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Reading Assigned Literature in a Reading Workshop

Barbara Hoetker Ash

I greatly admire the kinds of classroom communities described in the works of Donald Graves, Jane Hansen, Nancie Atwell, and Lucy McCormick Calkins. Indeed, I have tried in my own English classes to create just such communities where my middle-school students and I may safely experiment with reading and writing. In writing, the students select topics and genres, have conferences with each other and me, and publish their “neat sheets” in our classroom library; often their pieces evolve over a long period of time—six to twelve weeks, a semester even. In reading, the students also make their own selections (largely from our classroom paperback library); they correspond with me and fellow classmates about their books and talk informally with each other and with adults outside the classroom about the reading they have chosen to do. But there is one element I find missing in the description of other workshop process classes—all students in a class reading the same piece of literature.

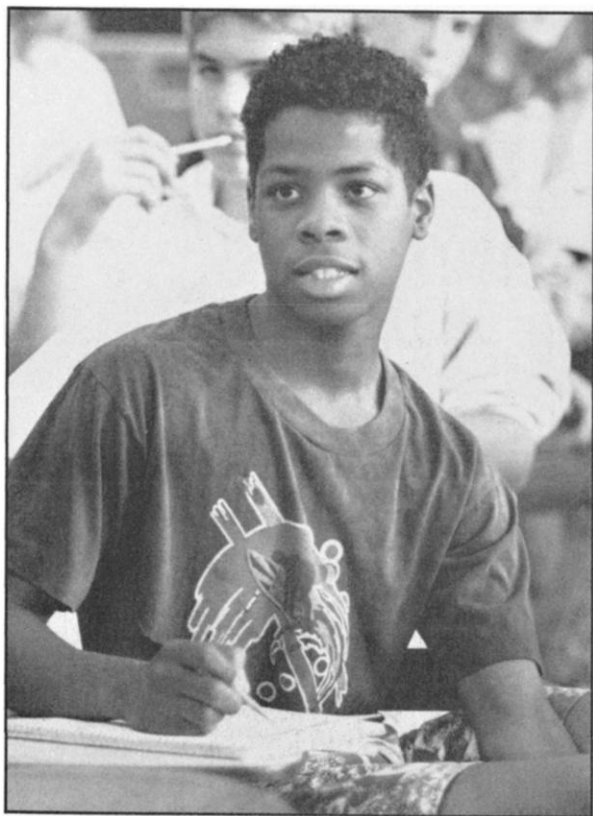
That an entire class of middle-school students should read a story, a poem, a play—even a novel—in common is, I think, a vital activity in English, but not as the reading is typically handled in secondary English classes where a “right” reading or interpretation is implied, if not openly espoused, and where students are usually quizzed and tested on aspects of the literary work (the themes, the characters, the setting, the images, symbols, and the like). Such teaching is anathema to teachers whose students, when they read and write, either individually or together, imagine, reflect, question, and investigate, and so, bring language to life—their own language as well as the language of “outside” or trade authors they read.

“Bringing language to life”: that is one reward of making reading a social affair, as opposed to a strictly private and solitary activity, or a one- or two-way communication between students and teacher. I have watched and listened with pleasure and delight as sixth and seventh graders, working in small groups, experimented with the different ways of reading a poem aloud. And I have learned much more about a given text as I have overheard these same students, again in small groups, preparing to dramatize the dialogue from a story to the class as a whole. Within their classroom community, working jointly on a given text, students have become less passive, more active readers.

That students often are passive readers of *assigned* texts was brought home to me dramatically in an exchange I had two years ago with a group of ninth graders. As homework, these students had been assigned James Thurber’s “Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and to note in their reading journals the words or phrases which had made them smile or chuckle. I had anticipated that in class the next day there would be an exchange—a sharing of what had struck them as funny.

But before that class could begin, a group of five girls had come to me worried. “Dr. Ash,” their spokesperson pleaded, “we didn’t find *anything* funny about this story!” In return, I asked if they had simply recorded that information in their journals. They hadn’t thought to do this, so back to their seats they went dutifully to record their reader response—or lack of it, as it seemed to me, suddenly anxious that my lesson would be a flop.

Thankfully, another reader’s question saved me. He opened the class by showing his confusion: “Is this guy daydreamin’, or is he nuts, or what?”



"Of course he's daydreaming, you turkey," came another student's quick retort. It was then that I intervened because the first student's question had made me wonder just *where* in the text the second reader had realized that Mitty was indeed fantasizing. So I proposed to the class that we begin with the first sentence in the story and read through to see if we could pinpoint the clues the second reader had picked up.

Since this was early in the literature unit, I was the one who felt most comfortable reading aloud. I began, in my best imitation "courageous commander's" voice, "We're going through!" I felt the stir in the class as I continued in the voice of one feeling the stress and strain of rough seas. But it wasn't until I hit "ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa" that the students roared with laughter. And who was laughing the loudest? That's right—two of the girls who had said there was nothing funny about the story.

Naturally, I pressed them on the matter. "You said there was nothing funny!" I protested. "There wasn't," came the reply, "when we read it. But it was the *way* you said it, Dr. Ash." At which point another student, not one of the original five,

clarified, "Yeah. Remember when your parents would read you those fairy tales and make the voice of the BIG BEAR and the *tiny baby bear* voice and you'd be delighted, but when you read it yourself it wouldn't seem nearly so good?" Now I was beginning to see the light: "You mean," I asked incredulously, "that when you read you don't hear the different voices in your head?" "Naw," came another classmate's reply, "we just read like this"—and she held up her book, with her finger following the words—"da, da, da; da, da, da." "That's right," agreed any number of others in the class.

So now it stood revealed. Many of these ninth graders were reading in a straight monotone a story chock-full of voices (Mitty's, Mitty's in the hero role, Mrs. Mitty's, the cop's, the parking-lot attendant's . . .) as if the text were something as lifeless as a table of random numbers. Very few had invested themselves in the assignment as I had imagined they would (indeed, as I had done) in order to make the reading delightful.

Perhaps because the reading was an assignment (to be done on the students' own time, no less), they had treated it as schoolwork—something to be done quickly with as much detachment as possible. Maybe if they, instead of I, had made the reading selection (or selections—different stories as individual tastes dictated), and maybe if the reading had been done inside, instead of outside, class, I would have seen different results. But maybe not—because, as I was later to learn, even with self-selections and time allotted in class for quiet reading and jotting in reading journals, many of the ninth graders did not possess or practice the reading strategies that I and some of their fellow classmates used not only to make meaning from a text but also to make the reading entertaining and enlightening. Nor did these less engaged readers include in their own writing the stuff that "turned on" more involved readers.

So it was through my encounter with the ninth graders that I discovered why reading a literary text in common should become an essential part of my reading and writing classroom communities for middle-school students: only by reading the same piece of literature at the same time, or re-reading jointly a passage from a work read earlier and in solitude, can students learn what strategies other readers use. Among the readers in the classroom, of course, I am a trained and enthusiastic but older, more experienced adult reader. By

working in unison with a story or poem or novel, students who are writers have an opportunity to see the effects on readers of certain textual features typically, or uniquely, used by published writers.

There is still another reward my middle-school students and I have gained from our response-centered classes. Through my study of reader-response critics such as Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, and Robert Scholes, I have begun to figure out how to incorporate “assigned” common readings without destroying the spirit and energy of the reading/writing community: reading aloud and “blocking out” characters’ gestures and moves as if we were producing a play from a story or poem or novel; “filling in the gaps on the page” by visualizing a character’s physical features and dress; drawing maps of landscapes described by an author or imagined by us the readers; sharing both written and oral responses and searching the text and our own pasts for what has triggered those responses; working together through a passage difficult to interpret or even make “plain sense” of. In these activities, students get to talk with each other, a pleasure for them and a learning experience for me. And it is, I hope, the pleasure of reading and writing—sometimes even the reading and writing in response to a common piece of literature—that will encourage students



to become lifelong, reflective, responsive readers and effective writers.

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