The New York State Reading Association is a statewide organization made up of 43 local reading councils having a total membership of over 6,500 educators from across the state. The goal of NYSRA and the local councils is to promote literacy and general improvement of reading at all levels, and to encourage reading as a lifetime activity. All members of NYSRA receive a subscription as part of their membership fees.

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The Language and Literacy Spectrum is a publication of the New York State Reading Association. It is published annually and intended for a wide professional audience including classroom teachers, reading and special educators, consultants, college and university faculty, parents and administrators of schools as well as others interested in literacy and the language arts.

The Spectrum welcomes manuscripts about literacy and language topics, ideas and events of interest at all levels of education. Only original manuscripts will be considered for publication. The Spectrum welcomes photographs depicting students in varied literacy activities. Black and white photographs are preferred. Parent/guardian permission must be obtained in writing, and the photographs are not returned. The deadline for submitting manuscripts is December 1st of each year. Manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to:

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Information for Prospective Authors

1. Varied manuscript formats are welcome. The journal accepts manuscripts related to reading and the language arts at all levels of interest. Articles by teachers as active researchers are encouraged. Technical articles and research reports are encouraged but must be written in a style suitable for the general readership of The Spectrum.

2. The Language and Literacy Spectrum is a refereed journal and, therefore, manuscript review is blind. Contributors must submit three copies of each manuscript. Author(s) and affiliation(s) should be identified in cover letter only. Manuscripts must be prepared according to the style of the American Psychological Association. If a paper is accepted for publication, authors must submit a 3.5 floppy disk of the manuscript in WordPerfect format, for either Macintosh or IBM compatible computer.

3. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of material in their article and the opinions and conclusions expressed therein. All manuscripts accepted in The Spectrum must be original and not being considered for publication elsewhere.

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On the cover of this journal: Germaine Vega Soto responds artistically to Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom in the Sage Literacy Program. Photograph courtesy of Robin Evans.
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Kathleen A. Gormley
Peter C. McDermott

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From the Editors...

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From the Editors

The seventh issue of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum* contains several sections; Articles; Literacy Research; College-Community Partnerships, Perspectives, Children's Literature. The Articles generally focus on four themes: (1) empowering students' voices; (2) responding to the call for higher standards by instructing and including all learners; (3) using the Internet to promote literacy; (4) poetry as a powerful genre. Literacy Research includes a variety approaches including experimental, ethnographic, case study, and teacher-researcher pieces. College-Community Partnerships describe a variety of educational collaborations from tutorial programs to in-service/preservice efforts. The Perspectives section includes two reviews of *Text, Lies and Video Tape: Stories About Life, Literacy and Learning*, providing a point/counterpoint discussion of this book. Multicultural books and favorite stories are recommended in Children's Literature.

The publishing of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum* could not have been possible without the support of others. Steck-Vaughn/Berrent assumed the majority of the costs of producing the journal. On behalf of NYSRA, we acknowledge their generous financial contribution. As in past years, The Sage Colleges continue their general support of the publication of the journal in many daily ways including some postage, fax, and phone costs. The Colleges' on-going commitment to the journal is appreciated.

The publication of the seventh issue of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum* completes our term as Editors. It has been much, much more work than we ever envisioned and, concomitantly, much, much more rewarding than we ever imagined. It was our initial hope that the journal might serve as a forum for thought-provoking literacy discussions with each member of NYSRA receiving a copy. We look back with a sense of accomplishment because the journal has grown in stature and distribution. We exceeded beyond our wildest dreams! Today we have nationally-known researchers and master teachers sharing their expertise on timely literacy issues. We did not accomplish our goal without the help of many talented and generous-spirited people.

To our professional colleagues across the State – we thank you for your support through submissions of manuscripts. Now you can relax when you see us. No longer will we greet you with, “When can we expect an article for *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*” or “Help! We need an expedited review of this manuscript.”

To the Editorial Review Board – we thank you for your legions of hard work reviewing manuscripts. If you think you worked harder this year, you are correct because the number of submissions doubled, while the Board remained the same size. Your efforts were greatly appreciated, and we were impressed with the thoroughness of your reviews. Thank you again and again!

To Wallace Freeland, President of NYSRA – thank you, Wally, for help in so many ways. Wally has been a strong advocate for *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*, much in the vein of Past Presidents’ Jane Barber-Smith, Paula Costello, and Marilyn Funes. We count ourselves fortunate to have worked with these four Association Presidents, are pleased to call them professional friends, and offer a sincere thank you for their support and efforts.

We continue to be grateful to the NYSRA Executive Board for their continued vision in supporting a state-wide professional journal. Thank you to one and all. Your literacy leadership is necessary in these challenging and complicated educational times. Thank you for entrusting the journal to us. We appreciate your belief in our competence.

We thank the New York State Reading Association for the opportunity to serve as Editors of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*. We have tried to fulfill our obligations by yearly producing a quality publication that reflects the spirit of literacy instruction in New York State. We hope we have contributed to a sharing of literacy knowledge in our State (and beyond).

Lastly, we pleased to entrust the journal to the new Editor: Dr. Janice F. Almasi at the University at Buffalo. We know that the journal is in very capable hands. As we relinquish the editorship, we send all our best wishes for the continued success of *The Language and Literacy Spectrum* under your stewardship.

KAG & PC McD
January 15, 1997
The Sage Colleges
Education Department
Troy, NY 12180
**Conversation in the Margins: Reading Literature as a Democratic Process**

**Gordon M. Pradl**

**ABSTRACT**

In working with our students in the area of literature, it is helpful to take into account the democratic aspects of the strategies and relationships we establish in our classrooms. After considering the importance of reader response and how time affects our reading processes, a teacher-less “written conversation” among four adults, who are reading a poem for the first time, provides one illustration of how the social reading of literature might enact a democratic exchange of views that further the understanding and commitment of individual readers.

Desiree and Donald, Deana and Darryl, are fidgeting and silent at the back of the room. The large-group discussion of *Bridge to Terabithia* going nowhere. Individually, the students had appeared enthusiastic to the teacher while they were reading Katherine Paterson’s (1977) novel. As Jess came to terms with Leslie’s drowning, readers had been visibly moved, and the teacher overheard several brief conversations about the power of the friendship the two characters had developed. Yet, when it came time to talk formally in class, most of the students sat still, waiting for clues from the teacher about what to say. How often all of us as teachers have struggled with similar unanimated situations. Students clearly involved with a text, but no meaningful forum where they might speak.

What if we look at this problem from the perspective of relationships? We might find that students frequently remain disconnected from each other in such large group discussions because they sense they should be acting according to some script not their own. And while they may want to be compliant, at best they can only participate as outsiders. In short, what’s at issue here, is the set of social values we end up modeling for our students. What room do we provide for students in the act of reading, as by the engaging minds of individual readers.

In working through disagreements, concessions matter, both big and small. Thus it is not surprising that democratic discourse rests on people cooperating, and the spirit that guides them is an agreement to meet their differences openly, and that requires them each to rethink continually their own intentions and actions in terms of those of differing others (Clark, 1994, p. 79). The democratic triumph, in other words, is how ways are found to negotiate and honor difference. In claiming our various group identities, we need to understand that in a democracy we have a responsibility to remain open to the competing claims of worlds opposing our own.

Our common belief in social democracy remains grounded in tolerance, reason, and persuasion, rather than the mere exertion of brute force. So it is this attitude toward ideas, both our own and those of others, that interests us as teachers when we consider democratic practices in our classrooms. We may not be in the classroom to vote on anything whether it be books, assignments, or student grades; we are, however, involved in either fostering or neglecting any number of values that may help create a democratic disposition among our students. We will, of course, have much to tell our students about the texts we read together. If we value democracy, however, we will also be searching for ways to encourage our students’ confidence in their own responses and ideas, even as we insist these responses and ideas be tested and expanded by those of others. Evidence and persuasion count, not position and power. In trying to honor multiple perspectives, we see that a course of continual reflection and criticism – of negotiation and compromise – must be rooted in individual voices, both the teacher’s and the students.”

In this article, I briefly outline two developments that have encouraged me to consider the democratic aspects of my work with students, however imperfect may be the results. The first development entails the recent focus on how readers actually go about reading. Now that we acknowledge the central role played by the engaging minds of individual students in the act of reading, as teachers we have responsibility for initiating classroom prompts and

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**Social democracy remains grounded in tolerance, reason, and persuasion...**

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relationships that will serve as a necessary medium for promoting open-ended discussions about literature. The second development recognizes that our lives and ideas are constantly evolving, which means our interpretations of literary works are also subject to the transformations of time. A story we failed to appreciate on the first reading may take on a positive coloring as we learn more or later talk to a reader who gets us to see the story in a new light. For a confident reader displays flexibility, laying out predictions and conclusions and then allowing evidence and time to work their possible revisions. This temporal quality of our experience is what undergirds the values of openness, permeability, and change—each being necessary for sustaining the fragile democratic arrangements in our culture. For when people are closed, intractable, and rigid, when they lack empathy, it is difficult to practice the tolerance and compromise our pluralistic society requires.

After considering how these two strands, reader response and time, underscore the importance of democratic conversation in the literature classroom, I report on one such conversation that occurred when I asked four graduate students to share their responses to a poem by writing with each other instead of talking. In contrast to speech, which continually disappears behind itself, a written conversation has the immediate virtue of leaving behind a record of thought that might be recursively challenged and extended, while democratically leaving space open for the responses of all participants. Finally, I end by commenting on the central role of face-to-face student encounters in encouraging forms of democratic exchange in the literature classroom.

The Influence of Reader Response and Time on Democratic Reading Practices

The unpredictable reader has been with us since the invention of writing, and so Reader-response criticism is not just a phenomenon of the last quarter century. For instance, any account of reading as an individual act of construction could hardly leave out Plato’s complaints in Phaedrus. Though not a democrat, Plato realized that, once ideas were set down in writing, the intended meanings were potentially weakened once the author was no longer available to explain or defend himself. Accordingly, through the ages, reading practices (such as Protestants insisting that no priest was going to explain or defend himself. Accordingly, through the ages, reading practices (such as Protestants insisting that no priest was going to explain or defend himself. Accordingly, through the ages, reading practices (such as Protestants insisting that no priest was going to explain or defend himself. 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Accordingly, through the ages, reading practices (such as Protestants insisting that no priest was going to explain or defend himself. According
often students want group membership to be defined on their own terms. Yet, despite these ongoing outbursts of egocentricity, the teacher recognizes that student self-expression is finally what serves as the foundation of social dialogue and advancement. Under the influence of democratic processes of discussion, the notion of some absolute and final response is replaced with the sense that, as we share them, our responses gradually improve. Indeed, the fact that readers can actually communicate their “idiosyncratic” meanings inevitably reminds us that we share a common language, one which makes society possible. Because we do not wish to be excluded from the company of others, we revise the responses and interpretations we articulate so that generally they might be comprehended by our audience. For democratic conversations to prosper, our words need not depend on conditions of absolute objectivity. Instead, as we imagine each other’s possible worlds, our exchanges become reciprocally reinforcing. This sense of critical and imaginative pluralism is precisely the spirit animating the understandings of Lee and Rosenblatt. For while they welcomed the individual reader’s opportunity to extend a text’s meaning beyond any fixed intention of the author, they simultaneously recognized the social conventions of language and culture concretely realized in any text.

Democracy stirs up obligations of fairness and balance. It would be naive, however, to expect that our goals of equity and justice will ever be reached, either in society or the classroom. Still, reader-response criticism invites us to explore collaboratively with our students the tension between reader and writer. From the reader’s perspective, the person doing the reading is a “self” in contact with an author who serves as a functioning “other” to be incorporated as part of the set of social relationships that readers come to internalize in their minds. In complementary fashion, when the author is looking outward toward the audience, wondering how his or her words will be interpreted, the reader becomes the “other.” It is this intimate and endless reciprocity between the roles of reader and author that lies at the heart of democratic reading. The democratic problem, in other words, is how we handle difference. In claiming our various identities as author, reader, teacher, or student, we need to understand that in a democracy the group aspect of our identity involves a responsibility to remaining open to the competing claims of other ideas and beliefs, other possible worlds different from the one we now inhabit.

The challenge in conceptualizing reading is to avoid dichotomizing the “entities” of author and reader, teacher and student. Because reading is a conventional, social act, it follows that as individual readers we are always in fact social readers in two senses: first, we begin with a prior sense of the activity – we read with certain expectations and are guided by certain conventions that are learned and revised through our social encounters; second, during the actual process of reading, which includes self-reflection, we experience a natural desire to compare and negotiate our meanings with others. Just as no set pattern explains how an individual makes meaning, there is no formula for the way readers come to negotiate their readings with others.

Works of literature can develop our capacities to stay in touch with interpretive lenses that contest our own. These contests involve competing answers to the ongoing ethical dilemmas that surprise us just as we settle into certainty. Without a conversational process to keep us in contact with the ideas of the opposition over time, our readings become rigid, constrained. By encouraging a democratic attitude toward the ways we talk with others about continually emerging and evolving readings, the literature classroom can provide an important opportunity for students to learn to live with complexity, with contradictory motives and allegiances. As Rosenblatt tells us, “the poem” is best “thought of as an event in time” (1978, p. 12). While it may appear to be happening all at once, reading, and our talk about it, exists in time. First, there is the time it takes to actually complete a reading (We may be days, for instance, consuming a novel, even as it consumes us.) This is why teachers have found reading response journals so useful in getting students to appreciate the irregularities of their readings of longer works. One's expectations and satisfactions change over the course of a long read, and a record of this journey cautions us against making any neat summarizing statements after we have finished reading a text. Second, after the initial reading, there is the longer span of time during which we may be reconsidering our original response and interpretation. As the circumstances of our knowledge or experience change, so might the way we view or value a text, and being forced to account for our conflicting readings can make us more tolerant of perspectives not our own. When we keep time in mind as readers, Steven Mailloux’s (1982) warning appears particularly salient: “By neglecting . . . the temporal reading process . . . traditional holistic criticism not only distorts the actual effects literature produces; it also omits an important part of the author's intention and artistic technique” (p. 71). Ignoring time, which imposes on us the endless variability of our current positions, we fail to exploit one of the central tenets underlying our democratic arrangements. For democracy is the only social system that depends on people openly acknowledging their fallibility. Therein lies the hope that equity and justice – revised and improved “readings” – might continue to grow out of the errors that time makes manifest.

How a reader actually makes sense and significance of the words as her eyes glide down the page is one starting point for democratic talk about literary texts. Prior to this act of reading, however, lie a vast array of conventions that a reader must command if any text is to be accessible. But this background knowledge (e.g., automobiles didn’t exist in 1776, not all poems have to rhyme, the wild things can be scary, Jack London joined the gold rush to the Klondike in 1897) exists dialectically like reading itself, despite the fact that often I can end up putting off student readers by drowning them in information before the book is even opened. Instead, a reader’s mastery of the conventions of reading seems to develop best when he or she is engaged in continuing conversations with texts and more experienced readers. Denise and Dmitri, for instance, never seem to get tired of pulling the letters out of The Jolly Postman (1986), perhaps because what is cleverly being communicated in each letter allows them to imagine familiar characters actually engaging in a world filled with everyday situations and conventions. As beginning readers, Denise and Dmitri have a starting point of information, which is then expanded as they talk with their older friend.
Dennis about these stories within stories. But such learning would be blocked in grouping situations where everyone is at the same level. Thus, from a democratic perspective, ability tracking restricts student reading development because it disrupts the natural rhythms of social reading that occur across interest and knowledge levels.

Through a mixing of readers, difference becomes an important shaping force, not something to be dismissed or used to enforce some existing advantage. Through talk students can learn to open for scrutiny the process of their readings, as they democratically push and challenge each other in a respectful manner. Yet in spoken conversation much of what occurs in individual minds is never captured or expressed, for often the topic has moved on before a speaker can break his or her silence. So what happens when the conversation is written instead? This might give us a fuller record of the dynamics of reading in time, of how readers in concert with others construct a more complex mental representation of the text before them. By engaging with both the author's words on the page and the words of other readers scrawled in the margins, we might come to see how the reading insights of others help us refine and keep open our own responses and interpretations.

Writing in the Margins: A Temporal “Experiment” in Social Reading

To explore the social conversation that ensues when mature students write conversationally together in response to a poem, I gathered four experienced readers to read a poem they had not seen previously. Because I had decided to be absent from their written conversation, I had left the four readers with copies of several as yet un-published poems by Julia Kasdorf, though she was not identified as the author. This placed them in a reading situation not dissimilar to what occurs when one picks up the latest New Yorker and reads a poem without previous knowledge about the poet.

The poems appeared in the middle of a large piece of paper (25 x 14), which provided ample margin space for their written responses. I encouraged any kind of marking, which provided ample margin space for their written responses as circular, as yielding a sense of “all-at-onceness” and reads a poem without previous knowledge about the poet.

The poems appeared in the middle of a large piece of paper (25 x 14), which provided ample margin space for their written responses. I encouraged any kind of marking — underlining, arrows, question marks, single words or phrases, longer comments or queries — to record the progress of their reading, how it evolved in its frustrations and satisfactions. They could go back through the poem as often as they wanted, relating whatever occurred to them, including questions and satisfactions. They could go back through the poem as often as they wanted, relating whatever occurred to them, including questions and responses, now circling between the poem and the marginalia accumulating on the page. This exchange process was to be repeated until, minimally, each reader had marked something on the page. This exchange process was to be repeated until, minimally, each reader had marked something on the page. When they came to a resting place in their initial response writing, they were to exchange papers with someone else and continue with their written responses, now circling between the poem and the marginalia accumulating on the page. This exchange process was to be repeated until, minimally, each reader had marked something on everyone else’s copy. They could, of course, return to any copy more than once, depending upon the written conversation that was developing. How long this would take was not clear; I just asked them to follow these procedures and see what happened when they entered the flow of sharing their written responses with each other.

The poems they decided on was “First Gestures”:

Among the first we learn is goodbye,
a tiny wrist between Dad’s forefinger
and thumb forced to wave bye-bye to Mom,
whose hand sails brightly behind a windshield.
Then it’s done to make us follow:
in a crowded mall, a woman waves, “Bye,
we’re leaving,” and the boy stands firm sobbing, until at last he runs after her
among shoppers drifting by like sharks
who must drag their great hulks underwater, even in sleep, or drown.

Living, we cover vast territories;
imagine your life drawn on a map –
 a scribble on the town where you grew up,
each bus trip traced between school
and home, or a clean line across the sea
to a place you flew once. Think of the time
and things we accumulate, all the while growing
more conscious of losing and leaving. Aging,
our bodies collect wrinkles and scars
for each place the world would not give
under our own weight; our thoughts get
laced with strange aches, sweet as the final
chord that hangs in a guitar’s blond torso.

Think how a particular ridge of hills
from a summer of your childhood grows
in significance, or one hour of light –
late afternoon, say, when thick sun flings
the shadow of Virginia creeper vines
across the wall of a tiny, white room
where a woman makes love for the first time.
Its leaves tremble like small hands
against the screen, while she sob
in the arms of a bewildered man, too young
to see that as we gather losses
we may also grow in love –
as in passion, the body shudders
and clutches what it must release.1

Their written “conversation” lasted close to an hour, though the participants (Heather and Alfie, who were working on doctorates in English, and Darlene and Andy, who were working on doctorates in English education) reported they could easily have spent double the time had they not had previous commitments. The marginalia were extensive and multifaceted, but presenting their written words in sequential fashion fails to capture the participants’ reported experience of feeling freer and freer as they went along. They also described their written exchanges as circular, as yielding a sense of “all-at-onceness” — something difficult to render in any linear transcript. Their written

1 The poem was later published in Poetry, CLXV.5 (1995): 261-2, and is printed here with permission.
The complete version of this written conversation appears in Chapter 13 of my book, Literature for Democracy.

As expected, this written conversation begins with each reader struggling to make some connection with the unfamiliar text. Darlene, for instance, tries to piece together line 5, "What's the antecedent – What's done to 'make us follow'? Why the colon after that?" Then associating the wave with "underwater" [line 11] she continues her questioning, "Is it the wave that makes us follow? Wave as seduction?"

At the very end of the poem, Andy asks, "What must be released?" and, trying to sort out images between the first and last stanzas, wonders, "Boy firm / leaves (woman?) trembling (sobbing?) Is the firm boy now bewildered man?" These questions, as ways into the poem, also engage the readers in considering their own understandings of human behavior. The very first line provokes Darlene to write, "They teach us to say goodbye – no – we learn it." This triggers Alfie to respond, "What do we learn? To replace our feeling of loss with a gesture. Here, if anywhere, is a place where the world refuses to give way, the sweep of our arm is the first line."

In this mutual exploration, the readers imagine themselves within the events of the first stanza and take account of their feelings. Heather detects a "hint of violence" in lines 2-3, and Alfie agrees, "For some weird reason I feel nervous about this image – like the baby's wrist will be crushed." But Andy expresses an opposite feeling, "Hmm – I felt safe here – as if being guided and held securely!"

Darlene, on the other hand, joins the majority when she adds, "But it's about force – not safe for me." Further, she notes that "The separation is forced" [6-7], to which Alfie adds, "Forced to leave the mother. From this comes the bewildermest – which is just another way of refusing, then, to be there for her." This in turn prompts Alfie to wonder about the father's role in this departure, "Why isn't Dad more implicated? Then, to be there for her." This leads Darlene to write, "Traced now makes me think of taking the pattern of age, experience, power? How does gender pull us back to what the boy is learning about gestures at the beginning of the poem? Darlene focuses on who fails to do the seeing in line 35: "Does the woman makes me think of taking the pattern of age, experience, power? How does gender pull us back to what the boy is learning about gestures at the beginning of the poem? Darlene focuses on who fails to do the seeing in line 35: "Does the woman make us follow? Wave as seduction?"

And Heather, continuing to employ her economic metaphor, wonders, "Why isn't she more implicated? What must be released?" Then Darlene adds to the discussion, "What does the first stanza best – maybe because it seemed the least gendered. Also the least claustrophobic – movement towards. helicopter. And she adds, "What's the map as a dynamic image pointing to lines 15-16: "For some reason this is a really satisfying image to me. Visual evidence of your existence marked on a communal document, the tracing of lines repeated representing a span of time, but captured at all once symbolically on the paper." This contribution leads Alfie to write, "Traced now makes me think of taking the pattern from someone else – the only way I used to be able to draw," which summons a humorous personal touch from Andy, "Still the only way I do!"

Darlene then repeats her concern about power and agency, as she writes about the map, "Who draws it? The map is two dimensional – I don't want to imagine my life drawn on a map."

A final set of productive "disagreements" emerge as the four readers position their own histories in relation to the love-making event of the concluding stanza. Who are these two figures in terms of age, experience, power? How does gender pull us back to what the boy is learning about gestures at the beginning of the poem? Darlene focuses on who fails to do the seeing in line 35: "Does the woman see? The man is too young to see – but is the woman? Maybe – yes – I think she is too young to see – maybe not, there's only one comma." Then she wonders about the loss: "Always – the loss of reaching the top – of going over the top?" Meanwhile, the men are seeing a clear age split between the man and the woman. Next to the first stanza, Alfie writes, "Again, like below, the woman is wise, the boy young. She makes up here for the crying she'll do later. The bewilderment that protects him below makes him impotent here."

And Heather continues to employ her economic metaphor, wonders, "Possessed? How can the young man imagine the thoughts of the woman who is primarily a possession?" To which Alfie replies, "No – he doesn't have thoughts – so why should she? Or, rather, his thoughts are to himself – why would this make her cry?"
Gradually, as interpretations take shape and the poem is seen as a totality, the question of authorship arises. Heather comments, “Maybe I’m totally wrong, but I feel convinced that the writer is a man—the baby at the beginning, the boy in the mall, the young man at the end. There seems to be an analogy between the woman and the baby I don’t like very much.” Aflee, for one, offers his support for this thesis, “I agree. It’s a man and I don’t really like it. Or it’s a woman—like James Tiptree she/he, a woman science fiction writer writing as a man. It seems like the poor boy is always at other people’s command—except who ends up crying?” This query brings the gender discussion full circle, as Darlene responds, “I wasn’t sure if the baby was a girl or boy—and I’m not sure how you see the analogy. I’m looking to see—what I see is that it is the ‘woman who makes love for the first time’—ah—maybe there is that connection to the first line—‘Among the first...’” Finally, Andy adds, “And I read the baby as a boy, too. Though now the violence seen by others in the father’s gesture points me to the baby being a girl. But this shifts for me, and I see the baby as a boy—in the same stanza ‘the boy stands firm’—seems to point to the same child on a later stage.”

What these four readers wrote in conversation with each other came to no conclusion, and this openness signifies to me that reading as a social act encourages us to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. They clearly, at least for me, exhibited democratic processes of conversation when they had the presence of mind to use the different reading associations of others to reflect on their own perspectives. By building off each other’s responses and interpretations, these mature readers extended how the poem resonated for them as individuals. As Darlene later commented on the experience, “I had a sense of how free we were to move any place we wanted; to explore with others, not alone—there was no map here—one layer at a time.” By not attempting to determine a poem’s meaning absolutely, the readers stayed in relationship, both with the poem and with their co-readers. And other teachers are reporting similar results, even with first graders (Blake, 1996), when the reading environment draws on the readers’ resources, rather than relying solely on the teacher. As one middle school teacher, Mary Kitagawa (1994), remarks, “Literature study concentrating on engaging the students’ responses in the emerging classroom conversation.”

...Social act encourages us to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty.

The Poet Responds

While the group’s commentary in the margins taken together seems full and satisfying (though hardly the last word, as subsequent “written conversations” about this poem by other groups of students have demonstrated), I wondered how it would compare with the author’s intentions. Such a question does not imply some “right” answer; it does, however, start us reflecting on how comprehensive or accurate a reading should be. Were these readers overlooking something, or were they so grossly misinterpreting a passage that their conversation missed the “poem” for the “tangents”? Similarly, in elementary and middle schools where students can represent so many diverse racial, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, how do we deal with responses that can easily be quite different from what an author or teacher intended or expected?

When a poem or other literary work has a history of critical interpretation behind it, such a history can serve as a point of reference for the teacher to guide any “mis-readings” back on track. At least this might be the case in a classroom where the teacher is oblivious to democratic reading practices. Lacking such referential points for a contemporary work, and generally not having access to the author, where will the teacher’s reading judgments come from? Again this raises the issue of reading authority in the classroom. From the democratic perspective I have been outlining, the teacher stops worrying about having to prepare a comprehensive “reading” to teach and instead concentrates on engaging the students’ responses in the emerging classroom conversation. And such engagement will be greatly facilitated to the extent everyone in the class is responsible for finding and sharing stories and poems—producing a cornucopia of found objects waiting their turn in a reader friendly classroom.

In this instance, however, the poet, Julia Kasdorf, was available to reflect on the “written conversation” as it related to her “intentions” and her sense of where the poem might need revising. Her remarks offer a further example of the textured layers of meaning and significance that surround the conversation that readers enter when they read socially, trying to entertain other perspectives.

For Julia, who had recently published her first book, Sleeping Preacher (1991), which deals with ethnic and “small” domestic scenes, this poem widened the scope of concerns that she might entertain as a poet:

“I wanted to write a ‘large’ poem, although I was entirely conscious of the tradition and values that reinforce this notion, a tradition I’d resisted even before I could reduce its complexity by ‘naming’ it... So I suppose this could be viewed as a persona piece, a trying on of another perspective, resistance and adoration in near equal parts, responding to another in his terms. The tone turned out to be one I like, and I do not see it as an erasure of my voice, but a testing of my own range. I think this may be an important poem for me in the end, partly because of what I learned about writing and the possibilities that can come of conflict and collusion.”

Given her personal background for the poem, which the readers had no way of accessing, Julia found herself immediately wondering
whether the readers' responses played more of a "doubting" than a "believing" game with her words. Do poets, for instance, suspend disbelief more kindly than do experienced reader-critics? She was "troubled by the violence people found, the mean gender politics, which may be there," though previously she had not been aware of it because she had not consciously intended it. The poem, however, acts as a story, and the writer can never completely control its meaning, which continues to bleed out of the form.

While Julia did not speak directly with her readers in this instance, she welcomed the variety of their contending responses. Their written dialogue surrounding the words of her poem furthered her understanding of what she had written, thus extending the permeability of this democratic conversation to yet another level.

Supporting Face-to-Face Conversation in the Literature Classroom

The rich conversational processes on display in this "experiment" suggest that as teachers we might exploit social writing in the margins for our particular democratic purposes. Because such back and forth writing slows down each reader and encourages them to probe deeper into their responses, it provides them with a more direct insight into the temporal process of responding to works of literature. No one formula, of course, describes this process as students experience it, as I quickly discovered on another occasion when I used this written conversation approach to Julia's poem in a class of twenty college students. Reading through the notebook entries students made in response to this reading event, I found, for instance, one student admitting that she "felt uncomfortable reading the other readers' responses, but then [she] opened up to the gist of the activity, to see that multiple readings are possible." I wonder where exactly in the literature classroom students learn to share feelings of vulnerability and discuss how what is being said affects them. Earlier, even Andy had confessed to me his self-conscious feelings, wondering if his responses would live up to the expectations of the others, whom he felt to be superior readers. This natural feeling of anxiety caused him to make very constrained and brief "responses" on his initial copy of the poem. Fortunately, however, as he joined the flow, he came to feel less threatened, and his offerings became freer and more self-reflective — it was safe for him to be vulnerable.

Besides the anxiety of exposure, students also discover attributes about themselves that have stymied their ability to remain open to the text: "I was struck by how quick I am to rush to judgments when it comes to poetry — I let things 'annoy' me from the start and I can't get past them." In other instances, a student might take to a given poem more rapidly than others, and this in turn can cause her to privilege her response over those she is writing alongside:

I felt [Julia's] poem really profoundly and so at first it was hard for me to respond to others' interpretations, who weren't feeling it as deeply as I did. I asked some questions to probe ideas deeper and saw some of my same thoughts developed in different ways. A couple strands of comments really deepened, but none contradicted, my sense of the poem.

Finally, some students simply get stuck on this poem (still, there are always an endless supply of other poems to read) and, despite the engaged remarks of their peers, never manage to form any connection to what the poet is saying. Meanwhile others gradually lose patience in various ways. One student could barely hold back from speaking aloud once some ideas had been excited at the margins: "Each reading got me to spot things that I had never before seen. Then I was concentrating on the comments, using them as a means of thinking about the text in a new way. At one point, I became frustrated and wanted to discuss it already." Another student lost interest instead of trying to examine points of difference between her ideas and what others were writing:

The first exchange was easy and interesting because I wanted to see someone else's interpretations. As the exchanges went on, I found it harder and harder to write anything else. I would respond to statements or questions that interested me but aside from that my own creativity and original thoughts were spent.

In sum, although most students find that collectively they have much more to say about a poem than they do individually, the dynamics of social reading are lost on many if the teacher does not invite them to reflect directly on the ways they are working together. Also I learn
that our tolerance for other perspectives is much less than my rhetoric would allow. Just what are the limits when we encounter a world view or narrative so radically different that it threatens the very one that otherwise renders most of our responses coherent?

The "experiment" I have detailed here, it may be argued, depends entirely on having experienced readers who are supposed to flourish without a teacher's heavy hand. As a profession we seem hesitant to allow such freedom for elementary or secondary students. Further, the poem was contemporary. What if it was a text already laden with years of scholarship and interpretation? In such an instance, doesn't the teacher have a responsibility to deliberately fill in the reading gaps? Should a student ever be left in ignorance when an interpretive impasse has been reached? Or what are we to do when connections with the poem are just not happening? Like other teachers I continue to struggle with these questions because I constantly feel the tension that exists between my desire for closure and that additional information that inevitably highlights the indeterminacy of response. And, indeed, this concern is only heightened as even more diverse cultures join the conversations in today's schools.

Yet, despite what is generally my minority view in these matters, I think we often lose more than we gain when we fail to trust readers and instead resort to focusing our classes too exclusively on information about literature rather than the messy business of reading the literature itself. The trick in fact is to avoid any dichotomy between reader response and literary information, but instead to seek ways of teaching that ensure that they complement each other. No reading will be perfectly rendered or rounded; it is the cumulative effect that matters in literature classrooms where democratically confident readers gradually increase their familiarity with and ability to manipulate the various codes and knowledge on which a text depends. Indeed, as Patrick Dias (1987) has amply demonstrated, even young readers working together in small groups are able to create richly textured responses without any direct teacher intervention. In such settings, Dias found that students value "disagreement primarily because it stimulates further inquiry, a looking-again," something "quite in opposition to a consensus-seeking pattern that tends to operate in much classroom teaching of poetry" (p. 66). To help break the pattern of teacher interference, Dias recommends that students participate in choosing what is read. Further, they might "perform" their own readings for the class outside of the teacher's direction. Finally, Dias suggests that responding-aloud protocols -- where students make transcripts of themselves verbalizing in real time how they are making sense of a text -- can offer a powerful way of demonstrating to readers their own processes of reading, especially as these are compared from student to student.

The experience of reading/writing in the margins suggests to students that the margins (and what has traditionally been marginalized) urgently need to be brought into the classroom forum. For this can represent a significant enactment of the democratic processes whereby students first have their own ideas, and then they test them. The choice, however, is not between modeling democratic citizenship on the one hand and sustaining intelligent reading on the other, nor is the teacher merely a mute bystander. Instead, reader-response criticism and our commitment to the temporal movement of reading and each reader's "story" supports our choice to take seriously students at every level sharing their responses and interpretations face to face. In this way we might nurture in students the democratic attitude that difference provides an opportunity for negotiating their perspectives together.