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Creating Interpretive Possibilities with Literature in the Teacher Education Classroom

[Dennis J. Sumara](#), ©1999

Recently, I have been asking my teacher education students to bring one half of a pair of old shoes to class. I tell them that although this need not be a shoe that they still wear, it must be one for which they continue to feel an attachment. I ask that this shoe be concealed in a bag and that it not be shown to other class members. At the beginning of class the students are told to pile their bags of shoes in the middle of the room. I do not explain why they have been asked to bring the shoe; however, I do say that there will be an activity that develops around it later in the class.

I begin class by reading Mem Fox's (1985) children's book entitled *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* to the class. The main character in this book is a little boy named Wilfrid who learns from his parents that his good friend, ninety-six year old Miss Nancy, has "lost" her memory. Because Wilfrid does not understand what this means, he asks his parents and a few of the residents at the senior citizen's home where Miss Nancy resides the question: "What's a memory?" They tell him that memory is something that you remember, that is warm, that is from long ago, that makes you cry, that makes you laugh, and that is as precious as gold.

Once Wilfrid learns that memory is important he becomes concerned that Miss Nancy has lost hers. He decides to help by collecting things that are meaningful to him: a box of sea shells, a puppet, a medal given to him by his grandfather, a football, a fresh warm egg. He carries these specially selected objects to Miss Nancy and, one by one, hands them to her. As she and Wilfrid examine the objects, she begins to remember: the blue speckled eggs she had found in a bird's nest in her Aunt's garden; going to the beach as a child; a big brother who had gone to war and never returned; a puppet she had shown to her sister. And, as she remembers, she tells Wilfrid the stories connected to these memories.

Like Patricia Polacco's (1988) *The Keeping Quilt* and Phoebe Gilman's (1992) *Something From Nothing*, this children's picture book shows the way in which certain cultural objects mediate interpersonal, intertextual, and intergenerational memories. The objects that Wilfrid brings to Miss Nancy create a location for the retrieval of memory, for the evocation of stories announced by these memories, and for the interpretation of these. For me, the book itself began to function as such a cultural object. As I continued to pass it around to friends and enter into discussions with them about it, the book continued to provide a focal point, a collecting place for my and others' interpretations. These interpretations were not just of the book; like the conversations between Miss Nancy and Wilfrid Gordon, these conversations came to include many memories and events that were announced by our shared reading of the book. I call these events "commonplace locations."

The commonplace location is an idea that represents the complex and ever evolving intertextual relations that collect around a particular interpretive activity. Reading is one such activity. There is, during and after reading, many associations made with the text. As reading occurs the reader is reminded of other

experiences. At the same time, as the reader begins to interpret the new reading in relation to what is remembered and associated, these memories and associations change. It is the process of memory and re-memory that is mediated by the reading and interpreting of the text. Although this occurs with all texts that are read, the literary text has the potential to create more elaborate and intricate interpretations.

When literary texts are shared with others, the commonplace location creates opportunities for interpersonal and intertextual interpretation. As a cultural object that bears the mark and trace of its own history, the work of literary fiction, like other cultural objects (such as the objects that Wilfrid Gordon brought to Miss Nancy), mediates and collects various remembered, lived, and projected experiences. I read *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* to my teacher education students to begin the process of individual and collective interpretation. I understand that as I read this particular book to them, they will begin to make connections between the cultural objects the characters in the book use to mediate experience and cultural objects that they remember. As well, I understand that this shared reading of a literary fiction will become part of the collective commonplace location that we inhabit as a group of readers. I also understand that in order to make the response to literature that come to be included in these shared readings more generous I need to intervene in the reading process with specific response practices.

Creating Liberating Constraints

After reading *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* to the students I ask that they do a five minute timed writing that begins with the prompt: "As I listened to the story I was reminded of....." In her books about living a writer's life, Natalie Goldberg (1990, 1993) suggests that timed writings are necessary to unleash thoughts and ideas that are bubbling below the surface of our conscious daily experience. Because most of my students have fears about writing, I have begun to use structured timed writing as a way to begin the process of capturing layers of response to literature so that these become materially present and available for interpretation. Adapting techniques used by Goldberg, I explain to students that these timed writings consist of continuous, uninterrupted writing that is meant to reveal the various associations that a reader has made to a particular literary work. I explain that it is important for the writer to "suspend judgment" and not censor or edit what appears on the page. I also explain that although these writings will eventually become part of a collection of material that is interpreted, they are not writings that they are required to publicly share. Therefore, although the timed writings often reveal deeply personal, surprising, and sometimes troubling insights to the writer because these function as material for later work rather than material that is publicly disclosed or subject to the evaluative gaze of the teacher, students seem able to fully participate in the timed writing activities.

Although this "timed writing" is a form of response to literature, for me it is not the most significant aspect of the complete response experience but only the first in a series of "collecting" activities. Immediately following this writing practice, I ask students to move with me to a shared reading of another work of literature. In the sequence of reading and responding that is associated with the "old shoes" activity, I follow the Mem Fox book with two poems from Michael Ondaatje's (1989) poetry collection *The Cinnamon Peeler*. The first poem, "Light", expresses the experience of interpreting intergenerational memories through the activity of looking at old photographs. The second poem "Her House" describes the way in which a person's house becomes inextricable from her sense of self-identity.

Although I believe that students need to have opportunities to personally respond to literature, I also strongly believe that these responses need to be developed within forms that I call "liberating constraints." Like the literary text, these forms function to condition students' experience but not overly constrain it. As

well, they situate students in experiences that are, at the same time, familiar and strange. Although the reading and responding to poetry in class is familiar, the specific response practices that I use are less familiar.

Because I have an audio tape of Michael Ondaatje reading "Light", I play it rather than orally reading the poem myself. Students are asked to follow along with photocopies of the poem that I hand out. I play the recording three times. The first time I ask students to follow along without making notes. The second time I ask them to underline, circle, or, in some other way, mark words or phrases that are interesting to them. After this second reading I ask them to choose one word or phrase and, on a clean sheet of paper, copy the entire line out the entire line of poetry from which it exists. A ten minute timed writing that begins with the prompt: "This line of poetry is interesting to me because...." follows. I then ask that they re-read what they have written and underline or circle anything in the passage that represents some new learning or insight. I do this so that students begin to identify the way in which new learning emerges from associations made in response to the reading of literature. Following this, I re-play the poem again asking students to mark on their copies anything that has new significance or interest for them. Once again, I ask them to identify an interesting word or phrase, to copy out the line, and to engage in a timed writing. Like the last writing, students are asked to examine this writing and to select words or phrases that represent new ideas or new thinking.

Although, at this point, students are already producing a great deal of writing in response to the repeated oral readings of the poem, I refrain from asking for any sharing or discussing of these. I do so for two reasons. First, much of this response is not fully formulated. Although associations have occurred and interpretations made, these are usually only tentative. It is true that with each successive reading of the poetry the students become more deeply involved with the poem and the interpretive location developing around it; however, without making the explicit move to include other texts and other experiences, these responses are overly personalized and, as a consequence, often not interesting for others. Second, even though I believe that response to literature should include opportunities for students to explore personal association they are making to the reading of literature, I also believe that these responses must be, in some way, re-symbolized before they are made available for public examination. Just as the poet and the novelist must work to reinterpret her or his experience and knowledge into a new form, so too must the student who is engaged in interpretive work within the commonplace locations that are created around the reading of literature.

Therefore, rather than discussing this poem and our successive re-readings of it, I move into another reading and responding activity, this time using the poem "Her House." I choose this poem because, like "Light" it shows the way in which the objects that circumscribe our experience become inextricable from our sense of self and cultural identity. And, again, I move students through at least three readings of the poem, each time followed by a timed writing that is initiated with a specific writing prompt. Sometimes the prompt asks that students elaborate a word or phrase of interest; other times I ask them to respond to a particular idea of issue announced by the poem. Regardless of the sort of prompt used, the structure of the response seldom varies. I have found that this "constraint" helps to "liberate" students from the "write whatever you want" model that, for many, is paralyzing. As well, the prompt, coupled with the timing of the writing oftentimes elicits associations that are surprising to students. I find that this helps produce more imaginative written responses which becomes important in the next stage of response interpretations.

Because I am able to work with teacher education students for long stretches of time (always at least three hours, sometimes a morning and an afternoon consisting of a total of six hours) I feel able to slow down—to conduct repetitions of readings and responses of the same reading—knowing that there will be time for the

synthesizing, resymbolizing, and continued interpretations that occur with these various reading and writing practices. When I do this work with elementary or high school students I use the same sorts of activities over a minimum of a two week period. Over the years I have learned that this way of structuring response can only work if the teacher is able to slow down the usual trot through the curriculum.

Creating Intertextual Chains

In my work with readers of all ages (from elementary school to graduate school) I discuss with the students with whom I read the manner and conditions of reading that, I believe, create more interpretive locations for response. For example, I suggest to students that although familiar forms of fiction are pleasurable and comforting and, oftentimes provide the kind of "escape" that we desire in our reading of fiction, these forms do not challenge us to see things in new ways. If literature is meant to rearrange our familiar worlds then it, in itself, must immerse us in an unfamiliar form. These forms (such as the literary work of Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, and Jeanette Winterson) are often difficult to read. They must be read slowly. And they must be re-read. The first reading only provides a general sense of the geography of the text. It is in successive readings that the needed relationship begins to form between reader and text. This relationship is necessary for the continued development of the commonplace location.

In addition, I suggest to students that the reading and re-readings are more interesting if some trace of these readings is made. Because many readers dislike interrupting their reading to write in a reader response journal (I am such a reader), I ask that they keep track by making notes directly in the book. If these are books that the reader does not own, I ask that they use Post-it notes to mark places of interest and to write notes on these. With poetry, I generally provide photocopies of the poem that will be studied so that students can make a variety of markings on the page. Whether students mark directly on the text or on Post-it notes that eventually become part of the text, these "traces," when read during a re-reading of the text, become very interesting for the reader. Not only do the readers begin to understand how knowing the contents of the entire work affects their original interpretations, depending on the amount of time between the readings, they come to sense how they, as readers, have changed since the previous reading. Making successive markings over a period of days and weeks has proven to be a most interesting way for my students and I to notice how our interpretations of literary works co-evolves with our senses of individual and collective identities.

Even if all the response are made in one day, such as is the case with the two poems "Light" and "Her House" that I discussed above, readers become aware of how quickly and dramatically their responses to, and interpretations of, a work of literature changes. As well, they become aware of how their "timed writing" activities come to co-exist with their reading of and response to the literary work. With each successive wave of re-reading and timed writing the response becomes increasingly complex. It is these re-reading and re-responding processes that, I believe, create beginning conditions for the interruption of the familiar since, with each successive response, new and more unusual associations are made. Because the *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* book and the Ondaatje poems are all concerned with the way human experience is circumscribed with and mediated by things and of how these things are inextricable from our memories, many of the students begin to write about personal and family objects that have meaning for them. As well, they begin to make associations between these objects and specific personalities and events that they associate with these objects. Because I do not want students to remain for too long in the narrow band of the personal, I move into the "shoe" activity as a way to interrupt the familiarity of these readings and the response evoked.

After removing all of the "old shoes" from their bags and heaping them into a shoe mountain I ask students

to select one shoe that is not theirs and that they do not recognize as anyone else's in the room. I then ask that they examine this shoe, paying close attention to details of the construction and marks of wear. I ask that they not communicate with one another while doing this. After approximately five minutes, I ask them to place the shoe on the desk or table directly in front of them and to move into a ten to fifteen minute writing that begins with the prompt: "This shoe is interesting to me because...." Before allowing them to write, I encourage them to focus on the shoe while they are writing, but not to feel constrained by the shoe. Although they will begin by attending to the shoe, oftentimes the various associations that they make while writing will move them into a topic that is related to but not necessarily directly concerned with the shoe.

Once this timed writing is completed I ask them to re-read what they have written and mark passages, phrases, or images that are interesting to them. I also ask them to identify some portion of the writing that they would be willing to read to the rest of the class. At this point, of course, students become very interested, not so much in their own writing, but in what others may have written about their shoe. Before beginning the reading I ask that students re-arrange their desks/tables into a circle. I also ask that they place the shoe that they have been writing about in on the table-top in front of them, and, most importantly, I ask that no student identify which shoe they have brought. Students then begin to read what they have written about the shoe. In every instance, the writings about the shoe not only reveal descriptive details about the shoe but, as well, speculations about the possible histories of the shoe. Although the writers are usually completely unaware of the shoe's owner or lived history, they create detailed descriptions and expositions of possible situations, possible events, possible relationships: a high heeled white ladies' sandal participated in a wedding ceremony on a sailboat; a chewed up thong became complicit in a robbery, a scuffed brown hiking boot went trekking in Nepal. All of these situations, of course, were enacted by very specific characters who, for the most part, were given interesting and well-developed personalities.

Following these writing and reading practices around the "old shoe" I ask students to engage in a ten minute reflective writing that begins with the prompt: "Hearing (insert name) writing about my shoe has provoked me to think about...." This, of course, becomes a very interesting response activity since the writer is responding to someone else's interpretation of an artifact that has personal significance to her or him. Although the just-disclosed writing about each of their shoes was wholly fictional it now necessarily exists alongside their own memories of their shoe. Once this writing is completed, I ask each student to identify the shoe they have brought and to say a few words about why they selected it and something about the shoe's history. Although this sharing generates a great deal of laughter, it also opens up a very interesting interpretive space. Some of the students, for example, are amazed at how close the invented situations were to their memories of the shoe's histories. Even when the invented narrative and the remembered narratives are very different, both the writer and the shoe owner become complicit together in developing new interpretations of the shoe. And so, although Marla's white high heeled shoe had not been part of a wedding on a sailboat, but, rather, had been shoes worn to a high school graduation, the two stories suddenly existed together and, in interesting ways, began to become involved with one another. Marla suggested, in fact, that she would never be able to look at her old white high-heeled shoes without remembering the story that Jeff had constructed around it. The telling of a fictionalized story about the shoe participated in the continual evolution of memories that were evoked by the shoe. And, since the invented story and the remembered stories now co-existed, each participated in the ever-changing commonplace location announced by the shoe. I use these various reading and writing activities, and the interpretations sponsored by these activities, to help all readers begin to understand how their remembered and fictionalized interpretations of literary texts and other cultural objects participate in the complex act of identity formation and re-formation.

At this point in the unit of study I ask students to revisit all of the products of their various writing practices that have accumulated around the reading of Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, of the poems

"Light" and "Her House" and from the "old shoe" activities. I ask them to choose three images or ideas from these writings and to represent each in one sentence. One of these should emerge from the children's picture book, one from the poems (or some combination of these), and one from the "old shoe" activity. I ask them to write these three sentences on a fresh sheet of paper. I then ask them to examine these three sentences and imagine what relationships there might be among them. This often seems very strange to them since the three images or ideas they have chosen are seldom obviously connected or related. However, despite the difficulty and ambiguity of the task, I insist that students make the move from these various personal and interpretive responses to some re-symbolized form of these. I call this writing activity "intertextual chaining." The connections that they make between these sentences I call "intertextual links." Because students now must work to make sense of these often disparate ideas, I allow them several days to work on it, asking that they create a short piece of writing that explains and interprets what has emerged for them by juxtaposing various interesting ideas that have come from their responses.

Once students have completed, to their satisfaction, one of these "chained" writings, I ask that these be read to the class. Because I want students to choose language precisely, I ask that their readings be limited to three to four minutes. These oral readings become highly ritualized affairs. Usually, I set aside a large chunk of time for these readings (whether in the university or the school setting, I try to allow for an entire morning or afternoon). My usual procedure is to ask each student to read what they have written to the rest of the class. I tell them that they are not allowed to say anything at all about what they are about to read. They are not to contextualize it, apologize for it, or defend it. They are to simply read it. While each person reads, others in the class listen carefully, jotting down any words that represent associations they are making as the reading is occurring. Following the reading, I ask each person in the class to engage in a one to two minute timed writing where each person responds to what the person has read. I explain that these responses are not meant to be congratulatory nor critical. Rather, these responses should represent associations and connections that the reading announced for them. Once these short responses have been made, I ask that they be passed to the reader. Because I time the reading and the response practices, each presentation takes no more than five to seven minutes. And, because each student moves through the same process of reading, responding, collecting notes related to their reading, the morning or afternoon of reading and response becomes an intense and very focused experience of thinking.

At the end of all the readings, I ask all students to spend fifteen minutes writing out their interpretations of the morning activities. I ask them to make special note of any common themes that seemed to have occurred in the writing, including any connections they made for themselves that they found interesting. Finally, I conduct a whole class discussion of the new ideas and new images that have been produced that morning. As well, I ask that they identify the particular conditions that helped all of us to see and understand in new ways.

As the final stage in the response process, I ask that students take home all of their notes and to read and reread them several times, making notes about ideas and associations that are interesting and helpful to them. The notes from others, their responses to them, their notes resulting from the experience of listening to others' writings emerging from the shared reading of other texts, their own "intertextual chain" writing, then function as a new set of texts from which they are to create some new writing. Because, by this point, students have had a great deal of practice generating experimental and response writing, and have had many opportunities to share their own and listen to others' responses to the various literary texts studied, they have fewer fears and anxieties about continuing to write from these experiences.

Creating Interpretive Reading Practices

Because the literary text positions readers in a world that is, simultaneously, familiar and unfamiliar, new insights and interpretations arise. Although this new knowledge emerges from a "fictional" experience, like all experiences, it becomes encoded into the reader's memory and begins to function as a lived reference point. What is imagined is often as influential as any other experience.

However, in order for the literary text to do its work, the reader must be able to establish a meaningful relationship with it. This does not mean merely comprehending the plot or being able to identify figures of speech. It also does not mean simply providing an immediate personal response to a first reading. Meaningful relationships with literary texts take time to develop. They require a more prolonged engagement. This means that the text needs to be read more than once. It also means that there must be some "trace" of the various readings become materially present for further interpretation. For those of us who work in public education institutions this need is difficult to fulfill for, of course, there is a strong desire to "cover the curriculum" by touring through as many texts as possible. I believe, however, that as difficult as it may be, these demands must be strongly resisted. If we are to help our students to learn to think we must teach them how to see with new eyes, to hear with new ears. Learning to perceive freshly cannot be imposed or willed upon oneself or others. As any artist knows, it requires that a particular set of conditions be created and a particular set of skills learned.

It is my view that it is the teacher's responsibility to not only teach students to read, but to teach them how to read. Although we are becoming better at teaching how to read in the content areas, I believe that we still have much to learn about how to teach students to read literature. The sequence of reader response activities that I have described in this article are ones that I have been developing to help create conditions for more imaginative and creative readings. I have learned that students cannot simply be told to be imaginative and creative with their responses. Conditions and forms must be created in order to make this work possible. And, as well, particular skills and strategies must be taught.

Although I have described a specific sequence of activities that I do with adults in pre-service teacher education classes, all of the techniques and skills can be adapted to readers of any age. I have used these approaches to reader response from grades five through nine. Graduate students of mine have used them with children K-12. Although some of the procedures are always modified, I believe there are common features in all this teaching:

First, literary texts must be read and responded to more than once. By examining the trace (the response) of a previous reading, readers begin to notice how dramatically their interpretations have changed. Most importantly, they begin to notice how their readings of literature have influenced their "real" lives and senses of self-identity.

Second, a literary text must be read alongside other literary texts and, as well, alongside other "cultural objects." These intertextual readings help to construct a broader and more complex commonplace location for interpretation. When accomplished with groups of readers in the classroom, these intertextual responses facilitate complex interpersonal relations among student readers and their teacher.

Third, written or oral responses to literary texts must have form. They must have structure. By offering

prompts, by timing responses, by reading and interpreting one response in relation to another using "intertextual chaining," teachers help students to become positioned in interpretive locations that function as "liberating constraints." It is within such locations that students begin the process of making unique forms emerging from their literary readings.

Fourth, students' responses to literary texts must, at some stage, become resymbolized into a form that functions like a literary text. This does not mean that they need to create a novel, a short story, a play, or a poem. It does mean, however, that they must learn to create new forms to express familiar ideas. It is the resymbolization process, the creation of new form, that comes to more fully represent the complexity of the commonplace locations that students have developed through their shared reading of literary texts in the classroom.

Finally, although students must be given many opportunities to respond in many different ways, these must be contained in a structured form. Although the response activities and forms that I have described in this chapter differ from the "hunt for the literary device" that is still commonly used in English language arts classrooms, it also differs from the open-ended response journal method that has also become common. Although I do feel that both of these are still useful I strongly believe that the teacher, like the literary artist, must create specific "liberating constraints" in order to facilitate the production of interesting, imaginative responses to literature. In so doing, teachers not only create the possibilities for understanding, they create possibilities for transformation. And this, in my view, should always be the primary reason for including shared readings of literature in the classroom.

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