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EXPLORING TEXTS:

THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION AND WRITING IN THE
TEACHING AND LEARNING OF LITERATURE

EDITED BY GEORGE E. NEWELL
AND RUSSEL K. DURST

EXPLORING TEXTS
THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION AND WRITING
IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING
OF LITERATURE



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Foreword



Arthur N. Applebee

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This is an interesting time in the teaching of literature, as the articles in this collection attest. The New Criticism, on which most of us were raised is beginning to lose its hegemony, as several decades of neglect, what we teach and how we teach it are receiving a careful reexamination by teachers and scholars. The most frequently proffered alternatives to New Critical perspectives usually emphasize one or another version of Reader Response theory. Reader-based approaches, however, are still poorly understood. Beyond the rhetoric of student-centeredness, what does it mean to teach and learn in a response-based classroom?

In a real sense, we do not know. Response-based approaches have been honored more in theory than in practice, and we have only a few good descriptions of what effective instruction looks like. The articles in this book are rich in their descriptions of what life in such classrooms can be like, but they also provide different visions of those classrooms for us to choose among as we tailor our instruction to the particular students with whom we work.

There are a number of misconceptions about response-based teaching that these articles should help dispel. One is the belief that in emphasizing student response, we give up all standards of quality and relevance — that, in fact, “anything goes.” On the contrary, good response-based teaching requires, in Nystrand and Gormoran’s words (Chapter 5) in a different context, “thoughtful and sustained examination of a given topic over a period of time.” Students are forced to confront one another’s differing perceptions of the texts they read, to return to the text for evidence for their claims, and

to confront the differences in perspective that arise from variations in previous experiences and current preoccupations.

A second misconception about response-based teaching is that it deals only with second-rate, easily accessible literature — that even to begin, we must abandon standards of quality. But on the contrary, response-based teaching requires literature of depth and substance in order to work — “thoughtful and sustained examination” of the trivial and obvious is a sure recipe for disaster. At the same time, works of depth and substance can be drawn from many different genres, media, and traditions, opening up a broader field for literary studies that has been true in the past. This broader field is evident in the discussions presented here, but so is the high literary quality of the words discussed.

The final misconception about response-based teaching is that the teacher’s role is greatly diminished as the focus shifts to what the students do and say. But again on the contrary, the role of the teacher is central to an effective response-based classroom. It is a more sophisticated role, however, than simply telling students what they must know; it requires modeling and guiding and shaping students’ growing understandings as they learn how to read and write and think for themselves. The teacher remains the arbiter of what counts as knowing, drawing the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable lines of argument, and introducing new concepts and more powerful strategies as they become appropriate within the developing classroom dialogue.

The chapters in this book are an important step along the way to sharpening our understanding of effective teaching and learning of literature, dispelling misconceptions while offering a wealth of practical approaches.

Preface



The teaching of literature has been and remains a staple of English instruction, but until recently the enterprise has languished amid seemingly more urgent needs, such as improving writing instruction and promoting “higher order thinking.” However, teachers and researchers have now begun to redress (often collaboratively) the neglect of literary understanding and its role in secondary education. On the one hand, scholars are developing a well-articulated conception of the nature of literature and a well-constructed agenda to explore the implications of that conception for teaching. On the other hand, the National Writing Project and the Literature Projects are providing vehicles for teachers to share their knowledge and expertise. Within this compelling intellectual context we recognize the need for a serious reexamination of the contributions of literary education to schooling in general and to the teaching of English in particular.

The basic premise of the collection is that whatever contributions literary education might make to schooling, the development of students’ understanding of themselves and the cultural communities in which they live must remain at its center. It is these understandings that must be challenged, refined, and enriched — through the process of reflection with activities that involve discussion and writing. Students’ progress, then, is not marked primarily by their memorization of authors, literary periods, themes, or interpretations but by their learning to explore progressively more complex texts in the company of peers and with a more experienced reader, the teacher.

Even though students might read and discuss literature beyond the classroom, schooling offers a special and unique occasion for learning about and through literature. At the center of literature instruction are a teacher and students engaged in discussion and writing, coming together to exchange ideas and interpretations. What binds the chapters in this book together is a focus on the importance of students using language to make mean-

ing, and an emphasis on an interactive notion of teaching and learning to foster this meaning making. How literature instruction might reconceptualize its mission using this language and learning perspective is a central theme of this collection.

We began this project with the idea of a book that would go beyond important but programmatic concerns such as decisions about the organization of instructional units, the selection of texts, or the teaching of literary genres. Instead, we sought to bring together recent scholarship that challenges reflective teachers to rethink the fundamental ingredients of their practice. We also wanted a book that had a specific theoretical orientation — language as a way of knowing — and a broad vision of the possibilities of literature instruction. Although we are aware of the vagaries of the individual reader, we envision “the reader” of this book to be experienced and beginning teachers, curriculum directors, and teacher educators. While teachers may read this book to enhance their own practice, the collection also provides compelling ideas to foster rich discussion in graduate courses. We believe this book represents challenges that are well-suited to recent attempts to make the work of literature teachers an intellectually strong and professionally fulfilling endeavor.

In the process of requesting, reviewing, and arranging the chapters for this collection, we have come to appreciate more fully the imaginative intellects of scholars and teachers involved in literature research and teaching. We were struck by a consensus of concern for a reader-based orientation grounded in the interplay of mind and text, and by the variety of ways of respecting and supporting the practical demands of teaching. Perhaps the single most important benefit of an edited work is its ability to focus on a single concern and to examine it from multiple perspectives and with many voices. Accordingly, we are particularly grateful to each contributor who allowed this project to intrude upon the already demanding daily grind.

We are also grateful to Sue Canavan and Hiram Howard, who sought us out, encouraged us, and taught us how to do a book. James Britton has been an important intellectual influence on our work, and anyone familiar with his writing will recognize our great debt to him. Thanks also to Mary Jo, George, Michael, and to Siusan, Alexander, and Jacob who willingly or not overheard our phone conversations and who granted us time away from them throughout the project. The teachers with whom we have worked encouraged us to face up to the realities of schooling and to keep firmly in mind the felt sense of working with students.

G.E.N.

R.K.D.

October 1992

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Toward a Framework for Improving the Teaching of Literature

*Rethinking the Relationships among Students,
Teachers, and Texts*



George E. Newell and Russel K. Durst

The second bell rings and a group of tenth graders of mixed abilities waits expectantly (if not quietly) for their English teacher to begin a lesson on “The Lottery,” a short story by Shirley Jackson.

Yesterday, at the end of class, we began talking about “The Lottery,” and we agreed that since the story is set in a quiet village on a “sunny and clear day,” the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson was quite a surprise. Today, to start off, I’d like you to write for about ten minutes to prepare for our discussion. I would like you to write about your reading of the story — how and when did you realize that things were not as they seemed at the beginning of the story, and that in the end, the lottery was not a pleasant matter? Consider the way the characters talked or acted that suggested a change in their mood. Don’t worry about getting an answer; just let your writing do some thinking about that change.

After the sounds of paper shuffling and timid requests for “an extra pencil” subside, the room falls silent as students begin to write. Some write quickly, some furiously. Others sit and stare into space, make a note or two, hesitate, and then rush to finish just before the teacher requests: “Okay,

now let's have a few of you read your responses." Within a space of about ten minutes, 30 tenth graders have begun to generate ideas and questions — why is Jackson's description of the village and its inhabitants so idyllic at the beginning of the story? What is the point of Tessie Hutchinson's death? How could seemingly normal people resort to such brutality?

In this scenario, we can begin to see what this book's contributors, as both teachers and researchers, have been spending a great deal of time trying to understand: what happens when a teacher, a text, and students come together to construct interpretations collectively by relying on the understandings of many individuals? From one perspective, this way of teaching a story may seem to be something of a waste of time — Why does the teacher begin with such uncertainty, with no real plan for what content to cover, and with just a glimmer of an idea (if he or she has experience) of what the students might write and then later discuss? No doubt beginning with students' understandings and puzzlements is inefficient if covering what more expert readers (teachers) or critics have said about "The Lottery" is the point of the lesson. But that is not the point at all. In this introduction we want to offer our thoughts on developing a new framework for the teaching of literature. To do so requires that we begin by reexamining our assumptions and rethinking what is often overly familiar about the way we lead discussions, the nature of the writing about literature we assign, and the validity of the assessments we employ.

ASSUMPTIONS GUIDING THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Each era of literature teaching in high school and college has offered its own set of goals — memorization of authors and their works in the nineteenth century, solutions to life's problems in the progressive era of American education, the study of an academic subject shaped by the tenets of the New Criticism in the 1950s, a source of social and personal revolution in the 1960s, and a content for reading skills and for cultural literacy in the 1970s and 1980s.

Such a turbulent history, it can be argued, has left literature teaching without a central metaphor for instruction. Findings from Applebee's (1989; 1990) studies of literature instruction in American schools reflect this lack of a principled and directed approach to literary education. Though Applebee marshalled much evidence that teachers have a deepening sense that traditional text-centered models of literature teaching are no longer

adequate, he also reported that, “The most widely used classroom approach involved a New Critical close reading of texts, and class discussion usually took the form of a dialogue leading students toward an accepted, teacher-sponsored interpretation. Reader response theory, to the extent it was acknowledged, was likely to be used as a motivating device on the way to close analysis of text, not as a legitimate approach in its own right” (Applebee, 1989, p. 37).

The sources of such practical compromises become obvious if we consider the rather contradictory assumptions currently driving the field. First, we have assumed that literature is a content area, like biology or history, that should concern itself primarily with specific facts and information about literature — literary themes, authors, characters and traditions. Such content clearly has a place in literary education, but as a primary goal this informational orientation seems to run counter to a consistent theme in discussions of literary understanding: the importance of both the reader and the text in the interpretive act. Second, we have assumed that since the professional critic’s interpretation is the best informed, literary criticism is the most appropriate source of facts and information about literature. Yet, as a result, teachers’ approaches to literature are often driven by canonized interpretations of specific works, a stance that often impedes efforts to foster students’ deeper understanding of a text. Third, we have looked to traditional notions of literary study as the model for how to teach literature — typically a teacher leading a text-centered discussion that requires close, objective analysis. However, the English language arts profession has frequently criticized this model, especially after two decades of process-oriented writing instruction (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford, 1989). Fourth, in selecting texts we have assumed that only the texts contained in the literary canon represent the best of the culture, and thus, it is those texts that must be taught in schools. These texts certainly have a place in the curriculum as valued representations of cultural wisdom, and yet we are aware that our school population is more ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse than ever and that the literature of other, non-western cultures also possesses wisdom that can challenge and enrich the lives of all students.

By pointing out some of the paradoxes associated with literature instruction we do not mean to say that teachers, researchers, and theorists alike have not given these assumptions much thought. Much of the current pedagogical work in literature has shifted toward reader response theory with its concern for reader-based engagement and the development of interpretive communities. Several reader response critics and theorists, such as Rosenblatt (1976) and Bleich (1975), have published major pedagogical

works, and others have become concerned with pedagogy (Fish, 1980; Scholes, 1985). Scholarly journals as well as practitioner-oriented journals contain an ample number of essays and research reports arguing for the importance of the thinking process in literary reading and understanding. However, we believe that to the extent that literature instruction is a field divided against itself, there is a void in conceptualizing new approaches to teaching literature.

GOALS FOR THE BOOK

Accordingly, this book attempts to examine, within a language and learning framework, the ways discussion and writing shape literary understanding, an orientation that is not always apparent in the press of teaching. Rather than asking what we, as teachers, might say to students about a text, we might ask what role students play in formulating an understanding of a text. But where does language come into this? As a mode of representation, language allows students to make knowledge and their thinking available for reflection and revision. By speaking or writing what they know, they change it. Each chapter of the book presents theoretically principled and practical ways for English language arts teachers to use discussion and writing to guide students in the process of such understanding.

Recent developments in theories of reading, writing, and learning provide rich sources of new ideas, and this volume's contributors explore their uses in the teaching of literature. In general, we have attempted to articulate principled approaches and activities that teachers may employ in teaching literature to junior and senior high school students to enhance literary understanding.

In compiling this edited work, we hope to accomplish four goals:

1. To explore ways of reconceptualizing the interrelationships of discussion, writing, and literary understanding by tapping new developments in the fields of reading and writing as well as in literary theory as the means by which we might construct reader-based activities. This seems a necessary first step toward developing general principles for literature instruction that will hold across various contexts.
2. to establish the teacher's central role in creating environments for literature instruction, demonstrating the teacher's professionalism as reflected in the day-to-day decision making and planning is a key element in the reform of literature instruction.

3. To develop a new rationale for the role of literature in the secondary curriculum based on recent arguments for the value of literary ways of knowing as distinct and significant forms of reasoning. If higher order skills of interpretation and critical thinking are to be taught more effectively, the study of literature may be a particularly productive way of doing so.
4. to reexamine the roles of the teacher, the student, and the text within the framework of “social construction” — a view of the instructional process that bridges the complex and dynamic setting of the classroom and recent work in psychology and language learning.

We now turn to an exploration of the implications of each of these four goals.

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION AND WRITING IN LITERATURE INSTRUCTION

After two decades of efforts to reform the teaching of writing, English language arts teachers and researchers have again started asking questions about literature instruction. Although more than 25 years ago a great deal of time and energy was given to examining literature as a component of the English language arts curriculum (Commission on English, 1965; Squire and Applebee, 1968; Dixon, 1975), we are now looking with new eyes at literary understanding and at the efforts of instruction to support it. Considering what has occurred over that time, it is well we should.

In Applebee’s (1989) study of “The Teaching of Literature in Programs with Reputations for Excellence in English” he reports two seemingly contradictory findings. On the one hand, he reports that the teaching of literature consumes about 50 percent of instructional time in the high school English classroom — a large portion of time when we consider that writing, an area that some would argue is a more urgent need, is taught about 28 percent of the time. On the other hand, Applebee also discovered that “The teachers in these schools lacked a vocabulary to talk about the process of literary understanding, or about the instructional techniques that might support such a process” (p. 37). Given the dearth of theoretically sound and practically useful new approaches to the most important component of the English curriculum, we believe that the time is right for a collection of essays that offers practitioners, teacher educators, and curriculum directors clearly articulated alternatives to the more traditional, text-centered approaches that now seem to dominate literature instruction.

One of the more persistent images of the literature classroom is of a teacher leading students to an interpretation of a literary text. Our view of literature instruction seeks to change, in several important ways, the traditional relationship among teacher, text, and student. Traditionally, teachers have considered students' oral and written responses to literature as tools for evaluation and testing. That is, when asking for discussion or writing about literature, teachers typically concern themselves with monitoring students' responses for a specific, perhaps teacher-sponsored, interpretation of the text. Using discussion and writing to evaluate literary understanding certainly has a place in the classroom, but we also believe that oral discussion and written responses can become tools for enhancing students' understanding of the text. This belief rests upon the assumption that language can become a means for acquiring knowledge, for reflecting on knowledge, and for reformulating knowledge in light of new insights whether they come from personal explorations or from participation in an interpretive community.

As we see it, adopting a language and learning approach to the teaching of literature represents one of the more significant changes we might make in literature teaching. Because oral and written language abound in literature classrooms, our perspective is based, not on a radical shift in what teachers do. However, it does require rethinking the significance of allowing students to discuss their literary responses (orally or in writing) with one another to arrive at their own interpretations of texts. Consider, for example, the experience of talking with a friend about a movie and discovering new insights into a character's motives or the significance of a dark and rainy final scene. School learning demands more public, less intimate forms of talk, but it is certainly possible to capture a similar spirit of inquiry and to provide contexts in which students can learn new ideas and skills in interaction with others.

However, efforts to reform the teaching of literature will require more than calls for increasing the amount of student talk and writing about literature. The teaching of literature now requires a major effort on three fronts: (1) a recognition of the central role of the professional teacher in the processes of teaching and learning and in the process of reform, (2) the development of a well conceptualized notion of the nature of literature and what it might contribute to schooling, and (3) the construction of a strong theory of literature instruction. Given that many teachers have not been exposed to recent developments in literary theory and that most of the work in theory has been oblivious to the pedagogical implications of the new approaches, this book explores how a language and learning framework as

well as new theories of reading, writing, and literary understanding may contribute to reconceptualizing literature instruction.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN REFORMING LITERATURE INSTRUCTION

Efforts to reform schooling have almost without exception ignored the teacher. Competency-based education, teacher-proof curricula, and state level programs of study are all examples of how the teacher has been overlooked. These represent attempts to reform schools from the top down rather than from the bottom up. Those of us who teach know that genuine change occurs when in the confines of our classrooms we interact with students and try to make our lessons work. This notion of curriculum as enacted in the process of teaching and learning has important implications for how we think about the teaching of literature.

In one sense, to include the practical knowledge of the teacher in reforming literature instruction requires that we define the curriculum as something that happens when teachers and students come together to study literature. A printed document may describe the scope and sequence of content to be imparted, but the literature curriculum becomes enacted when a teacher and students read, write, argue, share ideas, and interpret what they do and say.

Recent developments in English instruction such as the National Writing Project and the offshoot Literature Project have focused directly on the contributions of the teacher in the process of educational reform. The recurring theme that has emerged from these initiatives is that teaching is a profession that requires teachers to be regarded, and to act, as professionals who bear the responsibility of providing effective instruction for all students. Writing projects and literature projects contribute to this view of the profession by providing contexts in which professional teachers can share their practical knowledge with other successful and experienced colleagues.

Scholars have also begun to study the teacher as a professional whose instructional decisions are shaped by beliefs and knowledge. Shulman (1987) and Grossman (1990) have provided compelling evidence that effective teaching, including the teaching of literature, is best understood in terms of pedagogical content knowledge; that is, knowledge of how to transform the content knowledge of their field to enable students to learn. The primary assumption of their studies has been, "To reason one's way through an act of teaching is to think one's way from the subject matter as under-