The Effects of Instruction on Students' Reader Responses

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August 1999

**Note — Please see MLK for related materials, such as tables, that are not included in the web version of this paper.*

Statement of Purpose/Research Question
So much of today's classroom learning is simply regurgitation of what the teacher says. A text is read, the teacher tells his/her students what it means, and then the students are tested for those answers. There is little or no critical thinking involved; students are not encouraged to think for themselves. This is most tragic in a literature-based English classroom where meanings in the text can be ambiguous. There is more than one way to read a poem, and one person may relate to it differently than another. Robert Probst (1988) states that "the student of literature who parrots the thinking of classmates, learns the critical judgements of scholars, or memorizes peripheral information about authors' lives and historical periods has not begun to learn the literature" (38). There is so much more to a literary text than the format, time frame, author profile, and literary criticism.

Students can make meanings for themselves. They are thinking, feeling beings who have opinions. It is our job as teachers to show them how to use their feelings to capacity. They need to know that their feelings are what bind them to their readings - why they intensely dislike one reading and love another. And our students need an outlet for those responses to readings. For unless we allow them to react towards a text in a personal way, they will be left learning only the facts: author, theme, genre, and plot. And "unless students read and respond, there is no literature to teach - only texts and information about texts" (Probst 38). We should be giving the same opportunities to our students that we enjoy.

But we cannot expect students to understand reader response without some instruction. We teach students the concepts of plot, setting, and theme, so why not reader response? My research will show that students will respond on a more advanced level after they participate in a lesson during which we discuss the expectations of their reader responses, than they did without the lesson.

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Review of the Literature
It was necessary to present a philosophy of literature and teaching that would explain why and under what circumstances the reading of literary works would both have an intrinsic aesthetic value and make possible the development and assimilation of insights into human relations. (Rosenblatt 1993, 380) With this realization, reader response criticism was born. Envisioning this ideal, Louise Rosenblatt outlined it in her 1938 book, Literature as Exploration. Initially, her theories were widely ignored. Today, Rosenblatt's writings are considered touchstone texts for both practicing teachers and those in college education programs. No research in reader response would be complete without the mention of Rosenblatt at the forefront.

Reader response is, in a nutshell, a reader's reaction to a text. Rosenblatt says that each reader is involved in a "transaction" (1993, p.380) with the text he/she is reading. "…[The] 'literary work' - 'exists,' 'happens,' …in the transaction between particular readers and the text (the signs on the page)" (380). Readers create their own meanings when they read. And their interpretation of the text is dependent on their own thoughts, experiences, attitudes, and mind set. A student may react more positively to a book or poem that he/she feels akin to. Perhaps the text's theme is isolation. A student who has experienced such isolation may relate differently to the story than one who has always felt he/she was part of the crowd. In a reader response format, the teacher recognizes that each student thinks about the reading differently based on his/her own experiences and feelings, and these different interpretations are encouraged.

But even in a reader response based classroom there is, of course, room for factual knowledge. Rosenblatt calls reading for information "efferent" reading (383). A reader must have basic knowledge of the plot and action in order to react to the text. But the "aesthetic" (383) reading should not be ignored. Rosenblatt calls the "aesthetic" reading one which "is focused primarily on experiencing what is being

evoked, lived through during the reading" (383). In simpler terms, it is going beyond what is written in the text and questioning the reading using personal experience and feelings to do so. In Louise Rosenblatt's own words, "We should then be adopting an aesthetic stance toward the text - reading it with attention, of course, to what the words refer to, but mainly to what we are experiencing, thinking, and feeling during the reading" (1991, p.444).

But with all of this emphasis on students' reactions to reading, we question, "How do we encourage students' interpretations?" Moffett and Wagner (1991) saw that "students reading silently need a way to register their responses - bring them to awareness - equivalent to uttering responses in collective reading" (72). One way that students can respond to silent reading is in a reading journal (72). Moffett and Wagner recommend a "double-entry" journal where the students write their responses to their readings on one half of the journal page and leave the other half so that they can look back on their reactions and re-react, or the teacher may write about how the students' reactions affected him/her, or the students may choose to have their peers react to their writings (73).

Keeping a reading journal is an easy thing to do. A teacher might think that all he/she has to do is to tell the class that from now on, they are to write down what they think when they read. But, as Linda R. Berger (1996) discovered, it is not that easy. When she first incorporated response journals into her curriculum, she was quite shocked to discover that students used their journals not as outlets for reflective thinking, rather as plot summaries basically saying "'I'll prove I am reading this book. I'll tell you the entire plot'" (381). Realizing that just setting students to the response journal task with no further instruction was not netting the results she craved - "meaty, thoughtful interpretations of literature" (380) - she decided that the students needed a coach (380). She explains:

> My students and I devised formulas for getting sense and satisfaction from what we were reading. After much trial and error, four questions seemed to provide the most fruitful ground for reader response: What do you notice? What do you question? What do you feel? What do you relate to? (381)

Though Berger does not go in depth with the formulas that were devised, it can be assumed that the class embarked on an intense questioning of the literature. The students were aware of the goals, and they helped to find the questioning pattern that worked to evoke the best responses. They even practiced the four questions on a common class reading so that the students were comfortable with the Berger's expectations (381). Once the students were aware of what was expected in the response journals, Berger says their writing improved greatly: "We had become a community of readers who knew how to make meaning from the texts we shared…" (382).

Barbara Hoetker Ash's (1992) class went about making meaning in a slightly different way. Using questioning to entice her students to read, she read one sentence from a book the class was beginning. She then asked the students to "write down five questions we might ask based on that opening sentence" (61). The list of resulting questions was amazing, and the questioning pattern stuck because it worked so well. Hoetker Ash says that, eventually, "students no longer needed me to pose questions; they wrote their own…" (62). Once students were given the chance to practice the questioning technique in a receptive environment, they thrived. They were aware of what was expected of them, and their engagement with the literature changed accordingly. They learned that their opinions were meaningful to their interpretation of the texts, and they would not be criticized for them. Their questioning became an inherent part of their engagement with literature.

Marjorie R. Hancock (1993) tried to explain how students make meaning while they read in her study, "Exploring the meaning-making process through the content of literature response journals: a case study investigation." In this study, ten sixth-grade students read four "realistic-fiction" (335) books and kept reader response journals to record their feelings while reading. Upon analysis of the students' journals, Hancock discovered that "each reader in this study exhibited a unique response profile" (365). No student reacted to the texts in exactly the same way. This diversity is surprising considering the size of the sample and it "reflects in part the multiplicity of response options open to an individual reader" (365). The ways a reader may respond to a text are limitless. Each person is unique and may relate to a text differently than another person might. We need to recognize that our students are all individuals with their own opinions, and we need to respect those opinions discussed in their journal writings.
Another important point that Hancock (1993) makes is that students "tire of the demands of interrupting reading with writing" (366). In her study, the students were responding to their readings throughout the process, stopping to respond when an idea struck them. Through interviews with the students she learned why their response frequency declined as they reached the end of their books. Journal response may

"actually interfere with the reading of a book, particularly near its conclusion" (366). For this reason, Hancock recommends "moderation" in our expectations of our students' responses. We should not expect our students to respond every time they relate to the story. We should, instead, hope that our students are emotionally responding to the text whenever they are reading, and responding in writing perhaps only once per day in their journals.

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In 1995, Sebesta, Monson, and Senn published a study in which they attempted to assess and analyze students' reader responses based on a "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response," (see Appendix I). They concluded that "embracing this [reader response] view forces us to think about how comprehension is assessed" (444). If we are teaching our students that their opinions are valued and that they make the meaning of their reading, it is unfair to turn around and assess their knowledge with a test of the facts. To aid teachers in assessing their students' use of the aesthetic response, the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response" was devised. In their article, "A hierarchy to assess reader response," the researchers report on a study that tested this taxonomy.

Using Rosenblatt's theory as a springboard and other related research implied but not explicitly explained in this account of the study, Monson, Sebesta, and Senn (1995) developed a hierarchy composed of four stages: "evocation, alternatives, reflective thinking, and evaluation" (445). The researchers believed that readers' aesthetic responses developed as they passed through these stages.

Evocation is when a student gives a simple reaction, such as surprise at a given event. Stage two, Alternatives, refers to when the student uses comparison and contrast in his/her response. A student at the Reflective Thinking stage takes the information in the reading and generalizes it or applies it to the world around him/her. Lastly, Evaluation is simply judging the characters, actions, and overall value of the book. This stage comes with one caveat: that the student has passed through the other three stages along with stating whether or not he/she liked the literature. A student cannot just say "I don't like this book" and get credit for attaining the evaluation stage without also showing that he/she has elaborated on something in the reading that he/she found interesting (evocation), compared/contrasted this elaboration (alternatives), and reflected on how this elaboration generalizes to his/her world (reflective thinking). The researchers give no explanation as to why this is specified, but I speculate that students pass judgement over their reading all the time. A thoughtful, aesthetic judgement only comes from introspection and connection (or lack there of).

After Sebesta, Monson, and Senn established their preliminary hierarchy, they needed to test it. Could they apply it to actual classrooms with ease? Did the stages and results give any useful knowledge? Did the hierarchy do what it was meant to do - assess reading comprehension?

To assess the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response," 112 students in grades 4-10 were tested. Not all of the students came from the same school, but they all came from "literature-rich classrooms" (447) where response-based philosophies were practiced. Voluntary reading by the students and their class discussions were above average as observed by the researchers. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn believed that the students in these classrooms were more familiar with aesthetic response and would have fewer instances of efferent responses.

The students were asked to listen to a reading of an African-American folktale, "The Talking Mule." The researchers do not specify whether the tale was presented in a live reading or a taped reading, or whether the students had their own texts to follow along. The text was chosen because its "tall-tale tone, simple plot, stock characters, and fast pace seemed to work well across age groups" (447). Immediately after the reading, students were asked to "fill a page" (447) responding to the story. The researchers asked that if the students drew pictures to help them fill a page, some written response had to be present. There is no specification in the write-up of the study as to how many students chose to respond with pictures as well as text.

The responses were then collected and divided into 138 "response segments" (447). If they tested 112 students, how did they get 138 responses? The researchers state that 28 of the received responses were efferent and therefore not categorized in the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response." I am speculating that those 28 responses were partly efferent and partly aesthetic; therefore they were classified as both and counted twice. The researchers do not specify where the 138 responses came from, though. Two responses did not fit into the hierarchy because they were "so completely realized, original, and definitive; [the researchers] refused to categorize them (450). One hundred and ten segments fit into the hierarchy,

including parts of the 28 efferent responses. These responses were then analyzed for where they fit in the hierarchy. The highest stage shown (four being the highest) in each student's writing determined where he/she fit in the hierarchy. Each stage could be satisfied at the "minimal," "moderate," or "complete" (446-447) levels in the students' responses. The researchers did not specify whether the students had to satisfy each stage completely in order to fit into that stage of the hierarchy. I assume that if there was even minimal satisfaction of the level, credit was given.

As a work in progress, the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response" changed gradually, with each application. The researchers chose to collect and classify the responses from students at three different times. Each time some responses were collected, the hierarchy was revised. Generally, the four categories were amended with more specific examples of each type of response. For instance, under Stage 2 (Alternatives) there are four ways that students may compare/contrast their first impressions. Students could "apply own experience" and "reconsider responses," "apply other reading or media to the work," "apply other readers' views," or "reexamine the text from other perspectives" (446). In order for the hierarchy to be valid, each of the three researchers had to be able to look at the same response papers and place those papers in the hierarchy at approximately the same places their collegues did. In this case, "interrater reliability among the three researchers increased with each application after revision: 69%, 76%, and 82%" (448).

Because so many student responses fit the criteria of the hierarchy, the researchers decided that the four stages were indeed "identifiable and discrete" (448). The results of the study could then be analyzed. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn found that 27% of the students in grades 4-6 responded as far as the evocative stage only; but 41% moved beyond that stage to alternatives. A small percentage moved beyond alternatives. In grades 7-10, the majority of students, 43% responded at the alternatives stage also, though 10% responded at the reflective thinking stage and 14% at the evaluation stage. These results suggest that some students still need instruction in thinking aesthetically, even in literature-rich classrooms, according to the researchers.

It is evident that students need some guidance before embarking on their own reader response journals. Without instruction, their personal meaning-making becomes simple efferent response, regurgitating what they think teachers want to hear. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn (1995) used what they considered "literature-rich classrooms" (447) in their test of the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response," and the students were used to discussing literature and openly responding in class, yet 20% of the students who participated in their testing of the taxonomy responded efferently. An important factor influencing this result is that there is no evidence that the students were familiar with any journal writing or the expectations of written reader response. A question arises from this: "Would a smaller percentage of students respond efferently, and a higher percentage of students respond at higher levels on the taxonomy, if they were taught how to respond aesthetically?"

The purpose of this study is to show that students who receive instruction on how to question a text will respond with more independent thought and feelings, evident in higher scoring on the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response," than untrained students. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn (1995) completed their testing of the participating students by simply analyzing their reader responses based on one text, one prompt, and no other instruction for aesthetic response. With no prior training in aesthetic journal response, it would stand to reason that the students would be unsure as to the researchers' expectations. It is my hypothesis that students who participate in an aesthetic journal response mini-lesson will respond at higher stages of the "Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response" than those who had no instruction.

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Subjects

The 24 students completing this study were from two 7th grade classes a rural junior high in upstate New York and are from predominantly middle-class backgrounds. All learning levels were represented, and the students' experience with written reader response had been minimal. The school practices full-inclusion; therefore, I had students who worked with an aid in the classroom. I briefed the aid on the format for the two days of the study, but I did not tell her the purpose to prevent contamination. The aid helped the students with their writing as was usually practiced in the classroom. Although Sebesta, Monson, and Senn (1995) did not specify as to the socioeconomic classes or the learning levels of their participants, they did specify that their interactions were generally above average. The participating students did not have past experience with aesthetic response, similar to those students of the present study. Because the students were in two classes with the same teacher, they have read the same texts as a whole class. This is similar to the Sebesta, Monson, and Senn's study where the students were also exposed to the same

texts, but different in that the students in my study could choose which text they were most comfortable using.

The students participating in the present study were chosen not because they are a truly representative sample, but because I was limited as to the population available. I did not have access to other schools that would allow me to collect data from a larger sample of students, so I elected to complete this study in the school where I did my student teaching semester.

Method/Data Collection and Analysis

Although Sebesta, Monson, and Senn (1995) tested the participating students only once, in my study, students were tested over two days. This period allowed for one day of baseline data collection and one day of instruction and a second collection of data. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn simply told the students to write about what they had read, then analyzed each piece of writing using the taxonomy. My method was much different. To collect baseline data, I first began class as a review session of the stories we read as a class in the recent five-week marking period. I then handed out copies of questions (see Appendix II). I told the students that they had the remainder of the period, approximately one hour, to choose one or more questions to answer using any stories we have read in the recent marking period. I also instructed students to "fill a page" with writing, just as Sebesta, Monson, and Senn did.

The questions the students had to respond to were created using the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response to help steer the students into responding thoughtfully, rather than proving they did the reading by giving me the basic facts from the story. Students could have chosen one or more questions to answer, and could only give me a value judgement of the text if they had answered one or more of the other questions given. I believed that questions to guide students in their response had a marked effect on their writing, and encouraged them to respond aesthetically. I expected to get few responses that score a zero on the taxonomy.

Day two was similar to day one in that students were given approximately one hour to respond to the same set of questions they used the previous day. They were told that they could use the same question or a different one, and they could use any of the texts reviewed the previous day. The key difference was that the questions were discussed in a mini-lesson prior to writing. I used a text that the entire class was familiar with and encouraged the students to apply each question to that text during the class discussion. I answered any questions the students had before the students began writing, but once they started I answered no more questions. This eliminated contamination of the results when students asked me if they were "doing it right." I simply told them to do their best.

I then compared the writing from day one to the writing turned in on day two to see how a short instructional session (approximately 20 minutes) effected the students' writing. I analyzed the writing from both days using the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response to determine whether more students attained higher levels of aesthetic writing after instruction than before the mini-lesson. I paired up the writing from both days by author, then proceeded to read each response. At this point, I was simply familiarizing myself with the students' writing.

With a copy of the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response nearby for comparison, I read through each students' writing again, looking for any statement that might satisfy a stage. Sebesta, Monson, and Senn believed that a response had to satisfy one stage before it could satisfy the next one. So I looked for a stage one response first. If a student told me about a specific incident in the story that he/she liked, or imagined what the setting, characters, or events looked like, I gave him/her credit for achieving a stage one response. If the student took that response a little further by recalling a similar incident from his/her life or another book or movie, he/she was given credit for achieving a stage two response. If the student told me about something that surprised him/her, or if a student took a character's point of view, he/she also got credit for attaining a level two. To get to level three, the student had to reflect on what the story's meaning was. For a level four response, I looked for a judgement from the student. The student could either tell me whether he/she liked the story and why, or he/she could tell me what he/she learned from the story. Basically, I followed the criteria set by the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response. If a student's writing did not seem to fit any level of the Taxonomy, yet it was not an efferent response, that student's writing was categorized as aesthetic, but not applicable to the taxonomy.

Although Sebesta, Monson, and Senn did not use any other means of data collection other than their own analyses of the students' response journals, I used response analysis along with two other forms of data. Students were asked to answer a questionnaire about their writing from both days and a short question about what they thought they learned from the exercise (see Appendix III). Because I did not have

interrater reliability - I was the only person reading the student responses - I felt that triangulation of the data was very important to validate my data. This questionnaire and short question served to back up the journal analysis data.

Sebesta, Monson, and Senn also allowed students to draw pictures and write, and I, too, gave students that option. But I gave students a minimal writing requirement - at least five sentences explaining their picture. Without a minimum requirement, I might have received only one phrase or sentence of writing accompanying pictures. The level reached on the Taxonomy was determined by the writing.
I felt it was important to give students a choice of text to use for their writing, although Sebesta, Monson, and Senn did not do this. Because aesthetic writing requires the writer to identify with the story beyond a general knowledge of the plot, I believed that allowing students to choose their texts would give them a greater feeling of ownership, and would allow them to choose stories that they particularly liked and identified with.

Another difference between my study and that of Sebesta, Monson, and Senn was that they were not participants in the classrooms they tested. I was a participant/observer, involved in the instruction of the students in the selected test classes. The students were told that the response journal would have an impact on their grades to encourage serious responses and attitudes. This was not the case in the previous study, but I believed that more serious responses would be turned in if the students believe it is to be graded, especially given the age-range of the participants.

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Data and Analysis
The chart and graph on the next page show the results of this study. They were surprising. On day one, out of twenty-four students, only two turned in a response that was categorized as efferent. Twenty percent of the participants of Sebesta, Monson, and Senn's gave efferent responses. My figures were already significantly lower with 8%. And on day two, after the students participated in the instructional lesson, only 4% of the students gave an efferent response, an increase of 4%.

This dramatic difference between percentage of efferent responses Sebesta, Monson, and Senn received and the percentage I received on both days was probably due to the prompts I gave the students. It appears that they did exactly what I had hoped; they steered students into aesthetic responses. This shows how valuable prompts are when teaching students reader response.

Thirty-three percent of the students on day one and 38% of the students on day two scored at a stage one, an increase of 5%. Students recalled what they liked in the story or imagining the setting, characters, or events not described in the story. For example, Student 12 expanded on the setting for a story about Roberto Clemente. "The setting is in a plan(e), very windy. It pooring rain, hailing, and so nasty you can hardly see outside." These details were not in the story, yet this student imagined the setting for Roberto Clemente's plane crash this way.

Thirteen percent of the students on day one and 21% of the students on day two fulfilled stage two. This represents an increase of 8%. Students attained stage two responses by recounting similar experiences from their lives, other readings or movies. Some stage two responses looked at the story from another point of view or re-thought their first reactions to the story. Student 9 found similarities between her Christmas and one she read about in the story "Growing Up" by Russell Baker.
I've had the same situation but with clothes. One day my parents were gone and I went in my mother's closet to try to find something to wear, and found a bag and decided to look in it. I found all the clothes I was getting for Christmas from my mom. Now there would be no surprise on Christmas for me. I felt alful. I had to act surprised on Christmas morning and it wasn't easy.

It is important to remember that students that were categorized as a stage two also had to have satisfied stage one.

Some students responded only to a stage three. Thirteen percent of the students gave stage three responses on day one; 17% percent responded at stage three on day two, an increase of 4%. These students reflected on the meaning of the story and tried to apply it to their own lives. Many students stated that they learned a lesson from the story they responded to. Student 3 wrote, "I learned that you shouldn't jump to conclusions because you may not always be right." Students who attained stage three responses had to satisfy stages one and two also.

Twenty-five percent of the student texts on day one and 13% of the student texts on day two reached a stage four. This is a decrease of 12%. To be categorized as a stage four students assessed how good the book was or how well the author got his/her point across after fulfilling the other three stages. The following is an example of a reader response written by Student 21. I categorized it as a stage four. To make this response easier to analyze, I highlighted the pertinent text. The green text is a statement that I categorized as a stage one. The pink text is stage two. The blue text is stage three, and the red text is stage four. This text was reproduced authentically. None of the wording, spelling, or grammar was changed.

In the story "Evangeline," the character, Evangeline is searching for her husband. I am going to tell you about a similar situation that has happened to me before. Of course it is nothing like Evangeline's situation.

It was my birthday, and I was going to the mall. My sister and my mother came along. We got there kind of late. There was a hot new store out called "The Iceing," and I really wanted to go there and see what it was like. But before we could go there, we had to do some shopping for my sister and my brother. Then go eat. It was getting late and we were getting tired. A few of the stores were already closing. We found our way to the store and it was closed. I was dissapointed, but I new that I would have another chance. Evangeline's story and mine were alike because she was searching for her new husband, and I was searching for a store. We both found what we wanted eventually but her husband died, and my store was closed. We were both dissapointed.

I don't think I would give Evangeline any advice because I would have done the same thing as her. I would keep looking for what I was looking for and not give up. Which I learned from her.
From Evangeline, I learned that you should never give up. If there is something that you really want and you really need, you can't stop searching for it. Don't give up untill you have it. It might apply to me in the future because maybe there is a job that I will think is right for me and it pays good money. I will keep trying to get that job.

The green statement, "Evangeline is searching for her husband" is setting the scene for her response. It is a simple statement that orients the reader. Student 21 is reliving the scene that that she connected with, and this qualifies as "Evocation."

The statements in pink satisfy the second stage, "Alternatives." Here the student is comparing her experiences with Evangeline's. They were both searching for something. This student also demonstrates another way of satisfying stage two; she takes Evangeline's point of view by saying that Evangeline was disappointed when she found her husband and he died.

The blue statements show the student's reflective thinking. She has shown the similarities between her story and Evangeline's story, and now she applies it to her own life. She interprets the meaning of the story, don't give up, and the student imagines that if she were Evangeline, she would persevere, too. Red denotes a stage four statement. Student 21 has taken her interpretation of the story and applied it on a broader scale, evaluating what she has gotten out of the story. She has looked into the future for an opportunity where she could use the lesson she learned from Evangeline. She states that it "might apply" to her life in the future.

Two texts could not be categorized because they did not fit the taxonomy. But the two that did not fit were definitely aesthetic responses. Student 7 wrote an alternate ending to the story "Rip VanWinkle."
When Rip met the smurfs (little men) he drank their beerey stuff and had a hangover so he went to sleep. Twenty years later, he wakes up and returns to his home town, and finds the town all different, his wife went looney, his children are grown up and George Washington is President of the U.S.A. So he sells skateboards to send his son to college. His son becomes a lawyer, he than changes his name (for no one would vote for a man named Winkle) to Thomas Jefferson and became President of the U.S.A. Everyone lived happily ever after.

This response did not fit anywhere in the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response. It did not just give facts from the book, though. The response is creative, imaginative, and definitely aesthetic. I called this response "not applicable" to the taxonomy.

Ten out of twenty-four students dropped at least one stage in their day two responses. That represents 42% of the population sample. Four students, 17%, responded at the same stage on both days, and eight students, 33.3%, gained in stage. Two students were not counted as either staying the same, dropping in

stage, or gaining in stage because their responses did not fit the taxonomy. The following pie chart illustrates this analysis.

I looked to the questionnaires hoping to find out what the students were thinking as they were writing on days one and two. I received twenty-two questionnaires. I then broke them down into seven different categories that might help me discover why there were fewer students at higher stages and more students responding at lower stages. The results were as follows. The red categories represent questions about the writing on day one, while the blue categories represent the questions about the writing on day two.

Categories based on Questionnaire	# agreed	# unsure
Happy with their work on 3/4/99	15	4
Happy with their work on 3/5/99	17	3
Chose the easiest question on 3/4/99	9	0
Chose the easiest question on 3/5/99	8	0
Had trouble with their chosen question on 3/4/99	3	0
Had trouble with their chosen question on 3/5/99	4	1
Thought all questions were difficult on 3/4/99	3	2
Thought all questions were difficult on 3/5/99	1	1
Understood all of the questions	15	1
Chose a different question on 3/5/99	12	0
Understood the questions better after instruction on 3/5/99	15	2

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The majority of students were happy with the work they turned in on both days, with little variation from day one to day two. More students were satisfied with their work on day two, possibly because they knew what was expected of them after the mini-lesson.

Less than half of the students chose the question they thought was the easiest. This category is not easy to analyze because students were not asked to specify which question they chose, an oversight on my part. But this statistic does show that the students were not afraid to take risks. I thought that most students would choose the question they thought was easiest because they might do a better job and receive a better grade. Instead, students challenged themselves by trying questions that they thought were more difficult.

Few students had difficulty with the question they chose to do each day. Surprisingly, more students had difficulty after the instruction session than on day one where they were simply told to answer one or more of the questions. But looking at all of the questions, only three found all of the questions to be hard on day one, and only one found them to still be difficult on day two. This shows that more students understood the questions in general, and, in turn, the expectations of the assignment, after the mini-lesson. Maybe those students who had difficulty with their chosen questions just had a hard time putting their thoughts into words.

The students did not seem to feel confused about what was expected from them even on day one. Twenty out of twenty-two students felt that they understood each question. Again, the students' difficulties may have come from problems relating their chosen question to their chosen text in writing.
If the students understood the questions from the beginning, what if any impact did the mini-lesson have? For one, over half of the students chose a different question on day two than they did on day one. This shows that the instructional lesson gave students the confidence to try a new question. Fifteen out of twenty-two students also felt that they understood the exercise better after the mini-lesson. Although many students thought they understood the questions on day one, they also learned more about responding to the questions through the instructional lesson.

The questionnaires do not answer one perplexing question: Why did students 1, 5, 9, and 12 drop from

stage four responses on day one to stage one responses on day two? On day one, only one of these students took the option to draw a picture, then explain it in at least five sentences. But on day two, three of these four students took this option. The minimal requirement of five sentences was barely met, and the pictures were usually scenes from the story with some written description. Student 9, who on day one wrote a very insightful stage four response, wrote significantly less on day two, and chose to draw a picture. Her response read:

> As Roberto Clemente was flying over to Nicaragua after a earthquake his plane went down and Roberto Clemente was killed. Roberto was heading to Nicaragua because he was going to help the people who had no food and no homes etc.
>
> Roberto Clemente will be remembered by many people.

I thought this story was great. Roberto Clemente was strong and was liked by many people, and that is why I thought this story was great.

Although Student 9's last paragraph evaluates the value of the story, it does not satisfy stage four because stages 1, 2, and 3 were not satisfied, too. This is a simple stage one response that relates the tragic scene where Roberto Clemente died. She drew a picture of a plane crashing to accompany her writing.

Another reason why students 1, 5, 9, and 12 scored so much lower on day two than day one could be that they were bored. It appeared that they had put a lot of effort into their day one responses, so why should they do the same thing all over again? The students were asked to do the same thing on two consecutive days. The only difference was that there was a mini-lesson in the beginning of class to help the students understand aesthetic response better. Seventh graders need variety, and they get bored easily. Maybe they decided to draw for something different to do.

One student did gain three stages from day one to day two. On day one, Student 8 turned in a response that scored at a stage one. On day two, she turned in a stage four response. There are a few possible reasons for this dramatic improvement. First of all, this student did not draw a picture for either of her responses and she wrote about the same amount on each day. So maybe the instructional lesson really helped her understand how to respond aesthetically. Sometimes students just need a little guidance, then they run with it.

Another possibility is that she chose the fourth prompt on day two. Question four led the students to level four. The optional question also led students to stage four, but students could choose that question only after they had answered one or more of the other questions. Because I did not have the students specify what question(s) they chose, I don't know how many chose to do the optional question. The other questions gave the students a start, but did not take them by the hand. It would be interesting to replicate this study, telling the students to state which question they chose.

There are other reasons why effort seemed to wane on day two. Timing is everything, and in this study it appears to have had an impact. Not only was this study conducted on consecutive days, possibly boring the students, this study was also conducted at the end of a five-week marking period. The students were aware that their time in English class was coming to an end for a while (every five weeks students rotate their classes from an English-Social Studies concentration to a Math-Science concentration). Many of the students had already checked their English grades to see what their semester grade would be. Most probably ignored the fact that this assignment was going to be graded because the end of the semester was so close. They also knew that my time with them as a student teacher was coming to an end. All of these factors affect the attention span of seventh grade students. Though it was obvious that many students really tried to do their best, the distractions of the end of the marking period might have made them less conscientious. Perhaps the same study in the middle of the marking period would have yielded different results.

Though this study did not yield the results I expected it was not a total disappointment. There is evidence that students appreciate instruction on how to respond to reading and that they recognize their need for instruction. The third set of data collected in this study shows this. At the bottom of the questionnaires students completed at the end of day two, there was a question that asked students if they thought they learned anything from the two-day exercise. Twelve students stated that they did, eight felt they did not, and two did not answer the question. The results are graphed in this pie chart.

What did the students think they were learning? The answers varied. More than one student thought they learned to write more. Others stated that they learned how to understand stories better. That there are different ways to look at a story was also mentioned. All of these answers are valid, and could be seen as benefits to any classroom teacher.

Those who thought they did not learn anything missed the point of the mini-lesson. Most criticisms centered around the idea that they did not learn a new story. Students were using stories they had already read. Giving students a choice of what text to use would seem to give students an advantage in this study. They had already discussed these stories in class, so they knew them very well and probably chose those stories they knew best for their responses. But many thought it was really only a review of past work. They might not have put in as much effort because they thought it was repetitious. Perhaps duplicating this study with a text that is new to the students like Sebesta, Monson, and Senn did would show different results.

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Limitations and Need for Future Research

It is obvious that the sample of only two classes, twenty-four students, in one rural school would make the results of this study difficult to generalize to a larger population. But as the classes do encompass a range of learning abilities, probably the most important variable to consider when attempting to generalize a study's results, this study and its results may be applied to other classes with a spectrum of skill levels.

Another factor that may limit this study is lack of participation by some students and student absence. Had all of the students participated in the study, I would have had thirty-six subjects. However, student illness and lack of participation on the part of some students cut my sample to only twenty-four students. Student illness cannot be helped, and would be a factor in any study spanning more than one day in any given class. But lack of participation, I believe, is something that should be looked at more closely in another study. Did these students not do the work because they did not understand the assignment? Was it too uncomfortable to respond to their reading using their own opinions and feelings?

Maybe it was a distracting environment that kept them from doing their work. This study was completed at the end of a marking period and at the end of my student teaching assignment. The students were a little more rambunctious. This in combination with having friends close by can make it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Duplicating this study at a better time might yield different results.
This study does not go any further than examining the immediate effects of instruction on students' journal responses. The students are still given detailed prompts. There is still a great need for future research. Because this is a study with only a small number of participants, a larger study would yield results that may be generalized to a larger population. Another study might look at the effects of instruction on students' composition of their own prompts. Would they be able to not only respond to journal prompts but also create questions of their own without teacher input? Student-generated questions would allow the students even more ownership of their writing and its direction.

There are so many more directions that a researcher might take using the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response. The possibilities are limitless. And each study will take us closer to the ideal classroom where students are encouraged to think for themselves and are given the tools to do so.

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