



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 32
Issue 1 *September/October 1991*

Article 4

10-1-1991

Readers Theatre: Bringing Life to the Reading Program!

Terrell A. Young
Washington State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Young, T. A. (1991). Readers Theatre: Bringing Life to the Reading Program!. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 32 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol32/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.





Readers Theatre: Bringing Life to the Reading Program!

Terrell A. Young

Readers Theatre is a presentation of prose, poetry, or content area material that is read aloud by several readers. Readers Theatre is similar to a play; however, the participants read their parts rather than memorize them. Therefore, Readers Theatre is both less threatening and less time consuming for students than involvement in conventional children's drama since it is easier to read rather than memorize the script.

The benefits of Readers Theatre for students are many. Readers Theatre has been found to be an activity that builds confidence in the participants (Anderson and Lapp, 1989; Cox, 1988; Groff, 1978; Larson, 1976), allows stories to come to life (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988), reinforces oral language (Stoodt, 1988; Tiedt, 1983), and animates the content areas (Moffett and Wagner, 1983; Post, 1979). Moreover, Readers Theatre allows students with differing reading abilities to participate (Anderson and Lapp, 1989; Busching, 1981). Since movement is kept to a minimum, even physically handicapped students can take an active part (Monson, Taylor, and Dykstra, 1988).

Equally important, students can improve their reading by participating in Readers Theatre. Readers have the opportunity to practice oral reading since Readers Theatre is a meaningful way to involve students in reading text more than once (Busching, 1981; Swanson, 1988). Thus, students may develop larger sight-word vocabularies, increased reading rate, and improved reading fluency. As readers learn how to use their voices to alter their delivery, tone, pitch, and loudness, the quality of their oral reading and transition of meaning also improve (Bromley, 1988). Additionally, comprehension may improve since the focus is on interpretation rather than performance (Cox, 1988; Temple and Gillett, 1989).

Many benefits also exist for the audience. Listening to Readers Theatre performances can be enjoyable and entertaining, as the audience is exposed to many genres. Since characterization is conveyed by the readers and the narrator rather than by costumes, action, and props, the audience listens critically and appreciatively (Norton, 1989). Thus, listening skills and comprehension improve.

Selecting the text for a Readers Theatre script

In choosing suitable text, poems, short stories, books, or portions of stories or books can be adapted to Readers Theatre scripts. To begin Readers Theatre, the teacher may select one of the class's favorite stories or books (Tway and Lundsteen, 1989). The selection should have extensive dialogue, intriguing characters, rich and rhythmic language, and storylines which are suspenseful, and perhaps humorous (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988). Since picture books are written to be read aloud to children and use words and phrases that follow the rhythmic pattern of conversation, they allow for effective scripts (Sloyer, 1982). Some examples of picture books that make good Readers

Theatre scripts are *Miss Nelson Has a Field Day* by Harry Allard and James Marshall, *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish, *You Look Ridiculous Said the Rhinoceros to the Hippopotamus* by Bernard Waber, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* by William Steig, *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper, *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russell Hoban, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe, and *Alexander and the Terrible Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst.

Generally, teachers need to consider several factors when making a text selection. If an episode of a book or a story is used, the teacher needs to ascertain if the episode is self-contained; that is, whether or not knowledge of events before and after the episode is necessary to understand and enjoy the script (Swanson, 1988). If a story is chosen that is not self-contained, the teacher or students could write or create a prologue or epilogue. In addition, the text should be the right length for the age group. Lundsteen (1989) suggests that an eight page typewritten script is appropriate for fifth graders. Eventually, it is important to involve students in the selection of texts since the students need to feel a sense of ownership in this activity if it is to be successful (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988). Besides, students are able to maximize their learning by selecting, adapting, and writing texts for Readers Theatre scripts.

Adapting text to Readers Theatre scripts

After a text is selected, the teacher is ready to adapt it to a Readers Theatre script. The teacher should make a photocopy to mark since it takes less effort than writing or typing the text (Swanson, 1988). Next, the teacher should delete lines that 1) are not critical to the further development of the plot, 2) are peripheral to the main actions of the story, or 3) represent complex imagery or figurative

language that is difficult to express. Also, *said*, *replied*, and any other reference that a character is speaking should be removed (Cox, 1988; Swanson, 1988). Descriptive lines that could easily be spoken by a character can be changed to help the flow of the story (Cox, 1988).

Narration can also enhance the flow of the script and should be added to introduce the story in a story-telling manner (Moffett and Wagner, 1983) and identify the time, place, scene, or characters as needed. Narrator parts can describe essential aspects of the story that are not covered in the dialogue (Groff, 1978) and can provide effective transitions from one scene to another (Sloyer, 1982). One student can be the narrator for the entire script, or more than one narrator can be used to add variety (Busching, 1981; Cox, 1989). However, narration should be kept to a minimum, so it does not dominate the script (Anderson and Lapp, 1988).

Since most dialogue requires no rewriting for the Readers Theatre script, the teacher can label character parts by adding the character's name in the left-hand margin, followed by a colon. It is permissible to offer advice to a character regarding the speaking of a particular line. These voice directions should be placed within parentheses following the character's name (Swanson, 1988). As a teacher is preparing the script, it is useful to ask others to read the script aloud. Sometimes listening to the script makes it easier to add voice directions, revise narration, etc. (Swanson, 1988). Also, a practice session with a small audience can aid in revising the script (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988).

The teacher is not the only person who can adapt text to Readers Theatre scripts; students can also be involved.

For example, a group of students may choose a book, poem, or story and then work together to adapt it to a Readers Theatre script (Swanson, 1988). This is an excellent exercise in synthesizing and adapting text. Furthermore, they can also write scripts based on their experience and imagination (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; Monson, Taylor, and Dykstra, 1988).

Rehearsal

Before rehearsing the script orally the students should first read it silently. The students need to read the text silently to become familiar with it and to increase their chances for successful oral reading. After the silent reading the students discuss the way the characters talk and feel and methods in which they can express this as they read the character's parts (Anderson and Lapp, 1988). Students may then choose parts or be assigned parts by a teacher (Norton, 1989). The teacher may want to have some lines read by a group, especially if there aren't enough parts for each child to participate. Students can also alternate reading parts, so everyone can participate.

It is important to allow students to experience a variety of ways in script presentation. Allowing them to practice reading different parts and to experiment with changes in voice modulation maximizes effectiveness. It is valuable for all participants to share the same idea of the story's meaning and understand the characters.

A teacher or a child may serve as a director to make suggestions about pacing, clarity, and varying the rhythm, pitch, and volume in speaking (Tiedt, 1983). The students can stand or sit in a semicircle. This placement allows the student to make eye contact with others in the cast in order to heighten the dramatic effect of the reading (Monson,

Taylor, and Dykstra, 1988). Students can step forward when entering a scene or turn their backs to the audience when exiting a scene (Groff, 1978). It is important that students enunciate and project their voices, so they are easily understood and clearly heard (Sloyer, 1982).

Performing

Performing the script for others provides purpose and motivation for the planning and rehearsal (Johnson and Louis, 1989). When performing, it is necessary that the audience see the faces of the readers. While the readers do not memorize their parts, they should know their parts well enough that they can look up from their reading from time to time. The readers will generally use two types of focus, either a direct focus or an onstage focus. A direct focus occurs when the readers look directly at the audience (Coger and White, 1982; Sloyer, 1982) or over the heads of the audience at a spot on a back wall (Moffett and Wagner, 1983). It is used when a character is providing background as a transition or thinking to himself. The onstage focus is used when readers look at each other as they speak or react. For example, if dialogue is addressed to a particular character, then the reader should look at that character (Sloyer, 1982).

It is important for teachers to keep in mind that the Readers Theatre performance is to be fun. Teachers shouldn't expect perfection, but they should encourage the students to relax and enjoy themselves. The students can perform for more than one audience. While costumes and props are not generally associated with Readers Theatre, simple props and sound effects may be used to enhance the performance (Busching, 1981; Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, and Moore, 1989). Students may wear nametags or hats to identify themselves as specific

characters. Teachers may create interest by adding platforms and lighting (Post, 1979) and by videotaping the performance so students can watch themselves.

Conclusion

Clearly Readers Theatre is an appealing activity for students and teachers alike. Students are provided with a meaningful context for oral reading where they can experience good literature, and participating in Readers Theatre can improve both reading fluency and comprehension. The audience not only enjoys the activity, but also learns to listen critically. Because of its motivational quality, Readers Theatre can lead to more reading. In addition, students develop confidence in themselves and learn to work well in groups.

References

- Anderson, P.S., & Lapp, D. (1989). *Language skills in elementary education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Bromley, K.D. (1988). *Language arts: Exploring connections*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Busching, B.A. (1981). Readers theatre: An education for language and life. *Language Arts*, 58, 330-37.
- Coger, L.I., & White, M.R. (1982). *Readers theatre handbook: A dramatic approach to literature*. Glenview IL: Scott Foresman.
- Cox, C. (1988). *Teaching language arts*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cunningham, P.M., Moore, S.A., Cunningham, J.W., & Moore, D.W. (1989). *Reading in elementary classrooms: Strategies and observations*. New York: Longman.
- Groff, P. (1978). Readers theatre by children. *Elementary School Journal*, 79, 15-22.
- Harste, J.C., Short, K.G., & Burke, C. (1988). *Creating classrooms for authors*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Johnson, T.D., & Louis, B.R. (1989). *Bringing it all together: A program for literacy*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Larson, M.L. (1976). Readers theatre: New vitality for oral reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 29, 359-60.
- Lundsteen, S.W. (1989). *Language arts: A problem solving approach*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Moffett, J., & Wagner, B.J. (1983). *Student-centered language arts and reading, k-13: A handbook for teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- Monson, D.L., Taylor, B.M., & Dykstra, R. (1988). *Language arts: Teaching and learning effective use of language*. Glenview IL: Scott Foresman.
- Norton, D.E. (1989). *The effective teaching of the language arts*. Columbus OH: Merrill.
- Post, R.M. (1979). Children's readers theatre. *Language Arts*, 56, 262-67.
- Sloyer, S. (1982). *Readers theatre: Story dramatization in the classroom*. Urbana IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Stoodt, B.D. (1988). *Teaching language arts*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Swanson, C.C. (1988). Reading and writing readers theatre scripts. *Australian Reading Association: Reading around series*, 1, 1-4.
- Temple, C., & Gillett, J.W. (1989). *Language arts: Learning processes and teaching practices*. Glenview IL: Scott Foresman.
- Tiedt, I.M. (1983). *The language arts handbook*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Tway, E., & Lundsteen, S.W. (1989). *Choose your own learning and teaching activities for language arts*. New York: Harper & Row.

Terrell A. Young is a faculty member specializing in literacy education at Washington State University, Richland Washington.

Call for Manuscripts

Reading Horizons seeks to publish articles about aspects of reading which will be of practical as well as theoretical interest to teachers and administrators from preschool through the university level. Our subscribers also include both undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in reading courses. Articles which address topics of current interest in the field of reading, or are aimed at practitioners working at a particular level (pre-school, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, secondary school, college and university) are most useful. Reports of research should address questions of practical importance; explain the background, procedures and results of the study with clarity and a reasonable degree of brevity; and specify the statistical procedures concisely and without abstruse terminology. *Reading Horizons* is a juried journal, and articles are reviewed anonymously. Four copies should be submitted, each with a cover sheet giving author name(s) and affiliation(s); subsequent pages should not contain references to author identity. The title, or a portion of it, should be used as a running head on all manuscript pages. Text should be written using gender-free language; references should follow APA guidelines. Include 2 business-size stamped, self-addressed envelopes; manuscripts will not be returned. Send to: Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, *Reading Horizons*, WMU, Kalamazoo, MI 49008.