

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD BOOKS

Frank Serafini

This month's column began as a conversation between my good friend, Dr. Lawrence R. Sipe, a highly regarded professor of literacy education and children's literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and myself. Since his untimely death in March 2011, I decided to finish the conversation and dedicate this column to his life's work. Children's literature has truly lost one of its greatest advocates. Larry's



Dr. Lawrence R. Sipe

quick wit and generous spirit will remain with me forever.

It would be hard to find a mission statement about literacy education that does not advocate the development of lifelong readers. Even with the best of intentions, we often require experiences in school with literature that don't truly reflect the habits of lifelong readers. We do not know anyone who has finished a great book and gone looking through their garage for a cardboard box to make a diorama, or cut up magazines to make a mobile of one of their favorite characters. Unfortunately, these things happen all too often in classrooms under the guise of developing lifelong readers.

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In this column, I offer some ideas that Larry and I discussed regarding the types of response experiences that treat literature and readers with more respect. Two instructional approaches that are of particular concern to us are the decontextualized and overuse of prediction as a comprehension strategy and the picture walk.

The Challenge of Using Prediction as a Comprehension Strategy

To begin, prediction has been suggested as a strategy to activate prior knowledge. Although there are many ways to do this, prediction is often seen as the primary strategy for activating prior knowledge. Teachers show readers the cover of a book and ask them to predict what will happen in the book. They then proceed to read a few pages, stop, and ask readers to predict once again, continuing this practice throughout the reading of a story.

In general, asking readers to predict what will happen next is the same as asking them to talk about what they do not know. In addition, being able to correctly predict what will happen in a book is assumed to be a signal that a reader is comprehending the story. To some degree this may be true, but there are a few other things that should be considered. Being able to predict what happens next in a story may, in fact, reveal the shortcomings of the plot of a particular story, not necessarily the comprehension skills of the reader. In other words, if the plot of a story is that predictable, is it really an engaging, quality story worth reading further? In most cases, the books we enjoy reading the most are those for which we are not able to predict what is going to happen next. One's

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inability to predict what will happen next in a book should not be seen as a deficiency in one's comprehension skills, rather it is a testimony to the writing skills of the author.

Certainly, readers should learn to anticipate what happens next in a story based on what has been already read. However, that does not mean our instruction should devolve into an inquisition to see who is correct or incorrect. As an alternative approach, we suggest that before we begin reading a book we ask readers what they notice on the cover and what they are thinking. Let us begin with what they *do* know, not what they *do not* know. Scanning the cover, title, and peritextual elements (Sipe, 1998b) may provide enough information to activate prior knowledge without resorting to simply asking students to guess what might happen next. It is a subtle difference, but one that helps readers focus on what is at hand as much as what is coming next in the story.

The Perils of the Picture Walk

The second thing that concerns us, and other educators (Maderazo et al., 2010), is the instructional practice known as the picture walk. During a picture walk, the illustrations and design elements of a picture book are often reduced to serving as prompts for reading the written text, rather than as a system of meaning in their own right (Serafini & Ladd, 2008).

Maderazo et al. (2010) suggested that picture walks “rarely take full advantage of the multiple ways artists represent meaning in picturebooks” (p. 437). A picture book is a coherent whole, consisting of written language, design elements, and various types of artwork (Nodelman, 1984). Each of these elements brings different potential for meaning making and avenues for artists and authors to communicate with readers.

It is the synergistic relationship among art, text, and design that makes the picture book unique (Sipe, 1998a). Isolating one system of meaning to serve as a prompt for another privileges one system of meaning (usually written language) over another (usually art or design). We need to help readers see illustrations and design elements



as systems of meaning in their own right and develop skills and strategies for readers to use in comprehending these aspects of picture books (Serafini, 2011).

Reconsidering Response Activities

During the reading of a quality piece of literature, instructional approaches such as round robin reading and stopping to ask literal questions to ensure comprehension get in the way of a good story more than they support readers (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998). Other resources discuss alternatives to these challenging practices, and these will not be repeated here. We would just like to say that because the majority of reading readers do throughout their lives is silent reading, then the majority of reading children do in school should also be silent.

For Larry and myself, our biggest concern lies in what happens after books get read. Going to the computer to take a quiz on the book, rewriting the ending of a story, writing book reports, building dioramas, assembling mobiles, and engaging in other inauthentic response activities too frequently dominate reading instructional time. Roser (2001) offered us a challenge to consider which activities are *cute* and which ones *count*. To decide which ones count, we need to consider why we ask readers to complete these activities, what their instructional purpose is, and what they actually do for our readers. We also need to consider any unintentional consequences they may offer.

It is not our role to serve as the “activities police” deciding which activities are worthwhile and which ones are not. Instead, we offer a set of criteria

for teachers to reconsider the response activities and experiences they use in their classrooms (see Table). If one of the response activities does not stand up after applying the proffered criteria, we would hope that the response activity would be readily abandoned in favor of more effective instructional practices.

The last criteria—whether our instructional practices respect the books we read as works of art and literature—is probably the most important thing to take from this month’s column. Our instructional practices should involve two interconnected ethos: an *ethos of engagement* and an *ethos of intellection*.

Our instructional practices should ensure that readers are engaged in the learning experiences. We want our students to be engaged in the learning experiences we provide in our classrooms. Yet, engagement alone may not

Table Criteria for Analyzing the Activities Associated With Reading and Response

Criteria	Ask...
1. Relationship to literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is the connection between the activity and the piece of literature robust or superficial?
2. Time ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does the activity take up more time than the reading done for the activity? ■ Is it 10 minutes of reading followed by 30 minutes of extension activity?
3. Locus of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Who is making the decisions about what is occurring? ■ Do students have any choice in the activity?
4. Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How does this activity support the kind of readers you want to create? ■ Does the activity become an end in itself?
5. Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does this activity remind you of anything that occurs in the “real” world, or is it just a school-based activity?
6. Critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are the activities based on literal recall, or do they require some thinking beyond memorization?
7. Points of entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are readers of different abilities and interests able to engage with the activity? ■ Are there ways for each student to be successful within this activity?
8. Deep understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have we discussed the themes and structures of the piece of literature? ■ Have we gotten past the literal story to examine its implications for our lives and experiences? ■ Is there a broader context for our meaning making?
9. Book report or book review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does the activity have an audience beyond the teacher? ■ Will the activity be used to further discussion or thinking, or just provide proof that a book was finished?
10. Respect for the piece of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does the activity respect the book as a piece of art and literature before it serves as an instructional tool?

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be sufficient. Students may be deeply engaged in a mind-numbing activity during our reading block. We also need to consider the rigor, relevance, and authenticity of the experience.

Intellection is the act or process of using the intellect, thinking and reasoning. This ethos suggests that our instructional practices should require readers to think deeply about what they are reading. To do so would require readers to go beyond literal levels of meaning, reject the notion of a single main idea, and construct meanings for

themselves rather than search for predetermined answers.

Lifelong readers do not pick up books to get better at reading; they pick up books to hear a great story, to escape the reality of their daily existence or find information to help in their endeavors. The story becomes an end in itself, not requiring anything else to be done with it. In *Better Than Life*, Pennac (1999) offered *Ten Rights of a Reader*. Among them are the right to read anywhere, to read anything, to read out loud or silently, to skip pages, and the right to put down books that are no longer interesting. It is an important list to consider as we incorporate children’s and young adult literature into our classrooms. To Pennac’s wonderful list, we would add “the right to not have to do so much @!\$^&% before or after I read.” This is one additional right that I know Larry would have liked to have seen extended to all readers.

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