

# Response to literature as a cultural activity

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As recent research reviews (Beach & Hynds, 1991; Marshall, 2000; Martinez & Roser, in press; Sipe, 1999) on response to literature demonstrate, this body of research has expanded exponentially in the past 30 years. What do we know about response and how has this knowledge changed over the years? We actually know a great deal, but the complex nature of response and the development of new theoretical perspectives on language and learning have yielded increasingly sophisticated questions about texts, readers, and contexts for response. Of equal interest is the effect that all of this research has had on what actually occurs in classrooms. How is literature treated in our schools? What insights from research might influence classroom practice in the 21st century? These are some of the questions that we consider here as we briefly review the evolution of relevant research in both response and in the enactment of response-based practices in classrooms.

## *The evolution of research on response*

From the early days of the development of theory and research on response, studies have focused on (a) text, or how various texts affect response; (b) readers, or how experiences and attitudes situated in readers affect response; and (c) the context in which response is generated. These ways of discussing literature and response remain with us today (Galda, Ash, & Cullinan, 2000; Marshall, 2000; Sipe, 1999), but the ways in which we explore texts, readers, and contexts have changed consider-

ably since the 1970s. In this review, we discuss how earlier perceptions of texts, readers, and contexts actually prefigured later redefinitions of response research in the 1990s in sociocultural terms. These redefinitions suggest new ways of integrating literature instruction within the development of students' larger language systems.

## **Research on text**

Research on text consists primarily of content and literary analyses, including attention to the author in terms of authenticity or stance. In a few cases these analyses are conducted as a way of explaining or exploring responses to particular texts. For example, early studies such as Squire (1964) explored how the structure of text affected the responses of its readers. Responses changed at different points in the text, such as the climax. More recent research on text, such as Nodelman's (1988) study of the narrative art of picture books, uses semiotic analysis to explore how picture books convey a narrative to children who are constructing that narrative as they read. Stephens's (1992) exploration of ideology in children's fiction uses critical linguistics and narrative theory to demonstrate how texts work to situate child readers in both implicit and explicit ideologies.

For example, authors assume a stance toward the ideologies and societal norms that they portray; that is, either assenting to, advocating, or attacking the characters' sociocultural practices (Sutherland, 1985). Readers may then interrogate texts for their authenticity in terms of whether the social norms portrayed actually represent

a culture, as well as the author's stance regarding these social norms (Cai, 1997). Readers may also challenge the author's authority to construct these cultural representations, particularly multicultural literature for children and young adults (Cai, 1997; Harris, 1994; Sims, 1984). Interestingly, many, but not all, studies of text and ideology privilege the importance of text features over the reader in the literary transaction. That is, they assume that their own individual constructions of text are definitive, and allow little room for alternative constructions.

Researchers have also examined how readers acquire knowledge of literary conventions that allows them to interpret the symbolic meaning of various text cues (Hunt & Vipond, 1991; Mackey, 1997; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998). Through extensive reading within a particular literary genre or form, readers acquire knowledge of conventions for (a) understanding meaning of titles, names, beginnings, and endings; (b) predicting story outcomes; or (c) defining how texts cohere around thematic points. The unresolved developmental question is whether readers acquire this interpretive know-how simply through reading or through active participation in formulating interpretations with others in communities whose members share knowledge of these conventions (Svensson, 1990).

### Research on readers

Just as texts are created within and with ideologies that assume discourse contexts that privilege particular roles and social practices, so, too are readers. Research on readers has evolved in much the same fashion as research on text. Early research looked at expectations, attitudes, and practices of readers with little or no regard of how they were developed through participation in communities of practice. For example, Galda (1982) characterized the responses of three fifth-grade girls in a way that highlighted their distinctive styles, and Hancock (1993) explored the response styles of four sixth-grade students, but neither explored how those styles might have been developed. Other research goes beyond these studies to situate individual style within social practices. Sims (1983), for example, linked response to culture in her case study of a young African American girl's responses to books by and about African Americans. Sipe (1998) described how four first and second graders differed considerably in the responses they offered during story time discussions. One reader was very logical, using close textual analysis and intertextual references to bolster her arguments during read aloud time; another used texts to generate creative activities. A third reader often talked about themes that he perceived; a fourth used stories as springboards for his own performances. McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) also presented rich descriptions of two third- and fourth-grade readers who vary considerably in style in terms of how

they use their reading. One used his literary experience to help him understand the community in which he lived; the other to help her imagine her future. Studies such as these are examples of how research has come to explore how response styles might be connected to readers' lives both within and beyond the classroom.

Researchers have also explored how readers' expectations for characters' actions influence their responses. Readers have expectations for how people ought to behave, expectations that are shaped by the cultures in which they live and work. These expectations hold true for characters' behaviors, as well, as many readers treat characters as people regardless of the fact that they exist only in the literary transaction (Mellor & Patterson, 2000). Ample research has described how even young children become involved with characters, often comparing character action and feeling with their own (Hancock, 1993; McGee, 1992). Preschool children are more likely to adopt imaginative modes of response in responding to fantasy picture books than in responding to realistic or informational picture books (Shine & Roser, 1999).

However, not all readers respond positively to the characters they are reading about. Early research (Galda, 1982) discovered that readers rejected the actions of characters when those actions did not correspond to their own lived experience. Enciso (1994) connected this type of response to cultural practice when she documented how some readers might resist or reject a text that does not reflect their cultural expectations. Suburban high school students adopted a stance of resistance to multicultural literature given their reluctance to explore issues of racism and white privilege within their suburban culture (Beach, 1997b).

These responses also take the form of resisting the social norms readers perceive operating in a text or classroom. Students may resist invited stances and dominate discourses in ways that lead them to create their own versions of texts (Lewis, 1997). They may affirm or reject an author's or teacher's stance. For example, in responding to multicultural literature, students may adopt a stance of resistance to the assumption that a book such as *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1991) is being used didactically to discuss race issues (Enciso, 1997).

Other research has explored the types of intertextual connections that individual readers make between texts and their life experiences and/or other texts (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Short, 1992; Sipe, 1998; Sumara, 1996). Students make those intertextual connections fostered in the classroom—links defined in terms of shared topics, themes, issues, or stances, which are also connected to the social and cultural practices that surround them.

More recently, researchers have attended to how readers' responses reflect their cultural models or discourses (Beach, 1997b; Gee, 2000). In one such study (Beach, 1995), students in advanced and regular 10th- and 11th- grade classes wrote responses to a story about advanced and regular high school characters. The advanced and regular students differed in their responses to the story, differences reflecting their cultural models of schooling associated with the ability grouping system and student motivation. The advanced students attributed the fact that the story's main character was a regular student to their perception of him as unmotivated, lazy, and lacking social skills. The regular students perceived the regular student character as satisfied with being in the regular class and not having to cope with the challenges of an advanced class. Through their responses, they were reifying their allegiances to their separate ability-grouping worlds in which language or discourses are used for different purposes.

Another study demonstrated how differences in responses can reflect differences in students' sociocultural experiences related to socioeconomic class. In a comparison of working-versus middle-class high school students' responses to poetry, Hemphill (1999) found that working-class students focused more on speakers' actions and thoughts, while middle-class students focused more on thematic meanings consistent with the goals of literature instruction.

The differences in response in these studies (Beach, 1995; Hemphill, 1999) reflect a larger sociocultural participation in class-based communities of practice in which working-class adolescents use literacy to report on immediate interpersonal interactions and conflicts while upper-middle-class adolescents use literacy to judge and categorize others according to institutional norms (Gee & Crawford, 1998). This research suggests interesting connections between the language used to construct text worlds and the language used to construct readers' lived worlds as well, connections that lead beyond readers and texts into an exploration of contexts, large and small.

### **Research on contexts**

In the past decade increasing numbers of studies have explored how teaching practice and classroom context shape responses by the sometimes implicit set of rules and expectations that govern how literature is enacted in a particular classroom or culture. Fish (1980) described how the interpretive community in which readers existed shaped the strategies of individual readers. Hickman (1981) documented the influence of classroom context, especially teacher practice, on response. Others, such as Many and Wiseman (1992), O'Flahavan (1989), and Raphael and McMahon (1994), described

how instructional practices enacted by the teacher serve to set the agenda for a class, guiding not only how students respond, but also how they read. These and other studies reflect the trend toward an exploration of the larger sociocultural contexts that surround reading and responding.

Texts were once considered discrete entities containing an unchanging meaning that a careful reader could discover. Readers were seen as individuals, pursuing individual interests, perspectives, and practices. Contexts were considered immediate: this book club, that classroom. The sociocultural frame has complicated and expanded these notions. Texts, readers, and contexts, each inseparable from the other, are also inseparable from the larger contexts in which they are enacted. This suggests that the research agenda for the next few years will involve exploring the multifaceted sociocultural nature of response and what that means for instruction.

### *Blurring the boundaries: Exploring sociocultural perspectives on texts, readers, and contexts*

Literary response researchers in the 1990s have focused increasingly on response not simply as a transaction between texts and readers but as a construction of text meaning and reader stances and identities within larger sociocultural contexts. Readers, texts, and contexts are studied as constituted by culture and history. These researchers adopt a range of disciplinary perspectives—sociolinguistic (Beach & Phinney, 1998; Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993), dialogic (Kamberelis & Scott, 1992; Knoeller, 1998), genre (Hunt, 1994; Kucan & Beck, 1996; Pappas & Pettegrew, 1998), poststructuralist (Mellor & Patterson, 2000), semiotic (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998), phenomenological (Mackey, 1997; Sumara, 1996), performance theory (Lewis, 1997), critical discourse analysis (Beach, 1997a), or critical/postcolonial theory (Blake, 1998; Singh & Greenlaw, 1998—to examine how texts, readers, contexts, stances, and readers are constructed through language, genres, signs, images, or discourses. In doing so, they reflect a key tenet of a sociocultural theory of learning (Cole, 1996; Engestrom, 1987; Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999; Leont'ev, 1978) that defines learning as occurring through participation in a joint, collective activity mediated by cultural tools (Wells, 1999; Wenger, 1999; Wertsch, 1998). This implies that students learn to respond to literature as they acquire various social practices, identities, and tools not only through participation in interpretive communities of practice, but also through experience in acquiring social practices and tools and in constructing identities within

specific cultural worlds (Hynds, 1997; Sumara, 1996; Wilhelm, 1997).

Researchers who are studying changes in students' ability to use language, genres, signs, images, or discourses as tools to represent their experiences with texts need to examine how students acquire interpretive and social practices over time through participation in particular types of communities of practice. Examining research on response across grade levels can begin to help us understand how readers develop these abilities (Svensson, 1990), and how teachers can help students critically reflect on how the language of their own responses reflects not only construction of worlds in a text, but also their own lived worlds.

### **Constructing texts as cultural worlds**

In constructing texts as cultural worlds, readers are learning to interpret characters' actions within larger frameworks of worlds or activity systems constituted by cultural or ideological forces (Engestrom, 1987). Moving beyond a focus on individual characters to a consideration of the systems that shape the characters, the author's construction of them, and the readers themselves can help readers consider how lives reflect social forces and how individuals can influence these taken-for-granted practices. As Edelsky (1999) noted,

Studying systems—how they work and to what end—focusing on systems of influence, systems of culture, systems of gender relations...being critical means questioning against the frame of system, seeing individuals as always within systems, as perpetuating or resisting systems. Being noncritical...means seeing individuals as outside of...[and] separate from systems and therefore separate from culture and history. (p. 28)

Given their attentiveness to cues implying narrative conflict (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998), readers note tensions between status quo systems that serve to protect existing systems and potential systems that emerge out of the creation of new tools or objects that challenge these status quo systems (Beach, 2000). As Bruner (1990) observed, narratives “mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic work of beliefs, dreams, and hopes” (p. 52). In describing his own response to the novel *Huckleberry Finn*, Engestrom (1987) perceived Huck as initially operating in a status quo middle-class, small-town, racist system associated with the world of Tom Sawyer. When Huck and Jim go down the river on the raft and enter into a world in which slavery still operates, they mutually construct a potential system “of radical moral anarchism [that] makes Huck a personality of entirely different dimensions from that of Tom Sawyer. For Tom, freeing Jim is a safe, imaginary adventure....

For Huck, it is a deadly serious moral and existential struggle” (p. 183). As Huck and Jim acquire new tools—the use of language, parody, and discourses of freedom—they constructed an alternative, potential system (Engestrom, 1987).

In responding to texts at the level of activity, students learn to go beyond the usual pedagogical focus on inferring characters' acts or dialogue (what is the character doing or saying), beliefs (what do characters believe about each other), and goals and motivations (what is the character trying to accomplish and why) to interpret and contextualize characters' actions or dialogue as involving various social practices within activities (Beach, 2000). These social practices include (a) defining/constructing identities, (b) including/excluding/positioning others, (c) building relationships, (d) influencing others' actions or beliefs, (e) representing/serving institutions/systems, (f) establishing group allegiances/stances, (g) coping with conflicts/differences, (h) engaging in shared rituals, or (i) constructing/sharing knowledge. By inferring these social practices, students are interpreting how characters' actions or dialogue function or serve as social agendas (Mosenthal, 1998) designed to fulfill the objects or motives driving activity systems. As Gee (2000) noted, people (and characters) are recognized as having certain agendas or being certain kinds of persons through their uses of language or discourses. Stephens (1992) suggested that even in the elementary grades, readers should be taught how to assume an interrogative stance toward the texts they read.

To contextualize characters' acts as trees within the larger forest of object-driven activity systems, readers draw on their own experiences with act/object relationships in lived-world activity systems. For example, in responding to a story portraying a high school English teacher's highly personal reaction to a student's essay, a group of English teachers enrolled in a graduate methods course interpreted the teacher and student as caught within a range of competing systems by drawing on their own participation in the worlds of the methods course, their experiences as teachers, and their own families (Beach, 2000).

Readers also contextualize characters' acts by drawing on historical knowledge of past cultural perspectives and models. For example, in responding to the novel *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1953), high school students contextualized Gatsby's actions of acquiring wealth and status in order to woo Daisy away from Tom within the larger rags-to-riches system of accumulating wealth in the United States capitalism system, a system at odds with Daisy and Tom's system of inherited wealth (Beach & Phinney, 1998). The students drew on their knowledge of U.S. history and culture to interpret Gatsby's actions as driven by the objects of accumulating new wealth.

## Constructing identities through participation in worlds

A sociocultural perspective also suggests teaching students to perceive characters as constructed through language and discourses (Mellor & Patterson, 2000; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998). Students would draw on their own expectations for appropriate lived-world language practices to interpret characters' social practices, expectations that are shaped by the cultures in which they live and work. They also use these cultural expectations to detect violations dramatizing unusual, extraordinary events central to narrative development or a story's tellability or point (Labov, 1972). For example, a student may draw on lived-world experience with language to infer that the fact that a character's consistent bragging about his accomplishments may be seen as a violation of conventions operating in a particular text world as suggested by other characters' reactions to his bragging.

Readers also draw on their own experiences as persons acquiring social practices constituting identities and competence in lived worlds to interpret characters' own development as participants in text worlds (Athanases, 1998; Kamberelis & Scott, 1992). Second-grade readers (Galda, Rayburn, & Stanzi, 2000) used what they knew about their own varied family structures to make inferences about a character's relationship with his father. Adolescents, socialized to adopt certain social practices and discourses constituting participation in the world of romance (Christian-Smith, 1993; Finders, 1997; Willinsky & Hunniford, 1986), use their knowledge of romance as they read and respond to romance novels.

Readers also rely on their participation in text worlds as forms of socialization for participation in lived worlds, for example in reading romance novels (Christian-Smith, 1993; Radway, 1984). In some cases, adolescents resist the romance-world cultural model (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990) by adopting alternative, feminist discourses acquired through participation in different lived worlds (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997; Harper, 2000). In one study of early adolescent females' responses to young adult adolescent novels, participants adopted stances of resistance and roles consistent with practices associated with the "bad-" or "good-girl" characters by publicly adopting deviant practices associated with being the bad girl; for example, by walking across the tops of chairs in the school library (Enciso, 1998).

Younger readers do the same. McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) documented how third- and fourth-grade readers use the books they read to better understand their own lived worlds. One third-grade boy used *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1991) to think about his own home community as plagued by the same kinds of social problems depicted in the novel.

## Sharing responses through tools

Readers employ language, genres, signs, images, drama, visual art, or discourses as tools to share responses in communities of practice—such as classrooms, computer chat rooms, or book clubs (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Becoming members of these communities of practice entails learning to successfully employ uses of these tools consistently with a community's objects/motives, roles, norms, beliefs, or traditions (Engestrom, 1987; Wertsch, 1998).

Because these tools are used for social shared thinking (Rogoff & Toma, 1997), participants collaboratively construct "coherent beliefs" by "reasoning together rather than against one another" (Smithson & Dias, 1996, p. 255). Shared thinking also involves being open to disagreement, respecting differences of opinion, and verifying the validity of one's tentative passing theories (Kent, 1993) through triangulation with others' passing theories (Alvermann, Young, & Green, 1997; Hunt, 1994).

Through participation in discussions, students acquire the language and genres that enhance their level of participation and their use of response strategies valued in different types of discussions—small-group or whole-class, student- or teacher-led discussions. Research shows that many types of discussion are valuable, depending on the desired outcome. Small-group discussion without the teacher, for example, can allow students to work together to resolve cognitive conflicts (Almasi, 1995), or develop strategies that lead to successful discussions (Vinz, Gordon, Hamilton, LaMontagne, & Lundgren, 2000). Small-group discussion is the key component of the Book Club program developed by Raphael and colleagues (McMahon, Raphael, Goatley, & Pardo, 1997). This research demonstrated the importance of students having the opportunity to control the content and the flow of discussion. Students were responsible for bringing ideas to the discussion and for asking for and providing clarification during discussion. In Book Club, however, there was also a large-group discussion that was led by the teacher as this provided the opportunity to model strategies, raise issues that students did not raise themselves, clear up confusions, and link to thematic content.

One advantage of teacher-led discussions is that teachers can demonstrate the use of language and genre tools within the students' zone of proximal development (Wells, 1999). For example, Eeds and Wells (1989) described how adult members of literature discussion groups can facilitate discussions to turn them into grand conversations about literature by encouraging student responses, highlighting important student-made points, and demonstrating literate talk by using literary labels such as conflict or plot. Other research (McGee, 1992; McGee, Courtney,

& Lomax, 1994) shows how teachers facilitate discussion by helping children focus on topics and clarify contributions, nudge children toward new perspectives, and sometimes act as literary curators, often by posing questions that call for interpretation. When teachers did pose such questions, student discussions reflected an increase in interpretive responses. In a yearlong study of literature discussion in a second-grade classroom, Galda et al. (2000) documented the development of response strategies as mediated by teacher demonstration and explicit instruction. From the early years onward, readers' response strategies are shaped by their communities of practice.

Teachers also can model the uses of language and genre tools involved in (a) posing questions or hypotheses; (b) relating these questions/hypotheses to relevant aspects in the text and their own real-world experiences; (c) generating explanations or interpretations; and (d) critiquing characters and their own beliefs or ideologies shaping perceptions of these concerns, dilemmas, or issues. They may also use informal writing as a tool to assist students in formulating these questions or hypotheses prior to or during discussions, writing that is then read aloud to frame the direction of discussion. Sharing writing that discloses students' own conflicted, alternative interpretations as tentative passing theories (Kent, 1993) serves to invite other students to describe similar tensions in their interpretations. By framing their interpretations as tentative, students are implying the need for further verification—agreements or disagreements—from their peers (Smithson & Dias, 1996). In one study, these disagreements around alternative interpretations resulted in extended stretches; that is, a series of turns by different students with a consistent focus on the same topic or issue (Beach, Eddleston, & Philippot, in preparation).

Many elementary teachers use literature journals to help their students express their thoughts during or after reading, and most often before discussion, seeing writing as a way to organize for the discussion (Martinez, Roser, Hoffman, & Battle, 1992; McMahan et al., 1997). It seems that elementary grade students' responses are both organized and broadened by the opportunity to write. Writing serves to help them think through what they want to express, and experience with various writing prompts gives them access to different ways to think and talk about texts.

The teacher's modeling also provides students with a metalinguistic framework for talking about and reflecting on their uses of language and genres (Hunt, 1994; Wells, 1999). Children in elementary school devote a considerable amount of time to metatalk about their own purposes and strategies (Almasi, Anderson, Russell, & Guthrie, 1998; Galda et al., 2000; Raphael & McMahan, 1994). Second-grade students in a teacher-led literature discussion group often commented on their own behav-

ior and language during discussion as well as the language used by characters in the books they were reading (Galda et al., 2000). From research on high school students' literature discussions, Vinz et al. (2000) found that students are more likely to acquire these discussion strategies when they are given responsibility to direct or lead discussions, although studies of younger students highlight the importance of the teacher in the development of these strategies. That these strategies are important and develop through authentic talk about text is, however, clearly documented from the primary grades through high school.

Unfortunately, although research has affirmed the importance of authentic talk about text in the development of sophisticated, engaged readers, practice has lagged. Most classrooms still rely on the repetitive pattern of teacher question, student response, teacher evaluation (Mehan, 1979). In a recent study based on an extensive analysis of many classroom discussions, Nystrand (1999) found that only about 15% of instruction in more than 100 middle and high school classes involved the use of authentic questions with no predetermined answers or following up on students' answers. There was little dialogic interaction:

...dialogic shifts are rare, occurring in less than 7% of all instructional episodes observed. One striking finding is the virtual absence of dialogic shifts among low track classes: There were only 2 dialogic shifts in the 197 instructional episodes we observed, no doubt a result of emphasis on skill development and test questions about prior reading. Quite simply, lower track students have little opportunity for engaged discussions. This is particularly important in light of our findings that dialogic classroom discourse increases student achievement. (p. 2)

While all of this research on discussion demonstrates that students can learn to ask and answer important questions, advance their hypotheses, and listen to and learn from others, having discussions for their own intrinsic sake may not engage all students (Hynds, 1997; Miller & Legge, 1999). In the elementary grades this might be called thematic or integrated instruction as teachers and students work together to develop coherence around a variety of texts and tasks. Embedding discussion within larger contexts of inquiry about topics, themes, or issues of concern to students and teachers as co-inquirers provides some larger purpose for the discussion (Beach & Myers, in press).

Teachers can participate as co-inquirers by recognizing how students, as first-time readers, adopt a different stance than teachers, who are responding on the basis of multiple rereadings of a text and thematic patterns extracted from those readings (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998). It also

entails “dis-positioning ourselves as learners, teachers, readers-continually learning to un-know what we believe, what worked for us in the past, and what made sense in other teaching or learning situations” (Vinz et al., 2000, p. 148). It means being honest and tentative in discussions, responding as a reader as well as a teacher, and being responsive to the ideas of the students. When student responses are central to the classroom, then every time a text is read it becomes a new text, the unique construction of a particular group of readers.

In addition to learning to use discussion as a tool to think about text, students may also use writing, images, or graphics in drawings, cut-out figures, or hypermedia computer productions as tools for rewriting texts, parodying texts, or creating new versions of texts (Enciso, 1994; 1998; McKillop & Myers, 2000; Pope, 1995; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998; Whitin, 1996). For example, in responding to Toni Morrison's (1994) *The Bluest Eye*, high school students reacted negatively to the idea that the African American characters in the book would be limited to reading Dick and Jane books as cultural models of white privilege (Beach, Kalnin, & Leer, in preparation). They then used images, language, and narrative as tools to create their own alternative children's books designed for the main character, Pecola, that portrayed a world more consistent with her experience and needs. Or students construct their own hypertext versions of texts, including thematic or lexical annotations; intertextual links to other related texts; or paths and trails to related themes, topics, biographical information, or historical background (Cornis-Pope, 2000). For example, high school students used images, photos, video clips, or songs to construct Web-based hypertext responses to stories about love, family, and peer relationships (see examples at [www.ed.psu.edu/k-12/teenissues](http://www.ed.psu.edu/k-12/teenissues), Beach & Myers, in press).

Analysis of seventh graders' hypermedia responses to poetry found that students used images, clips, songs, or other texts as iconic signs to simply illustrate the poem's meaning by, for example, selecting an image that illustrated the poem (McKillop & Myers, 2000). In other cases, they selected texts that, when juxtaposed with the poem, created a new third meaning that served to extend or interrogate the poem's meaning. Preservice college students in a Newfoundland university developed Web-based hypermedia projects to interrogate and resist what they perceived as stereotypical portrayals of their province in the novel *The Shipping News* (Proulx, 1993) (see [lord.educ.mun.ca/educ41421/](http://lord.educ.mun.ca/educ41421/); Barrell & Hammett, 1999). Primary-grade students encouraged to draw their images of the stories they were reading became quite involved in what they were reading and used their drawings to begin conversations around the texts. All of this points to the ways

in which hypermedia texts and images serve as tools for mediating literary interpretation.

### *Pedagogical possibilities: Middle school students' response to a young adult novel*

We have argued that the meaning of students' responses is grounded in cultural and historical worlds, activity systems, and tools, and suggested the value of instruction based on developmentally appropriate inquiry about the worlds or systems portrayed in literature as well as students' own related experiences. To illustrate how this approach plays out in the classroom, we describe activities involved in inquiry projects conducted by a group of 15 seventh-grade females who volunteered to meet in an after-school group called The Girls' Book Club organized by Sarah Gohman, a middle school teacher at Wayzata Middle School, Wayzata, Minnesota (Beach & Myers, in press). The focus of their inquiry project was the social world of the Middle Ages as portrayed in the Newbery Honor novel *Catherine, Called Birdy* (Cushman, 1994), which portrays the life of an adolescent female, Catherine, whose father wants to marry her off to an older suitor whom she despises.

#### **Organizing instruction around concerns, issues, and dilemmas**

Much of literature instruction is currently organized around predetermined topics or themes, which students then use to frame their responses to literature. The socio-cultural perspective suggests that learning is more likely to occur when students are grappling with the conflicts, tensions, and dilemmas endemic to shifting or competing worlds portrayed in texts (Mosenthal, 1998). As they respond to texts, students may identify concerns, issues, or dilemmas portrayed in texts or derived from students' own experiences. The fact that they are bothered or disturbed by these concerns, issues, or dilemmas operating in worlds or systems enhances their engagement with inquiry about these worlds or systems. To help students understand the worlds portrayed in the novel, the students first studied specific aspects of medieval life—such as the feudal system, the life of lords and peasants, the church, and education. They then read and shared their responses to *Catherine, Called Birdy* in dialogue journal entries.

Many students were concerned with Catherine's treatment as a female by her authoritarian father and his attempting to marry her off against her wishes. One student noted,

They [women] were not allowed very much freedom at all and could be abused by men. The roles they played were those of not very smart or talented people, although they

might have been as smart or smarter than the men, given the chance to learn...they didn't get educated because it was considered a waste because they were women.

They were particularly perplexed by the issue of the role religion played in politics and were baffled that people were physically punished for not believing in Roman Catholicism. They wondered about how people would learn to truly understand the teachings of the Bible if they weren't allowed to question its meaning. Framing their responses in terms of issues meant that they then wanted to explore larger social and political forces shaping characters' lives. They also wanted to connect issues relevant to the medieval period to current issues of the role of the church and religion, gender status, and education.

### **Contextualizing the world of the novel**

We have argued for the need for students to go beyond inferences about characters' actions to contextualize these acts as social practices within larger cultural worlds. Students contextualized the characters' acts in the novel in terms of purposes, roles, rules, beliefs, and history operating in the worlds of the novel. For example, in responding to Catherine's family world and the conflict between Catherine and her father, they examined how that conflict stemmed from the family's sense of purpose, the roles family members assign to each other, the rules governing decision making in the family, or beliefs about power and privilege in the family. In all of this, they were focusing on more than just individual characters; they were examining the operation of social worlds as systems. For example, the students compared the roles of females in the medieval world with females in the contemporary world. They constructed a comparison chart, listing aspects of the medieval world on one side and paired aspects of the modern world on the other side. These pairings helped them understand that while women were largely subordinated during the medieval period, such subordination continues still in contemporary society. And, in studying the prevailing beliefs of that period, they, as one student reported in a written log, "were appalled that girls were told who they must marry." They were also disturbed by the fact that Catherine's father beat her regularly. They were upset by "the lack of opportunity for women during this time period."

### **Critiquing and transforming worlds.**

Based on their contextualizing of the medieval world, the students then interrogated the common-sense, taken-for-granted assumptions underlying that world, asking questions about the objects or motives driving that world such as "why are people doing this?" or "what is the purpose for this practice?" Then to envision ways of trans-

forming their current world, pairs of students each identified a topic related to women in present-day society: single-sex classrooms, women in the military, the Equal Rights Amendment, girls, sports and Title IX, mail-order brides, comparing women in different cultures, historical women, women during war, the media and females, glass ceilings, and super moms. For example, one group studied the role of advertising related to body weight. They gathered data on the use of thin models in advertising to portray an unrealistic perception of body weight, leading to their critique of these ads. The students then presented their findings to a group of sixth-grade females for the purpose of helping transform these sixth graders' beliefs about women's roles in society. Making these presentations served to bolster their own sense of self-efficacy as having expertise about women's roles, itself a transformative practice. Through experiences such as this with literature in schools, students have the opportunity to access their full potential as readers who can create and transform worlds.

## *Summary*

Research has helped practice get to this possibility. Having built on earlier work, research today is well beyond simple notions of texts, readers, and contexts. Researchers today who study response from a sociocultural frame take for granted the complexities of the reader-text transaction that is embedded in multiple worlds. Teachers, too, recognize the care with which this transaction must be negotiated in the classroom-itself a conflicted cultural world. What teachers say and do, the texts they choose and how they choose them, and the tasks they set for their students all affect this transaction. While teachers can help students develop specific tools to use as they read and respond in a particular classroom, the cultural tools that students bring to the classroom remain varied, sometimes closely aligned to those sanctioned by the teacher, sometimes in opposition. By creating opportunities for students to read and respond in the company of others, teachers foster their students' ability to make sense of text worlds and lived worlds. By encouraging 8-year-olds to make connections between their own experiences and experiences of characters in the books they read, or giving 16-year-olds the tools they need to explore how they and the characters they are reading about are constituted by their cultures, teachers make it possible for students to use their responses to school-sanctioned text to construct and critique their worlds.

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