

Responding to Multicultural Literature

You open a favorite book for the day's read-aloud. Reading to the upturned faces, you stop several times to ask listeners about an event, an unusual word, or to discuss an engaging illustration. Once the story concludes, what do you do next? You know there will be students who just sit quietly, rethinking the story on their own. Others will be enthusiastically waving their hands, eager to share their thoughts. When you chat together about a picture book or the last chapter in the novel you've just read, you are facilitating reader response. Not only is this an enjoyable time of sharing, but it is also an essential ingredient in the comprehension process.

Clearly, not every book read to or read by students should be followed by an activity. However, there are times when you want a reader to connect more deeply with the writing. That's when you invite readers to respond to a book, enriching and extending the reading experience. In this column we will share three of the many ways you can initiate personal response to multicultural literature. For a complete list of the books mentioned here, turn to "Comprehensive Bibliography" on p.62.

Promoting Good Books

Children are often the best sales force when it comes to spreading the news about a great book. Set aside time for readers across the grades to pitch their favorite titles.



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Whether it occurs as young readers rate and recommend books or when older readers booktalk their latest find, the joy of reading spreads like wildfire.

Rating a Book

To encourage young readers to rate a book, place a "critic's corner" rating sheet in the classroom or library. The rating sheet should include a space large enough for children to record the title, author, and rating based on these criteria:

- ★ = I'm glad I read it, but it's not for me.
- ★★ = A good book.
- ★★★ = Quite entertaining!
- ★★★★ = A "must read" that will soon become an old favorite!

After reading the book, students add their rating to the growing list. Provide time for readers to recommend their "four-star" books to the class by explaining the reasoning behind their ratings.

Booktalks

As teachers and librarians, we often use booktalks to entice readers to sample a new genre or author. As Nancie Atwell, author of *The Reading Zone*, suggests, our most important work is "to become so intimate with good books that we bring life, with our voices, to the tattered spines that line the shelves of our libraries." So we enthusiastically endorse our favorite titles as we highlight new books in the library, such as *Alvin Ho* by Lenore Look, or old favorites in the classroom. Then we teach children to do the same.

Once students are ready, provide time for them to practice booktalking with a peer. Readers in the intermediate grades might present insights into cultures other than their own by showcasing books like *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Indian Shoes* by Cynthia Leitich Smith, and *Satchel Paige* by Lesa Cline-Ransome.

Walking in a Character's Footsteps

Writing in response to reading gives children an opportunity to think more critically about events in a story and analyze why a character behaves in a certain way. For young writers, this response may take the form of "character snapshots," while older readers compose a "character journal."

Character Snapshots

Understanding a character's feelings and how those emotions drive the character's actions helps readers to think more deeply about a story. Character snapshots are an ideal response activity for helping children notice and record how characters evolve from the beginning of a book to the end.

To make a character snapshots page, divide a paper into three sections. Then read aloud a book featuring a character that clearly changes throughout the story. After reading the beginning, stop and ask students to record how that character is feeling and how they are acting. Then read to the middle of the book and invite students to create their second snapshot. Finally, finish the book and provide time for students to wrap up their final snapshot. Talk together about the character based on the students' work. Try Nikki Grimes' *Oh, Brother!*, where readers watch Xavier's character grow as he gets used to the idea of having a new stepbrother, and Gloria Whelan's *Friend on Freedom River*, where runaway slave Tyler changes his attitude toward Louis, who risks his life to row Tyler and his family to freedom.

Character Journals

When using a character journal, students walk in someone else's footsteps throughout a story, responding to unfolding events in their journals. Since this type of journal differs from typical journaling activities, model your responses to prompts like those suggested below. Using a picture book with a relatively short story line adds to the ease of modeling. Try *Armando and the Blue Tarp School* by Edith Hope Fine and Judith Pinkerton Josephson or *The Harmonica* by Tony Johnston to demonstrate thoughtful reactions. Post sample prompts on a classroom chart for easy reference:

- Who are you? Write a little about your life. Where do you live? How do your circumstances affect your life? What are your goals or dreams?
- How do you think knowing your story will affect the reader of this book?
- As you read, pick two or three problems the character faces. Thinking like the character, why do you respond to them the way that you do?
- After concluding the book, explain whether you would have reacted to various problems the same way the character did given the circumstances. Finally, explain how thinking like a character can help you better understand this story.

Titles that will pull intermediate-grade readers into lives from different cultures are *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis, *Little Leap Forward* by Guo Yue and Clare Farrow, or *Sahara Special* by Esmé Raji Codell.

Connecting with Stories through Drama

Children from the primary grades through intermediate grades welcome the opportunity to become actors, giving voice to characters in a favorite book they have just read. For our youngest readers, the process of retelling a familiar story is a comprehension booster. We found one of our favorite retelling activities, called "Paper Bag Theater," in Linda Hoyt's book *Revisit, Reflect, and Retell*.

Paper Bag Theater


After students have read or heard a tale such as *Mañana, Iguana* by Ann Whitford Paul, give each student a white paper lunch bag and a piece of white drawing paper. To begin, students illustrate two important settings from the story, one on each side of the lunch bag. Next, they draw, color, and cut out the main characters and any important "props" that they will need to retell the story. Then children orally rehearse their retelling. Once they've had an opportunity to practice, students may present the story to the class using their characters, props, and lunch bag "stage" to re-enact the tale.

Readers' Theater

Participating in readers' theater is another option to bring stories to life. One bonus of this form of response is that students read from a script rather than having to memorize lines. Thus, they bring their character to life through the expression they use as they read. In addition, props are kept to a minimum, which is a time saver. When you select a book to develop into a readers' theater script, keep these tips in mind:

- Choose a story that has an interesting plot and lively dialogue. For older readers, just a chapter with engaging dialogue could be enough for a short script.
- Look for stories with several parts to involve more children. One part is the narrator, who fills in enough of the story line between the characters' dialogue to keep the story flowing.
- Give students time to practice, practice, practice. This helps all students to shine, even those who might typically stumble over words. Every student is becoming a more fluent reader through this process.

Options for readers' theater scripts include multicultural folktales such as Eric A. Kimmel's *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* or *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe. Readers can also reenact key chapters in favorite novels such as *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry or Jerry Spinelli's memorable *Maniac Magee*. After your careful modeling and close monitoring, students can write their own scripts, following the preceding guidelines.

There is so much of value when students respond to reading through book-related conversations, writing, and dramatic retellings. Along with promoting books and the joys of reading, all students can improve their ability to interpret text thoughtfully and build their self-confidence and communication skills at the same time. 

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