

Louise Rosenblatt: An Advocate for Nurturing Democratic Participation through Literary Transactions

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In order to carry out their responsibility to participate, citizens in a democracy must be able to hear and view multiple perspectives from which they can develop their own interpretations of events. It is, therefore, no surprise that at a time when many believed that democracy was being threatened in this country, Louise Rosenblatt focused on the influence of literary texts on students' abilities to think critically. Due to her observations and classroom experiences while teaching literature courses at the postsecondary level, Rosenblatt (1995) articulated the

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transactional theory in her book *Literature as Exploration*. Explaining her theory in terms of stances or purposes that readers take when approaching texts, she discussed the *aesthetic* and *effere*nt stances. While reading *aesthetically*, a reader is focused on the very personal experience of the reading itself. Conversely, an *effere*nt reading renders a more public experience in which the reader concentrates on information to be retained for later use.

Rosenblatt was clear in her opinion that readers must be afforded opportunities to read literary works of art by focusing on an aesthetic stance. She also took a strong position against traditional practices in literature classes that required students to read literary texts for *effere*nt purposes. She emphatically stated that an aesthetic stance is more appropriate than an *effere*nt stance when students read poems, novels, plays, and stories.

Louise Rosenblatt (1994; 1995) described the reading process as a meshing of two elements: the reader and the text. She explained the reading transaction as a

reciprocal relationship, where both elements must be present for the reader to construct meaning. During the reading transaction, readers are actively involved in building the meaning of the text while they call upon all past experiences, sensations, and images, as well as their responses to the current transaction. The reader is not the only important component in the transactional process, of course; the text also plays an integral part. The text provides the symbols that serve as the focus for the reader's attention and that activate past experiences. During the aesthetic transaction, the ability to construct a personal meaning of literary works discourages the idea that there is just one correct meaning of the text. In fact, different transactions by various readers, if based on textual evidence, are acceptable and defensible because individual readers approach and render meaning from a text according to their own uniquely personal experiences.

In working with secondary students, I have observed the positive effects of allowing students an aesthetic experience when reading literary texts. It is not unusual for students in high school to have very negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure. It is especially true of students who are struggling readers. Struggling readers have had so many negative educational experiences because of their reading inadequacies—or what is perceived as reading inadequacies—that they have literally “shut down” where reading for pleasure is concerned.

I always began the semester with discussions of occasions when students actually derived pleasure from reading. During these discussions, we focused on why those particular reading experiences were more enjoyable than their more recent experiences in middle and high school. Using this discussion as an impetus, I would help students make connections between those experiences and the

experiences I hoped they would have in my class. After these discussions, I gave students opportunities to browse the young adult fiction library in our classroom, and I worked with each student to find the best fit for them between student and book. Once students found that “perfect” book, they did not want to put it down. I explained to them that in the real world, people who start books and don’t like them after the first several chapters usually abandon the book. I wanted to encourage these high school students not to waste their time reading books that they didn’t enjoy. I think that students are sometimes given the impression that readers must finish books—regardless of whether they like the book or not.

After students selected books, I emphasized to them that they would not take a test on the books they read. I truly wanted students to focus on the aesthetic experience—to enjoy and “live through”—their literary texts. Once students understood that they would not be tested on the books they read in this class, they relaxed somewhat. However, some were still skeptical—I guess they thought that there had to be a catch to this non-testing situation. They did not believe that I would give them class time, typically 30–45 minutes per day, to read a book of their choice. As students read during class, I modeled by reading my own novels. I also supported their efforts at reading literary texts for pleasure with continuous praise and encouragement because many of these students had little self-confidence or trust in their ability to read for enjoyment. Upon completing their first book, students became more self-confident and trusting of their own literary transactions. I found that students wanted to read when given time, choice, and support.

Rosenblatt also emphasized in *Literature as Exploration* the importance of reading and discussion of texts to participation in democracy by championing “the value of interchange among students as a stimulant to the development of critical and self-critical reading, essential to citizens of a democracy” (1995, p. 180). It is in this transactional experience that students learn to construct their own meaning of literary texts, and perhaps more important, learn to articulate their own construction. As students participate in discussions of their transactional experiences, they learn to listen to multiple perspectives and make comparisons between their own transaction and others’ transactions. Most assuredly, citizens in a democracy are required to construct knowledge based on multiple per-

spectives and to make informed choices.

Through personal experiences with secondary students, I know that students often learn more from each other than from teachers. Students often feel inadequate about their own construction of meaning and get the impression that teachers are the ultimate authority and that there is just one correct meaning for literary works. However, when given opportunities for literary discussions, students are able to hear their peers’ connections to and interpretations of the text and realize that the connections made by their peers are not the same as those made by teachers. Thus, students realize that construction of meaning is very personal, and that one person’s construction will not be the same as another’s for the same text. In addition, during these literary discussions, students are able to hear multiple perspectives, which sometimes results in lively debates about specific aspects of the text. As a result, students return to the text to defend their perspective, which results in a more powerful comprehension of the text. An added benefit is that students also learn to value each other as contributors to the learning community.

Although literary works of art invite an aesthetic stance, traditional teaching methods typically promote students’ adoption of the efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1994, 1995; Zarrillo & Cox, 1992). This type of instruction directs students to be more concerned with textual analysis and recalling details than with experiencing the text (Many & Wiseman, 1992, p. 252). An efferent teaching approach for a novel, for example, might involve a teacher telling readers to complete a study guide with questions that require attention to text details and elements. Typically, the use of study guides allows no time for personal probing of affective responses to the text; instead, students engage in a fact-finding mission or a textual analysis that produces a detached experience with the literary work of art.

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comparisons between experiences in their English class and my reading class. Typically, in their English classes, students were given study guides for answering specific literal-level, in-the-text questions about the literary works they were required to read. Being very candid, they admitted that they rarely ever read the literary works; rather, they relied on *Cliffs Notes* or *Sparknotes.com*. These students were definitely on a fact-finding mission to complete the assignment for attaining a grade. They certainly did not have a true literary transaction—most especially, since they rarely read the literary work.

In contrast to efferent teaching approaches, aesthetic teaching encourages students to experience the literary work of

art personally before undertaking analyses of literary elements, author's craft, or historical accuracy. Zarrillo and Cox (1992) state that aesthetic teaching encourages "students to shape individual responses to a text" (p. 242). Further, aesthetic teaching provides students the opportunity to experience the "personal aspects of the lived-through experience . . . the scenes, the associations, images, and feelings called to mind by the students while reading . . ." (Zarrillo & Cox, 1992, p. 242).

As educational leaders apply transactional theory and practices at all levels, especially in literature classes, students will be able to create those habits of mind that are required for participation in a democracy. Students want to be critical thinkers, and they want teachers who help them read to fully experience literature as works of art and as sources for insights and connections related to their life experiences. If educators wish to foster students' critical reading and thinking abilities, then certainly students need to be able to develop, trust, and give voice to their own aesthetic experiences with literature. However, if students are taught that the goal of reading, even for literary texts, is to extract a correct, public meaning (usually one established by the teachers' guide), they will adopt efferent stances for

reading that promote factual rather than thoughtful comprehension, inhibit critical-thinking skills, and limit preparation for enfranchisement in a democracy.

Instead of the traditional approaches of taking tests, answering questions on study guides, or writing contrived book reports, my students were given opportunities to discuss their books, ask their own questions, and confer with the teacher about their books. My wish for students was for them to have a true aesthetic experience and to personally construct meaning of their literary text. I wanted them to become so involved in these aesthetic transactions that they begged for class time to read independently. Once I heard that plea from a student, I knew that I had made progress. Ultimately, I wanted to hear all the students voice that plea. At different times when they were reading their texts, I would confer with students and try to focus their responses on their aesthetic experiences with the book. As they discussed their experiences, I had them supply support for their interpretations from the text. I did not quiz them to determine whether or not they had read the text. I simply allowed them to discuss the text just as they would discuss a movie. Students sometimes feel that they need to be too sophisticated in their discussions of books because they are familiar with how teachers discuss books in classroom settings. Often, teachers discourage student discussions with formal verbiage unfamiliar to students. I wanted to support and encourage students' discussions of their novels without using intimidating discussion tactics.

I believe, and I think that Rosenblatt would believe, that the teacher's role is to assist students in adopting aesthetic stances for literary works of art. It is likely that the students who prefer aesthetic instructional methods are more familiar and comfortable with the aesthetic stance. Unfortunately, many students are not as familiar with aesthetic teaching as they are with the more traditional, efferent approaches. As teachers provide necessary support and as students become more comfortable taking ownership for creating their own meaning, the teacher can gradually remove support until finally the responsibility for the aesthetic transaction lies primarily with the student. The ultimate goal is for students to create their very own evocations and interpretations for literary works of art.

I supported students in their quest for an aesthetic transaction because many were unaccustomed to this type of instruction. I used think-alouds quite often to model

how I transacted with literary texts. I wanted students to hear how I asked myself questions as I read, how I made connections as I read, and how I “lived through” the aesthetic transaction. I wanted to provide a glimpse into my construction of meaning. However, I stressed to them that each person has his or her own unique experiences; thus each person will have a unique construction of meaning for the same text.

If we truly wish to create thoughtful, critical thinkers in our classrooms, we need to consider and implement a more aesthetic teaching stance. Students must be allowed to take ownership for their reading and thinking today if they are to become the critical thinkers of tomorrow. To encourage development of these critical, thoughtful readers, Rosenblatt (1995) reminds us that

[W]e teachers of language and literature have a crucial role to play as educators and citizens. We phrase our goals as fostering the growth of the capacity for personally meaningful, self-critical literary experience. The educational process that achieves this aim most effectively will serve a broader purpose, the nurturing of men and women capable of building a fully democratic society. The prospect is invigorating! (p. 297)

Indeed, the prospect is invigorating! The challenge for educators is to become those teachers who promote aesthetic readings of literary works of art as described by Rosenblatt. Imagine the participatory level of students who

have been encouraged to develop their own reading, thinking, and learning skills—even when the teacher isn’t present to give them the “correct” answer. As a society, we could not possibly envision the benefits to the democratic processes within our great nation. ●

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