OPENING POTENTIAL: VISUAL RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

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The visual arts came together with literature to extend middle schoolers' meaning-making processes.

Teachers face a challenge as they encourage learners to investigate good literature in depth. What conditions support readers to move beyond the "who, what, when" of a story to personal interpretation and aesthetic response? To investigate this issue as a teacher-researcher, I studied the explorations of my seventh-grade students as they worked in literature response groups (Whitin, 1993). I based my study on two theoretical assumptions:

- Learners of all ages construct meaning in a social context. The concept of literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1990) is built on the premise that learners create meaning with the support of others in a social setting. Learners need to hear ideas from each other to extend understanding and to generate new insights. (Barnes, 1976; Gilles, 1991)

- Creating meaning through multiple sign systems (art, music, drama, mathematics) ensures that there is no one-to-one correspondence between written text and its representation (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Siegel, 1984). Harste states, "Seeing something familiar in a new way is often a process of gaining new insight." (1993, p. 4)

I have explored using visual representations to gain perspective on literary texts with my seventh graders as they work in literature study groups. By talking with students about how they view the experience of visual response to literature, and by making observations of classroom events, I am beginning to see exciting potential for exploring and constructing multiple interpretations of text. I base our visual response to literature on the "Sketch-to-Stretch" strategy (Harste et al., 1988; Siegel, 1984), in which readers create sketches of what a story means to them. The authors designed the strategy to support learners of all ages in gaining a new perspective on their understanding of a text, and to encourage students, particularly those who may be reluctant about reading and writing, to take risks. For middle school students I define the strategy as creating a visual representation of colors, lines, symbols, and shapes to convey one's understanding of conflict, character, theme, or feelings in a piece of literature. Students choose to respond through visuals in their reader's response journals and as culminating projects from novel studies. As I describe the literary study here, I will highlight the role of visuals as a potential to respond to literature aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1978), to generate multiple interpretations, to think symbolically, and to reflect upon the nature of literacy itself.

**Literary Study in the Classroom**

In this suburban middle school (Grades 6-8), seventh graders take two periods of language arts daily. The focus of one class is a writers' workshop and the study of literature from an author's perspective. The other, in which this study took place, emphasizes literature and literature response. There is a curricular framework for each grade level with several required novels and some optional novels for study.

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noted the role that collaboration, transmediation, intertextuality, and generativity played in the interpretation of text. Certain classroom events, which I will describe here, highlighted those ideas for me.

Collaboration through Visual Responses

Nathan and Troy spent the first few days of the study reading aloud to each other. During a discussion later in the week, I found Troy leaning over his notebook, sketching with the colored pencils Nathan had brought. Troy had drawn some hills, a wide river, and a tiny stick figure. Looming in the background was the outline of a chimpanzee head (see Figure 1). I looked on with interest.

Troy and Nathan wrote commentary on their visual (unedited):

We tried to go into Jay Berry’s mind and figure out what he was thinking. This symbolizes what Jay Berry was thinking on the way back from the store with his traps. He’d be thinking about the river bottoms, then the 100 dollar monkey kept coming back to his mind.

“This is the big monkey,” Nathan explained. “It’s showing that whatever Jay Berry does, the big monkey is watching him.” He further explained that Jay Berry could not get away with any trick to capture the monkeys. I asked about the color of the eyes, which were reddish. “Red looks like it can see more,” suggested Nathan.

“Yeah, and in the book when Jay Berry first saw the monkeys, he said the eyes looked red,” added Troy.

“Oh, yeah, it did say that,” remembered Nathan. Together, the boys had generated multiple meanings for the red eyes: one literal, one figurative.

The boys had used the visual to reflect on their understandings of the main character’s mind. When Troy sketched the chimpanzee, he exaggerated its size to convey Jay Berry’s preoccupation with that animal. Several weeks later I interviewed Troy about this visual and others.

PW: Do you ever start a visual, and then something makes you change it as you go along?
Troy: This one, right here (Figure 1). I was drawing, and . . . we were going to put a bunch of trees and a bunch of monkeys, but . . . it wasn’t really the monkeys (Jay Berry) was talking about. It was more the big monkey, Jimbo . . . and he knew he could catch the small monkeys, but Jimbo wouldn’t let them fall in his trap.

PW: In your commentary there, you said that he kept thinking about Jimbo; but when I talked with you and Nathan, I think Nathan said something about how Jimbo was always watching him.
Troy: Yeah.
PW: Was that part of your idea?
Troy: Yeah, that’s why his eyes were red, right here, ‘cause when he set his traps, he’s always watching him. It seems like anything he does, Jimbo’s always watching him.
PW: And the red, you thought, helped?
Troy: Penetrating eyes.

Troy’s generating additional figurative meanings (red to symbolize penetrating eyes) was supported by collaboration with Nathan. He was able to go beyond what he himself could do alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Troy’s sketch also shows that authoring in art operates like authoring in any sign system. Troy had revised the plan he and Nathan had developed originally, that they should draw many monkeys in the trees. In our interview, he demonstrated that he continued to revise these ideas as he reflected upon them even further.

Transmediation and Intertextuality through Visual Responses

Melanie composed her visual, “Jay Berry’s Block of Emotions” (see Figure 2), after she completed the book.

I was interested in the way she used punctuation marks to convey feelings. I began the interview with her by asking general questions about how sketching supported her understanding. As she talked, she described a visual from earlier in the year that she called “Margot’s Color Wheel of Emotions.” In it
block of emotions, not really of emotions, but something that she'd done back in Mississippi, and that's when I kind of got the idea. Maybe I thought it would be a change or anything. . . . I'm not sure, but I just thought a block would be better.

Next we looked at the symbols in her sketch. She explained:

Melanie: Well, for "wonder" I would just naturally put question marks. And, I thought like, when you want something, you just . . . it keeps going and going and going. . . . And then "greed," that was just like, when you have something, and like in a book where it says dot, dot, dot, you're supposed to take it to mean more. And he took it to mean more and more and more, and he just eventually got greedy. . . . the little dots.

PW: The little dots . . . kind of like an ellipsis in punctuation. Some of these are punctuation marks.
Melanie: That's what I was talking about.
PW: And then the. . . . (pointing to star symbols)
Melanie: "Realization." Like when . . . you realize something, and it dawns on you kind of like a flash of light. So I thought a star would be appropriate for that.

PW: The light dawns. And then "love" is pretty regularly a heart. So this. . . . this, and this, are all punctuation marks. That's really interesting.
Melanie: 'Cause usually in writing, where you usually use punctuation marks to express the feelings for a sentence.

PW: For a sentence.
Melanie: Like, if you've got a sentence that you read in a book, and it just says, it expresses that someone was happy, then the way to tell that they were really happy (except for the adjectives in the sentence) would be the punctuation marks, an exclamation point at the end.

Melanie's conversation illustrates several important concepts. Through social interaction and exploratory talk, Melanie had constructed links (demonstrated intertextuality) between chunks of meaning in different texts (Barnes, 1976; Rowe, 1987). Both Melanie's conversation with her mother about the book and her conversation with Brandi about an incident in Mississippi supported her constructing her visual of Jay Berry's emotions. Also, Melanie accessed her own previous texts when she considered creating another color wheel of emotions. She used her written notes generated from discussions with her literature study group and her own reader's responses to decide where "greed" would fit into her diagram.

Melanie's story also demonstrated transmediation, or moving across sign systems. Although any visual representation shows that a learner has negotiated mentally how to represent understanding in a new symbol system, art, Melanie was particularly explicit as she explained her thinking. She had thought what punctuation marks do for a sentence. They add feeling, emotion, and expression. She showed how these same marks could be transformed to a new context to signify emotions in a character.

Melanie's conversation also brings to mind Eisner's (1985, 1992) perspective on abstract thinking when she described her metaphor of "the light dawns." Eisner argues that all metaphors are rooted in physical sensation. Melanie had experienced the feelings of light illuminating darkness, so she could represent that metaphor symbolically.

Finally, Melanie called the novel "an emotional book." She experienced the novel aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1978), and her visual represented the emotional experience she shared with the character and with her literature response group. I mention her relationship with her response group because it was Melanie's literature circle that produced the skit of significant events, followed by an explanation of how creating the skit had brought the group closer together as friends. They had "lived through" the novel together.

Generativity through Visual Responses

Abby, Doug, Brent, and Rachel worked together in a study group. For their final presentation, they decided to construct a large visual to represent the entire novel. Because the poster was large, I have sketched a reduced version in Figure 3. They revised their ideas as they constructed the poster, but what is significant for our purposes here is their sharing of their visual with the whole class.

As the group held up its visual for the class to see, they each contributed to the explanation of its symbolism. I have combined their statements here:

Figure 3. Collaborative visual, sketched from original poster.
We were creating a community where process was more important than product, and where inquiry was more important than certainty.

new ideas. As one student commented, "You don’t have to have one meaning. It could be a bunch of different meanings."

As I reflected on the classroom events during this literary study, I saw that the processes of authoring are common to all sign systems. I saw that the students were willing to entertain multiple interpretations as they shared a “final” draft. Since I had not seen a similar willingness to revise written texts so early in the school year, I was intrigued with how this strategy of Sketch-to-Stretch might be used in other ways. I am currently wondering how sketching as a response to a student-authored text might invite multiple interpretations and extend meaning. I have also been struck by the powerful role of the arts and wonder in what other ways we can value an artistic perspective as we explain and explore our understandings of the world. Like my students, I have learned that interpretation in a collaborative group is a never-ending venture. Our journey has only begun.