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Reader-Response Theory and the English Curriculum

Robert E. Probst

*Double, double, toil and trouble; 
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

**Respecting the Text and Respecting the Reader**

There's something rotten in the state of Denmark, to mix plays, if not metaphors. Perhaps not rotten, but tumultuous, at least, with reader-response advocates, deconstructionists, cultural critics, feminist critics, new historicists, narratologists, and a few die-hard New Critics, all clustered around the cauldron, tossing their newts' eyes, rats' tails, and bats' wings into the tumbling, bubbling theoretical stew. If we aren't careful, when the hurlyburly's done, we may have forgotten that the purpose of literature programs in the elementary and secondary schools is to develop readers, not literary scholars and critics.

A few of our students will write us appreciative letters several years from now telling us of the joys and agonies of their doctoral research in seventeenth-century poetic forms or their pursuit of Melville's white whale, three of them will publish in *PMLA* or *New Literary History*, two will come home to debate feminist readings of Hemingway at the local college, and one lonely but diligent scholar will travel to England, become buried in the library at Oxford, and produce a brilliant and unreadable Freudian analysis of the significance of the three witches. Most of our students, however, are going to be elsewhere. They'll be in some line of work far removed from the literary world. They should, nonetheless, be readers. They should be people who enjoy literature, who read it willingly, even enthusiastically, and who respond to it and think about it in ways that enrich their emotional and intellectual lives.

To teach them, and to design English curricula for them, we need to keep in mind who they are and where they are headed. If they aren't scholars, if they don't have the instinctive love of books that probably led us into teaching English in the first place, how then do we approach them? How do we justify the time and energy we ask them to expend upon imaginative inventions, the hours we expect them to spend reading and writing, hours they might prefer to spend watching television or roaming the streets? Or—since the explanations and justifications we offer them are unlikely to be persuasive anyway—perhaps the more important question is, How do we teach so that the experience with literature is its own justification, so that the time spent talking and writing is compelling enough that it doesn't require formal defense?

We must try, first of all, to *respect the natural influence of literary texts upon readers*. Louise Rosenblatt argues that the teacher's influence should be "an elaboration of the vital influence inherent in literature itself." Our first task, if we accept that position, is to make sure that the literature has the chance to work its effects upon the readers, to make sure that we don’t get in the way, substituting other matters for that vital influence. The literary experience, then, although it may involve learning about history, biography, genre, technique, and the other elements into which literature is too easily subdivided, is first of all the immediate encounter between a reader and a book. Texts and lessons should begin here, assisting the students to articulate and investigate that influence rather than replacing it with peripheral matters. The literary text must not be reduced to exercise or drill, but must be allowed to live as a work of art, influencing the
reader to see and think and feel. Into the context of that natural response, whatever it may be, other tasks, other questions, may be introduced, but the influence inherent in the work itself must be respected and must be of primary concern in the classroom. We must respect the text.

Implicit within this vision of literary experience is a respect for the uniqueness of the individual reader and the integrity of the individual reading. We have tended in the past— influenced strongly by the professional tendency to insist upon the rightness of certain readings, upon conformity to established interpretations—to seek consensus in the classroom. Teachers who guided us to a select group of pre-eminent critics reinforced the notion that there was a perfect reading hiding out there somewhere. We didn’t have it—obviously—but the best, the most widely-published critics, might lead us to it. One thing we learned quickly was that our own, private, personal experiences would do little to help us find it. They were idiosyncratic, unique, almost deviant, and the poet clearly could not have had them in mind as he wrote, so they were better disregarded and ignored if we hoped to find the right reading, the correct interpretation.

If literature is to matter, however, if it is to become significant in the reader’s life, then those personal connections become hard to deny. Meaning lies in that shared ground where the reader and text meet—it isn’t resident within the text, to be extracted like a nut from its shell. Rather, the meaning is created by readers as they bring the text to bear upon their own experience, and their own histories to bear upon the text. Robert Scholes goes so far as to argue that reading text and reflecting upon our lives are essentially the same intellectual process:

Learning to read books—or pictures, or films—is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives. Reading, seen this way, is not merely an academic experience but a way of accepting the fact that our lives are of limited duration and that whatever satisfaction we may achieve in life must come through the strength of our engagement with what is around us. We do well to read our lives with the same intensity we develop from learning to read our texts.

So we must respect readers and their readings, too. This is not, of course, to say that texts mean anything we want them to mean—it’s obviously possible to misread, to misunderstand a word, or miss a point. When we argue that a writer holds a certain belief, that a character has certain values or goals, we obligate ourselves to offering evidence and logic that sustain our position. Our reasoning, when we do so, may be weak or it may be strong. In a debate about such matters of inference one argument may well prove to be more persuasive than another. The point remains, however, that a work may mean to a reader what it did not mean to its author. It may trigger responses, evoke memories, awaken emotions and thoughts that could not have been predicted by the writer. And those associations may be of much more interest and importance to the reader than anything the writer could have predicted.

Consider, for the sake of a concrete example, responses to this poem by David Bottoms:

Sign for My Father, Who Stressed the Bunt

On the rough diamond,
the hand-cut field below the dog lot and barn,
we rehearsed the strict technique
of bunting. I watched from the infield,
the mound, the backstop
as your left hand climbed the bat, your legs
and shoulders squared toward the pitcher.
You could drop it like a seed
down either base line. I admired your style,
but not enough to take my eyes off the bank
that served as our center-field fence.

Years passed, three leagues of organized ball,
no few lives. I could homer
into the garden beyond the bank,
into the left-field lot of Carmichael Motors,
and still you stressed the same technique,
the crouch and spring, the lead arm absorbing
just enough impact. That whole tiresome pitch
about basics never changing,
and I never learned what you were laying down.

Like a hand brushed across the bill of a cap,
let this be the sign
I’m getting a grip on the sacrifice.

It’s difficult for many students to read such a text as this without finding their minds wandering beyond the words on the page to extraneous mat-

We do well to read our lives with the same intensity we develop from learning to read our texts.

Robert Scholes

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ters. Of course, we’ll argue that they aren’t extraneous to the reading but simply external to the text. Students have spoken of their own experiences playing baseball (or if not baseball, some other sport that required the same concentration and practice), of fathers or mothers or other teachers who tried to get them to accept something difficult for youth to accept, and of their own slow realization that sacrifice was occasionally necessary. Other students will speak of still other matters we can’t foresee. One young reader said that it simply evoked a “sense of loss,” a sad awareness that the times he and his father had played football together were now past and seldom thought of. Adult readers, some with children of their own, have their own perspectives on the poem, perspectives shaped by their unique histories. For some teachers, the text has called to mind resistant students, students to whom they have struggled to teach concepts unpleasant at the time. If such other matters—thoughts of our parents and our children, our own memories and dreams—are awakened by the poem, are they not part of the literary experience, part of our own encounter with the text, and shouldn’t they be welcomed into the discourse?

The poem may invite some readers to reflect on their own mothers or fathers, to speculate that much of a parent’s rejected teaching was well-meant and ultimately significant. If so, if the reading enables a reader to see some aspect of his or her own life more clearly, to articulate a chapter of a personal story so that it makes sense, then it would be hard to assert that this reading was insignificant. Nor does attention to those personal elements preclude addressing other issues we might want to attend to in the English class. The concept of metaphor, for instance, is clearly worth discussing in the context of this poem. Paying attention to the readers’ responses, however, doesn’t necessarily obviate consideration of metaphor. In fact, the discussion of responses is likely to lead directly to an opportunity to define and discuss metaphor. Once students have pointed out that the “sacrifice” in the last line of the poem is more than just a ball tapped down the third-base line, that it suggests other sacrifices, larger sacrifices, once the class begins to see that the moment on the ball field represents the relationship between the man and the boy, that it is a metaphor for the teaching and learning, then we may observe that they have discovered the concept of metaphor, and help them define it with their own perceptions about the poem. The concept is more likely to register upon students if they come to the definition through concrete experience than if they are first given the definition and then asked to go out into texts and search for examples.

Those fundamental assumptions—that our students are not professional literary scholars, that the literary experience is at first personal and unique, that there is validity to unique and divergent readings, that we must respect and trust both the text and the reader—lead us to six goals for literature instruction, goals that might direct the design of programs or textbooks.

Goals for the Literature/Writing Program

1. Students will learn about themselves. That is the English program’s greatest and most sadly neglected potential. The essential content of our writing is, after all, our own experience. Literature is, above all else, a reservoir of conceptions of human possibilities; it is about life. Rosenblatt says that “of all the arts, literature is most immediately implicated with life itself,” and Kenneth Burke refers to literature as “equipment for living.” It isn’t purely academic, simply a scholarly exercise, but
rather it speaks of the human condition and invites us to reflect on our own. If a reading of the Bottoms poem offers us a chance to see ourselves more clearly, to tell something of our own story, to grasp our own experience more firmly, then that opportunity should be pursued. It is likely to result in more readers who see value and significance in literature and who will therefore be more likely to read on their own after schooling ends for them.

2. Students will learn about others. The English program ought to humanize us, ought to make us more sympathetic and understanding of one another. When the human questions that literary works raise are emphasized in the classroom, and when the differing responses of the students are respected, it has the power to do so. If the Bottoms poem is simply an opportunity to teach the distinction between metaphor and simile—one of the more useless distinctions in the literary lexicon—there is little to do but learn definitions and memorize examples. But if the influence inherent in the work itself, which may be to evoke thoughts of parents and children, of teaching, of lessons learned and taught, forgotten and remembered, of lost opportunities, of sacrifices made and not made, then the encounter with the poem is a chance to learn about both oneself and one’s classmates. And it may not be possible for students to understand themselves well without the background of their peers. They may need in part to define themselves in terms of similarities and differences with others around them. The literature and their own writing give them that chance.

3. Students will learn about cultures and societies, their varying concepts of the good life, of love and hate, justice and revenge, and the other significant issues of human experience. If we are to come to understand ourselves, we will have to do so, at least in part, by coming to understand the larger groups to which we belong. Those cultures and societies are the background against which we define ourselves as we accept or reject what they value, struggle against the limitations they impose, or celebrate the visions they offer.

4. Students should learn how texts operate, how they shape our thought and manipulate our emotion. Respect for the students’ unique readings doesn’t imply that readers should look only into their own memories and associations, that literary texts are simply catalysts to introspective meditations. Texts are more manipulative than that, and they do work upon us, encouraging us to see things in certain ways, to notice and value one aspect of a situation rather than another; if the reading is to contribute to our intellectual growth, we need to be able to see those effects and understand them. The power of the text imposes responsibilities on the reader. It’s appropriate to ask, for instance, how “Sign for My Father” suggests that more is at issue here than baseball strategy. Students might be encouraged to notice that the word “sacrifice” carries several meanings; that the narrator’s stance is that of one for whom many years have passed (“three leagues of organized ball, no few lives”) so that the bunt is likely to be of less significance to him now; that Bottoms plays upon the contrast of the glorious home run and the lowly but important sacrifice; that games are often offered as metaphors for life. Such observations should, as often as possible, emerge from the natural discussion of responses. Some student, almost inevitably, will offer the suggestion that this poem is about more than baseball, leading directly into the analysis of text suggested here with questions that their own comments imply: “Why is it about more than baseball?” “What makes you suspect that?” “What do you see emphasized in the poem that suggests a broader significance in the mind of the author?” “What do you hear in the responses of classmates that indicates some larger issue has come up?” Such questions, growing out of the responses of the students, will lead into the appropriate analysis of text without substituting it for the human reactions that come first.

5. Students should learn how context shapes meaning. Meaning resides neither in the text, nor in the reader. In fact, it resides nowhere. Rather, it happens, it occurs, it is created and recreated in the act of reading and the subsequent acts of talking and writing about the experience. As the game exists only in the playing, the dance only in the dancing, so meaning exists only in the active encounter of reader and text. That encounter, however, occurs within a context. The reader may meet the text alone, or surrounded by thirty other restless readers; may come to it happy or sad, troubled or at peace, hungry or satiated; may love baseball or hate it; may have made the team or been cut. Events in life outside the classroom, outside the
text, frame readings and either light them or cast them into shadow in various ways.

A student who brings to “Sign for My Father” a history of bitter conflict with a father, for instance, may see the poem very differently from one who carries pleasant memories of playing catch in the back yard. A student who has recently lost a parent may have a hard time reading the poem at all. A young woman with no interest in sports may see it as a male poem by a male poet about male experience and reject it utterly, though, when that did happen on one occasion, another woman asserted that she knew more about baseball than any man in the room, and that furthermore the poem was as much about parent-and-child or teacher-and-student as about father-and-son, a perspective that welcomed the female reader as well as the male. Each of us comes to a literary experience from other experience, against the backdrop of which we read. Those circumstances inevitably shape our reading.

6. Students should learn about the processes by which they make meaning out of literary texts. We have tended to deceive students about those processes by hiding from them our own struggles with texts. Typically, teachers come to class with meaning already made. That is to say, they understand the poem or play. They’ve read it, read about it, decided what’s significant in it, figured out what’s worth discussing, what problems there are to solve, what questions there are to answer, what, in sum, the text means. And students consequently don’t get to see readers in the act of making meaning out of texts. Instead they are deluded into thinking that meaning is outside of themselves, that it lurks somewhere out there in the world, perhaps hidden in the text, perhaps buried somewhere in the recesses of the teacher’s mind, but definitely outside themselves. Meaning comes to be something they have to find, or worse, that someone will provide for them, rather than something they must make and take responsibility for. They learn that the process of thinking about a literary work consists of answering questions posed by an authority, hoping that the interrogation will lead to some clearer vision of the text.

Students need instead to learn that literary meaning is largely an individual engagement, that it results from the creative effort of a reader working with a text, and that the reader may work in various ways. Answering someone else’s questions is only one way to work for meaning. Inferential reasoning is only one of many valuable strategies to apply to texts. The explicatory paper is only one of the suitable genres in which to write about our literary experience. There are other productive ways of dealing with texts and readings, and students need to know and appreciate them. One of the most valuable is in some ways a departure from the text. It is to tell your own story as it was evoked by the literary work. The Bottoms poem, for example, often awakens memories and associations that are compelling and interesting, though they leave the text far behind. When those stories rise to the surface, students seem almost driven to tell them, or if the stories are more dangerous and frightening, to write about them. Too often those stories are lost, listened to politely, perhaps, and then swept aside to let the class get down to the serious business of interpreting and analyzing. When that
happens, students are taught that their lives are less significant than the imaginary lives of the characters in the text, that their thoughts are less important than those of the writer, that making sense of their own lives is less important than analyzing how writers make sense of theirs.

But if literature is a valid way of dealing with experience, if narrative and poetry and drama are forms that help us comprehend and cope with human events, then it seems reasonable to invite students to use those forms in their own lives, to reflect upon their own experiences as Bottoms must have reflected on his to write that short, elegant poem. Students might be encouraged to choose the form appropriate for their response—a letter perhaps, or a personal narrative, or a poem, the writing of which might be aided by drawing upon “Sign . . .” as a model. Or, if it serves the student's purpose, a problem-solving essay, a traditional, expository paper.

These six goals might guide the development of a literature and writing curriculum devoted to cultivating in students a love of reading and an ability to draw upon literary experience to enrich their own lives. Such a curriculum proposes to develop readers and writers rather than literary scholars. Encompassing all of these goals, implicit in them, is the overarching goal that experiences with literature will yield pleasure—aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and social—for students. That is not to say that the work will always be fun or that class will seem a game, but that there will be rewards, intellectual and emotional, for students. They will have the satisfaction of seeing more clearly who they are, who their classmates are, what they value and reject. They will have the intellectual pleasure of solving problems and analyzing challenging texts and the emotional pleasure of participating in literature's celebrations of life.

Principles of Instruction

In pursuit of these goals several principles for instruction might guide the design of instruction.

1. Invite response to texts. Everything we do in the classroom should make clear to students that their responses, emotional and intellectual, are valid starting points for discussion and writing. Students must not feel, as they so often do, that they are irrelevant in the process, that they are interchangeable, that they could be replaced by anyone else who would sit there taking the same

notes while the class proceeded along exactly the same path. Instead, they have to realize that they are an integral part of the process, that literary meaning requires their presence and participation.

2. Give students time to shape and take confidence in their responses. They need an opportunity to reflect and to articulate their reactions and their questions before they hear those of others. Unfortunately, students are too often encouraged to do the opposite. Professors who announce at the beginning of a course that "the critics important for you to study are these . . ." tell us that it's more efficient to read those critics early, find out what it is we are to think, and then read the literary works and think those thoughts. The questions that often follow selections, those questions that call for information or that pose a particular textual problem, tell crafty students that nothing else needs to be attended to in the reading. Instead, we need to encourage students to verbalize their own responses, to articulate their own questions, preferably before hearing those of others, to ensure that their concerns will be addressed and will inform the work of the class.

3. Find the links among students' responses. Those points of contact, the similar stories, the shared reactions, and the dramatically contradictory readings will enable us to encourage communication among students and will demonstrate the possibilities for different points of view and for profiting from the exploration of those differences. The similarities observed will underline their shared humanity, and the differences will remind them of their uniqueness.

4. Invite discussion and writing about self, text, others, and the culture of society. Literary experience and writing should be opportunities to learn about all these elements. The temptation to focus exclusively on the text is strong—it gives us surer footing, a solid ground on which to build. The divergent readings and responses can be so varied, so digressive, that they become confusing and chaotic. If, however, we begin to think of the literature classroom as a workshop in which students may be doing many different things, then we may grow easier with the notion that in response to one text some students are writing letters, others poems, others are arguing about the author's intentions, others about the values they themselves hold, and others still are improvising alternate possibilities for a scene drawn from the text.

5. Let the talk build and grow as naturally as possible, encouraging an organic flow for the discussion. In the interest of devising and conducting well-crafted lessons, we've often tried to foresee exactly where the talk would go. We've built carefully designed edifices of questions that enable us to conclude, just before the bell rings, "Thus we have seen that Bottoms, in 'Sign for My Father,' means. . . ."
though some lessons may need to be taught that way, because we think that some point very much needs to be made, too often those lessons steal from the students the opportunity to explore their own readings. Students should feel free to change their minds, to explore, to follow the talk wherever it leads.

6. Look back to other texts, other discussions, other experiences, and forward to what students might read next, what they might write tomorrow. As the classes proceed, we need to search for opportunities to connect today’s discussion with yesterday’s essay, today’s novel with tomorrow’s play. Meaning grows not only out of the encounter of reader and text, but out of the rich interplay of other readers and other texts as well, and out of the tight bonds between the act of reading and the act of writing in the students’ lives.

Questions for Reading and Writing

These principles suggest a sequence of issues or questions to consider in teaching both reading and writing in the secondary English program. Our problem is to figure out ways to help students do something that they must do largely on their own. They need freedom if they are to discover the significance of the text for themselves and learn to find their own way through literary works. On the other hand, they need assistance and guidance so that they may learn a repertoire of questions, strategies, attitudes, and skills, that will enable them to enjoy literature.

The questions we raise to help students read and write are critically important because they should support without restricting. Here, for instance, is a hypothetical set of questions, offered as an example of the kind of inquiry that might guide without too tightly confining, that might support the students’ readings without dictating precisely what they will do with texts. All these questions are generic—none are tied directly to a specific text. All of them would have to be reworded for lower grade levels, and perhaps supplemented with questions directed specifically at the text of the moment, but they might suggest the approach and the emphasis for the classroom. Implicit in this sequence of questions is the opportunity, or perhaps requirement, that students write and talk about their perceptions. These questions can’t be treated like the short-answer questions often provided at the end of a selection simply to see if students did their homework.

The first question asks students to focus on what took place in their minds as they read:

1. Read the text and record what happens as you read—what do you remember, feel, question, see . . . ? Afterwards, think back over the experience. What is your own sense of the text—does it have any significance for you; does it recall memories; does it affirm or contradict any of your own attitudes or perceptions?

Such a question invites readers to observe themselves reading, to respect their thoughts and feelings and examine them for their significance. It asserts that they and their primary reactions are important and will constitute much of the substance of the class.

The second question then asks them to concentrate on what was going on in the text. Even such a simple task as paraphrasing has the potential of revealing differences in readings, differences in judgments of characters, differences in the attitudes and beliefs of the students:

2. What did you see happening in the text? You might paraphrase it—retell the event briefly. or What image was called to mind by the text? Describe it briefly. or Upon what did you focus most intently as you read—what word, phrase, image, idea? What is the most important word in the text?

The third asks them to compare their readings with those of other students. Its purpose, at least in part, is to begin to build the society necessary for the discussion of literary works. It attests to the importance placed upon readings, as opposed to texts, and affirms the importance of dialogue about unique readings as a way of coming to understand texts and ourselves as readers:

3. Please discuss your readings with your partner (or in a small group). Did the text call to mind different memories, thoughts, feelings? Did you make sense of it in different ways? What similarities and differences do you notice in your experiences with the text? What might account for those differences?

The fourth question asks them to reflect on the context of the reading: that is to say, the classroom setting and any related works that come to mind. It serves as a reminder that meaning is complex, that it demands attention to matters outside the text, even outside one’s self:

4. Does this text call to mind any other literary work (poem, play, film, story—any genre)? If it does, what is the connection you see between the two? How did the circumstances—this room, this
group, other events in your life—influence or shape the reading?

And the fifth asks them to consider how meaning has evolved, changing and taking shape, during the course of reading and talking and writing about the text. It reaffirms the extremely important notion that meanings are fluid, that they develop, evolve, grow; that meaning is not a static entity, a unitary and unchanging thing to be found, dusted off, admired for the moment and shelved:

5. How did your understanding of the text or your feelings about it change as you talked? How did you respond to it—emotionally or intellectually? How did you think about the text—did you analyze it, examine your own associations and memories, react to the observations of your partner, or something else?

If we designed instruction around such questions as these, we would be asking students to learn something about themselves, about texts, about other readers and thus about their society, about contexts (the classroom setting, other literary works, and so on), and about the processes by which meaning is made from literary texts and human experience. For them to read intelligently and to write well they have to be aware of all of those elements—they all contribute to meaning. The writing that students would undertake in such a curriculum would, of course, be diverse in both mode and content. Traditional essays about literary works, those answering questions about the author’s intentions or values, about the characters’ beliefs and motivations, or about similar issues, are reasonable and valuable assignments, so the curriculum should attend to the interpretive, analytical essay. Students will write it more effectively, however, if the essay is part of a real dialogue in pursuit of meaning and significance. Interpretive essays will be most appropriate when there is real disagreement about a text, and then the talk might lead into the writing of more extended and carefully planned argument than oral discourse allows. Those papers themselves could become the substance for further work—students could even be asked to write analyses of the arguments of their classmates. But all of the work should be devoted to making sense of literary and human experience in a way that respects the uniqueness and the integrity of the individual reader. In a curriculum that respects the student’s role as a maker of meaning, the expository, analytical essay would be only one of the genres in which students would be asked to perform.

Much of the writing we ask students to do might be personal narrative, perhaps the telling of one’s own stories as they are called to mind by reading. If poetry and fiction are legitimate ways of making meaning, then we should have students try their hands at them. Students of music aren’t asked just to listen and appreciate; they are invited to hum a tune or pound on a drum. Literature students should similarly be asked to hum a poem once or twice during their schooling if they are to come to understand the genre as fully as they might. There are, after all, various possible ways of making meaning out of experience, literary or otherwise, and students should learn to exercise some responsibility in choosing among them. They need to know that telling their own stories is a perfectly legitimate, respectable act, as significant as explicating a text.

Our primary goal in the English curriculum is not to make literary scholars of all of our students. It is to make them readers and writers, independent and self-reliant thinkers who employ language and literature to enrich their lives. If we keep clearly in mind what we are about, it should be possible for all our toil and trouble to yield an English curriculum that accomplishes that for many of our students.