

READING WELL

閱讀素養：黃國珍的閱讀理解課，從訊息到意義，帶你讀出深度思考力

Why should we read? Veteran reading teacher and literacy advocate Huang Kuo-Chen tackles head-on a question that most people consider so obvious, they don't even bother to think about it. With deft intelligence and energizing practicality, Huang shows us how clear answers to this question can remove students' resentment of reading that our blind faith in it often engenders.

Why do we read? The question feels so obvious – even silly – to most of us that we never even think carefully about our answer. Parents and teachers remind us over and over that reading is a good habit, we hear about successful people who read a lot, and even those of us who find reading to be a terrible chore find ourselves repeating the same dictum to our own children years later. Yet, as teachers like Huang Kuo-Chen have noticed, repeated invocation of this dogma to students often makes them resent reading and treat it like an enigmatic chore of questionable value.

Huang Kuo-Chen begins this remarkable journey of insight by answering the kind of simple questions that young learners would ask, like “What is reading?” and “Why should we read?” Huang takes us one-by-one through the most common misconceptions and blind spots we carry about the nature and utility of reading in order to present us with clear, pragmatic understanding of it that will resonate with students. He addresses the problems attendant to parental education as well as primary school curricula via a wealth of examples that will be familiar to parents and teachers alike.

As an innovator and advocate, Huang Kuo-Chen brings to his task a commitment to clarity and utility that keeps the reader focused and following along. *Reading Well* is more than a guide for educators of all



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kinds; it is an invitation to understand the act and value of reading in a wholly different light.

Huang Kuo-Chen 黃國珍

After many years as a cultural content manager and branding engineer, Huang Kuo-Chen founded *Reading Literacy*, Taiwan's first reading-focused magazine. He has designed reading curricula for schools at every level, as well as opened his own private reading classroom.

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By Huang Kuo-Chen

Translated by Roddy Flagg

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What is reading?

Reading initiatives always seem to assume that it's important for children to like reading. But the more you tell children they should like something, the more likely they are to resist it. In fact, there is nothing wrong with not liking reading. Reading is an important skill, whether you like it or not. It is an ability we need to use every day.

A friend posted the following question on Facebook: "What is reading?" The question intrigued me. It looks easy enough but is hard to answer. I had to leave my computer for a meeting, but when I returned two hours later, I found that a number of people had commented. I read their responses carefully, eager to see what others thought. Here are some highlights:

"Reading helps me calm down and start again."

Yes, often we read because what we read helps us rest. And then, in the wisdom and experiences of others, we find the power to move forward and start anew.

"Reading proves that I still exist."

We all know Descartes' dictum: I think, therefore I am. And when I read, I think, and so when I read, I am. Reading becomes proof I am still alive, that I still exist.

"Reading is like breathing."

I think this is very fitting. We read and breathe in similar ways – both activities are constantly underway, yet very easily ignored if we do not pay attention. As soon as our eyes open, we see light and shade, symbols and words, even people's expressions – and we read all of these. We are always reading, just as we are always breathing.

"Reading provides us with the essence of other people's lives."

This is very true! A book is like nutritious food – you need a healthy digestive system to extract the nutrients from the food so the body can absorb them. And if a child's digestion is weak, no amount of healthy food will help them grow. The same is true of reading – you need to digest external information and absorb that which will make you stronger. Too often we focus on what children should be reading. We should focus more on the abilities children use as they read, what they learn and think about as they read, and how they process and use that information, rather than whether or not they remember it.

"Reading is a dialogue, an exchange of knowledge with people you have no chance to meet."

This is very well put. We might never meet a favorite author, certainly not if they passed away centuries ago. But reading lets us exchange ideas and wisdom with those great minds we cannot connect to otherwise.

I'm sure that after reading all that, you too have your answers to the question "what is reading?" But if you read carefully, you'll see that none of the comments I quoted above answer the question directly. And if you take an even closer look, you'll find the answers can be placed into three different categories.

The first are personal interpretations of what constitutes reading based on the responders' own experience.

Second are affirmations of reading's importance as a vital part of life, like breathing; as a way of communicating with long-dead authors; as a method of self-restoration and renewal. These are all hugely important benefits of reading and together show us how essential it is.

The third group of responses emphasize the value of reading. These commenters have experienced this at first-hand, or they would not have replied as they did.

These comments in praise of the beauty and value of reading resemble the reasons we offer to children when persuading them to read. But over time that persuasion creates resistance, or it convinces children that reading should be a joyful activity, which leads to disappointment when reality and the education system fail to meet this expectation. But in my experience, the problem is not that children do not like to read, but that they do not like to read the books we give them. I've often found children never tire of reading something they enjoy, even complex books like strategy guides to their favorite video games, which are full of character data, obscure terminology, charts and tactical advice. They lap the information up and refuse to stop reading. Or they become absorbed in light novels aimed at high-schoolers, featuring simple plots and characters, which may even be too mature for them. But they finish book after book, showing more passion for reading than I can. And then there's the time they spend browsing the internet or chatting online with friends. Do you still think children don't read? Perhaps we adults have acquired an idealized view of reading, while our children are enjoying real-world reading experiences? Or have we forgotten how we actually started to read?

I don't know how many people started reading because they "liked reading," but I know I didn't. I started reading because I liked stories, and I read in order to experience those stories. We all like different things, things which reading helps us get closer to, or understand, or relive. Over time, reading becomes an ability that stays with us throughout our lives.

And if you asked me if I like reading? I can honestly say it isn't reading that I like. It is what reading brings me.

I've also observed that the different responses to reading lead to another question: "do you still need to read if you don't like reading?"

Efforts to encourage reading seem to aim to make children like reading, which leads to us telling them "you should read" in the hope they will like it. The catch is: the more importance you place on liking reading, the more children refuse to read on the basis that they don't like it. The reality is that it's fine to not like reading, but we cannot avoid the fact that we need to read in order to enrich our lives.

Some of my friends – high-ranking executives – need to read and analyze lengthy reports every day as part of their job. They are all excellent readers and agree unanimously that reading

is not something that you like or do not like – it is just an ability you use every day. We simply have different preferences about what we read. Yet we spend so much time going back and forth with our children about liking it, when the important thing about reading isn't whether or not you like it – it is that reading is an essential life skill. No one can escape the fact that human lives in the 21st century are structured by information. Personal preferences do not change the need to be able to comprehend written information. Why does the Ministry of Education's new curriculum insist that children should possess reading literacy? Because it is a fundamental life skill. If children lack even this basic ability, they will be unable to handle the vast and varied streams of information they will face, unable to improve themselves, and unable to participate fully in our society.

Is reading a beautiful thing? If you look at someone reading, it might seem a lonely undertaking! But I and many of my friends have all experienced spiritual peaks while reading, when it has carried us into a new world. Whether I'm reading Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem*, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or Jung's memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, it seems as if time has stopped and I no longer exist. I have no doubt that reading can be a beautiful experience, and those comments left on Facebook seem to agree. But did you notice that none of the commenters mentioned any specific books? If they had, discussion about what kind of books different people like would have been inevitable. What we read comes down to individual preference, but the ability to comprehend (which reading gives us) is not used so narrowly; it serves us broadly in our everyday life.

Finally, if I were to answer the question "What is reading?", I would have to respond that it is a valuable tool. Whether you like reading or not, you need to be able to use it – to explore the world, entertain yourself, make yourself better, or participate in society. Can children master this tool? Will they use it, and to what end? These are the important questions. I hope we can teach our children to use this tool. And I believe that when they realize how reading can help them, they will not merely like reading; they will love it.