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**RESPONSE PORTFOLIOS AND A  
LITERATURE RESPONSE MAGAZINE:  
ENHANCING A CHILDREN'S LITERATURE  
COURSE FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS**

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I have the pleasure and privilege of teaching an undergraduate course in children's literature to preservice teachers at a fairly large midwestern university. It is my intention to engage my students in directly experiencing various strategies and activities for teaching literature in elementary and middle school. While it is certainly necessary that preservice teachers gain skill in designing assignments that guide, immerse, and challenge young students in literature study, such as group discussion, cooperative learning activities, journal usage, and creative dramatics, I believe that it is even more valuable for preservice teachers to develop insights into themselves as readers and writers. To meet this objective, my students prepare an individual reading response portfolio. I have used this assignment for several academic terms. However, for one quarter I experimented with enhancing this requirement to include the production of a class publication, *A Literature Response Magazine*.

The students in my class form literature circles to read novels of various genres — fantasy, contemporary realism and historical fiction. While all of our readings acknowledge cultural diversity, a fourth novel is read that specifically features a theme that is important in multicultural education, such as immigration, urban life, family lore, or history told from the view of the culturally oppressed. The whole class reads *Shiloh* and *The Big Book for Peace* (Durrell and Sachs, 1990) and students individually read several self-selected picture books. As the students become familiar with children's literature, they use their response portfolios to observe and reflect how they themselves are learning from literature and responding to it. Moreover, they tend to develop an overwhelming need to relate their literature experiences to others.

My students have cultivated their ability to communicate about their transactions with text. They are able to articulate these perceptions with sensitivity and insight. As they learn more about their own transactions with text (selecting texts, gaining meaning from print, monitoring their own comprehension, and responding to text through a variety of creative means) they construct personal knowledge of how they might facilitate children's engagement with literature. As they discover what they themselves select and value as readers and choose how they will respond, they can generalize from their experiences to explore attitudes and

values which influence decisions about what, how, and why children read, both at home and at school.

### **The Dynamics of Literary Experience**

Holland (1975) suggests that a transformational experience of literature occurs when reading inspires a reader to feel dynamic interaction with text. This interaction motivates social, emotional, aesthetic, moral, or intellectual responses that either temporarily or permanently change the reader. Additionally, text inspires strong imaginative reactions. In an active re-creation of text, the reader senses the characters as 'real' people, and reaction to the events that befall the characters is intense. Readers feel so utterly absorbed in vivid details that they are taken from themselves, so to speak. They are so engrossed in an interior world that for the time being the exterior world is secondary.

The act of transformational reading entails essentially two parts. First, fantasy material is given significance. For example, a story of a hero fighting for his people's liberation may symbolize for a reader his own desire to have the power to overcome social injustice. Second, a reader is actively interpreting content based on personal needs. The events in the text resonate with her own hopes, desires, fears, fantasies, and expectancies. Readers distance themselves, involve themselves, or identify with text passages. Their underlying or characteristic preconceptions, their sentimentalities, cynicisms, memories, and their acceptance or

rejection of the text's doctrine all are exposed by the content and nature of their response to literature. Referring to *Remembrance of Things Past*, Holland (1975, p. 19) quotes "As Proust wisely said, 'In reality, each reader reads only what is already within himself. The book is only a sort of optical instrument which the writer offers to the reader to enable the latter to discover in himself what he would not have found but for the aid of the book.'"

### **The Process of Creating *A Literature Response Magazine***

How is an observer to find out what a reader is discovering in the literature that s/he reads? Students in this children's literature course learn to develop creative ways to share the thoughts and feelings that are brought about as they read quality children's novels and picture books. The reader's responsibility is to show fellow students and the instructor, as observers, how the reader is reacting to and responding to literature by completing two related assignments that provide opportunities to respond to text: a Response Portfolio and entries for *A Literature Response Magazine*.

#### The Response Portfolio

The response portfolio is a particular type of journal that I have devised based on my readings and experiences with the instructional effectiveness of both journal writing and portfolio construction

(Adams, 1990; Baldwin, 1990; Dahl, 1992; Fulwiler, 1988; Lamott, 1994; McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996; Murray, 1990). Ideally, when a reader records responses and reflections related to readings, the very act of writing or otherwise creatively responding helps the reader/writer clarify thoughts. This is considered to be "first draft" writing where the focus is on getting ideas down. Students are encouraged to find the literature's connections to whatever they are thinking about, wondering about, living through, or remembering from the past.

Nine portfolio entries are required but specifications are given for only two of the entries. First, the student must write a character simulation piece (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 1996) based on the historical novel being read by the student's literature circle. The writer must take on the role of one of the characters and write from the character's point of view to compose a journal entry or a letter from the character describing the character's part in an event or scene. This entry should go beyond a retelling of this part of the book to an unveiling of the character's mind and heart. The writer experiences talking in the character's voice and seeing through the character's eyes. Second, the student must write a personal response to the contemporary realistic novel read by his or her literature circle that is affective (offers feelings that are generated by the reading) and associative (tells how the reader is reminded of an event from his or her own life and how the book triggers memories and feelings).

For the remaining seven portfolio entries (the fantasy novel that the student's literature circle reads and any six self-selected pieces) students create personally meaningful responses. While many students produce responsive writings, such as creating poems based on stories they have read, responses need not be written. Students are invited to vary response modes and to experiment with collage, personal photography, taped voice or musical performances, video tapes of dramatizations, dances, or oral readings, sketches, crafts, posters, dioramas, etc. Creativity continues with the selection of the portfolio "container" which may be a book or a self-designed way to store artwork and other response items.

An additional requirement is that these seven entries exemplify theory-based approaches to literature instruction. McGee and Tompkins (1995) describe three theoretical orientations to teaching literature and subsequent teaching approaches guided by these theoretical bases. The first approach is driven by schema theory, which holds that a reader organizes a meaningful response based on the text's connections to the reader's prior knowledge. Teachers guide students in strategic use of cognitive processes that facilitate thinking about text, such as predicting how a text will proceed, paraphrasing and summarizing text, and looking closely at the author's use of words. In a shorthand way, I have come to call this perspective "efferent" because of its relation to Rosenblatt's (1978)

description of how a reader sometimes reads in order to take away information from a text.

The second approach is based upon the examination of literary structure: characters, symbols, archetypes, images, and plot lines. Stories in both traditional and modern literature often feature a hero whose adventure involves getting through an impossible ordeal, finding a way home, or establishing a new home to replace a shattered past. Teachers guide students to explore elements of genre, theme, style, and intertextual connections. To be brief, I call this approach "structural."

The third approach emphasizes readers' personal responses to text. Teachers encourage students to explore literature to see what a story means to them personally, share these insights with others, and appreciate the variety and differences in the responses that their fellow readers create. I refer to this approach as "personal response."

I ask my students to study these three orientations and respond to their readings in ways that reflect their knowledge of each perspective. I use this model to help preservice teachers become aware of curricular and instructional decisions that they will be making. For example, if the teacher asks herself the question, "How will I teach students about the historical information in this novel?" she may want to consider an efferent approach. If a teacher wonders, "How can my students learn more about the importance of the role of the hero in literature?" he may present activities that teach about literary structure.

The portfolio assignment requires students to respond to their literature circle's fantasy novel with an efferent or structural entry only, that can be written, drawn, spoken, etc. For instance, an efferent response may include keeping a reader's log that records how the reader predicted while reading as well as how predictions were confirmed or refuted as reading continued. To produce a structural response, students may write reflectively about symbols that occur in the text. Responses to any six self selected pieces of children's literature, such as novels, folk tales, informational books, poetry, plays, picture books, and the recommended titles of *The Big Book for Peace*, *Home*, and *The Greatest Table*, must be comprised of two efferent, two structural, and two personal response creations and, again, can be created in any media.

Assessment of students' work is done by using a rubric. For each entry, I evaluate whether the response is creative, personal, meaningful, relevant to the book, clear, visually appealing and comprehensible. I consider whether producing the entry has had some value for the learner and whether, when this entry is shared with the class, it has some meaning for others who experience it. I also look for some variety in the types of submissions that a student makes. My students have found that creating a response that is congruent with one of the three theoretical approaches is sometimes easy to do, but many types of creative responses reflect more than one orientation to teaching literature. Personal response, as in personally

defined meaning, is a factor in all responses, even if the reader is analyzing information found in text or exploring literary structure. I am comfortable with somewhat flexible boundaries; often a student's entry could be considered to fit two or even all three of these classifications. What is important is that students can tell why an entry fits one or more theoretical orientations to literature instruction. When a student wrote a poem about a hero's quest, incorporated some of the vocabulary of the text, and reflected personal feelings in the poem, my class and I were completely happy to celebrate this response and accept its theoretical pluralism.

About seventy students have constructed response portfolios to date. There is a range of self-expression that is manifested in all sorts of writing and artwork. Drawings, posters, mobiles, quilts, sculpture, dioramas, hand-sewn dolls, collage boxes, board games, greeting cards, photo essays, and wearable art have been created. It is interesting how many students designed their artistic responses as if they were done by a character from a text, as in creating a sympathy card from Dara Lynn to Marty when he lost Shiloh (in the book *Shiloh*). Similar to this, many students created scrapbooks, keepsake or memory boxes for favorite characters, as in the box created by Wilfred Gordon for Miss Lucy in *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*.

Written entries have included poems, essays, recipes, simulated writings, position papers, brochures, surveys, interviews, advertisements, and letters. Students have audio taped performances of

songs that they have composed as well as readings of original or published poems.

Creativity is also manifested in the selection of the portfolio "container." Bound blank books, artists' sketch pads, sewn books, decorative gift boxes, handmade folders, cans and canisters, oversize briefcases, pocketbooks and satchels, file boxes, tool boxes, jewelry boxes, milk cartons and cereal boxes have all been pressed into service as receptacles of written and artistic responses.

Examples of response portfolio entries include:

- a letter from a father to his daughter describing how he felt reading *A Bridge to Terabithia* and inviting her to read the book (personal response)

- an illustrated timeline depicting the events in *Number the Stars* (efferent)

- a written character analysis and a sketched portrait of Cassie in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (structural)

- clay sculptures of the animals in *Abel's Island* (personal response)

- a detailed map of the town of College Hill based on the author's description in *Stepping on the Cracks* (efferent)

- poems by Langston Hughes recited on tape, with a drum beat background (personal response)

- a humorous photo essay on acquiring a family pet from a pound in response to *Shiloh* (personal response)

- a survey of twenty respondents on "Would you like to live forever?" in response to *Tuck Everlasting* (personal response).

### A Literary Response Magazine

Producing nine portfolio entries helps each student become a literature response "pro," as one class member quipped. Each student then creates an additional response to any children's literature selection to contribute to *A Literary Response Magazine*. Given the magazine format, responses must be written or drawn. To contribute more than one entry, students may offer any of their response portfolio items whose dimensions and media fit the magazine format — 8 1/2 x 11 inch pages that are in black and white.

When I assigned this task I did not know what kinds of responses the students would contribute — I had no requirements for the types of writing or artwork that would comprise the magazine. When I arranged the entries according to response types the sections that emerged were Character Simulation Writings, Illustrations, Poems, "Eat Up A Book" Recipes To Go With Favorite Reads, Personal Responses, Teaching Ideas, Book Covers, Readers Theater Scripts, Book Talks, and Prequels, Alternative Endings, and Sequels.

To publish the magazine I sparingly edited students' writing, prepared a table of contents, designed graphics for the cover and for each section, wrote an editorial introduction to the

magazine, duplicated the pages and spiral bound the book.

### Excerpts from *A Literature Response Magazine*

Twelve students contributed seventy entries to *A Literature Response Magazine*. The students responded to thirty-eight works for children. Of the fourteen Character Simulation Writings, two responses to *Stepping on the Cracks* were particularly moving.

"I will never understand grown ups! First of all, Mrs. Smith. How can she tell such lies about what is going in their house? I never know when to believe Gordy, but June is too little to tell whoppers. If she says that her daddy hurt her, I believe it. Look at how scared she was to go home ... How can Mrs. Smith make them stay in that house when Mr. Smith is hurting them so badly? Why does she talk about the kids as though they were telling lies? ... And why wouldn't Gordy let us try to help? He's telling lies too. It's as if we'll think he's a sissy if he asks for help. I never thought that I'd feel anything else but hate for Gordy, but I saw him as a different person today. He was so gentle and protective with June. I guess he's really brave to go home from school every day knowing what will happen to him. ...

Maybe that's why he's so mean to other kids — because he gets hurt all the time and there's nothing he can do about it."

--Journal entry in the voice of Margaret

"... I hate the war, I hate the newspaper that constantly reports about all the young men who have been killed. I hate the radio reports that talk about the war. I hate the war, but I can't talk to my husband about it, he wouldn't understand. I want my Jimmy back! ... I want to sleep but I can't, my mind keeps returning to the fact that this war has taken my boy. My son is dead and I can't tell my husband that I really hate this war! ... I can't stop thinking of him, of the day I told his father we were going to have a baby, the first time I heard him cry, the first time he said "Mom." This pain is unbearable. I remember the plans we had for our boy, he was going to be a college graduate ... he was just a baby that I could protect and now he's gone."

-- Journal entry in the voice of Mother

Eighteen poems were contributed to the magazine. "Listen," a response to *Sing Down the Moon*, featured these lines:

Hear not the hate,  
the fear,



and confusion.  
See and listen to the wondrous beauty to be  
found  
The moon, silvery-white  
in the sky,  
round.  
Shhhhh! Listen!  
The winds whisper  
"Peace"

"Kit's Lament" was written in response to *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*:

"I come, a tropical bird,  
from light and heat and color  
'Prisoned now in grey,  
chilled and lifeless without and within  
Feathers too draggled and brittle to spread  
Wings weighed down with ice,  
Unable to lift  
To soar  
Heart and spirit too cramped for hope  
What is this cage, from which beauty is barred,  
Virtue made stern and cold?  
What hope, what life can there be where God's  
wonders  
Are deemed godless?"

Excerpts from a poem in response to *The Devil's Arithmetic* read:

"... The box car we were shoved in was  
overcrowded and hot,

As we were forced together in one little spot,  
It seemed like our trip lasted for endless days,  
And all we wanted was to feel the sun's rays.

... Because I had come from the future I knew,  
From history, from stories, and from school,  
too,  
Not only were they taking us away,  
But they would end up killing us - thousands of  
Jews a day.

... All I could think about was my family back  
home,  
Oh why did I complain and constantly moan?  
Here I was treated like a pig in a stable,  
I wished I were in America at our Passover  
table."

Students from a literature circle got together to  
write this poem in response to *The Devil's Arithmetic*, *Maniac Magee*, and *Sing Down the Moon* that is in imitation of a poetic form used by  
Lapsansky & McAndrew (1993):

"May you be like Hanna  
and possess inner strength  
May you be like Jeffrey/Maniac  
and look beyond the color of someone's face  
May you be like Bright Morning  
and have the courage to move on  
May you be like Tall Boy  
and overcome adversity

May you be like Amanda Beale  
and lend books to strangers!"

Fifteen personal responses were submitted to the magazine, all of which revealed candor and sensitivity.

"I remember F.H. as being one of the most beautiful boys I had ever met in my whole ten year old life. F. was short but he had the most beautiful skin, it almost looked as if his skin was made of cocoa flavored butter, it was so smooth and such a beautiful color. I remember his hair, it was jet black with a cluster of silky huge curls all over. Yes, F. was a gook looking kid but he thought I was a pal, a family friend that was just one of the guys. It did not matter to me that he called me "big head" whenever he saw me. What mattered was that he acknowledged my presence and that was good enough for me. My childhood friend came to mind while reading chapter ten of *A Bridge to Terabithia*. Like the character Leslie in the book, my friend lost his life at a young age to a swollen creek that swelled during spring rains. I found myself in tears as I read the last few chapters of the book. I relived the feelings I experienced when F. died."

"... Reading a book like *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant certainly triggers thoughts, memories, and emotions about my own personal losses. Summer and Ob were on a mission to somehow, some way reach their beloved May. I, too, was once like these two characters. I lost my mother at the age of eleven to cancer. Being so young and full of confusion about the concept of death, I was always looking for signs and signals from my mom. I would always think that maybe I would see her somewhere - on TV, or in the mall. Needless to say, I never did. ... When Ob and Summer went to find the psychic in hopes of contacting May, I remembered something I hadn't thought of in quite some time ... a bunch of friends and I were bored, so we decided to play with an Ouija board. The scene was set for something very eerie to occur (we had only candles lit, of course). As the game went on, the person in charge said the "someone was with us," and he moved the crystal to three initials: CJC. I immediately became hysterical and had to leave the room. These were my mother's initials. You see, as I played the game I secretly hoped that this might happen, I wanted to communicate with her so badly. When the initials came up, I regretted ever agreeing to play the game in the first place. After I

calmed down, I realized that I was wrong to go searching for her through a game that I know she would certainly disapprove of in the first place. I am a little older and a little more insightful on the topic of death now. I still wish that I could talk to my mom just one more time, but I will never again try to do it by "artificial" means. I actually have found her, though. She is with me every day in my thoughts, words, appearance, and heart."

In response to *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*, a student wrote:

"As I read this book I can't help but think how my parents must have felt when they first came to this country. I think mostly of my father. He came to the United States in late 1956 after the revolution against the communists in Hungary. ... Not only was he coming from a war-ravished country, but he did not speak a word of English. ... He found a job and did get into trouble with his co-workers at first. They were cruel. When my father asked his co-workers what a specific word was they gave him a "swear" word. He used this word thinking nothing of it. In time he learned who he could trust."

This preservice teacher wrote in response to a story in *The Big book for Peace*:

"... I was so proud of my soul mate when he announced to our family that he would be attending the Million Man March. ... I felt that way until the rumors began flowing through our community that the march was a set up and that they should expect trouble while on their journey. As I read the story "The Silent Lobby" I connected with the mother in the story who feared for her loved ones' safety as they travelled to participate in a peaceful protest. ... I remember thinking what this character said, "Why do you have to go?" ... Like the character in the story I was afraid to lose him but honored and proud to know him ..."

### Students' Reflections

I've asked my students to write a brief reflection on their experiences creating response portfolios and *A Literature Response Magazine*. Again, almost seventy have produced response portfolios, twelve of whom contributed to the magazine. Reflections by magazine contributors are marked by an asterisk. The reflections can be sorted into a few general categories. Some of their comments were about their reading enjoyment:

"I remembered how much I enjoyed reading as a child. *Tuck Everlasting* reminded me how I would test myself to see if I could wait and read to find out the ending of a book." \*

"I will enjoy teaching my students more now that I am enjoying children's books more." \*

"I find myself going to the children's section of the book store first." \*

"As a learner, I added a wealth of culture and emotion to my existing literary foundation through reading novels I really enjoyed." \*

"I have learned to have confidence in my own ability to choose good literature."

Other comments pertained to creating literary responses and sharing responses in a community of readers and writers:

"Not only has the instructor taught me, my classmates have also. By viewing their creations for their response portfolios, I have been able to expand my imagination." \*

"I have discovered how I have become attached to the characters in the stories I have read. I learned how to respond to books in various ways which include writing and art..." \*

"I really got a lot out of the way that people shared this quarter. I am the type of learner who responds much better to hands on versus lecture type of learning."

"I also liked the response journals. I welcome the opportunity to be creative with class projects, however, what I had forgotten was how much I enjoy it and how relaxing it can be."

"This has honestly been the most beneficial course I have had so far in my educational curriculum. I have been provided with many opportunities to respond to literature... My confidence has been lifted." \*

"I enjoyed participating in the response portfolio exercise. I like being able to show my creative side and most courses don't offer creativity as an option."

"This course has given me the opportunity to ... [experience] the work our students would be doing." \*

"I also enjoyed doing my reading response portfolio; this taught me other ways of expressing my feelings and reactions to what I read. ... I learn best through personal experiences."

"I liked getting ideas from other students also. It amazes me how we all think so differently."

Some students wrote about new views on pedagogy:

"I learned different ways to motivate the student to want to read. No longer are students told to read a book and answer questions at the end of the story." \*

"Our response portfolios ... that we did in this class are ways that I hope to teach children's literature." \*

"By exposing us to so many types of books ... you have taught me to do the same for my students. I have decided that choice is an important factor in motivating children to read." \*

"Did they laugh, cry, relax, enjoy, would they come back for more? This will be what I strive for when I teach literature."

"I will continue to use a variety of activities which will allow the students to creatively respond to literature." \*

"I was raised on book reports and doing the journal responses was a clear way of making myself find alternatives."

### Conclusion

The students' participation in the response portfolios and the response magazine provided them with the transformational experience of literature that Holland (1975) describes. Diverted by characters and stories, these readers interacted dynamically with text and experienced emotional, imaginative, and intellectual responses. They experienced literature that spoke of their own hopes, desires, fears, fantasies, identities, expectancies, memories, and cultural backgrounds. In their transactions with children's books, these readers arrived at a personal interpretation of the meaning of the texts. Oropallo and Gomez (1996) state that some of the desirable outcomes of the use of portfolios in preservice teacher education are discovery, ownership, comfort with personal disclosure, reflection on the process of growth, self-examination, and discussion of pedagogy and curriculum. These outcomes have been attained through preservice teacher engagement in response portfolios and *A Literature Response Magazine*.

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