DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 526 CS 212 845

AUTHOR Smith, Michael W.
TITLE Autobiography and Intertextuality.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Indianapolis, IN, March 14-16, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; Personal Narratives; *Reader Text Relationship; *Student Writing Models; Writing Research; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Intertextuality

ABSTRACT

To understand literature, it is necessary for a reader to make connections between the text of the literary work and the text of the reader's life. Student autobiographical writing before reading can be used to enhance students' ability to make such connections. Autobiographical writing helps students apply relevant life experience that might not be readily evoked by a literary text. Even the most successful student readers might not otherwise apply their lives to the literature they read. They may remain submissive to literary texts, thinking it is the text's job to make any connections that need to be made. Asking students to write about their lives vests them with an authority they might otherwise not feel and demonstrates to them a teacher's belief in the importance of students' connecting their lives to the literature they read. Student writing models indicate that autobiographical writing before reading appears to have positive effects on both students' understanding of and attitude toward literature. Furthermore, a study has shown that students who engaged in autobiographical writing before reading tended to like stories better than those who did no writing, and students who did not engage in autobiographical writing liked stories less after discussion. By allowing students to reflect on their lives, teachers can help them have more meaningful transactions with literature. (Eight writing prompts are attached. (SG)

Autobiography and Intertextuality

Michael W. Smith
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
225 N. Mills Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

When talking about such a heady subject as intextuality, it's probably important to begin with a little levity, so I'm going to begin with a joke, one that I think clearly illustrates the importance of intertextuality:

> One day a traveling salesman discovers that he does not have to make the trip he had scheduled, so he spends the night at home with his wife. In the middle of the night they are awakened by a pounding on the bedroom door. The wife screams, "Oh my God! It's my husband!" The husband leaps out of bed and jumps out the window.

In order to get this joke, it is essential that one make intertextual connections, for the joke plays against the genre of traveling salesmen stories. Unless we immediately call to mind the adulterous behavior of traveling salesmen and their wives, at least the ones that populate jokes, we miss the point and the joke isn't funny. What is true of jokes is true of literature as well. As Terry Eagleton explains, "All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influence' but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the original work. . . [A]ll literature is 'intertextual'. A specific piece of writing

thus has no clearly defined boundaries; it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, generating a hundred different perspective which dwindle to vanishing point" (p. 138). And, as Deborah has explained, this insight provides a challenge for us as teachers.

But to get the joke we must do more than call to mind other traveling salesman jokes that we have heard. We must also apply our knowledge of the world. We must recognize that the wife's screams suggests her guilt as does the husnband's jumping out the window. Robert Scholes explains: "As individual speech acts are to the language in which they are spoken, so are many other individual actions to the codes of the cultures in which they occur. This is the most fundamental and durable insight of structuralism, the insight upon which all later semiotic studies have been founded. Every meaningful action--wearing a necktie, embracing a friend, cooking a meal--is meaningful only to the extent it is a sign in some interpretive code" (p. 1). In order to understand the joke, in order to understand literature, we must also make connections between the texts that we read and the text of our lives. What I want to talk about today is how we can use autobiographical writing before reading to enhance our students' ability to make these connections, something that is essential for us to do, for our

students too often fail to connect their lives to texts in meaningful ways.

Autobiographical writing before reading helps students apply relevant life experience that might not be readily evoked by a literary text. Some students, for example, may view literature as something completely separate from their lives. Marshall (1989 b) found that this attitude is prevalent among urban students. He illustrates this point with the example of a student who was asked to write about how "Raymond's Run" made the student feel. The student's "It didn't make me feel like nothing" response is especially telling as the story was likely chosen because the teacher thought it was relevant to the lives of urban students. Other students might not make connections between their lives and literature because of an actual cultural gap between their lives and those depicted in the stories they read, especially the canonical texts. However, even those students who perceive connections might not make them, perhaps because adolescent readers do not feel they have the authority to apply their life experience. I have found, for example, that "at risk" students are less likely to apply personal experience to a literary text than are students who have been successful readers (Smith in press a). This is understandable. Many students have been told in many different ways that they are poor readers. As a consequence

they may devote all of their mental energy trying to do well what they have been criticized for failing to do: understanding the meaning of words and remembering literal information. But even successful readers might not apply their lives to the literature the read. They may remain submissive to literary texts, thinking it is the literary text's job to make any connections that need to be made (Smith in press b). They may simply not know that applying life to literature is something that readers do, especially if their view of the reader's role is conditioned by classroom discussions of literature, for as Marshall (1989 a) found, teachers seldom ask students to make these sorts of connections. Autobiographical writing before reading is designed to overcome all of these potential problems. The prompts are designed to direct students' attention to parallels between their lives and the situations about which they read. while avoiding cuing a particular interpretation. Responding to the prompts should minimize the feeling of separation and the cultural gaps that may exist. Simply asking students to write about their lives as preparation for reading vests them with an authority they may otherwise not feel and demonstrates to them a teacher's belief in the importance of students' connecting their lives to the literature they read.

The potential effects of this kind of instruction are suggested by contrasting two responses to "My Papa's Waltz" that I've written to characterize the sorts of responses my colleague Brian White and I have found in our research.

Julianne did no writing before she read. Upon finishing the poem, this is what she said:

> The dad seems like a jerk. And I feel sorry for the boy. His parents must not get along too well if the dad's a drunk. If I cared about my husband and he was a drunk, I'd get him some help. I think that if you know about child abuse, you should really do something right away and not just let it slide like the mother did. I don't know people like this, but I do know about alcoholism and child abuse from tv and stuff. You gotta get people help.

Julianne relates her life to the poem, but in some ways that relation limits her response to the poem. She sees the poem as about alcoholism and child abuse and she applies the life experiences that she has. But Julianne has had little experiences in these areas, so she relies on television's portrayal of these issues, a portrayal that is most often superficial.

Mike transaction with the poem seems much richer. Before he read the poem, he wrote on the following prompt:

> Think back to a memorable event you shared with a parent when yopu were younger. Explain how you felt about it then and how you feel about it now. Explain what accounts for the similarities and differences in your feelings.

In response, Mike write the following:

> My dad coached my Little League team. I was the fourth best player on the team. I remeber this clearly because the coach got to select three players for the All-Star team. And no matter how hard I tried I couldn't make myself think that I was in the top three. Two players were clearly better, but one was close. Even though i was only the forth best I kind of thought I'd make it anyway. After all, my dad was the coach. I remember when he announced the team. Tears burnt my eyes when I didn't hear my name, but I fought them back. And when I looked up, my dad was looking at me. Staight at me for a

long time. he never said anything, though, and I was mad, I guess. And hurt. But now, I'm kind of proud of him. I mean, it would have probably been easier for him to put me on. Other coaches did it. But not my dad.

This is how Mike responded when he finished reading:

I think there are four characters in this poem, the little boy, the dad, the mom, and the little boy at an older age. The little boy doesn't know what to think aboput his dad. He's big and rough and I think the kid is scared. But now he thinks back on it and maybe it wasn't so bad. I don't think he's scared now. I think he misses his dad. Maybe his dad is dead or something and he looks backa nd misses him. Sometimes you change your mind about stuff.

MIke's response goes far beyond superficial connections. He seems more able to use his life to respond to the poem, perhaps because through his writing he made a text of his life. As Rick (1977) explains:

Many students often have little opportunity to stand back and reflect on experince in a formal manner. They are daily bombarded with entertainment and information, by

> media which require little reflective thinking beyond immediate superficial experience. . . . Saturated with data and inundated by entertainment, studnts may find it difficult to put all of this stimulation into the perspective of personal meaning.

Brian White and I have found that the effects of autobiographical writing before reading demonstrated by Mike's response are not unique. Autobiographical writing before reading appears to have positive effects on both students' understanding of and attitude toward literature. White's (1990) study strongly suggests that autobiographical writing before reading can enhance younger adolescents' understanding of literary characters by helping them to move beyond surface descriptions and to focus more on abstract character traits.

White also found that the students in his study who had written about relevant autobiographical experiences before they read appeared to be more engaged in the reading and discussion of stories than were students who had done no writing. White supports this conclusion by noting that students who had written about relevant autobiographical experiences before they read were significantly less likely to make off-task or contentless (for example,

"I forgot") remarks in classroom discussions. If students are genuinely engaged in a story, there should be few such remarks.

In a follow-up study in a more diverse classroom, we (Smith and White in press) also found that autobiographical writing before reading appeared to have a positive effect on students' attitudes. When we compared the results of attitude surveys students completed after they had read stories and then again after they had discussed them in large or small groups, we made an interesting discovery. We found that the students who had engaged in autobiographical writing before reading tended to like stories better than those who did no writing, but that the difference between the groups was not significant. However, when we compared the responses that individual students made immediately after reading the stories to those they made after discussing the story in large or small groups, we found that while there was no significant difference between pre-discussion and post-discussion attitudes of the students who engaged in autobiographical writing before reading, students who had not engaged in autobiographical writing before reading liked the stories significantly less after discussion. We argue that such writing may mitigate the potentially alienating effects of classroom discussions that students might experience, on the one hand,

annoyance at classmates' off-task remarks and on the other, the revelation that others can connect to a text in ways that the student cannot.

Another measure of interest is personal investment, the willingness to become personally involved while interacting with subject matter and classmates, what Dewey calls whole-heartedness. While the students who had not written before reading engaged in comparatively empty and boring discussions, the students who had written before reading engaged in more fast-paced, thoughtful give-and-take (Hamann, Schultz, Smith, and White, 1990; Smith and White in press). In sum, when students in our studies had written about their lives before they read, they made more abstract inferences, offered significantly fewer off-task and contentless remarks, and seemed to be more personally and substantively engaged both in the texts and in class discussions of those texts

We have used autobiographical writing before reading with a variety of students reading a variety of texts. The handout that is going around makes some suggestions that you might try.

By providing students an opportunity to reflect on their lives, by authorizing them to make connections between the text of their lives and the texts that they read, we can help them have more meaningful transactions

with literature.

Autobiographical Writing Before Reading Prompts

Smith, M. & White, B. (in press). "That Reminds Me of the Time. . .": Using Autobiographical Writing Before Reading to Enhance Response. In D. Bogdan and S. Straw (Eds.). Boynton-Cook/Heinemann.

A. Prompt for Ernest Hemingway's "The End of Something":

Please answer the following question as specifically as you can (it has two parts).

Most young people want to have dating relationships that are fun, exciting, and long lasting. First describe healthy, lasting dating relationships that you've been part of or that you've observed. What does a relationship need to be like in order to grow and to last? Why do some relationships really seem to work well? Be specific, and remember to write about relationships that you yourself have experienced or watched. Second, why do some relationships break up? What sorts ofthings can stop a relationship from being fun and exciting? What sorts of things cause relationships to end? Be specific, and write about relationships that you know about.

B. Prompt for Armstrong Sperry's Call It Courage:

Please think about a time in your life when you had to do something that you were afraid to do. What was it that you had to do? Why did you have to do it? Why were you afraid to do it? How did you know that you were afraid? Describe your feelings in detail. How did you feel during and after the experience? Remember to describe the situation as specifically as you can and say as much about your feelings (before, during, and after) as possible.

C. Prompt for Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice:

I'd like you to do some writing about first impressions. Think about a time when you met someone, formed an initial opinion, and later had to change that opinion as you got to know the person. Who is the person (no names)? How did you meet? What was your initial impression and what caused you to form that impression? What happened to change your first

impression?

If you're having trouble thinking of what to write about, consider your first impressions of certain teachers, neighborhood friends, cousins. Or, perhaps you'd like to "turn the tables" and write about a time when someone formed a first impression about you and later had to change h
is or her mind.

Describe the situations as specifically as you can, and pay special attention to your own actions and feelings.

D. Prompt for Shakespeare's MacBeth:

Please write about a time in your life when you did something that you knew you shouldn't do. Be as specific as you can. What motivated you to do it? What influenced your decision? How did you feel before you did it? How did you feel after? Did you have to deal with guilt? What other consequences did you have to face? Describe the circumstances and your feelings as completely as you can.

E. Prompt for Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird:

Think about a time when you met someone who was very different from you. Perhaps this person had a disability that you don't have. Or maybe this person was from a different culture, spoke a different language or had a skin color different from your own. How did you feel while with that person? What sorts of things did you think about? Describe the "differences" involved and your feelings. Be as specific as you can be.

F. Prompt for Leo Tolstoy's "God Sees the Truth But Waits"

I'd like you to think carefully about some time when you were accused of something you didn't do. What were you accused of? Who accused you? Why were you the "suspect?" How did you feel when you were accused? How did you respond? Did you know "who really did it?" Be as specific as you can about the circumstances and about your feelings and response.

G. Prompt for Langston Hughes's "Harlem" or "A Dream Deferred"

Think about a time when something you really, really wanted to happen didn't happen--a time when you were very disappointed. Describe your hopes as specifically as you can, and pay special attention to your feelings before and after your hopes were dashed. How did it feel to hope? How, specifically did the disappointment feel? How did it affect you? Remember to be specific and to describe your feelings carefully.

H. Prompt for Morley Callaghan's "All the Years of Her Life":

We're going to be talking about a story in which a character learns something about someone he thought he knew. To prepare you to read and discuss that story, think back to a time when someones behavior surprised you--when something someone did made you realize that maybe you didn't know that person as well as you thought you did. Please write for ten or twelve minutes explaining your experience. As you write, you should think about what you learned about the person, what happened to help you learn it, what had kept you from understanding it in the first place, and what effects learning the lesson had on you.