Responding and Comprehending: Reading With Delight and Understanding

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When response activities and comprehension strategies are combined, classroom instruction can enhance student engagement and understanding of a text, enrich student response, and improve students’ awareness of their own strategic reading. The following activities, adapted from the new IRA book *Children’s Literature in the Reading Program* (third edition), demonstrate how to combine the goals of strategic reading and responsive, aesthetic reading.

**Responding and Practicing Predicting**

One of the most commonly taught comprehension strategies is generating predictions about the text to be read. Elementary teachers frequently encourage the practice of making predictions through activities like picture walks, where students explore the illustrations in a text to predict what the book may be about. Predicting is easy to teach and is an easy strategy for students to learn. It is also a strategy that research shows to be quite powerful in helping students better understand a text (Dewitz, Carr, & Patberg, 1987; Hansen, 1981; Hansen & Pearson, 1983).

The following activity helps students see how predicting is an integral part of responding. It is also designed to remind students to use their predicting strategy and responding techniques when reading outside of class on their own.

**Predicting and Responding Using Because of Winn-Dixie (Upper Elementary and Middle School Grades)**

Newbery Medal–winning author Kate DiCamillo published her first book, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, in 2000. A 2001 Newbery Honor book, the novel was quickly popular with adults and children because of its rich and memorable cast of characters and well-described turn of events. It currently remains a widely used text in upper elementary classrooms across the United States. The following activity would work well with other contemporary realistic fiction novels, books where students can easily relate to the situations and events characters face.

**Procedure.** The activity will occur over several days. Begin the first day by telling students they are going to be reading a book titled *Because of Winn-Dixie* over the next few weeks. Explain that the book is about a girl their age who moves to a new town and begins to make friends and becomes part of her new community. Ask students to raise their hands if they have ever moved to a new town, or transferred to a new school with very few people they knew, or gone to a summer camp or other experience away from home, or if they have made friends with people who were newcomers. Then tell them you want them to think about their experience of being or befriending the newcomer. Explain that most people at one point
or another have experienced what it is like to be new to a place, and that perhaps the biggest challenge of being the newcomer is making friends. Ask students to close their eyes and think quietly about a time when they were the new person or first met the new person. How did it feel to not know anyone? Did they try to start conversations with others? Did they watch people closely? Can they remember what it felt like when they first met someone who might be a friend? Next have students open their eyes and share their thoughts with a partner.

Use this discussion as a springboard to help students make predictions about the book. Remind them of the predicting strategy they have learned to use to better understand what they read. Tell them that they have now activated their background knowledge about things that might be part of this story, something they should try to do as they read all texts. As a class, have the students contribute predictions of what might happen in this story based on what they personally have experienced as newcomers. Make a big list of these predictions on chart paper and hang it in a place where students will be able to reference it throughout the coming class periods.

Next, have students read the first chapter of Because of Winn-Dixie silently or listen to you read it aloud. At the end of the chapter, refer students to the class prediction chart they just made. Read aloud each prediction and see if any have occurred or if something opposite has occurred that demonstrates a prediction will not come true. When you reach one that has occurred or one where another text event indicates the prediction is not going to happen, stop and ask the students to write the prediction down. Then they should write if the prediction came true and why or why not. Remind students that this is the process of evaluating predictions. Now ask students how they feel about the story now that this prediction has or has not come true. What sort of reaction (response) do they have to the text now? Let students explore this question by writing or thinking on their own first. Then move them to small groups to talk about their responses and feelings for a few minutes. After students have done this, ask them if their responses changed even more after discussing them with their peers. Finally, have students record any new predictions they have now based on this evaluation of the prediction, their personal responses to the text, and their sharing with others.

As students continue to read the novel, have them stop and go through this procedure at the end of each chapter. To remind them of the process, write the steps on a chart or on the board, as in Table 1, for them to reference as needed. This will help when students begin to record their predictions and responses without your prompt. When reaching the final third of the book, have students stop and evaluate predictions and respond at points where they feel they would like to do so. This will help students begin to use the strategy and to respond more flexibly and use their own metacognitive skills to predict, evaluate, and respond when it would be a natural aid. At the completion of the novel, ask students to reflect on how using this process while reading affected their understanding and enjoyment of the book. Explain that although they used the process as a group while reading Because of Winn-Dixie, and thus were able to listen to others’ responses and perhaps change their own based on what they heard, the process is one they can use when reading a book individually, too.

Responding and Practicing Visualizing

For mature, skilled readers, visualizing, or imaging as it is sometimes called, seems out of place in a list of comprehension strategies. “That’s just what you do when you read!” the skilled reader might think, and
dominant. It is easier to ask students to create their own images when they know that the image has not already been created for them! Further, the sometimes complicated use of language in poetry can create student confusion and using the visualizing strategy can be quite helpful in aiding understanding. Additionally, many poets make use of the technique of imagery, and understanding how imagery works helps students understand how poetry works as well. Responding to the images created in the poem helps to engage readers with the work and further increase their understanding.

The following activity helps students see the importance of visualizing to responding, particularly when reading poetry. It is also designed to remind students to use their visualizing strategy and responding techniques when reading outside of class on their own.

Visualizing Using All the Small Poems and Fourteen More (Preschool and Primary Grades)

Many poets make use of sensory imagery to present ideas and emotions in poetry. Poets such as Valerie Worth (1987) in her book *All the Small Poems and Fourteen More* or Kristine O’Connell George (2001) in her book *Toasting Marshmallows: Camping Poems* bring the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feel of their...
subject to readers through their use of vivid images. Learning to “see” what poets have written helps students both understand and engage aesthetically with poetic texts. While imagery encompasses all of the senses, visualizing is a basic strategy to begin with.

Procedure. Valerie Worth’s (1987) collection All the Small Poems and Fourteen More is a small book containing all of her brief poems, with small pencil sketches by Natalie Babbitt that accompany each poem. The size of the book itself is also small, so it is not a book that lends itself for sharing pictures with a large or even small group; however, it is perfect for sharing with young readers when you want them to supply their own ideas as they interpret the words with which the poet presents them.

Begin by reading a few poems each day, until you have read several and students are comfortable with the shape and sound of the poems in the collection. As you read, ask students, “What do you notice?” and “What do you see?” and accept their answers. If you are fortunate enough to have different ideas offered, discuss those different visions as individual interpretations. After a few days of this, remind students that they have already learned how to visualize as they read, and that it is important to visualize while reading poems because it makes them easier to understand.

When you notice that most students are able to describe the “pictures in their heads” after you share a poem with them, you can ask them to draw or paint what they see. It’s important to use media that allow them to select color, because the images in many poems bring to mind particular colors. One such poem, “dandelion,” calls forth images of this ubiquitous flower with words such as “green space,” “sun,” “bright,” “burning,” “husk,” “cratered moon,” and “starry smithereens.” Color, in this case, supports the idea of the way dandelions change from bright yellow flowers to puffs to nothingness in just a few days. Asking children to paint what they visualize will help them understand that the poem goes beyond the image of the cheerful yellow flower. Other poems, such as “rags,” might inspire collage or other artistic constructions. The entire collection asks readers to notice small things and to think about them in new, interesting ways. Visual presentation of the images and ideas in the poems will help young readers do that. A collection of art inspired by Worth’s poems also makes a wonderful display when mounted alongside of the poem that inspired it.

Introducing students to visual imagery through Worth’s poems is only the beginning. Once students have experienced creating their own images for the words offered by an author, they will continue to do so if you provide them with opportunities to respond using a variety of media. And don’t be surprised if students begin experimenting with imagery in their own writing.

References

Literature Cited