

**Enhancing Engagement in Reading:  
Reader Response Journals in Secondary English Classrooms**

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Dickens uses metaphors in his story in order to get a thought or opinion across without actually writing it. An example from book one was when the wine spilled on the street and everyone rushed over to drink as much as they could. I think that he, Dickens is trying to show that everyone was blood thirsty...when Dickens writes like this it takes me a couple of read overs to realize what he is trying to communicate. (student reader response journal entry, grade 10 English)

As I re-read this excerpt, I recognize the power of this student's writing and why reader response journals are so effective in English classrooms. Diane's response reveals her engagement in *A Tale of Two Cities* through comments about story details, the writer's style, and her awareness of how she reads for meaning. My contention is that writing reader response journals during the act of reading provides ideal opportunities for secondary English students to deepen and expand their understanding of literature.

**Teaching reading *and* literature**

Beginning in middle school and beyond, English teachers generally do not consider themselves to be reading teachers, but teachers of literature. This issue presents challenges in the English classroom when some students experience difficulty in reading; we cannot separate the teaching of reading and literature. Probst (1994) writes:

Our primary goal in the English curriculum is not to make literary scholars of all of our students. It is to make them readers and writers, independent and self-reliant thinkers who employ language and literature to enrich their lives

(p.44).

Since literature is a focus in secondary English, selecting classroom strategies which combine the reading of literature and writing about encounters with text is essential. One strategy which helps students initially engage in reading is the reader response journal which they write as they read a novel for class study. Not only do these journals provide an effective strategy for implementing reader response theory, but they serve as a meaningful base for the study of literature.

### **Engaging in reading through journaling**

Over the 13 years I taught secondary English, I observed students actively engaged in reading novels through use of such a journal. My particular interest in this strategy led me to complete two studies (McIntosh, 1992, 1999) on reader response journals and secondary English students. Study one (1992) focused on examining response journals as a meaningful base for the study of literature; participants were in grades 10 and 11 English and were reading a variety of novels. The influence of gender on the written responses of grade 10 students who were reading and responding to *A Tale of Two Cities* was the focus for the second study (1999). To conduct the research, I contacted secondary English teachers in my school board who used reader response journals for literature study. They were asked to be involved in these studies, then they selected one of their classes and those students were invited to participate; students were made aware that excerpts of their journal entries would be the focus for analysis. Informed consents were acquired and pseudonyms were used for confidentiality. Although one study was conducted in the school where I taught, it was in the classroom of a colleague and during the year I was on a leave of absence.

Currently, as an English educator, I encourage my pre-service teachers to use response journals in their English classrooms. Implementation of reader response journals in senior English classrooms by pre-service teachers is the study I'm now conducting (McIntosh, 2003). Over the past two years, pre-service teachers and I have discussed the value of journals and why many English teachers have made them an integral part of their secondary English programs. We've shared stories of how journals *work* for both our students and ourselves; we observe that students seem to like writing responses, we enjoy reading reactions and are often intrigued by the contents. Student writers clarify their values, explore their feelings and closely examine their own lives. Journal entries reveal that students, no matter what their reading skills, make meaning of their reading through writing in journals. On initial exposure to works of literature, adolescent readers' emotions are prompted. Journals provide an appropriate starting point for them to examine their ideas and reactions (McIntosh, 1992).

### **Personal journal responses**

How do reader response journals assist secondary students with writing, reading and acquiring an understanding of what they are reading? What does it mean to *read* in English language arts at the secondary level? According to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading, the meaning of the text resides in the person rather than the words on the page; the 'transaction' or interaction between the reader and the text is different for every reader since each is a unique individual (p. 16). Rosenblatt shows that "how we read a text depends upon what is in our heads, as much as the meaning or emotion we gain from reading the text" (Purves, 1991, p. 214). These personal responses are critical in assisting the reader with making meaning from the text.

“Accustomed to giving ‘correct answers’, many students rarely learn to compose - to formulate their own ideas or knowledge...lacking confidence in their own ideas, they simply defer to external authorities or the teacher as the primary source of knowledge” (Anson & Beach, 1995, p. 24). Students in effective programs learn that reflection is the key to comprehension and risk taking, the hallmark of an accomplished, independent reader (Parsons, 2001). Swartz (2002) states, “Writing down what they think about what they’ve read allows readers to clarify their thinking and the response journal provides a meaningful context for them to be reflective readers” (p. 43).

Darren, a grade 10 student, reads *Civil Wars*; its focus is on civil rights from a white family’s perspective. He explores his beliefs about the emotionally charged issue of racism:

Racism. It is a prejudice I cannot understand. I cannot comprehend how someone can judge a person inferior or superior according to their colour of skin...I am unsure as to how a racist attitude is instilled in a person but I would guess that your upbringing has a lot to do with it.

Uncertainty about this issue is evident from his response. Stopping to pause, reflect and then write about racism allows him to question why it exists and he offers a possible reason. Further reflection on this issue as he continues to read the novel will likely result in Darren having the opportunity to clarify his own viewpoint.

In my response-based English classrooms, both in secondary school and at the university, I encourage students to bring their own attitudes and prior experience to their reading. Research I’ve conducted has focused on students’ written response to novels. After they read about 20 pages of the text, they record a half-page journal

response. No prompts are provided; students are encouraged to write an initial reaction to what they've read. Response to text often begins on an emotional level as students share personal experiences which they link to events or issues in the book they are reading. After John, a grade 11 student, reads a section of *A Separate Peace*, he writes in his journal about his grandfather's death:

I still remember the day I was told. It was late April '87, a sunny day, and I had returned home from school for lunch. My eldest brother told me. My grandfather had been ill but he had achieved his health lately after returning from the hospital. Since that day I have missed him. I continue to think of him daily to let him know that I still love him.

John's memories of his grandfather are strong. Although this passage was likely difficult for him to record, he is able to feel for the character in the novel who has just lost a friend. Through examining his own experience, it is apparent that he empathizes with the character who has to face the death of a loved one.

### **Writing reflectively**

Reflective writing draws students into the text in a natural way and assists them in gaining an understanding of what they are reading. Some students benefit from response prompts, but many of my own students when given the opportunity to *journal*, actively relate the text to prior knowledge and seem to better comprehend what they have read; in turn, they demonstrate a greater confidence in their reading as they become more involved or engaged in the text. This engagement can be more closely examined through Rosenblatt's transactional theory which differentiates between an aesthetic stance toward reading and an efferent stance. Beers (2003), when referring to

Rosenblatt's research, states that "readers might take an efferent stance toward reading when their goal is to carry information *from* the text. They assume a more aesthetic stance when the goal is to live *through* the text" (p. 269). There is a range of possible stances between the efferent and the aesthetic poles. "Between the two poles, there is a sequence of possible proportions of attention to public and private aspects of sense...But there are many, perhaps most, reading events with the proportion falling nearer the middle" (Karolides, 1999, p. 165). Rosenblatt refers to the public or shared meanings in the efferent stance; privately felt aspects are more aesthetic in nature.

Writing a response journal helps students read a text from an aesthetic stance where engagement with text is often the outcome. Scott, a grade 10 student, writes about his emotional reaction to Sydney Carton, a character in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

If I ever need to comfort a female in as dire a situation as the one Sydney faced, I will be sure to consult the words of this Romeo of the Revolution though my intentions would surely be different. He spoke so affectionately and sincerely that I felt I should wish him farewell. When a character such as Sydney makes you sad enough to wish you had never finished a novel you have thoroughly disliked, he possessed a magic which is, and was able to tug at my heartstrings.

Scott focuses on his feelings about Sydney in this passage. His attraction to the positive qualities of this character engages him in reading the novel.

### **Experiencing the text**

"If our goal is to create lifelong readers, not just school-time readers, then reading must be something more than answering questions at the end of the chapter or

book” (Beers, 2003, p. 270). The act of writing responses in a journal invites students to become actively involved in their reading; teacher-created questions are not the focus. Students can experience text, as they record their initial reactions to the material they are reading, prior to any class or teacher discussion. This personal encounter with the whole text is a change from the time when “literature study meant only an analysis of literary terminology and authorial craft” (Milner & Milner, 2003, p. 105).

Experiencing the text by the reader is emphasized and valued through use of the response journal. When students realize that they have a role in determining meaning, they become more actively immersed in reading. Independent reading and writing occurs and with practice, students gain confidence in their skills. Too often reluctant readers lack the motivation to read on their own. Some have had the experience of being told by teachers what the book means and believe that their teachers hold the ‘correct interpretation’ of the text. Rosenblatt writes that “although there isn’t a single ‘correct’ interpretation of any text for all circumstances, that doesn’t necessarily rule out responsible reading. We can consider some interpretations better or poorer than others” (Rosenblatt, in Karolides, 1999, p. 163).

I’ve observed that students sometimes need to be encouraged to support their ideas with text details when writing response journal entries. Direct references are not required but textual interpretations seem to be strengthened when student writers refer to particular aspects of the novel they are reading. Based on the transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), a teacher’s interpretation of a text isn’t the only “acceptable” one; readers have different transactions with text. Peer or teacher modeling of a supported textual interpretation is an effective strategy in secondary English classrooms. Examining

how others interpret text enhances the reading experience. Students benefit from interpreting text on their own, as this is an essential part of reading but opportunities to share with both their peers and teachers are necessary. Through this process, the whole class or literature group can deepen their understanding of novels they are reading and analyzing.

### **Classroom practice**

Writing while reading is a key component of reader response journals. An approach I've used successfully with many English students is one which encourages students to divide a book into 10 segments and then write half-page responses at regular intervals *as* they read. Initially, this can cause students some difficulty as they may feel that they are interrupting their reading to write. With time and practice, many realize that it's easier to record their ideas when they are fresh in their minds. I've observed that pausing in the act of reading seems to spur them on to want to read more – as they move away from the text to write, they seem to be drawn back to it and want to return to reading so they can gather more information. One pre-service teacher wrote in her journal, "I feel drawn in every time I read another section...I want to know what happens next. I don't want to miss anything. I feel as though I can't read fast enough to get to the next section." A movement between the aesthetic and efferent stances is revealed in this excerpt. This certainly reinforces the idea that writing and reading can be effectively integrated. Providing in-class time for reading and journal writing is essential. If students see that teachers allot class time for journal writing, then they become aware that it's a valued activity. They are also happy to complete two tasks at the same time- the reading of a novel and producing a written response journal.

Through the act of journaling, students discover that they internalize text detail and clarify their understanding of the content in a novel. When referring to journals, Anson & Beach (1995) reveal that their informal nature and spontaneity can encourage some reluctant writers to develop a sense of voice. This idea is further reinforced if literature groups are employed in the classroom and students have the opportunity to share their responses with peers. In my classroom practice, I organize these groups before novel study begins. If students are provided with a choice of five or six novels, then they can be grouped with peers who are reading the same novel. At regularly scheduled times, students agree to read specific pages of the novel and write a response journal entry for class. For about fifteen minutes, during class time, they orally share their own reactions with peers *as* they are reading the novel. Response journal entries provide a focus for literature group sharing; often the discussion moves well beyond this initial stimulus.

Journal writing enhances classroom discussions, particularly for students who lack confidence in openly expressing their thoughts. They can use their response journal entries as prompts for literature group discussions. One pre-service teacher stated “Our book groups helped in promoting discussion and sharing ideas...helped me see how other members of my group were responding to the same pages of text.” All students, even the less confident, can participate in discussion as “articulating reading reflections in a log assures that everyone actively participates, contributes and learns...readers have time to think and prepare before they come to the discussion” (Kooy, 1999, p. 81). Involvement in small group sharing builds readers’ confidence and leads them to greater independence as both readers and writers. Students “come prepared (graphically) to

discuss their views, and become accountable to the group by preparing, exchanging, and using their texts to fuel discussions” (Kooy, p. 79).

### **Successful reading experiences**

Reflecting on the research I’ve conducted in secondary English classrooms, I recognize that implementation of reader response journals contributes to student success in reading. Through frequent reading and writing experiences, students begin to engage with text in a more aesthetic way. Journal writing elicits emotional responses and student writers frequently include personal experiences in their journal entries. Having time to think about their reading, as they read, is necessary and built into the journaling strategy. Reflection on life experiences including prior intertextual encounters helps students deepen their understanding of the current text they are reading; effective meaning-making is the result. Therefore, incorporating reader response journals in secondary English classrooms for literature study clearly enhances student engagement in reading.

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