

# Losing the Fear of Sharing Control: Starting a Reading Workshop

## **This We Believe Characteristics**

- *An inviting, supportive, and safe environment*
- *High expectations for all members of the learning community*
- *Students and teachers engaged in active learning*
- *Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory*
- *Multiple teaching and learning approaches that respond to their diversity*
- *Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning*

By Lesley Roessing

**W**e stood in the empty classroom. Lisa looked up at me. "I couldn't understand what I read last night," she said.

I looked at her, speechless. The class was reading a novel, and I wondered why Lisa had been failing the daily quizzes. These were genuine "right-there" questions, designed only to see if the students had read their nightly assignments.

*Of course, you do. You're a good student.* I bit back my thoughts.

"I did the reading both nights; really, I did. I just don't understand what I read."

I looked down at this little, trusting face. Goodness! This child expected me to teach her reading. Even worse, she *needed* me to be a reading teacher, not the literature teacher I considered myself, with degrees in English and comparative literatures, courses in literature, literary theory, speech and writing, and one lone course in Reading Across the Curriculum in my Secondary Education Masters program. I was here to teach eighth graders how to *appreciate* literature, not how to *read* it! I sighed; Lisa and her problem were not going to go away.

Then it dawned on me. I might not be trained as a reading teacher, but I was a *reader*. I thought about what *I* do as a reader. I connect the reading to my life, to other works, to what is going on in

the world; I question; I visualize what I am reading; I read between the lines and predict what is going to happen. Sometimes I even reread or grab a dictionary for clarity.

Lisa and I sat down, and I made a plan for her. The next day we met again. For two days I asked her to try various strategies.

The third day Lisa came to class. "I understood what I read last night, and I remember it!" That class period she passed the quiz and contributed to the group discussion.



Shanica enjoys *Maniac Magee* in the reading corner of her classroom.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LESLEY ROESSING

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*Lesley Roessing, a teacher-consultant for the PA Writing and Literature Project, is an eighth grade language arts teacher at Ridley Middle School, Ridley Park, Pennsylvania. E-mail: lroessing@comcast.net or Lesley\_roessing@ridleysd.k12.pa.us*

*Too close for comfort*, I thought. I realized that Lisa was motivated enough to tell me that she could not comprehend the text. How many more were just coasting along on class discussions? There was no way to avoid it; I needed to become a reading teacher. That summer I enrolled in the Pennsylvania Writing & Literature Project's Literature Institute. There, I read the masters, Atwell to Zimmerman, and planned for next year.

## The Control Issue

Reflecting on my teaching style, I realized that the way I taught gave me control of the classroom and control of my students. Control was safe; I knew what I was doing, but were the students learning? Obviously, not all of them. I resolved that I would read and apply the insights recorded by others—that I would work out a feasible plan that addressed teaching the state standards and fit into a middle school curriculum. After reading and reading, I vowed to change my classroom into a true reading-writing workshop so that my students could improve their reading skills and learn to love reading and literature as much as they loved writing. As I had previously done with writing (Roessing, 2004), I would trade total *control* for some student *choice*.

I began my journey to release this total control of my classes' reading, to share responsibilities with my students. But, I needed a plan. I teach two eighth grade heterogeneous language arts classes in a 6–8 middle school. For the past 15 years, my literature curriculum had been comprised of a mixture of short stories, poetry, folk tales, a play, and two or three novels. I interspersed magazine and news articles and essays, typically as background for the novel units or as examples for expository writing. In my language arts classes, all the students read the same literary works at the same time and for the same amount of time, all of which I controlled. The only choice the students had was their independent reading 25 minutes per night, and I did give them a (limited) choice of responses.

Did my students like reading? Not especially, although a few did mention that they particularly liked one chapter in *Rifles for Watie*. Was I in control of what we did and what we thought in my classroom? You bet! And everything moved along smoothly. I assumed that everyone was reading, and that, if I force-fed enough culture and showed them how to find the answers, one day

they would all love to read as much as I do and would read as well as I do.

Then came Lisa. And there was Richard, who admitted he never even opened the book; he just listened in class and scored the highest grade on the test "since the teacher did such a thorough job of explaining the book and answering her own questions." There was Alan, who did not even pretend to read, who said he would rather go to summer school where they did not have to read so much. And there were the students who insisted that they loved to read but stopped so that they would not have to read my books.

The depth of my problem suddenly struck me when I read a quote from one of Wilhelm's students. Randy defined *school* as "a bunch of crap that doesn't mean anything ... you just do a bunch of crap for someone else [the teacher] so you can get through the year" (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 12). That sentence really got to me. It affected me, not just because it was true, but because I had ambivalent feelings about it. First of all, I could see many of *my* students saying the same thing, and, second, I really thought that my "crap" was important. I worried that my students needed my crap—that they could not become educated without it. And that is when I knew I needed to change.

First of all, where did I get this idea that I needed to control all aspects of my classroom, especially reading, afraid that students would not learn what they needed, that the product would not remain sacred? Through writing workshops, I had somewhat successfully turned over responsibility of writing to the students. But reading was a different matter. Thinking about my classes with this new insight, I felt the same as Atwell (1998), who said that after her "writing revolution" she realized, "Writing was something that students did, and literature was something I did to students" (p. 21). I was determined to empower my readers and move toward a reader-centered classroom. I decided that I would learn to share control of reading: *what* (choice of literature read), *how* (movement from a variety of shared readings to book club readings to individual reading experiences), *where* (a realistic combination of reading workshop and at-home reading time), and, most importantly, *why* (validation of reader response). I began to agree with Wilhelm (1997) when he wrote, "Creating this new environment [would be] a new and difficult direction to move in as a teacher" (p. 11).

## My Plan

The first step was admitting that my teaching methods had become ineffective. Students needed to read better, and they needed to be able to read well to enjoy reading. Therefore, if my goal was to have students love reading as much as I do, they needed to read as I do. However, as pointed out by Purves, Rogers, and Soter (1995), "We found an assumption that reflects our (teachers of secondary English) own experiences rather than that of the contemporary adolescent student: 'I love literature, and 'I managed to 'get hooked on it,' and somehow, so will they; 'I will help them get there. The teacher is still the director" (p. 21). No one directs *my* reading; no one tells me what to read, although I appreciate recommendations, and I find that I expand my tastes when I am introduced to diverse types of literature—especially when the introduction serves a purpose. I love to talk about my reading with people who are reading the same book and also with those who are not reading that same book (or article or poem). And I appreciate time to read. My students needed the same—recommendations not requirements, peers with whom to discuss their readings, and time to read.

I recognized that, in my role as teacher, I could not break my control abruptly—not for my benefit, but for my students, I needed to prepare them for the transfer of power. I had to give them the tools they would need to assume control of their own reading and learning. An analogy came to mind. When I stopped smoking, I went "cold turkey," which successfully broke my habit but was not effective for my weight; I should have planned for a substitution for the cigarettes (other than food). In the same way, I could not just say, "Go forth and read. See you in June." Giles (1993) (cited in Spiegel 1996) wrote, "Teacher trust of students does not mean teacher abandonment of students" (p. 335). I needed to train my readers with demonstrations and strategy lessons. Purvis, Rogers, and Soter (1995) explained Rosenblatt's *Literature as Explorations*, writing, "Exploration doesn't mean being lost in the woods. It means finding out about new territory for the explorer. The students are the explorers, but they need guides who help them" (p. 77). I needed to become a guide, and my lessons would become their maps, assessments their compasses.

I decided that the most effective journey toward independence would be to begin with shared readings—short stories, poetry, and informational

articles first, then a novel. Rief (1992), a strong proponent of reading workshop, advocated differentiated reading experiences, "We read fine literature in many different ways: kids choose their own books, we read different books to each other, and sometimes we read the same books together. I think we need to get at reading from all those angles" (p. 101).

## Starting the Path Toward Independence—Shared Readings

In September my classes began reading short stories so that I could teach reading strategies using writings that we could read during class time and discuss *together*. I introduced each new concept with an approximately 25-minute lesson that included an example, guided practice, and independent practice and repeated the same strategy over the next week or so with 10-minute follow-up lessons. Most of these initial concepts focused on reading strategies, such as questioning, visualization, inferring, and connecting, and others focused on literary elements and classroom procedures (collectively referred to as "focus lessons"). We read these stories in varied ways: I read aloud, modeling strategies; students read aloud, using Reader's Theater techniques; and students read silently. The method depended on the story and the students' reading proficiencies. I know that student reading improves most by reading, but I felt it was important to model reading and strategies. Reading aloud is primary, especially in training readers.

Each class began with a focus lesson. Next, we would read the story, and we would discuss the story, focusing on the strategy or literary element being taught or practiced, scaffolding on past lessons. Many times, when I read aloud, we would practice a strategy, questioning or inferring as we read. When students were more practiced in the strategy, they would read silently, using sticky notes to mark strategies used.

After introducing a variety of reading strategies and skills through shared stories and, later, factual magazine and news articles, my classes segued into a shared novel. One aspect of control I retained was in choosing shared readings that I really like, that I am passionate about. As Rief (1992) pointed out in *Seeking Diversity*, "If I am not passionate about the book and what it says, I will not pass on that love of learning from reading" (p. 105). On the other hand, I chose stories and books that we

read together based on the interests of adolescents and relevance of the texts to my students and their lives. "Selection ... is a significant factor in engaging many adolescents (and any reader) in what they read" (Purves, Rogers, & Soter, 1995, p. 24). There were three reasons for my choice of novel: I had enough class sets (practicality); it was a story that most, if not all, would find interesting and that a heterogeneous class could read with some assistance; and the novel lent itself to practicing such reading strategies as questioning, inference, and visualization. I knew it was important to choose a novel that everyone could and would read and that would generate discussion and even debate.

### Continuing the Path—Book Clubs

After these shared readings, the students were ready for the next step: Book Clubs (also known as literature circles (see Daniels, 2002; Latendresse, 2004)). For this experience I looked for books for which I could round up five or six copies of enough novels of different genres and topics, and diverse reading levels to give choice to every group—class novels from years past, novels of which I had duplicates and the library had a copy or two, novels from the summer reading list donated by students.

The students looked through the offered selection of novels and chose their books and, thereby, formed their book clubs. Lessons associated with this experience focused on choosing appropriate books by reading level and interest, working cooperatively in a group, and other club management issues. We had practiced literature circles a few times for our discussions of the shared novel so the class was familiar with meeting in this way.

I explained that in book clubs the members would first meet and decide how they were going to read the book. They would meet every other day to discuss their reading and would be given time for in-class reading. I gave them an approximate finish date, and the club was to decide how many pages to read for each meeting. It was left up to the discretion of the members to make such decisions as to whether to read more or less over weekends; take other activities in consideration; start slowly and, as they became familiar with the plot, move more quickly; to co-operatively prepare their schedule. It was also within their jurisdiction to plan the in-class reading time. They could

choose to read aloud to each other or read silently or work on response journals during that stage.

Instead of assigning roles to each student, I deviated from Daniels' (2002) original model by requiring each student to bring to each club meeting a discussion point, a quote or passage to share aloud, an analysis of a new vocabulary word, and one question, prediction, or connection made with the text. That way, absenteeism did not leave a gap in the discussion, a problem I had discovered in past years of literature circles. I found that most of the students kept up with the readings and that the few who did not still benefited from the discussions, were "caught up" by the meetings, and wanted to read for the next session so that they could participate (and not incur the disdain of the peers who took this deficit personally since it now affected them). At times, members of groups met with other groups to compare characters, settings, plots, or writing styles.

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After students finished reading and discussing the book, each book club prepared a presentation of their choice to share the book with the rest of the class. We had quite a variety—brown bag projects, readers' theater, skits, interactive class activities, and a Jerry Springer talk show. These gave my other students ideas of other books to read during the next stage: individual reading.

### The End of the Path: Individual Reading

Now my classes were ready for individual reading—what some might refer to as "reading workshop," although I felt that we had been workshopping all year. Atwell (1998) defined workshop as "student-centered in the sense that individuals' rigorous pursuit of their ideas is the primary content of the course" (p. 71). By this point I had introduced and they had practiced all the reading strategies and were familiar with literary elements as well as a variety of writers'

crafts. They had read literature chosen by me and self-chosen literature; students had read aloud and read silently; they had discussed writings in large groups and in small groups; they had reflected together and individually. They had also practiced a variety of reading responses. The classes had been trained toward independence. Also, beginning with shared readings and progressing to book clubs and now to individual reading, each class had built a reading *community*. In this way, by the time students were reading self-chosen texts, they did not feel they were reading alone; they were reading separately but not in isolation—individually, not independently.

As the first step in preparation for the individual readings, I thought about my classroom library. I realized that, since many of the books had belonged to my own children, variety was missing; for example, there were few horror or sports books. I needed to think of the interests and reading levels of all of my students and offer a variety of reading levels, lengths, and genres. I ordered from book clubs, hit the second-hand bookstores, and, during the year, asked my students for donations of books. Well into reading workshop, students would send me to the bookstore on weekends with a list.

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A valuable activity was having the students rearrange the classroom library. For years my library of approximately 400 books was organized by author. The books sat there, year after year. After teaching genre, I distributed books to my classes and asked students to read the covers, look through the books, talk to others, and decide on genre classifications for their books. Productive discussion among students flourished. There were discussions about genre but also discussions about authors and books read. Short book talks spontaneously took place. We then re-shelved the books by genre, labeling each shelf: Horror, Mystery, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Historic Fiction, Biography & Memoir, Folktales, Multicultural Lit, Adolescent Life, Romance, Sports, Classics, Drama, Poetry, Short Stories, Nonfiction. Almost immediately,

books started flying off the shelves. The students felt more secure; a boy who wanted a sports book did not fear ending up with a romance and did not mind trying a new author since he knew that the book would be somehow related to sports. Mystery readers tried Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes, authors above their usual pleasure reading level. And, if students were looking for particular authors or books, they usually knew under which genre to find them.

Next, the students needed to be prepared for individual choices. Lessons on choosing books for a variety of interests and purposes, on authors, and on varying genres for varying purposes, as well as examples of book talks given by our librarian, students, and me helped my students to “cross the bridge” to independence. Natalie said, “Over this year ... I also read books suggested by other students, which I have never really done before.”

### **Individual Reading Workshop Begins**

I had explained the process of reading individually as opposed to book club reading. I explained the concept, and the students knew that they could choose what to read and where in the classroom to read; they could get comfortable and would be reading for at least a half hour per workshop class, which was a little more time than they usually had in book clubs. Finally, I held my breath, and we began. I presented my focus lesson (nothing new there) and told the students that they could now go to places in the classroom where they could comfortably read. I looked on in amazement as Heather took out her fleece blanket and headed to lean against the back wall, Tommy pulled out a Spiderman pillow and sat *under* a table, and a few students sat on the carpeted floor in various parts of the classroom; many stayed seated at desks but moved, turning their desks sideways and even backwards.

*They are making a mockery of this, I thought pessimistically. What have I done? I'll never get control back.*

Then they got out their books and read—each of them, all of them! I got my file folder with overlapping individual 3"x5" cards taped inside and a pen and started making the rounds of conferences, asking them about their choices, whistling inside but looking like all this was expected. I felt like Sally Fields at the Oscars saying, “You like me! You really like me!” But, in this case, referring to reading workshop.

And, in each reading workshop they read. And in each reading workshop until the end of the year, I was amazed and thrilled. I would like to give an example of the students who did not read and the brilliant plans I used to get them to read, but the simple truth is that, this year, everyone read in class every time. Surely, not all students always remembered to bring their books, but they were trained to go to our bookshelves and get a book of short stories or poetry, or even a magazine, for the period. When students finished their books, they went to the bookshelves for another—with some conferring with me or other students—or to our school library. By March or April, readers usually knew what book they wanted next.

I often tell the story of when my two classes got off the same schedule. My second class of the day walked in with their books, and I said, "It can't be your reading day; the last class said it was their reading workshop. I must have forgotten to change the workshop signs on the hall bulletin board last night." They started laughing. One student said, "Period 3 told us they lied to you. It was their writing day, but they wanted to read." Lying to read? I didn't know whether to be angry or proud.

## Scheduling Workshops

During the earlier time of shared readings (short stories and our novel), I had also taught writing with shared writings. Our school is on a modified block schedule: Language arts classes are 85-minute periods, all year. Therefore, usually this writing was accomplished during the half period before or after reading or on days after a reading was finished. As the classes moved to book clubs, I began alternating reading and writing workshop days, posting a sign outside my door to remind students. Typically, I began class with a non-workshop lesson such as language study or standardized test-taking skills. I started workshop time with a 15-minute lesson (including the reading aloud of a picture book, poem, excerpt, or continuing story, the focus lesson itself, and guided practice of the skill or strategy presented or reviewed in the lesson). After individual reading time of 30 to 35 minutes, we ended with a 10-minute share, discussion, and, at times, a book talk. Thirty minutes, in my estimation, was the perfect length for reading and writing some responses. As the students read, I circulated, conferring with about one-third of the class for about 15 minutes; the remainder of the time I read. Experts differ, but I think it is important for

students to see me, as a model, read and react to my reading—laughing, crying, gasping. I also talked about my books during share time and gave book talks. I read a range of adolescent books, "adult" books, and books which my students lent me. Students also borrowed the books I was reading. There were some books that I was still in line for at the end of the year. I was part of the community, and it felt good. I got to know my students as readers and could, therefore, recommend books. They got to know me as a reader and also recommended books.

To improve reading, reading should occur daily. For homework during workshop, students read for 25 minutes each night, five nights a week, and wrote journal entries, sharing their at-home reading experiences.

## Student Response

Through my personal professional development, I became familiar with Rosenblatt's reader-response theory. As Wilhelm (1997) explained it, "reading is a 'transaction' in which the reader and the text converse together in a particular situation to make meaning." (p. 19) In other words, readers construct meaning from their transactions with the text. Teaching that focuses on finding the correct answers or interpretations or teacher meaning is efferent or informational reading, and to teach students to experience, enjoy, and own literature, or, as she would say, read aesthetically, I must not even try to control the reader's response. Gone were my lists of questions, the lists of topics that must be covered. I let readers engage with the text on their own playing fields. How can literature be life changing and lead to self-discovery, as it has for me, if I am inserting my life and values between the literature and the self?

As I thought back, I wondered why I was afraid that my students would miss the "right answer," the correct interpretation of the text. I remember telling a friend that my problem with literature circles was that, even though the students were talking about the reading and were on task, I was afraid that they might not catch *everything*. She told me to think of my book clubs; did we cover everything when we discussed the book? Exactly who is the arbiter of "everything" (And why did I think it was me)? Where did the reader fit in?

I found, in my search, that I was not alone. In *The Literature Workshop*, Blau (2003) pointed out,

As a profession, we have for the past twenty or twenty-five years tended to teach composition in ways that are process-oriented, learning-centered (or learner-centered) and collaborative while we have continued ... to teach literature in a way that has been product-oriented ... [and] text-centered. (p. 3)

Because of this, students feel that they have to search for not *a* but *the* meaning in a text. They surmise that only teachers have the meaning; unfortunately, many teachers also feel this way. But I am learning that there are many meanings and that "literary meaning is largely an individual engagement, that it results from the creative effort of a reader working from a text." (Probst, 1994, p. 41). Probst further explains,

We must try, first of all, to *respect the natural influence of literary texts upon readers* [emphasis in the original]. He continues, "Our first task, if we accept that position, is to make sure that the literature has the chance to work its effect on the readers, to make sure we don't get in the way, substituting other matters for that vital influence. ... Implicit within this vision of literary experience is a *respect for the uniqueness of the individual reader and the integrity of the individual reading*. We have tended in the past—influenced strongly by the professional tendency to insist upon the rightness of certain readings, upon conformity to established interpretations—to seek consensus in the classroom. (pp. 37–38)

Probst also suggested that teachers guide the design of instruction to incorporate certain principles, such as "invite response to the text," "give students time to shape and take confidence in their responses," and "let the talk build and grow as naturally as possible, encouraging an organic flow for the discussion," among others (p. 42).

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However, here again I gradually loosened control of the students. They needed to be guided to make valid responses. Rosenblatt (1978) defined "valid" response as "an interpretation [which] is not contradicted by any element of the text, and ... nothing is projected for which there is no verbal basis" (p. 115). Even though readers are free

to make unique and personal responses, they need to base their interpretations on their understanding of the actual text. I taught students a variety of journaling techniques throughout the year so that they were responding in diverse ways. By the end of the year, most students had identified their favorite type of response or modified their journaling to fit their particular reading.

## **Student Assessment and Evaluation**

The purpose of assessment is to judge students' learning and, practically, the quantity and quality of work accomplished. Assessment also makes students accountable and provides feedback to both the students and their parents. I attempted to design a system that (a) would balance an evaluation of both student effort and achievement, (b) was based on observation (by me) and performance (by the student), and (c) would not penalize any student risk-taking in either choosing lengthy books or trying and abandoning books that were not right for them. Readers were required to keep a reading log with the date, literary work, and pages read, along with a response journal that I checked weekly. I expected daily entries in the log, and the journal was to contain responses or reflections from all reading. One student said, "[The requirement] forced me to read each night."

Assessment was based on quantity and quality of the journal responses and by a demonstration of quantity, quality, and genre variety in reading evidenced by log entries and a genre record card that listed 19 genres plus a personal choice category. This card was divided into genres and, when students finished books, they would place a star sticker in the appropriate box. I was not really looking for quantity of stars (I knew from the log that the lengths of the books varied), but for stars in a variety of boxes. On the other side of the card, students listed each literary work read, genre, dates began and finished (or abandoned), appraisal of the reading level for them, and if they wrote a book review or gave a book talk, one being required each quarter. In celebration of finishing a book, students were also encouraged to write the titles of their books and their names on laminated posters of library books hung on the back wall of the classroom. By June 1, the readers had filled in all 300 books listed on the posters and were clamoring for me to buy another set of posters, ignoring the fact that the school year was ending.

Students were also assessed by their preparation for and participation in workshops, both by the actual time spent reading and the discussions following, neither of which turned out to be a problem. The marking-period grade also reflected writings (based on the shared readings) or projects (book club) created in response to readings and book talks or written book reviews (based on individual reading), all of which were collected into a binder for other readers to peruse for book suggestions and some of which were submitted to magazines. The evaluation process ended with students' self-evaluation of themselves as readers. These diverse criteria for the assessment of my students' learning also served to assist me in evaluating the success of my workshop program.

### Self-Assessment of Reading Workshop: Did It Work?

The reading workshop incorporates what Hansen called the "four key elements" of learning environments: time, ownership, response, and community, which Keene noted as being timeless, relevant to the creation of meaningful environments, and critical to the passionate engagement of learning (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997, p. 7).

During this first year, I observed that students read more, read better, and read willingly. When asked to comment on how their reading changed this year and on reading workshop in general, my students observed these same details about themselves. However, I found it interesting that different students focused their comments on different components of the workshop:

Chris wrote, "My reading has changed a lot since the beginning of the year. In the beginning of the year I absolutely hated to read. By the end of the year I started to like reading. I started reading books that I usually would not have read before like *Murder on the Orient Express*. Usually I wouldn't read such a long book. I think this was the first book I read that had more than 200 pages. I was proud of myself." [Chris read 14 novels in nine genres]

John wrote: that "I thought reading workshop was a good idea for the school to use. It made me a better reader, and it was cool how we were able to move around the class and find a comfortable place to read." [John read 10 books in seven genres and sat in four different places]

Lauren wrote: "My reading has changed a lot this year. Reading workshop made me want to read more, and it taught me strategies that I used during reading. I used to read close to nothing but now I like it a lot." She continued, "Reading workshop was my favorite thing this year in language arts. I liked it so much because I really enjoy reading now and it really got me into reading more than I ever have before. I enjoyed the lessons in the beginning most of the time too." [Lauren read 17 novels in six genres]

But I think that Emily made one of the most important points:

"I like reading workshop because everyone can read at their own pace and not worry about [it]."

My students chose how they read and how they responded. And what about me? I read right along with them, sharing my revelations—guiding and guided.

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