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Turning Away from Teacher-Centered Discussions of Literature

Joe Wood

It was September in 1969, my first year of teaching. I remember chaffing to get at Chaucer in senior English. We rushed through Beowulf, the ballads, and the Venerable Bede. One thing I noticed immediately was that these kids were very bored by everything except Beowulf's gore. But so was I. Starting Monday, we would begin Chaucer, the first great English author—the good stuff. Over the weekend I reviewed my class notes from college and reread parts of *The Canterbury Tales*. I was disappointed that the “Pardoner's Tale” was the only thing included besides the prologue, but, no matter, I had lots of notes about the relationship of the characters and the tales that they told. I hit the ground running so to speak, lecturing on the prologue, tossing in tidbits about the characters—the wife of Bath's sensual gap in her teeth, the Prioress's elegant taste in clothes, the natural animosity between the Reeve and the Miller—information passed down by my respected professors that I would pass down to my students. I read them the “Tale of Sir Topas” and pointed out the irony. On the fourth day I reined-in my enthusiasm for Chaucer to ask a girl with a completely blank expression, “Am I going too fast?”

“You left me about two days back,” muttered one boy for her.

“Are you lost?”

For the first time the class responded and as one said, “Yes.”

I hadn't envisioned it that way when I sat through all those literature lectures in college. Instead of interested, attentive students, I saw apathy, boredom, and dullness in the slack faces, the clots of whisperers, and vacant eyes which stole peeks at the clock or were lost in speculating about something in the handful of student heaps parked on the drive outside my window. I was going to have to make some compromises with my ideal of making my students masters of interpreting literature. And in the twenty-seven years since, I have, but over the years the ideals die hard.

Since the early '70s I have worked to add variety to my literature teaching and stimulate student interest by using the four-level approach for personal engagement with literature suggested by Stephen Judy in his *Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English*. The levels included understanding, interpreting, relating, and exploring beyond the text. Because of my general uncertainty about the significance of relating and exploring beyond the text, I tended to emphasize only understanding and interpreting, leaving the other levels to be explored the last few minutes of discussion. I had begun to wonder if there wasn't some other approach.

The general sense of lassitude and apathy of my students' responses to literature made me receptive to some new approaches which I studied last summer when I participated in the Na-

tional Writing Project. I read Richard Beach's *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories* as a topic for exploration. Beach explains each of the five theories of reader response: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. Beach's description of the textualist articulated my approach. He explains that since textualists assume the text to be central and view it as an artistic object, they wanted students to appreciate its complexity. Therefore, they felt the teacher's job was to teach the skills of close, concise, attentive analysis. Encouraging any expression of or paying attention to differences in students' own responses was considered less important. Further reading of theorists' criticism of the textual approach, especially the ideas of Louise Rosenblatt in *The Reader The Text The Poem* led me to seriously reexamine my practice—past, present, and future. Rosenblatt suggests that the reading of literature is an aesthetic experience and the reader must be encouraged to construct his or her meaning instead of being told what it means.

After my reading last summer, I resolved to experiment with different reader-response theories in my classes. How to implement them was the question. In August a colleague from the writing project loaned me Kathleen Andrasick's *Opening Texts* which provided some ideas for using reader response in my classroom. Andrasick described how her American Literature classes used dialogue journals, process logs, and free writes to explore texts. Because she teaches many of the same works that I do and expressed some of the same concerns that this approach might result in "anything-goes" interpretations, I trusted what she said and felt many of her ideas were applicable. The first chapter, "Enabling Critical Discussion," promotes the idea of collaborative learning: "Collaboration provides emotional support; the group becomes a resource for the individual. Collectively, the group has more information and a keener critical facility than any single member. Collaboration demonstrates the truth of the old saw that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Group members validate and clarify understanding and judgments for one another" (21).

My experience with collaborative learning had taught me that one couldn't just put people into groups and tell them to discuss the story. Unless a group has clear objectives and members have to provide something tangible for the activity, the discussions are usually about dates, gossip, and sports, i.e. a waste of time. Dialogue journals, process logs, free writes, and other suggested response activities would insure that students would have something to bring to the group discussion.

Often I had assigned short journal responses to younger tenth graders in English II which the students would read aloud for credit after we discussed the reading. More often than not, these student responses stimulated greater discussion than the assigned reading and made the classroom lively after the often sluggish class discussion. In my American Literature class there were fewer opportunities for response. These were more mature, college-bound students; and I presumed they were less in need of the novelty of responding, i.e. I expected them to have read the material and to be fairly attentive to class discussion. I did want them to arrive at the meaning on their own, so I didn't lecture to them as my high school teachers and my college instructors had done. I preferred to lead discussion with occasional opportunities to respond to what they had read. But too often they were resistant. Only a handful of the achievers regularly contributed while the rest of the class remained passive. From time to time I would scold them for their apathy and things would improve for a while. Too often, however, we slid into that old rut, and I would leave class wondering if they were learning anything.

Leery about the efficacy of the collaborative study of literature and of turning over control to the students, but game, I divided my American Literature students into groups and assigned them to write responses to their readings. Groups met and discussed these dialogue journals or process logs or free writes. But old habits die hard. I wasn't sure that they were getting the material without my input, so to see if their performance was equal to last year's class, I gave them the same tests. They performed better by far: Eighty-five percent or twenty-three of the

twenty-seven students earned an A or B on the first unit test compared to less than fifty percent of last year's students.

One telling comment made by more than one student was, "I had heard how hard this class was going to be. It's been fun." Fun wasn't normally my objective in learning, but it certainly has changed my perspective of the class. I used to dread teaching the class those days when I knew the reading was going to be particularly challenging. The hour would drag, and I would steal more peeks at the clock than my students. Now the class hour seems to pass too quickly. Students ask questions about meaning and make some sophisticated observations. The class has been stimulating—even fun.

Several weeks into the semester I received another book from my mentor—Harvey Daniels's *Literature Circles*. Literature circles are collaborative groups that perform high-order, student-centered, open-ended activities. To facilitate learning, members are provided with role sheets that embody ways that readers think—visualizing, connecting, associating, analyzing, and reading aloud to name a few. Daniels suggests that the discussion must be "natural" and that the discussion role is only one element of what each student brings to the group. Though Daniels' intent is that these roles be used in the reading of novels, I tried using them to aid in the discussion of American Literature short story readings.

Ironically, on the first day that I used them, I wasn't there to see the results. But the next day the students' enthusiastic comments and their insights about the story "The Devil and Tom Walker" indicated that things had gone well irrespective of the presence of a sub.

To see if my new enthusiasm had any basis, I decided to transcribe two class discussions—one would be my old teacher-centered way and the other would be the new way with students collaborating. The discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" used the literature circle role sheets recommended by Daniels.

If I were teaching two classes of American Literature, I could have tried a different approach on each, but using two stories by the same author with the same students is enlightening. Both

discussions used roughly the same amount of time—twenty-five minutes. I must confess that I was rusty leading the discussion. Since the year began, I hadn't acted as more than a synthesizer of group responses when we convene at the end of the hour. But I did read some criticism of the story and I have read much Hawthorne, so I wasn't exactly a fish out of water.

The transcriptions of the six groups ran to over twenty pages and the teacher-led discussion was four pages. For the sake of brevity I have excerpted passages from the two discussions to give a sense of the responses elicited by each assignment.

The Student-Centered Discussion of "Young Goodman Brown"

The 27 students in the class were put into six groups of four or five. The day before the discussion, they were given role sheets to fill out and to have ready when their groups met. Each group was to record and then later to transcribe their 20 to 25 minute discussion.

Group One : Barry (Discussion Director), Emily (Investigator), Katy (Connector), and Jamie N. (Literary Luminator).

Katy: Okay, first of all, it reminded me of "The Devil and Tom Walker" because it has to do with the devil.

Jamie: Me too.

Katy: And it reminds me of how strong evil can be even though it is hard for some people not to commit sin. They should try as hard as they can not to.

Emily: It was kind of like in the Garden of Eden when they knew they shouldn't eat the fruit, but they just couldn't help it and they did it anyways. They knew the evil was there.

Barry: Very good.

Katy: And also when something bad happens in some people's lives, they blame God for it and start doubting their faith and then they are more vulnerable and more easily tempted by the devil.

Jamie: Okay, then (I picked a passage) on page 242. It was the whole part about Faith. Some-

times she is there and sometimes she is not. I found that to be a little confusing.

Emily: I think it is symbolic because sometimes you have faith and sometimes your faith hides somewhere and even if you have faith in God, you don't always use it.

Barry: So are you symbolizing his faith in God or his Faith, as in his wife?

Emily: Both. I think the reason her name is Faith is to symbolize that she is part of his life.

Jamie: Okay. I will read it. I thought it was thought-provoking. (She reads)

Emily: Wow, that was long.

Barry: Yeah. What thought did that provoke for you?

Jamie: That a lot of people we look up to like role models aren't really that good.

Barry: How can you tell the difference?

Jamie: You can't. That is what he is saying.

Emily: What role models remind you of it?

Jamie: Like sports figures, ministers, teachers.

Emily: You look up to them and later find out they do drugs.

Group Two Matt (Discussion Director), Staci (Connector), Tara (Investigator), Sarah R. (Illustrator), and Karri H. (Literary Luminator).

Staci: Has Goodman Brown rejected his former faith or has he only begun to doubt it?

Sarah: I don't really think he had a former faith in a way. I mean if you're embedded strongly in your faith, then you don't look at other things, and you won't accept them as true.

Matt: If you think they're better, you will. Or if they're more true or believable.

Staci: I think he doubted it; otherwise he wouldn't have went with the devil.

Tara: So does his imagination.

Matt: So then, are you saying that the townspeople—he just imagined all this stuff with his wife like the ceremony in the forest or is it true?

Staci: I think he imagined some of it because he says that there may be a devil behind every tree. And then he sees the guy, the devil.

Sarah: But he also says the guy was expected.

Tara: I think it's kind of like God is walking next to you. You don't see him but you know he's there. Not exactly physically but spiritually.

Matt: Yeah, he wants you to eat all the cake.

Staci: What's the next question?

Matt: I heard suspicions about the townspeople like are they verified or is he just imagining them?

Sarah: They're not verified because he never sees them. I mean, he saw the one lady, but who's to say that she's real? Because, I mean, she asked him to ride on her broom stick with her.

Matt: Why do you think he didn't want to ride with her?

Sarah: She was a witch.

Tara: Lack of trust...I still think it was a dream.

Matt: So investigator, what did you investigate?

Tara: His biography. He was born and grew up in Salem with his mother. He went to Bowdoin College in Maine. When he returned home, he lived in isolation to write for twelve years. He named them his "twelve dark years." After his work began to show up in magazines, he moved to Concord, Massachusetts. He wrote, among other stories "Young Goodman Brown." Along with Poe, Hawthorne was a leader in writing short stories. And was a leading transcendentalist. He spent six months at Brook Farm of Agriculture and Education to discuss philosophy.

Matt: Brook Farm was a utopian society.

Tara: He also wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Sarah: Isn't my picture beautiful? It's a picture of the devil out in the woods. He's like watching the woman and Goodman Brown, and this here

falling from the sky, that's the pink ribbon so it like symbolizes part of the story altogether.

Group Six Andy (Discussion Director), Jenni (Literary Luminator), Sarah J. (Connector), and Chrissy (Investigator).

Andy: How does Goodman Brown change?

Chrissy: He sees evil in everything.

Sarah: Everything is evil.

Andy: Is he pessimistic?

Chrissy: Hawthorne thought that too, everything is evil.

Sara: And Cotton Mather.

Andy: What did the story remind you of?

Jenni: "The Devil and Tom Walker."

Sarah: Deacon is like a priest who molests kids. It's like "The Devil and Tom Walker" where the wife is tempted by the devil. Brown is enticed into going to a witch meeting like young kids are enticed into gangs. Like the story about Martha Carrier. Deacon is like priests that molest people. His beliefs [Brown's] changed to those like Cotton Mather.

Chrissy: You have to connect it and gather info. I tried to stick to facts but it's difficult. Geography, it's in Salem, Massachusetts. Near the witch trials. Folk tale, like "The Devil and Tom Walker." Hawthorne felt guilty for his family's past involvement in witch trials. He believed there was an active presence of evil in the world. Some of his stories were based on personal experiences. He had one based on experiences at Brook Farm and one on the ancestral curse cause they were involved with the witch trials.

Sarah: What was Brook Farm?

Chrissy: It was a Utopian experiment. The story criticizes Puritan religion by showing hypocrisy....

I selected these excerpts because they provide examples of students demonstrating the various roles. It's easy to see how they go beyond the assigned roles to participate in the discussion by adding commentary, observations, and opinions

to one another's responses. There are connections between the group responses recognizing the ambiguity of Hawthorne's story, connecting the minister in the story to fallen idols in contemporary life, and recognizing the allegorical implication of names and events.

When I did a quantitative analysis of all the student-centered discussion transcripts, I was very pleased with the level of participation. Within the six groups there was a high of 117 exchanges and a low of 23 exchanges. There were 317 total responses in the group discussions and students asked a total of 78 questions. All twenty-seven students spoke at least once. The numbers helped me objectify what I could already see from listening to the transcriptions: students were actively participating, thinking on their feet, responding to each other, raising questions, and taking ownership of their own learning.

Teacher-Centered Discussion on "The Maypole of Merry Mount"

I recorded the following discussion about three weeks after the first one. In the interim the students had finished the unit and begun a novel by Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter*) or Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). They begged for more time to read their novels and in return for agreeing to read and discuss "The Maypole of Merry Mount" the day before Christmas break, I allowed them to finish the novels over vacation. They wouldn't be tested on the story, so I wasn't too intent on tying things up so they would leave with a digestible dollop of wisdom.

Teacher: What was the one word that he used to describe them over and over? The maypolers were silken I think is the term. What was the term that he used to associate with Puritans?

Chrissy: Iron.

Kari: Wasn't the maypole something like a Puritan symbol?

Teacher: Oh, no it was a pagan symbol. Did you read the little footnote about what the maypole was? Did anybody read that? It is on the back of the second sheet. "Great public festival...beginning in medieval times...young

and old alike went a-maying to celebrate the coming of spring." It's a fertility festival actually. They decorated the pole and they used to do a maypole dance. They'd wrap ribbons around it.

Teacher: Why were the Puritans such a dour, stern, serious, broody group?

Kelly: That's the only way they thought they would go to heaven.

Teacher: Right. They were troubled. First their beliefs that men were corrupt. And so there were their beliefs. Why do you suppose Hawthorne contrasts these two so dramatically? The people who were full of revelry and never want to be serious and are always pretending and those who never want to play and always work? One description of the Puritans is "the only time they were merry was when they were going to proclaim a bounty on the heads of wolves or Indians." In a favorite pastime, "singing Psalms," the selectmen nodded to the constable if they had somebody who "wanted to dance." The light-heeled reprobate would end up in the stocks or he would get to dance around the whipping post. Doesn't it say that when Edgar and Edith felt this unsettling feeling that it was like coming out of a dream? Find it. It says, "Just then as if the spell had loosened them, down came a showering of withering rose leaves from the maypole." That's on page 302. "No sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion than they were sensible of something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures and felt a gloomy presentiment of inevitable change." Could that be one of the reasons the Puritans are so dour? Is it that they accept the inevitability of change, of getting old, of dying and of all of that? And by being a Merry Mounter you refuse to accept that. You sort of play in the moment. You pretend. And it's like a realization of what's really going to happen. "From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth's doom of care and sorrow and troubled joy and no more a home at Merry Mount." That was Edith's mystery so he thought he presents the Merry Mounters as happy people and the Puritans as—nobody could really identify with them because they were so grumpy and dour

and disapproving of everything. Why did the Puritans then win? They break-up the thing, they cut-down the maypole, they flog several of the revelers, they arrest the high priest. What do they do with Edith and Edgar?

Erica: Arrest them.

Teacher: Yes, doesn't he want to flog them? And then Edgar says any punishment you're going to give to her give to me and let her go and she says the same? What effect does that have on Endicott, the leader, Katy?

Katy: He sets them free.

Teacher: It softens the iron in him. What gesture does he make?

Katy: He sets them free.

Teacher: It softens the iron in him....

Sarah J.: You're a Puritan?

Teacher: No, actually I think you feel that I am at the Puritan stage. I think you become a little less optimistic or naive about possibilities—about what life is, you know. Sometimes the rules that you thought were in place and the way things were supposed to function didn't function that way even though you followed the rules. Things didn't always work out. Life was kind of unforgiving at times. I think that maybe that's what the story is to indicate.

Teacher: What qualities do the Puritans represent that the maypolers don't have?

Kari: Hard work and less frivolous.

Teacher: Hard work and what was that? Less frivolous?

Kari: More conforming.

Teacher: Demanding conformity.

(Voice from the back "Boring")

Teacher: Boring somebody said. I once read a book by a Kushner who was counseling some man who explained that he didn't like working because it was boring and he lived for the weekend. And Kushner said you can't make your life one big, long weekend because even fun becomes boring after awhile.

Sarah R.: My mother told me life is as exciting as you make it.

Matt: I could live every day as if it were the weekend.

Conclusions

As I transcribed the teacher-centered discussion, I was amazed at the amount of talking that I did. I asked many questions but allowed little time for answering, and often I answered the questions (presumably to fill the intermittent and seeming interminable gaps of silence). Total number of student responses was 41 with 15 of the 27 students speaking at least once. Only 10 questions were asked in this teacher-led discussion. Here was concrete evidence of how students respond when they feel the teacher is leading a "discussion" but really wanting the "right answer." Many withdraw and simply refuse to play the game of "can you guess what I want you to tell me?"

A look at the difference between Barry's participation in his group and in the class discussion is telling. In the group he kept everybody participating and exploring ideas. In contrast, in the class discussion he didn't speak at all! He was not one of the 10 students who asked questions or even one of the 15 who participated.

Another element missing in the teacher-led discussion was one student getting another student to reconsider an interpretation. One need only look at the exchange between Kari and Jenni to see how patiently Kari tries to do this. Students have few opportunities to practice such interpersonal skills in a typical teacher-led discussion which seems to encourage passivity on the part of students since so little is asked of them.

I think recording class and group discussions can be a useful analytical practice. One can readily see that some groups benefited from effective leaders. It might be interesting to copy some of the better transcriptions and point out how the leader kept the discussion on track. Some groups relied heavily on their role sheets; others speculated well beyond what they had prepared. Again, a transcription copied for the class and showing

how the role sheets should stimulate talk and not be the end-all in thoughtful discussion, could be used as models to improve collaborative exchanges. I used Daniels' role sheet format for collaborative sharing, but I would predict similar results in the collaborative discussions had I used process logs, dialogue journals, or free writes.

From the very beginning of the year, my students have surprised and delighted me by their response to reader-response strategies with their interpretations, stories, poems, and essays. Recent reader-response theories which cast doubt on the primacy of textual theory require that readers be allowed to engage, question, relate, and revise their understandings of a text. A teacher-centered discussion stifles active participation, turning most of the students into passive receptors (or targets). Since I have used collaborative learning and individual responses to reading, student achievement is noticeably up, student interest is way up, and my enthusiasm is sky high. As far as I am concerned, my last teacher-centered discussion will be that transcription. Perhaps I will save it as an artifact of past practice which went the way of blab schools, teaching grammar under the guise of composition, hickory sticks, and dunce caps. Thankfully, it will be the method that becomes the artifact and not me.

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