Reading as Inquiry: An Approach to Literature Learning

Bryant Fillion

What does it mean to learn literature, and how does one do it? What is the literary equivalent of “linguistic development,” and how can we promote it? The answers to those questions should help us make significant improvements in our teaching of literature, but we have only just begun to ask the questions.

Our knowledge of literature learning (for want of a better phrase—and the lack of a better phrase is itself instructive) might usefully be compared to our pre-psycholinguistic knowledge of language learning. Not so many years ago, we knew a great deal about the nature and structure of language, but relatively little about how it was learned, or the cognitive processes involved in its use. We taught students about language, because that was what we knew, and because we believed that learning about it would lead to proficiency in its use. The great controversies in language teaching concerned what should be taught (e.g., which grammar?), and how it should be taught (e.g., systematically, or ad hoc, as needed?), and all such disputes were essentially unresolvable, because we had not yet addressed the key questions: What does it mean to learn language, and how does one do it?

Similarly, we know a great deal about literature and literary criticism. Like language, literature is a long-established university discipline. Through the pioneering work of Louise Rosenblatt (Literature as Exploration, 1938 and 1968), Alan Purves (How Porcupines Make Love, 1972), and Arthur Applebee (The Child’s Concept of Story—Ages Two to Seventeen, 1978), we have begun to understand readers’ interactions with and responses to literature. However, we still know very little about how one learns literature, or what the good literature student knows and does that the poor student does not. And, despite our growing concern with readers’ responses, most issues in the teaching of literature continue to center on content and instruction. What shall be read; should we include more fiction written for adolescents? How shall it be organized; which themes can best be developed? What shall be stressed in discussions and assignments; can metrics, rhyme scheme, and structure be given meaning to the average fifteen-year-old? Except for the insistent reality of students who are unwilling or unable to undertake a steady diet of the classics, the learners and the learning process are largely overlooked in most of our discussions. Even when we promote the study of literature as an exploration of students’ values and social concerns, we are not very clear about the processes involved, or what kinds of changes we are looking for in students’ behavior.

Despite recurring arguments on behalf of teaching the cultural heritage, I believe most English teachers have now abandoned the notion that learning literature means learning the classics. Although we continue to hope that our students will eventually read and appreciate at least some great literature, we are now more directly concerned with enabling objectives: helping students learn to read and respond to literature, developing their capacity for independent reading and appreciation. But, like language teachers before psycholinguistics, we often do not give serious thought to the nature of those objectives, or their relationship to our classroom practices. (“Of course I want them to write and speak better! That’s why I teach them grammar!”)

To paraphrase James Moffett’s seminal comments about language, learning literature is not learning about literature but learning to use litera-
ture, as a source of experiences and as a resource for personal growth. What we are after, then—the literary equivalent of “linguistic development”—is our students’ increasing capacity to read and benefit from literary texts. What is the nature of this capacity, how is it acquired, and how can it be assessed?

My thesis here is that the capacity to read and derive benefit from literature involves an interaction of at least three related abilities: aesthetic reading, reflecting, and problem-finding, and that an inquiry approach to literature teaching offers one way to promote their development. I have consciously avoided the word skills in this description for two reasons. First, although these abilities can be developed and applied, there is little evidence that they can be taught directly, as one might teach long division. Second, although they may be observed indirectly, in their use these abilities are not quantifiable. We can assess their development, but we cannot measure them with precision.

**Aesthetic Reading**

As Louise Rosenblatt has argued, the reading of literature is distinctive not merely because of the nature of the text, but because of the reader’s approach to it. She distinguishes efferent (non-literary) reading from aesthetic (literary) reading in this way:

In nonaesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out. . . . In aesthetic [literary] reading, in contrast, the reader’s primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event. . . . In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.¹

This distinction is not, as Rosenblatt points out, a hard-and-fast separation, but a continuum, with most of our reading a mixture of the efferent and the aesthetic.

Fortunately, given the basic ability to read, most people seem to learn aesthetic reading quite naturally. Whether from watching TV, listening to people narrate their experiences, or being read to, most children acquire an ability to engage in a story or poem as an experience in its own right. Even in non-literate cultures, people acquire the ability to experience stories, poems, and plays, and many of our students who have difficulty reading for information can read fiction and some poetry with enjoyment. This is not to say that they can read Shakespeare or difficult poetry without some help, but their problems with such works may be more a lack of reading experience than an inability to read aesthetically.

Reading aesthetically presupposes the ability to read with some fluency, and the experiential background to handle the level of an author’s language and ideas. In a very real sense, all of the student’s experience with written language, reading, ideas, and the world contribute to his or her ability to read—aesthetically and efferently—by increasing the background knowledge brought to the task. There is probably a very narrow range of specialized knowledge, about the conventions of poetry and play scripts, for instance, which is necessary for, and acquired primarily from the reading of literature.

Although most English teachers place a high value on aesthetic reading (usually identified as “appreciating literature”), we may, inadvertently, discourage such reading, by assigning selections which students are unprepared to read, and by focusing our discussions of literature too exclusively on the recall of information from the text. Certainly it is reasonable to determine whether or not students have actually read an assigned selection, but when we treat the literature as if it were just information to be remembered, rather than as experiences to be enjoyed, contemplated, and reconstructed through our recounting, we may in fact be creating confusion about what it means to read and learn literature.

As a very practical matter, I think we must look seriously at the contrast between our everyday discussions about experiences, and our classroom “discussions” about students’ experiences with literature. When listening to tapes of literature classes—my own as well as others’—I am struck by how often they sound like inquisitions, rather than real discussions. The natural outcome of aesthetic reading, as of most shared experiences, should be discussion, rather than the interrogation of one reader by another. Having “read” a poem, or “seen” a film does not necessarily mean that we are finished with it, any more than we are finished with an event that continues to puzzle or interest us in some way. But in each case, with the event itself in the past, we are

in what James Britton calls the "spectator role"; we are free to contemplate, reconstruct, and interpret the experience, and in the process to understand better what we may not have understood at the time. The advantage of literature, unlike most "real life" events, is that the stimulus can be revisited; we can return again to the causes of our uncertainties (though we can never again return to our first reading), in order to overcome them.

One index of development in aesthetic reading is the students' willingness and ability to read with satisfaction an increasing range of literature. That is, the ability itself may be constant (who is to say that the five year old enjoying The Cat in the Hat is less aesthetic a reader than an adult engaged with King Lear?), but its applications are not constant. It seems probable that what we need to promote is the application of aesthetic reading, and the provision of reading experiences which will enable our students to read an increasing range of literature with ease and enjoyment.

Reflecting

A recent major study of (primarily non-literary) reading in England, Eric Lunzer and Keith Gardner's The Effective Use of Reading (London: Heinemann, 1979), concludes that:

individual differences in reading comprehension should not be thought of in terms of a multiplicity of specialized aptitudes. To all intents and purposes such differences reflect only one general aptitude: this being the pupil's ability and willingness to reflect on whatever it is he is reading.

(p. 64)

Such reflection is fostered, according to the study, partly through the use of readable materials which interest the students, and partly through the way teachers deal with the reading:

reading to answer questions can result in a passive absorption of facts rather than reflection or evaluation. It seems, therefore, that in organizing the purposes of reading across the curriculum, teachers need to balance 'getting information' with genuine inquiry. (pp. 300-301)

Instead of being passive recipients of information, students can be taught to approach the material in the role of interrogators and discussants. Reading for learning then becomes a 'conversation' with the text in which the student asks his own questions, finds the answers, and makes his own comment. (p. 303)

Although many students are able to read literature with some degree of satisfaction and enjoyment, the extent to which they reflect on their reading appears to vary greatly. Reflectiveness—the willingness and ability to contemplate the literary experience—may depend partly upon the student's usual approach to experience, and partly upon the way he or she has learned to deal with reading in school.

Certainly one characteristic of "good readers of literature" is their willingness and ability to consider and think about what they have read, and about its effect on them. It is not enough just to have the experience; we must also consider its meaning. It is perhaps through a growth in reflectiveness that learners of literature benefit most. That is, in addition to what one derives from the literature itself—which is in any case limited to the relatively small body of literature one happens to read—one also develops a way of dealing with experience. Through the consideration of the literary experience, we learn to consider other experiences as well. Learning literature may not be the only way to develop this reflectiveness, but it is certainly one way. The reflective ability which is necessary for the consideration of literature is also necessary for consideration of life—the adoption, as it were, of a "poetic stance" toward life, reflecting on the human meaning of experiences, to balance the "scientific stance," which closely analyzes the experience in objective terms.

We usually attempt to promote reflectiveness through discussion and writing, asking students to think again about their experiences with a selection. The primary benefit of considering the reasons for Macbeth's actions may not be what we learn about Macbeth, or even about ambition and fate, but the experience we gain in reconsidering experience, what we learn about learning from reflection. Often, however, we may short-circuit the process, and reduce its real benefits, by misinterpreting the purposes of literary discussions. That is, if we believe that the purpose of discussing the literature is primarily to learn about the literature—to discover, for instance, the theme of overweening ambition in Macbeth—then we soon realize that recitation (a lecture punctuated by questions) or the so-called Socratic method is much more efficient than real student-to-student discussion. In short, we do most of

the reflecting for the students, and in extreme cases the students do not reflect upon the literature at all, but only upon the short-answer questions, or what the teacher says about the literature.

The development of reflectiveness may be assessed in several ways, but all of them require us to let the students express themselves. Given enough time and very few students, we might try a read-and-think-aloud exercise, such as researchers have used, to determine the extent to which our students respond, question, cross-reference, predict, paraphrase, and relate to their own experiences during and after reading. More realistically, we might compare students' responses to comparable short selections at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. For example, given the open-ended assignment to "comment on this poem," how do students' October responses to Frost's "Birches" compare with their June responses to his "Mending Wall"?

**Problem-finding**

In a recent report on research into the composing processes of good and poor writers, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes conclude that "good writers are simply solving a different problem than poor writers. . . . People only solve the problems they represent to themselves. Our guess is that the poor writers we studied possess verbal and rhetorical skills which they fail to use because of their underdeveloped image of their rhetorical problem." As they observe, "Even though a teacher gives 20 students the same assignment, the writers themselves create the problem they solve." 3

Readers, like writers, are problem-setters. A key difference between the sixth grader and the graduate student reading and responding to *Huckleberry Finn* is in the tasks they set for themselves. Both presumably read aesthetically, to enjoy the experience of the reading, and both may reflect on the experience—recalling, contemplating meanings, and considering the personal significance of the novel—though the graduate student is likely to reflect much more self-consciously. But the graduate student, through maturity, experience, training, and inclination, is much more likely to consider such matters as the themes of the novel and how they relate to its history, the writer's intentions, the ways that the structure and language affect the reader, and the relationship of the novel to other literary works. Although both readers can be said to have read and understood the text, the graduate student will have more and different things to say about it, not just because of greater experience with literature, but because he or she has posed different questions of the text and the experience.

Learning to pose problems is learning to recognize and raise questions to the level of consciousness. The ability which most clearly distinguishes the good reader from the poor, and the professional critic from the general reader, is the ability to recognize and seek answers to questions which illuminate the text and the reading experience. As the College Entrance Examination Board indicated fifteen years ago in *Freedom and Discipline in English*:

> Question asking is the process the students must learn, becoming critics themselves as they become increasingly adept at asking their own questions and at seeking and testing their answers. (p. 55)

More recently, the Bullock Report, *A Language for Life* (HMSO, 1975), argued that "reading for learning will be most effective when the reader becomes an active interrogator of the text rather than a passive receiver of words" (p. 118), a point echoed in the Lunzer-Gardner study cited earlier.

Question asking, like aesthetic reading, has not so much to be taught directly (as a "skill") as to be encouraged and applied, with many opportunities provided. It is not, however, a simple matter of the teacher stepping out of the picture. Even though most students are quite accomplished questioners in their own areas of interest, few of them have had much experience questioning literature. They have depended on their teachers and textbooks to ask the questions for them. Conditioned as they are in most classrooms to respond rather than to initiate, students will usually generate questions only when requested to do so, and then initially with some reluctance. ("How should I know what questions to ask? You're the teacher!") Also, as Richard N. Jones points out in observing elementary school children, question asking can be a threatening business for students:

> children will share their answers with almost anyone who asks the right questions; but they will only share their questions with their own teachers—and then only if they love them. After all, there is little risk in giving an answer; it is either right or wrong and that is usually the end of it.

But to share a question is often to invite inspection of one's tenderer parts. Like other loving acts, this is not something we do with strangers.  

An important pre-condition for student question asking is that our classrooms be made safe for student inquiry and uncertainty.

Problem-finding is, of course, partly a function of maturity, and of familiarity with the subject. The more experience we have with something, the more likely we are to recognize the questions that are there to be asked. Even experienced readers may need prompting, and examples of intrusive style in order to recognize that questions of style and structure are there to be asked. One role of the teacher, then, is to create situations in which an increasing range of problems becomes obvious to the student. For example, if we want students to consider metaphor, we need to provide selections in which the metaphors are striking and likely to cause, or at least justify, comment.

In secondary schools, we usually teach questioning indirectly, by example; that is, we ask the questions. Although students can and do learn from models, there are several problems with such modeling as it is frequently practiced. First, our questions are often not the questions students need or want to answer, at least not at the time they are asked. In such cases, our questions may well create barriers between the reader and the literature, rather than bringing them closer together. There is also the danger of leading students to distrust their own questions and responses, to assume that responding to literature is a matter of knowing what the experts say they should know. Second, our own questions may tend to crowd out students’ opportunity to ask questions, so that we model behaviors we never allow students to practice. Third, so long as we ask the questions, we have no way of knowing whether or not the students are learning how to question texts on their own.

In a recent interview in *Language Arts* (February 1980), Northrop Frye was asked, “What role do you see children’s questions playing in the study of texts? Does their inquiry have a place in literary education?” His reply was:

I think it has an extremely central role to play. You can’t deal with literature solely with a teacher monologue. It’s only when you begin to get questions, that you know whether what you’re saying has been intelligible or not. Sooner or later a question that you haven’t thought of will be asked. Out of that question can come an expansion of the teacher’s understanding, as well as the students’. I always say to my students, “Now, I know you are shy about asking silly questions, but remember that the silly ones are the only ones that express your real difficulties. So let’s start with them.” (p. 206)

The assessment of students’ development as problem-finders in literature is essentially a more focused elaboration of the procedures we might use to determine the growth of reflectiveness. We may infer from their open-ended responses to selections the elements they are noting and the questions they are answering, or we may ask them directly to generate the questions which might be discussed about a particular work. We might chart students’ development by noting changes in the types of questions they ask and deal with, and the range of literary elements considered, using some matrix such as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Elements</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events, plot</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Characters,</td>
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<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting, mood,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideas, themes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language, style,</td>
<td></td>
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<td>structure</td>
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If our teaching is successful, students should gradually learn to use the full range of such a matrix in their writing and discussion.

**An Inquiry Approach to Literature**

An inquiry approach to literature treats reflection and problem-finding as primary objectives in our

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teaching, rather than as expected outcomes of other activities. We need to focus students’ attention on the process of inquiry in reading and responding to literature, and to provide them with opportunities to engage in the process. Such an approach, explicitly intended to teach students how to inquire into literature, would not involve new and untried teaching techniques—there are few methods literature teachers haven’t tried, at one time or another—but it would involve adopting a particular focus, emphasizing the students’ activity as much as the literature itself. In practical terms, such teaching might involve techniques such as the following:

1. Organizing our courses, or units of study, around the activities of reading and responding. For example, instead of arranging selections thematically, or according to genre, we might arrange them to promote particular kinds of inquiry. That is, in place of units on “Growing Up,” “Social Conflicts,” or “The Short Story,” we might have units on “What does this say?” (providing opportunity for students to confront problems in literal comprehension), “What does this mean?” (with selections likely to provoke varied student interpretations), and “What does it matter?” (using selections dealing with particular adolescent concerns). Such units would not be “skill building” exercises, but units focusing students’ attention on particular aspects of the reading-responding process, providing opportunities for them to examine and develop strategies to answer the title questions: What does it say? How should this be read? What is there to say about character? etc.

2. Encouraging students to examine the role of inquiry in their everyday lives, and to apply their findings to the reading and discussion of literature. For example, many of the questions students face in getting to know people are the same questions we want them to address in their consideration of characters in literature: What is this person like? Why do I think so? How are we similar or different? Why does he or she act this way? How do I feel about him or her? Similarly, the same strategies students use in making sense of real life experiences—close observation, prediction, recall, reconsideration, questioning, and discussing—can also be brought to bear on literary experiences.

3. Examining the inquiry which is usually buried within the reading process itself, so that even good readers may not be aware of it. For example, after reading the opening sentences or paragraphs of a story, we might ask students to identify the questions that have been raised, from the powerful global question, “What will happen?” to such text-specific questions as “Who is telling this tale, and why should we assume we think him mad?” (Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart”), or “What is it that happened?” (Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow”). Predicting and hypothesizing are, as Frank Smith points out, powerful components of comprehending, and yet such interrogations of the text (“What will happen next? Will he get away with killing the old man?”) often occur below our level of conscious awareness. By making students aware of such inquiry, we may help them develop a more sensitive awareness of their own reading, and of the way authors influence and interest them. (Prediction is, of course, a key element in suspense, anticipation, and surprise, and it is another example of everyday inquiry that can be applied to the reading of literature.)

4. Grouping selections to stimulate inquiry into certain aspects of literature. For example, Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart,” Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” and selections from Masters’ Spoon River Anthology all provoke questions about the narrator. Edward Lueders’ “Your Poem, Man...” (in Some Haystacks Don’t Even Have Any Needle), the poems of e. e. cummings, and the essays and stories of Gertrude Stein all force readers to attend to the language of literature.

5. Perhaps most important, encouraging students to generate and try to answer their own questions about texts and their responses to them. Too often, students’ questions are the last thing we make room for in our lessons. (As one study of classroom language points out, the question “Do you have any questions?” is usually not an invitation at all, but a signal that the lesson is over, and we are now going on to other things.) After students have read a selection, why not precede the discussion by having them write out the questions they want to have answered in order to understand the text, and the questions they would most like to talk about in class? For many students, at least initially, writing questions, or raising them in small groups, is less threatening than asking them aloud in class.

Movement in the direction of an inquiry approach to literature could well begin with an assessment of the present status of inquiry in our classrooms. For example, in typical literature classes, how many students volunteer how many questions, and what kinds of questions do they ask (aside from...
"Why do we have to read this?" "What time does this class end?" and "Will this be on the test?")? When challenged to "write as many questions as you can think of about this selection, in five minutes," what questions do students come up with? When they are asked to "write one or two questions about this selection that you (a) cannot answer, but (b) would like to be able to answer," are their questions the ones we would have asked the class? When students are asked to lead discussion on particular selections, what questions do they ask? (Typically, the first discussion leader will ask questions very similar to those the teacher asks. Given time, and instruction to "ask questions that you and the class would really like to discuss," leaders become noticeably less imitative.)

Aside from its benefits to literature learning, the inquiry approach may be advocated for its potential contribution to students' language development. By increasing their range of inquiry, we also increase the range of writing and discussion problems students must solve. If we believe, with Britton, Moffett, and the Bullock Report, that language proficiency develops primarily through purposeful use, then an increase in students' use of language in service of their own intentions and inquiry should result in improved speaking and writing in various modes: from the phrasing of questions to speculation about the significance of events and the creation of their own imaginative writing.

There are, of course, no panaceas. I doubt we will ever find any one approach to literature that will guarantee success in enabling and encouraging all students to read and derive greater benefits from increasingly sophisticated selections. However, I believe we can greatly improve on our present practices if we begin to consider the learners and their learning, rather than looking solely at the literature.

Bryant Fillion teaches at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Canada.

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**Getting Them to Read**

Patricia A. Bilby

"If there be pleasure in reading, skill in reading will surely come" writes John Hersey in the Spring 1977 *Connecticut English Journal*. Few teachers would argue that sentiment, but how do we convince students of the pleasures of reading? In the past I have tried brief book talks, lists of books culled from the *English Journal*, and books recommended by children's literature text books, all with a modest amount of success. Some students discovered books they enjoyed; too many, however, loathed the books they selected and continued to loathe reading. To reach these students I devised this approach.

One Friday afternoon I informed students that next Friday they should bring to class the best book they had read in the last year. I then gave students hand-outs which explained how they should prepare for class.

The next Friday I divided the class into groups of five to keep friends apart since they had probably discussed the books in question and might be tempted to move on to other, less academic, topics. Each student made a five minute presentation to the group to include the title, author, and type of book; description of major characters; comments about problems students might have in reading the book, such as difficult vocabulary or a slow beginning; and a brief explanation of why others might enjoy the book.

Other students listened attentively (I stressed the importance of respect for one's peers) and wrote down title and author. If the book sounded interesting, they took notes. After the speaker finished, others had opportunity to ask questions, and then they rated the book on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). It is important to stress at this point that students were rating their interest in the book, not their opinion of the presentation.

This procedure was then repeated with other members of the group. I moved around to insure that students were addressing the work at hand. After everyone finished, students totalled up their scores and had about ten minutes to report to the whole class. One person from each group described the highest rated book to the rest of the class. Assuming you have a class of thirty students, each student will be exposed to four books within the small groups and an additional five books when the other groups report.

This procedure worked. It got students talking about books and directed them towards books they might enjoy. A higher percentage of students were satisfied with the books they chose as a result of this activity, and a number of students were anxious to repeat it.

*Patricia A. Bilby teaches at Saint Thomas Aquinas High School in Edison, New Jersey.*