Making a Difference in Teaching Literature

by John E. Oster

Many years ago as a conscientious first-year teacher, I sometimes struggled with decisions regarding the best ways to teach language arts. The veteran teacher in the class next to mine, who was usually a pillar of support, would occasionally shrug off my concerns with the comment, "Twenty years from now who'll know the difference?" My initial reaction was to be annoyed that he should treat my honest endeavors to find the most effective methods of teaching English in such a cynical and cavalier fashion. However, as I got to know him better, I came to realize that in his typically flippant manner he was suggesting I focus my attention on things that really matter. Perhaps as English teachers we should pay more attention to the long range effects of our teaching. If we ask ourselves what we would really like our students to have retained twenty years from now from the classes we are currently teaching, the natural follow-up question is whether the approaches we are using are compatible with our desired results. For example, if we are hoping our students will become readers who respond sensitively and independently to literature, are we providing them the necessary background and relevant experiences? If we would like our students to love literature and become lifetime readers, are we making the development of positive attitudes a high priority in our classrooms?

We can't successfully grapple with questions of methodology, however, until we have sorted out our fundamental beliefs about the nature of literature and the literary experience. During the past couple of decades, literary theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, and Robert Probst, have stressed that the "meaning" of literary works resides not solely in the text but in the interaction between the reader and the text. The poet Robert Currie expresses a similar view when he writes,

> My poems
> are slim bombs
> craving explosion
> Their fuses lie

> dark on the page
> awaiting your arrival with a light.

If we acknowledge that the meaning of literature is created in part through the dynamic interaction of readers and texts, then it follows that the essential aspects of literature cannot be transmitted as one might transmit the content of other subjects. The true essence of literature is in experiencing literature and responding to it personally and authentically.

Language arts teachers who adopt a response-oriented approach recognize that the goal of literary study is not just to know about literature. Among other things, students need to learn how to read with sensitivity and understanding, to explore human experience and values, to deepen their understanding of the nature of literature and of life. If they are to learn how to respond fully and gain confidence in working independently with literature, they need to have wide and varied experience with literary texts. Adopting a responsible response-oriented approach, however, means providing students opportunities to experience a full range of literary responses, including a judicious balance of personal and informed critical responses. Our programs should provide students enough knowledge about literary texts and techniques for them to function successfully at the university level. However, adequate preparation for further work in English demands much more than knowledge. Students who leave secondary schools with a positive attitude and lively curiosity, who can read sensitively and with understanding, and who are not afraid to express their own ideas and to explore the ideas of others are admirably prepared for university work. Those students who view literature as received wisdom from teachers and critics and who have limited confidence in their own ability to respond meaningfully to it are not.

Personal response and informed literary response should not be viewed as competing paradigms. After all, a literary critic is really just a sensitive, confident reader articulating his or her response to and interpretation of a literary work. In fact, informed literary criticism can often best be approached from a base of personal response. For example, students working in pairs to dramatize "Porphyria's Lover," Robert Browning's well-known dramatic mono-

logue, will usually re-read the text many times in order to develop an understanding of the characters their relationship, and the details of the action they themselves are being asked to reenact. They will have to read carefully and make many interpretative judgements as they develop insights into the motivation of the speaker. In order to orally interpret the last line of the poem, "and yet God has not said a word," they will have to decide whether the speaker expects commendation, condemnation, or indifference from God. In making these decisions, students will be exploring issues that have caused raging controversies among critics. By letting students discover these issues for themselves, then possibly feeding conflicting articles by noted critics into the ensuing discussion, teachers provide students with an opportunity to see that they themselves are engaged in real literary criticism. They also learn, as Louise Rosenblatt suggests they should in The Reader, the Text, the Poem, that literary critics should be regarded merely as experienced co-readers, not surrogate readers.

An approach which places high value on students developing positive attitudes to literature and acquiring confidence in articulating their personal responses provides the type of background students need in order to develop informed literary responses. It is important, however, for students first to gain imaginative entry into a work of literature through personal response. Enjoyment of literature is obviously the key that can unlock all subsequent stages of literary development. But enjoyment, like a leprechaun, is seldom captured when pursued directly. It is more likely to appear in situations where individuals are totally engrossed in purposeful and satisfying work. The following ideas are intended to illustrate approaches that can both engage students and help them develop their abilities to respond fully and meaningfully to literature.

Dramatic approaches such as improvisation, role-playing, and readers' theatre can help students understand characters and situations and bring many literary works to life. They stimulate discussion about varied interpretations and help to integrate listening and speaking with literary study. Most importantly, perhaps, they can make students experience the affective as well as the intellectual aspects of many pieces of literature. They can also be used effectively to provide motivation for the future study of an extended literary work. One

approach I particularly like is to conspire with a few students or fellow teachers to prepare a readers' theatre or dramatic interpretation of a key scene to be presented to a class about a week before a novel or play is introduced. The presentation serves to motivate the students to want to hear, see, or read more about the coming attraction. It is generally surprisingly easy to recruit co-conspirators if one approaches the right combination of people with enthusiasm and an air of intrigue. Initially most students seem to enjoy the activity because they are doing something the rest of the class doesn't know about. Later, the social interaction, the active engagement with literature, and the thought of surprising their classmates serve to motivate them. While members of the audience sometimes groan about the suspect acting talent of their teachers and peers, this activity is generally successful in providing an imaginative entry into the text and is often referred to in subsequent discussions. I suppose twenty years from now the presentation may be remembered even if the rest of the book isn't.

Developing confidence in one's own literary response is an important factor in acquiring independence as a reader. Having an opportunity to respond personally to literature before being asked to make a public response is extremely important to developing confidence as a reader. Teachers can increase opportunity for the students' personal responses as well as the depth of class discussion by having students respond to poetry in pairs before engaging in general class discussion. Few of us would feel comfortable addressing an audience about our responses to a poem we had read only once or twice. We would certainly want to try out our ideas on one or two people before expressing them in public. Shy adolescents are particularly sensitive about exposing their ideas in a large forum of people whose opinions they especially value, their peers. If a teacher uses only large group discussions, some students will never volunteer their thoughts. Working in pairs provides assurance that all students have an opportunity to discover, explore, and express their responses to what they have read.

Group work and cooperative learning are indispensable in a response-oriented approach. The way the groups are structured and the nature of the assignments are crucial to the interest and consequently to the success of the endeavor. When using small groups for response activities, I frequently have

each of the groups work on a separate task. Doing so makes the sharing period following group work much more meaningful as each group contributes something new to the class. Sometimes I use a jigsaw grouping procedure as a substitute for reconvening groups for general class discussion. This procedure involves regrouping so that one member from each of the original groups goes into each of the new groups. For example, home groups can generate questions, study groups can explore answers, and individuals can take the answers back to the home groups. The home groups thus have the benefit of the insights of all groups. Differences in study group responses can generate considerable discussion and further exploration of ideas in the home groups. This approach is valuable because it teaches the process of interrogating texts, gives students a chance to discover answers to their own questions, and gives every student opportunity and responsibility to talk about literature.

Sometimes when using thematic poetry units or when focusing on the work of an individual poet, I have each small group work on a separate poem. The members of the small groups can then present to the rest of the class the fresh insights their poem brings to the topic under consideration. This approach promotes a sense of ownership of literature and exposes the class to a larger number of poems than would a whole-class approach.

Few approaches generate as much thought about poetry in an atmosphere of enjoyment as does group-planned oral or choral reading of poetry. Please note that I am not referring to choral reading in which the teacher selects a poem, decides how it should be read, orchestrates the reading, and polishes it for public performance. What I am advocating is choral reading resulting from student-centered group planning sessions. In these sessions, the students invariably find themselves discovering meaning, deciding what effects they want to achieve, and experimenting with ways to achieve these effects by using the vocal resources of the individuals in the group. Frequently they will discover the impact of diction and metaphor, discuss matters of form and style, and interpret theme and mood without fully realizing that they are engaged in literary analysis. The teacher, of course, may use these group discussions as starting points for further explorations of literary aspects, but the students will not see these explorations as arcane and theoretical because, in effect, they initiated them.

Presentations of choral readings and readers' theatre can be both enjoyable and worthwhile. The excitement can be heightened by using props and costumes and by giving the event status within the school or classroom, perhaps by having it videotaped or presented to other classes or to parents. It is important, however, for the English teacher to keep in mind that the process of working with the poems is much more important than the product, the presentation.

Many response-oriented teachers find that having students adapt literary works to other media forms such as radio plays or films is a very effective way to develop response and to have students focus on sound and image. Many students today are not used to doing their own imaginative visualizing because film and television create images for them. Yet to become accomplished readers of literature, students must become very adept at creating mental images from words. Planning a film adaptation of a short story or a poem requires them to concentrate on visual aspects of the work such as imagery, characterization, details of setting, and point of view. As they attempt to transpose the work from one form to another, they become more aware of both literary and media techniques. Students may actually prepare a filmed version of the literary work (a fairly time consuming process) or just discuss the decisions that would have to be made in order to do so. Ironically, perhaps, the latter choice can be just as educationally and imaginatively effective as the former because students are not faced with technical and economic limitations. In their planned versions they can use the most sophisticated of film techniques and settings, employ Tom Cruise and Kim Bassinger as stars, and get Woody Allen as director. Both approaches encourage a surprising amount of close reading because students are driven back to the text time after time to clarify details and support interpretations. Sometimes they will even rewrite scenes to make the text amenable to the new medium.

An often neglected aspect in developing literary appreciation is having students experience literature from the writer's perspective. Although expository writing has become the privileged form in secondary schools, students can learn a great deal about literature, as well as about themselves, through writing

in imaginative literary forms. Many literary concepts, such as point of view and foreshadowing, can be taught more convincingly through writing than through reading. A writer struggling to achieve a particular effect has an immediate need to learn a particular technique which may otherwise have little relevance to an adolescent reader. Writers' workshop approaches in classrooms encourage a much-needed change in perception of our field. They have helped teachers and students of English to start thinking of literature as one of the arts, not just as a content subject. Students of art, music, and drama may study masterpieces in their respective fields, but they certainly also draw, paint, sing, play instruments, and act. Why shouldn't students of literature write poetry and fiction?

Writing, however, need not be either transactional or poetic to be helpful in making literature more personally meaningful. Personal, expressive writing can be invaluable in exploring personal response to works of literature. It can also be extremely effective in setting a context for the initial encounter with a story or poem. For example, personal writing can establish a receptive mood or evoke related experiences that heighten the impact or make the work more personally relevant.

Many teachers have students use response journals to record their impressions, questions, and conjectures at designated stages as they read a short story, play, or novel. As well as providing the students with a vehicle to discover and record their responses, the journals give the teacher an opportunity to gain insights into students' reactions and levels of understanding. This information can be invaluable in helping the teacher discuss the work individually with students, lead interesting class discussions, design meaningful assignments, and select future readings. We should be aware, however, that some readers find it very annoying and disconcerting to interrupt their reading in order to write. As with any other approach, teachers need to be careful not to overuse response journals but to allow flexibility in their application.

All of these approaches can contribute to our students becoming better readers, but we can also help them develop insight into reading-response processes and confidence in their own ability to read literature meaningfully. Many

students lack confidence in their own ability to read literature because they compare their own faltering first readings with the carefully prepared literary analyses of teachers and critics. As teachers of literature we are used to sharing our interpretations, the products of our thinking, with our students. However, we too infrequently share our reading processes with them. As co-readers of works we are encountering for the first time, rather than as expert readers of texts we have studied and researched, we can show them how we read literature. For most of us that means showing them that an interpretation does not arrive full-blown in our minds. It comes about through questioning and conjecture, through connections with personal experiences and works previously read, through taking into account sounds and images, emotions and insights. It also means revealing that responding to literature can involve evoking memories, following false leads, getting confused by multiple meanings of language, being unable to account for some details, entertaining contradictory hypotheses, and having to reserve judgement. It means acknowledging that for various readers the literary work may be more or less accessible, have more or less impact, and be more or less appealing, depending upon the personal and vicarious experiences the readers bring to the work.

Students need to realize that it is not only all right but inevitable that individuals respond to and interpret literature in a variety of ways. They also need to learn that the joy of literature is in the experience of reading and responding. It is sharing ideas and feelings, playing with language, making imaginative leaps, and experiencing acts of discovery and acts of creation. It is an engaging and active experience. It is not passively acquiring accepted interpretations of authorized texts. If our fondest wish is that our students become and remain lovers of reading and literature, then the amount of knowledge they have acquired about specific literary works is not of the greatest fundamental importance–development of reading and responding skills and positive attitudes are. If twenty years from now our students are making use of the competence, confidence, and independence as readers they developed in our classrooms, we will have fulfilled our real jobs as teachers of literature. We will have made a difference.

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