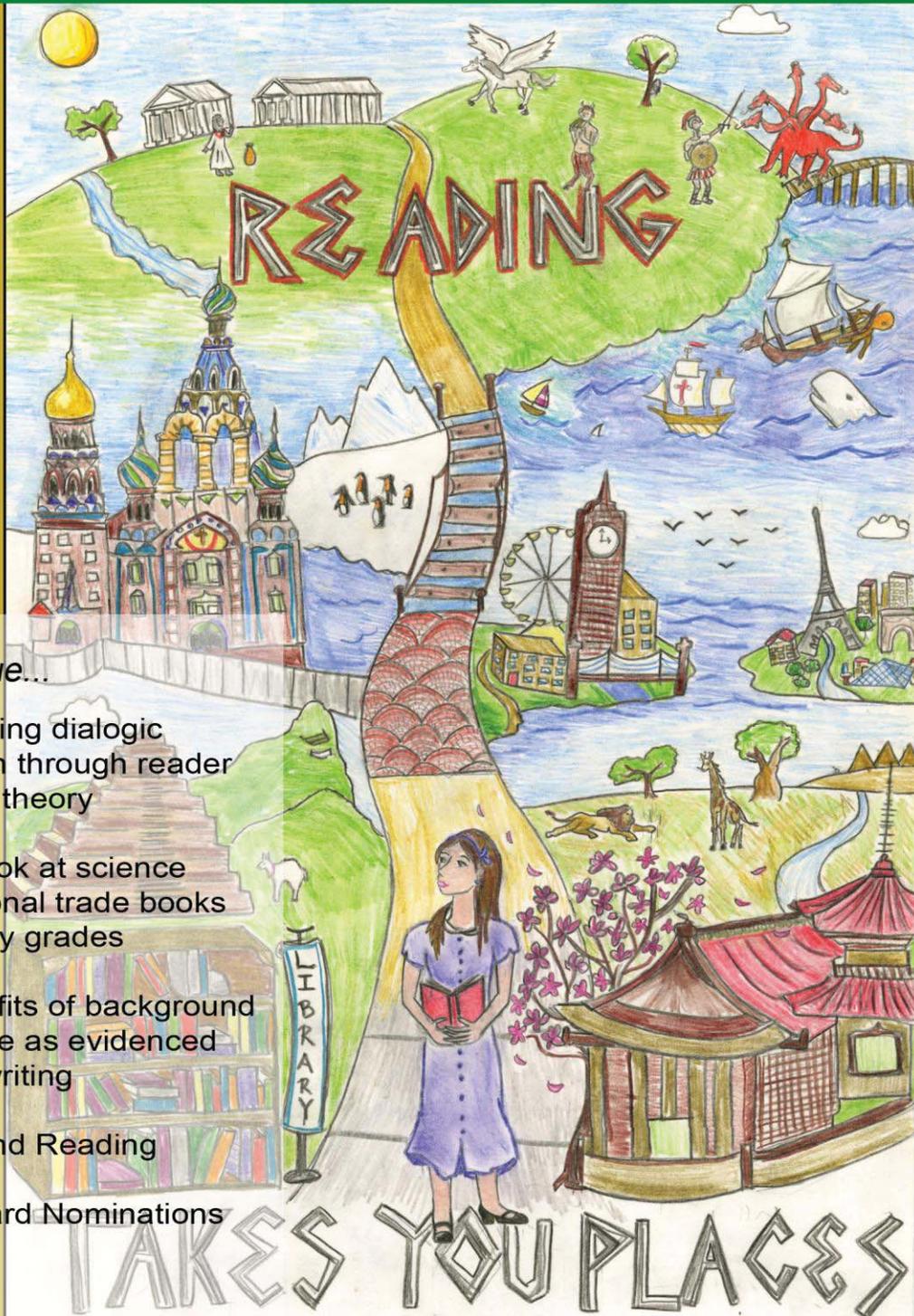


The FLORIDA Reading JOURNAL



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Encouraging Dialogic Instruction through Reader Response Theory

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Abstract: This article examines Reader Response Theory within a middle school language arts classroom and the teacher's move toward creating dialogic engagement with literature.

What Am I Thinking....Now!?

I always hated playing the traditional “guess what’s in the teacher’s head” game when I was a student. I can remember sitting near the back of the classroom, hoping to fade into the wall or remain hidden by the student seated in front of me so that I wouldn’t be called on to answer the instructor’s next question. It wasn’t that I was incompetent or that I didn’t have a possible answer. It was more that I didn’t want to provide the “wrong” answer. So, when my teacher would ask, “What was Jonah’s logic in taking the apple home from the school playground?” as we read *The Giver* (1993) or “What do you think of the society’s belief in sameness?”, I would keep my thoughts to myself and refrain from speaking up.

As a teacher, I find that I still hate this game. I don’t want my students to feel that they must find “my” answer as we discuss literature. In fact, I don’t want my students to feel that they must focus on “my” questions. However, it often seems that by the time they reach my middle school classroom, they have become so ingrained with the notion that the teacher holds all of the knowledge, it’s like pulling teeth to get them to think critically and respond with their own insight, knowledge, and connections. Why is this?

I don’t want my students to feel that they must find “my” answer as we discuss literature. In fact, I don’t want my students to feel that they must focus on “my” questions.

My ultimate goal as a language arts teacher, is to produce a truly dialogic classroom, or a classroom in which my students share their own knowledge, questions, and insights rather than rely on me for the answers. Sure, it might seem easier as an educator teaching in an accountability-driven era to turn my attention towards test preparation and questions that contain a single, “best” response, but I want my students to engage with a text in a critical and very personal manner. The question is, how do I accomplish this? How do I assist my students in seeing that their own connections are just as valuable, if not more so, than my own? How do I navigate my classroom away from my own reader “monologue” of the text and towards a true dialogic engagement with the literature?

Active VS Passive Engagement

To begin my search for answers, I had to understand what it means to “engage” in the reading of a text. While researchers and scientists can work together to understand the human brain and therefore conceive methods and theories regarding the process of transforming symbol to letter to word, the area of reading comprehension remains rather elusive and complex in nature.

For years, experts in the field of reading have worked to define and discuss what it means to “read” a text (Gunning, 2000; McCormick, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Tovani, 2000; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Researchers view reading

comprehension as simply the ability to reconstruct an author's original message. This would constitute what Vacca and Vacca (2005) refer to as the "literal level" of literacy. Still others believe that comprehending requires much more from the reader. It requires that the reader involve his/her own personal experiences and background knowledge in the reading of material (Robinson, 2004). At the "interpretive level," students read between the lines and find ways to integrate their own knowledge and background into determining the meaning of a text (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Today, we understand that true comprehension requires that the reader involve his/her own personal experiences and background knowledge in the reading of material (Robinson, 2004). This notion of reading views it as an active process on the part of the reader.

A passive view of reading notes that the reader's only responsibility is to engage in the text in a manner that permits basic knowledge and understanding of the author's intended message (Robinson, 2004). In this case, it is not necessary for the reader to attribute opinion to or question the text. The act of reading becomes the mimicking of the author's ideas or in my case, the mimicking of my own ideas.

Within the passive view of literacy, my role as the teacher is simply to assist the reader in acquiring the skills to decode language and repeat the information placed before them. Reading and classroom discussion become a monologic, or back and forth interaction. The reader attempts to comprehend the text according to what the author intended and respond to teacher-guided questions using another individual's interpretation of the text.

As a teacher of reading, I know that a passive view of literacy will not allow my students to flourish as competent, avid readers. In fact, I would be doing my students a serious disservice if I simply required that they read and respond to material based on my own preconceived ideas regarding a text.

In contrast, an active stance on literacy places the reader in a position to interact with the text and therefore achieve comprehension. The reader becomes an active participant in the reading process as he/she brings background knowledge and experience to the text. Reading becomes a transmission of thought as the reader brings his/her personal experiences to the text.

An active, or engaged view of literacy values the reader as an active participant in the creation of meaning. Interpretation is left to the individual mind and questions are prominent. In this case, class discussion becomes a true interaction between readers rather than the replication of the teacher, or a single reader's thoughts or ideas.

Classroom Discourse

"Someone tell me what you think about Katniss's character," began a recent class discussion regarding Suzanne Collin's novel, *Hunger Games* (2008).

The question was an honest one as I sought to unveil what my students understood regarding the text. I glanced around the classroom at the twenty-two faces staring back and noticed that only a few hands shot into the air. These same few hands seemed to wave at me day after day.

I called on Linda (a pseudonym), and I noticed that she seemed rather hesitant in her response. Her eyes appeared to search my own for some sign of acceptance that she was providing me with the answer I sought.

"Um," she muttered, "I think that she is brave?"

After she responded in a statement that rounded off with an inflection offering hesitation and question, I had to admit that the readers were seeking "my" answer to "my"

question, exactly what I did not want for my students.

“What makes you say that,” I asked, hoping to probe her for personal support. She seemed a little frightened of my question as she began to shy away from responding. This was not at all what I wanted as a teacher of reading. This passivity to the text displayed an attempt at “my” interpretation of the material rather than that of the individual reader.

Taking an Active Role

It is essential that readers learn to read and comprehend material in a manner that creates personal relevance and forces them to take an active role in their learning. What I want is for all of my readers to feel secure in their own thoughts and ideas rather than feel as though they must mirror my own. I want to encourage true dialogic learning.

Contemporary experts in the field of reading take into account the notion that readers must create a curiosity and internal motivation to read, comprehend, and engage in a text (Allison, 2009; Hedrick, 2007; Kohn, 2010; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Over time, studies have steered away from viewing reading comprehension as the ability to answer assessment-type questions towards the creation of meaning by engaging in text with prior knowledge and experience (Huey, 1968). Reading became viewed as an active process that noted how readers chose to construct meaning from text as they experienced reading as an act of empowerment (Villaume & Braham, 2002).

Expecting readers to take a passive role in their comprehension as we feed them information undermines our mission as teachers of reading. Promoting a disengagement from the text removes empowerment as readers are spoon-fed the thoughts and reactions of another rather than provided the tools to engage and enjoy material for themselves. Therefore,

teachers of reading cannot look at reading comprehension instruction as teaching readers the “right” way to read a text. Rather, we should instruct in ways that promote comprehension so that readers can learn to read for their own pleasure and learn to fulfill their own curiosities and learn more about their world (Robinson, 2004).

More pragmatically, we know that readers become disengaged or confused when they do not take on an active role in their comprehension and in the act of reading itself (Nagy & Scott, 2000). An interactive view of reading recognizes the roles of both the reader and the text in building meaning (Tovani, 2000). Deeper understanding of the text rests squarely in the middle as the text presents itself to the reader who in turn must implement background knowledge in order to construct a personally relevant meaning that has a credible relation to the text (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998).

Every reader comes into the reading process with his or her own foundation of knowledge and with personal experiences. Comprehension proceeds from the transaction between the text and this personal plethora of knowledge and experiences (Gunning, 2000).

Engaging in Critical Reading

“Okay, let’s try something different today.” After noticing that the class discussion was not exactly flowing in the manner that I would have liked in encouraging comprehension in my young readers, I instructed everyone to take out a piece of paper and a pen. “As we read today, we are going to try something a little different today. We are going to complete a Reader Response.”

A Glimpse at Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) explained the significance of aesthetic response, or personal response to reading, and an efferent, or

informational response to reading in the construction of her now infamous, Transactional Theory of Reading. She argued that readers should read beyond the text and engage with material on a personal level using their background knowledge, feelings, and thoughts in order to further their comprehension. This form of reading takes place as the readers engage in transactions with texts (Gunning, 2000).

Rosenblatt (1991) examined the hypothesis that personal responses to a piece of literature become the foundation for a critical, knowledgeable interpretation of the text. Readers can pull from both personal experience and personal knowledge in completing reader responses (Tovani, 2000).

From Transaction to Response

Researchers have noted how the development and implementation of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory has proved invaluable to the area of reading comprehension (Watson, 2005). The role of the teacher has moved from imparting readers with a definitive view of the text, to the encouragement of independent, critical reading (Watson, 2005).

Today's reading experts and educators have implemented Rosenblatt's theory and put it to use in the classroom as Reader Response Theory. Reader Response Theory is viewed as a particular form of interactive reading. According to contemporary authors and educators, such as Chris Tovani (2000), it accompanies the active view of reading. And although the response is personal and can therefore vary from reader to reader, the foundation for that response must come from within the text itself. In other words, there must be a basis for each response (Gunning, 2000).

Reader responses show the reader that they have something in common with the text arousing curiosity and resulting in

comprehension (Tovani, 2000). Reader responses are the creation of connections (Tovani, 2000). Connections help readers to: relate to the characters, visualize the story, avoid boredom, pay attention, listen to others, read actively, remember what they read, and ask questions (Tovani, 2000).

Research has demonstrated that while it is easier for educators to provide readers the answer, it is more meaningful and worthwhile to assist readers in locating their own interpretation of texts (Blake & Lunn, 1986). In other words, if we as educators hope for our readers to grow as readers, we must allow personal interpretation of text to flourish within the classroom. Textual connections and the relating of personal experience and knowledge create a foundation from which readers can create and validate these interpretations.

Finding a Solution Through Meaning Making

Reader response in the classroom has become a means of allowing readers to create meaning from the text and value their own interpretations rather than view reading as a process that simply involves "guessing" the correct answer to comprehension-based assessment questions (Watson, 1992). It promotes cultural identity and value as young readers construct meaning with respect to their own heritage (Watson, 1992). In this way, Reader Response Theory not only promotes comprehension, but values diversity in the classroom and thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to growth in learning. If teachers force young readers into the role of "repeaters" rather than independent "thinkers", we "relinquish [their] rights as readers and [force them to] submit to the meanings, beliefs, and purposes advocated by others" (Villaume & Braham, 2002, p. 672).

So What?

Feeling that it is just as important for my readers to understand why they were

completing a reader response as it was for them to complete it; I completed a whole-class discussion after each reader had an opportunity to jot down a personal response to the text. Using Chris Tovani's (2004) "so what" strategy as a guideline, I offered my students the chance to engage in a metacognitive activity in order that they might understand the significance of what they just completed.

"Someone share your response entry with us." I waited patiently as readers began to volunteer their answers with the class.

Lisa responded, "Well, when I was reading about Katniss and her sister, Prim, and how Katniss volunteered for her sister in the Reaping, it reminded me of my own older sister, Catherine. She has helped me out of some bad situations before. Like, one time, I had this girl who wanted to fight me for no reason and Catherine walked up and stepped between us and so the girl backed off."

A few students responded with a "my sister does that too" or "my brother has had my back before."

"Okay, so now we need to find out how that connection can help you as a reader." We then discussed the connection as a class and eventually made our way to describing Katniss as a brave, loyal fighter.

"Why do you think Katniss would choose to put her own life on the line?" I asked as our discussion continued.

"Well, I know that my sister loves me and that she knows family is the most important thing. I guess it could be that Katniss also sees the value in family. I mean, Prim is really the only family she has left. Her dad died and her mom has been rather distant for a while. Maybe she loves her sister and this bond they share?"

I smiled as I noted the wheels turning in the minds of my young readers. My readers were beginning to realize that connecting their

reading to their own knowledge might actually help them understand the story after all. It's not a matter of figuring out what I want, but rather, what they can determine for themselves. With time, I hope this flourishes as I continue to encourage dialogic learning in my classroom.

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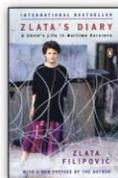
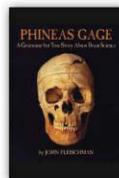
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