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What Happens When We Read: Picturing a Reader's Responsibilities

Cover Page Footnote

Laurence Musgrove is Associate Professor of English at Saint Xavier University where he teaches courses in writing and contemporary American poetry. His research interests include the oral histories of Middle Eastern Americans and the ways in which students visualize what happens when they read. He also coordinates the Middle Eastern Studies program and chairs a taskforce on revising the general education program at SXU.

What Happens When We Read: Picturing a Reader's Responsibilities

Laurence Musgrove

1. Visualizing Reading

*One cannot arrange a classic.
It is the reader's life that opens a book.
—Richard Rodriguez*

In “The Reception of Reader-Response Theory,” Patricia Harkin provides a short historical overview of reader-response theory and claims that it can play a central role in current composition pedagogies as the need for explicit reading instruction returns to the college writing classroom.¹ I agree that reader-response theory can be very useful in first-year composition courses that include or primarily focus on literary texts. I also believe it can play a productive role in high school and college literature courses.

For some time, I have been working to help my students learn the value of reader-response theory, or, as Harkin terms it, “a generalized account of what happens when human beings engage in a process they call ‘reading’” (411). More specifically, I want students to understand reader-response theory as an effort to prompt them to stand back and acknowledge what they bring to reading, what a text has to offer, what responses are possible, and what they can do to evaluate the quality of their responses. Because I am continually interested in what my students contribute to their own learning—their attitudes, their knowledge, their skills—and how these affect their chances for success, I have been particularly drawn to thinking about learning as a developing and active relationship between students and the objects of their study. This interest in the subjective nature and power of learning has made reader-response theory very appealing to me, and I have searched for ways to incorporate reflective practices into my teaching, not only in composition but in my literature classes as well.

Lately, I have tried to promote reflective learning in two ways. First, like many teachers, I have students create writing portfolios in order to help them picture themselves as learners-in-action, students responsible for and empowered by their learning. Not only do students collect their writing projects and reading responses here,

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¹I'd like to thank Thomas Rivers, Marie-Clare Prisco, and my colleagues at Saint Xavier University for commenting upon drafts of this article.

but they also set reading and writing goals, discuss their achievements as the term progresses, and in the end reflect on the degree to which they have been able to reach their goals. Second, I have students attempt to visualize what happens when they read. I ask them to consider their histories as readers, their attitudes toward reading, their favorite things to read, the places and times they like to read, and the processes they employ. Next, I ask them to draw a picture of what happens when they read. Finally, I ask them to write a description of how their drawings depict what happens when they read. While I am still in the early stages of collecting and analyzing these pictures, I have learned that very few students draw or describe anything that resembles a process.² It is ironic that we regularly teach writing as a process and help students move through the various stages of planning, drafting, sharing, revising, editing, and publishing their work, but rarely do we offer students a procedural perspective on reading. It is also probably true that students rarely encounter a graphic depiction of what happens when we read.

Therefore, I would like to propose a visual representation of reading as a process for English teachers who want to provide their students with clear strategies for engaging and responding more fully, reflectively, and responsibly to literature whether the setting is the composition or literature classroom. To represent this process, I've designed the simple graphic (see Figure 1). The four shapes of this graphic represent the four elements of the reading process: the reader, the text, the response, and the review.

The reader is represented by an arrow because the reader is the only active participant in the process. The reader comes to the text and creates a response. The reader also brings along all kinds of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that affect the kind of response that will be created.

The text is represented by a triangle because the text stands alone waiting for a reader to initiate the relationship. While the text is an inanimate object, it still contains a world of experiences for the reader to discover and interpret. This "rhetorical" world will also reveal information about the author, the variety of topics raised by the story, poem, or drama, the author's formal choices when crafting the text, and the implied audience.

Because the response results from the relationship the reader has developed with the text, the response is located above and between the arrow and the triangle. It is

²Over the last three years and in two separate studies, I've collected almost 300 drawings by first semester college students that depict their reading habits. These students were enrolled in developmental writing classes, regular first-year writing, or Honors English, and their drawings were collected during the first two weeks of classes. Initially, I assumed that these drawings would reveal students' attitudes toward and assumptions about reading through a shared vocabulary of images. While this research is in its very early stages, there are a few initial and tentative conclusions that I am prepared to make. First of all, students did communicate their reading habits in a limited and common vocabulary. As might be expected, the most common image was that of a reader. The second most common image was a book with no title, and the third was a thought-bubble. Other common images included a bed, question marks, a landscape, and Zs in a thought-bubble to signify sleeping. Second, and more significant to my concerns here, only nineteen students, or about 10 percent, drew a process of reading. Again, this was a very limited study, but I believe it does contribute to Harkin's claim that a new pedagogy of reading is necessary.

See <http://english.sxu.edu/musgrove/PRP/ipa2004.ppt> for a brief overview of the purpose for, design of, and results from my second study. I hope to broaden this research by gathering a larger sample of drawings from first-year students.

ars provide teachers of English with a better understanding of what happens when readers engage texts, produce responses, and evaluate the quality of those responses. In very general terms, Rosenblatt, Probst, and Booth are all “reader-response” theorists, individual teachers and scholars interested in how readers create responses to literature, what responses reveal about readers, and how those responses might be improved. Moreover, they are interested in the ethical or “character-building” potential of reading and responding to literature. They believe that when readers improve their abilities to read and respond to texts responsibly, they improve their abilities to think responsibly about themselves and others. The purpose, then, of literary study is not only developing a further understanding of literature but also developing human understanding.

In the preface to the fifth edition of her landmark book *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt claims that the teaching of literature can make a significant contribution to the promotion and preservation of democracy. She argues that citizens of a democratic society “need the ability to imagine the human consequences of political and economic alternatives and to think rationally about emotionally charged issues” (xv). How does the teaching of literature contribute to imagination and rational thought? While Rosenblatt contends that much of literary education has been continually misguided with its focus on form and the search for right answers, she also offers an alternative approach that accounts for the active roles readers play in the literary experience:

The teacher of literature, then, seeks to help specific human beings discover the satisfaction of literature. Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual’s capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process. The starting point for growth must be each individual’s efforts to marshal his resources in relation to the printed page. The teacher’s task is to foster fruitful interactions—or, more precisely, transactions—between individual readers and individual literary texts. (26)

The graphic representation of reading presented above is meant to help students develop just this kind of metacognitive ability to reflect upon their transactions with literature, especially the “reader as arrow” figure designed to remind them of all they carry with them to reading, to acknowledge what Rosenblatt in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* calls their “underlying biases and obsessive attitudes” (151). Literary study then is as much about the exploration and revision of what developing readers bring to the reading process as it is about the literary work itself. The figure of the speech balloon response pointing back to the reader is also meant to emphasize that responses are largely shaped and colored by the knowledge, attitudes, and skills students bring to the reading transaction.

Rosenblatt’s critique of ineffectual teaching practices distinguishes two processes of reading: efferent and aesthetic. Efferent reading occurs when we read for practical purposes, searching for information we can use at a later time. This is the process that students use when highlighting a science text in preparation for an objective test or that we use when scanning the telephone book for a number to call. Aesthetic reading, on the other hand, demands an altogether different process. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt writes, “To produce a poem or play, the reader must broaden the scope of attention to include the personal, af-

fective aura and associations surrounding the words evoked and must focus on—experience, live through—the moods, scenes, situations being created during the transaction” (xvii). It may be too commonplace to say that literary experience involves a reader’s personal engagement with characters’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, and conflicts, with the thrill of the rise and fall of language, with the escape into another reality, but it is also unfortunately a commonplace to say that literature teaching often fails to offer this mode of reading to students. Rather than promoting fruitful engagements, schools tend to dehumanize literary study by emphasizing an efferent and assessment-driven approach concerned with quantifying literary experience into correct answers: names, dates, and categories. The consequences to literacy and our understanding of others continue to plague us.

As an alternative, Rosenblatt outlines a transactional process of reading literature that accounts for how responses are created when readers and texts meet. In other words, instead of focusing on the formal qualities of the literary work or, just as harmful, on the first impressions of inexperienced readers, Rosenblatt maintains that teachers should help students learn how responses are dependent upon what readers bring and what the text evokes. “The same text,” she argues, “will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances” (*Literature* 35). When students learn how their skills, knowledge, and attitudes allow or inhibit their responses, they have the opportunity to understand themselves as active readers in the creation of responses that reflect who they are. In this sense, reading is not about getting the correct interpretation; reading is about self-awareness. But it is also much more. When students learn reading as an opportunity to test themselves against the skills, knowledge, and attitudes portrayed in the novel, poem, or play, they also have the chance to become more aware of others; to grow new skills, new knowledge, and new attitudes; to change their minds and values in the company of others on the page and in the classroom (62-69; 72-73).

Understanding the nature of subjectivity, that our responses are created out of who we are, allows us to see that others read and respond according to the same logic; we deduce from what we bring with us: the baggage, light or heavy, of our lives. The teacher’s role, in Rosenblatt’s opinion, should be to foster students’ critical abilities to analyze rationally their first literary deductions, examining the evidence available in themselves and in the text, wary of snap judgments and emotionally charged reactions. Thus, teachers of literature must encourage students to understand their responsibilities to go beyond initial responses by reviewing the story, poem, or play: “An undistorted vision of the work of art requires a consciousness of one’s own preconceptions and prejudices concerning the situations presented in the work, in contrast to the basic attitudes toward life assumed in the re-created work” (*Literature* 109).³

³In “Approaching Texts in School,” Karen Gallas and Peter Smagorinsky argue that reader-response approaches may focus too much on what individual readers bring to texts and not enough on how socialization shapes the ways readers make meaning (58). I believe most reader-response theorists acknowledge culture as a significant influence on a reader’s response, but making interpretation a more publicly shared activity in the classroom can provide excellent opportunities not only for a cultural studies approach to literature but for students to reflect on their cultural assumptions as well.

The process of literary exploration then is a continual back and forth between response and analysis, reviewing our responses and examining the logic of their creation. This challenge, as Rosenblatt claims, will cue not only self-inquiry but an enhanced interest in literary craft as well as the kinds of cultural knowledge that might broaden our understanding and appreciation of the work (*Literature* 117). And this other movement from personal response to an increased knowledge of ourselves, literary technique, and the enlarged world of ideas and people around us expands our perspectives and rational capabilities while arming us to become better readers of future texts and future others. It contributes, Rosenblatt concludes, to the larger purpose of strengthening “the ability to escape from the limitations of time and place and environment, the capacity to envisage alternative ways of life and in moral and social choices, the sensitivity to thought and feeling and needs of other personalities” (276). Good readers of literature already know these outcomes and values. So do good teachers of literature. The visual representation of literary response and analysis offered here is designed to assist teachers and students in realizing these same ends by emphasizing graphically what students bring to reading (the arrow), what the text has to offer them (the triangle), how responses are created out of that relationship (the speech balloon), and what students can do to evaluate and improve the quality of their responses (the box enclosure).

An excellent summary of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of teaching literature as well as practical advice on implementing reader-response theory in the classroom is contained in Robert Probst’s *Response and Analysis*. In the first section of his book, Probst reviews the basic elements of response-based teaching and provides specific ways teachers can encourage discussion and writing about literature (41-63). He also suggests ways students might discover relationships between assigned texts and common themes (65-81). In the second section, Probst focuses on the formal qualities of genre, the values of young adult literature, and the importance of teaching visual literacy. Extended lists of recommended adolescent and popular adult literature categorized by theme are also provided in this section (124-27, 135-37, 143-69). In the third and final section, Probst reflects on the history of teaching literature, the influence of the transactional model on curriculum development, the role of evaluation and testing in literature courses, and the influence of current literary theory (including subjective criticism, reception aesthetics, and structuralism) on the approaches he is advocating in *Response and Analysis*.

For the purposes of encouraging student response, one of Probst’s most useful contributions comes when he theorizes on the range of literary response. While he admits that the options for response are almost limitless—given what students bring to reading and what the multitude of texts have to offer—they tend to fall within five general strategies: personal, topical, interpretive, formal, and broader concerns (56-61).

The first and most common response strategy is a personal one. When readers respond in this way, they remark upon how the text makes them feel or what personal experience or person comes to mind. In these cases, a reader’s response reveals more about the reader than the poem, story, or drama. Still, personal responses are necessary and valuable first steps even though some may veer dramatically away from the text and focus only on what the reader knows and feels and thus disable any further engagement with and exploration of the text (56-

58). A poem like Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," for instance, might cue reminders of the reader's childhood or a parent, and words in the poem like "whiskey" and "scrapped" might cue unpleasant feelings.

A second response strategy uncovers topics or issues introduced by the text. Because literature anthologies are often organized by theme, topical responses are another frequent mode of literary analysis. To claim that Roethke's poem is concerned with childhood or family is to make a remark about its topic (58). Still, this is a fairly low-level mode of response.

Interpretive strategies demand a fuller examination because they move beyond immediate reactions and generalizations to claims about some specific aspect of the text or its overall intention and craft. For example, if a reader wanted to claim that "My Papa's Waltz" should be interpreted as celebrating the relationship between a father and his child, that reader would have to offer evidence to support that argument. This evidence could come from a number of sources, such as the reader's experience, the poem itself, other readers, and other critical sources. "Marshalling such evidence," Probst claims, "is an extremely important skill that deserves a significant place in the literature classroom" (59).

Another common strategy for responding to literature is to analyze its formal qualities. Formal responses focus on the rhythmic, rhyming, figurative, physical, and repetitive nature of poems, stories, and plays. When readers examine narrative structures, poetic meter, and set design, they are engaged in strategies focusing on the formal qualities of literary experience. To analyze Roethke's poem formally requires attention to its analogies, rhyme, and waltzing meter. Formal analysis alone, however, is again limited in scope, especially when, as Probst remarks, "it is imposed as an exercise, not to answer questions raised by the text" (60).

In the final category of broader literary concerns, Probst includes response strategies, such as the study of biography and literary history, which move the reader beyond the text to related interests (60). The reader of "My Papa's Waltz" might wish to investigate Roethke's biography, read his other poems, examine his contemporaries in twentieth-century poetry, or study the lives of the working class during the Depression. Each of these paths leads the reader away from the original text toward secondary sources that may eventually lead the reader back, armed with a broader understanding and appreciation of the primary text.

Because inexperienced readers commonly believe that there is only one true and correct interpretation for every text, they may be surprised at the various methods of response available to them. By practicing these options one by one as well as in combination, they learn that they have choices—and a certain degree of freedom—when responding to literature. They should also learn that a generous analysis and interpretation depends upon a generous helping of each. As Probst puts it, "The range of responses is broad, and students are better off learning a whole scale than restricting themselves to one note" (61).

The value therefore of Probst's theory of response is not only in the delineation of these five strategies but also in the notion that readers have choices and that multiple responses to the same text are possible, none necessarily privileged over the others, yet together they are more comprehensive in their combined power of analysis and understanding. In the graphic representation of reading I am recommending, the speech balloon situated above and between the reader and the text stands not only for the response created out of the relationship between the reader and the text but also for the range of response possibilities available to the

reader. To help students understand that they have choices when they respond also accentuates the active role they play as readers and, thus, their responsibilities to choose well.⁴

Wayne Booth has focused much of his scholarship on the rhetorical nature of fiction. In short, Booth believes that literature is ultimately persuasive because it grows out of an author's desire to communicate to readers an aesthetic experience via literary language. Of particular interest to my purpose here is Booth's theoretical work—most evidently played out in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*—on the quality of relationships that exist between readers and texts, and among readers of the same text. Even though literature, according to Booth, is not explicitly didactic, authors make creative choices that nonetheless promote some beliefs, characters, literary forms, and readers over others. Booth also believes these choices are best understood as invitations to assent to the author's vision and value system:

Each narrative, fictional or historical, provides an alternative story set in a created "world" that is itself a fresh alternative to the "world" or "worlds" previously serving as boundaries of the reader's imagination. Each work of art or artifice, even the simplest wordless melody, determines to some degree *how at least this moment should be lived*. The quality of life in the moment of our "listening" is not what it would have been if we had not listened. We can even say that the proffered work shows us how our moments *should* be lived. If the maker of the art work did not believe that simply experiencing it constitutes a superior form of life, why was the work created and presented to us in the first place? (17, author's emphasis)

Given this view of literature's purpose, Booth argues for a mode of reader-response criticism concerned with providing readers with a method for evaluating the literary companionships authors extend to us (3-20).

While ethical criticism accepts the rhetorical and persuasive nature of literary art, it also accounts for the variety of reader response. In other words, the evaluation of the story, poem, or play is contingent, as Rosenblatt reminds us, on readers. Although there are no hard and fast rules or critical dogmas available that will make these judgments easy and true for all readers, literary evaluation

⁴When I outline possible response strategies for my students, I drop the category of "broader concerns" from Probst's list and add six more: biographical, historical, cultural, audience analysis, creative, and ethical. When we focus our interests on the life of the author, we respond biographically. When we are interested in the historical contexts of the work, we respond historically. Cultural responses occur when we consider how social contexts influence our judgments about the cultural world of the text. When we imagine the audiences for which the author might have been writing, we are engaged in audience analysis. In addition, when we study how different readers respond differently to the same text, we are practicing a form of audience analysis. A fifth common strategy is the creative response. When we use another author's language, style, characters, or forms to create our own story, poem, or play, we are responding creatively. Finally, when we imagine the value of the literary world to ourselves and other potential readers, we are creating ethical responses. (See my discussion of Booth's work below for more on the ethics of reading.) These response strategies are not exhaustive, but they do offer an introductory range of methods for developing readers.

cannot be left to indiscriminate and subjective musings either. As Booth phrases it, “the logic we depend on as we arrive at our particular appraisals is neither deduction from clear premises, even of the most complex kind, nor induction from a series of precisely defined and isolated instances (71).

In response to these extremes, Booth proposes a logic for ethical criticism and invents a new term to signify this collaborative act of literary response and analysis. “Coduction,” he proposes,

will be what we do whenever we say to the world (or prepare ourselves to say): “Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced, comparing my experience with other more or less qualified observers, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker) ones, or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons.” Every such statement implicitly calls for continuing conversation: “How does my coduction compare with yours?” (72-73)

Thus, ethical criticism is situational because it depends upon human interaction in particular times and places; consequently, the results of ethical criticism are provisional because the quality of the evaluative responses must always depend upon the quality of the respondents’ abilities to read, respond, analyze, and judge together. Therefore, the literature teacher’s purpose is not to dispense correct interpretations or even to show students where the correct interpretations might be found, but to improve students’ abilities to evaluate critically, cooperatively, and collaboratively the skills, knowledge, and attitudes literature offers. In this way, the teacher does not evaluate a student’s interpretation as being wrong or right; the teacher evaluates his or her students’ abilities to demonstrate conductive criticism with the knowledge that varying interpretations may co-exist.

More specifically, the logic of ethical criticism demands responsible conduct on the part of the reader toward the text and toward other readers. According to Booth, readers are initially responsible for giving themselves over generously to the author’s vision. This, of course, includes generous reading habits, such as full attention to the text and genuine interest in what other sources and readers can contribute to our understanding and appreciation of that vision. Passive and uncritical acceptance of that vision, however, would be irresponsible conduct. Booth believes that readers are further obligated to evaluate the degree to which the values envisioned “join” or “conflict” with their own (135). In other words, good reading demands we move to ethical concerns by asking, “Do the patterns of desire seemingly privileged by the work attempt to enlarge or belittle us?” Following the golden rule of treating others as we would have others treat us, Booth analogizes this preferred behavior of criticism to the virtuous acts of the best kind of friendship, wanting to embrace, understand, inspire, and improve us. In other words, when investigating the quality of a literary work, we should evaluate the sort of friendship it offers us, what sort of friendship it demands of us in return, and what sort of friendship we offer other readers in our talk together about these literary friendships. Booth maintains, “[t]he key question in the ethics of narration, then, so long as we pursue it under this personal metaphor, becomes: Is the pattern of life that this would-be friend offers one that friends might well pursue together?” (222).

Booth’s concern with the quality of literary experiences (those we encounter in reading and those we encounter when talking about what we are reading) re-

lates in two main ways to the graphic representation of reading I'm offering here. First and foremost, when students learn reading as the act of building a friendship with a text, they may better understand the responsibilities that come with that friendship. These responsibilities include reviewing how they came to their responses and expanding the company they keep as they broaden that relationship further. For example, when we challenge ourselves to test our responses against other critical resources, the evidence available in the text itself, and other readers' responses, we not only enlarge our capacity to imagine, understand, and appreciate what we are reading but also enlarge our capacity to include the perspectives of other readers. In this sense, reading literature is not an end in itself; it is the means to a broader understanding of others. In the graphic representation of reading responsibly, the "review" stage offers students further opportunities to understand their responsibilities by reflecting on how they've arrived at their responses and how they might broaden their responses. Returning to the five response strategies Probst details in his book, we can add an "ethical" response. Following Booth's call that we attend to the vision or pattern of life offered to us by literature, we respond ethically when we review our engagement with the literary work and imagine what value it might have for others. Reading and responding ethically occurs when we think of other readers we want to share a poem, story, or play with because we think they will find the work enjoyable and enlightening. We also respond ethically when we decide that a particular work will do another reader harm or "no good." In addition, an ethical response strategy should prompt us to consider the quality of the relationship we build with a text. When we accept with humility the limits of our knowledge and skill and reach out to others to help us explore the possibilities of a literary experience, we are acting ethically toward that work.

3. Responsible Reading

*When a practitioner becomes a researcher into his own practice,
he engages in a continuing process of self-education.*
—Donald Schön

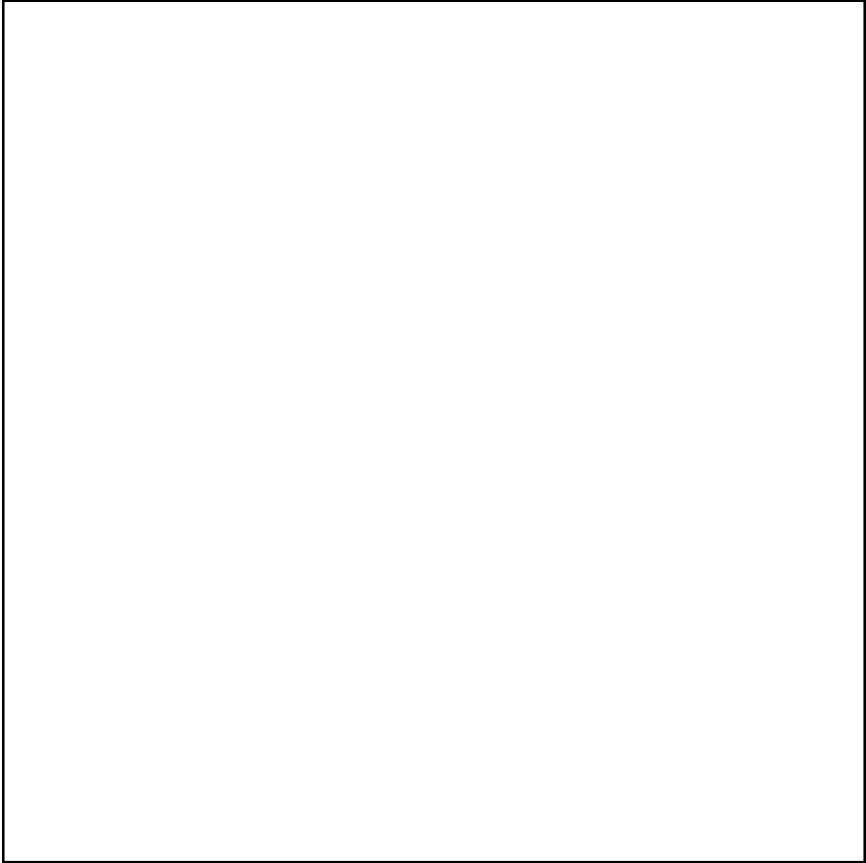
Taken together, Rosenblatt, Probst, and Booth characterize reading as a relationship-building activity that can be dramatically improved when students reflect upon and better understand the active roles they play, the world the text has to offer them, the response options available to them, and the responsibilities they have to review and improve their responses when reading literature. Learning to read virtuously must also include a setting in which students are prompted to move from private and isolated reading to public and cooperative discussion, seeing themselves in a community of generous readers who are enriched not only by literature but by each other as well.

In the final analysis, my desire is to offer teachers graphic support for teaching a process of reading literature that is explicitly reader-focused and that emphasizes the unique responsibilities students have as they begin to develop relationships with literature.⁵ It is just as important that they encourage students to

⁵Find below Figure 2, an expanded version of the graphic representation of reading as a process reflecting in more detail the ideas presented in this article.

see how the skills they develop and the responsibilities they learn also apply to their lives after their books are closed.

Figure 2: A Reader's Responsibilities Detailed



As a teacher of introductory writing and literature at the college level concerned with developing students' abilities to reflect critically about their own learning habits, I find Figure 2 helpful as way to represent reading as a process. I begin each semester by telling my students that there will be one question on the final exam. The question is "What does a reader's response reveal?" I then give them the answer: "The reader." I don't mean to overstate the power of the reader or to denigrate what a text contributes to the literary transaction. However, when new college students year after year tell me that the readings I've assigned are hard to understand or boring, when they continually blame texts for their own reading failures, I'm able to respond by quickly drawing a simple graphic on the board in order to help them see that their responses reveal more about them than the object they are describing and condemning. I can tell them that when they claim a text is hard to understand, they are really saying that they don't have the understanding they need for the text. Then I can ask them to think

about what they need to learn to be the reader the text desires. I can also tell them that they may want to reconsider claiming that a text is boring because of what it may reveal about them as readers.⁶ But when students take themselves and reading seriously and when they develop the ability to acknowledge and reflect upon their own subjectivity, they are better prepared to move forward, to become more mature readers of themselves and of the texts offered to them. They are ready to reflect, revise, and be held responsible. □

⁶Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue offer an alternative method for responding to student boredom in their textbook *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*, one of the most recent efforts to resurrect reader-response theory in the service of teaching writing and literature (37-38). In addition, their definition of "active reading" is similar to the process of reading I am promoting here. "Active reading," they maintain, "is a process of interpretation and reflection, whereby a reader constructs meaning, establishes significance, and reflects on the limits of his or her understanding. Active readers are often conscious of their moves and can describe them" (128).

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