Let's Go to the Movies: Rethinking the Role of Film in the Elementary Classroom

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What is "text"? Michele Whipple makes a strong argument for elementary language arts teachers to expand their definition of "text" to include film.

Films have traditionally played a less prominent role in the elementary language arts curriculum than other instructional materials. While they have frequently been used as a supplemental resource, follow-up activity, form of reward, filler, and as background noise, films have rarely been approached as serious material for literacy instruction. Fortunately, recent developments in what qualifies as "text," in conjunction with research on response-based language arts instruction, have facilitated our developing understandings of the value of this medium. Preliminary application of these findings have shown film to be an accessible and engaging material which can bind children together and bring validation to their varied home and school literacy experiences. Hence, I would like to suggest here that films are a valuable instructional material for the elementary teacher and that they deserve a closer look.

EXPANDING LITERATURE LEARNING THROUGH FILM

I first became interested in the use of film with elementary students while working on a longitudinal research project investigating the changing literacy experiences of a group of students as they moved through grades 5–7 (Walmsley, Rosenthal, & Whipple, 1997). As part of this study, I engaged in bi-weekly conversations with several children about books they had been reading both in and out of their classrooms.

Following a book conversation with Jason, a fifth-grade student, he began to tell me about a movie his class had watched earlier in the week. The movie, entitled *April Morning* (Goldwyn & Halmi, 1987), was based on a novel of the same name by Howard Fast (1961). Ironically, I had recently read the original text for a graduate class. Excited about our recent experiences, Jason and I began to talk about this title, making comments and asking questions of one another. Here is a segment of our exchange:

JASON: In social studies, we're learning about the Revolutionary War and we watched a movie called *April Morning*.

MICHELE: You did? I read *April Morning* for my class (at the university). It's by Howard Fast, right? I didn't even know there was a movie.

JASON: It's a great movie.

MICHELE: I loved the book . . . I felt especially bad in the beginning.

JASON: When his dad died?

MICHELE: Yeah, but also for the soldiers.

JASON: They just stood there and got shot. . . .

There were several characteristics of the extended version of this conversation that struck me as significant and that altered the manner in which I both engaged in and viewed literature conversations from that point on. First, in talking with Jason about our related experiences surrounding the title, *April Morning,* I was struck by his involvement in the exchange. He was genuinely excited about the film and the fact that I could possibly fill in some of the *gaps* he felt existed in his understanding of the story (Iser, 1989). In addition, as I read over the transcript of this conversation and compared the nature of Jason's responses to those he had made in previous *official* conversations concerning tradebooks, it was evident that he had ventured into areas of the text and response which he had not addressed in prior exchanges (i.e., analysis of the plot and the actions of the characters). I then realized that had this opportunity not arisen, I may have never seen this side of Jason's "response personality." Thus, I would have had only a partial picture of Jason as a reader and responder.

Secondly, I began to recognize that just as books and other forms of written communication are considered *texts,* so are alternate forms of story such as films, oral dialogue and narratives, and audio and computer communications (Bakhtin as cited in Holquist, 1990; Cox, 1994; Myers, 1996; Rosenthal, 1997). I wondered on how many occasions, prior to this one with *April Morning,* Jason and the other children participating in the study had attempted to bring their film experiences to our conversations and I had urged them back to talking about written text.

It was for these reasons that I decided to investigate the instructional and response opportunities that arise when we broaden our definitions of what counts as *text* to include film. In order to supplement these findings and to assess the future of instructional film use in the elementary classroom, I also felt it necessary to explore these possibilities in light of recent trends in language arts. This lead me to examine the relationship of Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1938/1976, 1978) to film viewing and to review the related literature.

LACK OF FOCUS ON THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

As a result of my experience with Jason, I became increasingly interested in film use with elementary students. In the months which followed, I began scouring the library for resources only to find that, in general, the information available on film use in the classroom is considerably limited. In addition, the majority of what is accessible to teachers focuses on students of middle school (Witkin, 1994), high school (Senger & Archer, 1989; Shull, 1989; Teasley & Wilder, 1997), and college age (Costanzo, 1992). While we have much to learn from these writings in terms of their applications of transactional theory, the films and related activities suggested by these authors are generally not appropriate for K–6 students. I believe this trend has left those elementary educators who are interested in instructional film use within their classrooms with few places to turn to for supportive information and specific suggestions for film use.

A significant amount of what is available on this topic at the elementary level has been contributed by Carole Cox (1975, 1982, 1983, 1996), who, in conjunction with co-author Joyce Many, was one of the first elementary educator-researchers to make connections between Rosenblatt's theory of reader-response and film viewing (see Cox & Many, 1989). Unfortunately, only within the past five years have others begun to expand upon and add to the body of work created by Cox and her colleagues. In addition, much of this work has centered on the role of technology in education, focusing heavily on computer use and only vaguely addressing the role of film and related response issues.

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Therefore, I speculated that, in order for us to begin rethinking the role of film in our classroom literacy instruction, information was needed that immediately addressed the instructional options available to elementary teachers, including sample film titles and activities, and that offered supplementary information which discussed related trends in the field of language arts education. Here, I will focus on the latter of these tasks.

Two recent discussions most immediately applicable to this issue of film use in the elementary classroom are the expanding notions of what qualifies as "text" and the application of reader-response theories to elementary language arts pedagogy. Their relevance and application to film use in the elementary classroom will be discussed in the following sections.

EXPANDING NOTIONS OF WHAT COUNTS

Currently, film viewing plays a major role in popular culture and in the daily lives of our young students (Costanzo, 1992; Rosenthal, 1997; Witkin, 1994). In short, there are two approaches which may be taken by educators in response to this

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trend. We can either become resentful and judgmental about frequent home viewing practices, mourning the de-emphasis of written text, or we can look at students' movie experiences and emerging knowledge of films as an opportunity to support literacy development and to make connections with more traditional media (i.e., written text). There are several reasons why the latter of these reactions has proven more effective. First, recognition and use of students' knowledge of movies can open doors for students who have traditionally been thought to be at-risk, as suggested by language arts educator Carole Cox (see also, Teasley & Wilder, 1997):

> Media experiences from inside and outside the classroom provide access to learning for all students, drawing on a shared media culture as the basis for classroom exploration. . . . The media culture is available, in some way, to everyone . . . different kinds of media provide different kinds of access to a range of students, encouraging those who are sometimes silent because of their social status, race, culture, gender, disability, or language-minority status. (Cox, 1996, p. 486)

In other words, the validation of alternate texts such as photographs, computers, television, film and videotape, through their emphasis and use in the classroom, may allow those students who are in some way at-risk in their literacy development to participate in classroom discourse, to become a part of the classroom community, and to be validated as learners and people. For example, while only a few children in a given third-grade classroom may have actually read the written version of the book, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985), some may have rented the film version from the video store or viewed it on television. Other children may not be familiar with *Sarah, Plain and Tall,* but they may have seen the sequel, *Skylark* (Close & Self, 1993), on television. In addition, several more children may be able to make connections between these texts and titles and others they have encountered which focus on the Westward Movement, farm life, families, death, courage, and other related topics. The possibilities for engaging in complex conversations about these diverse, yet strongly related experiences is staggering. It is the formulation of intertextual connections and personal responses such as these that we strive for as response-based teachers (Short, 1993).

Secondly, the use of film is another avenue by which we can reach second-language learners and others who have not had their home literacy experiences validated through their current literacy instruction. Students who have had limited experiences with English and with written text in their homes and within preschool settings have often had other rich experiences, frequently with film. Therefore, if your immediate instructional goals are to encourage students' personal responses and to build community within the classroom, and these are not dependent on the form or content of a particular piece, this alternate approach may be ideal. For example, both the classic animated tale and the newly released dramatic version of Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (Disney, 1961; Feldman, 1996) are available in English as well as Spanish. Students may have also seen the picture book versions of the title, related games, or news stories. Hence, students may begin by sharing their common experiences with this title, later focusing more on traditional mediums as their classroom and literacy experiences evolve. Therefore, by expanding the notion of what qualifies as "text" we are also expanding the prevailing notions of which literacy experiences are valuable and who gets to participate in classroom conversations.

Students' growing understandings and use of film and other alternate forms of "text" is often referred to as *media literacy*. In a 1994 document prepared for the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Media, then director, Carole Cox, defined the term as follows:

> Media literacy refers to composing, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, and appreciating the language and texts of . . . both print and nonprint media. The use of media presupposes an expanded definition of "text." . . . Print media texts include books, magazines, and newspapers. Nonprint media include photography, recordings, radio, film, television, videotape, video games, computers, the performing arts, and virtual reality . . . constantly interact . . . (and) all (are) to be experienced, appreciated, and analyzed and created by students. (NCTE, 1994, p. 13)

Acknowledgment of the presence and relevance of media literacy has been widespread in recent years, due in part to the rapid development of computers and other forms of technology. While many debate its role, there are few who doubt the relevance of media literacy as we approach the millennium. Indeed, its immediate significance was felt most recently at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, where the program offered more presentations than ever before focusing on film use and technology in the classroom.

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The benefits are boundless and the groundwork set. Our students are already talking about the internet, video games, television, and film. We need merely to take advantage of these conversations and experiences. There is much to be lost if we choose not to act. The following section includes examples of instructional opportunities which were missed as a result of a limited view of what types of text count in the elementary classroom.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

As I considered the *April Morning* event with Jason, I began to wonder if similar examples existed with other students involved in the study. So, I returned to the data. Reading through the piles of transcripts, I found that, for three years, students had been trying to talk with me about their experiences with film text. There were numerous opportunities for the discussion of film elements, as well as for addressing film as an alternative to written text. The following are just a few examples of the "missed opportunities" I found when I reviewed the transcripts of the book conversations I had engaged in with two of the students, Ben and Ellen, with a broader definition of "what counts."

The use of suspense in movies and books was a common theme among the students. In this first example, Ben compares the suspense found in one of the Goosebumps books, by author R. L. Stein, to that found in mystery and horror movies.

BEN: It (R. L. Stein book) was kind of like the movies. What I don't really like about movies is sometimes you know "who did it" all the way through the movie. I like the ones when you think it is one guy, then all of a sudden you find out it's the other guy . . . That's what this book was (like).

In this second example, Ellen comments on the use of suspense in written text and film, and her dislike of the latter. Her focus here is on the Nancy Drew series books written by Carolyn Keen. Ellen stated that, given the chance, she would tell the author to:

ELLEN: . . . have more suspense in the stories. I like a lot of suspense (in books). But, in movies, I can't stand too much suspense. Just a little and I'm screaming at the top of my lungs.

MICHELE: I think it is a lot harder to put suspense in books.

ELLEN: It's easier to show it.

Each of these excerpts provides information on the students' individual abilities to form intertextual references and their ability to analyze the use of the element of suspense in differing texts. While the term *intertextual reference* has primarily been applied to comparisons made between two books, these students have displayed their ability to compare across modes and mediums, between written text and film text. These comments, and the many others like them found in the transcripts, have a great deal to say about the students' individual experiences with film and provide insights into their literature learning and literacy development. They are, at the very least, "points of departure" for individualized literary instruction.

Within the book conversations, there was also evidence that Ben and Ellen had made repeated attempts to talk about the relationships which existed for them between written texts and films of the same name. In our first example we see Ben as he talks about his interest in reading books generated from films. These books, called novelizations, have been written only after a movie by the same title has been released (e.g., *My Girl,* 1991; *Hook,* 1992; *Babe,* 1995; and *Toy Story,* 1995).

BEN: I like to read the Walt Disney movie books; books that they make from the movies.

MICHELE: Oh. I see here that you read *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* (Band & Gordon, 1992).

BEN: Yeah. I just finished that.

There is much which could have been done instructionally with this information to expand and extend Ben's experience. In addition to probing further on this topic, finding out what specifically it is about this category of books which attracts Ben, he could also have been encouraged through discussion, journaling, or a Venn diagram to compare the film and written versions of these pairs.

In this related example, Ellen broadly shares her impressions of the "movie versions" of children's books and their relationship to the original story.

ELLEN: That (the movie version of *My Side of the Mountain,* Radnitz, 1968) would be neat to see, but it's probably not the same as the book. They're (movie versions) never the same as the book.

Unfortunately, rather than probing Ellen further on her comment that (movie versions) are "never the same as the book," I attempted to redirect her back to the written text. This sent Ellen the message that it was the book version, rather than the film version, that was the focus.

I have no doubt that interactions similar to those provided here occur in elementary classrooms around the country every day, and they are a result of how we have been enculturated to view the place of books and films in education. One of the easiest things we can do, as teachers, to take advantage of these missed opportunities is to acknowledge the film references made by our students during class discussions and to help them to make connections to *all* related texts.

INTEGRATING FILM VIEWING AND RESPONSE THEORY

As we begin to acknowledge the instructional value of alternate forms of text, we naturally attempt to bring to them the approaches and theories which have been applied to written text over the years. One of the most popular approaches to have made the transfer from written text to film text has been that of reader-response theory.

The premises of reader-response were first written about by Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 in her book, *Literature as Exploration,* and later expanded upon in *The Reader, The Text,*

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The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978). These writings suggest that readers are actively engaged in the reading process and that they construct, rather than merely decode, meaning from written text while they read. Reinforcing this point, Rosenblatt (1994) states:

> Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader, and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation. The 'meaning' does not reside ready-made 'in' the text or 'in' the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text. (p. 1063)

Therefore, in any single reading event, there is a reader, text and context "transacting" with one another to create meaning from the situation. These meanings are generally shared with others in the form of "personal responses." The term *response* suggests a type of personal reaction to what has been read or experienced; a student's individual thoughts and reflections.

Ideally, students in response-based classrooms do a great deal of sharing of their personal responses to text through oral, written and artistic modes and mediums. In offering a wide variety of response opportunities, teachers ensure that all students will be exposed to the various ways in which we communicate and that each individual may find a comfortable way in which to express their responses. As a result of the "risk-taking" which is involved in the formulation and sharing of personal responses, teachers recognize the importance of a community atmosphere within their classrooms. If students do not feel at ease in their physical environment and valued by those with whom they share the classroom, genuine or unfiltered responses will not be shared.

In recent years, authors who have written about film use at the secondary level, such as Shull (1989), Costanzo (1992), Fehlman (1994), and Teasley and Wilder (1997), have made various connections between Rosenblatt's writings on reader-response and the viewing of films. For example, there has been wide-spread use of the term "viewer-response," in this literature. Adapted from Rosenblatt's commonly used term "reader-response," this new variation emphasizes the change in focus action from reading to viewing. In addition, authors such as Fehlman (1994) have applied Rosenblatt's popular 'reader, text, context' model for describing how personal meanings and responses are constructed. In both instances, change is evidenced, not only in the action of the student, but also in the implied text preference. In this latter example, rather than focusing on the 'reader, text, context,' Fehlman talks about the *viewer, text, context;* where the viewer is the individual watching the film, the text is the film itself, and the context is the environment in which the film is experienced.

In many ways, these examples appear to be natural applications of Rosenblatt's work. For, it has been suggested by Cox (1989) that,

Rosenblatt (1985) takes an eclectic view of the various literary forms and their potential as lived-through experiences. She uses the term 'poem' to stand for any literary work of art . . . The formal differences between stories, poems, and plays which she classifies together as literary events are no less great than the differences between literature and film. (p. 289)

The following are additional examples of popular premises of Rosenblatt's writings which have been applied to film viewing and related points which deserve consideration.

Rosenblatt (1938/1976) has written that,

> The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (p. 31)

This statement implies that a reader (viewer) brings as much, if not more, information to the literacy event than the text (film). Therefore, as a teacher and fellow reader (viewer), while you might have an idea of the possible responses which could be offered in discussion, it may be impossible to expect certain meanings or responses from students. And, as individuals with unique experiences, the students in our classes will formulate a spectrum of meanings for the same literacy event.

From these teachings, we begin to realize that what is viewed, just like what is read, must be interpreted by the viewer. Only through this personal interpretation can "life be breathed into" the film, so that it can become a *poem* as defined by Rosenblatt (1978). Based on this premise, there can be as many poems for a given text title as there are people who read the written version or who view the film version. Therefore, the goal of finding the "right" interpretation becomes moot (see Teasley & Wilder, 1997). Ironically, films which are adaptations of novels are in essence already in poetic form, since the film is *one* interpretation of the author's and/or screenwriter's original text (Costanzo, 1992). Thus, we are creating a poem from a poem. This adds another dimension to understanding the construction of students' responses.

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It is important to note that viewers receive different information while transacting with the film text than readers do with their written counterparts. Films are multisensory experiences which engage our minds differently than books. In some ways, they may "fill in gaps" (Iser, 1989) for us (i.e., in terms of what the setting and/or characters might look

like), but they may also prevent us from using our *mind's eye*—the pictures we create in our heads when we read—by providing too much visual and auditory information. We often observe the intersection of the "film's perception of reality" and our own "personal perception of reality" when we engage in multiple encounters with the same text title. The most common example of this is when we watch the movie version of a novel after we have read the written text. The key is in understanding that the nature of students' responses, as well as the manners in which they are created, will differ as we move between these texts, and that engaging students in such a variety of literacy experiences will provide us, as educators, with additional insights into individual students as responders and literate people.

With regard to "how" one approaches a text, Rosenblatt has spoken at length about the stances, efferent and aesthetic, that a reader, or in this case a viewer, may take during a given event. Rarely, she states, is an event solely efferent or strictly aesthetic for the reader, here the viewer. Rather, a given textual experience has elements of both in combinations which vary from person to person. Take, for example, my recent viewing of the film *Emma* (Gigliotti, Weinstein, & Weinstein, 1996). Although I was watching the movie primarily because of my love of Jane Austen's work and the scenery of period English films, I was also looking for specific similarities between this film and *Clueless* (Berg & Shroeder, 1995), a story set in present day which is said to possess many parallels to Austen's novel.

While, in this case, I had a personal agenda for watching the movie which gave my viewing a strong efferent characteristic, we, as teachers, frequently press our efferent agendas upon our students. For example, the students in the secondary classes described in the pieces above were often called upon to take notes or to fill in charts during their viewing of a film. As a result of such activities, students' school experiences with film often become primarily efferent in nature and their main purpose becomes to gather facts. As an option, students may be given the opportunity to engage in "multiple viewings;" first, watching the film as a whole without the task of notetaking or other focused tasks and again later for the purpose of closer examination of particular scenes, characters, etc. This also applies to films which at first glance would appear solely informational or expository in nature, for as is implied by Rosenblatt (1991), you can never tell the extent to which an encounter will be aesthetic or efferent for an individual person.

In closing, through my prior classroom experiences and, more recently, observations in a wide variety of elementary grades and class settings, I have seen firsthand the instructional benefits of response-based pedagogy and the power of personal response as an instructional tool in broadening students' understandings of the forms and functions of written text. However, it is only recently that I have begun to explore the possibilities and the influences of a child's film experiences upon their individual literary growth and literacy development in the elementary grades. Through the fledgling inquiry described here, I have drawn several conclusions. First, additional information is needed which expands on the relationships between film, literacy development, and the premises of response theory as described by Louise Rosenblatt. Second, investigations are needed which link current theoretical discussions of *text* to elementary language arts pedagogy. And, finally, elementary educators would benefit from resource lists providing films and activities which are in keeping with the ideas discussed here.

CONCLUSION

Today's elementary students come to our classrooms with a great deal of knowledge about films in video form, as well as other types of text and the technology which creates them. When we take advantage of these prior experiences, we open the doors of participation to many children who have been closed off because of the nature of their past life and textual experiences, their primary language, and/or their gender. In addition, we provide expanded and extended learning experiences and opportunities for making intertextual connections for all of our students. In acknowledging students' experiences with alternate texts, in this case film, and using those experiences as a basis for response-based language arts instruction, our students will not only experience personal validation, but also growth in their understandings of the multiple roles of literature and media in our lives. ●

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