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ABSTRACT

Although elementary teachers are encouraged to use reader re-
sponse strategies in their work with children, many questions remain
about the nature of young children's response. This study is part of
a year-long naturalistic exploration of second and third grade stu-
dents' written responses to text. Entries from children's reading
logs constituted the primary data source for this study. Analysis fo-
cused on two different assignments or writing tasks: "Write what
you remember" and "Write what you think or feel." The children
responded to four different types of texts (two per task). Task and
text differences were found in children's personal statements, the
nature of those personal statements, and the relationship between
children's written statements and information from the text.

Mitch, a third grader in Gretchen's classroom, shared his ideas
about writing in his reading log:

Interviewer (I): Sometimes Gretchen will say, "Today we're go-
ing to learn about [something]," and she has you write down everything
you know,... and then she'll read to you and she'll ask you to write
more... Does that type of writing help you understand?
Mitch (M): Yeah ...because you can put down whatever — more
than what she reads. I like it because you can put more down.

I: Do you see any difference between that writing and just writing after she reads to you?

M: You don't know as much at first. You write. And then after she reads, you can add more... It helps me understand better when she's done reading it... I like putting it down first.

When this interview took place in March, Mitch and his class-mates were accustomed to responding to reading by writing. Reading response logs had been routine in Gretchen's classroom since October. Gretchen used the logs to promote students' written responses to text in order to help them explore the distinctive nature of their meaning-construction processes. Response theories allege that a reader's construction of meaning from and with print is influenced by many factors, including feelings and beliefs, the structure of a particular text, and the context in which a reading event occurs. Moreover, a reader's responses may change frequently and dramatically during a reading event.

As conceived by Rosenblatt (1983) in 1983, response referred solely to the solitary transaction of reader and printed text. She wrote that readers establish tentative notions of a text's intent by infusing "intellectual and emotional meanings into the patterns of verbal symbols" (p. 25). Those symbols then channel a reader's thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, from this "complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience" (p. 25).

Rosenblatt later (1978) introduced the concept of stance, arguing that readers approach text aesthetically or efferentially. Aesthetic stance is the province of literature, since it invites the reader to savor the emotions prompted by the text. Efferent stance is the province of exposition, with its emphasis on information-gathering. Recently, Rosenblatt (1993) has cautioned against a dualistic view of stance, noting that many readings are on a continuum as readers bring multiple purposes and shift stances during each reading event.

Rosenblatt's seminal work has spawned dozens of response theories, each weighting the relationships among reader, text, purpose, and context somewhat differently (e.g., Beach, 1993; Mailloux, 1990). Much of the original work behind these theories focused on high school and college students' transactions with literary texts (Petrosky, 1982; Purves and Rippere, 1968; Squire, 1994). But in recent years, the term "response" has been expanded to describe how readers of all ages engage with both literary and expository text (Squire, 1994).

Early studies of children's response found a relationship between their responses to fictional texts and cognitive development (Applebee,

1978; Cullinan, Harwood, and Galda, 1983). Hickman's (1981) ethnographic study indicated that children's responses were also influenced by features of the classroom context. A later qualitative study of sixth grade language arts students (Guise, 1995) observed that children respond to texts "differently, according to particular context-specific activities" (p. 386). In that classroom, silent reading, book selection, writing situations, and aesthetic activities each became opportunities for socially constructed interactions among children who consistently sought "authentic audiences" for their talk about books (p. 395).

In addition, response has now embraced a variety of literacy interactions, including listening to the oral reading of a single text (Enciso, 1994), responding to illustrations as well as printed symbols (Madura, 1995) and synthesizing multiple readings (Poe and Hicks, 1997). Response modes through dramatic presentation (Davis, 1997; Enciso and Edmiston, 1997), drawing, and art (Altieri, 1995; Whitin, 1994) have also been explored. In one study, Smagorinsky and Coppock (1995) analyzed the choreographed dance of two young men and used this art form to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between two characters in a short story.

Classroom use of more conventional oral and written response activities continues to be explored (Altieri, 1995; Hancock, 1993; Kelly, 1990; Vacca and Newton, 1995). The impact of multicultural literature on response has been examined (Altieri, 1996; Reissman, 1994; Wilkinson and Kido, 1997). Like the progenitive theory of response, studies of response to these variations in text and task view reading and writing as organic and learner-driven processes.

Research in response theory has resulted, then, in a myriad of instructional strategies that invite learners to draw on and explore a range of meaning-making influences (Karolides, 1997). Many of these strategies use writing and discussion to explore a range of thoughts, feelings, and associations provoked by textual engagement in order to build or extend understanding. Naturalistic descriptions of response-based classrooms are also beginning to appear in the literature. Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1999), for example, have explored the nature of first graders' written responses and the scaffolding role played by the teacher and peers in promoting extended response. Yet, although elementary teachers are encouraged to use response strategies for many instructional purposes, Langer (1994) believes many teachers remain "uncertain about the place of instruction" and the "role they should play" when using response strategies (p. 203).

And although research in this area has expanded our understanding of the role of the reader, the nature of the text, and the influence of the classroom context, it has also raised additional questions. Purves (1993) expresses a concern that studies of response have not fully recognized the impact of school acculturation into "habits of reading" that result in "response preferences" (p. 349). He also cites Langer's (1989) comment that "the difference between efferent and aesthetic reading in school lies less in the way we read than in the follow-up to reading" (p. 352).

Some research on the concept of stance may underscore these concerns. In a quantitative study of aesthetic response and teaching methods, Many and Wiseman (1992) used three instructional approaches, literary experience, literary analysis, and no discussion, to probe written response among 120 third grade students. They found that teaching approach did affect stance; students taught from a literary analysis approach were more likely to write about conventional elements of story structure. In a related study, Wiseman, Many, and Altieri (1992) found that students taught from a literary experience approach were the least likely to write efferently. The authors noted the need for teachers to be "aware of the differences" involved in different teaching approaches (p. 283). They also called for future research to examine the effects of teaching approaches on both "immediate free response" and on "student responses to subsequent work" (p. 283). Similarly, Hynds (1990) writes that teachers often unintentionally suggest "correct" interpretations of literary text, although researchers have not yet explored the implications of this for response –based learning.

Such focused studies are informative and add to our understanding of the nature of response, but at present many questions remain. Understanding more about the influence of the texts children read and the tasks teachers use to prompt responses seems an important step in answering questions about response-based instruction in elementary schools. Accordingly, this study examined how one group of students in a multiage second and third grade public school classroom constructed meaning from fiction and nonfiction when asked to respond in writing to different instructional tasks. Although data were collected from 22 students over one academic year, in this article we focus on patterns that emerged among eight of those students through four assignments. After sharing background information about the teacher and students and the data collection and analysis procedures, we will discuss the intriguing meaning-making patterns that emerged from the children's written responses.

THE CLASSROOM, THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS

Gretchen teaches in one of five public elementary schools in Kent, Ohio. The student body of this neighborhood school is diverse culturally, racially, and economically. During the year of the study, the district used Gretchen's classroom to pilot multi-age grouping. Her students came from traditional first and second grade classrooms and ranged in age from 7 to 12. Their reading and writing fluency was varied; two were from homes where English was not the primary language.

Gretchen's classroom is a literature- and print-rich environment in which children have many opportunities to read, write, and talk about what they have read and written. Gretchen designs instructional tasks that integrate language arts with content area subjects. In planning for this multi-age group of children, Gretchen often used a thematic approach, which she believed would blur age and grade distinctions.

In early October, Gretchen introduced reading response logs as part of her language arts instruction. Her students spent 1.5 hours each day in a writer's workshop where they created texts of their own choosing using process writing procedures. When she introduced the reading log, Gretchen carefully established different purposes for this type of writing. She encouraged students to use the logs as a place to explore their own thoughts and feelings about what they read. Students were assured that they did not have to worry about correct spelling or grammar, there was no final grade; they could write freely and in forms of their own choosing.

Students wrote responses about three times a week to a variety of fiction and nonfiction texts throughout the year of the study. Before children read a nonfiction selection, for example, Gretchen sometimes asked them to write about their topical knowledge (e.g., "Today we're going to read about bones. What do you already know about bones? Make an entry in your reading log.") After reading, children added new information— what they had learned— to their log entries. On occasion, children were asked to make notes as they read or to jot down predictions.

Other times, Gretchen's suggestions for response log entries were more open-ended. She occasionally asked children to "write what you remember," particularly after they had read a nonfiction selection or as a summary activity for a thematic unit in social studies or science. Another example of a more open-ended response task was "Write what you

think or feel." Thus, Gretchen provided a variety of response tasks over the year of the study. Responses were often shared in class discussions.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

Our purpose in this study was to describe the effects of naturally occurring classroom events. We made no experimental manipulations; we did not change or attempt to influence the instructional environment in any way. The study design is based on the belief that human behavior is multi-faceted and contextually sensitive. In order to fully understand how these young students were engaging with response strategies, then, we needed to observe their behavior as it evolved over time in their classroom setting. Thus, we analyzed our primary data source, student writing, within the context of naturally occurring events in the classroom. Qualitative research methods are also compatible with the view of reading and writing as interactive, dynamic, learner-centered processes upon which Gretchen's classroom instruction is based.

Evangeline observed in Gretchen's classroom one afternoon each week throughout the school year. She kept extensive field notes about these observations and occasionally talked informally with Gretchen about classroom events. In March, Evangeline conducted audio-taped interviews with each child about a variety of literacy-related issues, including opinions about the response-based strategies Gretchen was using in class. Our entire data set, then, included the children's reading response logs written over eight months, the audio-taped interviews, and our own field notes.

The Tasks and the texts

The focus of this study is students' written responses. Two research questions guided the analyses: 1) What is the influence of task on students' written responses? 2) What is the influence of text on students' written responses?

Although Gretchen provided several different prompts for students' written responses, for this study we focused on two: "Write what you remember" and "Write what you think or feel." We chose these tasks because their open-ended nature invited free response. We examined two sets of reading response log entries for each of the two tasks, all written between November and February. This timing was purposeful; we wanted to examine entries that reflected some experience with reading response logs, but we did not select entries written so far apart in time that our interest in text and task differences would be

complicated by changes in children's writing ability. We also limited our analysis to reading response log entries only from the eight children in the class who had written in each of the four situations. Data for this study, then, consisted of 32 reading response log entries, four responses each from the eight children.

For "Write what you remember," children wrote in response to two social studies units. The first, the Native American unit, featured Susan Jeffers' *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1991) as a centerpiece. Two examples of children's written responses to the Native American unit follow:

> *I. The Indians preserved the land by giving back what-*
> *ever they took. They also respected the land and treated it*
> *like their family. When they cut down a tree, they planted*
> *an acorn in its place. They didn't even think they owned*
> *the land. Indians thought the gods and nature owned the*
> *land. They thought that nobody could buy land from any-*
> *body because nobody owned the land. They never hurt the*
> *land or animals. Indians thought the animals were their*
> *brothers and nature was their sister. White men did not*
> *keep their promise to Chief Seattle. White men said that*
> *they would take care of the land, but they didn't. White*
> *men kept cutting down trees and killing animals. We still*
> *cut down trees.*

> *II. The Indians preserved the land by replacing every-*
> *thing. They didn't pollute the rivers and air. They treated*
> *the land like they wanted to be treated. They never*
> *thought they owned the land. They only kill[ed] as many*
> *animals as they needed. When they killed an animal, they*
> *used all the parts of the animal. White men promised to*
> *take care of the land; they lied.*

The second "remember" response occurred at the end of a unit about the Underground Railroad. Students had read several trade books, including Debra Hopkinson's (1993) *Sweet Clara and the Free- dom Quilt.* Here are two entries from this assignment:

> *III. The underground railroad was not a railroad. Really*
> *it was where slaves traveled to Canada so they could be*
> *free. One man right when he stopped into Canada, he*

*looked back and saw his master behind him. He looked
into his master's eyes and grinned at him [be]cause he
now knew he was free. If you are wondering why they
were traveling to Canada because the country of Canada
is free and America was not free at that time. I think there
was no reason for slavery.*

*IV. The underground railroad was not a railroad. It
didn't have any tracks. It was probably just a circle of
dirt. Harriet Tubman was a slave that got to Canada She
had a job that she gave herself. It was when she got to
freedom she would go back and save other slaves so they
would be free. She was so slick that no one or nothing
caught her. There was a rule that a master could get their
slave back. The rule was if the master could find [them
they could] get them back.*

One set of "Write what you think or feel" entries reflected chil-
dren's responses to Langston Hughes's poem, "Mother to Son." Two
examples follow:

*V. In the poem Mother to Son, it seems that the mother
had a hard time getting through life. The poem kind of
makes me feel sorry for the mother. I think that the mother
is trying to tell the son to get through life better than she
did. It was a good poem.*

*VI. I think this poem is telling you to never give up. When
she said there had [been] some tacks in it, I think she
meant there had been some tough times in her life.*

The second "think or feel" task was the result of an unplanned read
aloud. Gretchen explained what happened: We had been discussing the
Revolutionary War, and the students were very interested in the topic but
had no real first-hand experience with war. I asked my students to write
anything they were feeling concerning war or what they felt the effects of
war would be on the whole world... It was clear, by the speed with
which they wrote, that most of the children had not written much... As a
way to bring this issue to life for them, I then read aloud the story *Faith-
ful Elephants* (Tsuchiya, 1988) to the class. This is a true story that de-
scribes how the animals in Tokyo's Ueno Zoo were put to death by their

keepers for fear that the bombing of Tokyo during World War II might set these animals free in the city. The story is a very emotional one, and the children became saddened as I read. Following the read-aloud, I asked the children to continue to write..., adding any new thoughts after hearing this story. This time their writing took more than 10 minutes.

Here are two examples of what children wrote:

VII. I think there are too many wars. There is too much violence. I would hate to be in a war. If I were in a war, I wouldn't kill anyone. I don't feel very proud to be an American. STOP THE VIOLENCE! STOP THE WARS!

VIII. There is too much violence in wars. It seems like people are getting killed every day in wars. I wish instead of having wars the people would just patch things up. Sometimes wars get so bad that at the end everybody dies. I saw a war movie and I cried almost through the whole movie because it was so sad. Right now I feel like bursting into tears. They had to kill three elephants because of the bombs. If a bomb dropped on the elephants' cage, they would run loose in the town and could do a lot of damage to the town. I didn't know that they had to kill them. That is very sad! I cried because of it!

Data Preparation and Analysis

Data preparation began with entering all student log entries into the software program *The Ethnograph* (Seidel, Kjolseth, and Seymour, 1988). We then determined the length and calculated the T-units (independent clauses); (Hunt, 1965) for each of the 32 entries. T-unit calculation is a commonly used alternative to counting sentences in students' writing. We also calculated a words/T-unit ratio for each entry; this is a widely accepted indication of the syntactic complexity of a piece of writing (Hunt, 1965).

Next we reviewed the log entries inductively to search for patterns across them. At each stage of data analysis, we identified patterns independently and then met to resolve discrepancies between observations. As is frequently the case, this inductive analysis was rather messy. For example, we began by searching responses to expository

text, looking for evidence of aesthetic or efferent response. This framework did not appear to represent most responses.

However, some differences in text and task seemed significant. For example, we were struck by the frequent references to self and by the strong voice in children's responses to *Faithful Elephants*. This assignment appeared to have evoked a qualitatively different kind of response than the other three assignments. Moreover, it seemed that the "think or feel" assignments, in general, provoked more emotional responses from children, and the "remember" assignments, in general, yielded more cognitive responses.

To capture these differences, we located, counted, and listed all "personal T-units" within the children's log entries. We defined "personal T-unit" as any T-unit containing a first-person pronoun (e.g., "I" or "we"), and we included the verb attached to the pronoun in our lists (e.g., "I think" or "we feel") in order to capture the cognitive or emotional nature of children's personal statements.

Some statements seemed closer to the text and others more distant, but we were unable to generate categories that concretely represented this phenomenon. Finally, it struck us that some T-units were essentially literal restatements of the text while others were expressions of personal opinion. Although these differences might be classified as "reader-centered" or "text-centered," this dichotomy does not account for distance from the text. Consider, for example, these two T-units: "It was a good poem" and "Right now I feel like bursting into tears." Both express feelings or opinions, but the latter comment is more distant from the text. So we eventually used the three comprehension levels described by Pearson and Johnson (1978) — literal, inferential, and applied — as an analysis scheme. Literal T-units were statements or restatements directly tied to the text. Inferential T-units offered interpretations of the text but stayed close to the issues and ideas mentioned in the text (e.g., "It was a good poem"). Applied T-units were related to but beyond the scope of the text (e.g., "Right now I feel like bursting into tears").

RESULTS

Descriptive information about children's written responses to the two "Write what you remember" tasks is provided in Table 1. Inspection of these data shows a wide range in the length of individual responses, both in terms of word count and in terms of numbers of T-units. On average, children's responses to the Native American unit

were longer than their responses to the Underground Railroad unit; syntactic complexity (words/T-unit) was similar.

Table 1
Write What You Remember

		Native American Unit	Underground Railroad Unit
Words			
	Range	38-146	28-130
	X =	93.4	76.6
T-units			
	Range	4-14	2-13
	X =	10	7.6
Words/T-unit			
	Range	6.3-11.2	7.3-13.3
	X =	9.6	9.7
Personal T-units			
	Range	0-6	0-1
	X =	1.5	0.1
List		I learned (3)	I think (1)
		We cut (1)	
		I bet (1)	
		I know (1)	
		I will try (1)	
		I should sue (1)	
		We did (1)	
		We threw (1)	
		We knocked (1)	
		I hate (1)	
Literal T-Units			
	Range	0-7	2-13
	x	2.6	7.4
	% of total	24%	91%
Inferential T-Units			
	Range	0-11	0-2
	x	5.6	0.5
	% of total	52%	6%
Applied T-Units			
	Range	0-13	0-1
	x	2.6	0.1
	% of total	24%	2%

Children made more personal statements in response to the Native American unit (12) than they did to the Underground Railroad unit (1). As can be seen in Table 1, most of these personal statements reflected cognition rather than affect or emotion. The relationship between children's statements and the texts they had read is also summarized in Table 1. About half of children's T-units for the Native American unit were classified as inferential; literal and applied T-units were evenly divided and constituted the other half. Almost all (91%) of children's statements about the Underground Railroad unit were classified as literal; they made very few inferential (6%) or applied (2%) comments.

Similar information about the "Write what you think or feel" assignments is provided in Table 2. Here, too, a wide range of individual differences in length is apparent. Children's responses to *Faithful Elephants* were longer in words and T-units than their responses to *Mother to Son*. Although the number of personal statements was similar in the two assignments (16 for *Faithful Elephants*; 13 for *Mother to Son*), children's personal statements in response to *Faithful Elephants* were more varied than their responses to *Mother to Son*. Among these varied responses were personal statements that reflected emotion (e.g., "I cried," "I would hate").

The relationship between children's statements and the texts they read shows that very few statements in response to the "think or feel" task were classified as literal. More than half of the T-units written in response to *Mother to Son* were classified as inferential, and about a third (30%) reflected applied-level issues. In contrast, for *Faithful Elephants*, the overwhelming majority (88%) of children's T-units were classified as applied.

Table 3 isolates comparisons among the four assignments. Task differences are apparent in the extent to which children wrote personal statements, which accounted for 15% and 1% of children's "remember" T-units and 41% and 26% of their "think or feel" T-units. Some text differences are likely as well, as the differences between entries within task (e.g., Native American vs. Underground Railroad) are substantial. Moreover, *Faithful Elephants* prompted more emotional or affective response from children than did any of the other three texts. This, too, is a likely indication of text differences.

Table 2
Write What You Think or Feel

		Mother to Son	Faithful Elephants
Words			
	Range	26-53	43-144
	X =	40.8	77.4
T-units			
	Range	2-10	4-13
	X =	3.9	9
Words/T-unit			
	Range	5—22.5	5.3—16.3
	X =	12.9	8.9
Personal T-units			
	Range	0-3	1.6
	X =	1.6	2.3
List		I think (9)	I don't feel (4)
		I feel sorry (2)	I cried (2)
		I know (1)	I didn't know (2)
		I did not like (1)	I wish (2)
			I think (2)
			I saw (1)
			I liked (1)
			I would hate (1)
			We should (1)
Literal T-Units			
	Range	0-1	0-2
	x =	0.3	0.6
	% of total	7%	8%
Inferential T-Units			
	Range	1-5	0-1
	x =	2.1	0.4
	% of total	63%	5%
Applied T-Units			
	Range	0-3	3-11
	x =	1.0	7.3
	% of total	30%	88%

Table 3
Comparisons

	Remember		Think or Feel	
	Native American	Underground Railroad	*Mother to Son*	*Faithful Elephants*
Personal T-Units	15%	1%	41%	26%
Literal T-Units	24%	91%	7%	8%
Inferential T-Units	52%	6%	63%	5%
Applied T-Units	24%	2%	30%	88%

Task differences are also apparent when children's responses are analyzed for their relationship to information presented in the text. The "remember" prompt was far more likely to generate literal information than the "think or feel" prompt, which tended to invite nonliteral response. Text differences are revealed as well, especially among T-units classified as inferential or applied (see Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Our exploration of these students' written responses supports the growing practice of inviting young children to write in response to what they have read. The complexity of the response process, so evident in studies of older students, is also apparent in young children's responses. For example, we found diversity among individual responses, and the texts children read seemed to prompt qualitatively different responses. In addition, the children's responses were influenced by the instructional context, in our case the tasks assigned by the teacher. Primary-level teachers need to understand both the response process and the potential influence of the tasks they assign in order to support children effectively. More research is necessary in this area.

The second and third graders in Gretchen's classroom did not need a great deal of scaffolding or direction from the teacher in order to craft effective responses to single or multiple texts. Directions like "Write what you remember" and "Write what you think or feel" were more than adequate. Elementary teachers, then, might consider use of reading response logs, perhaps using similar writing tasks, as a means to encourage children's written response. Results of this study amply

demonstrate that young children are capable of providing rich written responses to what they read.

Moreover, since children's written responses showed evidence of their comprehension, we believe that elementary teachers can use children's log entries for assessment purposes. Most teachers are already aware of the "three levels of comprehension"; our work with these levels indicates their utility as a tool to analyze children's written products. Thus, analysis of children's reading response log entries can be an alternative or supplement to direct questioning, retelling, or other forms of evaluating literacy learning. In using logs for this purpose, however, we recommend that teachers remain sensitive to the likelihood that task and text will influence how children choose to respond.

Among the questions to emerge from this study is one that centers upon the constructs "efferent" and "aesthetic," which have dominated rhetoric about response to literary and informational text. When we began our analysis, we attempted to identify these constructs in the children's responses. Although it was possible to identify efferent and aesthetic portions of children's responses, this typology was not helpful in exploring all dimensions of children's meaning-construction. Like Langer (1989), we believe that the picture of children's responses to reading in school is complex, both the follow-up to reading and the nature of the texts themselves influence children's responses. Future research should investigate the efficacy of "aesthetic or efferent stance" for informing instructional practice.

We began the study with questions about the influence of text and task on children's written responses. Our exploration of naturally occurring written responses reveals that there are indeed differences among texts and between tasks. Like others (e.g., Guise, 1995; Hickman, 1981), we believe both task and text influence children's responses. Asking children to write what they remember prompts one sort of written response; asking them to write what they think or feel prompts another. In other words, the children in Gretchen's classroom did what she asked. Although more research is certainly warranted, we believe that an old adage reflects an important conclusion from this study, "Be careful what you ask for." The teacher's directions to children appear to influence what they write. If their writing reflects their thinking about the texts, these task directions will ultimately influence children's comprehension or learning.

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