(Chapter in Book)

Teacher's and Pupil's Construing of Reading

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in:

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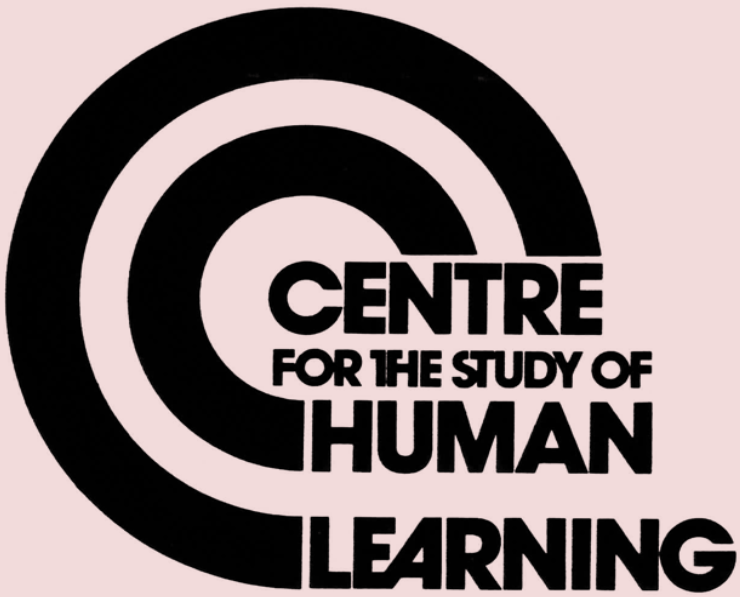

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis in the educational world on the need for the 'development' of children's reading skills. This has been most notable in junior and middle schools (9-13 year olds). The increase in book-based 'project work' in the curriculum of many schools catering for this age-range calls for a varied and flexible range of reading skills. This 'Project work' is carried out under a variety of labels: 'topic work', 'thematic studies', 'centres of interest' and others. Generally, children are required to use a variety of sources to compile an individual 'special study' folder in a certain subject area.

In organising work of this kind, I feel that there will always be uncertainties in the teacher s mind. How much choice should pupils have in deciding the subject area to be studied? Some boys may choose 'football' term after term. One girl I knew compiled a project folder on horses three years running with different class teachers. Another uncertainty is connected with the nature of the 'study reading' skills which children need to deal most effectively with a range of written sources. Robert Dearden has remarked how classes of children involved in project work can resemble anything from an 'embryonic university' to something like a 'wet playtime which lasts all day'. This difference reflects underlying attitude to books.

For book-based project work to be effective, children may need to be involved in accessing and surveying information, defining specific purposes for reading, comprehending written texts at more than just a literal level, responding imaginatively to literature, constructing and evaluating a variety of types of reading outcome and so on.

Underlying these skills is a view of reading as an active, generative process, as proposed to Goodman, and Harri-Augstein & Thomas. When such skills are absent, the project founders. Indeed it can be argued that it is only when embedded within a battery of these skills that reading becomes really beneficial to individuals of all ages in virtually any circumstances, whether in school or college or more generally in learning whilst living. The need for the development of these and other skills has been emphasised in various publications including the Bullock Report, 'A Language for Life'. Significantly, the Open University's reading courses have been called 'Reading Development'. The B.B.C. are soon to begin an in-service course for teachers called 'Reading After Ten'.

There are certain difficulties in trying to assess the effect on teachers of courses about these skills and in trying to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers's subsequent attempts to encourage their growth in children. Firstly, we may over-estimate the maturity achieved by teachers themselves in their use of 'reading as a learning skill' and the empathy that this gives them with their pupils' problems. A well-known paper by Perry, for example, highlights the relative inefficiency of Harvard undergraduates in their ability to study by reading. Secondly, by incorporating our own selective views into our measuring instruments, we may also fail to do proper justice to what children 'make' of the many reading tasks which can be experienced in school and of the reading materials to which they have access.

APPLICATION OF KELLY'S IDEAS

I hope that this brief introduction allows you to envisage the potential value of Kelly's repertory grid technique, and the recent extensions of this developed at the Centre to the evaluation of reading competence. The research in which I am e1gaged uses the grid technique to assess how junior and middle school teachers' construing of reading materials and reading activities is influenced by an intensive, eight-month , part-time, in-service course on the teaching reading.

In the coming months, grids will also be used to examine how the 'views of reading' of a sample of the pupils in these teachers' classes, change as the ideas from the course begin to be implemented by the teachers.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aims of the research are:-

1) To elicit teachers' personal construct systems relating to reading materials, purposes and outcomes before they begin their in- service course on reading.

2) To repeat these elicitations during and after the course.

3) To assess the nature of any changes in constructs.

4) To relate these changes to the nature of the course, through discussion with the teachers.

5) To elicit children's personal construct systems relating to reading materials, purposes and outcomes when they first enter the classes of these teachers in the Autumn term of the year in which the teachers complete the course.

6) To repeat these elicitations later in the school year.

7) To assess the nature of any changes in constructs.

8) To relate these changes to the nature of the reading for learning activities devised by the teachers and thus indirectly to the content of the teachers' course.

Discussions with the teachers will also take place and also with the pupils if this is found to be practicable.

METHODS

It was decided to concentrate on the constructs of teachers and pupils relating to three aspects of the reading process. Three grids are being elicited:-

i) reading materials
ii) reading purposes
iii) reading outcomes (acceptance of written, spoken, conceptual, behavioural).

These three components derive from a model of the reading process developed at the Centre.

The grids on reading materials are based on six 'common elements', the same six pieces of material being used in all grid elicitations:

an encyclopaedia
a dictionary
a well-known story for children
a comic
a book on a general subject
a book on a specific subject (within the same subject area as the general one)

Respondents are asked to add other types of material to this list, if they wish to, before elicitations begin.

A tick and cross rating is used.

The common elements allow the SOCIOGRID computer analysis, devised at the Centre, to be used to reveal and measure commonality of construing. Construct systems and change in them can be compared between teachers, between a teacher and his or her pupils and between pupils.

The grid on reading purposes and the grid on reading outcomes are both based on 'individually negotiated elements' and five point rating scales are used. These grids are analysed using the FOCUS and CORE programs, also developed at the Centre. Changes in individuals' construct systems in the year of the teachers' course or, in the case of the pupils, in the year following it, will be closely monitored.

REPORT ON PROGRESS

At the present time, only the first set of grids have been elicited with the teachers before they begin the course, and with a number of teachers not taking the course who are being used as 'controls'.

The proposed elicitations with the children are currently being developmentally tested. The materials grid, using the same six examples of reading matters, has been elicited from children without many snags being discovered. They were interested and involved in the sorting and labelling activities, treating the grid like a puzzle or a challenging 'game'. When asked about the different purposes which they can read for in school, some anecdotal prompting has sometimes been necessary: 'Think of the different things you read or could have read at school yesterday or today' and so on….. The 'outcomes' grid at first proved more difficult: but introducing the term 'effects of reading' and some non-directive prompting has enabled children to complete these grids without too much difficulty.

EARLY ANALYSIS

Early analysis of the first four teachers throws up some interesting findings.

In the 'materials' grids, elements added to the initial six, as other types of reading material 'used' in school include:

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a reading laboratory card
a maths book
word games
wrappers
a newspaper
a postcard
a poetry book
a crossword book
and an activity based English textbook.

The maximum number of constructs elicited in the materials grid was 9, the mean 7.5 (I have had my own constructs elicited on this grid and in spite of having been deeply involved with reading courses for a number of years, only managed twelve from a total of twelve elements).

In the 'purposes' grids, the maximum number of constructs elicited was 10, the mean 6.25. The maximum number of elements negotiated was 9, the mean 7.8.

In the 'outcomes' grids, the maximum number of constructs elicited was l0, the mean 6. The maximum number of elements negotiated was 9, the mean 8.

The SOCIOGRID analysis includes the assembling of a MODE GRID made up of those constructs from different grids which best represent the shared construing of the group.

As Laurie Thomas explained in his paper, Focusing involved re-ordering the rows and columns of constructs and elements in a 'raw' grid, in such a way as to produce a re-sorted grid in which every pair of adjacent rows and columns has more in common than in any other arrangement.

In focussing the mode grid with those of each individual's reading materials' grid, the closest match was 85.7%. It is interesting to note that this match involved the grid of a teacher who appears to be the most unsure of her performance on the course and who is most keen to work with other students in informal study groups. All the teachers so far analysed have at least a 70% match with the mode grid. It is also interesting to note that my grid (as a course tutor who had been through all the 'reading for learning' course components) only had a 52% match with the mode grid.

The SOCIONET analysis provides a further commentary on the relationship between my construing of reading materials and those of the teachers. This analysis involves the focusing of all pairs of grids and the computation of similarity measures which can then be expressed as a sociometric-like diagram (i.e. socionet). A rank ordering of similarity measures enables an evolving sequence of socionets to be extracted. My grid was involved in the two highest similarity measures (links one and two),

Insert fig 1

and with teacher number 2, I also seem to be the person who most relates to the other four (see link 8).

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FINALLY

The great bulk of work in this research has still to be done but it is hoped that the results will help contribute to the understanding of the transfer of ideas in teaching and learning, both at the level of professional in-service training an in school classrooms. The repertory grid allows the construing of reading to be explored in the teachers' and the children's own terms. The SOCIOGRIDS analysis will reveal the commonalities and difference in construing both between people and over time. Thus, this approach to the evaluation of a course avoids the more obvious pitfalls which derive from measuring instruments that embody only the researcher's views of the terms in which 'change' or 'improvement' should be measured.