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ABSTRACT

A study underscored the potential of whole language philosophy as a framework for secondary English teachers and students as they move away from strictly traditional methods. Research methods included case study, grounded theory, and qualitative inquiry. Participants included 2 veteran teachers who taught in a predominantly white, suburban high school which housed 1,000 students in grades 7 and 12. Data collection spanned 1 year and included interviews with the teachers, anecdotal field notes, lesson plans, assignments, student work samples, and teacher learning logs. By the end of the second semester, one teacher who taught 7th and 11th graders regretted having stalled in using dialogue journals. Though she had primarily held to traditional ways of insisting upon required readings of common texts, she had found students read more willingly and more carefully when engaged in dialogue journal activities which enabled them to verbalize opinions in writing and then share ideas with peers. The other teacher, who taught 8th and 12th graders, introduced dialogue journals differently: she used three forms of dialogue journals and quickly recognized the potential for students to grapple with words and ideas. The teachers approached change warily, yet found the results edifying. The students reacted strongly to restraints imposed by required readings and study guide questions; they much preferred the freedoms of selecting their own reading, exploring their own ideas, and consulting with one another to construct meaning. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

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SHARED MEANING:

WHOLE LANGUAGE READER RESPONSE

AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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Shared Meaning:
Whole Language Reader Response at the Secondary Level

Reader response theory has explored aspects of the reader, the text, the teacher, the curriculum, and the context (Beach & Hynds, 1991). By applying reader response theory, teachers have enabled students to develop critical thinking skills, use imagination, and express a fuller, more personal response to literature (Edelsky, 1989; Egan, 1990; Shannon, 1990; Shor, 1987). Secondary level English courses have often neglected these central aspects of learning (Applebee, 1974; Suhor, 1988).

Drawing from the premises of whole language philosophy (Goodman, 1987), control theory (Glasser, 1986), and teachers as researchers (Giroux, 1988), this study continued research begun in 1991 when whole language approaches and interactive reading methods were first introduced to both veteran, secondary teachers. In that study, teachers collaborated with students about writing process and reader response methods. The actions and perceptions of teachers and students altered greatly when they were given increased opportunity to interact, integrate language skills, and give and receive feedback (Gross, 1991).

This study underscores the potential of whole language philosophy as a framework for secondary teachers and students, as they move away from strictly traditional methods. In this study, both teachers continued to refine cooperative learning strategies (Johnson et al, 1984) and reader response techniques (Andrasik, 1990; Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978). However, while drawing upon whole language premises of students as resources and classrooms as communities of learning, they also relied upon some traditional methods. In an effort to help students build shared meanings beyond individual interpretations of a text, they used close reading techniques in conjunction with dialogue journals.

Three dialogue journal approaches to reading included double entry journals, personal responses, and peer responses. In double entry journals, students wrote factual notes on one half of the page and individual reactions on the second half. Personal responses stemmed from free write or teacher-guided topics regarding themes, characters, motivations, settings, predictions, and outcomes. A third dialogue journal format entailed student exchange of written reader response and peer reactions. These activities served as springboards for whole class or small group discussions, engaging students in closer textual reading and deeper, shared thought about literature.

METHODS

The research methods included case study (Merriam, 1990), grounded theory (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986), and qualitative inquiry (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). These means reinforced the theories behind the nature of whole language and the strategies of reader response. Using the case study approach supported holistic and naturalistic settings. Applying grounded theory facilitated learner choice by teachers and students. Employing a qualitative investigation fostered tentative, open-ended inquiry.

Participants

The participants included two veteran teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B), who taught in a predominantly white, suburban, high school which housed 1,000 students in grades 7 through 12. They chose to include regular ability students - Teacher A involved grades 7 and 11; Teacher B involved grades 8 and 12. Some of these students had participated in the former study and were familiar with whole language philosophy and reader response methods; others had no previous exposure to these strategies.

Data Analysis

Data collection spanned one year. Interviews with teachers recorded intentions, experiences, and reactions. Anecdotal field notes documented classroom observations by the researcher as participant-observer. Lesson plans, assignments, and student work samples added to learning logs written by the teachers.

The joint analysis by the researcher and the teachers, in keeping with grounded theory, occurred periodically throughout the study. During these discussions, teachers reassessed goals, philosophies, and lesson plans, as they pinpointed problems and explored solutions. Teachers consulted with the researcher about the design of dialogue journal tasks and the consequent quality of student written responses. They collaborated with students and refashioned writing tasks. Teachers' learning logs were reviewed to note insights gained. The congruence of theory and methodology enabled all participants to construct individual and shared meanings throughout the process.

These procedures revealed the following themes or patterns: students wrote more clearly when tasks were well-structured and precisely worded; students became more word conscious when close reading techniques were suggested; students examined ideas more thoughtfully when they exchanged ideas in writing.

DEVELOPMENTS

For the first semester of the school year, while they were getting to know their students, both teachers followed traditional, district methods of assigning books, reading schedules, and study guide questions. They operated from familiar patterns of required readings, uniform pacing, leading questions, and teacher-centered approaches. These methods failed to capture student interest. Both teachers resorted to trying dialogue journals.

CASE STUDY - TEACHER A

When she first introduced dialogue journals, Teacher A designed a post-reading exercise. She asked seventh graders to consider life as a teenager in some other specific time frame. Students wrote lively responses about the Ice Age and dinosaur times, the Medieval ages, and every century since. One chose the 1500's "because there were no drugs for me to experiment with or turn down." Some selected the 1930's because "there was no radio or television or cars, less to learn, and it was more difficult to get by." Others felt life in the 1960's would have suited them with "music about peace and love," sunglasses, bell bottoms, and long hair. Linking text with their lives tapped relevance.

Early attempts to have these same students write peer responses proved limited to one and two word comments, noting "good detail" or "good job." Despite specific directions to comment in greater depth, Teacher A believed the 7th graders seemed more concerned about protecting each other's feelings than about developing ideas. She reacted by returning to traditional ways, assigning another common text, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, with worksheets. Students did not read the book and Teacher A forced the issue for five weeks.

Urged by the researcher, Teacher A polled students about the assigning of Tom Sawyer. Students wrote "We should be able to read whenever we want," "There is no specific chapter or chapters that I really hated. I hated them all equally. I hated writing summaries about it," and "I think we wasted our time, we could have been going over grammar and may have finished our vocabulary books." Students clearly preferred anything to being told what and when to read. These replies spurred Teacher A to try dialogue journals again.

She selected a common text, The Homecoming, but designed peer dialogue journal activities. Students interspersed reading with analysis of the main character's decisions. For example, after reading the first three chapters, one student wrote: "I think that Dicey did make a wise decision. If she did not make the decision to go to her grandmother's, she might have to work in the house of Cousin Eunice until she grows up." To which a peer replied: "Why do you think it isn't suitable for Dicey and the others to stay where they were? What makes you think that her grandmother's is good?" Other students questioned the outcome "if a detective finds them" or "if the grandmother was not there." One felt the children should seek professional help "instead of trying to do everything themselves."

Teacher A recognized heightened student interest which she credited to a more recent storyline and a more personal approach to interpretation through the reader response writings. She gradually permitted 7th graders more say in reacting to readings, though she still persisted in assigning common literature.

Teacher A met greater success with 11th graders, partially because of her increased trust in their age level and experience. Though some of these students had shared her attempts at interactive reading methods the previous year, she still refrained from experimentation for the first semester. However, student apathy and the researcher's prodding spurred her to change.

She planned the unit on Lord of the Flies with pre-reading tasks and dialogue journals. Students worked in teams to identify survival priorities and structure a government as if they were stranded on an island. Throughout a more open-ended schedule of reading, students wrote individual reader responses to guided questions about the way the boys handled their situation and how the students would act or react differently. These writings became the bases for small group and whole class discussions.

The level of thought and discussion differed so markedly from the ideas expressed during the traditional reading instruction, Teacher A asked students to comment about which method they preferred. They responded that the traditional reading of _Rebecca_ had been "piecemeal, with too many quizzes that guaranteed grades of 100% if you read, but were boring." They also expressed concerns about the reading schedule being "too regimented" and the level of discussion resorting to "the teacher told us most of it." In sharp contrast, students described the approach to reading _Lord of the Flies_ as "more individually paced," leading to "greater independence," "more exciting group discussions," "better understanding," and "more depth and detail and opinions of others" which "helped us to discover meanings for ourselves." Student honesty and input impressed her.

For _Tale of Two Cities_, Teacher A encouraged students to write personal reactions and to generate their own topics. Gradually, she employed peer response writings which resulted in students finding greater relevancy in what they read.

By the end of _Tale of Two Cities_, students wrote such thoughtful responses as, 1) "I think that even Sidney Carton was better off. He seemed to be a rather miserable man with a drinking problem. He was in a better place because of the good deed he did by helping Charles and Lucy before he died." and 2) "The ending of _Tale of Two Cities_ was very moving. When I read it, I felt sad and sorry for Carton. He was really a good man, but his outlook in life prevented him from living up to his full potential. That he should make the ultimate sacrifice for Lucy was very sweet and a touching act. I was also outraged at the callousness and barbarisms of the French peasants. Now that they had their freedom, they didn't know what to do with it but kill innocent people."

Some students exchanged ideas, as "I think the ending of this story was good but a little unrealistic. It's not very easy to just switch places with a person, even if he looked like that person. What about fingerprints? No two people have the same fingerprints, no matter how much they look alike," to which another replied, "but this is the 18th century, I don't think they used fingerprints then."

By the end of the second semester, Teacher A regretted having stalled in using dialogue journals. Though she had primarily held to traditional ways of insisting upon required readings of common texts, she had found students read more willingly and more carefully when engaged in dialogue journal activities which enabled them to verbalize opinions in writing and then share ideas with peers. When consulted, students not only sought more opportunities to write and confer about literature, but they also wanted more say in the selection of titles.

CASE STUDY - TEACHER B

Teacher B introduced dialogue journals differently. More confident and determined than Teacher A, she used dialogue journals in three forms and quickly recognized the potential for students to grapple with words and ideas.

Teacher B began with a unit for Hamlet. She asked students to summarize the characters, action, themes, settings, or ideas for each act and then to describe how they felt and what they would do differently, especially in modern times. She suggested topics as guided reading prompts.

In this case, she learned that requiring summaries as part of reader response caused students to get caught up in repeating the plot and skimping on personal interpretation. Teacher B came to realize that less emphasis on summary encouraged deeper analysis of reactions to specific characters and incidents, the very exploration of which necessitated incorporating the facts she sought as reassurance that they had understood.

For The Stranger, Teacher B found more substantial ideas emerged after students wrote personal response dialogue journals. Resulting small group and whole class discussions transcended mere detail and reached a higher level of participation and critical thinking. Students discussed existentialism, contrasts between European and American philosophies, and attitudes and perceptions during World War II.

The unit on The Sun Also Rises illustrated the increasing value of dialogue journals for Teacher B and the students.

Double entry writing enabled students to discover nuances of words ("sadist" conjured up a comment, "I've never heard of it - sounds negative;" "blank, pock-marked face" caused another to remark, "if your face is blank, then where are the pockmarks?" They noted repetitions, like "the characters in this book seem to use 'damn' a lot," leading this student to claim "it's getting annoying." Students also reacted to juxtapositions, as "you're a damned romantic," which led one to question the word choice "because romantic is soft and damned is harsh." Yet another noted that "all the detailed descriptions of a glass of beer shows the obsession with alcohol in this story."

These examples from students' reactions to The Sun Also Rises delighted Teacher B who had never had students so word conscious before. Asking students to note words or phrases that impressed them and to explain why in writing had created an interest in words and wording she had not anticipated. Using this method served to heighten student awareness of the lingo of a time period and its reflection of the people and what they valued.

Teacher B found double entry dialogue journals also enabled students to read more closely. Students inferred more ("the road climbing all the time keeps going up and it doesn't seem like it's going to end," "he sleeps with the lights on because he has something to fear," and "wine made everyone easier to get along with, but things that should have been important were ignored.") She found students reacted more personally ("Brett's promiscuity makes me sick. The girl needs counseling. How could anyone want to be with her when she's been with so many?")

These kinds of comments had been volunteered by students, not extracted from them by a line of leading questions. Dialogue journals had freed students to personalize and particularize what they were reading.

Teacher B had also introduced peer response. Students weighed ideas and then exchanged them in writing. For example, one student wrote: "All these characters feel sorry for themselves, but are not doing anything about it." A partner replied, "These people are not going to progress very far. They all want what they simply cannot have. Brett wants Jake, but she can not have him in the way she would like to. Frances wants Cohn, but he is losing interest in her. They all want the good life, yet they drink into a stupor and progress nowhere. They are drowning in pity and sadness and the chance at a fulfilled, happy life is very unlikely."

Peer response journals facilitated shared meanings. Students built upon one another's ideas and drew deeper and more universal conclusions. As effective as double entries and free writes proved to be for individual comprehension, the peer responses really engaged students in dialogue about the text.

With her 8th graders, Teacher B taught most literature traditionally, but she and they enjoyed a new curriculum most of all. This unit had been designed jointly by both teachers in the summer of 1991. They had consciously promoted whole language philosophy - centering on adolescent literature, writing process, and reader response. Having won a district grant to purchase high interest literature to create classroom libraries, the teachers incorporated student selection from the new titles, student pacing, and student use of dialogue journals. The culminating activity entailed student presentations.

Teacher B was incredulous about the excitement the unit caused among the students. They "pounced on books immediately, eliminating any concerns about distribution," "read quickly and ahead of schedule - causing lists of planned activities to be handled individually," and "requested the chance to read other selections from the lot."

As part of the unit, students shared dialogue journal entries. They wrote letters to characters giving advice, wrote predictions about possible consequences, and determined the influences of secondary characters. Through writing and talking with peers about the various texts, students dealt with symbols, sequences of events, and relationships among characters. The whole language authenticity of this unit resounded, as did the students' positive reaction to choice of text, free writing, peer exchanges, and self-generated concerns and solutions.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The ways in which works of literature are selected, introduced, read, and analyzed impact reader response. Student choice and student voice matter.

Dialogue journals increased student interest and ability to analyze and react to text. Writing double entry journals sparked interest in words and wording; peer and personal responses invited students to test ideas and draw conclusions.

Teacher A fretted about "regressing to familiar and safe chapter-by-chapter approaches to literature" before "taking the risks involved in giving students greater say in their own learning." Teacher B encouraged Teacher A "to recognize that change takes time and adjusting." Both felt the effort resulted in "students reading more and showing more interest, expressing ideas and feelings about what they read."

This study provides data regarding the difficulties of changing approaches to literature, as well as the differences in reader response when whole language methods are applied. The teachers approached change warily, yet found the results edifying. The students reacted strongly to restraints imposed by required readings and study guide questions; they much preferred the freedoms of selecting their own reading, exploring their own ideas, and consulting with one another to construct meaning.

This study should help to inform teachers who are in the throes of changing from traditional literature instruction. Implementing whole language philosophy at the secondary level encourages active learning. Utilizing a variety of dialogue journal strategies, in conjunction with close reading, influences the content and quality of reader response.

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