

### Listening, Writing, Drawing: The Artistic Response of Incarcerated Youth to Young-Adult Literature

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*by Sue Jacobs*

For as long as adolescent males have attended school, many would rather have been elsewhere (Brozo 2002). Often, adolescent males are academically and emotionally detached from the classroom setting. Brozo shows that early reading and learning failures are precursors to unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics 1999), crime (Ayers 1999; Davis et al. 1999), drug addiction (National Institute on Drug Abuse 1997), homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 1997), and prison sentences (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1991).

In particular, mounting evidence shows that the reading and comprehension skills of adolescent males need particular attention. For example, boys are three to five times more likely than girls to undergo learning or reading disabilities placement in schools (National Center for Education Statistics 2000). Boys in elementary school through high school score significantly lower than girls on standardized measures of reading achievement (Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarsky, and Skovera 1996), and they are 50 percent more likely to be retained a grade than girls (Kleinfeld 1999). Of the estimated 500,000 to 1 million students who annually drop out of high schools in the United States, more than 55 percent are boys (National Center for Education Statistics 1998), and five of six children and adolescents diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder are boys (American Psychiatric Association 1994). Fewer boys than girls study advanced algebra and geometry. Boys are less likely than girls to take advanced placement examinations (National Center for Education Statistics 1998), and more girls go to college (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). It is very common in the United States (Hedges and Nowell 1995) as well as in Canada (Gambell and Hunter 1999), England (Murphy and

Elwood 1998), and Australia (Alloway and Gilbert 1997) to find evidence that adolescent males are caught in the failure cycle.

According to Brozo, boys are not reading as much or as often as girls. Klein (1997) strongly suggests that boys' steady decline in reading achievement between ages seven and sixteen could be due in part to peer pressure that brands reading as unmasculine. However, adolescent males who can discover literature that speaks to their interests may become more involved and interested readers (Brozo and Schmelzer 1997). Helping adolescent boys to become more engaged in reading and listening is a priority for many teachers because developing readers at a young age helps them to become lifelong learners (Young and Brozo 2001). Reading levels and comprehension may increase when students interact independently through artistic response (Whitin 1996).

In many traditional middle-level language arts classrooms, students must respond to assigned literature either orally or, more typically, in writing. Students are asked to explain or discuss their answers to the selected reading. The teacher decides whether the students are answering the questions "correctly"—usually how the teacher believes they should be answered. Such traditional approaches often slight the affective area of literature by regarding meaning as residing in the text.

In contrast, Rosenblatt indicated in 1978 that an aesthetic response to literature can help the reader participate in a lived-through experience, thus creating a higher level of engagement and interaction. Thus, the reader is more likely to become engaged if the affective areas of engagement and checking for understanding are addressed. Nonetheless, acquiring technical knowledge, rather than concentrating on the initial affective aesthetic response and finding enjoyment in the literature, has too often been traditional instruction's major concern (Chasser 1977).

Although linked to the technical aspects of literature and reading, artistic response can interpret literary work through a composing process with no set rules (Bussert-Webb 1997). Art, like writing, deals with personal experiences (Albers 1997). Smagorinsky and Coppock (1994) indicate that composing should include multiple sign systems, which may include artistic response.

Unique characteristics of reader response parallel artistic reader response. Those who read or listen to a piece of literature may then respond in various ways, choosing either an artistic vehicle for response or writing in a journal. The reader and the text mutually affect one another. The idea of a literature-based approach is supported by Rosenblatt's theory of reading for aesthetic purposes (Rosenblatt 1938; 1978). For example, a class of students reading the same material will respond differently because of unique prior knowledge, experiences,

and feelings. Thus, each reader and the work are interrelated in idiosyncratic ways.

There are three conditions under which responders may function in artistic response to literature (Whitin 1996). The first condition encourages responders to participate actively in a range of literary experiences. Second, responders are encouraged to respond, reflect, and make decisions as authors, shifting between creating and reflecting. A third condition helps to promote an inquiry stance. Together the three conditions aid the responders' ability to engage in the story world through artistic response. Many of the experiences occur not in isolation, but rather in conjunction with collaboration used to create new knowledge.

It is important that the student population be allowed to take risks in a safe, non-threatening environment. Whitin (1996) identifies two sides to risk taking. A situation in which there is just one right answer discourages risk taking. Learning is individual. Using the ideas of others is cheating; the teacher states outcomes, and the teacher poses the questions. The focus of learning is on the product, and the teacher evaluates the product. Multiple interpretations of the text, however, encourage experimentation. Learning is collaborative. In using others' ideas, new possibilities open up. Teachers and students pose questions. Ideas are expressed through multiple communication systems. The focus of learning is on process. Teachers and students together reflect, assess, or evaluate the process as well as the product.



## The Purpose of the Study

The author undertook a study to examine the types of artistic responses and personal interpretations that incarcerated male youths make as they listen and respond to selected pieces of young-adult literature. Often, because of the extreme situations such youths have experienced—abuse, school difficulties, and frequent involvement with the criminal justice system—they operate at an intense emotional level that may endanger themselves and others. Thus, their prior experiences add a unique perspective to their story interpretations.

An environment that promotes artistic reader response conveys the significance of feelings and emotions. Channeling the extreme emotions of male juvenile offenders into an artistic literary response may actively engage them in an alternative yet socially appropriate method of expression, as well as aid in understanding how these particular students interpret and respond to literature when given the freedom to do so. The findings could encourage teachers of incarcerated youth to adjust teaching strategies to enhance reading, comprehension, and artistic responses to a selection of literature.

Those who may benefit from this study include students and teachers in both the secured setting where the participants are incarcerated and not free to leave, as well as traditional classroom settings. The study may also conceivably contribute to the fields of art education, reading education, and criminal justice.

## Description of the Study

This study utilized qualitative and quantitative methodology to gather information about incarcerated youth and their responses to young-adult literature. The information gathered is reported as individual case studies. The population under study was incarcerated male youths ranging in age from thirteen to seventeen. Many had lengthy criminal histories of absconding from home or placements, school truancy, and deviant behavior such as assault, theft, and the use of drugs and alcohol.

These youths chose novels from a list provided; the researcher conducted a “book talk” on each; and the youths then voted on the top three they wanted read to them. The favorites were *Moon over Tennessee* (Crist-Evans 1999), *Tenderness* (Cormier 1997), and *Surviving the Applewhites* (Tolan 2002).

During each session the researcher read for forty-five minutes, and afterward the youths responded using a choice of art medium. Then each youth, interviewed individually, responded to oral prompts about his art piece. Each one explained his picture, how it related to his personal life, and whether it brought forth any memories of people, places, or situations.

## Data Collection

Purposeful selection of the participants was a key to the study. To determine attitudes toward reading, the youths were given pre- and post-tests modified from the Denver Reading Attitude Survey (Davis and Rhodes 1991). They were also given an Interest Inventory (Hill and Ruptic 1994), modified to help establish common ground between the individuals and the researcher. The interviews with the incarcerated male youths were transcribed and included in the text.

Using Squire's *Classification Methods for Response to Literature* (Squire 1964), each drawing was documented under literary judgments; interpretational responses; narrational responses; associational responses; self-involvement; prescriptive judgments; and miscellaneous. The responses were examined in their entirety. An analysis of the data revealed thirty-seven responses placed in Squire's *Framework* (1964). None fell into the literary-judgment category, thirteen into interpretational, and eight into narrational response. Six dealt with associational responses, eight with self-involvement, and one each with prescriptive judgments and miscellaneous. One surprise was the lack of artistic responses falling into the literary-judgment category. It is perhaps a lower-level thinking skill. This finding contradicts a large part of the other activities that take place within the facility.

Initially, the youths seemed to rely on safe responses, but as they were encouraged, they began to take risks with their artistic responses. They started to make judgments and applications, such as living in foster homes, dealing with drugs, and gang violence, to their lives.

The youths brought up some interesting ideas during coding of the interviews, many of them related to the context of the books the researcher had read to them. Those included alternative placement arrangements; discussions of different types of abuse suffered; parental drug abuse; participation or affiliation with various gangs; interest in the arts, including music, art, and drama; always being a "run risk"; aggressive behavior by either the child or the caregiver; and reflecting on one's own actions. The most surprising concern was that of hunger: the youths indicated they had been hungry most of their lives and they were always striving for food. An additional surprise was that although the youths received stocking hats and gloves from the staff during the Christmas season, most received nothing from their families. They were excited to show off their new gifts.

The incarcerated youths initially appeared unexcited about this project but soon came to look forward to hearing the reading of the young-adult literature book, using art to reflect their responses, and participating in the interview session. In the end they wanted the project to continue. During the course of the study the researcher experi-

enced no discipline problems with the youths, who were always polite and well mannered.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

*Teaching Possibilities.* The areas of research featured in this study suggest possibilities for teaching. What might increase youth interest in reading? What changes might be made in the curriculum to enhance engagement in text? How might youth attitudes be affected? The implications for teaching are many:

- increasing youth engagement with young adult literature;
- including artistic response in the curriculum to demonstrate text comprehension, especially higher-level thinking, in young-adult literature;
- developing personal points of view rather than depending on other literature and peers;
- transferring the positive aesthetic experiences to benefit youth attitudes;
- providing an alternative to the traditional paper-and-pencil method of responding to questions;
- providing a forum for understanding individual youths' concerns and prior experiences

*Research Possibilities.* The data gathered and analyzed for this study also suggest possible further avenues of research. Although this study focused exclusively on incarcerated male youths and their artistic response to young-adult literature, more research is needed on the reluctant reader in general and how to engage that reader in the text for better comprehension. More research is also needed on various methods of allowing participants to respond in a variety of ways to demonstrate engagement with text.

The researcher suggests several areas for such research and inquiry:

1. *Replication of this study with other populations.* Similar studies could be conducted at other facilities, with female populations, and using a specific age group.
2. *Longitudinal study of these incarcerated male youths.* A longitudinal study could record long-term effects of artistic response and perhaps infer clearer attitude changes.
3. *Replication using a different type of response forum for the students participating.* Written responses rather than the interview technique or oral responses used in this study could be used. A quantitative perspective may be added to the study.

4. *Case study utilizing stories of the students' own choosing.* This might elicit more emotion-based responses, a critical component for artistic response.
5. *Focus on the moral and cognitive developmental levels.* IQ scores with the types of responses the youths make could be compared to determine any correlation.

## Results

The results of this study indicate that artistic response is another vehicle incarcerated male youth may use when responding to young-adult literature. The findings did show that artistic response coupled with interviews provided a forum for youths to understand young-adult literature while they enjoyed an aesthetic activity. The youths also learned about themselves, including concerns and attitudes surrounding their situations. Educators can accomplish that by understanding the response process, which can incorporate literature that reflects the world around us.

Although some of the research did not show a marked difference in the youths' attitudes, it is the researcher's personal and professional opinion that they grew in many areas. Trust was established. They indicated they felt they were in a risk-free environment and could discuss concerns, facilitated by the topics brought forth in the reading of the young-adult literature.

The conclusions reached from the analysis of data reflect the importance of allowing youth to respond artistically. The evolution of issues, development of communication skills, attitude, interest, and engagement in text was evident.

Artistic response can be a powerful tool to evaluate engagement and understanding of text. It is important to engage youth in literature, and there are a multitude of ways to make sure that happens. This strategy can potentially create readers who otherwise might be lost in the system.

Many youths have negative school experiences, and using the artistic-response strategy may help create a more positive outlook on the school environment. If teachers can find "hooks" to entice youth, the increase in positive attitudes may carry over into other areas of academia. Sometimes strategies such as artistic response may be the "last chance" many youths have before dropping out of school. Educators sensitive to helping youths understand and develop meaning from text must encourage them to take a risk. Through aesthetic experiences such as artistic response, youths become more open to appreciating themselves, others, and the world we live in, therefore acquiring the potential to become productive citizens.

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