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Author: Pugh, Sharon L.
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Teaching Children To Appreciate Literature. ERIC Digest Number 1.

Charlotte Huck and her colleagues (1987) have defined literature as "...the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language." If life, thought and/or imagination are missing, the language alone will not suffice.

Appreciation may be explained as the capacity to understand, learn from, and above all enjoy literary works. It involves the ability to read and respond creatively, sharing the author's role by drawing on one's own imagination and experience. The text enters the

reader as the reader enters the text. Their worlds are joined.

Two basic approaches to teaching literature at any level are the "structural" (traditional literary analysis) and the "reader response" approaches. While they may be viewed as opposites, they are more productively regarded as complementary. Structural analysis provides the terms and concepts that help readers interpret and discuss literature, while reader response emphasizes the integrated experience an individual has with a text, with the reader's personal response having primacy over formal knowledge of textual characteristics. A strong case can be made for beginning with reader response. If done without first establishing the personal relationship by which the reader breathes life into a text, formal analysis is likely to resemble an autopsy.

READER RESPONSE

Perhaps the best known theorist to explicate reader response as a pedagogical as well as critical stance is Louise Rosenblatt (1978), who formulated the "transactional theory" of reading and the distinction between "efferent" (utilitarian) and "aesthetic" reading. Aesthetic reading centers on a transaction between reader and text fostered through personal response, reflection, discussion, and elaboration, leading to new literary experiences, both in reading and in writing. In this process, reader and text mutually affect one another. Jim Parsons (1978) echoes this view in his description of reading as "the meeting of two meaning makers over literature...[which]...produces changes in both, the author's text and the reader's growth." (p. 18) For this to happen, he asserts, reading instruction should not seek to control the reader's experience but rather to facilitate the reader's own structuring of that experience.
For children, encounters with literature should retain characteristics of play, children's most natural activity. This principle is well illustrated in the exuberance of color and design in children's books and in themes that align the natural and the fantastic. John Dixon (1987) describes the maturing re-sponses of young readers as "drawing on parts of the imaginary world in their play (and progressively, in drama and writing) and thus trying to explore complex situations and characters from the inside; talking and writing about personal and other familiar experiences that chime in with what's been read, thus approaching them from a new perspective; raising questions about the imaginary world and its people, discovering new connections between the imaginary and the real world, and thus discussing what human experience is actually like." (p. 764)

Probably the most frequently given advice for stimulating creative reader response is simply to surround children with good reading. Bill Martin, Jr. (1987) proposes a supportive, non-analytic approach to literature of which two major components are oral reading and an abundance of interesting books. Reading would develop "by osmosis," he writes. "Without consciousness of how or why...[t]he reader is forever rummaging and scavenging through the pages for a glimpse of self...[f]or the pleasure of finding a closer relationship of the outer world to the inner world and vice versa. For the intense satisfaction of finding a special book that speaks to both the heart and the mind." (p. 18)

Describing a literature program for the gifted, Denise Bartelo and James Cornette (1982) advocate both exposure to a wide variety of materials and the design of activities that encourage creative reader response, such as compiling a museum of personal artifacts in relation to autobiographical writing, pretending to be a book with fantastic characteristics, and putting a current events item in the form of an animal fable. In their program, emphasis is on "making reading less of a skill-related activity and more of a personal experience that could be shared and discussed." (p. 6)

At the middle and junior high school level, when analytic sophistication may begin to develop, emphasis may still be placed on the encouragement of personal response as a way of exploring the possibilities of various genres. Philip Anderson (1982) recommends exposure to a broad range of works and a lot of writing and sharing of personal responses to build awareness of the commonalities among readers of the same texts. In this way students begin to understand their membership in a cultural and literary community. He considers the intense sociability and garrulousness of students at this age as a resource too often overlooked. He writes that "it seems that more time is spent in the middle school and junior high school trying to get students to shut up than there is trying to channel that verbal onslaught into something productive." (p. 7) He would like to see more in-class publications of student work, oral reading of plays, discussion, and other kinds of literary sharing that lead to active, productive language use.

Similarly, Dixon (1987) suggests having students maintain their own journals, recording their responses to poems and stories. Personal class anthologies of selected works and excerpts from the reading journals can be compiled. Response approaches, then, emphasize both the personal and the social. Anyone who can compare the experiences of reading a poem in solitude and hearing one read and discussed in a group may understand the importance of both aspects. Sometimes the solitary experience is appropriate, but other times--and this may be most of the time for younger readers--the social reading in which they play an active role is the most enriching.

STRUCTURAL APPROACHES

As they and their reading material mature, children may need concepts and strategies for dealing with the increasing length and complexity of what they read. Michael Higgins (1986) points out such elements as flashback, conflict, and parallel structures that are common in children's stories and novels. As they encounter more varied literature, young readers must make decisions such as setting purposes for themselves and modifying reading strategies in accordance with the possibilities within a text. Higgins also believes there is a kind of literary canon at each age level, implying the development of cultural literacy. This includes acquaintance with works that Americans are often assumed to have read as children, such as, say, Winnie the Pooh, Wind in the Willows, and Alice in Wonderland. It may also entail knowledge of genres such as legends, myths, folktales, poetry, and so on, formal features of literature, and the

vocabulary to discuss this knowledge.
Joy Moss (1984) has developed a curriculum for elementary school teachers based on the concept of "focus units," sets of stories grouped around a common theme or author. She defines categories of questions for teachers to use in story sessions, ranging from a close focus on the story and its structural elements to open-ended reader response. These categories are 1) previewing, 2) literal recall, 3) basic literary elements and devices (e.g., plot, character, figures of speech), 4) implied meanings and logic, 5) formal artistic features and genres, 6) comparing stories and finding relationships, and 7) subjective responses such as speculation and evaluation.

Jon Stott (1982) has developed the concept of a "spiralled sequence story curriculum" designed to lead students through increasing levels of complexity, with earlier stories arranged so as to introduce students to components and techniques found in later stories. For example, in Stott's curriculum a number of fairy tales and journey stories lead up to reading The Hobbit, which, in addition to being interesting to middle grade students, enables him to talk about structural features such as character, plot, setting, and so on--what he calls the "grammar" of literary construction.

Fairytales, myths, fables and legends are frequently recommended for teaching literary analysis because of their clear formal features and predictable patterns. Denise Nessel (1985) describes a program of storytelling using such material. It encourages students to use their imaginations to visualize scenes that are not shown in pictures as well as to use the structure of stories to improve listening comprehension. Bette Bosma (1981) finds that sixth-grade students are very interested in the formal features of folktales and in using this knowledge to "make evaluative comparisons, discover unstated premises, and draw conclusions"--which lead them into critical thinking.

Anita McClain (1985) also discusses teaching critical thinking through literary analysis, for example, by comparing different versions of the same fairy tale, understanding genre characteristics, and developing intercultural knowledge both of differences between cultures and of shared values.

Literature is the means by which people communicate across cultures and across ages--across all divisions of time and space to gather the collective wisdom of the human experience. It is also the way we explore and communicate with the future. Through teaching literature, we recognize the special claim that children have on the future as well as our willingness to share the past. To appreciate literature is to appreciate what it means to be part of the entire human scene. No child should be denied that.

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