

Does My Opinion Count? Interpretation and Inclusion in a Community Reading Program

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Abstract

This paper utilizes Reader Response theory and Erving Goffman's analysis of behavior and conversations in public places in order to frame a discussion about the nature of community reading programs. Each reader necessarily brings his or her own experiences to a book. Can inviting an entire community to read the same book break down barriers, or do rules of etiquette and social interaction preclude meaningful connections? The nature of public and private reading groups is discussed. The focus of the paper is adult literacy students who participated in a community reading program.

1. Introduction

This paper is a discussion about some of the questions which remain regarding the study which I completed this year for my dissertation regarding status and barriers to participation in public reading events. The title of the study was "A Phenomenological Study of New Adult Readers Participating in a Community Reading Program." I began the research last fall when I was working as a tutor in an adult education literacy class. The teacher bought her students a copy of the book which the city was to begin reading and discussing for its yearly 'One Book' project. This instigated the study when I realized the implications for the literacy students' participation—it was a way to bring the students into the world of readers and to help them learn the pleasures of book discussion.

The study began with ten students in the class, although by the time it ended only five students remained. The literacy class is a fairly fluid group, with people coming and going as their lives allow them the time to attend school. The students in the classroom took turns reading the book aloud with their teacher and tutors, or sometimes in a circle as a class. We sometimes read individually, because

some of the students were better readers than others. The very slow readers were sometimes embarrassed to read out loud in front of the other students. I talked with four of the students after our class had their book discussion. The interviews focused on their views on participating in the program, their educational experiences, and their self-perception. This paper loosely utilizes three of those interviews and numerous observations in the classroom and at community discussions. I also interviewed their teacher and other readers and program leaders, and observed other book groups. The goal was to gain a holistic view of a community reading program, concentrating especially on what it meant for readers.

The literacy students' self-perception and identities as 'new readers' limited their participation in city-wide events, but the students reported that that attending the events helped them understand that their own interpretations were valid. It also enhanced their understanding of the book. Their teacher's goal of having the students feel as if they were part of a community of readers was realized by allowing them to hear what other people had to say about the book.

1.1 Community reading programs

Many books chosen for community reading programs are works of literary fiction. They are usually books which have been deemed meritorious by critics, but which are not so difficult that the general public will shy away from reading them. Additionally, they tend to grapple with social or 'meaty' topics which provide conversational starting points. Some of the interviewees said that it is easier to discuss sensitive topics when they are centered on a work of fiction.

Using a text to discuss sensitive topics is one method to negotiate meaning. It is a way to discuss beliefs and former experiences with others, and to make sense of one's world. Participating in a reading group with this goal is a way to negotiate the self. The common experience of reading the book creates a bond for the participants and provides guidance for discussion.

The goal of community reading programs is to bring people together around a common text. In an interview, Nancy Pearl, the originator of the city-wide reading programs, said that "Reading and discussing the same book seemed to me to be a perfect way to overcome our superficial differences

and understand our common humanity.” It is about connecting to other people. Because I had been focusing on the social exclusionary aspects of illiteracy, this involvement seemed, theoretically, to be a perfect testing ground for both community involvement and reading in the context of literacy. However, I questioned whether the literacy students could feel like they were a part of the community which was forming around the text. That is where the main question for this paper came from, which is: “Does my opinion count?”

2. Rosenblatt, Fish, and Reader Response

There are essentially two distinct areas, or disciplines, from which the theories informing this question sprang: psychological connections with reading; and sociology. Each reader of a book in a community program actually reads the book—that is, they connect with it on some level. However, when people come together to discuss a book, the focus turns to the sociological. Reader Response theory, especially as explained by Rosenblatt, and Irving Goffman’s discussion of behavior and communication provide the theoretical ground for this discussion. Both of these—the psychological and the sociological—are part and parcel of this phenomenon. Without a discussion of what goes on during reading—that is, how people make a connection with the text—it is silly to talk about what goes on in a room full of people who read the same book. Communication of the ideas is a separate problem—it entails revealing feelings and interpretations, presentation of these ideas, and presenting one’s ideas in a way which is socially acceptable.

The adult new readers presented a challenge to the idea of a community reading program: who is actually part of this community? Is ‘community’ defined by library service area, or is it something to which people belong by social status? There were essentially two barriers to membership in this community for the students: the psychological barrier presented by understanding and interpreting the book; and the sociological problem of social status.

The act of reading is both individual and contextual. The reader has a base from which to draw in order to make sense of a text. This base is formed by both the texts which he has read in the past and by his life experiences. New readers are missing a part of that—they can draw from the well of their own past

experiences, but their limited experience with books is a barrier to understanding. Their past also might not match that of other participants who choose to participate in a public reading event. Additionally, the literacy students don’t have the same understanding of history, which is formed from reading, as other participants. Their educational experiences have often been deficient and demeaning. They don’t have the same literary stock of knowledge that more mature readers can draw from in order to interpret the text. In addition to the students’ experiential differences, the act of reading is also more difficult for the new students because of the mechanics which enable reading to occur.

Reader Response theory provides useful explanations regarding literary interpretation for both new and experienced readers. As reader response theorists, Stanley Fish and Louis Rosenblatt both emphasized the centrality of the reader in textual interpretation. Rosenblatt in *The Reader the Text and the Poem* (1978) briefly traced the evolution of literary criticism from its focus on the text as a “mirror of ‘reality’” to the new recognition of the reader as interpreter, with interpretation as a form of creation. Stanley Fish, in *Interpreting the Variorum* (1973), said, the “intention (of the author) and understanding (of the reader) are two ends of a conventional act, each of which necessarily stipulates (includes, defines, specifies) the other” (p 161). Both Rosenblatt and Fish recognized the situational nature of the literary experience, emphasizing the fact that the same book could be read multiple times by the same reader at different times and the response of the reader could be completely different. Because the state of the reader has changed, the text will elicit a different reaction. The readers’ goal is to create meaning from the text; the creation of meaning, not the formal structure of the text, is central.

The place in which the text is read, and with whom the reader discovers or explores a text is another facet of the situationality of the reader’s response. The classroom is one place where many young people first encounter many texts. Rosenblatt emphasized in 1938’s *Literature as Exploration* the role of the teacher in helping students become good readers, or interpreters of texts:

...a teacher of literature may have a powerful and beneficial influence. The basic postulate is that such influence will be the elaboration of the vital influence inherent in

literature itself...once the unobstructed impact between reader and text has been made possible, extraordinary opportunities for a real educational process are open to the teacher. (p. 70 – 71).

As such, she was discussing the interpretation of literature in a group—in the classroom, under the tutelage of a knowledgeable instructor who encourages the students to discuss their reactions to the text. The teacher's role is to create a psychological space for the development of textual exploration and discussion: "lively, untrammelled discussion bespeaks an admirable educational setting" (p. 71). She said that a good teacher of literature will encourage students to pay attention to their own reactions to the text, rather than stifle them so that the students can regurgitate her interpretation for a test. This is the goal of the teacher in creating an aesthetic response—one that is reflective and introspective, rather than what she called an 'efferent' reading, which is simply reading literally, for the sake of finding information.

Literature as Exploration seemed to be a sort of handbook for teaching literature, rather than musings on the more theoretical aspects of reading; that was to come in her later *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. In the latter book she also went into depth regarding the differences between efferent and aesthetic reading. This proved to be useful for examining the responses of the adult new readers to the text. Most of the students were not reflective; they read the text in order to practice reading. They did enjoy the story, but their aesthetic experience was limited by the concentration which they had to devote to mechanics.

Purves (1980) said that it is not entirely possible for a teacher to help students read aesthetically. He claimed that the development of an aesthetic response is, rather, something of a personality trait: "Where does schooling fit in?...In some respects schooling plays little or no part" (p. 233). Instead, he said that this is the responsibility of the reader, although not all readers will develop this trait:

The newly enthroned reader stands as a person who has a complex set of schemata to bring to bear on a text, who can willingly enter into seeing the text as an aesthetic object, who becomes involved with reader, and who emerges from reading with a will-

ingness to enter into a complex analysis of the transaction with the text (p. 233).

Purves said that some students will become students of everything—they are more contemplative and imaginative by nature. These are people who will read aesthetically; others are spectators, and may do well enough in school, but will continue to read quite literally. Fish, similarly, defines the intended reader: "the reader whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences, and so on make him capable of having the experiences the author wished to provide..." (p. 160). The writer of a text is given leeway to imagine a world which he wants the reader to find himself; only some readers will find themselves in this world, while others will remain on the outside.

So, this difference between readers might illustrate part of the attraction to taking part in book groups: for some people, reading literature is a way to understand themselves—it is a way to explore self identity, to explain the world in which he as reader inhabited while engrossed in a text. Rosenblatt (1995) explained this aspect of teaching adolescents about the literature experience when she said,

Literary experiences may enable the reader to view his own personality and the problems objectively and so to handle them better.

Literature, through which the adolescent reader encounters a diversity of temperaments and systems of value, may free him from fears, guilt, and insecurity engendered by too narrow a view of normality. (p. 212)

It is not too difficult to imagine that not only adolescents benefit from reading and the discussion of literature as Rosenblatt described.

Stanley Fish echoed Rosenblatt in "Interpreting the Variorum" when he said that "it is the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description" (p. 152). Asking "Is there a text in this class," Fish answered, "Yes, there is a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force" (p. vii). Reader response requires negotiation with the text in order to make sense out of it; the text, itself, has no inherent meaning. A classroom experi-

ence, a private reading group, and a public reading discussion are three places where the 'interpretive assumptions' are in force.

As the Reader Response theorists explained, the act of interpretation is situationally mediated; the possibilities for interpretation are limited only by the number of people who read the book. Bringing a book into a group, then, is a way to explore lives through literature. However, it is not only the act of reading which is situationally produced; so also is the act of explaining one's interpretation of the book. This explanation becomes a way to make sense of one's life as one compares interpretation with others. The explanation of self through literature is contextual, set within a specific time, place, and interpersonal dynamic. The self which the reader (here, as actor) wants to portray is yet another dimension of the story. Discussing the literary experience with others sometimes turns an internalized experience into a self-critique, or a performance, as discussed by Purves. The reading group, then, is a way to interpret and act out a self, with a piece of literature as a focal point for discussion—that is, it is a way to indirectly explore the idea of 'self', or a way to covertly do 'identity work.'

3. The Self on Display: Goffman and social situations

At this point we will return to the central question of this paper: "Does my opinion count?" One questions which should be addressed when asking if one's opinion counts is, "What does it take to fit in to a social situation?" Every act is judged as proper or improper by the situation in which it occurs. According to Goffman, every act "can, of course, be proper or improper only according to the judgment of a specific social group, and even within the confines of the smallest and warmest of groups there is likely to be some dissensus and doubt" (p. 5). Even the smallest and most open groups, there are social expectations. People who meet the expectations of the group will be the most respected. This respect, in turn, will dictate whose opinion counts, or who are the 'opinion leaders.'

So each group must be redefined according to the situation in which it occurs—who is present, and where the group is formed. A reading group is one example of a group situation. Reading groups are often located in private places, such as homes or

classrooms, but they also might be held in public places, such as libraries or book stores. This study covered both. The etiquette observed in a reading group is learned; reading groups tend to be generally polite and congenial (though certainly not necessarily bland). The participants tend to display behavior which was learned in school and polished throughout life during middle-class social situations. The groups probably have a specific social purpose, and the norms of the group will be reflected by that purpose and the social status of the members. For instance, some reading groups might be a social outlet away from the family; others might focus on some specific problem or topic.

The whole idea of a public reading group is actually fairly difficult, because as we discussed previously, reading and the discussion of texts is a way to do 'identity' work. Doing such work in the context of people whom one doesn't know can be daunting because full participation might require revealing feelings or some other element of oneself which might cause some discomfort among strangers. The library is a public place, as defined by Goffman. Let's take a look at his definitions of public and private spaces. He defines a public place as "any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community; 'private places' refer to soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather" (p. 9).

Despite the public nature of the reading events in this study, there were certain general expectations of attendees. For instance, the attendees were generally expected to have read the book, and at the smaller, more intimate events everyone was expected to contribute to the conversation. Participants are expected to contribute, but not to contribute too much, because then they would dominate the conversation. Moderators at the events invited everyone to contribute and steered the conversations appropriately. Participants revealed their feelings about the book, but not much about their personal lives. Everyone was expected to turn off their cell phones and otherwise prevent rude interruptions. There were ground rules, or expectations of behavior, that the attendees exhibited in order to fit into the social situation.

Unfortunately, not everyone will fit into any given public social situation. Goffman said that "in many situations certain categories of persons may not be authorized to be present, and that should they be present, this in itself will constitute an improper act." As an example from my study, the librarians whom I

interviewed said that a group of activists once used a book talk as a venue for promoting their political platform. The librarian said that they quickly figured out that this was not the place for that behavior. It didn't adhere to the norms set by the group. One expectation of that particular group was that attendees remained congenial and open to differing opinions. It's probably not a stretch to imagine that this is a common norm at community reading events. The purpose of the events is to open up communication and deepen appreciation for literature, not to promote a single point of view. The activists, as individuals who read the book, would have been welcomed, but because they let a platform dominate their interpretation of the book, they were not welcome. Goffman called this keeping with the "spirit or ethos of the situation" (p. 11) in order to fit in.

Likewise, children are generally not welcome at events in which adult discussion is expected to occur. Young children have not generally mastered polite social interaction—it is a learned behavior, and even the most polite children might display boredom or distraction, behaviors which indicate a lack of engagement. Additionally, if the book being discussed is for adults, one could reasonably presume that the young child has not read the book. It is the ability to engage fully with a group which indicates that a person truly fits in. The interaction of the group is focused on a particular activity—that is, talk; outside activities take away from the participants' enjoyment and ability to focus on the talk.

4. Whose voice counts?

One very positive finding from this research is that group reading was highly beneficial for the adult new readers. Reading out loud and discussing the text in the classroom allowed the new readers to overcome some of their reading difficulties because it enabled the students to work through the mechanical problems with their teacher or tutor, and it also allowed them to discuss the ambiguities of the text, such as colloquialisms or unfamiliar historical details. The teacher's role in the process of reading was to help with the mechanics of reading, the vocabulary which mature readers take for granted, and the contextual placement of the text. The students agreed that the classroom was very open and welcoming, and that their teacher's attitude encouraged them to keep pushing themselves to become better readers. She encouraged them to talk about how their own lives connected with the text. The students' voices, as

quiet as they were, counted in the classroom. They were validated by their peers and by the teacher.

The participants at the public reading events had read the same book, but, as Fish and Rosenblatt pointed out, every reader necessarily brings the baggage of his or her own lives and past experiences. The differences in people's lives and their own positions and opinions regarding the social issues in the book create both controversy and commonalities between the readers. Bernstein, as quoted in Demetrian (2005), described such 'divergences of interpretation':

Because all understanding involves a dialogical encounter between the text for the tradition that we seek to understand and our hermeneutical situation, we will always understand the 'same thing' differently. We always understand from our situation and horizon, but what we seek to accomplish is to enlarge our horizon (p. 22).

The students in the literacy class were novices at both reading and literary interpretation. Their low literacy isn't necessarily one of the 'superficial' differences to which Pearl was referring when she said that "Reading and discussing the same book seemed to me to be a perfect way to overcome our superficial differences and understand our common humanity." Low literacy is more of a deep seated and overwhelming problem in the students' lives. It is also a cause of some of their other problems, such as a lack of resources and an ability to fully participate in society—by the students and their teachers' admission, most of them are fairly socially isolated.

These problems, along with their low reading skills, separated the students from the experienced readers at the public reading events. These problems are also what they are working on in class. In the classroom, they are all in the same boat; in a reading event, they were different. Likewise, their low literacy and the problems surrounding literacy are a major part of their life-stories. Their life-stories, in other words, were very dissimilar to other people at the library, the experienced readers, who participate in the community-wide reading event. In the context of such a reading program the dissimilarity between the new readers and the experienced readers is emphasized because the program centers on the act of reading. The literacy students are not good at read-

ing, and furthermore, their experience with reading is based less on pleasure than past failures.

The literacy students' previous educational experiences had been demeaning; they all reported that they had often been the subject of ridicule in the classroom as their peers learned to read and they lagged behind. Other participants reported positive experiences with their education, and many of them were involved in educating others (either in a classroom or parent) as an adult. Education and the discussion of literature for these two groups of people, thus, had entirely different connotations.

In the classroom, it was not only difficult for the students to read the text, but also to discuss it. They speculated about what might have occurred after the book ended to some of the main characters, trying to tie up some of the loose ends. The teacher tried to get the students to discuss motivations of characters, but they had few insights into character development. She also tried to get them to talk about how they connected to the text. However, this was somewhat futile; because the students have had difficult lives, they are often unwilling to discuss events to which they might have connected in the book. Their teacher certainly didn't want to dredge up uncomfortable memories. The group (the classroom) is very small and open; the students know each other; but they still, only very rarely, discuss their lives outside of the classroom. It was impossible to determine if the source of difficulty in discussing the text was due to, as Goffman put it, the nature of the group; or if it was because the students had not truly engaged with the text. In other words, was it a psychological problem, or was it a sociological problem? It was likely both—the students have not been taught to read aesthetically, but efferently. They have been taught to read a paragraph or a short book and literally recapitulate its meaning. The idea of putting one's self into a text was foreign.

Let's return to the idea of whose opinions are privileged, then, in a reading group. One thing to note is that the private events that were observed in this study were quite different from public events, because the private events tended to digress towards much more personal topics of conversation. Friends who discuss a book in the company of friends might find that their conversations veer off-topic more often than not. If one member doesn't understand the informal nature of the discussion, their insistence on staying on topic might be as disruptive as if a person

in a public event were to become too personal. The type of public event also dictated what type of conversation occurred—the very small, intimate events required that each attendee participate, while the large events accommodate anonymity well. Therefore, observations regarding the situationality of norms confirmed Goffman's description of the rules of behaviors and interactions.

People who meet expectations or norms of any event were the most respected. People who deviated from the norms were shunned. For instance, one older man kept talking loudly and out of turn about a past event during one discussion, contradicting what the leader of the event was saying. During one event, a panelist's cell phone kept ringing. These people made other attendees visibly uncomfortable. In turn, it seemed that their opinions were less respected than people who adhered to the norms.

This respect, in turn, will dictate whose opinion counts, or who are the 'opinion leaders' of the group. The people who seemed to have the most authority at the events were well spoken and were able to cogently recall precise events in the book. They talked in turn and had something to say when they spoke. It was also obvious that they were good readers when they spoke—they made, for instance, insightful comments about characters which revealed a psychological and historical understanding of the book. Likewise, people who were already well-respected seemed to feel the most comfortable at the public events. Their body language exuded confidence. People who didn't fit in as well stayed on the outskirts. For instance, at one event a young, non-Native speaker attended an event and she was the only person who sat outside of the circle of attendees. Another young man who wore all black clothes attended several events, and he also always sat outside of the group. The self-imposed physical distance from the group of mostly middle-aged and middle-income attendees indicated that they didn't feel as if they fit in.

As was previously stated, the goal of this paper was to determine the place where the literacy students fall in the context of the community reading program. How might they 'fit in'? One reason that the actual research did not necessarily point toward findings which were originally proposed for this paper is because the students did not really act as full participants in the community reading events. That is, they did not actually interact with other people in the

room. They were present, but they didn't speak up. They didn't make eye contact. They mostly sat with their arms crossed. They were not fully engaged in either the act of reading (psychologically) in the classroom, or in the social situation of the public discussion. However, they did report that they enjoyed both reading the book and taking part in the events. We can say, then, that they enjoyed being spectators; the events were, for them, a way to learn how people do 'book talks', and reading the book out loud in the classroom was a way to successfully work through a difficult text. The students did not really stand out at the events because they lingered on the edge. The events were large enough for them to remain comfortably anonymous. They were certainly as welcome as any other unknown people who attended the events. Let it be noted that the students were not the only people at the events who were not fully engaged. This lack of general conformity was another difficulty in assessing the students' participation in, or psychological distance from, the group.

The public reading events which I attended might best be compared to public art events. They are a place to learn more about a text. However, they are distinctly public events at which public rules are in place. Both art events and book talks are focused on an aesthetic response to an object which was produced by an artist or author. These events did not seem to be the appropriate place to discuss crises or problems; they were fun for the participants, and they knew what to expect. The value in these programs in regards to forming bridges between people seems to be encouraging people to talk about the book in private. The private book talks were places in which people could discuss more personal issues. The text itself does bring a new, common light to guide discussions. The text acts as a common psychological connection between people. The rigid sociological rules of public interaction were decidedly in play, and knowledge and adherence to those rules determines whose opinion counts.

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