LITERATURE COURSE MADE INTERESTING:
The Effect of Reader Response Approach in Teaching *Introduction to Literature* at the English Department - Universitas Pelita Harapan

Clara Evi C. Citraningtyas
Universitas Pelita Harapan

ABSTRACT

A student often chooses her or his course based on whether or not a course is a fear-provoking one. This has also been the case at the English Department Universitas Pelita Harapan. Literature courses, in general, were previously not popular among the English Department students at UPH. One of the reasons was because students do not generally enjoy reading. They do not want to memorize a lot of details.

Though reading a lot cannot be eliminated from a good course, something can be done to lessen the amount of memorizing. This study focuses on the implementation of an approach in teaching *Introduction to Literature* at the English Department, a course that has been quite unpopular in the history of the English Department Universitas Pelita Harapan despite it being a compulsory course. By proposing a reader-response approach to the course, this important course becomes accessible and pleasurable to the students.

Keywords: reader-response approach, introduction to literature, accessible, pleasurable
Background

*Introduction to Literature* course had traditionally been a fear-provoking course at the English Department Universitas Pelita Harapan. Though a compulsory subject, many students tried to delay taking the course. In the odd semester of 2005/2006, the course was even cancelled due to the low enrollees. Students prefer to delay the course, if not avoid it. Three students under my advisee deliberately avoided the course and were pleased enough to do less credits than they were allowed to. According to the students, they dreaded doing the *Introduction to Literature* course because they did not want to read and memorize a lot. Students said that they could not memorize too many details in literature. Literature courses are worrying for the students because there is a false belief that literature should be memorized. Moreover, the course generally remained something apart, something separated, outside its readers’ lives.

What would make the *Introduction to Literature* class more accessible and pleasurable? How can we encourage more students to study literature? The answer to these questions seems to lie within the frame work of a reader-response approach to literature. Reader-response, which takes into account the student’s personal response to a text, allows literature to be relevant to the student’s lives, and makes it possible for the students to be connected with literature. This view allows room for creativity and reflective thinking in the literature classroom, rather than mere memorizing.

Reader Response to literature pays attention to the uniqueness of the reader, suggesting that it would be reasonable to respect the individual’s relationship with a text, to what the reader brings to the text and how each reader goes about making sense of it.

Reader response's primary impulse is one of reaction to the New Criticism’s treatment of the literary as an object that could and should be interpreted in dissociation from the reader’s experience of it. Reader-response critics challenge the notion of a single predetermined meaning of the text and suggest that more is involved in reading literature than analysis of texts. They argue against locating meaning in the text, against seeing the text as a fixed object, and in favor of a criticism that recognizes the reader’s role in making meaning. Literary experience, according to them, includes recalling previous experience, expressing and exploring emotions and associations evoked by a text and reflecting on the human issues addressed or suggested.

Best known for his work on reader-response theory, Wolfgang Iser in his book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), acknowledges the active role
of the reader - “the reader is present in the text” (1978: 118) - and the potential for more than one interpretation of a text. His discussion relates how the strategies of the text guide or direct the reader who fills in gaps and textual indeterminacies. It seems that the features of the text control meaning, giving it, ultimately, greater prominence. To Iser, it means that the reader must act as co-creator of the work by supplying that portion of it which is not written but only implied.

The Study

This study aims to respond to the following questions:

1. Would teaching the reader response approach make the *Introduction to Literature* class less fear-provoking to students at the English Department UPH?
2. Can reader response approach encourage more students to study literature?

The subject of the study is the students enrolling at *Introduction of Literature* during the even semester of 2005/2006. This study employs a classroom action study approach, applying the normal class time over the semester. During the semester, the reader response approach is entirely used. Rather than being given objective questions only, the students are instead encouraged to answer questions that show their connection with the texts that they read. The students are observed for their behaviors in the classroom: their attendance, and their participation during the class. Spradley (1980) defines the participant observer’s purpose as “to engage in activities appropriate to the situation” and “to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation” (p.54). I chose the classroom setting, since I was not investigating students’ responses out of the normal context of their classroom experiences. This observation is recorded weekly, reflecting the four hour meeting each week. The results of the mid-semester exam, final semester exam, quizzes, assignments and class discussions are used to decide students’ achievements as expected by the university. These variables are used as the bases to decide the effect of the reader response approach to *Introduction to Literature* course.

Results of the study

The result of this study will be presented by topics covered during the *Introduction to Literature* course. The *Introduction to Literature* course generally covers three genres of literature: narrative, poetry and drama.
Narrative

A narrative is a story: an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality. In a study of narratives, the students are generally introduced to the elements of fiction, such as setting, character, characterization, plot, and point of view. It is very important that the students of literature know the elements of fiction. In using the reader response approach, however, the students were not asked to memorize what those elements are. Instead, the students were given examples of different elements of fiction in different literary texts, and the students were asked to give reactions on those different elements. That way, the students still understand what the elements of fiction are, but also feel connected with the texts discussed.

In attempting to study a character, for example, the students were not only given the definition and different kinds of characters in fictions. They are then given a short story to read, entitled *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin. This story is a story that tells about how a wife reacts differently from any other wives on the news of her husband’s death. Instead of being sad and shocked as commonly expected, Louise Mallard experienced a feeling of freedom upon hearing her husband’s death in a train accident.

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

This uncommon reaction serves as an excellent spark into the discussion of character. The students were asked on what they think of Louise, and then to position Louise in the character chart. After the class agreed on the fact that Louise is a protagonist regardless of whether the students think that Louise was a positive or negative character, the class was divided into three according the students’ thoughts. The students’ responses fell into three groups: positive reaction towards Louise, normal reaction towards Louise, and negative reaction towards Louise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was interesting that all of the male students in the class viewed Louise negatively, while the group that viewed Louise positively was all females. There were 7 males only in a class of 35, and all of them viewed Louise negatively. This finding surprised the students and they were eager to discuss further about the reason why the groupings became gendered. The students were involved in a serious discussion, bringing in their life experiences and world views into the discussion. Examples of the responses were:
A: I think Louise is a bad wife. When I die, I want my wife to be sad of my death. I don’t want her to be happy.

B: Perhaps Louise didn’t have a happy marriage with her husband. If she had a happy marriage, she would be sad to hear her husband’s death, just like any other wives. So I don’t think Louise is a bad wife.

When time was up for the class, the students were still engaged in an interesting discussion on the character of Louise. Everyone expressed their regret that the class was over. This enjoyment is evidence of the success of bringing in the readers’ life experiences in the discussion of texts. When the students can connect literature with their own life, they not only learn, but also enjoy the study.

Poetry

A poem is a literary work that uses elements of poetry such as rhyme, rhythm, tone, irony, diction. It is important for the students of literature to understand the elements of poetry, but the traditional way of memorizing them proves to be discouraging and boring for the students. Memorizing the elements of poetry will also prevent the students from knowing the use of those elements in poems, and in creating feelings and senses to the readers.

Using the reader response approach, the students are given reflective questions rather than questions that require them to memorize details. Some of the questions during the discussion of Daddy by Sylvia Plath are as follows:

1. What are you thinking about as you read the first stanzas?
2. What do you think the poet wants you to know?
3. What are you imagining might happen next?
4. What do you know that is helping you understand what you are reading? What might you need to know more about to help you understand?
5. What clues do you have to the speaker’s personality?
6. Do you like the speaker?
7. What are the speaker’s problems?
8. How is the speaker like anyone you know or even like you?
9. What information did the poet leave out? What’s happening behind the words or scenes? How did you fill them in?
10. What other works have you read that are similar in some way to this one? What sticks out as the most important connection between the two?

11. Will you tell your friends about this work? What do you want them to know?

12. What did you like most/least about this poem?

13. Was there anything you didn’t understand? What was it?

14. What idea was the author trying to explore in this work? How important is that idea?

15. If you were to make a movie of this poem, who would be in the movie? What would you change to make the movie fit two hours? What kind of setting would you choose?

16. Who was the speaker of the poem? Does it make a difference? What if someone else were telling it?

17. How do you recognize when literary elements are being used? (symbol, metaphor, hyperbole, etc.)

18. Do you agree with how the poet sees the world? In what ways?

19. How do you feel about the way the story was told? Is there anything you enjoyed or were irritated with about the way the poet is written?

20. What do you feel is the most significant passage/word/event from the poem?

It was evident that the students do not need to memorize anything to be able to answer the above questions. Moreover, the reflective questions such as above were successful in connecting the poem with the students’ life and feelings. Some of the interesting responses made by the students are as follows:

(On Questions numbers 1 and 2):

- I’m thinking that the child was probably suffering when his father was still alive.

- The first thing that came into my mind was that the poem is about someone living in oppression and sadness.

- That even your parents could treat you as cruel and vicious as Nazi soldiers.

- I think the poet wants the readers to know how her relationship with her dad is.
From the slightly different responses, the students are encouraged to discuss their responses and listen to their friends’ responses. By discussing it, the students learn to understand other points of view, which is a crucial thing in text interpretation, and learn whether or not their own responses are mature. They will then be able to decide whether to revise their responses or keep their own responses.

Besides connecting the text with the students’ lives which proves to be successful in making the students love literature, the above reflective questions are also able to make the students learn about the elements of poetry. Instead of memorizing those elements, the students have the opportunity to make hands-on practice on applying those elements in real poems.

Some of the responses made by students for questions 16 and 17 are as follows:

- The poet is the speaker. Yes it will make a difference if it were told by someone else, I'm not sure if it would be that intense and personal.

- I know when literary elements are being used when repetition occurs. In addition, relying on common sense is also another way of knowing whether they are used, especially when I am faced with metaphors and hyperboles.

- The speaker of the poem may well be Sylvia Plath herself, as the resemblance and similarities between the speaker and Plath is clear.

- In this poem, literary elements are not difficult to spot. For example, the speaker uses a number of hyperbolic sentences to describe her daddy (verse 2 lines 3 to 5, verse 3 line 1), as well as metaphors such as references to the Holocaust (verses 7 and 9).

The above responses show the ability of the students to recognize and locate literary elements embedded in the poem. Should there be any mistakes made by the students, it will be revealed and corrected during the class discussion.

Drama

Due to class time, it is not possible to discuss a drama in one meeting. Therefore, the drama discussion was broken up to several meetings, depending on the number of the Acts in the drama text chosen. This class chose to study *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare which consists of five Acts. The discussion was therefore divided into six meetings, discussing one Act per meeting and movie watching in the last meeting.
During the discussion of the Acts, the students were not just given facts about elements of drama, but also asked to apply them in Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare and some other well known drama. Moreover, the students are also asked on their responses of the drama. This is a reader response approach to make students connected with the text, as well as making the students construct their own meaning according to the signs given by the text. Rather than just accepting the meaning given by literary critics, it is important and useful that the students learn to construct their own meaning.

Students are presented with situations which relate in theme to those presented in the play. They are then asked to consider how they might react and respond given the situation. Some of the reflective questions given to them are as follows:

1. Love at first sight - is it possible?
2. To what lengths would you go to support a friend? Is there anything that you wouldn’t do?
3. Would you support a friend indefinitely? Is there a line of acceptability or a point which would be going too far?
4. Revenge - as related to Romeo’s retaliation for the death of Mercutio - acceptable or did they go too far?
5. Filial Piety - Do you think Juliet’s parents are good parents?
6. Perfect partner Student & Parent Survey.

The students proved to be enjoying this reflective discussion so much that they often do not realize that they went beyond the class time. One of the activities that was enjoyed most by the students was the Student and Parent Survey. In this activity, the students and parents were asked to fill in a survey question on the qualities of a perfect partner for the student. The students and parents should not work together in filling in the questions. Their answers were then discussed in class together, and the students found many surprising wishes both from the parents as well as from the students themselves. This is an important activity for the students for their relationships with their parents as well as their struggles as part of growing up.

Evaluation

Reflecting the nature of the reader response method, the class evaluation does not emphasize factual questions. Right at the beginning of the course, the students are made aware of the evaluation standard; they are asked to be actively involved in the subject if they want to excel in this class. As the class involves a lot of discussion, students' participation is therefore very important. Students learn to unravel the belief
that silent is golden, because in the Introduction to Literature class, silent is NOT golden. Those who are active will get a plus point, and those who are passive will not get any plus points. This is also the time for them to practice giving out their opinions in a non-frightening atmosphere. The students learn that there are not always right and wrong answers, and should they give a wrong answer, they will not be embarrassed by the class.

In line with the nature of the reader response again, the mid semester and the final exams are in the form of a take-home paper. Though still focusing on the elements of fiction, poetry and drama, the questions were packaged to be involving what students think rather than on factual facts.

Rather than asking the students what the characters are, for example, the students are asked to analyze the characters in the story. (What are their most striking traits? How do they interact with one another? Are the characters fully developed, or are they stereotypes whose sole purpose is to express a single trait - good, evil, generosity - or to move the plot along?).

Rather than asking the students to make the definition of setting, they are asked to identify the setting of the story. (At what time period and in what geographic location does the action of the story occur? How does the setting affect the characters of the story? Does the setting create a mood of the story? In what way does the setting reinforce the central ideas that the story examines?)

Rather than asking the students to define what narrative point of view is, the students are asked to examine the narrative point of view of the story. (e.g., Who is telling the story? Is the story told in the first or third person point of view? Is the narrator a major character telling his or her own story? Does the narrator present an accurate picture of events? Does the narrator understand the full significance of the story?)

Rather than asking the students what symbolism is, ask the students to focus on symbolism in a poem. (e.g., Does the author use any objects or ideas symbolically? Are the symbols conventional or unusual? At what points of the story does the symbol(s) appear?)

Rather than asking the students what themes are, ask them to identify the themes of the story. (e.g., What is the central theme? How is this idea or concept expressed in the work? How do characters, plot, setting, point of view, and symbols reinforce the central theme? How does the title contribute to readers’ understanding of the central theme?)
These kinds of questions help the students more in understanding the elements of fiction, poetry and drama, as well as giving credits to students’ opinion. By doing so, the students construct their own meaningful understanding of literature.

Students’ Achievement

At the end of the semester, the students’ achievement was very good. Out of 35 students, only one student failed due to non-attendance, and one student failed due to plagiarism. It means that all students who attended, participated, and did their papers honestly passed the course.

Besides achievements as standardized by the university, the success of this course using the approach could be reflected by the sharp increase of the enrollees after the drop and add session. Students usually “shop around” for courses during the drop and add session, and settle their choice for the ones they like and need. A large number of students who were not originally enrolled in the class decided to enroll once they learnt that memorization was not emphasized in the course. At the end of the drop and add period, 35 students joined the class. The success of the course could also be reflected in the increase of the number of enrollees in the Introduction to Literature very significantly in the following semesters, and that the course had to be offered every semester to minimize the bottle neck (See Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollees to Intro to Lit</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cancelled due to the low enrollees</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 The Number of Enrollees in the Introduction to Literature course

Table 2 below shows the number of English Department students per batch according to the Menu Maker. The following data may include students who have now graduated or dropped out, but were still enrolled at the time they were supposed to take Introduction to Literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 The Number of Students from 2002 to 2007
The bold typed in Table 1 show the courses using Reader Response approach and after. Table 1 and Table 2 show that Introduction to Literature course are not so much avoided by the students anymore. After the use of the reader response approach, the course gained in popularity. This affects the other literature courses in the semesters that follow.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that the students enjoyed the Introduction to Literature course in a Reader Response approach. This is proven by the numbers of enrollees after the Drop and Add period as well as the consecutive semesters, by students’ attendance, and their achievements.

It can also be concluded that the benefits of the study are as follows:

1. This study gives the English Department some suggestions of how to teach Introduction to Literature to its students. The result of this study gives a new approach to the study of literature at the department, connecting literature with the students’ lives.

2. The students feel that literature is not something apart, nor separated from its readers’ lives.

3. The lecturers learn that the students do actually have their own responses that can shape cultural understanding. Barbara Pace (2003) states that it is not just the narratives of a culture that shape the possibilities open to its members but also the responses to those narratives that are shared in community with others. She believes that “[t]hrough stories we learn what acts are likely to draw criticism and ire, what acts will be tolerated by our peers or are likely to alienate us from the crowd” (p.35). However, the power (or lack of it) of the students’ responses to shape understanding is of concern when the standards of behavior set by the community inhibit critical exploration of texts or undermines the potential of literature to illuminate students’ experience.

4. The students continue to practice the writing process as they complete assignments and projects.

5. The students continue to consider and formulate responses to questions in a grammatically sound manner.

6. The students continue to identify the elements of a story including the plot, setting, characters, conflict, theme, climax, crisis, denouement, etc.
7. The students continue to participate effectively in group discussions practicing their listening and speaking skills.

8. The students continue to practice their public speaking and presenting skills as they are continually asked to present their ideas, opinions and projects.

9. Connections are made to the students' cultural awareness as they recognize how time affects the values of a society as well as how these ideas and values may not be universal.

Works Cited


