Reading and Democracy: The Enduring Influence of Louise Rosenblatt

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When I began teaching literature, I naively thought that there was one correct response to every literary text, even if at the moment I had no idea what it was. My job was to get the students rounded up and on the right track. For whether we did this directly or circuitously, the end in sight was supposed to be mine, not theirs. And then, just as the world seemed clear, with the meaning of every text carefully pinned down, along came a new wave of literary criticism, one that focused on the reader, not the teacher. Suddenly, heeding the dictates of "reader response" criticism, it was possible to allow more than one response or interpretation, and this inevitably changed my goals as a teacher of literature. No longer driven by the "correct" answer, the latest challenge was to encourage each student to find his or her own way into the poem or story. Pandora's box had been opened.

At this stage in my development, like other teachers I've talked to, I believed I was honoring the responses of my students when I allowed them to speak their minds in open discussion; what I eventually would discover was that my new-found interest in individual acts of reading and interpretation provided too limiting a focus. Gradually it dawned on me that replacing my answer with a host of idiosyncratic answers was not very satisfying. There needed to be some middle way of initiating conversation in the classroom, a way that was more than just a roll call of individual student monologues. If the words on the page merely composed a personal inkblot for each reader, then discussion in the class had no place to go and community became impossible.

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In struggling with what to do I came to realize that the various ways I might read a literary work with my students finally involved competing social philosophies. When I claimed to have the right answer what I was really modelling was life in an autocracy. It might be benevolent, but it was still hierarchically organized with the top position clearly in place. On the other hand, if members of the class went off on their own tangents, we were left with anarchy—and, when this happened, my own authority as teacher came very much into question. So what kind of society did I value, and what reading practices might help me get there? Might there be an exploitable tension between autocracy and anarchy?

Fostering Democratic Principles in the Literature Classroom

Pondering my future course as a literature teacher, I discovered the work of Louise Rosenblatt, especially her seminal book, *Literature as Exploration*, published in 1938 (and now in 1995 being reissued by MLA in a fifth edition). In her “transactional” approach, Rosenblatt emphasizes individual acts of reading where the “reader” creates a “poem” out of the “text.” Thus her focus seems to be on individual readers; still, in looking at her underlying agenda more closely, I came to realize that she holds powerfully to a democratic vision (Pradl, 1991). It was never her intention to leave the responses of individual readers dangling in splendid isolation. Instead, the reading transaction is the necessary first step toward a “discussion method” that is the central thrust of her book. Yet this fact has often been ignored by many literature teachers as they continue to waver between right interpretations and no interpretations at all.

The goal of *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt forthrightly stated, was “to demonstrate that the study of literature can have a very real, and even central, relation to the points of growth in the social and cultural life of a democracy” (1938, p. v). Honoring the transactional process, a teacher begins with the individual student and then has that student participate in sharing and contesting with other students as part of a dialogue of inquiry and interpretation. During the ensuing conversations the class as community explores the social implications of the range of responses and postures that individual students have enacted during their initial processes of reading.

By first listening to what readers have to say, instead of having them remain silent in deference to someone else’s expertise, a teacher acknowledges the central role of the individual in our democratic approach to social relationships. Such an emphasis, however, does not ignore how individual responses necessarily exist within some cultural and social context. Always within Rosenblatt’s thinking I find a profound awareness of this delicate balance between the individual and the group. Through the stories of literature—from the indecisive actions of Hamlet to the latest Harlequin romance—students have the opportunity to reflect on the values they hold and what their consequences might be as they live within the tensions of freedom and discipline, of personal desire and community control. Yet, how readers finally come to understand and enact democratic values depends very much on the *way* “poems” are evoked and considered in the classroom, not on what is actually in the text itself.
Rosenblatt’s choice to emphasize “evocation and response” is not based on the results of some independent, “objective” investigation of a reader’s processes of reading; instead, she privileges the individual reader only within a dynamic social context. It is this tolerant communication among “selves” and “others” that embodies the values of a democracy. Indeed when we fail to highlight the word democracy in any discussion of Rosenblatt’s work, we neglect the central foundation of her thinking. Following the lead of John Dewey, she explores how the reading “experience” serves as the initiating force in the literature classroom and thus furthers “the assimilation of ideas and habits of thought conducive to social understanding” (1938, p. 22). Her entire argument, in fact, centers on the responsibility of the literature teacher, who

can play an especially important part in this process, since it is very likely that the student's social adjustments will be much more powerfully influenced by what he absorbs through literature than by what he learns in the usual impersonal and theoretical social-science courses. (1938, p. 22)

This is the goal in a transactional literature classroom where the teacher is never the sole and dominating reader.

Rosenblatt insists that democracy is a function of the quality of life and relationships earned from below, not a result of privileges imperiously dispensed from above. The best educational defense against the “true believer,” against the mechanically automated student, is a transactional program of teaching/learning, one which reinforces each individual’s faith in his or her own judgments, even as these judgments remain open to question. In this way we help prevent belief from degenerating into dogma.

The danger, Rosenblatt points out, lies in our democratic arrangements being unable to mediate those persons and groups who prefer a single perspective:

The individualistic emphasis of our society builds up a frequent reluctance to see the implications for others of our own actions, or to understand the validity of the needs and drives that motivate other people’s actions. The fact that the success of the individual must so often be at the expense of others places a premium on this kind of blindness to the needs and feelings of others. We teachers of literature need to take this cultural pressure into account, since it is so directly opposed to the attitude of mind we are attempting to foster. For the very nature of the literary experience is a living into the experiences of others and a comprehension of the goals and aspirations of personalities different from our own. (1938, p. 108)

Ideally, Rosenblatt emphasizes, citizens in a democracy have the convictions and enthusiasms of their own responses, yet they are willing to keep an open mind about alternate points of view, and finally are able to negotiate meanings and actions that respect both individual diversity and community needs.

To overcome our tendency to follow authority blindly, we need to develop confidence in our own ability to interpret and judge what we observe around us in the world. But confident and out-spoken individuals must be complemented by a tradition of conduct for reconciling differences among their re-
sponses. Rosenblatt’s formulation of literature education thus is especially salient: the dialogical, back-and-forth movement between reader and text and then the reach outward to an ongoing negotiated conversation with other readers and other texts. It is her perspective that supports a continuing growth model for both reading and democracy:

[The student] needs to retain his spontaneity and yet to develop further, to make of every literary experience something on which to build enhanced capacities for his next experience. For he can begin to achieve a sound approach to literature only when he reflects upon his response to it, when he attempts to understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction, and when he goes on thoughtfully to modify, reject, or accept it. (1938, pp. 88-89)

Because the democratic social conversation was foundational to Rosenblatt’s thinking, she helped encourage an approach to the selection of texts for the classroom that strikes a balance between contemporary works and “the classics.” As she noted,

in a democracy, the more varied the literary fare provided for students, the greater its potentialities as an educationally liberating force. In this way, through literature, the necessarily limited influence of their environment will be supplemented and corrected by contact with expressions of other phases of society and other types of personality. (1938, p. 254)

In the transactional classroom, contemporary works figure centrally. Not only do they confront students with artistic representations of the basic problems of living—questions such as those of work and leisure, of friendship and disloyalty, of autonomy and control, of love and neglect—they also encourage independence in matters of valuation since questions regarding the worth of a work remain open to debate. As Rosenblatt suggests, “Not from the works in themselves, but from lively interaction with them, may flower heightened sensitivities, and powers of judgment based on an ever more human scale of values” (1940, p. 109).

From Reader Response to Democratic Community

If we try to look at the reader/text relationship as some formulaic absolute, we miss seeing that the relationship is only an artifact of a particular set of socially constituted values. For Rosenblatt, the “poem” exists as a bound reader/text composite during the reading transaction; “reader” and “text” are never separate individual elements. Further, for her, readers are forever testing their readings in a public arena and then modifying them accordingly—the essence of a democratic process. Because Rosenblatt does not want to lose sight of our need to participate in a verifying community, one that serves as an anchoring referent point for our readings, she separates herself from Norman Holland and other “egocentric” reader-response approaches to literature. In contrast, Rosenblatt sees group effort as supportive of individual human agency. It is precisely this social effort that characterizes reading in non-hierarchical, democratic classrooms. In such classrooms students are continually part of the circle of praxis, moving from understanding to decision to action. When individual
student responses to the “poem” begin the lesson, a countervailing force is established that prevents interpretation from later being constrained by either the teacher or the group. If I want students to experience the full sweep of interpretation, it is important that I not immediately influence or direct them toward preordained answers or meanings.

Literature for democracy inevitably influences the patterns of conduct that citizens must exhibit if the possibilities of our pluralistic society are not to wither. Literary texts can be central to our democratic education because they affirm and confirm the uniqueness of the individual through the personal acts of aesthetic evocation that are necessary to access them. Yet “poems” also convene us socially by insisting that individual acts of reading inevitably lead to sharing and participation in the action of a larger community. After reading a story or watching a movie we generally are bursting to talk with others about our “experience.” Because literature is never merely knowledge or propaganda, one reader does not substitute for another. In Rosenblatt’s transactional scheme, unlike much of the theory given us by reader-response critics, solitary readers responding are simply never to be found.

The rise of reader-response criticism could have provided a natural opening for Rosenblatt’s thinking to begin transforming life in the literature classroom. It was a chance for teachers to question the social practices that allowed them to assume sole responsibility for the interpretations of texts. Yet Rosenblatt’s social agenda for the reading of literature has proven incompatible with traditional academic literary concerns. This is because she refuses to separate acts of interpretation from their pedagogical implications and consequences. Rather than presenting the reader’s response as yet another theoretical problem to be solved—a shrewd strategy for exempting teacher-centered pedagogy from change—Rosenblatt saw the reader as the key to democratic practice in our literature classrooms.

Improperly identifying Rosenblatt with reader-response criticism has allowed her to be neglected by “cultural critics” of the left, whose approach she both anticipated and transcended. Rosenblatt has never believed that the individual is solely created, “written,” by the culture, by its codes and conventions. Culture certainly plays an important role in what a person believes and does, but the “self” cannot be simply reduced to a series of group imperatives. Instead, Rosenblatt validates the creative tension that exists between autonomy and control when democratic relationships are encouraged among students and teachers. Ironically, many “cultural critics,” who are also concerned with altering power in the classroom, fall prey to their theoretical analyses and end up using them as the latest content for the next “liberating” lecture. When teachers only employ theory this way—as part of a monologue—it contributes to alienating the general public from literature. As Rosenblatt has noted: “If anyone is to blame for the declining interest in literature, it’s the academicians and critics who have given us theories of the literary work that neglect the transaction between text and reader” (1981, p. 12).

Unlike those critics who use “disclosure” or “deconstruction” to paint, in blanket fashion, a negative picture of “Western” values—values they see as exploiting individuals and minority groups under capitalism—Rosenblatt insists on helping students discriminate between what should be rejected in the
society and what should be retained and strengthened. This kind of critical
discrimination requires the values of democracy:

Any phase of life, any cultural mechanism, any custom or institution, any forms
of conduct, should be measured in terms of their actual effect on the indi-
vidual personalities that go to make up our society... This means that the hu-
man being is recognized as having value in himself and that anything which
reduces him to the status of a mere thing, instrument, or automaton is con-
demned... This rests upon the belief in the fundamental dignity and worth of
the human being. It sets up the well-being and fulfillment of the individual in
opposition to any abstractions for which might be claimed a superior reality or
value such as the State, the Nation, the Race, the Elect, the Heroes, or the Su-
permen. This basic postulate of value is obviously one which receives rein-
fforcement from many elements present in our cultural heritage. (1938, pp. 195-
196)

Rosenblatt is certainly critical of many trends within our society—from the
increasing disparity in wealth between the rich and the poor to the growing
intolerance expressed in the politics of identity—but this only encourages her
to further champion democracy. She challenges all teachers to "indoctrinate"
openly the basic concepts of a democratic system, to urge upon students the
values of a "civics" of the literature class. Democratic principles, she believes,
defend students against being covertly indoctrinated with negative attitudes
toward our society. They preserve students' freedom to make up their own
minds after rigorous debate about what to accept and what to reject. Following
Rosenblatt's agenda, literature study is part of a broader movement to foster
constructive social transformation, while avoiding the "alienation" unwittingly
invited by other "cultural critics."

Despite a hesitancy in literature education to talk about democratic values
and relationships, references to Rosenblatt's work now dot the landscape of
writings on literature teaching. But is discovering the reader equivalent to sup-
porting a democratic strategy for reconsidering authority in the classroom? We
need to be cautious and remember that what Rosenblatt says about the reader
cannot be divorced from its democratic social implications. Thus, while more
teachers are now citing Rosenblatt in support of allowing individual students
to play a central role in the literature classroom, seldom is there any clear sense
of how a focus on individual response contributes to the positive dynamics of
democratic public discussion. Richard Beach and James Marshall, for instance,
value active student talk and discussion (1991, p. 59), but this is because it's a
better way of enhancing student learning, not because it furthers our society's
democratic mission. Disagreement in the democratic literature classroom fos-
ters reflection, just as the sharing of responses generates new questions, rather
than merely confirming previously held beliefs.

For those literature teachers who pay close attention to the broader scope
of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, collaboration plays an important role. Even
when a democratic social agenda is not explicitly articulated, the classroom
space is seen as providing occasions for students to support one another as
they test ideas and learn from each other. The teacher joins this democratic
conversation instead of dictatorially dominating it. Honoring reader response
in this instance establishes the learning base for productive social participation. When response is not an end in itself, it can encourage movement between self and group. Without social exchange there is no way to arrive at critical reflection, the basis for altering one’s original responses and conceptions—again a democratic protocol without naming it as such.

**Listening and Democracy**

Children’s comments often reveal classrooms where rules and order prevail. Ironically, these regulations are justified as creating the necessary climate for learning; instead, they all too easily provide a cover for not listening to students. What might we hear if we eavesdropped for a moment:

Teachers are always saying “Finish the question you are on.” The reason I really hate this is that I’ve been stuck on the question for ten minutes, and I don’t know the answer.

They say “Shut up!” when they are the only ones talking—usually about the “noise level in this room.” Then there’s “I’m not repeating myself.” But what do they do? Yes, you’ve guessed it.

Teachers say: Shut up! Sit up! Clear up that mess! Do you do that at home? Do you want to do the teaching? Come to the front and read this! Go to the headmaster!!! Or they just: Glare!!! Point!!! Clear their throat!!! Slam rulers down!!!
—We just secretly say “No!”

When children are allowed to speak, their complaints even go beyond the confines of the classroom: “Some grown-ups think children don’t say anything important... so they don’t listen.” Early on children learn to read the deeper intentions of adult behavior—“Find your own place and leave me alone.” Or as we see in another child’s brief story: “In the garage: Dad? Yes? Can I help? No. Please? No. Oh. If you want to help go and tidy your bedroom. (He means, ‘Get out of my way.’)”

These insights of children have been gathered strategically by the National Oracy Project in Great Britain and published in their handout, “Are you listening out there?” Using a number of such materials this group has encouraged teachers to reexamine their practices through the gentle nudge of irony—“50 Successful Ways for Making Children Not Learn Through Talk,” for example, offers suggestions such as: no choice of activity, encourage competitiveness, nothing on the walls, no interruptions, belittle spoken ideas. In our democracy, we must not neglect the central role each teacher as listener plays in the education of the young. At stake finally is the kind of tolerant listeners they in turn will become.

Listening is about control—and as a teacher I know that one of my greatest fears is losing control of the classroom. Thus it’s easier to speak and question rather than listen. For if I’m just listening, I think that students will only end up talking about their own interests, and the lesson will be left far behind. Already there seem to be too many agendas spinning in the air to get anything done. Yet as I drone on, students quickly learn that they have nothing important to say because no one respects them enough to listen. In a survey by Sharon Wieland of 49 students aged 7 to 14, the vast majority reported that discussion
could only be forwarded by the teacher, and in fact no one realized that "discussions might take place among a group of students without the teacher present" (p. 2). So this is the lesson teachers cumulatively convey: "Somewhere along the way students learn that their teachers want and expect a rigid, controlled environment in the classroom" (p. 3). In short, this plays into a pattern where students come to understand that democratic initiative is not rewarded, that it's better to wait for someone else to make the first move.

Rosenblatt's transactional approach to literature helps counter this growing tendency not to participate in communal action. By complementing the authority of the teacher's reading with the emerging confidence of individual students, the classroom becomes a place where responses are shared, not dictated. By giving students a genuine chance to speak their minds—which only occurs when we show we're listening—we help foster their confidence in their own capacities to comprehend and assess what they discover in the "poems" we read together. Rosenblatt, in other words, is simultaneously supporting emotional investment and rational inquiry on the part of students. Reading the "poem" is never just a matter of following orders or directions set down by the author; rather, Rosenblatt's kind of democratic reading involves benefiting from conversations that extend all sides beyond themselves.

Many teachers, of course, are attempting new ways of relating to students in the classroom in order to carry out Rosenblatt's democratic agenda, even when at first some loss of face may be suffered. Barbara Canterford, a teacher from Australia, describes a literature discussion group she ran during 33 half-hour sessions with eight children from Grade 6. Attempting to encourage the open reading responses of these students, Canterford soon discovered that some of her traditional authority would have to be relinquished. Moving toward her "new role of participant/facilitator" did not, however, mean that she had any less "control" than in her previous role. What was important was that role relations needed to be explicitly reconstituted:

The difference between the two roles lay in the social relations that developed with the group involved in the discussion. The children had to develop a different view of me as the teacher and of the way that learning took place. The mutual recognition of the value of sharing, which applied to me as much as to the children, contributed to this development. (p. 287)

Just like Sharon Wieland, this teacher has become aware of Rosenblatt's message. She realizes that students will not talk democratically unless they are actively encouraged to do so through an adult's commitment to act differently in the classroom and change the power relationships involved in learning. This includes making time for self-reflective conversation about how everyone is participating in the conversation and why.

It has taken me a long time to understand that to practice a selfless kind of listening is not to be sheared of my identity or authority; Rosenblatt's agenda does not mean I am fated to be drowned in the outpourings of students. In fact, active listening suggests a strongly composed sense of self. When I'm clear about my own interests and concerns, about my own need for control, I begin to appreciate the negative effects of intrusion and how my adult ego constantly risks swamping the egos of the young. The challenge to have my classroom
reflect that democracy depends upon both mutuality and plurality. The speaker's story will not be heard properly if the listener's story is not also in the arena.

There's a children's book by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnall that I love to use with children as we think through what it means culturally to provide democratic listening space for others. In the story, The Other Way to Listen, the central character is an old man from the hills who "was so good at listening—once he heard wildflower seeds burst open, beginning to grow underground. That's hard to do." But before the children read the story, we talk together about various sounds they can identify. What sounds frighten them? What sounds give them pleasure? They will touch on a wide range of noises from fingernails scratching a blackboard or the intrusive sirens of the city to natural sounds like the wind and the rain or the differences among bird songs. I ask them what it takes to imitate a sound and we try various ones. Also there is the challenge of the imagination as I encourage them to make up sounds not yet heard, such as the conundrum "one hand clapping." In time we play our made-up sounds off of each other, both in dissonance and harmony, becoming a room of sound effects—always reaching toward Rosenblatt's community of reciprocal attention. As we listen to each other's sounds, we consider the spaces that are necessary for them to be heard, so that both unity and diversity might be honored.

As the children read the story, they play with what it means to "walk by any corn field and hear the corn singing." What would they have to be attuned to? How do they pick up the noises of the world and what messages do these noises send? It sounds like this... one child ventures. Eventually they come to a passage where the narrator is thinking back to when as a boy he asked the old man, "Tell me everything you can." In his reply, the man challenges our hierarchical assumptions, "...the hills and ants and lizards and weeds and things like that. They do the teaching around here." For to be a successful listener, just like a successful reader, requires an attitude that is democratically inclusive, "Well, you have to respect that tree or hill or whatever it is you're with. Take a horned toad, for example. If you think you're better than a horned toad you'll never hear its voice—even if you sit there in the sun forever." Finally the old man says, "Don't be ashamed for bugs or sand or anything." Following this example, I ask the children to talk about what they felt when someone really paid attention to them.

In short, I believe that the democratic struggle for mutuality that Rosenblatt delineates for us plays out in my literature classroom only when I begin to acknowledge that students have much to tell me. Rushing either to interpretation or correction stops me from listening to the underworld—the place where some hurt or injustice resides—where each student's set of beliefs actually begins. The challenge is to listen with absorbed amazement, establishing context and connection. Yet in attempting to listen caringly, it may be awhile before I can incorporate the referents of the "other" into my own view of the world.

What Rosenblatt would have us develop as literature teachers is a kind of facilitating social script, one that embodies the values of reflective listening. Such facilitation supports and encourages as it draws the learner forth. Kierkegaard's words speak to this democratic responsibility we hold as teachers:
to be a teacher does not mean simply to affirm that such a thing is so, or to deliver a lecture or so on. No, to be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner. Instruction begins when you, the teacher, learn from the learner, put yourself in his place so that you may understand what he understands and in the way he understands it, in case you have not understood it before. Or if you have understood it before, you allow him to subject you to an examination so that he may be sure you know your part. (pp. 29-30)

Listening to the learner means I am striving toward an interpersonal role relationship that is fundamental to democratic endeavors: mature dependency. Infants, because they are unable to survive without their mothers, determine the immature end of the dependency continuum. At its opposite is not the independence of the rugged individual, but rather the kind of relationship that is possible between friends, lovers, learners, workers, a wife and husband. Each involves a kind of reciprocal dependency that in fact defines maturity (a social concept) as opposed to self-sufficiency (an individual concept). Facilitative listening allows for the reciprocity that makes mature dependency possible: the capacity to play a social role in relation to someone else while allowing others to play a role in relation to you. In this way listening is not merely a route to the democratic learning Rosenblatt would convene in the literature classroom, it embodies such learning itself.

**Listening Together as Teachers**

One way of experiencing and practicing the kind of listening necessary to enact Rosenblatt’s democratic agenda is to participate with our colleagues in the close reading of texts—written, spoken, visual. By slowing down and letting our responses continue to hover over the words or images before us, we learn what it feels like not to rush to judgment. In testing our readings against those of our peers we begin to hear behind the words. We find ways of extending interpretive possibilities, of avoiding unnecessary competition.

Rosenblatt clearly recognizes that “this situation in which free exchange of ideas is possible, and in which each member of the group feels confident to express himself, is an extremely difficult one to create” (1938, p. 83). Accordingly, patience and reflection must be developed. We learn to withhold closure by circling back and forth between words and associations, even as we acknowledge our desire to be finished with a text, to end with an unambiguous conclusion. The reading task naturally goes far beyond deciphering dictionary references for the phrases of the text we’re reading—the challenge is to express the emotional tenor these phrases hold for us. But what we might reveal about ourselves gives pause to us all. For among our various fears is the fear of getting it “wrong.” What will others think about our errant response? Yet, sharing our responses with other teachers prepares us for the complexities and frustrations of democratic discussion.

Margaret Himley offers one example of the kind of extended conversations that allow teachers to support each other democratically, something she calls “deep talk.” Himley illustrates this process of collaboratively generating meaning by telling the story of how a group of teachers helped her to understand her son Matthew’s emerging writing. Together this group came to see
how Matthew's words were intimately interwoven with the culture in which he was growing up.

Here is a transcription of the first story Matthew wrote just before he turned six:

Once upon a time there were two little boys. Their names were Matt and Matt. Their Moms and Daddys were lost. They had to spend their own money to buy food, so they could eat breakfast and lunch and dinner. One day their Moms and Dads came home. They asked how they got food. “How do you think? With money.” “Did you have enough money? “Yes, we were almost out.” “I’m glad you did not die.” “We almost did,” said Matt Himley. (pp. 141-142)

Initially, after clarifying some of the features of the text—such as its fairytale structure, its play on the doubleness of the boys having the same name, and the reversal of our normal plot schemas with the parents getting lost—the group of eight teachers, including Himley, began to concentrate on how “specificity” stood in opposition to “vagueness.” The money and meals were detailed; however, crucial things, such as how the boys got where they are, remained unclear, and the time frame also was ambiguous. As the group considered the meaning of these observations, they gradually, in their second round of discussion, put the pieces together in this conclusion:

The story thematizes children searching ambivalently for independence but not quite being there. It takes a surprise, a transformation or reversal of the normal world, to enable them to assert this independence, but then they are ready to return to the constraints and safety of that normal world. (p. 145)

By not quickly dismissing the story as a simple and limited instance of childhood make-believe, by withholding closure, the group comes to see what cultural and personal knowledge Matthew actually commands here. Through this text he is already exploring a number of subtle human motives and actions.

Listening to the text and each other in this way, the group enacted a process of social reading, but one that began with individual responses. Contemplating Matthew’s words in a shared democratic fashion allowed the group “to slow down and ambiguate the reading process.” By coming “at a text over and over again,” the group could “layer words on words” and “disrupt meaning.” In this way the text was located “in multiple and changing contexts.” As Himley concludes, “this kind of reading loosens the pragmatic frame, opening up texts to ambiguity and multiple meanings, and moves slowly and carefully and respectfully (and always partially) from outsidership into otherness” (p. 139).

This movement perfectly illustrates the kind of tolerance of alternate perspectives that Rosenblatt sees occurring when initial responses are built on, not suppressed. Thus “otherness” points to the social nature of both Matthew’s text and the entire enterprise being undertaken by these teachers. Like Rosenblatt, Himley is telling us that our teaching pleasures exist within the “shared territory of the text itself.” Each act of taking apart becomes an act of making, but most important these transactions occur without appropriating the text from its original author. The democratic rewards of social listening/
reading are thus distributive. When we make time for another teacher, we are really learning to listen to ourselves.

**Democratic Reading and the Integration of Thought and Feeling**

In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt emphasizes the intimate connection between our lives and our reading. How we handle direct experience can be shaped in important ways by how our mind joins with the literary text, both in feeling and sense-making: “There is more than a verbal parallel between the process of reflective thinking based on response to literature and the process of reflection as a prelude to action in life itself” (p. 267). In reading and in life our responses progress only as they engage problems and overcome obstacles. It was Dewey, Rosenblatt reminds us, who clarified how “in actual life constructive thinking usually starts as a result of some conflict or discomfort, or when habitual behavior is impeded and a choice of new paths of behavior must be made” (p. 267). Yet breaking with tradition is risky. Thus I often avoid stepping into something new. In fact, having to acknowledge the role of conflict in constructive thinking, and all of the uncertainty this entails, forces me into a confession: how resistant I often am to student conflict as it emerges in classroom discussion.

Because my intellectual energy is mostly employed in removing or resolving conflict, I think of conflict initially as something negative, as something to be avoided. Thinking, however, is precisely what “grows out of some sort of tension, some emotional impulse, and is colored by it” (p. 267). In this sense my ideas are not separable from my emotions. The two are always intertwined when I’m fully engaged in a new situation or relationship, engaged in an activity I cannot predict or control in advance. Problem solving is a natural human endeavor that’s triggered by some emotional tension. This tension serves as “the impetus toward seeking some solution, but intelligent behavior is the result of thought brought to bear upon the problem.” In other words, “the validity of the thought will usually depend on the extent to which emotion has been controlled or has been prevented from obscuring the actual situation before us” (pp. 267-268).

The most significant emotional tensions in a person’s life are bound to be social in origin: How will we handle contradictions, or conflicting motives, as they occur in our significant relationships? What will we do when faced with new people or situations? As Rosenblatt argues, I first need “to understand [my] own emotional response to the person or situation.” This means realizing “to what extent [I am] dominated by preoccupations and prejudices that may have led [me] to exaggerate some things, ignore others, and thus not to have fully understood them.” Further, I must bring my “basic moral or psychological assumptions out into the open in order to test the validity of their application to this new situation” (p. 266). Indeed, if I am not modeling the honest disclosure of my preferences and prejudices for my students as we read together, then I’m not helping them find ways of being open about their own reading responses.

Under such scrutiny I may discover that my “own past experience and
information must be supplemented before [I] can make an adequate judgment or plan appropriate action” (p. 266). And, inevitably, my original reactions may need revision or rejection. As Dewey noted:

in the arts proper, we can not only modify our own attitude so as to effect useful preparation for what is to happen, but we can modify the happening itself. This use of one change or perceptible occurrence as a sign of others and as a means of preparing ourselves, did not wait for the development of modern science. It is as old as man himself, being the heart of all intelligence. (1960, p. 132)

This ongoing process of reaction, reflection, and revision marks a mature person’s innovative and productive encounters in life, for art connects reason with emotion. Still, at this point, having reached “conclusions” that appear to work, it is all too easy to dismiss the new questions and solutions of the next generation.

Events occur so rapidly that I find myself confused, disconcerted, disoriented. I yearn for the comfort of some mindless routine. I just want to switch onto automatic pilot. That way I don’t have to risk the emotional energy required to keep response open and changing. Just tell me what to do, but don’t ask me to invest anything of myself. Yet this is not the way of learning, regardless of how tempting it might be to try to isolate the curriculum from the “noise” and bustle of everyday living. As Rosenblatt emphasizes, such separation often creates thought situations that are free of feeling and emotion:

It is comparatively easy for the students to think rationally about difficult human problems when impersonal academic treatments make them abstract subjects of thought. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking is probably not very useful; it lacks the conflicting impulses or emotional perplexities out of which thinking usually grows in real life. (1938, p. 268)

Reason only flows as the issue of feeling. This is a key insight it’s easy for me to avoid. It seems safer to stay locked inside the abstractions of my mind than to engage in the mess of feelings. Rosenblatt, however, shows us that democracy requires a healthy mix of both, which is why for her literature involves much more than the working out of some intellectual puzzle.

In the process of transacting with a text, Rosenblatt tells us, feeling and reason can form an essential partnership:

[Literature] may provide the emotional tension and conflicting attitudes out of which may spring the kind of thinking that can later be assimilated into actual behavior. The emotional character of the student’s response to literature offers an opportunity for helping him to develop the ability to think rationally within the context of an emotionally colored situation. Furthermore, the teaching situation... in which a group of students and a teacher exchange views and stimulate one another toward clearer understanding can contribute greatly toward the development of such habits of reflection. (1938, p. 269, author’s italics)

This conception of “constructive thinking” encourages me to face the fury and unpredicatability of emotion, which by the nature of things will initially appear
out of control and therefore uncontrollable—living life in the uncertainty lane. But that’s the promise of democracy: Vulnerability. Trust. Improvisation. Community. Listening and making sounds with students—sharing, probing, testing, celebrating each other. Everything seems turned on its head when as teacher I’m preparing myself to listen, not to act as if I know the answer in advance. But democracy has always been the old world turned upside down. Reading in this way just helps keep it so.

Teachers of literature, Rosenblatt is forever reminding us, can contribute in important ways to creating the character of future citizens: private confidence and response, public assertiveness and scrutiny, collaborative humility and tolerance. Further, by showing us that the feeling/thinking connection lies at the center of our enterprise, she encourages us not to lose touch with our own literary responses. As we work to keep her democratic vision alive, we face opportunity and challenge: How might we engage more openly and reflectively with the conflicting emotions and interpretations that literature prompts? How can we prolong each student’s evocation of the “poem” and so promote reasoned discourse as the basis for decision-making and action-taking? How might we find a creative balance between self and group in order to help expand each student’s freedom and possibilities within a classroom setting that promotes democratic discussion? By ensuring that the “transactional” approach to literature remains embedded within a social context, we honor Rosenblatt’s crucial educational focus on democracy as it becomes translated into a classroom agenda for individual readers.

References