Making Sense of Texts

Rebecca G. Harper: Georgia Regents University

This article addresses the triadic nature regarding meaning construction of texts. Grounded in Rosenblatt's (1995; 1998; 2004) Transactional Theory, research conducted in an undergraduate Language Arts curriculum course revealed that when presented with unfamiliar texts, students used prior experiences, social interactions, and literary strategies to aid in meaning construction. A discussion of these primary themes explains possible implications and suggestions for teacher education programs and classroom practice.

According to pragmatic philosopher Peirce (1955), "We think only in signs." Signs take on the forms of images, words, sounds, and objects, but only become signs when meaning is associated with them. Without meaning, signs are ambiguous with no point of reference or association. Hall (2007) states, "societies have two basic sources of signing: the first source is natural, while the second is conventional" (p.7). Conventional sign systems often reflect the social and political influences of a particular society.

I came face to face with a complex sign system while vacationing in New Orleans in the fall a few years ago. As I stood in line at the Café du Mond, I watched as patrons placed their orders with a worker who wrote nothing down. Later, another worker placed a coffee, a beignet, and other items that were ordered on a tray. She then passed the tray to a third worker who rung it up on the register. Is there anything unusual about this exchange? No, but I might add that there were no words exchanged between workers either.

As I continued to stand in line, I began to pay close attention to the woman taking the individual orders. I listened as the customer stated the order and then watched the worker's action. If the customer requested coffee, the worker placed the lid of a cup on the tray. If they asked for hot chocolate, the worker placed a spoon on the right-hand side of the tray, face up. After watching this phenomenon for a few minutes, I finally asked if this was their sign system to which she replied, "Yes." By the time I had received my order, a coffee and an order of beignets, I had cracked their sign system and could have applied for a job there, but instead I walked away perplexed, intrigued, and somewhat shocked. Sign systems, complex in nature, were everywhere, permeating our society. Yet, the integral piece of the puzzle was not located in the signs themselves, but in the meaning associated with each of the signs.

This experience prompted me to question how my students made sense of texts and how they came to achieve meaning and understanding. As a result, I conducted an inquiry to answer the following questions:

- How does a student's past experience aid in the construction of meaning in relation to a text?
- What factors influence how students make sense of texts?

Although I wanted to gain insight into my own students' constructing of meaning, I was hopeful that this inquiry would allow these future educators to see how unique the construction of

meaning is for individuals. I believe this insight would later aid them in their future classrooms and in literacy instruction.

Literature Review

Rosenblatt's (2004) Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing emphasizes the importance of the transaction with the text, the exchange that occurs between the reader and the text, as one that is unique to each individual. Each reading of a work of literature is unique and individualized for that particular reader, as each reader brings to the table his own experiences, thoughts, prejudices, and ideas with the reading of the text. According to Rosenblatt, there is no generic literacy work or a generic reader.

The text on the page that Rosenblatt (2004) is referring to in her Transactional Theory is simply symbols that stand for something more concrete. These symbols on a page are just lines and shapes drawn on paper unless meaning is somehow linked to their shape, form, and orientation on the parchment. However, symbols do not just occur as text on a page; they are everywhere in life. Symbols can be a catcher's gesture to the pitcher on the mound, the turn signal blinking on the car in front of you, or the peace sign you yield at a Janis Joplin cover concert. These symbols make up sign systems that range from simple to complex and reflect social and political contexts as well.

Rosenblatt (2004) discusses Peirce's notion of a triadic relationship with symbols. A sign represents a certain object, which represents a certain meaning for the interpretant. Because Peirce did not want to enforce the "mind" as an entity, he referred to the cognitive processes of the linkage between sign, object, and "interpretant," which should be understood as the mental operation instead of an actual entity.

Rosenblatt's (1998) explanation of reading also emphasizes a triadic relationship in which "signs relate to mental associations, interpretants linking them to their objects" (p.6). She further illustrates the transactional process by comparing it to a face-to-face conversation. This sort of back and forth exchange is seen in all linguistic activities. The speaker and the addressee interpret these verbal signs. Each person draws on his own background knowledge and experience in an effort to understand the meaning behind the verbal signs as well as the facial expressions and gestures that are all part of a verbal conversation. The interpretation of these signs aids the participants in making sense of the conversation.

Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing was greatly influenced by Peirce's ideas in pragmatic philosophy. The Theory, like Peirce's explanation of sign systems, is deeply rooted in experience. The interpretation of signs is based on past experiences and past knowledge. Moll (1990) refers to these experiences as "funds of knowledge". According to Moll, students use their life experiences and knowledge that they already possess as part of the framework for developing literacy practices and making sense of the world they live in. Like Moll, Rosenblatt acknowledged the role of past experiences and knowledge in literacy practices.

Similar to how Peirce explained in his theory, Rosenblatt defines text as a set of signs capable of being interpreted as verbal symbols. The text alone holds no meaning. The meaning only exists when there is a transaction between it and the reader. The meaning is what happens during a transaction (Rosenblatt, 2004).

While Rosenblatt emphasizes the role of the reader in the transaction, Saussure emphasizes the role of language in the creation of meaning. Language is a social activity due to the fact that language is a sign system whose conventions are agreed upon by a society. The meaning is not simply a product of the author's intention, but instead a product of the language itself (Sloan, 2002).

Theoretical Underpinnings

As a teacher educator working from a socio-cultural perspective, I believe that reading and writing are social activities that reflect the culture and community in which students live (Pradl, 1996). Students from varying cultures have different expectations for learning as well as preferred modes of learning all influenced by culture and background (Heath, 1993; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Because reading is such a personal experience, students need to access their personal experiences in order to transact and understand the text. According to Dewey (1961), education, experience, and life are intertwined and connected. That is, when one attempts to study education, in essence, they are studying experience. It has been argued that reading and writing are viewed as social activities that reflect the culture and community in which the students live and students need opportunities to talk about texts and discuss their thoughts, ideas, and reactions to the texts (Probst, 1988).

Methodology

Population

Data were collected for this study from two undergraduate Language Arts classes I teach for pre-service teachers. The Language Arts classes I teach are part of the first semester education coursework for students in the Early Childhood program at a mid-sized state university in Georgia. A total of 37 students participated in this study, 34 females, and 3 males, ranging in age from 22-55.

Data Collection

To collect data for this study, I used two types of artifacts. Participants were given two poems, Roethke's (1948) My Papa's Waltz and Plath's (1981) Mushrooms. Each participant was given a copy of the poem with the title omitted. The students were instructed to read the poem silently and determine the meaning. After time elapsed, participants were encouraged to discuss the poem with a peer. The experience was then concluded with a whole class discussion. During peer and class discussions, I made observational notes of their comments and thoughts. Following the experience with the poems, students were instructed to complete an exit slip explaining their methods used for making meaning as well as their thoughts regarding classroom implications. The observational notes and exit slips were collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I relied on a thematic analysis, grouping data into categories based on various themes for further analysis (Glesne, 2006). On the initial perusal of the data, various external codes were applied to the data including: past experience and social opportunities. Upon further examination of the data, various internal codes began to emerge such as: academic past experiences, personal past experiences, and academic strategies. Analytical memos were made regarding recurring themes and issues that were presented by the data (Glesne, 2006). For example, memos were written regarding the students' academic and personal past experiences. These memos helped to organize the themes, thoughts, and issues regarding the data as it addressed the common themes and issues that were presented by the data.

Findings

The participants relied on three major factors when attempting to make meaning of a text: Past Experiences, Academic Strategies, and Social Interactions.

Past Experiences

Data collected suggested that students relied on past experiences to make sense of the poem. In fact, out of the three categories that emerged, past experience was the most commonly used strategy for making sense of the text. Many students blatantly stated that they used past experiences

to help understand the poem, while others gave specific examples of the past experiences that they relied on. For example, Mary related her own experience with her father to help interpret the poem. "I used to dance with my dad late at night after work so I thought it could be about dancing," (M. Collins, personal communication, September 27, 2010).

Students elaborated on the use of past experience to interpret the poems by explaining that past experience helped them think about the situation presented in the poem, which allowed them to think more deeply. Others even explained how experience over time could change the text's meaning for the reader. For example, Lashay explained in her exit slip the role the passage of time plays in interpretation. "A person's experience makes them see different things in the text. Sometimes the same person can read a text ten years later and read something totally different," (L. Smith, personal communication, September 27, 2010). Lashay's comments in her exit slip mirror Rosenblatt's (2004) views that the human is seen as a part of nature, in continuous transaction with the environment it is in.

Students also relied on past readings of other texts to help them understand the poems. One student had prior experience with one of the chosen poems, so she relied on this experience to help determine the text's meaning. As a whole, students relied heavily on past experience to decipher the poem, some of which were specifically identified, such as past experience with an abusive, alcoholic father, experience as a parent, prior academic and personal readings, or generic past experiences.

Literary Strategies

The reliance of literary strategies aided many students in making sense of the poems. Several students relied on re-reading the poems, some line-by-line, to help them understand the text, though a few explained that although they re-read the poem numerous times, they weren't completely sure of the poem's meaning. Other students located key words or phrases in the poems that they could make sense of in order to decipher the poem. Students also relied on word usage, context clues, and poetic structure to interpret the poem. In several instances, students relied on defining specific words in the poems in order to make sense of the text. One student used point of view to help him make sense of the poem. "My strategy was looking for key factors in the poem such as who was speaking and who was being spoken to," (C. Jackson, personal communication, September, 27, 2010). As a whole, most students used the literary strategies that involved defining key words and re-reading the poem to help them interpret the poems.

Social Interactions

Surprisingly, social interactions were the least common identified influence used to achieve the meaning of the text. Although many students listed the importance of talking about the poems with a partner, this was often eclipsed by their reliance on past experiences. Students frequently expressed how talking with their partners and the class discussion changed their original ideas about the poems. As Bree recounted in her exit slip, her initial thoughts regarding the poems changed after talking with her partner. "At first I thought it was about dancing. After talking with my partner, a drunken parent seemed closer to the idea," (B. Summer, personal communication, September, 27, 2010).

Several of the students emphasized the importance of talk during the assignment because it gave them the opportunity to hear someone else's view of the poem. Others explained that the class discussion prompted them to go back to the poem and re-read it using another lens in an effort to see their classmates' differing points of view. Many credited the social aspect of the experience with providing additional clarification and understanding of the text. For these students, talking about the poem helped them solidify their understanding of the text.

Discussion

A precise reading of the data mirrors many of the ideas of the previously described theorists and research. The students relied heavily on their past experiences and personal knowledge when making sense of the text. A majority of the students within the study indicated past experience as integral in their meaning making, therefore suggesting that past experience is a dominant factor in the reading and interpretation of texts.

Though the data implied the importance of past experience on interpretation, I am curious if the participants' responses were influenced by the stance taken when reading the text. Rosenblatt (1995) explains that the stance a reader takes depends on the goal associated with the task at hand. Rosenblatt divides reading into two categories: aesthetic and efferent reading. A reader whose goal is to extract information from a task is taking part in efferent reading; yet, a reader whose goal is to read for pleasure and savor the text is taking part in aesthetic reading. Because the participants took part in the reading of this text as part of a class assignment, it is likely that they took an efferent stance to the text, as perhaps they believed that the goal of the assignment was to extract meaning and analyze the text.

A reader's purpose or reason for reading affects meaning as well. Reading can be defined as a "choosing activity", a term coined by James (1983). In other words, our experiences, goals, personal history, etc. determine which parts of the text should garner attention. We seek cues in order to help us gauge what is coming next, we determine which parts we need to focus on, as well as those parts we deem as unnecessary for perusal. All of these acts are transactions and all are unique to each reader. These types of transactions are greatly related to the reader's purpose for reading in the first place. Much like Eagleton (2008) states, transacting with a poem is freer than interpreting a text whose purpose is

to inform, much like a notice or court document. Although I did not ask my students directly of the stance they assumed when reading the text, it is possible that many of them would not have categorized the reading as pleasure reading. (Pradl, 1996)

In many instances it was evident the past experiences category overlapped with the academic strategies category. For example, Lashay used an academic strategy of extracting individual words from the text in order to define them, she then used her past experience to help her develop the definitions of the extracted words. As Rosenblatt details, past experience plays a vital role in interpretation of text. In this case, Lashay's use of an academic strategy falls under the category of past experience for two reasons. One, any academic strategy she employs is a product of past experience because these are taught. Two, once she utilized the academic strategy, she then relied on past experience to aid her in defining the extracted words. Although the lines between these two categories can become blurred, it was evident that students relied both on past experiences and past academic experiences which included strategies to make sense of text. Much like Cai (2002) articulates, knowledge of literary conventions and the possession of academic strategies can enrich a personal experience with a text.

Implications for Teaching

Clearly, this study suggests the importance of past experience in textual interpretation. Therefore, students should be encouraged to provide their own personal responses to literature, ones that emphasize and draw on their own past experiences. For example, simple schema activators could provide opportunities for students to draw on past experiences in the classroom setting. Opportunities for students to read literary works that allow them to utilize what Moll (1990) refers to as funds of knowledge are suggested as well. This includes literary works that are high

interest, relevant, and enjoyable. In addition, students need time for social interaction when transacting with the text. Unfortunately, much like Probst (1988) discovered, many teachers feel constrained by time limits and standards. However, the benefits that social interaction has on textual interpretation are great (Allington, 2002; Keene, 2008; Routman, 2000).

Although the original explicit goal of this research was to determine how a student's past experiences aided in the construction of meaning in relation to a text and the factors that influence how students make sense of text, many of the students became more aware of the role past experience played in the interpretation of texts. Many of them commented in their exit slips about the need for teachers to allow students time to talk about their interpretations of literature and the need to acknowledge that there is no one interpretation of a text. In addition, it is equally important for teachers to take strides to get to know their students. An accurate understanding of students' backgrounds and past experiences can aid teachers in designing curriculum and choosing culturally relevant literature.

Implications for Research

Although this study did reveal pertinent information related to my research questions, additional research needs to be conducted on this subject. One way to expand this study would be to conduct research on Reader Response using a variety of texts. Additional information from student responses regarding informational texts, as well as texts in a variety of disciplines, could deepen the understandings of Reader Response. Further insight into the role of past experience on interpretation and the possible identification of additional factors that affect meaning in cross curricular texts would add and extend to the body of literature. In addition, research regarding transactions with pleasure reading would be beneficial. This type of research could be conducted through book club investigations

or through the use of a transaction journal which students could keep as they read books they personally choose. Continued research in the field of Reader Response is both essential and crucial in order to widen the understanding regarding this field of study.

References

Allington, R. (2002). Moving forward with literature circles. New York: Scholastic.

Cai, M. (2002). Reflections on transactional theory as a theoretical guide for literacy and literature education. The New Advocate, 14(1), 19-32.

Dewey, J. (1961). Experience and education. New York: Free Press.

Eagleton, T. (2008). Literary theory: An introduction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Glesne, C. (2006). Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hall, S. (2007). This means this, that means that: a user's guide to semiotics. London:Laurence King Publishers.

Heath, S. B. (1993). Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms. New York: Cambridge University Press.

James, W. (1983). The principles of psychology. (G. A. Miller, Ed.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Keene, E. O. (2008). To understand: new horizons in reading comprehension. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Moll, L. (Ed.) (1990). Writing as a social process. Vygotsky & education. (pp. 48-72). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Peirce, C. S. (1955). Philosophical writings of Peirce. (J. Buchler, Ed.) Mineola: New York. Dover Publications, Inc.

Plath, S. (1981). Mushrooms. In S. Plath, The
    Collected Poems (p. 139). Harper Perennial.
Pradl, G. M. (1996). Literature for democracy:
    Reading as a social act. Portsmouth:
    Heinemann.
Probst, R. E. (1988). Dialogue with a text. English
    Journal, 77(1), 32-38.
Roethke, T. (1948). My papa's waltz. In N.
    Sullivan (Ed.), The Lost Son and Other Poems
    (p.27). New York: Doubleday.
Rosenblatt, L. (1995). Literature as exploration
    New York: Modern Language Association of
    America.
Rosenblatt, L. M. (1998). Readers, texts, authors.
    Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society,
    34(4), 1-38.
Rosenblatt, L. (2004). The reader, the text, the
    poem. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois
    University Press.
Routman, R. (2000). Conversations. Portsmouth:
    Heinemann.
Sloan, G. (2002). Reader response in perspective.
    Journal of Children's Literature, 28(1), 22-31.

Author's Notes:

   Rebecca G. Harper, Ph.D. is an assistant
professor at Georgia Regents University in
Augusta, GA. Her primary research interests
include teacher beliefs and writing practice,
writing across the curriculum implementation,
and multiple literacies.