

READER RESPONSE IN SECONDARY SETTINGS: INCREASING COMPREHENSION THROUGH MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS WITH LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

A fresh look at the reader response theory to enhance student comprehension through meaningful interactions with literature, this paper explores the instructional implications of a reader response approach in secondary classrooms and examines its role in fostering students' critical reading and thinking skills. The approach promotes transaction between readers and texts as readers are given the freedom to analyze literary pieces based on their personal experiences, diverse cultures, and unique perspectives. A selective review of recent literature on the positive effect of the reader response approach in secondary settings is included, demonstrating how this approach yields positive results with students becoming both more critical readers and thinkers. The paper also addresses best practices or strategies that help secondary students increase their reading comprehension and interactions with literary texts through a reader response approach. Implications for instruction include reader response journals, reading workshop, and literature circles, which encourage students to respond to literature as a means of interacting with various texts in meaningful ways.

Reading is a lifelong skill that students must master to become critical, engaged readers and thinkers in both school and life. Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) reader response theory stresses the importance of the reader in making meaning from a text. The basic premise of reader response is that readers breathe life into texts through their prior knowledge and personal experiences (Larson, 2009). Although teachers sometimes find it easier to impart their knowledge directly about a literary piece, students benefit most from reading texts when they are provided opportunities to think critically and thoughtfully on their own terms without first being bombarded by the thoughts of others. Reader response theory supports this process for students to become engaged, thoughtful, and critical readers.

At the secondary stage of development, students have already established their opinions about reading: either they love reading, or they do not (Hendrix & Griffin, 2017). Reader response not only refreshes teachers' reading instruction but renews students' interest in reading because the emphasis is balanced between the reader and the text and not solely focused on the text as a self-contained object. Readers are challenged with the task of interpreting a text through the lens of their prior knowledge, diverse perspectives, and personal experiences. Using a reader response approach helps secondary students become critical readers and thinkers because they are not simply told how to think about a text, but must justify their multiple interpretations of a text using textual evidence and support.

The central component of reader response involves giving students opportunities to make meaningful, authentic connections with the texts they are reading. According to Graves, Juel, Graves, and Dewitz (2011), there are a variety of “instructional frameworks that center around students’ reading and personally responding to literature” (p. 359). When using the reader response approach, teachers become facilitators rather than lecturers, and students actively engage with texts as they transform the texts’ words into meaningful connections to their personal lives. Reader response helps secondary students increase their reading comprehension and interaction with texts. Although there are numerous strategies that support the underpinnings of the reader response approach, reader response journals, reading workshop, and literature circles are designed to meet the needs of different types of learners—gifted learners, struggling readers and writers, English learners, students with learning disabilities, and general education students—which suggests that this approach can positively influence literacy education in various educational settings. These methods welcome students’ varied interpretative meanings of literary pieces that are founded on their personal experiences and knowledge. Such strategies hold students accountable for their train of thought by engaging them in purposeful activities while reading. More importantly, such instructional frameworks stimulate students’ interest in reading and foster their abilities to read reflectively and deeply (Graves et al., 2011).

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the reader response approach to literacy instruction positively influences secondary students’ comprehension of texts as well as the meaning they create from texts. Though literature showing the positive effect of the reader response approach has been prevalent for decades, looking at the reader response approach with fresh eyes is important as it refreshes the collective conscience of literacy teachers and reintroduces them to an approach that has consistently been shown to enhance students’ interactions with texts. To this end, this paper will outline a theoretical framework for the reader response theory as well as establish reader response’s importance in secondary classrooms through a selective review of relevant literature. An explanation of how the reader response approach influences literacy education in the secondary setting will be provided along with concrete instructional implications, including journaling, reading workshops, and literature circles, which have been shown to promote interactions with texts and thus lead to improved reading performance for secondary students.

Today’s classrooms are filled with diverse students who come to school bearing unique perspectives (Griffin, Martinez, & Martin, 2014). Because of this increase in diversity, educators realize the importance of connecting students’ personal lives to the curriculum if educators wish to grab their students’ attention and make learning meaningful (Kelley, Siwatu, Tost, & Martinez, 2015). Reader response promotes student interactions with each other and the text, and in today’s diverse classrooms, incorporating reader response into the curriculum, as opposed to traditional teacher talk, will result in increased reading comprehension and engagement.

When reading literature, students are often bombarded with their teachers’ interpretations of a particular text. Teachers commonly immerse students in their personal analysis of a literary text simply because they are familiar with the piece and feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts rather than allowing students to interpret it “incorrectly.” However, teachers sharing their personal responses to a text before asking students to divulge their own reactions mistakenly teaches students that there is only one correct interpretation of a piece of literature, which could result in students creating an unfavorable opinion about reading in general (Mitchell, 1993).

Reading is an active process, one in which readers use their background knowledge, diverse perspectives, and personal experiences to make meaning of a literary text. Providing ample opportunities for students to form their own thoughts and opinions of literary texts as opposed to being taught only the teacher's interpretation paves the way for students to connect with these texts on a personal level (Mitchell, 1993).

Unlocking Louise Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) reader response theory provides pedagogical tools for increasing student interaction with texts. The reader response theory is a top-down model in which readers gain meaning from texts through transactions between the reader and the text. This theory also acknowledges that different readers will have varied interpretations of literary works (Graves et al., 2011). Students feel valued by their teachers when they are able to say what they think about a literary piece. The reader response approach to interpreting a piece of literature is effective because students formulate their own generalizations about the text rather than passively accepting the teacher's response to it (Mitchell, 1993).

Reader response theory does not support the idea that all interpretations are correct. Mitchell (1993) explains that teachers often "wonder if using a reader response approach means that anything goes and that their classrooms will become a loosey-goosey mess" (p. 42). To support a specific response to a text, readers must justify their reactions based on evidence from the text (Graves et al., 2011). Using such evidence ensures students hone in on the important textual elements, such as the plot, theme, setting, conflicts, etc. (Mitchell, 1993). This combination of the reader's reaction as supported from the text can help give life and meaning to the words in a literary piece. Because reader response theory suggests that the role of the reader is essential to the meaning of a literary text, a further look into the process of using a reader response approach in the classroom will uncover how this particular approach to reading helps secondary students become more critical readers.

READER RESPONSE THEORY

Rooted in the cognitive-constructivist view of learning, reader response theory emerged in the 1930s and gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s (Powell & Kalina, 2009; Roen & Karolides, 2005). The theory was first developed by Louise Rosenblatt (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978) although other theorists are credited with contributing to reader response theory, including Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser (Graves et al., 2011). Rosenblatt, an American university professor of English education, who was born in 1904 and died in 2005, asserted that the reader plays a vital role in the life of any piece of literature in her book *Literature as Exploration*, which was published in 1938 (Roen & Karolides, 2005).

Reader response theory was formed in direct response to traditional criticisms such as New Criticism. New Criticism focuses on a work of literature as a self-contained object, completely excluding the reader's reactions to the text (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Reader response theory embodies a stark contrast to such traditional criticisms because the reader is an essential part of the reading process. At its most basic level, the reader response approach focuses on the transaction between a reader and his or her response to a literary piece (Roen & Karolides, 2005).

Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) maintained there are two primary types of reading: efferent and aesthetic. Efferent reading is also called informational reading. The purpose of efferent reading is to learn new information or how to complete a procedure. As such, efferent reading does not call for a variety of interpretations. On the other hand, aesthetic reading is not concerned with what

students learn or remember about a text. The primary purpose of aesthetic reading is for readers to immerse themselves in a text and simply enjoy the reading experience (Graves et al., 2011). In addition, Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) believed that literature was written to provide an aesthetic experience for readers because literature invites readers to consider their diverse cultures, background knowledge, and personal experiences when analyzing texts. Rosenblatt explained, “A novel or a poem or a play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (as cited in Roen & Karolides, 2005, p. 59). In other words, the reader’s role is crucial to breathing life into a text.

The reader response approach is heavily reader-oriented. Readers use their prior knowledge and experiences to give meaning to a text, and they are required to justify their unique interpretations of a text with textual evidence. A reader response approach to literacy instruction does not promote chaos or support the creation of far-fetched interpretations without sufficient justification (Larson, 2009). Furthermore, students are encouraged to use their personal experiences and prior knowledge when interacting with a text. Also, the reader response approach embraces differences among readers and acknowledges that people view pieces of literature in different manners (Graves et al., 2011). By requiring students to look past the words on a page and search for deeper meanings, the reader response approach teaches students to think critically about a text.

A reader response approach has limitations that must be foreseen and mitigated. The author’s intended meaning may be overlooked, for example, and readers may create narrowed responses to a text because they are only considering their own perspectives rather than looking at different perspectives. Additionally, readers’ interpretations are highly subjective, sometimes making it difficult for teachers to determine which answers are acceptable and unacceptable. To mitigate these potential pitfalls, teachers should embrace their role as facilitators and help guide students toward appropriate interpretations of texts. Speaking about the teacher’s specific role when utilizing reader response, Roen and Karolides (2005) specified that the reader response approach acknowledges the teacher not as an authority representing the meaning and background of the literary work but as a catalyst of discussion, encouraging a democracy of voices expressing preliminary responses to the text and building group and individual understandings. The teacher’s voice is at once that of the shepherd and of a partner participant (p. 60). Teachers can incorporate technology into their classrooms when using reader response to reach all learners. Blogs, journals, and discussions allow learners to engage in authentic learning that increases their literacy skills (Larson, 2009).

SELECTIVE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much of the literature surrounding the reader response approach explores its influence on the pedagogies of middle and secondary English classrooms (Park, 2012). Several common themes emerged from a selective review of relevant literature, allowing the effects of the reader response approach to be categorized into three critical categories: connecting to texts, thinking critically about texts, and increasing comprehension of texts.

CONNECTING TO TEXTS

The reader response approach is centered on the belief that a work of literature comes alive when the reader interacts and connects with it, and research explores the influence of the reader response approach to promote text-to-self connections. Conversation surrounds selecting texts that invite students to make connections.

Leung (2002) explored the interconnectedness between responses to literature and diverse perspectives about the world of three Asian American students and one student of Eastern European descent. She asserted that cross-cultural literature best suits the purpose of the reader response approach because it provides students with opportunities to examine cultural issues and historical events from their diverse perspectives. Specifically, she found that the “study of literature becomes more meaningful if the real problems and life situations experienced by students outside of school are depicted in books read in the classroom” (p. 31). Using relatable texts prevents students from feeling isolated from such texts and instead encourages them to see how they themselves fit within the story’s plot.

Louie (2005) found that culturally relevant material coupled with students’ interests has the strongest influence on students’ connections to a text. Her study consisted of 25 high school seniors, including 23 Caucasians and two Latinos; these participants read Feng Jikai’s *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom*. Findings suggested that the utilization of multicultural literature aids the development of empathetic responses from readers because they are able to see themselves being placed in similar conflicts as the protagonists of such literary pieces and can therefore relate to these characters on a personal level. Discussing a text with other readers is crucial in constructing a more conscientious connection to a piece of literature because there is greater exposure to diverse perspectives.

Additionally, Park (2012) conducted a yearlong qualitative study of urban middle school girls’ critical and communal responses to Laurie Halse Anderson’s young adult novel *Speak* during their participation in an after-school book club. He asserted the importance of a reader connecting to a text but believed reader response is most effective when making connections becomes a communal effort between students. A communal reading of a literary text forms a community and sense of belonging between readers where they can share ideas and engage in dialogue with each other about the text. When reading alone, a student’s interpretation is limited based on his or her unique perspective, ultimately affecting how well-rounded his or her connections are to a text. Conversations about literature that include multiple perspectives keep students open minded about how other cultures and beliefs affect the reading of a text.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT TEXTS

As students make connections to pieces of literature based on their prior knowledge and personal experiences, they inevitably begin to think critically about what they are reading. Because a reader response approach requires readers to justify their interpretations of a literary piece with textual evidence, readers are challenged to explain which aspects of a text led them to derive their personal responses.

Pope and Round (2015) measured the correlation between children’s existing knowledge about heroes and their understanding of heroism in Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*. Between the ages of seven and 11 in seven classes at three schools, 150 students were asked to draw on their prior knowledge about what makes a person a hero and then apply this understanding to their varied interpretations of the protagonist as a potential heroine. A whole group discussion, ethnographic research, and individual student questionnaires were utilized to gain insight into students’ reactions to Matilda’s actions, as well as their thoughts about Matilda’s heroic nature and the concept of heroism in general. Most students involved in the study did not initially equate a hero and a novel’s protagonist, but with further prompting, students drew on their background knowledge and personal experiences to classify Matilda as a heroine due to her powers and caring nature toward her friends.

Similarly, Leung (2002) found that a readers' age, gender, life experiences, and ethnic identity play a major role in their ability to think critically about a text because these characteristics help the reader more effectively grapple with the deeper meaning of a text and the author's purpose for writing a literary piece. Park (2012) concluded that reader response helps "students find the pleasures of reading (i.e., getting 'into' the literature), while also helping students to read these texts critically" (p. 209), such as deciphering an author's motivation for composing a work. Reading critically also means using a text to understand and question the self, others, and the world.

INCREASING COMPREHENSION OF TEXTS

Reader response increases students' comprehension of literary texts due to their transactional engagement with texts. Reading comprehension is a person's ability to read a text and understand its meaning, and a student's comprehension level is directly affected by his or her ability to connect with and think critically about a text.

McCullough (2013) sought to determine what role prior knowledge and interests play in the ability of students to successfully comprehend six short stories from young adult multicultural anthologies. Based on students' completion of demographic, prior knowledge, and reading comprehension instruments, she found that the participants (117 eighth-grade African American students) heavily relied on their prior knowledge and personal experiences to answer the literal and inferential questions about the multicultural literature they read. While students' interests ultimately guided their decisions in selecting multicultural texts to read, their prior knowledge aided them in thinking both literally and figuratively about the multicultural texts.

In elementary school, students are often taught to search for answers to comprehension questions through explicit instruction. As students advance into the middle and upper grades and develop into independent thinkers, they must search for a text's meaning through a process that moves beyond directly stated answers and toward using their schema to infer the meaning of a text (Graves et al., 2011). The studies mentioned here demonstrate that a reader response approach to reading instruction provides secondary students with opportunities to make connections with the texts they read, which enhance their ability to think critically about and comprehend texts, thus promoting their overall literacy achievement.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Practical classroom applications of reader response allow all learners—English learners, gifted learners, struggling readers and writers, and students with learning disabilities—to engage in authentic experiences that increase their literacy skills and understanding of literary texts. Such instructional applications encourage students to respond to literature as a means of interacting with various texts in meaningful ways and to gain valuable insights into literary pieces.

READER RESPONSE JOURNALS

Reader response journals are "informal, written communication between two or more people about something one has read" (Fulps & Young, 1991, p. 109). Reader response journals meet the needs of all learners because they do not require students to prove their understanding of what they read by answering questions or writing summaries. Instead, students are encouraged to relish the experience of reading for an authentic purpose by recording their thoughts about a text—what they like about it, what they do not like about it, how the story's elements connect with them on a personal level, if they would recommend it to a friend, etc.

Students should write regularly about their reading. Teachers could invite students to compose journal entries as they read a text. These journal entries should contain students' thoughts, predictions, reactions, and connections to the text; they can be either written or typed. As with writing portfolios, reader response journals can be stored in composition notebooks, stapled sheets of paper, or as computer documents. A suggested best practice when incorporating reader response journals into the classroom is not to grade them based on mechanics but on content because students should feel comfortable enough to write their thoughts about literary pieces without feeling pressured to write perfectly (Fulps & Young, 1991).

Meaningful, purposeful technology integration into the curriculum promotes student success (Balentyne & Varga, 2016). As such, students could turn their journals into blogs, or they could reflect on the reactions that they recorded in their journals through the creation of video blogs. A free web 2.0 tool to create student-friendly blogs is www.kidblog.org.

READING WORKSHOP

Reading workshop provides an invaluable method for teachers to differentiate their reading instruction because it is both student centered and a highly engaging way to include all learners. Developed by Nancie Atwell, reading workshop encourages students to assume ownership of their reading (Graves et al., 2011). A great strength of this instructional methodology is that students have the power to select books that fit their personal interests as opposed to reading texts chosen by their teachers (Thomas, 2012).

To begin with, the teacher shares selections of texts that she finds interesting. A mini-lesson follows where the teacher provides whole group instruction. These mini-lessons may include procedural explanations about the reading workshop, introductions to literary devices, or discussion about a particular reading comprehension skill. After the mini-lessons, students move into the self-selected reading and response phase, which is the core of the reading workshop model. Students spend 30 to 40 minutes silently reading while occasionally pausing to complete activities as an outlet for interacting with their self-selected texts (Graves et al., 2011).

When responding to texts, students may use a variety of methods, such as book talks, interviews, portfolios, and Readers Theater. Web 2.0 tools would easily allow students to transform their final projects into digital presentations. Specifically, a Weebly or Wiki website could serve as a storehouse for students' artifacts. Ultimately, the purpose of reading workshop is for students to develop into independent and thoughtful readers (Thomas, 2012).

LITERATURE CIRCLES

The utilization of literature circles promotes student engagement in the reading process (Graves et al., 2011). In literature circles, a group of students read and respond to the same text, generally a novel selected by the students and not the teacher. There is no "one size fits all" prescription when implementing literature circles in a reading classroom. Literature circles can take on many different forms depending on the teacher's desired objectives and students' interests and needs. Daniels (2006) believed that literature circles are effective because students, not teachers, cooperatively lead their literature circles and do not feel the pressure they would during a whole group discussion of a text.

In traditional literature circles, student participants have different roles, such as discussion director, vocabulary enricher, and bridge builder. However, roles are not a necessity when utilizing literature circles. While literature circles are fluid in their structure, their outcomes are consistent:

students learn to become passionate and critical readers (Daniels, 2006). For this strategy to be both effective and successful, students need to use it repeatedly. That is, they should not just participate in literature circles as a one-time activity.

If teachers wish to add a technological component to their literature circles, they could require students to post their responses to online message boards on a weekly basis and then thoughtfully reply to their classmates' discussion postings. Edmodo is one option for creating an online classroom for students to post their responses and reply to their peers' comments in interactive online discussion boards. Doing so creates collaborative online learning communities for students as they respond to literature (Larson, 2009).

The instructional strategies discussed here are only the beginning of a wide variety of learning activities that are informed by the reader response approach. The ideas presented in this section should prompt teachers to begin thinking about other ways to meaningfully integrate technology into their reading curriculum across the content areas to provide students with meaningful opportunities to select texts that interest them and discuss those texts verbally with peers and through writing. While important in the earlier grades, the middle and high school grades are the ideal time to provide students with opportunities to interact with texts in more meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

Simply stated, Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) reader response theory is a reader-oriented approach to delivering effective reading instruction. Using the reader response approach to improve literacy education engages all learners by stressing the importance of the transaction that occurs between a reader and a text. Teachers can use this aspect of the theory to inspire students to become habitual, passionate readers. Reader response offers teachers the flexibility for reaching the needs of all students and engaging them at levels that are appropriate to their development. By allowing students to intersect their prior knowledge and diverse, personal experiences with their interpretations of literature, teachers can entice more students to enter the world of reading and to reside there for a lifetime.

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