



Danish beach wood in spring with (white) anemones in bloom

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THE EFFECT OF PREREADING INSTRUCTIONS ON READERS' RESPONSES

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It has been suggested that prequestioning causes students to focus on obtaining answers to particular questions, and that this may in turn lower the overall reading comprehension of a given work. Wiesendanger and Wollenberg (1978) have reported this for eight-year olds, and indeed, some problems in the early stages of a Danish study of reader response also seem to indicate that much prequestioning or a specific instruction given before reading may affect the reading process among older readers as well.

This, then, is a report on this aspect of the Danish studies, in which we leave out some points that may not apply to English-speaking countries. We will discuss the anomalies within four pilot studies as well as the results of a final larger study that underscored the influence of instructions and prequestions on reader responses.

The Text and the Rationale

When originally planned, the purpose of the study was to chart readers' immediate response to the protagonist of a short story and to identify the passages (words, sentences, etc.) which determined the character of this experience (Skydsgaard 1979).

The short story chosen for the purpose was *Vædderen* ["The Ram"], a minor classic by the Danish au-

thor Cecil Bødker.

It takes place on a farm one fine day in the harvest season and starts around noon when the farmer and his wife are asleep.

Page 1: Standing near a fence is Vagn, a disgruntled boy who seems to be a Copenhagen slum child who has been sent out here to enjoy a healthy country life. Vagn hates everything at the farm, where they have accused him of ruining the tractor which they had borrowed for the harvest.

Page 2: Vagn resents being cooped up at the farm where he is not allowed to have any fun, e.g., by walking in the fields of grain, or by letting out the pigs.

Page 3: His thoughts ramble on to his dislike of "snoring at noon" and being fondled because of his curly hair. He must not play with the ram he sees in the neighboring field because it is dangerous - or so the grown-ups say. Instead he decides to go and collect a fishing rod, something he has also been forbidden to do.

Page 4: Vagn spits at the ram, but misses it. Then he picks up a stone and throws it at the animal.

Page 5: The ram does not react. Vexed, Vagn starts throwing more stones. The ram comes closer, and, finally, enraged, it butts the pole.

Page 6: Vagn is fascinated. By hitting it on the bridge of the nose, he makes it run into the pole again. The ram starts to bleed.

Page 7: It stands dazed. Vagn goes to collect the fishing rod so that he can prod it.

Page 8: He pricks it as if in a bullfight. The fishing rod breaks and is now better for hurting. The ram continually crashes into the pole.

Page 9: Suddenly the pole is broken. Vagn flies to the safety of the stable and notices that the animal is smeared with blood-but, of course, this is not his problem.

Page 10: He changes his clothes and goes to the garden where some newly arrived guests are having coffee. Without provocation, the farmer's wife accuses Vagn of having eaten peas - which he must not do. Then, however, they persistently ask Vagn if he has seen Ole, a boy whom the guests have brought along so that the two children could play.

Page 11: They try to make Vagn go and look for Ole, but he insists on finishing his coffee first. All of a sudden, there is a shriek. The ram has attacked Ole. When Ole is carried away, Vagn is only curious: "Was he dead?"

We assumed that readers would gradually evolve a picture of Vagn and by and by change their attitudes towards him. We thought different readers would recreate and judge the protagonist in differing ways, since the story seems to call for moral judgments.

We knew that whatever we found to be the "readers' response" would actually depend on several things, notably textual stimuli, the readers' decoding, and the method used for charting and assessing the response. Accordingly, the first problem was to isolate the readers' immediate response and the factors that determined it. ... // 114 ...

Table 1
Studies of Reader Response to a Story Character

Pilot Study	Interviewers		Subjects				
	Number	Questions Asked During Reading*	Number	Background	Instructed to Tell About	Minutes Spent Reporting	Stops Made During Reading
A	1	Many	10	Mainly students of psychology	Their experience of Vagn	96	46
B	2	Relatively few	16	Undergraduates and graduates	Tension, etc. in the story	12	27
C	2	Relatively few	11	Undergraduates and graduates	Their experience of Vagn	18	44
D	3	Relatively few	5	High school pupils	Their experience of Vagn	9	29

*The actual reading of the short story took 12 to 15 minutes on average, with 9 and 36 minutes as the extremes

The Pilot Studies

Table 1 shows the details of the four pilot studies that yielded information on students' responses to the character of Vagn.

The interviewers were trained by an experimental psychologist, and training started with a session where they were subjects themselves and then went on to conduct some supervised trial interviews.

In the actual interviews, care was taken to establish an informal atmosphere by chatting and having a soft drink with the subjects. Partly because of the generally informal atmosphere in Danish society and the fact that most interviewers and readers were students, this presented no problem. Then the instruction was read to them.

In pilot studies A, C and D, the instruction ran as follows:

"We would like you to read a short story - as far as possible - in the same way as if you had picked it on your own.

"It can hardly be completely natural, though, for we'd like to know what you experience while you're reading - especially concerning your experience of the protagonist. We would like you to stop at those places where [something special happens - for instance as soon as] you get an idea of the protagonist's character, or where you think the protagonist changes, where he gets some new characteristic, or where the existence of a trait that you have until then only suspected, is finally confirmed.

"You are to react in your normal fashion - and *not* to try to give a school-like literary interpretation. If you have read the short story previously we would like to know - even if you do not recognize it until the end.

"You get a one-page story for trying it out.

"Do you have any questions?" (The lines in brackets were left out of studies C and D as superfluous.)

During the interviews all speeches were taped. At the same time they were taken down by the interviewers in order to make sure that they would note obscure statements and therefore ask for clarifica-

tion.

Pilot Study A

The primary aim of the first pilot study was simply to map readers' attitudes to Vagn.

The interviewer was an advanced and highly socially oriented student of psychology who "understood" Vagn completely. She was allowed to pick subjects of her own choice and background, since psychologists are supposed to be particularly trained for introspection.

The problem arose when, after finishing the study, she issued a report in which she concluded that all subjects had sided with Vagn from the outset to the very end - with only one exception.

Later careful analysis has, on the whole, only confirmed her results, with one notable exception. The subjects' attitude to Vagn had remained much the same during the reading, but their attitude was not uncritically pro-Vagn. It showed some minor, though perceptible, changes, e.g., from sympathy to neutral or analytical understanding, and from initial antipathy to ambivalence. Only 3 subjects considered Vagn completely normal, and the other 6 understood him, though some characterized him as sadistic or a psychopath.

The subjects had made some very extensive comments (96 minutes). This was in part because the interviewer had asked many questions. Among other things she had tried to get a detailed impression of their recreation of Vagn and of their attitude from the very beginning. But in addition she had looked appealingly at the subjects, said "Huh?" in an encouraging way, and entered into discussions (but without asking overtly leading questions).

One interesting and pedagogically relevant effect had been that the subjects had given their imagination free rein and gone much beyond possibilities for which there was textual authority.

Virtually all subjects reported on Vagn's social background (a Copenhagen slum) and his age (most ended up by thinking that he was around 10 years old although their original guesses ranged from 5 or 6 to 15 or 17 years). Three accepted at face value Vagn's view that the grown-ups were stupid, while the rest thought they were ordinary farming people. Several of the students of psychology also believed that Vagn transferred and gave vent to his hatred of them in his actions against the ram.

Pilot Study B

Surprising as they were, the above results would probably have been accepted without suspicion were it not for another study within the same research program (summarized in English in Dollerup 1971).

The aim in this study, which used three short stories, including "The Ram," was different, and so was the instruction, which sounded as follows.

"We would like you to read three short stories - as far as possible - in the same way as if you had picked them on your own.

"We would like to be told about your experience during the reading - especially your experience of what might be termed the sequence of suspense, the degree of tension, intensity, or how fascinating the short story is. We would also like to know if it is the same type of tension, intensity, or the like you're commenting on.

"While you are reading you should stop at those places in the text where something special happens. Give us the line number, quote the passage, and tell us how and why the short story changed compared to your previous stop.

"Try to express the rise and fall throughout the story (in terms of coordinates with nine gradations, where - 4 is the low-

est and + 4 the highest. You should take 0 as your point of departure and then use the figures from - 4 to + 4).

"You are to react in your normal fashion - and *not* try to give a school-like literary interpretation. If you have read the short story previously we would like to know - even if you do not recognize it until the end.

"Your task, then, is to identify and quote the line where you stopped, tell why you stopped and give a figure to show how much you feel your assessment has been changed since your previous stop.

"You get a one-page story for trying it out. Is there anything you'd like to ask us about? ...

[The method for gauging rises and falls was changed seven times with the first 12 readers and one time with the last 14. The purpose was to give us an idea of what we could do in the extensive data collecting, which was dropped.]"

The main purpose of this study being to get information about tension and the like, the statements about Vagn which had been made were incidental-they had been recorded, but not analyzed. Nevertheless the two interviewers were sure that out of the total of 26 participants in this study, those 16 who had spoken about Vagn at all had disliked him.

The references to Vagn made by these 16 persons were now included in the present experiment on reader attitudes to the protagonist of the short story as Pilot Study B.

The analysis showed that among the 16 subjects, only 10 had made sufficiently many comments on Vagn during the reading to enable us to map their attitudes: 4 had started out with a decided dislike of him from the very beginning and had not mollified later. The other 6 had initially been favourably inclined towards Vagn, but somewhere between pages 7 and 8, where he deliberately tries to hurt the ram with the fishing rod, their attitudes changed to utter dislike. From page 8 the attitude was, without exception, overwhelmingly negative.

None of the 16 subjects made any guess about Vagn's age. Two thought the grown-ups did not understand him and advanced this as an explanation, but certainly not an excuse, for his behaviour, while 3 made halfhearted attempts to view his behaviour as understandable or normal.

The Problems

These responses were so different from those of Study A that we assumed something was seriously wrong.

A priori it was most reasonable to assume that this had happened in Pilot Study A, because there had been no attempt to tamper with the subjects' experiences of Vagn in Pilot Study B. Accordingly we listed a number of hypotheses.

1. The subjects' experiences may have been misrepresented. The interviewer's report was based on written protocols which were shortened versions of what the subjects had said. As mentioned, their comments had also been taped, and it turned out that the written protocols faithfully mirrored the contents of the subjects' speeches if not the actual words.

2. The report might be wrong. This possibility was carefully checked, but though it had overlooked dimensions like "normal" vs. "abnormal," this hypothesis could also be ruled out.

3. Perhaps the readers in Study A - notably psychologists - were more apt to accept outsiders than we had anticipated.

4. The instruction might have made it difficult for subjects to respond to the protagonist as they would have done in normal readings; in spite of the instruction, some may have been under the impression that we wanted to

test their tolerance.

5. The interviewer's own tolerant attitude to Vagn might have affected the subjects (a "Rosenthal effect"). This might have been strengthened by the prolonged reporting done by the subjects in Study A.

Pilot Study C

To test the hypothesis about the "Rosenthal effect," we conducted another pilot study. The subjects' backgrounds were, roughly speaking, similar to those of the readers in Pilot Study B. On the other hand, the instruction was virtually the same as in Pilot Study A. Also, two interviewers were present to safeguard against leading questions.

Once again the readers' attitudes seemed to be predominantly pro-Vagn or at least neutral. Only one subject considered Vagn a nasty character, while 3 others conceded that their sympathy might disappear if they had to associate with him every day. Even so, the fact remained that by and large the results were like those in Pilot Study A, except that the psychologists there had been somewhat more outspoken in their pro-Vagn sympathies. In this series, Pilot Study C, the proportion of negative words seemed to be higher than in Pilot Study A, even with ostensibly sympathetic readers (e.g., aggressive, bloodthirsty).

Only 4 subjects hazarded a guess as to Vagn's age; most realized that he was away from home; and all were conscious of the conflict between him and the grown-ups. Only one, however, accepted Vagn's view of them, while 3 thought the ram was a substitute for them.

So, in other words, we could not rule out completely the possibility of some kind of a "Rosenthal effect" in the early Pilot Study A, although its significance must have been negligible.

Pilot Study D

As part of the preparation of the large-scale data collecting, we now interviewed 5 high school pupils (*gymnasiaster*). We cannot generalize from only 5 readers, but even so their attitudes were ostensibly neutral or positive towards Vagn. At this stage we had, however, also finished our analyses of the previous pilot studies and knew that the experience might be more complex. So after they had finished reading they were subjected to a very careful questioning. Not until then did it turn out that they had, in fact, experienced a strong shift in their attitudes towards less sympathy, which they had abstained from reporting during the reading.



Autumn by a lake

Discussion and Teaching Implications

The long and detailed instructions before the reading apparently affected the oral responses and perhaps the whole reading process with some subjects because their attention was drawn to one prominent feature in the story. ...// 118 ... And the prereading instructions may similarly have made some subjects abstain from giving a true report of their immediate experience.

Table 2
Readers' Responses to the Question, "My Attitude
to Vagn is: Positive ... Negative"

After Page	Positive					Negative	No Data	Total
	1	2	3	4	5			
1	25	107	143	82	16	13	386	
2	13	67	119	130	40	17	386	
3	17	74	105	136	36	18	386	
4	11	47	95	155	60	18	386	
5	10	28	46	136	147	19	386	
6	6	19	28	97	214	22	386	
7	7	17	36	105	202	19	386	
8	7	15	25	91	229	19	386	
9	7	17	33	89	221	19	386	
10	8	29	66	97	168	18	386	
11	8	27	48	82	200	21	386	

"No Data" covers three situations: no response, crosses outside the box, and crosses on dividing lines between two categories.

It also seems as if careful and thorough questioning in an experiment will bring forth aspects which would not have surfaced without insistent scrutiny, as was seen in the very detailed responses in Pilot Study A. These facts may have been part - consciously or not - of the readers' experiences, in which case, then, questioning brings them out. But in other cases, subjects may have felt compelled to express themselves on something that "was not really there." It is noteworthy that the prolonged questioning in Pilot Study A also made the subjects go far beyond the textual information.

There is no doubt that these problems have been identified only because of the unique and careful way the reader responses have been charted and analyzed. And the anomalies have been pinpointed only because we happened to use a short story whose protagonist is singularly unattractive, and because we happened to have a "control group," viz. Pilot Study B.

At first glance the number of subjects in each study is small. But what makes the detailed analysis of their statements pedagogically interesting is the fact that, by and large, the number of subjects in each of the three first studies corresponds to, or exceeds, the number of active students in an ordinary class.

Accordingly the study seems to shed light on some undesirable side effects in the teaching of literature and perhaps reading comprehension, if teachers set too detailed tasks before the text is actually read by the students. On the other hand, it would be preposterous to suggest that we should give up

teaching literature or setting tasks just because there are some more or less perceptible side effects. The short story used in the present study is highly unusual, and the effects must be less obvious in most literature. ...// 119 ... The studies only caution us about what may happen when a task is too detailed, or prequestioning gets out of hand.

The Extensive Study

After additional pilot studies, the main experiment was carried out in 1970-71 with 717 high school pupils and 27 students of psychology. And even though not all statistical analyses will have been completed until sometime in 1979, we now have data relevant for the present discussion. (The study dealt with much more than this question of response to a story character, so only the relevant details will be included here.)

In slightly more than half the cases (386 students), there was a questionnaire after each page in which the readers could record their attitudes to Vagn on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "positive" and 5 being "negative." (Note that this contrasts with the instructions in the pilot studies, where the readers were merely told to stop at those places "where something special happens" and to record their response freely.) Table 2 shows the responses made at the end of each page by the 386 readers in the final study.

After reading the first page, most readers are neutral or perhaps even slightly in favor of Vagn. After page 2, which thoroughly reveals his contempt and utter dislike of farm life, there is a small but significant shift towards "negative." By and large there is, then, no change until page 5. On pages 5 and 6 the boy coolly goes on throwing stones at the ram, he hurts and enrages it, so that it starts to bleed from butting the pole – and here we meet with big shifts to "negative." From now on, most readers are dead set against the boy. The short-lived turn to less aversion on page 10 should be seen as a reaction to the woman's unfounded accusations that he has been eating peas which he must not.

These data from inserted, preset questions, then, support the results from Pilot Study B with one notable exception. Here the "landslide shift" has taken place on page 6, while it did not occur until pages 7 and 8 in Pilot Study B.

There may be two explanations for this discrepancy: the readers have exploited the negative side of the semantic differential to the full by page 6 and, accordingly, they can from then on record no intensified aversion; or the "delay" in the pilot study may illustrate the findings of, e.g., Hansson (1964) and Fredholm (1970), that it is easier for readers to become conscious of and to express nuances of experience earlier when faced with prearranged questions, than if they must verbalize their responses on their own.

At all events, the results in the major study support the assumption that cautious questioning does not have the same strong effect as a long instruction or questions prior to the reading. In the extensive study only 17 subjects did not change their attitude to Vagn during the reading: their attitudes ranged from category 1 to 5. It is suggestive but not statistically significant that the three psychology students among these 17 stuck to categories from "positive" to "neutral."

The instruction or prequestioning in the pilot studies affected the readers' spontaneous response deeply, present study is highly unusual, and the effects must be less obvious in most literature. ...// 120 ...

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The instruction or prequestioning in the pilot studies affected the readers' spontaneous response deeply, but we do not know if this was only on the surface or in the totality of the experience.

Implications for teaching seem obvious: If we direct too much attention to specific features, or pose too detailed tasks before students read a text, this may have effects that are, on the one hand, impossi-

ble to assess in a normal classroom setting, but which may, on the other hand, imply that the response we get and consider "true" is actually either a distorted reflection of what the students have really the outcome of something different from the normal reading process.

To put it bluntly, if you demand too directly and persistently to be told nothing but the truth, you won't get it.

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