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TEACHING CHILDREN TO BE READERS OF LITERATURE

(A collation of theoretical insights, research hints and teaching ideas from Language arts, March 1984, vol.61, no. 3.)

Every act of reading involves a text and a reader.

Until recently, literature teaching concentrated on the text and virtually ignored the individual response of the reader. The methodology for teaching literature, especially in high schools and tertiary institutions was firmly grounded on works like I A Richards Practical criticism. (Think of the SHIFT SEI method of analysis taught to thousands of UNISA English students, who in turn taught some version of the method to thousands of matriculation candidates.)

Recent work in reader-response theory suggests that the reader is crucial to the construction of a literary experience. (See, for example, Rosenblatt 1978 and Thompkins 1980). One of the implications of this insight is that literature teaching should begin by honouring the individuality of the reader's response to a work. Whatever the approach at higher levels, if we are going to initiate children into an imaginative engagement with symbolic forms of language, we require a methodology which acknowledges the nature and importance of reader-response.

The question is : How can teachers acquire a

better understanding of their pupils responses to stories and poems? And, equally important, how can they help to develop responses which are appropriate to the texts concerned? Here are some suggestions, many of them gleaned from articles in a recent issue of Language arts (March 1984):

I. Small-scale classroom-based investigations
(To acquire a better understanding of how children respond to literature)

Teachers' research can make an important contribution to our understanding of what happens when cildren read (or listen to) poems or stories. Yet many teachers are reluctant to undertake classroom research, either because they do not know how to procede or because they feel that curricular and institutional constraints are too rigid to allow for research. Michael Benton (1984) proposes a number of research strategies which can be modified to fit the constraints which prevail in different classrooms. My outline of some of these proposals will, I hope, encourage English teachers, school librarians and perhaps even student teachers to embark on small-scale investigations of children's responses to literature.

In designing a research project, two of the teacher's key decisions concern the selection of texts and of pupils. The texts for a small-scale investigation should be short; for example, short stories, poems, myths, legends, and picture books. Similarly, the number of pupils involved should be small.

Whole class monitoring is an unrealistic ideal for teachers without research assistants. Benton suggests that it is best to work with four to six boys and girls of similar ages. The children can work as a group, in pairs or individually, depending on the kind of text which has been selected. Picture stories, for instance, are well suited to group or pair work because they invite shared reading and interpretation. However, one-to-one contact between researcher and reader is more likely to yield detailed and sensitive reporting on the reader's response. It also allows the teacher to build up comparative case studies of different reader's responses to the same text.

To prepare pupils for participation in the research programme, Benton recommends the following preliminary activities:
(i) Talk to the children about their reading habits - where and when they tend to do most reading, what kinds of books they most like and dislike, and so on.
(ii) Ask each child to list his or her five favourite books.Then ask them to say which book they would choose if they could take only one and to describe the most memorable incident, character or setting from the book to the other children in the group. The purpose of this task is to train pupils to focus on the detailed effects of their reading.
(iii) Read a passage from a story to the children and ask them to jot down what was going on in their heads during the reading. (Their jottings should be done 'stream of

consciousness' style without any careful consideration.) Afterwards, let the pupils share their responses with one another, picking out common features and features unique to individual listeners. Part of the point of this task is to show the children that the researcher is interested in all responses, not only the 'right' ones.

Now the children and teacher are ready to begin the inquiry proper. There are a number of different ways of structuring such an inquiry. I want to sketch just one approach here. Teachers who are interested in conducting their own research should consult Benton's article and the works listed in his bibliography for more detailed information.

Research by Benton and others indicates that there are four main kinds of mental activities involved in the reading of fiction: Picturing (in which the reader uses mental imagery to create meaning); anticipating/retrospecting (in which the reader makes both long- and short-term predictions about how the story will develop and end, on the basis of evidence so far); interacting (in which readers project themselves into stories and, at the same time, assimilate texts into their own experiences; and evaluating (in which the value which the reader places on the story forms part of the impetus to continue reading).

These four notions can be used as a basis for formulating questions or prompts for investigating pupils' responses to

literature. Here is an example of the kinds of questions suitable for a fairly tightly structured inquiry into children's responses to a short story:

> 1. Picturing. What pictures do you get in your mind's eye of this characater, scene or event? If character X were to come through the door now, what would he or she look like?
> 2. Anticipating/retrospecting. How did these present circumstances arise? What do you think will happen next? Why? How do you think it will all end?
> 3. Interacting. What do you feel about this character/setting/ incident?
> 4.Evaluating. What opinions do you have about this setting/character/ incident/way the story is being told? (Benton, p 270)

Instead of posing the questions formally, the teacher can simply prompt an open-ended discussion around these points and tape-record the children's responses.

How should the teacher go about recording and assessing the results of the inquiry? Benton recommends a judicious blend of formal and informal techiniques:
(i) Keep a logbook in which you note your decisions, your reasons for changing any of them, your reflections on the progress of the inquiry.
(ii) If your inquiry has involved

tape-recording children's responses, transcribe selected sections from the tapes for more careful analysis

(iii) Decide whether your data is best handled by means of free interpretation or by content analysis. Content analysis will produce tidier results but because it is concerned to fit the reader's comments into a prescribed system of categories, it will often take little account of what the reader's responses mean to the reader. Free interpretation is much more sensitive in this regard and so yields richer insights into the nature and scope of reader-response.

II. Creating a community of readers

So much for coming to a better understanding of how children respond to literature. Even when we have this understanding, we are still faced with the issue of how best to help children to respond in ways which are appropriate to the texts concerned.

The classroom-based studies of Hickman and Hepler (1982, 1981) indicate the importance of the human context in children's response to literature. A classroom in which pupils and teacher together form a community of readers is much more likely to foster appropriate responses to literature than is a classroom in which stories and poems are spoken about only in the periods formally set aside for them on the time-table.

What is a community of readers and what is the teacher's special role within it? One of

the features of a community of readers is the spontaneous sharing of literature and reading experiences. Children who discover something of particular interest will read the passage out aloud to a friend or offer the book to the teacher for interest or approval. A community of readers has an effective grapevine which lets children know which books have exciting 'secrets' (for example, ones with hidden elements, or picture books which tell a different story from the text). The children serve as informal critics, both in their recommendations about what to read and what to ignore and in their discussions about the meanings of books which elicit very different responses from different readers.

Initially the teacher's most important role is in forging a community of readers - generating a sense of excitement about books; allowing time for pupils to talk about books and to explore their favourite works through different media (painting, drama, and so on); respecting children's desire for silent contemplation of a story or poem; showing pupils by example the different ways in which a book might engage one's attention.

Once the community has been forged, the teacher's role is one of judicious guide and model reader. But as a member of the classroom reading community she (or he) is also a fellow reader - one who shares excitements and insights. In the role of judicious guide, one of the teacher's central tasks is to help children adopt a reading stance which is appropriate to the text

concerned. Rosenblatt (1978, 1982) has distinguished two main reading stances: The aesthetic stance focuses on the satisfactions and images of the 'lived-through experience' of literature, while the efferent stance focuses on the accumulation of facts. No doubt there are other major reading stances; for example, the stance appropriate to the reading of arguments and related discursive modes is, I believe, distinct from what Rosenblatt calls the efferent stance. But Rosenblatt's distinction provides a good starting point for teachers. The teacher's task is to show, both by her own example and through questions and comments, which stance is appropriate to different texts.

Many of the suggestions which I have outlined here are very general. If you have been successful in forging a reading community in your class, write and tell us how you went about it. Or, if you have tried and been unsuccessful, write a short piece on the problems you had to contend with. Lengwitch can only become a forum for debate and the interchange of teachers' ideas if teachers send in written contributions. Reports on classroom-based research will be especially welcome.

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