



ATTAINING NEW HEIGHTS THROUGH

READERS THEATRE

AN OZARKS WRITING PROJECT DEMONSTRATION
WRITE-TO-LEARN CONFERENCE 2008

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THE PROBLEM: Apathy. What educator doesn't struggle with this silent terror? There's no need to bore you with useless statistics and obvious statements. Since this demonstration is all about Readers Theatre, let's just act out a common scenario:



CAST

Teacher *A Faceless Teacher (Possibly You)*

Student *A Faceless Student (Possibly One of Yours)*

Man Across the Desk *(A Hypothetical Man Across the Desk)*

Teacher: *(nasal tone)* Now we're going to learn about Julius Caesar.

Student: *(in disgust)* Why do we need to know this?

Teacher: Because I said so.

Student: *(angrily)* How am I *ever* going to use this crap?

Teacher: Well, Jimmy, maybe one day you'll walk into a job interview, and the man across the desk from you will ask:

Man Across the Desk: Who was it who once said, "Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once"?

Teacher: Then you won't know, will you, Jimmy? Because you didn't listen in my class. You won't get that job, and you'll be forced to live on the streets.

Student: *(in awe)* Will that really happen?

Teacher: Probably not.

QUESTION So how do you get your everyday reluctant student to be engaged by what you're reading? Well, from my experience, Readers Theatre is an excellent solution, and here's why.

When struggling with my high school Mythology class, a class which, in theory, should have been fun, I stumbled upon the idea of turning one of our dry stories into a play. I have to give credit for this idea to the illustrious author Edith Hamilton. Ms. Hamilton spent many years of her life translating ancient manuscripts and compiling them into one of the most complete collections of Greek and Roman mythology to date. In this meticulous process of collecting

and summarizing, she also managed to suck all the life out of their telling. *Edith Hamilton's Mythology*, the textbook for my Mythology course, is a complete collection of myth, but it puts almost any reader into a literary coma.

You might guess how an alternative to such a text went over. The play was a success. It was *fun*, and the students learned far more than when they had been trudging through Edith Hamilton's soul-sucking text. The next step was obvious: I had to re-create this sensation as much as possible. Now it's two years later, and I have created over twenty-five plays covering information from the Trojan War to King Arthur. Readers Theatre has changed the face of my Mythology class beyond recognition. Was it a lot of work? Yes, but my motivation was a powerful one: I saw the students engaged, I saw the students learning, and I saw the students *experiencing* what they read.



"Old Edith" as she came to be called by the students

HOW IT WORKS If a student is wondering how classroom material relates to him or her, there may not be a clear cut answer. As I tell my mythology students, knowing the Greek gods and goddesses by heart won't make you famous, help you get a date, or make you any money. But by placing the student into a role, he or she assumes the concerns, ideals, and personality traits of that character. Interest comes from experience. Readers Theatre interests them by placing them into the story.

Higher level thinking skills are employed at once. Rather than simply telling the student that Hera and Aphrodite hated each other's guts, you *show* them the two goddesses swapping violent threats. Result: inference and cognition.

As far as writing goes, how much easier is it to write about something that *you* have experienced? If you have experienced the sights and the sounds of the Constitutional Convention or the discovery of electricity, writing about the subject will not be as daunting.

WRITING PROCESS At the risk of sounding like a Sunday afternoon infomercial, *you too* can create your own Readers Theatre plays through ten easy steps. This type of learning can be applied to any literate grade level in any content area. It seems daunting, but the plays don't have to be works of art. They can be cheesy. I find my students are far fonder of cheese than anything else. It causes a laugh, which triggers a memory.

- STEP ONE** Choose your source. RT plays aren't required to be created from "stories" necessarily. Your play could be a dialogue between the founding fathers or a series of monologues given by famous historians, mathematicians, scientists, writers, or athletes.
- STEP TWO** Adapt the source by adding dialogue. Once again, it doesn't have to be a masterpiece. Identify your students' current comprehension level and challenge it, but keep the language from growing too daunting. When they encounter your script, they will be reading it for the first time. Avoid extremely hard-to-pronounce words, or add a phonetic pronunciation after the word. If you are translating something that already has dialogue, you may need to tweak it slightly, adapting it to your students' level.
- STEP THREE** Almost every script should have a narrator to give details through description. In a Readers Theatre play there should be no stage directions. The narrator describes what happens when a character is not speaking. (*The Teacher should perform the part of the narrator to be involved in the play with the students.*)
- STEP FOUR** If a certain line demands a certain emotion, give a small direction at the beginning of the line. For example: (*passionately*), (*angrily*). Also, in any part that would require one, insert a sound effect. For example: (*whoosh*), (*ka-pow*)
- STEP FIVE** If your play contains multiple characters, creating a cast list at the beginning is a good idea. This will help you remember which parts to assign. It's also a good spot to give preliminary information. For example: **Arthur** *King of All England*
- STEP SIX** After you have completed your script, don't look back over it and think, "This is stupid." Students will latch onto anything that is differentiated. Worksheets, lectures, and textbooks fill their education. This will be something different, and they will enjoy it.
- STEP SEVEN** Distribute scripts. Highlight, and assign parts. You are the director in this step. Select students that you perceive to be

stronger readers for larger parts, but do not neglect other enthusiastic students. Small parts are a great way to give everyone a shot. Assign the sound effects as a certain part, and by doing so include a student who may not be a strong reader.

STEP EIGHT

Read. Make sure that the students who do not have a part are following along. The combination of auditory and visual reception of the words builds better reading comprehension in some students.

STEP NINE

Enjoy *yourself*. If the students perceive that you are enjoying the play, it will only motivate them to do the same. This is a time for you to experience material along with your students. Eat it up.

STEP TEN

Go back, and fix the problems. Revision only makes things better. Add sound makers, sets, or costumes to your script to spice it up. Do *anything* and *everything* to make the material exciting.

RESEARCH I found this technique to be successful, even without knowing why. As it turns out, there are many well-documented reasons why Readers Theatre (RT) is such a powerful tool for engaging students from elementary to high school. Here follow some quotes from some of RT's biggest proponents.

As children's book specialist, *Instructor* columnist, and RT advocate Judy Freeman states, "If you want to get your kids reading with comprehension, expression, fluency, and joy, there's nothing more effective than Readers Theatre" (qtd. in Prescott 2).

"Students who were usually reluctant to express themselves orally blossomed in the Readers Theatre arena" Rick Swallow, a RT veteran (qtd. in Prescott 5).



Julius Caesar (*nearly as lethal as Edith Hamilton's Mythology*)
claims yet another victim

“The children were so willing to help each other...that they lost much of their anxiety about reading aloud” (Uthman 1).

“RT is a hands-on approach that honors different modalities...honors those kids who need a different way of expressing themselves” Linda Cornwell, educational consultant and former teacher (qtd. in Prescott 5).

“For those students who do not function primarily according to their linguistic intelligence, watching a dramatic interpretation of a literary work provides ways of seeing into literature through means other than the medium of print alone” (Harris 11).

STUDENT WRITING Readers Theatre is also a tool to inspire and deepen student writing. As Violet Harris states, “Students are interpreting character, action, motivation, mood, and tone by doing and experiencing them, rather than by talking about them. Through such personal involvement in a literary text, students come to know and understand the characters and the characters’ thoughts and feelings from personal identity with them” (11). Because the students are allowed to “experience” the same events as the characters, they write from their *own* experiences. This greatly increases the quality of any piece of writing.

Here some ideas for follow-up writing activities:

Write a play relating the events of a different story

Write a monologue for one of the characters from the play

Write a letter from one character to another

Write additional dialogue between characters

Create a fictional journal entry for a character

Summarize the events of the play

Design a costume for a character in the play, and write an explanation of it

Select a character’s line, and explain why it shows his or her personality

Describe which character you most closely identify with, and explain why

STUDENT WORK

Here are some short examples of exemplary student work.

HAIKU

It covers his face
And trails down a river's way
His blood, his last breath

CINQUAIN

Daylight
Neglects damp space.
Anxious stares request hope,
Looking to the fallen leader.
Darkness

HAIKU

("Thetis")

Lady of the Sea
Who dips her child in greatness
You have missed a spot

HAIKU

Sweat gleams on his brow
Dull, dry blood cakes his spear's edge
Death comes from behind

HAIKU

("Paris")

Just like a weenie
He has to be protected
By a small Trojan

The following is a typical, very informational introduction to the story of Perseus from ancient Greek mythology. Please read the passage and try to remain conscious.

“Perseus was the son of Danae who, by her very name, was the archetype and eponymous ancestor of all the Danaans. She was the only daughter of Acrisius, King of Argos. Disappointed by his lack of male heirs, Acrisius consulted the oracle at Delphi, who warned him that although destined to remain without a son himself, he would one day be killed by his daughter's child. Danae was childless and to keep her so, he shut her up in a bronze chamber underground: This mytheme is also connected to Ares, Oenopion, Eurystheus, etc. Zeus came to her in the form of a shower of gold, and impregnated her. Soon after was born their child Perseus.

Fearful for his future but unwilling to provoke the wrath of the gods by killing Zeus's offspring, Acrisius cast the two into the sea in a wooden chest. Danae's fearful prayer made while afloat in the darkness has been expressed by the poet Simonides of Ceos. Mother and child washed ashore on the island of Seriphos, where they were taken in by the fisherman Dictys, who raised the boy to manhood. The brother of Dictys was Polydectes, the king of the island.”



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