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INTRODUCTION
Learning to Listen

We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less.

– Laertius

I am sitting down to write this at the same time that construction is starting in a vacant lot next to my home. Gone are the usual sounds of urban life wafting in from the backyards: the low hum of nearby traffic, an occasional horn or siren, birds, children, church bells and ice-cream trucks. Now, it's pumps and generators, pile drivers, cement mixers. A big building is going up and it's producing some big noise!

So it comes as no surprise that I've been thinking about noise a lot lately. My interest in noise was piqued when I heard an article – the volume of my radio turned up to maximum so I could hear above the din next door – about the impact of ocean noise on marine mammals. It seems that the noise humans are creating in the oceans – starting with propeller ships 150 years ago and continuing to today's use of air guns to explore for natural gas – interferes with marine mammals' abilities to hear and communicate with each other, which is severely impacting their survival (NPR Staff 2013).

Too much noise!

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But even when the construction crew calls it a day and the quiet of evening settles over my neighbourhood, there are other noises I face. My in-box beeps, my phone chirps. Blogs, Twitter, and all manner of newspapers and magazines, form an endless stream of chatter about education, testing and standards. Anyone with a device is chiming in, often with vitriol, about what is wrong with our schools and what can be done better. These voices are exhilarating and important. We need voices, and lots of them, to speak up about the state of our profession: the reforms that are not righting what is really wrong, the evaluations that are not valuing teachers, the tests that are eclipsing learning. But while the activist in me wants to raise my voice and join my colleagues in speaking loudly and frequently for what I feel is right and necessary in education, the teacher in me wants to unplug. Let me rephrase that: the teacher in me ***needs*** to unplug. Sometimes it all feels like too much noise, noise that is distracting rather than energising, noise that takes me away from my work rather than helping me focus. I feel the need to do what so many teachers tell me they have done during previous shifts in educational policies: they shut their doors and pay attention to what they know is most important – the students in front of them.

I say this with some trepidation. Up until now, my job has consisted mostly of urging teachers to open their doors. Collaboration and public learning – signified by open doors – should be the DNA of schools. Additionally, I don't have my own classroom. Instead, I travel from room to room, building to building, city to city. I depend on teachers opening their doors to me so we can work together toward better practice.

And yet.

That open door can often let in a deafening cacophony. Randy Bomer calls such noise a "policy churn" (Bomer 2011, 6), a term I love because it evokes those propellers that have been preventing whales from hearing each other for over a century. I know there is policy churn when I walk into classrooms and hear teachers ask questions that begin: "Am I supposed to?" "Am I allowed to?" "Should I?" or "Is it OK if I?" The chatter of mandates – lists of year-level texts provided by the authors of our curricula, particular interpretations of those books, an outside curriculum promising alignment with standardised tests, the threat of evaluations based on those test scores – has taken the place of the voices of the students sitting in front of these teachers. We have been deafened by policy churn.

It is clearly time to close our doors.

We need to shut off the noise that seeps into our classrooms so we can better listen to our students. Listening is hard for most of us, but especially,

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I think, for those of us who teach. Talking seems to be a requirement of our profession, practically a synonym for teaching. But listening?

When I think about the kind of listening that happens in schools, I think of how we, as teachers, usually listen ***for***. We listen for the right answers, the key words, the idea that best matches the tests or what we're thinking. This is most obviously evident when we hear ourselves asking questions and replying to a student's answer by saying, "OK, but I'm thinking of something else." Though most of us have moved away from the guess-what's-on-the-teacher's-mind method of teaching, we still fall into this trap, perhaps using more subtle language. I'm thinking of how often during discussions I say, "Yes, and what else?" Am I honestly asking students to add to their thinking or am I listening for something that matches the "it" I want them to get?

There is no doubt that we are teaching at a time when success is determined by whether our students can "get" the "it" – and get it in specified texts. Answers, unfortunately, seem to matter more than questions these days, and assessments are overshadowing learning. Thomas Newkirk puts it this way in his marvellous book ***The Art of Slow Reading***: "The test, rather than being built on a value system, becomes the value system" (Newkirk 2011, 12).

But that's not to say we have to give in and teach toward these tests. Instead of listening ***for*** answers, we should be trying to listen to our students. I first wrote about the distinction between listening ***for*** and listening ***to*** with Vicki Vinton in our co-authored book, ***What Readers Really Do*** (Barnhouse and Vinton 2012). In the pages of ***Readers Front and Centre***, I'll be attempting to dig into that idea more deeply, to examine the implications of teaching – and specifically, teaching reading – that has, at its heart, listening.

A recent article in the ***New Yorker*** addresses this very issue, albeit in a different context. The writer, Atul Gawande, who has previously written about coaching and teaching, here describes efforts on the part of the Indian government and several non-profit organisations to instil safer childbirth practices in some of that country's poorest villages. The practices seemed simple – better hand washing, for example, to prevent infection, and swaddling the infant next to the mother's skin to prevent hypothermia – yet the birth attendants were not internalising these practices and babies continued to die shortly after birth. It was only when training nurses spent time on the ground, side by side with the birth attendants, talking over tea, listening to why they were doing or not doing what they should, that practices began to change. When Gawande interviewed a birth attendant about why she finally did change her practices, she responded that the training nurse "was nice" and "smiled a lot" and that talking with her "wasn't like talking to someone who was trying to find mistakes … It

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was like talking to a friend" (Gawande 2013, 45). That's what it took to make changes in practice: smiling, talking, being a friend. In contrast, countries that implemented similar health-care training programs "at arm's length, going 'low touch,' without sandals on the ground … have failed almost entirely. People talking to people is still how the world's standards change" (44).

We can't teach people if we don't know them and we can't know them if we don't listen to them.

Teaching as listening is not a new concept. Most famously, Don Graves made listening the core of his teaching. He listened to students and taught them, in turn, to listen to each other (Graves 1994). But listening is a concept that seems to have gotten shuffled to the bottom of the deck in recent years. I think, for example, of the entire movement toward national standards, a movement that was often spearheaded by a small group of people with limited public input and discussion (Newkirk 2013). I also think of the scripted curricula that are being offered to schools and systems in the name of helping teachers help their students "meet" curricular standards. These curricula come loaded with questions teachers are supposed to ask and possible answers they should be listening *for* ("Guide students to recognise", "Help students identify", "Possible responses include" and "Sentence starters are").

As a result of such teaching, I'm afraid, students are being trained to think of reading as a listening-*for* activity rather than learning to listen to the texts in front of them. Tom Newkirk describes such readers as those for whom "the text has no hold" (Newkirk 2011, 50). He, too, recognises this as a kind of hearing loss, realising that in addition to visualising, readers "auditorise" or "hear" the "way writing is told" (50). While some readers seem to develop and practise auditorising as they read silently to themselves, some readers – non-readers really – do not. These readers, Newkirk states, need to develop an "inner ear" that allows them to "hear" the print their eyes take in (50).

Teaching in a way that suggests that texts have answers is exactly the opposite of what these students need. They will read in order not to dwell in a text but to hunt and peck for an answer, which they can then deliver to their teacher. I see this all the time in classrooms. In a secondary English class reading *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, for example, students were discussing a particular scene in small groups – a scene none of them had bothered to read for homework. One "smart" reader had it all figured out, however. "Just read the back, guys," he advised his group. "It's a post-apocalyptic novel. That means it's about hope and despair, so the dog here probably symbolises hope." Satisfied, the students shut their books and wrote their essays. Done. I also see this in classrooms of younger students who are told to use specific "strategies" to "identify" themes or main ideas. They skim through a book looking for the

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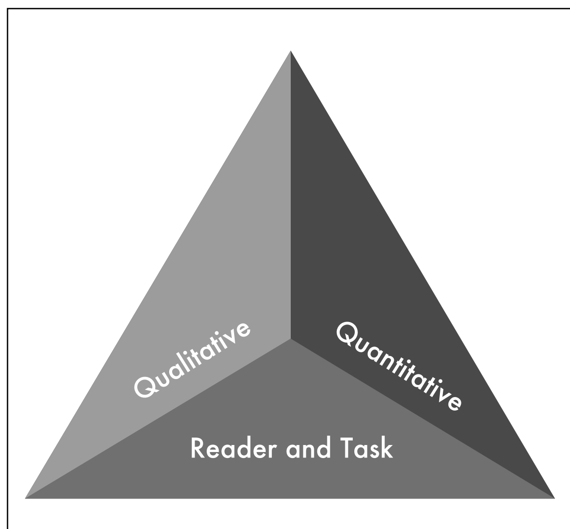

Figure 1 The three factors used to measure text complexity in many curricula

required to read texts like these. That means the Qualitative and Quantitative criteria have trumped the Reader and Task criteria. So much for being at the base of the pyramid.

So what? Why does this matter?

Well, here's why this matters: A year-eight has finished with a task the rest of his class is still working on. Following his teacher's instructions to read independently when finished, he has taken out the "aligned" textbook recently acquired by his school and the only book available in the room for "independent reading". He sits for about ten minutes with the book open to an excerpted chapter from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a text his curriculum deems fit for years 6–8.

Here are the first few sentences of the excerpt, which is the opening of Chapter 31 in the real book:

> Now to return to Tom and Becky's share in the picnic. They tripped along the murky aisles with the rest of the company, visiting the familiar wonders of the cave – wonders dubbed with rather over-descriptive names, such as "The Drawing Room", "The Cathedral", "Aladdin's Palace" and so on. Presently the hide-and-seek frolicking began, and Tom and Becky engaged in it with zeal until the exertion began to grow a trifle wearisome; then they wandered down the sinuous avenue holding their candles aloft and reading the tangled web-work of names, dates, post-office addresses, and mottoes with which the rocky walls had been frescoed (in candle smoke). Still drifting along and talking, they scarcely noticed that they were now in a part of the cave whose walls were not frescoed. They smoked their own names under an overhanging shelf and moved on. (Twain 1998, 159)

I approach the student and start talking to him about what he's reading. He (courageously) admits that he doesn't have a clue about what's going on in these sentences. I can see why, or at least some of why: there's the first and most obvious fact that this is written in a different era – the sentences are long, the paragraph itself is an unending block of text running down the page, and the language is not contemporary. Additionally, the reader – any reader – has

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no context for these sentences. It is clear from the first sentence (*Now to return to Tom and Becky's share in the picnic*) that this is an excerpt. In the previous chapter, which does not appear in this school's textbook, Twain has generously described the cave in which Tom and Becky find themselves and explicitly given information that would help a reader make sense of some details that appear here: *the rest of the company,* for example, or *the familiar wonders of the cave*. In addition, the previous chapter has explained that Becky and Tom have gone missing and that a search party has been sent out to the cave to find them.

But does this boy know this? No. For how could he? That chapter is not here. This is a text without a context. And while those previous details are certainly not essential to comprehend exactly what's going on in these first few sentences, they would certainly be clues that any reader would rely on to ground themselves in this scene, in other words, to get that Tom and Becky are in a cave, exploring, and on the brink of getting lost.

And so when I ask this boy what he thinks might be going on in this paragraph, he takes a stab at it and says he thinks that Tom and Becky may be in a movie theatre. When I ask him what makes him think that, he points to the words *aisle* and *dubbed* and to the clue about Aladdin, which he says he knows is a movie. At this point the bell rings. The boy, I'm quite sure, feels saved; he scoops up his belongings, leaving the book open on the desk behind him. I linger with the text a bit longer and can't help but wonder what he might have made of the passage about the characters smoking their names under a shelf.

This is a text exemplar, all right – an example of how *not* to use texts in classrooms. Disembodied. For assessment purposes only. Matched to the Qualitative and Quantitative criteria ordered, but certainly not to that of the Reader and Task.

What's wrong with this picture is that the teacher has been rendered powerless. She was handed a textbook and told to use it. She was not required to employ any professional judgment, experience or knowledge except how to manage a classroom in which a few students may finish a task before the others. As a result the student has been rendered powerless. Just as the chapter from Tom Sawyer has been yanked out of its context and placed, absurdly, in this textbook, so the act of reading has been yanked out of its context. There is no *why*, as in why should this student read this particular text; there is no *how*, as in how should this student read this particular text; and there is no *so what*, as in what's the payoff for this student's efforts. The Reader and the Task don't matter at all in this scenario.

We have to right that wrong. Our students need to become the centre of our teaching – not the texts, not the standards and certainly not the assessments.

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To start, let's visualise a different diagram about text complexity. Instead of the pyramid, let's think of a pebble thrown into a pond. The pebble is the student and the pond is the text. When that pebble hits the surface of the pond, we see ripples. That's the thinking the student is doing as he reads. By paying attention to those ripples – and doing so by listening *to* the student – we can get a better understanding of how that text might be complex for that student. There may be some quantitative issues – there are definitely a lot of big words and long sentences in that excerpt from Tom Sawyer. There may be some qualitative issues – how much background knowledge is necessary for an urban teenager to fill in the missing context? And there may also be some task issues – why should this student bother to read this text? But not every student will be confronted by each and every one of these issues in the same way. One student may comprehend the difficult words in context; another may read on and discover more clues about a cave and therefore revise his initial ideas about the movie theatre. As teachers that's what we need to see – our students interacting with texts. That's where our teaching needs to start. Figure 2 is a re-visualisation of what this kind of thinking about text complexity could look like instead of the pyramid.

Whatever our curriculum or school system, and whether our current shiny new standards become just another policy churn or grow into the backbone of our curriculum for decades to come, I hope we can learn this much from the conversations they spark: We cannot say one thing and do another. We cannot say that students are an important factor in determining text complexity and then create curricula that ignore students. We cannot say that students need to read independently and proficiently and then hand them texts they can't read.

Our methods have to match our goals. How we teach is of equal if not greater importance than what we teach. We know this because we know that "language is not merely representational … but constitutive." It "creates realities and invites identities" (Johnston 2004, 9). To do right by our students – whether it is to make sure they are tertiary- and career-ready or ready for duties that surpass study and careers, such as building and developing relationships and living actively in a community in which they feel a sense of mutual and shared responsibility – we need to make sure that we are inviting them to take on a lifetime of learning. This means treating them like learners, placing them in the centre of our classrooms, and doing so not in word but in deed. Only then will they develop agency and engagement and only then will they truly be "independent and proficient".

This book is an attempt to help teachers help their students take on identities as learners. To start, we need to put students front and centre in our classrooms and we need to listen to them. The first three chapters of this book are

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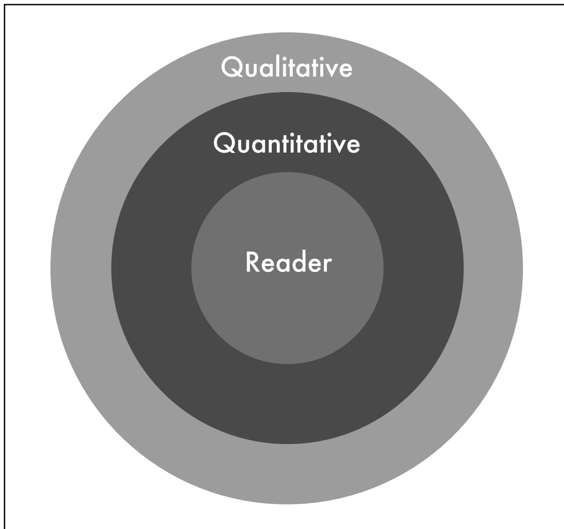

Figure 2
The reader is at the centre of what makes a text complex.

about conducting reading conferences that allow us to truly teach from where our students are, first by listening to their thinking as they read and then rooting them in their own agency as learners. The following three chapters are a guide to stepping students up from where they are so they can think more complexly in more complex texts – not because they have to, but because they can and because they want to.

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