Thinkpiece: Bringing what we value as a lens to reading

*No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasures so lasting.*

(Lady Montagu, 1753)\*

I have an idea. And forgive me those for whom this is totally obvious, well-founded practice, or an assumed position already- Let's remind ourselves of our point of view, our perspective and come to the text with this *way to read*.

Over some generations we educators have focused more and more on convergent learning in practice (let’s put aside the reasons for that). By calling our practice convergent I mean planned teaching and learning activities have been predominantly directed towards specific goals identified whether in benchmarks, standards or school exit credential requirements. I would argue that because of this situation we have created a climate in which we come to find our students don't know how to read *for themselves*.

Rather than reading in school being first and foremost about the reader’s love of reading for its own sake, our young primary students can get the message that reading is for achieving appropriate levels fluency and comprehension or reading is to meet the proportion of ticks required in a running record to progress on to the next colour level- a performance of competence (Dillon, 2015). Later, reading is to locate the information needed to answer the questions on the worksheet. We may say explicitly that *reading will help* but students interpret this message through the practice we provide. In class, reading is principally a task to enable students to answer questions posed by the teacher.

We know this practice is more likely to turn off than turn on readers. Powell, Mcintyre, & Rightmyer, (2006) found that classrooms that used scripted literacy programmes had a high degree of off-task behavior and few of the six variables (choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequences) for understanding student motivation in the classroom. McPherson (2007) also promotes student choice, along with use of appropriate strategies and real-world reading materials of interest as, not surprisingly if students dislike something they avoid it. However, the benefits of teachers selecting readings based on student’s interest might be more about an appreciation of a teacher listening to them -caring enough to want to know- that is motivating these readers to read (Casey, 2008; Smith, 2006).

At tertiary level reading is to *critically* review what an author is saying even though we all know the peer-reviewed article has been published and lecturers have selected it. Then there are reader tasks presented in our professional lives. In an employment world that values life long learners we now need to prove this aspect of our employable selves by keeping *up to date*. How do we read for that task?

*The greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is moral illumination.*(Elizabeth Hardwick, 1989)

To read for the sake of reading, a reader is motivated to come to the text by a point of view, a perspective, and curiosity - a purpose. Such a view might be to seek distraction, to seek escape for a while. Our reader might be seeking guidance, hope or vision of a better time and place for him or herself, or just that such a space exists at all. Our reader may be seeking a world that makes theirs seem better by comparison. We tend to get children to practice reading for the author’s meaning more than to make meaning of their own personal experience and lives, to develop greater self knowledge and knowledge of others. Those of us who love reading know reading can give us pleasure; insight, scenarios of problems solved and challenges met, and help us cope with grief and loss. Reading can give us words to describe an emotion, a scene. Don’t young children love being read to and with?

*Children are made readers  on the laps of their parents.*

(Emilie Buchwald, 1994)

Discovering my students were not compelled to read simply because it was reading, and that they struggled to get into course readings provided I firstly tried to provide more scaffolding. Worksheets and set questions, to help students get started. Later in a course I progressed to providing question banks (a kind of master sheet compiled from reputable sources, e.g. De Luca & Annals, 2011) for students to select appropriate questions for a particular reading to help them prepare their summaries, reviews, and critiques. These worksheets are the most used but essentially worthless for the purpose of enthusing students to read. Once filled in, students’ start, and stop with these worksheets, they were done. Of course at times, I have been delighted by a student that had actually read the article and said they ‘liked it’. I regret not digging deeper to find out what it was they connected with specifically. Then I could help them identify and articulate that connection- what they value and what they had ‘found’.

A value is identified as a belief within our personal philosophy that we care enough about to influence or actions. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) explained, “Values are deeply held beliefs about what is important or desirable. They are expressed through the ways in which people think and act” (p. ). The values identified in our National Curriculum (MoE, 2007) are: excellence, innovation, diversity, equity, community ecological sustainability, integrity, and to **respect** themselves, others, and human rights.

# The values in Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners (MoE, 2011, p. 4) are:

* *Wänanga:* participating with learners and communities in robust dialogue for the benefit of Mäori learners’ achievement.
* *Whanaungatanga:* actively engaging in respectful working relationships with Mäori learners, parents and whänau, hapü, iwi and the Mäori community.
* *Manaakitanga:* showing integrity, sincerity and respect towards Mäori beliefs, language and culture.
* *Tangata Whenuatanga*: affirming Mäori learners as Mäori. Providing contexts for learning where the language, identity and culture of Mäori learners and their whänau is affirmed.
* *Ako:* taking responsibility for their own learning and that of Mäori learners.

And beyond these values such as justice, love, equality, freedom, democracy, perseverance, loyalty, empathy, independence, autonomy, agency, inclusion, self-care, family, and realizing talent/potential, (the list could go on).

My idea then is for the reader to firstly determine a value that is a priority for his/her or your life. Bring to mind what authors you are familiar with already that speak to (have influenced) this concern of yours, and what are the kinds of things they look at/ say. Read the article in front of you seeking anything that speaks to your concern. I am suggesting this idea as a strategy, of interest to readers, involving personal choice and real-world relevance in the sense that personal values are all these things: Simply ask ourselves, and ask our students to identify one value that they hold dear and through that lens read the assigned text.

*But what if, for example, there is no social justice message in a specific piece?* That is a good question. Well, already the reader has had a good look and exercised a version of compare and contrast to ascertain this and come to such a conclusion. In doing so this reader has started his or her dialogue with the author(s).

*What if they say they value financial success or celebrity status?* Whether genuine or not, go with it and see what they come up with when they read the assigned text.

When we ask readers to approach texts as individuals holding personal values (rather than as a class of students given the same questions, looking for the same answers), they will each come with a perspective enabling interesting group discussion at least. Other benefits might be articulation of their values, developing knowledge about a concern shared by others (authors and peers), and self-confidence as a reader.

Something I intend to try.

*For* it's here, right *in this* first word, *that the* love of reading is born, *and the* longer his reading *is* organic *the* stronger *it* becomes, until *by the* time he arrives *at the* books *of the* new culture, he receives them as another joy rather than as a labour. (Sylvia Ashton- Warner, 1986)

*The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.* (Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841)

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\*All quotes were accessed from various online sources by a google search using the words ‘quotes about reading’.