

Reading to Fly

Creative Reading as Pedagogical Equalizer

Elite Ben-Yosef

*"I hate reading."
"I don't have time to read."
"It's boring....."*

We hear such claims or assertions from our students all too often, yet we shouldn't be surprised since we are responsible for a great part of it. In my daughter's honors English class (in what is considered one of the best high schools in the U.S.), the teacher wanted to make sure the students actually read the assigned pages at home so she quizzed them, and one of the questions for *Catcher in the Rye* was "What color jacket did he wear in the bar scene?" What has this got to do with reading? What has it got to do with literature? Questions like this promote responses like those above. Forcing all students into lock-step, predetermined, teacher-controlled reading dynamics, turns many youngsters away from reading, particularly those with minds of their own and those who have difficulties reading and/or memorizing (which surely should play no part in reading activities). In addition, as Miller (2009, 3) states, there is no justification for all the money and effort we have spent systematizing the act of reading:

The only groups served by current trends to produce endless programs for teaching reading are the publishing and testing companies who make billions of dollars from their programs and tests.



Struggling beside my son through school, I found more just possibilities in literacy studies and an ability approach to learners. I teach the concept to graduate students of education and use it in teaching developmental reading to undergraduates. For some adult examples, visit www.LiteracyAndLife.blogspot.com.

All these mountains of programs and bundles of cash have made us lose sight of what we were trying to create in the first place: a child independently reading a book *with pleasure*.

Like any other reading teacher, I always struggled and juggled to engage my students with reading. "Tricks" like working with high interest trade books, creating suspense through read-alouds, trying to fit the book to the reader's interests, teaching about the readers' authority vis-à-vis texts and introducing reader response theory sometimes work (Ben-Yosef 2008; Drogowski 2008; Hidi 1990; Rosenblatt 1994). Force — read it for a grade — also occasionally works, but we have to ask what our real goal is. If it is prepping for "The Tests," the dismal statistics about nationwide poor achievement on reading tests and the high percentage of students reading below their grade levels should alert us that something is wrong (not with the kids, whom we tend to blame, but *with us and our system*).

Yet, isn't school about preparing kids to function in "real life" adult society? Who tests us adults about our independent reading? To whom do we owe an explanation if we give up on the book after the first chapter? Who controls what, when, how, and why we read independently? Who holds sway over the wandering of our imaginations while reading? In the real world, we control what and how we read, and we are lead only by our interests, imaginations, and pleasure. This should also be our goal for our students.

In the past few years of teaching literacy to pre- and inservice teachers in graduate school, I grappled with this problem because I realized that many of my grad students were the same reluctant readers from

middle and high school who have developed negative feelings about book reading, although they constantly read other media. They remember books they liked, even loved, from childhood, but most have a spotty reading history after that. Another recurring obstacle to assigning books to read are the many students who got stuck — when they first learned to read — on reading “correctly,” focusing on pronouncing every word and never progressing to fluency. This sort of mechanical reading demands so much energy from the reader that little is left for comprehension and the reader easily becomes frustrated by the slow pace of getting through the text (Wolf 2007). It is very troubling to think that these are the role models we are sending into schools to influence the next generation to read books.

Rethinking and re-envisioning the teaching of reading in schools is imperative. What we should be doing is transmitting to our students the love and pleasure of reading and its creative potential, its inherent power to teach us new things about ourselves and the world, to slake our curiosity, expand our minds, open our hearts, and reach out to others across time and space. Readings is a treasure trove full of wonders and powers with a built-in reward system. The reading teachers’ real mission is to lead students to the treasure chest and entice them to open the cover. The rest should take care of itself.

Reading to Fly

My idea for motivating students to read has to do with giving *them* control over their reading. It is based on brain studies that have shown that when learners feel in control of their learning, their brains go into “learning mode,” as opposed to “survival mode” in which we are busy protecting ourselves from danger. When we feel safe and in control, our brains open to learning and facilitate the intake and comprehension of information (Zull 2002). *Reading to Fly* is based on the idea that when reading independently, be it for information or pleasure and anywhere in between, it doesn’t matter what you read, how much you read, or what you remember from your reading. The important thing is knowing that you are in control both of the process and of the creative rewards you obtain.

The rewards are invaluable because reading has the power of taking us places: places we had never visited; places that can strengthen, challenge or change our worldview; places that can grow our minds and skills; and most importantly, places we may like coming back to for knowledge, comfort, and pleasure. It’s not about what “kind” of reader we are (distracted, fast/slow, ELL student, uninterested in the topic, etc.), but where we allow reading to take us. Real reading isn’t about remembering, knowing, passing tests, or achieving for others; it is about creating personal meaning, whatever that happens to be. Creative reading is a great equalizer because it allows *every* reader, regardless of individual differences, to successfully find personal meaning and creatively respond to any text.

Reading to Fly uses an ability approach that includes all learners and accommodates readers’ interests, experiences, and strengths, combined with Rosenblatt’s (1994) ideas about the readers’ power over texts, and insisting upon flights of imagination, which, as Maxine Greene (1995, 3) writes, allow us to create that which has never been before, to envision what should be and what may be, to “give credence to alternative realities,” and to realize our quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world. *Reading to Fly* introduces reading literature as a platform from which to launch the reader’s imagination into those places that interest her — wherever and whatever appeals, excites, engages. Reading is unshackled from someone else’s understandings, directions, or questioning, and it becomes a creative journey in search of personal meaning, beginning with the individual reader and open to any possibility, any direction, anywhere the reader wishes to head. And oh, the places they go!

This approach to the teaching of reading and responding to literature mimics adult “real life” reading of books for pleasure and for knowledge. As adult independent readers we can fly anywhere our mind takes us before, during, and after reading (without having to prove where we’ve been). Reading to fly (or creative reading) is also totally inclusive in terms of language, culture, and ability levels. Every reader may respond to the text as she chooses, according to her ability, interests, and motivation. There is no attempt to fit anyone into a box; perfor-

mance anxiety is eliminated and engagement is heightened. The reader is fully empowered to make her own decisions and choose her own way. As Dr. Seuss (1990, 2) wrote,

You have brains in your head.
 You have feet in your shoes.
 You can steer yourself
 any direction you choose.
 You're on your own. And you know what you
 know.
 And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

Examples of Student *Reading to Fly* Responses

The students are given the list of ideas (see appendix) and are asked to respond to the text using one of the possibilities, or any other they come up with. They decide what they respond to (a word, an idea, an issue, a character, or the whole book). They also determine what form the response will take, the execution, and the amount of effort they want to invest. When it is time for presentation, the scope, creativity, and imagination of the students' work never fail to impress. They have created skits, sound tracks, travel brochures, collages, and performances of songs and dances. The following are a few examples of student responses.

The Circuit by Jimenez elicited a list poem:

Mexico
 Migrate
 California
 American Dream
 Work
 Labor camps
 Farms
 Crops
 No home
 Uncertainty
 Spanish-English
 Schools
 Brothers, sisters
 Family
 Lying
 Panic
 Fear
 Caught

One student responded to *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson by creating a box within which the book itself and several relevant objects were placed. She

covered the outside of the box with a collage of pictures and quotes from the book protesting violence against women.



In response to reading *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant, a student wrote a poem to May (who passed away) from her adopted daughter, Summer. (Ob is her adoptive father and Cletus, a classmate.)

We Miss You May

Ob and I are forever changed
 Your garden seems so bare
 From day to day we journey through life
 With a dark and disconsolate stare.
 I worry about Ob
 He loved you so much
 I often hear him talking to you
 About our home, the garden and such.

I remember you would always say
 "We're all meant to need each other."
 Now that you are gone I realize
 Your absence will manifest forever.

Each day hurts a little less
 Fading like a dawn that leaves little by little,
 Even Ob's beginning to smile again
 Cletus helped with that a little.

At first I was against
 Him hanging around the house
 Till I realized it helped Ob cope
 With missing you so much.

We miss you May
 We miss your smile
 So fly off to that church picnic
 In the big beautiful sky.

Esperanza Rising by Sharon Creech prompted a student to imagine a letter Esperanza's mother, who was dying in the hospital, would have written to her daughter:

Dear Esperanza,
 I am writing you this letter from the hospital bed while I still feel I have enough strength to write.... I want to tell you what an honor it has been to be your mother. We have been through so much in recent times and I want you to know that your willpower and perseverance have been astonishing.

As I lie here I think of your father and how much he loved you.... I remember the harvests of grapes and the fiestas. I think of Abuelita and wish she were here now to comfort you.... Most of all I think of you, my dear Esperanza. A day does not go by when I do not feel awful that you had to give up all of your things and leave your friends to go off to work in America....

Do you remember the day we went to una tienda for Mexican candies and sweet rolls? That was one of my best memories in America with you! We had so much fun that day, no work and happy faces! I do wish you many more memories just like that here, Esperanza.

Concluding Thoughts

When we work with creative reading responses, it doesn't matter if the student has read every page or if she liked the book. One student who was required to read *Far North*, the adventures of two boys in the Canadian wilderness, said she didn't like the book and wasn't interested in the topic. Her response, however, was creative: she chose 10 concepts or objects from the book — e.g., bush pilot, moose, The Dene — researched them and shared her findings with the class. It makes no difference if the student is rereading a book he likes or what "level" the book might be, or whether only the action parts or the dialogue were read. Real independent reading is ultimately about some form of thoughtful engagement

with a text and our personal enrichment. So these responses are all excellent assessment tools because they assess real learning from an inclusive perspective, using an abilities approach: we can assess what each student was *able* to learn or take away from the text. Every student responding to the text achieves success, and by sharing the responses with the class, all of our experiences are enriched.

What I learn from my students' responses is that all have invested time and thought in their projects; that they focused on something that interested them in the text; that they chose an activity they liked doing (a text-messaging option was not on my list until one student used it in her response). These responses show involvement, compassion, interest, creativity, stretching and extending the texts, going on flights of imagination. The smiles on their faces when they presented their responses clearly showed that there is a good chance they will be less afraid of approaching a book in the future.

They all succeed (rarely have I received a poor response), and when students associate reading with a positive, pleasant, interesting experience, I know that reading has come closer to the heart, has become slightly less boring and a little more intriguing. I feel that I have nudged them towards an independent creative reading path and that I may have set a new empowering attitude in motion. I only hope they will do the same for their own students.

References

- Ben-Yosef, E. 2008. Students finding voice in a college classroom: Reflections on a teaching/learning journey. *Curriculum and Teaching* 23(1): 73-88.
- Drogowski, P. P. (2008, June). Teaching through the year with read-alouds for the primary age. *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 24(10): 27-29.
- Greene, M. 1995. *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hidi, S. 1990, Winter. Interest and its contribution as a mental resource for learning. *Review of Educational Research* 60 (4): 549.
- Miller, D. 2009. *The book whisperer: Awakening the inner reader in every child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. 1994. *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Seuss, Dr. 1990. *Oh the places you'll go!* Random House.
- Wolf, M. 2007. *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*. New York: Harper/Perennial.
- Zull, J. 2002. *The art of changing the brain: Enriching the practice of teaching by exploring the biology of learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Multiple Ways to Respond to a Text

Perform the text or part of it in a dramatic presentation/ reading with musical accompaniment.

Respond to the text in several, ongoing personal/double entry journal entries.

Write a poem from/about the text (found poem, list poem, 10 reasons why poem, etc.).

Dramatize the text as a one-act play.

Create one/several drawings, sketches, visual representations of the text or parts of the text (a scene, a mood, a character).

Create a power point/storyboarding electronic presentation of the text or parts of it.

Make a picture book about the text with lines or paragraphs from the text accompanying every illustrated page.

Create a short video recording to complement the text.

Write a film script for the text (or for a chapter).

Investigate the author/poet, including other works s/he has written and how this text fits in to the author's body of work.

"Box" the text by decorating a container appropriately and putting in it the text as well as several items that go along with it. ("My bag" is the same concept for older kids using a regular backpack where you place things associated with the text).

Research ideas/concepts from the text on the web and share the information with the class (including why this concept intrigued you).

Choose a scene from your book that is referenced but not elaborated on and write the scene as you imagined it took place. Be sure to include dialogue.

Create a graphic novel/ comic book version of one of the chapters/scenes of the story.

Stretch the text. Bring in 10 outside texts that are related to issues in the story to enhance and stretch its meaning (e.g., ads, brochures, web sites, other books, poems, songs, magazine or newspaper articles). Explain the relevance of each text.

Write a new ending to the story or continue it to another phase (what happens to all of the characters in the sequel).

Create a travel brochure for other readers who will be visiting the story world of the novel you read. What do they need to know about the climate, the attitudes of the people, the money, the food, etc., of the place in which they will travel? Insert photos and use your computer to make it look professional.

Write eight to ten journal entries from the perspective of the main character. Be sure that your entries show the subtle shift in your character's thinking as they mature and grow throughout the novel.

With another classmate, write the script of an interview between a journalist and the main character OR the main character and the author.

Design a movie poster for the book you read. Cast the major characters with real actors and actresses. Include a scene or dialogue from the book in the layout of the poster. Remember you are trying to convince someone to see the film so your writing should be persuasive. Attach two movie reviews with the poster.

Make a soundtrack for the book. Choose five to eight songs that represent themes/characters/ conflicts in the story. Along with the CD or tape, include a paragraph for each song on how it relates to the story.

Write the story from a different point of view (e.g., the stepmother in Cinderella, the rat in Charlotte's Web, the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood).

Write a text-messaging conversation between several characters.

Create a collage from found objects/pictures related to the text (e.g., a portrait of a character).

"Step inside" the book and describe what happens to you in the story and how you change the plot.