

Reading as a Responsive Act

John W. Lannamann

Durham, NH

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories... For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?

(Benjamin, 1968, p. 60)

Each time I go to the filing cabinet in my office, I navigate around two tall piles of articles on the floor. Visitors stopping by my disheveled faculty office might find these collections a chaotic bricolage, but closer inspection reveals the lingering trace of a passionate reader.

When John Shotter left the University of New Hampshire Department of Communication in 2004, he bequeathed to me the master copies for his course reading packets. In the waning days of paper, before students expected digital copies of assigned readings, these masters were clean copies and the only handwriting was John's careful notation of source information. But even without marginalia, the wide-ranging collection of articles tells a coherent story. John transformed the strange amalgam of philosophers, anthropologists, neurologists, literary theorists, linguists, sociologists, and even dramatists by putting their ideas into play, shaping a dialogue that students might enter. John's presence is there, even twelve years later, in the spaces between the authors.

The other pile in my office contains copies of articles that John made for me in the course of his own wildly energetic reading. This pile was a continuously expanding one while John was on the faculty. Our discussions over lunch, always populated by multiple voices even when we sat at a table for two, usually meant that the pile would grow with copies of his latest chapter, or the work of one of his many textual friends whose distant voices were animated that day by John. Many of these voices now echo in the diaspora of my study at home where a chance encounter with an unruly pile often yields a fresh conversational partner for a stuck writer.

Others in this issue have commented on the impact of John's writing and his presentations, or on the joys of being in his presence. There is no doubt that he is one of the most generous and prolific writers, presenters, and fellow travelers. But, here I want to celebrate John's generosity as a reader.

John once shared with me his approach to reading pieces from authors whose approach radically differed from his own. Instead of quickly dismissing a piece as a hopeless example of positivism, reductionism, or theoretical arrogance, John told me that he would try to find a sentence that puzzled him and provoked the question, "how could the author mean that?" Once found, he would then work out from that sentence to try to find the internal relations that made the statement sensible. This approach reflects the generosity that John brings to all his scholarly pursuits, but it is particularly notable in his approach to reading. It is easy to think of reading as passive compared to writing or speaking and so

it seems odd to describe someone as a “generous” reader. But, for John, reading is a responsive activity, shaped by a dialogic engagement with the voices of others. His responses as a reader are relentlessly generous. Ever the generous reader, he seems to open up spaces for further exploration and elaboration rather than closing them down.

As a child growing up in a religious family, I spent a fair amount of time in church where I would become quickly bored. But the one part of the service that would wake me up was when the congregation was invited to participate in what was called the “responsive reading.” Set up as a kind of call and response, this section of the service alternated readings between the congregation and the pulpit. The readings were often from different texts and sometimes produced an engaging counterpoint.

Until I began writing this, I had not thought of the phrase “responsive reading” for many years. But, it strikes me now that John is the consummate responsive reader. John often quotes Bakhtin’s comments about understanding as an activity, not a passive event. Bakhtin writes that any understanding “is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely” (p. 68). He goes on, “Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.69). In these passages Bakhtin is referring to “live speech” but this approach to understanding clearly applies to reading, particularly the way John practices it.

The contents of the piles in my office offer glimpses of John, the responsive reader. Opening any text read by him, I am greeted with the traces of the emerging conversation that John had with

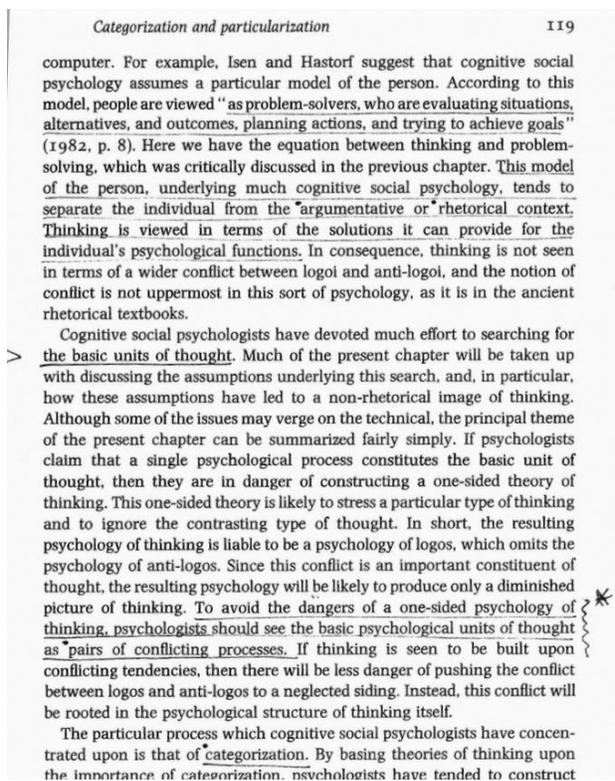


Figure 1: A page from *Arguing and thinking* showing the responsive hand of John as he reads.

the author. Perhaps out of the respect he shows for the words of others, or maybe just the lingering effects of the engineering in his background, the markings John leaves behind are disconcertingly neat. Unlike the wavy markings of most readers, his underlining is precise, measured, and even as if drawn with a ruler. Bold dots appear around key words and resemble the musician’s notation of phrasing and articulation. Triangular pointers add emphasis, as do occasional asterisks and squiggly vertical lines. All of these features appear in Figure 1, a page from Michael Billig’s 1987 edition of *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology*.

This kind of reading engages with the author in a way that can only be described as generous and

appreciative. I remember an afternoon early in John's tenure at UNH when he told me he had just re-read an article of mine. He wanted to talk about it and in the course of our discussion, I happened to look on his desk and saw my article, marked up with the careful notations that had become familiar to me from reading other articles that John shared with me. It was an emotional moment for me. Although my article had gained some attention, I doubt that it ever had received the careful responses that I saw on John's copy. His way of reading was an affirmation, a response that brought life to the ideas on the page.

There is a self-reflexiveness to John's responsiveness. Going through the piles in my office, I sometimes come across drafts of John's own articles and chapters that he has read and marked up. The careful underlining, the dots and pointers are all there. But to interpret these as evidence of an author's narcissism would be completely wrong. The markings reflect the excitement of the same responsive reader who generously engages the words of others. In this case though, it is John's own work that has come back into view. The marks suggest the he is not simply reviewing his already written words, but responding to them. In this vein, it is interesting to consider one of the early origins of the word respond. In addition to our common understanding of the term as a reply, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, another origin of the word traces back to the Latin verb "spondere," meaning to promise or pledge. "Re" can imply "again" or "anew." And so, as I stand in my study reading John as he reads John, I see a performance of promise. It continues his generous interventions in my life, as if for yet another first time.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M., Holquist, M., McGee, V., & Emerson, C. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Billig, M. (1987). *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- OED Online. (2016, December 1). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unh.edu/view/Entry/187311?>

Author Note:

John W. Lannamann
 Professor of Communication, University of New Hampshire
 Email: john.lannamann@unh.edu