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READ A BOOK IN AN HOUR

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Why not use a wholistic technique to introduce a novel? Why not tear the chapters out and discover, not only a novel, its plot, themes, characters, but also deal with those elements as a group discovery? The technique should resemble a treasure hunt where the process of "getting there" is as exciting as arriving.

I still see the wide-eyed horror and disbelief come on the eager, waiting faces as I calmly tell students that we will read a book in the next hour and just as calmly tear out the nineteen chapters of Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*, handing each participant a chapter. Within an hour the nineteen chapters are read, the plot, themes, characters and significant events are summarized, analyzed, thoroughly discussed and initial shock replaced with enthusiastic promise.

Torn to Pieces

The technique is simple enough, the student reads a portion of the whole. Responsible for a chapter, several pages, or a few key paragraphs, the student is asked to summarize what is read and relate it to the class. In this manner the novel, short story, or essay takes form.

Individual students are given the responsibility of a unique portion of the narrative. A sense of having a meaningful contribution is developed. Only the individual knows what content was read. Shy students have something to say; and extroverted students have some limits put upon them. Yet each must participate to establish a totality.

Reading With A Purpose

As the task is outlined to the student, several guiding principles can be applied. Suggest to the students that the report to the class might concentrate on one element of the author's intention: (1) a retelling of the plot—the ability to sequence events after reading them is necessary, and the outcome is the retelling of the story line; (2) a retelling of character development—details of the major characters, and sometimes key minor characters, force the student to look closely at protagonist and antagonist behavior and make a judgment; (3) a critical reaction to themes—a level or so removed from plot, the student is forced to come to grips with internal meaning, allegory, symbolism and the other abstract concepts having to do with the ultimate purpose of the work; or (4) other typical purposes for literary analysis.

By using questions, the teacher can keep the series of summaries on target. This forces the student to recapitulate and relate a chapter to a previous chapter. This is especially important for analysis of character

development or thematic denouement. It is equally helpful for establishing the prediction of future developments. Discovery is based upon the ability to anticipate or to hypothesize. Other techniques also seem appropriate in developing these same habits, DRTA (directed reading-thinking activities), reciprocal questioning, even SQ3R.

Extensions of the Technique

Some teachers report that tearing the book apart, while dramatic, offends their sensibilities concerning books. So they suggest several alternatives:

1. Have a book for each student and portion out the readings. This has the added advantage of already having the book in hand so the students could *read* the book for themselves after this quick summary. The technique aids motivation.
2. Pass the book around or orally read portions of the book.

These suggestions defeat, for me, the purposes of getting a full picture of a long work in a short period of time.

But applications to other reading situations seem to be easily generated as the technique is discussed. Some teachers see the technique as a modern version of round-robin reading; others view it as a panacea to their *Silas Marner* frustrations. In a dialogue with a grammar teacher, we agreed that it may be appropriate, as review, to make each student an expert on one structure (one chapter in the grammar text). Some other suggestions include:

1. Portioning chapters to one student or small groups for retelling would provide for a good overview of the material or review if used after class reading.
2. This technique seems ideally suited to motivating students to read an entire book.
3. Concentrating the technique for the first half of the book, followed by class retelling and sharing, would really prepare the students for the reading of the rest of the book on their own.
4. It may be suited for supplemental reading in a content area, health for instance, so that a biography might be shared by someone in the history of health (Salk, Pasteur, etc.). This is equally true in social sciences in dealing with several biographies of the same person. A quick comparison of interpretations of the crucial individual in history would probably be very exciting and stimulating to further reading.
5. Several teachers have suggested that this technique is appropriate with slow reading students who seldom achieve a total concept of their reading.
6. The technique enables students to concentrate on specific elements and grasp deeper insights into how imagery, character development, main ideas, or significant details operate in a limited task. Sharing their insights with others confirms or challenges their own perceptions.
7. Forcing the student to condense the retelling sharpens that ability. The

sharing assists self-esteem as the students have something of value to relate to classmates.

8. Simply, it is a technique which can engage the entire class or a portion of it as either a teacher directed or student directed activity.

Some Cautions

On the other hand, a few cautions have been noted. The time for retelling should be specified and adhered to. Too much telling allows for boredom, so a reasonably rapid tempo needs to be maintained. An attempt should be made to fit the reading and retelling and discussion into a single class hour to maximize the dramatic effect. Reasonable care should be taken with the text material selected. Material which has thematic coherence seems to work well. Some concern has been expressed in books (material) in which each chapter is self-contained, i.e., *Body Language*. Concern has been expressed over the students who, exposed to a book by this technique, feel that they know the book well enough to get by without reading it fully. I am afraid that will happen even with the best of techniques.

Try It You'll Like It

This approach to getting students into a book is really an attempt to look at the form of the work. Some have even elevated the purpose as an attempt to look at the process of reading. If the technique succeeds in bringing a student closer to the author's meaning through careful attention by which he gains an insight to the whole book in a minimum amount of time, it is successful. If it forces that student to read the entire work with a greater appreciation, with more critical response, or with greater understanding, I could ask for nothing else.