Reflective Activities

Helping Students Connect with Texts

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Edited by

Louann Reid
Colorado State University

Jeffrey N. Golub
University of South Florida

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David S. Miall
University of Alberta, Edmonton

Experiencing Literature

If the central experience of reading literary texts is, as Frye (1970, 75) has suggested, incommunicable, then we should not be attempting to tell the literature students in our classrooms what a text means. We can teach about literature (about genre, rhetoric, history), but we cannot instruct students how to respond, what to feel and think as they read a text. If we attempt to do this, we are likely to derail students' own responses and implicitly deprecate their feelings and thoughts, as well as disenchant students with the whole enterprise of becoming literary readers (Miall 1996). How, then, can we nurture the responses of students to texts, empower and strengthen those responses, and make them more authoritative? In this essay I discuss one method that I have used with success in my own literature classrooms, working with both university and high school students. It is called the project method. Now being used with increasing success in elementary classrooms (Katz and Chard 1989), it has considerable potential for application with literary studies at a senior level.

First, we have to persuade students to take their own responses seriously. It may seem evident to them from their other classes (including previous literature classes) that learning must be teacher-directed—what are teachers paid for, after all? Teacher direction also usually appears to be more efficient. The teacher can offer coverage of the ground required and lead a large group of students through the same topics. But while it is possible to learn under these circumstances, such learning (in contrast to essay preparation or homework done alone) tends to be erratic and fortuitous. Students may learn when a point being made by the teacher relates to something they already know or are interested in, but much will bypass them because they have no way of assimilating it to their own experience of the text.

Learning with such a teacher is rather like taking a guided coach tour through a city. You will see most of the main sights, assuming you look in the right direction, and you will gather a few facts about the

history of each monument you pass, but your impression at the end of the day is likely to be a somewhat disconnected jumble of impressions. You learn about a city far better by walking the streets for yourself with a map and guide in hand. You may not get to see so much, and you will take longer over the tour, but you will feel and hear the city on your own terms and at your own pace, and you will see many scenes that the coach tour ignores. So it is with learning in a literature class. The learning that students do at their own initiative unquestionably takes longer and demands more effort, and it may become tiring or distressing at times (like the city explorer who wanders into a side street and becomes lost), but it ends by giving far more real understanding.

One of the project method's features, clearly, is a redefinition of the role of the teacher. But its most important feature is that it involves a change of expectations on the part of the participating students. They must give up the security (and the irritations) of the guided tour in return for a less comfortable, and sometimes unsettling, journey on their own feet. But they will be in control of the itinerary.

Working in Groups

Group work is at the center of the project method that I will describe. It is the most creative part of the learning process, because it is here that the dialogue that takes place in response to literary texts is realized amidst a group of learners. To read a text requires that you supply your own knowledge of the world and the judgments you have made about it, but the text in turn may call into question the adequacy of your knowledge and impel you to shift your perspective. You may learn to judge differently, or to feel differently about some significant aspect of your life. This is the defamiliarizing work that literary texts achieve through a variety of structural and stylistic devices: through defamiliarization the text involves you in the conflicts of ideas and feelings that come from unsettling the existing structures of your thought (Miall 1993).

But what world knowledge does a text require? What feelings seem to be called into question? And what new processes of thought do the defamiliarizing devices of the text call into being? Individual readers will, of course, have their own answers to these questions, and it is important to allow time (whether in class or out) for these responses to develop. Well-structured discussion in a group then enables students to compare ideas about the existing structures of thought that are drawn upon by the text, and to consider what new feelings and ideas it creates. Group discussion not only enlarges the range of ideas available

but may also enable students to enact, unprompted and extempore, some of the conflicts and arguments that the text initiates. A group discussion realizes in this way somewhat more of the potential dialogue in a text than the individual student will manage to do alone within the same time.

But working in a group of four or five students requires aims and a method. Unless students are agreed on a particular strategy, discussion within a group is likely to stray from one aspect of a text to another without arriving at any useful conclusions; discussion may wander off the text altogether. For this reason it is important, first, that a group defines the aims of its work at the beginning via a discussion to which all members of the group contribute, according to their interests in the text. Second, the group will agree on a particular method that will achieve one or more of the aims.

When meeting a new class of students at the beginning of the year, I usually spend the first few sessions giving them experience in a range of methods for use with literary texts. Some of these are general, others are specifically aimed at working with a particular genre (a poem, a drama, or a short story). Each is designed to draw upon what is distinctive about the student's own direct response to the text. Three such methods are webbing (sometimes known as mind mapping), ideas and contrasts, and the structure diagram.

In webbing, students are provided with a pack of self-stick notes (the small size). Each student working alone puts down in a word or two (with line or page references where appropriate) the most striking or interesting features of the text, with each idea on a separate note. (More advanced sessions of this activity can employ different colors for the different classes of ideas.) The students in a group then examine each other's notes, discuss and query them, and sort them into a pattern that makes sense to all of them on a tabletop. They can classify some of the main groups of ideas by adding a label. This, in itself, or transcribed to a poster or overhead slide, can be made the basis for a report to the whole class.

For the ideas and contrasts method, a short passage is chosen from a text, either literary or critical: for example, a short poem, a page from a novel, or the first two or three paragraphs of a critical article or review. The method requires first that students underline words or phrases that seem to carry the main ideas. Then an opposite or contrasting term is generated for each underlined word or phrase, where possible, and written in the margin. Some of the contrasts may already be expressed or implicit in the text; in other cases, the contrast may be absent. In ei-

ther case, the method begins to reveal much about the underlying structure of the argument employed by the writer, whether poet or critic, and serves to bring to the fore its dialogical texture.

The structure method can be used on any kind of text, whether a sonnet or a novel. The students ask the question, If you were dividing this text into several sections (say, from three to seven), where would the divisions come? Having decided on, say, six episodes, students draw these on a sheet of paper in a pattern like a simple flow chart. Six boxes are shown, where each box is accompanied by the page or line numbers of the episode it contains. In a short phrase written in each box, they then describe the episodes and add such other annotations as seem required. This method serves to raise questions about why the writer chose to focus on these episodes, and why they are put in this order. Students might annotate the boxes, for example, to raise issues created by the writer's handling of each episode or the question of how each relates to the next.

The Project

The project builds on such methods, and develops them into a more comprehensive and elaborate treatment of a given text or group of texts. It also usually requires that students work in their groups outside of class time and over an extended period, perhaps two to four weeks. The group will usually consist of four students and should be formed from students who share a similar set of interests.

A project generally will have three phases (Katz and Chard 1989). In the first phase, represented by the kind of work described in the three methods above, students explore their existing responses to a text, and share them through a specific method that allows them to represent and organize their responses. While doing this work, they will discover issues, raise questions, or notice problems that require further work. During phase two, students agree on the main questions to be pursued and assign tasks to each individual in the group. Students will then use the library, local museums, or other sources (including the teacher) to undertake research on their specific questions. For example, while one student might examine the life of the author and the influences on that particular text, another might seek information about a historical event referred to, while a third tries to locate visual resources to illustrate the text (cartoons, paintings, or the like). In phase three, students bring together their information and find an effective way to present it to the whole class. I usually encourage students new to this method of work-

ing to use a poster display for this purpose (other methods might include oral or dramatic presentations, but these generally require greater skill and experience in order to be effective). Organizing a poster is itself an intellectually demanding task, and often leads to further stimulating discussion.

I usually arrange for students to present their projects during the same class session. Thus, on the agreed-upon day, a number of posters will be displayed on the walls of the classroom, and we give some time for students to circulate, to examine the work, and to note any points they wish to raise. Finally, each group is invited to introduce its poster briefly and participate in discussion about the work done. After the session, the posters are displayed for several weeks in the department library, where students can examine them at their leisure.

The project report sessions at the end of phase three are among the most invigorating and remarkable occasions I have experienced in a classroom. For students who have understood how to make the methods work, who have collaborated effectively on a project, and who have embarked as a result on a study that matters personally to them, the project can also be a high point of their educational experience, as many students have told me (informally or in course evaluations). At the same time, working with projects takes careful preparation if students are to benefit from them. In particular, such work requires that students learn to trust one another, to trust the teacher, and to commit themselves to the rather different kind of learning process it involves. For the teacher also it can be a challenging experience: not only do we give up a large measure of control, which may be unsettling, but the process itself is often defamiliarizing, when students raise questions or surprise us with perspectives on a text that we have never considered.

An Example Project

I conclude by reprinting a report on a project that was produced recently in one of my classes. For Amanda and her collaborators (pseudonyms have been used), this was the second project undertaken in a full-year course on British Romantic writing. Among the resources for this course is a hypertext on the Romantic period that I have been developing, available to students in a computer lab on campus. Amanda used this resource primarily for the advice it contains about methods of presentation. She also referred to several other methods that I introduced earlier in the course.

Project Report on Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo"

When we first read Perkins's excerpt from "Julian and Maddalo" [in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers*], I was intrigued and wanted to pursue it further. Because I was interested in studying this poem for my final essay, I thought the project report would be beneficial to my essay preparation. Due to the length and nature of the poem, I think that "Julian and Maddalo" was an excellent choice for our project report.

I first consulted the hypertext for further information on Shelley and the poem but found the most guidance in the section dedicated specifically to project reports. It was here that I uncovered the suggestion for a structure diagram—an excellent way to present a poem that was too long to include on the poster but was, at the same time, unknown to the class [Perkins's anthology omits the second half of the poem]. Because such a detailed analysis would be helpful to my overall understanding of the poem, I offered to contribute a plot diagram and summary to the poster display.

To begin my analysis, I color-coded significant aspects of imagery, character, and tone. While doing this, I paid attention to shifts between the ideal, reality, and the imagination as we had practiced at the beginning of the year. I then recorded the line numbers of these small sections and included a brief summary or significant quotations. I was then able to take these short sections and combine them under broader headings. This helped me to establish shifts in the plot, as well as changes in voice, tone, and theme throughout the poem.

The results of this analysis were six distinct sections which I labelled "introduction," "rising action," "conflict," "climactic movement," "resolution," and "epilogue." The Maniac's section was the most difficult to label since it was a huge shift in tone—almost a digression—yet still integral to the plot. It was climactic but too long to be considered the climax of the poem, so I settled on "climactic movement" as a label for this section.

This basic plot structure provided us with the necessary basis from which to build our poster. Andrew studied Julian and Maddalo and their conflict, while Alan considered the role of the madman, each of which corresponded to a section of my plot diagram. We also selected key passages from the other sections to portray a theme, tone, or concern of the poem.

To add visual appeal to the poster and to show the poem's setting, I collected photographs of Venice from travel brochures. Rather than cluttering the poster with arrows, we color-coded sections which related to one another. In so doing, we created a poster that presented plot, introduced the characters, established the setting, and hopefully inspired others to read the poem.

The hypertext was also very helpful in providing suggestions for the oral report. Since the poem was new to everyone, we de-

cided to highlight the plot and, in so doing, offer some of our own speculations. Because the Maniac's section was so intense and emotional, we chose it as a sample to present to the class. We hoped that this too would create interest and make other students want to read the entire poem.

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