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Dialogue with a Text

Robert E. Probst

A Story

I was observing a class in a suburban junior high school, one that drew many of its students from comfortable homes with parents in successful professional roles, parents who expected a great deal of their children, and of the school. The entire class, but especially one girl sitting directly in front of me, was intrigued by the story. It was C. D. B. Bryan's "So Much Unfairness of Things," and the unfairness of which it spoke seemed to trouble and awaken the students (342–67). They stirred, noticeably uncomfortable and disturbed when the time came to discuss the reading.

The story is that of a young man, a student at a tough preparatory school in Virginia, who found himself in difficulty with his Latin course and succumbed to the temptation to cheat on an examination. He regretted the lapse immediately, and painfully, but too late. He was reported, his father was called, and the story ended as he was driven away from the campus.

Many of the students reading the story must have been painfully aware of the complexity of the situation Bryan had created. P. S., as the student was called, had no intention of cheating. It wasn't planned or premeditated. He hadn't even considered the possibility. Not until well into the examination did he realize that the translation of the test passage was in his desk—he hadn't brought it to the exam planning to use it—and even then he fought the temptation. But he *was* in desperate straits, having failed the exam the year before. He needed to pass it to graduate, and he didn't want to stay at the school another year. Things were not going well on the exam, he was obviously in bad

shape, and the notes were there in his desk. The temptation was just too great. He slid the sheet out, copied the translation, and went off to his room in terror.

He was not habitually dishonest and corrupt. If somewhat too casual about his work, too easily distracted from his studies, he was nonetheless a pleasant, good-natured, likable fellow, and not the sort of character whose punishment the readers could watch with equanimity. It must have been easy for the students to imagine themselves in a similar situation.

On the other hand, those readers could not permit themselves the satisfaction of railing against the teacher and the headmaster who expelled P. S. Both the Latin teacher, Dr. Fairfax, and the headmaster, Mr. Seaton, appeared to be kind men, nearly as upset and unhappy with the situation as P. S. was. Bound by the school's strict honor code, they had little choice but to abide by its demands. Even the student who reported P. S. was a good fellow, whose motivations were respectable. There was no villain to blame and thus relieve the reader of his problem.

Before the teacher could begin the discussion, the girl sitting in front of me raised her hand, and without waiting for the teacher to call on her, began to talk. "I know exactly how he felt," she said, obviously troubled. "My parents expect me to become a doctor, and if I were going to fail I'd *have* to cheat."

Her remark provoked a flurry of comment, some students confirming the point, almost sadly and shamefully, as if revealing an unhappy truth about their lives. Some were casually amoral. "Everyone cheats," one student said, "that's the

way it works." And some spoke almost belligerently, as if expecting the teacher to reprimand them for asserting that they would, if they thought it necessary, cheat to succeed in school. But the teacher didn't reprimand them. She tolerated the outpouring for a few moments, then waved the class into relative quiet and asked, "What techniques does the author use to reveal character in this story?"

The girl in front of me waved her hand this time, waited until the teacher acknowledged her, and said, "My father has warned me what medical school is going to be like, and I'm not sure I can get through it—I'm not even sure I want to be a doctor . . ." which was understandable, since she was at the moment in the eighth grade.

The teacher acknowledged that, replying, "Yes, Jane, you have plenty of time to make up your mind. Now, there are three ways an author reveals character—can you tell me what they are?"

Jane slumped a bit in her seat, in a gesture that often reveals ignorance, but that in this case seemed an expression of indifference, and another student joined in, "The kid who turned him in for cheating is a character, all right—he ought to be shot. Nobody turns you in for cheating."

Another flurry of argument followed that remark, with several students agreeing but with several objecting that there were good reasons not to tolerate cheating, even if it did mean turning in a friend. One youngster argued that there were reasons for having rules against this kind of behavior, and others responded that no circumstances justified turning in a friend. A few of them tried to defend the concept of a code of ethics, while others spoke for unconditional loyalty among friends. They were searching for their arguments when the teacher again interrupted.

Bending slightly to the path the discussion insisted on taking, against her will, she asked, "All right, how does the author reveal the character of the student who turns P. S. in?"

The students stared blankly, apparently unable to turn their thoughts away from the moral complexities of the story toward the teacher's questions, and the room was, for the first time, silent. One boy, introspectively, as if speaking to himself, muttered quietly, "I *did* cheat once, on a test, and I was scared to death, but no one turned me in."

"What techniques," the teacher repeated, sternly now, "does the author use to reveal character in this story? We've had them before, you

studied them last year, you know what they are, there are only three—now what are they?"

The class was subdued.

"Well, the author can just tell you about somebody's character," one student responded.

"He can show how the character acts," said another.

And the girl in front of me, still preoccupied with other thoughts, offered distractedly, "He can show other characters reacting to him or talking about him."

"Good," said the teacher, breathing a sigh of relief, "now let's go on. . . ."

But I forget what she went on to. She had to move on, she explained later. There were other

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stories to cover, other skills and techniques to learn, and there was to be a test that Friday. They had to be ready for that test. It had to do with techniques of characterization, and it was important. Those kids, that girl, would be under a great deal of pressure to pass it, one way or another. . . .

The Argument

I'm sure that all of the pressures the teacher felt were real, almost as real as those her students felt and wanted to talk about, and the discussion might have served her as it might have served them, but her vision of literature and its function led her to other matters. She saw her job as the teaching of skills and terms and techniques. The students wanted to address the moral dilemmas presented in the story. Their instincts and inclinations led them to talk about the intense pressure to succeed that comes to bear upon some of them, about the temptation to cheat that confronts them all, about the weight of parents' expectations, about the conflicting values of friendship and honesty, about the burdens of a demanding honor code that is supposed to be valued even above friendship. But their teacher wanted to conduct a recitation on the three techniques of characterization.

Louise Rosenblatt would argue that the students in that class had the clearer, more vital conception of literature:

Surely, of all the arts, literature is most immediately implicated with life itself. The very medium through which the author shapes the text—language—is grounded in the shared lives of human beings. Language is the bloodstream of a common culture, a common history. What might otherwise be mere vibrations in the air or black marks on a page can point to all that has been thought or imagined—in Henry James' phrases, to "all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision." ("Language" 65)

Had the teacher viewed literature that way, she might have considered the students' questions and interests more significant—they came, after all, from the life, the feeling, the observation, the vision of the students. They were focused clearly and intently upon the connecting links between the text and their own lives. The story was, for them, implicated with life itself, and they wanted to consider those implications. To have done so would have been to invite the students into the literature in the most powerful and effective way, allowing it to be, not an exercise or a drill, but a shaping experience, one out of which students could make meaning. They could have, if the teacher had allowed it, participated in the making of meaning about their own lives as well as about the text, engaging in real thought rather than in simple recall of terms and definitions.

Rosenblatt has suggested some principles for that sort of teaching (see *Literature as Exploration* 66, 69, 71, 74):

First, the students must be free to deal with their own reactions.

These students clearly were not free to deal with their own reactions, which were strong and clear. They were instead constrained to ignore them in favor of the teacher's exercise.

Second, there must be an opportunity for "an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work."

The personal sense of the work *was* crystallizing quickly for these students. They had begun to articulate the personal implications of the story even before the teacher was able to start her lesson, and it took some effort for her to interrupt it so that she could proceed with her work on characterization.

Third, the teacher should attempt to find the points of contact among the opinions of students.

These students were finding the connections easily. Some said "cheating cannot be tolerated"; others, "you can't betray your friends." They had

begun to notice and discuss their different perspectives upon cheating, upon the honor code, upon the issue of loyalty. There was great potential in that discussion, because there *was* conflict, in their lives and in the story, between two codes of behavior. An opportunity to talk about those matters would have been very valuable to them.

Fourth, the teacher's influence should be "an elaboration of the vital influence inherent in literature itself."

In this incident, the teacher was working—struggling—*against* the influence inherent in the literature, rather than allowing the students to pursue it.

None of Rosenblatt's principles eliminate careful, reasoned analysis in the study of literature, but they suggest that the basis for intelligent and productive reading is in the unique, individual, perhaps idiosyncratic, connection between readers and the text. Rosenblatt has demonstrated that the meaning made of a literary text depends upon the readers as well as upon the text itself. Meaning is the product of a transaction between active minds and the words on the page—it does not reside in the ink, to be ferreted out, unearthed, uncovered. Rather, it is created, formed, shaped, by readers in the act of reading, and thus it is *their* meaning.

That doesn't, however, necessarily condemn us to total intellectual isolation. Language has both

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idiosyncratic and social dimensions, and meanings can, to an extent, be shared. Even widely accepted conceptions are the result of such sharing and negotiating among individuals. What we understand by such terms as "love," "justice," "good" is the result of our immersion in a culture that has dealt with these issues in its art and literature and law, continually refining and modifying its understandings in the light of new experiences. All of these crucial concepts have their roots in concrete human experience and emerge from continual reinvestigation of that experience—it is the role of literature to present and explore those roots.

Instruction in literature should enable readers to find the connections between their experience and the literary work. If it does so, it may enable

them to use the literature, to employ it in making sense of their lives.

The Dialogue

If we were to devise instruction consistent with Rosenblatt's principles, what shape might that instruction take? If students are to be "free to deal with [their] own reactions," her first principle, they must be working in a comfortable setting, freed, at least for the moment, of some of the customary burdens of classroom discourse—the obligation to prove all assertions, the pervasive concern with accuracy and correctness, and the competitiveness that often rules the talk. Further, they must be invited to attend to matters that are often considered extraneous and irrelevant in classrooms—their feelings, perceptions, memories.

They must be given time to articulate all of those thoughts and help in finding the links—the "points of contact"—between their various reactions that will reward talk. They may need assistance in identifying the elements in the text that have contributed most powerfully to shaping their responses and help in figuring out how they have worked. And they are likely to need a great deal of assistance in learning the difficult process of talking with others.

Finally, they need an opportunity to shape the discussion, pursuing it toward their own goals. They need to sense the "influence inherent" in the literary work and attempt, in the discussion and writing, to articulate it, define it, explore it.

The questions following below are intended to lead students to the sort of literary experience implicit in Rosenblatt's principles, giving them some assistance along the way. The activity is an effort to demonstrate some of the potential satisfactions in beginning a consideration of a literary work with the reader's response. It asks you—and your students—to read a short literary work, probably a poem, although a short story—Bryan's, for instance—might work as well, and then to discuss it by responding to a series of questions designed and arranged to encourage reflection on several aspects of the act of reading. The questions are an attempt to transform Rosenblatt's guiding principles into a pattern for discussion, one that is necessarily loose and flexible, but that respects the ways in which response to literature might vary.

The talk can be guided gently, without too much interference from the teacher, by providing

a selection from these questions—perhaps five to ten, depending on the time available and the maturity of the group—reworded to be suitable for the group, of course, and prepared without the sidenote (the column labeled "Focus"). Placing each question to be used on a separate small page (4" × 5") stapled into a small book provides a place to jot down notes and encourages the readers to address each question more thoroughly before going onto the others. The first page of the booklet might give such instructions as those following, again, reworded appropriately for the group:

Please read the text, and take a moment or two to reflect on it. Then turn to the next page and begin. Take a few minutes—as much as you need or want—with each question. Please reflect on each question for a moment, or two, perhaps jotting down brief notes, before discussing it. Some may be more productive than others for you, and you may wish to give those more time. There is no rush, no need to finish them all. Please don't glance ahead in the booklet.

The discussion might be conducted in pairs, or in small groups of perhaps four or five students. Each arrangement has its virtues and its problems. In pairs, if the students are compatible, the talk may be more intimate, more personal, and more likely to lead to discoveries about the self. The small groups, however, are sometimes better able to sustain the discussion because they have more minds at work on each question. Decide how you wish to arrange the talk, give the students a copy of the text and the booklet, and explain the activity. If you've chosen a poem, read it aloud, and then let them begin. . . .

Focus	Questions
First reaction	What is your first reaction or response to the text? Describe or explain it briefly.
Feelings	What feelings did the text awaken in you? What emotions did you feel as you read the text?
Perceptions	What did you see happening in the text? Paraphrase it—retell the major events briefly.
Visual images	What image was called to mind by the text? Describe it briefly.
Associations	What memory does the text call to mind—of people, places, events, sights, smells, or even of something more ambiguous, perhaps feelings or attitudes?

Thoughts, ideas	What idea or thought was suggested by the text? Explain it briefly.
Selection of textual elements	Upon what, in the text, did you focus most intently as you read—what word, phrase, image, idea?
Judgments of importance	What is the most important word in the text? What is the most important phrase in the text? What is the most important aspect of the text?
Identification of problems	What is the most difficult word in the text? What is there in the text or in your reading that you have the most trouble understanding?
Author	What sort of person do you imagine the author of this text to be?
Patterns of response	How did you respond to the text—emotionally or intellectually? Did you feel involved with the text, or distant from it?
Other readings	How did your reading of the text differ from that of your discussion partner (or the others in your group)? In what ways were they similar?
Evolution of your reading	How did your understanding of the text or your feelings about it change as you talked?
Evaluations	Do you think the text is a good one—why, or why not?
Literary associations	Does this text call to mind any other literary work (poem, play, film, story—any genre)? If it does, what is the work and what is the connection you see between the two?
Writing	If you were to be asked to write about your reading of this text, upon what would you focus? Would you write about some association or memory, some aspect of the text itself, about the author, or about some other matter?
Other readers	What did you observe about your discussion partner (or the others in your group) as the talk progressed?

Discussion

The questions guiding the discussion of the text reflect a concern for the variability of response, and for the possibility of moving from response into analysis without denying the validity of initial responses, of unique personal reactions and associations. They are, you may have noticed, generic questions, tied not to a particular text, but rather to a conception of the reading process. They invite

the students to attend to themselves, to their own experience with the work; to identify aspects of the text that seem, to them, significant; to consider their reading in the light of other readings by other students; and finally, to reflect on what they have observed, about themselves and their classmates, in the process.

After the pairs, or the groups, have finished with the booklet and reconvened, consider reactions to the activity. In particular, you might raise questions such as these:

Do you have any first reactions to the discussion, any thoughts or observations about its results for you or for the group?

Did differences in readings of the text emerge as you talked? Did those differences reveal the possibility of other legitimate experiences with the text? Did the talk lead to any insights into the text, or yourself, or others at the table?

Did the discussion occasionally drive you back to the text to find examples, evidence, sources of ideas? Did you find yourselves engaging in analysis, either of the text or of your interpretations and associations?

How did your understanding of the text or your feelings about it change as you talked? Do you view the text differently now that you have discussed it extensively with others?

Conclusions

If the activity works, and the discussion seems productive, it should suggest that the teaching of a literary work might begin with the reader's response, whether that response is emotional, visceral, aesthetic, or intellectual. The teacher might then encourage students to examine that response, looking at themselves, the text, other readers, and other texts. That discussion might lead to several possible outcomes. Students might find that their initial impressions or interpretations are reinforced and confirmed, that they are refuted, or, most likely, that they are modified in the course of discussion and writing. This is not, however, necessarily a matter of right and wrong, of dispelling error, but rather a process of refining and clarifying. The confirmation, modification, or refutation resulting from the discussion indicates not simply that mistakes have been corrected, though of course that may have happened, but rather that there has been some growth in understanding, some change in perspective. To see the changes simply as rejection of error is to suggest once again that there is a single correct interpretation.

Discussion beginning with response might then extend to biography, history, criticism, culture, and intellectual history. Beginning with the personal and unique does not necessitate a purely egocentric study that denies the validity of other information, other lines of inquiry; it simply asserts that the fundamental literary experience is intimate, personal, and dependent upon the nature of the individual. It is, in fact, quite likely that these discussions of personal readings will lead the students into close analysis of the texts, and that other questions—biographical, historical, and the like—will emerge as students attempt to understand and reconcile their different readings.

For this sort of instruction to succeed, the tone in the classroom must be cooperative; debate is an inappropriate model. Discussions must build, must have an organic nature, pursuing questions that arise from encounters with the text. The questions suggested for this activity are an attempt to simulate that natural development of the talk, suggesting the possibilities for it. It would probably be desirable to abandon even such gentle, open questions as these if, and when, students learn to identify and pursue the potential in the literature on their own initiative.

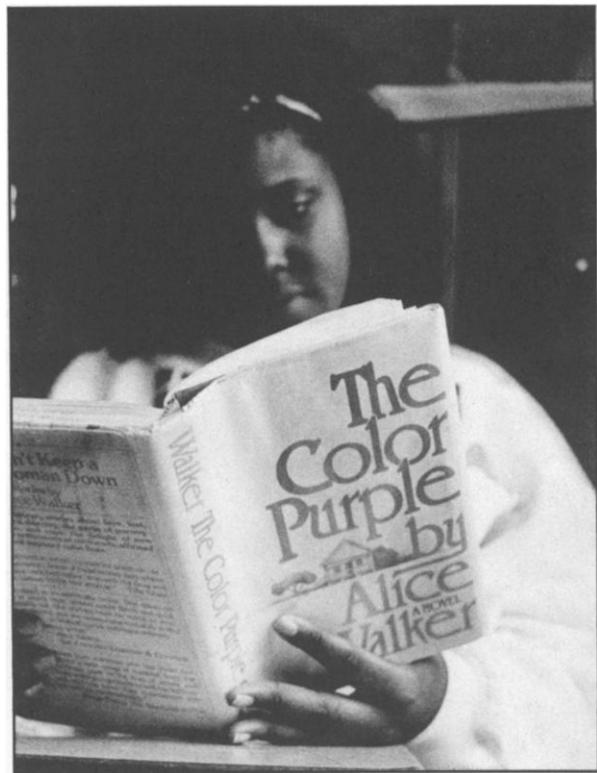
Because the reading of literature is in many ways an exploration, it is suitable for teachers not to read in advance some of the works they intend to teach. Coming to them cold, as their students do, enables teachers to think matters through with their classes, modeling for them the process of speculating and probing, examining memories and finding associations, tentatively proposing interpretations or assessments and then revising them. Too often students have the impression that teachers simply know. Students don't know how they know, nor see the process that leads to that knowing, only that teachers know and students don't. Reading along with the students, approaching a text as something new, allows teachers to think with the students, showing them the processes they are to learn.

A few cooperative colleagues might agree to provide each other, once every other week or two, with sufficient copies of a poem or story. Opening the package along with the students, not knowing before they do what it contains, may suggest to them that teacher and student are in something together, colleagues in the task of making sense out of literary encounters rather than adversaries. The first few attempts to teach a text you haven't

seen before may be unsettling, but the practice can have the benefit of focusing attention upon response and upon the strategies for making sense of literary experience.

There may be a problem with transition for students, too. Not used to an approach that emphasizes working with responses to texts, they may not like it and may even fight it. If they have learned well to play according to other rules—predicting the interests and interpretations of the teacher, for instance, or memorizing details, or whatever other pattern may prevail—they may not be happy with a sudden change in the game.

Although it may seem to them, as it does to many teachers, permissive and indulgent, this sort of reading—and teaching—can be rigorous and demanding. It requires the reader to consider not just the text, but also one's self and the readings of others. Readers must analyze and think, producing their own understandings, not simply remembering information provided by teacher or textbook. This exploration of responses can be either fascinating or exhausting or both. It may reveal much about the individual who engages in it. It is easy to resist, however, since teachers cannot spell out precisely what they expect. There are no absolutes in such a classroom; all readers indi-



vidually must make their own sense of things. Still, it is possible to be foolish and wrong about texts or about statements of others, and possible also to be deceitful or confused about one's own perceptions. The exploration of responses can be hard work.

Teachers trying to elicit and work with response to literary texts may find it useful to try predicting

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students' reactions, at least some of the time, but the predictions can become boundaries. There can be tension between the need to prepare for possibilities and the desire to allow for developments. Teachers need to sense the direction the discussion seems naturally to take rather than decide in advance exactly what will be covered. They need to be open to the possibilities that arise in the thirty different responses—and thus the thirty different poems—that they have before them. Without abandoning that flexibility, it is desirable for teachers to have in mind some possible direction for follow-up, that is, some idea of the issues that may arise and the literary works or writing activities that might develop them (see LaConte). Being prepared with at least some of the possibilities gives teachers some sense of stability and security. Again, though, they must remain open to the possibility that something unexpected will arise in the talk and be prepared to capitalize on it.

That uncertainty may be nerve-wracking, but it has its rewards. It keeps the class alive, allowing a vital exchange of ideas rather than the working out of a script. Both students and teachers need to develop a tolerance for ambiguity in such a classroom. There may rarely be a satisfying con-

sensus at the close of the lesson. Individuals are responsible for their own conclusions and summations.

If we accept the idea that literature ought to be significant, that readers have to assimilate it and work with it, that transforming it into knowledge is more significant than memorizing the definitions of technical terms, then we need to find some ways of bringing readers and text together, and of forcing upon readers the responsibility for making meaning of text. First efforts are very likely doomed to fail for obvious reasons: the students aren't used to it and don't trust it; we aren't used to it and haven't figured out all of its complications; it places tremendous responsibility on everyone involved, not the teacher alone; it requires that we deal with thirty evolving poems at a time rather than just one stable text; it requires that students accept a new and frightening notion of what knowledge is; and it demands a tolerance for ambiguity and digression. But if meaning is a human act rather than a footlocker full of dusty facts, then we must focus attention on the act of making meaning rather than simply on the accumulation of data.

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