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Toward Student-Led Reading Discussion in the Classroom: A Teacher's Journey with Reader Response

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TOWARD STUDENT-LED READING DISCUSSION IN THE CLASSROOM: A TEACHER'S JOURNEY WITH READER RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces an ESL teacher's learning curve with student-based reading discussion, both teacher-guided and student-led. It comments on her pre-teaching experience with formalist and reader response theory as reader, student, writer, editor, and then as teacher experimenting with student-led discussion in three consecutive terms. Special attention is given to the strategies that were used to build a reading community and to facilitate the release of students' voices in the reading discussions. The taped, transcribed discussions are summarized for their intellectual content and examined to assess the social and linguistic benefits to the students. Also evaluated are the uses of the student-led discussion format as a feedback tool for the teacher.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about my journey as an ESL teacher, traveling toward a consciousness that allows me to give my students tools for language learning while getting out of their way. My physical destination is a classroom in which I apply reader response theory in the form of student-led reading discussion. My mental destination is a state of mind that helps me structure a learning context that lets the students' voices come through instead of mine.

The journey begins long before I started teaching, in my childhood when, as a reader and student, I rebelled internally against the hierarchical teaching practices that prevailed at home and school. The paper follows my learning path from grade school student, reading two ways, to graduate student grappling with formalist theory, to writer and editor, at home with reader response, and finally to teacher. It traces the learning curve: before studying at The School for International Training and after, with teacher-guided, student-based discussion and student-led reading discussion. The three long chapters before the conclusion focus on my three consecutive tries with student-led reading discussion: what I learned from my students, my assessment and theirs of the approach, my reassessment of teacher-guided discussion, how and when to use each or both, together. The final chapter offers some conclusions about the nature and value of student-led reading discussion.

My journey with reader response in a language classroom continues.

CHAPTER II

MY BACKGROUND AS A READER AND STUDENT

When I left home for college, I was sure that I wanted to explore any other field of study but education. At home I'd been surrounded by teachers: my father was an elementary school principal, my mother taught first grade, and my older brother would eventually teach science in high school. My parents were devoted to the cause of education, at home as well as at work. Like their immigrant parents before them, they fervently believed that it was the path toward personal liberation, world peace, and any other worthy goal you could possibly wish for. This belief, which they passed along to me at an early age, I came to view as a gift, which I've carried ever since. On the face of it, then, it might seem that I just needed to do something different from them, to make a strong case for a separate identity. And though this was certainly true, there was more to it than that. There was something troubling me about the assumptions of my teachers at home and school. But it took me a long time to figure out what it was--and even longer to change my mind and choose teaching for myself.

My Teachers Deliver the Meaning

During my elementary school years, I barely sensed the contradiction I would eventually discover between my impulse as a student to make my own meaning and the belief system driving the learning process at home and school, that it was the teacher's job to deliver meaning and the student's job to

receive it. At home, my learning opportunities seemed boundless. Even before I could read, there was storytelling: my parents reading and rereading my favorites, my father, a classics major, weaving his own myths. Almost any activity in my parents' child-centered household was a vehicle for conveying their knowledge--and their enthusiasm for knowledge--to me and my brother. We learned botany and native American lore on woodland walks, rudimentary physics and American history on camping trips, my father's blend of ethics and theology during the hour commute from Ethical Culture Sunday school. Using the Socratic method, my father would ask us questions designed to elicit the truths he was so eager to impart. When we couldn't guess the direction in which he was headed, he would jump in with gusto and tell us The Answer in vivid detail. We understood without discussion that his answer was non-negotiable.

My school experiences were sometimes pale by comparison, but the pedagogical subtext was the same: the student was an empty vessel and it was the teacher's job to fill it. The teacher was the boss of information, as my father was at home. Teachers gave answers and good students remembered them. It was the rare teacher who asked questions to elicit the answers she wanted to hear, let alone encouraged us to ask our own questions to form our own theories about cause, motive, or anything of an interpretive nature. There were many teachers who stopped at the facts, equating them with meaning, as if there were no need to interpret them at all. There was teacher talk and student recitation, but not much discussion.

I didn't identify any of this as a patriarchal or hierarchical model at the time. It didn't occur to me to question the supremacy of a one-way system that was triply reinforced by my teachers in school, my parents as teachers at

home, and my father as principal, captivating us with his school stories at the dinner table. The world my parents had shown me held a rich stew of information to take in. I was curious. I had an appetite for facts, and I was persuaded that the more knowledge I absorbed, the more I would inherit the world. Besides, my father's obvious passion for his work and his talent for story-telling softened the edges of his authoritarian style.

It took years of being a student before I saw that behind the premise that the teacher was the authority on meaning was another, that meaning had a location. It resided outside of the student, in the authoritative texts of the teacher. By some mysterious process, writers had put in books all the knowledge and meaning I was supposed to get and which the teacher had already absorbed, so she could guide me to the right conclusions. My job was to listen and read and then demonstrate what I'd learned by recalling what I'd heard and read. Rarely was there a reading discussion in which students exchanged their own responses to a text to draw their own conclusions.

Two Ways to Read

Inside me, a voice of disagreement began slowly to stir. It took several years of grade school before I began to hear it. Sometimes the voice said, "I think something else." Or, "This is not true!" Or, "How come she (the teacher) isn't talking about the thing that really matters?" Once in awhile the voice said, "I don't want to go along with the teacher's answer, I have my own." But the voice of parental and school authority was more forceful, and wanting to please, I came to the conclusion that there were *two* ways to gain knowledge and meaning: one was to be a "good student" and go along with what authority defined as the learning process: ingest the teacher's words and the words of

her texts and reproduce them to prove that I'd learned, and the other way was to discover my own meaning through the books I read outside of school.

Because when I read for pleasure, outside of school, I paid attention to my own responses to the text -- my questions, inferences, feelings, and associations. I allowed myself to draw conclusions and to trust them. I never doubted that I was making a meaning of my own, but I kept it a secret--and what a fabulous secret!--because I was going against authority at home as well as at school. It never occurred to me that anyone else in school might also be learning--making meaning--in this way. Or that a teacher could choose to facilitate this alternative process. So I went underground with the meaning I discovered in books outside of school. And reading for pleasure became a subversive act.

I read eclectically: classics and comics, Nancy Drew, Dickens, The Bobsy Twins, Hardy, Austen, Henry James, my Uncle Max's medical texts, especially the volume on sexual reproduction. There were *Treasure Island* and *The Secret Garden,* which I reread several times, and *My Friend Flicka* and *The Yearling.* I remember finishing this book at my grandmother's house, throwing myself on her bed in a deep funk, and my mother shaking her head at what she called my "theatrics." "It's just a book!," she declared. But I had lived with Jody for many hours and felt his grief when he was forced to shoot his beloved yearling, Flag.

I read books for their story before I could understand their themes, bringing home the maximum allowance of six at a time from the library, sniffing the pages like a bookdust junky. I read for vicarious experience, for release of feelings no one talked about at home, to learn more about the mysterious world of grownups. I imagined worlds, savored new words that I

understood but never spoke. I cared about the characters and wondered what would happen to them afterwards. I experimented in my own life with things I'd read about.

I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do in the world when I grew up, but it certainly wasn't teaching, if that meant forcing my views or a textbook author's views down my students' throats. I only knew that I loved hearing a good story and I loved to read, and whatever work I did in the future, I hoped it would include both.

My parents' reactions to my passion for reading reinforced my need for secrecy about the nature of the experience itself. To my mother, I was a "bookworm," someone to ridicule for "burying my nose in a book" all the time, when I should be up and about doing the practical everyday things. My father, who was pleased to see me reading so much, encouraged me to write down my impressions. But when he began to correct my ideas, I turned to diary writing, which gave me a place to be with myself, by myself. I wrote to sort out feelings for which I didn't always have a name. I found myself rereading the diary to understand myself better. Sometimes I agreed with myself, sometimes I no longer felt the same way. Each reading was a fresh experience.

A Writing Teacher Validates My Way

I kept the journal until the middle of high school, when I took a creative writing class and began to write stories. Here, for the first and only time in high school, I was encouraged to make my own meaning, not only from my own texts, but from the novels, short stories, and poems we read together, and--equally important--from the texts written by other students in the class.

We also discovered that, at least when it came to our own work, we fiction writers often did not start with an intended meaning. As writers, we had a memory of a place or feeling, a scrap of dialogue or an image, and the story grew from that fragment through a dynamic interaction of language and personal associations. We had not fixed a meaning in the text for our readers to identify. We were discovering it as we went along, just as readers did! What was more, our teacher suggested, seasoned authors did the same thing. In fact, he went so far as to warn against starting out with a fixed meaning because that might stifle the creative process.

What a relief to be told that this meaning I made as reader or writer, which was not in the text, was the very thing to which I should pay close attention! My wonderful secret was out in the open! And it was better than okay. It was necessary business, our teacher assured us, because meaning was made when a reader read the text. How could his meaning be our meaning? he asked us. *His* meaning happened when *he* read a text. *Our* meaning happened when *we* read a text.

So! Not only was the meaning not in the text, but it was not a static, written-in-stone meaning outside of the text. In fact, there could be as many valid meanings as there were readers. I was reminded of my experience rereading my own journal. It made sense to me that our experience, even our reading context, could change what we thought and felt about a text. So it was important to know where we were coming from psychologically, politically, socially, etc. to better understand our own and each other's reader interpretations.

The Formalist Agenda

In sharp contrast to this emphasis on reader interpretation was the formalist agenda of another high school teacher of mine, whose Advanced Placement College English course I took in my senior year. I knew nothing about literary theory then. I didn't even know there was such a thing until I got to college. But without calling it by its name, this teacher was applying literary theory she must have learned as a graduate student, probably some time in the fifties, when New Criticism was a dominant force in literature departments. What she was teaching us was also based on the hierarchical learning model I'd been exposed to all along at school and home, only now it was being presented as a specific method for studying literature.

According to the theory, there was no meaning outside the literary text. A text was an *embodiment* of a writer's experience. It was the thing itself, an objectification, not a representation. New Criticis like John Crow Ransom believed it was fallacious to consider author's intention or readers' emotional reactions as elements of literary meaning (Beach 1993). What he and other New Critics advocated was "precise, technical, objective analysis of the language of a text, particularly figurative language" (Beach 1993: 15).

So the reader's job was to penetrate the language of the author and thereby receive the objectified experience. The student's task was to analyze the language of the writer to determine how she accomplished the goal of objectifying experience, and the teacher's job was to guide the student toward a correct explication of that objectification.

In Advanced Placement English we were asked to explicate a meaning found in a text by analyzing the author's use of metaphor, symbolism, meter, refrain, or any other literary device used by the writer to recreate a meaning.

The idea was to verify the intrinsic meaning precisely, through documentation of the language contained in the text. It was meant to be as orderly a process of reasoning and documentation as the work of a scientist.

I tried. I put personal philosophy aside, didn't discuss my interpretation of character's motives or moral dilemmas, avoided exploration of feelings triggered in me by reading. I looked for literary devices in a text and tried to explain how they helped tell the story or develop a theme. But I wrote papers which felt like plot summaries, even to me.

My teacher wrote in the margins of my papers, "N. N. G." (Needs no ghost from the grave, Horatio, to tell us this), her code from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" for saying that I was stating the obvious. On one paper she wrote, "I'm disappointed in you." I went home, cried into my pillow, and determined to look for a non-traditional college where I might find literature teachers who thought like my creative writing teacher.

I was stunned when I got to the small, progressive, liberal arts college of my choice and discovered that literature was taught the way it had been taught in high school Advanced Placement English. Professors were still authorities who delivered the meaning located, and, according to them, objectified, in the text. They often lectured or read from their papers to explicate and defend a thesis supporting their formalist theory, and we were expected to model ourselves on them, so that we, too, could become expert formalists. The usual strategy was to cook up an idea and head for the stacks to search the journals. If your idea had already been taken, then you searched some more, to see who had already proven what and to find some unclaimed territory, some as yet unexplicated literary aspect of the text to analyze for its contribution to the objectification of the author's experience in that text.

This was in the mid-sixties, when beliefs about the supremacy of white over black, male over female, sexual chastity over sexual freedom, rich over poor, developed over developing nations were in a state of upheaval. But while politics and social life on my "radical" campus reflected that uproar, most of my literature teachers were carrying on an academic literary tradition I had been trying to escape. Confused, I considered switching majors. Maybe psychology, I thought, since I'd always been interested in people's stories. Instead, I switched colleges and found, to my disappointment, that most teachers of literature at this east coast university were also following the formalist credo. Once again, though, there was an exception, another creative writing teacher who, like my high school writing teacher, wrote fiction himself.

This apparent dichotomy in thinking between writing teachers and literature teachers was puzzling to me. I wondered if there were something about the fiction writing process, maybe the fact that writers reread themselves as they wrote in order to arrive at their own meaning, that convinced my writing teachers that *every* reader made his own meaning as he read. As writers reading their own work, perhaps they understood firsthand what literary and pedagogical theory would propose years later, that there was an equation between writing and reading, where the reader "rewrote" the story as he read, fleshing out the writer's script out of his own experience, and the writer reread the story he wrote, interpreting his own story as he read himself.

But the strangest and most confusing dichotomy seemed to be in the mind of my college writing teacher. He also taught literature, but in his literature courses, he switched hats and analyzed the text as a New Critic,

dismissing the reader's response as something irrelevant! Somehow he was separating the work of writers and literary critics so that in his own mind he could justify viewing the reader's process in two distinct ways.

If it had been possible to major in writing at the university I'd transferred to, I might have made that choice. Writing was one kind of work I'd discovered so far where it was assumed that I would have a meaning of my own to communicate. Instead, I stuck it out as a lit major, with the hope that I might eventually figure out in graduate school how to reconcile the conflict between formalist thinking and my own. In the meantime, I read two ways, as I had since childhood, one that was based on my own response, and the second, with a new veneer of literary theory coating it, for the objectified experience located in the text. I learned how to write a paper that discussed literature in formalist terms. I could even see the value of analyzing how the literary aspects of a poem or story helped to convey its meaning. Sometimes it was exactly what I wanted to focus on. But the problem with the New Critics, for me, was their insistence that this was the *only* way to make meaning out of a poem or a short story. They had left the reader, even the author, out of the picture.

By the time I completed the masters, the decision I'd made back in high school not to teach felt as if it had grown roots. Not only was I more certain than ever that I didn't want to teach at any level, including college and graduate school, but now I was sure I didn't want to do literary research either, if it meant advancing the cause of formalism. I put down literary journals and climbed up out of the stacks, without looking back.

CHAPTER III

TRANSITIONS: FROM FORMALISM TO READER RESPONSE, FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Ironically, by the time I left to work in the east coast offices of a literary/political monthly magazine, there *was* an upheaval taking place in literary theory. Reader-response criticism had been percolating in the late sixties to early seventies, in schools where I hadn't studied, and was having an impact in classrooms from grade school to graduate school.

These critics were saying essentially what my writing teachers had told me: there was a dynamic relationship between the reader and the text during the act of reading which resulted in a unique interpretive response by the reader. Reader response theorists repudiated the idea that meaning was a fixed entity located in the text, to be discovered there by the reader like a nugget of gold dug up on a treasure hunt. Instead, they believed it was an event that happened in a unique way each time a text was read by an individual reader. Though they did not all agree about the nature or location of that event, they could agree that there were multiple meanings for every text at any given time and place, dependent on the number of readers.

The implications for structuring reading discussion in the classroom were enormous: any teacher in agreement with reader response theory would have to move with the paradigm shift from teacher-based to student-based discussion, finding venues that would allow for the students' reading responses, and not the teacher's, to shape the discussion. A teacher could lead a student-based reading discussion, or students could conduct their own. The

teacher's job was no longer to provide the interpretation, but to find venues for students to exchange their own.

I hadn't felt the impact of reader response as a graduate student in English, but part of my job while I was working in the editorial offices of the magazine was to discuss my interpretation of manuscripts accepted or submitted for publication. For all I know, the senior editors may have believed that meaning did reside in the text. But the issue at hand was to conceptualize your response to the articles clearly enough to persuade the editorial staff to either publish or not, to edit or not and how. What the magazine decided to publish was as likely to be the result of aggressive persuasion from a reader as any good quality of the story or article measured in human or literary terms. But it was exhilarating nonetheless to be reading in a context that wasn't dominated by formalist thinking.

The same went for editorial writing, which was modeled for me as a delicate balancing act between trusting one's own response while respecting what you intuited as author's intention. In looking for author's intention, we were not so much searching for the meaning in the text, but rather trying not to replace an author's agenda with our own. And since we were actually working with writers and their work in progress, we had the chance to dialogue with them about their intention to help them say what they wanted to say.

In the early seventies, after my two sons were born, I continued to work for the magazine and other publications as a freelance editor, but I began to write fiction again, this time picture books and stories for children. I also began to write stories for school reading programs, work that often felt compromised because of the editorial bowing to fundamentalist market

demands and the rigidities of a graded vocabulary. Looking for more rewarding ways to work as a freelance writer, I began to write video scripts for educational film companies, which felt like a better fit with fewer external restrictions. I continued to write fiction: a novel for young adults, short stories for adults.

And then, in the early eighties, seemingly out of nowhere, I decided to teach. The novel had taken a long time to produce, and though it had led to an agent who was enthusiastic, he was unable to place the book. I didn't intend to abandon writing, but I needed a way to earn a steadier income for my family. After the long stint of solitary work on the novel, I wanted work with people that would result in more immediate benefits to community. When a friend suggested tutoring foreign nationals in a corporate setting, I found myself excited by the possibility of working with people who were looking for a way to release their voices in the language of a new culture. Here was my chance to facilitate "reader" responses to a living, fluid "text"--US culture--while helping students strengthen their language skills in English. I pursued the idea and suddenly found myself riveted by the challenge of trying to be the kind of teacher I'd always wanted to have.

I'd done a complete turnabout, or so it seemed at first glance. But hindsight tells me what I hadn't realized after graduate school. To begin with, I'd underestimated the degree to which I'd inherited my father's passion for education, if not his pedagogy. The fact that the students in his school were Hispanic immigrants whose families he tried to draw into the school community must surely have been an influence, too. Then later, when I became a mother, the teaching aspect of parenting had fascinated me. As a parent, it had meant everything to me to help my children learn for

themselves, to help them develop their own voice and express it. What I mean by their own "voice," is the authentic expression of themselves, unique, distinct, recognizably theirs and theirs alone. I wanted them to be able to read a book, listen to the news, participate in a discussion and be aware of their own responses as well as mine or any other. I hoped they would learn how to "give voice" to those responses in a way that was their own.

I began tutoring ESL at the Latin American headquarters of an international corporation. My students were a group of highly educated, self-directed business executives who were already asking their own questions, so it was easy to take my cue from them in planning classes. Yet as articulate as they were, all of them, without exception, worried that their voices were so diminished because of their limited English, that it would not be possible for them to be who they really were while living in the US.

Before this, I hadn't appreciated how adult language acquisition was so colored by deep rootedness in the first culture. The connection between the linguistic and cultural aspects of learning a second language was a mystery that began to fascinate me. But the fact that my students were on temporary assignment meant that they were essentially visitors, eager to navigate a new culture until they returned home a year or two later. I wanted the chance to work with immigrants who were planning to remain in the country, or at least to stay long enough to interact with US culture as permanent residents.

CHAPTER IV

ESL TEACHER IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE: PRE-TRAINING DIFFICULTIES WITH TEACHER-LED READING DISCUSSION

I began teaching ESL at Westchester Community College (WCC) in Valhalla, New York, where I assumed I would find the kind of students I was looking for.

The ESL program at WCC had over 800 adult students, many of whom were legal immigrants. There were also significant numbers of university students and *au pairs*, with a sprinkling of refugees, diplomats, and executives on assignment. A small minority of students were citizens. Some admitted to not having papers. Many were Latin American or Asian, but there were growing numbers from eastern Europe, Russia, French-speaking Africa, India, western Europe, the Middle East. My classes typically had students from eight to fifteen countries who spoke five to twelve different first languages.

I taught courses in evening and intensive day programs that combined reading, writing, listening and speaking, with an emphasis on building grammar skills and vocabulary and, to a lesser degree, teaching speech production. Teachers were obliged to make use of texts which students were required to purchase, though the director of the program supported our use of these as reinforcers and not the primary source for class work. The thirteen-week program offered an attendance-based certificate, but no academic credit.

As it turned out, many of my students at WCC were not nearly as interested in becoming a part of US culture or in finding their voices in a

second culture as I had expected. Many socialized exclusively in first-country circles. Except for ESL classes, they used only their first language. Many were here to make more money than they could earn back home. They wanted to improve their English to get a raise or a promotion, or to go back home and compete for better jobs there. They had no intention of becoming citizens. In fact, many of them traveled back and forth from the US to their native countries, carrying on double lives in which they remained active members of their native culture.

This is not to minimize the significant presence of students who were interested in becoming a part of US culture: the handfuls of citizens, the refugees and others who were here to stay, or wanted to find a way to remain. But I had to factor in the presence of so many students who thought they could learn a second language without trying to enter into the new culture, even on a temporary basis. Or who clung to their first cultures out of fear, bitterness, or inertia. They were among those students who were most resistant to discussion of any kind.

The presence of students who weren't making an effort to be part of US culture complicated my goal to bring out their voices in English, but it didn't cancel it out. Whether they consciously shared my hopes for them or not, I believed that the only way to improve their English was to bring US culture into the classroom as the milieu for their practice. With my corporate students, I had seen firsthand how the content and manner of what people communicated to each other was so completely influenced by the rules of the culture to which they belonged.

Meeting the Challenge of Cultural Diversity

In a teaching context with such cultural diversity, I knew that I would have to find ways for students to accept each other's cultural differences as well. I assumed that the more we drew from personal experience, the more interactive the approach, the greater the chance that my students would respect each other's voices to the extent that they came through. My hunch was that if I was willing to make myself vulnerable first and tell stories from my own experience, then students would feel safer to enter a discussion in which they could have a free exchange of their own ideas, not mine.

I assigned tasks that gave the students venues for self-expression and for building cultural awareness. We wrote dialogue journals, brought cultural objects to class, used student-selected articles for our reading text. I brought in articles and photos to use as catalysts for students to voice their real concerns. We swapped stories about the real things. My classrooms became friendly places. Sometimes there were exchanges that created enough energy to raise the roof. But I wasn't satisfied. To my great surprise, I discovered it was much harder to have a student-generated reading discussion--or any kind of student-directed discussion--than I'd expected.

The truth was, I didn't have a clear idea of how to guide a student-based discussion, much less structure a venue for student-led discussion. As a student I'd wanted my teachers to help me ask my own questions, to let the discussion flow from these questions, to help me figure out what I thought, not what they thought. But I didn't know how (yet) to do that as a teacher. I knew from experience that asking a class, "Do you have any questions?" usually went over like a lead bomb. Unsure how to guide students' responses to each other's questions, I asked critical thinking questions based on my ideas, and

when they resonated meaningfully enough for my students, I would get back honest, thoughtful answers that sometimes led to a lively exchange. But my questions reflected my concerns, not necessarily the students' concerns. And students rarely kept the ball going by themselves.

One mistake I kept making about discussion in general was that I tried to keep it going by paraphrasing and mirroring the students' thinking, hoping this would clarify the content of their thought and spur on more dialogue. This kind of active listening had worked fine one-on-one, as a tutor. But with a group, I ended up funneling the conversation through myself with comments like, "So you're saying that..." This had the effect of compressing the energy in the discussion, rather than increasing its flow from one student to another.

Why didn't I let silence happen? I was afraid. I thought if I let silences build, students would think I didn't know the answers, or that I didn't know how to do my job. On the one hand, I wanted to empower students to talk freely. On the other hand, I was afraid to do anything that might tarnish my image as an authority figure! I hadn't yet made distinctions for myself between authoritarian control for the sake of being in charge and a teacher's responsibility to keep commitments to learning goals and time agendas. I was willing to abandon my planned discussion questions to let something spontaneous and student-generated happen, but I didn't know how and when to step in, or when to move on.

Sometimes I did a flip-flop and just handed over the reins to the students without giving them any directions on how to conduct their own discussion. Of course, they usually floundered. Other times, after a whole class discussion had taken off successfully, I would step in with an opinion of my own, as if I

were just another student, but whenever I did that students would defer to my authority as teacher and clam up. Nobody wanted to disagree with the teacher. And they knew better than I not to treat me as a student.

When I had small groups lead their own discussion, they would become animated, presumably because they were less exposed and felt safer that way. But aside from circulating, I wasn't savvy about getting feedback about the content of their discussion, or their degree of involvement, especially while I was not there to listen. All in all, I was vacillating back and forth between too much management of class discussion, or not enough.

I discovered a dirty little fact: it was easier for me to give in to fear or inertia and lead a teacher-based discussion than it was to figure out how to create a context for discussion in which students bounced off one another.

I made a second discovery about something that was getting in my way. Many of my students actually preferred the teaching model I was trying to replace. They wanted an authoritarian teaching style in which the teacher gave them the answers.

There was more than one irony in this. I was teaching a student population that hadn't been exposed to reader response and its classroom application any more than I had, unlike many of the US-born students on campus. Just like me, my foreign-born students were largely raised on formal lectures, note-taking, and student recitations. They had no reference point for a reading discussion in which they were expected to make their own meaning and then share it. But I persisted in searching for non-hierarchical methods that were foreign to them--and me!--unaware that my insistence could be viewed as yet another form of hierarchical thinking!

CHAPTER V

THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING: MY LEARNING CURVE WITH TEACHER-GUIDED, STUDENT-BASED READING DISCUSSION

I decided to go back to graduate school and learn how to be the teacher I'd always wanted to have, particularly with respect to student-initiated learning. While studying in an MAT program in TESOL at The School for International Training (S.I.T.), my thinking evolved gradually about how to create the groundwork for a reading discussion in which students' responses were the primary source for discussion. I saw that there had been a discontinuity in my classes between community-building time and linguistic work, instead of classwork that reflected their organic connection. I had been scheduling time for us to be real people together, say during a pre-reading discussion based on cultural and personal experience, in which we shared feelings and ideas. And then scheduling in separate time to learn grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation from assigned texts and my handouts. There'd been honesty and humor in the discussions, but we'd still been in the hierarchical, teacher-guided box. And though the students had been learning context-based grammar from articles and stories about US culture, the work was divorced from their own speech and life experience.

What I wanted to do was to create a circular flow of energy between the linguistic and the cultural as well as between me and them. I believed this would help build community, increase meaningful communicative practice and eventually lead to freer student exchange and more authentic self-

expression. As I experimented in my classroom with what I was learning in graduate school, a learning curve began to happen for me on how to create that flow, with reading discussion as a vehicle.

I increased and diversified my use of small-group, task-based assignments that resulted in student-generated language for grammar study. Many of these assignments gave students (1) more initiative by asking them to negotiate a meaning, (2) more accountability by reporting back to class and (3) more opportunities to give me feedback about what they were actually doing while I was circulating elsewhere in the classroom.

For example, I used catalyst photos to elicit small group responses to questions which required critical thinking and use of targeted grammar, then had groups discuss and write down their responses, then used their sentences to analyze correct or incorrect use of the grammatical structure. Sometimes I combined my use of catalyst photos with jigsaw readings on the same subject, each group taking responsibility for (1) discussing the main idea/issue of their assigned paragraphs, (2) appointing a secretary and representative to report back to class, (3) correcting each other's errors before presenting. I would routinely ask small groups to use targeted grammar or vocabulary to respond to my opinion questions about an in-class reading or video that reflected aspects of US culture. Sometimes I used role-plays, small-group-generated survey questions, small-group writing collaborations, or cultural simulations for the same purposes. In all of these sequences, the point was to interweave the linguistic and cultural aspects through student discussion.

In graduate school I had discovered the dynamic possibilities of the double-entry reading journal as a source for reading discussion. Bringing it back to the classroom, I replaced teacher-student dialogue journals with

student reading journals. Now, instead of the dialogue going back and forth between me and a student about whatever came to our minds, students used their journals to respond to the book we had all read, the author's words on the left side of the page, their own response on the right side. Then they dialogued with partners and/or me, or I posted their entries for them to read and discuss. What did they have in common? Where did they agree or disagree? How had their thinking changed? I found that with this approach more students were focusing on the larger life issues that had been evoked for them in their reading. Later, when I used their journals as a source for linguistic study, asking them to correct errors I'd circled, or find the errors with a partner, they were analyzing journal writing in which the content revealed their thoughts and feelings about those issues.

From one of my advisors I learned the Islamabad Technique, originated by Stevick and described by him in *A Way and Ways* .(1980:139-141). It has become one of my favorite ways to interweave the linguistic and cultural because it generates student-based discussion that draws directly from student responses. Using cuisinaire rods, a student makes a symbolic "picture" of a place only (s)he knows, while describing the place for classmates who listen in silence. The teacher can assign a category of place that will focus attention on a student's cultural background and at the same time serve specific linguistic goals: a childhood home, a place the student used to visit with family, the student's current neighborhood, or the city of his/her dreams.

The teacher occasionally mirrors what the speaker has said, to show that the student has been heard, but also to make linguistic corrections. When the presenting student finishes, the listening students take turns mirroring a

part of what they've heard and then asking the speaker their own questions about the place.

Here is an example from one of my low-intermediate classes, to show how the technique works. After I'd modeled with the rods, Helen volunteered to describe her neighborhood. With a smile and an absorbed look on her face, she picked up a few long orange rods and laid them out to form a large rectangle. I shifted my gaze to the rods and kept my eyes on them as she talked.

"This a field."

"Ah, so this is a field?"

"Yes, this is a field."

Up went some blue rods for Helen's house across from the field. Then yellow rods in one corner of the field for a basketball court, red rods on the far side of the field for a school, and more yellow rods next to the school for a playground for the little kids. Brown rods for the road between her house and the field, green rods standing upright for trees and poof! a neighborhood appeared on the table.

As I watched and listened, I repeated statements to make linguistic corrections. I had to remind students to wait until Helen was finished before speaking and to describe what they'd heard before asking questions. They were bursting with questions!

"Has there any neighbors?" Jorge asked.

"Helen," I asked. "*Are* there any neighbors?"

Helen put up more blue rods to represent her neighbors.

"Has two neighbors," Helen said.

"Ah, so there *are* two neighbors."

Helen nodded.

"There *are* two neighbors," I repeated.

"Yes," Helen said. "There are two neighbors."

"How long they are living there?" Jorge asked.

"Since twenty years ago," Helen replied.

"So you have two neighbors and both of them have been living there for twenty years."

"Yes, for twenty years."

Students of all skill levels would frequently self-correct, as Helen did here. They would also segue from a question-and-answer session to a student-led discussion on a subject that had been generated by the speaker's narrative or their own questions. Helen's description of her neighborhood, for example, led to a spontaneous discussion on the loneliness students felt in their US neighborhoods.

Each time we did Islamabad, I marveled at the learning opportunities. Here was a procedure that let students' voices come through, built community, provided a venue for students to ask their own questions, increased student initiative, produced student-generated speech and dialogue which could be used later as text, while at the same time helped me assess students on an individual basis for their understanding and/or progress in whatever linguistic skill we were working on!

Besides the learning curve that was happening for me in structuring small group discussion, I was also having more success in guiding a whole class discussion. I stopped funneling students' dialogue through myself and learned to throw the ball back to the students with a question like, "What do you think of Lilian's comment that there isn't as much freedom in the US as

people say there is?" Or, still taking my cue from the students, I might ask them to look at their classmate's comment in another way: In what ways do you agree with Lilian, that there isn't freedom in the US? In what ways do you think there *is* freedom in the US?

I learned to give them more time to think their thoughts and express them. Sometimes I was able to let silence happen, the kind that means people are busy with their thoughts. If the subject was potentially sensitive and an uncomfortable silence developed, I found that I could help discussion along by giving students the privacy of working with partners or small groups. To feel out the particular quality of a silence, I had to pay more attention to students' faces and body language. Sometimes students would tell me, if I asked what was going on. Sometimes I helped them tell me by asking them to write their thoughts in a note to me.

Probably as important as anything else I learned, because it anticipated my goal for student-directed reading discussion, was how to make use of student's questions in class. I experimented with different ways of building students' questions into class discussion. For example, students wrote down post-reading opinion questions for their small groups to discuss, or volunteered one for the whole class. To keep them on-task, I would ask them to correct each other's grammar in the written questions before handing them to me, at least one from each student. I would then write the discussion questions on the board, or ask students to do it, so the class could focus on the question.

In a similar manner, students asked their own opinion questions after reading each other's essays, or made up essay questions for the class after post-reading discussions that were teacher-guided or held in small groups. They asked their own questions after listening to each other's speeches. When

we had international poster sessions, they would write down their questions about each other's first cultures on newsprint paper, then I would write the corrected questions, and on the day of the poster session, post both theirs and mine, so their question-and-answer session could be followed by mini grammar lessons based on my corrections. There were also the above-mentioned students' questions with Islamabad technique, student-generated surveys, simulated talk shows and interviews, all of which had the potential to lead into dialogue based on students' concerns.

Whenever I assigned a task in which students had to ask their own questions, even if it was slow-going at first, many of them responded to the opportunity to come in contact with their own concerns and express them. There was increased participation in discussion by a greater number of students, including those who had previously held back for a variety of reasons.

But for all my willingness, I still hadn't found a way to facilitate student-directed reading discussion in which the whole class was involved. This seemed like a logical and important next step, to have students respond to a text without me, but in my presence, in dialogue with the whole class community.

CHAPTER VI

READER RESPONSE AND STUDENT-LED READING DISCUSSION: THE WORKSHOP AT THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING

My journey with student-based reading discussion turned another corner in my second term at S.I.T. , when I was introduced to reader-response theory and its application in the classroom.

An Update on Reader Response Theory

I learned that reader-response theory had continued to proliferate in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, until there was a wide range of views about what was happening to a reader during the act of reading. Critics like Wayne Booth posited a transfer of meaning from author to reader, in which the reader temporarily put aside his own beliefs to be receptive to the author's (Suleiman 1980). Wolfgang Iser thought the reader and author were co-creators of meaning, with the reader fleshing out the author's story from his own experience (Tompkins 1980). Louise Rosenblatt (1995), who first offered her theory in 1938, believed that the reader transacted with the text, not the author, to produce the poem. This transaction consisted of a continuous, reciprocal relationship between reader and text in which there was a nonlinear flow of influence from text to reader and reader to text, until the poem or story was brought to life in the personal response of the reader.

Others argued that meaning was located in the reader, that the reader created literature in his mind during the act of reading. If you wanted to

know what a story meant, then you had to examine the contents of the reader's mind at the time of the reading.

This emphasis on the reader's process had led to a shift in critical focus, from the relationship of reader to text to the nature of reader activity, with an emphasis on how readers made meaning (Tompkins 1980). One critic, Jonathan Culler, claimed that a reader internalized the system of rules and conventions of the community to which she belonged (Tompkins 1980). Literary meaning was located, in some sense, then, not in the text or the reader, but in the institutions that teach readers to read.

There were psychoanalytical critics who believed that a reader's personality and personal history had an even greater influence on her response to a text than the institutions to which she belonged. Not only was meaning located in the reader's mind, but more specifically in the psychological identity the reader assumed over time. It was with this psychological identity that the reader interpreted a text to symbolize her own experience and, ultimately, to recreate it (Suleiman 1980).

Not until I listened and read did I realize that reader response, in particular Rosenblatt's view of it, was what I had been doing secretly as a schoolkid and later with my high school creative writing teacher, transacting with a text to make my own meaning. I was astonished to learn that reader response as an academic theory had been gathering momentum and evolving since the late fifties or early sixties, well before my completion of the MA in 1968, when I'd left academia for the world of editing and writing.

As I listened to the workshop leader talk about the pedagogical differences between teacher-centered and student-centered reading discussions, I felt many things: chagrined (how could I have managed not to

notice this revolution in education?), vindicated (I knew my secret childhood approach to reading had value), wistful (I wish I'd had this approach when I was a schoolkid), eager (I can't wait to get back to school and try this out!). But it was not until I participated in the all-student group reading that followed that I could experience firsthand, from a reader's point of view, what the potential benefits of reader response might be for my ESL students, or reflect on how I might go about using it in my classroom.

The Process

The presenter handed out copies of a Raymond Carver story called, "I Could See the Smallest Things," (Carver 1982) explaining that he had deliberately chosen an ambiguous text, one that wasn't polemical or culture-specific, so that we could use our own responses to build a meaning together. He asked us to read the story silently, write down any questions about it while reading, and then jot down our thoughts about the main idea of the story. After that we were to put our questions out to the group and pool our thoughts to create our own text.

My summary of "I Could See the Smallest Things" follows:

A married woman, Nancy, goes outside in the middle of the night to investigate the sound of a swinging gate. She sees her neighbor, Sam, leaning on the fence that divides their properties, looking her way. He told her he'd been out catching the slugs that were eating his rosebushes, would she like to have a look.

Nancy tells the reader about the falling-out between Sam and her husband Cliff. They'd been drinking, had 'had words.' This had happened some while ago, after Sam's first wife, who became a good friend of Nancy's, had died from a heart attack and Sam had remarried. Sam talks on about slugs,

but Nancy wants to know how he is, how everyone's doing. Sam has little to say about his family, but he asks after Cliff, says he misses his friendship with him, confides that he quit drinking, and gives her a long look. She says she has to go in, he asks her to say hello to Cliff for him, and she promises she will.

As the class discussion unfolded, the story took on new shades of meaning for me. Before our exchange, I'd thought the story was about the pain and loneliness that follow the inability to forgive, (Sam and Cliff's), that it depicted the emotional fallout after the loss of friendship (again, Sam and Cliff's). This interpretation of mine wasn't dispelled by discussion, but the content of the story expanded gradually for me as each of our questions and answers opened up more perspectives from which to view each of the characters.

For example, in response to my questions about the whereabouts of the second wife and Nancy's relationship to her, other students thought that she and the children were still living with Sam, that Nancy had shut down on them out of loyalty to her husband, or fear of his anger if she tried to keep up a relationship with them. This opened up lively exchanges about Nancy's relationship to her husband Cliff and her feelings about their marriage, about what kind of loyalty husbands and wives should be able to expect from each other. Class feelings ranged from sympathy, pity, disbelief, contempt, to feminist outrage at the prospect of a wife forfeiting platonic relationships outside of the marriage out of loyalty or fear.

Several of us began to speculate about Nancy. Someone suggested that she had had an affair with Sam, and that was the reason for the falling-out between the two men. Or that there was a mutual attraction between Nancy and Sam, which Nancy had not acted on. Perhaps the opened gate which she

experienced as a 'dare' was a metaphor for her yearning to break out of a constricting marriage. Yet she also seemed to feel boxed-in by her own need for routines as much as her belief that a wife should obey her husband at all costs.

I found myself rereading to understand Nancy better, re-examining my own response more closely, weaving my colleague's insights together with my own to reach new conclusions, or holding fast (publicly or privately) to opinions that didn't float with the group.

But I wasn't as sure about our group meaning. Did we have one? What exactly was it? And how did we get there? Was it necessary to have consensus to have a group meaning? Our process hadn't included a stage where we formally agreed about the text we'd created, not that I thought public meaning could be voted on in any case.

When I reflected on the value of our process, I realized that it epitomized everything I wanted to offer my students: a dynamic method for communicating the meaning they made as they read, an authentic way to build fluency in English, a process by which they might find and express their voices in a second language, a student-generated text to use as a source for future grammar/vocabulary/speech production lessons. I liked the idea, of course, that I wouldn't own the meaning, and that it would be a given that my students should not look to me as the authority. I couldn't wait to use the method with my students.

Feedback and Questions

Later, when my classmates and I exchanged responses to reader response itself, this time via e.mail, I learned that reader-response had met with mixed reviews. Several others besides me were inspired and planned to use it with

their classes in the fall. Some of them, like me, had been excited to see how the meaning had expanded for them as a result of our discussion. But there were a number of dissatisfactions, too.

A couple of my colleagues thought the method wasn't appropriate for their teaching contexts. In one case, the teacher felt she would be abandoning her business students if she didn't help them understand the facts about American culture embedded in the difficult non-fiction readings she felt obliged to assign them, and though she preferred to have them grapple with meaning, she thought she would end up "rescuing" them, presumably by telling them what the facts meant to a native-born reader.

Another classmate felt that her ESL program was too academically oriented to justify taking the time, in a reading class, for students to grapple with meaning to increase their fluency. Instead, she felt mandated to help them increase their reading skills, such as skimming and scanning, so they could handle the reading load at University. Besides, she was afraid of appearing like a "do-nothing" to her students.

Their comments raised many questions for me. The presenter had already pointed out the value of using ambiguous materials to elicit dialogue about meaning, and it made sense to me. But was it a mistake to use unambiguous materials, in particular culture-specific non-fiction, for a reading discussion? If a text contained non-negotiable facts that were central to the meaning, would there be nothing left to discuss? Wasn't non-fiction written from a point of view that could be interpreted? And if readers didn't have the background to access the basic, culture-specific facts in a non-fiction text, would their discussion, based on this lack of information, be meaningless or without value?

As for rescuing students when they misunderstood the facts, I wondered how my colleague would react to her students not understanding the cultural content in a short story (rather than an article). How would I react? In spite of my self-declared goal to help students make their own meaning, I often found myself rushing in to deliver the answers. "Let them struggle a while," my advisor had reminded me after visiting my classroom.

What was really behind this teacher impulse to rescue students? Another teacher, more candid than I, had confided to the group with some embarrassment, that he gave his students the answers instead of letting them struggle. Could we "rescuers" tolerate our students' mistakes for the duration of their student-directed discussion, for the sake of their having a reader-based experience? How important was it for everyone to get everything right, every time? What value did reader response have if participants in the discussion exchanged misinformation? Was their exchange of misinformation any different from a discussion among uninformed or misinformed native speakers? To what extent should a classroom reading discussion mirror life outside the classroom?

There were many questions for which I didn't yet have answers. And the comments about teaching context and student expectations had raised still more. What about that fear of looking like a do-nothing? Was that why we teachers delivered the answers even when we claimed that we wanted to help our students do their own learning? Did we rush in so we could be perceived as Doers? To prove that we were Experts who had the answers? Or was it sometimes reasonable to correct students in their discussion, so as to redirect them towards what we thought were the pertinent issues?

Someone had asked the workshop presenter what he did when one of his students asked him for the answers. He said that he asked his students if they were satisfied with their meaning. He didn't offer his students his own interpretation because he owned it, not them, and he didn't want to diminish their responses in their own eyes.

I was startled by the degree to which he chose to step back. Why not let students know what he thought after their discussion? I didn't know if I would refuse them that, if they asked. I figured I could emphasize the fact that I was giving them my interpretation, not the answers. I thought it would be possible to have it both ways, first a student-directed discussion and then a (solicited) teacher's view that wouldn't take away from the students.

In our class's e.mail post-mortem, there were a couple of students who felt that the reader response process was not a good fit for every individual. They had both felt uncomfortable with the process and chosen to remain silent. One disagreed with the presenter that the message of quiet students is either that they have not read the assignment or they don't understand the reading. She thought of other reasons: they might dislike the reading and not feel engaged in it, they might be shy or intimidated by other outspoken students who cut them off, or fearful of expressing strong disagreement. She herself happened to be one of the quietest members of the class, with a strong loyalty to traditional teaching approaches.

The fact that student-directed reading discussion might not be everyone's cup of tea didn't strike me as a reason, at that time, to avoid it. There was no teaching method that I knew of that was for everyone, and the fact that a particular method was not liked unanimously didn't mean that it had no value for the majority or many. Even for those who were uncomfortable,

there might still be value in doing it, I thought, particularly since it mirrored the democratic process held up as intrinsic to US culture and therefore something to become conversant with.

CHAPTER VII

MY FIRST TRY WITH STUDENT-LED READING DISCUSSION

That Fall, when I went back to WCC, I experimented for the first time with reader response in an advanced reading/writing class in the intensive program, which met three times a week, three hours each session. My intention was to set up student-directed reading discussions patterned after the format I had experienced in the workshop. I planned to use an anthology of short-short fiction, *Sudden Fiction*, as our reading text, to follow the suggestion of the workshop leader at S.I.T. that an ambiguous text draws out the most discussion of meaning. Many of the short-shorts in *Sudden Fiction* were not only provocatively ambiguous, they were also written by master storytellers, all from the US, whose reflections about universal issues were filtered through the lens of US culture. But the ESL program director objected. He wanted the students to bathe in sea-waves of English and suggested I use Pat Conroy's novel, *Prince of Tides*, instead, which was already in the school bookstore, ready for students to buy.

Prince of Tides is a big, sprawling novel about three generations of a family from South Carolina: the impact of one generation on the next, and the interplay between the family and the natural and social forces surrounding them. In spanning four decades of American history, Conroy addresses several bedrock themes in US culture, including racial and sexual violence, small town vs. big city, materialism and commercial exploitation of nature. Though the book was not my idea of the best US literature we could offer, I

knew there would be fertile ground for reading discussion, if my students were willing to read such a long book for a thirteen-week, non-credit course.

Early in the term, to build mutual trust among students, I assigned dialogue reading journals and other tasks intended to increase familiarity with one another. For example, after we had teacher-guided discussion about the importance of place in *Prince of Tides*, I asked students to make a drawing of a place from their childhood that was important to them and take turns telling a partner and then the whole class what this place evoked for them.

They responded eagerly. Kyung drew a well in her grandmother's front yard in South Korea. "The water was very sweet," she said. "It reminds me of the sweetness and innocence of the long hours I spent there, dreaming and playing by myself. I was very shy. I didn't venture far from the house."

Each, in turn, shared something personal and illuminating. Sun Hee, also from South Korea, drew the big tree on her grandparents farm that had been a gathering place for villagers to share news. "My parents were divorced," she told us, "and this was a place where everyone was together. I felt happy there." Luis drew a zoo in Bolivia where he and his father had gone every weekend; there he had learned to love animals, he told us, and to respect nature.

It delighted me and them, I think, to discover the intelligence and sensitivity they had in common. It looked very promising, I thought, for student-initiated discussion. There was only one voice that didn't seem to fit with this hope of mine: Yoshi, a high school dropout from Japan, who tended to pour out self-referential monologues, without seeming to realize that he was veering off and not making sense. He was at my side before and after class, walking with me to my car and telling me about himself, including the fact

that he didn't like to read long books, much less a 660-page novel in English.

As it turned out, the other seventeen students in the class were more than willing to read. Most were university graduates or undergraduates. Among them were a Burmese medical student waiting for a change in visa status, an Israeli architect applying to New York graduate schools in architecture, Kyung, a high school physics teacher, her sister, a magazine editor, and Luis, a graduate student applying for US research programs in sustainable agriculture. They and many others in this class were not only comfortable with a long read, but also gifted with intellectual curiosity and a passion for the written word.

Culture Bumps

So I was caught off-guard when I assigned the first in-class, student-directed reading discussion and was met with a long, deafening SILENCE. I looked at their alert, intelligent faces and though they didn't seem puzzled, repeated the instructions to make sure I'd been understood. No question was too small or too large, I coaxed. More silence. I could feel their reluctance gathering force like a snowball in an avalanche. It was all I could do not to jump in and speak. Finally, Samar, a sixteen-year-old who'd just finished high school in her native Jordan, asked tentatively, with a Persian ring to her R's, "You are waiting for us to begin?"

Innocent Samar, so young and protected, had reached out first, while all those educated professionals held back. Then Niva, the architect from Israel who turned out to be a gregarious intellectual, got the ball going, and Simone, an articulate, multi-lingual student from Brasil, joined in. Yoshi, the non-reader, jumped in with self-referential monologues that Niva and Simone navigated around. But except for a few additional comments from Luis and

Rodolpho, the rest of the class remained intently silent. This happened a second time, and then a third, with Niva and Simone forming a strong nucleus and Yoshi spinning off on his own, while the rest remained silent.

I didn't know which I felt more strongly, disappointment or surprise. I was so taken with my newfound technique, that even though I recalled the objections of my colleagues at S.I.T. that it was not for every student, I couldn't believe that so many could be so unwilling. Especially such avid, perceptive readers who'd already been writing up a storm of response in their journals.

Then I considered the cultural composition of the class more carefully and reflected on a previous teaching experience at another college, in which even my own teacher-guiding questions were met with deep silence. That class had been composed exclusively of Asian students. In my current class of eighteen, there were thirteen Asian students, two from Peoples Republic of China, one from Burma, six from South Korea, and four from Japan. Among the Korean and Japanese students, all were women, except for Yoshi.

In the previous class of exclusively Asian students, I'd encountered lasting silence when I threw out critical thinking questions to the whole class. I'd persisted, waiting for them to screw up their courage to speak out, determined not to put them on the spot by calling on them. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to dictate when they should express themselves. I wasn't even trying then for student-directed discussion, just free-flowing, teacher-guided discussion. Their silence had felt like a refusal to play ball. They were in the US now, I'd told myself. Where were all their voices?

There was one girl in that all-Asian class whose face showed the struggle she was going through about whether or not to respond while the silence around her grew. I would make eye contact with her, she would look

around at the other students and wait. Sometimes she would speak up with responses that showed just how clearly she'd understood the question.

In that class I'd tried to deal with the silence by finding a variety of ways to elicit speech, if not conversation. Some of my efforts were successful and some were not, but I stubbornly refused to call on students because I wanted a freer (!) atmosphere in the room. Even after I learned that they were accustomed to teachers giving lectures and calling on students to recite what they'd learned, I held out. I had the strange notion that all they needed was a little more time to see what a wonderful opportunity I was offering them. And even if they didn't see it as an opportunity, they would eventually succumb because I was the teacher and I had the right to insist.

During that term, I wasn't ready to address the no-response issue with the students. When I appealed to colleagues about the difficulty I was having in getting students to speak, they all commiserated about how impossible it was to get Asian students to speak. But none of us talked about ways for teachers to bridge differences between our culture and theirs in the classroom. None of us even acknowledged to each other that our teaching styles reflected a cultural bias.

When I met up the second time with Asian reluctance to speak out in class, much less initiate a discussion, I remembered the frustrations of that first experience. I also recalled the comments of a Japanese student from another program at S.I.T. who'd been my cross-cultural discussion partner for a course I was taking on culture and the language teacher.

"I *like* to be called on in class," he'd said. That's what he was used to.

He told me how he and other Japanese students perceived Americans as quick to speak a lot, even when they didn't know very much. Americans, he

said, seemed very extroverted, compared to Japanese, who were quiet on the outside, but had a lot going on on the inside. He talked about Japanese comfortableness with silent spaces in conversation and the importance of doing things in a group: "When one person needs to buy something in town," he said about the other Japanese students in his program, "four of us go."

That Fall at WCC, I realized that my predominantly Asian class and I were having a culture "bump" similar to the one in the all-Asian class, in which there was a sharp contrast between my expectations for teacher and student behavior and theirs. I knew they would feel more at home if I had teacher-guided reading discussions in which I called on them for answers, refereed their opinions, or functioned as an authority and provided answers. But I didn't want to give up on student-directed reading discussion. And I didn't see how I could call on them without winding up as a traffic manager deciding who should speak when, which would completely negate the flow of ideas through the students.

I decided to talk to the class again about what I expected from them in a student-directed discussion. This time I went a step further and told them how these expectations were rooted in US culture, how this kind of student-directed exchange of ideas would help prepare them for discussion with US Americans outside of the classroom. It would help build their fluency in English. It was important to give each student the time she needed to speak her mind, so their dialogue could include everyone, not only those who jumped in first.

"Japanese don't discuss in public," Yoshi informed me after class, very cogently for him, and in a manner that suggested he needed to take me in hand. "I'm not like them. I'm like American. I have power to speak."

In the next couple of tries, despite Yoshi's warnings, a few Asian women stepped in who hadn't before, joining the non-Asians led by Niva and Simone. They struggled. It was tense and bumpy. "They don't talk!" Niva complained to me after one session. But it was Yoshi, more than any non-Asian student in the class, who was intolerant of their first, awkward efforts. He would jump into the silence, heading off in another direction.

At one point, they were talking about the narrator's father, who'd fought in World War II, trying to trace the roots of his violent nature.

Sun Hee asked, "Did the war change Henry's personality? He was not so cruel before World War II."

Yoshi said, "I didn't know that the US fought Germany in World War II. I thought they just fought Japan. They dropped the atom bomb on us. We didn't do anything to anyone."

I heard gasps from some of the Japanese and Korean women.

"May I make a suggestion?" Simone called out. "Why don't you speak to us when anyone makes a mistake and tell us the right answer."

To tell the truth, I was vague on US-Japanese relations during and after World War II. I knew less about Japanese-Korean history before that. Yoshi's ignorance, greater than my own, had created a situation in which it might have been appropriate to briefly correct a student during a student-led discussion. But I wouldn't have been able to give a lecture on the subject for any amount of money. Yet here was a non-Asian student, one of the most competent in the class in student-directed discussion, asking me to pitch the technique and lecture!

Between Yoshi and Simone, I was in a sweat. But I dug in my heels.

"Not in the middle of a student-directed discussion," I replied. "You have your own answers. I'll talk at other times."

After a silence thick enough to slice with a bread knife, Kuniko, one of the Japanese women, spoke up, detailing Japanese repression of Korea for a period of forty years, from 1910, when Korea was formally annexed to the Japanese Empire, until 1945, when Japan capitulated in World War II and Korea was divided into two occupation zones, the Russians north and the US south of the thirty eighth latitude. She said nothing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, referred guardedly to the US occupation of Korea, probably so as not to offend me, and went on to say that by 1948 the two Korean zones had become two separate countries.

The Korean women in the class stared straight ahead. Yoshi's cheeks were red. After a pregnant pause, the class went back to their previous discussion without further interruptions from Yoshi.

"I was just trying to get them to talk," he told me afterwards. "I know all about it."

Cross-Cultural Hostilities

I was glad I hadn't stepped into their conversation. If I had, Kuniko wouldn't have spoken up. I wouldn't have understood how the cross-cultural tension in the room, stirred up by Yoshi's bumbling, was another factor, besides cultural inhibition about initiating discussion, that was making it difficult for them to open up. Yoshi's remarks about heinous acts committed by the US only complicated the issue. There was a bitter, sorrowful history shared by the Japanese and Korean students that had not been openly acknowledged by their two countries. How could I expect them to overcome these obstacles to a free-flowing exchange overnight?

I sensed that the Japanese and Korean students were more upset with Yoshi than one another, but I assigned more partner and small group discussion activities intended to build community in the room, mixing groups strategically to increase contact between Japanese and Korean students.

I decided to take a firmer hand with Yoshi. I cut in on his digressions when we were doing anything that was teacher-guided. I took him aside and asked him to stay focused on the content of the reading during a student-led discussion.

"But I want to make discussion exciting," he said.

The fact was that while the rest were struggling to communicate their thoughts about the meaning of the book, Yoshi had not bothered to read it. But he didn't see that as an obstacle to talking about whatever he thought was exciting, even if it had nothing to do with the ideas and issues in the novel. I told him privately and then repeated to the class that the task in student-led reading discussion was to start with an exploration of the ideas and issues in the novel.

I began to appreciate how much more vulnerable a student-led discussion was to the personality quirks of a single student, without a teacher to referee and no other students willing or able to take on the undermining student. I began to think about a way to stop Yoshi that wouldn't also stop students' discussion. Perhaps I could insert one sentence into their discussion, such as, "Yoshi, come back to the book." Or I could encourage students to redirect the discussion, if they thought it had gotten off the track.

I also decided to schedule in more teacher-guided reading discussion, hoping to balance the frustration with long silence, concerned about what damage Yoshi might do next, secretly ashamed that I wanted to build credit in

the bank as a teacher who knew how to do things the traditional way. Though I told myself these were legitimate reasons, at the time they felt more like a concession than a realistic adjustment. I still planned to hold out against calling on students, though, hoping for as much flow through the students as possible.

There was another practical reason for my increase of teacher-guided reading discussion. I had discovered problems with using a long novel for student-led discussion. Readers were going through the book at home at their own pace. So when they came to class, many of them had read past the chapter I'd assigned for discussion and forgotten its content and their response to it. Besides being hard to remember, it was difficult for students to lift out their response to one chapter from the web of associations that had accrued over time. Moreover, because the structure of *Prince of Tides* made heavy use of flashback, students who were further ahead were uncovering mysteries that others didn't want them to reveal.

To gather students onto common ground, I had already begun to assign in-class readings (or rereadings) of chapter segments, which helped. In fact, reading silently together in class appeared to be a crucial ingredient for the student-led discussion. It gave students an immediate common context on which to focus their questions. The reading itself became a shared activity. In choosing the segment to be read in class, I was also able to guarantee a greater degree of ambiguity in the emotional and intellectual content, which made it easier for them to find questions with which to launch their discussion.

Now, with my decision to increase teacher-led discussion, I hoped to provide students with a vehicle for sharing those complex associations that were so difficult to address in a reading of one short segment. My critical

thinking questions were aimed at directing them to theme-related parts of the book, asking them to focus on the connections between the narrative and the developing themes. I felt my way on the ratio of teacher-led and student-led, trying for a minimum of teacher-led to boost confidence and initiative.

Clearing the Air

In the next student-led reading discussion, sure enough, there was another confrontation between Yoshi and the other Asian students. This time they were talking about a schoolyard fight between the narrator, Tom, when he was twelve, and a wealthy classmate, Todd, whose father was the most powerful man in town. Todd had ridiculed Tom's poverty to the point where Tom had punched Todd out until he slumped to the ground, bleeding, and ate the five dollar bill he'd thrown at Tom's feet. Yoshi broke into the discussion with his own agenda:

Simone: Tom says he's a coward, but here he's brave.
Kyung: But when Callanwolde came, Tom didn't do anything and many times he didn't, so he perceived himself as a coward.
Yoshi: This kind of fighting was common?
Rudi: Tom did the best he could. It was necessary.
Niva: I don't agree. Talking is the way to resolve problems. Lila gets crazy because Tom is reacting like his father. She wants him to ignore it, to pretend it never happened.
Yoshi: Americans are violent people. Japanese don't fight anyone. We don't even have an army.
Sookyeon (snapping): What are you talking about? You have an army.
Yoshi: But no bombs or big weapons. We don't fight anyone. It's just for self-defense.

Sookyean exploded into dissertations on Japan's military aggression and their systematic suppression of Korean culture until the end of World War II.

"I learned all this from my father," she said. "His generation has not forgotten."

Maung, the Burmese medical student, began to tell us, in his careful, serious way, about Japanese aggression toward China and Burma during World War II.

Sun Hee, old enough to have witnessed the destruction in South Korea, held out her hands to me, entreating me to stop them.

"Sun Hee," Sookyeon insisted, "you know what happened."

"We're all friends now," Sun Hee answered. "Everyone's friends."

What was happening seemed too important to stop. With honesty and mutual respect, they were beginning to explore their interrelated history. It felt constructive, not dangerous, to me.

"Sun Hee," I said gently. "I think people need to talk. As an American living in the US, I can say truthfully that here it is considered a positive thing to talk directly and openly like this in class about difficult things."

One at a time, students from Japan, South Korea, Burma and People's Republic of China joined the discussion, Sun Hee wringing her hands, the rest listening intently. They continued for an hour without me, reconstructing a complicated history of aggression and capitulation, emancipation and slow recovery, until they seemed to be satisfied that they had negotiated a consensus about the harsh truth of their parents' and grandparents' generations.

I was impressed and let them know it. Despite their reserve, I had the feeling they were pleased, too. But after class, Yoshi confided to me, his face still flushed, that he was afraid of the South Koreans in the class. "They're very aggressive," he said. I reminded him that they had been talking about a very painful time in the history of their country and, as Sookyeon had implied, they were determined not to let it happen again.

Yoshi's fears had complex roots, I was sure, and I was not his therapist. But I was worried about Sun Hee. That night I called her to feel her out on her view of what had happened. She was polite, but not forthcoming, as I should have expected. I'd hoped to reassure her, but I ended up worrying about where she and others were headed. Had they lost or gained ground as a reading community?

To my relief, Sun Hee, Sookyeon, and most of the other Asians who were good readers were prepared to discuss the book without me. In fact they seemed emboldened to speak their minds, though not without the characteristic silences in-between comments. Now I wished I'd taped their discussions and played them back for the class. I believe we would all have learned something from hearing how the discussions progressed with, and not in spite of, the silences.

Meanwhile, Korean and Japanese students began to pour their hearts out in their journals about their mutual history, the Japanese women wanting me to understand what an aberration Yoshi was in his ignorance of Japanese-Korean affairs, the Korean women writing about Japanese soldiers raping Korean women, about their parents not being able to speak Korean in public. All of them assured me, though, that Japanese relationships with Koreans were improving now, especially among the younger generations.

My intuition that the tension was more between the Asian women and Yoshi than between Japanese and Korean students seemed to be born out by their observations about cross-cultural healing. But there was something else going on in their tone and demeanor, I thought. It seemed to me that they were serving as self-appointed ambassadors for their parents' generations, the

Japanese conveying contrition, and the Koreans standing their ground with dignity and sometimes force for a generation that grew up in subjugation.

I don't know to what extent this current of intention was conscious or not, or to what extent it helped or interfered with their ability to direct their own discussion. But because of the cultural inhibitions to do so, if nothing else, we crept along. Even though I came to view contradictory cultural expectations as the single most important factor influencing student-led discussion in this class, I still waited hopefully for the silences to grow shorter, for students to open up in reading discussion the way they were doing in their journals. It was hard for me and the non-Asian students to let go of our own cultural bias and to see the Asian process as more than a painful struggle.

Conclusions on the First Try

At the time, I thought student-led discussion was not working in this class because struggle and silence were such a big piece of the process. There were times when I did allow the segue between student-led- and teacher-guided discussion, regarding the shift as a defeat. But looking back, I would disagree with myself on both counts. It may have been frustrating for a handful of outspoken non-Asian students, who liked a rapid volley of exchange, and difficult for everyone to negotiate the impulsive monologues of an immature, needy classmate. But the participation of the Asian women increased steadily, always with silences but with the intensity that I'd already noticed in their journals.

Judging from their written teacher evaluations, which I received later, the struggle to adapt to a radically different classroom behavior, the student-led reading discussion, may actually have been exciting for the Asian students.

I wish I'd asked for specific feedback on this. In their teacher evaluations, which were very positive in general, students expressed appreciation for the chance "to think about many topics," "to analyze and find out the deep meaning in the story." One student wrote, "...we could discuss and know each other deeply."

Hindsight taught me the importance of looking for my own cultural bias--not only the students'--as I assessed classroom process. Reflecting on my experience and theirs, I gradually revised my view of Asian silences in discussion. I no longer saw it as a failure for the students or me, in my selection of material or method. It was culture-based behavior going through a transition.

Equally important was the need to identify cultural inhibitions that made it difficult for students to lead their own reading discussion. Or any cultural factors influencing their conduct. To do that I might discuss different cultural expectations for teacher/student behavior in the classroom. Or get written feedback from students on the subject. Or assign more tasks to build cultural *self*-awareness and awareness of cultural differences. I saw more clearly the connection between building a reading community and the need to respond in the future to cross-cultural hostilities in the class, articulated or simmering under the surface.

In retrospect, teacher-guided reading discussion proved to be an instructive complement to student-led reading discussion, and not the concession or replacement I'd feared it would be. It allowed me to send signals of my ability to set boundaries to a distracting student and those who missed the traditional structure. It also gave us another handle on the unwieldy length and complexity of the novel by allowing me to model respectful,

discussion-launching questions that didn't ask readers to get ahead of themselves in the story.

The double-entry reading journal had been a good source for student-led discussion. Alert readers made use of their journal entries when it came time to ask each other questions about the novel. I recognized permutations of their written questions, memories, political and psychological insights about characters and narrative, associations to native and US culture, now transformed into discussion questions. While the journals gave students a lead on discussion, they gave me important feedback on their emerging voices, which was particularly instructive when there was a marked contrast between the intensity of their writing and their diffidence during discussion. They allowed quiet students who were strong writers to shine.

In a way that I hadn't anticipated, *Prince of Tides* may have been a lucky choice of reading material for this class, insofar as Conroy's exploration of social hostilities in US culture became a stimulus for students to examine their own, parallel concerns. The experience left me more aware of the selection of reading material as a political act in itself and hopeful that I would find an equally resonating match for future classes.

With all of the above conclusions in mind, I decided that for my next reading/writing class, I would plan on using a shorter novel *and* short-shorts from *Sudden Fiction.* In this way we could have the wash of language with the novel, and the ambiguity of the short-shorts. But this time I would assign reading journals and use teacher-guided discussion for the novel only. And only with the short-shorts would we have student-led reading discussion. Hopefully, this combination would build a richly textured reading community, in which students could have the benefits of the familiar and the new.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND TRY WITH STUDENT-LED READING DISCUSSION

In the following term, my reading/writing class was large and culturally diverse. There were twenty-two students from fourteen countries: Brazil, People's Republic of China, Columbia, France, Hungary, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Macedonia, Peru, Russia, Spain, Uruguay, Zlovakia. It was an intermediate/high-intermediate class this time, friendly and curious about each other, with no apparent cross-cultural hostilities.

We were together three mornings a week, but on Tuesdays and Thursdays they were divided into two skill-level classes for their Listening/Speaking class. Not surprisingly, when they came together with me, students tended to seat themselves along this skill division. Unfortunately, there was a parallel cultural division between the two groups as well, with the articulate, sophisticated students of the high-intermediate class coming from Europe (east and west) and Russia. From the intermediate class, the quietest ones were from Asia. The less experienced readers were from South America. They sat around me in a crescent (the long, narrow room wasn't big enough for a large circle, which I would have preferred), the high-intermediate class on my left, the intermediate class on my right.

From a questionnaire I handed out about their experience in English, I learned that some of the Europeans and Russians had already read novels in English and were good writers, while some of the Latin Americans had never read a novel and couldn't write a complete sentence in English. There was a

wide range of ability, schooling, and comfortableness with classroom discussion. Actually, it felt like a class composed of two extremes. Nine or ten students, mostly from the high-intermediate class, were gregarious conversationalists in English, even during breaks, a far cry from the predominantly reluctant speakers of my previous class. Now I was worrying about the possibility of the gregarious intimidating the diffident.

Building a Reading Community

Following my decision to couple teacher-guided discussion with a novel and student-led discussion with short stories, I led off with the novel, to give students time to get their bearings with me and each other through the more familiar discussion format. This time I chose a shorter, simpler novel, *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, a book frequently used in the intensive program for intermediate classes. Though once again it was not my idea of the best literature we could offer, I hoped that the themes of the book, and its suspense, would hold the interest of even the most competent readers while still being accessible to those less skilled.

In the novel, Charlie Gordon narrates the story of his transformation, the result of experimental surgery, from a genial, retarded man to a driven genius in a big hurry to catch up with himself in friendship, love, book-learning and work. As his intelligence grows, he becomes painfully aware of the ways he was mistreated from childhood up until the surgery. He discovers his own emotional immaturity and the moral bankruptcy of many adults around him, both the ignorant and the savvy. His growing understanding of how people treat each other leads him and the reader to ruminate on human nature at its best and worst. The suspense builds as Charlie's future is threatened.

The students liked the story, writing at length in their journals, which I had them share with partners and small groups, alternating between homogeneous and heterogeneous mixes of sophisticated and inexperienced readers. Hoping to build some common ground for the mix, I asked groups to find a reading response that at least two students in their group had had and write it on the board. Some students identified with Charlie's post-surgery frustrations with the English language. Others became incensed over the cruelty of Charlie's mother and his coworkers, or they worried what would happen to him after the surgery. Many, even the less skilled, were writing about the political and philosophical issues raised in the book.

Hoping to draw out the diffident, I used everyone's journals as a source for my discussion questions, culling material from their written responses that was as good as any of mine, and better. Students smiled in recognition as I threw out questions that had come from their inferences: (1) Do you think the researchers can predict what will happen to Charlie based on experiments with mice? (2) What is emotional intelligence? Does Charlie have it? His co-workers, Alice, or Faye?

In the first couple of weeks the quick talkers were calling out responses to my reading questions, all at the same time, in a clamor of enthusiasm and confidence. If I had remained silent for long enough, they might have taken off without me into a student-led discussion that had a shape. But I fielded responses, still intent on eliciting from the students who were holding back.

I mixed recall with critical thinking questions, even called on quiet students, still the method of last resort for me, with my bias against that form of teacher control exerting a waning influence. Also, I worried that focusing more attention on a quiet student by calling on her might make her feel

uncomfortable, even exposed, rather than supported by a more familiar, traditional approach. I was willing to slow down class discussion for the sake of drawing out quiet students, but at the same time, I wanted to fuel the energy of the vibrant students, not let them become bored or frustrated. I asked for their patience, reminding everyone that it was a large class and everybody had the right to be heard.

The tasks I assigned to build cultural awareness were helpful in drawing the two groups closer together. When they were talking about cultural objects that had personal meaning for them, even Drita, from Macedonia, who frequently stared off to some distant place during reading discussion, had plenty to say when she passed around tea plants grown in her native mountain village. Some students had never heard of Macedonia, much less knew where it was. We looked at a map and suddenly classmates wanted to know if her friends or family were in danger because of the war in Bosnia.

During an international poster session I experimented with for the first time, everyone had a chance to shine in discussion as they asked and answered each other's questions about their native countries. Students wrote their questions in advance, one question per student per poster, for each of the fifteen countries represented, including the US. Then they wrote down classmate's questions about their own country, to prepare thoughtful answers in advance. I rewrote the posters with corrected English and posted theirs and mine on the day of the convention activity, for error analysis and other grammar work later on.

At the convention, half the class set up "booths," for their native countries, and the other half circulated, making sure that they visited at least three booths and distributed themselves among all of the available stations.

Then they switched roles as presenters and guests, following the same format. The large class registration worked in our favor, with plenty of students to circulate, and so did my strategy to choose countries for each session that were represented by a mix of articulate and reluctant speakers.

It was exciting. There was a buzz and hum from every booth. Students were talking, laughing, debating, handing out fact sheets, taking notes. Some of their questions I wouldn't have thought to ask; many were challenging: How do South Koreans feel about the American "base" in Seoul? Can Peruvians immigrate easily to the US? Is it true that Brasilian women are always taking care of their bodies? Is it hard to find a job in Hungary? Does the Columbian government protect the economy by not importing lots of goods from abroad? Do you find mostly Columbian products in the stores?

The same was true of their questions to me: How do you think cultural diversity in the US improves the quality of everyday life? Why are Americans in the US afraid of talking about sex? Why do they take so many supplements (vitamins) all the time? Do you think the US is a police force in the world? I gave myself a separate session afterwards, so they could all have a chance to vent on US culture at the same time.

Dealing with Obstacles

Although their cross-cultural dialogue helped everyone make new connections, a social clique was forming among the talkers. They weren't unfriendly with the others, just wrapped up in each other. Most of them took their break together, carrying their jokes back into the class, where I frequently had to remind them to stop talking when someone else had the floor. Not that the wonderful, spontaneous energy during reading discussion often moved from their side of the room. But I had to insist to get their

respectful attention while I was maintaining eye contact with the quiet students I was calling on: the Asians who always sat opposite me in the middle of the crescent and the inexperienced Latin American readers on my right.

I wasn't about to dictate choice of seats and redistribute everyone. That went against my anti-authoritarian grain, and I didn't believe it was possible, in any case, to build a reading community by forcing people to sit together. But I tried to counteract all of the imbalances in the room by leaning even more heavily on small group tasks, in which I distributed the multi-talented clique for a better mix of cultures and linguistic ability. Interestingly, a few of the talkers took it upon themselves to change seats, possibly out of sensitivity to the imbalance, or out of cultural loyalty. That brought all of the Asian students together in the center (which reminded me of my discussion partner's comment about Asian loyalty), while Helena, a psychologist from Spain, began to sit with the South Americans. There were already three confident readers among the intermediate group. These additions brought the number to six, which I hoped would make for a better distribution of strong speakers.

This time, I did more explaining and modeling of my expectations for student-led discussion. Students might want to write down questions about something that interested, confused, bothered, or excited them, I suggested, as they did in their double-entry journals for the novel. It didn't matter what question they started with, I told them, because they would eventually get to everything that was important to them. They could answer each other's questions in as many or as few ways as they needed to: if three students had answers, that was fine, they should all give them. If they disagreed with each other, it was okay to debate different points of view. If no one had a strong

opinion, they could speculate about the possibilities. The point of the activity was to discuss the content of the story and their opinions about it to arrive at a meaning together.

I had selected ambiguous stories (word defined), I explained, because life was full of ambiguity, and this was a chance to discuss real-life issues. I understood that this was a difficult task in a second language, hard enough in a first, but I knew they could rise to the challenge. Unlike discussion outside the classroom, I expected everyone to participate because this was a very special opportunity for communicative practice in English.

I had intended to tape the student-led discussions and transcribe the tapes for follow-up on content and grammar, but I didn't have the equipment for such a large group. Probably because I was so intent on a format for whole class student-led discussion, it didn't occur to me to use a fishbowl arrangement, with an alternating speaking circle inside a larger listening circle. Because of the size and social dynamics of the class as well as the equipment problem, this might have been an effective way to distribute these students for student-led reading discussion. But my plan, instead, as I explained to the class beforehand, was to take notes on their whole class discussion and then transcribe it for follow-up.

Selecting the First Short-short

The first short-short I chose from *Sudden Fiction* was Bel Kaufman's "Sunday in the Park." My summary follows:

A middle class couple are sitting on a bench in a playground, the husband reading the NY Times, while their little boy, Larry, plays in a sandbox. The one other child in the sandbox, a boy, throws sand at Larry. Larry's mother scolds the boy. He does it again, and a big man sitting on a

bench, spitting and reading the comics, tells the boy to throw all the sand he wants because 'this here is a public sandbox.' Larry's father, Morton, tries to reason with the man, the way he would with one of his university students, but the other man cuts him off. He says his son Joe's rights are just as good as Larry's, and if Morton doesn't like it, he can take his son and get the hell out. He stands up and flexes his muscles. Morton says, 'This is ridiculous, I must ask you --,' and the other says, 'Yeah, you and who else?'

Morton decides to leave the park with his wife and son. The son complains and drags his feet as the couple take his hands and pull him away. The wife feels relieved at first, then heavy that reason was defeated by force, then something else she can't name towards her husband that feels familiar. Morton tries to justify not fighting: he would probably have gotten hurt and for what? She agrees, she tells herself the man in the park was a despicable bully, Morton couldn't possibly have educated him, there was no point in calling the police so there was nothing he could have done about it. But when her son continues to whine, she snaps at him, 'I'm ashamed of you.' Then she and Morton explode at each other, supposedly about the right way to handle the boy. Morton says if she can't discipline him, he will. And she echoes the man in the park, 'Oh, yeah, you and who else?'

Remembering the previous class's struggle to deal with inherited cross-cultural hostilities, I chose this story because it centered on a clash between two cultures, actually two subcultures of a larger culture. In this case, it was between the middle-class professional who believes in public civility and the uneducated, rude man who is ready for a fistfight because he thinks his family's rights and status are being threatened. The story raises questions about the responsibilities of members of a democratic society towards each

other in public places, about aggression vs. negotiation as possible solutions to a conflict. It also takes a look at conflicting male and female ideas about masculinity and the role parents play in educating and protecting their children.

I thought the students might find connections between the story's themes and their own experience as immigrants or foreign-born students. Perhaps they had felt exploited by native-borns, or feared violence in public places, either here or in their native countries. I thought the wife's conflicted feelings about her husband retreating instead of having it out with the park bully and the subsequent clash between her and her husband might stimulate an interesting exchange of views about gender-based roles.

Because it took longer than I had expected for the intermediate students to write their questions, I dropped the idea of written summaries and interpretations for the time being. Scribbling furiously on paper, I was able to capture most of their dialogue. To keep apace, I took notes on complete sentences only, skipping over unfinished or interrupted comments. I corrected their linguistic errors as I wrote because that went faster than writing them down. This meant that, for this term, I would not have a written record of these errors for them to work with later on. With this story, I didn't write speakers' names down, so I wasn't able to connect students with their comments in the transcript. Here, and with subsequent student-led reading discussion, there were silences before and after they started for which I have no record.

The First Student-led Discussion: "Sunday in the Park"

The students' discussion zeroed-in immediately on the clash. It began with a question that might have reflected some uncertainty about US cultural

rules in public places like a park. Or it may have been an effort to understand the motives of the aggressive man. Four students responded with different theories:

-Why is the stranger saying, "Throw all you want, this is a public sandbox?"
-He doesn't care about the other kid.
-Maybe because it's public. Nobody cares about a public place.
-Maybe he feels his son was attacked by the mother's words.
-Maybe he wants to start a fight.

At this point, the students may have agreed with all four possibilities or none. They may not have had an opinion, or may have felt self-conscious about the process. I wasn't sure if the comment, 'Nobody cares about a public place' reflected the speaker's own cultural perspective or an interpretation of the US norm based on what he'd seen in US public parks.

They shifted attention to the husband's refusal to fight and the wife's mixed relief and disappointment, citing the text to support their views, building on each other's evidence. But the subject that held their interest and led to sustained negotiation was the pros and cons of the child-rearing practices exemplified by the two sets of parents. They began to disagree about what kind of danger Larry was in, documenting from the text and theorizing about how much protection to give a child, and to what degree the mother was overprotective.

-Larry can't protect himself. When there's a problem with children, they have to work it out. But she felt bad when her child was hurt. She wanted her husband to do something.
-What's the big deal if there's sand in Larry's hair? Who cares? He's not gonna die from that.
-It's not about the sand, but about protecting the child.
-She's being overprotective.
-Why did she control herself and not punish the other child?
-She wants her son to defend himself.
-It's very hard to punish the other kid. Especially in America.
-It's true. In America, it's no good to punish kids. It's the kids' problem.

When they began making predictions about what would happen to the characters after the story ended, I could feel how engaged they were with the story and the moral issues it raised for them:

-After this, do you think she will still want to go out more often with the family to the park?
-I think she'll go back to another place.
-I think she'll build a sandbox in her backyard.
-Then children are never going to learn to defend themselves.
-Why didn't Larry say anything or do anything when the boy threw the sand?
-Because his mother always defends him.
-Maybe because the mother is there.
-What do you think Larry has learned from this?
-I'll never call on my Dad to protect me.
-Do you think Larry will throw sand the next time?
-Only the other kid. He'll do it again.

On the one hand, they could identify with the mother's fear of another encounter with the aggressive man. On the other, they could see the need for Larry to learn how to defend himself. Once the subject of self-defense was introduced, the discussion segued naturally into a search for a morally acceptable way to resolve the conflict between the two families:

-Let the children find a solution. It's better.
-The boys didn't know how throwing sand is dangerous. But the parents didn't say anything. Just stop, stop, stop! Why didn't they say anything?
-Which attitude is better for the children?
-I think both are wrong.
-I think Morton's attitude is better for educating children.
-Morton didn't let his son defend himself.
-But the child didn't try to defend himself.
-I think the other father is wrong. His kid threw sand. He should find out what happened and have his kid say, "I'm sorry," not "Go ahead. This is a public sandbox."
-I thought other things. Where is the country? What are the parents' backgrounds? In Japan, everyone would know that throwing sand is bad, not nice. But if they're living in a dangerous place, the kids have to learn how to survive.

In evaluating the moral and pedagogical consequences of the two parental stances in the park, the students were coming to terms with some of the important issues raised in the story: How do you pass on values which are

not shared by everyone? How do you teach children peaceful solutions and self-defense at the same time?

The Impact of Culture-based Response on Reading Discussion

The student who thinks the mother could have punished the other child (the word 'punish' presumably being used to mean "hit") is suggesting a response that would not be likely today, from a US middle-class mother to a stranger's child. In fact, she is more likely to discipline her own child as this mother did, by repeating the rules and scolding a transgression. She might reward desired behavior, or take away privileges for misbehavior.

The suggestion itself reflects a cultural perspective different from the mother's, and might have been editorialized by me, if I had been guiding the discussion, which in turn, might have eclipsed the interesting exchange that followed, in which some students agreed that "in America, it's no good to punish kids." On the face of it, this conclusion oversimplifies to the point of inaccuracy. But it's also an elliptical statement that no one challenges, possibly because students thought they knew what the speaker was referring to, or, not being knowledgeable themselves about US attitudes toward punishment, didn't feel the need to pursue it.

My guess is, they were alluding to recent legal backlash in the US against formerly neglectful child-abuse laws, probably without knowing the extent to which children had formerly been battered while society looked away. What the students saw were strict, punitive laws which, at the first sign of abuse, or even a teenager's false report of being abused, could result in a quick separation of child and parent, or even land a non-violent parent in jail for one weak moment that had ended with a shove.

I have since had teacher-guided discussions in which students, Hispanic immigrants especially, have talked openly about their fear of US laws that restrict and punish parents in ways they don't understand, including child-abuse laws. For many of these students it is the cultural norm to use corporal punishment (spankings, not batterings, I'm sure) in raising one's own children, as previous middle-class generations once did here and as some working-class and ethnic groups do here now. My guess is that the students who concluded that, "in America it's no good to punish kids," were coming from the same cultural perspective.

Did this different cultural perspective (which I'm guessing at), which led to a partly invalid observation about US culture, prevent them from having a meaningful interpretation of the story? I didn't think so, in this case. Their shared conclusions about the characters and themes were reasonable to me and to them, including the idea that the mother was overprotective, that the park man shouldn't have encouraged his child to initiate aggression, and that it is difficult to balance protecting a child with teaching him self-defense. A more culturally-informed reader, however, might have had a richer reading, or expressed views from a culturally relativistic framework, as Masaya did later, when he pointed out that what would be the cultural norm for everyone in Japan, i.e., that it is wrong to throw sand at another child, might not apply in a place where the same cultural norm is not held by everyone.

The culture-specific response of the Hispanic student dramatizes for me the premise of reader response theory, that the meaning is not in the text but rather in the reader as he transacts with the text. Once you accept the premise, then it is a given that any reader, no matter how cosmopolitan, is

going to have a response that will be shaped by many personal facts, including cultural perspective. The theory is radical, though, because it implies that all meaning, not only that made by a reading community, is culturally relative. One question that rises, then, is, does cultural relativity lead to moral relativity in individuals or groups when they are interpreting human events? Is any conclusion morally acceptable because two or more individuals agree to it?

Masaya was careful to make a distinction between what was the right thing to do in Japan where (according to him) everyone shared the same cultural norm and what might be the right thing to do where not everyone shared the same values. I don't think he was implying that "anything goes" in the culturally diverse community. I think he meant that if a child whose parents are teaching him peaceful interaction plays in a park with children whose parents encourage them to be aggressive, then not only will that child have to learn the value of not starting a fight, but he will also have to learn self-defense, which (according to Masaya) wouldn't be necessary for a child playing in a sandbox in a Japanese park.

Ideally, in a democratic society, it is the community, in this case, the reading community, that decides, through its venues for dialogue, what is valid or invalid, what is morally acceptable or not. But if a community is culturally diverse, as my class was, then what would be the effect of that diversity on the moral tone of its discussion? Which cultural perspective(s) would influence what was a valid or invalid meaning, or what was a morally acceptable or unacceptable conclusion? It would not be me, the teacher, with my US white, female, middle-class, liberal, urban intellectual perspective. Would it need a consensus or an acknowledgment of the range of opinion?

Assessing the First Student-led Discussion

While this first student-led reading discussion had raised some questions and answered others, I was thrilled with the students' process. The format had allowed them to stand on their own feet, using whatever language they had, to speak out on timely controversial social, psychological, and moral issues that were of consequence to them and the larger community in which they were living. Using ambiguous short-shorts instead of a novel seemed to have inspired a variety of discussion behaviors: speculating, theorizing, building on each other's theories, documenting from textual evidence and life experience, disagreeing, predicting, identifying with the players in the drama, making value judgments, addressing implied universal issues.

Clearly, the process had created incentive for students to produce such a range of communicative behaviors, and this made me very hopeful about the potential for building fluency this way. Because they were so motivated to get their ideas across, students were not only reaching for language they already knew, but also struggling on the edge of what they knew and making errors, sometimes unselfconsciously, other times with awareness, apparently willing to risk errors for the sake of giving voice to their views.

Sometimes, in making errors, students self-corrected or found another way to say the same thing that was grammatically correct. Other times, in responding to another student's statements, they restated what that student had said, but without errors, in effect monitoring each other's linguistic content at the same time that they moved the discussion forward. Not wanting to interrupt the flow of their thoughts, I had made the decision not to step into their discussions with corrections. Instead, I made mental notes of errors for

post-discussion grammar work, glad for the feedback this format gave me about their linguistic trouble spots. Unfortunately, because I had written corrected versions of their discussions, we had no record of their linguistic errors or assistance for students to use later as text.

As for the intellectual content of their discussion, I was struck by the rich opportunities this format gave students to interpret differently from me. If this had been a teacher-guided discussion based on my thinking, I might have asked questions about the clash between the park man and the parents to lead into a discussion about the rights and responsibilities of individuals toward one another in a democratic society. Does the big man want the boys to fight? What does he hope to settle with a fistfight of his own? What does he think his rights are in a public place? Whose rights are being violated in this story: Joe's? Larry's? The bully's? Larry's mother and father? In a democratic society, what is the lawful way to respond in a public place when we think someone is violating our rights?

I might have encouraged the class to explore the park man's propensity toward violence. Did he feel insulted because another parent told his son what to do? Does he carry resentments about the social inequalities that exist between the powerful haves and have nots? Does he view the mother's discipline of his child as an inappropriate assertion of power?

I might have segued from the story to a more general discussion about the relationship between education, child-rearing practices, and the seeds of violence. All of my critical thinking questions would have reflected my concerns, my beliefs, my values. The students would not have had their discussion about child-rearing practices, which flowed directly from their own thinking.

As pleased as I was with the linguistic, intellectual and social benefits, so far, of student-led discussion with ambiguous short stories, I had also been noticing the mounting evidence for the parallel benefits of teacher-guided, student-based discussion. Basing my reading questions on their journals about the novel had helped build reading community before they even began their student-led discussions and given me feedback about where we needed to go with grammar work. Giving in and calling on quiet students had helped draw them out. Monitoring some of their discussion had helped me protect diffident students from the excesses of garrulous and opinionated students. While keeping the teacher-guided discussion student-based, I'd been able to put my voice in the room, too, thereby setting a tone, creating moral parameters for how we would behave towards one another in our discussions.

The students were excited with the process, too, even the quieter ones. Some said they hadn't understood the story at first, but as they listened to the discussion, they came to understand what it was about. Like me and my colleagues at the S.I.T. workshop, some students found that their thinking expanded.

As I had expected, it was the high-intermediate half of the class that had done most of the talking. Naoko, a quiet but conscientious Japanese student who hadn't spoken, came to me afterwards. She hadn't spoken, she told me, because she hadn't understood a lot of vocabulary in the story. We had already done vocabulary pre-reading work with the novel, but I had deliberately avoided any pre-reading activities with the short-shorts, not wanting to influence the direction of the student-led discussion. Naoko's comment changed my mind. It was worth the risk, I decided, if I could help non-speakers get involved. I also suggested to Naoko that in the next student-led

discussion, she could ask questions about words she didn't understand. I made the same suggestion to the rest of the class before the next discussion.

The Second Student-led Reading Discussion
Grace Paley's "Mother"

The second story I chose was Grace Paley's "Mother," in which a woman remembers with sorrow and regret how, in her youth, she and her father had neglected her mother.

Contrary to my expectations, the students didn't pick up on the fact that the parents were immigrants who had worked very hard to achieve The American Dream, had made enough money to have a second home in the country, but as a result were alienated from one another. The father was too tired from his medical practice to even talk with the mother, the daughter was staying out late getting involved in left-wing politics.

Even the strongest readers were struggling to get their bearings in this enigmatic story, with questions like, "Who is sitting in the living room?" "What country do they come from?" "Was the mother young and sick?" "Who is telling the story, a boy or a girl?" Gradually, with these appeals to each other for clarification, they helped each other pin down some facts about the narrative.

On the question about gender, though, they went back and forth, offering culture-based assertions as if they were universally true: "Mothers don't say anything to boys about coming home late," or "Boys are more interested in politics." Other students refuted or agreed, citing personal experience that was equally subjective:

Laszlo: My parents didn't tell me not to come late.
Zlatka: Actually, mine don't either. If I say I'm going to be late, it's enough.

Lydia: For my father, after 12:00 is another day. You have to stay home.

Marilenis brought them back to cultural relativism with her comment, "It depends on the culture." Taking their cue from her, Vladimir and Angel found evidence in the text instead of from their first cultures that proved the late hour, but which still didn't answer the question of gender.

Virginia, a quiet seventeen-year-old from Uruguay who rarely spoke unless called on, suddenly shifted the discussion to the heart of the story with her haunting question:

> It's not important whether it's a girl or a boy. It's about the mother. Why don't we pay attention to the people who want our attention?

There were several heartbeats of silence as everyone in the room let the truth sink in and redirect them:

Marilenis: I agree. Sometimes when our mother is alone, we don't pay attention and then she dies and we miss her so much. In this story, the writer misses the mother.
Zlatka: Do you think she feels sorry now, that she didn't pay attention?
Marilenis: No, I think she's missing her a lot. She wants to see her in a doorway. I miss my mother a lot, too.
Vladimir: I feel it's pretty hard to tell something concrete about the story. It's a reminiscence. It's about feelings. His mother passed away. He misses her. No facts. Only feelings.
Renata: It's sad.
Adriana: She repeats, "And then she died." Maybe she's feeling bad.
Vladimir: The mood of the story is sensitive. It evokes things we want to do and have never done.

Now the speakers were sustaining focus, playing off each other, echoing, adding, examining the feeling, building a case for the sorrow and regret that runs through the story. Vladimir, a sophisticated, intellectual Russian in his forties who had begun to emerge as a leader in discussion, explained to the others in literary terms, how the mood of a piece could bring the same feeling out of all of us. Above, he convinced Renata and Adriana to focus on feelings.

It was clear to me and the others that Vladimir was knowledgeable and very comfortable interpreting fiction. He could also be opinionated and argumentative. I'd been playing sheepdog in teacher-guided discussion, making sure he didn't gobble anybody up with the force of his remarks, but he wasn't insensitive, and I liked the fact that he consistently raised the level of discussion. So did students like Helena, below. Still, he may have been grating on the nerves of others, like Laszlo and Angel, below:

Laszlo: The story doesn't make sense.
Helena: You can imagine.
Vladimir: It's a kind of art. It's fiction art. It makes sense.
Laszlo: For me, it doesn't.
Vladimir: We make a deal with the author. If we judge, we have to judge it as literature.
Helena: You don't need a biography.
Vladimir: They're supposed to be immigrants from Russia. 1905 was the time of the Revolution.
Angel: Maybe Bulgaria.
Vladimir: I won't insist. Bulgaria's OK, too. I think the author who wrote this doesn't feel comfortable with her memory.
Helena: Say why. It's something very human. We have this feeling that we carry with us. In a family we always have good times and bad times. It's life. Surely the writer and mother had good times, too.
Vladimir: This story tells something to my heart.
Zlatka: Maybe the writer thinks, 'My mother didn't have a nice life. She always worried about me, my father didn't pay attention."
Anne-Laure: Maybe the writer tried to understand why he died.
Vladimir: There isn't enough information.
Adriana: Maybe she died inside. Not the body. The feeling. She was dying all the time. She didn't have life.

Helena, also a sophisticated reader, who was not intimidated but impressed by Vladimir, teamed up with him and he with her in their defense of a story that works with fewer details than Laszlo wanted. And then she coached Vladimir to explain more to the class about the author's uncomfortableness, as if she were sure that he could. Helena, the psychologist who changed her seat to be with the diffident, was emerging as a synthesizer

and team-builder. Here, her comment spurred further efforts by others and led to Adriana's creative insight about the mother dying 'inside.'

Adriana's metaphor, that the mother may have gone emotionally numb by degrees until she had no feelings left alive, was a sensitive, plausible reading that captured my imagination. If I had been guiding the discussion, her insight, or Virginia's haunting question, or Vladimir's literary perceptions might not have been shared. They might not have had them. Helena might not have had the chance to function in English as a team-builder.

Benefits and Hurdles

Because reader-based discussion, especially student-led reading discussion makes space for authentic responses from students, the community-making power of these shared insights is also considerable. It was palpably present among these students, and not only those who were participating in discussion. I could see subtle shifts in their regard for each other after they had come through each of these dialogues without me. A quiet, girlish classmate turns out to be sensitive and wiser than you might have thought. You have your first conversation with her in the next break to see what she thinks about something else. A creative classmate can catch your imagination and get you to think in a new way. The next time she wants to tell you about a movie she's seen, you listen with new interest. Even an opinionated speaker can earn your respect as a classmate to turn to for information and literary perceptions.

In the reading community, there was better distribution around the circle of the most active speakers, with Vladimir, Anne-Laure and Zlatka on my left, Masaya in the center, and Helena, Adriana, and Marilenis on the right.

Out of sixty-four responses, Vladimir made roughly one fifth of them, with five others each contributing about an eighth. Still, a hopeful sign were the first-time speakers (Drita, Ethel, Virginia, Sonia, and Xianglan) who had found their courage to join in. Out of a total of twenty-two students, fifteen had spoken, a large number, I thought, for this kind of discussion.

Once again, it was the Asian students who had participated the least, with only one out of a total of six speaking. Xianglan had spoken with incorrect grammar that had made it difficult to understand. "What kind of reason for the mother died?" she'd asked. One of the non-Asian students had asked her to repeat, a resourceful response that I hadn't thought to suggest. Other students rephrased her question, and good discussion followed.

After class I asked some Asian students why they hadn't spoken. Young Ja, a university graduate from S. Korea, explained that the students with more skill talked very fast. It was hard for her to keep apace with listening, let alone putting her thoughts into English before the discussion had moved on. She was also afraid of making mistakes.

I suggested that they could make a space for themselves by saying, "I have a question to ask," or "I want to say something." I promised to mention this suggestion in class before the next discussion and to remind people to give everyone the time they needed to say what they wanted to say.

The Third Student-led Discussion: Cheever's "Reunion"

As students gained confidence with the student-led format, the number of participating students continued to increase. In John Cheever's "Reunion," a story about a failed meeting between a divorced, alcoholic father and his pre-adolescent son, twenty-one students spoke, and their discussion was twice as long as the first two. Janna followed my suggestion and began with, "I have

a question." This time Naoko spoke, then asked, "Can you understand me?" We all smiled and nodded, and Naoko smiled back in relief.

In their discussion of "Reunion," students became more focused in their exploration of human psychology. With an increasing number of references to the text, they analyzed the father's feelings about meeting his son for the first time in three years, speculated about the extent of his alcoholism and its previous impact on the family. Masaya got it going:

Masaya: Why does he want to give his son alcohol?
Zlatka: He didn't know what to do with his son.
Vladimir: He was nervous, yeah.
Masaya: Maybe the father was nervous about meeting him. He hadn't seen him for three years. So he wanted to drink alcohol before meeting him.
Vladimir: I think he was drunk before.
Helena: I think he wanted to impress his son and show off before the waiters that he was a powerful man.
Zlatka: It's possible.
Vladimir: Maybe he felt embarrassed because he had divorced the boy's mother and they had met so rarely.
Adriana: Why did he take him to a bar? Why didn't he take him to another place to show him how smart he was? I don't think this is a good way.

With Adriana's question, the students segued to the heart of the story, the father's inability to communicate with his son. Cheever's theme seemed to have struck a chord. They were engrossed, working as a team, disagreeing without judgment of each other's views, laying out a rich spread of ideas:

Naoko: I think the father might suffer from mental problems. So the son hasn't seen him since.
Angel: He doesn't care about his son. He's only interested in drinking.
Anne-Laure: No. He hasn't seen his son in three years. He doesn't know how he will react.
Adriana: But when you love someone, you try to find a way to communicate. You prepare better.
Anne-Laure: He hadn't seen his son for three years, so maybe this means that he hadn't been carrying out his responsibilities.
Masaya: They didn't have much time, so he was in a hurry to show his son his position. If they'd had one day or one week, the father wouldn't have had to be in such a hurry. He wanted to do a lot of things, but he only had one or two hours. Maybe Charlie was disappointed. He'd hoped to meet his father a different way.

Anne-Laure: But in the end he said nothing. He didn't speak with his son.
Zlatka: It seems he was afraid of conversation.
Vladimir: I think he felt embarrassed. He actually didn't know what he was supposed to say to his son. We know that in real life it's not easy to express feelings. His behavior was strange, and it shows the lack of a relationship between the father and son. He felt more than he could express. It's a kind of tragedy because it was the last time they met together.
Tito: He wasn't thinking as a father. He was thinking as a friend.
Atsuko: I think that the father didn't have a good relationship with his son before, when he was still with the mother. The son didn't have any good memories to mention at the beginning of the story, when he was talking about the father. Maybe he was never a good father.
Virginia: He doesn't know he needs to give his son time to speak. He didn't organize his time. He was very nervous. Maybe he wanted to do the best for his son, but he didn't.
Lydia: I think the father doesn't want to talk to him. If you want to talk to your son, you get on the phone directly. You don't need a secretary.
Masaya: So you mean, before he was divorced, he didn't communicate enough with Charlie.

The students had woven a rich portrait of the father, all of which was plausible: a man with emotional problems, distracted by alcoholism, apprehensive about his son's feelings toward him, unprepared for conversation, afraid of conversation, maybe a shirker of parental responsibilities in the past, flustered and rushed by the shortness of the meeting, embarrassed, at a loss for fatherly words for his son.

In the last comment, you can hear Masaya actually bouncing off Lydia, adjusting his thinking from his previous statement, concluding that the father's failure to communicate goes way back. His talent for listening closely is not just a linguistic skill but an element of his personality that shapes his voice. His distilling and synthesizing skills were also important elements of his voice that were becoming more evident in discussion, particularly student-led discussion.

Other students made value judgments about the characters which revealed an aspect of their voice. Below, Anne-Laure's fear of being judged by

association with a weak person and Vladimir's witty appreciation of strange New Yorkers are two examples:

Vladimir: I find his behavior strange. I like a person like that.
Anne-Laure: You don't feel ashamed, when you're with this kind of person?
Vladimir: It's fun!
Anne-Laure: Fun for a while, maybe.
Vladimir: When I first came to New York, I thought everyone should go to a mental hospital. Everyone was acting in a strange way. I see it differently now. But my wife is training to be a psychiatrist in New York, and she's going to have a lot of business.

The syntax and tone of Janna's disapproval of the father almost tells you how she would sound, if she had a relationship to the father:

Janna: So, he has time to go to the club, but he doesn't have time for his son?

In Adriana's case, though she made some judgmental remarks, her compassion for the characters was emerging as even more of a trademark.

Their sustained interest showed me what an enormous appetite they had for talk in English about real life problems and confirmed the practical value of this process for allowing them to do that without my help. To answer their own probing questions, they had to find vocabulary to discuss psychological issues and describe personality, and they did: *strange, ashamed, nervous, excited, impress, show off, powerful, serious, ordinary, embarrassed, suffer, carry out, afraid of, insecure, relieved.*

They also consulted the dictionary and worked on some definitions:

Adriana: The title is "Reunion." For me it's something more formal.
Anne-Laure: Maybe more for family stuff. But it's not a real reunion.
Vladimir: From the dictionary, I just checked the meaning, "reunion" means a meeting of persons who have been separated.
Renata: Why did he say his father is his doom? Doom means ruin. It's a bad thing, a bad feeling.
Sonia: Maybe he had a problem when he was younger and they were together.
Zlatka: He thinks it's in the blood, they are of the same flesh.

Vladimir came up after discussion and said, "I really like these stories. I like talking about them." He asked to be corrected during discussion, but I explained that if I did that with everyone, it wouldn't be a discussion anymore, but a series of short grammar lessons. When he made a second request, "How about putting the common mistakes on the board?," I decided on a variation of his idea, to cull common errors from their reading journals and put those on the board, instead, for students to correct with me. But Vladimir's request was a reminder to me to find a way to tape the discussions the following term, so we would have another source of uncorrected, student-generated text for grammar study.

In the next class I let them know how pleased I was with their increased participation and their use of starting sentences like "I have a question." I thanked the student who had asked Xianglang to repeat the statement he hadn't understood and suggested that anyone who had a problem understanding another student's English could say, "Could you please repeat? Or, "I don't understand. Could you say that again?" I also explained and implemented the plan to use common grammar errors from their journals.

The Fourth Student-led Discussion
Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never"

In the next student-led reading discussion about Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never," there was much less culture-based reasoning about human psychology than in previous stories. Students were drawing conclusions that applied across cultures as they analyzed the feelings of Mr. Ramirez, an immigrant with an expired visa, who is located by the police and forced to leave. He says a tearful good-bye to his landlady who had never heard about his visa problem until he tells her now. Both are saddened by the finality of

the departure and the consequent losses, including whatever previously unexamined connection they might have had to each other. Zlatka and Anne-Laure summed up the feeling-tone of the piece in a way that reverberated for me and everyone else:

Zlatka: Sometimes you don't realize something's happening, and then it's over. Now it's too late to say good-bye.
Anne-Laure: She feels regret about not saying good-bye.

I was surprised, though, by the widespread confusion about Mr. Ramirez' visa problem, but pleased to see some students closing in on the narrative facts (a good reason to wait it out and not intervene). Their confusion may have been due to a lack of information about US visa laws, an inability to decode the syntax, or a lack of vocabulary, but their zeroing-in process reveals how they helped each other gain some clarity:

Adriana: Why did he leave? [She missed a central fact that his visa had run out.]
Drita: He went out and did bad things. [The author portrays him as decent, hard-working. The only bad thing mentioned was not renewing his visa and thereby breaking US law by becoming an undocumented immigrant.]

Xianglan came closer to the facts when she tried to change the direction of the discussion from the relationship between boarder and landlady to the fact that Mr. Ramirez had broken the law:

Xianglan: How did he find a job without the right visa?
Vladimir: Ask Ray Bradbury.
Masaya: He doesn't need a visa to find a job. Sometimes they can find a job, even when it's illegal.

Actually, Mr. Ramirez had a two-year visa when he got his job at the airplane factory. Xianglan's question would have been more fact-based if she had asked, How was Mr. Ramirez able to keep his job after his visa expired? Or, did Mr. Ramirez use his visa to get his job in the first place?

Masaya's observation about availability of jobs that don't require papers is true, but it shows that he has also missed the point as it was made in the story:

"What happened, Mr. Ramirez?" asked Mrs. O'Brien.
"I have been here thirty months," said Mr. Ramirez quietly, looking at Mrs. O'Brien's plump hands.
"That's six months too long," said one policeman. "He only had a temporary visa. We've just got around to looking for him."

Immigrant Themes

Masaya's comment seemed to satisfy some students, who went on to other things, but Angel brought the subject back to illegal immigrants with a question that didn't address the issue of the expired visa, but reflected his indignation at US police for throwing the law in the face of a hard-working, productive immigrant: "Why did the police get this man if he's helping this country?"

No one picked up on this, but Angel persisted in his stand against what he perceived as social injustice, an important, emerging element of his voice. A few minutes later he asked another angry question which led to a long, heated discussion about US treatment of illegal immigrants:

Angel: What about the police? Why did they smile?
Tito: They knew he was illegal. He was supposed to be there for six months.

Tito's reply to Angel showed the most understanding of the visa situation, that it had expired, although he confused the amount of overstay with the length of stay allowed by the visa, probably because he didn't have the linguistic skills needed to read the passage correctly. And then they were launched on a subject close to everyone's hearts:

Adriana: But there are a lot of illegal people here. They don't stop you unless you've done something wrong.

Marilenis: You're right. But sometimes the police go to factories and find illegal people. You don't have to do something wrong.
Tito: Sometimes employers pay taxes and they find out.
Marilenis: Some have luck, some don't.
Helena: The police can't just stop you on the street and ask for your ID.
Angel: It's a terrible problem. Spanish people working in this country make $5.00 an hour, but their rent is much higher. Who are the slaves in this country right now?
Zlatka: But it's your choice to come here illegally.
Helena: It's the rules of the market. If you don't have papers, you have problems.
Virginia: Without papers, you don't have opportunities.
Marilenis: Everyone has to be legal before getting a visa.
Helena: I don't think so.
Virginia: It's your decision. If you come here, you have to learn the rules.
Vladimir: That doesn't mean it's understandable.
Helena: Who is more immoral? The immigrant who finds the illegal job, or the employer who offers the illegal job for less pay?
Angel: The worker is not immoral.
Helena: If no one employs someone who is illegal, there would be no illegals.
Adriana: You and I may be legal, but you have to think of the others who are illegal. They have come here for a new life.
Helena: I think the government allows illegal people here because there are low-paying jobs that no one else wants except the illegal people. If employment was better, this wouldn't happen.
Marilenis: I think the government has to help poor people. In my country, the government has to help poor people.
Adriana: What can you do about here?
Vladimir: It's not an important point to the author. Let's go back to the story.
Young Ja: Do you think Mr. Ramirez is honest? He forgot to pay money for the car.

I was not expecting to hear so many students--Adriana, Marilenis, Tito, Helena, and Angel--agree that Mr. Ramirez had not done anything wrong in breaking the visa law. I expected their empathy, which I felt, too, for a decent, otherwise law-abiding immigrant who wanted to stay longer and earn better money than he could back home. I knew that some of the students in the room wanted to change their visa status from temporary to full-time, and that from some countries it wasn't easy. I shared Helena and Angel's views that immigrant workers were often exploited, especially undocumented immigrants, by employers who couldn't find anyone else who would accept such low pay. But these students seemed more concerned with Mr. Ramirez'

bad luck than any legal or moral responsibilities of the immigrant worker, the employer or the US government.

It wasn't until Zlatka pointed out that Mr. Ramirez had chosen to break the law that the class began to look at these issues. Now everyone began to agree with Zlatka, a lucid voice of reason in every discussion, that if an immigrant breaks the law or doesn't follow the rules, he has to face the consequences, such as getting in trouble with the law, or losing out on economic opportunities.

Then Vladimir peeled off another layer of the onion by inviting students to look closer at the right and wrong of it. Helena followed close behind, asking and answering her own question with vehement disapproval of the US employer who lures economically-needy immigrants to become illegal by offering them jobs when they don't have papers or letting them stay on the job when their visas expire. "If employment was better," she said, meaning employment in the immigrant's native country, then "this wouldn't happen." Angel went even further in his defense of immigrant workers in saying that there was nothing about their behavior that was immoral; immorality was on the side of the employer and the government for punishing the worker instead of the employer.

This was another conversation that only a student-led discussion could have given birth to. The process allowed them to speak from their common ground, to give voice as immigrants or visitors, a role I didn't share with them. At times during this discussion, they looked at me questioningly, as if to say, Is this OK? Can we do this in front of you? I nodded and reminded them that I would not quote them outside of class (which is why the names of the speakers have been changed). By the same token, I expected them not to quote each

other outside of class, either. Whatever confidences we knew about from discussions or journals were to stay inside the room.

But once this student-led conversation had happened, it served as feedback for me about where to have follow-up discussion. I knew their thinking and because the subject was so close to them, I thought it would be important for me to tell them what I felt, in order to be part of the classroom community, to which I did belong. Also, I felt their need to vent more. I saw the need to pinpoint the narrative issue about an expired visa and sort out facts about visa law that applied to them. We did have further discussion, in which I was able to carry out my goals and students got a chance to compare US visa policy toward their respective countries. They also swapped hard-luck stories. This in turn led to some team effort to solve their own visa problems.

More Student-led Discussions and Some Conclusions

Students read and discussed four more stories, one of which they couldn't understand and didn't like, another in which two discussions were going on at the same time, one conceptual and one literal. The puzzling story was Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics," in which a husband and wife fight over who will get the baby after they split up. I turned it into a play, dividing the class into four groups which then performed for the rest of us. Anne-Laure held bundled clothes in her arms for the baby and cried real tears when she and Laszlo began to pull the baby away from each other. In another group, Adriana drew a window on the board and turned off the lights to create dusk in the room. Zlatka summed it up for everyone, when she said the play had helped her "feel it better."

In Tobias Wolff's story, "Say Yes," where the conceptual/literal split took place, a white woman becomes distraught after she asks her husband if he

would marry her if she were black, and he says no. The less skilled readers tried to figure out whether the characters were married or not and shared anecdotes about interracial couples, while the more competent readers explored the subtext about the differences between male and female thinking and the impact on this couple's relationship. They went back and forth, with Vladimir shepherding the skilled readers back to the subtext, and the less skilled trying to grab onto something more tangible:

Adriana: Why did they begin to speak about black or white?
Vladimir: For me, this story is absolutely true. It's about the difference between male and female thinking. Female thinking sometimes surprises me. Sometimes a man tells something that means nothing to him, but it means something important to the wife.
Angel: When a couple are warring, they have to argue about everything.
Anne-Laure: Either they fight all the time, or they don't speak to each other at all.
Laszlo: So was Vladimir saying that men are always right?
Vladimir: They're different.
Anne-Laure: Women are moodier.
Angel: Do men think with the head and women with the heart?
Drita: Are they friends or are they married? Why is she asking, "Would you marry me?"
Vladimir: Women want all conditions to be perfect.
Marilenis: If they can't understand each other, they'll never get married.
Vladimir: It's about a different point. Would you marry me if I had one eye? If I were ten years older?
Marilenis: If you love someone, the background doesn't matter.
Anne-Laure: Even if there is love between two people of different cultures, there will always be difficulties.
Ethel: I think it would be interesting. We would always find something new.
Vladimir: The story is about something else.
Helena: When you're married, you can think that your husband will always think like you.
Angel: This is the problem.

Here's an example where differences in reading background, not cultural perspective, had led to two discussions weaving in and out of each other. Unable to explore the subtext, the less-skilled readers kept associating to the surface of the story. Unwilling to abandon the subtext until they had explored the complex issues to their satisfaction, the skilled readers eventually arrived at a consensus without the others. This was a marked departure from

the other discussions in which a nucleus of skilled readers had led the rest down the same path, one path at a time.

Though this kind of thing happens all the time in life outside the classroom, the more so when people have different backgrounds, I found myself thinking about how else it could have gone. In this case, I might have been able to eliminate cross-talk between the two groups and given the less-skilled a chance to shine more if I'd used a fishbowl arrangement, with all the intermediate students in the inner circle at one time. Now that I knew what a success student-led discussion with the ambiguous stories in *Sudden Fiction* could be, I was readier to try the fishbowl with a large split-level class, or any large class. But with an all-intermediate class, I was now more inclined to use stories that were less of a stretch. When I asked the handful of least-skilled readers what they thought about it, they told me what I thought they would say: "The stories are too short," "They don't tell enough," "We don't know what's happening." But they did like *Flowers for Algernon,* which was a more literal piece of writing.

I'd learned several important things in my use of student-led reading discussion in this second try. As I'd hoped, the process had offered benefits that weren't possible with teacher-led reading discussion. It had given students an autonomous way to build fluency in English by requiring them to use what they already knew and build a repertory of discussion behaviors on their own. It had brought out their voices as they responded to an ambiguous treatment of universal issues with their own concerns and interests, not mine.

The process had also given them a chance to share more about themselves, to work as a team, to vent their frustrations and express their human empathy as they talked about the dilemmas of the characters. It had

allowed them to assume positive roles, as intellectual leader, team-builder, synthesizer, poet, and bring out the best of themselves. In a real way, it had been community-building beyond what I had anticipated.

Though I had no way to be sure that the first class might not have done better with *Sudden Fiction*, or the second class might not have managed with *Prince of Tides*, I wanted to continue in the next term with ambiguous shorts that had universal themes and use these for student-led reading discussion. In order to set the tone, and for reasons already discussed, I also wanted to continue the combination of teacher-guided discussion and double-entry reading journal with a novel.

On the third try, I wanted to take a closer look at the process of student-led discussion: what use had students made of their pre-discussion questions? What was the interplay of written and spontaneous questions? How had students' thinking been changed by the discussion? How did they monitor each other's linguistic errors? What kind of language learning was taking place?

My plan was to tape and transcribe their discussion to use for linguistic study and follow-up critical thinking. I would ask students to write pre- and post-discussion questions, summaries and interpretations, and I would keep records of these. At the end of the term, I would ask students to assess their own experience with student-led reading discussion.

CHAPTER IX

THE THIRD TERM WITH STUDENT-LED READING DISCUSSION

The Reading Community

This time the class was small, only six students. All but one were college students or recent graduates who'd studied English in their native countries and had been here for less than a year. Five were from Latin America, the sixth from Japan. A few had read novels in English.

This time I'd chosen Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees.* Taking my cue from the previous class's passionate response to the immigrant issues in Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never," I wanted to use a well-written novel that focused on those or related issues. In *The Bean Trees*, a young woman breaks away from a confining life in Kentucky to reroot herself in Tucson, Arizona. Along the way she mothers an abandoned Native American baby and becomes friends with political refugees from El Salvador. The story is all about learning how to deal with culture shock and cultural difference.

By chance, two of the six students in the class were from El Salvador, Sonia, a refugee from the Revolution of the 80's, and Alejandro, the son of a Salvadoran journalist who'd been involved in radical politics during those years. Politically, they seemed to be from opposite ends of the spectrum, but I was very hopeful that the book would especially resonate for these two.

From partner interviews and classroom conversation, we learned that Alejandro, the youngest at eighteen, was staying with his mother and stepfather, studying English before returning to El Salvador to be with his

father. He planned to study economics in a Jesuit University there and do graduate study in the US. A bright, idealistic boy, he wanted to return to El Salvador to "help the poor people."

Maria, who worked at IBM in Argentina, was on leave to be here with her husband on his two-year assignment at IBM/US. A quiet, modest student, she hoped to improve her English skills enough to feel comfortable working for IBM/US while she and her husband were in the states.

Sonia, who'd left El Salvador fifteen years before to live permanently in the US, was the only US citizen in the class. She'd completed high school, but unlike the others, had never studied English before coming to the US. She'd read a novel in English in a previous ESL class in the program. She confided to me that she'd recently been asked to leave a secretarial job because of inadequate English skills and was receiving financial aid to study in the intensive program.

Diego, a university graduate in his native Columbia, wanted to pass the TOEFL so he could study civil engineering at Virginia Tech. He'd been in the US for only four months, and had had the least amount of English study--six months--before coming to the US.

Juliana had also just completed her university studies in her native Brasil. She was here with her parents and sister for two years while her father was on a corporate assignment. She hoped to study in an art school here. She loved to read and had read two novels in English on her own.

Hiromi, a kindergarten teacher in Japan, was teaching Japanese to the children in her host family. She wanted to study here long enough, she said, to learn an American approach to education. Not reserved in appearance, with

blue fingernails and long hair dyed copper, Hiromi was nevertheless a reticent speaker. She liked to read novels in Japanese.

In a small class like this one, any big linguistic differences would stand out, and already Sonia was different from the others in a number of ways. She hadn't had the academic, intellectual, or middle-class background of the others, and after living here for fifteen years, she was still having difficulty with grammar. But she was more familiar with US culture, colloquial speech, and idiom than the rest. She was also considerably older, which could set her apart or be an asset in discussion.

I had some concern about Diego, too, with his strong academic background and little exposure to English. Would he be able to express the complexity of his thinking with us? And for his own sake, wasn't he expecting too much of himself, to be able to read competently for the TOEFL in just a few short months? He was tense most of the time, maybe because of this self-imposed pressure to achieve what I thought might be an unrealistic goal.

Alejandro had confided his own concerns about what role he would play in this class. He was afraid his ideas were two unconventional for the others, that they wouldn't understand him or like what he had to say. Wearing long hair and sandals, tribal amulets around his neck, hand-embroidered peasant shirts, and a handloomed bookbag, he reminded me of myself in the sixties. But his appearance set him apart from the others, and he wanted to be a regular guy with a social life in the class.

I suggested that he might want to give his classmates a chance and try his ideas out on them. There wasn't a mean person among them, I pointed out, and they might surprise him in their willingness and ability to comprehend. And if they couldn't, I doubted they would hold it against him for having taken

the risk. "Don't worry," I added, "there are people who share your views out there. If you don't find them in this class, you will, somewhere down the road."

Working with the Novel

We had begun reading *The Bean Trees.* I'd shown them Kentucky and Arizona on a map of the US, given them pre-reading vocabulary, modeled comprehension and critical thinking questions in guided discussions of the first chapters. To one question, "Why do you think Missy changed her name to Taylor?," I moved us from a discussion of the protagonist to ourselves. Taylor, who'd been trying to dissociate herself from a painful childhood memory associated with 'Missy,' had picked the name of a town she was passing through during her getaway from her hometown in Kentucky. I told the students how my given name had been Diane Judith, but everyone at home had called me Judy, so when I came home tearful because a first-grade teacher had insisted on calling me Diane, my parents had my name legally changed so my teacher would have to call me Judy.

When I asked the students if the names on my roster were the names that they wanted me to call them, Maria said, "My friends call me 'Ile'," and she was Ile after that. Hiromi told us that she used to be called "Little rabbit" by her family, but she preferred Hiromi now. Alejandro told us that his first name was actually Roberto, named after an uncle who was killed in the Revolution, but that everyone called him Alejandro.

With another question, "What did Missy want to get away from in her hometown?" I segued again from a discussion about the protagonist to us. I gave them a few new words to talk about Missy's dissatisfactions (bored, provincial, narrow-minded, non-conformist), and when I asked them why

they had left their native country to come here, they all agreed that they had come for economic and educational opportunity.

Sonia told us why she left El Salvador in the early eighties:

> One time men came with guns and made us get off the bus. They made us lie down with our hands over our heads. Then they exploded the bus with a bomb. Another time I was in the mall and men came running in with guns, shooting everywhere, da-da-da-da-da-da! Everywhere people running, screaming. You call that a life?"

Students' voices were also emerging in their reading journals for *The Bean Trees*, which they had begun to share, and from which I culled questions for whole class discussion. I learned that Hiromi was an enthusiastic and sensitive reader who responded to nature imagery and innuendos of feeling. Diego wrote unintelligibly at times, with some invented vocabulary, about the philosophical implications of the first chapters. Ile was a thoughtful reader who looked for psychological content. Juliana was a confident reader with story-telling skills of her own. Sonia seemed to be a slow reader, responding to only the first part of the reading assignment, but she was thoughtfully engaged in identifying moral issues raised by the book. And Alejandro had written passionately about his growing sense of self.

Preparing for the First Student-led Discussion "Sunday in the Park"

Before the students read Bel Kaufman's "Sunday in the Park," I did a pre-reading vocabulary activity to arrive at meanings for the following:

sandbox	insolent
digging	menace
shovel	fists
spit,spat	dragging
rush	defeat

When I asked them what they thought the story was going to be about, they were quick to say, "A fight!" "Some kid is rude!" "Someone is going to win." "Someone is going to get hurt."

I went over the instructions, reminding them to read silently and go for the larger meaning. Several of them scanned the first page and were still worried about unfamiliar words. How would they be able to talk about a story if they didn't know what the words meant? I asked them to read for whatever meaning they could get without a dictionary and to keep reading until they had questions. But it was also fine to ask questions about vocabulary, for which they might get answers from each other.

Juliana asked, "What if I don't have any questions? I just read the first page, and I understand everything."

I assured her that because of the ambiguity in the stories, she would have questions about why people in the story did what they did. Because they were glancing nervously at each other and making little self-conscious jokes, I decided two things: to have them do only the pre-discussion questions and postpone the summary and interpretation for the next story, and just this time not to tape the discussion, but to take notes furiously, as I had in the spring. I reminded them, if they had trouble jumping in, to say, "I have a question," or "I want to say something."

The First Student-led Discussion

In contrast to the previous class's focus on the different child-rearing practices of the two families, this class paid more attention to the conflict between the adults. Would it have been wrong for Martin to fight? How did Martin and his wife feel about his not having it out with the park man? Why

were they angry at each other? Juliana led off with the first of her written questions:

Juliana: Why was Martin so angry after he left the park, if he didn't want to fight with the big man? He's still angry.
Sonia: That man was so rough and rude that anyone would want to punch him in the face. But we know that sometimes we have to avoid fighting.

Now that I knew some of her story, Sonia's answer felt like a faint echo of the decision she'd made in her own life, to get away from violence. Though I agreed with her moral stand, I thought there was something else going on with this middle-class university professor from NYC, perhaps a feeling that his values and his dignity had taken a beating with this guy who could care less about civility.

Juliana, who accepted Sonia's answer, hurried ahead with another of her written questions, but the others were still mulling it over:

Juliana: Does the wife agree with her husband?
Sonia: She agrees about avoiding fighting, but she's also angry.
Alejandro: I think Martin felt defeated. It was a question of honor, mainly between two men. The big man said, "You can take your kid the hell out of here." He lost the moral fight.
Hiromi: Martin is angry at himself.
Sonia: Do you think if he left he lost? He knows that the right thing is to leave that situation.
Juliana: But sometimes men don't like that.
Alejandro: Sometimes the women are more intelligent.
Marilenis: I think women are always more intelligent.
Alejandro: Some stupid women fight. The stupid thing is to fight with a big man who can kick your ass. Excuse me. If he were the same size as Martin, he could fight.
Marilenis: It's not good to fight, but if someone wants to fight with you, you can. If a person is bigger, I can pick up a pail.
Ile: But not in front of the child.
Sonia: It was a good example for the child to avoid fighting.

In bringing out some of the complexities in Martin's feelings, Alejandro raised another issue, about honor among men, in which he implied that the way for a man to keep his honor is to fight. His conventional stance on the macho issue surprised me, given his earlier confidence about his

unconventional thinking. But as soon as he said Martin had lost the moral fight, Sonia shifted the conversation to the moral issue, with a question that was not one of her written questions but an on-the-spot response to the evolving discussion: Do you think if he left he lost?

Sonia's viewpoint was less complicated than that of the characters in the story, in my opinion. But from Juliana's questions and comments, I got the impression that she was sensitive to the husband and wife's conflict with each other and themselves about that very question. But nobody picked up on her comments and the thorny issue was dropped.

In this first student-led effort, I saw quickly that I didn't have to worry about Sonia's ability to speak out. Diego was the one having the most trouble finding words to express his thoughts, and he was an even more reserved speaker than Hiromi. With Sonia, it seemed I might expect to hear some quick segues from the story to its broader moral applications. As for Alejandro, he was probably testing the waters.

Students' Pre- and Post- Reading Questions

Later, comparing the questions they had written while reading with the questions they asked during discussion, I saw that five out of ten discussion questions had come from their reading, from which I concluded that writing down their reading questions had helped them direct their discussion. Some of their written pre-discussion questions were duplicated, though not many. Among the seventeen reading questions that hadn't been asked, one had been written by three students, the question that launched the previous class's discussion, 'Why did the man tell the boy to throw all the sand he wanted?' There were only three on-the-spot questions, and two of those were in response to an on-going discussion. Though students hadn't shown much

spontaneity this first time in initiating on-the-spot inquiries, they had paid close attention to each other's thoughts and responded with other kinds of spontaneous discussion behavior.

Beginning with the next reading from *Sudden Fiction*, and with each subsequent reading, I asked students to write pre-discussion summaries and interpretations of the story. I also taped and transcribed each of their reading discussions, noting silences, laughter, incomplete sentences, etc. With a transcript to study, I began to see how with a class of this small size, there was more time and space for sustained exploration of everyone's questions, for students to help each other, for discussion to extend meaningfully beyond the story, for me to intervene in small ways without interrupting, for intimacy to grow with shared laughter and life stories, for voices to become more delineated.

The Second Story: Langston Hughes' "Thank You, M'am"

The first transcribed discussion was about Langston Hughes' "Thank You, M'am," in which a boy tries to snatch a purse from a woman who grabs, scolds, and drags him to her home, where she feeds him dinner, talks to him kindly and gives him ten dollars for the shoes he wanted but couldn't afford.

Students took their time deliberating each of their main points. They decided the woman wanted to teach the boy a lesson her own way, which was why she hadn't contacted the police. Based on evidence they cited in the story, they thought she might have taken an interest in the boy because she'd done some wrong thing in the past, or had wanted things she couldn't have.

They wondered if her way of teaching him a lesson was moral and effective. Would the boy try to steal again because she had made it easy for him, or had he learned something about how to behave in the future? Perhaps

he'd already begun to change his behavior, at least toward this woman, when he didn't run out of her apartment or steal from her open bag, which she left out on the bed while she had her back turned at the stove.

Students Helping Students during Discussion

They helped each other in several ways, encouraging each other to speak, teaching each other vocabulary, expressing sympathy after a personal anecdote. In the following discussion, they helped each other learn new words:

Sonia: Why did the boy try to snatch her purse?
Juliana: Because he wants the money to buy a--shoes?
Everyone: Yeah.
Ile: Yeah, a pair of shoes.
Juliana: Pair of shoes? What's that?
Ile: Pair.
Juliana: What's that she says--?
Ile: Suede, something like that.
Hiromi: Like a kind of material.
Juliana, Ile: Ohh.

As in this exchange, there was also frequent unanimous affirmation, with everyone saying, 'Yeah, that's right,' or someone using an expression of agreement, as Sonia and Alejandro did below:

Hiromi: I heard somebody was caught the police, went to the jail, but it's not getting better. He go out of jail again and do the same thing. Maybe she thought it's better to teach by herself.
Everyone: Yeah.
Alejandro: And also the jail, you can learn more things, you know.
Sonia: I know! Sometimes people come out worse!
Alejandro: Yeah, it's the best school.

In one instance, Juliana asked for confirmation of a word that she was experimenting with, but no one else knew enough to help her:

Alejandro: She was very strong, you know?
Juliana: Courageous.
Alejandro: Yes, with courage.
Juliana: How do you call someone with courage? Courageous?
Sonia: Brave.
Alejandro: Yes, she was brave to do that.

When other students influenced Juliana to drop her correct use of the word 'courageous,' I took that as my cue to incorporate the new word into a post-discussion vocabulary lesson about adjectives ending in *-ous*. But it was the transcribed text, with its record of linguistic errors, that helped me charge my memory batteries and prioritize for follow-up work.

Once they had satisfied themselves about the content of the story, they began to make connections to their own lives, with Sonia asking, "How many of us would do the same as that woman?" Juliana thought she would want to, but didn't know if she would be that brave. Alejandro thought it was likelier to happen with a strong woman than a man because between two males, there would probably be a different reaction. "A fight!," a few said, and then there was some shared laughter as they remembered their discussion about macho values in connection to "Sunday in the Park."

Diego initiated a discussion of an implied theme when he asked the others to consider his written, pre-discussion interpretation:

Diego: I have one note in my sheet. The man is naturally good, but the society change him. What do you think about it?
Alejandro: I don't agree with you.
Ile: Are you saying that the human is natural good?
Diego: Yes. By nature is good. But society changes this attitude. It influences.
Alejandro: Yes. The human is born good.
Sonia: I think we are not good. I think no one is good in this world. Because all of us are human and we make a lot of mistakes. But I think we can be affected by the society, or we can affect the society, because all of us can affect it.
Diego: But sometimes people think 'No, this person was born bad. This is his life.'
Sonia: But probably he wasn't born bad. Maybe he learned that watching TV. Or maybe a friend told him to do that. I don't think no one was born bad or good one. I think all of us are human and make mistakes.

This interesting discussion about nature vs. nurture, or what makes people go wrong, was a logical extension of their discussion about the feasibility of teaching a moral lesson through kindness to a boy who had done

a bad thing. What particularly pleased me was that Diego's notes had helped him construct an interpretation and introduce it into the discussion. It showed me that the task to write a pre-discussion interpretation had been useful for a quiet student like him, with a philosophical bent.

Hiromi extended the discussion in yet another direction, when she asked if anyone had ever had an experience with a thief. Everyone agreed with Sonia that there were teenagers like that everywhere, but Diego wasn't sure that was true about Japan. This gave Hiromi the chance to enlighten them:

> Juliana: Are there boys in the street stoling just like this boy?
> Hiromi: Yeah. Actually, not many. But the young people like high school student catch a business man and say, 'Give me money. If you don't give me, I will kill you.' You know those shoes, Air Nikes? They are so popular in my country. Someone walking along, the teenagers pull them off. Like that!

Alejandro drew them back to their own experience by repeating Hiromi's question, but when Diego tried to tell his story, Alejandro jumped in excitedly with his own about being held up on a bus by teenagers with a knife, and then Maria followed. Because Diego was a quiet person who would not push his way into the discussion but clearly had a story he wanted to tell, and because the class was small enough for a minor intervention to work, I decided to help him enter the discussion. I called his name in a low voice, then communicated with eye contact and hand gestures and he began his story, the others punctuating, echoing, and commenting like a Greek chorus.

They also helped Diego with vocabulary:

> Diego: I had a terrible experience in my country, too.
> Ile: Yeah?
> Diego: Yeah. I was sequestered?
> Sonia: Kidnapped.
> Ile: You! You did?
> Diego: Yeah. Two people with one gun--
> Sonia: Ohh!
> Ile: How long?
> Diego: Three hours.

Ile: Oh, I thought three days.
Diego: No, but it was terrible.
Ile: Yeah! I think an hour is like a century!
Diego: These people robbed my car. One opened the door, put me in my car, and keep the gun in my head.
Sonia: Ohhh!
Juliana: And shut the door.
Diego: One guy drive the car.
Juliana: Did they want money?
Diego: Yes. Then in some place they stop the car and he got out. He went near to the river and the forest.
Ile: Leave you alone there?
Diego: Yes. They coach me, I don't know how to say--
Ile: Try.
Juliana: What they want, the car, your money?
Diego: Everything. Everything but my clothes.
Juliana: I think just stole, I don't know how to say, is not a kidnap. Kidnap is when someone take you and keep you in one house, ask your family for money.
Ile: It's a kind of stole.

After Diego finished his story, Juliana and Sonia took a turn. "Thank You, M'am" had clearly struck a common raw nerve, with everyone living in fear of violence in their native countries, but it was the size of the class that allowed everyone enough time and feeling of intimacy to tell a story of their own. In comparison to the previous, larger class with its cliques, students in this class weren't stepping out of role as listener in order to have side conversations with a neighbor, not even to share a memory triggered by the speaker's story. Smaller class size seemed to result in more courtesy and loyalty to one another and the desire to show it through sustained attention.

Using the Transcribed Discussion as Text

Having the text to study later, with all of its stops and starts, jokes, laughter, exclamations, and interruptions, gave all of us a better handle on the different flavor of each student's speech during reading discussion and storytelling. It was a document of the individuality of their voices: Alejandro's

humor, Sonia's moral fervor, Juliana's love of language, Diego's philosophical bent, Ile's close reading of psychological motive, Hiromi's friendliness.

The transcribed text, with its record of linguistic errors, gave me critical feedback about a discrepancy I had often noticed in the language skills of most of my students. Their fluency and grammatical accuracy in spoken English lagged behind their linguistic skills in reading and writing. I had noticed this among high-intermediate students as well. It was often the students who'd had more English study in their native countries whose spoken English was relatively less skilled or fluent, probably because they'd spent most of their class time reading and writing English rather than speaking and hadn't had outside opportunities to speak, either.

This first transcribed discussion documented that discrepancy, particularly their use of present tense for past actions, their difficulty in forming questions, their omission of nonreferential 'it,' all aspects of grammar most of them could handle with greater accuracy in their in-class written work. The writing in most of their journals was far superior. (In Sonia's case, her spoken English was more fluent if not grammatically accurate, but she was the one student who hadn't gone beyond high school and had lived in the US for fifteen years.) As a document of the discrepancy, the transcript pointed to the great need for discussions like this one and made a strong case for the potential of the student-led discussion to increase fluency and for the transcript itself to be a source for grammar and vocabulary study.

Later, when we used the transcript in class as a grammar text, I elicited from them some of these common errors and asked them to correct them. We also looked at new territory, for example, some work with the conditional future, eliciting some rules from their grammatically correct sentences (What

would happen if the boy were a true delinquent? How many of us would do the same as that woman?) and correcting their errors (Who take the risk to do that? Maybe she call the police in this case.) We did vocabulary work, introducing and using new words, including steal/stole, kidnap, hijack, stealing as a gerund, and I did that above-mentioned lesson on adjectives ending in *-ous*. These were only some of the possibilities, the only real limitation being how much time could reasonably be spent on in-class analysis of errors and follow-up practice using the corrected grammar or vocabulary. In this case, they used their practice time to make further cultural comparisons about theft in different cultures.

Interpreting Pre- and Post-Discussion Questions

When I looked at their pre-discussion questions this time, I found that once again, the students had leaned heavily on these to direct their discussion and to arrive at consensus about the content of the story. All but Ile had used at least one; Sonia had used all five of hers. Instead of asking, Ile had been busy building her role as synthesizer, supplying answers about the narrative and the characters' motives, or restating other students' comments for more clarity.

This time, I had pre- and post-discussion questions available for comparison. Sonia, who'd had all of her pre-questions answered, had no additional questions. Ile, who had asked none of hers, had gotten answers from the discussion to all but one, for which she now wanted an answer. As I looked further, I saw that the students felt they had gotten answers to most of their pre-discussion questions, either because someone else had written down the same question and asked it, or because the question or related subject

matter had come up spontaneously in the course of discussion and been explored to their satisfaction.

As for their post-discussion questions that had come to them as a result of their discussion, it was clear that discussion had led to deeper reflection. Alejandro had a hypothetical question: What would happen if the boy were a true delinquent? Would Mrs. Jones have helped him the same way? Diego's question was also about the way to help someone in trouble and a continuation of the class's assessment of the way the woman had helped the boy. "What do you think is better," he asked, "doing something good that lasts a while, or helping people learn something they can use for the rest of their life? If you give a fish to someone, this person can eat for one day, but if you teach him to fish, this person can eat for the rest of his life."

Hiromi had two new post-discussion questions, both extensions of the class's dialogue. Her first, "If I were the woman, what would I do?," Juliana, Sonia, and Ile had addressed during the discussion, but the question was still reverberating for Hiromi, who hadn't responded to this in class. Her second question was really the same as Diego's, but without an answer: "What is the best way to help people who are making a mistake and look like they are in trouble?" This question was at the heart of the story and their discussion. The fact that all of their new post-discussion questions continued to explore the central issue of how to help someone in trouble confirmed for me that this task had indeed helped them to continue their thinking, that student-led discussion was a mentally stimulating process and a good venue for engaging their minds. Clearly, discussing the content of an ambiguous story with important and complex issues had led to further introspection about related issues in the world around them.

The students' pre- and post-discussion written interpretations of "Thank You, M'am" revealed a parallel evolution in their thinking. Hiromi, for example went from a pre-discussion interpretation that was more like a synopsis to an assessment of the woman's impact on the boy and herself:

> I think the woman is strong, but also her inside, her soul is very tough! She had same experience as the boy, and she couldn't get somebody who teachers her "right way." She did! I think it's great job. He is very lucky she taught him very good way. This case may be rare, but I hope I can help somebody like her. If everybody teaches and helps each other, the globe will be getting better. Let's make good world by ourselves!!

Alejandro made a similar transition, from pre- to post-discussion interpretation, though he took a different view:

> It was a good way to help him, but it was so fast and an ephemeral help. It would be better if she teach him a good way of life, (echoes of Diego's fish and learning how to fish), like look for a job, or also, she can give him a job in her house.

Students' Associations To and From Discussions

There was interesting spillover from these discussions to their journal responses to *The Bean Trees.* It was clear, for example, that Alejandro had been ruminating about the macho issue in "Sunday in the Park." Not long after their student-led discussion, he wrote in his journal about a macho guy Taylor had met on the road to Tucson:

> I disagree with the behavior of some men who think they can impress a woman by looking brave, rude, macho-macho, etc. as if they are the protection in a dangerous world. I know a lot of women who can protect themselves.
>
> It's worse when the women like to be the weak person.
> In Latin America, we have many cultural problems like this one.
> The machismo is not only in the men, it is in the women, too.

Here he goes on to talk about how women perpetuate their own subordinate roles by teaching their daughters to be dependent housewives like themselves, who let their husbands push them around in exchange for economic

protection. I responded to his thoughts by writing some of my own in his journal:

> I think every man and woman has a chemistry that combines elements of the masculine and the feminine. But we would have to define what we meant by the two terms...
> Why are the husbands hitting their wives?

There was also spillover in the other direction from their responses to the novel to their responses in student-led discussion to the stories. In their next discussion, this one about Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never," students were trying to pinpoint what kind of relationship there had been between the landlady, Mrs. O'Brien and Mr. Ramirez, the immigrant who'd been caught with an expired visa. When Alejandro pointed to what he thought was evidence of a special feeling between them, it reminded Ile of *The Bean Trees* and some cautionary words spoken to Taylor's housemate Lou Ann:

> Alejandro: She considered him the best tenant, and she couldn't eat naturally when he left. And he cried! Maybe not only for the life there, but looking at her!
> Ile: What Alejandro is saying remind me of the guy who sells tomatoes to Lou Ann. He say that something you want the most becomes the worst for you.

Immigrant Themes Again: "I See You Never"

As they explored two main issues in "I See You Never," the same two as the previous class--the sudden realization of loss of connection to a person who was part of your household, and the legal and moral ramifications of becoming or employing an illegal immigrant--this class made many of the same points, but they speculated further about why Mr. Ramirez became illegal and how he was caught:

> Juliana: How the police find him?
> Ile: Maybe he was found because he has a job, and he bought a car. There are many ways to find. Or maybe he stopped in the street to ask something.
> Juliana: No, because they said they are looking for him. Maybe someone told them. Talked to the police.

Hiromi: Somebody said something to the police.
Juliana: Somebody went to the police and said there is one guy who is illegal.
Diego: But he's prepared to return to his country.
Ile: Yes, I know, he had the suitcase. I think he was prepared, but he thought this will never happen.
Hiromi: He thought they wouldn't catch him.

Ile was the one who raised the issue of wrongdoing on Mr. Ramirez' part. The others came to his defense, emphasizing the US employers' exploitation of undocumented immigrants who worked hard for less pay at jobs Americans wouldn't want to have. But Ile made a strong case for Mr. Ramirez' responsibility for his own troubles, insisting that he "should have known that it would happen," that "this is not the right way to stay here a long time."

Ile: And why didn't he go to someone with his visa situation?
Juliana: He need to return to Mexico and do this in Mexico. It's not easy.
Diego: Maybe extend his visa.
Ile: Two years is a long time to extend the visa.
Juliana: But he's working illegal. He couldn't renew the visa. He's illegal.
Ile: If he thought he wanted to live in US, why don't he prepare for this?
Juliana: Because it's not easy!
Ile: I know, but he have a job, the job can help.
Sonia: But maybe he asked the boss, and the boss couldn't help him.
Juliana: It's easier for your husband, of course. [Ile's husband was on assignment with IBM.]
Diego: Mr. Ramirez is the kind of person who wasn't to school, he didn't prepare for this kind of life, he didn't know the real life in the US.
Alejandro: Usually the people who came to the US by bus--
Diego: It's difficult to be an immigrant in the US without an education.

But in their post-discussion questions and interpretations, students revealed the influence of Ile's thinking on theirs. Now there were several students who asked why Mr. Ramirez hadn't renewed his visa. Why hadn't he consulted with Mrs. O'Brien, other immigrants or his boss about how to fix the problem? If he really liked Mrs. O'Brien, why hadn't he let her know the truth? Ile wanted to know why he had come to the US at all, if he knew that he would become illegal.

Hiromi, Sonia, and Diego's post-discussion interpretations captured the sense of warning the story had given them:

> Hiromi: The immigrant has to take care about visa carefully. 'The spilt milk never come back again.' I felt his feeling that he never want to go back. But I'm afraid it was his mistake.
> Sonia: There is a lot of people around the world that are in need to come to this country looking for a job and better life that they don't have in their countries, but living here they have to take care of other things like legalizing their papers. If not, they can be returned to their countries...
> ...We should be careful about laws and rules in any country.
> Diego: We must not give a lot of opportunity to chance because it can catch us suddenly. We need to be prepared for whatever eventuality in our lives.

Even after further discussion with me about the moral and legal issues, they were still roiling inside about the injustice of punishing illegal immigrants but not the US employers who hire them. Because these were authentic concerns first expressed in their own discussion, I saw this as an opportunity for them to write down their thoughts about possible solutions to the problem. They had plenty to say! Juliana thought the government should fine companies that hired illegal immigrants. Ile and Diego thought US manufacturers should build more factories in other countries, rather than entice the poor to seek work in the US without papers. But Alejandro thought that could be a problem if the US companies pushed out local enterprises, or violated basic conditions of health, minimum wage, and human rights in the workplace. Sonia thought there should be no quotas on immigrants and all illegal immigrants should be allowed to legalize themselves with the help of an agency or lawyer. I posted their papers for everyone to consider the pros and cons of each other's solutions, which led to more heat and some light.

Spontaneous Shifts from Teacher-led to Student-led Discussion

Students began to look forward to their student-led discussions, which became a very natural part of their work together in class. For the most part they forgot about me as they grew into their dialogue relationships with one another. The more comfortable they became, the more carry-over there was to discussions launched by me, so that what had started as a teacher-led reading discussion was likelier to turn into a student-led discussion.

One of the most moving of these examples came from a discussion I launched about a character in *The Bean Trees.* Why, I asked, had Esperanza, a political refugee from El Salvador, attempted suicide now that she was safe in the US? The class began to talk about the decision Esperanza had made about her daughter, who was captured by the police, along with sixteen comrades of Esperanza's. Esperanza had decided not to come forward to ask the police for her child.

"How could she do that?" a few students blurted out. "Let her own daughter die?"

"I could never do that," someone else said.

"She had to do it," Alejandro said. "If she had come forward, the police would have forced her to tell them the whereabouts of her comrades, and they would have all been killed, like my uncle. When you're in the movement, you die before you tell about the others."

Alejandro told the story of his uncle, for whom he'd been named, and after a compassionate silence, there was more talk about Esperanza's sacrifice, about human despair and hope in the novel and in life. It was as heartfelt and authentic as anyone could hope for anywhere, in or out of a classroom.

By midpoint in the term, everyone was discussing freely, launched into their roles, including the two most reserved: Hiromi often serving as helpmate, and Diego as philosopher. Sonia, with her store of life experience, increasingly presented herself as the wise elder, which the others let her do, even though their university education and cultural sophistication gave them a frame of reference that Sonia didn't have.

This togetherness during discussion was in sharp contrast with the class's social dynamic during break, when the younger five usually grouped in the snackroom and Sonia went off by herself. The university group wasn't exclusive towards Sonia, but there was a definite social distance, initiated more by Sonia, who may have felt uncomfortable because of the differences in age and background.

Nevertheless, it seemed as if every student had developed a commitment to class community or culture as strong as any social alliance to one another outside of class. Everyone worked together in student-led reading discussion as equals, making room for each other's developing voices. Even when the social dynamic began to shift, with a romance developing between Alejandro and Juliana and the others spending more break time with Sonia, there was a remarkable degree of respect for their differences during reading discussion, though now I had to stop the constant side conversations between Alejandro and Juliana during other class time.

Discussing Tobias Wolff's "Say Yes"

The students' discussion of Tobias Wolff's story, "Say Yes," was a remarkable culmination of their collaboration as readers. They wrestled with slippery concepts, explored possible interpretations together, abandoning and revising their opinions about the meaning of the story. Their growing ability

to think on their feet together in this way in English was, for me, a dramatic barometer of their increasing fluency. No less remarkable was their increasing linguistic skill, with respect to grammar, sentence structure, and syntax.

In the story, a white woman asks her husband of many years if he would marry her if she were black. He says no because if she were black, she would be different, someone he wouldn't be likely to meet or really get to know. The wife becomes distraught over his response. They argue, ostensibly on the issue of interracial marriage, but the wife uses the husband's logic against him, insinuating that he doesn't know her as well as he thinks. Still distressed, she locks herself in the bathroom until he finally says yes, he would marry her. But his effort to make peace doesn't work. Instead, she tells him to wait for her in bed in the dark, which he does, heart pounding, almost frightened when she finally comes out and disappears somewhere in the house, feeling as he used to in the beginning of their marriage, that she is like a stranger.

Responding to the Surface Text First

Sonia started the discussion by asking the others if white people should marry black people. By responding in this way to the surface text, the husband and wife's discussion about interracial marriage, and not the subtext about the husband and wife's relationship, Sonia launched a long, heated discussion about culture and racism before the class had even begun to interpret the story.

She restated her question after everyone answered yes, of course, if they're in love, this time asking, "Can two people from different backgrounds and different cultures understand each other?" This time her question came

much closer to the core issues of the story, and once again, everyone said yes, of course, if they love each other. Only Diego disagreed, saying it was "very, very difficult to go with a person with another culture."

Still taking the lead, Sonia asked a related question that asked for the moral stand on racial difference, which, in turn, led to discussion about the roots of racism:

Sonia: All right, what should make a difference in a person, the color of the skin or the kind of personality?
Ile: Personality.
Sonia: Why some people judge other people for the skin color? Why some areas they're just white people living? Why some countries have schools just for white or just for black?
Ile: There are here?
Sonia: Africa. Here there are areas where only white people live, but in Africa, I read about the schools just for white, even churches just for white and just for black.
Alejandro: This is in South Africa, you're right. It's apartheid.
Sonia: Right! Apartheid.
Hiromi: I think it's a question of history, because before the black man served the white man and now somebody think of black man in a lower position.
Sonia: Yes.

A Dialogue about Culture

Sonia seemed satisfied with Hiromi's suggestion, that slavery in the US had led to a white attitude of superiority over blacks, but a moment later, when Ile tried to get the discussion back to the story, with the opinion that it wasn't about racism, Sonia persisted with essentially the same question about skin color, "Why people of different color don't mix up?" This time the question precipitated a heated exchange about the meaning of culture and disagreement about the cultural differences between African Americans and Caucasian Americans:

Alejandro: I think it's because some people don't like another culture.
Sonia: But American black and American white is the same culture.
Voices: No, no!

Alejandro: Okay, okay. Let me answer. For example in this country, some North Americans don't like Latin American culture.
Sonia: No, I'm talking about the same culture. Just different races, black and white.
Juliana: But American black doesn't have the same culture like one white American.
Alejandro: Yes.
Juliana: They talk different.
Sonia: They have different way of speaking, but not different culture.
Diego: You can live in the same country but have different cultures.
Sonia: How? So what is culture for you?
[Voices talking at the same time.]
Alejandro: Okay! That's what I want to say! You have to know what is culture.
Sonia: Okay, what is background for you?
Alejandro: Not background, culture. Culture is the way you speak, the way you eat, the food you eat, the way you think--
Ile: Yeah!
Alejandro:--the way you walk, the way you dress, the way your education, the way you treat the person, the way you behave when you have a visitor in your house. This is culture! Culture is everything! It's every little thing in your behavior.
Sonia: Okay, then what is background for you?
Alejandro: Background is only the education and experience you have you are keeping in all your life. Culture is not only one person. It is all of the group that behaves the same way. It is behavior of the group, not of the individual. It's in groups, you know? It's collective.

Though she seemed satisfied with Alejandro's definition of culture, Sonia, having lived in the US for fifteen years, continued to insist that African Americans and Caucasian Americans shared the same national culture, American culture. None of the others considered this to be a legitimate premise, though Diego's statement, that you can live in the same country and have different cultures, allowed for the possibility. No one, not even Sonia, tried to explore the ways in which black and white Americans might have a common culture. Instead, Sonia's comment led to a lively rebuttal of the idea that they shared a culture. Hiromi observed that many African Americans themselves were proud of their separate culture and even preferred it to white culture. Ile, Diego, and Alejandro offered examples from their first countries of racial, ethnic, and economic subcultures that were different and separate entities. None of them allowed for the possibility that an individual could

belong to more than one culture at the same time, to national culture, and various subcultures.

Despite the separatist thinking, it was exciting to hear a group of students from different cultures struggling to arrive at a consensus about the meaning of culture. It was also sobering, to hear their perception of cultural difference as a dividing line. None of them wanted to be perceived as racists, but some students were stating partial truths about subcultures and veering towards stereotypes: all Northern Argentinians are different from all Southern Argentinians, Salvadoran peasants have more humility than Salvadoran bourgeois. (Later, we talked about how easy and dangerous it was, when making generalizations about groups of people, to slip into such stereotypes. We also looked at the possibilities of cultural overlap between subcultures that shared a national culture.)

Once again Sonia insisted that blacks and whites had the same American culture, but this time she made a distinction between subculture and national culture, which in turn led to a distinction between the attributes of personality and subculture:

Sonia: I'm not talking about African Americans. I'm talking about American blacks, living in the same culture.
[Voices talking at once.]
Diego: I have one question: you look the same behavior in black American people and white American people?
Sonia: No one in this world is the same of the other. Everyone is different. They have their own personality and their own way.
Diego: Okay, you can see similar behaviors in black people and other black people?
Sonia: Every person is different. Some are Latins, but we are all different.

Shifting Focus to the Subtext

No one, not even Sonia, seemed to be able to clarify what it was Sonia was trying to get at. Once again Ile made an attempt, this time successful, to

bring them back to the story, with a lucid, concise connection between their discussion and her interpretation of the main point of the story, one that seemed valid to me:

> I think Ann tried to show her husband that they can be from the same culture, they can be white people, but she feels like a stranger in the relationship...for me, the meaning, the main idea is the different points of view that they both have in the marriage.

At this point, only Diego understood Ile's viewpoint and agreed with her thesis, that the wife was trying to show her husband that you don't have to be from different cultures to be different or not understood by someone, even someone as supposedly intimate as a spouse. Sonia still thought the issue was about white racism evidenced by rejection of black skin color, Juliana thought the wife had discovered that her husband was a racist.

Ile tried again, citing evidence from the text about the wife's general feeling of not being understood by her husband. Diego backed her up, while the rest struggled to integrate the couple's argument about racial attitudes with the subtext of the story about their relationship:

Ile: But remember when she say, 'You know me?' She was ironic! She was ironic with that.
Juliana: I don't understand.
Ile: She say on the first page, 'Like you know me?' Because her husband say I can't get married with black people because I can't know them.
Juliana: Because we have different backgrounds?
Ile: Yeah! And then she said, 'Like you know me?' I think she feel like they don't know each other.
Juliana: Maybe because she find out something about him that she didn't know before. Found out that he's racist.
Sonia: But she said, 'If I were black, would you marry me, and he said 'No."
Diego: But the end problem in this reading is not racism.
Juliana: No?
Sonia: Then what?
Diego: It's that you don't know another person. Yeah, because you no talking with another person, about what kind of thinking, ideas. I think it's the main idea in this book.
Alejandro: I think the main idea is the difference about the opinion. The husband isn't racist, he's just trying to say that black and white people are different because of their culture, not because of their skin. But the wife is trying to say that he is racist because he is saying that they are

different people because they are different colors. It's the same discussion which we already had here.

Sonia: It's not about culture. The wife said, 'You know me. We are married, you know me.' I just changed the color of my skin. I'm still me, but I'm just black. Would you marry me? and he said, 'No.' It's not about culture, because it's not different. She just changed the skin color.

Alejandro: But he say already something about it, remember? 'If you were black, you wouldn't be the same. You'd be another person.' You will grow up with another kind of culture, another kind of external influence.

Sonia: Let's say it's still me. I'm just black.

Alejandro: What do you mean with that? What is your question?

I thought I'd understood Sonia's point. She believed the husband was a racist because he would not be willing to live with his own wife if she had black skin. In retrospect, I wish I had stepped in and asked her to tell us what she was thinking, rather than have her continue to play devil's advocate, because she was determined not to give it up, and the others were feeling stuck. But I also wanted to let them struggle because they were functioning at such a high level of involvement without me. I didn't want to break the spell.

I was fascinated by Alejandro's analogy between the class's debate about cultural similarities and differences in US blacks and whites and the husband and wife's debate about whether skin color automatically implied cultural difference. This was as close as any of them, including Sonia, had come, so far, in exploring Sonia's position. It was also the first time that any of them had offered a spontaneous analysis of their reading discussion during the discussion itself.

Seconds later, with Ile and Diego leading the way, they were able to zoom in on the connection between the husband and wife's discussion and their marital relationship. Diego made the important point that the husband finally told his wife yes, he would marry her if she were black, because he

loved her. That led Ile to speculate about the wife's underlying dissatisfactions with the husband and Alejandro to shift with her:

Ile: When the story starts with 'they were washing and drying the dishes,' do you think that she needs something else that the husband helps with? I have a feeling she needs more. I don't know, to be closer. You know, when her husband overheard a friend say something about, 'oh, you have a husband that is--
Diego: Wonderful.
Ile:--wonderful because he wash the dishes. I know there's another way to show that. She needs something else from her husband. Not only that. You can tell your mother to wash the dishes. But he's your husband. It's different.
Alejandro: I think we found that we were changing the topic from before.
Ile: Yeah.
Alejandro: It's good, your intervention, because we were thinking superficial, just only in the beginning, about the discussion. But I think the main idea is not the sense of the discussion. It's the sense of the behavior about what happened later.

Once again, Alexandro analyzed their discussion, this time acknowledging the constructive role Ile was playing in getting them to address the subtext. When he offered his own interpretation of the main idea, it was different from Ile's and Diego's, but Sonia felt he had touched on the point she'd been leading up to all along:

Alejandro: Do you think that the main idea is, I don't know, about the origin or nature of remorse?
Ile: Remorse?
Alejandro: Remorse is like you feel guilty for something.
Ile: No, no.
Alejandro: Because in the end--
Sonia: He's ashamed.
Alejandro: I think they felt remorse, but in different ways. When he was outside the house and he was thinking in general, thinking about the real life, you know, he was thinking about just only his marriage. He was thinking that their discussion was a really stupid thing. This discussion is small. When we are dead, it will seem like a really stupid thing. My life is great. My marriage is great. It is bigger than this little, stupid discussion.
Sonia: I love her.
Alejandro: Yes.
Sonia: And why, when she said, 'if I were black, will you marry me,' why did I say no? I love her! She's my wife.
Alejandro: Yes.
Sonia: I will not stop loving her because she changed her color.

Alejandro and Sonia had now arrived at the same understanding that had been offered in the previous class by Vladimir, though they and their classmates had taken a much different journey to get there! The wife wanted her husband to prove his love to her by saying that yes, he would marry her if she were black, or, as Vladimir had put it, 'if she had one eye.'

Arriving at Consensus

Their discussion took another turn here, different from the previous class's exchange about the differences between men and women's thinking. With Ile leading the way, they speculated about the husband's motives. Was he sincere or had he finally said yes just to end the fight? Or was it both? Perhaps he'd wanted to make her feel better. Perhaps he'd felt guilty for his thoughts and wanted to make amends.

But the climax of the entire discussion was Alejandro and Sonia's agreement about the main idea of the story since they had been most actively engaged in disagreement before that. The others must also have felt a strong need for consensus, however, because now they began voicing their agreement about the subtext of the story, including Hiromi, who'd been unusually silent throughout much of this discussion:

Hiromi: She wants to make sure that he really loves her.
Ile: Yeah.
Sonia: Yeah, she wants to prove his love.
Hiromi: She wants to prove how he loves her. He loves her very much, but he just has his thoughts about white man and black man. But she wants to talk about white and black man to prove his love.
Sonia: Maybe she used that discussion to end up proving his love.
Ile: Yeah, maybe.
Alejandro: Maybe she was expecting, 'I don't care about the color of your skin, I just love you.'
Sonia: You are my wife, whatever you are, white or black, I will still love you forever, honey.
Hiromi: Best answer.

When I compared the students' pre- and post-discussion versions of the main idea of the story, it was clear that Hiromi, Juliana, Sonia, and Alejandro had shifted their viewpoints to arrive at a consensus. In Hiromi's case, the class's discussion had helped her understand the narrative as well as influence her viewpoint. Juliana, Sonia, and Alejandro had abandoned other interpretations in favor of Ile's. And Diego the quiet philosopher, who'd already agreed with Ile early in the discussion, stayed with his original, never-presented-in-class interpretation of the intellectual content of the story, that unless there is good communication between two people about their belief systems, even two people who have lived together a long time will never know each other.

Student Feedback on Student-led Reading Discussion

The students were pleased with the results of their dialogue. I could see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. I let them know how pleased I was with their sustained focus in English, with their growing fluency, and their ability to work through their intellectual disagreements.

Later, when I asked the students for feedback on student-led reading discussion with the short shorts, there was unanimous enthusiasm. They loved the opportunities for free communication with one another and for cross-pollination of ideas. "You can combine and mix ideas," Ile said. "With different experience, we can see many viewpoints." Hiromi and Juliana said they liked exploring other viewpoints because it was a good way to learn. Hearing other students' ideas was stimulating, Alejandro added. It led to other ideas. Juliana said it gave her "a chance to reconsider." Diego liked the spontaneous exchange just after reading, "when your ideas are fresh."

The fact that the reading discussion was a required task was viewed primarily as a plus. "You have to speak," they all said. It was impossible not to communicate with one another, Ile pointed out. "With each communication you learn something. Even if you don't want to communicate, that's what you're communicating."

Diego, on the other hand, said he'd felt a pressure to speak faster than he was able to, in order to keep up with the others, and wished there had been more time allotted to their student-led discussions. His comments reminded me that it is in the nature of quiet students not to seek help on this issue, and that in future, I would do better to make more interventions to help quiet students like him, rather than ask them to depend solely on the strategies I had been suggesting to make space for themselves, with phrases like, "I have something to say."

The ambiguity of the short-shorts was generally considered an asset to discussion. For Alejandro, it encouraged imagination about characters' motives. "There are many answers," Diego pointed out, "not one." This had led to their mutual respect for each other's ideas, they said, and respect from me, as well, for being able to develop their different views in a second language.

Juliana liked the friendly atmosphere that was generated without a teacher. "We helped each other. We start to get friendship in the class." She believed, and I agree with her, that the trust and respect that had developed were necessary in order to disagree productively. Most of the students also mentioned the linguistic help they had received from each other during discussion: the idioms, grammatical phrases, and especially the vocabulary.

Students felt they had benefited by writing down pre- and post-discussion questions, summaries, and main ideas. It had helped get them

started, they all agreed. At first Ile had thought it was a waste of time to write down the main idea a second time, after the discussion, until she realized how much her thinking had evolved as a result of the discussion.

Without exception, everyone appreciated having a transcribed text to study. Alejandro liked it for further analysis of their discussion as well as a reference point in continuing the discussion itself. But the others liked having a written record of their grammar mistakes to examine at their leisure, after the discussion had taken place, and a chance to make corrections first, before I had my turn. They also liked the way this had triggered mini-lessons, either requested by them or suggested by me.

For some students in this small class, their discussions of the short-shorts were the best part of the class because that was when they had done their most authentic work. At the same time, they'd appreciated reading a novel for its psychological depth and wouldn't have wanted to eliminate that experience. Juliana, for example, had enjoyed having an ongoing relationship with the characters in the novel and writing about it in her journal; she didn't think she would have enjoyed journaling with the short-shorts because there wouldn't have been enough to refer back to.

CHAPTER X

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Using Teacher-led and Student-led Discussion

Looking back at my experience over three terms with teacher-led and student-led reading discussion, I see compelling reasons to continue with both approaches in the future. Because most of my students are more familiar with the traditional approach and come into my classes expecting teacher-guided discussion, starting the term with that approach helps build trust between them and me. During the three terms discussed above, teacher-guided discussion set a tone that helped students build a cohesive reading community. It also helped me scope out the needs of the students and plan accordingly.

I learned that it helped to have a preliminary period of time in which only the teacher-led discussion was used, in conjunction with small group tasks to build students' confidence and develop cultural awareness. It served to give students and myself enough exposure to each other's personalities and backgrounds before taking on the challenges of the student-led discussion. This was a period of time in which to identify any "difficult" students and try to help them and the class find appropriate ways to work with each other.

I learned through trial and error how important it was to clarify my expectations of the students, to give them directions and strategies for the different stages of student-led discussion. I also saw how a class's personality or cultural makeup could--and should--influence a teacher's decisions about how to introduce the student-led discussion. With the first class's majority of

Asian students, I'd jumped in too soon, before any of us had known what to do about their silence. If I were to have a similar situation in the future, I would call on students regularly in teacher-guided discussion, to build their confidence in me as a teacher before offering an alternative approach.

With the second, large, split-level class, high registration alone would have made student-led discussion unwieldy. Even with teacher-guided discussion in a class of twenty three, it had been difficult to involve everyone. But the additional problems that had separated the class into two groups had resulted in lopsided participation in student-led reading discussion. Not only had the outspoken higher-end students dominated discussion, but their intellectually aggressive style had intimidated the less skilled or more reserved students.

The Uses of the Fishbowl Arrangement

Having seen the good effects, in the third class, of small registration and student congeniality on student-led discussion, I was prepared to use techniques like the fishbowl the next time I had to handle the problems of high registration or group divisions due to differences in skill-level, culture or personality. With the fishbowl, I would be able to control the number of speakers in the inner circle, keeping it down to six, the number that had worked so well in the third class. The remaining students, however many, would form the outer circle of listeners. To keep them involved, each could be assigned a speaker to report on after discussion, summarizing and responding to the main ideas of that speaker. Speaker assignments could be made on a rotating basis, to give everyone equal time in the inner circle. In a larger class, more than one listener could be assigned to the same speaker.

I recently did this with a listening/speaking class of thirteen students, with excellent results. To ensure motivation of the listeners, I taped and transcribed their responses as well as the discussion of the inner circle, for the class to study afterwards. When shy students didn't volunteer, I called on them, knowing they would have thoughtful responses if given the time and space. When one student motioned to me to stop the tape because she was dissatisfied with the way she'd explained something, I paused it and everyone else called out, "No! No! Keep going! We want to talk!" Listeners loved having the last word, and everyone wanted to correct their mistakes later.

This was the first time I'd taped and transcribed a student-led discussion in a listening-speaking class. I'd always used the technique with reading classes. In this class, students listened to tapes about cultural issues, responded in teacher-guided discussion, and then voted on a topic for the student-led discussion. In a feedback session with them, one student said he wished I'd started the student-led discussions sooner, so he could have had more turns as a speaker. Taking his comment into consideration, I plan to make some changes next time. To reassure and embolden students to begin sooner, I might play a tape of another class's discussion or give students a transcript of another (same-level) class's discussion. I can also ease them in, as I have in reading classes in the past, by not recording their first effort. With an especially shy or reserved class, I might dispense with any note-taking the first time, and make more interventions during the discussion to help the quiet students, as I did with Diego.

Different Benefits for each Class

My thinking about how to use the student-led discussion with shy, reserved students--or any other kind of students--has changed since the first

first try with the class of predominantly Asian students. I'm more willing to blend different techniques, modify, give one strategy up for another that suits my students more than it does me. With experience, I've become less invested in my own preference as the New and Better Way (shades of The Answer!), more tuned in to how a particular class will benefit most from the technique.

Because of differences in class size, personality, and skill level, each of the three reading classes benefited in different ways from student-led discussion. The reserved Asian majority in the first class struggled with a discussion model that contradicted their cultural habits and expectations. Though their progress felt slow and at times painful to me (and probably to them, too), they did succeed in exchanging their views in my presence and without my direction. In the process, they continued down the road of cultural transition. The Korean and Japanese students found a venue in which to clear the air. Some Asian women gained the courage to speak their minds in public and to disagree in public with Asian men. From a US cultural perspective, all of these were accomplishments that increased student fluency in English and familiarity with American custom.

The active participants of the large, culturally-diverse second class enjoyed the stimulation of cross-cultural dialogue with students from a wide range of backgrounds. Because they were able to assert their autonomy in a student-directed reading discussion from the beginning of the term, they made steady gains in fluency and vocabulary building. Some of the reserved Asian students were able to make modest gains along the same lines. Unfortunately, other Asians and less skilled Hispanic students continued to hold back without any help from me during the discussion, and, as a result, the process contributed only minimally to an increase in fluency or authentic

self-expression. Still, they participated in a student-directed process as listeners, and on those occasions when they entered the discussion late, showed without guidance from me that they had been able to follow the substance of a reading discussion in English, a sign of their increasing listening fluency.

The third class was most fortunate in its intimate size, compatibility in background and ability. They were able to build trust, cohesion and friendship in their reading community rather quickly. As a consequence, they were motivated to help each other linguistically, to encourage each other to give voice to their own views even when they disagreed, but to work through their differences to reach consensus. As a group, they achieved the greatest increase in fluency, with students like Diego making dramatic strides forward. Sonia, on the other hand, who already had the fluency but was somewhat fossilized in her grammar, at least had the satisfaction of letting her voice be heard in English in a student-directed process.

As for the benefits to me, the teacher, student-directed discussion was an excellent source of ongoing feedback. By letting students function in English without me, I saw where the class as a group needed the most help in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, speech production, and information about US culture. I had the chance to learn more about the personality and language needs of each student in the class. Listening to the students helped me hone my listening skills. With their self-directed analysis of the content of the short-shorts in *Sudden Fiction*, I was able to assess the suitability of the readings I had selected. Listening to their discussion gave me ideas for follow-up teacher-guided discussions and essay assignments based on their authentic concerns.

Some Questions Answered

Clearly, my experience with student-led discussion confirmed my earlier hopes. The technique was, indeed, the powerful language tool it had been advertised to be in the workshop at S.I.T. As for the questions I'd had at that time, my professional experience with student-led reading discussion has led me to some answers.

Having used both a long novel with chunks of unambiguous narrative as well as short-shorts for reading discussion, I'm convinced that ambiguous short fiction is far more fertile territory for eliciting students' voices and developing fluency. Because the ambiguous short fiction offers not one correct answer but many possible interpretations, students are geared to bounce their own ideas off one another and to develop their thinking together. It is possible, as my students did, to formulate substantive reader response questions for each other about a novel, but without the spontaneity of a fresh, in-class reading of a complete piece, there is less common ground on which to engage in dialogue.

As for rescuing students, I have rarely felt the need to jump into student-led reading discussion with my notion of the right answer, particularly with the ambiguity of the short-shorts allowing for so many interpretations. But I do make a clearer distinction now between rescuing students by giving them answers and helping students communicate their own responses to one another. I've come to see that small interventions, such as helping a quiet student get into the discussion, or correcting linguistic misinformation that is misleading one or more students, are ways to support student-led dialogue without jeopardizing authentic response. For example, when Juliana experimented with the word 'courageous,' and was told to use the

word 'brave' instead, I could have quietly confirmed the accuracy of her choice, noted that it was a synonym for the word 'brave,' and let them get on with their discussion, without having disrupted the flow.

On the other hand, I think it undermines students' autonomy to redirect an interpretation, whether the students miss what I think is the main idea or jump directly to the universal implications before negotiating a meaning for the story. The purpose of their class discussion is to let them give voice to their own concerns and views. It is still an exercise, observed by the teacher, even if it is an exercise in autonomy.

Even when students exchange cultural misinformation, so long as it is not harmful, I believe there is still value to their discussion because of all the linguistic and social benefits they are getting from their exchange. In this respect only, in-class student-led reading discussion is just like discussion outside of the classroom, where exchange of misinformation happens all the time. There's plenty of time afterwards for a teacher to share her views or enlighten the students about their cultural misconceptions. There may even be a student, as Kuniko did with Yoshi, who can correct cultural misinformation during the student-led discussion.

As for the students veering off, what looks like a digression may be the time when some students come closest to their own truths. If the class takes a long time to get back to the story, there is usually at least one student who can redirect them before the teacher needs to. And it is much better for the students to be able to manage their time, as Vladimir or Adriana did for the second class's discussions, than for the teacher to oversee the dialogue with a stopwatch.

In the case of an immature or needy student who specializes in self-referential monologues, the teacher may need to step in and redirect the discussion or give the undermining student a chance to come back to the topic. I've come to understand that this kind of intervention is sometimes necessary to protect the learning time or feelings of other students or to enforce the social parameters for the class. In retrospect, I think I could have stepped in sooner and more frequently with Yoshi. I let him waste some discussion time even after I understood his particular immaturity. I have learned since then to redirect such students gently or more forcefully, if necessary, when I think their discussion is a misuse of class time. In this respect, student-led discussion is not meant to mirror life outside the classroom, where all kinds of people routinely manipulate discussion. The teacher and the students need to preserve the class as a safe place. Student-led discussion is not a free-for-all.

Students do have the freedom, in a student-led reading discussion, to disagree with each other's interpretations, to debate, contradict, and refute. But when they are negotiating a meaning for a story, it can only be a group meaning if they arrive at a consensus, as the third class did with their in-depth exchange on Tobias Wolff's "Say Yes." If they remain in disagreement, they have only their individual meanings. With consensus, however, there is still the possibility that those students who didn't voice agreement in the end are holding to an interpretation that is different from the group's meaning. And this aspect of reading discussion does mirror life outside the classroom, where it is not so easy to identify the views of every participant in a discussion, even after the group seems to have arrived at consensus.

Watching a broad spectrum of students engage in student-led reading discussion has led me to believe that the technique is for everyone, even the

shy or culturally reserved student. It is a classroom group task which has all of the above-mentioned benefits, even for a shy person who speaks less often. They are still benefiting as members of the community, increasing their listening and linguistic skills. If the teacher is committed to making the classroom a safe place for the students and helps quiet students, then student-led discussion has even more potential value for reluctant speakers.

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