

Nothing outside of the text in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

One of the longer-term effects of poststructuralism and its principles, in particular deconstruction, has been to direct fresh attention to reading as an ethical practice. A re-focus on the ethical responsibility of the reader is part of a large, historic process of moving beyond 'structuralism' – a name for the formerly-dominant paradigm of the academic disciplines, which embedded false ideas based on sexism, racism, and scientism in the heart of philosophical theory. We will consider how ethics applies to reading in our local milieu; a nation founded on a bilateral relationship between British settlers and iwi Māori, which was inscribed in 1840 in a national treaty, the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We read everything we see around us as part of a system of meanings determined by local histories and cultures. What does it mean to be 'read' as a Māori, a Pacific, or a Pākehā/White person in the local educational contexts of university and school, and what are the implications of different (cultural) forms of reading in a complex community?

Introduction

When Derrida says 'nothing outside of the text' he means that we humans—and, indeed, animals as well—are always reading our environment, reading the landscape, the people-scape, 'signs' that tell us of welcome or hostilities, or neutralities, either from friends and from foes, or from ecological environments. Some of us are better at reading different kinds of signs and systems of signs, or semiotics, than others. There is no way I can compete with my dog in reading the olfactory landscape – but then she cannot compete with me, in reading text and digital landscapes. We might call this activity 'primary' (or primal) reading: the dog smells meat and goes to eat it. But the dog smells its humans also, and makes itself as close as possible to them too. In this case, the smell, although primary, already has a referent: the person emitting that smell is a source of comfort, leadership, or food. The dog's sensory reading of its environment has already made a large step – from the point of reference, the person, to the elements associated with that person. It is already, for the dog, a system of translation.

In this sense we might legitimately regard 'reading' as a way of 'inquiring.' The 'survey' - the overlooking – or the surveillance of our landscapes, both physical and theoretical, is essential to our continued engagement with and existence in our own world, however small or extended that 'world' might be; a few metres of tasty lettuce garden, perhaps, for a slug, and an entire universe for Elon Musk. If we consider 'reading our world' to be a

form – perhaps the original form – of inquiry, then all subsequent forms of inquiry can be viewed as specialised, perhaps narrower forms of reading. Empirical research, therefore, is a way of ‘reading’ the world that delineates both a defined field, and a limited number of inquiring mechanisms.

In these examples, the concept of ‘reading a text’ is being applied broadly, to mean responding to systems of meaning received via sensory information from the social and natural context—viz, the impressive ability of a dog to read the subtle signs of their owner getting ready to take them for a walk. In its dominant meaning, ‘reading’ means reading literacy—reading in the everyday sense of reading a book, taking understanding from written language. Reading is also a key research metaphor in secondary or non-empirical approaches, as in close readings and critical readings of the literature or other textual sources.

As our title indicates, we are writing from a viewpoint located in Aotearoa New Zealand, a country name adopted to acknowledge the centrality of the Māori-Pākehā relationship in our national culture and identity. We live in a country founded on a bilateral relationship between British settlers and iwi Māori, which was inscribed in 1840 in a national treaty, the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The two language versions of this founding document represent the cultural binary that pumps through the heart of this country. Currently, there is a national debate over whether or not the name of the country should change from the colonial British-imposed ‘New Zealand’ to ‘Aotearoa’—the most famous Māori country name (Venuto, 2022). That such a debate is even going on is something about which we, as citizens, feel some pride. We see it as a sign that te Tiriti/the Treaty is still speaking (Tawhai & Gray-Sharp, 2011), still being read by the grandchildren of those who signed on both sides, Māori and Pākehā.

New Zealand is one of the safest and most socially liberal of ‘Western’ societies in the world today, and enjoys a longstanding international reputation for having ‘the best race relations in the world’ (Human Rights Commission, 2017). But that reputation supports a White complacency that hides ignorance, wherein certain anti-Māori myths hold national status as commonsense truth, thereby reinforcing an ongoing Pākehā sense of superiority in relation to Māori (Stewart, 2023). At least one of these myths—the invention that Māori killed and displaced a pre-existing Indigenous people—was promulgated to the general public through major schoolbooks, including *The Coming of the Māori to Ao-tea-roa* (A. W. Reed). This expedient Eurocentric myth has been taught as official truth to many generations of New Zealanders as small children, and is still widely believed, especially by the Pākehā population, despite accessible accounts of its falsity (Wikipedia, 2018). These circumstances, even today, affect the way in which Māori are ‘read’ by Pākehā, and the way Pākehā are ‘read’ by Māori: the inheritance of injustice is strongly perceived by one party, but to a very much lesser extent by the

other. Perhaps the saddest thing is the (not unjustified) expectation that Pākehā will be ignorant of their own past with regard to Māori.

Within this intercultural context, we are most interested in the subject of the next section—the debates about language and its relationship with knowledge and the world, and how a new paradigm of knowledge calls anew for an ethics of reading. The third section considers how these ongoing debates affect educational research, and the fourth section explores how reading supports social justice and upending monoculturalism in educational theory and research. The conclusion draws these threads together to reflect on the role of reading in educational research and scholarship.

Language, knowledge, and the ethics of reading

The conventional view of the relationship between language and the world is that ideal statements or propositions are those sentences that have a literal meaning, independent of context, which accurately corresponds with the facts. This idea seems to be talking about ‘a’ language rather than languages in general, in particular modern English, which developed to become the global language of science (Ammon, 2001). Relatedly, science was believed to accurately and universally capture the reality of the natural phenomena it describes. This overlap in underlying assumptions reflects the post-Enlightenment co-evolution of modern science knowledge and modern English language.

Derrida’s concept of deconstruction is described as ‘the pivot of the shift’ of the ground of the (Western) academy and the ‘nerve center’ of the widespread controversy caused by the impact of poststructuralism (Miller, 1987, p. 186), associated in particular with the work of Foucault. By challenging formerly-dominant, positivist understandings of how language works, and, therefore, how truth is established and maintained, poststructuralism and deconstruction have destabilized and upset Western assumptions across many fields, including history, philosophy, science and literary studies.

These seismic disturbances have flowed into associated fields, including education. Confrontations between the paradigms have been hostile, as demonstrated by the exchanges between John Searle and Jacques Derrida (Alfino, 1991), as two leading scholars representing each side. Their hostility turns on reading, with each author accusing the other of not properly reading or understanding their arguments. It is ‘unfortunate, though understandable, that the Anglo-American philosophical community finds recent French philosophy difficult to read. Failures of interpretation characterize both sides of the debate’ (Alfino, 1991, p. 152). Searle is a leading American interpreter of the works of influential British philosopher, J. L. Austin, especially his 1955 lectures, *How to do things with words* (Austin, 1975). Searle’s

readings accommodated Austin's ideas to the dominant paradigm, but Derrida later radically re-read Austin as seriously challenging dominant understandings of how language relates to knowledge and truth (Crary, 2002).

In other words, philosophy of language and science have undergone changes resulting from challenges to the positivist and structuralist frameworks that are significant enough to amount to a paradigm shift as defined by Thomas Kuhn (1970), yet one that is not yet fully accepted. This paradigm debate is an exemplar of 'reading' in its fullest sense. Each scholar 'reads' the work that has gone before (Fish, 1976). According to Alice Crary (2002), Austin rejected the conventional view of literal sentence-meaning, but Searle assimilated his critiques within the dominant paradigm. Derrida disagreed with Searle's interpretation of Austin, finding affinity between Austin's view of the language-world relationship and his own views. Derrida reads Austin as 'maintaining that there is no such thing as a statement that possesses the kind of universal authority that is distinctive of objective truth' (Crary, 2002, p. 74). But Crary points out the internal inconsistency of seeing a rejection of literal sentence-making as undermining the notion of objective truth. The world exists, but decontextualised language cannot accurately describe it. In other words, philosophy of language and science have undergone changes resulting from challenges to the positivist and structuralist frameworks that are significant enough to amount to a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970), which is not yet fully accepted.

In the histories of philosophy of both language and science, before about 1950, both were influenced by structuralist models of correspondence between language and the world. In 2023 we are witnessing the emergence of artificial intelligence, large language models, and machine learning, which are rapidly rewriting theory of language. Yet even trying to think of a model of language seems incongruous, since how can language analyse itself?

Acknowledging the large central concepts and questions onto which reading opens reinforces the understanding of reading as an ethical practice. Concomitant with new understandings of how language works, and the downstream destabilising effects on concepts of knowledge and truth, Miller (1987) heralded a 'new ethics of reading' (p. 190), in which the primary ethical obligation of the reader is to the text. 'The whole sequence of obligations begins with the act of reading and with the call or demand that the work makes on its reader' (Miller, 1987, p. 189). A text demands a response from the reader, which creates a form of responsibility or ethical obligation of the reader to the text, and through the text, to society and the world.

Miller surmised that the primary obligation of a new ethics of reading would be philological, based on a love and care for language, and the acceptance of a narrowed focus in teaching subject English to centre on teaching 'good reading' together with 'good writing' (p. 190). Thirdly, Miller foresaw a shift from monolingualism towards

multilingualism, and a concomitant questioning of the notion of translatability. 'Translation is now seen as a problem, a topic of fundamental importance to be studied, not a solution' (Miller, 1987, p. 191). This point is extremely relevant in our local context in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Māori and Pacific languages enjoy much greater public support than 'minority languages' in most other countries (May, 2012).

Miller stipulated that a new role for literary study, on which a new ethics of reading would depend, needed to be defined by 'serious and prolonged discussion involving young and old, conservatives and radicals' as well as theorists, teachers, historians, 'Marxists, feminists, and the rest' (Miller, 1987, p. 189) but his optimism that the time was right for such discussions being productive was probably misplaced, with global conditions becoming more polarized in the intervening years, and literary studies continuing a seemingly unstoppable decline, ironically with 'postmodernism' used as a favourite scapegoat (Coyne, 2020).

Reading as freedom from method

'Reading the world' is a flexible metaphor for responding to information from our environment, applied above to the instinctual and intelligent behaviour of humans, dogs and other animals. What we read, and how we read it, are key factors in building and maintaining our personal and collective self-identities and subjectivities (Devine, 2021). Here we are pointing to a type of immanent experimentation; an approach that requires an engagement with multiple contexts, yet does not revert to the proceduralism (or closure) invoked by conventional notions of 'method' in social science research.

'Reading the literature' is a meta-level usage in research that actually means *writing* about the literature, and involves research values and skills of diligence, reading literacy, writing ability, ability to select main points, ability to construct an argument, and so on. The bifurcated attitude towards literature reviews in the world of educational research makes a useful example. Educators tend to occupy one of two camps, either seeing a literature review as a piece of research in its own right, or not (Stewart, 2021). When a principal investigator delegates their project 'literature review' to a junior colleague they betray their allegiance to the second camp, which overlooks the ethical-political significance of reading, and hence of a literature review. To see a 'literature review' as a neutral, inert process and product falls prey to myths of empiricism, scientific method, and the bifurcation of the world of writing into 'science' and 'literature' that underpinned the emergence of the (Western) academic disciplines (Richardson, 1990).

Deconstruction is a critical principle of reading that is consistent with the insights of poststructuralism. Deconstruction is a synonym for what Miller calls 'good reading' by which he means 'noncanonical reading' (Miller, 1987, p. 189). Built into the idea of deconstruction or critical reading of extant literature is a claim of political significance,

which provides a natural affinity between deconstruction and Kaupapa Māori, as well as ‘post-qualitative inquiry’ (St. Pierre, 2018) and ‘writing as a method of inquiry’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). That much-quoted entity the ‘literature’ is theorised using the concept of the ‘archive’ and cognisant of the importance of scientific publishing in the history and maintenance of the disciplines (Devine, 2019; Stuart, 2019).

Miller notes that in proposing a radical reconstruction of the ethics of reading he does *not* mean the ‘freedom to make the work mean anything one likes, but just the reverse’ (Miller, 1987, pp. 189-190). Reading as deconstruction involves an ethical responsibility to attend to the words on the page, and their contextual implications. On this view, reading can never be ‘methodologized’ by turning reading into a procedure or part of a process that can be taught and implemented as a series of steps, almost as if without involving thinking. This spurious process is also bound up with positivism, outdated ideas about scientific method, and the purportedly ‘value-free’ nature of science, a claim that has been thoroughly debunked, but is still fiercely defended by scientists and conservative thinkers (Proctor, 1991).

Deconstruction cannot by definition be defined or delimited, since it is fundamentally a recognition of a mobility within language or from one language to another. Certainly it is not to be encompassed by identifying it as merely one mode of reading among others. (Miller, 1987, p. 186)

Reading as deconstruction is a radically qualitative approach to analysis, resistant to numerical thinking or quantitative methods of investigation. Today, paradoxically, the notion of scientific method, and a tendency to equate ‘research’ with collection of empirical data, is more influential in education and social science than in scientific research itself. Contemporary working science is thoroughly interdisciplinary and readily incorporates any data or method that advances its purpose.

To see empirical research according to scientific method as the only way of generating new knowledge is a strong form of empiricism, which succumbs to its own forms of blindness, particularly in the contemporary knowledge context of the postdigital age (Jandrić & Knox, 2022). It is widely agreed that increasing the amount of knowledge available to humanity necessarily also means increasing the amount of ignorance in the world (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). In this online world, data has usurped information, and in the process generated post-truth (Büscher, 2021).

Without a critical understanding of these philosophical disputes about the relationship between language, knowledge and the world—also called the ‘knowledge wars,’ the ‘science wars’ or the ‘paradigm wars’—an educational researcher can easily succumb to the weaknesses of qualitative research methodology, where, at worst, ‘busy work’ replaces diligent reading and thinking; small-scale empirical data is reported in

meaningless tables and graphs; and theory is either inadequately addressed, or altogether absent.

Reading and learning in society

When we reject decontextualised language and knowledge we are insisting on context – this can be extended to include cultural contexts, which leads directly to biculturalism and multiculturalism. The liberal society of Aotearoa New Zealand encourages cultural expression, including support for languages and social customs such as performing arts and education. A person of the dominant White culture will sometimes be present on a Māori or Pacific social occasion, when they may find themselves immersed in ‘other’ systems of meaning, derived from other times and places, opaque (to the White person) systems of symbolic meaning. Such an experience is often described as encountering a ‘different world.’

Māori commonly describe their experience as ‘living in two worlds’ – te ao Māori me te ao whānui (the Māori world and the wider world). Contemporary Māori identity is like a ‘double reading’ of the bi-ethnic milieu or ‘two worlds’ through which Māori people navigate their lives. Education is a particularly freighted vessel of systems of meaning, so what does it mean to be ‘read’ as a Māori, a Pacific, or a Pākehā person, in local educational contexts?

In this way of thinking, reading is a very active process, in which the reader brings to the text not only (hopefully) a critical mind, but also a mind constructed itself by the language(s) it has been immersed in. Consequently, for example, a French reader and a Māori reader of the same text can be expected to take away or ‘construct’ different ways of understanding: each word, each ‘parole’ has different connotations, the difference greater the more complex the concept, but negligible to nothing for simple words such as concrete nouns. The consequences of each reading will have differences that are distinctive of the linguistic, and particularly the reading, history of each reader. In a complex community such as Aotearoa New Zealand, it has to be expected that terms, ideas and practices which may be perfectly acceptable, even to the point of functional invisibility, to one group may form a significant challenge to another. The following paragraphs present an example of multiple cultural readings: the dominant historical record, and an alternative Māori reading, of an historic occasion that marked a key point in the early story of our nation, Aotearoa-New Zealand.

According to received accounts, on Christmas Day 1814, Anglican missionary Samuel Marsden preached the first Christian sermon in Aotearoa New Zealand to a Māori congregation, gathered on the beach at Oihi, in the Bay of Islands in the far north. The occasion was arranged by local rangatira (leader) Ruatara, who is recorded as translating the sermon into Māori so that his people could understand the ‘significance of the birth of Jesus’ (Ministry for Culture & Heritage, 2021). This event is known as the

‘first sermon’ and marks the start of the Anglican mission in New Zealand, which opened the first schools, and spread literacy among Māori, in early decades through the medium of te reo Māori (the Māori language) (Jones & Jenkins, 2011).

But re-reading these historical events from a Māori-centred point of view changes the picture entirely, suggesting that certain aspects of the historical record are just incorrect: some things did not, in fact, take place (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). In their research on the first sermon, Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins are interested in the effects of ‘materializing’ Māori realities by reconsidering the basic facts of the situation through a Māori lens or ‘ontology’ - used here to mean a basic sense of what the world contains, and the nature of a human being. Their approach, which they describe as a methodological experiment, goes beyond ‘different perspectives’ on one event. They find, ‘in the shadows of the written settler accounts, events quite different from those recorded’ (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 126).

In the arrival of the missionaries (the first permanent settler group), we see no missionaries. In the eyewitness description of an entertaining “sham fight” on the beach, we find no sham fight. In the story of the first sermon preached, there is no sermon. (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 126)

In other words, when considered through Māori eyes, an entirely different understanding exists of what took place on that historic event in 1814. This positing of a different version of historical truth is a form of thought experiment that reconsiders Māori people in history; no longer resigned to ‘nonplussed observers’ as in the dominant records of the first sermon, but reinstated to their rightful place as active, strategic players in events taking place around them, in their homelands. Jones and Jenkins speculate about whether and how this approach of ‘materializing’ people and events when re-reading the past makes it possible to think differently about the present and future. The received account is called heavily into question by this re-reading. To reconsider historical accounts from the perspective of less powerful groups calls into being alternative accounts heretofore absent from official records.

A current example in our local context is the debate about the place of Māori knowledge in the national school curriculum. This fiery battle of words has drawn comment from globally renowned evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2023), when he was on a speaking tour of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Dawkins accuses Mātauranga Māori of being:

deeply invested in vitalism. New Zealand children will be taught the true wonder of DNA, while being simultaneously confused by the doctrine that all life throbs with a vital force conferred by the Earth Mother and the Sky Father. Origin myths are haunting and poetic, but they belong elsewhere in the curriculum. The very phrase ‘western’ science buys into the ‘relativist’ notion that evolution and big bang cosmology are just the origin

myth of white western men, a narrative whose hegemony over ‘indigenous’ alternatives stems from nothing better than political power. This is pernicious nonsense. Science belongs to all humanity. It is humanity’s proud best shot at discovering the truth about the real world. (Dawkins, [2023](#))

The tendency to take invalid binary positions (either true or false) is clear in these sentences – invalid claims because they make no sense for comparing entities as large and diverse as science or Māori knowledge. So in his central claim Dawkins fails in terms of the basic cognitive criteria of science. He uses the words ‘horrificed’ and ‘affronted’ to describe the reactions of local scientists, which seem like emotive responses that contravene his claim that science uses reason, not emotion, to conduct its debates. Dawkins calls on the argument of evidence, but here he fails in two ways: he omits to mention the ‘second half’ of science, namely the theoretical models that underpin empirical data; and he overlooks the vast bases of empirical knowledge that underpin Mātauranga Māori. Thus Dawkins fails *educationally*, because, by presenting partial accounts of both science and Māori knowledge, he confuses his readers, including his opponents in these debates. His commentary does not help anyone to learn in ways that could serve larger purposes. Dawkins’ published remarks also retain the trace of his chauvinistic assumptions of superiority, showing he fails *ethically* to consider those he is writing about as intellectual equals.

Dawkins’ careless comments are being brandished in local school communities as ‘proof’ that the Ministry of Education is lost to deranged ideologies. Less well-known amongst the public of Aotearoa New Zealand is that Dawkins has been thoroughly debunked in the academy for overstepping the bounds of science with some of his most famous work, including the ‘selfish gene’ theory (Johnson et al., [2018](#)). That dubious notion gave a pseudo-scientific imprimatur to the otherwise implausible concepts of capitalist economic theory, including the notion of individuals being by nature motivated by unlimited greed, as expressed in the term ‘homo economicus’ (Devine, [2004](#)).

The current round of this debate is being stoked by local scientists who follow Dawkins and for whom he is a hero. These allegiances show how scientists are more credulous than others of the triumphalist versions science promulgates about itself. A local commentator wonders what is unreasonable about teachers and students in this country being interested in Māori ideas about nature (Armstrong, [2023](#)). This simple but devastating riposte highlights the dubious nature of Dawkins’ commentary, calling his remarks a ‘misreading’ of Mātauranga (Māori knowledge).

Conclusion

The knowledge debates are marked by hostility between intellectual opponents, such as described prior between Searle and Derrida. In the intervening decades, the hostility

has only grown stronger, ably assisted by social media and the relatively greater anonymity of the contemporary post-digital context of research and publishing. Currently, the universities in Aotearoa New Zealand are under pressure to include te reo Māori, which is an official national language, in their business practices and documentation (Hoskins & Jones, [2022](#)). Intrinsic to interculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand is a complex social semiotics, a multi-layered symbolic system of cultural meanings, supporting tolerance, interest and engagement between and among different ethnic identities, Pākehā, Māori, and Pacific. These considerations return our attention to the importance of context in knowing and knowledge. Irrespective of other differences, commitment to context is held in common by radical scholars of all kinds.

To read any extended text, whether a poem, novel or academic paper, we must necessarily follow where the author is going, and while doing so, to an extent, willingly suspend our disbelief, in the classic phrase attributed to English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817). That willingness allows us to engage with the ‘world’ of the author, and is part of an understanding of reading as a creative, ethical action. When we are reading, our minds are actively working. In reading for pleasure, we are free to either enjoy or discard what we read. But key to our work as ‘scholars’ is our right and responsibility as readers to reflect on the ethical implications of the work in question—a responsibility that includes but goes beyond the obligation to speak back to poor scholarship, and necessitates engagement in critique and counter-critique (Stewart, [2022](#)). We bring everything we know to our scholarly readings, including our cultural knowledge and our ‘street’ knowledge; knowledge from experience of life, as well as knowledge from formal education and our personal reading history (Devine, [2022](#)). Reading, in this sense, is a re-integration of the classical divisions of Greek Philosophy in a way that is more like the holistic thinking of Māori Philosophy (Stewart, [2021](#)).

Perhaps the most important lesson of all is to learn how to properly discuss our ideas with each other, and with our ideological opponents, in ways that serve us all, and our precarious future.

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