

Oral Interpretation of Literature: Readers' Theater

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The pedagogical principle of experiential learning embodied in the oral interpretation of literature through Readers' Theater provides an avenue to accomplish a seemingly daunting task. Students' participation in reading, interpreting, discussing, writing, assessing, and performing their own creative responses to a literary work promotes a learning activity that leaves an indelible mark on their educational process as they explore complex and abstract levels of thinking—in real time, no less. The activity entices students out of the virtual world of technology to explore a tangible sphere of performance. The thought processes that the activity demands cover the gamut of Bloom's taxonomy of skills, which defines levels of intellectual behavior important to learning. The synthesis and evaluation elements at the top of the taxonomy demand creative behavior. Anderson and Krathwohl's revision of the taxonomy—remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating—also places creativity at the top of the hierarchy of skills.

I have used oral interpretation of literature through Readers' Theater for many years and have adapted the process for numerous contexts. Readers' Theater consists of a performance based on a specific text (sources are varied) that has been adapted into a script. In a group performance the students read a script for an audience, while using voice inflection to interpret

the text. I assign specific lines to each reader so that images and ideas from the script bounce from student to student. The emphasis, then, is not on acting as in a stage play, but on each student's oral interpretation. Students celebrate their own voices and perspectives through this live performance of a literary text. When examining the trajectory of the concept of "voice," Peter Elbow reflects in *College English*: "Voice used to be a hot critical term in the pages of journals, but our current scholarly conversation has gone rather quiet. I think there is something to be gained if we reawaken the discussion" (168). Providing oral interpretation assignments as an alternative method of exploring literary texts prompts a reexamining of how "voice" can be reawakened.

The very roots of celebrating human responses to life experiences and beliefs lie in the act of creative, oral expression. Early beginnings of drama in ancient Greece occurred with maenads dancing and singing the myths surrounding the god Dionysus. Oral expression of cultural myths and human stories define the ancient traditions of experiential participation, learning, and devotion. Poetry emerging from songs was the earliest form of oral tradition. David Pike points out in *Literature: A World of Writing*: "Because most poems are not focused on telling a story, they tend to withhold clarity in order to focus our attention on the dense interrelationship of its themes" (25); this genre becomes the ideal mode of expression to serve as a basis for a script. Using poetry as a basis for Readers' Theater allows a dialogue to emerge in which the intertwining of themes creates vivid images of a text rather than a chronological story. Creating a learning environment that allows a revisiting of these ancient traditions offers a sound pedagogical approach to literature, while providing students the opportunity to express their voice before a live audience.

Pedagogy that allows students to reach beyond the process of taking in information and discussing it promotes a rich learning environment where expression and articulation reinforce the material. David Kolb states in “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education”: “Learning is like breathing; it involves a taking and processing of experience and a putting out or expression of what is learned” (208). As Dewey noted, “nothing takes root in mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving” (qtd. in Kolb 208). Kolb goes on to state that learners need to express and test in action what they have learned (208). Readers’ Theater promotes this type of “testing in action.” Students also must become aware that creative thinking “is the result of hard work at the levels of knowledge, comprehension, application, and analysis” (Lovell-Troy 34), while synthesis is possible only when they have mastered the topic.

The text stems from a variety of sources—instructors can let their imaginations be a guide to suit their specific discipline and purpose. The following are examples of some possibilities for creating a Readers’ Theater text:

1. Use “cuttings” (a shortened version) from literary texts, essays, etc.
2. Utilize student writings: essays, narratives, vignettes, poetry, City as Text impressions , etc.

Two literary sources that I have used most frequently in my honors world literature class are Homer’s *Odyssey* and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. After reading and discussing the literary works, students write a vignette (a short descriptive passage) based on their impression and interpretation of the work. The vignette then is reshaped into a poem. The expression that results from the vignette and poetry writing adds rhythm to the language of the script and allows

for an interweaving of images and themes from the literary work, while students experience both the cognitive and affective domains of learning. (Consult the following Web link that outlines the process for instructors and provides information for student instructions as well as sample vignettes, poetry, and excerpt from a Readers' Theater script:

<http://iws.collin.edu/kennedy/Readers%20Theater.htm>).

Next, I shape a script from the student vignettes and poetry. Some of the poetry and vignettes are left intact, while others are fragmented as I piece the script together into a coherent whole. I may have to provide some transitions to link passages if I cannot find any within the students' writing. The script that results from this assignment offers "images" of the text rather than a chronologically developed dialogue. With a sufficiently rich text as the basis for student responses, an instructor does not have to assign any specific themes for the students to develop.

Creating a coherent script from student writings may seem difficult or challenging, but, actually, one can accomplish this within a few hours on the computer. I can compile and adapt a fifteen-page script within six hours. A Readers' Theater script should not be much longer than fifteen to twenty pages, which represents approximately twenty minutes of performance time. Since reading rather than performing is the mode of delivery, this is sufficient for an audience.

A variation of this project consists of choosing a "cutting" from a literary work that would allow both literature students and foreign language students to perform a Readers' Theater together. Literature students read a script in English, while foreign language students "echo" in the original language of the literary text. For example, my literature students performed a "cutting" of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*. French students performed in conjunction with them by reading the same lines in French. The students performed before an audience of

students and guests. We repeated the activity the following year with a script adapted from excerpts of Edmond Rostand's verse play *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

During the performance, students usually remain stationary, sitting on stools of varying heights, with some performers standing and others sitting on the floor. The group may choose to wear costumes or may select a color coordination for clothing. I often videotape a performance so that students can evaluate themselves and enter into critical commentary.

I, along with a colleague, have also used Readers' Theater to introduce an honors component into a Prague International Learning Community taught in the Czech Republic. My colleague and I gave students poetry from Czech writers and, during the eleven-hour flight overseas, students created a script to perform during our class in Prague. The result was impressive, as the group performed, accompanied by a guitar, at an outdoor theater in a scenic area of Prague, echoing poetic images from Czech culture.

Assignments derived from "City As Text" responses to and writings about a culture could serve as an excellent source of material for a Readers' Theater script. Bernice Braid, originator of "City As Text" explorations of culture, states that they "are infinitely applicable to differing sites, and equally seductive to students and faculty. They have. . .provoked long-term sensitivity and reflection about the human experience in the built environment" (23). Students on an outing at a particular site or in a particular city would gather impressions of their surroundings in a journal. A script adapted from these collections reflects the students' impressions of the culture. Braid goes on to emphasize: "A simple adage is this: the discoveries students make by virtue of looking and seeing some slightly surprising thing are the ones they never forget" (25). Indeed, this experiential learning process leaves a lasting impression on students who could take their

performance “on the road” back out into the community, perhaps performing for special groups. The assignment offers numerous possibilities. I used this as another Prague Learning Community activity.

A speech colleague and I joined efforts in combining our classes—Freshman Composition and Speech—for a performance in our local Black Box theater. We chose a topic reflecting a social issue and had the students write a short response to it. We then created a script from the student writings. Both speech and English students read the script for an audience of family and friends. The blending of the two disciplines would make an excellent creative assignment for Learning Community classes, where students are exposed to two teaching perspectives while working on the same assignment.

The process of closely studying and of creatively responding to literature in a performance setting serves to bring a literary text and student closer together than what is possible with silent reading alone. Students derive numerous primary values from this experience. Interpretation enables the students to study the world’s best literature, to examine their cultural surroundings, or to reflect on social issues. In addition, the students expand their knowledge of themselves through writing about and orally interpreting the various texts. The performance experience itself creates an important benefit of Readers’ Theater interpretation of literature. Performing before an audience develops poise, self-confidence, and awareness of oneself. This process helps to improve oral delivery in other types of communication situations as well. The experience allows students the opportunity to learn in such a way as to make a lasting impression on them as they actively explore knowledge. The process guides them up the hierarchy of learning skills, celebrating their creative abilities. As college English instructors,

we can lure students out of the virtual world of technology for a brief moment to experience the tangible world of expressing their authentic voice in real time.

Works Cited

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