Book Reviews

Young Adolescents Meet Literature: Intersections for learning

Mary Clare Courtland and Trevor J. Gambell (Eds). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 2000, 384 pp.

Unlike authorized curriculum, English language arts and English literature do not, by definition, respect national or provincial boundaries. Prospective teachers taking courses in the teaching of English in Canadian faculties of education face some tension between the multinational subject and the national or provincial practice of curriculum and instruction in that subject. For obvious market reasons most textbooks available for English language arts or literature courses used in Canada are written and published in the United States. In some cases, a publisher will bring out a "Canadianized" version of a textbook and nowadays the revisions undertaken by Canadian teams of writers can be quite substantial in contrast to some examples from the 1970's when the changes tended to be superficial.

This all-Canadian publication will help to reduce that tension. It is a rich and reputable Canadian resource for teachers, teacher candidates and other educators interested in planning and teaching English language arts, using literature as the major organizing resource to develop young adolescents' competence in the arts of language. Young adults are defined in this text as readers between the ages of 10 and 14. Each of the 12 editors and contributors lives and works in Canada. Nine hold positions in faculties of education as English language arts specialists; one is a full-time writer. Interestingly, half of the participants are from Saskatchewan.

The 14 chapters provide a rationale and demonstration for the new orthodoxy in teaching literature in schools, referred to as Reader Response Theory. The theory, originating over 60 years ago in the work of Louise Rosenblatt, is explicated and illustrated in Chapter 2 by the editors, Mary Clare Courtland and Trevor Gambell. Sam Robinson provides a compatible account of Reader Response in this chapter on assessment of literary learning. The two editors provide a bridging chapter in which they show how the theory influences planning, teaching and learning. Several other chapters then present discussions of issues that arise from this new Reader Response pedagogy such as censorship and selection, gender, multiculturalism in the English classroom, and aboriginal literature in Canada. Other contributors show how opportunities for teaching strategies to encourage and develop response lie in drama, the use of the internet, and in multimedia representations. Others apply the theory to teaching literary genres such as picture books, short stories and poetry. Diana Wieler, author of several novels for young adolescents, shares her craft and her understanding of the qualities of books that succeed in engaging young teenagers with fiction. In what he calls a "playful" contribution, Dennis Sumara takes the concept of response to deeper levels.

Mary Clare Courtland supports the case for Reader Response with an account of the development of literature for young adolescents over the past quarter century. The exponential rise in the number of high quality titles published each year, many by Canadian authors, provides teachers and students with wide choices of literature to teach and read. In contrast to much of the older canon of authorized school literature, young readers find their own experience reflected in the actions and themes of these newer titles. Moreover, the turbulence of many children's lives amidst the rapid social changes since the 1960's often resonates in these literary works. Likewise Reader Response teaching is timely in view of the increasing multicultural composition of school classrooms. In other words, the message of this book is that the new paradigm in teaching literature-based language arts has come into fashion at just the right time.

Rosenblatt (in Hook, 1959), long before Reader Response became popular, made the following observation which introduces the kernel of the theory contrasted with the then prevailing practice in most classrooms:

Undoubtedly what happens in many English classes today is that the student functions on two planes. On one plane he memorizes the ideas about literature which his teacher or the literary critic presents to him as being the traditional ones accepted by all educated people. On the other plane, he reads the literature and has his own personal reaction to it which he may never express or even necessarily pay much attention to himself (pp. 153-4).

Traditional teaching of literature (Rosenblatt's first plane) was based on the assumption that the meaning of a literary work resided in the text itself and that the purpose of the study of literature was to discover these authoritative meanings with the high-priestly help of the teacher and literary critic. Instruction was designed to transmit authorized meanings of works that constituted the literary heritage. In contrast, Reader Response Theory locates literary meaning in the multiple responses that readers make, Rosenblatt's second plane. Responses by individual readers are not surreptitious or irrelevant, but central to meaning making as part of the interactive process involving the reader's experiences brought to the act of reading. While the text stimulates and guides the responses, there is necessarily a range of responses that readers may make and therefore variability in the meaning evoked. However, the process is disciplined and constrained culturally and socially because the reader is a member of a community of readers and writers so that, while there may be an infinite number of response-mediated meanings in the reading of a particular text, not all possible meanings would be plausible.

Obviously this theory of reading literature, and its particular application to the aesthetic reading of literature, fits comfortably within the more general concept of learning as a constructive process which is the currently ascendant paradigm in education.

It is fair to say that the theory of Reader Response as outlined in this book is the professional consensus in Canada and in other parts of the English-speaking world on how literature should be used and studied in language arts programs.

Influential in the formation and popularization of this consensus was the publication, *Standards for the English Language Arts* (International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, 1996). This publication followed the wide consultation within the world-wide community of leaders in English language arts.

The merits of the compendium under review lie in its clear articulation of the theory, in the many practical applications of the theory to teaching strategies, and, especially, in the rich body of young adult literature, much of it written by Canadians, that many of the contributing chapters discuss and describe. There is much practical advice based on actual classroom experience. Pre-service teachers will find great value in the extensive reference lists of books enjoyed by young adults provided by several of the authors. Sample unit plans, tested in classroom projects, will give teachers confidence to try out response-based teaching.

I have used the words "orthodoxy," "fashion," and "consensus" to express the status of Reader Response Theory as articulated in this book. I have also said that this approach to teaching literature within the language arts program is timely. None of this is to make any claims for superiority based on science or research. Although research on Reader Response is reviewed, especially in Gambell's framework chapter, nothing is said about any definitive proof that demonstrates superiority in outcome from this type of instruction. Of course the absence of such evidence in education is not unusual. It is notoriously difficult to design research studies that compare outcomes in achievement, competence, or attitude. How could you find a random set of classrooms in which some pure form of New Criticism (the Old) was being taught and then a set of classrooms in which instruction was authentically based in Reader Response (the New) and then compare the results of such different instruction on some set of dependant variables?

What we have, then, is a good book written with passion and enthusiasm for what the contributors propose and describe. However, the underlying conviction about the rightness of the cause is based in faith, not educational science. Faith is supported by consensus among language arts specialists - professors of education and ministry officials; it is bolstered by case studies, classroom experience and observation. Gambell's review of research studies that have set out to identify developmental stages in students' response to literature is likely the best supportive evidence available. If students do show growth and maturity in their responses to literature - as his review of several studies does reveal - that finding suggests that response is an important element of reading literature.

The only example of skepticism in the book about Reader Response was a reference in Meredith Cherland's chapter on gender issues to a body of writing that was critical of the theory and practice. Otherwise the book conveys the impression that teachers now have *the* paradigm for teaching young adults how to engage with literary texts that speak to their own experiences. Of course that may be true, at least until a new fashion comes along.

There is one issue that is not addressed in this book in any systematic way. Apart from a few passing references in some of the chapters to official curricula

in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Atlantic provinces, the question of the extent to which the theory and practice of Reader Response are endorsed or recommended by the legally mandated curricula of the provinces remains largely ignored. Without access to a comprehensive review of this question, my guess would be that what is recommended in this book is generally compatible with current provincial curriculum documents across Canada. After all, the language arts and literature documents produced by each province and by the consortia in the western provinces and the Atlantic provinces are likely products of the same professional consensus that produced *Young Adolescents Meet Literature*. Some of its editors and contributors will have played leadership roles in the development of curricula in their provinces.

Many readers, especially pre-service teacher candidates, would be interested and reassured to know whether or not Reader Response is officially sanctioned. Perhaps the reason for this lacuna in the text is that there are at least 12 independent, provincial and territorial curricula in Canada, making a pan-Canadian synthesis a formidable challenge. Less kindly, however, I think that many professors of English language arts education, like our political parties, take either a generalist perspective on teaching language arts, without touching down on any specific provincial or even national ground; or a rather parochial, home-province focus.

Notwithstanding this small complaint, Courtland and Gambell have brought about a book that will serve language arts instruction in Canada well. It deserves to be widely read and discussed as a contribution to English language arts curriculum, teaching and teacher development.

References:

- Hook, J.N. (1959) *The Teaching of High School English* (2nd Edition) New York: The Ronald Press Company.
- International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Newark, Del. and Urbana, Ill.

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