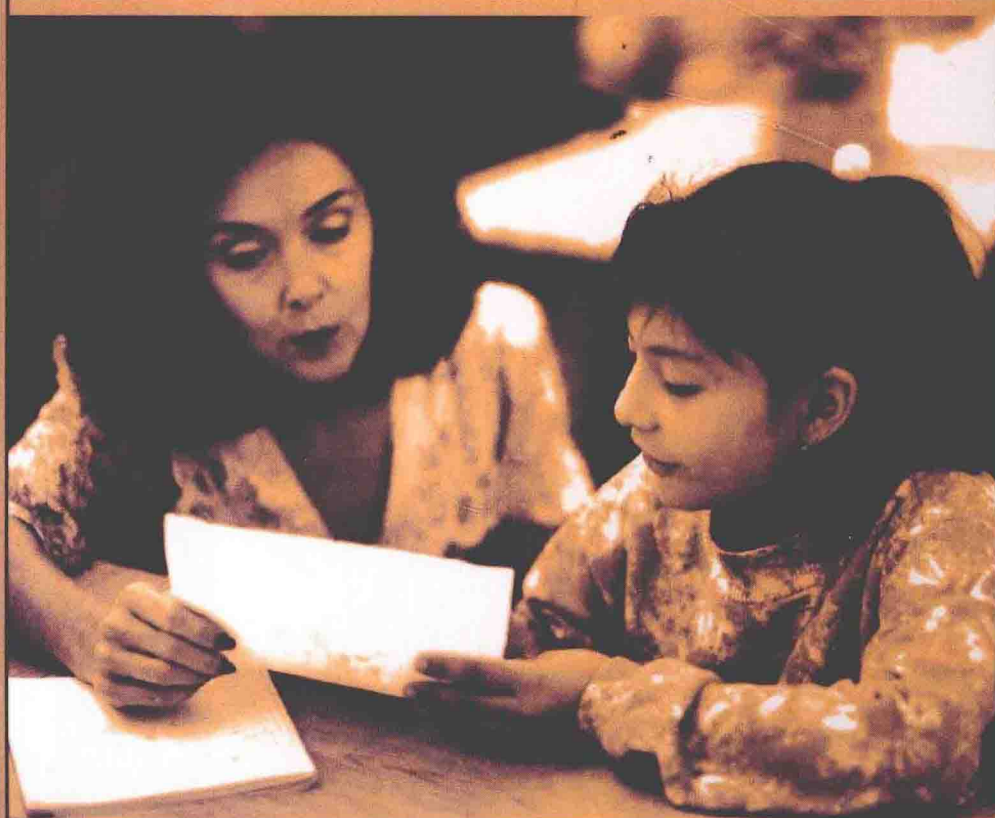


MAKING MEANING

IN THE

RESPONSE-BASED CLASSROOM



Margaret Hunsberger George Labercane



Making Meaning in the Response-Based Classroom

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Making Meaning in the Response-Based Classroom

*In memory of
Diane Paulsen
Gifted teacher
Insightful student
Warm-hearted friend*

INTRODUCTION

Response, then, can never be singular; it is always multiple, layered, combining understanding and affect, involving mental images and gestures for which the surface features of words always seem inadequate. For me, and for the children I know, responses are other versions, rediscoveries, sets of possibilities, hazards, risks, a change of consciousness, a social interaction. (Meek, 1990, p. 10)

Reader response theory has, perhaps, been the most influential development in the teaching of English for the past decade. Numerous treatments of the theory have been put forward in a series of writings by notable figures such as Louise Rosenblatt (1978), Wolfgang Iser (1978), and Stanley Fish (1980). This work has reflected an interest in the reading process and with reader-text relationships. Eagleton (1983), in his review of literary theory, raises issues of definitions of literature and corresponding notions of it that have been imported from Europe: hermeneutics, semiotics, reception theory, structuralism, and deconstruction. Freund (1987) also provides a clear and cogent account of the development of reader response criticism in which she focuses on the work of four influential thinkers in the field: Culler, Fish, Holland, and Iser. These, and other accounts, reflect the interest and concern with moving our thinking beyond the work of the New Critics.

Richard Beach (1993) provides further explication of reader response theories from five different theoretical perspectives: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. His review is instructive in that he presents a comprehensive overview of these perspectives and provides teachers with a number of useful strategies for showing how each perspective reflects its own theoretical framework. Other texts have attempted to show how response can be taught using a variety of pedagogical approaches: Corcoran and Evans (1978) and Hayhoe and Parker (1990), to name a few.

What these reviews and edited versions show is that the field of reader response, as it relates to classrooms, has been evolving in recent years, so that we are now into the second generation of such work. The first generation ushered in new and exciting ideas, often presented dramatically and idealistically. What was evident was the import of these ideas for the classrooms. Teachers were excited by Atwell's (1987) conception of the Readers' Workshop, in which students were encouraged to develop an understanding and deep appreciation for literature by simply being given a text and an opportunity to read. Teachers were admonished to act as guides who "led from behind" while students were to be left alone to read what they wanted. We now know what some of the difficulties are with such approaches and what kinds of issues ordinary teachers encounter when they try to implement a Readers' Workshop in their classrooms. As we enter the second generation in our teaching of response, we need to deal with these issues so that teachers will not abandon the teaching of literature because they feel overwhelmed by the evident difficulties but rather will find renewed vigor in the approaches offered in this book of readings.

The writers here are teachers and scholars, in the sense that each has taught elementary or secondary school and has also done graduate work and given attention to research. Some are university professors. What we have attempted to do is to seek to meld theory and practice, not by offering a section of each, but by using both to show how and why. Some case studies have been included showing what the teacher actually did to develop response and taking an analytical approach to why or how an idea worked, did not work, or partly worked.

The book includes suggested teaching strategies, ideas, and procedures; bibliographies of theoretical and applied sources; children's and adolescent literature; reflective questions within chapters; and other invitations to the reader to reflect on or discuss with other teachers the ideas raised. Our goal has been to develop a set of readings that present evolving ideas in reader response and to show how reader response is being translated into practice in classrooms. Although we believe that the text could serve as an introduction to the area of reader response as it has evolved to this point, our intent is to allow those teachers (or pre-service teachers) who have some acquaintance with the theory to pursue it more fully and thoughtfully. Our bias is against those texts that make reader response sound easy and rose-colored (i.e., "Adopt reader response and your language arts problems will be solved") and those that discuss teaching activities as divorced from theoretical underpinnings and principles. We are biased toward reader-text positions that we think can be reasonably applied in the classroom, such as the views held by scholars like Iser and Rosenblatt.

Finally, to reiterate the aims of this book, we see the necessity to re-vision reader response, to see it as an attempt "to allow readers to take risks in trying out new generic forms, to tolerate uncertainty, to discover that texts have power, and to read against the grain in the spirit of the age, as we teach it" (Meek, 1990, p. 7).

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and *Workplace Contexts* (with Freedman, Medway, & Paré), Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999; and Dias & Paré, Eds., *Transitions: Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings*, Hampton Press, 2000.

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Making Meaning in the Response-Based Classroom

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CHAPTER

1

“Can We Really Read Anything We Want?”

Aesthetic Reading in the Classroom

CATHERINE RAMSDEN

Calgary Board of Education

“I have never finished reading a whole novel for school since Grade Four!” Bill announced boldly to me and his Grade Twelve English class. Trying to maintain my composure at this scandalous confession, I responded with, “But how did you manage in Grades Ten and Eleven?” To which he proudly replied, “In Grade Ten, we did *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and in Grade Eleven *Lord of the Flies*, and I rented the videos.”

This flagrant revelation stirred a long-suppressed awareness in my English-teacher soul: the attitudes and practice inherent in Bill’s statement were more common than I or my colleagues really cared to admit.

The Challenge

The challenge became to find a better way to develop in my students a heightened interest in and commitment to reading in their lives, but more specifically in English class.

Much has been written (including Farrell and Squire, 1990) about the difference students experience between the reading and responding to literature they do in school and that which they do apart from school. “I read for detail when I read for school. . . . I try to focus on all the little things I know we’ll talk about in class. When I read for myself, I just kick back and let the story sort of swallow me up” (Nelms & Zancanella, 1990, p. 44). Louise Rosenblatt describes students as operating on “two separate and distinct planes” (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 58), one relating to information and ideas about literature handed down from teachers and critics, and the other—not often considered—pertaining to their personal responses to what they have read. My concern here has more to do with their attitudes toward the reading itself than specifically how students are asked to respond to it, but it is

naive to consider that the two are mutually exclusive. Also, as I was considering a Grade Twelve English class (with provincewide examinations looming at the end of the school year), evaluation was a necessary (albeit somewhat restrictive) component. It impacts how free students feel to explore and respond as they wish versus what they think the teacher expects. The first consideration, though, was the reading.

The Nature of the Reading

The specific nature of the project emerged from reading Rosenblatt's description and discussion of efferent and aesthetic reading, and from personal reflection about why I enjoy reading and what I would really like my students to take away with them from my English class. Rosenblatt suggests: "The teacher of literature, then, seeks to help specific human beings discover the satisfactions of literature" (1983, p. 26). Also, "Literature provides a *living-through*, not simply *knowledge-about* . . ." (p. 38). She originally expressed these ideas in 1983, and although we teachers of literature have moved some distance in that direction, there is still considerable room for growth and change. When I assign a novel or short story for my students to read, I suspect—rather, I am certain—that many of them do not necessarily experience much "satisfaction" but are more interested in getting the job done and receiving a reasonable (the definition is relative!) mark for doing it. However, acknowledging their understandable concern about the results, I was drawn to Purves' conclusion that an important goal of literature education deals with "habits of mind in reading . . . inculcat[ing] specific sets of preferred habits of reading and writing about that body of texts termed 'literature'" (1993, p. 88).

My objective has been to provide a reading project and an environment that would allow and encourage students to move their reading stance as close to the aesthetic end of the continuum as possible, while still retaining an evaluative component. This was partly to satisfy the need for marks from the perspective of the teacher and students, but moreso to demonstrate that work done related to reading can be personally fruitful as well as "educational." Before describing the specific nature of the project, its implementation, and its results, however, it is important to review the theory and reflection on which it was based.

It is worth considering Purves' assertion that "the problem may be that we err when we even consider that reading a literary work in school is anything like reading for pleasure" (1993, p. 348). This observation apparently suggests that there is no resemblance or relationship between the two. However, he may be proposing that reading for pleasure and reading for assignments are different enough that teachers should pay attention.

In support of aesthetic reading in the classroom, Greco, for example, writes: "Because reading is personal and dynamic, it can trigger self-discovery and self-actualization" (1990, p. 40). She also quotes Iser's description of the reading process as "active and creative" and providing "a theoretical base for focused reader-oriented writing assignments that can excite students about reading literature" (p. 40). My contention is while writing assignments that focus on specific reader ori-

entations can excite them, the same is true for choice of literature to be read. So I began planning the project with the belief that the students should be absolutely free to select their reading material.

When I presented this idea to the students, of course, their questions about the choice of books very much reflected their school experience. Could they really read anything they wanted? I replied by asking them if they felt there should be any limits and was rewarded with their response that their choices should reflect a meaningful use of their time. In other words, *The Cat in the Hat* (their suggestion) would be inappropriate. The issue of rereading also arose, and we agreed that this was an acceptable element of free choice—and, incidentally, an interesting aspect of reading that I could examine through their responses.

That being said, some support for the free choice of texts is perhaps necessary. Probst said it well when he observed that "the fundamental literary experience is intimate, personal, and dependent upon the nature of the individual" (1988, p. 37). Albeit rather obvious, this conclusion is not often considered when assigning literature to be read by students in English classes. I was reminded of it during my Grade Twelve English students' discussion of Timothy Findley's *The Wars*. Their responses were as varied as their personalities, to the extent that one student declared it was the best assigned novel he had ever read, whereas another insisted he disliked it so much that he didn't even want to discuss it. Despite my students' observation that their choices should reflect a valuable use of their time, one concern that arose for me when considering absolute free choice of books to read was the fear that they might choose "junk." Donelson has a delightful way of alleviating that misgiving as he examines the types of books we all read when we were young "but now find reprehensible" and suggests that our students may also "survive their lists of literary horrors, just as we did" (1989, p. 23).

In reader response work, some student choice is critical (Probst, 1990). However, an important consideration is the fact that all reading assignments in English classes do not need to be individual student choice. It is indeed the mandate and responsibility of teachers of English to expose students to a variety of genres, themes, authors, and so forth. However, first we need to create what Prest and Prest call "a dynamic atmosphere of trust, discussion, enthusiasm and acceptance in the classroom" (1988, p. 131). In fact, a good number of students sought my advice, especially those who did not usually read for pleasure. I took great delight in chatting with them about their interests and then recommending some of my favorites, which I was happy to lend them. This created an unexpected additional reward in the relationships that were developing between teacher and students.

Meeting Curricular Needs

Having decided that the project would allow students this free choice of books to be read, I faced a number of significant questions. The most important of these were the amount of time allowed for completion of the project and for reading in class, the nature and weighting of evaluation, and the question of how much background and explanation of my goal I should share with the students.

I confess to feeling anxious about the amount of time we would be spending away from the “curriculum,” but my guilt was assuaged when I reflected upon Galda’s comment that “allowing students time to be with books in the classroom . . . teaches them to value books” (1988, p. 100). Also, because I had decided that there would be oral and written components to the evaluation (the only teacher demand apart from time), I realized that many of my curricular responsibilities would be addressed. The students would be engaged in prewriting activities, such as small group discussion and one-on-one planning with me; they would have the opportunity to participate in peer editing; and they would be challenged to exercise their creativity and personal and critical response to literature.

The specific nature of the evaluation would be decided by the students. As a result of our collective brainstorming, we settled on a total mark of 100, to be divided between written work and an oral component, which could occur either through a class presentation or one-on-one with me. The breakdown between written and oral work would be decided by each student. However, first we had to determine *what* we would be evaluating. I asked the question, “What does a thoughtful, insightful, aesthetic reading entail?” As I examine that question now, I realize that its wording somewhat influences the possible responses, but I believe that is almost impossible to avoid. The list they brainstormed was:

- vivid description
- what you liked
- recommendation
- enthusiasm
- understanding
- comparisons
- related interests
- thoughts provoked

When discussing *how* we would be able to discern whether any of these elements were present, they again devised a long list of possibilities, including such ideas as seminars, newspaper articles, and posters. I encouraged them to select a book first because it was something they wanted to read and to think about what to do with it later—easier said than done, as it turned out.

With regard to the issue of what to tell the students about the purpose of the project, I elected to introduce them to the concept of efferent and aesthetic reading.

Aesthetic and Efferent Reading

I am tempted at this point to quote Rosenblatt’s entire chapter entitled “Efferent and Aesthetic Reading” (1978, pp. 22–47), as this is the basis of my understanding and I highly recommend her explanation. However, time and space preclude such quoting; moreover, articulating my own interpretation will more effectively characterize my application of it. In essence, the difference between efferent and aes-

thetic reading lies in where the reader's attention is focused. In efferent reading, the attention "is directed outward . . . towards concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading" (p. 24). When reading aesthetically, however, the reader is attentive to "what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25).

An important feature of this theory is the fact that these two types of reading exist at opposite ends of a continuum. This is crucial to the argument that aesthetic reading can occur in schools, because the practice, I believe, needs only to move students' reading stance closer to the aesthetic end of the continuum. Purves refers to Langer's suggestion that one "difference between efferent and aesthetic reading in school lies less in the way we read than in the follow-up to the reading" (Purves, 1993, p. 349). Rosenblatt also introduces the idea that the same text may be read efferently and aesthetically. My own experience of reading as a student in school attests to that. I often recall feeling very fortunate that while being absorbed in a good novel, I was actually doing my homework. Rosenblatt contends that, compared with efferent reading, aesthetic reading requires more and continuing attention to the words of the text and their effect on the reader. That suggests a more conscious, active reading than does Nell's description of ludic reading as being *Lost in a Book* (Nell, 1988), which is the kind of reading Purves argues is impossible in the classroom. Rosenblatt proposes that an aesthetic reading may be interrupted by a concern about information being acquired but that this enhances the overall aesthetic reading.

I explained to my students that my objective was to provide an opportunity for them to really enjoy their reading apart from restrictions created by the English class, and I made a point of expressing my confidence and faith in them as individuals who would make worthwhile choices (for them) and be responsibly involved. As I reflect on this, I'm sure that assurance was more for me than for them.

Expectations

The final aspect of the introduction to the students was a discussion of expectations: theirs of me and mine of them. I talked about wanting them to throw themselves wholeheartedly into their reading, especially if we were to devote considerable class time to it. In other words, that time would be for reading, not doing other homework or staying away. I was reassured later when, on a day that I had to be away from school, during the two hours allotted to reading, my substitute reported that they did exactly that with little distraction but for bathroom breaks. When I asked the students about their expectations of me, I had to do a little prodding. This is not something students are often invited to do, and I'm sure it had not really occurred to them that they have this right. Eventually, they expressed their need to be reassured that they really did have all this freedom and that I would be fair in their evaluations. This issue arose several times throughout the project, with students asking questions such as, "Would this be okay?" and "Is this what you want?"