Reader-response activities combat lack of interest in the introductory literature course.
by Lois P. Tucker

Introduction

I can still remember the poems and stories that excited me and made me determine that I would become an English teacher. However, once I actually got to teach an introductory literature class, I realized that many of the students were not interested in reading the assigned literature. They could not have cared less whether Robert Frost was bending birches or mending walls. William Wordsworth's "London 1802" was too far removed from them. If Hester Prynne was stupid enough to actually wear that scarlet letter on her person, then she deserved whatever happened to her. T. S. Eliot could continue to measure his life in teaspoons, and Alice Walker could go on searching for her mother's gardens all by herself. And worse than the students' lack of interest were the writing assignments they submitted that evidenced it. The papers generally lacked thought, depth of understanding, and a sense of commitment to a literary response.

Trying to remedy students' apathy so that reading and discussing literature could become enjoyable for both teacher and students, I sought to connect the students to the literary experience through a reader-response approach. I have had success with this approach by incorporating regular reader-response activities that validate students as literary critics in their own right and by allowing them to assist with selecting course readings.

The Value of a Reader-Response Approach

Reader-response criticism allows students more latitude in responding to what they read and encourages varied responses. According to Ross C. Murfin, "[it] focuses on what texts do to—or in—the mind of the reader, rather than regarding a text as something with properties exclusively its own" (253). Employing a reader-response approach in the introductory literature course helps maintain the student interest and involvement necessary for a good course. This approach

- enables students to experience relevance in the reading task,
- involves them in an active, not passive, encounter with the literature,
- validates them as critical readers who are capable of determining meaning in texts, and
- provides them with the opportunity to express themselves freely.

The issue of relevance for the introductory literature student is major, as many
critical theorists attest. Patricia Prandini Buckler asserts that “the most valuable pedagogical application of reader-response criticism creates a link between real-life experience and the work—helping the student to connect—and then builds on that connection” (38). Norman N. Holland avows that all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work—as we interpret it (“UNITY” 816).

He also claims that reading literature meets personal human needs: “the need to impose oneself on the world; or the need to find certainties; or the need to be able to read; or the need to be read; or the need for human acceptance and understanding of all one’s pivots and flourishes” (“Stanley” 440-41). And finally, Louise Rosenblatt posits that “a poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text” (qtd. in Murfin 253).

These theoretical positions apply to readers, in general, and to introductory literature students, in particular. For so many, the text and the process has precluded them. They have just been carried along for the ride in previous classroom encounters with literary works, and no one has demonstrated that the students’ own experience is germane to the course reading assignments.

Students need to be involved in active encounters with the literature. When the comfort of relevance is achieved, they can begin to appreciate literature the way Stanley Fish describes it—as “an event” (386), as an “activity, something [they] do” (383), in which they, according to Wolfgang Iser, actively participate and transact with the writer (30). This perspective on reading transforms the literature course from one in which the teacher is the proverbial “sage on the stage.” Instead, the students actively engage in reading, extracting meaning that is released through their experiential involvement in the process.

The third benefit of the reader-response approach is that the students are validated as critical readers who are capable of determining meaning in texts. In this approach, the reader is key. In fact, Wolfgang Iser describes literature as full of “gaps” (Mailloux 425), which readers fill as they read. Readers, Iser continues, are “forced to explain [the gaps], to connect what the gaps separate, literally to create in [their minds] a poem or novel or play that isn’t in the text but that the text incites” (Murfin 256). This approach is reassuring to the students. They realize that their interpretations are appreciated. They are not wrong. They did not miss the point.

Once the students feel that what they understand and what they write is respected, they begin to take ownership of literary perspectives. They are then comfortable enough to express themselves freely. Literature then takes on significance for them—in the class and in their lives.

Activities Which Liberate Students
Icebreakers
I keep in mind that the students in introductory literature are those who would prefer to be somewhere else. Therefore, I resist the urge to jump right in and “cover the syllabus” as quickly as possible. I break the ice first by using some techniques that draw the students into the literary experience and allow them to let down their guard. Since many students
are resistant to literature at the outset, I invite them to share orally with the class a memorable experience, positive or negative, that they have previously had in studying or reading literature. Not only does this activity provide an overview of the students, but they feel that I am interested in them and what they have to say, and it also gives them the opportunity to identify with others who have had similar experiences.

It also helps to break the ice by starting the course with a literary work that is short, easy to read, and relevant to the group. With a group of adult learners, I begin with “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin. This story works because it is only three pages long and lends itself to a variety of responses without students having to work hard on extracting meaning from the text. Before teaching the short story, I divide the class into groups and have them prepare a role-play activity to illustrate different responses to “bad” news. Each group decides what their bad news will be and who the receiver of the bad news will be. This activity involves the students, first of all, in a collaborative activity in which they become a little better acquainted with each other and also taps into their more creative, dramatic, and humorous selves. Discussion of the story can then begin in an atmosphere of laughter and relaxation, making students feel more comfortable about sharing their responses to the literature.

Journal Entries

Journal entries can be used to great advantage in making students feel comfortable in the classroom. In one variation of the journal, I structure a four-point framework which includes the following response activities:

1. **Responding to the Text:** Write a journal entry in which you note an observation from the story which made you feel something (something you liked or disliked; agreed with or disagreed with).

2. **Sharing Your Perspectives:** Share your observations in a group.

3. **Evaluating Your Perspectives:** How did your journal entry differ from those of your colleagues? What were the differences based on (gender, occupation, age, ethnicity, geography, social status, values, family backgrounds, personal experiences, background knowledge, other)?

4. **Refining Your Perspectives:** Broaden your understanding of how literature affects the reader by looking at the responses from other writers outside the class. Consider the responses to the work written by professional critics. How do they compare with your own perspectives? For example, do they confirm, support, extend, complement, refute, or differ from your ideas? Begin by using general critical indexes, such as *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism* (NCLC), *Short Story Criticism* (SSC), *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Drama Criticism* (DC), and *Poetry Criticism* (PC). Other sources may be suggested to you by the “How to Use this Index” page in NCLC or TCLC or by the college librarian.

This fourth task of having students review the criticism actually takes us outside the strict boundaries of reader-response theory into reception theory, in which students are able to expand their collaborations to include historical perspectives. This review complements the
reader-response process by including three features articulated by Louise Z. Smith: “its capacities to integrate formal with social analyses, to construct an intergenerational chain of receptions based upon real readers’ experiences, and to reveal the socially formative nature of literature” (75). By incorporating this element of reception theory, I introduce students to some of the necessary rudiments of literary analysis and review in a manner that is painless and nonthreatening.

Other journal questions can be structured to derive specific objectives. Some that have worked for me include the following:

1. Cite three specific passages you enjoyed in the text. Explain what they mean to you. Why did you enjoy each?

2. When was the text written? What was going on historically at the time? Do you see any connection?

3. Write a plot summary of your reading. Do you know a similar piece with this plot or theme? Compare and contrast the two.

4. Put your magnifying glass on a character. Choose a favorite character in the text, either because you like or dislike him or her or because you can relate to the character through personal experience. Describe what you like or dislike about that character and tell why.

5. How do you see? Do you see people? Do you see events or circumstances (time, place, atmosphere, plot)? Write about the significance of what you see.

6. Assume the role of the writer. If you could change part of the story, what word, phrase, scene, character, or whatever, would you change? Why?

7. Analyze your feelings. How did the text make you feel? Did it sharpen your view on something? Did it challenge an existing belief? Did it confuse you? What did it make you feel?

In class, I incorporate the journal responses into the discussion of the literature so that the students see its relevance. They again can identify a sense of self in the context of these class discussions.

Writing Assignments

I vary the writing assignments to allow the students to express the ideas that emerge in the journal entries and in the sharing of their perspectives.

Individual Writing Assignments

1. Write an essay in which you advance a particular point about the literary text from the course anthology that has been assigned to the whole class to read. (This very traditional assignment allows students to articulate their own perspective in a structured and well-considered framework amidst the experience of assessing the various perspectives that their colleagues have shared.)

2. Write an essay in which you advance a particular point about a literary text from the course anthology not assigned to the whole class. Share your essay with the class. (In this assignment, students apply their learning and sharing experiences beyond the assigned literary pieces. They can draw connections and identify contrasting stances among literary artists and literary pieces, using the skills of analysis and synthesis.)
Collaborative Writing Assignments

1. In groups of three or four, write a collaborative essay advancing a particular point which the whole group agrees to about an assigned literary text from the anthology. (In the small group activity, students get another opportunity to express their perspectives. With a common task at hand, they assess and refine their thoughts and contributions to come to consensus on a group project which usually concludes as an enjoyable give-and-take experience. The idea of submitting a joint paper is also appealing to students who are already juggling various assignments due in other courses.)

2. In groups of three or four, select a work that has not been assigned to the whole class, but which complies with the theme or author which the class has been studying. Write a collaborative essay advancing a particular point on which the whole group agrees.

The Student-Driven Syllabus

In the introductory literature course, far too often students are bombarded by the seemingly impenetrable “canon.” I see two main problems with this. The first is the same issue of relevance. Since students need to be interested in what they’re spending their time reading, I allow them to help choose the reading list for the semester. This practice proves successful in creating a socially and culturally comfortable learning environment. The second problem is the probability of their being turned off literature before they are turned on to it. To underscore this view, Douglas Lanier has suggested that teaching introductory literature through the study of the traditional canon usually constitutes what Gerald Graff calls a “coverage” model (qtd. in Lanier 199), which merely “exposes” students to a literary canon. This approach, Lanier continues, “can mislead students about the nature of literature and literary interpretation” (200).

In contrast, there are definite benefits derived from a student-driven syllabus. First, texts that the students select themselves will be meaningful to them. James J. Sosnoski alleges that “one of the major advantages of having students make their own anthologies is that the texts they choose are ones they can relate to” (280). Second, the opportunity of choosing their own texts encourages the students to review the reasons for enjoying them and further obligates them to assess the reasons why those works should be included for class study. This approach carries with it the further benefit of, according to M. H. Dunlop, “overcoming the frustrating passivity” that exists in typical introductory literature courses. By including “accessible” literature, the teacher makes the students “feel culturally at home [. . .] in these texts, and they read them rapidly with considerable interest and pleasure” (252). Hence, when students can connect with what they read, they are more interested in writing about it.

I propose two ways in which the student-driven syllabus can be adopted. The first is a modified implementation that takes place after the midterm break. Couched in the framework of the reader-response approach from the beginning of the course, the introductory literature course is a bearable experience for most students if the instructor selects accessible and relevant works. These works, along with the ice-breaking activities and focused journal responses, help the students to maintain interest for at least half of the semester. After midterm break, when the
students understand the parameters and course guidelines, they then can select additional literary works to study.

It works best to have the students select their reading suggestions in groups. Groups provide them with a forum for justifying a piece of literature, first to their small group, then to the teacher, and then to the class as a whole. Since we can’t read what everyone wants to read, I allow a slot on the reading list designated for individual choices. While the whole class reads most of the work, each student can read a text that he or she alone is reading. The accompanying writing assignment can be shared with the whole class.

I also use groups to present the theoretical elements of the chosen genre. We study the short story, nonfiction essays, drama, and poetry. I encourage the students to use Power Point demonstrations, overhead projections, or whatever other creative means they choose to explain the genre in presentations spread over the semester.

At the time for studying a particular genre, the groups assemble, beginning during the class period, to choose from the anthology the specific pieces that they wish to study. This works especially well if the class periods are longer than one hour. For shorter periods, the exercise may continue beyond the class period as a homework activity or for another period. After a designated amount of time, we regroup and hear the suggestions from each group. Through group consensus and class vote, the reading list for that particular genre is constituted. Though I may have decided that we were going to study, for example, twelve short stories for the semester, the students invariably read more than twelve to make their decision and in the process, share their feelings about what they have read—those pieces accepted for class study and those that were not.

**Pragmatic Concerns**

If one chooses to use literature outside of a required anthology, the teacher needs to keep in mind the basic logistics of ordering texts. Many times the books that the students prefer are those that are easily accessible and less costly. If such is not the case, Amazon.com is many a student's or teacher's answer when books are needed in a hurry.

Then there is the issue of how to fit all the students' interests into the syllabus. This calls for creative scheduling. However, since this is a collaborative exercise between teacher and students, they will help schedule what they want to cover. Here, also, in a role of allowing for a variety of reading and writing activities, you may (1) group the selected works for comparative study, (2) designate some reading as supplementary for extra credit, or (3) require that students complete a minimum number of texts from the final list. Having the students report on texts not covered in class enables students who have not read them the opportunity of deciding whether or not they want to add those texts to their personal reading lists. These reports are also a means of encouraging students to expand their reading activities by instituting “reading-and-sharing” communities outside of class.

Groups work well for covering a variety of works. I allow the students to group themselves according to interest and meet in discussion groups during class times. In so doing, my role changes. Dunlop enunciates this new role:

[. . .] the teacher is not needed to certify anything about the texts or to guide student readers into or through their mysteries; the
teacher is instead required to articulate the textual theory that will allow the students to begin decoding, interrogating, and manipulating the texts. In the text-based classroom, the teacher, like the students, is situated as a reader, and by articulating ways to read becomes a helpful guide on how to read instead of a forbidding guardian of meaning, a watchdog over what to read. (252-53)

At this point I let the students go and I wander from group to group, learning from them and sharing with them. I express confidence in their ability to encounter texts and attempt to validate them as critical readers.

**Conclusion**

Reader-response approaches to teaching literature can assist in making the literary experience of introductory literature students more meaningful and enjoyable, because in the words of Elizabeth Freund, reader-response criticism attempts to grapple with questions generally ignored by schools of criticism which teach us how to read; questions such as why do we read and what are the deepest sources of our engagement with literature: What does reading have to do with the life of the psyche, or the imagination, or our linguistic habits: what happens—consciously or unconsciously, cognitively or psychologically—during the reading process? Reader-response criticism probes the practical or theoretical consequences of the event of reading by further asking what the relationship is between the private and the public, or how and where meaning is made, authenticated and authorized, or why readers agree or disagree about their interpretations. (5-6)

Many theories exist on how to read, interpret, and analyze literature, but for reaching the students in introductory literature classes—to take them beyond mere passivity—the reader-response approach is invaluable. It enables the teacher to liberate the students and regard them as vital stakeholders in the process. By allowing students to assist in determining the reading list for the course, they become actively involved. Then when I follow with activities that encourage their own literary interpretation, that reassure them that they have a perspective worth sharing, and that validate their responses as part of that body of work which we call literary criticism, they invest more of themselves in the process. They want to see it work. They leave the class remembering the stances they passionately defended and the perspectives they accepted from their colleagues. The literary experience emerges as a more memorable one for them and for me.

**Works Cited**


Dunlop, M. H. “Textual Theory and Formula Fiction.” Cahalan and Downing 251-60.


Lanier, Douglas. “Less is More: Coverage, Critical Diversity, and the Limits of
Pluralism.” Cahalan and Downing 199-212.
Murfin, Ross C. “Reader-Response Criticism and The Scarlet Letter.” The Scarlet
Smith, Louise Z. “In Search of Our Sisters’ Rhetoric: Teaching through Reception
Theory.” Cahalan and Downing 72-84.
Sosnoski, James J. “Collaborative Hypertextbooks.” Cahalan and Downing 271-90.

Lois P. Tucker has several years’ experience in teaching writing and literature courses at the sec-
ondary and postsecondary levels. She presently teaches at Bermuda College in Paget, Bermuda.

NCTE’s On-line Bookstore Is Now Open

You can now purchase NCTE books online at www.ncte.org. You’ll find new and featured
publications, bestsellers and old favorites, an extensive backlist, and many gift items. And the
rest of the site is being updated to provide you with the latest teaching tips, education news,
conference and convention information, listservs that connect you with colleagues, and much
more. Be sure to check out the NCTE Web site often—we continue to update it regularly.