Rosenblatt's Presence in the New Literacies Research

A p r i l   S a n d e r s

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) established the transactional theory that moves literacy instruction away from prescribed meanings established by author, teacher, or expert into more of an experience with literature. Rosenblatt's reader response theory has a long history of being connected to print text, but as the language arts classroom evolves and technology broadens the realm of literacy, theory must adapt as well. While connections can be made between reader response theory and new literacies, literature that explores such connections is just emerging. In this paper I examine the changing nature of texts and literary practices in order to illustrate possible connections between Rosenblatt's reader response theory and new literacies in order to help escort educators and researchers into a new world of multimodal, transactional thinking.

Rosenblatt's Theories

Beginning in the 1920s, New Criticism emerged as the dominant theory used when teaching literature, and this theory places an emphasis on meaning that resides solely in the text. This theory remains a popular perspective for teaching literature, but the emergence of the contrasting reader response theory has challenged New Critical thinking. Reader response theory suggests that literature cannot be considered in isolation from the reader. Instead, the reader brings experience and knowledge to the text and creates meaning. Beach (1993) divides reader response theories into five categories: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. Of those five categories, Louise Rosenblatt is considered a major theorist in the experiential category.

Rosenblatt's transactional theory moves literacy instruction away from prescribed answers that the teacher or experts have established into more of an experience with literature. The reading experience is so critical in Rosenblatt's theory that she believes that meaning from the text is not created until the reader actually connects with the text, writing that "a novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 24). For Rosenblatt, reading transaction is not passive, but rather an active event, because meaning is created when the text and reader come together. The reader and the text have a particular affect on one another to create an experience. Works must be experienced and meanings produced as readers relate to texts (Rosenblatt, 2005). In other words, the transaction produces meaning, and its manifestation is the response from the reader to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). The text does not contain a single meaning; the text and the reader combine to create meaning and a unique transaction.

Rosenblatt argues that text must be read and interpreted by the individual; the reading will be influenced by the individual's experience and stance. If the text is more than a literal piece, "the reader must have the experience, must 'live through' what is being created during the reading" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 33). The response emerges from what is in the text but also what is in the reader. A reader's growth comes from sorting through the "ideas and emotions relevant to the work" in relation to life experiences and literature (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 71). Instead of simply relying on or only regarding the knowledge of a critic or expert, the transactional theory gives credence to the reader and what s/he brings to the text. Whatever the reader brings to the text builds the foundation for the reading, which is particularly significant because the "reader needs to honor his own relationship with the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978,

p. 141). Quite simply, the text is read (and experienced) by the reader, not a literary expert or outside other.

The transactional experience is influenced by the stance of the reader, which can be established by the reader or by an outside person, such as a teacher. One's stance can be defined as a position one assumes toward an event or, in this case, text. For Rosenblatt, a reader assuming an efferent stance is one concerned with what one might take away, as the Latin root of efferent means "to carry away." The opposite of the efferent stance is the aesthetic stance. The more literary or aesthetic stance focuses on the combining of the private or personal contributions to the meaning (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). The experience flows through this transaction that is created when the reader melds text and personal experience together.

The *poem* is Rosenblatt's term for the culminating event happening as a result of the transaction. The poem is "an event in time" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 12). Once a reader brings personal aspects from that moment in her/his life, the experience forms into the transaction. Through true motivation and engagement, an individual response is elicited from the reader. That individual response and transactional experience transforms into the poem. The reader and the text coming together in a particular moment in time results in the poem (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Rosenblatt's reader response theory has a long history of use in the literature classroom, often as a way of approaching literature (Close, 1990; Evans, 1987; Greco, 1990; Vine & Faust, 1993). A common theme across the research involves using reader response theory as a way to work with students' responses to novels read in the classroom (Cox & Many, 1992; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Leal, 1993). But as literacy tools, practices, and texts evolve, in the language arts classroom and beyond, it is worth considering how current theories can be applied and adapted to make sense of current and future actions. Before exploring the connections between new literacy practices and reader response theory it is first necessary to understand thinking associated with the changing nature of literacies.

New Literacies

By defining new literacies, we can see how literacy, which has historically only included traditional reading and writing, is morphing to include the Internet, email, instant messaging, avatars, virtual worlds, wikispaces, webpage design,

multimedia applications, and gaming. These are just a few examples of the various specific technologies included under the broad umbrella of new literacies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Because the technologies shaping new literacies are rapidly changing (Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Leu, 2001), the precise definition of new literacies will continue to be dynamic and flexible.

Knobel and Lankshear (2006) discuss how the definition of new literacies is tied to changes in mindset instead of solely being connected to technological advances. For example, using PowerPoint presentations for narratives is not incorporating new literacies simply because a technological component is involved. Email-ing is another example of how a traditional literacy practice (letter writing) was simply performed on a new machine, yet "when emailing became a truly collaborative practice, underpinning listservs and the like, *that* was new because that bespoke collaboration and participation on a scale and within a timeframe that was more or less impossible to achieve under older media" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 81).

The New London Group, comprised of ten experts in the fields of multimedia, workplace literacies, and cultural diversity, met for a week in September 1994 in New London, New Hampshire, to begin a process of reviewing and discussing literacy pedagogy. The focus of discussion was on (1) how new media have drastically changed literacy pedagogy, and (2) the need for exploration of multiliteracies and pedagogy to incorporate new forms of media. The group explored the definition of *multiliteracies* and defined it as going past "mere literacy" focused only on traditional language. The New London Group (1996) identifies "the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (p. 61). The term *multiliteracies* can be, and is

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often, used in conjunction with *new literacies*, but the two phrases are not interchangeable. In addition to language, multiliteracies includes modes such as print, gestures, visuals, or talk. The term *multimodal* has evolved from that original concept of multiliteracies. Modes of communication vary by culture and context, and meaning is derived and influenced by the use of such modes with language. Multiple literacies "involve many literacies and modalities beyond print literacy and a heightened awareness of culture" (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006, p. 379). The New London group calls for literacy pedagogy to move past "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (1996, p. 61). The work resulting from the New London Group impacted the study of the new literacies in academia, as well as K–12 classrooms.

In continuing the work to define new literate practices, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has established initiatives to define 21st century literacies. Initiatives are designed to connect reading and writing in and out of school. The definition of 21st century literacies established by NCTE states that 21st century readers and writers need to:

• Develop proficiency with the tools of technology;

• Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally;

• Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;

• Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;

• Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;

• Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments (NCTE Position Statement, 2008).

As a result of changes in our world and shifts in thinking in our field, a static and traditional definition of literacy and pedagogy that can accompany literacy instruction is not feasible if the new literacies are appropriately included in instruction. Leu et al. (2004) emphasizes that new literacies studies say that literacy must include more than traditional print text and simple comprehension tests. However, just because new literacies are now included in literacy does not mean that traditional literacy practices are obsolete and we must forget all that we have known. Practices associated with traditional literacies continue to provide a foundation for what new literacies need, such as decoding skills, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, inference skills, and comprehension (Leu et al., 2004). The more traditional and historical definition of literacy has certainly included the mechanics of reading and decoding as well as interaction between the reader and the text, but as communication evolves with technologies, that definition becomes quite limited. It is important that we do not discard historically valued practices and actions but draw from a rich history of literacy thinking to help us best understand current and future practices—in this case, how Rosenblatt's work can be used to understand new literacy practices.

Connecting Rosenblatt and New Literacies

As students work with different new literacy practices and texts in their lives outside of school, teachers are trying to incorporate some of these media into the classroom. Research is also starting to make the link between new literacies and reader response theory (Aguilar, 2001; Carico, Logan, & Labbo, 2004; Larson, 2008, 2009). Connecting image and language is the primary type of connection students are making with literacy outside of school, and this type of literacy connection will be necessary to function in a rich multimedia world. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) describe this connection by looking at two aspects of New Literacies: technical and ethos. The technical aspect includes the tools and operations, such as clicking and cropping, that are employed in the creation of multimodal texts. In contrast, the ethos aspect is focused on a mindset that sees the world quite differently than in the past by recognizing cyberspace as a new world not operating with the same values as the physical world. Students come to school with the ability to make meaning using their available resources, which will include various new literacies that are shaped by this new mindset, Lankshear and Knobel describe. These prior

experiences are what Rosenblatt (2005) refers to as "raw images" that the reader can use to help make meaning (p. 65).

Leu et al. (2004) recognize a broad definition in their work: the "ability to communicate, to present one's message, and to understand and evaluate another's message is part of reading, and . . . an interaction and transaction into one's experiences as well as personal response and meaning-making is part of the goal for literacy instruction" (p. 1584). With this recognition of Rosenblatt's thinking about reading transactions, the authors are saying that text is not the only valued element of the transaction.

Additional connections can be drawn by looking at gaming, a new literacy that is being explored more in-depth with regard to its connection to the world of literacy. Alberti (2008) points out, "Aren't novels, after all, seen as 'games' that readers 'play'? They require active participation and hours of work and result in experiences that range from the amusing to the disturbing to the tedious" (p. 263). Gee (2003) has explained that games are powerful systems imparting knowledge, and situated learning is significant to the learning process. The space of the virtual world in games defines the player's identity through the rules of the game, and players explore the world of the game by being motivated and overcoming challenges presented. In gaming, the player *must* be involved in an interaction with the game. Rosenblatt's transactional theory is key to understanding the reader's engagement with literary texts as well as providing the reasons such responses are significant (Soter, Wilkinson, Connors, Murphy, & Shen, 2010). The video game is vital to the experience, just as a piece of text is vital to the transactional experience. Likewise, the gamer is also essential in the experience. As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explains, the transactional experience is personal and varies for each individual, based on what the individual brings to the reading experience.

Gee and Hayes (2011) created the term *passionate affinity-based learning* as when people organize themselves, whether in real life or virtually, to learn about a common interest or endeavor. Through such affinity groups, gamers gain and share knowledge that they take directly back to playing within their gaming experience. In a game like The Sims, players can play within the realm of the game and then take what they learned to another level of creation. Such innovation leads to further learning and development. Language arts classrooms should consider incorporating games as texts because they actually are texts—texts readers can

transact with. A gamer can find insight into narrative structure as well as interpret the text. Educators can take aspects of the ways gamers are learning in the virtual environment and transfer them into how readers are learning from traditional texts (Gee, 2007). Rosenblatt (2005) argues that a standard literary diet does not meet the needs of our heterogeneous grouping of students. To combat standardization, educators should find literary works that "hold out some link with the young reader's own past and present preoccupations, emotions, anxieties, ambitions" (p. 65). Gee (2007) does just what Rosenblatt suggests by connecting traditional literacy with modern literacy options (such as gaming) in order to produce meaning through transactions.

Connections are emerging in the literature between Rosenblatt's reader response theory and new literacies, and these connections demonstrate new possibilities for pedagogy and literacy learning. As Rosenblatt (1978) writes "It is difficult to assess the residue of successive waves of philosophical thought" (p. xiv). Taking the transactional process off the printed page into the world of new literacies could produce interesting residue from Rosenblatt's reader response theory. ◉

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