

# **Reading: Process and Pedagogy**

**NINETEENTH YEARBOOK OF THE  
NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE  
IN TWO VOLUMES**

**VOLUME I: PROCESS**

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**Publisher:**  
**THE NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE, INC.**  
**MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN 53233**

1970

# The Problem of Definition in a Non-Existing Profession: Presidential Address

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The idea of a Presidential Address is new to this organization. It calls for president-like behavior. But I don't know what that is. The National Reading Conference is a strange group and to be president of it is an even stranger thing.

Several things have happened in the past few years that have made me feel the need for an appraisal of the college adult reading field and its professional and scientific position.

A few years ago, at a conference of editorial advisory boards of all the International Reading Association journals and the Publications Committee of the International Reading Association it became clear that the primary audience of the *Reading Teacher* was to be the elementary classroom teacher of reading. The *Reading Research Quarterly* was to serve the scientific community in reading at all levels. The *Journal of Reading* was to serve the high school and college level. However, since the two new editors were primarily secondary reading specialists, and since a later survey was to show that only 5 per cent of the International Reading Association members were employed in colleges anyway, it was clear that the primary function of none of the International Reading Association journals could appropriately serve only the college level. So the college-adult reading field was left without a journal. Some of us were aware that a new journal became inevitable at that meeting. It did not appear until this year, but it was clear to some of us that the National Reading Conference would have to produce a journal if the college-adult level was to be served. The result is the *Journal of Reading Behavior*. In the process of losing and gaining a publication with which we could identify, we went through a kind of identity crisis as a professional group.

Another event that has called for some self-examination was the appearance of the commercial super-speed reading fad, complete with its devotees in high places and its supporters within the academic community. The lack of effective action on the part of any professional group with regard to the super-speed reading problem makes it clear that one of the primary functions of a professional group—the professional ethics or policing function—simply was not being performed. We had neither the bureaucratic superstructure nor the confidence of the public. Both are necessary for effective action.

The super-speed reading problem also brought out another problem. It became clear that we had no satisfactory way of answering questions which involve the specification of our field of scientific inquiry or the limits of our professional services. We were tempted to say, "that isn't reading as we define it," but of course we hadn't defined it, so our ad hoc efforts were not much help. Scientists and practitioners in the medical field can deal successfully with witch doctors partly because they have pretty clear legal and scientific specifications that *define* the field of medicine. We have almost nothing of the sort.

Other events that have made me aware of a need to examine our professional and scientific posture have to do with efforts on the part of the International Reading Association to fulfill their professional responsibilities. We have been invited to join the International Reading Association in several efforts. Some joint meetings have been attempted, and we have had some relationship problems. Recently the International Reading Association has been attempting to pursue problems relating to college-level teacher certification, and the National Reading Conference was invited to join in that enterprise. We took the position that we did not want to be involved in the political aspects of the field—that we are a scientific group, not a political action group. The International Reading Association is going ahead without us. Recently we were asked by the International Reading Association to join in the development of a statement to the public on the responsibilities of the Reading Teacher. We will be meeting with them and will decide later whether to co-sponsor the public statement. I bring this up because it is an example of the kind of pressures and needs that any professional group will encounter. Some form of self-image is needed to provide a basis for action. If we are a professional group, we do one thing. If we are a dis-engaged scientific society, we do another. In the case of the National Reading Conference, not only have we not decided; we haven't even looked into the problem.

Another set of events that demonstrates a need for a clearer self-image has to do with the program for the past two conferences. Last year I tried to encourage the submission of papers on college-adult reading and did not encourage papers on elementary reading. I found, to my surprise, that we had members of the Board of Directors who did not think of us as a college-adult group, and that they felt we couldn't successfully distinguish college-adult reading from any other kind of reading. One more time we were limited by our lack of agreement on our goals and our identity.

We return now to the title of these remarks. I have been giving examples of two basic needs that seem to me to be crying out for attention on the part of those who spend their lives associated with

the college-adult reading field and the National Reading Conference. One is the need to get a clearer picture of the college-adult reading field as a profession. The other is the need for a clearer understanding of the nature and limits of the scientific sub-specialty that constitutes our field of knowledge.

What is a professional reading specialist? Does the term have any meaning? Are we in a profession, an art, or a science? Is the National Reading Conference a social club, a mutual applause society, a professional organization, an academic and scientific association, or an annual reunion?

One way to find an answer to this question is to examine the characteristics of a profession to see if we fit. Fortunately we don't have to do this whole thing for ourselves. There are people who try to make a profession of studying professions. A great body of literature exists on the topic of the characteristics of professions and a lot of interesting generalizations about how they develop. The whole area of the sociology of work is extremely popular these days and even boasts its own sub-specialists, dealing with such topics as the professionalization of labor groups and the dynamics of the ministry as a profession. While there is a great deal of disagreement about the details and about the relative importance of each, certain characteristics are generally agreed upon as the basis of a profession. The following quotation is typical, and will provide us with a point of departure for our discussion. It is from *Professional People*, by Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, Phoenix House, Ltd. London, 1952, pp. 55-56:

We may place first a *body of knowledge* (science) or of *art* (skill) held as a common possession and to be extended by united effort. Next is an *Educational Process* based on this body of knowledge and art, in ordering which the professional group has a recognized responsibility. The third is a *Standard of Professional Qualifications* for admission to the professional group, based on character, training and proved competence. Next follows a *Standard of Conduct* based on courtesy, honor and ethics, which guides the practitioner in his relations with clients, colleagues and the public. Fifth, we may place more or less formal *Recognition of Status* by one's colleagues or by the State as a basis of good standing. Finally there is usually the *Organization of the Professional Group*, devoted to its common advancement and its social duty rather than the maintenance of an economic monopoly. Professional status is therefore an implied contract: to serve society over and beyond all specific duty to client or employer in consideration of the privileges and protection society extends to the profession.

Let's look at these attributes of the professional and see how the college-adult reading person fits. First the body of knowledge—Some very important points about the relationship between a body of

knowledge and a profession were made recently by Goode. (Goode, William J., "The Theoretical Limits of Professionalization" in *The Semi-Professions and Their Organization*, Etzioni, Amitai, ed., The Free Press, N.Y., 1969, pp. 277-278.):

With respects to knowledge, seven major characteristics affect the acceptance of an occupation as a profession.

1. Ideally, the knowledge and skills should be abstract and organized into a codified body of principles.
2. The knowledge should be applicable, or thought to be applicable, to the concrete problems of living. (Note that metaphysical knowledge, however well organized, may have no such applicability.)
3. The society or its relevant members should believe that the knowledge can actually solve these problems (it is not necessary that the knowledge actually solve them, only that people believe in its capacity to solve them).
4. Members of the society should also accept as proper that these problems be given over to some occupational group for solution (thus, for example, many do not as yet accept the propriety of handing over problems of neurosis to the psychiatrist) because the occupational group possesses that knowledge and others do not.
5. The profession itself should help to create, organize, and transmit the knowledge.
6. The profession should be accepted as the final arbiter in any disputes over the validity of any technical solution lying within its area of supposed competence.
7. The amount of knowledge and skills and the difficulty of acquiring them should be great enough that the members of the society view the profession as possessing a kind of mystery that it is not given to the ordinary man to acquire, by his own efforts or even with help.

Note that when we look at our field from the point of view of its body of knowledge, relatively few of these conditions are met. Our society is not ready to assume we have exclusive claim to a body of knowledge created, organized and transmitted by us in an arbitrary, codified way so that we can have this kind of charisma.

When we look at the next attribute, an *educational process*, we are in better shape. Although we do have higher education organized so that the technical skills and knowledge are available, it is by no means clear that a common core of training exists.

The same may be said of the notion of a *standard of professional qualifications*. To some extent the possession of an appropriate Ph.D. might be taken to demonstrate training and proven competence, but most of us would not agree. As I indicated earlier, this matter of professional qualifications in an area into which the International Reading Association is now moving, with or without our advice or consent.

On the matter of a *Standard of Conduct* which guides the professional, we do have some rather vague ethics standards. (Here again the International Reading Association is ahead of us, but not far). On the other hand ethical standards are of little or no help without the appropriate sanctions to be applied, when they are violated. Our professional ethics have not been of much help, for example, in dealing with the problem of inappropriate services offered to the public by those in the business world. We simply do not have any power that the average citizen doesn't have.

On the matter of *recognition of status* by colleagues or the state, we have some informal kinds of status that have to do with degrees and university employment. Some also have various forms of state certification. Curiously, certification is a much sought-after status indicator in most other professions, but in our field it means very little except to indicate part of the history of the professional person. The fact that one of our members has a teaching certificate does not in itself confer any special high status on him.

Finally we come to the last attribute listed by Goode—the *organization of the professional group*. When we compare the purpose and function of the American Medical Association, or the American Institute of Architects, or the American Bar Association with this group we see immediately that while we do have an organization, it does not play the central role in our professional or economic lives that some others do.

I have mentioned only a small number of the identifying traits of professions. Some other we could deal with that have been mentioned by sociologists are high income, prestige and influence, high educational requirement, professional autonomy, licensure, formal codes of ethics, and monopoly over a task. Rather than discuss them, let me turn for a moment to the natural history of professions. They go through some identifiable stages following a common pattern, with some minor variations. Wilensky (Wilensky, Harold, "The Professionalization of Everyone?", *American Journal of Sociology*, 70, (Sept. 1964, 142-146) suggests the following steps:

1. Full-time activity at the task.
2. Establishment of university training.
3. National professional organization.
4. Redefinition of the core task to give the "dirty work" to subordinates such as nurses, technicians, research assistants, or teacher aides.
5. Conflict between the old timers and the new men who seek to upgrade the job. Sometimes this results in the creation of new job titles to differentiate the new from the old. In this process janitors become custodians, garbage collectors become sanitary engineers, and

junk dealers become salvage consultants. I don't know what college reading specialists become.

6. Competition between the new occupation and neighboring ones. The clearest and nearest example of this is the situation existing between clinical psychology and medicine. I see little of this kind of conflict in our case.

7. Political agitation for legal protection in the form of certification, licensing, or registration. We are seeing this now as the International Reading Association pushes for certification of college teachers of reading.

8. Codes of ethics. Here again we are not at this stage yet, but the International Reading Association is working on it.

It seems very clear that the National Reading Conference has not been moving in any organized campaign for professionalization. In fact we have made a few moves which retard such development, but we hear demands for the advantages that might be gained by such a move. Only a real profession can have the controls we sometimes want. As Wilensky puts it (p. 139), "Any occupation wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction, link both skill and jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy." If we want to control the charlatans and the quacks, we need this kind of political power. The only way to get it is through professionalization. That means highly developed and influential professional societies, legalistic controls on practitioners through certification or licensure, formal controls on professional actions by powerful ethics monitors, and other things we have actively avoided. Most of us do not want to be licensed, registered, or ordained into a professional status.

On the other hand we can avoid all this by identifying ourselves only with the scientific aspects of our work. The National Reading Conference has always had more of the flavor of a scientific society than it has a professional group. However, if we do decide to be a scientific society we have to be ready to give up the hope of performing certain functions for each other. The scientist as a scientist does not deal with professional matters. He may care who offers services to a professional, but as a scientist, he is officially disinterested.

Wilensky (p. 141) makes an interesting distinction in talking about estimating how many occupations or scientific specialties are professionalized:

An obvious difficulty here is the overlap between a scientific discipline (psychology, physics) and a profession (the practice of clinical psychology, aerospace science). A science, in contrast to a profession, has no clients except, in an ultimate sense, society and bosses, if any are often indeterminate. The main public for the scientist is fellow-scientists, who are in a position

to judge competence. The main public for the professional is clients or employer-clients, who usually cannot judge competence.

I have been leading us to the second major topic I want to discuss—the problem of definition in the scientific area we try to understand. If we are to be scientists rather than professional practitioners, we should be able to specify what it is we are scientists *about*. Or to put it another way, if reading is our scientific specialty, what, exactly, do we mean by reading? If we ask a paleo-botanist to tell us exactly what it is he studies and how he defines his field he is likely to say, for example, that he studies the flora of the pre-Cambrian era. (I know one such paleo-botanist, and he will also tell you that he restricts his inquiry to pre-Cambrian flora north of the Arctic Circle!) We need a similar set of delimiting and defining concepts in our field, if we are to claim to be a scientific specialty.

Helen Robinson has already addressed herself to this problem and finds in the published research great confusion of three things—1. the process of reading, 2. the teaching of reading, and 3. the outcomes or results of reading. (Robinson, Helen M., "The Major Aspects of Reading," Chapter III in *Reading: Seventy-Five Years of Progress*, ed., H. Alan Robinson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1936, pp. 22-23.) A child reads a recipe and bakes a cake. We can easily distinguish the process of teaching him to read from this independent reading behavior. We can also distinguish the baking of the cake from the reading behavior.

While it is true that we are interested in the pedagogy of reading, we cannot be sure that it is being taught until we have found out what it is. To put it another way—we have to know how to recognize and identify reading behavior before we can productively study methods of producing reading behavior.

Likewise, we are interested in what people do with their reading, and in the general outcomes of reading behavior in our society. However, the outcomes of reading must be distinguished from the reading behavior itself or we have a hopeless confusion, in which any possible behavior which might be the result of reading becomes the focus of our primary scientific study. Clearly the science of reading must deal first with an identifiable behavior or set of behaviors to be called reading. We do this by deciding what behaviors we include and exclude when we use the term "reading."

This approach to a definition does not solve any of the scientific questions in the field of reading. It allows us only to tell when we are talking about reading behavior and when we are not. That may not seem to be a very big thing at first glance, but as we look at the things written in and out of textbooks and journals we are struck by the lack of scientific precision and the lack of real additions to knowledge.

Using some clearly delimited statement as to the identity of reading behavior we can at least tell when we are finding out more about it. We can look at proposed reported research and make some judgment as to whether it can or has added anything to an understanding of the reading process. If it has, then it is a scientific study in reading. If not, we can ignore it as scientist. Given the nature of most of the research we have now, based on unidentified notions of what reading behavior is, it is difficult to summarize or integrate what we know. A clear definition would allow us to see the gaps in our knowledge and might even keep us on the topic as we try to fill them in.

To go back now, to the general topic—The Problem of Definition in a Non-Existing Profession—maybe we can see a little more clearly what our alternatives are and where we might go from here.

We can continue to fail to define the nature of our commitment. This will result in a continuation of the present confusion and seems like a bad alternative.

We can decide that we want the field of college-adult reading to become a profession, and the National Reading Conference a professional group. If this is our decision, there are some very clear paths to follow to meet that objective. It involves an effort to firm up and formalize a required educational process to be followed in entering the profession and probably some standard curriculum approved by the professional group. It also involves the creation of some powerful body of watchdogs in or out of government to assess both training and professional behavior. This group would control entrance into the profession in the manner of a medical association, a state bar examination board, or an ordinating committee.

Such a group would also control the behavior of members by enforcing standards of conduct with regard to professional courtesy, honor, and ethics, guiding the practitioner in his relations with clients, colleagues, employers, and the public. Such a group would have to be satisfied by a member who wanted to continue to be part of the professional group.

On the other hand the National Reading Conference could decide to be a scientific society, devoted to the advancement of science in the highly specialized field of the study of reading behavior. This alternative would require that we become much more vigorous in our selection of topics and papers, and that we carefully define the area of science we want to claim as our special province. We would then refuse to concern ourselves with ethical problems, training standards, and other social rather than scientific issues.

It would be presumptuous for any one person to try to make this kind of commitment for a group, even if he could. I have no interest in doing so. I simply want to point out that many of the frustrations we feel as members of this group result from the fact that we have

become neither a profession with a clear social mission nor a scientific society with a clear definition of its area of scientific investigation.

Whatever direction the National Reading Conference and the college-adult reading field take, I do have a strong commitment to one thing, and that is the emotional tone of this organization. In my experience it is unique. The informality, the identification of all of us as friends together like an annual reunion, the lack of unnecessary bureaucracy, the openness of communication, are the values that out-weigh any other considerations I have mentioned. We must keep them at all cost.