary modern school. When I saw his collection, I found the reading level so high that, for all my aspirations towards reading standards, I was frightened by it. John Elliott, who was qualified in religious education, assured me that it was easier than the Bible. There were some compromises, but the collection remained essentially an adult education collection, and subsequent collections were more or less in tune with it.

There were gradings of difficulty within the collection

but they were the gradings existing in our society - between the popular press on the one hand and philosophical writing on the other.

A major line of public and professional attack on the project's work was that it was out of touch with the realities of the schools and the limitations of these pupils. The reading levels of the great majority of the materials were seen as quite unrealistically high. How could we expect fourteen and fifteen-year-old students to work with the more intellectual newspapers with historians like A.J.P. Taylor, with the Geneva Convention?

The majority of the teachers found that students could not deal with such difficult materials. But a minority of teachers found that they could. And in the process the trend of evidence suggested that these pupils' reading achievement as measured by the Manchester Reading Test or as judged and tested by classroom teachers improved.

This improvement was associated with the skilled and rigorous adoption by the teachers of the role of neutral chairman of a discussion of evidence. It also seems to have been associated with a shift from the teaching pattern: We read - we understand - we discuss to the pattern: We read - we do not understand - therefore we discuss. And in this second pattern the understanding of issues was integrated with the understanding of text.

Let me sharpen the issue as a personal judgement: 'formal' teachers using traditional methods, which are now being advocated by a back-to-basics movement, could not achieve the reading levels demanded in the Project. Nor could 'informal' teachers using progressive, child-centred approaches. Teachers who adopting a new formal role of

neutral chairman and adult procedures with the pupils achieved the necessary reading levels and increased reading achievement. But the role that was successful in terms of pupil achievement questioned the authoritativeness of the school. It put the teacher in control like a referee, but it forbade him to claim that he was an authority as well as in authority: that is, the elder possessed of knowledge rather than merely the more advanced student helping others to learn to be students. (9)

Now the climate of the times calls for a return to basics and a stress on reading skills. The procedures of the Humanities Project and of similar rigorous work in discovery and inquiring-learning (10) suggests that the best road towards this is through strategies which are neither pupil-centred nor teacher-centred, but which offer access to knowledge and to matters of substance, and hence increase not only students' competence but also their powers.

We can offer pupils an extension of powers through knowledge in some confidence that it is the best way of increasing basic skills in literacy and oracy.

But many of those who clamour for a return to basic skills may want to see that they are achieved without really emancipating the pupils. It may not be a return to the values of Nissen - or Grundtvig - they advocate. Theirs is not apparently the spirit of universal emancipation. The new innovators may be engaged in making schooling for minimum competences without the dangers of education for powers trendy among those who can ensure their childrens' powers by means outside the state school system.

## NOTES:

1. Stenhouse L. Hartvig Nissen's impressions of the Scottish Educational system in the mid-nineteenth century. British Journal of Educational Studies. May 1961. pp. 152-3
2. Ibid. p.153
3. Schools Council Working Paper No. 2. Raising the School Leaving Age. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1965. p.14
4. Ibid. p.14
5. Ibid. p.22
6. Stenhouse L. Pupils into students. Dialogue No. 5 1970.
7. See: The Humanities Project: an Introduction London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970; Bibliography of work on the Humanities Project available from H.C.P. Secretary, C.A.R.E. University of East Anglia, Norwich, England; and in Norwegian Stenhouse L. Samfunnsfag - med ny laererrolle Skollens Arbok, Oslo: Tanum, 1975. pp. 4879-4892. and Wang, J.E. The Humanities Curriculum Project Trondheim: Universitet i Trondheim, N.L.H.T. Pedagogisk institutt, 1975.
8. All published by Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 22 Bedford Square, London W.C.1B 3HH and available direct and not through booksellers.
9. The distinction between in authority and an authority is taken from R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966.
10. We appear to have had similar effects from Man: a course of study, the American middle-school social science curriculum associated with Jerome Bruner, when teachers have worked to a rigorous definition of role similar to that used in the Humanities Project.