THE READING OF LITERATURE AND RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

SALLY I. CANNON

Teachers of writing have become increasingly interested in the relationship between reading and writing in the past ten years. This interest has prompted us to explore new frontiers, from the distant discipline of cognitive psychology and computer science, to those closer to home, such as post-structuralist and reader-response criticism. One common activity employed in the writing classroom which unites the skills of reading, writing, and responding is the peer response group, where students critique one another's essays. The peer response group—where writers become readers and readers become writers—provides a unique place to investigate and apply the theories of reader-response criticism. Pondering their potential connections led me to pose the following question: How might practice in responding to literary texts influence student responses to their peers' texts?

HYPOTHESIS

To learn how the reading of literature would affect the quality of responses to student written texts, I studied five peer response groups in a freshman composition class before and after a semester of reading and responding to literature. My hypothesis was that through the practice of responding to literary texts, students' responses to their peers' texts in the peer response group could be strengthened.

I hypothesized that approaching the literature in reader-response fashion might strengthen students' ability to respond in general. That is, I would encourage the students to work back

and forth from their affective responses, to the text, in an attempt to integrate their personal responses with textual constraints. In this way, the emphasis would be placed upon response—the process of building a reading—which should underscore and strengthen the same process underlying response to student prose.

For example, if students pay close attention to their own changing responses to the question "Will he make it?" when reading about Jerry's dangerous swim in Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel," they will discover the rhythm of near success/setback, near success/setback that moves the current of the story. If they are asked to recall from their own personal experiences what it was like to be young, desperately striving to look mature and be accepted, they will be better prepared to understand Jerry's decisions not to tell his mother about the tunnel—a decision with which students sometimes have trouble.

Students' confidence in responding to literary texts can be built up if they are shown that there is no magical secret lying inside the text waiting to be discovered. If they are shown that the more analytical responses to the works they read often begin in personal reactions, they may be less stymied when confronting complex literary texts and prose written by their "smarter" peers. Approaches and techniques by Stanley Fish and Ann Berthoff, for example, might help make students conscious of this transactive process between reader and text, between affective response and critical response. Teaching students to approach literary texts, not by the traditional interpretive questions of "what does this poem or play mean?," but by what Fish calls a more "operational" question, "what does this sentence do?," should encourage students to reflect upon their responses and to the parts of the text that helped generate that response (25). It seems plausible to assume that practice in working from a literary text's effects to its meaning might carry over to student written prose. In a similar way, Berthoff's "double entry notebook" asks students to record on one side of the page their written notes, direct quotations, and the like, while on the facing page their thoughts on those notes. Teaching students to use the double entry should encourage critical thinking and reflection, as students respond to their observations of the work under discussion (45).

Teaching students to respond affectively to complex literary texts, to analyze textual clues, and to synthesize the textual clues

into a coherent reading should result in stronger, more helpful responses to their peers' prose. Specifically, with practice responding to literary texts, students responses to their peers' prose should:

1) be more text-specific (Text Specific Discussion)
2) be more complete by
   a. addressing the entire text and its organization (Organization for Rhetorical Effect)
   b. in general, detecting and diagnosing more problems (Detection and Diagnosis)
   c. specifically, construing gaps in logic or information (Gaps)
3) be more critical by
   a. responding as reading audience to the text's effects (Effect of Paper for Audience)
   b. revealing discrepancies between author's intentions and effects (Intended Meaning vs Effects)
   c. discovering ways text could be developed further (Prospective Inventing)

The above list is meant to represent potential ways in which student responses to their peers' texts might improve through the practice of responding to literary texts. The critical term for each category of improvement is listed in parentheses and will be discussed further in the Data Analysis section of this manuscript.

METHODS

Since I planned to study students in an academic setting but did not wish to disturb or impede the business of my freshman composition class, I chose a descriptive research design. As much as possible, the study of the five workshop groups was done under "natural" conditions and through unobtrusive means. Therefore, several descriptive methods of data collection were used: observation, tape-recorded revising sessions, reader-response worksheets, and questionnaires.

To test the students' ability to respond to their peers' prose, I taped their first workshop session, before the semester got underway, and their last workshop session, after a semester of reading and responding to literature—essays, poems, short stories, and one play. Those two workshops were the only times the students critiqued one another's work or even discussed their writing in

class. Ordinarily, I would have brought in samples of student writing for class discussion, but I refrained from doing that because I did not want to introduce the powerful variable of practice in peer response; rather, I wanted to see if responding critically to literature during the semester would carry over to the peer response group. To help the groups continue to grow as working units, however, they often discussed their responses to the day's reading assignment in groups. In this way they were given ample practice in response—but only to literary works.

The class was broken down into "permanent" response groups of three members each for the duration of the semester. "Permanent" groups were chosen so that the students could become used to working with one another. In the interest of heterogeneity, the students were separated according to friendships, sex, and race. In addition, the students' personality traits such as confidence, gregariousness, and talkativeness were taken into consideration. Finally, and most important, I attempted to distribute as evenly as I could the writing ability in my class, by placing one high, one medium, and one low ability student in each group, based on a writing sample and a questionnaire taken the first day of class (see Appendix A and B). In this way I hoped to distribute the wealth, so to speak, dividing the better writers among seven (initial) groups in a class of twenty-one students.

The reader-response worksheet used in this study consists of six questions. In its structure, it attempts to capture the movement from affective response to analysis, or from reader to text, as described in the work of David Bleich in response criticism and Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky in psychology. A copy of the worksheet can be found in Appendix C.

Excluding minor equipment malfunctions, the taping sessions occurred without any problems. One tape recorder refused to cooperate; therefore, that group had to be eliminated. In addition, we lost one member of the class due to a scheduling conflict; therefore, her group had to be excluded from the study, leaving the total number of groups at five.

DATA ANALYSIS

All of the tapes were transcribed and then analyzed against the categories of improvement discussed earlier. The groups were given a point for every comment that fit in one of the ten categories

listed in Table 1. I am defining comment here as a stretch of conversation on a particular idea. The comment might include only one sentence by one of the students, but usually included discussion by all three students. Many comments, of course, did not correspond to any of the categories but acted as filler comments, provided bridges to other comments, or had nothing to do with the paper being discussed. Occasionally the comments overlapped from one category into another. To avoid confusion, I gave the group only one point per comment, the point given to the category that comment seemed to be addressing.

The first category, "Text Specific Discussion," refers to helpful, specific comments that often quote or paraphrase the part of the text to which the comment refers. To receive a point in this category, students' comments must refer specifically to the text at hand. They were not given points for simply repeating rules out of context that they had memorized about composing (e.g. you should never use "I" in a formal paper). One student in Group 4's post-semester workshop made the following text specific comment: ". . . you might want to look at . . . the transition between the first and the second paragraph. You say 'first' and the next transition is 'next' and so on. It gets boring."

"Detection" and "Diagnosis" are two terms borrowed from Flower et al.'s recent study "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision." Detection refers to a student's ability to locate a problem in a text (26). Diagnosis, however, includes not only this ability, but the ability to discover the source of the problem and to suggest strategies for solving it (26). A good example of diagnosis occurred in Group 1's post-semester workshop. As the group discussed their initial reactions to their peer's paper on Women, Marriage, and Family, one of the members diagnosed a lack of focus (as she perceived it) within the paper:

> I think that you mentioned too many things. If you had just kept a stand—on one side. . . . I think you said too many things. You're saying one thing . . . against women being in the army, and then you say women are fine? I don't know. You just took two stands because you didn't want to insult anybody. But that's what the paper is supposed to do. It's supposed to take a side and hurt (i.e. oppose) whoever it hurts. You know?

In this example, the peer critic successfully locates the problem (get off the fence) and suggests a solution (take a stand and develop it). Together, she and the student writer help shape the evolving text.

The next category, "Gaps," is defined as places in the text which need more development. This definition differs from Wolfgang Iser's use of the term in that Iser's gaps are spaces of indeterminacy which the reader construes during the act of reading itself (165-69). In this study, gaps are more obvious and refer to that which an able student can locate during or after the act of reading is complete. Therefore, they are not only discovered during the act of reading, but can be located within the physical text which the student reads. In addition, gaps as Iser describes them in literature are positive qualities; they are ultimately fillable. It is this activity of closing the gaps which makes the reading of literature so pleasurable. The reader is invited to take an active role in the constitution of these gaps which heightens her involvement in the reading. However, the gaps that I am describing here in student texts are often unfillable by the reader—they indicate a lack of information in the text itself which the reader is unable to provide and are, therefore, a defect rather than an enhancement.

For example, in a paper read in Group 1's post-semester workshop, a male author attempts to persuade his readers that women should be given an equal opportunity with men to compete in all types of situations—business through the armed forces. However, he fails to develop the section on business, an important aspect of his argument. After the author restates his main idea, a group member discovers a gap: "I think you should support both sides. You said a lot about combat and kind of said some about business but not enough. Now, if you're going to support women on that side [business] you need more support, (laugh) cause there wasn't much."

"Intended Meaning-vs-Effects" refers to discrepancies between what the author meant to say, his intended meaning (either implied or stated), and how his words were actually interpreted by his audience. The peer response workshop is particularly effective in dramatizing the fact that discrepancies between intentions and effects can occur. Students are sometimes surprised to learn that what they meant is very different from what they said, at least as it is being perceived by the reader.

"Prospective Inventing," the term for the next category, means actively searching for ways in which to expand, develop, and push the text further. The emphasis in my definition of prospective inventing is on the discovery of new meaning—a reaching forward, a projecting of possibilities into hypothetical future text. In order to set this process in motion, critics must call upon what Sondra Perl has named "felt sense" or "the ability to recognize what one needs to do or where one needs to go" (116). While prospective inventing is inspired by Iser's concept of "wandering viewpoint," it differs from Iser's notion in a couple of ways. First, and most obviously, prospective inventing refers to the articulation of new ideas, new avenues of exploration, in the form of a response (after reading). Wandering viewpoint, on the other hand, is a process which occurs during the reading act itself which facilities the grasping of the text (109).

In addition, prospective inventing is not as aimless in its "wandering" as Iser's viewpoint. When a peer critic engages in prospective inventing, helping the student writer to expand the possibilities of his text in new ways, the critic is already working from a preformed text. He/she is guided, in part, by (his/her conception of) the ideas and structure that the writer has chosen. With the original text in mind, the critic engaged in prospective inventing projects forward, calling up an ideal, prospective future text that, with revision, the original text could become.

A good example of prospective inventing at work occurred in Group 5's post-session. One student author's text attempted to persuade its readers that mothers should stay at home and raise their children instead of going to work. The author argues, somewhat weakly, that mothers were the only ones who could suitably care for their children. The following is one peer's reaction:

> You need to think of the opposing arguments. Why can't fathers raise the kids, for example? And make sure that your arguments about motherhood are very solid. Perhaps you could get the "latch-key" children in there like we talked about in class. Or where parents ship their children off to nursery school. That would work too.

This student's comment exemplifies prospective inventing in the way it takes what the author has written and helps him build on his ideas, moving his text farther along towards a more developed whole. Prospective inventing does more than fill already existing

gaps: it probes beyond those gaps for potential avenues of exploration. In the example above, the critic suggests three new ideas for the writer to explore: fathers as primary care-givers, latch-key children, and the pros and cons of nursery school (by which I think the student meant day-care). The peer critic helps his or her fellow writer realize what else the text could say.

The last four criteria are fairly self-explanatory. Language appreciation refers to comments expressing a peers' appreciation of a writer's use of language—use of metaphor, word choice, or description, for example. Editing, on the other hand, refers to grammatical errors that are detected by peers. Although I did not expect the reading of literature to improve students' editing skills, I included it nevertheless because of its importance to strong critiques.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the two taped sessions are presented graphically in Table 1. The five groups' sessions, both pre-semester (held in September) and post-semester (held in November), are listed at the top of the page. In the left-hand column are listed the categories just discussed. The numbers in the columns represent the number of times that group made a comment corresponding to the category in that column. At the bottom of each column are listed the total number of responses made by each group and the percentage that each group increased from September to November.

Table 1

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Text Specific Discussion	7	14	9	5	14	22	9	10	17	20
Detection	1	1	4	2	3	2	1	3	4	2
Diagnosis	2	9	1	2	4	12	4	5	2	6
Gaps	1	6	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	3
Intended Meaning vs Effects	1	4	1	1	3	3	0	2	1	3
Prospective Inventing	0	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	4
Organization for Rhetorical Effect	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	2	5
Effect of Paper for Audience	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	1
Language Appreciation	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	0
Editing	2	3	3	1	3	0	3	1	11	2
Total	15	39	22	12	30	52	20	25	39	46
Percentage Increased	160.00%		-45.45%		73.33%		25.00%		17.95%	

As the table indicates, four out of five groups dramatically increased their total number of responses from September to November. Group one increased most dramatically, with fifteen responses in the September session and thirty-nine responses in the November session. This increase of 160% is especially impressive when one takes into consideration that Group 1 was only able to discuss two papers in the November session before its members ran out of time. It stands to reason that the group's total number of responses would have increased even further had the students had time to discuss another draft.

Group 2 had a problem similar to Group 1 in its second workshop, in that the students were able to discuss only two of the three papers. However, whereas Group 1 ran out of time, Group 2 included an unprepared member who had only one paragraph of his rough draft completed. This factor, in part, helps explain why the group did so poorly compared to the others and characterizes, in brief, the personality of the group. In addition to a group member's unpreparedness (which finally caused him to fail the class), the group never seemed to break out of the question/answer mode. In other words, they did not use the worksheet as a springboard for discussion, as did the other groups, but rather breezed through the questions in an automated fashion. One reason the group may have stuck to questions and answers is the group's dynamics or personality. Somehow, the group members never felt comfortable enough with one another to relax and break into a discussion. They felt more secure rigidly adhering to the questions that I had provided for them. Besides the unprepared student, whose offhand comments to his peers bordered on arrogance, a second group member, an immigrant from Taiwan, was extremely shy and unsure about his writing. The third student was one of the better writers in the class and confident as well, but too polite to challenge the first student or demand more of the second. Instead of feeling more comfortable with one another the second time around, the group apparently felt even less so.

Even with the lack of success of Group 2, the groups as a whole did well, as the table demonstrates. Together the five groups averaged an increase of 46%. But the groups as a whole not only improved in terms of total scores (quantity), but improved the quality of their responses as well. Turning again to that table, we see that all of the groups (except Group 2) increased their number of text-specific comments. Therefore, the discussions held

by the groups in November were more specific and thereby, one hopes, more helpful to the students than those held in September.

Even more exciting is the consistent improvement of each group in Diagnosis. Every group, including Group 2, increased the number of times they diagnosed a problem within the paper. These results suggest that students were better able both to detect problems and help their peers find solutions to problems that plagued their papers. In short, over the course of the semester they became better critical readers of their peers' prose.

Editing is another category worth attention. In Groups 2-5, the students chose to focus less on minor grammatical mistakes than on the larger rhetorical issues represented in the other categories. My hope was that the tendency to concern themselves with the smaller matters of grammar and mechanics ("microstructure changes") would lessen as the semester progressed, and that after practice responding to the larger matters of a literary text—its meaning, organization, rhetorical effect and others—the students would show an increased awareness for these larger concerns instead ("macrostructure changes") (Faigley and Witte, 400). Instead of editing, their comments seemed to indicate an increased concern with diagnosis, organization, intended meaning-vs-effects, and prospective inventing.

It could be argued, I suppose, that since the papers discussed in November at the end of the semester were better papers than those discussed in September, the students did not need to discuss editing as much in their November workshop. But if we look at the proportion of Editing to total comments made, it seems unlikely. In September, the editing comments of Group 5, for example, represented almost one-third of the total comments made—an inordinate number. In November, on the other hand, editing comments represented only a small fraction of the total (46) made. Since Group 5 did not increase as dramatically as some of the other groups in terms of total number of responses made (17.95%), it is clear that the focus of the comments shifted from more local issues to more global ones.

Statistical results such as these, although not quantitative, are nevertheless encouraging. Also encouraging is a comparison of comments made in group discussions of literary texts to comments made in peer groups just discussed. Transcriptions of the taped literary discussion groups reveal that students' comments and

strategies were similar to those made in the peer groups, which suggests that one may have influenced the other. For example, in a discussion of Sylvia Plath's poem "Metaphors," the groups focused on the central "gap" in the poem: solving the riddle that Plath constructs. When one student suggested that the riddle was war (instead of a pregnant woman), reading the words, "a melon strolling on two tendrils" as bombs, and the boarded train ("there's no getting off") as war itself, his reading was discarded by the other members of the group because he failed to synthesize other important lines in his reading. He failed to grasp the whole text, thereby leaving gaps which his peers diagnosed, in the same way that a group member in Group 1 diagnosed a gap in a peer's paper concerning women in business.

Through practice construing the specifics of a literary text into a coherent reading, students learned that their readings of their peers' texts must be backed by specifics in order to be credible. When interpreting a text like "A Rose for Emily," for example, students had to reconcile the fact of the odor emanating from Emily's house, the purchase of the poison (was it really purchased to kill rats?), with the disappearance of Homer Barron, in order to make sense of the text. Students' interpretations of that text could not be made without specific reference to those incidents. In the same way, students' advice to their peers must be text specific if it is to be of any help.

Improvement in the Diagnosis category can also be attributed to the active reading of literary texts. In the same way that students' readings of literature must attend to the specifics of the text, students must be able to diagnose discrepancies between their readings and specific textual constraints. Practice in locating problems in their readings of the literature seemed to help the students locate problems in their peers' texts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the potential that the reading of and responding to literary texts holds for peer response. Although interpreting poems and evaluating student written prose have different purposes, they share several characteristics and reading strategies. They are, finally, two sides of the same coin—that coin that is response to the written word.

To conclude, I offer the following hypotheses which also serve as suggestions for future investigations:

1) Students who are given practice responding to discourse, including literature and student essays, may demonstrate improved responses to their peers' texts in peer response groups.
2) Through practice construing the specifics of the literary text, students seem to respond more specifically to their peers' prose.
3) Students' detection and diagnosis of problems found in their peers' texts appear to be strengthened by practice in the critical reading of literature.
4) Reading literature necessitates the constituting and closing of gaps, the process of which, although different from the process of detecting gaps in student texts, should nevertheless improve the detection of them in their peers' texts as well as their own.
5) Students' ability to prospectively invent, or envision future possibilities in the present draft, may be improved through critically responding to works of literature.

Sally I. Cannon is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati-Raymond Walter College. The study from which the manuscript evolved was undertaken as part of her Ph.D. dissertation at Case Western Reserve University. Her research interests include reading and writing, literary theory and composition theory, and gender and personality theory as they apply to the study of writing.

APPENDIX A: WRITING SAMPLE

Write a letter to me in which you do one of the following: describe your feelings about writing and why; describe your past writing experience; or describe something interesting that has happened to you since arriving on campus.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE ON READING AND WRITING PART I.

1. I did a lot of writing in high school English classes.
a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. neutral   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree
2. I do a lot of personal writing—writing that is not assigned by a teacher.
a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. neutral   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree
3. I enjoy writing.
a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. neutral   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree

4. I enjoy reading.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
5. I do a lot of pleasure reading in my spare time.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
6. I did a lot of reading as a child.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
7. I did a lot of reading in high school English classes.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
8. I like to write about what I read because it helps me to better understand it.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
9. I like to read essays, fiction, or poetry because it gives me ideas to write about.
   a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
10. I would rather write about my own experiences and ideas than write in response to readings given by the teacher.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
11. I believe that reading can help me to improve my writing.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
12. I believe that reading (essays, short stories, poetry, drama) has a place in the writing classroom.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
13. I believe that reading is more helpful to my writing than grammar.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
14. I believe that reading is more helpful to my writing than lessons in logic.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree
15. I believe that reading is more helpful to my writing than writing itself.
    a. strongly agree b. agree c. neutral d. disagree e. strongly disagree

PART II.

1. Rank the following items in the order of most importance to success in writing, with 1 being the highest ranking:
   a. reading
   b. grammar
   c. logic
   d. feedback on your writing
   e. sentence combining
2. Do you think reading has a place in a writing classroom? In what ways? Explain.
3. What specifically do you think reading can teach you about writing?
4. Do you think your proficiency in reading is related to your proficiency in writing in any way? Explain.

APPENDIX C: READER-RESPONSE WORKSHEET

Name of Reader: Name of Writer:

1) What are your initial reactions to this paper? What in the text helped stimulate them?

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2) What is the writer's purpose? Is it clearly stated or implied?

3) What did the writer do in the paper that was especially effective? (What worked?)

4) What did the writer do that was not effective? (What did not work?)

5) What did the assignment or writing lead you to expect that needs more work?

6) Do you have any other helpful comments?

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