
The Three Rs

Rationale for Reader Response

December 2008

Dear Mom,

This year we have learned a whole new way of responding by journal entries. It really helps you think about what you're reading, and since it is all on paper you can always go back and think about things you have changed about your reading in the past. What we usually write about is like a little bit of a summary, not too much though, then we talk about some of the strategies we used and what we were thinking while reading. I like it a lot because I get to see what I thought before I read the book and then after.

Hollie

I have always encouraged my students to read. The consensus of the research as well as my experience is that the more students read, the better they read. However, I have found that to a great extent, that conclusion depends on the definition of *better*. I agree that students will read more fluently, but first we have to examine what *reading* is. Many students think they are reading because they can understand the words and then summarize the plot or, in the case of nonfiction, find the facts. But teachers need to recognize if their students really comprehend what they are reading. If not, teachers must distinguish where the breakdown occurs and identify how they can help students take comprehension to a more profound level. Many students do not automatically advance to more challenging material or push themselves to think about their reading on different

levels. Adolescents can read without awareness—unconscious of literary devices, inattentive to writer’s craft, lacking insight of comprehension skills they are using. In other words, they read without *interacting* with the text.

A reader response program allows teachers to see how readers make meaning from what they read and whether they are truly engaged in what they are reading, and it allows teachers to help students read authentically.

Authentic reading is interactive. A few years ago, I became familiar with Louise Rosenblatt’s reader response theory. As Jeffrey Wilhelm (1997) explains it, “reading is a ‘transaction’ in which the reader and the text converse together in a particular situation to make meaning” (p. 19). In other words, readers construct meaning from their transactions with the text. Teaching that focuses on finding the “correct” answers or interpretations or deciphering teacher meaning is efferent, or informational, reading. In teaching students to experience, to enjoy, and to claim ownership of literature—or, as Rosenblatt would say, to read *aesthetically*—one must not try to control the reader’s response.

For years I *taught* novels. I told the students what to see, how to interpret, what the text meant. I gave tests, and students dutifully spat back my insights. I was testing their listening, not their learning. I remember congratulating one student, Richard, for earning the highest grade on a test about a novel. I was mortified when he admitted to the class that he had never opened the book; he’d just listened and given me back what I said in class “discussions.”

As a result of this type of teaching, students feel that they have to search not for *a* but for *the* meaning of a text. They surmise that there is One True Meaning and only teachers hold that meaning. Instead, we must all acknowledge that there are many meanings. “Literary meaning is largely an individual engagement . . . it results from the creative effort of a reader working from a text” (Probst, 1994, p. 41). Rosenblatt (2005b) wrote, “There are no generic readers or generic interpretations, but only innumerable relationships between readers and texts.” She continued, “Traditional and formalist methods of teaching literature treat it as a body of information to be transmitted, rather than as experiences to be reflected upon. . . . Teachers often forget that if students know they will be tested primarily on factual aspects of the work (often by multiple-choice questions) a full aesthetic reading is prevented, and the ‘mix’ [of public and private or personal relationship with the text] swings toward the efferent [nonliterary, factual] end of the continuum” (pp. 17–18).

Gone are my lists of questions, the lists of points that *must* be covered. I let readers engage with the text on their own playing fields. How can literature be life altering and lead to self-discovery, as it has for me, if I am inserting my life and values between the literature and the reader. Where does the reader fit in?

No one else can read a literary work for us. The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself. He responds to the little black marks on the page or to the sounds of the words in his ear and he makes something of them. The verbal symbols enable him to draw on his past experiences with what the words point to in life and literature. The text presents these words in a new and unique pattern. Out of these he is enabled actually to mold a new experience, the literary work. (Rosenblatt, 1938/2005a, p. 27)

Response theory provides that understanding best begins when students clarify and reflect on text with their own *unique* and immediate impressions. However, students need to be guided to make valid responses. Rosenblatt (1978) defines “valid” response as “an interpretation [that] is not contradicted by any element of the text, and . . . nothing is

projected for which there is no verbal basis" (p. 115). Even though readers are free to make unique and personal responses, they need to base their interpretations on their understanding of the actual text. Robert Probst (1994) suggests that teachers design instruction to incorporate certain principles, such as "invite response to the text," "give students time to shape and take confidence in their responses," and "let the talk build and grow as naturally as possible, encouraging an organic flow for the discussion" (p. 42).

Teachers have to teach readers to respond—not what to respond but how to respond. Not all readers do this automatically, just as some do not automatically use reading strategies. I have asked students, "What do you think?" and received blank stares as if to say, "I think what we just read." I am reminded of Charlie Gordon in "Flowers for Algernon": when asked what he thinks when looking at an inkblot, he says, "I think an inkblot!" The difference is that our students have the intelligence to imagine and interpret. We need to scaffold response technique as well as response procedure just as we scaffold anything else we teach. I teach students how to respond, modeling different types of response. I build upon, and vary, the types and amount of response based on what they respond so that, at the end of the school year, students choose ways of responding they feel are appropriate to the text and the situation.

With this in mind, I have devised a yearlong curriculum of response journaling. The curriculum is based on two premises: (1) teachers need to teach readers how to journal, and (2) teachers need to give readers choice. Throughout the year, I teach students a variety of journaling techniques so that readers learn to respond in diverse ways, realizing their response options. These lessons give them the tools they need to assume control of their own learning. I want them to know that it is appropriate to respond in divergent ways to different types of text and to different readings and at different times in their reading lives. It is important that they experience all the options so they know the alternatives from which they can choose. By the end of the year, most students identify their favorite type of response or become skilled at modifying their journaling to fit a particular reading. The purpose of response journaling is reader reflection; the goal is better comprehension and a more profound understanding of text.

There are five key reasons for requiring written response:

1. *To make response second-nature.* I tell students that writing responses is somewhat artificial. After I read, I do not usually write down my responses. Instead, I think them; I may discuss them with others. I tell my students that this is a training time. I also explain that when they write their responses, I am able to read them, which leads to the second reason for requiring response . . .



Photo 1.1 Matt writes a response in his reading journal

2. *To make individual assessment, both formative and evaluative, possible, and then . . .*

3. *To allow for metacognition.* Response journals allow students to reflect upon and respond to their thinking, thus permitting self-assessment. As William Zinsser (1988) says in *Writing to Learn*, “We write to find out what we know and what we want to say” (p. viii). He adds the point that “writing and thinking and learning cannot be separated. One cannot happen without the others” (p. 11). I explain to my students that we write to find out what we are thinking, to work out the kinks, to take us deeper as we unravel our thoughts . . .

4. *To increase comprehension.* As the 2000 report of the National Reading Panel states, “Teaching students to use . . . writing to organize their ideas about what they are reading is a proven procedure that enhances comprehension for text” (p. 4–103). And finally . . .

5. *When students write, they are reading.* Conversely, when students are reading, they are not typically writing. An added bonus of reading response is that students frequently write in conjunction with their reading. This form of writing is new for many, and it can lead the way to other, more formal writings, including critical writing.

In this era of high-stakes testing, an additional bonus is that students will become comfortable writing different types of responses to text, a major component of standardized reading tests.

While the importance of response cannot be minimized, Regie Routman (2000) counsels,

Literature extensions, when we do employ them, must be worthwhile (not merely busywork) and expand students’ meaningful involvement with the text.

Meaningful literature extensions—

- develop naturally from the literature,
- thoughtfully encourage students to reexamine and reconsider the text,
- demonstrate what the reader has gleaned from the text,
- deepen students’ understanding of the literary piece,
- promote connections between the text and the students’ lives, BUT
- are secondary to reading for meaning and pleasure. (p. 72)

With that admonition (“secondary to reading for meaning and pleasure”) in mind, I keep my response time requirements simple. My students are required to read at least 25 minutes per night, 5 nights per week, and for each reading session they are to respond for 5 minutes. Therefore, response is no more than 15 percent of their actual reading time. The goal is to not stop readers from reading because they “have” to write, so I encourage them to make the writing meaningful and even fun and keep it to a minimum. In most cases, these are draft writings. I tell students that their writing must be legible but need not be edited and certainly not revised. They are to concentrate on their reflections, not the writing product. They can write after they read so they do not interrupt aesthetic enjoyment, unless they would rather “stop and jot.”

Readers are capturing raw thoughts before, during, and after reading whole texts. These writings help them to become reflective readers, which, in turn, increases their comprehension, as well as assisting me—and them—to evaluate their reading and comprehension. In a quote many have attributed to philosopher Edmund Burke, “Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting.”