Reader Response:
Learning from Teacher Research

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Like many adults across the United States, I grew up thinking that understanding literature meant figuring out the right answers to all of the boring study questions that were assigned for English homework. Because being a good student constituted a primary part of my identity in secondary school, I diligently jotted answers for most questions as I read along in the text (the questions usually followed the plot in order), but resorted to guessing when I got to the difficult but inevitable queries about theme and tone and conflict. Those answers weren't written explicitly in the text, and it was hard to figure out what the teacher was looking for. Regardless of what I came up with, I always hoped that the teacher would eventually reveal the "right" responses—which he or she almost always did. I would then scribble that knowledge in my notebook, memorize it, and get an A on the test. Unfortunately, this quest for correct answers continued throughout my undergraduate literature studies and even emerged at times in graduate school whenever I found myself in a seminar taught by a New Critic. Thus, stumbling on to theories of reader response was a liberating experience, in Appleman's (2000) words, "a friendly antidote to the tyranny of the text" (54).

Because reader-response theorists posit that each reader is actively and individually involved in the construction of meaning,[1] they question the New Critical view that if readers attend

closely enough to a text, they should come up with its "correct," intended meaning. Reader-response critics insist that because individuals bring different backgrounds, cognitive abilities, and reading experiences with them to a given text, one "correct" response to literature cannot exist. According to Louise Rosenblatt (1978), one of the earliest reader-response theorists, objective meaning cannot be found within a given text any more than it can be found exclusively within the reader of that text. Instead, Rosenblatt argues that meaning is derived, or, in her terms, a poem is evoked from the transaction between the reader and the text during a particular act of reading, and therefore meaning is unique to an individual within a specific context and in each successive act of reading. A change in either the reader, the text, or the situation will, in Rosenblatt's terms, result in "a different event—a different poem" (14). No two readers will have the exact same response to any text, and no single reader will have the exact same response to a text read multiple times.

Many scholars have theorized explanations for the wide range of responses that can result from a single text. For example, Vipond, et al. (1990) agree that response to literature will be unique to the particular reader, the text, the time, and the place where the reading transaction occurs (Rosenblatt, 1985), but they have developed a theory of reading modes to further account for the diversity. They argue that readers approach texts from a predominantly information-driven, story-driven, or point-driven stance depending on the text and the situation and that these modes or stances will affect response. Responding to literature is a learned social process, and therefore readers will also respond to literature differently depending on their different social roles (Beach, 1993). Beach posits that socialization by cultural institutions will affect the subject positions readers assume, and their responses will reflect this positioning. Fish (1980) developed the concept of "interpretive communities," groups of people who share particular assumptions and strategies for reading, to explain how the activity of reading does not bear universal interpretation.

Given the variety of meanings that readers can construct from a single text, I was interested in exploring how three people

in three different roles would respond to the same text. How would a ninth-grade student, the student's parent, and the student's English teacher respond to a contemporary novel written for young adults? What similarities and differences would emerge between the way a young adult responded to a novel written specifically for her age group and the way two adults responded to the same text? In addition, how would the difference in the adults' roles affect their reading of the text? By analyzing the various responses I planned to glimpse the novel through three different lenses and reflect on the complex process of meaning-making in reading. Months later after completing this informal study, however, I realized that although I did learn about reader response, I learned more about the value of teacher research. I am now convinced that classroom studies can be powerful tools for teachers as they shape their curricula and pedagogy.

The Study

I conducted this study in a small Minnesota city, and the participants included John, a high school English teacher who is interested in incorporating young adult literature into the curriculum, Amy, one of his ninth grade students, and Amy's mother, Sheri. John has been teaching for six years. This is his first year back in the classroom after a two-year hiatus when he was pursuing his master's degree in English. He is married, but has no children. John identified Amy as a good research candidate based on her enthusiasm and cooperation in the classroom. Amy has good work habits in school and earns good grades, but she does not generally spend her free time reading. She is popular among her peers and is a cheerleader, but she is also known as a "good girl" who likes to please her parents and is very active in her church youth group. John has good rapport with Amy's mother and predicted accurately that, given her and her husband's interest in their daughter's education, she would be willing to participate in the study as well. Sheri is college-educated and chose to be a stay-at-home mom when her three daughters were small (Amy has a twin and a sister in fifth grade), and she now works part-time as a teachers' aide, a job that allows her to attend all of her children's events and supervise their after school activities.

She considers herself a fairly strict parent and holds high expectations for her children's conduct. Sheri reads non-fiction frequently and is usually into multiple books at once, but she rarely reads fiction for pleasure. John, Amy, and Sheri are all part of the white, middle class, Christian mainstream of their community.

Each of the three participants was given a copy of the young adult novel *Rats Saw God* by Rob Thomas to read within two to three weeks; none of them had read it previously. *Rats Saw God* is the story of an extremely intelligent high school student, Steve, who gets into trouble and ends up almost failing out of school. The school counselor will allow him to make-up credit for English class and ultimately graduate only if he writes a 100-page narrative, so he begins writing about his sophomore and junior years—and the reasons his life went downhill. I chose this book for its controversial nature; it was praised by critics, but some of the content—profanity, sex, drinking, and drug use—could prove disturbing to some adult readers. At three places in the novel I marked the text with instructions to the participants to stop reading and write down brief responses to the story up to that point. Participants could write down anything they wanted to, but I provided a few examples: "Responses may include identification with characters and the situations they are in, emotional responses, comments about the writing, your interest level, etc." I also asked for written responses at the end of the novel. After each participant finished the book, I collected and reviewed the notes and then conducted individual follow-up interviews to clarify and extend the written responses. The interviews were open-ended, and questions were largely determined by the participants' written responses. However, I did make sure to elicit comments about what the readers liked and disliked about the book, its degree of realism, its appeal to teenagers, the messages the books conveys, how the study design affected the participants' reading, and whether they think books and/or television can affect kids' behavior.

Amy's Response

Amy's written responses to *Rats Saw God* were very

brief and revealed little about how she engaged with the text as a reader. Although she was not quite finished with the novel when we talked, she had read through many scenes containing profanity, drinking, drug use, and sexual activity. As Amy is a "good" kid, I was surprised that she provided almost no personal responses to the book's content in writing. Other than commenting that "what these kids are doing is a little on the dumb side . . . I wouldn't want to spend [life] 'getting hammered' or using drugs like cocaine," she withheld judgment of their behavior. More than half of Amy's notes were actually questions about the novel's plot. She was confused because the book was "different from any other books [she had] read" the way it jumped back and forth between Steve's sophomore and senior years, and some of Thomas's phrasing and vocabulary left her wondering exactly what was going on, too. Amy likened *Rats Saw God* to *Romeo and Juliet*, which she had recently read in school, because "you had to read things more than once to understand."

In contrast to her written comments, in her oral comments Amy was very forthcoming with personal responses to the book's content. She thought the book was interesting and fun to read, and she really wanted to keep my copy until she could finish it. When asked what she found interesting, she said that "when you got past the beginning boring part—when it got into the descriptive details—it was more fun." Amy's comment that she "kind of liked the drugs and sex—even though Mom didn't at all," revealed that she is very conscious of her role as a daughter. This role probably affected her transaction with the text because she admitted that, as she read, her mom "was always on [her] mind." Amy knows her mother's value system, and she knew that Sheri would not be pleased with the content of *Rats Saw God* and would be uncomfortable knowing that her daughter had read it. She observed, "I don't think [Mom] realizes that I can handle stuff like this and it's out there." Thus, whenever Sheri asked Amy how far along she was in the book, Amy answered vaguely and led her to believe that she hadn't read much. She also told her mom that she thought it was "a pretty dumb book," hiding the fact that she found it entertaining.

When Amy was at school among her peers, however, her adolescent role would take precedence over her daughter role. During free periods when Amy would be reading, other students questioned why she would possibly want to spend her time immersed in a book. Not wanting to appear strange or overly scholarly, she would quickly explain that she had to read the book for a research study. She would also tell her peers that *Rats Saw God* was "really pretty good" and then she would show them especially juicy excerpts to prove her point.

Amy found Steve a realistic character and said, "I know people like that. I know people who've done drugs and I know people who've had sex." She also noted that divorce can have a devastating effect on kids and that "divorce could give [Steve] a reason to be rebellious and not do the right things." Amy thought that Steve's life was so mixed up because of his anger toward his mother and father. (At the time of the interview she had not read far enough to know that his girlfriend had an affair with their English teacher.) She said that "he had nobody to turn to and nobody really cared." Obviously, Amy values her own two-parent family and the love and guidance that her mother and father provide, even though, in typical adolescent fashion, she finds them annoying at times:

> Sometimes I wish my parents were more like [Steve's] dad and I didn't have to communicate with them. I'd like just writing notes back and forth. Sometimes I just don't want to talk to them. Like last weekend, my mom was gone the whole time, and when she got back I just didn't feel like talking to her, even though I knew I should.

In the next breath, she continued, "But if we didn't talk I suppose I could end up like Steve," and she knows her parents behave like they do because "As much as I don't want to admit it, [they] just want the best for their kids."

Amy also found the plot of *Rats Saw God* realistic, and when asked to comment on any messages the book conveyed she said that "it's kind of reality . . . People who don't

want to face reality—this would be a good book for them to read." But she was also quick to add that "in a way it's a turn off because of all the bad stuff." Although she was disturbed by how mixed up Steve's life was, Amy was confident that reading about all of Steve's problems and the way he lived his life would not affect her own values and behavior, however, because she has already set her own moral standards.

Sheri's Response

Sheri, approaching the text as a parent, responded to *Rats Saw God* quite differently. Her written response to the book as a whole left no doubt about her feelings:

> I was truly appalled by this particular example of young adult literature. This particular book, I feel, is quite representative of all the garbage young people are exposed to. I think it's dreadful that young people have literature like this available to them.

Anticipating some negative reaction, I did warn Sheri about the book's major sex scene before she agreed to participate in the study. However, as I had not reread the text yet at that time, I had forgotten about the romantic relationship between a teacher and a student and the extent of the substance use and profane language. Sheri's responses to the first few chapters, though, show that she tried to maintain an open mind about the book:

> I was a little taken back when I first started reading the book. I knew there would be a part about sex, but I hadn't thought about drugs. Once I got over the initial, "Oh, there's drugs in this book too," I was okay with it.

She also commented on the book's easy reading and the good description of relationships.

Subsequent written responses conveyed increasing disapproval with the text. An initial comment about disliking the "bad words" later became "Do all teenagers talk like this? The language really turns me off. I hope the majority of young adult lit. isn't like this." As the book went on, Sheri also questioned the nonchalant approach to teen cocaine and cigarette use and

the lack of adult guidance. She was especially disturbed by the romantic relationship between Steve's girlfriend, Dub, and Sky, their English teacher. The whole time she was reading she thought about her daughter reading the same text, and by the time she was three-fourths through she called me one evening at home to voice her concerns. The content made her so uncomfortable that she did not want Amy to finish the book. Sheri called herself a protective mother and said she wants to "shield [her daughters] from things" as long as possible. She thinks that "kids grow up way too fast in our society, and they need [time] to be kids and not mini-adults."

Sheri also shared with me her concerns that Amy would not finish the book in time, anyway, because she seemed to be reading very slowly. Ironically, Amy, as a caring daughter, was trying to protect her mother just as her mother was trying to protect her, and she purposely tried to hide how far she had progressed in her reading. She did not want to disillusion Sheri by letting her know that the teen drinking, drug use, sex, and language use in *Rats Saw God* is realistic for some of her peers. When she found out that her mother had called me and wanted her to stop reading the book, she was surprised and then indignant. Reacting in typical adolescent fashion, she said her mother's objections just fueled her motivation to read more.

Sheri does know that some kids behave like Steve, but she "would like to believe that he's the minority." She attributed most of the "immorality" in the book to "lack of adult guidance" because she believes that adults, particularly parents and teachers, have the responsibility to be role models and to set appropriate limits for children and adolescents. She thinks that kids end up like Steve because parents are not involved enough in their lives. Her own experience as a parent supports this view. Because Sheri and her husband have always made their expectations and values clear to their daughters, Amy found much of Steve's conduct dumb and wouldn't think of doing those things herself because that is not "the way we're brought up." Amy's recognition of the value of strict parents is affirmation of adolescents' need for adult guidance. Sheri also believes that teachers have an obligation to set a good example for their students. It is not surprising that

Sheri, as a parent, found the teacher-student romance extremely disturbing. Parents trust that teachers will educate their children and treat them with respect, and seeing such a gross betrayal of this trust must be especially frightening for mothers and fathers.

Sheri talked about her strong Christian background, and she described herself as conservative and idealistic, all of which affect her reading stance. When she first saw the title of *Rats Saw God*, she thought that the novel must have a Christian theme, and if that were the case she would naturally enjoy it. Perhaps this expectation made the actual story harder to swallow. Much later, when she read that Steve's club, GOD, was "dead," she recognized the statement as "a subtle, yet blatant, message seemingly directed toward insecure teenagers to instill doubt" about the existence of God. Sheri would disagree with Langer (1990) about the purpose of literature instruction: to develop critical thinking rather than to "indoctrinate students into the cultural knowledge, good taste, and elitist traditions of our society" (p. 812). Sheri believes, in contrast, that a book should "have some moral outcome to it [and kids] should get something positive":

> I sure hope a book like this is not required reading for a student. I'd be quite upset if my daughters were reading something like this and *not* reading something that taught values.

She also believes that while limited exposure to morally questionable material probably won't affect the behavior of kids, parents need to be careful:

> Even if good kids read enough of these ["negative" books] it will make a difference. A person becomes numb to it and indifferent. If they were to read book after book after book . . . It depends on the number of times they're exposed.

John's Response

Like Sheri, John has a strong Christian background. Not surprisingly given the many factors that affect how a reader makes meaning, his responses were very different from hers, however. This difference can be explained at least in part because John is not a parent, because he assumed a teacher stance

as he read *Rats Saw God*, and because, with an M.A. in English, he has experience reading diverse texts and has been well-trained to do literary analysis. John readily admitted that he almost always "reads from the perspective of 'How can I use this in class?'" And anytime he reads or views anything with young adult protagonists, he finds it hard not to judge the realism of the characters and plot against his own considerable knowledge of teenagers. Thus, while Amy predominantly maintained a story-driven stance toward reading (Vipond, et al., 1990), whether she was putting herself into the story or using the text to reflect on personal experience, John's relationship to the text was more mutable. His responses revealed that he was sometimes aesthetically involved in the text, but at other times he read from an evaluative stance. For example, John pointed out that Steve was not like most kids he has known over his six years of teaching:

> It strikes me as a bit unrealistic that *such* a brain would also be *such* a rebel. It's a combination you really don't see—okay *I* haven't seen. You've got your rebels who are intelligent, but none that would use "et al." voluntarily in writing.

John was especially surprised that for half of the book's episodes, Steve was only supposed to be a sophomore ("If he's a sophomore, I'm Edgar Allen Poe."), and he questioned why a tight-laced girl would choose to date Steve. Despite these departures from the typical high school world, though, John acknowledged that Steve's problems were real, and he could picture himself as the school counselor negotiating with Steve over graduation requirements. John also appreciated that Thomas portrayed Steve's girlfriend Dub as an average high school girl instead of a breath-taking beauty:

> How refreshing to have Juliet be rather bland . . . even funny looking. Thomas' realism here is very important, I think. It'd be so easy to make her the prototypical "beauty behind ugly glasses and a big sweatshirt." I'm grateful he fought off the urge.

Even though Steve's quick wit and impressive vocabulary were unrealistic, John found them entertaining and enjoyable. However, he feared that the book's "focal audience [was] misaligned" and the humor "would be wasted a bit on the young adult audience." He compared *Rats Saw God* to Dr. Seuss books or other cartoons that are presumably written for kids but have a layer of complexity for adults as well. He was confident that, because of the content, teens would enjoy the novel, but he wondered whether freshmen and sophomores, including Amy, would "get it." For example, John noted that "Steve's allusion to Desdemona and Cassio is very funny, but most JH/HS kids haven't read *Othello*."[2] Judging from all of Amy's questions about the book, John's concerns are probably valid. Her understanding most likely lacks some of the richness of John's because she has less reading and life experience to draw on. Interestingly, Amy reported that even though Steve's big words were "hard to understand at times," she did not question their use, and she saw Steve as a realistic character. Sheri also missed the humor of *Rats Saw God*, but because she found the book so offensive, she was not adopting an aesthetic stance toward the reading and attending to its "lived-through experience" (Rosenblatt, 1978). Sheri was perhaps assuming a point-driven stance (Vipond, et al., 1990), as she kept hoping that a positive message would emerge to give the book redeeming value.

John read as a teacher, but some of his analytical responses marked him specifically as an English teacher. At one point he was troubled by a seeming lack of character motivation, and he also wondered whether the plot fulfilled the expectations it had created. He was pleased, however, by the plausibility of the book's conclusion:

> I suppose Steve must be screwed over by Dub so we/he sees a parallel with his dad. I'm glad the conflict with Dad wasn't immediately a "happily ever after" piece of junk. The conflict is real . . . and the resolution can't be fast.

John assumed, though, that his students would want more closure in a piece of literature (like Sheri, who was searching for a

happy ending).

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two adult readings of *Rats Saw God* stems from the difference in how John and Sheri view the purpose of literature instruction. John's goal as a teacher is to get his students to leave his class thinking more critically than when they came in, and he uses literature for this purpose. He thinks that *Rats Saw God* tackles a lot of controversial issues pertinent to teens' lives and that, instead of trying to shield kids from them, they should be demystified through discussion and analysis. John pointed out that issues like drinking and sex are relevant to all teens because, regardless of whether they decide to participate or abstain, they will all have to confront the decision at some point. Because Steve's gradual "recovery" involved looking back at his life and examining his problems, John thinks that the novel encourages kids to think about the choices they have made and, more importantly, to think before making decisions in the future. John also noted that discussing a book like *Rats Saw God* would promote learning because "kids can relate better to me if I assign material that's interesting to them." He admitted that this might sound like a superficial ploy to "get kids to like you," but he insisted that as a student he learned the most from teachers he could relate to on a more personal level.

Despite the potential that John sees in *Rats Saw God*, though, he did question some of its content. He did not like how the teacher-student relationship seemed like "it's your standard girl leaves boy for other boy. It [didn't] 'feel' illegal here." He is not sure that Thomas passed any judgment on the teacher, and he thought perhaps he should have. John also wondered about the portrayal of Steve's and Dub's sexual relationship. He thought that the scene where they lose their virginity was very significant because they felt regret afterward; he liked "the negative spin on it *without* the preaching." However, Steve and Dub did go on to have sex often after that first incident, leaving John with feelings of ambivalence. Like Amy, though, John thinks that reading negative messages will not cause an adolescent to do negative things unless he or she was ready to do them anyway. He is agreeing with Beach (1993)

when he notes that "It's not the book as much as it is the kid."

Teacher Research and Literature Instruction

By the conclusion of this small study, my research questions were answered and I had gained insight and understanding into reader response theory. However, upon reflection, I realized that perhaps my most important learning centered around how teacher research has the potential for improving the quality of teaching and learning in our classrooms. Specifically, teacher research can help teachers get inside students' heads and understand their thinking. Because of the difference in age, social roles, life experience, etc., teachers do not read like adolescents do, and they need to be aware that their personal responses to a text will be very different from the responses of their students. John and Amy expressed opposite perspectives about the realism of Steve, for example, and they gleaned very different messages from the book. This study was a good reminder to John that, even though he has been teaching for several years and has a good grasp of what adolescents are like, he will not always accurately predict their responses to a text. He might assume he knows his students, but sometimes his assumptions about their reading are actually more reflective of his own viewpoints instead. To illustrate, he anticipated that Amy may have some trouble with the vocabulary and allusions in *Rats Saw God*, but was surprised to learn, instead, that the book's structure and plot proved confusing at times.[3] Therefore, teachers should always encourage student questions about a text and be ready to clear up confusion about seemingly obvious (to the teacher) story elements. Even though a book may be marketed for young adults, this target group may lack the reading or life experience to understand or appreciate its structure, humor, themes, etc. In these situations, the teacher can build on students' responses and guide them to a more complex reading.

Given that a primary goal of literature instruction is to "develop an enjoyment of reading so that lifelong reading is realistic" (Maxwell & Meiser, 2005), this study also underscores the importance of choosing literature that reflects students' interests and complex lives—and allowing students to choose their

own literature. Amy was not an avid reader outside of school, and yet when she was given a text she found interesting, she could not put the book down. Reading became a "want to," not a "have to." Amy's comments acknowledge that even though she's a "good" kid, she has acquaintances who drink alcohol, use drugs, and have sex, and she finds reading about kids her age like this engaging. Amy's comments also support Beach's (1993) claim that reading texts will not directly affect the behavior and/or attitudes of readers. He argues that many other factors influence behavior, including family, school, and community:

> [T]he claim that a particular book will have a particular effect on a group of students—that it will cause them to behave in deviant ways or to change their attitudes—underestimates the strength of their socially constituted roles and attitudes. (110)

Thus, including contemporary young adult literature in the curriculum is a prudent choice for English teachers seeking to engage their students with books.

Finally, this study suggests the importance of teachers choosing literature purposefully and understanding why parents may view the curriculum differently than they do. Just as teachers need to understand their students' thinking, it is helpful for them to understand the "parental stance," as well. John's and Sheri's thoughts about the purpose of literature instruction generally and the value of *Rats Saw God* as a teaching tool specifically were very different, but if John can be empathetic of Sheri and aware that her objections stem from a concern about her child growing up too quickly or growing up into a person with questionable values, he will be more likely to work with her as an ally instead of an adversary. Hearing Sheri's comments stressed to John the importance of communicating with parents, respecting their points of view, and convincing them that he wants what's best for their children, too. Thus, when selecting texts for his classroom, John needs to take care to choose high-quality materials that support his goals for English instruction. Teachers have the responsibility to provide sound, well-reasoned rationales for their curricula,

and they should be aware that, when parents object to materials, they are generally not trying to be enemies of education but are acting in what they believe are the best interests of their children.

Although an interest in seeing reader response theory at work prompted this study, these unexpected lessons about teaching are ultimately more important to me. I have discovered the potential of informal classroom research to inform and influence classroom practice. While the specific results of this small, local study cannot be generalized to other contexts (the responses of Amy, Sheri, and John are not meant to represent the opinions of all students, parents, and teachers), this kind of inquiry can prompt teacher reflection, heighten sensitivity, and ultimately improve classroom practice.

Notes

1. Although prominent reader-response critics like Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Peter Rabinowitz, and Elizabeth Flynn "adopt quite different conceptions of readers' roles, purposes, texts, and contexts, suggesting that there is no single 'reader-response' theory" (Beach 5), they share the belief that readers create meaning through their experience with a text.

2. John is basing this comment on his own experience as a student and as a teacher. He has taught in three different school districts, none of which included *Othello* in the English curriculum.

3. Because I thought it would be helpful to John professionally, I chose to share some of Amy's responses with him. I did not share the adults' responses with her. John and Sheri agreed that they would be interested in hearing each other's thoughts about the book, though, so during the follow-up interview, I shared some of their general impressions and comments with the other. I do not know if John and Sheri had any face-to-face conversations about the study later.

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