

*Response
& Analysis*

SECOND EDITION

Teaching Literature in Secondary School

Robert E. Probst

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(Credits continue on p. vi.)

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*To my parents, Harry and Marian Probst.
And to my wife, Wendy, and my sons, Geoffrey and Bryan.*

(Credits continued from p. iv.)

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PREFACE

About ten years ago, Louise Rosenblatt, while sitting in Princeton, New Jersey, talked with fifty teachers and me as we huddled around a speakerphone in Anchorage, Alaska. During the conversation, Dr. Rosenblatt made the remark that she had written *Literature as Exploration* “as a defense of democracy.” I wasn’t sure what she meant at the time, and may not fully grasp it even now.

I think, though, that she meant that we have to learn to read both our texts and the world responsively and responsibly if we’re to preserve democratic processes. That is to say, we must not simply submit to texts, accepting too easily what they offer us, following them too willingly wherever they would take us. Rather, we have to bring those texts to bear upon our lives, and our lives to bear upon the texts, reflecting conscientiously upon the experience, attitudes, and ideas that emerge from our reading, analyzing both the text and ourselves, continually rethinking who we are, what we believe and value, and where we stand in the world. Literature offers us the chance to do that thinking. If our students learn to read in that way, they may be able to exercise some control over their lives and participate in the free thought necessary for a democracy; if they don’t, they’re prepared only to follow, accepting someone else’s decisions and judgments.

This book is an effort to figure out how we might teach that responsive and responsible reading in the secondary schools, grades six through twelve.

Whatever changes have found their way into this revised edition I owe to a great many people from whom I’ve learned, borrowed, and stolen. Louise Rosenblatt is still the foundation; her theory is as strong and vital now as it was when she first articulated it almost 70 years ago. Many others, however, have helped me explore it and have shown me, more clearly than I otherwise could have seen, what it means in the classroom and in a democratic society: R. Baird Shuman led me to first explore these ideas; Kyleene Beers taught me everything I know (a small part of what she knows) about working with kids who have difficulty reading; Ken Holmes showed me skillful and sensitive teaching of less privileged students in an impoverished inner-city; Joan Wynne helped me tremendously to better understand African-American and Latino students; Hal Foster demonstrated for me how universities and schools

can work together; and there are many others (too many to name), including the teachers studying at Georgia State University who put up with my experiments in the classroom and shared their own with me, and countless middle and high school students around the country who have helped immensely, although they may not know it.

I would also like to thank Lisa Luedeke, who diligently kept after me to get this revision completed—it would never have happened without her support and encouragement—and the others at Heinemann who work so hard to bring a book together. In many ways, it's been a group project, although I'm responsible for the misspelled words and other errors.

—Bob Probst
Marathon, Florida
July 2, 2004

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3

The Reader and Other Readers

You usually don't go to a movie alone. Not, in any case, if there's someone else around who'd like to see it, too. It's just more fun to share the popcorn and to have someone else to talk with about the movie afterwards. If it's a good movie, you'll have much to say, questions to ask, scenes to talk about; if it isn't, you'll have complaints you'll want to share with someone. You'd rather not go to a movie, watch it, and then go home, take out the trash, wash the dishes, and pay your bills. A great movie, even just a good movie—even a bad movie, for that matter—demands discussion. You need to sit down and talk about it.

Talk is called for. You don't walk out of the theater thinking, "I sure wish my old English teacher, Ms. Riley, was (or did she say it should be *were*?) here to give me one of those devious ten-question multiple-choice or true-false or fill-in-the-blank quizzes she used to give us every other day to make sure we'd done our homework, because I know I'd knock it—I paid attention; I caught every nuance, every detail; I know the plot, the characters, the cinematic techniques, the pacing, the tone, the theme, the style, everything about this movie. I'd get 100 percent, an A+. She'd be so proud of me she'd write a note home telling my parents that I was a model student and that they should raise my allowance and give me back my driver's license. She'd start drafting my letters of recommendation to Oxford and the Sorbonne." No, you don't think those thoughts. Nor, on the other hand, if it were (or was?) a confusing movie—something like *Memento*, with its recursive structure, starting and backing up, retracing its steps, going over the same events again and again—do you walk into the lobby and call out, "Is there an English teacher in the house?" hoping that one will step forward proudly and proclaim, "I am here! What is it you need dissected, vivisected, analyzed, explicated, and made crystal clear?"

No, what you do is head to the nearest coffeehouse, sit down with your friend or friends, order a drink, and talk, just talk. You compare notes, tell them what you liked, ask them about what confused you, argue about whether Bruce Willis or Anthony Hopkins might have been better in that role than Hal Foster (probably not). Good movies, and good books, want to be talked about.

But it doesn't usually happen. Not outside of the classroom, in any case. Kyrene may give me a book that she loved, but by the time I've read it and get back to Houston she's moved on and read twelve other books. I pass it along to Hal, but he goes off to Akron and we don't talk until I'm deep into something Kathleen sent me so I can't remember the issues he'd like to discuss. There aren't enough people reading the same thing at the same time.

Except in English classes. There you have a rare opportunity. You have thirty kids and a book. You can talk.

Chapter 2 was about what happens when someone reads and reflects upon a literary work; it focused on the individual response to a text. Good reading, it was argued, is neither submission nor arrogance. That is to say, it is not simply a matter of absorbing the work, receiving it as one receives the comfort of a warm shower. Nor, on the other hand, is it an opportunity either to loose one's unconsidered opinions upon others or to indulge in quiet self-deception. Rather, it is a matter of responding to the text and of thinking carefully about both the response and the words on the page in order to understand both oneself and the work better. This notion of good reading recognizes limitations to any one person's knowledge and experience, and asserts that those limitations, that particular point of view, necessarily shape the understanding of the text. In this chapter we'll look at the relationships among readers.

In the discussion of the Jones poem, "As Best She Could," we examined how various readers' points of view might shape their readings of the poem and how reading the poem might in turn shape the points of view. People will read the poem differently, and if they read carefully and thoughtfully, they will be slightly different people when they finish reading. The Hughes poem "A View of a Pig" provided an illustration of the transition from response to analysis, showing how the responses of students could raise questions that compel them to look closely at the words on the page for answers. So far, the discussion has concentrated on the individual's private reading of the work, her transaction, as Louise Rosenblatt calls it, with the text.

Once students are beyond the schools' reach, their reading is likely to be not only private, but also independent and solitary, unassisted by any other readers. They probably will not search out book discussion groups or critical essays to help them think through their experiences with literature. While in school, however, they have the opportunity to invite others into the private exchange between work and self. Other readers can help tremendously by calling attention to different readings, alternatives they might not otherwise have noticed. It is with this opportunity that this chapter is concerned.

The opportunity to read in company with others is not without its drawbacks. Though the group provides a variety of insights and responses to work with, it demands tolerance of occasional digressions and ramblings; though it provides a forum for your own thoughts, it demands that you share the platform with others; though it provides feedback for those who speak, it allows a retreat into anonymity for the timid ones; and though it may provide much stimulation for thought, it may also

intrude disruptively into the private meditations that are part of the personal and solitary act of reading. Individual students may find themselves lost in the crowd, with little chance to express their thoughts, or perhaps even to think them. With other subjects the problem may not be so acute, but the teaching of literature must be grounded in the students' responses to the text, so they need the opportunity to articulate those responses. The ideas and concepts in the literature classroom do not have identity and substance independent of the students; rather, they are produced by the students as they interact with the text. Unless students read and respond, there is no literature to teach—only texts and information about texts. The unresponsive student of algebra may grasp its basic principles, and the indifferent student of history may begin to comprehend the sequence and the rationale of events, but the student of literature who hides in the crowd or parrots the thinking of classmates, who learns only to paraphrase the critical judgments of scholars or to memorize peripheral information about authors' lives and historical periods, has not begun to learn the literature. Those parroted observations and memorized judgments reflect not less learning, but no learning whatsoever. They indicate that the student has failed to confront the literature and test himself against it. Insofar as the classroom permits students to avoid dealing with responses, it permits them to ignore the literature.

So the classroom may help or hurt, and the teacher's job is to manage it in such a way that it helps more than it hurts. We may begin by considering how reading in a group differs from reading alone. What differences does it make to a reader to have twenty-five or thirty other readers around, all dealing with the same text? Perhaps the most significant difference is the group's pressure on the individual student to respond to the text aloud. Reading without anyone else to talk to, a student too easily puts a work aside without articulating her thoughts, and thus without fully digesting it. Without the talking or the writing that might follow reading, the student's reaction to the work remains undefined, unspecified. George Henry describes the typical act of reading:

We read at our own pace, finish with an inchoate lump of meaning unformed by language, and then go on to other reading or non-reading activity. Only when we try to communicate the ideas of the passage to ourselves or to others or to relate it to another work or passage do we determine what meaning is really ours. . . . In short, we must conceptualize it—join it to something. That is, we must synthesize it, which always entails bringing something of ourselves to it. The conclusion for teaching, it would seem, is that reading is inextricably tied up with both oral and written composition, with experience, with other concepts inside us, and with other reading.¹

The group, because it consists of others whose inchoate lumps are different from mine, compels me to define my own more carefully, and thus see how I differ from those around me. Students who can be brought to sense their uniqueness can be encouraged to take interest in and explore it further. It is the group that gives one

the sense of uniqueness; without others, the individual remains indistinguishable, an image without a contrasting background. The varying perspectives that may emerge in discussing a literary work with a class fill in that background for the individual, helping him to see more precisely where he himself stands; in other words, the group supplements his imagination by showing him alternatives that he might not have envisioned as he read the work. Recognizing those alternative readings assists and encourages him to clarify his own and thus to understand himself. And—equally important—the discourse about readings may enable him to come to understand his fellow students better.

This testing of oneself against others may occur infrequently. Students are likely to resist it. Followers are, after all, more numerous than leaders; buying is easier than creating. Given the opportunity, students may simply accept, and even seek, someone else's reading. It's much easier, after all, to wait until the class star has spoken and then say "I think what she said" than it is to think something yourself. Teachers who try to encourage students to think independently, to reason out their own understanding of a text, soon come to hear in their dreams the constant refrain "But tell us what it means." The students want something they can jot down in their notes, if they take notes, with assurance that these notes will be both *right* and *important*—that is to say, that they'll be on the test. The teacher, after all, is the one with answers—the answers that count, at least, on important things like tests. Raised on a diet of multiple-choice questions, students come to view thinking as a process of choosing from among several statements, one of which is right and four of which are wrong. If occasionally intellection is complicated by a choice that reads "all (or none) of the above," they suspect that someone has been careless or lazy, allowing ambiguity to creep in and muddy the processes of thought.

Such students, given the chance, will agree with the teacher's reading. If you withhold your own interpretation, they will fall back on the second line of defense and accept the reading offered by that student whom they know to be most often right. Only when all else fails will they consider the desperate and frightening course of thinking for themselves. The pain that labor inflicts is likely to discourage them from ever attempting it again.

Finding Responsibilities

The testing of self against others isn't natural or easy. Overcoming the inertia of the group and breaking down students' resistance to the work of thinking require some ingenuity on the part of the teacher. This problem is solved in part by careful selection of works, an issue we'll discuss more fully in later chapters. If a work touches upon matters in which students have a vital interest, and if the students can read it with enough ease to be able to grasp the fundamental issues, then they may react strongly enough to the text to feel the need to speak. Yet it's also surprising how often works that seem to have little relevance to the students will nonetheless sustain a long and energetic discussion. The energy for these discussions often seems to come not so much from the work itself as from the lucky appearance of a difference

in the readings of several students. It is as though the literary work has served as the catalyst for an examination of oneself and one's friends in the classroom.

Those moments are hard to predict and harder still to arrange, but the teacher who seeks them can do several things to increase their frequency. First of all, we can demonstrate that they are welcome, which we may do by inviting and accepting personal response and by encouraging attention to the statements made by students in the class. Using them simply as building blocks in an argument of our own, as steps to a predetermined reading to which we will lead the class regardless of its inclinations, tells the class that their insights and questions are valuable only insofar as they contribute to our labors. On the other hand, listening to them and dealing with them indicates that we consider them significant and worth investigating. In such an atmosphere students are more likely to make statements interesting enough to stimulate thought and discussion.

Response Statements

Further, you can find ways to put mild pressure on students to think and to formulate their reactions to what they have read. For instance, you may deprive the students of the opportunity to seize upon someone else's reading by asking them, immediately after they have finished reading a work, to take five or ten minutes to note their first responses to it. Without dictating a form for the notes, suggest that they jot down questions, observations about the worth of the piece, memories it calls to mind, speculations about the writer, or condemnation or approval of the ideas presented. Required to verbalize in solitude, however briefly, students will be forced at least to begin to make sense of their impressions of the text. No one else will have said anything with which they can simply agree; they will have to begin, by themselves, the labor of conceptualizing. Having begun it, they may feel some commitment to develop or explore it, since it is their own.

Thus those brief notes may yield the substance of the discussion. Depending on the group, you may want to allow discussion to begin informally, when one of the short statements read aloud elicits a reaction from students, or you may prefer to use the first several minutes of discussion to select from among the statements several that you can arrange as an agenda for the session. You might ask for several students to volunteer to read or paraphrase their notes, jotting down the essence on the board to serve as a rough agenda for subsequent talk, or else collect the papers from the class and, looking through them, read out loud several that you think may be provocative, preserving the anonymity of the writer if that seems desirable.

Another alternative is to collect the five-minute responses and sort them into groups. You might tell the class, "I need about five or ten minutes to arrange these responses according to the issues or ideas they address. Please just look over the text again quietly so that I can do that" (a slightly disguised request to re-read, pleading *your* necessity, not theirs). Then sort them quickly so that you have groups of three to six, rearrange the students accordingly, and invite them to talk about their various readings. Once, feeling either bold or lazy (or both), I called for their responses,

telling them that I was going to quickly sort them thematically. I took up the papers and then, poring intently over them as if studying every nuance to be sure that my grouping was carefully done, I randomly divided them into five or six stacks. Then I rearranged the class and asked each group to study the collection of responses they'd had to the text and try to figure out what it was about their brief papers that had led me to put them together in a group. Several groups successfully articulated some idea that bound them together; a few struggled fruitlessly to find a common thread. But the point, of course, was simply to get them talking.

If you're discussing these free-writes with an active, alert, outspoken group, the students might be content to listen, as the responses are read, for the ones that arouse their interest. On the other hand, if the students are too outspoken or eager, then submitting them to the discipline of working by an agenda to ensure that all of the worthy statements are considered may be more effective. A more reticent group, happy to let you read all the remarks without commenting at all, may need more than a casual invitation to comment on whatever statement appears interesting. For that group, the formality of an established agenda may be more productive.

The complexity of the work under consideration may also influence your choice of method. A work complex enough to elicit a wide range of response, touching several different themes, might be better handled in the more orderly fashion, again, to ensure that the various issues raised by the students are all given time. Regardless of the technique, you should keep in mind that the brief writing period is intended to force the students into solitary, unassisted thought about the work read and to obtain that thought from them so the group can discuss it. The justification for isolating them at first is that the students' responses will more likely be their own and that the collection of responses will be more varied and wide-ranging. Thus we need to demonstrate our respect for that variety by refraining from criticism of the statements and by managing the discussion with some discretion. If we too blatantly select statements we either like or disagree with, or those of particular students, either good or bad, it will soon become clear to the students that we are not using the statements to begin a discussion of their responses and concerns, but that the statements are simply the hooks upon which we can hang our own views.

That is not to say that we should completely avoid guiding the discussion; the excesses of the overly indulgent teacher who confuses freedom and anarchy do the student little good. There is nothing wrong, for instance, with suggesting that the class pursue certain questions before it undertakes the discussion of others. For instance, a poem might elicit the following two hypothetical responses from two students in the class:

"I like the character in this poem. She seems to me to be a bit confused, but good-natured and kind."

"This poem represents everything that is wrong with twentieth-century poetry. It's the worst of Dylan Thomas and Bob Dylan wrapped up in one."

The teacher would, of course, have to take the class into consideration, but if the class is typical, beginning discussion with the first response rather than the second may yield more lively talk. The first response focuses on something fairly specific—the character—and comments on it in a personal, subjective manner. The remark could easily lead to further talk about what the student, and other students, find appealing or unappealing in people, and to observations about the specifics in the poem that develop an impression of the character. The second response, on the other hand, tends toward the abstract, the formal, and the scholarly, and it makes broad statements that would be difficult for most high school groups to handle very well. What, for instance, does the speaker mean by “twentieth-century poetry”? And to what characteristics of Thomas and Dylan is she referring?

This second response, if dealt with early on, seems likely to impede the discussion. First, it will probably intimidate or annoy those students who feel uncomfortable with the vast concepts to which the speaker has so casually referred. A high school student who can easily sum up all twentieth-century poetry and test this particular poem against that summation either has an imposing intellect or is a pompous fraud. Even if such a response does not antagonize the rest of the class, it is likely to lead to vague talk that, by avoiding specifics, manages to sound impressive without saying much at all. A discussion of twentieth-century poetry presumes knowledge of twentieth-century poetry, and most students don’t have the background to handle such a large and slippery concept.

The first response will draw more students into the conversation. It does not pretend to great scholarship, breadth of reading, or depth of insight; it simply comments on the person created by the poem. More students are likely to feel capable of discussing such a mundane, human issue. The talk is also more likely to lead to specifics:

- Who is the character?
- How is she represented to the reader?
- What is the source of her confusion?
- Why does she seem kind?

All of these questions direct attention to the poem, calling upon the students to refer to and draw inferences from the text.

The first response may also lead to reflection upon one’s own perceptions or values: What characteristics do you consider desirable or attractive in people? What features do you share with the character in the poem? These reflections, too, might lead back to the poem: Does this character actually have those virtues you have said are desirable, and if so, how are they shown? Such discussion is concrete, being built on specific observations and inferences that can be traced to the text. It demands actual thought, not simply manipulation of phrases likely to be encouraged by too hasty an effort to discuss “twentieth-century poetry.”

After the concrete discussion the first response might promote, the class may be ready to deal with the more abstract second response. Students may be reminded

of other poems as they talk, and thus may recall specific examples of twentieth-century poetry to compare with the poem before them. By replacing the generalization with examples, they can retain some of the concreteness of the earlier discussion. They may even arrive at a statement about twentieth-century poetry in general. Questions may also arise about the characteristics of Dylan and Thomas, and samples of their work may be presented for examination by the group. The second response is not, in other words, a useless statement to be discreetly avoided by the teacher. But it is more difficult to deal with effectively and therefore not a good place to begin. Start with the concrete and specific, and then move on.

After discussing the first statement about the poem, the class may sense the vagueness and ambiguity in its efforts to deal with the second. They may see that the second response brings up issues they are not yet ready to handle comfortably. That student who offered the second response may be gently led to qualify it. She may be compelled to reflect on the possibility that the response was not really a response to the poem, but an effort to impress the teacher and the class with insight and knowledge she did not possess. That, however, is a judgment for the student herself to make. Although the teacher may suspect such a possibility, she should not voice her suspicions too openly for fear students will hesitate to contribute in the future. The purpose of these response statements, after all, is to initiate discussion. They are not to be treated as the products of thorough, painstaking thought, but as guesses or suggestions to be explored. If the exploration leads nowhere, nothing is lost but a little time, and the class may turn its attention to other possibilities, one of which may lead to insight.

On the other hand, our second student might really be on to something. She may not simply be trying to impress the class and the teacher, and might be encouraged to find a poem by Thomas and a song by Dylan and show us just what she means. How do these texts compare with one another? What are their similarities? How do they all represent “twentieth-century poetry”?

The teacher may assist in finding the most productive route for the discussion to take, but should not deceive the students about the nature of thought by suggesting that it is all orderly, cumulative, and successful. Students must learn, largely by experience, that some beginnings are more likely to lead to productive discussions than others, and they must also learn to tolerate uncertainties and failures. A lesson that moves logically, almost inexorably, from beginning to end may give the teacher a satisfying sense of craftsmanship, but it does not accurately reflect the process of thinking any more than a research report accurately reflects the process of scientific experimentation. The classroom should, as often as possible, demonstrate the process of thinking as well as its results.

Patterns of Discussion

Brief responses, jotted down in the five or ten minutes after reading, may serve as the basis for a variety of patterns of discussion. As we have noted, you may read them aloud, with pauses for discussion when one of them provokes a reaction; you

may call on volunteers to present their statements to the class; or you may list the statements on the board and rearrange them into a formal agenda for the class session. There are other possibilities as well. For instance, the teacher may wish to pair students initially, asking them to read one another's statements and react to them. The pairing for this activity could be purposeful; you might place together two students whose views are radically different, so that under your watchful eye they could learn to listen more attentively and tactfully to opposing viewpoints. You might even prescribe that students must first find something in their partner's statement to agree with or commend, if only the neatness of the handwriting, to begin the conversation on a more pleasant, less adversarial note.

After discussing in pairs, the class might combine pairs into groups of four, and perhaps later into still larger groups. Discussion in these small groups will be easier for students to handle than discussion with the full class. The talk will be less likely to jump from one issue to another, but may instead be progressive, allowing the students to build upon and come to understand one another's ideas. After the groups have reached a certain size, perhaps four or eight, the entire class may come together again to hear the ideas the smaller groups developed.

Discussion first in pairs and then in slightly larger groups serves a purpose like that of the brief writing period following the reading. It allows ideas to germinate and grow enough so that they can't be ignored. In the full class, the ideas of the more vocal students are likely to command attention, whereas equally valuable ideas of more timid students may wither away unnoticed. If, however, those fragile thoughts grow for a few minutes in the more comfortable setting of small groups, they may root firmly enough that students will be willing to present them to the class. As the short writing period discourages students from simply waiting for someone else's ideas about the reading, so the small group discussion nurtures ideas until they can stand on their own before the full class.

The talk will wander far from the original statements, and when discussion has concluded, those first statements may again become useful. You may ask the students to look at their first notes, reflect upon them, and again write briefly:

Have their original ideas changed?

Have they seen the poem from other perspectives?

Have their first responses been confirmed?

Has anything been revealed to them about their classmates or themselves?

The original statements may serve the students as a journal might, to remind them of how they felt and what they thought. Reviewing those notes may help to show them what they have learned in the discussion. They may even grow less eager for your explanations of works and less dependent on the narcotic of grades for their sense of accomplishment.

These notes will also give you an excellent way to judge the effectiveness of discussion and the appropriateness of the literature. If the notes show that the students

have been thinking and listening to others respectfully but not submissively, then they are likely to be enjoying the work. If the responses remain arid and detached, and if the notes written after discussion indicate that little or nothing has happened, then you can reconsider the material or the way you are managing the class.

One of our goals for the literature classroom is to invite students into the ongoing dialogue about significant issues that is our culture. The guided discussions within the classroom should ultimately prepare them to take responsibility for themselves in all of those discussions they'll later enter without the aid of a teacher. Thus it's important to move them toward independence, gradually backing away and allowing them to take more and more control of the discussion. Consider the activity presented in Workshop #4.

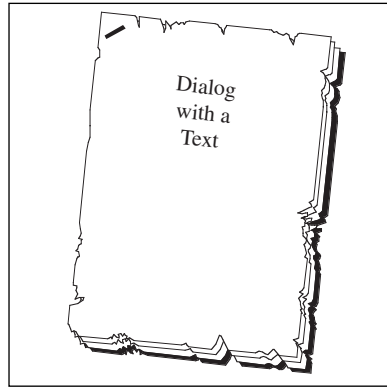
DIALOG WITH A TEXT

Prepare a small booklet of prompts of questions (I'll suggest some below) that might guide the students through a conversation about a text. It's easily done by duplicating each prompt in each quadrant of a page as follows:

Dialog with a Text	Dialog with a Text
Dialog with a Text	Dialog with a Text

This way, when the sheets are copied (roughly one set for every four students in the class) and collated into sets, they can then be stapled and cut, each yielding four small booklets 5.5 inches by 4.25 inches.

Pass out whatever text you plan to use. A poem is suitable since you might be able to handle it satisfactorily within the class period, but even a short story, provided students can read it quickly (or the night before), would also work. If you're about to begin work on a longer work, perhaps a novel, then you



might select a passage that you find interesting or provocative. Then hand out the booklets, requesting that students not read through their booklet in advance, but rather take it page by page as discussion progresses. Tell them to read the text, or read it aloud to them, and then ask them to begin working their way through the booklet. Suggest that they spend a few minutes reflecting on the question or prompt, jotting down notes about it in the booklet itself, and then share their thoughts and talk as long as seems productive. If the discussion takes a path of its own, urge them to follow it, even if it strays from the text or the question. Tell them that when the talk seems to flag, they should agree as a group that they're ready to move on, and then turn to the next prompt, read it, again reflect for a few moments, and then discuss. Let them continue for what seems to you an appropriate period, and then pull the entire group back together to consider the issues that have come up in the small groups.

Here's a set of prompts for you to use or consider (obviously they would have to be modified for students according to their maturity):

Instructions

Please read the poem and take a moment or two to reflect on it. Then turn to the next page and begin. Take a few minutes—as much as you need or want—with each question. Please reflect on each question for a moment or two, perhaps jotting down brief notes, before discussing it. Some may be more productive than others for you, and you may wish to give those more time. There is no rush, no need to finish them all. Please don't glance ahead in the booklet.

- Introduce yourself to your partner(s): Where are you from, what are your interests, and so on. Ask any questions you wish.
- What feeling or emotion did the text give you? Describe it briefly and explain why you think the text caused that reaction.

- What memory does the text call to mind—of people, places, events, sights, smells, or even of something more ambiguous, perhaps feelings or attitudes?
- What did you see happening in the text? Paraphrase it, retelling the event briefly. When you discuss it, see if there are differences in the paraphrasing among discussion partners.
- Did the text give you any ideas or cause you to think about anything in particular? Explain briefly what thoughts it led you to.
- What is the most important word in the text? Explain briefly why you think the word you've picked is the most important.
- What is the most important phrase in the text? Explain briefly why you think it's so important.
- What image or picture did you see as you read the text? It might be something you remember and not something in the text. Describe it briefly.
- What sort of person do you imagine the author of this text to be?
- How did your reading of the text differ from that of your discussion partner(s)? In what ways were they similar?
- How did your understanding of the text or your feelings about it change as you talked?
- Does this text make you think of another text, song, TV show, or literary work? What is it and what connection is there between the two pieces?
- What did you observe or learn about your discussion partner(s) as your discussion has progressed?
- If you were to write a few pages, maybe a letter, about your reading of the text, who would you write to and what would you write about?

If you're trying this activity, take your time with it. The objective is not to finish first, to rush through the questions and be done with them, but rather to start conversation and see where it takes you. Remember the movie and the coffeehouse discussion afterward—you aren't hoping that the cab gets there before you finish your drink; you're hoping the snowdrifts slow it down enough so that you can have one more and make this one other point you have to make or ask this one other question you just have to ask. Students think of questions as tasks to be accomplished. They can get through twenty discussion questions of the complexity of "What is the meaning of life?" in roughly five minutes. The problem is to slow them down, to encourage them to explore, to relax, to investigate, to speculate, to consider and reconsider, to tell stories, to ask more questions, to remember, to explain, to learn a bit more about the movie or the text and the friends who spent the evening with them.

Focused Writing

You might also vary the pattern by placing constraints on the written responses. Ask students to respond to a certain aspect of the work: the motivation of a character, the influence of the setting on the mood, the nature of the conflict between two characters, the values implicit in the choices characters make, or the values and beliefs of the writer as shown in the work. Or suggest that they respond from a particular perspective. If, for instance, you want students to compare the works of two authors, one of whom the class has recently read, have them read the first work of the new writer and respond as though they were the writer they have previously studied. Such an assignment is, of course, more complicated and demanding, and you have to judge the group carefully before making it.

Further, keep in mind that any restriction on student response sacrifices something. The virtue of the free response is that it identifies the student's most vivid connection with the text. It may be a memory, an interpretation, an image, or even a digression that seems entirely unrelated, but it is the immediate consequence of the encounter of reader and text, and is thus material from which meaning might be made. Constraints on the response diminish the chances that it will be so intimate a part of the reader. The constrained response is the result of the encounter of three forces—the reader, the text, and the assignment; that third variable will interfere with the interaction of the first two. Presumably, compensation lies in stretching students to new perceptions they might have missed, or in increased efficiency in teaching some element of literary art. We may decide that it's worth the sacrifice, but we shouldn't let the assignment dominate the literature itself. If students' responses are too frequently or severely constrained, the students may come to see the literature only as a basis for prescribed exercises and may find themselves taking the pseudo-professional approach to their reading that Rosenblatt decried. The essential feature of response-based literature teaching is that it makes every effort to ensure that students discover their own routes into the literature.

Longer Response Papers

Instruction may be further varied by expanding the brief writing period. Students may be asked to write a long response, perhaps several pages, identifying and elaborating on their reactions to a work and tracing them as far back into their own history and as deeply into the text as they can. A longer response statement is, of course, more than an effort to identify starting points for discussion; it demands that students sustain their thinking alone, without the support and questioning of other students or the teacher. In a sense, it asks them to discuss the work with themselves, to reduce the dialog of the classroom to an internal monolog. More difficult than the ten-minute response, it nonetheless has the virtue of allowing students the opportunity for uninterrupted reflection, at length, on their own perceptions. They need not suspend their thoughts to consider those of their classmates, or compete for the time to voice opinions; they can follow their own thoughts wherever they lead.

As is the case with shorter writing assignments, you may constrain long response papers in some way if it seems desirable. In fact, constraint may be of more value to the students in longer papers than in the shorter response statements since it helps sustain and focus their thoughts. Responses longer than a page or two, however, may be difficult for students not yet used to the technique and aware of what to expect. The self-reliance demanded by a longer paper will quickly drain those unpracticed in pursuing their own thoughts, so it may be wise to begin with very brief writing assignments and only gradually ask for more extensive statements.

You can also assign response papers so that only limited direction is given. Richard Adler proposes a technique that he calls “answering the unanswered question.” Observing that “[f]or too long we have tended to ask students questions, bypassing their questions,” Adler suggests inviting students to identify the unanswered questions in a work of literature and propose answers to them. He points out:

As readers, all of us have found gaps in stories wherein we wish the author had supplied us with more information. For example, if we read in a story that a character did something after discussing a situation with a friend, we wonder what the dialogue between them might have included, or how the two persons conducted that dialogue.³

The student seeking the question or questions that remain, for her, unanswered, or at least not explicitly answered, will look closely at the text and at herself. The assignment does not neglect the student or declare her to be irrelevant, but forces her to ask herself, “What is it that *I* do not understand in this work?” The question is general enough to allow the student’s individuality to surface, and yet may inspire a bit more confidence and sense of direction than the instruction simply to respond.

Assignments like Adler’s may help make longer response papers more palatable to the class. David Bleich, in *Readings and Feelings*, offers several more strategies for eliciting responses from students. He proposes a sequence that “begins by asking for the most important word in the work, then the most important passage, and then the most important feature, whatever it may turn out to be.”⁴ As one might predict, Bleich asserts that it is “immediately clear that each person has a different sense of what ‘importance’ means.”⁵

Those different notions of importance indicate unique readings of the work. The statements made are often specific enough to discuss intelligently, and the very presence of the word “importance” seems to compel people to offer reasons. “This word is the most important because. . . .” What follows the “because” is the substance of the discussion.

You might plan one or more class sessions around Bleich’s sequence. The discussion might, for instance, be divided into three sections. First, you would ask students to read the work and answer the question “What is the most important word in the text and why?” After giving them several minutes to reflect on the question and jot down brief notes, you could call on several students for their comments, and use them to begin a discussion. If the resulting talk seems energetic and productive,

it can be pursued. It might be exhaustive enough that no further impetus is necessary. On the other hand, if talk begins to fade, you may revive it by means of the next question, “What is the most important passage in the text, and why?” Again, several minutes of reflection and writing might precede the discussion, which may in turn be interrupted for the third question, asking for the most important feature of the work.

The technique, like Adler’s, provides a task, thus giving direction and purpose to the students’ thinking, but the questions are sufficiently open to allow students their own responses. The shifts in focus, although minor, may be enough to refresh a discussion and reawaken the flow of ideas. The technique is a compromise between freedom and control, directing the students but encouraging them to look inside themselves as well.

Like the brief written response, Bleich’s teaching pattern may be varied in several ways. For instance, you might vary the length of time for reflection. At one extreme, you may wish to raise the question as soon as reading is completed and encourage the students to respond with their first thoughts. The spur-of-the-moment choice of most important word might be different from the choices they would make if given a leisurely period for contemplation. That rash choice may lead them to a surprising discovery. Or students may reject their choice after they have had several minutes to think, and thus learn something about the difference between instinct and thought.

At the other extreme, you might ask students to prepare three- to five-page papers answering *one* of the three questions. These longer papers, explaining the student’s choice of most important word, passage, or aspect, require the student to look at both the text and himself and examine the transaction that has taken place between the two. The assignment allows the student a fair amount of latitude. His choice may spring from his own concern with a particular issue, conceivably one of minor importance to the author, or it may be an exercise in close textual analysis, an effort to identify a key to the writer’s intentions. Ideally, a student will encounter a diverse enough collection of literary works during his years in school that his papers will fall at both ends of the spectrum, some dominated by an interest in self-understanding and some by a fascination for the workings of the writer’s mind. The virtue of teaching literature with attention to student responses is that it allows this latitude; the challenge for the teacher lies in the difficult judgments such teaching demands, for he must look for patterns in the students’ responses and encourage them to try new things, not cling to one approach or the other.

Dealing with Longer Response Papers

Both the spontaneous, unconsidered choice and the fully developed paper can promote the exchange of ideas within the classroom. Discussion after long written response, however, may be somewhat more difficult to manage than that following brief periods of writing. Those hastier responses are fragments or kernels of thought, and are fairly easy to handle. The longer statements, on the other hand, are likely

to be not fragments of ideas but full logical chains. They are more difficult to discuss because they are more complicated, because they are themselves “works,” or literary essays. You might respond to them in several ways.

One way, of course, is to reply in private, either in conference or through notes returned with the papers. Both are time-consuming. Notes, because they are easily ignored, are of questionable value, although they are traditional and students may feel neglected if nothing is written on their papers. A brief note is probably a good idea, if only to reassure students that their efforts have been given a serious reading.

Too often, however, students come to view papers as exercises in avoiding errors or predicting the teacher’s views, perhaps as a result of too many futile lessons on grammar and usage or too many comprehension questions in basal readers. When comments on papers consist of little more than approbation or correction, students come to see them not as part of a dialog about their writing progress, but as a final, authoritative judgment of their work. This misapprehension is reinforced by the absurdity of grading; if there is both a grade and a comment written on the paper, most students will look first, and perhaps last, at the grade. And the comments, regardless of their content or motivation, are likely to be taken as judgments or corrections.

Teachers who wish to participate with students in thinking about the literature may have to shake them loose from some of their preconceptions about the teacher’s role, and that may be easier in short private conferences than in lengthy notes on the students’ essays.

CONFERENCES Conferences allow the teacher to speculate with the student, and to make remarks that in writing would require careful phrasing too time-consuming to undertake regularly. You might, for instance, think that a student’s response is facile and evasive, skirting a difficult issue in the literature. To explain this might require a lengthy analysis of the student’s paper, carefully worded to find the right tone. Such a comment might more easily be made orally, where your tone and bearing can demonstrate that you hope to understand, not accuse, to help the student think, not tell her what to think. In conference, you can observe the effect of your remarks on the student and can adjust and correct.

In these conferences teachers might strive for several goals. The first is a sense of shared purpose with the student, as people working together for a better understanding of the literature and of themselves. We should neither represent ourselves as absolute authority on the literature nor deny the sharpened insight that broader experience and fuller knowledge will have given us. On the other hand, students too have a rich background of experience that provides the context for their reading and shapes their response. In a conference, we have to demonstrate respect for both the perceptions of the student and the words of the text. We must convey somehow that we are not the final authority, the one who decides what the text means; meaning is created by the individual reader through the subtle process of reasoning about one’s own responses to the words. The conference is a cooperative venture in which student and teacher reason together. The student contributes what he knows

of himself and his responses, while the teacher contributes what she knows of the work, the process of reading, and the student. Again, as with all aspects of instruction in literature, a delicate balance is required.

A second goal for the conferences, and one that might be made explicit, is to model in miniature the kinds of exchanges hoped for in the full class. First of all, the talk is cooperative rather than competitive; the point is to understand, not to win arguments. Students should learn to suspend their own thoughts momentarily for the purpose of listening to another's. They should maintain respect for differing points of view, but also for reason, logic, and evidence. And they should consider both the reader and the text. These criteria are more easily met in discussions with two or three than in a group of thirty. If they can be modeled, even occasionally, in the smaller groups, then they are more likely to be met in the large group.

A third goal is to evaluate the student's work. The seriousness of the student's efforts to understand the literature and deal rationally with her responses to it may be more readily judged in a private conference than in the aftermath of full class sessions. Furthermore, the student herself will be involved in the evaluation. She is, after all, the only one who can know with any assurance whether she is thinking conscientiously about her reading. Others, including the teacher, are too easily fooled. The final judgments upon her work are the student's; if she is to continue to learn from her reading in the years after school, she must begin to assume responsibility for those evaluations rather than leave them in the hands of others. In private conferences the teacher may be frank, asking more penetrating questions, encouraging the student to take responsibility for self-examination.

GROUP DISCUSSION Dealing with long written responses in groups and in the full class, although it will be made easier by conferences, remains a difficult task. Patterns similar to those used with the very brief writing periods are possible, but the work is complicated by the greater length of the papers. One alternative is to provide an outline for the discussions, divide the class into the appropriate size groups, and ask them to follow it. For instance, students may be paired and given a set of instructions like the following:

1. Read your partner's paper, taking careful notes on:
 - any questions you have about his or her ideas
 - any points you think need to be explained more completely
 - any disagreement you have with his or her interpretation of the text
2. Discuss your notes with the author of the paper, encouraging him or her to elaborate and explain as much as he or she wishes. Keep in mind that your purpose is to help your partner to think, not to change his or her mind. If you disagree with points your partner has made, you might express those disagreements, but only to show her another perspective or another reading, not to persuade your partner to accept it. After discussing one paper, reverse roles.

3. When you have discussed both papers, add a paragraph or two of postscript to your own paper in which you record any additions, clarifications, or changes in your thinking that your conference has yielded.

Groups may need either more or less guidance than this brief outline provides. For example, they may need time limits for each step. The purpose of the outline is simply to provide security and direction for students who may not feel comfortable finding their own way through a discussion of one another's papers. Ideally, the time will come when you can discard such outlines and give students the freedom of the open request, "Discuss each other's papers." That time may not come quickly, however, and shallow, perfunctory efforts to discuss one another's works may be discouraging in the meantime.

VARIATIONS Other patterns for discussing longer responses are worth experimenting with. For example, placing students in groups of three, ask students to discuss the third student's paper. While they talk, the writer should remain silent, taking notes on the conversation. After a specified time, the writer should join the discussion to reply to points the other students made and questions they raised. In larger groups of perhaps four or five, students might read the papers written by group members; identify one major issue, question, or idea that the group seems either to share or to disagree on; and then discuss that issue. The group might then summarize its discussion for the entire class so that the class can discuss it.

Even if the students' papers are not discussed directly, they can serve as a source of ideas for discussion. We can abstract interesting issues from the papers; the students, having written them, are likely to have opinions about which issues they want to discuss. It is also possible for the papers to suggest by their neglect of an issue that it might be appropriate for the discussion. For example, if all the students have commented on the events of a story but have failed to consider the motivations of the characters, you may want to give time to that issue. That is not to say that the response statements should be ignored, but neither should they be allowed to dictate the topics treated in the classroom. Having given thought to the papers, the students may be expected to discuss more intelligently whatever arises in class, whether it is drawn directly from those papers or not.

Of course, the teacher may devote class sessions to analyzing the students' writing problems and accomplishments as well as to exploring the literature. Our concern in this chapter is promoting interactions among students, so we've concentrated on the usefulness of the response statements in stimulating thought and discussion, but they may also serve in other ways. For instance, we might display them, if that seems a desirable way to reward performance or make the students' thoughts available to one another (and if, of course, the writers are willing). Or we might compile them into a journal that we can distribute within the class, perhaps near the end of a unit, as a sampling of the students' reflections on the material. They might also serve as the basis for long papers of other kinds. If, for example, a student's response to a work speculates about the author, you might encourage the student to undertake

a research paper on that writer. Or if the response suggests other possible outcomes of a story or reminisces about characters the student has either encountered or envisioned, you might be able to persuade the student to try writing fiction of her own. If the student speculates about the intentions of the author, she might work on a critical essay, binding herself to careful analysis of the text, and perhaps undertake the study of other critical statements about the work. Other possibilities will suggest themselves as the work proceeds.

At the very least, response papers will serve as a source of some insight into the students themselves. That insight might be the discouraging revelation that a student is barely comprehending, or that he is comprehending but remains unmoved by the literature, but even that may help you to reconsider your selections, teaching, or both. At best, the responses afford a privileged glance into the mind, allowing teachers to understand aspects of the student's thought and personality that might surface in no other way. Revealing or not, the response papers should indicate clearly to the students that their feelings and thoughts are important in the classroom.

These papers provide teachers with an excellent opportunity to move the writing process all the way through to publication. In recent English Methods classes, for instance, we invited responses to the Cisneros piece "Eleven." The class was asked to read and reflect briefly on the story, writing for about ten minutes to catch responses to the text, any thoughts, memories, or emotions it awakens. They then divided into small groups—about four in each—to discuss those brief essays and the issues that came up. Predictably, since the story was about a classroom incident and these were students working to become teachers, there were memories of classrooms, incidents in schools, former teachers, and the like.

We then pulled the whole class back together to see what the various groups had discussed. We talked for awhile, deciding that many of the responses had to do with memories of English classes. So I asked them to write again for several minutes using the following assignment:

Recall an experience as a student in an English class, perhaps a very good or very bad lesson, or a particular teacher, again perhaps exceptionally good or bad, or maybe an unusual collection of students in a class or group within the class. Write briefly about it—ten or fifteen minutes—a few paragraphs to capture the rough sketch of the person or the crude outline of the event.

Again, when they finished writing we went into small groups to talk. I encouraged them to read aloud what they had written, but didn't demand it, since these were obviously going to be very rough drafts and I didn't want to embarrass anyone. Still, I wanted them to begin sharing responses and collaborating on their work, taking a few risks if they could muster the courage.

After some time in groups we came back together as a full class once again to see what had transpired, and finally, I sent them off with the assignment to expand their two short responses—the first an unmediated reaction to "Eleven" and the second their reflection on a memory of some previous English class—into something longer and more polished. The specific assignment was the following:

Take your draft and spend some time expanding it into a longer piece, polishing and revising it in the light of both the small-group and the full-group discussions. Make of this short essay whatever you want it to be. You might simply write a story or an anecdote from the classroom; you may prefer to explicitly analyze the memory, pointing out the principles of teaching that you think are revealed; or you may wish to write an essay on teaching practice. Do whatever you wish.

On subsequent days students reviewed the drafts with one another, helping to revise and polish them, and then put them together in a small booklet, printing copies for each member of the class. The computer makes that easy, enabling us to combine all the essays into one file, format everything consistently, print it out in booklet form, copy, and staple. Within a week or so we were able to move from initial response to publication.

The purposes for this activity were, of course, specific to the English Methods class. I wanted the students to begin their study of teaching with reflections on their own prior experiences, to see how individual responses to a work of literature—sometimes dramatically different—might lead to coherent and interesting discussion, to see how literature and composition instruction might be integrated, to show them that there might be some pleasure in publication, even on the small scale of the classroom, and to begin to develop some sort of community within a group of students who had come together for the first time. Your purposes will, of course, be different, but your design might be similar, moving back and forth among reading, writing, and talking.

The Teacher's Role: As Teacher and as Learner

It may seem that this emphasis on the responses of students, whether they are visceral and ill-considered or carefully reasoned, diminishes the authority and stature of the teacher. In a sense it does, for by choosing to view reading as an act of creation rather than a search for one true meaning, the teacher relinquishes the traditional authority of the pedagogue. The abdication is not complete, however, for he has to assume a different responsibility: to counsel his students through the difficult act of thinking. The attention to students' first reactions is not meant to substitute for thought, but to precede and prepare for it. As Bleich says, "feeling precedes knowledge";⁶ a student must desire to know before he will undertake the labor that results in knowing. The literature teacher encourages students to feel and then to think about what they feel in hopes that the thinking will then matter and the students will give more effort to it. If this succeeds, and the students begin to discover that the literature *does* raise questions that matter to them, it might become easier to encourage and demand careful thought.

In so doing, the teacher may find herself talking about her own responses, lecturing about the work or the writer, or arguing with the students about their interpretations. But that isn't out of place in a style of teaching that emphasizes student participation. If a class begins to work well, the students may accept the teacher as

a participant in the same processes of responding and thinking, able to contribute as another learner. The teacher who has achieved this stature with her class may find that she slides easily back and forth between the roles of teacher and student. At one moment she may be managing the class, assuming all the responsibility and authority that implies, and at another moment she may be seated in discussion, joining the group as an equal, shown no more and no less deference than anyone else.

Authority

A teacher who achieves that relationship with her students has a rare opportunity to influence their thinking. Having abandoned the authority of power—the threat of grades and tests—she may retain the authority of reason. Rather than present the result of her thought, she joins in the process of thinking, giving the class the opportunity both to challenge her and to observe her. In other words, the demand that the teacher respect student responses is not a demand that she ignore her own. She should refrain from imposing her perceptions on the students, but if the class has matured enough to accept her views without holding them sacred, it will be useful to present them. They may broaden the discussion, showing the class how an older person, with more experience of the world and of books, reacts to the work. The students should receive her opinions as they would receive those of a published critic—not as the final word, but as the reflections of an experienced reader. In an untrained class that expects a great deal of telling and explaining, the teacher must move cautiously, withholding her own thoughts to give the students room for theirs. But when the class comes to understand the process of responding and building on responses, and sees that differences in readings are not only expected but desired, we may state opinions with less fear that they will be taken as the final word.

In such circumstances, our responses and thoughts may even serve as models for the class—not because they are right or correct or best, but because they may demonstrate interesting lines of inquiry that the class has not discovered for itself. In one class, for instance, many students had recently watched a film entitled *Death Wish*, the story of a man whose wife and daughter are raped and beaten, one of them dying and the other left in a catatonic state, by housebreakers. The courts fail to convict the killers, and the hero decides to seek justice by setting himself up as a potential victim for the sort of spontaneous crime that took his family. Then, when assaulted, he summarily executes his attacker. He becomes a vigilante wandering the streets, apparently vulnerable to anyone looking for an easy victim.

The students, almost without exception, heartily approved. They agreed that crimes against the defenseless were inexcusable, that the courts and the police were inefficient, that punishment for violent crime was too mild, and that the efficiency and finality of the hero's method were laudable. He was, in their eyes, a modern-day Robin Hood, a little soiled by his surroundings—his city was grimmer than Sherwood Forest—and by the brutality of his method, but nonetheless a hero, defending the weak against predators.

On the other hand, although I shared the students' vicarious satisfaction with the rapid and well-deserved executions of the criminals, I was not so pleased with the movie, and said so. I told the class I thought the film had exploited my natural anger at stupid and violent crimes, moving me to applaud a form of justice I really didn't condone. Leaving justice in the hands of either victims or vigilantes was likely to lead to some terrifying abuses. The hero had made no mistakes, but would all who modeled themselves on him be so lucky? Might they not shoot someone running from the scene of a crime and then discover that she was a frightened bystander rather than the criminal? Further, the crimes the hero dealt with were all clear-cut cases of violent aggression, many of which could be stopped by violence. But if vigilante justice were approved and accepted, it might be exercised in situations of less clear and obvious crime, perhaps when someone felt deceived in a business arrangement that was not quite illegal but not completely upright. In short, I worried about the film because it seemed to promote a dangerous conception of justice by playing upon natural feelings of rage and impotence and using incidents carefully conceived to support its principles.

The discussion of the film was a digression from other class work, and I wasn't attempting to lead an analytical attack on the movie. I was simply expressing an opinion, and intended to return quickly to the work at hand. The observations, however, suggested a line of thought the students had not recognized. They had been caught up in the emotional satisfaction of vicarious revenge, but a more complicated response to the film, one that involved reflecting on the implications of its notion of justice, was also possible. The students accepted these thoughts not as the voice of authority, but as an interesting alternative to their view. Some were annoyed, apparently because my reservations about the film diminished the pleasure they could take from it, and some seemed almost chastened, perhaps by the discovery that they had neglected to consider the implications of what they felt. In any event, my reflections seemed to contribute to the students' thinking about the film, even though I had presented them directly, perhaps even didactically, without making any subtle effort to raise doubts or elicit further thought.

In other words, I wasn't trying to teach in the sense that teaching is leading students in their own thinking; nonetheless the students seemed to be learning. I had for the moment been accepted as one of the class members; my opinions were neither jotted down to be returned on the next test, nor disregarded as the irrelevancies of an academic. It was a lucky happenstance, of course; both students and teacher had seen the same film and wanted to talk about it, interested in the film and in each other's responses. The incident may serve as a model of the sort of relationship between student and teacher toward which the procedures outlined in this chapter strive. When such a relationship is achieved, when students talk for the sake of the literature and themselves and not for the teacher or the grade, then the teacher may feel more comfortable joining in the discussion.

Range of Response

I have suggested several techniques for encouraging students to respond and work with their responses. It might be appropriate now to consider what kinds of responses

the literature and discussions might provoke and how these will influence the course of the conversation. The range of response is, of course, infinite; each reader is unique and will react differently from day to day depending upon the circumstances. Still, the responses seem to fall into rough categories, which are useful as a crude checklist for observing what takes place in the classroom and judging how best to intervene.

PERSONAL Some responses are comments about oneself. They may express feelings produced by the work read or describe incidents or individuals it called to mind. These responses may draw heavily upon the text, but they are more likely to depart from it or abandon it completely, as the reader explores memories awakened by the work. Although such responses may seem to offer little potential for teaching, the teacher might use them in several ways. You might simply encourage the student to follow his own thoughts and see where they lead. If the reading has generated enough enthusiasm and energy, this process may be very satisfying, even if it does not reflect the goals traditionally associated with literature instruction.

If the student is unable to elaborate on his thoughts without assistance, the teacher might suggest exploring their connection with the work. What, she may ask, are the similarities and differences between the incident you recall and that presented in the story? Or, how does the person you remember differ from the character in the play who called her to mind? Such questions provide the student with a small task that may help him to think further. The questions may be appropriately dealt with either in class or in writing; in the classroom, however, the teacher must keep in mind her obligation to the group. Other students may or may not be interested in the comparison between a story and the memory it brings to one student. The teacher might remind the class that discussion will not do justice to all possible issues and that they should make a note of questions that interest them so that they can either consider them in private, use them as topics for future papers or journal entries, raise them again later in the class session, or talk them over in private conference with the teacher or with friends. In class, it may often be necessary to move the discussion on to other matters.

Personal responses are unquestionably desirable in the literature class, but the teacher might be alert for three possible problems. One is the possibility that students will use personal digressions as a way of avoiding serious thought about the work. Responding with opinions and feelings is not the sum total of reading. Students also need to learn to analyze, to interpret, and to seek evidence for their conclusions.

The second possible problem is that the classroom may become for some students an orgy of self-expression and for others an exercise in voyeurism. There are occasional students who cannot resist the temptation to bare their souls and who are likely, when invited to respond to a literary work, to embarrass the class, the teacher, and perhaps themselves with vehement outbursts or intimate revelations. The teacher needs to defend both the class and such students themselves from that sort of behavior. That is perhaps best done by gently guiding the discussion into

other paths or by encouraging others to speak, but it may also be necessary to speak privately with a student who is too outspoken, both to find out why and to recommend greater discretion or restraint in the future.

The third possible danger, the most subtle, is the tendency of personal comments to invite amateur psychoanalysis. Neither the class nor the teacher is qualified to analyze a student's psyche on the basis of her response to a literary work. To do so is to become badly distracted from the task at hand, which is to deal with a literary work and the responses to it. The student's *response* may be examined and analyzed, but the student should not be, except insofar as she wishes to do so herself.

TOPICAL Some responses are *topical*, focusing on the issue raised by the literary work. A book like *Go Ask Alice* may encourage some students to talk about their own encounters with drugs or about friends who have run into difficulties like those Alice faced, but it may also elicit more general discussion of the issue of drugs or of parent-child relationships. Responses in which the issue is the most prominent concern may also digress widely from the text. In the discussion of *Go Ask Alice*, some students may bring up the hypocrisy of a generation that can devote time at a smoke-filled cocktail party to condemning marijuana, or they may lament the ineptness of the police and the courts in enforcing the drug laws. They may, in other words, have a backlog of thought on the issue that they can call forth at will, with little or no regard for the text.

The teacher's charge in that case is to direct the energy of the students to the work at hand. If students are interested in the issues raised by the text, they may be led to take an interest in the attitudes it expresses toward those issues. The teacher might encourage them to compare their opinions with those offered by characters in the story or by the author. When the responses focus on issues, the teacher is likely to have little problem getting the students to speak out—the difficulty may instead lie in persuading them to pause long enough to hear what the writer has to say.

INTERPRETIVE The third form the response may take is *interpretive*, an effort to judge the significance of the literary work. Here the reader focuses mainly on the text, intrigued by what it says and does. Thus students may respond to *Go Ask Alice* by wondering, "Is that really what it is like to be addicted to drugs and run away from home?" They may be reminded of no similar person or incident, and may not previously have considered the larger issue of the availability of drugs, but the work may still capture them and make them want to understand it. Of course, students need not be indifferent to the subject to want to interpret. Those with strong opinions may seek both the opportunity to express them and the chance to hear someone else's views. They, too, may wish to understand, as accurately and thoroughly as possible, what the writer has said. Many of those students who responded so strongly to *Deathwish*, although they were at first satisfied with their vicarious revenge, quickly became interested in interpreting the movie, in determining the implications of acting as the hero did and the significance of the narrow range of incidents the screenwriter had selected for his story.

Skill in interpretation has been a prominent goal of most literature instruction, and although our concern with response may reduce the emphasis on this skill, interpretation remains crucially important. The responses of the reader establish a basis upon which interpretive statements may be made and judged. An interpretation is, after all, the statement of one person, and thus, although bound to the text, it is still idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, students need to distinguish between expressive and attributive statements, recognizing that a statement that attributes some characteristic to a character or a text, or infers some belief on the part of a writer, requires us to offer some evidence for its validity. When we simply express our feelings, we may assume that we are the authoritative voice on the subject, but an inference requires proof. In an expressive statement, the student is restrained only by the demands of honesty—his feelings are his own and don't need proof or defense. An attribution or inference, however, does require demonstration. Thus, when a student says, "The author means . . .," he obligates himself to a clause beginning with "because" and containing evidence for his conclusion. Marshaling such evidence is an extremely important skill that deserves a significant place in the literature classroom.

FORMAL A fourth possible topic for the response is *form*. Young children take great pleasure in the repetition and rhythm of nursery rhymes and other children's poems. They seem to feel no void when the meaning remains obscure or simple, as it frequently is in children's verse. Their pleasure derives from the formal elements—the sound, the rhythm, and perhaps the images evoked. Although adolescents seem less patient with works that lack a strong narrative line, they too respond to formal elements, whether consciously or not, when they read. The reader who speaks of the suspense in a mystery or the buildup of fear in a novel of the occult is noting effects created by careful manipulations of form. Interested students should be encouraged to discuss those elements and even analyze them if the question, "How did the writer accomplish this effect?" arises. Such analysis should not be overemphasized. If it is, the students may see the text as something to work on rather than an experience to live through, and reading will no longer be an aesthetic experience. Rosenblatt cautions against the tendency to:

hurry the student away from any personal aesthetic experience, in order to satisfy the efferent purposes of categorizing the genre, paraphrasing the "objective" meaning or analyzing the techniques represented by the text.⁷

Rushed into the scientist's role, students are likely to bypass the literary experience:

The great problem, as I see it, in many school and college literature classrooms today is that the picture—the aesthetic experience, the work—is missing, yet students are being called upon to build an analytic or critical frame for it.⁸

So the talk about form should not be purely analytical. There are, of course, works that call conscious attention to their form and almost demand that it be analyzed. Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts" (which we'll discuss later), with two voices,

the drill sergeant's and the bored recruit's, sliding back and forth into one another, seems to compel the reader to look at technique. So does a work like Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* (1977, Dell), a young adult novel sufficiently complex and disturbing to capture the interest of the most sophisticated adult reader. Cormier's book tells about a terrifying event in the words of a child whose mind has been disturbed by it. The story itself is intriguing, but more intriguing is the author's skillful management of form. Readers will want to examine what he has revealed, what he has concealed, and how he manages to do both. The analysis of form in such instances can be very productive and satisfying; it comes as a natural part of the reading, answering questions that the reading inspires. But when it is imposed as an exercise, rather than to answer questions raised by the text, it can supplant rather than support the aesthetic literary experience.

BROADER LITERARY CONCERNS Finally, the reader may address *broader literary concerns*. These include interest in biography, literary periods, the working habits of the writer, and the history of the times portrayed. Mary Renault's novels may inspire an interest in early Greece and Rome, Poe's short stories may stimulate curiosity about his unhappy life, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* may lead some students to read *Walden* and perhaps Emerson's essays, the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* may be compared with the book, and *2001* may arouse an interest in computers and artificial intelligence. Such interests are to be encouraged; they are the lucky events of teaching. A teacher with several good bibliographies (like *Books for You* and *Your Reading*—see the end of Chapter 5) or a helpful librarian can entice a student into a great deal of independent and valuable reading when she discovers that a literary work has awakened curiosity.

Using the Catalog of Responses

This list of responses, with its five crudely drawn and overlapping forms, has proved useful for some teachers in observing class discussions. They have found it helpful to note, for instance, those classes in which one form of response predominates. Some classes make little effort to do anything but interpret the works read. Raised on comprehension and interpretation questions, they seem to have allowed their capacity for emotional response or personal involvement to atrophy. In such cases the teacher may wish to encourage a more personal interchange with the text using the techniques discussed in this chapter.

The list is more likely to be of help, however, in judging the performance of individual students. Students tend to stick with the response modes they are used to, fearing to venture into new territory, and the teacher should adjust his instruction accordingly, encouraging the patterns each student neglects. The range of responses is broad, and students are better off learning a whole scale rather than restricting themselves to one note.

Variations

One problem that may have become apparent as this chapter progressed is that many of the techniques presented here are demanding, both for teacher and students. Response papers demand concentration and careful reading, and analyzing and discussing the responses may be even more rigorous. To teach in these patterns every day, five periods a day, may well be too exhausting. You'll find that when things go well in the classroom—when students do respond enthusiastically to the text, and the discussion is active, with most participants enjoying it and learning from it—the lessons may generate energy rather than drain it. Nonetheless, there will be days when it seems desirable to plan something simpler.

Strategies will suggest themselves in the course of other lessons. If, for instance, students develop an interest in the life and times of the writer they are studying, a session or two on that topic would be appropriate. I've discouraged substituting such information for direct experience with the literary text, but if the direct experience sparks historical or biographical interest, there is no reason not to satisfy it. The teacher might either lecture herself or ask students to prepare lectures or short papers to deliver to the class. Both experiences can be valuable, retaining the focus on the literature but providing some respite from the more severe demands of response-based discussion.

Class sessions devoted simply to quiet reading may also be beneficial. They are first of all pleasant, allowing students a small island of solitude in the middle of a day filled with other voices. They may also be used, if further justification is necessary, for private conferences, conducted quietly off to one side so as to distract as little as possible. The good results of sustained-silent-reading programs, in which everyone in the school suspends other work for a certain time each day to read, provide evidence for the virtues of this simple activity.

The strategies of creative drama might also be applied in literature teaching. It may take time for the class to grow comfortable with pantomime, improvisation, and role-playing, depending on previous experience and how comfortable the students are with one another, but once used to the techniques, students may find they provide insights into the literature that are inaccessible through other approaches. Students regularly asked to read and analyze literature may become cold-blooded in their judgments, showing no empathy for the characters portrayed. Acting out a scene from the work may help these students sense the feelings of the characters more clearly than they otherwise would. For instance, pairs of students might act out the confrontation between the old woman and the social worker in "As Best She Could." One student would imagine the thoughts and emotions of the old woman. She could be asked, in that role, to think about such questions as:

How do you feel about asking for welfare?

What do you know about the welfare system?

Do the conditions of your life make you confident or pessimistic?

How do you feel about your daughters and about the social worker?

The other student could imagine herself as the social worker:

How many clients have you seen today?

How have they treated you?

Are you well paid for what you do?

Are you compassionate and eager to help, or are you tired and bored?

How often have you been deceived by welfare clients?

Then the students could play out the scene.

After the improvisation they would be asked what they felt and thought as they acted out the scene. Many students report feeling emotions they had not anticipated, or feeling expected emotions more strongly than they had anticipated. The social worker, for instance, may report real anger toward the client. Simulating the experience produces some of the emotions and insights the actual experience might have yielded, giving students a perspective they couldn't attain through the more intellectual and distant process of analysis. It is one thing to say, "Well, she might be angry at having to deal with someone without the necessary forms who seems to want all the rules bent just for her," and quite another to shout, "I was furious!"

Students may also find through improvisation that things need not have worked out as the author arranged them. The student playing the old woman may grow so angry with the social worker that instead of walking away, she erupts in an angry tirade. Or the social worker may sympathize with the old woman and decide to bend the rules for her. If improvisations vary from the text, so much the better, for this demonstrates that the poem is the result of the author's choices, and that other choices could have been made, revealing different values and ideas and resulting in different poems. Just as varying response statements yield discussion by showing alternative readings of a poem, so might varying improvisations reveal the alternatives from which the writer has selected.

The premise of the first chapter was that students should be encouraged to experience the literary work, allowing it to stimulate images, feelings, associations, and thoughts, so that reading might be personally significant. The premise of this chapter has been that discussion will yield insight into varied readings and perspectives, and will both deepen the capacity to respond to literature and sharpen the powers of analysis. Toward that end, students should be encouraged to speak with one another about their readings and analyze them together. Chapter 4 will introduce the third element—other texts—and attempt to show how a collection of literary works can be compiled and taught so as to further broaden response and sharpen analysis.

Endnotes

1. George Henry, *Teaching Reading as Concept Development: Emphasis on Affective Thinking* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1974), p. 17.

2. Robert E. Probst, "Dialogue with a Text," *The English Journal*, Vol. 78, No.1 (January, 1988), 32–38.
3. Richard Adler, "Answering the Unanswered Question," in *Re-Vision: Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1974–1975*, Allen Berger and Blanche Hope Smith, Eds. (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), pp. 74–75.
4. David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), p. 50.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 3.
7. Louise M. Rosenblatt, "What Facts Does This Poem Teach You?" *Language Arts*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (April 1980), pp. 391–392.
8. Ibid., pp. 393–394.