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The Design of the Reader in Educational Settings

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In Norway a new curricular reform was implemented in 2006; a reform characterized by inclusiveness (all school levels up to university level) and a particular focus on five cross-disciplinary basic skills. The skills in question are: reading, writing, numeracy, oral skills and the use of digital media. The reform entails that teachers in all school subjects need an awareness of these skills when teaching their specific curriculum subject. A teacher in mathematics, for example, needs to ensure that the pupils are able to read the mathematical text and write according to the textbook's goals.

INTRODUCTION

At Vestfold University College, Norway the project “Lesing av fagtekster som grunnleggende ferdighet i fagene” (The Reading of Expository Texts as a Basic Skill in Curricular Subjects) is conducted from 2006–2009. The project deals with four curricular subjects: religion, mother tongue, mathematics and science. In this article we will give examples from observations and interviews carried out in a 5th grade class during mother tongue tuition,

The observations were carried out whilst the 5th grade class was occupied with reading the text “Philosophers”. In the text “Philosophers” from the textbook *Ord for alt 5* (Eide et al., 2006) (Words for everything 5), used in the teaching of Norwegian as mother tongue, the principles of the new Norwegian curriculum are implemented and integrated. The curriculum focuses on the pupil’s reading of different modalities (meaning illustrations in the shape of paintings, drawings or verbal text), but what is really new in the curriculum is an increased awareness of reading as a basic skill. This new awareness of reading as a skill to be developed is reflected in the heading of one of the chapters in “Philosophers”: “Read and learn!”. Reading in the new curriculum is not just about decoding a text, but is also about developing vital reading strategies such as gathering information and interpretation. Finally, and most importantly, the curriculum stipulates that the pupil should be able to carry out the basic exercise of collecting information from the text, but that he or she is also to develop his or her abilities of interpretation and reflection until he or she becomes a competent and critical reader. “Philosophers” contains the following elements: illustrations, captions, a verbal text, exercises, a simple drawing and a fact box. The changes in the Norwegian curriculum are reflected in the *meta-level* of the text, in which pupils are encouraged to reflect more broadly on the major existential questions posed by the philosophers they are studying.

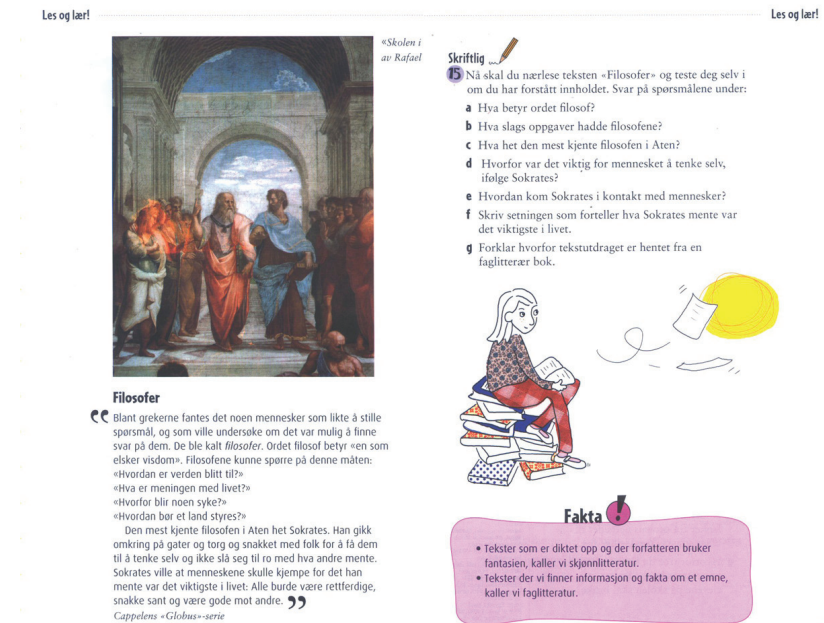


Figure 1. The text “Philosophers” from the textbook *Ord for alt 5* (Eide et al., 2006).

In the text “Philosophers”, an excellent demonstration of the curriculum guidelines can be found. We find it in key words such as “reflection,” “interpretation” and “questioning”, all of which are strongly emphasised in the curriculum. The text urges the pupil to think about existential questions such as “How is the earth created?” and “How should a community be governed?” The exercises encourage interpretation by asking the pupil to explain why the text can be classified as non-fiction. These exercises also fulfil the curriculum’s emphasis on the development of pupils’ critical reading competence.

The text shows that reading requires skills, strategies and competence. Literacy as a skill is connected to a close reading of the text. Literacy as strategy is connected to interpretation. Literacy as competence is connected to the combination of skills and strategies with an awareness of potential reader positions.

Our introduction focuses on the significance of reading. Reading is not only a matter of decoding a text, but is also about gaining a deeper understanding of the text. In the second part of this article we will introduce definitions of *reading skills, strategies and competence*. The third and fourth parts present the theoretical obligations to develop concepts of three *reader positions* (inspired by Iser and Gestalt-theory) and a theory of an ‘extra-text’ (inspired by Fish, 1980 & Eco, 1979). The fifth part deals with the resistant reader and cultural practices (inspired by Corcoran, 1994).

READING SKILLS, STRATEGIES AND COMPETENCE

Reading skills are required for a first reading, which can be done using various methods. In this context reading skills are understood as close reading, skim reading and finding key words. These skills are functional tools. However, the skills can also be connected to reading strategies. In the 2000 PISA-study, *reading strategies* are divided into three categories: gathering information, interpretation and drawing conclusions, and the pupil's final reflection on the text she has read (Lie et al., 2001, p. 42). Anne-Beathe Mortensen-Buan has surveyed the pupil's strategies *before* reading, *during* reading and *after* reading (Mortensen-Buan, 2006). Strategies used before reading are linked to the goal of the reading and the activation of previous knowledge. During the reading the pupil can make notes, stop to review his or her understanding of the text and formulate questions. Strategies used after reading may include writing a short summary of the text, doing exercises, and discussing the attitudes and values expressed in the text.

Reading competence is a broader concept. This competence requires the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, and to read with knowledge of the conventions of genres and multimodal texts (verbal and non-verbal, written texts, pictures and sounds). Furthermore, reading competence implies a *cultural competence* which enables the pupil to decipher the meaning inherent in the educational text. This is stated in the new curricular reform in Norway for mother tongue tuition. Competence implies both skills and strategies. Furthermore, competence includes knowledge and discernment about how elements are connected. The word competence has a broader meaning than the word qualification in the sense that qualifications can be measured, while competence is a more abstract concept.

In the Nordic countries, reader-response theories have inspired several studies of reading competence. In particular, the theories of Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco and Stanley Fish have been used to develop new concepts for analyzing textbooks and their practical use. Iser's concept of interaction has proved particularly useful (Iser, 1974; 1978). He has inspired the study of readers' responses to literary texts as interactions between texts and readers, and also the study of educational texts (Tønnessen & Maagerø, 1999; Bäckman, 2002). Eco's study of fictional texts and his theoretical reflections on the reading processes and the open and closed text have been adapted to a number of textual genres (Eco, 1979). His concept of the *model-reader* has been used to demonstrate the interaction between the text and the reader in a variety of textual and visual genres, and has also been used in analyses of educational texts (Aamotsbakken, 2005; Tønnesson, 2004; 2008; Knudsen, 2006). More radical theories of reader positions have been influenced by Fish, who claimed that a text is unstable, and that there are as many meanings in a text as there are readers (Fish, 1980; Hetmar, 1996; Nussbaum, 1977; Aamotsbakken, 2006). Fish's concept of "interpretative communities" has been useful with to the awareness of the ways individual readings contribute

to a communal interpretation of a text. This development from the individual to the collective response has been the focus of culturally oriented response theories. Bill Corcoran has argued for a practice that is not only reflective on behalf of the text and the reader, but which also implies a reflective critique of cultural contexts (Corcoran, 1994).¹

THREE READER POSITIONS

Wolfgang Iser studies the process of reading by stressing the interaction between the text and the reader: "The 'consistent interpretation' or gestalt is a product of the interaction between text and reader, and so it cannot be exclusively traced back either to the written text or to the disposition of the reader." (Iser, 1978, p.119). Susanne V. Knudsen elaborates on Iser's theory of the interaction between the text and the reader by studying the concept of projection (Knudsen, 1994; 2008). In the projection the reader draws on his or her experience of the reading of the text. However, the reader cannot interpret the text in whatever way she likes, because the text itself limits the reading. Some texts are open for several readings (i.e. the texts have gaps, open endings) whereas other texts are closed texts telling the readers what and how to read, thus ensuring that the intended message is communicated. The most obvious example of closed texts are textbooks, which provide information using one-way communication.²

Knudsen (2008) has introduced three reader positions by establishing an imaginative axis between the text and its potential readers. On both sides of the axis there is a projection; various positions are offered to the reader in the text, and the authentic reader can take place as one of the three readers. The *confirming reader* belongs to the text, whereas the authentic reader is both the confirming reader when he or she is in the reading process, and the *confirmed reader* having read the text. The *exploring reader* can be found both in the text and in the authentic reader meeting with this text. The *confronting reader* belongs to the text, whereas the confronted reader is the authentic reader meeting with this text. The axis of the text and its potential three readers can be illustrated by the following model:

Three reader positions

Text	Reader
confirming	confirming and confirmed
exploring	exploring
confronting	confronted

Which of the positions the authentic reader will enter into, depends on his or her potential as a reader, his or her knowledge, interest and competence. The confirming reader in "Philosophers" is mirrored in existential and philo-

sophical questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” and “Why do people become ill?” These questions are characterized by their universal validity. They are of significance to all individuals independent of cultural or religious background. The following examples are taken from a recent interview connected to a research project. The first is related to a confirmed reader. Lisa, a ten year old pupil in the 5th grade, studied the text and responded to the question “How was the earth created?” with: “Something crashed (clapping her hands). Stars were created and died. Our earth was born because of the Big Bang. After a few hundred years the earth was formed.”³ These utterances reveal that Lisa is a confirmed reader. She recognizes existential phenomena about life in general, and identifies herself with the contents of the questions in the body text. However, when she introduces the Big Bang into her reflections, she is also the exploring reader. Lisa incorporates a phenomenon from science by talking about the Big Bang. She also refers to her leisure time activity, namely watching the National Geographic Channel. Lisa thereby represents the *exploring reader*: the curious pupil thirsty for knowledge.

The sequence with the exercises contains the confirming reader by giving closed questions; i.e. questions that can be answered by quoting a sentence from the body text (the text can be viewed in the end of the article). However, the final task is oriented towards the exploring reader by challenging the pupil to explain why the excerpt in the body text is non-fiction. The pupil is encouraged to gather information and reflect upon previous knowledge. The painting can also be said to contain the exploring reader because it portrays previous knowledge about philosophy, Greek mythology and renaissance pictorial art. When it comes to the authentic reader, the painting challenges the reader. The exploring reader must be able to make inferences, and the following experience from another interview will demonstrate this. Petter, aged ten years and a 5th grade pupil, says that the painting represents “God and Jesus”. He continues: “Somebody is thrown out. The figure in the middle looks like a boss.” His classmate, Ivar, adds by saying: “I don’t think that the boss, the old greybeard, smiles very often.” After reading the text Ivar adds: “It is about philosophers. They like to pose questions. They ask questions about how the earth has been created, how things should be governed.” Petter interrupts by saying: “Those are stupid questions.” Ivar says: “They are clever questions.”

In the course of the conversation Petter has moved from the exploring to the confronted reader. The fact that he sees a picture of God and Jesus instead of Greek philosophers indicates that he acts as a *confronted reader*. Ivar pushes him in the direction of becoming even more confronted when he claims that the painting portrays philosophers. The text then breaks down for Petter, and he rejects the total content by stating that the questions are stupid. We could say that Petter has moved into the process of the confronting reader. The *confronting reader* is not an intrinsic part of the text. The authentic reader might get confused by the exploring reader in the text in ways that can open for a variety of readings, resistance against some readings and reflections upon

possibilities of reading. However, in the “Philosophers”, the text only includes the confirming reader and the exploring reader, not the confronting reader. The text presupposes the confirming reader, when it implies a reading based on experience, a reading which creates identification, and a reading with the text as a mirror. The exploring reader is in action when the pupils are challenged to gather information, select knowledge and reflect critically upon the questions. When Petter acts as a confronting reader he moves into a process which takes him beyond the text as the frame of what to read (Iser, 1978).

The three reader positions can overlap each other in a classroom with different authentic readers, i.e. the pupils have different backgrounds and experiences. Consequently, they may in the process meet the educational texts as confirming readers and confirmed readers after the reading in one context, and as exploring and confronted or *confronting readers* in other situations and contexts. Also, one pupil can read a textbook as a confirmed reader, whereas the same pupil will be the exploring reader meeting the web site accompanying the textbook. In a classroom some pupils may encounter a text as confirmed readers, whereas other pupils will meet the same text as confronted readers. Furthermore, some pupils may adjust other pupils’ readings; they can shift reader positions.

THE “EXTRA-TEXT”

The observations in the classroom have been made with a new concept in mind: the concept of the *extra-text* (Aamotsbakken, 2006). Aamotsbakken is influenced by Stanley Fish’s claim that the only interesting texts are the readers’ interpretations. Fish’s argument demonstrates how the pupils create a text different from the text they have been assigned (Fish, 1980). This kind of reading can be a subjective matter, but it can also be the result of a co-operation between pupils in “interpretative communities.” This extra-text tends to be multiple and diverse as there could be as many texts as the number of pupils in a group. Instead of the concept of interaction the concept of transaction can underscore the “ongoing process” between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1993, p.17; Aamotsbakken & Knudsen, 2009).

In the example of Petter and Ivar, who are reading “Philosophers,” it is evident that two extra-texts emerge from their readings. In the case of Petter, the extra-text demonstrates what he has learned in religious education in school. His class mate, Ivar, creates a very different extra-text because he is “closer” to the text and reads it with no references to biblical myths. We may postulate that Ivar is a “better” reader in the sense that he copes with the text’s intention. Petter uses his imagination and combines his reading with more tangential impressions. The two extra-texts turn out to be different, but this variation can be used as a resource in interpretive communities. Fish (1980) emphasises that his interest is in what interpretative communities do with the text, rather than what the text does with the reader. For Fish, the real reading is done by interpretative communities, because the individual

readers interpret the texts according to the conventions of the community.⁴

Eco’s concept of the model-reader has been a source of inspiration in the development of the model of the extra-text. The extra-text is created during the transition between the authentic reader’s situation, in which he or she confronts the text, and his or her attempt to “meet” the text. Here we see a distinction between the confronted reader and the confronting reader. The confronted reader is passive in the sense that he or she is dependent on the textual framework, whereas the confronting reader is the active creator of a text which differs from the original text. Petter is an example of the confronting reader because he interprets the picture as representing God and Jesus instead of the Greek philosophers. Nevertheless, Petter’s extra-text contributes to a meaningful discussion in the classroom.

In some cases the text can be too advanced for the reader. For instance, if a reader merely decodes a text with no further understanding, there will hardly be any extra-text. In this case the text will be abandoned, and the extra-text will be restricted to the point of being worthless. However, when the text shows itself worth while struggling with the opposite reaction is likely to be the result. The codes can then be shared by the readers, and their competence is sufficient for understanding references and hints in the text. In an educational setting, some texts may appear too complex and almost meaningless for some pupils, whilst other pupils will find that the same texts contain an exciting challenge to discover new knowledge. This is evident in the example of the two male pupils reading “Philosophers”.

Educational texts contain different kinds of model-readers. In some educational texts the model-reader is very inviting and addresses the pupil with an appropriate number of codes. Other parts of the text may be filled with too many unidentifiable references and hidden meanings, making the pupil give up reading. The *confirming*, the *exploring* and the *confronting* readers are representations of model-readers in educational texts, whereas Fish (1980) is the spokesman of the realisation of the reading by the authentic readers. Fish’s model shows different readings converging in one strong, communal reading (Knudsen, 1994; Aamotsbakken and Knudsen, 2009), which is illustrated by the following model:

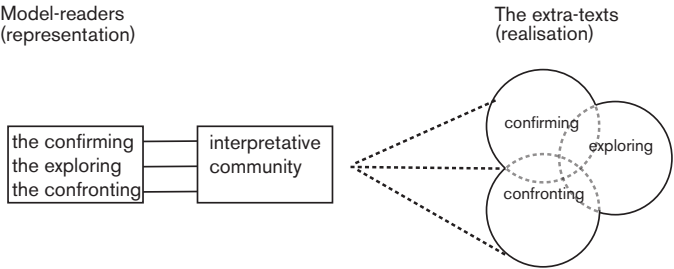


Figure 2. Model-readers & extra-texts.

The model demonstrates the connections between the model-readers inherent in a text and the activities taking place in interpretative communities. These activities can be regarded as extra-texts created by the members of the communities. A significant point in this context is the emphasis on the extra-textual component as something collective and very rarely individual. The extra-text is a dynamic phenomenon due to the fact that it can change many times during the common reading in an interpretive community. The three circles indicate how these ongoing changes are resources in the creating of reading competence.

FROM THE CONFRONTED READER AND EXTRA-TEXT TO THE RESISTANT/CONFRONTING READER

The concepts referred to above as the three reader positions and the extra-text are all influenced by theories developed by Iser (1974; 1978), Eco (1979) and Fish (1980). These theoretical reflections belong to what Bill Corcoran refers to as “the first wave of reader-response practice” (Corcoran, 1994, p.18). Corcoran criticises the reader-response-practice that is focused on the interaction between the text and the reader. He wants to extrapolate this practice by including the cultural context, or as Corcoran calls it: political and ideological discourses. The cultural codes can be found in Petter’s reading of the painting. Reading a painting as a biblical expression is related to an experience made by the pupil in the subject of religion. Cultural codes referring to the Bible are so frequently found in Western culture that they are easily transferred to the reading of ancient paintings in general.

In an educational context the authentic readers are a complex group with varying interests, abilities and motivation. Consequently, educational texts struggle to adjust the reader positions and their relation to the group of authentic readers. The number of extra-texts produced by a given text is unpredictable. Corcoran (1994) argues for a response linked to culturally oriented practices. In his view, both readers and texts are deeply influenced by cultural practices. He therefore proposes to contextualize all readings and to question the pupil’s opinion more often. Instead of concentrating on textual qualities, he wants to find out what could provoke the pupils’ feelings, perceptions and associations by reading a certain text. His term “the resistant reader” is vital to this argument and is commented on in this way:

“What is at issue for the resistant reader is an attempt to recognize, challenge and change predetermined roles or subjectivities. What readers need is some assistance in understanding how the elements of an already constructed perspective, of gender, family, or class background, age difference, or historical placement are helpful in a particular reading, and those that hinder a particular reading.” (Corcoran, 1994, p.16).

Corcoran’s ideas of culturally oriented practices and resistant cultural re-

sponses can be compared with the confronting reader and the extra-text. Corcoran is, as mentioned, more interested in the provocations hidden in textual patterns than the cultural impact they might have on the textual structure. In this way the concept of intertextuality could create a constructive debate and critical reflections on how texts play with existing texts, and how they are constructed among pupils. In the case of the two pupils Petter and Ivar, the concept of intertextuality creates discrepancies between their interpretations. When Petter says that the painting represents God and Jesus, Ivar responds by telling him that the characters in the painting might be Greeks, although they are normally dressed in white. Ivar gets second thoughts when he says: "But these [clothes] are colourful."

These two readings reveal that Petter is dependant on the intertextual pattern of the Bible as he ends his interpretation very quickly. Ivar on the other hand reads the painting in coherence with the text and thereby makes a more adequate interpretation of the connection between the painting and the text. Both pupils rely on intertextual representations, but in the one case the pupil's interpretation turns out to be connected to traditional religious conventions which are not actually relevant to the text. Therefore an extra-text is constituted by their dialogue. The boys confront each other and enter the position of the resistant reader. It begins when Petter claims that the painting represents God and Jesus, and Ivar confronts him with the resemblance of the persons in the painting to Greek statues. They then start talking about whether the questions are stupid or clever, but consensus is not reached.

The concept of intersectionality can be connected to questions of age, gender, race, family background and class. In this context Corcoran speaks of "*Multiple reading positions*" (ibid., p. 8). In the text "Philosophers," the painting potentially contains the confirming and the exploring reader if the reader is familiar with ancient Greek culture. However, a reader with another cultural background may answer differently: Mohammed, a pupil in the same class as Petter and Ivar states that the painting "is about prophets because they are old." In our interpretation Mohammed stresses the aspects of age and dignity which are important in the Koran. Later on in the interview he says: "I did not understand what the text was about." Mohammed is a different kind of resistant reader than Petter. Mohammed does not understand the text in the first reading. He reads the headline with the word 'philosophers', and at this point his reading is interrupted because he doesn't understand the meaning of the word. In other words he reads the headline prior to the reading of the text. Mohammed prefers to read single words instead of full sentences, and this creates an obstacle in his reading process. He simply stops as soon as he comes across one single word he doesn't understand, and refuses to understand the total text. One can ask whether the fact that the resistant reader in this context are all boys has any influence. Another aspect to be considered is the fact that Mohammed is a multicultural pupil who uses reading strategies differently from his class mates.

Lisa represents a more 'sympathetic reader' than Petter, Ivar and Mohammed.⁵ She reaches the potential of both the confirming and the exploring reader. She reads the painting concomitantly with the body text and the exercises as the whole 'text wants her to read it'. She says: "We got some facts about the philosophers. I have heard about Socrates before ... The painting reminds me of the Greeks, the way they act in the painting. I have seen it on National Geographic."

The concept of intersectionality has proved useful when analyzing marginal positions represented in textbooks (Knudsen, 2006). In expository texts, minority groups are often presented from the point of view of the majority. Intersectionality can also be useful in analyses of reader positions in the majority culture. The reading of the marginal positions illustrates how ethnicity and gender are presented as a minority group with its own rules closely linked to religion. In the textbook, the categories of ethnicity and gender are represented through filters with pupils brought up in a Western culture as the model readers.

Corcoran (1994) divides resistant responses into an "active/personal response" and a "resistant/ cultural response". When it comes to intersectionality, he points towards feelings and associations. From a personal point of view the question which arises during the reading is "What feelings did the text arouse in you?", whereas the cultural response is "What aspects of your age, sex, race, or family background would help to explain why you reacted that way?" (ibid., p.16). Both questions are oriented towards feelings, and it is the confirming reader in the text and the authentic confirmed reader of the text who are active. The exploring reader is used, asking from the personal point of view: "What memories or attitudes did the text bring to mind?", and from the cultural response: "What aspects of your gender, race or class make these memories or attitudes difficult for you?" (ibid., p. 17). Other responses concern the intertextual level and function through association. They are the responses of the exploring reader, who asks from the personal point of view: "Does this text call to mind any other works you have read recently or earlier? What particular references or textual features connect the works", and from the cultural point of view "What intertextual patterns (and therefore beliefs and ideologies) do you find problematic in this range of texts?" (ibid.). Furthermore, the confronting reader is activated when Corcoran proposes that the pupils' responses are to be used as a cultural response: "Which of the other readings of your group or class provides the biggest challenges to your reading? Why?" (ibid.). The extra-text can then be the challenge in an interpretative community.

In Corcoran's concept of multiple reading positions there is a potential for every pupil to take part in the reading of the text. However, the didactic practices in educational cultures often have as their goal to reach a consensus of what the text represents. Teachers are trained to create a basic interpretative frame acceptable for most pupils in a group. Consequently, the variation of extra-texts is not always regarded as a fascinating expression of creativity. On the contrary, the textbooks with their exercises and their practical use in the classroom encourage simple solutions which express consensus. By sticking

to consensus oriented readings and failing to understand the resources hidden in pupils, the interpretative communities are neglected. The resources of intertextuality and intersectionality are made invisible and remain an untapped resource for the teacher. Teachers aware of multiple reading positions (understood in concordance with theories of the three reader positions and the extra-text) can, together with their pupils, open for greater diversity in the classroom.

• • •

The text in figure 1 (translated).

Philosophers

“Among the Greeks some individuals liked to pose questions and find answers. They were called the philosophers. The word “philosopher “ means “somebody who loves wisdom”. The philosophers would ask questions like: “How is the earth created?” “What is the meaning of life?” “Why do people become ill?” “How should a country be governed?” The most well-known philosopher in Athens was Socrates. He walked the streets and the squares and talked with people. He wanted to make people think for themselves and not accept what other people believed. Socrates wanted people to fight for what they thought was the most important thing in life. Everybody should be fair, stick to the truth and behave kindly to each other.”

Writings

You are going to do a close reading of “Philosophers” and test yourself to see if you understand the content. Please answer the following questions:
a What does the word philosopher mean?
b What kind of tasks did the philosophers have?
c What is the name of the most well-known philosopher in Athens?
d Why did Socrates think that it was important for human beings to think for themselves?
e How did Socrates make contact with people?
f Write a sentence describing what Socrates regarded as the most important issue in life.
g Explain why the excerpt can be classified as non-fiction.

¹ Bill Corcoran uses the expression “political and ideological discourses”; a concept we wish to avoid using. The reason is that this concept has reminiscences of the 1970s’ ideology critique.
² When it comes to a precision of the categories “open text” and “closed text” these are developed by Eco and defined in The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the semiotics of texts (Eco, 1979).
³ Our translation here and in the following of the interviews.
⁴ Today there is an increasing awareness of the importance of reading as a cooperative activity. This is seen in the many neologisms with the prefix ‘sam-’ in the Danish and Norwegian languages, for instance ‘samlesning’ (joint reading). In English language the prefix co- functions in the same way, i.e. co-reading, co-operation. The

focus is on the historic and cultural meaning of interpretative communities rather than the individual reader.
⁵ The concept of the ‘sympathetic reader’ is used by semiotic literature researchers in opposition to the ‘symp-
tomal reader’. The Norwegian professor of literature, Atle Kittang, has elaborated on these concepts.

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