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EXPERIMENTING WITH RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

By Celeste Resh

We are coming to recognize that teaching that encourages students to actively construct meaning for themselves is of far more value than the kind that sees students as passive receivers of the teacher's message. In *How to Read a Book* (1940), Mortimer Adler observes that people are likely to be passive during lectures, and that their note-taking can become an automatic habit, substituting for learning and thinking. He writes, "A lecture has been well described as the process whereby the notes of the teacher become the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either." An alternative to this, and one that is being advocated increasingly, is "reader-response," an approach to the teaching of literature that stresses the reader's subjective reactions.

In theory, the reader-response approach enables students to create meaning from their own, legitimate interpretations of literature. I was impressed by how one method of reader-response—one developed by David Bleich (1975)—was used with a group of teachers. The Bleich "heuristic," or strategy, encouraged the readers to pay attention to both their experiences and the text in creating interpretations. The teachers I witnessed seemed to use this strategy very effectively. But I wondered how realistic it was to expect students, who did not have the teachers' education or experience, to be able to respond successfully to literature in this way. To satisfy my curiosity, I asked Roberta Lott, a teacher at Holt Junior High, if she would be interested in trying the Bleich heuristic in one of her classes. She was familiar with reader-response theory and agreed to try it with her eighth-grade students.

David Bleich's approach encourages the reader to respond emotionally to literature and then translate the responses into decisions about meaning. The reader's written responses are a record of his or her perception of the reading experience. The responses contain spontaneous consequences of the reading, as well as feelings, thoughts, memories, and associations. A reader may write a response to the literature during or after the reading, and, in the act of writing this response, the reader-writer becomes more aware of how and why meaning is assigned or constructed. Bleich identifies the essential purpose of the response statement as to objectify, first to ourselves and then to others, our perceptions of the literature. Thus, students are encouraged to establish knowledge through sharing their perceptions and subjective reactions. This approach denies the existence of one objective "truth" that can be sought and found in a literary work. Instead, it assumes that meaning comes from response to literature within a social context. That is, in sharing their individual responses, the students negotiate a collective understanding, or common knowledge.

Specifically, Bleich divides the response statement into three phases: perception, affective response, and associative response. In the perception phase the reader is asked to "say what the poem says." Bleich emphasizes that it is important to resist the temptation to criticize such statements and instead ask *why* the reader saw the poem in just the way he or she did. In the second phase, the affective response, the reader describes the actual feeling experienced while reading the poem. The third and most complex form of response is the associative response, which asks the reader to identify associated thoughts and feelings that come to mind when reflecting on the work. Bleich emphasizes that the associative response shows that each reader reads a poem according to the demands of his or her personality. Through the associative phase of the response we are able to see what motivated the reader's particular interpretation.

The Bleich heuristic is enthusiastically supported by Anthony Petrosky (1982) because, he explains, instead of teaching us how to memorize and regurgitate information, it teaches us how to think. It

"begs us to speak our minds about what we have read and, in the process, it asks us to substantiate our interpretations and opinions--our readings--with evidence from our lives and the texts" (21). Reporting on his use of the heuristic in one of his seminars at the University of Pittsburgh, Petrosky notes that the responses students wrote were similar to examples and illustrations used in authoritative essays and not the vague statements and empty assertions often found in "theme" writing. Petrosky suggests that following the use of the Bleich heuristic, teachers move to a discussion in which everyone's responses are treated "as both critical statements whose assumptions and stances need to be examined, questioned, and discussed, as pieces of writing that can be revised and edited" (35). It is important that the reader's interpretations be supported by the text because the reader-response approach does not assume an "anything goes" philosophy.

A variation on the Bleich heuristic was developed by Kathleen McCormick (1985). In her classroom she uses the following general instructions, and she also includes a specific "response statement" assignment for each piece of literature to be read and discussed.

1. What is the Predominant Effect of the Text on You?

Confusion, suspense, identification with characters, interest, boredom, amusement, terror, etc. Expand as much as possible.

2. Why Do You Think the Text Had That Effect?

- a) The nature of the text: subject matter, language, structure, use of familiar/unfamiliar conventions, organization, social norms, characters, themes, gaps or blanks in the structure that the reader has to fill in, etc.
- b) The nature of the reader: did you have prior knowledge of or expectations about the text or about literature in general? What were your reading patterns--consistency building/wandering viewpoint? Did you have knowledge/lack of knowledge about particular literature or social conventions? Did you have knowledge/lack of knowledge about the historical period in which the text was written?

3. What Does Your Response Tell You About Yourself?

About your style of reading, about your values, about assumptions you hold regarding literature, our society, our codes of behavior, your notion of what is "normal," "conventional," etc. (838).

With Bleich and McCormick in mind, Roberta created a homework assignment for her eighth-graders that was somewhere between the simplicity of the one and the detail of the other. Essentially, the assignment asked the students to read a poem twice, write a paragraph on what the poem was about, to write a second paragraph telling how they felt about the poem, and finally, to write what associations came from their feelings and thoughts about the poem and to include examples of things they have heard, read, seen, or experienced that could explain the origin of their ideas. The poem Roberta and I selected was Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." We felt that the poem would not only be challenging but also be likely to generate varying interpretations. These eighth-graders met the challenge with remarkable success.

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

When we reviewed the students' written responses we found that the interpretations of "My Papa's Waltz" generally fit into two categories: 1) the son and/or father seem to be having fun although there is an undercurrent of strain related to the alcohol and/or the disapproving mother; or, 2) the son is a victim of child abuse. The latter is not surprising when one considers the importance of experience to interpretation. In general, television frequently provides experiences that trigger associations upon which interpretations are based. This was true for these students. One student saw the father as a hard-working alcoholic who takes out his frustrations on his son. In the association section of her response, she wrote, "I can't help but think back to *The Burning Bed* and how the man acted. It seems like society deems a poor hard-working man as immediately associated with alcohol. That must be why I think the way I do." *The Burning Bed* was responsible for influencing several students, probably because the event, the killing of a man by his abused wife, occurred only a short distance from Holt; and, the movie had been aired only a short time before we conducted our experiment. This student astutely saw that she had been influenced in her thinking not only by television, but also by the society she lives in.

Another student associated the poem with her reading of *Mommie Dearest*, in which Christine Crawford at one point had to help her drunken mother to bed. "I liked the poem," she wrote, "it was kind of a different twist to make the grown-up look improper and the son to look like a grown-up." With the help of her experience with *Mommie Dearest*, this eighth-grader was able to sense the adult perspective of the boy narrating the poem.

Many of the students saw the poem as describing fairly warm memories of family life. Bill's association, "I remember dancing on my dad's feet but I don't remember him being drunk," allowed him to say that the poem made him "feel happy to see a father having fun with his child." Nancy described the father as "play-dancing" with the son in a "game to get the kid to sleep." She felt "confused" about the situation in which she saw the father as a "good, hard working person who loves his son." The son

was "patient" with the father, but the mother "frowned upon the act." The father "had had a couple of drinks to relax after working hard," Nancy explained. In her association phase of the response she wrote, "The poem made me think of a caring family who loved their son." The confusion she mentioned in the second part of her response apparently occurred because she could not understand why the mother was not happy, as were the son and father. (It is a confusion that can be cleared up in a class discussion that allows Nancy to see that even happy families can have some tension occasionally.)

One of the most unusual responses was Carl's. He saw the child as having been drunk, and in his association part of the response he referred to a time when someone he knew "got into trouble." This is certainly an example of someone reworking a poem according to the demands of his personality, as Bleich said the associative response would show. For Carl, the class discussion that followed the written response turned out to be very important because through it, he saw for himself that his first interpretation could not be substantiated by the text of the poem.

In the discussion following completion of the written responses, Roberta asked students to share their responses with each other. Her focus was to encourage examining and questioning by students of each others' stances and assumptions, as Petrosky suggested. Of the group whose initial responses could not be substantiated by the text, half acknowledged in a questionnaire following the session that they had changed their minds because of the discussion. Carl, who had seen the boy as drunk, wrote that "I now think it is the father... because of the ideas of other people." Another student, who originally saw the boy as being carried and slapped by the father, reported that the discussion made the poem "more clear." She was now able to see that they were dancing, even though "the father was drunk and they were stumbling." She also reported that she had abandoned her original speculation, that the father had become angry while trying to teach his son to waltz, because the discussion had been "convincing."

Roberta and I were pleased at how, during the discussion, students with the more disparate views moved closer to the understanding shared by the larger community of readers. They had not simply memorizing someone's idea of a "correct" answer but had actively thought and decided about the ideas for themselves--created their own knowledge. This gave us an indication of how powerful the sharing phase of a discussion can be, even though our particular class discussion was not as effective as we had wanted. Clearly, the process of negotiating shared meaning requires that **every** student contribute to the discussion. It is rare in all-class discussions that each student participates. Less vocal students do not easily put forth their ideas for examination, nor do they freely comment on others' ideas when they must speak before the whole class. Thus, our next experiment with reader-response will incorporate small group discussions. These group discussions will occur **after** the individual, written responses and **before** the discussion with the full class. In this way, all students will be encouraged to share, to contribute actively. The reader-response approach is a potentially powerful tool in literary study. But in order for it to be fruitful, future research must focus on developing a productive format for follow-up discussions--a powerful part of the process of creating and affirming meaning in literature.

ENDNOTE

Occasionally, teachers will hesitate to use an approach that makes assigning grades difficult. The following statement from Bleich deals with the evaluation of the response method for purposes of meeting school grading requirements:

Inevitably, most of those wishing to try out the response method outlined above will be working with a traditional grading system.... Two principles may be applied in determining a fair letter grade in a literary response course: (1) the amount of work produced by the student, and (2) the seriousness of purpose in the production of that work.... Long and substantial responses cannot be produced by someone who is 'lying' emotionally.... No single response can be graded. Neither, as a rule, can one grade a group of responses. However, in applying the second principle of

evaluation--the seriousness of purpose--the overall development of the response process in the individual is a key factor.... While the length and number of submitted responses is a relatively objective measure of involvement, the instructor's judgment of a student's overall effort is quite subjective. There is no way of denying or reducing this subjectivity.... My response courses have required a predetermined number of response essays of announced lengths. Those students who turn in all the essays--on time and in a cooperative spirit--receive a B in my course. If one or two essays are not turned in at all, or are turned in inconveniently late, the student's grade is reduced by a letter. Further delinquency results in further reduction of the grade.... Any form of sustained and serious involvement in the work of the class must be rewarded (1975, 107-09).

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More from NASA:

The normal process during the countdown is that the countdown proceeds, assuming we are in a go posture, and at various points during the countdown we tag up the operational loops and face to face in the firing room to ascertain the facts that project elements that are monitoring the data and that are understanding the situation as we proceed are still in the go direction.