

Shared Reading Theatre:

An Invitation to the World of Story

We are in a school library. The teachers are engaged in staff development. They have just watched a videotape of a class involved in Shared Reading Theater. They take turns voicing their objections and asking questions:

“I thought I needed plays to make this work. Do I have to rewrite books to look like plays?”

“How is it different than Round-robin Reading?”

“What about students who read badly? When they read aloud, I die a little bit with every tortured word.”

“I read the text to my students. I believe they all understand it that way.”

“You know, I have to teach writing, too. Can I use this for teaching writing?”

The vignette above is not a creation. It really occurred during an after-school staff development session. Students of differing abilities need to become engaged in text by actually reading it. When the teacher reads the text to students, middle school students have a strong tendency to “zone-out.” It is easy to blame the students for a lack of understanding. Teachers might say, correctly, “They just aren’t listening.”

Still, teachers need to provide for the variety of reading abilities in their classroom. In addition, to fully engage their students, they must offer ample time and opportunity for students to make personal connections to the text, to the world, and to their lives outside of the classroom. We believe that Shared Reading Theater provides an ideal solution to these problems.

However, in our role as staff-developers, we have found that the middle school teachers we work with have a great deal of trouble understanding the concept of Shared Reading Theater. These teachers believe Shared Reading Theater is “just reading plays,” or worse, Round-robin Reading. To clarify the difference, it would be useful to look at Reader’s Theater and Shared Reading and see how Shared Reading Theater is an amalgam of the two older, tried-and-true strategies and the farthest thing possible from Round-robin Reading.

Readers’ Theatre:

Young & Vardell define Readers’ Theater as “a presentation of text read aloud expressively and dramatically by two or more readers.” (396–406) Johns and Berglund suggest that, “Meaning is conveyed to the audience, primarily through readers’ expressive and interpretive readings rather than through actions, costumes, or props” and that students can “read from commercially-prepared scripts or develop scripts from materials they are reading [. . .].” (2002)

Shared Reading:

According to Routman, Shared Reading involves learners viewing a text usually on chart paper or in a big book, observing the teacher fluently reading the text, and then reading along with the teacher. In this conception, the teacher makes reading visible and,

because this is done with an entire class, provides differentiation for all the readers in the class. Students and teachers become “partners in an enjoyable process and see themselves as ultimately capable” (139).

Round-robin Reading:

In contrast, Round-robin Reading (Eldredge, Reutzel, & Hollingsworth, 1996) involves “turn-taking” oral reading. During a session of Round-robin Reading, students are sitting around the teacher waiting to take their turn to read aloud. Every student, no matter what his or her ability might be, reads audibly. Students must wait their turn to read; they cannot actively read until their turn has arrived. This practice can lead less-skilled readers to feel that they have been singled-out by their inability to read the text smoothly. Less-skilled readers get little support beyond immediate correction. Unfortunately, this can undermine their self-confidence, which has a negative effect on their ability to comprehend.

When Eldredge, Reutzel, and Hollingsworth compared Shared Reading and Round-robin Reading in their 1996 study, they found that Shared Reading was the superior method. The use of Shared Reading was, “effective in improving [. . .] reading development” (220). They found that students in the “Shared Reading group outperformed children in the Round-robin Reading grouping in word-analysis knowledge, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension” (218). Further, the Shared Reading strategy caused a significant change in the ability of less skilled students to comprehend text (221).

Shared Reading Theatre:

What is Shared Reading Theater and how is it different from Readers’ Theater or Shared Reading? Unlike the Readers’ Theater strategy described by Johns and Berglund, Shared Reading Theater does not require a script of any kind. Students involved in Shared Reading Theater can use a variety of available texts: novels, short stories, newspaper articles, science texts, even math texts. It is not a “play-reading” strategy. There is no audience in the sense that students are passive—all students have active roles to play. Everyone is involved in reading. It is like Shared Reading because the reading process is observed, done with an entire class, and provides differentiation because all the students in the class read. It differs from Shared Reading because the teacher does not model fluent reading while the students observe her although the teacher might play a part as everyone reads the text. In Shared Reading Theater, everyone has a copy of the text and plays a role, with less-skilled readers taking shorter or more predictable or repetitious parts. In addition, in Shared Reading, as Routman describes it, the students read chorally after the teacher has modeled fluent reading. Students engaged in Shared Reading Theater, however, read only their assigned parts. This demands a higher level of engagement while providing a genuine purpose for reading. The following chart attempts to clarify these differences:

Shared Reading Theatre and Less-skilled Readers:

Often when nonfluent readers read aloud, their reading is interrupted not only by their own pauses but by other stu-

| | Shared Reading Theater | Readers’ Theater | Shared Reading | Round-robin Reading |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Text | Can be used with any text | Requires a script | Uses a single text that all readers can see | Uses a common text |
| Teacher’s Role | Director or sometimes the teacher takes a role | Director or possibly one of the roles | Models reading | Observes reading and offers immediate correction |
| Student’s Role | Every reader takes an active part with less-skilled readers taking shorter roles | Some of the class takes a role while the rest of the class becomes the audience | Every reader reads no matter their ability | Students take turns reading in a predictable pattern |

dents (or teachers) who tell them the word that is causing the pause. Whether done out of kindness, offered out of frustration, or offered because we don't know other strategies, telling the dependent reader the word encourages more dependence [. . .]" (Beers, 2003).

We found that, in order to prevent our students from "rescuing" their friends who were struggling with a particular word, we would assign one student to help the other students. This strategy gives the reader time to try the word on his or her own—or guess the word's meaning—before the class or the teacher jumps in. When the reader feels the word is beyond reach, he or she asks the delegated student to supply the word. This *student teacher* or *assistant director* can just supply the word or give hints for getting the word using an established class protocol for determining an unknown word—such as dividing the word, looking for parts of familiar words, trying to say the first few letters, even trying to sound the word out slowly. In this way the less-skilled reader is provided with a model of the embedded habits of good readers (Beers 217).

Sharing responsibility for the making of knowledge in the classroom with the students invites everyone to participate in the story world. It offers an easy method for teachers to assess how fluent the students have become and measure their prosody. Are they pausing for dramatic effect? How are they using punctuation to help us understand the author's intent? What signals do quotation marks give us? (An additional benefit is that once our students become accustomed to reading this way, their appropriate use of punctuation marks in their writing improves dramatically—particularly quotation marks!)

Mrs. Carey, a middle school teacher in Chicago, uses Shared Reading Theater with her students as they read a story from their anthology about two friends entering a boxing match.

Mrs. Carey asks the students to take out their literature books. "Brian, you'll be assistant director again today."

"But I want a part this time," Brian objects.

"Assistant director is a part. You keep track of who plays which part. It's an important role, and you did a really good job last time." Her affection for her students is apparent by the slight smile that crosses her lips. She is pleased with them and especially

delighted in Brian's interest in reading.

"But I want a character part or a reading part," insists Brian.

"OK. You can be one of the six people to read-around. You will be one of the narrators, and you'll read every sixth paragraph. Brian, you are number one reader. I need five more Read-around readers." She surveys the room. Mrs. Carey assigns five other people to read-around. These people read assigned paragraphs on the first two or three rounds. They locate words they cannot read before it is their turn to read, and Mrs. Carey tells them how to say a word if they ask her about the word before they read their paragraph. Later they will read automatically when it is their turn.

Mrs. Carey instructs students to put their finger at the start of the story. For the first two pages, there is little dialogue and students read their assigned sections. Mrs. Carey stops the reading to discuss the difference between "heavyweight" and "lightweight." A very knowledgeable student fills her in with the exact difference between the different weights in boxing including welterweight, which she hadn't asked for. Mrs. Carey wonders what will happen to the friendship between these two boys.

Mrs. Carey has assigned six volunteers to read the next six sequenced paragraphs of the text. Another student was assigned to be the "he said—she said" reader, to read those parts of the text that lead into dialog before and after quotation marks.

Having students read their texts twice silently—once for content and once for character—improved their confidence over time. Having students read for a specific purpose through the perspective of a specific character adds so much to what students get out of oral reading because they are genuinely engaged in a meaningful task for a purpose that makes sense to them. This improves student confidence over time. They read more smoothly and with more expression.

What Texts to Use:

We have used Shared Reading Theater with young adult literature (both fiction and non-fiction) across the curriculum. Any well-written descriptive text, with well-drawn characters or events, is fertile ground. With fiction, we did not limit ourselves to plays (the

traditional arena of Readers' Theatre). For example, Karen has used Shared Reading Theatre when she was modeling Louis Sachar's *Holes* in a sixth-grade classroom. She felt it was crucial to help the sixth-grade students understand the dynamics of Stanley's visit to the Warden's office by having students take on the part of the Warden, Mr. Sir, Stanley, and the narrator. Other students listen and then ask questions of the readers. Karen found that small snippets of texts read in this fashion were sufficient—it was not necessary to treat entire texts this way. After Shared Reading Theater, she sends students off to read the next section of text on their own.

Claudia has found that a text like Avi's *Nothing But the Truth* is just right for Shared Reading Theatre because it is written in dialog, notes, memos, phone conversations, and newspaper reports. This post-modern style provides plenty of parts for everyone in the class. She experimented with this method when she was modeling a reading lesson in an eighth-grade class:

The Malloy family is sitting down to dinner discussing the time-honored family topic, "school." Phillip Molloy turns to his father, "What would you say if a teacher said I wasn't allowed to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner'?"

"What?" Mr. Malloy replies. He cannot believe his ears. Maybe he is hard of hearing.

Phil, impatiently, "Singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"

Mr. Molloy is shocked, "Anywhere?"

Phil is terse now. Apparently, his father can't understand anything. "In class."

Mrs. Molloy chimes in, "I don't understand. What's this have to do with what your father asked—your running? Singing in the middle of class?" (Avi, 51). [The dialog is Avi's; the italicized text is Claudia's.]

Claudia interrupts the reading, and everyone in the class writes furiously. Then there is a minute of talk. She turns to the student playing Phillip Malloy and asks, "Phil, why did you say that to your father?"

Greg, Phil for the last 53 pages, says, "I just felt like it. I felt I couldn't tell him the truth."

"Why couldn't you tell him the truth? The truth is important, isn't it? Why did you bring up the part about the singing?"

"I wanted to get him off the topic of the track team. I felt bad about not being on the team. I don't want him to guess that I couldn't join because of my

grades, so I thought the singing bit would distract him."

"And you, Mr. Molloy," Claudia asks Bill, a bit uncomfortable in his fatherly role, "What are you thinking when Phil tells you about the singing?"

"Lawsuit!" Bill quickly replies. The class cheers. "She can't do that, that teacher. It's Phil's first amendment right to sing 'The Star Spangled Banner.' Who does she think she is? I'll have her job!"

"Mrs. Molloy," Claudia turn to Olivia, "What do you make of this?"

"I'm just confused. I don't get it. Why is he singing in class? Anyway," Olivia adds, "I just want to be sure everyone has enough to eat. That's what my mom would care about."

Ariel, a class member without a major role, chimes in. "That's so true. My mother is only concerned about our eating. We have to finish all our food."

Students become so involved in their roles, they take their personalities outside the class. After finishing *Nothing But the Truth*, Greg, who had played Phil Molloy for the run of the book, followed Claudia all the way to the lunch room arguing in favor of Phil Molloy's point of view, "Look, I had to lie. It meant so much to my dad. I couldn't just tell him I'd blown it by messing up on a stupid English exam. He'd never understand."

Greg had truly entered the world of story.

Writing as an Extension:

We often ask our students to stop and write an answer to a reflective question through the eyes of their character. Karen has modeled this using Karen Hesse's *Witness* with ninth grade students. In the book, thirteen characters tell the story of the same event from thirteen different perspectives, and Karen's students love to argue from their character's perspective about what really happened. Because the author does not tell the reader everything, Karen's students write powerful passages that fill in some of these gaps. These passages are revised and rehearsed and become the center of the students' culminating project.

In another instance, Karen had ninth-graders write letters to other characters in *Witness* explaining their behavior. Students read these letters aloud, creating additional refinements to their understanding of the story.

In the book, a black woman dies from exposure. Percelle, the town's sixty-year-old constable, refuses to

accept responsibility. This hands-off attitude allows the Klan to gain a foothold in this small Vermont town. Demetra, writing in the role of Leonora, the twelve-year-old protagonist in *Witness*, to Percelle, the constable, writes,

“Why did you let my mother die?
Why didn’t you help us?
What did we ever do to you?”

This passionate response helps Demetra and her classmates understand in tangible ways the reality of the Klan’s presence and the fear and terror it engendered.

The Procedure:

- Determine a text you might want to read with the entire class. This text can be more difficult than the average student is reading because you will be there to scaffold the text with the students.
- Determine what reading roles might be available. Assign roles. You might uncover additional roles as you read. We have mentioned several roles in this article.
 - Character Readers
 - He said/she said Reader
 - Bold Reader
 - Regular Reader
 - Number Reader
 - Italics Reader
 - Parenthesis Reader
 - Date Reader
 - Box Reader (The person who reads everything printed in boxes.)
 - Underlined Reader
 - Student teacher Reader
 - Assistant Director
- Do some pre-reading activity before entering the text. Look at the cover or the graphs and pictures. Introduce essential vocabulary words.
- When introducing the strategy to the class, allow the students who are reading together to practice before reading to the audience. This provides for smoother reading, a better understanding of the content, and better modeling for the class.
- Jump into the text and begin to read, or invite students to read the text themselves, locating and focusing on their roles.

- Stop reading occasionally to point out meaning-making strategies, salient vocabulary, or the focus of a recent mini-lesson such as figures of speech.
- After reading, invite students to reflect on events in their journals, answer questions in the role of the character they played, or write letters to other characters.

Conclusion:

We have combined two classic classroom strategies, Readers’ Theater and Shared Reading, into one large meta-strategy, Shared Reading Theater. Shared Reading Theater goes one step beyond traditional Readers’ Theater by combining the reading of any text with the best features of the Shared Reading approach.

Two weeks later, we return to our staff-development school and ask how Shared Reading Theater has worked. Previously, the teachers had read the text aloud to their students because they felt that it was the only way to include less-skilled readers. After trying Shared Reading Theater and observing their students’ engagement with this strategy, they offer these observations in their written evaluations:

“I was amazed. I didn’t know my students could do that.”

“They were so engaged in the text. They really knew what was going on.”

“The post-reading discussions were so much better. I didn’t have to pull so hard.”

“When students took on the role of a character, they became the character with real conviction.”

“This approach brought the story world into my classroom.”

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Appendix

Good books for Shared Reading Theatre for Middle Level Students:

Fiction:

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- Enzensberger, Hans Magnus. *The Number Devil: A Mathematical Adventure*. Illustrated by Susanne Berner Rotraut. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997.
- Hesse, Karen. *Witness*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2001.
- Mikaelsen, Ben. *Touching Spirit Bear*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
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- Na, An. *A Step From Heaven*. Asheville, NC: Front Street, 2001.
- Park, Linda Sue. *A Single Shard*. New York: Dell Yearling, 2001.
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- Spinelli, Jerry. *Maniac Magee*. New York: Scholastic, 1990.
- Whelan, Gloria. *Homeless Bird*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Wolff, Virginia Ewer. *Make Lemonade*. New York: Scholastic, 1993.

Non-Fiction:

- Armstrong, Jennifer. *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance*. New York: Crown Books for Young Children, 2000.
- Bridges, Ruby. *Through My Eyes*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1999.
- Cooper, Michael L. *Bound for the Promised Land: The Great Black Migration*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1995.
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