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What do Response Journals Reveal about Children's Understandings of the Workings of Literary Texts?

Sylvia Pantaleo

Children's literature has become a central component of many elementary reading programs. The multiple benefits of using children's literature in classrooms have been well documented (Cullinan, 1989a, 1989b; Fuhler, 1990; Galda and Cullinan, 1991; Huck, 1987). Reading programs using literature as their core content vary in organization and structure (Hiebert and Colt, 1989; Tunnel and Jacobs, 1989; Zarrillo, 1989; Zarrillo and Cox, 1992). Publications, workshops and university courses abound as educators continue to explore the use of literature and literary response in elementary and middle school classrooms.

Reader-response theorists have influenced the teaching and use of literature and literary response in classrooms (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1976, 1978). Although varying in their specific theoretical explanations of the reading process, all reader-response theorists contend that a text cannot "be understood apart from its results. Its effects, psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader" (Tompkins, 1980, p. ix).

Wolfgang Iser's reception theory (1980) and Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1976, 1978) both acknowledge the active role of the reader in the reading event. Iser argues for the existence of an interactive and interdependent relationship between reader and text as he believes a reader actively participates in the meaning-making process. Rosenblatt adopted Dewey's term *transaction*, (Dewey, 1949) to denote the reciprocal relationship between reader and text, and states that the literary work exists "in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (1976, p. 25). Both theorists contend that texts are simultaneously open and constraining as the words in the text provoke thoughts, awaken memories, arouse feelings and conjure images in the reader's reservoir of literary and life experiences (Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1981). Through a continual process of modification of meaning, individuals experience and interpret texts differently as a result of their particular life and language experiences. Rosenblatt asserts that during the transaction between the text and the reader, a new experience the poem is evoked. This "lived-through 'work,' this 'evocation' is what the reader 'responds to' as it is being called forth during the transaction, and as it is reflected on, interpreted, evaluated, analyzed, criticized afterward" (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 124).

Rosenblatt (1978) views aesthetic and efferent reading as forming poles of a continuum. In aesthetic reading, the reader "adopts an attitude of readiness to attend to what is being lived through during the reading event" (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 74) and focuses on both the private and public aspects of meaning. In efferent reading, "the process of making meaning out of a text involves attention to what is to be retained" after the reading as 'residue' (Rosenblatt, 1981, p. 6). She asserts that literature should be read and responded to aesthetically (1991a). Research has demonstrated that aesthetic responses are associated with higher levels of

interpretations and understanding of texts (Beach, 1990; Cox and Many, 1992b, 1992c; Many, 1991; Marshall, 1987; Newell, Suszynski and Weingart, 1989; Squire, 1964).

Rosenblatt (1978) states that readers respond to texts both during and after the reading transaction. Purves and Rippere (1968) explain response to literature as, "mental, emotional, intellectual, sensory, physical. It encompasses the cognitive, affective, perceptual and psychomotor activities that the reader... performs as he reads or after he has read. Yet most teachers know that, in the classroom, a student's response will be like an iceberg; only a small part will become apparent to the teacher or even to the student himself." (p. xiii) More recently, Purves (1990) describes response as the meeting of mind and book. To Margaret Meek (1990), response "can never be singular; it is always multiple, layered, combining understanding and affect, involving mental images as gestures for which surface features of words always seem inadequate" (p. 101).

Literature response journals

Journals are one popular medium used by teachers to capture a view of students' responses to literature. The written responses of readers will be unique as they reflect upon reading. The written response, like the reading process, is a way for readers to work through their understandings and interpretations of texts in personally significant ways where the uniqueness of their responses is accepted. According to Petrosky (1982), writing about reading "is one of the best ways to get students to unravel their transactions so that we can see how they understand and in the process, help them learn to elaborate, clarify, and illustrate their responses by reference to the associations and prior knowledge that inform them." (p. 24).

The content of students' responses has been analyzed into various categorization schemes (Cooper and Michalak, 1981; Cox and Many, 1992a; Hancock, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Protherough, 1983; Purves, 1975; Purves and Rippere, 1968; Squire, 1964; Vandergrift, 1990; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). Further, some researchers have examined qualitative differences among students' responses to literature and endeavored to investigate characteristics which constitute a quality response (Blunt, 1977; Bogdan, 1990; Hancock, 1993a; Langer, 1990a, 1990b; Many, 1992; Protherough, 1983; Squire, 1964; Thomson, 1987; Vandergrift, 1990). Researchers have also examined how characteristics of readers, contextual factors, and textual factors influence students' responses to literature (Beach and Hynds, 1991; Martinez and Roser, 1991).

An unexplored area of response is what students' responses reveal about their understandings and knowledge of the workings of literary texts. Meek (1988) discusses the private lessons readers learn from literature without formal instruction. She states that readers become involved with texts, learning to "become both the teller (picking up the author's view and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter)" and that "this symbolic interaction is learned early" (p. 10). Among the many lessons texts teach, Meek (1988) writes, "the most important lesson that children learn is the nature and variety of written discourse, the different ways that language lets a writer tell, and the many different ways a reader reads" (p. 21). Through interactions with literature, children give themselves lessons about "authorship, audience, illustration, iconic interpretation and intertextuality " (p. 10).

Structuralists, text-oriented reader-response theorists (Rosenblatt, 1991b), view texts as having meaning as a result of readers actively applying socially acceptable internalized

literary conventions. Culler (1980), a structuralist, contends that literary works have structure and meaning because they are read "in a particular way, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading" (p. 102). Culler (1980) labels the understanding that good readers have which enable them to make literature texts have meaning as literary competences (Thomson, 1987, p. 101). He describes literary competences as "an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for... an internalized grammar of literature" which allows readers "to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings" (p. 102). Culler maintains that this implicit knowledge of publicly accepted conventions is possessed by both readers and authors. Application of this internalized grammar determines construction of meaning and thus interpretation of text is limited by a reader's literary competence as the structure of text is a creation of the reader (Mailloux, 1977).

Students' written responses

But what do students' written responses demonstrate about the private lessons they have learned from texts or their internalized grammar of literature or literary competences? Several students' written responses have been included below and they will be examined and discussed in terms of what each reveals about the writer's knowledge and understandings of how literary texts work. These responses are windows into the children's knowledge as one response provides only a glimpse, not a panoramic view. The children who wrote the responses were in a combined fifth/sixth grade classroom where literature was the central component of the reading program. The students engaged in real reading behaviors as they selected their own books to read (from approximately 185 different novels with multiple copies of each title), set their

own reading goals, and talked and wrote about what they read. A substantial amount of time was scheduled for the students to read during class (approximately 350 minutes/week). The classroom teacher had read every book of the multiple copies selection as she believed this to be integral to the program's success. Knowing the books was central to her program and her approach with the children. This knowledge was important in dialoguing with the students about the novels, writing literature responses, recommending books, giving book talks, and being cognizant of the breadth and depth of material available to the children. The spelling of the responses has been conventionalized to assist with reading.

Response #1

The first response (see Figure 1) was written by Cathy, a fifth grade student who was usually ranked as an average language learner by her teacher. *The Castle in the Attic*, written by Elizabeth Winthrop (1985), is a fantasy about a boy named William who receives a wooden model of a castle, complete with a miniature knight guarding the gate, from his nanny, Mrs. Phillips. Once the knight comes alive in William's hand, a series of adventures follow, including William shrinking Mrs. Phillips and battling a wizard and a dragon.

Figure 1
The Castle in the Attic

I thought that the crooked old man was Alastor in disguise and there was a spell on him that if he picked the apple he would turn to lead. I am glad it wasn't because if both William and Sir Simon were turned to lead, who would save the land?

William was brave to fight the dragon, wizard and mirror by himself. It must have been hard to fight the wizard on his own because he is just a ten year old boy.

In this response, Cathy has shown an understanding of the need to use previous information about characters and actions to make predictions, and that the latter may not always be verified or actualized. She has articulated her

awareness that particular events in texts lead to other events, and that the path of the story may be narrowed or widened as a result of specific events. Cathy has also indicated her knowledge of the author's crafting of the plot as she stated that one good character (i.e. William or Sir Simon) needed to remain unchanged in order to defeat the evil wizard (and save the land). She has thus made reference to her knowledge of recurring structures in texts and the universal theme in literature of good vs. evil. In this response, Cathy has demonstrated an understanding that it is acceptable for readers to become emotionally involved with characters in literature. She has also communicated her knowledge that authors develop characters through description of their actions which can then serve as a basis for character evaluation.

Response #2

The second response (see Figure 2) was written by Kari, an above average sixth grade student in language arts. *The Crossing*, by Gary Paulsen (1987), tells the story of an orphaned Mexican boy's struggle to live in the streets, his efforts to escape to America and his friendship with an alcoholic Vietnam war veteran.

Figure 2
The Crossing

This book has made me realize how lucky I am. I thought I had it hard because I have to clean my room and do chores in the house and yard. When I read about how Manny has to beg for money, hardly eats and has no parents, I thought and realized that I really actually am very, very lucky to have what I do. I have a house and a bed and blankets. Manny sleeps in a cardboard box. I have food and money to spend. Manny doesn't have either of those. I have several pairs of clothing but Manny has a torn T-shirt and an old pair of jeans. In Manny's country (Mexico) he has hardly any rights. In my country (Canada) we have many rights and privileges. I hardly ever have nothing to eat. Manny hardly ever has something to eat. I do not have to cross a river to a free country for I am in a free country. I do not have to wander the streets although I am conscious nothing happens to me as it would to Manny. Now that I have realized how lucky I am, I think I will have a better attitude about it.

As a result of reading the text, *The Crossing*, Kari has examined herself, the text and the human condition. This piece of literature has facilitated her reflection of her personal state compared to that of the main character. Kari has realized that literature can provide insights into the breadth and depth of human experiences and thought. This text allowed her to gain an appreciation of her current living conditions as she developed an empathetic understanding and appreciation of another person's life and culture. In addition she has experienced the power of literature--to convey the effects of social and economic problems on human lives, to influence a reader's point of view and to create profound lasting impressions.

Response #3

The third response (see Figure 3) was written by Susan, an above average language learner in grade five. *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi (1990) is Charlotte's account of her voyage across the Atlantic in 1832 as a passenger on a ship captained by the nefarious Captain Jaggery and manned by a mutinous crew.

Figure 3 *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*

I find Captain Jaggery to be hiding his true identity. When he and Charlotte had tea together he always acted so gentlemanly but in fact, he was a tiger waiting to pounce. The reason I say this is because when Charlotte joined the crew, he worked them even worse and was always on deck for Charlotte's shift to watch her every move. Another happening was when Charlotte told him that when they found land she was going to take him to court, he turned pale and got a look of murder in his eyes. I knew something was wrong with his brain, like he was half crazy or something.

This response demonstrates an understanding of the techniques authors use to reveal characters. Susan has displayed an awareness that she must pick up the clues and fill in the gaps in the text (Iser, 1980). She has engaged in several inferential walks (Eco, 1978) as she has put together pieces

of the text in order to make her evaluative statements regarding Captain Jaggery.

Response #4

The fourth response (see Figure 4) was written by Carla, an average sixth grade language arts student. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis (1950), is a fantasy about four children who discover a magical land called Narnia through the doors of a wardrobe. Together with Aslan, the lion King, the children must defeat the evil White Witch, who in her attempts to be Queen of Narnia, has cast an evil spell of eternal winter on the land.

Figure 4
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

I really think the end was really disappointing how they all followed the white stag out into the wardrobe because they didn't really need a wish at all. I think that C.S. Lewis could have ended the book by going home because they had missed their country so much and wanted to see the professor (to tell him what happened).

I also think that Aslan is the professor because he had told the children they should go through the wardrobe but other adults might just say, "Oh, there's no such thing as another world in a wardrobe. The girl must be going crazy!" Also the beaver said that Aslan has many worlds to visit.

In this response, Carla has revealed an awareness that texts are crafted by authors. She has articulated an understanding that as a reader, she can question or criticize the text. Carla has used explicit and implicit events in the text to construct logical and sensible alternatives and explanations. As a reader of literature, she has demonstrated an understanding of the necessity for readers to use the textual blueprint (e.g. characters' actions, comments by other characters) to make inferences.

Response #5

The fifth response (see Figure 5) was written by Jeremy, an average fifth grade student in language arts. Gary

Paulsen's (1983) novel, *Popcorn Days and Buttermilk Nights*, tells the story of Carley, a teenager who has broken the law and been sent to his uncle's farm to escape the negative influences of the city. Carley learns to respect the values of his relatives and experiences satisfaction and pride in working in his Uncle's blacksmith forge.

Figure 5
Popcorn Days and Buttermilk Nights

I enjoyed reading this book because Carley is trying to change his life and he eventually does. For example when Carley lived in the city he used to burn things down and throw rocks at windows or churches, laundromats and other places. Now Carley works at a blacksmith shop and is fixing and building things instead of destroying them.

Another reason I really enjoyed reading this book was because there were a couple of funny parts too. One of them is when Tinker and Carley are riding calves. When Carley tries, he gets dragged in the pasture behind the barn. I can just imagine being dragged through the manure because Gary Paulsen is very good at describing what is going on and how it is happening.

In this response, Jeremy has articulated an understanding of how readers use characters' actions to discern personalities and goals. He has recognized how the character's actions were symptomatic of his inner conflicts as well as how the character's development was revealed through his solving the conflicts. Jeremy has expressed enjoyment of the piece of literature, demonstrating also an appreciation of the power of literature to entertain. He has commented on the author's language style and recognized that the latter helped him to imagine himself in a character's position. As a reader of literature, Jeremy has communicated his knowledge that he is to assume an active role in reading and read literature from an aesthetic stance.

Response #6

The sixth response (see Figure 6) was written by Richard, an above average language arts student in grade six. *The Dragon Children*, by Bryan Buchan (1975), tells the story of the

attempts of a group of children to catch a thief who is cheating elderly people. The children receive assistance from a mysterious boy named Steven.

Figure 6
The Dragon Children

I really liked this book because there were two mysteries in the whole book. One of the mysteries was if the crook would make it out of town in time and if John, Scott, Cathy and Steven would get the crook or not. The other mystery was to find out who or what Steven really was. I figured out what Steven was by putting all the clues together. At the end of the book I found out who Steven was. At first I thought that Steven was a ghost (even though he was) that the crook had drowned in the river. I was half right about that.

It was a surprise to me when John, Scott and Cathy found out that the crook wasn't who they thought it was. It surprised me because when Steven told John that the crook was driving a green car with license plate number 5K-206 it wasn't the crook driving it. Instead it was a man who had come with his family for their vacation. The man did seem like a crook though because when he was walking through the woods with his son, it looked like he had kidnapped the child.

My favorite part though was when Scott sneaked up behind the real crook and poked the needle in his back end. I liked it because it really made me laugh.

Richard has communicated an understanding that two stories may be occurring simultaneously within one piece of literature and that the reader is to follow the individual story lines, as well as to relate them. He has displayed his knowledge that authors provide clues in mysteries and readers are to connect or unravel the clues in order to solve the puzzles. In this journal entry, Richard has communicated an understanding that readers need to engage in both anticipation and retrospection (Iser, 1980) as hypotheses may be abrogated, validated or modified (i.e. readers maintain a wandering viewpoint during their reading). In addition, this response revealed Richard's awareness that events in literature, as in life, are not always as they appear. Further, Richard has communicated his understanding that literature provides aesthetic experiences as he has described his enjoyment of solving the mysteries and his amusement at textual events.

Response #7

The seventh response (see Figure 7) was written by Corey, a below average sixth grade language arts student. In *The Foxman*, Gary Paulsen (1977), tells the story of Carl, a teenager who is sent to his Uncle's farm because his parents are alcoholics. While lost in the woods, Carl and his cousin meet the Foxman, an individual who has chosen to live in the wilderness because of his mutilated face. Carl returns to the Foxman's cabin and he and the recluse develop a deep friendship.

Canyon Winter, a Walt Morey (1972) book, is about fifteen-year-old Peter who is stranded alone in the Montana wilderness after a plane crash. Peter, a complete tenderfoot, follows a deer out of the canyon and meets Omar Pickett, an old canyon rat, and his many animal companions. As a result of his developing friendship with Omar, Peter learns much about nature and becomes involved in a fight to save the forests from logging industries.

Figure 7
The Foxman

The Foxman was a lot like Omar Pickett from *Canyon Winter*. A reason to explain that is that the Foxman and Omar were both very old. Also they both didn't want a boy staying with them very much but they both decided that it would be nice if he did. Also both men chose to live in the wilderness. Omar and the Foxman both died of pneumonia after saving someone from freezing to death.

Some ways that they were different were that Omar saved a deer from dying and the Foxman saved a boy from drowning. Also Omar was unlike the Foxman because Omar's physical appearance was fine but the Foxman's face had been burnt and mutilated from the World War One. That is why the Foxman had moved from where he used to live to a different spot because he didn't want people to feel sorry for him. Another difference they had was that when Omar died he wanted to be buried but when the Foxman died he wanted to be burned with his shack.

Corey has displayed an intertextual understanding as he has compared two characters from two pieces of literature. He has demonstrated an appreciation of the unity of literature by

examining the similarities and differences of two characters. Although this response may be considered more efferent in nature than previous responses, Corey has shown an understanding of the links which exist amongst pieces of literature.

Response #8

The last response (see Figure 8) is written by Jane, an average sixth grade language arts student. *Sing Down the Moon*, by Scott O'Dell (1970), tells the story of the forced resettlement of the Navajo, an actual historical event. Bright Morning, a brave Navajo woman, longs to escape from Fort Summer, New Mexico and return to her peaceful home in the Canyon de Chelly.

Figure 8
Sing Down the Moon

Bright Morning always was wondering, dreaming and thinking about her sheep. Before she was driven from her home, she would always take care of them and watch over them, herding them in if they wandered. When she was stolen by the Spaniards, she thought of how she hadn't herded them in and completed her work even though she had no choice. When the Long Knives drove her people from Canyon de Chelly, she thought of her 30 sheep, what they were doing and if they were all right. Even after a very long time (when most people would have given up hope), she still believed she would some day see some of her sheep again. When Tall Boy and Bright Morning returned to Canyon de Chelly she actually saw one of her sheep. She was glad to see it (even though it looked like a buffalo). When she saw the other sheep with a lamb her heart jumped for joy because then she knew that someday she would have 30 sheep again and that was the beginning of her home getting back to normal.

Jane has discussed the actions, thoughts, feelings, and dreams of Bright Morning--techniques authors employ to develop characters. She has also made reference to the universal theme of hope--a belief that unites humans. Jane appeared to recognize that the sheep symbolized Bright Morning's hope of her life returning to its previous state and encouraged her to continue in her dismal circumstances. As well, Jane has demonstrated an understanding that characters can be involved in journeys. Characters embark on journeys (either of

their volition or by some means of persuasion), encounter a number of obstacles which must be overcome or tasks which must be completed, and then return home, changed as a result of their experiences.

Discussion

Writing responses to literature in journals has been shown to have many benefits (Cox and Many, 1992a; Crowhurst and Kooy, 1985; Fulps and Young, 1991; Kelly, 1990; Marshall, 1987; Petrosky, 1982; and Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). Through journal writing, students are able to engage and participate personally with text, reflect on evoked emotions and ideas, and imagine the perspectives and experiences of others. Students can take ownership of their reading as they write about their personal interpretations and connect and associate their prior knowledge and experiences with text. They can express, reflect upon and clarify their thoughts and understandings, gaining self-confidence and motivation as they realize different interpretations of text are acceptable. Students can improve their comprehension, discussion and writing skills. They can become emotionally involved with literature, developing an appreciation of literature and becoming cognizant of how meaning is constructed during reading when attention is directed to the thought processes revealed in the journal entries. Further, response journals facilitate the expression of individual interests, needs and concerns as the students decide on the content of their entries. In varying degrees, the journal entries in this article demonstrated all of the aforementioned benefits. Further, the written responses revealed substantial information about the children's understandings of the workings of literary texts.

The content of children's written responses to literature can be a rich repository of information, allowing teachers to see what children understand, their level of understanding,

how they are learning, and their growth in communicating ideas (Crowhurst and Kooy, 1985; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). In order to discern what children's written responses reveal about their transactions with literature and their understandings of the workings of literary texts, teachers must read the literature their students read. Students' written responses to literature can provide invaluable pedagogical information for teachers as they develop their reading programs and support and encourage children in their growth as life-long readers.

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