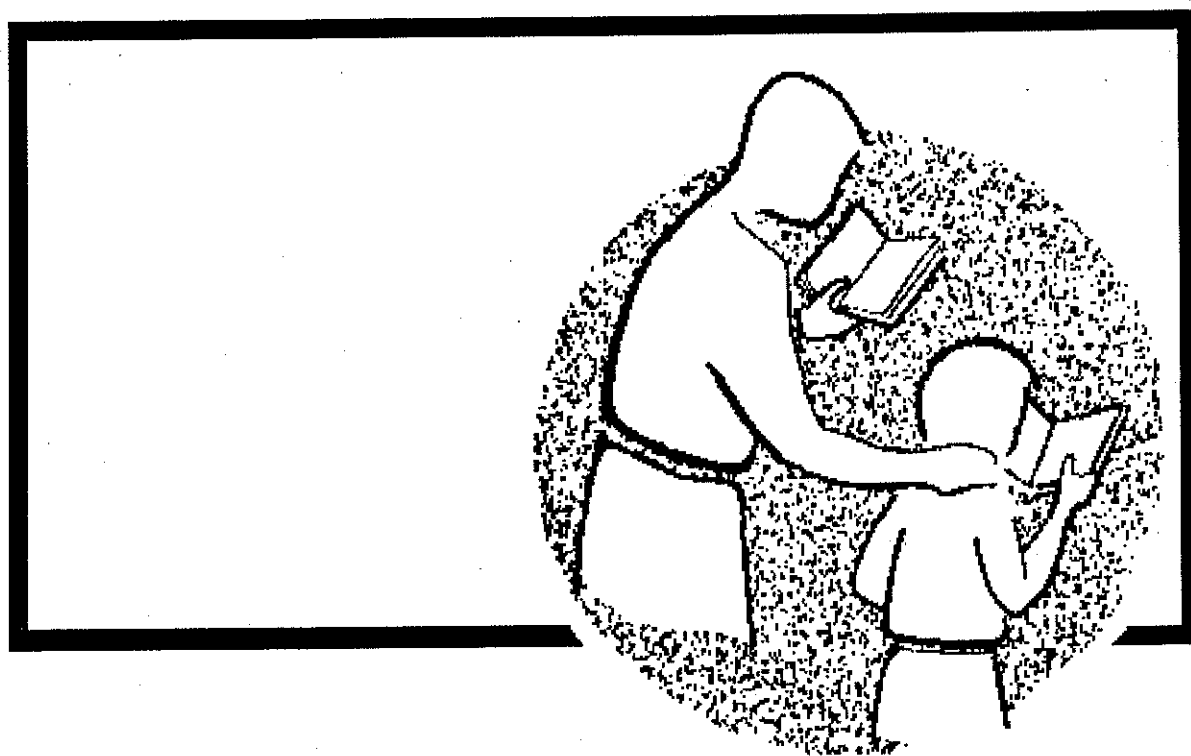


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If not for points, then why read? Exploring the grandest purpose of literature

John M. Ponder & Cathleen Doherty
University of West Georgia

What is the purpose of reading literature? What should we teach children about reading literature? How should we use literature in the classroom? Answers to these questions will help us set up structures and set worthwhile goals for using literature in our classrooms. Those of us who love to teach reading through literature understand that the answers to these questions are foundational to our view of the purpose of literature.

We are writing to start a dialogue concerning what we as teachers want to instill in our students concerning the nature of literature. In this commentary, we will examine what we refer to as the *grandest purpose* of literature and then compare these ideas with the ways in which we currently see literature being used in schools. Our concerns are focused on the misuse of computerized management programs as a common component in the reading curriculum. We use the term *computerized management programs* as a general reference to programs that help teachers keep track of how many books have been read, readability levels, and scores on literal comprehension quizzes. While these programs work well for keeping up with students' progress in reading, we believe they fall short of recognizing and promoting literature for its grandest purpose.

What is the Grandest Purpose of Literature?

When we attempt to describe the grandest purpose of literature, we can all be accused of using somewhat pompous literary language. The purposes of literature are hard to put into exact terms. We might say that reading literature builds onto our understanding of the world. Or, we might say that reading is about reflecting and developing higher-order thinking skills. It is about creating awareness of our own perspectives while considering the perspectives of the author and others as well. Maybe, it is about enjoying the author's craft -- the way an author uses words to convey meanings. Some would say that reading literature is about evoking emotional experiences and bringing the text to life. And still others may feel that reading literature is

an avenue for escaping into a world beyond their own. Yet, however we choose to describe the purposes of literature, everyone who loves to read would agree that there is something quite grand about it.

When we talk about our favorite author or our favorite book, we typically use language that is heartfelt because literature is capable of evoking an experience that is both personal and unique. This type of experiencing the text can be described as reading aesthetically or as Rosenblatt (1978) describes, reading from an aesthetic stance. In this case, we are not talking about the type of reading that belongs to the science or social studies textbook. For some readers, reading in content area textbooks can be an aesthetic experience; for most, however, it is of an efferent nature -- that is, reading to simply gain information (Rosenblatt, 1978). Aesthetic reading takes more than just our minds to completely digest; it takes an investment of the heart as well. Many of us can remember a book or two that really changed us inside. As we like to say, "We just couldn't put it down." It is hard to put a finger on exactly what happened or how it happened, but we love our favorite books because they did *something* to us. The best-loved literature resonates with our own humanity and the universal human condition. It is more than an intellectual and emotional experience; literature touches our souls and makes us want to become better people. Yes, good literature can do this.

Reader Response Perspective

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) described reading literature as an *event* in time. During this event, a transaction occurs between the reader and the text. The story unfolds, not between the covers of the book, but in the mind of the reader. Rosenblatt was on to something. She recognized the critical importance of the reader's role during the reading event during a time when most thought that reading was just about the text. Some were critical of reader response views that place the emphasis on the "psychological symptoms" (Wimsatt, 1954) of the

reader. The writings of Rosenblatt and others (Bleich, 1986; Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978) triggered what we now know as the *reader response* movement.

What exactly happens when a reader and a text come together is an issue that many have tried to grasp. In current teaching materials, it is popular for writers to use the phrase "the reader *interacts* with the text" (Rumelhart, 1985). Rosenblatt pointed out that this is not really the case. An *interaction* implies that there is a give and take between two things -- a linear process. The term *transaction*, on the other hand, conveys a more accurate description of the reading event. During reading, the reader and text come together to bring life to the symbols on the page. As Rosenblatt pointed out, the text is simply ink marks on a page, a blueprint waiting for the reader to construct the meaning. Karolides (1992) suggests that meaning is constructed as a result of a "fusion" (p. 22) which combines the author's text and the personal-ity and experiences of the reader. Rosenblatt refers to this entity born during the reading event as "the poem."

Valuing individual reader's interpretations is a key aspect of using literature for its grandest purpose. Rosenblatt gave much credence to the reader; however, she was not advocating an "anything goes" attitude with regard to interpretations. Interpretations must be congruent with the text. That is, the text serves to put constraints or guidelines on the reader's construction of meaning. For example, if a reader reads a sentence concerning a dog, the reader might evoke an image of a big dog, a skinny dog, a hairy dog, or any species of dog, but it must be a dog -- it cannot be a cat.

What is the author's role in writing? Some consider the act of reading as a search to find the one correct, author-intended message (Brooks, 1947). We think reading is more than that. Once a book is published, the author is outside of the reader-text intimate circle. The text may or may not fulfill the author's intended message. Even if you knew the author's intended message, it might come across differently to each reader. Readers use their imaginations to create the message that moves them, the message that they can connect with experiences of their own. Since each reader brings a lifetime of experiences to the book, we would expect a wide range of interpretations to literature.

The value of individual reader's interpretations is not recognized by computerized management programs.

Computerized Management Programs

Considering our notion that literature has a grand purpose and that readers play such an important role in the construction of meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978), we have to ask how the use of computerized management programs in the reading curriculum serve the grandest purpose of literature and how these programs are being used in classrooms. The widespread implementation of these programs is cause for teachers to examine the benefits and limitations of these programs in light of their beliefs about the use of children's literature.

The use of computerized management programs in the reading curriculum has been heralded by many as a great way to motivate children to read. Media specialists report that more books are circulated among students than ever before. Some children seem to enjoy taking the quizzes and therefore check out more books. Teachers like to use the programs to keep track of students' reading, assess readability levels, and document reading comprehension.

Administrators appreciate the ease with which computerized management programs can be used to document state required reading performance standards. However, there is scant evidence that participation in computerized management programs increases scores on state-mandated reading achievement tests.

What concerns us is the way we are modeling literature use for our students. We have observed that, in cases where computerized management programs are emphasized in the reading curriculum, the grandest purpose of literature is often replaced by quizzes and points. The issue of quantity of books read, rather than the quality of the reading event, is one we believe needs to be addressed in the dialogue about the efficacy of such computerized programs. Students who read more books, earn more points, and win more prizes. Thus, these programs reward faster readers. Slow readers, who finish less books and score less points, become frustrated with the scenario. Yet, it is important for us to understand the developmental aspects of reading. For some students, reading just

a few books can be a major achievement. What messages are children sending us when their pride about passing the tests and earning the points is readily apparent and their impressions of the book, the characters, or the themes are absent?

With some students, short comprehension quizzes might have a detrimental effect with regard to the amount of effort they put forth during reading. For example, we have observed children reading simply for the sake of finding answers to the questions they think will be on the quiz. In other words, reading to them has become a search-and-find mission. The following classroom conversation is typical of what we hear from children when they are using computerized management programs:

Two third-grade students are sitting in the back of the classroom in front of computers. They have finished reading some classic pieces of literature available from the school library. Here is their conversation:

Did you take the Charlotte's Web quiz?

What level is that?

I don't know. It's a blue dot.

I'm on yellow.

How many points do you get for yellow?

Five.

I get 7 points for blue. You should read Charlotte's Web. It's worth 7 points.

Yeah, but if I take two yellow dot quizzes, I can get 10 points.

I wanted to read Freckle Juice next, but I can't.

Why not?

It's not worth any points.

How many points do we need for the grand prize?

100 Bet I'll beat you!

In the conversation between the two third-grade students, we do not see an appreciation of Charlotte's gift to her friend, Wilbur. We don't see the reader's heart aching for Wilbur's loss of his best friend. The grandest purpose of children's literature which is to transform children in some way is lost. Gone is the chance to sit spellbound in silence, swept away in story where the reading experience is the treasure.

When the quiz becomes the staple, and the points become the ultimate goal, children are deprived of the power and pleasure of literature for its own sake. They are, in fact, being "punished by rewards" (Kohn, 1999). Literal level questions focus on reading for accuracy rather than allowing readers to experience the story in greater depth. Literal level questions strip literature down to the barest skeleton of meaning and distract children from literature's power. It is like watching a sunset and then doing an exercise in which you are asked to list the colors in their order of appearance. Not only would the exercise be pointless, but it detracts from the sheer joy and beauty of the experience.

Recommendations

In light of these concerns, we recommend the use of activities that strengthen the role of literature with regard to its grandest purpose. There are many forms of reader response activities that can accomplish this. Chapters of books as well as entire books have been written that focus on response-based literature activities (Gunning, 2000; Karolides, 1992; Norton, 1992). Thus, within the limits of this commentary, we are not attempting to present a comprehensive coverage of all the activities that have been developed. Instead, we present just two activities that illustrate the nature of these response-based activities and incorporate the use of listening, speaking, and writing.

Eeds & Wells (1989) developed the idea of having *grand conversations* with your students. The grand conversation activity offers so much more in the development of critical thinking than what literal comprehension questions can. Grand conversations are basically focused discussions that allow teachers to facilitate student responses by asking strategic, interpretive, or literary questions. These questions, by their nature, are open-ended and engage students in higher-order thinking, discovery of deeper meanings, discussion of universal themes, and appreciation of the author's craft. Grand conversations take advantage of the social aspects of reading and advance each student's knowledge and understanding to a point which could not have been reached without the give and take of other involved readers. The conversations can take place in a variety of formats, including whole class and small literature circle discussions.

Further, grand conversations encourage what most of us do naturally after reading a good book; we tell someone about it. Most of our favorite books have found their way to our list as a result of trusted friends' recommendation.

Although responding to literature is stimulated by the social interactions of fellow readers, it is also deeply personal. Each reader brings a unique complex of background knowledge and experiences to the text. Opportunities for students to share their individual experiences with a book can be fostered through written response journals. Through journal writing, the rich connections between reading and writing are developed as well as links between the story and personal experiences. As Donald Graves (1990) suggests, writing makes readers learn more about themselves as well as discovering their own point of view.

After reading a selection, teachers can introduce journal writing topics such as: write about your favorite character; write about a character who you do not trust; write to give a story prediction; write to develop a plausible, new ending to the story; or write about a theme critical to your understanding of the story. Depending on the developmental abilities of the students, writing sessions can last from fifteen minutes to an hour.

The activities described above can be implemented in a variety of forms. The role of the teacher in these activities can vary as well depending on the how the students are responding and what the teacher is trying to accomplish. It is important to note, however, that the teacher's role is an important one — whether it is that of a facilitator or participant. The teacher has to endorse the value of these activities. This can be accomplished by giving adequate time for these activities, sharing and responding when appropriate, and giving genuine interest and value in the students' responses.

They are good activities in that they make reading literature rewarding and, quite honestly, fun. It is through activities such as these that our students begin to appreciate literature for its own value and begin their travels as lifelong readers.

Now consider this classroom conversation in which two fifth graders have just finished reading *The Giver* by Lois Lowry:

Wow! That was some ending. I was pulling so hard for Jonas to make it to those other people. My heart

was racing and I just knew he would get there. I think this is my new favorite book!

What do you mean? Jonas and Gabriel didn't make it; they died in the snow. They couldn't beat the weather and so they just kinda slipped off into oblivion or something with their good memories of the past.

That can't be the way it ended. I hate that ending! Read the last two pages again.

Wow, I see your point. I wonder what the author meant.

Let's ask Ms. Smith what happened in the end of the story.

She said there isn't a correct ending; it's up to us to decide what happened in the end.

Is there another book that comes after this one? If there is, I can't wait to read it! I'm dying to know what really happened! The author can't leave us like this.

Ms. Smith, after overhearing some of the comments made by her students, sees a wonderful opportunity to practice critical thinking skills. She decides to take advantage of the moment and allows her students who have finished *The Giver* to meet as a group. She asks them why they could possibly have different ideas about the ending of the story even though they read the same pages. Her students are rapidly flipping through the final pages of the book trying to find a line, phrase, or sentence to support their interpretations. She tells them how interested she is in hearing their thoughts and suggests that they write them in their response journals. The students eagerly begin to write. After a few moments, they share their journal entries with the group and a passionate discussion ensues.

The powerful influence of the story has grabbed its readers. The grandest purpose of literature is being realized. Higher-level thinking has become the norm. We know that reading literature is more than passing quizzes and earning points. There is *so much more*.

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About the Authors

John Ponder (jponder@westga.edu) is an assistant professor of reading education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of West Georgia. His research interests include applications of reader response theory and reading teacher training models.

Cathleen Doheny (cdoheny@westga.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of West Georgia and co-director of the Cherokee Rose Writing Project. Her research interests include affective dimensions of literacy education, reading education for pre-service teachers, and literacy development for early childhood and elementary age children.

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World Congress Center, Atlanta, Georgia

College Reading Association's Golden Anniversary Conference
November 6-9, 2008
Hyatt Sarasota, Sarasota, Florida

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December 3-6, 2008
Wyndham Orlando Resort, Orlando, Florida