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# Literature Alive: Connecting to Story Through the Arts

J. Lea Smith  
J. Daniel Herring

*"How can I create 'living' experiences that will support my students to explore the 'layers' of meaning in a story? What type of learning activity supports students to build personal 'connections' with a story?"*

We, along with language arts teachers, face these questions as we collaborate to develop literature studies. Our uncertainty seems to imply confusion as to whether we should emphasize story comprehension, reading skills, or a personal connection as the basis.

Relying on more traditional methods to explore a literary text, we used instructional activities such as knowledge-based discussions, story mapping, or writing plot summaries. With instructional emphasis on knowing the story rather than 'living' the story, students seem unable to build human connections with the stories they read. Often they fail to connect to the story when it is offered as a means to demonstrate reading skills.

Our dilemma suggests a limiting understanding of what it means to come to understand literature and about what the teaching of literature has to offer to the intellectual, social, and emotional development of the learner (Langer, 1990).

Our collaboration with teachers in their classrooms became one of discovering avenues for students to interact personally with literature. Our classroom teaching — Lea as a children's literature professor and Daniel as a theatre artist — involved us with classroom teachers to create literature studies built on an aesthetic response to story. What form might instruction take that would enable readers to find connections between their world and the literary world?

### **Aesthetic response**

Rosenblatt (1978) defines reading as a comprehension seeking process. This interactive process between the reader and a text becomes a transaction as the reader gives 'life' to the pages of print. This transaction is an ebbing of 'give and take' where the reader interprets meaning as the text affects the reader. It is an aesthetic involvement with a text that creates dimensionality enabling the reader to construct a personal, human, and lived-through response. Without this human response, the text is no more than empty words on the page (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983, 1993). It is then, the aesthetic — human response that creates the distinction between reading literature and living literature. With this in mind, our goal in this article is to provide examples of arts infused literary studies. Each example uses arts experiences to relate to the literature text. The learning outcome is to involve readers in exploring the meaning of the story as it relates to their own life experiences.

### **Literature**

Literature — an art form — powerfully secures the human experience through language. Then, as the human experience of literature is magnified through other art forms, one's connection with humanity is broadened and deepened. These points of contact enlarge the capacity of literature to make sense of life and the world (Probst, 1988). Thus, the arts

provide for multidimensional involvement with a text. This involvement includes both reaction and creation. For example, in reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1952), students experienced difficulty in relating to discrimination and what it actually was like to be Jewish during World War II. To experience discrimination and truly connect with the universality of these feelings, students were asked to begin keeping a journal to describe incidents of discrimination and prejudice they observed, read about, or experienced first hand. From this record, students then were able to discuss their reactions.

Involving students in conceptual endeavors where they 'transact' with themes of the text supports them to construct and generate their own view and interpretations (Rosenblatt, 1978). To further enhance and deepen these human connections between students and story, other art forms included the activities of scripting and acting out journal entries, creating anti-discrimination posters using collage techniques, and choreographing a series of movements to depict scenes of discrimination or prejudice incorporating music from both the 1940's and 1990's. These arts-based episodes provided a means for students to meld with the literature and investigate their feelings as developed through the readings.

### **The arts**

The arts represent feeling and meaning. Through the arts, students experience their own unique association with the story. This provides a process for students to experience personal connections, to discover new meanings, as well as to expand their understanding of the literary text. When students directly connect with literature through experience of the senses, they are able to go between verbal, nonverbal, logical, and emotional — the better to gain an understanding of the whole (National Standards for the Arts, 1994). Through

these multiple forms of creative communication, readers create spiraling levels of understanding. Then, as the students use the arts as a tool to build personal meaning, they are supported to exercise divergent thinking.

Using the arts as a medium to interact with literature can be accomplished in a number of ways. However, the use of the arts raises questions. What does a teacher need to know about the arts to use them in the classroom? How does a teacher use the arts to provide students with a meaningful, concrete examination of literature? And when are the arts a valuable instructional strategy? These questions alone are enough to keep most of us bound to a more traditional curriculum. Yet, that doesn't have to be the case.

### **The arts as instruction**

Bringing literature studies 'alive' begins with a teacher's desire to involve students actively in the learning process coupled with the realization that the arts are a powerful tool for literacy. From this comes a willingness to experiment with music, movement, drama, writing or visual arts as ways to connect students with the human experience portrayed within literature. This is not to suggest that the literature teacher will be teaching the arts, but rather will be using elements of the art forms to provide students with experiences, which enable them to connect with literature. Through the arts interpretative experiences, students 'connected' with the text. Through this personal bridging students were able to consider how the issues of a story may suggest modes of thought or behavior as they meet the challenges of their world.

As collaborating classroom teachers we came to recognize the arts as 'hands on' experiences to build problem solving and critical thinking. We saw students 'making' art,

which subsequently lead to self-awareness, communication, concentration, and individual or group work. As students engaged in different social learning contexts, learning was supported through thinking, talking, manipulating materials, and sharing viewpoints to make decisions (Siks, 1983).

In the following section we outline an arts response lesson sampler for *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) and *The Miracle Worker* (Gibson, 1983). Each example illustrates the arts as a tool to encourage aesthetic reading. The desired instructional outcome is to involve the student with opportunities to extract multiple meanings from a story. The arts episodes — expressive writing, creative movement, visual arts, exploratory music, and informal drama — become a type of aesthetic response enabling students to connect with a story and construct personal meaning.

### **Arts reader response sample #1**

Using *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) as the text to be read, we illustrate arts activities that support students to deepen their involvement and understanding. In Paterson's book, life is examined through the eyes of a young boy who has developed a special friendship that has helped him to uncover his hidden creativity and imagination. When the friendship ends tragically, it is the young boy's self-discovery that ultimately allows him to accept the realities of life. The theme — friendship and imagination — found in Paterson's text parallel the lives of the students. Using these themes as the building blocks for the arts experiences provide natural points to connect students with the human dimension.

Expressive writing. Friendship verse is a writing activity sequence designed to focus students on the concept of friendship. Friendship is studied in terms of what it takes to be a friend.

- Students discuss friendship and write a definition. In the definition, a list of the components necessary for a good friendship is included.

- Students write a narrative using one of the following: "I am a good friend ..."; "(fill-in the name of a good friend) is a good friend ..."; or write an original friendship narrative.

- Students share their writings. Following these sharings the class discusses the commonalties along with the differences among what others think it takes to be a friend. This discussion should encompass those elements found in Jesse and Leslie's friendship as well.

Creative movement. Magic kingdom provides an opportunity for physical movement through play while developing imagination. Story characters, Jesse and Leslie, create an imaginary kingdom which is a special place reserved just for them.

- Through discussion, students examine what would make a place special, taking into account the types of animals/creatures, dwellings, people, and landscape that would be a part of their special place.

- Divide students into six groups. Groups are asked to create a magic kingdom using movement. Invite students to respond physically to the environment, objects, and animals that may be in their magic kingdom. For example, "Is the ground wet and muddy or hot and sandy? Do you need to jump from rock to rock to cross a stream? Are there animals and creatures to look at and touch?" Students are encouraged to create the sounds of their magic kingdom as they move through the space. Sound might include chirping birds, babbling brooks, and whistling wind. Encourage students to use all available space in the classroom. Each group would later share their magic kingdom movement activity.

Visual arts. Friendship collage is a visual representation of your relationship with a best friend. This literature response makes use of a variety of materials such as photographs, mementos, writings, drawings, and other concrete objects that would visually denote you and your friend.

- Through discussion, students identify an individual considered to be a 'best friend.' Students are asked and encouraged to collect different materials (as listed above) for several days in preparation for creating a collage representative of their friendship.

- Students design and create their collage using their collected materials which may be mounted on tagboard or other study material.

- The friendship collages may be displayed and given to the 'best friend.'

Exploratory music. Radio readings is a strategy that combines dialogue from the literature text with music and sound effects. In tandem with the teacher, students identify different dialogue passages between Jesse and Leslie that occur at Terabithia.

- Students are paired. Each pair selects a dialogue passage to prepare for radio reading. In preparing for the recording session, pairs are asked to consider appropriate music to heighten the reading of the dialogue text. Students may also use other auditory effects to enhance the reading. These may include instrumental sounds and man-made sounds (for example, crumpling paper can sound like leaves crunching under foot). Pairs practice and rehearse orally reading their selected dialogue text selections.

- The pairs record their readings including all other background sound effects developed.

- The radio readings are 'broadcast' for the students to enjoy.



Informal drama. Ultimate good-bye is a dramatic improvisation that examines the theme of friendship. The following strategies may be used as an instructional sequence or used singularly.

- For each improvisation divide students into pairs. Each pair develops and plays their own improvisation. The pairs will need planning and rehearsal time. The pairs may perform their improvisation for the large group or they may work through their improvisation in pairs and then report and share reactions regarding their improvisation.

- Scenario 1: Two people meet for the first time and all circumstances seem to point toward the development of a strong friendship.

- Scenario 2: Best friends are engaged in a conflict. Include not only the conflict in action but also the resolution or compromise.

- Scenario 3: Best friends are saying good-bye. This good-bye scene can represent separation for the summer, after high school graduation, a long distance move, or the students' own original idea of friendship and good-bye. Encourage the students to avoid making the scene unrealistic and melodramatic (e.g., the use of fake crying).

- Some points to be developed through discussion could include the following: types of good-byes, short-term, long-term (people will be reunited).

- A type of good-bye which is permanent such as death — being able to say good-bye or not having the opportunity.

## **Arts reader response sampler #2**

Our basic knowledge of the world around us is derived from our sensory experiences with it. Sensory awareness is central to all learning. From our various sensory experiences we make observations, comparisons, and discriminations to form our concepts about the nature of things. Strengthening our sensory awareness may lead to a greater understanding of

self and the world where we live. It also strengthens the imagination and the ability to experience all aspects of being with greater clarity.

*The Miracle Worker* (Gibson, 1983) is the story of Helen Keller, a special needs child, who is able to tear down the barriers of her non-seeing, non-hearing, and non-speaking world through the aid of a gifted teacher. Gibson's story is written as a play. The storybook *Anne Sullivan Macy: The Story Behind Helen Keller* (Barddy, 1933) is a narrative account, which also may be used. The following are instructional episodes designed to build and to extend the concept of sense deprivation as developed in the text.

Expressive writing. Sensory walk is an exercise designed to use all of the senses except for sight.

- Divide the class into pairs.

- Each student will take a turn leading a partner, whose eyes are closed or have been blindfolded, around the room (or outside the room). Ask the students to explore the environment through their sense of touch, sound, smell, and taste. In order to explore the sense of taste in more depth, you may want to set up a food tasting station. Ask that the leaders take care of their partners. Leaders should work to gain the trust of their partners and to ensure their safety.

- Ask that there be as little talking as possible during this exercise in order to aid concentration.

- Following this sensory walk, students write a narrative focused on the feelings experienced when one cannot rely on sight and must depend on someone else and the remaining senses.

Creative movement. Vibratory response is an exercise designed for coordinating sound with physical response and directionality.

- Each student defines his or her personal space in the classroom.

- Students will need to be either blindfolded or asked to close their eyes.

- The teacher will create man-made sounds (hand-clapping, foot-stomping, coughing, etc.), instrumental sounds (drums, tambourine, bells, etc.), and play recorded music (classical, western, rap, etc.). The different sound sources will come from different areas throughout the classroom. Students will position their bodies towards the sound and respond with movement to the sounds.

- Following the sound exercise the teacher and students will discuss the relationship between sound source and directionality as they relate to perception, noting how the absence of sight would create a different interpretation. Of particular note is the experience of physically responding to sound without the aid of sight. Discussion questions might include, "Were you able to tell where sounds were coming from?" "Were you confused or did you ever lose your sense of direction?" "What different types of movement did you create in response to the variety of sounds and music selections?"

Visual arts. Mind's eye sketch is designed to develop students' appreciation of sight. Students will create drawings based on auditory descriptions of unfamiliar scenes and images.

- Each student will sketch a drawing of a personally familiar scene or image (such as their fish aquarium, neighborhood park, favorite animal).

- Divide class into pairs.

- Pairs will sit back-to-back, not revealing their original sketch.

- Each member of the pair will describe his/her sketch as the other creates an interpretation of the sketch based on the verbal description. Repeat the sequence switching roles.

- As a follow up, lead a discussion centered on the different feelings that were experienced. How did the describer feel? How did the sketcher feel? Highlight the dependency that sighted people rely on in interpreting the world.

Exploratory music. Musical emotions is for discovering the emotions elicited by different musical compositions and sounds. The goal is to examine how sounds and music affect our moods.

- Students will sit in silence as the teacher plays different musical selections, creates man-made sounds, and provides instrumental sounds.

- Students will record on paper the different feelings and emotions that the particular sounds provoke in them.

- Class will participate in a discussion examining how sound and music creates emotions and moods. This discussion may include issues such as how a deaf person may develop an understanding of emotions and moods.

- Divide class into four groups. Each group is given the task of creating a "Mood Recording" for an assigned emotion. Groups will select music, man-made sounds, and instrumental sounds to create a sound recording representing their self-selected emotion. These recordings will be shared in class and students may free-write as they listen to the different mood recordings.

- Class may choose to read aloud their written pieces with the mood tapes playing in the background.

Informal drama. No words improvisation is designed to cause students to communicate through physical movement rather than verbal or written communication. The key concept for students to grasp is how body movement is essential to congruent communication.

- Class is divided into pairs.

•One member of the pair is instructed that she/he must borrow \$5.00 from the partner. The lending partner is instructed that she/he must get a ride to the football game from the borrowing partner. This scenario is acted out with no verbal communication, similar to charades.

•Class discussion could explore different problems encountered in communicating. Additionally, communication can be examined from a different person's perspective such as Helen Keller or a visitor in a foreign country. Also, students would analyze body language and what it may communicate to different people.

Figure 1  
*Arts Reader Response Samplers*

	<b>Bridge to Terabithia</b>	<b>Miracle Worker</b>
<b>Expressive Writing Technique</b>	Friendship Verse	Sensory Walk
<b>Creative Movement Technique</b>	Magic Kingdom	Vibratory Response
<b>Visual Arts Technique</b>	Friendship Collage	Mind's Eye Sketch
<b>Exploratory Music Technique</b>	Radio Readings	Musical Emotions
<b>Informal Drama Technique</b>	Ultimate Goodbye	No Words Improvisation

## Conclusion

School is a place to develop the mind. The arts give us a means to extend learning beyond pencil and paper, question and answer, and quick recall. The language of the arts is universal. It allows students to convey feelings and ideas while extending human understanding. The arts integrate the curriculum — a way to establish connections with other

subject areas. When the transactions with literature are lived through for their own sake, students have the opportunity to examine educational and social conditions for which literature is most valued. The arts — literature, drama, movement, music, visual art, and writing — invite all students to participate through personal connections in learning through reading literature.

Perhaps, the potential of arts as a medium to read literature is captured best by students' comments, "I really liked writing my friendship verse cause it made me see how special my best friend was even though she's dead now. And reading *Bridge* I didn't feel all alone." "I never [never] understood before how listening [music and sounds] made you feel different when you talk til we [did] Radio Readings of Jesse and Leslie." "I didt [didn't] know how they [visually impaired] lived even after doing the walk." "Helen Keller and her teacher were very smart and strong women. I felt weak and stupid when I was trying to do all those things without my eyes and ears." "Doing all that stuff made me better understand the book. The book is more real."

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