

# Emerson, Reading, and Democracy

## Reading as Engaged Democratic Citizenship

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### ABSTRACT

“What is the right use of books?” Responding to the question he famously raised, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “books are for nothing but to inspire,” which we take as endorsing a pragmatic and pluralistic view of reading literature and other kinds of texts in a manner that keeps books open to a flow of continual questioning and renewal. The purpose driving Emerson’s democratic conception of reading, we argue, is not to arrive at definitive readings but to engender new possibilities for thinking about oneself in relation to others and to society at large. As such, an Emersonian perspective on reading is a key practice for engaged democratic citizenship that provides a necessary counterweight to increasing pressure on teachers to standardize learning in schools.

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*Nothing solid is secure; everything tilts and rocks. Even the scholar is not safe; he too is searched and revised. Is his learning dead? Is he living in his memory? The power of mind is not mortification but life. (Emerson, 1983, “The Method of Nature,” p. 116)*

LIKE IT OR NOT, the new Common Core State Standards are rapidly becoming the norm across the nation. To date, 44 states have adopted them as the basis for defining “the knowledge and skills students should have within their K–12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). Our purpose in writing this article is not to criticize the concept of standards or these specific standards, which in our view are no worse and in some respects are preferable to previous iterations of K–12 student achievement standardization. Rather, our intention is to underscore the high ideals that appear, for example, in the overview of standards for our area of focus, the teaching of reading and literature. Who would argue against teaching young people to “undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature,” to “seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges

experience, and broadens worldviews,” and to “demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011)? We pose questions about how reading might be conceptualized for the purpose of instructing young people in accordance with these high ideals. More specifically, we question prevalent assumptions about textual objectivity that call for “close reading” of “high-quality” texts using “cogent reasoning.” Instead of instructors teaching children to view books as closed containers of meaning and to read passively in search of predetermined “right” answers, we believe the

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ideals set forth by the authors of the Common Core State Standards require a different approach. To elaborate on this claim, we turn to an unlikely source, Emerson, who conceptualizes reading for both literary and informational purposes in ways that educators today would do well to heed as increasing pressure on teachers to standardize learning threatens to undermine our best hopes for the future of democratic education in America.

### **Preamble: Emersonian Pragmatism**

Emerson embraced the power of the mind as that which exists through constantly reforming its understanding of the world, as a chrysalis poised at the outer hemisphere of becoming something different, something renewed, something powerful. Security of knowledge and complacency of thought were for Emerson pernicious concepts that sapped the life out of living and ceremoniously padlocked shut the gate on imagination and intellect. He saw no mode of thinking as permanent and no scholar as above critique, and especially derided what James (1907/1997) would later refer to as “truths grown petrified by antiquity” (p. 104). In the following paragraphs, we underscore Emerson’s affinity with James and Dewey, both of whose skepticism toward all absolute claims to knowledge, emphasis on inquiry into the practical consequences of thought, and elaborated understanding of the significance of experience are hallmarks of their pragmatic philosophy. With them he shared what Rorty (1979/2009) called an “edifying” as opposed to a “systematic” approach to philosophy (p. 369). We conclude this preamble by suggesting it makes sense to refer to a specifically Emersonian form of pragmatism that is directly connected with his particular claims regarding the role reading plays in the lives of healthy individuals and by extension in a healthy society.

Pragmatism, as James (1907/1997) described it, opposes rationalist modes of thinking in which logic and deductive reasoning channel thinking down a narrow, well-trodden path of expected outcomes and results that too often become the only one acceptable path to understanding. James contended that pragmatism subverts such forms of knowing because it does not seek to provide the answers; rather, it asks how ideas come to be known in certain ways, how things might be understood differently. In his words, “pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work” (p. 98). The key word in this statement is *work*, for pragmatism as James understood it does not promise ultimate solutions; it is an instrument, a resource, and a “program for more work and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*” (p. 98). James’s famous remark that ideas should be interpreted in terms of their “cash value” (p. 114) has tended to overshadow his emphasis on a process approach to philosophy as a way of thinking and questioning rather than a set of conclusions. The notion that life is best viewed as a work-in-progress is also prominent in Dewey’s (e.g., 1903; 1920/1982) writing and is indicative of Emerson’s influence on pragmatism as a distinctly American philosophy.

Dewey (1888/1997) made it quite clear that he believed democracy is more than simply a system of government. Dewey (1916/1980) stated that democracy also refers to a way of life or “a

mode of associated living” (p. 93) in that we are organically connected in experience through our actions in the pursuit of our goals. Living in a democracy or, rather, a lived democracy, means we should validate multiple perspectives on ideas and that it is our ethical responsibility to welcome and pay attention to polyvocal viewpoints. In other words, Dewey envisioned a healthy democracy as rife with possibilities, tensions, and opportunities, and in order to have a working democracy, people must devise a theory of knowledge in which knowledge works as a method toward further knowing. Knowledge, for Dewey, is something that works, that is at work, in creating newer ways of understanding in a productive democratic society. As Emerson (1983) said, “Knowledge is the knowing that we cannot know” (“Montaigne; or The Skeptic,” p. 703), which speaks not only to the aims of pragmatism but to the goals of democracy. The point is not to know with certainty but to know approximately, contingently, and that knowledge constantly shifts and reshapes in a healthy democratic society.

Emerson’s uniqueness with respect to Dewey lies, as Cavell (2003) put it, in his “emphasis on the democracy of the person” contrasted with Dewey’s “vision of democracy as political, societal” (p. 223). Cavell quoted Dewey as saying that “the scientific method is the only authentic means at our command for getting at the significance of our everyday experiences” (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 88). James would have concurred because both he and Dewey embraced a very instrumental iteration of pragmatism focused on connecting thought with direct, real-world material and social consequences. In pointed contrast, Emerson (1983) said, “I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought.” (“Experience,” p. 492). Compared with James’s and Dewey’s perspectives, Emersonian pragmatism presents a much less goal-directed understanding of what it means to live a life predicated on experimentation and open-ended thinking. It is productive and focused on an art of living, of cultivating a certain “posture” toward one’s life, rather than seeing everything as a means to an end. Emersonian pragmatism views every individual as well as America itself as a constant work in progress rooted in democratic thinking that places as much emphasis on problem posing as upon problem solving. Put otherwise, Emersonian pragmatism sees America and Americans as an unfinalizable, unfinished project always with an optimistic eye toward possibility and hope and always ready to be remade, rethought, and refashioned.

In a book entitled *Emerson’s Pragmatic Vision*, Jacobson (1993) situated Emerson as a philosopher who “generally ignores the perplexities of epistemological dualism” in favor of what he took to be “the more fundamental philosophical issue of describing and justifying a way of being in the world, a posture or attitude taken toward thought’s production of the diversity and difference in nature and society” (p. 9). Emerson offered no program for ameliorating the ills of society. What he offered instead was a vision of human potential tied to learning how to read words and the world differently, to widening the circle of possibility within which every person must live in the here and now. Emersonian pragmatism is rooted in a concept of nature understood as “what you may do” (Emerson, 1983, “Fate,” p. 949), and Emerson

believed one always can do more and different things than one imagines. “Words and deeds,” he wrote in “The Poet,” are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (Emerson, 1983, p. 263). Learning to read changes the world because the world we live in changes as we learn to read it differently.

Emerson (1983) was not blind to the density and unpredictability of changes that would be wrought if people were to follow his lead. He understood that the potential for a democratic society to thrive rests in the negotiation of complex, varying viewpoints as a way of bringing people closer to nuanced, critical understandings of any number of issues. “The centripetence augments the centrifugence. We balance one man with his opposite, and the health of the state depends on the see-saw” (Emerson, 1983, “Uses of Great Men,” p. 628). The seesaw effect of life in a democratic society, as Emerson saw it, sets the stage for newer ways of understanding and living to emerge because centripetence/centrifugence works in concert and must work in concert for the American experiment to endure. Emerson (1983) acknowledged that overcoming the struggles and tensions inherent in nurturing a Democratic society populated by people resistant to change, ideas, and progress is just a beginning but one worth our best efforts toward realizing “this new yet unapproachable America” (p. 485) that he envisioned in “Experience.” Ultimately, for Emerson, that vision is already realized to the extent that America becomes a society committed to reforming and reimagining itself. Emerson’s eye was not focused, as Dewey would have it, on *ends-in-view* but rather on *the see-saw* that is an individual human being caught in the throes of conflicting claims, ideas, and possibilities for self-realization. Emerson sought to remake American society by indirectly remaking individual Americans through language as a vehicle for producing new ways of thinking and being. It is a radical idea, and Emerson’s democratic conception of reading is standing at its heart.

To develop this claim in the following pages, we focus on three interrelated themes running through many of the essays Emerson wrote on a variety of topics. The first section connects creative reading with thinking as a form of action with pragmatic consequences; the next section speaks to the notion that reading promotes healthy individuals through healthy questioning of authority; and the final section seeks to explore Emerson’s broader claim that a certain practice of reading that can be taught is essential to the health of a society conceived as constantly forming and reforming itself.<sup>1</sup>

## Creative Reading

*One must be an inventor to read well. . . . There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. (Emerson, 1983, “The American Scholar,” p. 39)*

According to Emerson (1983), a scholar ought to be the prototypical reader specializing in an activity so as to exemplify its potential value for all people. In one of his most famous essays, “The American Scholar,” Emerson called books “the best type of influence of the past” (p. 56) and situated reading alongside “nature” and “action” as interlocking influences key to the overall “education of the scholar” (p. 63). Emerson went to great lengths in

this essay to distinguish the right use of books, which, he claimed, was that we be inspired by them. He argued that we must free ourselves from a slavish obsession with books as repositories of past thought or, worse, merely collectible objects. Such abuse of books produces a “grave mischief” when “the sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought” is reduced to record keeping. In such cases, “the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant” (p. 57).

When Emerson (1983) rhetorically asked, “What is the hardest task in the world?” and immediately answered, “To think” (“Intellect,” p. 420), he articulated a belief that thinking functions as an antifoundational enterprise associated with becoming an active, creative person who is alert to possibilities and loath to be exposed as a “mere parrot of other men’s thinking” (p. 54). McMillin (2000) underscored Emerson’s claim that thinking and reading are intimately and inseparably connected activities when he wrote:

*Reading must always involve thinking about what, how, and why we read. Reading, then, is probably the second hardest task in the world, after thinking. Thinking is the hardest task in the world precisely because it is a way of making sense of the world while being inextricable from it. (p. 146)*

In this passage, McMillin acknowledged a view of reading dear to Emerson, namely reading as a means to thinking or, better yet, as a form of thinking that is tied to critical and certainly not passive contemplation of a ready-made objective world. This way of thinking about thinking/acting as productive of experience and recursively creating new experience is characteristic of Emerson and directly challenges familiar Cartesian dualisms such as that between subject and object, mind and body. “The world, this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself” (Emerson, 1983, “The American Scholar,” p. 60).

Revisiting Dewey’s (1920/1982) concept of reconstruction in philosophy in light of what we are saying about Emerson, it is easy to see how both advise against a spectator viewpoint on knowledge and believe stagnation in thought keeps ideas locked in a holding pattern that precludes philosophy from taking root as a productive part of living. Dewey wrote of the “isolation of thinking” and the “exultation of theory” as deleterious to future growth and newer ways of knowing (p. 161), and he argued that the mutually informative concepts of thinking/acting usher in opportunities for a reconstruction in philosophy that situates philosophy as an active engagement with the world. Furthermore, Dewey followed Emerson’s (1983) claim that, “We know that the ancestor to every action is a thought” (“Spiritual Laws,” p. 322), and this intimate genealogy of thinking and acting rests well with an Emersonian stance on reading as an active enterprise where ideas coagulate, repel, and bifurcate in order for newer understandings to be produced.

Considering Emerson’s ideas about reading as fertile territory for thought and action, McMillin (2000) discussed the concept that engaged reading informs one’s ability to transact with the universe of texts, ideas, and other individuals. “How we gather meaning

from texts informs how well we will participate in the worlds of our words” (p. 126), which suggests that, in a world saturated with and situated in language, reading may play a crucial role in helping a person negotiate complex and diverse experiences. McMillin further elaborated, “Reading, then, is nothing other than a method of thinking, of gathering the world” (p. 126), and we interpret McMillin’s quite pragmatic claims as saying that the performance of gathering the world, of sifting through the seemingly infinite amount of data and information available, coincides with sense making as an active component to reading that allows us to ponder judiciously our views on important issues. Reading fosters complicity between thought and action, providing a platform for this relationship to flourish.

McMillin’s analysis of the profound relationship between reading and thinking accentuates Emerson’s ideas about the power of language and the influence it had on his work. For instance, words performed such a vital role in Emerson’s (1983) thinking that he wrote in reference to Montaigne’s essays, “Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive” (“Montaigne; or, The Skeptic,” p. 700). Not only did words possess circulatory, oxygenated nervous systems for Emerson, books themselves had a rejuvenating, life-giving function: “I find books vital and spermat, not leaving the reader what he was: he shuts the book a richer man” (“Books,” 1870, p. 159). For Emerson, language served a galvanizing function and enlivened how he articulated ideas, and reading transactions with and across texts brought Emerson to contemplate his own vital relationship to books, a relationship that he welcomed to abet his evolving thought processes and perspectives on the world.

To take Emerson’s recognition of the power of language a step further as a living, breathing entity, language not only brings forth action, it is a form of action in itself. Again: “Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (Emerson, 1983, “The Poet,” p. 450). That is, language has a performative role in making sense of the world. Given this perspective on words, reading transactions consist not merely of a leisurely and passive consumption of words on a page; words do something during reading transactions, and readers paying attention to these processes allow themselves not only to know more about themselves, others, and other worlds but also to tap into that knowledge in a participatory fashion that leads them back and forth between the text and their worlds. Actions are realized in thought, and if reading is to be a factor in understanding what is meant by engaged democratic citizenship, it must focus on the reciprocity that exists between thinking and acting as a mode of critically understanding and making sense of the massive array of information on offer in society and of making informed choices in a democratic country.

As Emerson scholar Porte (2004) claimed, “Far from being inadequate to represent its world, language, for Emerson is an instrument of power—a sign of our command over nature and fate” (p. 194). Porte acknowledged that language fulfilled a fortifying need for Emerson by opening gateways to thinking/acting that Emerson embraced as elemental in developing notions of how the world works and how it might be conceived differently. We view

Emersonian pragmatism as a productive mode of inquiry that complements James (1907/1997) when the latter wrote that “a fully armed and militant” pragmatism aims to disrupt and unsettle solidified ways of knowing (p. 98). Pragmatism, in general, is a rogue philosophy insofar as it resists conventional philosophic theories; it is a working theory, a piece of armament that assists in seeking different possible understandings. Creative reading aligns with this view as it affords opportunities to explore multiple ways of understanding that override the assumption that the goal of reading is to arrive at a correct, preapproved interpretation. The idea that language mediates what happens during any given reading transaction marks what we call democratic reading experiences, pushing readers toward a more nuanced awareness of their worlds.

Emerson (1983) believed firmly in experimentation, even labeling himself “an endless seeker” (“Circles,” p. 412) of new experience, and he envisioned this work as allowing for the random, messy, and disarrayed. But for Emerson the work didn’t end there, as he assiduously sought unanticipated confluences and connections that became the basis for further exploration. As Emerson conceived it, creative reading allows for experimentation because it puts readers in a space in which they can think independently through a process requiring close attention to what happens when they read. Rather than reading books for preordained right answers, Emerson celebrates the idea that

*there are far more excellent qualities in the student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments. (1983, “Nature,” p. 43)*

In other words, reading becomes a powerful event when readers achieve a sense of agency and thus dare to read counter to the assumption that the goal is to arrive at predetermined meanings, intentions, or purposes. Emerson (1983) personally felt the power of exploratory reading transactions when he wrote, “It is a low benefit to give me something; it is a high benefit to enable me to do somewhat of myself” (“The Divinity School Address,” p. 82). Certified knowledge held little interest for Emerson, and the empowering act of reading infused his own mind and lived experiences in order that they might be transformed or challenged by texts with which he engaged.

Anticipating James’s concept of pragmatism as an armed, working philosophy, Emerson (1983) invoked a militaristic metaphor when he saluted the transformative power stemming from active transactions with texts: “That which was unconscious truth, becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge—a new weapon in the magazine of power” (“Nature,” p. 25). In this example, truth possesses no innate value; it exists as a random variable in a galaxy of factual information. However, as Emerson offered, after that knowledge is harnessed through transactional experiences and made sense of, that previously randomized assortment of information transforms into something useful, something powerful, as one preparing a

weapon in the war against foundational thinking, uninterrogated decisions, and unquestioned systems of ideology and government. This sifting and mulling over of ideas, bringing them under the blue flame of analysis, and considering multiple possibilities for understanding are hallmarks of an Emersonian perspective on reading for engaged democratic citizenship.

For reading to be productive of democracy, McMillin (2000) claimed that we need to teach young people how to think for themselves creatively and responsively and how to do this collaboratively and in an atmosphere of give and take that Emerson (1983) lauded as provocative rather than instructive:

*Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing.* (“The Divinity School Address,” p. 79)

According to McMillin, “Reading is not something we do all the time but something we could (and should) do more often, if we would learn to see differently” (p. 127). And learning to see differently, to see difference, is essential to the posture Emerson urged us all to cultivate as democratic citizens.

The next section links Emerson’s concept of creative reading as productive of healthy individuals with what is required to sustain a healthy democracy and counters claims that Emerson’s views are narrowly individualistic and elitist.

### Reading, Pluralism, and Mental Health

All philosophy, of East and West, has the same centripetence. Urged by an opposite necessity, the mind returns from the one to that which is not one, but other or many; from cause to effect; and affirms the necessary existence of variety, the self-existence of both, as each is involved in the other. (Emerson, 1983, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” p. 638)

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James (1909/1997) argued that humans necessarily live amidst diversity of knowledge, understanding, and thinking, that nothing can be all-inclusive in how the world can be known:

*Things are “with” one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word “and” trails long after every sentence. Something always escapes. “Ever not quite” has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness.* (p. 132)

James’s line of thinking about a pluralistic universe is a well-stated echo of Emerson’s (1983) idea about the interconnectedness of ideas and that “all philosophy . . . affirms the necessary existence of variety” (“Plato; or, The Philosopher,” p. 638). In thinking pluralistically, relations are those constituted moments of specific experiences that lead to one route for how things may happen, not how they must happen in every instance. As James (1909/1997) said, “Each relation is one aspect” (p. 132), one possible outcome, one modicum of knowing in a dense vegetation, root works, and veins of understanding a particular concept. In

Emerson’s (1983) words, “A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world” (“History,” p. 254). Employing pluralism as a means of understanding reading, then, means using reading as a means of questioning codified ways of knowing and absolutes. It welcomes an exploratory process that extends the olive branch of knowing the world differently and of questioning long-ago accepted notions of how things are and begs the question: How else can they be? For Emerson, to deny the pluralistic nature of the universe amounts to a disease of the mind, a state of ill health that harms the individual and, by extension, society at large.

As noted by Wider (2000), who has studied the critical reception of Emerson from the nineteenth century to the present day, many of Emerson’s readers over the years have failed to recognize the experiential dimension implied by his essays, which consistently invite movement and openness to ideas rather than offering logical arguments leading to firm conclusions. Thus, Emerson’s characteristically unsystematic thinking has often been perceived as weakness rather than as strength. Like the German philosopher Nietzsche, whose debt to Emerson is well documented (e.g., Friedl, 1997; Kaufmann, 1974; Lopez, 1997), Emerson believed a stagnant mind is a sick mind and the antidote to that sickness is to awaken to the transient, constantly evolving quality of nature and of society. “Everything good in nature and the world,” Emerson (1983) wrote, “is in that moment of transition, when the swarthy juices still flow plentifully from nature, but their astringency or acidity is got out by ethics and humanity” (“Power,” p. 980). Such sentiments appear throughout his essays, standing guard against the false notion that Emerson “licensed an intellectual free-for-all in which one idea was as good as another” (Wider, 2000, p. 88). Emerson understood that there is an ethical dimension to reading that is reflected in his many calls for readers to pay close attention to the way books can inspire a flow of thought that varies from reader to reader. This flow should never be perceived as random but rather as generative, a process recursively focused on imagining a possible rather than a fixed universe of discourse. “Health is good,—power, life, that resists disease, poison, and all enemies, and is conservative, as well as creative” (Emerson, 1983, “Power,” p. 974). Furthermore:

*Theologians think it a pretty air-castle to talk of the spiritual meaning of a ship or a cloud, of a city or a contract, but they prefer to come again to the solid ground of historical evidence; and even the poets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience. But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact.* (1983, “The Poet,” p. 447)

Someone who believes in the coexistence of possible worlds should never be construed as endorsing a view that anything goes. Clearly, Emerson would call that another form of mental disease but one he astutely recognized as much less worrisome than the opposite threat of closed-mindedness.

Wider (2000) noticed a virulent strain running throughout arguments made over time by Emerson's many critics:

*Those who thought themselves as cultural guardians were always wary of Emerson's meaning. What did self-reliance really advocate? Did its liberty mean license and would its practice ensure a moral community or an anarchic chaos? (p. 86)*

This sentiment is connected with the false idea that Emerson's emphasis on the individual in society amounted to an argument for unbridled individualism. The fact that Emerson did not fear anarchy but its opposite, a thoughtless conformity, belies the concerns of those who repudiated his celebration of self-reliance. Groupthink, which in its way constitutes a more subtle and dangerous form of anarchy, was Emerson's constant target. He admonished people to learn how to think for themselves not so as to live in isolation from one another but to contribute to the betterment of all through sustaining a vibrant spirit of community.

Our argument is that Emerson viewed reading as a key element in fulfilling his vision of a healthy society comprised of people who are capable of self-reliance without falling into a dangerous individualism. Reading is by nature a social, communal experience. Despite the illusion that it is a solitary experience, reading requires a melding of minds if only because it presumes a common language and context of understanding. Emerson went further by claiming that a disciplined practice of reading opens one's mind to voices other than one's own, possibilities other than one can presently imagine. With this idea in mind, it is easy to conceive why he would have found value in contexts where collaborative reading thrives as a microcosm of democracy at the level of society. Such reading cuts both ways, in that it fosters recognition of the plurality of possible voices resonating throughout Emerson's democratic concept of the individual self while at the same time nurtures respect for others who similarly attend to possibilities within themselves.

We conclude our paper with a discussion of pedagogical implications to our consideration of Emerson as a theorist of reading. What ought to happen in classrooms where we invite students to participate in creative, collaborative reading events? And how might such practices be connected with a truly authentic respect for the high ideals supposedly embodied in Common Core State Standards?

### **Pedagogical Implications of Reading for Engaged Democratic Citizenship**

*Every man brings into society some partial thought and local culture. We need range and alternation of topics and variety of minds. (Emerson, 1870, "Clubs," p. 199)*

What Emerson (1983) called "creative reading" in "The American Scholar" differs sharply from the programmatic reading endorsed by the Common Core State Standards of the twenty-first century (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). Even when Emerson acknowledged the "laborious reading" (p. TK) required of history

and science, he claimed reading as a drilling practice is counterproductive to creative, exploratory forms of reading that welcome empowering and multiple reading experiences. Emerson wrote that educational institutions "serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create [and to] set the hearts of their youth on flame" (p. 59). We contend that creative reading should be nurtured and taught in schools, as envisioned, for example, by Wilhelm (2008), author of "You Gotta BE the Book": *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. Wilhelm claimed that reading creatively marks a crucial instantiation of reading democratically in its valuation of student transactions with texts as the students make sense of the words and the world around them. Unfortunately, much of the reading condoned in schools narrowly focuses on learning the elements of literature, and terms such as *creativity* and *democracy* are noticeably absent from the reading standards in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). In fact, reading as taught in schools can appear more like a process of anesthetizing students to experience than one aimed at engendering creative transactions with texts, fellow students, and the world. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, in many respects twenty-first century schools resemble nineteenth-century schools (Cuban, 1993), making Emerson's call for needed reforms more timely than it might appear at first glance—reforms that would be required if reading is ever to be valued as a form of engaging students democratically.

In the posthumously published essay "Education," Emerson (1884) levied a severe critique on the state of education in the nineteenth century. He referred to education as "a system of despair" (p. 135) and wrote that the maintenance of a school driven by strict obedience to endless skilling and drilling could be handled by "an automaton, a machine" (pp. 150–51), suggesting that leadership and teaching had become mindless and perfunctory in an educational system dominated by repetition and routine. Such a system sapped the life force and energy out of the learning process at "a frightful cost" (p. TK) to future generations of American citizens. Contra to a school system that relied upon rote learning and recitation, Emerson, like Freire in the twentieth century (1970/2000), refused to see students as empty vessels awaiting the supplicating knowledge of their elders through rote work. Rather, he saw students as intelligent, emerging scholars who should be liberated from the mandibles of routinized schooling and who were entitled to challenge their teachers' wholesale monopoly on knowledge. As Emerson (1884) quipped:

*[Students] know truth from counterfeit as quick as the chemist does. They detect weakness in your eye and behavior a week before you open your mouth, and have given you the benefit of their opinion quick as a wink. They make no mistakes, have no pedantry, but entire belief on experience. ("Education," p. 138)*

Emersonian reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship, we argue, predicates itself on such an understanding of pupils and welcomes the to and fro of challenging texts, facts, and histories across students and teachers. We contend that an educational system founded upon the shared enterprise of learning

marks one element in the use of reading in a reformed—and always reforming—society.

Emerson conceived of reading as rife with potential for engaging the world in order to change it, and he claimed that the power of books lay in the ability of the current generation to rethink that which was previously understood by past generations as a means of reforming the world. As Bickman (2003) noted in his analysis of the essay “The American Scholar,” Emerson’s idea of Man Thinking and his concept of reading presented a new paradigm to his readers that Bickman characterized as *constructive* and *transactive*. Bickman continued, “The mind is not passively shaped by reading or the outside world but actively creates knowledge in an interactive process in which the world is not only observed by also shaped” (p. 12). Emerson (1983) addressed the necessary forms of reading that readers, as agents of change, must undertake: “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (“The American Scholar,” p. 57). Reading as a form of engaged democratic citizenship situates itself upon the understanding that the world exists in constant flux and, consequently, the knowledge of that world must also exist in flux. When we teach reading from this perspective, reading opens opportunity, invites critique, revisits outmoded ways of knowing, and incites readers to join in a meaning-making process that speaks to present contingencies and the needs of the times. An engaged democratic citizen is a reformer, and, as Emerson (1983) asked:

*What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life? (“Man the Reformer,” p. 146)*

Consistent with Bickman’s emphasis on the Emersonian concept of Man Thinking, Wilhelm (2008) argued that democratic engagements with reading must go beyond the passive consumption of literature. In particular, Wilhelm’s work implicitly challenges the Common Core State Standards’ (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011) overreliance on a narrow set of interpretive tools used to analyze what the standards repeatedly refer to as “author’s purpose.” Wilhelm embraced an idea that Emerson the educator would certainly celebrate: students thinking for themselves. To illustrate how his students “created, experienced, and responded to literary worlds” (p. 67), Wilhelm (2008) described literary reading using 10 dimensions embracing various possible approaches one might use to connect with a literary text. Each was predicated on the idea of readers as thinkers. Across these 10 dimensions, readers make explicit, concrete connections to literary characters in light of their own background of experience, which in turn is enriched by encounters with situations that are unfamiliar and require interpretation. Students learn not only to enter and visualize story worlds but to pose their own questions concerning those worlds and to evaluate characters’ motives in a creative

manner that significantly expands the literary terrain as presented by the text. Most important, students are not confined to analyzing an author’s purpose—as prescribed by the Common Core State Standards—as if books exist as stable, unchanging containers of meaning. Rather, Wilhelm encouraged young readers to consider their own purposes for reading—that is, how books might speak to them and thus potentially widen the sphere of their understanding and concerns. During this process, students pay close attention to an author’s words through generating critical questions about how the author frames characters and events, depicts ways of being in the world, and represents, doesn’t represent, or misrepresents the students’ own personal identities. Wilhelm’s ten dimensions to reader response, we argue, promote reading as engaged democratic citizenship in that they consistently eschew formulaic responses to literature in favor of active, creative, curious engagement. As Emerson (1983) proclaimed, “One must be an inventor to read well” (“The American Scholar,” p. 59), and that inventiveness involves students thinking about, connecting with, and evaluating what they read as a means toward seeing themselves as shared participants and collective reformers in a living democracy.

Contrary to Winters’s (1937/1987) claim that Emerson advocated for a universe populated by unthinking yet “amiable” and “perfectly unconscious imbeciles” (p. 164) with an overemphasis on aimless individualism, Emerson not only valued the role of society in shaping a healthy individual, he stated that any absolute adherence to individualism is septic to a healthy society and thus reform. Emerson wrote (1884), “Society he must have or he is poor indeed” (“Education,” p. 139). A democracy’s continued progress is contingent upon healthy individuals who actively participate in the constant reformation of America. Similar to Emerson, Dewey (1920/1982) argued that individuals need to conceive of a shared happiness and that healthy living is achieved by acknowledging one’s interrelatedness to society:

*Healthy living is not something to be attained by itself apart from other ways of living. A man needs to be healthy in his life, not apart from it, and what does life mean except the aggregate of his pursuits and activities?” (p. 175)*

Newer modes of thinking, such as seeing the individual as intimately tethered to society, are crucial aspects to reading democratically and pragmatically. Reading democratically means acknowledging that readers are situated in a climate and are surrounded by a political landscape in which they have the responsibility to participate. Moreover, the health of a society also affects the health of individuals, and reading democratically also means understanding the reciprocal roles of self and society in order to move forward with reform. In fact, Emerson hoped that one day education would become more important than the politics that keep education in an impasse of restraint and failed reform. Emerson (1983) boldly declared:

*Let us make our education brave and preventative. Politics is an after-work, a poor patch. We are always a little late. The evil is done, the law is passed, and we begin the uphill agitation for repeal of that of*

which we ought to have prevented from enacting. We shall one day learn to supersede politics by education. ("Culture," p. 1020)

Reading democratically speaks to Emerson's aspirations for an educational system situated around bravery and prevention. When we read bravely and teach students to read bravely, Emerson (1884) wrote in the essay "The Sovereignty of Ethics," "We are learning not to fear truth" (p. 204) but to challenge it, to prevent the circulation of unchecked knowledge, and to serve as agents for change and progress. Hence, engaged democratic citizenship isn't merely the practice of casting ballots for a political candidate; it is the engaged act of reading the textual landscape of America as a country founded upon multiple perspectives, healthy questioning, and perpetual reform. Put otherwise, "Every man brings into society some partial thought and local culture. We need range and alternation of topics and variety of minds" (Emerson, "Clubs," 1870, p. 199).

Echoing Emerson's ideas on what it means to live in a democracy, Dewey (1888/1997) firmly adhered to the idea that democracy cannot be conceived only in terms of how a government operates. He argued that this distancing perspective eschews and obfuscates the idea that a democracy must be lived, that it must be a way of life. Concomitant with this idea is Dewey's (1920/1982) urging that a reconstruction in philosophy must take place in order for America to progress as a society, and he lamented the then (and it is still current) status quo of many Americans who choose to treat their participation in society as nothing more than a spectator's sport. However, as Emerson (1983) put it, "A man should know himself for a necessary actor" ("The Method of Nature," p. 123). The idea of the necessary actor anticipates James's (1907/1997) and Dewey's (1888/1997) arguments that multiple perspectives have merit and must be articulated in a democratic society, and readers must envision themselves as necessary actors in the process of reading transactions.

Similarly, in the twenty-first century, Wilhelm (2008) argued that in democratic classrooms students need to see themselves as necessary and important actors during reading transactions in order to question, critique, and challenge their own reading responses alongside the reading responses of their peers. Misson and Morgan (2003) would agree. Their book, *Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic: Transforming the English Classroom*, closed the gap between critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation by showing that far from being mutually exclusive, these two modes of reading can and indeed should embrace complementary practices aimed at fostering rich experiences with literature. Similar to Wilhelm's, their approach called for teachers to stage "direct encounters with texts" (p. 179) that support agency among students who are encouraged to think for themselves and to listen to each other by interrogating their lived-through experiences with texts. Misson and Morgan believe the goal of critical thinking is not to coerce students into conformity with predetermined outcomes or "correct" answers but the opposite. They suggested a range of classroom practices designed to support students making something from their encounters with literary and other kinds of texts while all the time cultivating respect for multiple points of view

and allowing for the emergence of individual and collaborative ways of thinking and doing that connect art and life. We believe that classroom experiences modeled from these premises are necessary if teachers seriously hope to engender "the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews" called for by the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). The practice of forcing young readers to memorize information in isolation from any meaningful context, produce formulaic writing assignments, and respond to textbook questions that drive a wedge between them and what they are actually experiencing as readers is all too common in this era of mandated accountability fueled by the testing industry. Teaching reading so as to position young people as obedient consumers rather than as engaged, critical makers of meaning is inconsistent with the goal of promoting democracy, the health of which depends on citizens educated to simultaneously read the word and the world. It seems clear to us that America is ripe for a new round of reform.

Emerson (1983) placed the responsibility of reforming American society squarely on America by asking his readers to rethink the United States as a text, and an unstable one at that—as something worthy of improving: "Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres" ("The Poet," p. 465). As with much of Emerson's meticulous wordsmithing (Richardson, 1995), this passage leaves us with little doubt that Emerson specifically elected to use the word *poem* because of its etymological lineage to acts of making and remaking. Reading America as a text, on one level, may be as simple as embracing the belief that all individuals have equal access to resources to achieve their own version of the American dream. On another level, America can be read as Emerson chose to read it, which is as a text sadly committed to a capitalistic ideology that precludes many of its citizens from actively engaging in the democratic process. The second reading speaks to Emerson's (1983) idea of "this new yet unapproachable America" ("Experience," p. 485). It expresses the challenges America faces if it is to achieve its promise of a fair and just society for all its members. To read America—and Emerson—with the idea that America falls short of the democratic ideals upon which it was founded, we see that America needs a vast overhaul of bold thinking and leadership if the grandeur of this country's potential is to be realized. Reading America differently means realigning one's focus toward reforming society; reading America democratically carves a space for new ways of thinking that are beneficial and holds society responsible and accountable to the individuals who constitute it and, by extension, asks individuals to live and act responsibly as members of a shared society.

## Notes

1. Note on sources: The authors consulted works spanning Emerson's entire publishing career. *Essays and Lectures*, published by the Library of America in 1983, contains Emerson's first published work, "Nature" (1836), and includes all books of essays

through *The Conduct of Life* (1860). The title of each quoted essay is included in the citations for reference purposes.

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