Student-Centered Reading Activities

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People fit reading into diverse personal patterns and schedules of seeking fulfillment. We read various sorts of discourse for various reasons at various stages of individual development. It is futile and mischievous to try to codify all this into one program for all. Just array the kinds of reading and help individuals make their way around the repertory. This is the here-is-God's-plenty method. Watch students’ patterns of choice and play to that, as knowing parents do. Freely make suggestions based on what you perceive about them, but let them decide. The power to choose what one reads makes for the best reading program you can devise.

Structuring literature around concepts of either form or content interferes with individualized reading, and individualized reading should be initiated as soon as children can read at all and preserved through the years at all costs. Nothing you or anyone else can cook up by way of units or sequence will teach reading so well as guided individual choice in an interactive setting. The real learning will occur as individuals and small groups make up their own sequences as well as thematic or formal units. Your structuring best comes when you organize a classroom library, provide directions for reading activities, and confer with individuals about choices of texts. If you predigest form and content for your students, you will rob them of their education by short-circuiting their thinking.

The tradition in secondary school of organizing literature around nationalities, periods, or themes works against individualization. It would be more interesting for groups or individuals to pursue a subject of interest across national or ethnic literatures. Organizing literature by time and place doesn't do justice to the nature of literature, which is not mainly national or historical. Thematic organization pre-interprets. By focusing readers at the outset on preselected frames of reference, both historical and thematic approaches meddle terribly with reader response. Such approaches have made too many students dislike both reading and literature. While taking control of texts away from readers, they also misrepresent literature, which affects people personally, what they think and feel. It is a figurative, artful mode of discourse, an experience itself as well as a perception about experience, created not merely to be understood but to be undergone.

The historical and ethnic aspects of literature are indeed worthwhile in themselves and often illuminate the texts, as all other aspects of context do. The relations, in fact, between texts, authors, and their environments will naturally interest youngsters. But if background becomes foreground, it will filter the text so much as to prevent readers from knowing what their native responses would have been. It is far better education to let individuals and groups explore contexts within their own programs. One thirteen-year-old girl became so fascinated with French history after reading *The Three Musketeers* that she read an adult biography of Madame Pompadour and other works about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Teachers and aides can serve as resources.

Presenting literature through concepts and terms of literary criticism poses a similar problem. For one thing, both literary history and literary criticism contain differing schools of thought, not to say at time vehement disagreement. Students should not be brought up in one or another camp, and surveying all the various factions takes time away from the literature itself. Even old Aristotelian concepts like plot, character, and theme risk
stereotyping the way readers think of fiction and drama. The priority for students is to experience the literature itself. Parallel to choice of texts is the second issue of control—who decides interpretations.

The currents of literary theory flow around three poles—the author, the text, and the reader. Which is most authoritative for determining meaning? Factions differ over emphasis on one or the other or over the relations among them. These relations are so basic that if students are enabled to select and deal with texts in the ways recommended here, they will reinvent the schools of literary theory for themselves, which is how they should first know them. Literary history and critical theory can enhance response, but you would do best to bring these spontaneously into students' discussions, performances, or other reworkings of texts, when they can use such ideas to extend their initial responses. Terminology is unimportant.

The following are selected means to reading maturity and involvement in literature.

**Partner Reading**

Partner reading is taking turns sight-reading aloud to each other in a group of two to four students who have chosen to read a text together. Partners may have a copy each of the same text or may pass one book around. The activity teaches more if all have a copy to follow while others read. One purpose is to allow weak or dependent readers to read collectively while socializing and to pool their skills to read a text that any one of them alone might not have enough knowledge, courage, or motivation to get through.

Part of the point is not even to help each other but to read collectively for the sharing of responses. Asides are more than welcome. Excellent discussion, in fact, often follows from casual comments interjected into the reading. Members compare interpretations or predictions, swap observations or tales prompted by the text, and generally enrich each other's comprehension at the same time that they become more aware of their own reactions to the text. This is how students come to value personal responses to reading. This is also the genesis of literary criticism.

**Dramatizing and Performing Texts**

Dramatizing and performing texts entail close interpretation in order to know what to render and how to render it. Players working up a performance must think about and discuss many aspects of the text, and this experience pays off handsomely during silent reading. Students become attuned to tone and style by imitating characters and playing roles. The structural cues and patterns of texts encountered in silent reading can often be translated through drama into visual, auditory, and spatial equivalents.

Reading aloud is the base from which performing a text is a natural extension. Working up a reading with one to three partners prepares well for bigger script rehearsals. A small group can render a text by simply reading in unison or by reading aloud one at a time. The goal may or may not be presentation to an audience. As a development of partner reading, playing with the text may itself be enough of an incentive. Or the group may rehearse until students perfect a version to record.

The general procedure for rehearsed reading is to sift and discuss some reading selections, talk some about the main point and approach of the text chosen, try reading parts to get a sense of who should take certain voices and how the piece should be treated, then cast and rehearse. Typically, this process interweaves silent reading (as members study the text a bit to size it up), trial oral readings (as they sound out the text to listen for ideas about meaning and the best rendering), consulting the dictionary and other people for pronunciation and definition and other information, discussion of author's intention and characterization and so on (as they work out the content to be expressed), and textual analysis (as they dig for helpful particulars).

Acting out memorized scripts is what most teachers think of first when they envision performing texts. This often evokes images of hours of rehearsal and the frantic tension of the final production of a play—complete with costumes, stage, lights, properties, and so on. If this is what performances of texts were as a regular routine, few teachers could justify them as a staple classroom process, as we recommend. Occasional per-
formances of memorized scripts for a large audience are enjoyable and stimulating, of course, but regular rehearsed reading, text in hand, for an audience of people at hand is by far the more valuable experience for the total language development of the student.

Any rehearsed reading or singing can be recorded on audio- or videotape and played later for an audience. As students listen and discuss changes between tapings, they become sensitized to various voicings of text. Producing a tape provides a stimulus to read. And the tapes become part of the classroom library for other students to listen to themselves or to use with the text for read-along.

Listening to and Watching Performed Texts

Read large quantities of stories and poems to students, sometimes assembled as a whole class, sometimes in small groups. Before youngsters can read much themselves, this practice is, of course, a necessity if their appetite for literature is to be both nourished and satisfied. It also makes reading a common part of everyday life and shows many children of nonreading parents what books are all about and what pleasure and stimulus can be associated with them. It also puts you in a giving position. While receiving this gift, learners develop an urge to assume the teacher's power, to become able to do themselves what the teacher does. In this respect you become a model to emulate.

Continuing to read to youngsters who have themselves learned how to read serves to show what good oral reading is like—how it recreates a storyteller's voice, how it brings out moods and feelings and meanings, how it follows cues of punctuation and typography. Your interpretive readings prepare students to read to other people.

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Hearing a text read aloud well while following it with the eyes helps students to learn to read better both aloud and silently. From good recordings they can hear all aspects of print brought skillfully to life—letters, typography, paragraphing, punctuation marks, and line settings of poetry. Pronunciations of words rarely heard in common speech are sounded while the listeners are looking at the words, enabling them to read those words aloud when encountered and also encouraging them to use those words in conversation without fear of mispronouncing them.

Modern technical texts can become accessible also despite unfamiliar terms, heavy loading of thought and information, and difficult sentence structures. Hearing Shakespeare can almost obviate the need for textual notes, for professional actors can not only give pronunciations of old words and proper names but also make clear the meaning of words that have changed sense and unravel difficult syntax caused by older grammar and poetic compression. This is in addition to bringing out the drift of whole speeches, the characterization of speakers, and the dramatic interplay among characters. Excellent discussion is often prompted by students' surprise that the voice they hear on a recording does not sound as they imagined it when reading silently.

Transforming Texts

To transform a text is to take the essence of what it expresses and transfer it to another form of writing or to another medium altogether.

- Any tale that learners have read can be shared with others by paraphrasing.
- A prose fable can be rewritten as a poem, an anecdote as a script, a story as a series of letters, a biography as an autobiography, a diary as a memoir, or a mystery story as a film script.
- Rewriting prose or poetry as a script automatically shifts the medium from book to stage, radio, film, or television. Or texts might be recast into a nonverbal medium through music, dance, drawing, or mime.

Reading Journals

Students reading silently need a way to register their responses—bring them to awareness—equivalent to uttering responses in collective reading. Annotating the margins of a text would be the most direct way, but most often the text is not the student's own. Occasionally, however, students can photocopy a short text so as to leave unusually wide margins for annotating. Suggest sometimes that a group silently reading a text in common do this and bring their annotations to the ensuing discussion. Or individuals could do this for a one-to-one conference with you.

Annotations link responses directly to words,
phrases, or passages that prompted them. Encourage students to underline, circle, draw arrows, or invent other graphics to single out and relate these citations to each other and to the marginal remarks. Make clear that they may jot down anything that comes to mind while reading that text—memories, images, feelings, observations, all sorts of associations. These may not have anything to do with explaining or evaluating the text, though they might, if desired at some point, be used for that.

Readers bring their journals to conferences or group discussions and refer to them while sharing.

Annotations are a record of a reading experience for later reference in discussion or other follow-up. Annotation should lead easily into journals and establish the idea of registering responses immediately and relating them specifically to certain parts of the text.

Some readers find a double-entry journal useful. On one half of a journal page they note what occurs to them about a text and leave the other half for a later response to the response. They may ask the teacher or someone else to write on this blank half what occurs to them about the original entry. This can become a valued and valuable dialogue about reading experience. (See the periodical about dialogue journals of all sorts, Dialogue, edited by Jana Staton, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Shelley Gutstein, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.) Or the readers themselves might make the second entry at a more removed moment, perhaps after reading something else during the interim.

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Discussing Reading
When a group has finished reading a selection, members may come together to raise questions about things they did not grasp, things they want to know more about, or issues in the selection they want to talk about. They can jot these down and bring them to the group. They also just share opinions or feelings about what they have read and compare interpretations. This comparing is of vast importance, for it allows readers to discover that their reactions or interpretations may not be the only ones justified by the text.

Such a group is, of course, ideal for sharing entries in the reading journals. Once students are familiar and fluent with discussion based on reading journals, there is no more powerful way to enrich understanding of texts and increase the range of reader response. It will do more for the study of literature than any other activity you can sponsor.

Writing in Literary Forms
Students who have tried their hand at writing fiction, poems, and scripts have an inside track on understanding what professional authors do with those forms. Participating in writing workshops focused on them enhances considerably the appreciation of literature, because not only are learners role-playing the poet, playwright, or short story writer, they are reading drafts of similar efforts by partners. Being part of the creation of these texts as both author and audience sensitizes them to many issues of the writer’s craft that increase enjoyment and perception manifold.

We believe such democratic and collaborative ways of learning to interpret will carry all students to their maximum development in literacy and literature.

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