

JOLLE@UGA[®]

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of *Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters*

By Kyleene Beers and Robert E. Probst

Reviewer: Kimberly Bressler
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, Pennsylvania



Beers, K., & Probst, R.E. (2017). *Disrupting thinking: Why how we read matters*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

ISBN: 9781338132908

From the broken lightbulb on the cover to the insightful discussions throughout its pages, *Disrupting Thinking*, Dr. Kylene Beers and Dr. Robert Probst's newest book, indeed disrupts the thinking of its readers in relation to the reformation of literacy education. Throughout the heart of this book, both Beers and Probst (2017) address the notion that "reading should be disruptive" (p. 61). The authors explain to educators what this notion looks like within a classroom setting and why it is so important to the education of our students. Building off of their previous books, *Notice and Note* (2013) and *Reading Nonfiction* (2015), this research aims to educate teachers and administrators on the benefits of creating readers who are not reading merely for facts and scores, but for enjoyment and self-growth.

The authors divided the book into three different parts: (1) the readers we want; (2) the framework we use; and, (3) the changes we must embrace. The 'we' in all of these sections is addressing the education community, specifically teachers and administrators. To fully comprehend the conversation that Beers and Probst are creating, it is necessary to analyze each section individually. Therefore, this review will outline each of the three sections and conclude with a critical analysis of the entire book.

Part I: The Readers We Want

Within the first section of this book, Beers and Probst address the kinds of readers they want students to be within the classroom—responsive, responsible, and compassionate. Through eye-opening conversations with students in

various grade levels, Beers and Probst gauge the presence of these three characteristics within the average reader. Through observations, the authors discover that readers lack these reflective qualities and begin to define each characteristic within the context of reading.

Becoming a responsive reader is rooted in one's ability to respond actively to the events of a text, according to Beers and Probst. Similar to the way Louise Rosenblatt (1985) defines responsiveness, a reaction of some sort is necessary for a reader to be considered responsive. It is this reaction which takes the student from simply recalling information within a text to recognizing the words' effect on both themselves and their peers. Without the skill of responsiveness, it is difficult for students to be responsible and compassionate readers as Beers and Probst suggest they should be.

Secondly, a reader who is responsible reads a text carefully and questions the message presented. By doing so, they are ensuring that the information is accurate and reliable for both themselves and others. This reading skill goes beyond the pages of the classroom texts we assign and extends to the social media outlets exposed daily to students.

For Beers and Probst, to be a compassionate reader is to be an empathetic reader. There is an apparent overlap of this characteristic with Louise Rosenblatt's (1985) theory of aesthetic versus efferent reading stances made evident within the context of the book. When a student reads from an efferent perspective, they are examining a text for

details that are fact-based, whereas if a student is reading from an aesthetic perspective, they are approaching the text from a more emotional standpoint that encompasses the student's feelings about what they are reading. Beers and Probst argue that while efferent reading is necessary within our classrooms, it is also pertinent that we educate students to read aesthetically, since this is a skill that will be needed by the student beyond the K-12 classroom.

From the discussion of these reader characteristics—responsivity, responsibility, and compassion—it can be understood that Beers and Probst aspire to create students who not only possess these qualities as readers but who continue to utilize these skills beyond the classroom. In some ways, through their particular use of language, they are also asking the reader of this book to embody these characteristics as they progress through the additional sections of the book.

Part II: The Framework We Use

The core of this section of the book deals with the framework known as the BHH—the Book, Head, Heart model of reading. In conjunction with the three characteristics readers should possess, the BHH model helps make the reading process more personalized for each reader. Since Beers and Probst (2017) strongly believe “that reading should involve disrupting their [students’] thinking, changing their understandings of the world and themselves” (p. 59), this message is also echoed at the core of the BHH model’s objectives. Building from this framework, the authors continue to

describe how the BHH model is implemented within the classroom. Through trial and error within the classroom, Beers and Probst developed the BHH model of reading to create changed and engaged readers. At the basic level, students must be able to recognize what events are taking place within the text at hand before they can engage with it on a deeper level. Essentially, this is the *book* level of the model. It requires students to ask themselves what the text is about and what the author wants them to know. Once that is determined, they can focus more on what the book has done to engage their minds, or the *head* level of the model. When students are centralizing their focus on this element, they are asking questions about what surprised them while reading or about how the author challenged their thinking. Both of these elements, the *book* and *head* levels, are addressed in their book, *Reading Nonfiction*. Finally, the students are asked to address how a text has reached their *heart*, meaning the “reading should involve changing their understanding of the world and themselves” (p. 60). Students self-reflect on what they learned about themselves and how this particular text can help them be better in the future. All three levels of the BHH model are essential for students to fully engage with a text. By utilizing this model, students are enacting the reading characteristics Beers and Probst focused on in the first part of the book. For students to be proactive, forward-thinking, literate citizens, Beers and Probst argue that it is necessary for students to be readers who: are conscious of the text’s details (responsible/book), are questioning how

the text has challenged their minds (responsible/mind) and are changing from the heartfelt messages presented in the text (compassionate/heart).

Within this second section of the book, the authors also take some time to reference their previous book, *Notice and Note* (2013), to provide teachers with additional techniques to use in conjunction with the BHH model. By having students ask Big Questions and having them mark down Signposts while they read (both techniques suggested in their previous book), students will be able to effectively implement the BHH framework within their reading. These tips will allow students to anchor themselves within the text before needing to think on a deeper level. No matter the way in which students access the BHH framework of reading, Beers and Probst urge teachers to practice what they preach by employing the same strategies to thoroughly understand the process and be able to lead more productive conversations with students. However, all of this seems like a moot point if we, as educators, do not know how to incorporate this model into the classroom successfully.

Part III: The Changes We Must Embrace

The early chapters of this section illustrate for readers how reading practices have evolved to become the “best practices” that are implemented within the classroom today. These practices begin with oral reading and soon include Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), popcorn reading, and several others. While the goal of all these

practices is noble in pursuit, they tend to be ineffective if not coupled with proper instruction. Beers and Probst believe change is needed when it comes to best reading practices, and students need guidance for any of these practices to be effective.

However, none of these practices can ever truly be effective if we do not put a focus on the importance of reading within our classrooms. As Beers and Probst suggest, too much of the current focus is on test scores and how students (and teachers) can meet those demands. Furthermore, they argue that the “othering” of students that happens as a result of this testing atmosphere creates toxic classroom environments that don’t seem to foster creative thinking. In order for students to be successful on these exams, the authors argue that more meaningful reading needs to be implemented regularly within the classroom. As the previous sections of their book clarify, students are more effective thinkers and processors of information when they follow the BHH model since they are not simply regurgitating facts. In this way, the authors argue that students will become better test takers and acquire skills that go beyond the classroom. Therefore, Beers and Probst (2017) urge teachers to “think about how some curricular decisions in your building and in your classroom are made” (p. 113) so that educators can begin the necessary discussions needed to change the perception of reading and practices currently in place.

Critical Review

Within their book, *Disrupting Thinking*, Beers and Probst are striving to reach a large audience. Not only do they want to address the needs of reading education for English educators, but also the administrators and legislative representatives within the education sphere. This is evidenced by the fact that the book contains many more graphs and statistics than in their previous books which would appeal more to those individuals making the administrative decisions, for it is data that rules their domain of the education sphere. Furthermore, the entire book is printed in color which seems to make a statement that the book is trying to reach as many people as possible in education so that they may engage with the BHH model, even if it means enticing them with colorful pages. After all, there is no doubt that it is more enjoyable to flip through the pages of a colorful book than a black and white one. In short, however, the message being conveyed is that the information in this book is important enough to spend the money on color printing.

The extra effort to reach a larger audience seems to be worth it. The contents of this book are daring and forward-thinking. Beers and Probst challenge their readers by disrupting their own thinking about the way reading is being taught today. While parts of this book reflect on strategies they addressed within their previous book, *Notice and Note* (2013), this new book seems to take these strategies and emphasize how their usage will create an overall stronger reader and student

through the use of productive conversations and real classroom examples.

While there is no doubt that their reaching of a large audience is a positive aspect of the book, this does seem to lead to some overextending on their part at times. For instance, the authors address fake news within Chapter 3 of the book to demonstrate the importance of a responsible reader. While this is certainly one reason that students should be responsible readers, this section in context felt a little forced. The authors even begin this section by stating that they “could spend chapters discussing the differences between news that is reported and news that is invented” (p. 39). For this reason, this section needs more development and perhaps a book of its own in the future. While it is important to address the issues of fake news, this context did not seem fitting to do so.

Perhaps the strongest element of this book is at the end of each chapter. After several pages of pertinent information, Beers and Probst present their readers with a time for reflection. Their “Turn and Talk” section asks readers to take the time to think about the information in that chapter and discuss their thoughts with other educators and even administrators. The “Turn and Talk” element does not allow for passive readers and forces educators to practice the skills that Beers and Probst want students to implement. This element, as well as some of the skills that Beers and Probst expect students to possess clearly fall under the teachings of Louise Rosenblatt (1985). Throughout

the book, there is a clear emphasis on reader response theory. The “Turn and Talk” sections and the three reading skills of the “readers we want” both show evidence of the authors supporting a personal response to the reading by both students and their readers. What is the advantage of approaching reading in this manner? Beers and Probst answer this by emphasizing a Rosenblatt inspired theme throughout their book: “The literary transaction in itself may become a self-liberating process, and the sharing of our responses may be an even greater means of overcoming our limitations of personality and experience” (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 44). In other words, Rosenblatt is emphasizing the importance of change that happens to a reader while reading. There is an exchange that takes place between reader and text, Rosenblatt suggests, and Beers and Probst both

recognize and propagate this concept to their readers. However, this causes one to ponder how other reading theories work alongside this approach to reading around which Beers and Probst have centered their research.

There is no doubt that Beers and Probst have created a book that has the potential to change the face of reading education in our future classrooms. It should serve as a staple for the educator’s library for years to come. Disrupting the thinking of educators and students alike is exactly what Beers and Probst will accomplish with this book, and both groups around the country will be better for it. To all the future and current educators out there: may your students be critical in their analyses, responsible in their reading, and aware of their emotions.

References

- Beers, K., & Probst, R.E. (2017). *Disrupting thinking: Why how we read matters*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Beers, K., & Probst, R.E. (2013). *Notice and note: Strategies for close reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Beers, G. K., & Probst, R. E. (2016). *Reading nonfiction: Notice & note stances, signposts, and strategies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1984). The transactional theory of the literary work: Implications for research. In Cooper, C. R. (Ed.), *Research response to literature and the teaching of literature: Points of departure* (pp. 33-53). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.