

Slow Transformation: Teacher Research and Shifting Teacher Practices

By Thomas H. Patterson & Thomas P. Crumpler

Introduction

How do teachers change their teaching practices and classroom instruction? What really motivates that change? And if change is made, how is it sustained?

What model or models could be constructed to serve as guides for sustained change?

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As a teacher with more than 30 years experience at the middle school, secondary, and college level, primarily in English studies, I (the first author) decided a few years ago to reexamine my practices and instructional methods. All teachers are familiar with unmotivated students, and while my classes were at least somewhat motivated, I noticed a few years ago that a growing number of students in my advanced novel class appeared unmotivated and apathetic. I had begun to confront some discipline problems and notice shoddy assignments, formerly rare in the advanced classes I was teaching. Although I did not at the time perceive these problems as crucial, I became highly irritated with these students. I realized, however, that I was not supposed to have any problems with this class. What could be a solution to my newborn problems?

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It is easy to blame students for what are perceived as their deficiencies, but I wanted to take a careful look at my own teaching practices. Although after attending workshops and institutes that exhorted teachers to adopt a student-centered classroom I would try to practice some of the progressive ideas expressed there, I would soon find myself slipping back into my standard way of teaching: mostly lecture with some question/answer sessions, all emphasizing my personal interpretations of the texts, themselves based on the critical works of various scholars I had studied while a college student myself. When students would express their own ideas about the work of literature in question I would evaluate them positively or negatively based upon how closely they conformed to my own interpretations. Additionally, I found it much easier to retain the tried and true authoritarian methods when dealing with classroom management, methods not suitable for a student-centered classroom. Though I strongly desired to change my methods, I found that I either would not or could not. I found that modification of pedagogical practice is very difficult to realize. These methods, formerly successful when teaching highly motivated students, were not working well in my present classes.

My Literary Background and Pedagogical Practices

As both an undergraduate and a graduate student in English during the 1960s and 1970s I was trained in formalist methods of teaching called *The New Criticism*. Although I. A. Richards (1925, 1929) could be considered the “father” of The New Criticism, stronger influences towards my development of literary theory were T. S. Eliot (1933), Allen Tate (1936), John Crowe Ransom (1941), and Cleanth Brooks (1947). Essentially, The New Criticism attempted to objectify literature by showing the organic unity and order of a text. A work of literature is effective in direct relation to this organic unity, which can be understood through a close reading of a text. The best readers are those who possess the most comprehensive command of such literary devices as metaphor, paradox, irony, and symbolism. Under this hierarchical system, the authority of the expert stands at an apex, with a sort of filtering down effect. Critics and scholars such as Tate (1936) and Brooks (1947) stood at the apex, their knowledge progressing from university professors through high school teachers, who in turn passed on the knowledge to their students. To Wellek and Warren (1956) a work of literature ultimately is an object of knowledge which has “special ontological status” (p. 144) that should be interpreted by a student as close to its “objective” reality as possible.

Although The New Criticism was arguably revolutionary when first popularized in the 1930s, by the 1960s it had hardened into dogma and could be misinterpreted by many English teachers. Essentially, I continued in the 1990s to use teaching methods developed in the 1960s based upon this theory. Encouraging student response to questions in class, I nevertheless subverted student input by my intellectual domination of the classroom through numerous lectures. I usually considered individual student

ideas idiosyncratic and subordinated to my corrections in the name of “objectivity.” I was not interested in multiple student literary interpretations.

My teaching methods were simple. Assigning 30 to 50 pages of reading per class period, with students usually given some class time to read, I would either begin the class with a short factual quiz or immediately proceed into a lecture interspersed by questions over the content and interpretation of the reading. Often, in the interests of time, I would dispense with the quiz. Occasionally I did attempt questioning the students, but sometimes the questions became rhetorical; often I would forego them completely due to my impatience with accepting student answers which I would later minimize or contradict because they did not conform to the model of the segment of text I had developed mentally. Although I would not always repeat theories I had formulated over the years concerning a given novel, the theories were nevertheless my own adaptations. And the longer I taught a given novel, the more personal knowledge I would present, if only because I thought I had delved more deeply into its essence.

For purposes of evaluation I would usually give three or four short answer or essay examinations, sometimes exclusively one or the other, at other times combined. My short answer examinations required fairly long, well-developed paragraphs; the essays ranged from one to several pages, depending upon the student. Sometimes I would substitute a 300-500 word essay for the final examination. Very rarely I would require a short oral presentation by students on selected topics.

For many years these methods sufficed. I would assign As and Bs to most students based upon how well they had absorbed and presented my interpretations of text. Everyone was content—I because I would deepen my own knowledge of the texts through reinterpretation; the students because their grade point averages were fattened.

Modification of My Teaching Practices

I first began to modify my methods not in the high school classroom, but while teaching literature in a local community college. Many of my students were older adults and some were military veterans. Most of them had unique life experiences which they applied to the literature they were studying. I discovered that they were engaging the texts without close instructor intervention. They were engaging in transaction, showing respect for the works of literature but also applying the richness and variety of their own experiences to the texts.

Although I decided then to modify some of my methods within the high school setting, these students were never as forthcoming in responding to questioning as were the college students. My shift was therefore slow, and although I became more student centered, I continued primarily to utilize formalism as my theoretical underpinning. By this time I was, however, familiar with other literary theories, including reader response.

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Although Louise Rosenblatt (1978) had formulated and developed what became known as *reader response theory* beginning in the 1930s, I first heard of her while I was studying James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1986) in a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar in the summer of 1994. These seminars, established for the purpose of enabling high school teachers to expand their knowledge of various areas in the humanities, were conducted by university professors who had distinguished themselves in their respective fields of knowledge and attended primarily by secondary teachers who received the grants on a competitive basis.

Reader response is essentially a transaction where readers, while respecting the integrity of a given text, bring their own experiences to act upon it. But it was not until the 2000s that I began to apply Rosenblatt's knowledge and that of other response critics—Bleich (1978), Lewis (2000), and Mann (2000)—to my classroom teaching. More recently, O'Flahavan and Wallis (2005) have confirmed Rosenblatt's impact upon classroom teaching, while Flynn (2007), although acknowledging her acceptance as a reading theorist, believes that she should be taken more seriously as a literary theorist. Additionally, Carey-Webb (2001) examines possibilities for unifying reader response with cultural studies in the classroom, and Eva-Wood (2004) examines emotional responses while reading poetry. Further, research by Beach, Thein, and Parks (2007) found that secondary students' changing responses to multicultural literature were complex and multi-layered, and the teacher's interactions with students were one of a number of key factors in those changes.

My transformation, however, remained haphazard. I was not carefully planning, organizing, executing, or evaluating. Thus I decided to read and apply Rosenblatt (1978) more systematically and expand my knowledge further by delving more deeply into pertinent literature by Bleich (1978), Lewis (2000), and Mann (2000). Also, as I began to reflect upon my readings and tentative practices, I expanded my parameters into areas of the reading-writing connection and gender concerns. I found, however, that I needed a systematic theoretical underpinning if I were to effectively accomplish change.

Teachers as Researchers

Teacher research is the systematic and careful evaluation by teachers of their own pedagogical methods they utilize to foster student success. Such research entails the examination of teachers' pedagogical techniques as exemplified by their day to day practices. Considerable literature exists concerning teachers becoming researchers in their own classrooms. Seminal research by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) shows teachers have a unique perspective about how knowledge is presented in their classrooms because they are both co-creators and observers of it. Research by teachers is a "significant way of knowing about teaching" (p. 43). The teacher who wishes to investigate pedagogical change within the context of literature will be uniquely positioned to understand its nuances through observation followed by reflection.

Berlin (1990) believes that teacher-researchers can ideally transform schools. Wall (2004) supports teacher research as a catalyst whereby teaching and teachers can shape and change the profession of teaching. She believes that the teacher research movement is more important today than it was at its initiation. McBee (2004) thinks that teacher-performed research can bridge the gap between classroom practice and university-based researchers, ultimately enhancing teacher knowledge and improving classroom practice. Bills (2001), through practitioner research in her classroom, demonstrates how teacher researchers can combine a personal classroom perspective with theoretical and methodological approaches.

When I decided to examine any pedagogical changes I could effect by acting as a teacher researcher in my own advanced novel classroom, I hoped to be able to view my changing instructional practices in a truly systematic manner. I believed that as a teacher who investigates pedagogical change within my own classroom I would be uniquely positioned to pursue a careful evaluation of pedagogical methods to understand the nuances of change through practice/observation followed by reflection.

The Research Questions and Teacher as Researcher

Next I began to formulate research questions that would be relevant to my concerns and would contribute to the improvement of my instruction. I wondered what would be the effects on my students and me when I would begin to utilize ideas emanating from a reader response paradigm instead of the formalism I had used for so many years. Would learning be enhanced, or would I actually become a less effective teacher due to my lack of experience with a different teaching paradigm? I was unsure what these effects might be, and I did not consider to any great degree my personal relationship with change. Also, I was not sure that the students would accept my evaluations of them for grading purposes based primarily on essays rather than tests.

Since I had decided to conduct the research over Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1986) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), I was curious if any gender issues would become apparent during my research. Over the years I had thought that males generally preferred Hemingway and the females would more closely embrace Tan. I did not expect to notice any significant change in their attitudes, but I was curious to examine the issue more closely and systematically than I had in the past.

Before beginning the research, I formulated one overarching research question with three related sub questions to structure my inquiry. They are as follows:

1. How will shifting my pedagogical practices from a formalist frame to a more response-oriented frame affect student learning?
 - What impact will this shift have on the process of student engagement and response to specific novels?

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- What effect will conducting teacher research have on my own attitudes towards the authors and novels I teach?
- What impact will conducting teacher research have on my perceptions of gender bias in my pedagogical practice?

Methodology

I began the process of inquiry into my own practice to examine how I could adjust my instruction to impact these adjustments upon my students in order to accomplish and ultimately sustain change. The study took place in an advanced novel class I had been teaching for several years in a small rural high school in a Midwestern community with a population of about 4,200. The students were primarily White and middle class. At the time the research was begun, the enrollments were 97.7% White and 2.7% Hispanic. No other ethnic groups were in attendance at the high school at that time. The duration of the class was one semester, operating on an eight-block schedule, which consists of 85-minute classes meeting every two days. Novels studied varied from semester to semester, although I always taught a core of two or three.

Eleven of the 15 students in this class consented to participate in the research. Of these, only three were female, and one of them declined to participate in video tapings of the class and individual audio interviews. Therefore the study was limited by the homogeneous composition of the students and the imbalance of male and females in the class.

Data Collection

The following data collection methods were used:

Field Notes: I wrote most notes soon after the fact, although I took some while I listened to students respond to the texts either individually or in small groups. I expanded all notes, usually descriptive, as soon as possible after they were taken. I usually refined the notes during the evening after they were taken, adding some analysis to the descriptions.

The Journal: I kept an ongoing journal detailing what had occurred in class on each particular day. I based my thoughts primarily on the field notes, but also included was my reflective analysis and subjective commentary on what had transpired.

Videotapes: I taped the class four times, two for each novel. These were made of the entire class at work in various ways and were valuable for recording teacher action and showing students either actively participating, or not, in classroom discussions. I was able to directly observe the classroom environment without the problem of mistaken memories.

Student Writing: The writing can be classified in three ways. First, short responses

to a section of the novel. Second, longer papers which were analytical based upon the students' own particular responses to sections or chapters. Third, papers written as total personal responses to the novels. These would include student likes and dislikes.

The Interviews: The majority of the students who agreed to the research also agreed to be interviewed on audio tape. I interviewed the students individually from sets of questions I had formulated. All of these questions demanded personal responses from the students. I transcribed the taped answers over a period of time, then analyzed them, taking notes in the same way I took field notes—descriptively followed by analysis.

Analysis of the Data

Analysis of data included organizing, categorizing, synthesizing, and interpreting data gained from reading and observations. Initial analysis included developing coding, structuring and codes, and writing a weekly summary.

The Research

I began the research with an open mind regarding my ease of the transition from formalism to reader response. I was not unaware that I chose to teach *A Farewell to Arms* (1986) first because I understood well this novel in both its structure and philosophy. I had not taught Amy Tan for enough years to say the same for *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

Considerable literature can be found extolling the roles of both teacher and researcher. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), for example, found that teachers' views of themselves as theorists and also as both teachers and writers leads to positive transformation (p. 19). Teachers can immerse themselves within learning contexts through informed research in ways that would not be done in statistical studies. In practice, however, the situation appeared more ambiguous. Almost from the outset of the research I found some conflict in my role as teacher and my role as researcher. I was concerned at times whether I was being too manipulative in the classroom due to my role as a researcher. I feared that I was losing sight of my primary purpose in the classroom, which was still that of instructor. The following is an excerpt from my initial field notes:

Problem: on the one hand, you are supposed to be an objective researcher. But you have to maintain discipline. I'm thinking that my attention to the research I'm doing will hurt my management, although this class is generally well-behaved.

Additionally, because I feared losing control of the class, the shift from formalism, which is well suited to authoritarian control, to reader response, which gives the students much more freedom, was more difficult than I had anticipated. The fact that I began to encourage more student responses than was usual when I lectured would naturally predicate group work and the attendant confusion that such a shift can bring.

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Throughout my many years of teaching I had always been uncomfortable allowing the students to work in groups, which to me appeared to foster confusion and less time on task. Also, group work required close contact with the students. The following is an excerpt from my journal done soon after I had begun the research:

I really don't like close dealings with students. Throughout the years, I have liked to keep the relationship "by the book." I never have been close with the kids, not the nurturing type of teacher or a mentor. Couldn't handle that. I'm in it for the subject matter, the literature, philosophy. This, however, may force me into a closer relationship with them. We will see.

After the passing of a week, I still lacked confidence in my ability to change. Here is another excerpt from my journal:

Still too much teacher direction. Have to set the standards. Have the text and student meet halfway. Still too much old-fashioned stuff. I don't know how to draw out these kids very well. I've depended on New Critical methods too long. It's really hard for me to adjust.

Nevertheless I slowly began modification. After I explained some background elements of *A Farewell to Arms* I began to ask questions concerning the text. While not as forthcoming with answers as I had hoped, the students did respond more often than they had when we were reading the novels previous to Hemingway. A good example of the interchange during class was this exchange with Jason in response to Hemingway's dislike of abstract words:

Teacher: Well, what do you think of the abstract words now? Is there something more here than you thought by just giving the definitions?

Jason: (all student names are pseudonyms) Well, I think Hemingway after thinking about this the abstract words mean nothing. He talks about places—rivers, villages and stuff, and those mean something. But the abstractions are nothing.

Teacher: Yeh. Some of the places in our past wars you might have heard about. Guadalcanal, Normandy, Iwo Jima, Pork Chop Hill.

Next I moved the class into Hemingway's use of dialogue and his symbolism. Aaron was positive, although not specific. "I didn't like it at first but I grew to like it as the book went on." Phil thought the style was easy to read. More typical, however, was Jason's comment, "His short sentences were irritating and he didn't get his point across, but I kind of liked how he didn't give a ton of details that didn't have anything to do with the book."

Most, but not all, students disliked the dialogue. Bill thought the exchanges between the protagonist Frederic and his lover Catherine to be "totally false. There was nothing that sounded like they would be really happy if they were talking in real life. It was just dumb and remedial, the same thing over and over again." Kristine ultimately had few problems reading the Frederic-Catherine conversations,

. . . because after reading the book for awhile you figure out things about each character, which helps you pinpoint who is talking. In a way I think of this dialogue as Ernest Hemingway's diary. When he wrote this book he had to remember all the details and important things that happened in his life when he drove an ambulance in World War I

The majority (male) opinion on dialogue was summed up by Patrick: "It is a unique style, but I don't think it's effective in accomplishing what it tries to do. It just confuses the reader."

Responses to other elements of the novel—irony, the Hemingway "code" (the stoical acceptance of the hardships of life and the inevitability of death), and finally the love-war theme, elements which previously I would have explicated to the exclusion of immediate student feedback—were mixed. Some enjoyed one and not another. They seemed to understand the "code" without embracing it. It might have appeared a curiosity to them. However, the students did grapple with the author's ideas. While reviewing audiotapes I had made after we had concluded the novel, I became aware that many had confronted and engaged it to a more considerable degree than I had expected. The following are three examples, the first, by Bill, concerning the symbolism:

I kind of could see the symbolism between the plains the mountains because the plains it was all smooth and you could see what was going ahead and that was kind of like the love story between Catherine and Frederic. But then when he was at war he was in the mountains and then nothing was the same.

Here is Kevin's comment on the love-war theme:

It seemed like the love gave Frederic a reason to keep going when he knew he had Catherine waiting for him. And that seemed to be the major part. I think that's what kept him alive.

Patrick's comment about the Hemingway code follows:

What's the point? If you are going to die, just do whatever you want to do . . . it is right, the Hemingway code, you will die naturally but it's a pessimistic way of looking at it.

The true depth of some students' understanding of the novel was expressed when they commented on the conclusion of the novel. The death of Frederic and Catherine's baby followed by Catherine's death was very affecting. This response by Bill was in essence indicative of the thoughts of many:

This was his own child that died. And then later Catherine starts hemorrhaging and then she dies. It's him losing everything he ever loved. He deserted the army which was something he believed in and then he loses Catherine who he loves and then he loses this baby which was from what he loves.

Answers to some questions I asked about the ending indicated a close engagement

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between the students and the text, one that might not have been present had I been using the formalist approach. Had other students been strongly affected in the past I realized that I never knew, since I had never asked them for their opinions.

Overall, by this point in the progress of the class I was relaxing my classroom procedures and not lecturing as often as I had in the past, but I still utilized some authoritarian practices and imposed my own attitudes about the novel. It was taking me some time to realize that my imposing essential rules for classroom management still could be done while embracing reader response techniques. Also, I was bothered by the fact that without daily quizzes many would fall behind on the reading or even stop reading the book entirely. At this time I did in fact impose some factual quizzes on an occasional basis.

Regarding gender issues, I discovered that contrary to my preconceptions, the males who enjoyed the book were in the minority. I believed that the boys would enjoy the war segments enough that they could accept the love story. This proved to be a stereotype, a misconception based on attitudes I had formulated in the middle of the 20th century. In the study, most of the boys did not think the war segments compensated for the love portions, which they disliked.

Neither female I interviewed (of the three who participated in this research, I interviewed two) was very expansive on topics that referred to gender. Jenny did not think the love scenes realistic and thought they just shifted back and forth without any apparent purpose. She did not think Catherine was realistic "because he (Hemingway) just kind of threw it in for someone for Frederic, just to not make the whole story about war." Kelli said this in response to the love scenes: "They were kind of fake. Catherine was kind of 'I'll do whatever you want.' I thought she was unrealistic. She never seemed to disagree with Frederic." Later, Kelli said this about the character of Catherine:

I didn't think she was very realistic, like the things she said to Frederic, especially toward the end of the book when she was going to give birth, she was like saying how she was sorry, she was apologizing, complaining about it. I thought like Frederic or the author thought women as inferior to them.

Overall students' attitudes were mixed about this novel. The following two samples were from one who generally enjoyed the book and one who definitely disliked it:

Jason: I liked it. I thought it was easy to read. A lot of people criticized it because of its style. That part of the style was where he was almost rambling in thought into a large paragraph. It was like a dialogue with himself.

Patrick: I didn't like it at all. I thought it was a chore to read because his writing style was so simplistic. Hemingway had Frederic describe every minor detail, but with the great major events, he didn't describe very well. This book was hard to follow.

I had never heard individual value judgments like these from students in the past except through cursory “novel rankings” I would ask them to write at the conclusion of the class.

By the time we had finished *A Farewell to Arms* I had modified my attitudes both towards the novel and my students. I still believe it is one of the 20th century’s best, but am more aware of how students can find fault while engaging in the transaction between reader and book. As I noted at the time in the journal I kept concerning the activities of the class:

I think I’m becoming more accepting of the students as critical thinkers than I had been in the past. I think I’m doing a better job than I had in past years when I ground through the texts with classes attempting to elicit intricate analyses which most students were unable to do on their own. Maybe good teaching does not always entail the forced imposition of my knowledge upon intelligent, but young and unformed student minds.

When we entered the world of Amy Tan’s novel about the relationships between young Chinese-American girls and their immigrant mothers, I was much more relaxed in my belief that I could reach the students not by the imposition of my knowledge upon them, but through their own devices in engaging the text. It was, indeed, easier for me to allow the students more intellectual freedom with *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) than with Hemingway because my knowledge of Tan was much inferior to my knowledge of Hemingway. Since I was learning more about this novel along with my students, I became more relaxed and granted the students considerable leeway in presenting their ideas, both orally and in writing.

Based on unsystematic anecdotal evidence I had received from past classes, I expected the females to enjoy the novel and the males to dislike it. I was surprised to find that, on the whole, my attitudes were indeed stereotypical and were somewhat detached from the reality of the students’ engagement. Although initially one male did say that he was not interested in a novel about “Chinese broads,” even his evaluation changed as we penetrated more deeply into the book.

Soon after we had begun the reading I had the students write a general response paper asking for their overall opinions about the novel. There were, of course, some male responses that I had been led to expect. Phil set this tone when he wrote:

This is the first book that I have ever read that has to deal with China and women. I mean I have read books with women in them, but never a book like this where the women are the main characters. I find it hard to relate or even find anything interesting about any of the book so far.

However, Aaron wrote that,

The Joy Luck Club has been a somewhat interesting book so far. I thought I would strongly dislike this book because it was about Chinese-American women. It hasn’t been that bad, though.

Both males and females related to a section of the novel where one of the girls,

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Waverly, is pushed by her mother into becoming a chess champion. Although an excellent player, Waverly rebels against her mother's increasing demands on her free time. Most of the students could relate to this, some more than others. Aaron mentioned how he became "burnt out" when his father pushed him to excel in sports when he was a child. Patrick thought Lindo, Waverly's mother, became power hungry, that her ego "swells to massive proportions." Phil's comment can serve as a summary for all of these thoughts:

I've seen parents in my life where they push their kids way past the limit in many activities, especially sports. Dads trying to live out their dreams through their kids playing sports. It should come from inside, not from a parent trying to push their kid.

Phil is connecting his experiences to the larger world.

Kelli responded to a different question I asked concerning parent-child relationships of two young girls, one of whom constantly fights, both verbally and physically, with her mother, while the other, whose mother is pathologically withdrawn and incapable of intimacy, longs for her attention, even if it were to be negative. Which, I queried, is better?

I believe that it is better to get bad attention than no attention at all. Lena envies Teresa because Teresa has a relationship with her mother even though it is not such a good one. Lena's mother suffers from psychological disabilities which greatly affects her relationship with her daughter.

Concluding her essay, Kelli wrote:

After the death (of Lena's brother) Lena became even more desperate for her mother's attention and thought about it constantly. She even dreamt about it. She dreams a girl grabs her mother and pulls her on to the other side of a wall, which is exactly what Lena desperately wanted to do.

Here Kelli expressed insight and engagement with the text.

Overall, shifting to a reader response approach increased my respect for the students' abilities. They wrote and spoke truthfully about the novel, unencumbered by worries about saying the "correct" thing. I became increasingly impressed with their growing forthrightness and acumen. Kristine, for example, engaged the text emotionally. Commenting on June's mother, who was forced to abandon her twin babies on the road as she tried to escape the Japanese during World War II, she wrote:

I found it quite sad when Suyuan had to drop her bags because her hands couldn't take it anymore. Suyuan had no other choice obviously, to carry anything, not even her two babies.

Later, Kristine commented on Suyuan's husband's thoughts on his wife's death:

June's father believed that she was killed by her own thoughts. I think that there are

so many different ideas you can get from that statement. Suyuan could've died later from all the stress from the depression, or everything just built up inside of her.

My attitudes did undergo modification. I had formerly looked askance at this novel because I thought it was of passing topical interest and never would become part of the literary canon. I thought it was suitable to read for relaxation but not with "high seriousness." I am not sure if this novel will ever be categorized as one of the enduring works of literature, but after we had concluded our particular study I have come to a new appreciation of Amy Tan. This change in attitude was in many ways prompted by my growing respect for the abilities of my students, most of whom while reading this novel transcended any blind prejudices they may have held.

I thought this paragraph by Kevin concerning the structure of the novel more than adequately justified my confidence in the abilities of the students to think critically:

I liked how the stories changed and the plots just kept going as different ones because you just kept interested in it as you read a chapter. But the next chapter didn't have anything to do with the last chapter; it was sort of like starting over, like reading eight different books. They tied together but then they didn't. You could read a chapter and get an idea of what's going on. You don't have to read them all to get the whole thing.

In a sense, Kevin is talking about an artistic whole, a concept which in previous years I would have imposed upon the class at the beginning of the study. At this time he grasped well without my coaching an organizational pattern Tan certainly utilized. How much he was influenced by my instruction is impossible to gauge, but he reached this conclusion without the superimposition of my knowledge of the structure. I believe I had at least to some degree succeeded in enhancing the students' abilities to think critically about this novel without my assistance.

Summary and Findings of My Changing Practices

Ultimately, what had I accomplished in this inquiry? My intention to effect teacher change by shifting my pedagogical practices from a formalist to a reader response frame was on the whole successful in fostering student learning. Students became more closely engaged in the novels by responding to them actively, sometimes passionately, indicated by detailed oral and written responses to my questions. Additionally, the research steered me towards a reevaluation of both novels: more critical towards Hemingway; more appreciative of Tan. Finally, my perceptions of gender bias were altered. Few students, either male or female, expressed great pleasure towards Hemingway. Surprisingly to me, most of the males expressed an appreciation of Tan. Thus my stereotypes were dispelled: males could dislike Hemingway and accept Tan. Females were more in keeping with what I had expected: disliking Hemingway and enjoying Tan.

Considerations of teacher change have been described by Hampton (1994), who believes that the powerful constraints preventing teacher change can be overcome.

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Margolis (2002) and Rodgers (2002) believe combining reflection with action will successfully effect change. None of these studies discounts the difficulty in first obtaining and then sustaining change.

For example, Torff (2003) examines developmental change with novice, experienced, and expert teachers as they attempted to develop high order thinking skills among their students. He concludes that growing expertise on the part of teachers can be associated with a change from curriculum-centered practices that emphasize content knowledge to a student-centered environment that shows content decrease. Although expert teachers maintained higher thinking skills after lesson initiation, experienced teachers often shifted back to content centered formats as the lessons progressed and developed. Again, it must be emphasized that sustaining change is very difficult, even among teachers who desire it (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, George, 2007; Hashweh, 2003; Peine, 2007; Rodgers, 2002; Sparks, 1988).

I believe that overall I was successful. The transformation of my attitudes modified not only my approach to the novels, but changed my entire classroom demeanor. And as I was transformed, the atmosphere of the classroom changed, enabling the students to more closely enter into the world of these novels. My openness and willingness to discard many of my old methods such as lessening lecture times enabled the students to push themselves mentally into more critical assessments of the novels. Success, however, did not derive from allowing students complete freedom in their responses. Like Rosenblatt (1978), I insisted that the text always remain foremost in the students' minds. Although occasionally we strayed and extrapolated from the text, we did always return. Associative references to our personal lives always had some relation to the text.

I did allow considerable independence, especially for the student critiques. Early in the semester one student expressed surprise that I was interested in whether they enjoyed the book or not. They became enthusiastic when they realized that they would be able to really *criticize* Ernest Hemingway, one of the anointed writers secure in the American literary canon.

Allowing the students to express themselves freely both orally and in writing awakened me to their abilities as critical thinkers. Even the most lax readers among them had something intelligent to write or say based upon their classroom attention. When they were not under pressure to conform to my ideas, they were better able to express acceptance or dislike of these novels, unlike their experiences with previous novels we had studied.

And I too responded to the novels in a fresh manner. Especially concerning Hemingway, my ideas had become timeworn and rote. It was fascinating to me listening to the students speak or read orally what they had written. In a sense I was renewed. Allowing the students latitude in their responses to the novels, I found myself thinking more creatively and modifying positions I had held about writers and literature for many years.

I did not, however, completely abandon The New Criticism (Blackmur, 1957;

Brooks, 1947; Eliot, 1933, 1960; Ransom, 1941; Richards, 1925, 1929; Tate, 1936; Wellek & Warren, 1956; Wimsatt & Brooks, 1957). I will note that just as The New Criticism can be constricting and smothering, reader response can lead to chaos if misused. In studying a work of literature, a work of art, we may foster uncontrolled relativism for what we believe to be studied emancipation. I remain convinced that we should not stray too far from the text. Following the conclusion of this study, I have come to believe that compromise is necessary. For a teacher whose theoretical attitudes were as ingrained as mine, it was very difficult to surrender formalist theory. But releasing the students to move totally in their own directions is also, I believe, a misreading of reader response theory. Students will never be able to grasp the “true essence” of the work of art because in reality there is no true, “objective” essence. But neither should they attempt to comprehend the book based entirely on their perceptions and past experiences. A balance must be discovered between text and reader.

Research in one’s own classroom allows the teacher to examine pedagogical practices, both good and bad, that otherwise would be overlooked. Such research immerses the teacher in intricate details of classroom procedures and instructional design. I found that I more closely entered into the academic lives of my students than I had done before. In doing so, I was able to ascertain aspects of their engagement with the literary works which otherwise would have remained alien to me. Impelled by the research, I also modified my teaching practices to a degree I had not realized at the time of the research. In my case, teacher change was closely connected to my research within the classroom.

Finally, once change has been accomplished, how can it be sustained? What is to prevent teachers from reverting to past practices when these practices are comfortable and familiar, and when institutional inertia and other constraints make such reversion appealing? It is my learning in this area that pushes my inquiry to where I believe it has value not only for English education, but for teacher research as well. Hashweh (2003) believes that teachers who embrace change in order to accommodate the needs of their students do so because such teachers are internally motivated to learn. These teachers are aware of certain other conditions that help them maintain the course they initially began in response to overturning the timeworn methods which had become inimical to student learning. In order to maintain change, teachers need to follow these guidelines: remain open to new pedagogical possibilities while recognizing their limitations; construct new knowledge and beliefs; develop their ideas and put them into practice; synthesize new with prior ideas that had been valuable; and collaborate with colleagues and possibly university educators in order to maintain a support system (p. 428). Each teacher will need to tailor these guidelines into his/her own teaching context.

Rodgers (2002) believes that it is possible to sustain change through reflective teaching. Teachers must be *present* to student learning. *Presence* to Rodgers is an organic encompassing that transcends merely being present in the classroom. It is

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an immersion into the totality of the realness of the students. Additionally, teachers must view experience from multiple perspectives, analyze that experience, and continue to experiment (p. 234).

Enacting Change

For two years following the conclusion of this research, until I retired from high school teaching, I continued using most of the knowledge I had gained from theoretical study. Also, I continued to experiment with knowledge I gained during the course of the class. I did not find it difficult to maintain a reader response paradigm, not only in the novel class, but in other English classes I taught as well. I later used the reader response paradigm in college classes that I taught. Although I did not consciously follow the precepts for change described by Hashweh (2003), Rodgers (2002), and others I had read, I had absorbed these and other ideas to the degree that I never totally reverted to the lecture-quiz-test/paper methods I had used for so many years. I feel that I was more successful in some classes than in others, but overall I did sustain transformation. I accomplished this primarily for two important reasons. First, I continued to read more imaginative literature and scholarly criticism. Second, I consistently reminded myself to communicate with my students in such a way that I was usually aware of what they were thinking about the literature they were reading. I continued to allow them to respond personally to the literature while reinforcing their often very creative ideas with what I considered to be the best of my own knowledge and fresh responses. Our mutual respect enabled us to successfully continue the process of learning.

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