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The Experience of Being Assigned Reading

by

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Abstract

Experienced teachers generally proceed on the bases of established protocols, knowledge, and expertise. When habit is interrupted and assumptions are challenged, we are struck by the possibility that what has been routine could be otherwise. In the midst of a usual procedure, a student's unusual comment called my practice into question, and compelled me to consider what I had been taking for granted about the teaching of literature and the reader's response to it. Recognizing an opening that invited me to a new awareness, I reexamined reader response theory in light of what students experience in the classroom.

Speculating about the experience of avid readers in particular, I invited nine grade twelve students registered in English 30 to discuss what they experienced when they were assigned literature to read in class. In audiotaped interviews, they were asked to describe their initial reaction to a reading assignment, the process they followed to complete it, and the nature of their response to it. As well, they were asked to compare school assigned reading to personal reading choices.

Several themes emerged from these interviews. Students expressed the importance of appropriate background information as provided by the teacher, the social context of the reading event, and the desire to proceed independently. Their initial reaction to being assigned literature was an emotional one, and the reading touched them as they moved through it, leaving impressions on them when they were finished. They spoke of their taste in literature and how it affected the choices they made. They related what they heard, what they had been told that made them want to begin the assignment, and what others said about it in reflection. They described the images that the text evoked, and the meaning they saw in the text. In describing its sensory character, students revealed how they had embodied the text, and a picture of the lived experience of reading emerged.

The teacher's attention is directed towards the immediate circumstances of the classroom, and the ability to judge the meaning of an incident when it occurs is limited. Only when a critical pause follows can the event's significance be contemplated. Studying the relationship between the reading assignment and the reader's response exposed my presumptions, and illuminated what might be possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PROLOGUE

THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME

It was taken some time ago.
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.
I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me).

                        Margaret Atwood

CHAPTER ONE - CATCHING A GLIMPSE OF A TEACHER'S ASSUMPTIONS

> "What is forged in the secret act of reading
> is a different kind of identity, as the
> reader and the writer merge through the
> medium of the text to become a collective
> being that both writes as it reads and reads
> as it writes - and creates, jointly, that
> unique work, their novel." (Rushdie in
> Findley 1990, p. 189)

What I enjoy most about reading is entering the

imaginative space that the author has deliberately

created (Findley 1990). When I open a book, it also

opens itself to me. It presents the prospect of

encountering strangers who are somewhat familiar, and

seeing unknown places that are almost recognizable.

Reading leads me to understand what I have not

experienced and make sense of what I have. It compels

me to reflect upon my own character and my relationship

with others, and reveals the nature of human

experience.

The way I teach reading is mirrored in the way I read,

rather than in the way I was taught. When I began

teaching English Language Arts eighteen years ago, I

vowed to avoid assigning the 'Questions for

Consideration' I had been forced to complete as a grade

twelve student five years prior. What those end-of-

chapter questions ignored is what fascinated me most

about teaching literature: the possibilities presented

by a variety in student response. During undergraduate

curriculum courses, I had been enlightened by theories which suggested that questions, connections, and interpretations were most often of an individual nature, arising from background knowledge and past experience.

Even though the literature studied in my classes was similar from year to year, each group read it differently. Individual students suggested nuances and interpreted actions in original ways. It is not that they brought new meaning to light; instead, familiar meaning was lit from different angles. Rather than playing the guessing game that specific questions required, students developed a personal understanding of the literature and answered their own questions. During class discussion, students explored their unique interpretations, and reading response journals captured what they experienced as they read.

I began a graduate program in 1992. Four years ago, in 1994, a course in reading theory prompted a reflection on my professional background, and it became clear that the focus of much of my teacher education, professional reading, and workshop attendance had inadvertently neglected the teaching of reading because I assumed I knew how high school students read. My perception was

limited by the belief that they read in the same manner that I did, based on a transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt 1978), which proposed that a unique interpretation is formed in the synthesis of reader, author and text.

The grade 12 students I was teaching at the time were a particularly bright group and their response journals were insightful. Using samples from them which illustrated the theory, I began a paper for the course which cast light upon response journals. When an English 30 deadline approached, I initiated a discussion with my students by reviewing the purpose of journals within the reading process, and then asked them to include with their literature entries a written reaction to the dialogue. I hoped to serve two purposes: to provide students with opportunity for reflection and self-evaluation, and to provide me with material for my paper.

I read through the journals that night, and when I got to Adam's, I paused. The paucity of written comments did not reflect the depth of thought he often displayed in class discussion, but that was not unusual. Adam preferred talking and generally avoided writing.

especially journals. What troubled me was what he had
written instead.

> I don't know what to write in a journal. How
> can I write something when I don't know how
> it got there? I read and think all at the
> same time. I can't help it. And I can't
> write about it.

While an isolated comment can easily be dismissed, I
could not ignore the vague unease this one provoked.
Adam was an intelligent student and he had noted
something of importance. His remark had described the
manner in which literature became meaningful to him
that my assignment criteria had excluded and ignored.
For the purposes of the paper I was writing, his
comment appeared as one of two dissenting voices in a
single paragraph near the end. Personally, its
disruption disturbed me.

That Adam saw things differently than I did made me see
things differently as well. What initially became
clear was that, for some students, the journal
assignment was not unlike answering questions. It had
required Adam to proceed in a linear manner: read,
think, talk, think, write. His response indicated that
his process was less sequential. How, then, did he
proceed? On what basis had I been proceeding? Whose
purpose did the journal serve - the student's or mine?
Had I lost sight of the theory? What did I understand

about the relationship between reading, thought and expression?

When I contemplated my own experience of writing in journals, I remembered feeling uneasy. For instance, during my practicum, I was required to keep a personal journal in addition to the log book records of my lesson plans. I always found these journals embarrassing to write, not that I avoided reflection but rather that I preferred that those reflections remain private. More recently, in graduate courses, when a percentage of the assessment was based on a journal, my entries were a report of class discussion, and again my response was restrained and my reflection unrecorded. Adult students echoed the questions that my adolescent students asked: how will these be marked; how long should they be; what do you want; and, most importantly, what is the right way to do it? Perhaps reluctance to disclose lies in the threat of evaluation which determines that a written account must be accurate and complete, a way of recording the right answer rather than a way of finding it.

Pedagogy exists in the confluence of theory, practice and a sensitivity to what students encounter. Seeking the essence of those events guided me towards

uncovering internal structures (van Manen 1990), and examining the theoretical foundation, the perceptions and assumptions that formed the basis upon which I had been teaching reading. In other words, I had to see the theory again for the first time, and see the theory reflected in student experience.

Transactional theory (Rosenblatt 1978) provided the philosophical basis for much research in the teaching and study of literature, advocating a recognition and respect for the unique response of the individual. I began to seek a description of what a response-based classroom, program or curriculum looked like. Recommended classroom procedure explored the degree of the teacher's involvement and the inherent tension of the teacher's position. In what ways might the teacher help students access their prior knowledge without also establishing the purpose of the task? To what extent was teacher intervention during the reading process necessary? Does the efferent nature of the school assignment conflict with the aesthetic experience of reading?

Furthermore, an exploration of the activities in which readers engaged when they lived through literature required that I ask the readers themselves. An

approach to human science research of this kind was suggested by van Manen (1990). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences, the researcher seeks a pre-reflective description of the way the world is perceived. What emotions did students actually encounter when they were asked to read literature in class? How could process and engagement show itself? How did individual students proceed within the context of the assignment? What common approaches existed among the manner in which students read? How does the theory and research relate to the practice of living in the classroom? The retelling of lived experience reveals a description of the reader's life world, and links the research results to the manner in which they were obtained (van Manen 1984). The connections between Rosenblatt (1978) and van Manen (1990) began to intrigue me.

At the same time as I was formulating the route my inquiry would take, friends and colleagues with whom I discussed my questions expressed concerns that students no longer read for pleasure, citing the influence of television on the imagination, and suggesting that the printed word had been replaced by technology. Including questions which asked students about their

experience of reading outside of school would

illuminate the differences between reading for school

and reading for pleasure. In addition to the students'

perspectives on reading preferences, I explored the

observations of authors, poets and journalists who had

pondered their own passion for reading.

Seeing connections within the questions I wished to

pursue provided a clear direction for the organization

of the study. Chapter II reviews Rosenblatt (1978) and

subsequent inquiries which addressed transactional

theory and reader response classrooms. Chapter III

explores the approach to research that van Manen (1990)

suggested, leading to the formulation of questions to

ask students whose answers might uncover common

structures which ground human lifeworlds. These

fundamental phenomenological themes of relationality,

the interpersonal space we share, and corporeality, our

physical or bodily presence (van Manen 1990), came to

light in the conversations with students. Their

transactions with literature, examined in Chapter IV,

indicated both the lived body and the lived human

relation inherent in the description of their feelings,

the images and meaning that the literature evoked, the

impressions the text left upon them, and the enjoyment

found in personal reading choices. Chapter V reviews the inquiry and the possibilities it presents.

Gradually, I began to realize that, just as my journal assignment had required that students proceed in a linear fashion, the way in which I had interpreted theory into practice was also linear. I had not made the recursive connection from the students' experience to the theory. In order to complete this pedagogical triangle (van Manen 1990), the prereflective descriptions provided by the students allowed me to read theory through their voices rather than my practice. My interpretation of their comments in light of the theory did not, however, absent me. Even though I was "in the centre of the picture, [I was also] just under the surface" (Atwood, 1974, l. 17-18).

While I proceeded with some certainty, it was the grey areas, the vast middle ground, that troubled me the most and required thoughtful attention. In the transformation of theory into practice, what had been gained and lost?

> This is a photograph of me.
>
> It was taken some time ago.
> At first it seems to be
> a smeared
> print: blurred lines and grey flecks
> blended with the paper.
> (Atwood, 1974, l. 1-5)

Listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts made me wonder about the changes that might occur when I return to the classroom. While I wrote, I continued to look closely at my pedagogy and my assumptions about students and their reading process, and an image of the way I teach emerged.

> It is difficult to say where
> precisely, or to say
> how large or small I am:
> the effect of water
> on light is a distortion
>
> but if you look long enough,
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.
> (Atwood, 1974, l. 19-26)

CHAPTER TWO - A RECURSIVE GLANCE AT READER RESPONSE THEORY

An isolated comment can lead to a critical incident. It was not so much that Adam's remark changed my life, not immediately, but rather it interfered with my complacency. It reverberated through subsequent course work at university and the classes I taught at school. As a reader, I speculated on how text made sense to me and to others, and what the act of reading entailed. As a teacher, I questioned whether the reading journal was part of the process or the product of reading, and considered alternatives. I wondered whether a balance between structure and freedom was possible.

The interruption of my practice led me to reconsider the transactional philosophy within which it was situated. Rereading Rosenblatt (1978, 1980), I wondered what her theory had replaced. Because her work had provided the foundation for much of the current research in the teaching of literature, I sought in that research descriptions of classroom procedure, the teacher's role, and the activities in which readers engage. as well as the inherent problems of a reading response classroom. Because I planned to ask students about reading outside of school, I

considered the remarks avid lifelong readers might make about reading for pleasure.

Inviting readers to participate

That the reader plays an active role is a relatively recent development. In the past, research about reading emphasized the authority of text and the submissiveness of the reader. Richards (1929) recognized the function of the reader in his study of the way in which college students made aesthetic as well as critical judgements about literature. Later, Applebee (1974) suggested that reading response facilitated the student's ability to read and defend an interpretation. Purves and Beach (1972) examined factors which influence students' response to literature, such as comprehension and interpretation, reading interests, and teacher intervention.

Transactional theory reconceptualized how readers engaged in literary texts. Rosenblatt (1978) clearly identified the importance of the reader's role. The reader approaches text equipped with previous experience; the text has been produced by a writer with specific intentions. The combination of reader, text and author produces a new work of art: the poem. The reader's focus of attention is specified by his or her

stance. The lived through experience of reading, the emotional and personal response, requires an aesthetic stance. If the reader's purpose is to acquire information, an efferent stance is adopted. Most reading hovers in the middle of the continuum between the two.

Iser (1978) concurred with Rosenblatt's (1978) concept of aesthetic and efferent stance, and the transaction between author, work, and reader. He demonstrated that the reader calls upon previous experience to bridge gaps left in the text by the author, and produces an intersubjective interpretation rather than either a subjective or objective one. The moving viewpoint is a result of the reader's inability to comprehend the whole work at once. When the reader encounters the unexpected, norms are negated and the reader actively makes new meanings leading to new insights.

The teacher's role

The importance of previous experience in creating contexts for interpreting the present and generating expectations for the future was expressed by Britton (1970). Awakening prior knowledge and providing contexts necessary for understanding the literature is the teacher's responsibility (Applebee 1993a; Early and

Ericson 1988; Langer 1982; Page 1982; Probst 1989;
Smith 1985; Smith, Carey, Harste, 1982).

The transactional approach requires that teachers
reexamine traditional roles, perhaps by relinquishing
some authority over text and response in order to help
students become independent. Probst (1988) suggested
choosing literature that is personally significant to
students because the introspection inherent in
developing a response to text reveals a reader's
values. Dias and Hayhoe (1989) examined the
application of research in reading response theory and
literature criticism theory to the teaching of poetry,
balancing the independence of student response with the
control of textual meaning. Kooy and Wells (1996)
suggested the use of reading response journals as a way
for individual students to interact meaningfully with
text. McCormick, Waller, and Flower (1987) provided
instruction in how to teach students to approach and
understand text, and suggested ways of developing
response statements. Teacher control was recommended
by Robinson (1982), who believed that students need
guidance in self-regulating learning through text in
order to avoid superficial interpretations. Vaughan
(1982) also found that when the teacher guided
instruction, there was greater overall improvement.

The reader's stance

Much of the reading done for school demands an efferent
stance while most personal reading is for aesthetic
reasons. Aesthetic reading skills are developed by
reading literature and differ from those required in
content-area reading (Purves 1992). The choice of
stance is connected to students' previous experience,
and aesthetic response is validated in how students
recreate text and produce personal reconstructions
(Beach 1990; Corcoran 1987). In order that there be
unity between what reading is and what students
experience in school (Goodman 1985), a balance of
enjoyment and judgement is necessary (Marshall 1993).
Rather than the linear continuum of aesthetic or
efferent stance, Langer (1990) suggested four recursive
stages through which the reader moves in order to reach
a final envisionment: being out and stepping in, being
in and moving through, being in and stepping out,
stepping out and objectifying the experience. This
process was echoed by Milner (1989): surrender to
text; reflect on reading; observe text from a distance;
and, analyze and criticize the literature.

How the reader engages

In turning to the experience of reading itself,
Hunsberger (1992) demonstrated that readers engage in

dialogue with text as a way to build understanding. Dias (1987) examined what occurs in the transaction between adolescent readers and literature by recording a small group discussion of a poem. Evans (1987) elaborated the work of Iser (1978) to demonstrate how children used blanks or gaps in a text to constitute meaning and expanded the notions of moving viewpoint and negation.

Often students retell the plot as a way of understanding it. In the recounting of a book in narrative form, the reader's summary is a creative act of interpretation (Protherough 1987). The narrative is a way of ordering experience and constructing reality that reveals the imaginative side of human consciousness: how we think, know and feel (Bruner 1986). A narrative provides the transactional link between how the world is and how the mind works; in other words, how meaning is negotiated.

That the reader and text combine to form a poem can become problematic, as each reader's interpretation represents a legitimate engagement with the text (Gilbert 1987). Meaning is uniquely personal (Holland 1973) and in a student's emotional response to literature, subjectivity and objectivity combine.

A balance must be achieved between students independently making their own meaning while still being dependent upon the text and the teacher (Adams 1987; Hynds 1990) and their peers (Galda 1982). On one hand, Squire (1990) emphasized that response does not mean "anything goes", and Athanases (1993) questioned the extent of freedom allowable within personal response and multiple interpretations. On the other hand, Findley (1990) suggested that writers deliberately make room in the text for the reader to exist inside the fiction. When readers construct text by filling in gaps, different readings are produced (O'Neill 1990). While many readers may share a common response, no two are alike.

Does the text itself impose limits? Estes (1982) and Bleich (1975) agreed that the structure of text does not dictate nor constrain response. Fish (1980) argued that readers are active meaning makers, not passive recipients of meaning. Active readers control text, and it is their unique backgrounds that results in the ownership students feel (Brown 1987). Because the nature of literature is that of depth and substance (Applebee, 1993), its multiplicity is inherent (Petrosky, 1992). The significance for both teachers and students exists in exploring the disparate

interpretations of literary text, and confronting the tension of negotiated meaning.

A sensitivity to lived experience

Qualitative research may be considered legitimate because people are self-critical and attend to the sensations they encounter (Guba and Lincoln 1981). Human science research requires a sensitivity to lived experience (van Manen 1984, 1990), and a phenomenological approach to reading research reflects the experiential way in which literature is understood. This approach considers literature as well as the interpretation of it to be open-ended, a recursive process rather than a set of techniques. Information is contextualized, and the world is described in terms of the way people encounter it. Such an approach creates the pedagogical space in which teachers can locate points of misunderstanding, thereby improving classroom instruction (Guthrie and Hall 1984).

Other readers

What are the social and cultural traditions that make people enthusiastic readers? Avid readers concur that a life-long love of books can be traced to being read to as children by accomplished narrators. Rae (1997) invited well-known Canadian to relate personal

anecdotes of special books that stirred them or changed their lives. Schwartz (1996) pondered the meaning of the act of reading through childhood memories of vivid books. Davies (1996) described encounters with books, advising that reading aloud to themselves and rereading helped people to read deeply and thoughtfully. Findley (1990) explored his own reading process and recognized how it influenced his writing, leading him to a subsequent awareness of how an audience might read what he had written. MacNeil (1989) examined an enduring fascination with words and language. Denby (1996) returned to university, registering in two introductory survey literature courses in order to revisit classics of English literature he first read in 1961. Manguel (1996) examined a history of reading, ranging between a personal story of his own reading and a cultural history of what reading meant in different societies. It would not be surprising to find these works on the shelves of Richardson's (1993, 1995) fictional Bachelor Brothers' Bed & Breakfast, where guests have in common a love of books, and a need for time away from the business of life in order to read them.

Problematic issues

Reading response theory is not without its critics, and as I read their appraisals, Adam's comment continued to

resonate. Beach's (1993) critique noted that response theory privileges a certain way of responding. It is expected that an initial response needs to be expanded to a more mature one, which implies that the initial response is superficial. Moreover, response theory perpetuates the myth of individual subjectivity.

Problematic issues have the potential to create conflicts in the classroom. For instance, Gilbert (1987) noted that the teacher may have problems in knowing how to read student responses, and have difficulty recognizing a good response. If any reading, any text, is acceptable, how is chaos avoided? Hines (1993) suggested that response compels students to speculate when a non-committal teacher seems to have a hidden agenda. As well, students assume a free range of ideas: if there's not one right answer, then everything is right. Among students, the possibility for tension exists between prior knowledge and interpretive community. Are students indeed freed, or do they surrender to the conventions of text and submit to the constraints of the classroom (Purves 1990)?

Reader-response advocates an open classroom which provides students with eclectic literature and divergent response. The range of choice, however, is

constrained by the variety in complexity and intensity of text (Rosenblatt 1978). As well, freedom is confined by suggestions that students make more progress when teachers direct classroom activities, attributing lower achievement to student choice (Rosenshine and Stevens 1984).

Distinguishing between what constitutes aesthetic or efferent stance is difficult and unclear. While Rosenblatt (1980) reacted against teachers who ask students to read poetry for the facts it can teach, Richards' (1929) statement that students must first make sense of the poem before they can respond to it implied a need to establish facts or information before interpretation can take place. Rosenblatt (1978) stated that stance exists on a continuum along which readers frequently move, although she often polarized the examples: literary texts require an aesthetic stance, and non-literary texts require an efferent stance. Yet for some readers, an aesthetic reading is also an efferent one. Actors read scripts to prepare both the inner emotion and the outward performance. Gourmets who read cookbooks combine technical knowledge with creative judgement.

Rosenblatt (1978) also advocated the use of selective attention, in which readers must suspend disbelief and distance themselves from reality in order to enjoy the aesthetic experience. The efferent stance requires that readers select only those responses which are relevant. Iser (1978) countered with the idea that prejudices should not be ignored nor beliefs suspended. Rather, when these tensions are confronted, they become a part of the interpretation. As well, for some readers, aesthetic enjoyment occurs when they encounter the realities of their lives, and literature provides a way of thinking about those events (Probst 1988). Readers crave the escape into fantasy worlds, worlds of the imagination, other people's lives, but also hope to see their own lives reflected. Does literature mirror reality and can it reveal the truth?

Butala (1994) stated:

> "There's a way in which all nonfiction is
> fiction: the backward search through
> happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam
> of life to search out a pattern, themes, a
> meaning is by its nature an imposition of
> order onto what was chaotic. It's an attempt
> to give a linearity to events...which had no
> linearity, which, if anything,...had more the
> hectic quality of a dream. What is true are
> thoughts, dreams, visions. What may or may
> not be true are the order and timing of
> events, the perception and linking of them.
> If it's true on the one hand that everything
> is what it seems to be,....there is a way in
> which it's also true that nothing is....In
> writing what the world will call

autobiography, I am torn between the facts
and history and the truth of the
imagination..." (page xvi-xvii).

In the reflective journey through my teaching practice,
I looked for recurrent patterns in my uncertainty and
respondent themes in the literature. I had hoped to
answer my initial questions. Rereading the theory,
however, also raised many other problematic issues,
such as those regarding textual meaning, the role of
talk, and the nature of assessment. Those departures
and tangents were left for another inquiry.

The variety of ways in which the reading process was
described formed an image of the questions I wished to
ask. I hoped to compare the theory to practice: how
individual readers completed a reading assignment from
the preparation to read through their activity during
reading to what ensued after they read. Do readers and
text combine to form a unique poem and is this an
accurate description of the experience of reading?

CHAPTER THREE - SEEING A WAY TO PROCEED

Orienting to the phenomena

The guiding light that theory provides also imposes boundaries. Like a beam of light on a path, the way is well-lit, but that which lies outside the edges disappears into darkness. The possibilities of theory are limited by the preconceptions and assumptions teachers have who often know too much about students and reading, rather than too little (van Manen 1984). To reflect means to look at again, as well as to think about critically, to bring into awareness that which has been taken for granted (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1984). The interruption that at first appeared to call the theory into question became instead the response to questions about the theory itself. More specifically, what are the questions to which Adam's comment is the response?

Rereading Rosenblatt (1978) and critics of the theory sparked specific questions about what students experience in school. How do students feel upon being assigned literature to read in an English classroom? What process do they follow, and how do they show response? In what ways does assigned reading differ from personal reading? Can the aesthetic experience of reading be described?

We seek new perspectives by turning to others (Weber 1986) whose background and practice approximates ours. It was essential that I speak with students who were similar to mine, whose teacher shared my philosophy, at a school that was like the one at which I taught. In formulating my questions, I rejected suggestions that led to prescriptive instructions more suitable for ineffectual readers. In choosing participants, I sought proficient readers.

Before selecting students at a particular site, I interviewed three students I had taught the previous year. This preliminary work provided the opportunity to refine my questions and interviewing technique, undergo the process of transcribing the audio tapes, and review the transcripts with the participants. These conversations revealed fresh perspectives, made some assumptions explicit, and suggested possibilities of additional questions. While these initial interviews refined my technique, and I questioned the next participants in the light of what the previous students said (Weber 1986), none of their specific responses appear as part of the project.

Seeking perspectives

The research project was conducted at a rural high school in a town situated outside the city limits of a large Canadian urban centre. The town had originally been a farming/ranching community which had experienced rapid growth in the last decade. While there remained a core group of rural families, the school population came to resemble that of a city suburban school. An estimated 975 students were registered in grades 9 to 12, and of the approximate 200 grade 12 students, about 130 were registered in English 30.

This school was chosen for several reasons. It was situated in the school division in which I had taught for 17 years, and I was familiar with the staff, administration, and nature of the student body. Its population was approximately double that of the high school at which I had taught for the past 11 years. Other than the number of students, the two schools had much in common.

The philosophy of the English department was transactional and response-based. Students were provided with choice in literature within the boundaries of the curriculum and individual teacher preference, and encouraged to read perceptively and

intelligently. Instruction included a variety of approaches to text, and a variety of responses to it. Small and large group discussion took place as a means to refine and clarify ideas. Students completed reading journals in order to interact with the text, make sense of the work, and find connections with it. The atmosphere of the specific classroom allowed for interpretations which began tentatively then gained meaning and significance.

The students were selected from volunteers who replied to advertisements (Appendix A) which appeared on bulletin boards throughout the school and to verbal announcements in the daily bulletin and in grade 12 classes. The criteria for selection included students who described themselves as avid readers, who read literature extensively both in school and outside of school, who had the ability to articulate personal experiences and feelings, and who were willing to discuss reading phenomena. The students were nine grade 12 pupils registered in English 30. While four students were in one section of the course and five in another, both sections were taught by the same teacher. Of the nine volunteers, six were girls and three were boys. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities.

The criteria for selection was written with certain assumptions in mind, for instance, that only a particular type of student might volunteer. Fortunately, the range of differences among students added randomness. The length of time the students had lived in the community varied, from a long-standing farming family to more recent arrivals. Based on anecdotal evidence from their teacher, their conscientiousness and achievement in the course ranged from low average to excellent. The extent to which they actively participated in class varied. Some were very involved in school and community activities, while others were occupied by after-school jobs; all of them discussed their attempts to balance school, activities and reading for pleasure. They spoke of the influence of their parents and friends, be it helpful or harmful.

Inviting a conversation

The dialogue of an interview is not simply an exercise in data gathering (Carson 1986). The word's French origin, *entre vue*, suggests that the participants look between the questions and responses. The discussion is a joint reflection on a phenomena (Weber 1986). Students were asked questions which explored in detail and fullness anecdotes of their life-world and drew them into a conversation about their reading

experience. They were asked to provide direct accounts by citing specific examples and attempting to avoid causal explanations or interpretive generalizations (van Manen 1990). While questions cannot be truly open because they always have a certain direction (Weber 1986), replies were not predetermined.

Each student was asked a series of questions (Appendix B) in open-ended, taped interviews. The first series of questions asked for a description of their reaction to being assigned literature to read. The second series of questions asked them to describe the process they followed in order to complete the assigned reading. The third series of questions asked for a comparison between classroom reading and personal reading. After recording the interviews, transcripts were typed. These transcripts were made available to students for review, clarification, and/or additional information.

The interviews were influenced by the instruction the students had received in the first six weeks of the term. Their teacher had introduced a novel study by reading excerpts from four books and asking the class to vote for which one it would like to read. The novels were The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

(1987). <u>Nineteen Eighty-Four</u> by George Orwell (1987), <u>The Stone Angel</u> by Margaret Laurence (1989), and <u>The Wars</u> by Timothy Findley (1986). The assignment had been structured: students read a certain number of pages and responded by a particular date, upon which they discussed their reading and responses in class. They had been discouraged from reading further than the designated pages.

There had also been a number of short story assignments, and these lessons varied: the teacher provided students with an extensive historical context for "The Guest" by Albert Camus (1981) before reading it aloud in class; he specified a key question for students to consider when they read "Boys and Girls" by Alice Munro (1981) on their own; and, he stipulated that "The Painted Door" by Sinclair Ross (1982) be read for homework and provided no background information. For each story, students were asked to write a response, and were expected to be prepared to participate in class discussion.

The variety in preparation provided the opportunity to explore the basis upon which individuals and groups made selections, how students felt about the novel that had been chosen, and what information they required

before proceeding with an assignment. This range
enabled them to compare the way the novel was assigned
with the diverse procedures for the short stories. As
well, they were able to discuss how they felt about the
different approaches to completing the reading
assignment.

Shedding light

Interpretive description explores the nature of human
behaviour, seeking commonality, familiarity, and
universality (van Manen 1990). The experience is seen
in different contexts, yet common themes and language
describe it (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij
1984). The researcher borrows other people's
experiences and reflections in order to construct a
possible interpretation of the nature of the experience
in terms of existentials and structures (van Manen
1984).

Many of the quantitative measures of validity and
reliability are not directly applicable to qualitative
research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). It does not involve
experiments with hypothetic variables, testable skills
or comparisons of scores (van Manen 1984) but rather
its purpose is to formulate recommendations that might
lead to more possibilities (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker,

& Mulderij 1984). While the traditional definitions of science do not necessarily apply, phenomenology is scientific in a broad sense. It is systematic in its use of question and reflection. Because numbers and statistics may not necessarily provide confirmation for emotion, verification is sought in the knowledge that others feel the same way. Validity can be assumed because people are self-observers who pay attention to their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It is a human science and seeks to describe what it means to live in the world. It makes explicit the common and familiar nature of human experience (van Manen 1990).

The students I interviewed had extensive experience with being assigned literature and were able to communicate what this experience was like. Their responses were clarified and checked for accuracy and completeness both during the interview and in the review of the transcripts. After I read and reread the transcripts, I felt that the quality and the amount of responses was sufficient to illustrate the students' subjective experience of being assigned literature.

The first time I read the transcripts, I noted the answers to the specific questions that I had asked, highlighted each student's response and collated these

statements. I reread the transcripts repeatedly and throughout the interpretive and the writing process, first to expand the categorized statements, then to discover information students had volunteered in addition to their specific response to a certain question. Meanings and themes were formulated as they emerged from the significant, repeated or common statements. The accumulated formulated meanings and themes were validated by referring back to the interviews and reviewing the literature cited. These theme statements appear in Appendix C.

Casting shadows

There were surprises, reactions I had not anticipated, during the experience of conducting interviews. That I was not their teacher affected the manner in which they responded. They were a captive group, and I was a stranger to them. Despite volunteer participation, I felt that questions which asked them to explore their feelings imposed on their privacy and assumed a relationship that we did not have. That I was a researcher and a teacher imposed an awkward dialogue of question and answer rather than relaxed conversation when we spoke of school assignments. The comfort level increased, however, when they spoke of reading for

pleasure. Students seemed to relax and enjoy the experience (Weber 1986) of discussing personal reading.

My lack of knowledge about them as students and as people limited mutual trust and the extent to which I might have probed more deeply for certain responses. Yet, when I compared the initial interviews I had done with my former students to the ones with strangers, I became aware that familiarity also had the potential to prevent further investigation. When the students who participated in the study answered questions, unfamiliarity prevented me from assuming I knew what was meant, and through rewording or persistent questions, their descriptions became more detailed and they provided specific examples.

When I reviewed the transcripts of the interviews, I also began to note that I had made certain assumptions about how participants might respond. For instance, I had assumed that the students would be far more homogenous than they turned out to be. I had initially worried that the recounting of their experience might be limited because the interviews took place in early October, yet this was not the case. Specifically, I expected students to discuss the provincial diploma

exam they faced at the end of the semester. Only one student made reference to it.

Despite the limitations on the possibilities for a free and open conversation, I felt students answered as honestly, openly and completely as possible. Despite careful preparation and three preliminary interviews, I had not thought of everything. The interviews continued after the students departed (Weber 1986)and as I read through the transcripts again and again, I was struck by the questions I might also have asked.

CHAPTER FOUR - GAINING INSIGHT INTO AN EXPERIENCE

Entering a reader's space

> I was curious to see what George Orwell's
> perspective would be of that year (1984). I
> didn't know if it would be totally outrageous
> and I just thought, it's kind of a neat idea,
> because we're past that now.

Shannon, one of the first students I interviewed, was

an avid reader who eagerly anticipated English class

and the literature it offered. While her curiosity was

piqued by one novel, the class chose another novel.

She was not disappointed, however, because she trusted

her teacher to make good choices; she has "always

enjoyed the literature they've assigned."

What is the classroom context into which reading is

assigned? Teachers engage student interest by linking

the literature to students' previous lived experience.

When appropriate connections cannot be made, teachers

create an artificial life-world, building the necessary

context which enables students to enter text. As well,

teachers establish a classroom climate within which

personal discussion of literature can take place.

Confiding emotion

Students were first asked "How do you feel about being

assigned literature to read in English?" Their initial

reaction was silence, a groping for words (van Manen
1990). Feelings, like sensations and intuition,
operate at a passive subconscious level and actively
eliciting emotions required pause for reflection. From
an early age, students are asked to discuss not
feelings but thoughts, and while their emotions may be
close to the surface, describing those emotions is
difficult (Bleich 1975). Being asked how he felt about
receiving an assignment surprised Brian, because it
implied that choice was involved. He replied that he
thought the book would be good, indicating that he
expected to comment on the value of the literature.
When students broach a response, they expect to be
corrected, so declaring an emotion means taking too
great a personal risk. Because the nature of the
pedagogical relationship is that students seek
information and teachers provide it, both students and
teachers emphasize the cognitive rather than the
affective domain.

Regardless, an initial emotion response to text is
natural and essential to understanding it (Beach 1990).
Patricia described a book that she "really really
liked...because it made an impression" on her, and
added that the "stories [they were currently reading]
don't have a happy ending, so [she] really likes

English 30 right now." Robert lamented that "a lot of the books that have been assigned...are depressing, about people who push away all their friends and end up alone, and the stories always end in disaster." Submitting to the experience of reading obligated students to feel something (van Manen 1983), whether it was anticipation or dread.

It was within their discussion of how they felt about a book that students revealed how they felt about reading. When the question was contextualized in specific literature experiences, reactions were enthusiastic, indicating open mindedness, trust and a willingness to participate. Students were 'happy' and 'excited,' they 'anticipated it' and 'felt good.' Expectations had been fostered by parents and other students as well as the teacher. Brian, for instance, disclosed feeling "apprehension" but also "anticipation" when he had been assigned The Merchant of Venice because of its reputation. Barb's father had recommended she read Nineteen Eighty-Four. How previous students had reacted to The Grapes of Wrath prepared Donna. Being located in a social network aroused students' curiosity, acknowledged a book's worthiness, and stimulated motivation to read.

Committing to text

In order to enter the world of text, readers make two decisions (Hunsberger 1992). They decide to spend time with some particular text, and they commit to becoming involved with and open to it. Patricia replied that she did not "mind assigned reading because usually the teachers pick pretty good stuff that's interesting." Brian has "been assigned things [he] didn't like, but usually [he] won't judge [them] before [he] reads them." While Nicole resented being assigned boring books, she admitted becoming intrigued by others.

> My English 30 teacher was going on about how good The Grapes of Wrath was. He made it sound quite interesting but I wasn't too sure. Actually I think he did a pretty good job of telling us what it was about. He read an excerpt from it that caught my interest.

Interest and understanding, feelings and knowledge, are associated (Bleich 1975; Purves and Beach 1972). Being captivated by a book depends upon its appeal to personal taste, and flexibility within curriculum provides the space to offer alternatives.

> He gave the class a choice of novels. He read us maybe a page and half out of each book and told us what previous classes had done - if they liked it, what book he liked, and stuff like that. We had a vote and the class voted for The Grapes of Wrath.
> (Shannon)

Being able to choose affected their feelings about the reading assignment and the specific literature. Katherine was disappointed that the class had chosen a

novel that did not interest her, and she indicated a reluctance to enter the text and a diffidence towards reading. She approached the assigned reading with the attitude that it was occupational, informational and functional (Goodman 1985). "If I have to read it, I will, and I'll do my best at the assignments. I don't feel anything." For Donna, the lack of choice transformed the assigned reading from an enjoyable experience into a utilitarian one.

> I'm not too excited generally [when I'm assigned literature to read]. I kind of wish we had the choice to do what we wanted to do. I voted for The Grapes of Wrath but not because I thought it would interesting. I thought that it would be good to do essay topics on for the diploma exam.

The pragmatics of school do not always allow personal taste to effect choice, and teachers often assign more complicated text than most high school readers might choose (Estes 1972). For Paul, that meant being "forced to read books that [he] would not ordinarily read," and Shannon enjoyed "being exposed to other things because [she] would never have picked up The Grapes of Wrath." In all cases, students expected to learn something, to be interested, to be challenged, and to be intellectually stimulated (Purves and Beach 1972) by something worthy of analysis.

Outlining the picture

Preparing students to read involves helping them coordinate their background knowledge with the text (Langer 1982). Combining what students already know with the words on the page merges the nonvisual and the visual (Smith 1985), and provides "a picture of where it is" (Katherine). When students have no previous awareness, it is necessary to contextualize the literature in their life world. "If [the teacher] wouldn't have told us the background, I wouldn't have understood the story" (Patricia). Yet, while teachers often assume that there will be greater overall improvement when they guide instruction (Vaughan 1982), beyond getting "an idea of the whole picture" (Barb), students wished to proceed independently. Setting purpose, for instance, "tells [them] what [they] should be thinking" (Robert), and "spoil[s] the book" (Patricia). Katherine "prefer[red] to figure it out for [herself]" and Barb wanted to "find it on [her] own." Brian said, "It's a lot more interesting to find out from the story itself how it's important than to know about it before you go into it."

Students accepted reading assignments willingly because they expected the text to say something significant about the human condition. Feelings about reading were

contextualized in the literature, and the act of
reading itself was contextualized in the social
network. Beyond the limits upon choice imposed by the
inherent school structure, they proceeded
independently. In the process of becoming individuals,
they established social links with the world of people
and the world of ideas (Britton 1970). .

Reading between the lines

> It's like I'm watching a play, where I'm
> there but I'm not in the story line. I can
> see everything that's going on, like
> sometimes I'll be watching from above, and I
> can see what people are doing, but I'm not
> influencing them in any way. If they
> describe a house, I try to picture it,
> connecting to something else that I've seen.
> (Barb)

The reading event as depicted by students revealed both
its corporeality and its relationality. Readers
described the physical sensations of reading, how the
body reacted in the encounter with text. The emotional
connections they made between previous experience and
the literature were imbued with personal significance.

Embodiment

The lived through experience of reading was almost
perceptible. inasmuch as readers used their background
knowledge, awareness of text, and previous experience
to "step in" to a story (Langer 1990).

> I don't even realize that I'm not looking at
> the page anymore. I lose awareness of what's
> going on around me. I turn my thoughts
> inward. I'm focussed on what's happening
> inside my mind and it's more like I'm looking
> at how people act, and going over whatever's
> written as opposed to what's on the page.
> (Robert)

They placed themselves bodily within the literature.

'Being a part of it' enabled them to observe the

action, and they used visual metaphors to describe

understanding. From their external location outside of

the story, they relied upon perception in order to

examine its surface. Upon entering the text, the

metaphor of seeing also described their internal

functions of learning, coming to know, imagining, and

contemplating.

> I think it's sort of experiencing the book,
> like actually being inside the story as it
> happens. I'm not a character, more watching,
> but watching from the inside, but not just
> understanding what's happening but actually
> seeing it as you're reading it. (Brian)

As readers, they were spectators and outside the

literature, able to judge and comment. At the same

time, they felt wholly present within it. When the

literature was internalized, the visualization was

individualized, to the extent that some formed

idiosyncratic pictures.

> In some of the books that I read, the cover
> will have a picture of the character.
> Sometimes I forget what it looks like and
> I'll think they look differently than they're
> described or pictured. (Shannon)

It is not unusual for readers to conceive ideas that deviate from the description, or from those which others describe. Unique images are legitimate (Corcoran 1987; Evans 1987; Purves and Beach 1972). Learning about a character indirectly, as one does in a book, forms physical impressions that may or may not match the reality (van Manen 1990).

Introspection

As students became personally involved, they recognized characters in familiar settings. The words on the page were transformed by the inner eye. The text moved from the eye to the heart, from body to feeling.

> It was an old farmhouse made out of planks, a
> one-room place. With a door, instead of
> having a door handle, it has a latch. I
> pictured something from the Laura Ingalls
> books. John was a normal farmer, a little
> like my dad. My dad doesn't quit work until
> it's done. He likes working and he likes
> being outside, same as John. My dad's got
> big hands, same as John. They're made for
> outside, same as John. (Patricia)

Within personal contexts, feelings about characters emerged. Comments reflected values and revealed contemptible or undesirable qualities.

> I really didn't like Anne. She is perceived
> as such a weak female I think. She can't do
> anything by herself, she can't walk out to
> the barn, she can't be without John for the
> afternoon. I guess that kind of bugs me.
> (Barb)

The literature evoked strong emotion, and meeting characters presented the opportunity for conversation and relationship.

> Since I identify so well with the character sometimes I'll think that he's real. I used to listen to this one CD while I read the book. Now whenever I hear the music, I wonder how the guy is doing. I really do place people in real life. (Barb)

An affinity developed that transcended the physical reality of separate reader and text. Feeling kinship with characters meant engaging in dialogue with them, or speaking directly to them.

> In The Grapes of Wrath I'm relating to them. Like, why did you do this? You're so dumb. Somebody will die and they're not really emotional and I can't believe it. Don't they have any feelings? (Shannon)

Being in the book is not solely a visual experience (Evans 1987) nor an emotional one. Just as students pictured with the internal eye, they heard with the internal ear. Robert experienced text through inner verbalization (Davies 1996), "read[ing] in [his] mind not out loud."

Interruption

While reading aloud may guide imagery or provide students with voices they might not otherwise hear, these students preferred autonomy.

> I still prefer to read the story to myself afterwards. When I'm read to, I always feel like the voice that the speaker has seems to

> be that person. If I see the words, I can
> make my own tone and expressions. (Paul)

Their reactions to having the story read to them echoed

earlier comments regarding independence. In the same

way that they did not require purpose to be

predetermined, it was unnecessary that progress through

the story be prescribed. Reading aloud was seen as a

way to guide instruction, or have the class function as

a single group (Britton 1970).

> When the teacher reads it to the class then
> everybody's on the same page to start with.
> So everybody knows the story, the plot line,
> so you're not getting people who haven't read
> it. If you didn't do it that way, you'd have
> to have a whole other system.

Here, Barb's comment acknowledged the need for

classroom management and conceded that other students

required an external control that she did not. In

addition to oral reading, other suggested instructional

strategies to improve understanding include the use of

interrupted readings, adjunct questions, and directed

reading-thinking activities (Vaughan 1982). Modelling

such activities may help students monitor their

comprehension (Early and Ericson 1988). Yet students

overwhelmingly voiced their frustration at being

interrupted.

> I don't like having to read to a certain
> place, stop every few pages and try and write
> something down. I'd rather get on with the
> book because that's what I'm thinking about
> while I'm trying to write the reading
> responses - what's happening in the book. I

> can write about something after I've read it
> a lot easier than writing during the reading.
> (Brian)

While sustained silent reading does not necessarily improve a student's ability to read, it improves attitudes to reading (Vaughan 1982). When students were engaged, they embodied the text and spoke of it corporeally and relationally. When the teacher intervened, either explicitly or implicity, students moved from the affective domain to the cognitive one, from the body to the head. The book was no longer an aesthetic experience, but an efferent one.

Students preferred to surrender to the reading act (Milner 1989), to experience the whole text (Early and Ericson 1988). For instance, Brian "read the book pretty much start to finish at [his] own pace." Moving through the story, they wondered about the significance of events and decisions, but they did not wish the spell to be broken. If students encountered something they did not comprehend, what strategies did they use to overcome lack of understanding?

> If I don't understand, I either go back and
> try to clarify it, or if I can't find any
> clarification in the book, then I'll ask
> somebody else. I'll just go on and maybe
> it'll clarify later on. (Katherine)

Confidence in meaning and a strong sense of ownership suggests a tactile need to own the book, to "burrow in

its pages" (Schwartz 1996, p. 66). While people rarely curl up with a book (Davies 1996), the image of doing so implies the embrace of possession.

Retrospection

The stance which students adopted as they read was not easily determined. Expectations and intentions determine how readers approach literature (Dias and Hayhoe 1989), and it can be assumed fulfilment of a task implied an efferent stance (Purves and Beach 1972). Yet even though stance seemed to be determined beforehand, students read, at least initially, for the aesthetic lived-through experience.

> I read the whole thing to get a picture and then do a response. The second time, I...read the story and [ask] what could this mean, what are they doing and why are they doing it. (Barb)

Stance was not linear. At any time during reading, students distanced themselves, reflecting on and reacting to the literature. Judgements about characters took place after students stepped out and objectified the experience (Langer 1990). Some judged characters by their own standards. Others judged themselves by what the story revealed about their own lives. The introspective nature of literature ameliorated contemplation of their own values and beliefs (Probst 1988).

> I've always hated how the white man have
> disrupted other cultures. [In "The Guest"].
> I thought that the reason why this Arab was a
> prisoner is because he was following his own
> culture but it clashed against the French.
> (Katherine)

The context into which the literature was introduced continued to be important during the reading process. Teachers provide background information in order to enable students to enter literature, and hope that students will exit literature having added to their knowledge.

> When I was reading <u>Nineteen Eighty-Four</u>,
> [Orwell] described Goldstein as having Jewish
> features. I looked up the time period of
> World War II, the time period that the book
> was written, and I knew about the genocide of
> the Jewish people, and so I made a connection
> between the two of those. I kept thinking
> about why he would pick Jewish features and
> why what was happening around the time that
> he wrote the book. It made it more
> interesting. (Barb)

When the literature was assigned, students spent only a brief time as its audience. They actively sought to participate in its depth: they elected to 'get into it,' 'spend time with it,' and most importantly, 'get something out of it.' During the act of reading, they were physically and emotionally engaged in the lived-through experience. At the same time, they interpreted actions and judged characters in order to fulfil the efferent task. They constantly shifted stance (Beach 1990), preparing themselves to step out and take their knowledge public.

Emerging from text

> I definitely like discussing things because
> that gives me other ways of looking at things
> and more understanding of what might have
> been meant. What other people say might make
> sense to me and then I can expand my own
> thoughts. I add bits and pieces of
> everybody's until I find my own opinion.
> (Robert)

As students emerged from the literature, they

anticipated sharing what they had learned. The social

need to confirm their interpretations and explore

additional ideas by hearing from classmates fulfilled

personal purpose. A knowledge of literary purpose made

students aware that it was necessary to step out and

objectify the experience, to observe the text from a

distance in order to analyze and criticize it (Langer

1990; Milner 1989). In going public, stance became

efferent.

Thinking aloud

Private conversations with text became public

conversations with others. The community of responders

(Rosenblatt 1978) included parents, friends and former

teachers. Small groups allowed for tentative responses

or those which did not have to be immediately justified

(Dias 1987).

In the large group discussion, students sought

confirmation of their own interpretations and

anticipated alternative explanations and additional meanings. Shannon liked "to share [her] ideas because [she] thinks they're based on something good. [She'd] like to know if other people agree with [her]." Barb anticipated hearing something that she had not considered, and then, "if I agree with them, I build on what they may think." Language allowed the representation of experience and the modification of meaning. Through talk, students tested theories and uncovered their strengths and weaknesses (Britton 1970).

The teacher's role in discussion was not to verify comprehension nor suggest a correct interpretation (Hynds 1990). Students continued to proceed independently, relying upon the teacher only to ask clarifying questions, or moderate the discussion.

> [A teacher I had before] would tell us what to write down. She'd dictate it. I didn't get much out of those stories. I need to be able to think about it myself first, and get an idea of what's going on and what I think the story means and what it means to me. Then the teacher comes in with what it means to them, and I either say, no I don't think so or I say, yeah that makes sense. And then I form my own opinion. (Barb)

The visual and the oral/aural merged. Paul said "class discussion shows me how people look at things and I try to teach myself how to look at it in the same way."

When they "heard what others saw" (Katherine), their own interpretations were refined or modified.

> People look at many things in a completely
> different way, and you're thinking, where did
> this person come from? And then I'll ask
> them, how did you get to this conclusion, and
> then they'll explain it to me and I think,
> wow, that was an awesome way of looking at
> things. (Paul)

While consensual responses and conflicting meanings coexisted (O'Neill 1990), dissension presented the opportunity to consider other possibilities. Patricia may not agree with her classmates but "[she] knows where [they're] coming from." If Barb disagrees then she can "make [her] own understanding of the story." Self-confidence, however, potentially breeds contempt: "Sometimes I find myself going, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard" (Shannon).

Each reader reads text from a different perspective and interpretation is open to modification. The writer cannot possibly tell the whole story (Butala 1994) and leaves gaps for the reader to fill. As well, especially with longer works which cannot be seen in their entirety, the reader's moving viewpoint (Iser 1978) ignores or covers flaws that do not fit with the interpretation. The discussion uncovers the flaws and makes public that which was not obvious.

Thoughtful reflection

For Patricia, who is "THE participant" and Paul, who
"learns way more in class", discussion is an important
learning tool. Yet verbal response can be problematic
because students may not be articulate, or their
comments may be limited by the presence and opinion of
others in the classroom (Galda 1982). As most teachers
know, some students always contribute, some do so
occasionally, and some never speak.

Speech is temporal, a way to communicate ideas and
feelings, while writing is symbolic of concepts and
ideas, an unchanging way of remembering. Ironically
though, the permanence of writing is also temporal:
even though text remains the same, the world changes
and so text cannot have permanent meaning. In
addition, text is carefully pondered and often edited
before it takes its final form. It is speech that is
the more permanent: once something is uttered, it
cannot be retrieved and revised (Purves 1990).

In transactional classrooms, discussion is often a
precursor to writing in journals, a place for students
to record feelings and thoughts. Writing moves the
reader from participant to spectator (Britton 1970).
It teaches them what they know, makes internal what is

external, and helps them to discover existential structures of experience (van Manen 1990). But is the journal part of the reading process, or a product of it?

Giving direction for journal entries is difficult. Sentence completions, comprehension questions, or length requirements explicitly frame the response and contradict the theory. Asking for specific answers to questions leads to deception:

> The reading response questions had to be done
> for a certain time so what I did was skim
> down for the answer and wrote that down.
> They were fairly straight forward questions.
> Or I'd ask someone what they got for the
> answer. (Nicole)

As well, even avid readers had difficulty in finding something to say about everything.

> Sometimes I find journals a bit of a bother
> because he makes us get two pages which isn't
> a lot of writing, but in some parts of the
> book, there just isn't anything to write
> about. (Barb)

Most of all, however, journals made Barb "look at reading as work because [she] knows that [she has] to do the response journal." The worst thing that can happen is for a journal to be assessed, and in order for it to be meaningful, form and purpose need to be negotiated (Corcoran 1987).

As an instructional strategy, the journal has been misused and overused, and its objective and structure need reexamination. What is the purpose of the response journal? What did it replace? How can instruction be given in such a way as to avoid framing the response?

The purpose of the journal is for students to record their feelings and thoughts about what they have read (Kooy and Wells 1996). Journal responses help students to make explicit what is implicit without becoming end-of-chapter comprehension questions. As an alternative, a variety of approaches are suggested; for instance, summary, free-association, interpretation, interaction, or analysis (McCormick, Waller, Flower 1987).

Students were aware of this purpose and acknowledged the journal's usefulness in comprehension and interpretation. Despite disliking the specific requirements for writing it, they were aware of its merit. Rather than interrupting her reading to write, Nicole adopts an alternate method.

> I note pages that I want to come back to and write about by putting a little footnote about what I've been thinking at the time in case I forget. The journal responses help me understand the literature. I like the fact that you can put down what you think and then you can look back on it later and realize how

the story has changed or the different
impression you've gotten as the story goes.

Because written responses are by nature retrospective
(Dias 1987), the journal helps Barb and capture
interpretation and reflection.

> When I do a response journal, I think about
> the topic of the story more in depth. If I
> read the story and say, what could this be
> symbolizing, what could these people be
> really doing and why are they doing this,
> then I can look back to the beginning of the
> story and connect the beginning to the end.
> And if I write about it, sometimes just
> writing things down, even if they don't make
> any sense yet, they come together and then I
> will finally have an idea, and so just
> writing whatever comes to mind sometimes
> helps me piece it together.

The reading act is recursive and the interpretation is
subject to revision. Any final envisionment exists
within a horizon of possibilities of what the
literature means to the reader (Langer 1990); it must
be personally significant. They 'get something from
it' and they 'take meaning away.' Through discussion
and journals, students established meaning and their
place in the interpretive community (Fish 1980).

An experience of reading

> When I know that the only thing I have to do
> tonight is read my book, it's something that
> will calm me down. Reading a book relaxes
> me. I can read and put myself into the book
> and nothing else matters right now. (Barb)

The students I spoke with volunteered and were chosen
because they are avid readers. They enjoyed discussing

their favourite books because personal reading was gratifying. When the topic of our discussion turned to their preferences, what had been an interview became a conversation. Students became animated and spoke easily about how they felt.

Since I was largely unfamiliar with what they were reading for pleasure, they related story outlines. Narration is normally the form used when we talk about reading (Protherough 1987) and about experience. It is a way of making text one's own, and a way to construct meaning (Bruner 1986).

Moments of judgement

Personal reading meant stepping into book and staying there, the only requirement an aesthetic one. Because their purpose for reading was enjoyment, their responses were empathic.

> My favourite book I read seven times. It's
> very moving which is what I like. I like it
> when you can get into it and feel the
> emotions. If a story is supposed to make you
> sad and if you end up crying I think it's
> really succeeded in what it's supposed to do.
> If you can feel the emotions expressed in the
> story it enhances it. (Nicole)

In literature, strong consequences lead to insight and enlightenment. Rae (1997) remembers the early influence of Charlotte's Web, perhaps because it made her cry, and MacNeil (1990) recalls books which "made

[his] breath come quicker, a scary yet exciting
feeling." It is the emotion aroused that makes
literature enjoyable, how they touch us, even their
tactile pleasure (Davies 1996) which causes a reaction.

Taste in literature reveals itself in images of food
that personify reading. Books "feed the mind" (Findley
1990, p. 188) as do book discussion groups (Richardson
1995). Although reading Freud was "tough chewing",
Davies (1996) "gobbled [his major works] with a greedy
appetite" (p. 13). MacNeil (1989) devoured the "plums
and puddings of 17th century prose, loved for the taste
on the tongue, and years in the digesting" (p. 52)
despite having one schoolmaster who "served verse like
the kitchen served potatoes" (p. 102). Few acts are as
satisfying as reading at the table (Schwartz 1996).

> The two infusions, food and words,
> intermingle. The rhythms of chewing and
> swallowing join with the rhythms of sentences
> in a fantastic duet. Food and story converge
> in mouthfuls of narrative (p. 64).

Taste in books varied and choices were made within a
context of relationship and familiarity. School-
assigned reading provoked further reading. Barb
enjoyed reading Fahrenheit 451 in English 10 so
continued to read Ray Bradbury's short stories. Robert
"really liked 'The Guest'" so predicted that he would
"go to the library and look up Camus and see what other

stuff he has and read some of that." For Shannon, the

school assignment was necessary in making choices.

> Choosing books is really hard for me because
> I can't walk into a bookstore and look and
> then go, that looks good. People have to
> recommend them to me. I like being assigned
> stuff and I like being recommended stuff
> because I don't know what I'll like. I
> wouldn't know what to read.

Students relied on recommendations from friends,

teachers, and parents. Robert, for instance,

> might read a book because the teacher has
> talked about it and it interests me.
> Trusting someone's opinion comes after being
> with them for awhile. It takes me awhile to
> get used to them.

They made selections based on familiarity, rapport with

the source of the recommendation, with the author, with

the character, with the genre.

> I get things recommended from friends quite a
> lot, and then if I read one book by a certain
> author and I really enjoyed it, then I'll go
> out and find the rest of them and read them.
> (Brian)

> I like the Dragonlance series. I like
> fantasy. What I like about it is it would be
> nice to picture myself in that world, doing
> that kind of thing. That's why I like Anne
> McCaffery's books, dragon riders and all
> that. I'm into dragons and unicorns.
> (Nicole)

Choices were made based on what was heard and what was

seen. Books were selected which looked interesting: "a

title that catches my eye" (Patricia). Nicole "looks

around [bookstores] and [usually the cover] catches my

attention." Barb "look[s] at the book and [if it's] a

topic that interests me, I see what it's like." The importance of the visual in judging a book for its quality indicates that perhaps one can judge a book by its cover.

The serendipity of choice is another matter. In an attempt to discover the meaning of certain dreams, Sharon Butala haunted bookstores.

> Certain books began to seem to jump off the shelf at me, books I hadn't heard of and knew nothing about. If, on a crowded shelf, I saw a book grow bright and separate before my eyes, I bought it, took it home and read it with total absorption....During the time this was happening, I always found the books that appeared to me in this way were the very books I needed at that moment (Butala, 1994, p 79).

Was it a case of being ready to read a certain book, coincidence rather than intervention? Did she choose the book or did it choose her (Rae 1997; Davies 1996; Schwartz 1996)?

Discussing books read for enjoyment meant sharing the experience rather than suggesting interpretations or analyzing motivation. The purpose was a mutual sharing of assumptions about the world (Bruner 1986).

> I like to read things that [my father has] read because then we can talk about it. I find myself doing that a lot more lately since he read classic literature and things that I can understand now. I like it when I read a book that other people have read, so I can talk about it with them, because reading

a book just for myself sometimes isn't always
as fulfilling.   (Barb)

Seeing reality...

Visualizations which occurred during school-assigned

reading transported students into the novel. The same

aspect creates reality in personal reading. Brian

said, "Some authors can create a very realistic world

in their novels. I think that's what makes a [story]

really good is how close it comes to actually seeming

real." Robert loves "historical fiction because it

lets me look at what it was like. It gives me more

understanding of what used to be."

Connecting to the reality in books provides connections

to the reality in our lives. Paul identified with the

character in his favourite book.

> The way people always alienated him. I moved
> [frequently]. I've been in a different
> school every single year and every single
> year it's always starting this process of
> making friends over and over again, but each
> year I had less friends. Each year, these
> friends became closer and closer, and
> everybody else seemed to...I guess I felt
> alienated. I'm not saying they alienated me,
> but I felt alienated every time I moved
> somewhere. Especially here...I notice that
> the values and the morals are completely
> different from what I'm used to. I guess,
> well, people didn't sort of accept that at
> first. So, it's a book I've read about six
> times. I love it. It's an awesome book.

...and imagining fantasy

Others preferred their personal reading to provide diversion and illusion.

> I like fantasy because it's an escape from reality. It's the emotions you feel and you wish you were there. That's why I like to read it because it's the kind of world that I would want to live in. It's so much better than reality. Reality sucks. (Nicole)

> I like stuff that's not totally realistic because my free reading is to escape from reality, to go into a different kind of world and then I don't have to face it in my reading as well as my life. (Katherine)

The calamities in fiction are seldom duplicated in life, yet the power of imagination bypasses physical reality (MacNeil 1989). Escaping to the world of the text and becoming embodied in it allows us to take time away from the business of our own lives, and to eavesdrop on the lives of others. We compare our beliefs with theirs, and we understand ourselves better.

Aesthetic pleasure

The primary difference between being assigned reading in school and reading for pleasure was the difference between aesthetic and efferent stance. Because they were not required to look for meaning, not asked to analyze, reading outside of school provided a greater sense of freedom.

> When I read books on my own and if I don't
> understand what's going on, usually I just
> either try to finish it as well as I can, or
> give up, or start the book over, depending on
> how interested I am in it. (Barb)

Books read at home do not require a commitment. "You spend a whole lot more time on a book or a short story at school than you ever would at home. I don't analyze books I read at home." (Brian)

Most important, though, is personal preference, being in control. Nicole likes to read: "I read all the time. But I prefer being given a choice." Patricia enjoys feeling the "freedom when I'm reading my own choice, compared to English. There's always a deadline in English - you have to have it done by a certain date." Like a game in which the score is not kept, students read for the pure aesthetic enjoyment of it rather than to produce something.

In each interview, students were asked to compare school-assigned reading to personal reading, to reflect upon required and preferred material, structured and unfettered process, and fulfilment of personal and directed purpose. Somewhere in the comparison, the reflection, the response, I wanted to ask: how is this reading? Robert said it best: "Everything I do is reading."

CHAPTER 5 - SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

> "Poem" presupposes a reader actively involved
> with a text and refers to what he makes of
> his responses to the particular set of verbal
> symbols. "Poem" stands here for the whole
> category, "literary work of art," and for
> terms such as "novel," "play," or "short
> story" [and] to the whole category of
> aesthetic transactions between readers and
> texts. (Rosenblatt 1978, p. 12)

The word "poem" comes from the Greek word *poiein*,

meaning "to create." The poems students created were

in the images they envisioned as they read, emerging

from their corporeal and relational encounters with

text. Physically, they became a part of the literature

and were able to visualize the action and the

characters. Emotionally, they established connections

between their own values, beliefs and experiences, and

those of the characters. It was in the 'being there'

that the phenomenon of reading occurred, in the

immediacy of being struck by something. Personal

reading was often primarily aesthetic because there was

no assignment to complete, yet school assignments were

initially aesthetic as well. For these students, there

was unity between what reading is and what they

experienced in school (Goodman 1985).

Rather than use the word 'poem' as a referent for all

literature as Rosenblatt (1978) did, students used the

word 'story.' The word comes from the Latin word
historia, or history, meaning "to inquire." Stories
link themes and contextualize meaning. Narrative is a
way to communicate, to understand, and to inquire into
experience. In the stories that students told me, they
described what Rosenblatt (1978) called "the play of
attention back and forth between the efferent and the
aesthetic" stance (p. 37). The initial reading allowed
them to 'see the whole picture' and subsequent readings
helped to refine interpretations, which were revealed
in class discussion and journal entries. Through
talking and writing, they fulfilled the efferent
purpose the assignment required, as well as their own
need to validate meaning by checking with others and
checking with the text.

The balance between independence and authority is in a
state of perpetual negotiation. Students hesitated
when they were asked to discuss how they felt about
receiving assignments, revealing a reluctance to
divulge feelings, but also because the question implied
that choice was involved within the realm of school
work. They simply completed the assignments they were
given. Yet their compliance with authority
contradicted their desire to make literature choices,
their reluctance to allow the teacher to dictate pace,

meaning and response, and their need to form unique interpretations. Their autonomy also became apparent in their inability to describe the process they followed in order to complete the reading assignment, or the manner by which they made sense of the literature, because, in much the same way as Adam had described, these student "read and thought all at the same time." Their silent submission to completing the assignment contrasted sharply with the means by which they completed it.

The significance of contextualized reading was evident when students discussed their activity before, during and after reading. Their previous experience of the author, the teacher, or the genre prepared them for an initial encounter with the literature. Their prior knowledge mingled with that which the teacher provided. Expectation was further influenced by an extended social network. The junction of previous experience and the current reading event resulted in the unique poems that students formed as they read. That this context operated both covertly and overtly accentuated the need to embrace and confront prejudices and assumptions.

In some of our discussions of the literature, what students found funny, depressing or shocking, did not necessarily amuse, sadden or surprise me. I was reminded of the need to balance my assumptions of what a story means with what it is like to read that story for the first time. The teacher's role involves choosing good literature, preparing students by providing sufficient background information, unearthing their preconceptions, trusting their abilities and independence, and respecting their desire for choice. Recognizing the effect their life-world and previous experience has on the act of reading entails attending to the relationality and corporeality of being a teacher of adolescents. Being embodied by the literature and the students acknowledges the relationship between choice, interest, understanding and meaning.

When most of a teacher's day is spent interacting with students rather than colleagues, questions which arise are most often asked by and asked of students. We rely upon students to hold up the mirror so we can see ourselves reflected in it, in much the same way as an interview, a dialogue between two people, exposes each participant to the other and to the self. The process involved in conducting and transcribing the interviews

unveiled a picture of who I am as a teacher. As students answered my questions, my silent dialogue supplied them with precise words and elaborated their ideas (Weber 1986). When I encouraged them to speak, I had to do so without also interpreting what they had just said. In fact, when I listened to the initial interviews I had done with my former students, I became painfully aware of how much more I talked than in later interviews, fulfilling my own need to make clear the questions I was asking. At one point, alone in my study transcribing interviews, I told my voice on the tape to 'shut up.' About the student's experience the interviewer should say little (Weber 1986).

In talking to students, either individually or in a group, it feels natural to model appropriate speech patterns and help them clarify thoughts so that each conversation becomes a covert learning experience. Unfortunately, helping students improve oral communication comes at the risk of altering their intended meaning. With that in mind, as I transcribed the tapes and then used portions of the transcriptions as examples throughout this thesis, I was careful to preserve the unique and individual student voices by using their exact words, no matter how inexact the meaning. That did not entirely overcome the

difficulty, however, of substituting the printed word for the lived experience, which potentially betrays the spontaneity of oral language (Weber 1986).

Throughout the process of writing I struggled with the dilemma of response journals as process or product. Do they provide a way of representing thought and making meaning manifest, and is that what happens when we read? Do they assume a certain style of reading? Using response journals reflects the way I want to teach reading and the way I want students to respond, and are based soundly in theory. Yet what I believe needs to be seen in light of what students experience. Writing in journals provides them with the opportunity to answer questions that no one asked, or avoid having to say something in class that others might ridicule. It allows students to enter a private, interpretive space. On the other hand, regardless of their acknowledgement that writing in journals benefited their understanding of the literature, students considered them an evaluation tool, and the evaluation of reading turned their stance naturally to an efferent one (Rosenblatt 1978). While teachers read what students have written in order to probe their understanding, journals become a course requirement and are ultimately marked.

How, then, can assessment be managed in a reading response classroom? The difficulty lies in the conflict between a response-based philosophy and the traditional way evaluation of reading operates. The use of multiple-choice or short answer tests implies that only one response is acceptable, and the questions compel students to 'read to find the right answer' rather than develop a response to the literature. Excerpts and passages, rather than works in their entirety, decontextualize the reading act further. How can we use what we know about aesthetic stance and prior knowledge in order to develop assessments which situate the reading act within students' experience?

In addition to the challenge of developing appropriate assessment, the swirl of questions that marked the initial stages of my inquiry continued to surface throughout the preparatory reading, during the interviews, while I was reviewing the transcripts, and in the process of writing.

I wondered about the effect a student's past had on their attitude to reading, and the manner in which they read. For instance, had they been read to, and what early books influenced them? How had they become avid readers? In addition to wondering about their pasts, I

wondered about their futures. Does a reading response philosophy in high school help or hinder post-secondary education and literature study?

The possibilities presented by a variety in student response can become problematic. Who controls meaning? If individuality and uniqueness is encouraged, is it possible that there are incorrect readings of text? In what ways does the teacher and the individual reader combine with the author's intention?

Students often used visual metaphors to describe their experience of reading: they 'saw what others meant', or 'saw what they had to say.' What role do the eyes play in the way students behave in a classroom? The corporeality of the life-world suggests the way in which we physically meet our world, and also to the way in which we are met; we reveal and conceal at the same time (van Manen 1990). Being in someone else's gaze affects our behaviour. How are students affected by the gaze of the teacher, by the gaze of other students?

There is no shortage of advice (Smith 1985) that recommends classroom procedure in the teaching of literature, yet that advice can often be contradictory and confusing. Transactional theory presents complex

and sometimes perplexing issues (Beach 1993; Gilbert 1987; Hines 1993). What are the larger pedagogical implications of examining how avid readers experience assigned literature? What do proficient readers do? Can these strategies be taught to other students to help them become proficient readers? What is the relationship between teacher instruction and learning style? What is effective teacher direction?

The questions I continue to encounter underline the difficulty of living within practice. The tension between autonomy and dependence, giving direction and exercising control, personal meaning and interpretive community, are inherent in the simple complexity of reader response theory.

Reading students and responding to their questions is the blessing and the curse of a transactional classroom. It is easy to become blinded by the light of theory when it seems to describe the way we teach, or the way we want to teach. We proceed on the basis of its principles, balancing what is best for our students, ourselves, and the larger considerations of curriculum and evaluation. Always, the tension exists of preserving the individuality of the student within his or her context and that of the class, of

maintaining the relationship between the part and the whole.

When we read, we trust the narrator to make things knowable and recognizable. We understand that, in the same way that life is not linear, the narrative cannot be so either. Rather, the story exists in a multilayered way, involving past and future with present, blending one's own experiences and those of others. The response, the poem, the embodiment, means being open to the questions the literature asks and being willing to bridge the interpretive gap created by the author, to attend beyond the present and immediate into the imaginative.

Reader response draws teachers and students into an instructional space wherein they jointly vest authority. An expanded awareness of meaning beckons them to seek understanding and explore misunderstanding, seeing beyond limits to what might be possible. 'Pedagogue', traced back to its Greek origin *paidagogia*, means 'to lead.' In the pedagogical relationship, as teachers lead students, so too do they lead us..

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APPENDIX A

Advertisement for Volunteers

ARE YOU A READER?

Do you describe yourself as an avid reader?
Do you read extensively?
Do you primarily read fiction?

You are invited to participate in a study which is being conducted as partial completion of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in the Graduate Division of Educational Research, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary.

In a thirty-minute interview, you will be asked to respond to the following question:

> "What is your experience of being
> assigned literature to read in an
> English classroom?"

In a follow-up session, you will be allowed to review your comments for clarification or additions.

Your participation will be anonymous and will in no way affect your standing in English. You will not be asked to do any additional work.

You may submit your name for consideration as a participant by signing up at the office, or by informing your English teacher. You may also contact me directly, Sandra Ens, by leaving a message at 220-5874.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

INITIAL QUESTION:

How does it feel to be assigned literature to read in an English 30 classroom?

SERIES ONE: LIVED EXPERIENCE

What is your experience of being assigned literature to read in an English classroom? What do you feel? What is your first reaction? Discuss an example.

SERIES TWO: PROCESS OR PROCEDURE

What do you do before you read? What do you want the teacher to tell you, and what do you not want the teacher to tell you, about the story, for example, purpose, theme, context?

How do you proceed through the text? Do read all the way through then take notes? Do you stop periodically, taking notes as you go?

What do you do while you read: visualize, make personal connections, look for meaning (i.e. symbolism, irony, theme), try to understand character motivation. How do you work at understanding it?

What do you do after you read: class discussion, reread, journal response, seek more information?

SERIES THREE: PERSONAL READING

How do you feel about personal reading? How do you choose books? Under what conditions do you read outside of school-assigned literature? What procedure do you follow?
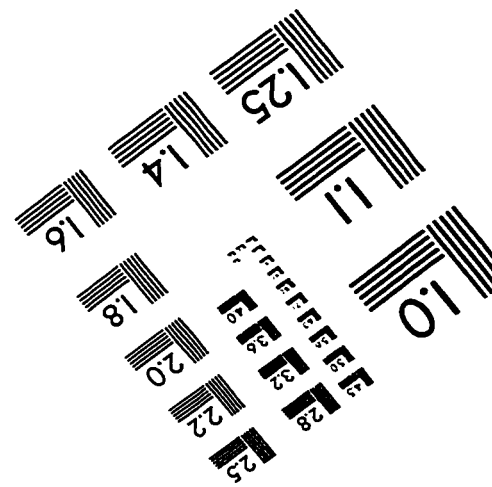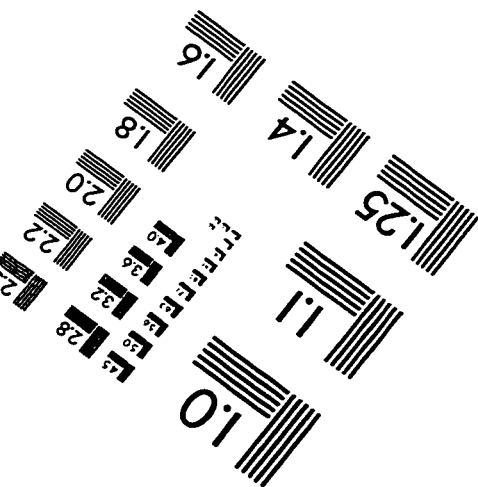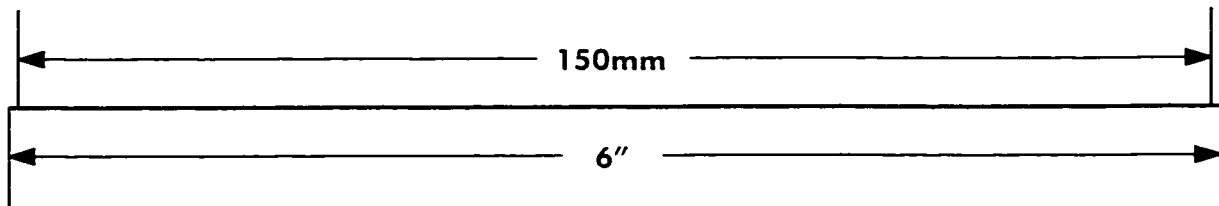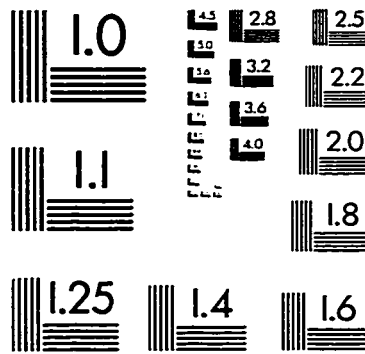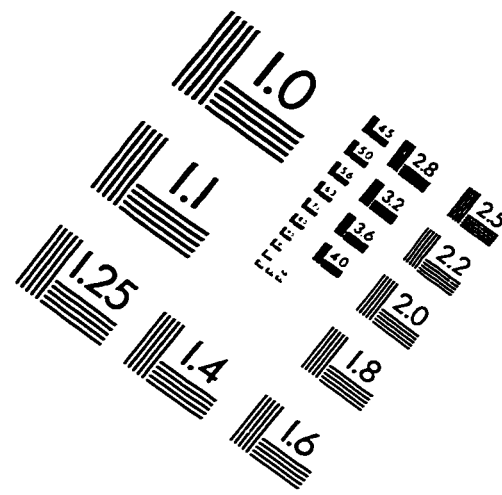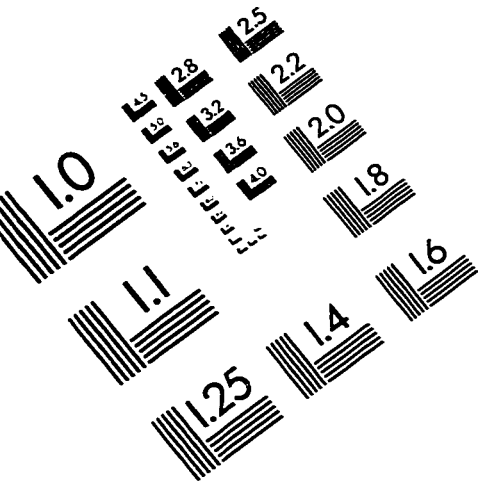

FINAL QUESTION:

How does school assigned reading compare to personal reading?

APPENDIX C

Thematic Statements

1. Students experienced text in corporeal ways, through the body and the senses. They described what they saw as they read and the voices that they heard.They placed themselves physically in the literature, experiencing feelings of 'being in' the text. They expressed the sensation that the text could take them somewhere else, and referred to each other's opinions as 'where they're coming from' or 'how they got there.'

2. Students experienced the text through its relationality. The lived human relation of text was expressed in the connections they made between the character's lives and their own lives. They talked about how text evoked emotion.

3. Students expressed the importance of context. When they knew what to expect from text, either from its genre, author, or their prior knowledge, students were able to 'get into' text and 'get something out of it.' If they were unaware of appropriate background information, they relied upon the teacher to provide it.

4. The stance students adopted with text was initially aesthetic, then efferent, yet they moved freely between enjoyment and judgement. With both school-assigned reading and personal reading, the initial reading was a lived-through experienced. After reading, they wanted to talk about what it meant with other people who had read it.

5. Students acknowledged the social network of the classroom. This interpretive community, which includes the teacher and the other students in the class, is accessed through class discussion. The community also includes those outside of class who have had similar experiences - other students, siblings, parents, former teachers.

6. Students expressed the tension between being independent and being controlled. They acknowledged that many classroom constraints restricted the freedom that they wished to have, but accepted these controls as necessary for the way in which school operates.

IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

150mm

6"