

**Foreword to *Reading, How To* by Herbert Kohl
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1998**

One day, years ago, I was walking down my street when the meter reader from the gas company stopped me. "Excuse me," he said as he leaned out of the truck window. "How do you spell 'do,' like in 'I do'?"

"D-O," I told him, and he thanked me and drove on.

I never forgot it. This man may not have learned to spell a simple word, but he hadn't learned to feel the shame and embarrassment that prevents most people from asking such a question, either. Shame and embarrassment about ignorance is a lesson school teaches all too well. Few people openly admit that they don't know something they ought to know – especially about reading. And if they do admit it, few can do it as casually as the meter reader did.

Reading, especially the teaching and learning of it, is one of those necessary but extremely challenging acts, fraught along the way with all sorts of potential problems. This is what most discussions of reading in educational circles would have us believe, but Herbert Kohl doesn't believe it. The opening sentences of *Reading, How To* are as important and as indicative of Kohl's general philosophy as anything that follows. "Anyone who reads with a certain degree of competency," he begins, "can help others who read less well. This is the case regardless of age or previous educational training."

Make no mistake; this is a radical idea. It's not the premise upon which most reading programs or methods rest. But right away, with those first sentences, Kohl suggests to us that things don't have to be as hard as we've been imagining. The materials for learning, and for helping others to learn, are abundant, not scarce; accessible, not hoarded away. Teaching and learning are not difficult and mysterious but basic human activities. It's as if Kohl is looking a bunch of scared, nervous people in the eyes and saying, "Relax. We can do this." And suddenly the book is about more than just reading.

Though titled as if it were simply a manual, *Reading, How To* is both an extremely useful handbook *and*, by implication, an explanation of how things have gone so far off track. Here are some of the educational ideas Kohl challenges: That learning to read is hard. That teaching reading is hard. That schools are the best or the only places for learning or teaching reading. That if one hasn't learned to read by the age of 6 or 7, reading will automatically become a problem.

How prevalent these ideas are! I think of a woman I overheard on a city bus, responding to a young child who asked what a sign said. "Just think," she said to him, "soon you'll be starting school, and then you'll learn to read." I wanted to whisper to the child, "Actually, you can start learning to read now, or any time you want to. In fact, you've already started," and to the mother, "It's not only a trained specialist who can help your child figure out what words say. You can help too, right now."

This is the spirit of Kohl's book. This is the message he offers, boldly but also reassuringly. This is what he suggests when he talks about helping people learn to read at home, on the streets, in literacy centers, throughout the community – and yes, also in classrooms, especially classrooms that meet some of Kohl's minimal conditions, such as being places where "learners feel safe enough to make mistakes and ask questions" and where teachers have "patience, a sense that there is time to learn."

I think, too, of people who say of a skill or field of study, "I never learned that," as though the opportunity for learning ends with one's last day of school. Kohl doesn't believe this, and his book is as much about helping adults learn to read as it is about helping children. Tell Herb Kohl that you never learned to read, and he responds, "You mean you haven't learned *yet*." But you can now, he says implicitly on every page of this book. Sure you can, he repeats when the familiar doubt creeps in. Let's figure out what got in the way before, and do it differently this time.

And it's with exactly that optimism and belief in people's capacity for learning and growth that we bring this book back into print.

SUSANNAH SHEFFER