

Personal Experience and Emotion in Making Sense of Literary Texts

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Abstract: In academic contexts, students' everyday knowledge and understandings are often undervalued as instruction attempts to supplant these with sanctioned content. However, in reading and interpreting literary texts, personal experience and emotional reactions can both guide and inform reader sense-making of texts. This work looks at how students' personal insights, emotions, and experience enrich discussions of literary texts and contribute to broader understandings of human nature and the world.

Introduction

Literary texts offer readers opportunities to explore ideas about the world and human nature in relation to their own experiences and through discussion with others of various perspectives on the text. In making sense of literary texts, readers rely on various types of knowledge, including knowledge of the genre, author, cultural and historical context, and rhetorical devices. However, making meaning with literary texts is also informed by personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural understandings (Lee, Goldman, Levine, & Magliano, 2016). Readers often use literary narratives to make sense of human actions and events of the world as these texts mirror human reality (Mar & Oatley, 2008). In addition, readers often react to characters and events with emotions rooted in sympathy, empathy, or identification (Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011) that may alter the way readers see the world. Therefore, in literary reasoning, what a reader brings to a text through personal experience or emotional connection is an integral part of reading and interpreting texts.

Learning environments designed to support literary reasoning need to consider the importance of what students bring to the interpretive process as well as the knowledge, skills, and strategies students need to be able to make sense of literary texts. Research around instructional interventions to support literary reasoning practices indicates the importance of sequencing texts and tasks (Sosa, Hall, Goldman, & Lee, 2016), of providing students with opportunities to learn explicit strategies related to literary interpretation (Lee, 2007; Levine, 2014), and of using class discussions to build understanding (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Discussions allow spaces for students to make sense of texts while listening and responding to the ideas of others. Indeed, discussions before, during, and after reading serve as bridges between students' own world and experiences and the texts as well as provide opportunities to listen to and explore others' perspectives on text and on the world.

Students' personal experiences, emotions, and expertise play a pivotal role in meaning-making but are often treated as less pertinent and, therefore, are rarely foregrounded. We base our work on the idea that drawing from student expertise about the social world promotes meaning making and transaction with texts. Accordingly, we examined classroom discussions to understand the role of student experiences, emotions, and expertise.

Methods

This work draws from a year-long study that focused on interactions and learning enabled by students sharing their embodied experiences and related understandings of the social world, while explicitly learning interpretive strategies necessary to connect their insights to literary texts. The focus class was a regular tracked 9th grade ELA class in a large urban district with a White male teacher and 30 students: 25 Black, three Latino, and two White.

Table 1: Lesson descriptions

Lesson	Text	Objective
A	Images of racist mascots	Build socio-historical understandings of racism and exclusion of Native Americans prior to reading story
B	Short poem: "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide"	Practice discussion techniques and interpretive strategies with unfamiliar poem
C	An autobiographical piece titled, "With a little help from my friends."	Connect to the experiences of the author after reading autobiographical excerpts
D	Statements around themes for novel: <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Explore ideas around themes related to novel prior to reading the novel

This study examines four classroom lessons described in Table 1 that took place during the first semester of the school year. Data sources were video recordings and field notes from classroom observations. The video was transcribed, and each discussion was analyzed for the types of knowledge and practices that the participants used to make sense of literary texts. Focus was on how personal experiences, emotional reactions, and cultural understandings were made explicit in the discussions and how those contributed to collective sense-making.

Findings

Analyses indicated that discussions that were centered on students' ideas, experiences, connections, and feelings with texts supported them in building understandings as a basis for literary interpretation. These discussions created a space in which students were willing to ask questions and seek clarity about surface aspects of texts. This is important as readers must know the basic character and plot information before engaging in higher level interpretation (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1985). For example, students were open about not being sure if Native Americans still existed in the United States, about assuming the main characters in *Of Mice and Men* were Black during the first few chapters, and about the reality that mascots many deem racist are still used by major sports teams. Understanding characters and the implications of how authors portray them is essential for making interpretive arguments. Students also related character experiences and their own social world. For example, students connected the argument around the use of the N-word, a highly offensive racial slur for Black people, (Lesson D) to discussions related to racist mascots and Native Americans (Lesson A) by noticing how charged racist names are and how heavily the offense is related to who uses the terms.

In addition, analyses revealed that students connecting their understandings of the social world to the text world focused attention to the ways language is used and its function such as symbolism, metaphors, and imagery. For example, students' recognition of Native Americans rarely being discussed in the media, and thus more easily portrayed in racist mascots (Lesson A), led them to read the short story as more than a one-time racist incident of a white police officer stopping a van of Native Americans and accusing the driver of drinking. After reading a character described as struggling "against his weight," a student noted, "I think they are talking about emotional weight," realizing that the weight was literal (the character is described as a 280-pound teenager) as well as symbolic of ongoing racism. Similarly, students initially considered the poem (Lesson B) racist, but focusing on certain language led to the idea that it might be a message to Black people not to be like White people. Ultimately, a student noted that the last stanzas were not about racism and began to identify with the people of the text: "The author says all these things that make us who we are. He's like, 'Black people are flutes, the warriors and survivors through this situation.' Like we never gave up." Her focus on the explicit language of Black voice and expression allowed for personal identification with the poem as well as reflection on its broader message.

Significance

Overall, this work indicates the value of allowing space for student experience, emotion, and expertise in making sense of texts and the importance of teachers leveraging these understandings and connections as ways to clarify, extend, and deepen meaning making and transaction.

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