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AVOIDING THE BASALIZATION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Karen Day and Joyce M. Edwards

In recent years, we have witnessed an enormous change in the teaching of reading and the subsequent incorporation of literature and trade books as essential elements in elementary school classrooms. Reading series have been developed which include selections from literature written by well-known and acclaimed writers of literature for children. Clearly, the work of Louise Rosenblatt has been the impetus for much of this change. Her work, and the work of other theorists such as Iser, Holland, Bleich, and Fish, has caused educators to look more critically at their work in the teaching of reading and literature and to examine not only their practice but their beliefs. Fish says, "Not only does one believe what one believes, but one teaches what one believes, even if it would be easier and safer and more satisfying to teach something else" (364). Changing our beliefs, we posit, requires reflection on current practice and knowledge of alternatives.

Louise Rosenblatt, for more than fifty years, has provided us with the raw material for changing our beliefs and our practice (Farrell and Squire ix). Through her studies of the exploration of literature and readers' responses to literature, she developed what she termed a transactional theory of reading. Frequently, the phrase "response to literature" is used to define a wide range of activities. In this article, based on the Latin derivation of the root 'spondere,' response means *a promise to engage with the text*. This kind of engagement is more than a single reaction, but instead an exploration of the text with repeated readings so that readers can organize and select personally meaningful aspects of text as they create meaning from their reading. This is one of the foundations upon which literary growth is structured.

Rosenblatt maintains that a response is evoked by a transaction with a text. This response is going to be dictated to a considerable extent by the purpose for reading or, in other words, by the stance the reader determines.

The stance can be either **effere**nt, when the reader seeks information, or **aesthetic**, or a combination of the two, a moveable point along a continuum. If we are reading a first aid manual in order to treat an injury, our reading will have very pragmatic outcomes. We read specifically for essential information that will directly affect our behavior in the immediate future. The reading of a first aid manual is *effere*nt reading, at a far end of the continuum (Figure 1). If we are reading a novel, the purpose is likely to be for appreciation and, at some level, for a deeper understanding of the human experience. As readers engage with the text, they enter into the space of the novel and disconnect themselves from the time of their own existence, their own ongoing or chronological time. This is what Rosenblatt terms a "lived-through experience with the text" (Cooper xiv), an *aesthetic reading*. It may evoke angst or pleasure and certainly evokes a deep personal experience. Rosenblatt maintains that "once the work has been evoked, it can become the object of reflection and analysis, according to the various critical and scholarly approaches" (Farrell and Squire 106). Once we begin to reflect upon the experience of reading aesthetically, we have moved toward a more effere

nt response. We may read a poem in such a way that we at first enter the poem's time and leave behind our immediate concerns. But when we reflect on the poem to create text-based meaning that may be relevant to our own lives, we re-enter ongoing time and engage in a more effere

nt response. We have learned something or become aware of something new as a result of reading the text. Nelms and Zancanella (Hayhoe and Parker) state that "effere

nt activities directed toward the communication of clarified ideas. . . may be brought to bear on further experiences of the text, clarifying and enhancing one's subsequent lived-through experience" (42). We agree with Meek that it is these "effere

nt" activities that can create the link between teaching children how to read and teaching children how to become readers of literature.

While Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading has had an impact in many English departments at the university and high school levels, it has been our experience that elementary school teachers have had little opportunity to develop appropriate practical applications of that theory. Many teachers are required to use a reading series for reading instruction, and many of these series have workbooks and skill sheets which drive the reading program. The emphasis appears to be on the teaching of reading skills rather than on the teaching of the reading process in a more holistic context. As a result, other than incorporating more "real books" into their reading programs, and seeing the pleasure and enthusiasm for reading which these

Response

Aesthetic/Efferent

Figure 1

books create, many teachers are still attempting to understand how aesthetic responses to literature can enable children to become better readers. It is a valid quest, for the acts of reading and of learning to read are complex. Our understandings of these processes are still growing, and we have no simple explanation for them. What we do know is that children must be given the opportunity to respond aesthetically to any text, whether it is in a basal reader or in a trade book they have borrowed from the library.

With the recent development of literature-based curricula, particularly reading programs based entirely on the use of trade books, elementary teachers are in need of a knowledge base that informs their teaching of literature—and the teaching of reading—in their classrooms. As Jobe and Hart say, "A literature based reading program implies a change in name and a change in methodological approach" (148). If teachers are constrained by mandated skill-based curricula, testing, and pressures from commercial publishers, a change in methodological approach will be slow in developing. Such conditions make it essential that teachers take the initiative and undertake professional development that will provide them with new tools to use in the classroom and new confidence to use the knowledge they already possess about children's literature and its impact in the lives of young readers.

The results of Jobe and Hart's study in Canada show that teachers in literature-based programs (i.e., those using trade books and not a reading series) "still rely too heavily on a traditional skill and comprehension

orientation to explore literature while ignoring the kinds of thinking operations that promote intellectual growth and enhance the literature experience" (150). Walmsley conducted a study with 74 school personnel in Albany, New York and found, not surprisingly (given the above-mentioned constraints), that elementary teachers "did not have either an instructional philosophy for the teaching of literature or a well-developed practical scheme for integrating it within the elementary curriculum. Nor, surprisingly, did their supervisors or administrators" (510). It appears that the reason for reading a story is still, too frequently, to take from the text a lesson in a specific skill or to demonstrate comprehension of that text. Unfortunately, the teaching of reading may often consist of a series of activities which call forth responses situated at the extreme efferent end of the continuum (Figure 1).

As in any major shift in any discipline, there is a danger that a momentum will develop creating the potential for the pendulum to swing to extremes. This has occurred in some literature-based programs where the text has virtually been ignored and the 'teaching' is based solely on personal experiences. Rosenblatt (Hayhoe and Parker 105-106) maintains that "reader response theories such as the psychoanalytically based ones tend to overemphasize the reader and to treat responses primarily as means of self-interpretation according to Freudian or some other theory of personality. Poststructuralists or deconstructionists, on the other hand, range themselves with the New Critics and the traditionalists in overemphasizing the text. They are concerned with abstracting underlying codes and conventions that the text possesses for a particular 'interpretive community.' Author and reader become mere carriers of cultural conventions." Rosenblatt also says, "[T]he text, as an active element in the reading process that produces a literary work of art, offers guidance and constraint, yet it is also open, requiring the creative contributions of the reader" (Cooper 36). "In any specific situation," she goes on, "*given agreed upon criteria*, it is possible to decide that some readings are more defensible than others ... [and] that one evocation did 'greater justice to the text' than another reading of it."

Nelms and Zancanella (Hayhoe and Parker 43) write that "an interpretive community is any group who share enough assumptions, practices, goals and knowledge to make talking and writing about literature with one another a meaningful exercise. It is an important concept for teachers because perhaps the best available model of an interpretive community is a literature classroom." They feel that this could be problematic, however, because most classrooms have not yet provided a sense of community or an opportunity for

children to respond to literature. We "lack a clear picture of what a response-centred classroom might look like, and especially, what the teacher's role in such a classroom might be" (43). Jobe and Hart maintain that, as a result, teachers have frequently espoused the new materials (i.e., trade books) but have not changed their teaching methodologies since they began working with basal readers and controlled vocabularies. Those who have moved towards a response-based curriculum are uncertain of their roles and have become unsure both of what it is they are actually teaching and in what direction they should be moving with their students.

It is possible that the teaching of "reading" and the teaching of "literature" need not remain disparate, but that through thoughtful study the two may be incorporated into an effective model for teaching children both how to become better readers and how to become readers of *literature*. Meek says that "reading experts for all their understanding about 'the reading process' treat all texts as the neutral substance on which the process works, as if the reader did the same thing with a poem, a timetable, a warning notice" (5). She goes on to say that "the reading process has always to be described in terms of texts and contexts as well as in terms of what we think readers actually do" (6).

Our experiences with both teachers and children have led us to explore how we can enable readers to deepen their meaning making with texts. In general, activities can either take the child further into the story or, on the other hand, become a barrier between the child and the text. After reading a story, time must be allowed for an aesthetic response— the process of living through the experience and connecting with the text. This must be honored and fostered before activities are initiated that evoke a more efferent reading of a text. Rosenblatt says "the aesthetic stance. . .[can be] unwittingly nullified or subverted" (391). We have seen this happen, with the best of intentions, when a teacher has emphasized a skill exercise to the detriment of the aesthetic reading of a story.

What has often been called the "basalization of children's literature" consists of response activities at the extreme end of the aesthetic/efferent continuum such as traditional skill lessons selected or designed by the teacher. These almost always *come between* the child and her engagement with the text. They include some vocabulary development activities (with a word list), fill-in-the-blank workbook exercises, and word attack skills taught in isolation from the story. Basalization occurs when there is a skills

orientation in working with literature rather than a more holistic view of the reading event. It is essentially a confusion in the purposes for reading literature. Basalization occurs when we read a work of literature with children in order to teach and understand the "mechanics" of reading or to test for comprehension of the material read. The dual purpose for reading literature in the elementary school is to help children make meaning for their lives *and* to take a further step in the journey of learning *how* to read and appreciate the many genres of literature. It is a recursive process which requires multiple transactions between the text and the reader.

Basal readers or specially prepared textual materials do have a role in teaching children the mechanics of reading. However, they are not for the purpose of enhancing our understanding and appreciation of a literary work or story. Taking an appropriate efferent stance in reading literature should cause us to focus on the many layers of meaning making and ultimately deepen our aesthetic experience with the text. It should not focus on the mechanics of reading, important as that undoubtedly is. This confusion between an efferent reading stance and the basalization of literature must be examined. It is both possible and desirable to work with an efferent stance in teaching literature and not 'basalize' the process.

Benton and Fox, Corcoran and Evans, and others have suggested various forms of teacher intervention which are intended to heighten students' awareness of the ways texts instruct their readers on how to read them. These activities basically take an efferent stance in the teaching of literature, but they presuppose an equally important reading which is an aesthetic, lived-through experience with the text. Corcoran (Hayhoe and Parker 132) reminds us that it may be time for teachers to "stop teaching literature and start helping their students to come into their own powers of textualization." We need activities which lead to recursive exploration and not to reactive reading.

An exploration of one children's novel that led to a deeper aesthetic response by a group of teachers with whom we worked was the reading of *Warrior Scarlet* by Rosemary Sutcliffe. An historical novel set in the Bronze Age of England, *Warrior Scarlet* has a style of writing that is rich in description and a plot which moves too slowly for many readers during the first few chapters. Many modern day readers, including both teachers and children, who are oriented toward fast-paced plots and much action, find the style of the first chapter to be a barrier to fully engaging with the book. Readers tend to focus

on plot, action, and characters. In spite of being "able" readers, the teachers in our group found this book "difficult." They commented that they "couldn't get into" the story, that the gender bias disturbed them, and that the language of the book was "foreign" to them. Yet, after an opportunity to share aesthetic responses through journal writing and after engaging in small group discussions, many of them began to raise more efferent questions which led to an exploration of the many layers of the book and added to the meaningfulness of the reading experience. Questions arose about the age in which the story took place, the way Bronze Age peoples organized their communities, the way they attended to their spiritual needs, and the way in which they defined roles in their society. The teachers drew on information gained in an anthropology course in order to answer some of these questions. They also explored details that are constructed by the author through descriptions of setting, mood, and tone. This exploration of the many layers of the story is an efferent response to the literature, but through learning about this ancient culture and historical time as a result of their own questions, the readers were more fully able to enter the secondary world of the book and in turn engage in a stronger aesthetic reading of the text. They could empathize with the hero, Drem, and understand that Drem's "journey" was not unlike the journey that many young adults face in their lives today. Such exploration of texts builds literary experience for future reading endeavors.

Jacob's Little Giant, by Barbara Smucker, is a story about a boy named Jacob, who cares for a pair of Giant Canada Geese on an Ontario farm at a time when the species was almost extinct. In a fourth-year elementary classroom we visited recently, the children read the story with the teacher and, after each day's reading, took part in a number of activities. Initially, the students were given time for aesthetic responses, writing in their response journals, most of them focusing on Jacob's dilemma and relating it to their own family situations. This writing centered on Jacob's personal development and his need to feel important within his family. In the story, Jacob's development is mirrored in the growth and development of some newly hatched goslings. As a class, the children discussed the reasons why Jacob felt empathy with the smallest gosling. Following the group discussion and writing in response journals, the children embarked on more efferent activities, which included the writing of logbooks—the detailed and organized recording of certain events as they occurred in the text. This activity was planned by the teacher from an efferent stance toward the literature in order to take the children back to the text to focus on details which would add to

the richness of their reading experience. These activities also aided the children's comprehension of the story and fostered the development of many reading "skills."

In order to teach the children about the writing of a logbook, the teacher used *Wild Mouse* by Irene Brady. This book is written in the form of a log, with illustrations on each page drawn by the recorder as she witnessed the birth and subsequent development of a family of wild mice. From this text the children were able to make their own logbooks of the development of the Giant Canada goslings in *Jacob's Little Giant*. Each child created a different log as they re-read sections of the novel and selected what were, for them, the most important events in the development of the goslings. Two of the children's entries are shown in Figures 2 and 3. It can be seen that each entry is for the third day in the project with the geese, but each has a different focus and a different style of writing. Figure 2 is brief and written in the style of the log by Brady. This child, however, is somewhat unclear about what happened on day three and summarizes part of the story that is still to come. The picture clearly depicts Jacob's actions that day but focuses on a hawk, which appeared later in the story, rather than the hunting dog. Figure 3 is much more accurate in recording the events of day three but is written as a narrative retelling and does not include an illustration. It does not record the development of the eggs and the perils of trying to protect the birds but, instead, retells the story of the events of the day from Jacob's perspective and demonstrates a concern for Jacob's role in his family. These logs provided the children with an opportunity to make close observations of the events in the story, and their selection of events made the story more personally meaningful for the children. In addition, the process of writing the logs facilitated the readers in self-organizing and self-corrective reading activities which Rosenblatt advocates as part of a reader's response to literature. When the children read each other's logs, they were able to note the differences and return again to the text to verify the events and the timeline.

Another efferent activity the children completed was the creation of an informative brochure about the Giant Canada Goose modelled on professional brochures about wild animals. The children's fictional reading led to library-based research projects enabling them to find information and organize their own thoughts about geese, thus forming a context for the story. An example of one of the brochures is shown in Figure 4. Throughout the process the children returned to the text to find relevant information provided

Day three

Today a hunting dog came and tried to take the goose, but I scared the dog away. The goose layed five eggs and all of them hatched. One gosling is very little. A hawk tried to get the goslings but he saw the hissing goose and gander and flew away.

Day three

When I arrived at the pond, the gander was hissing and flapping his wings. The goose was hopping nervously around her nest. A hunting dog was chasing a rabbit and the goose didn't like it. The rabbit went into a hole and the dog whined and circled around the hole. Then he stopped and looked at the pond. He moved towards the pond but then I took a dead stick

off the willow tree and I ran at the dog shaking the stick at the dog. The dog growled but I didn't move. The dog turned away and went away. He looked into the tree expecting food to come. I climbed up the tree really fast and then dumped all of the corn out at once. When I was in the tree I saw a creamy white egg in the nestling box. When I got to

the house, I told everyone about the eggs. No one was very excited about the egg but father asked me to tell him if another egg came.

Figures 2 and 3

there. The result was a set of brochures, each one different, that was shared with other classes and finally, individually, with the children's families. Each brochure was illustrated differently and focused on different aspects of the goose, though certain headings were provided by the teacher as a way of helping the children to organize their research. The children were then free to add to the list of possible headings or delete from it. All the brochures were formatted in the same way, however, under the direction of the teacher.

In undertaking research on the Giant Canada Goose, the children learned more about these birds and about the ways in which wildlife management can assist and make a difference to the continuing existence of a species. They also learned about their own possible roles in participating in wildlife management projects. This venture helped the children to more fully appreciate Smucker's story and the many and varied implications and interpretations of it. The efferent information gleaned by students enabled them to re-enter the story at a deeper aesthetic level and to discuss Jacob's world with an understanding and empathy that demonstrated a personal involvement.

Tasks such as the creation of brochures and logbooks engage readers in the process of organizing and expressing their observations, ideas, and feelings. The reader becomes a writer making meaning from the original text. The ultimate aim is to experience a more complete aesthetic reading of the text while forming an understanding of the skills and conventions used by the author. The products, as with other efferent tasks, will vary with different readers as they select what is personally meaningful. During these tasks readers can return to the text to discover how their own habits influence what will be attended to and synthesized; that is, they can become more aware of their own processes as readers as they generate meaning. The process of reading, in Rosenblatt's words, is self-ordering and self-corrective. We see a pedagogical difference between efferent tasks that enable students to organize their own thinking (and our list could be extended to include timelines, diary entries, posters, character sketches, want-ads, and maps; see Benton and Fox) and what has become known as "basalization," or the use of skill-based lessons and activities that tend to organize the readers' thoughts for them. There is a difference between what constitutes good teaching of literature from an efferent stance and, on the other hand, plainly poor teaching of either reading or literature. It is not necessary that "language activities in the school. . .push the child mainly in a nonaesthetic direction" (Rosenblatt in Cooper 42).

THE CANADA GOOSE

Appearance

The Canada Goose is grey-brown in the feathers colour.

Canada Geese have black necks, eyes and bills. They also have snow white cheeks. Canada Geese have black feet.

Their feathers are waterproof. They waterproof by using a gland by their tail. They spread the liquid on their feathers. They have a wingspan of six

feet. Canada Geese are large birds. The Gander weighs twenty pounds and the Goose weighs eighteen.

Habitat

Canada Geese live in north Dakota, south western Ontario, north Central United States and Michigan.

Feeding

They don't eat much. They eat corn and water bugs.

Movements

Canada Geese move in many different ways such as flying,

walking and swimming.

Nesting

Canada Geese always mate with the same goose. They nest by the water. Canada Goslings lay apart from each other. There are five to six eggs. The Goslings have fluffy down when they are born. When they are one month old they start to get their feathers.

When they are one they're also half as big as their parents.

The goslings hatch in June.

Enemies

Canada Geese have few enemies. Their enemies are the long eared hunting dogs, the hawk, the fox and some kinds of man.

Canada Geese hiss and flap their wing. They also bite their enemies when attacked.

Weapons Geese have

Natural Weapons. They are their beaks,

Wings and

Their Feet.

These Weapons are used for biting and protecting themselves from their enemies.

Figures 4A and 4B

It is our hope, as we make the paradigm shift from teaching reading as a mechanical skill to teaching multi-layered interpretations of reading through literature, that we may more fully understand the difference between these two perspectives and the implications of these differences for our own learning and our own reading. As teachers, we certainly need to read literature written for children regularly and frequently, and we must respond to it as adults, attending to our own interpretations and feelings. It is through this contact with literature that we can become more closely in touch with the responses and needs of developing readers. We must share our "evocation" of the text with the children we teach if we are to model and acknowledge the importance of the aesthetic role of literature in our lives. This, in turn, will allow us to collaboratively create meaningful and purposeful learning activities for—and with—children that are soundly based in research and theory and are effective in promoting the development of reading abilities and the appreciation of literature.

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