Drama in the Developmental Classroom: August Wilson's A Piano Lesson as Text

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Abstract
Dorsey shares her practice of using a written play to connect the knowledge students bring to the classroom with Howard Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences.

For several years, I have used August Wilson's play, *A Piano Lesson*, as a required supplemental text for my developmental reading classes. The colorful characters, festering family conflict, and illusory ghost immediately capture the attention of the students, catapulting them into the reading comprehension process which requires visualization, application of prior knowledge, and prediction. Besides providing lively classroom discussions and intriguing journal entries, the text lends itself easily to creation of exercises that appeal to the multiple intelligences and further enhance comprehension. Reading the play aloud, as a class, creates a community of readers who encourage and motivate each other to keep reading. The journal entries and exercises foster critical thinking and build interest. The end results are marked improvements in comprehension and enhancement of writing skills. Also, upon completion of the play, the majority of students eagerly select and complete a second book, independently, before the end of the semester.

To understand reading comprehension, Frank Smith says, "We must begin by considering what it is that 'we already have in our heads'"(Smith 1994, p. 7). Meaning is derived from prior knowledge which the reader uses to make sense of written language. Prior knowledge allows us to make predictions through which we ask questions about the text. Comprehension is receiving relevant answers to those questions. Transactional theory further emphasizes the fact that meaning resides in the person rather than in the printed word and explains how personal meanings are applied to text. "In order to share the author's insight, the reader need not have identical experiences, but he must have experienced some needs, emotions, concepts, some circumstances and relationships from which he can construct the new situations, emotions, and understandings set forth in the literary work" (Rosenblatt 1978, p. 81). Students' prior knowledge lets them immediately identify with Wilson's characters; the characters have personality types with which we are all familiar, they are involved in sibling rivalry which most people have experienced or encountered, and the appearance of a ghost brings familiar mystery and intrigue to the plot.

The play opens with the boisterous protagonist, Boy Willie, along with his sidekick, Lymon, arriving at his sister

and uncle's house in Pittsburgh with a truckload of watermelons which they have brought from Mississippi to sell. Boy Willie's dream is to raise enough money to purchase his own farm. Although he hasn't seen his sister, Berniece, in several years, she is neither happy to see him nor does she want him to stay long. The uncle, Doaker, is more welcoming but is intent on not seeing Berniece upset. Doaker's intentions are thwarted, however, because Sutter's ghost has also decided to visit. Sutter, who owned Boy Willie's ancestors during slavery, also was the former owner of a stolen piano which currently sits in Berniece's parlor. The question of whether or not the ghost really exists or if Boy Willie's climactic wrestling with it is merely symbolic of his atoning for the role he played in the theft and subsequent death of Berneice's husband is fodder for the literary analysis which students write upon completion of the play.

The play offers myriad opportunities for journal writing. Journal writing assists students in making connections between what they already know and what they are reading and also helps them interact with ideas and information in ways that facilitate comprehension and learning (Kennedy 1980, Troyka 1986, Staton 1988). The very first entry is made before the actual reading begins; immediately after we make a survey of the text, students are asked to write what they think the title of the play means. Through this entry, they start thinking about the play and predicting what might happen. From then on, students are reading with at least one purpose in mind, that of discovering if their prediction was correct. After reading begins, students are required to make journal entries at the end of each class reading. Because very little description of the characters is given, the next journal entry asks students to "Select a character. Tell what he or she looks like. What is the character wearing? Who does the character remind you of (a relative, a friend, a television personality, a character in another book)?" This entry requires each student to draw on prior knowledge; practically every family has sibling rivalry, those with entrepreneurial spirits or unwelcome members. Once students are able to tie characters to people they already know, the characters become real to them. Every time a particular character speaks, each student will see an image in his or her mind and make a prediction about the course of the text. Good readers have strong mental imaging which aids them in storing information for retrieval (Smith 1994). Through mental imaging, readers create clear pictures in their minds. A much later journal entry asks students if their initial images of the characters have changed and if so, why.

No at-home reading assignments are given until students begin to announce they have jumped ahead of the class and completed the book or are nearing completion. This usually begins to occur when we reach Act Two, about halfway through the play. From this point on, students are required to make a journal entry after every twenty pages and answer four standard questions:

• What do you notice? (Have any changes occurred between scenes? Can you predict what will happen in the next few pages? What examples or details have led you to believe there is change going on?)

• What is the main point? (What is the primary event? Support your thoughts by giving a few examples of why it is the

main event occurring.)

• What do you feel? (Does any part of the story make you feel agitated, annoyed, frustrated, happy or horrified? Give specific examples. Do you feel differently about a character or situation now than you felt before? Why?)

• What do you relate to? (Does anything in this play remind you of something from your own experience? Have you read any novels, seen any television programs, or know any songs that remind you of some of the events in this story? Discuss how it compares to the events in the text.)

I collect the journals every other week for several reasons. First, I check to see that students are able to differentiate between characters; sometimes they have the names or roles mixed up. Second, I am able to determine if students are properly organizing and following the sequence of events; some of the events are recounts of the past. And, third, I am able to begin a dialogue with each student as I comment on his or her entries, ask or answer questions, or suggest that he or she re-read certain passages for clarification. If several students have similar misunderstandings, the event or character can be discussed by the entire class.

It is required that everyone read aloud and take his or her turn portraying different characters. Reading aloud shifts the concentration from naming words to listening for meaning. While poor word recognition may be a deterrent to comprehension, Bartholomae & Petrosky (1986), who were successfully involved in college remedial reading courses for many years, observed the problem with comprehension at the college level is not necessarily with the mechanics of reading: "Even if our students could literally remember and understand every word or sentence in that text . . . they'd be no better able to reassemble that text in an essay of their own" (p. 13). Troyka (1986) also found that word recognition did not lead to understanding. She noted that basic readers read word by word and move their lips to decipher words. Associations and meaning cannot be made because the brain concentrates exclusively on naming words: "Comprehension often eludes these students because they have to concentrate on looking at each word rather than on looking through the words to make meaning" (p. 188). Reading aloud allows students to hear the text while they practice the mental motor skills necessary to organize their thoughts in such a way as to derive meaning from the written word. During class, we can pause at any time to reflect on certain events and examine them from different points of view. We can define unknown words as we encounter them. We become completely engaged in the text and there is less opportunity for minds to wander.

Some students are reluctant to read aloud at first, but the camaraderie that develops through discussion of the text puts them at ease after a week or two, and before long, everyone willingly participates. Certain students *become* certain characters and the class will encourage them to take on specific roles more often. A "Boy Willie" and "Berniece" invariably emerge. Oftentimes, I will ask students to repeat lines after asking if that was how the particular character would have said it. From their understanding of a character, a humorous, sarcastic or emotional tone might

emerge.

While the bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences never get enough of the role play and journal writing may have particular appeal to students with intrapersonal intelligences, additional projects can engage students with the other intelligences identified by Howard Gardner (1983). Crossword puzzles reinforcing definitions of new vocabulary words gleaned from the text are of particular interest to those with linguistic intelligence. The mathematical intelligence group is drawn to exercises in which context clues are used to determine the year in which the drama takes place or the ages of the characters. Those with musical intelligence are always interested in identifying the popular music of the period or the movie Boy Willie and Lymon may have seen at the "picture show." The spatial intelligence group enjoys exercises in which we draw pictures of the handcarved upright piano based on the description given in the text or investigate the style of dress Berniece might have worn when she got "dressed-up" to go downtown. Approaching the text from their own personal intelligence point of view also enhances comprehension for students.

A successful program of comprehension instruction should include large amounts of time for actual text reading, direct strategy instruction and opportunities for collaboration and discussion (Fielding and Pearson). Reading *A Piano Lesson* during class time meets these criteria, providing the proper environment for enhancing reading comprehension. The resulting literary analysis papers are rich with critical thinking and insight. Students tackle such issues as whether or not the ghost existed, whether the piano should have been sold to finance Boy Willie's dream, and the role of tradition in families today. They use direct quotations from the book and investigate the background of the writer. For quite a few, it is the first time they have completed an entire book, and they remark about their sense of accomplishment. Some students would recommend the play to other students; others find it too dull for recreational reading. But all have interacted with and derived meaning from the text.

When the papers are done, and before the students select their next book to be read independently, we all sit back, relax and watch the movie version of *A Piano Lesson*. Then we discuss whether or not the screenwriters and casting directors got it right.

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