MAKING MEANING: A TEACHER'S JOURNEY

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING DEGREE AT

THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING

BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

BY

JOANNE GRIFFIN YORKS

AUGUST 2002

This project by Joanne Griffin Yorks is accepted in its present form.

Date_____

Project Advisor_____

Project Reader_____

ABSTRACT

This thesis shows how one teacher gained an increased understanding of the way she learns, discovered a theoretical support base for her learning style and found validation for her way of making meaning. Melding this new awareness with what was for her a new theoretical approach to teaching reading, reader-response theory, and then adapting the theory for the ESL classroom, she sought to offer her students opportunities similar to those she'd had to use reading to bring about new understandings of self and increased confidence in one's ability to make meaning for oneself. The first chapter is an introduction to the author's insights into how she makes meaning and her first encounter with reader-response theory. She also describes her reading classes previous to her SIT training and her goals for her classes after her experiences at SIT. Chapter Two describes the key concepts and methods of reader-response theory, and the third chapter discusses how this teacher has used reader response with her students. Chapter Four concludes this thesis with the author's assessment of how well she integrated reader-response theory into her reading course. Student feedback on the course is also included in this chapter.

ERIC Descriptors

Reading Comprehension
Reading Skills
Writing Skills
Class Activities

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are moments in time that we do not forget, moments which mark transformative experiences, altering reality as we know it. One such moment for me occurred while reading an assignment for my Four Skills class at SIT in the summer of 2000. The catalyst was a chapter called "Experiential Theories of Response" from Richard Beach's book, A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories (1993). In this chapter, theorist David Bleich writes that "engaging with a text involves a range of different subjective experiences…emotional reactions and associations, involvement, empathy, identification. Readers gain a heightened sense of these emotions by attending to their own 'felt-sense' experience with texts" (1993:52). Elaborating on this, Beach wrote that "Bleich criticizes the New Critical orientation that attempts to objectify the reader/text transaction by dismissing readers' emotional responses under the guise of the 'affective fallacy'. To the contrary," Beach wrote, "he argues that the subjective response leads to cognitive understanding" (1993:53). I put the reading down, closed my eyes and experienced the emotional impact of these ideas. I felt a sense of vindication. I hadn't realized how much I had internalized the message from my early schooling that I didn't fit the established academic mode which legitimized one kind of learning, that of the intellect in pursuit of objective meaning. I wrote that day in the margin of the text: *Thank God. A change. This is so much more my style of learning/being in the world – my emotions, intuitive sense is a central part of how I react/respond to the world, including what I read. I felt inadequate in academic settings because I couldn't analyze, objectify*

as well as others…" I have never been good at memorizing facts or learning disparate pieces of information; I need to put things into relationship, especially into relationship with myself. When I read this chapter on experiential theories of response, I discovered a theoretical support base for my learning style. I thought, this is how I make meaning for myself – and it's okay!

By that point, in my second SMAT summer, an SIT slogan, "teachers are students and students are teachers" had become part of my belief system. So what I experienced as a learner at SIT, especially in regard to experiential theories of response and in particular, reader-response theory-- which had evoked in me such a profound cognitive and emotional reaction--had to affect me as a teacher. For example, in my reading courses since that time, my understanding of reader-response theory has given me a new approach to teaching reading that goes beyond the technical aspects of teaching reading skills such as finding main ideas, skimming, scanning and summarizing passages; it offers ways to explore more meaningful learning with my students. Now I give more attention to pre-reading activities which activate the students' prior knowledge about the topic (schema theory). Also, taking the time to help students relate to the text by encouraging them to make associations and connections between what they read and their own experiences through subjective writing, reflection, discussion, drawing and dramatization has become an integral part of our working on the reading process.

When one is not just looking for 'the right answer,' there is room to explore how we as unique individuals relate to a reading. What do we think? How do we feel? Why do we

think and feel that way? What assumptions do we make and on what are they based? What memories and associations does the reading bring to mind? In other words, what connections can we make between the words on the page and our own lives, and then, what are we willing to share that comes from our hearts as well as our minds? I've found that when people share what is meaningful to them, others listen with an intensity that doesn't often happen when sharing objective facts. Processing a reading in this way -- asking the kinds of questions which prompt students to reflect on their experiences, feelings, and assumptions in relation to a text -- makes it more possible for the kind of learning to take place which brings about growth and even transformative change.

In order for the reader of this thesis to better understand the classroom implications of what I've just said, a brief description of my teaching, before SIT and pre reader-response theory, is in order.

I love to read and I love to teach, especially ESL, but prior to studying at SIT it had been frustrating to me that I hadn't had much success in getting the students in my ESL reading class to love to read, too, or to experience any kind of a felt connection with a reading. At the community college where I taught, I'd worked with a variety of reading texts; I brought in books that I loved, to share with my students, and I had my students choose their own books which they would share with their classmates and with me. None of this connected my students with the joy of reading; I couldn't seem to provide them with ways to interact meaningfully with a text.

Meeting one-on-one with students to discuss the book they'd chosen, I'd wait expectantly to hear about the parts that inspired or challenged or amused them. It rarely happened. Students would tell me about the characters and the plot and whether they liked the book or not. "What did you like about it?" They'd answer, "It was interesting" or "It was boring." I'd press further. "What particular part was interesting/boring? What made it interesting/boring to you?" They didn't seem to know how to answer these questions and I didn't know how to engage them, either in the reading or in the ensuing discussion. I became bored with this activity and as time went on, I met less often with students to talk about their books and spent more time teaching reading skills from the textbook. My focus became more technical. We worked on finding the main idea of reading passages, skimming, scanning, summarizing, reading for inference and for fact, all good things to know how to do. But I did sometimes wonder about the benefit of teaching reading skills to these students when it didn't result in their wanting to read, loving to read for the sheer enjoyment of the activity and the possibility of being affected in profound ways. But since I didn't know how to accomplish that, I stuck with what I did know how to do. I taught how I was taught.

Then I went to SIT. After 12 years of teaching ESL in a community college, I went back to school to get my master of arts in teaching with a concentration in ESL. What I expected to get from this venture were the credentials to continue to teach in an area that I loved, more theoretical knowledge and some new techniques to take back to the classroom. I laugh as I write this – how low my expectations were! I got all that I expected but much more besides. I gained a new understanding and acceptance of

myself; increased awareness of how I learn and validation of this learning style; the affirming experience of teachers and students engaged in the learning process together; and a newfound trust that my thoughts, reactions and feelings about the academic material I was studying had a rightful place in the discussion. I noticed that I was more willing to give my opinion even when it ran counter to "authority" opinion, to make mistakes more often without judging myself, and to fly more freely into the learning without the baggage I'd carried from elementary school days. Noted educator Parker Palmer says that we teach who we are (Palmer 1998). Now that I had a much better understanding of who I was, especially in terms of learner and teacher, I wanted to create these same kinds of opportunities for my students. I wanted to continue my own journey toward self discovery in relationship with myself and with others, and I wanted my students as fellow travelers.

The above goal is a pretty lofty one, but as I had experienced all of this myself as a learner at SIT, I knew it could happen. The next chapter will discuss the key concepts and methods of reader response theory. Chapter Three will show how I've used reader response with my ESL students. The final chapter will discuss how well I integrated reader-response theory into my reading course and give examples of student feedback about their learning in this course.

CHAPTER 2

READER-RESPONSE THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Educational theorist and teacher Louise Rosenblatt is central to the literature of reading-response theory. She has said that the text is nothing more than ink on paper until someone reads and responds to it (Rosenblatt 1995:24). Until that point of 'transaction' between a reader and a text, the text does not contribute to any kind of meaning or literary experience (Rosenblatt 1978). This is quite a different approach from that of the New Critics, dominant from the 1930's through the 1950's (Henderson and Pederson 2000:494), who elevated the role of the literary work and downplayed the role of the reader (1995:29). In their fixed critical stance towards literature, they saw the text as containing the meaning, and relegated the reader's role to mining the meaning from that text: separate roles and not equal. Rosenblatt brings the reading process into equilibrium by emphasizing the essential roles of both the reader and the text in the reading process, calling this process a *transaction* between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt's use of the word *transaction* and not *interaction* was a conscious choice; she wanted to emphasize how dynamic the process of reading is and how intertwined the reader and text become in making meaning. She explains that the word **interaction** "*suggests two distinct entities acting on each other, like two billiard balls*" but that the term **transaction** "*permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning*" (1995:xvi). This understanding of how we read suggests a quality of 'aliveness,' an openness and willingness to see what may

evolve via the process of an individual-- with all his/her past experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and feelings--transacting with a text at a particular point in time.

It seems clear now that even choosing a particular approach to teaching reading has implications beyond teaching reading. I was taught literature using the New Critics approach with its emphasis on finding the 'right' answer in a text, and reading objectively. It made me feel separate from the reading process and dependent on an 'authority', whether the text or the teacher, to tell me what was acceptable. Perceiving meaning as outside oneself can undermine confidence in one's ability to arrive at suitable answers for oneself.

Though Rosenblatt opens the door for personal response and subjectivity in the reading process, she does not believe that 'anything goes' in regard to accepting students' interpretations of a text. Rather, she writes that, "students should be led to discover that some interpretations are more defensible than others" (1995:108-109). This is an important point because while it is crucial for the teacher to create an atmosphere where students feel free to explore their responses to a reading and share these personal responses with the class, this activity is only part of the reading process. Another equally important part of the process is that the student be able to support his/her interpretation by referencing the text for this support. If a student cannot find support for his/her interpretation, for example, "an interpretation that assumes ideas and attitudes for which no basis can be found in the text" (Rosenblatt 1995:109), or ignores major facts in the

text, the student must be led to reflect on how he/she came up with this interpretation and go back to the text for a closer reading.

In addition, Rosenblatt's analysis of the reading process led her to differentiate between two different modes of experiencing a text: the "efferent" and the "aesthetic." The term "efferent" comes from the Latin "*efferre*" which means 'to carry away.' This kind of reading focuses on the factual information that the reader takes away from the reading (1995:xvii). For example, reading a recipe or instructions on a medicine bottle would be efferent reading. In contrast, the aesthetic mode involves the reader's senses, feelings, intuitions and experiences. When one reads a piece of poetry that stirs the emotions or captures the imagination, the reader is operating in the aesthetic mode. However, Rosenblatt believes that "both cognitive and affective elements are present in all reading," (1995:xvii) and she makes it clear that "these stances are not opposites but form a continuum of possible transactions with a text"(1995:xvii). Where readers find themselves on the continuum depends on their focus of attention or purpose for reading, and often readers move back and forth along the continuum when their purpose or attention shifts, even while reading the same text (1995). An example of this kind of movement between the two modes of reading may be seen in the instance of a reader enjoying say, bell hooks' Bone Black, Memories of Girlhood (hooks 1996) and empathizing with the author's childhood feeling of being misunderstood by her family and her sense of isolation. Perhaps the reader is drawn into reflecting about his/her own childhood. This is obviously aesthetic reading, but now consider how the reader's purpose changes when he/she can't recall the name of the poem that bell hooks had

repeated to herself as a young girl, and so must search in the text for that piece of information. Now the reader is looking for factual information and so he/she has slid along the continuum toward the efferent mode.

In calling attention to the two different modes of reading, the efferent and the aesthetic, Rosenblatt not only increases our understanding of the multidimensionality of the reading process, but gives us reason to consider the kinds and implications of the questions teachers ask about a reading. Because in a reader-response classroom it is the students who are making their own meaning from a text and not the teacher 'teaching' the meaning to the students, discussion is central and "the major tool in these discussions is the question" (Christenbury 2000:53). Furthermore, based on what Richard Beach (1993:50-51) says about discussions in the following quotation, it seems clear that certain kinds of questions will elicit efferent responses and other kinds of questions will lead students to respond in an aesthetic mode. Beach says that "teachers often use activities that entail only efferent responses: … discussion questions that are limited to "literal recall," questions about "known information" (Mehan), or discussions that are "recitations" (Dillon and Searle) in which "procedural display" of "mock participation" (Bloome) undermines any genuine, mutual sharing of experience" (1993:50-51). This quotation suggests that teachers should be clear about the goals of a discussion and about whether efferent or aesthetic responses are sought, and ask questions accordingly.

Leila Christenbury (2000:51-57) writes about the kinds of questions that elicit personal responses to a reading. Some examples of these kinds of open-ended questions are:

"What do you think?" "What makes you think that?" "Does anyone else think that?" "As you read this (poem, story, excerpt) what thoughts, what feelings did it evoke?" "Any memories?" "As you read, what lines (words, phrases) ideas struck you most powerfully? Why?" "What in the text do you have the most trouble understanding?"

As mentioned, discussion is a key ingredient in a reader-response classroom, and the role of the teacher is one of "facilitator and connector" (Varvel 2000:164). This is quite different from the "traditional" classroom where we see students addressing their comments and questions to the teacher only. It is vital for the kind of free exchange which is central to reader-response classes that the teacher help students relate more directly to each other. To use a sports metaphor, when a student throws the conversational ball to the teacher, the teacher throws the ball to another student, or to the whole group. The object of the new 'game' is for the students to learn to pass the ball from student to student with the teacher participating as one of the group (Rosenblatt 1995: 68-69). This does not in any way lessen the importance or active involvement of the teacher in such discussions. The teacher must draw out timid students, keep aggressive students from dominating and help students clarify and elaborate on the ideas that they are discussing. The teacher must also draw attention to the points of contact between different students' opinions (Rosenblatt 1995:68).

Another important role of the teacher is affirming students' responses (Christenbury 2000:57). However, using overt praise or agreement is not a productive method in a reader-response classroom because it reinforces the teacher as the central figure and as

'the knower,' thus undermining the students as knowers and as central. This keeps the student dependent on the teacher. Instead, a reader-response teacher would reinforce student contributions as worthwhile and valued by making reference to a student's comments during the discussion, and by asking other students to respond to what a student said (Christenbury 2000:57). This kind of teacher response keeps the focus on student interactions and reader-oriented discussions which create a sense of empowerment for the students.

One key point touches on the importance of choosing texts that are suitable for the students' level of maturity, match their interests and experience and are appropriate for their linguistic capabilities (Rosenblatt 1995). I agree with Rosenblatt that finding an appropriate text is important, but I would caution the reader not to assume that finding the right text is the key to unlocking student responses and facilitating learning. Before I went to SIT and learned about reader-response theory, I had offered my students books that I believed they could relate to, linguistically and personally, however, they didn't make the kinds of important connections with those texts that I saw them make when I used the reader-response approach.

The above discussion of the key concepts and methods from the reader-response literature is necessary for the reader's understanding of the next chapter. In Chapter Three I will discuss how I used reader-response theory in an ESL reading course at a community college.

CHAPTER 3

USING READER-RESPONSE THEORY IN AN ESL READING COURSE

Before describing how I utilized reader response in an ESL reading course, a brief description of the origins of reader-response theory and its adaptation to the ESL classroom is in order.

Reader-response theory was developed to teach literature to American secondary and college students; it was not originally intended for ESL students. It is necessary to make this distinction when discussing how reader response is used in non-native English speaking classes because although some ESL teachers do share with teachers of native English speakers the same goal of helping their students develop an understanding and appreciation of literature (Ali 1994), I believe that accommodations must be made even for advanced level ESL students. It is likely that these students would be limited in either their linguistic proficiency in English or their cultural awareness which would limit some of their efferent understanding of a text as well as their aesthetic range. If this is true for advanced level ESL students, even more accommodations are necessary when using reader response to teach lower level ESL students. When teaching these students, the primary goal is not so much helping them to understand and appreciate literature, but of helping them progress in their fluency and accuracy in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and in expanding their cultural awareness. I believe that using reader response can help teachers accomplish these goals because the core concept of reader-response theory espouses that learning involves more than just

cognitive skills as one's feelings and experiences are equally important to making meaning. I have experienced this in my own learning and I believe that there is a dynamic interaction between the efferent and the aesthetic modes that facilitate learning. This concept has application for even the more mundane acts of learning as discussed in the following paragraph.

Although one may not think so at first, the inclusion of the affect as well as the cognitive in the learning process applies even to something as basic as learning vocabulary words when seen through the lens of reader-response theory. Though in some ESL classrooms learning vocabulary means matching words to definitions and other activities which primarily call for only the student's intellect, in the following quotation, Louise Rosenblatt explains the fullness of the process needed to really understand and be able to use a vocabulary word. She explains that understanding the meaning of a word

> "requires linking the word with what it points to in the human or natural world. This involves awareness of the sensations it symbolizes, the systems or categories into which it fits, the complex of experiences out of which it springs, the modes of feeling or practical situations with which it is associated, the actions it may imply. Above all, the word cannot be understood in isolation; it must be seen in the variety of its possible contexts. Moreover, we must relate it to our own experience so that it may become part of our working equipment. Only then, as we place it in its relation to other sensations, ideas, attitudes, and patterns, all equally realized, shall we be in a position to say that we understand it…The word

> *love*, for instance, cannot be defined without reference to some context. The varied experiences in life and literature that different individuals associate with the word will also affect the way in which they understand it"(1995:106).

With this understanding of how I see reader-response theory in relation to teaching ESL, I will now describe how I used this approach to teach a reading course at a community college during the summer of 2001. I chose this particular course to illustrate how I used reader response in an ESL classroom because I had the freedom to develop this course as I wished, to experiment with the methods and activities of my choosing.

This class met twice a week for six weeks; each class was two-and-a-half hours long. There were eight students in the course, four Russian students and four Hispanic students from South America, Central America and Puerto Rico. The class was evenly divided between men and women who ranged in age from eighteen to mid fifties. Four of the eight students were at the high intermediate level (61% - 74% on the Michigan Test), three were at the low intermediate level (48% - 60% on the Michigan Test), and one student was at the low beginner level (up to 29% on the Michigan Test).

In preparing to teach this course I wrote in my notes for the first day of class that "my most important goals are to get the students to trust themselves in the learning process, to become more confident learners, to speak up in class, to freely offer their opinions and share their experiences, to not be as afraid of making mistakes." These goals set the tone

for the first day of class. I wanted to start off the course by modeling an acceptance and appreciation of a variety of responses. I also wanted to show that making personal associations with academic subject matter was acceptable. I used a word association activity for these purposes.

After the first day introductions and warm-up activities which began the process of forming a supportive learning community, I told the students we would play a word association game. I wrote the word *reading* on the board and circled it. Then I wrote the words *book* and *my brother* connecting them to the central word, *reading.* I commented that it was probably obvious why I wrote the word *book* in relation to reading, but it was probably not as clear why I wrote *my brother*. I explained the connection. I told them that I used to read to my younger brother every afternoon when I got home from school, that he would be sitting on the living room sofa with a book in his lap waiting for me, and by the time he started kindergarten, he had learned how to read. I shared how proud I felt that I had taught my brother to read, and that this experience had reinforced my desire to become a teacher.

The students listened attentively to this personal anecdote, and I hoped that they would follow my lead in connecting their own experiences to this activity. I asked the students to take a few minutes to think about their associations with the word *reading*, and when they were ready, I would include what they said in the graphic organizer on the board. The students participated enthusiastically, calling out words until there was no more space to write on the board. However, the words they offered seemed pedantic rather

than personal, words like *comprehension, writing, grammar, words, history, school, lists, newspaper, reading out loud* and *reading silently.* I also noticed that out of their two dozen or so contributions, only two -- *enjoyment* and *reading something interesting* -- had an objectively positive connotation.

After I'd written their contributions on the board, I asked the class if there were any personal connections to the words they gave. After a short period of silence, a student commented on the phrase *reading out loud.* She suggested that this technique aides comprehension and explained that she reads aloud when she is reading something difficult because it helps her understand it better. Another student quickly countered that this was not a good approach when reading for comprehension. Immediately, the students appealed to me to tell them which approach was correct. I tossed the question back to the class, a reader-response technique to encourage students to look to themselves and their classmates for answers and not just rely on the teacher.

During the discussion that followed, most of the students agreed that reading out loud did not help reading comprehension. Several backed up their opinion by saying they learned this fact in another reading course. However, the young woman who had made the statement that reading aloud helped her understand was not swayed. When the discussion came to an impasse, I shared two personal anecdotes that related to the topic. I told them that as a student at SIT, I read aloud whole chapters from a linguistics textbook that I found hard to comprehend, and it helped me understand the material. Then I shared another personal story about the time my younger brother was chosen to demonstrate his

reading skills to my sixth grade class. He read aloud flawlessly but when the principal asked him to tell us what he had read, he replied, "How do I know? I wasn't listening." I thought at the time that he was being a wise guy, but understood much later that he was just telling the truth of his experience. In this situation, reading out loud had hindered, not helped his comprehension. In telling these personal anecdotes I was modeling how I was making connections with the topic by using my experiences, and that it was acceptable to share these personal connections. Also, the anecdotes both addressed the students' question about which was the correct approach when reading for comprehension and also reinforced something I wanted them to be aware of about learning (and life) which is that often there is not only one right answer or approach.

Continuing the discussion that first day, we talked about why, in one situation, reading aloud seemed to help comprehension and why, in the second situation, it did not. I made reference to the young woman's comment which had started us off on this topic as a way of affirming her contribution to the discussion. As previously mentioned, this more subtle way of giving positive feedback supports the practice of reader-response theory because it keeps the focus on the student's contributions and not the teacher's opinion, which empowers the student and builds trust in his/her own ability to make meaning.

We also discussed that first day why, how, and what we ourselves read. I asked if anyone had read something that had made them laugh or cry or change an idea or belief. The students' comments addressed the topic under discussion except for a few instances when some students made comments that seemed unrelated to the topic. I let these

comments go by without questioning them because everyone was participating and sharing and that was both my long range goal for the course and the overriding objective of the first day of class.

As discussed in Chapter Two, selecting appropriate reading material is very important when using the reader-response approach. The material must be appropriate not only linguistically but also for the students' life experiences which helps them to connect with the text. This is, of course, easier to do when the class is homogeneous. However, I had to anticipate that I would have a variety of levels, cultures, and ages in this class, so I knew I had to give careful consideration to the reading I chose. The selection of the book that we used was based on the following criteria: I wanted to use an authentic reading, not one written for ESL students. However, I was looking for a text that was not only linguistically appropriate but one that was written in a clear and succinct style that would not overwhelm lower level non-native English speakers. I also wanted a story that people of all ages and backgrounds could relate to and might connect with on an emotional level, one that had a universal theme such as family relationships or overcoming adversity. I wanted a story so compelling that, despite varying degrees of linguistic proficiencies among the students, which was a given in this situation, they would willingly struggle with the language in order to understand what was happening in the story.

I found a text which met the above criteria in a book store in the section for young adults on an intermediate reading level. There I found the free-verse novel, Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse, (1999) which is about the lives and relationships of a family in a small rural

community in Oklahoma during the dust bowl years. It is an historically accurate and emotionally compelling story told through the eyes of Billie Jo, a young girl who struggles to come to terms with the tragedy which befalls her family and the hard times which affect the larger community in which they live. The story touches on many emotions to which most of us can relate: love, hate, fear, envy, and pride. I thought that these attributes of the book would provide us with some common ground on which to journey toward our collective and individual ways of making meaning.

The format of the book is reader friendly. Written in free verse in the style of a journal entry, each passage can be read as a separate entity. However, the story unfolds as one continues in the reading. The volume of print on a page doesn't overwhelm the eye and each entry is no more than three pages, with some only half a page in length. In the final course evaluations, all of the students rated the book highly and several commented that this book contributed significantly to their learning and their enjoyment of the course.

Engaging the students' imagination, increasing their tolerance for ambiguity and encouraging them to make guesses and give opinions was something I wanted to support in their learning. At the same time, in accordance with the practice of reader-response theory, I wanted the students to be aware that interpretations and opinions need to be supported. To meet these objectives, I introduced Hesse's novel in this way: I divided the class into three groups and gave each group a copy of the book. I told them to look at the front cover (which contained the title and a black and white picture of a young girl in a straw hat standing in front of some long gray boards). I instructed the groups to

discuss what they thought the book would be about and after five minutes, I would write their comments on a large sheet of paper on the wall. The following, in essence, is what they said: 1) It's a story about the girl on the cover. She's the author. I think she's poor and maybe she doesn't go to school, but she's intelligent and likes to write and became successful later in life; 2) It was dusty where she lived; 3) It's a story about a little girl and it took place in the past, maybe around 1920. She's standing in front of a barn. She probably lives on a farm.

After I wrote the students' comments on the newsprint, I asked what had made them think of their answers. Though their opinions were in relation to a picture and not to a text (with the exception of the title), this activity introduced the practice of connecting an opinion to a support and in a rudimentary way, reflecting on their thinking processes.

The student who gave the first answer (above) said that his group decided that it was the author's picture on the cover of the book because authors usually put their photos on books. Then they projected that even though she looked poor when she was little, she must be successful now because she wrote a book. As for liking to write when she was young, and being intelligent, the student explained that when you like to do something when you're old, you probably liked to do the same thing when you were young, like playing an instrument or fixing things. Also, you have to be intelligent to write a book. The student who provided response number two simply said that his group thought the girl lived in a dusty place because of the title, Out of the Dust. The student whose group suggested that the story took place a long time ago, maybe around 1920, (number

three) said that she didn't see girls wearing hats anymore, especially straw hats, and the girl on the cover of the book was wearing a big straw hat. They'd also noticed that the picture of the girl was in black and white, another indication of past time. The gray boards behind the girl reminded them of a barn so they guessed that she lived on a farm. I thought that the students gave reasonable support for their answers.

Extending this activity, I asked the class to preview the book (see appendix A) and then to list the characters that they thought they would meet in the story and describe them. The students wrote on a piece of newsprint taped to the back wall of the classroom. I thought that they would write about the little girl and her mother and father; however, they came up with a whole cast of characters to people the story: aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, friends, and even farm animals. Some of the characters they included on the list were not in the story, but I didn't comment or correct the list. I decided to leave this cast of characters on the wall and have them revise the descriptive list as they read the story. This would give them practice in comparing what they wrote with the reading and revising first assumptions as they gained new information. They worked on this listing activity with enthusiasm, conferring with each other, laughing, helping each other creatively and technically (with grammar and spelling) while I remained outside the group, pleased with their cooperative interactions and independence from the teacher.

In another activity, I told the students that I would read a passage from the book to help them get a better "feel" for the personalities of the characters and what their lives were like. I suggested that they relax and just listen. The passage that I read, entitled "Debts,"

contained a disagreement between “Ma” and “Daddy” about whether to continue to plant wheat when it hadn’t rained enough to grow wheat in the past three years. Billie Jo listens to her parents arguing and after Daddy storms off to the barn, asks Ma “how after all this time, Daddy still believes in rain.” Ma answers, “Well, it rains enough now and again, to keep a person hoping. But even if it didn’t your daddy would have to believe. It’s coming on spring, and he’s a farmer.” (1999:27)

The passage I chose for the students’ first exposure to the story wasn’t the first passage in the novel; I used it because it was rich in emotion, which I hoped would draw the students into the story. This selection also gave them an understanding of the problems and the relationship among the main characters. I decided to read aloud because I wanted the students to “feel” the emotional exchanges between Ma, Daddy and Billie Jo which I thought could best be accomplished by a dramatic reading.

While this activity could easily have continued as a listening exercise, I wanted to use this passage, with its emotional impact, to begin the writing process of responding to a text by making connections between the reading and one’s experiences. Joining the processes of reading and writing are important in helping students see connections between what they have read and what they think about what they’ve read. Educator and author Vivian Zamel said at an SIT workshop I attended (summer, 2000) that the process of writing lets us see our thoughts. I think this is an elegant description of a method that can facilitate our ability to make meaning for ourselves, which is what reader response is about.

After the students had listened to the passage once, I handed out copies of the text and asked them to read along silently as I read the passage aloud a second time. I wanted them to see the text as well as hear it in preparation for the writing activity. After the second reading I told the students to write for ten minutes about their reactions to the reading and then share what they had written with a partner. I explained that I didn't want them to write a summary of the story; I was more interested in learning how they felt about what they were able to understand. When a student asked the meaning of a word not vital to understanding the reading, I told her that we would go over vocabulary later, that it wasn't necessary to know all the words in order to understand the story. This is an important concept for students to understand. I often see them going back and forth between a text and their electronic dictionaries which interrupts the flow of ideas and impedes comprehension; however, it is also important that they understand the key words in a passage or their comprehension will be adversely affected as well.

It was obvious that some students found it difficult to begin writing; they sat staring at the blank piece of paper in front of them. Other students asked me questions about spelling and grammar. At that point, I thought I should have explained the exercise more carefully, perhaps demonstrating what I wanted them to do. Later on I realized that part of their difficulty was due to a lack of experience in responding to a text in this way, by using one's own experiences to make connections to the reading.

It was painful to see the frustration level building in the class during this writing exercise, and probably the most dejected looking person in the room was the beginning level

Russian student. He told me that he couldn't write enough English to do this activity. I knew this was true, so I told him he could write in Russian. He looked surprised and began writing. I was aware that allowing students to use their native language in an ESL classroom is frowned upon, and that translating from one's native language to a second language can impede second language acquisition; however, I believe that in this case, allowing this student to write in his native language better served the goals of the lesson, which were to connect with the reading through writing, share what they wrote with a partner and the class, and begin the process of rereading and revising one's ideas and writing.

This writing activity was not a great success. Most people stopped writing before five minutes were up and the discussions with their partners were short and perfunctory. When I called the class back together to share what they'd written, they retold what had taken place in the story; there were no personal stories or experiences that they connected to the reading. However, as they gained more practice in this kind of writing, students became more adept at responding affectively to a text.

In another reading/writing activity the next week, several students did make personal connections with the text. I had asked them to read a short passage from the text and then write their reactions to it. I told them they could write sentences, phrases or even just words. I wanted them to capture their thoughts and feelings on paper without worrying about the technical aspects of writing. They read the passage a second time and wrote again. After that, they shared what they'd written with a partner. There was a lot of

discussion and as I moved around the classroom, I could hear them telling stories about their own lives as well as Billie Jo's. After this sharing, I told the students to take what they'd written and make it into a paragraph. I think the sharing helped this writing activity because they shifted easily into the writing. After about 20 minutes (during which time I walked around the room, helping students), I asked for volunteers to share what they'd written with the class. Several people shared and those that didn't paid close attention to the students who did, sharing in the laughter and asking questions or making comments. The final step in this activity was to have the students revise their writing, which we began in class and they finished for homework. This is where we worked on the technical aspects of writing, i.e. grammar, syntax, spelling.

The reading passage that I used for this writing exercise was entitled "Beginning: August 1920." In this passage, Billie Jo tells the reader how and where she was born (at home on the kitchen floor when the wheat crop came ripe); about how her father had wanted a boy and named her Billie Jo; about her relationship with her mother, and that Ma was pregnant again. She closed with the thought, "Wonder if Daddy'll get his boy this time?" Written in a matter-of-fact manner, the reader had to "read between the lines" to comment on Billie Jo's feelings about these events.

Here are excerpts from three students who wrote about the passage described in the preceding paragraph.

> *Juan: This story is about what happened the day that she was born. This passage describes how was her father feeling, because he was waiting for*

a boy, but ! surprise! was a girl. That was the reason why her father named her with a boy's name: Billie Jo. In Chile one of my relatives wanted a boy too but he got a girl and named her Pedro. The whole family was angry with him. They said that this would affect the girl negatively and she would grow up with a poor self image. But she's a lovely woman and has a wonderful family. I still don't think is a good idea to name a girl a boy's name.

Maria: Billie Jo loves her father but I think she feels bad because she knows that he wants a boy. She tries to do things like a boy, drives the tractor. What does her mother think? Why do men always want boys? I think this is the same in all countries. In my country, boys are more important, but I don't think this. I have a son and daughter and I treat them equal.

Melba: I like this episode because talk about a new member came to the family. I think always when a new member is came to the family is a the mor happy and emotional time I remember when my children born I was so happy and so nervious I love remember that time.

I've described reading and writing activities whose goal was to put students in touch with their affective states, but obviously students also need practice in finding facts and specific pieces of information in a reading. At least once a week I checked students' reading comprehension by asking them to write answers to factual questions from the

text. After completing the assignment, they compared their answers with a classmate. If they had a different answer for the same question, they referred to the text or checked with another classmate. The teacher was the last resource to corroborate an answer.

A brief discussion of additional activities that were used during the course will follow. These activities include drama, role-play, drawing, and use of video. If the reader of this thesis is interested in learning more about how to use reader response with these activities, he/she can refer to the text, Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms (Karolides 2000).

The students did dramatic readings from Out of the Dust. One way we did this was with an activity called "Read and Look Up," which I learned as a student in my Four Skills class at SIT. Students chose a part of the reading they wanted to say aloud to the class. With a partner, they practiced reading and then looking up from their reading at their partner while they said as much of the text as they could remember. Students practiced speaking with appropriate expression, accurate pronunciation and phrasing. After fifteen to twenty minutes of practice, students would say their piece to the class, often with their partners at their side for technical (and moral) support. Students liked this activity and as it lent itself to the dramatic passages in the text, we used the activity several times over the course of the semester.

We also used dramatizations where students took on the role of a character from the novel and spoke from that character's point of view. In their role as Daddy or Ma or

Billie Jo, they argued about and answered important questions such as whether to give up on farming and join the exodus of families moving to California to escape the harsh conditions in the dust bowl. It was obvious that they enjoyed taking on these new identities because often they would make up whole new scenarios to discuss which the book hadn't touched on. This kind of activity finds support in the principles of the Suggestopedia approach which maintains that "assuming a new identity enhances students' feelings of security and allows them to be more open. They feel less inhibited since their performance is really that of another person." Furthermore, "dramatization is a particularly valuable way of playfully activating the material. Fantasy reduces barriers to learning" (Larsen-Freeman 1986:78-79).

Sometimes students would choose to draw in response to a question about the text. In one activity where students had the choice of writing or drawing a description of the characters in the story, a young woman who didn't speak much in class chose to draw. She drew Billie Jo in an exaggerated fashion but completely in accordance with the text's description: "a long-legged girl with a wide mouth and cheekbones like bicycle handles…a redheaded, freckle-faced, narrow-hipped girl with a fondness for apples…"(Hesse 1999:3). She used her drawing to describe Billie Jo to the class and said that her drawing helped her talk. In fact, she seemed to enjoy talking about Billie Jo. I think her drawing served both as a prop which she could focus her attention on as she spoke, and as a prompt to help her remember what she wanted to say.

Whenever possible, when I wasn't observing the class or helping a student, I participated in the activities and exercises that I assigned the students. I wrote when they wrote (or drew) and shared what I'd written or drawn. I asked questions not only to help students make connections between what they and others had said, or to make them aware of certain aspects of the reading that I thought were important to consider but had been overlooked, but because I wanted to know what they thought. For example, who was to blame for Billie Jo's mother's death? There could be many interpretations, and there were, even though the sequence of events leading to her death were clear cut. Listening to others' ideas and interpretations made me "think again" and sometimes revise my own positions. I know that this happened for the students also. It's important for a reader-response teacher to be seen as an active participant in the process of making meaning, and not as the keeper of the meaning. Joining in the learning process with one's students benefits both teacher and student, although not all students are immediately comfortable with these new student/teacher roles. There were a few instances where students became impatient when I tossed questions that they'd asked me back to them or to the class; and sometimes I got impatient because of time pressures and short-circuited the process by giving students answers they could have figured out on their own. However, I believe that this approach empowers the student while keeping the teaching process fresh and interesting for the teacher, and the enthusiastic responses I got from the students, in terms of their class participation and feedback, encourage me to continue to pursue this approach.

The next chapter concludes this thesis with my assessment of how well I integrated reader-response theory into this reading course and with student comments about their learning in this course.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this paper I described my early frustration with my inability to help my students connect with the joy of reading. As I said, I knew that there were more meaningful ways to interact with a text than just being able to relate the plot or summarize the reading or find the facts. I knew that "something" was missing in my students' responses to a reading, but the best way I could describe it was to say that the "joy" was missing. I think that part of the reason the "joy" was not present in my reading classes was because I didn't know then how to help students relate to a text as something more than a technical vehicle to learn a new language. I would ask open-ended questions like "What do you think?" and "How do you feel about that?" but these questions, for the most part, came out of the blue because I had not prepared students to explore personal connections with a text the way I did in this reader-response reading class.

Also, students had been so accustomed to looking to me -- or other teachers -- for 'the answers' that they weren't used to investigating or acknowledging what they thought and felt about a reading. I, in turn, had answered questions too readily and rarely let students struggle with their own thoughts and interpretations. Now, however, I am more comfortable with the struggle and with allowing time for it in my classes. Also, when I am asked questions, I have learned 'to throw the conversational ball' back to my students with ease. This reader-response technique, which I described in the second chapter, is an outgrowth of reader-response philosophy which reinforced what I learned at SIT, that the

teacher is a participant with the students in the learning process. I think that this reading class exemplified this practice. By the middle of the course, I saw students routinely turning first to each other for help rather than to me. They didn't immediately look at me when they had a question or got stuck. I think that my reader-response way of responding and the activities that we did which I described in the last chapter reinforced this collaborative approach to learning.

I said early on that one of my goals was to help my students become more confident learners. As the class continued, I observed that students were more willing to speak, to offer opinions and to share their feelings with the class. This added a quality of "aliveness" that had been missing in my previous classes. Perhaps students felt freer to make mistakes partly because many of the activities we did encouraged them to make guesses about situations in the text and later revise their guesses. We talked about 'revisions' and not 'mistakes.' Revising their answers also helped students see that reading and writing (and thinking) is a process, and because I participated in the class exercises with them, they saw that it is that way for the teacher, too.

Overall, I am satisfied with how I was able to implement reader-response theory in this reading course. One thing I would do differently, however, is spend more time on some of the technical reading skills such as summarizing. I think that I was too focused on getting students to respond from their own experiences. For example, the first (unsuccessful) writing exercise that they did, which I discussed in the last chapter, could have been more successful if I had had the students summarize the reading first. I think it

would have especially helped the lower level students to understand the reading passage better, and it would have helped most of the students to write more easily about their associations with the text. Next time, I will aim for more of a balance between teaching the technical skills like summarizing and finding main ideas with connecting the reading to personal experiences.

I will end this thesis with some thoughts from the students on their learning in this course. As I said previously, feedback on the text, Out of the Dust, was unanimously positive. The following student's comments show the personal connection she was able to make with the text. *"I think my teacher when decide to read this book, "Out of the Dust" she was right because this book touch myself and live me very good think to understand my parents too, because sometime I think they were not very good to me special to listen to me, but sometime parents are so bizy, but they love the children and they cannot listen all the time. thank a feel more comfortable now about my negative feel about my parents."*

In response to the question, "What helped you learn in this class?" a student wrote: *"If you make a mistake no one will judge you. You have to make mistakes. From mistakes we learn, not from someone telling you your mistakes. When you don't feel free you think more narrow. You can think more wide if not concerned with making mistakes."* Another student wrote, *"there's a difference between home and school – home I have to fight – my children tell me I make mistakes – that's not good."*

On the subject of student interactions, a student wrote that *"(students) share our appreciation (with) each other*," and another student commented on "*the friendly partners*" in this class.

Whenever possible I tried to give students choices in how to respond to questions or assignments. This is especially important in classes with different levels of English skills. One student wrote: *"It was good course. I think, it was the best class in my study life. I don't know many vocabulary. But in this class I could just listen."*

Finally, a student wrote that in this class *"English language in so simple and easy lessons and topics from interesting fully emotion, easy understanding, the book "Out of the Dust". In this kind of teaching I didn't feel like I shoud, or must come to the class, but I wanted to come."*

In conclusion, I think that reader response works well with more than just teaching an appreciation of literature, for which it was developed. Its philosophy and techniques apply as well to teaching language skills. Reading response helped me teach the most enjoyable reading course I'd ever taught. Though I have since left the community college and am now teaching a variety of courses in a university intensive English language program, I find that reader-response philosophy and some of its methods are applicable even in courses other than reading.

Appendix A

Previewing a Text: In this activity I wanted to see what the students knew about previewing a text before I taught them how to do this. Since there were mixed levels in this class, I expected that some students would know more than others. I asked them to tell me what they did before reading a book to find out if they would enjoy reading it. I listed their comments on the board. If I hadn't gotten all the information from the students that I wanted about previewing, I would have demonstrated how to preview something. For example, I could have used a letter, noting the kind and size of the envelope, the writing, return address, date it was sent, where it was from, in order to predict what was in the letter (Mikulecky, Jeffries 1998). After that, we would have brainstormed more ways to explore a text before reading it. However, the students gave me all the necessary information about previewing, so those steps weren't necessary. For the benefit of the lower level students, I gave volunteers a book to demonstrate the process. They explained what they were doing as they previewed the book for the class and then made predictions about what the book was about.

Steps to take when previewing a text:

1. Look at the front and back covers and read the information there.
2. Look at any pictures or illustrations in the book.
3. Note if the book is fiction or non-fiction.
4. Read the table of contents if there is one.
5. Read a few sentences or paragraphs from the first chapter.

Appendix B

Student Feedback: I asked for feedback from the students once a week. Sometimes it was verbal feedback and other times it was written feedback. Below is a copy of the format we used with a student's written comments.

Feedback # 2

What class activities helped you learn?

1. – The storm ideas about some topic.
2. – The teacher read the books in order to get improve our pronunciation.
3. – Share our appreciation each other.

What class activities didn't help you learn?

None

General comments or suggestions

Perhaps, It should be good spent more time listen our teacher how she read, special when we have new words.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ali, Soraya. "The Reader-Response Approach: An Alternative for Teaching Literature in a Second Language." *Journal of Reading* 37:4, pp 288-296. December 1993/ January 1994.

Beach, Richard. *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories.* Urbana, ILL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993.

Christenbury, Leila. "The Guy Who Wrote This Poem Seems to Have the Same Feelings As You Have": Reader-Response Methodology, pp.47-60 in Nicholas J. Karolides (ed.), *Reader Response In Secondary And College Classrooms.* New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1999.

Henderson, Helen J. & Pederson, Jay P. (editors), *Twentieth-Centuty Literary Movements Dictionary*. Michigan: Omnigraphics, Inc., 2000.

hooks, bell. *Bone Black, Memories of Girlhood.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

Karolides, Nicholas J. ed. *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms.* New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

Larsen-Freeman, Diane. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. New York and England: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Mikulecky, Beatrice S. & Jeffries, Linda. *Reading Power,* second edition. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1998.

Palmer, Parker J. *The courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1998.*

Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Literature As Exploration.* New York: The Modern Language Association, 1995.

----------, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Varvel, Linda. "Reader Response to Drama: Prospecting for Human Understanding and Connections." In Nicholas J Karolides (ed.), *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classroom, pp.159-177.* New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.