



Readers Theatre—Take Another Look—It’s More Than Fluency Instruction

Marlene E. McKay, University of Alberta

ABSTRACT


This article argues that in spite of its benefits and value, there appears to be little attention given to the use of readers theatre or to its connection to theories of learning or reading. The author takes a “second look” at readers theatre and highlights its value in an attempt to reignite the excitement that it brings to reading. Social constructivism, Cambourne’s (1988) conditions for learning, and reader response theory are examined as the theoretical underpinnings. Using readers theatre increases comprehension, literature appreciation, and student engagement. Evidence is provided to support the claim that readers theatre is not only enjoyable for students, but it is also a sound pedagogy that results in more than improved fluency as reflected in the sample of student thoughts prefacing the next section.

Readers Theatre—Reading, Drama, and Much More Than Fluency Instruction

“I was very excited to perform our group reading to show the class the ideas we came up with in our interpretation of the literature. I felt very connected to the story and the characters.” I couldn’t wait to come to class that day to watch the other groups to see what their stories were all about and how they would be performing them.”

“I normally hate presenting in front of peers, but I was more focused on the book than on the audience and I could really feel the book come alive.”

“I found myself totally engrossed in stories that I otherwise would not have been interested in.”

hese comments clearly indicate that for these students readers theatre blurs the boundaries between reading and drama, engages students in text, and provides opportunities for literacy learning that go beyond fluency instruction.

During my twenty years as a classroom teacher and twelve years as an English Language Arts consultant, I have introduced readers theatre into many classrooms with students of different ages, grades, and reading abilities. The response is always positive, not only because it is engaging, but also because with its use, reading comprehension, motivation, appreciation of literature, and confidence in reading performance improves.

With such a track record of success, imagine my surprise when I recently introduced readers theatre to a university undergraduate English language arts class that I was teaching and discovered that in a class of twenty-eight students only three had previous experience with readers theatre. In class, I briefly introduced the concept of readers theatre and then provided each group with multiple copies of a children's book. Each group planned and presented its book as a readers theatre to the rest of the class. Following the presentations, we engaged in reflection and discussion about the process. The students were surprised by the variety of reading strategies they had used, their engagement in the text, and the amount of discussion and negotiation that occurred in their group.

These preservice teachers were left excited, enthused, and confident about using readers theatre with students of any age, while I was left to ponder why they had never experienced it, either in their own schooling or in classrooms that they had visited as education students. Has readers theatre been forgotten or neglected in favour of other programs or initiatives that bombard our schools today?

In spite of the success of readers theatre, as evidenced through my own experience and as documented by other teachers and researchers, there appears to be little attention given to its use, its benefits to readers, or its connection to theories of learning and reading. Although definitions of fluency vary, it is agreed that fluency is an important aspect of the reading process. Readers theatre is often cited as enhancing reading fluency. In textbooks of language arts teaching, readers theatre seldom receives more than a few brief lines: sometimes in the category of drama or, as a way to practice oral reading. Readers theatre, a dramatic, hands-on reading activity, offers much more to young readers (Corcoran & Davies, 2005; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Peebles, 2007). Little has been written about readers theatre and its connection to other very relevant language and reading theories.

I have been motivated both by the reactions of the undergraduate students and my observations of the continued success of readers theatre in classrooms, to share my beliefs about what it has to offer. My purpose in this article is to reexamine readers theatre. What can it do for students other than increase their fluency? What theoretical underpinnings contribute to its success?

I hope this discussion of readers theatre resonates with all teachers and ignites the excitement for what it can bring to reading. For those who already use readers theatre and are confident in their knowledge of teaching reading and literacy, this article will confirm and strengthen their beliefs. For those who use readers theatre because the children enjoy it, this article will contribute to an increased theoretical understanding of why it works and is so enjoyable. For those teachers who have never tried readers theatre, I sincerely hope this article will provide authentic reasons that will entice them to try it in their classrooms.

In this article I will suggest some practical steps that have worked for me when introducing readers theatre in the classroom. I will summarize and briefly share the pedagogical underpinnings of readers theatre in relation to two theories that have helped to guide my practice as a teacher, consultant, and, most recently, as a university instructor. I will examine readers theatre from the underlying paradigm of most current language arts curriculum, that of social constructivism. Two theories, congruent with social constructivism, that connect to the success of readers theatre are Cambourne's (1995, 1988) eight conditions for learning and Rosenblatt's (1978) reader response theory. Through the lenses of these two theories, coupled with my personal experiences, I will examine the benefits of using readers theatre which include increased motivation and engagement, heightened appreciation for literature, and increased transaction and negotiation with text.

What Is Readers Theatre and How Is it Introduced in the Classroom?

Readers theatre is an inclusive, literature-based learning process involving readers of all abilities. It is a form of drama that emphasizes the dramatic portrayal of various roles and characters through reading. Readers theatre differs from other dramatic forms because it requires few, if any, props or costumes, and the performers are not required to memorize a script. Typically, readers sit on stools in front of the audience with a book or script in hand and present a dramatized reading. There are many different approaches to introducing and teaching readers theatre. Some include the

use of ready-made scripts, while others use literature or expository text and adapt the text to a script. However, most agree that readers theatre is a way of performing a text through reading.

Readers theatre in the classroom is usually not an end in and of itself. It is a means to engage learners in meaningful reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing. It involves cooperation and collaboration among students. Although the performance is important, active engagement in literacy learning occurs during the process leading up to the performance.

There is no “right way” to introduce readers theatre. However, as an example, I would like to present a brief description of how I introduce readers theatre in a classroom. This brief summary may provide a better understanding of how it can be implemented. This introduction is included for those educators who have little or no previous experience with this pedagogical approach.

Summary of steps for introducing readers theatre:

- A. Modelling: (whole class or small group)
 - 1. Find a suitable script or text for readers theatre.
 - 2. Read the text aloud to the students so that they understand the story.

- B. Planning for a Presentation:
 - 1. Discuss the characters in the script or story.
 - 2. Chart the characters.
 - 3. Decide on narration roles and characters.
 - 4. Assign roles to students or allow students to choose roles.
 - 5. Practice the role or character.
 - 6. Change roles and characters and practice (optional).

- C. Presenting and Sharing:
 - 1. Decide on any minimal props or costumes that may be used in the presentation (optional).
 - 2. Practice, practice, practice.
 - 3. Provide feedback for improvement.
 - 4. Perform.
 - 5. Celebrate and reflect.

Following this introductory activity, students engage in a process of planning, preparing, and presenting in a wide variety of ways, with a myriad of student choice in the selection of materials, the portrayal of roles, and the group presentations. Children can read scripts, adapt literature or content area text, or write their own scripts. The degree of support and scaffolding depends on the task, the text, and the students. There are some wonderful resources available to teachers who wish to learn more about readers theatre. The possibilities for readers theatre as a pedagogical tool are endless.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Classroom Research

I have been privileged to work with many committed teachers who sincerely want to make reading a rich and meaningful experience for students that will lead to lifelong learning and engagement with a variety of texts. The undergraduate students I taught have asked the same kinds of questions that classroom teachers ask: “Why is this approach a useful strategy or idea? What benefit will this activity have for the students in my class?” Providing theoretical support for good teaching strategies helps the teachers who grapple with such questions to make thoughtful decisions.

Most contemporary discussions of literacy education are influenced by a social constructivist theory of learning. The social constructivist theory of learning, credited to Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978) posits that learners create or construct knowledge rather than simply receive it from others. A constructivist classroom is based on instruction and assessment in an environment that promotes the construction of student knowledge rather than one dominated by the transmission of teacher knowledge. Vygotsky has shown that by providing interactive activities for students, they have a structure for their own independent thinking. Cambourne’s (1988) conditions for learning are congruent with the social constructivist theory. It provides a framework to compare the attributes of readers theatre with relevant learning theory.

Cambourne’s Eight Conditions for Learning

Cambourne (1995, 1988) describes eight conditions necessary for learning: immersion, demonstration, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximations, response, and engagement. These conditions are based on years of research in

children’s literacy learning in natural settings. Cambourne observed children learning and applying complex knowledge and skills in the everyday world. These observations lead to eight conditions of learning. Cambourne uses these eight conditions for literacy learning to develop a theory of learning.

The conditions affect and are affected by each other. Together, they support literacy learning. In Table 1, I briefly describe Cambourne’s conditions for learning and align each with aspects of readers theatre to illustrate sound pedagogical reasons for using it.

Table 1:
Cambourne’s (1988) Theory of Conditions for Learning Applied to Readers Theatre

CAMBOURNE’S CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING	APPLICATION TO READERS THEATRE
<p>Immersion: It is important for students to be immersed in language and text of all kinds.</p>	<p>In the process of planning, preparing, and performing readers theatre, students are immersed in literacy rich language as well as in text.</p>
<p>Demonstration: Students need to see, hear, or experience what literacy learning looks like, sounds like, and feels like. Modelling is a key element of learning.</p>	<p>The teacher demonstrates the process of planning and preparing for readers theatre and models fluent and dramatic reading. This demonstration and modeling helps students to understand what both good reading and readers theatre looks and sounds like.</p>
<p>Expectations: Learners often achieve what they are expected to achieve. It is important for learners to receive messages that tell them they can be successful.</p>	<p>Because students are expected to prepare and present the readers theatre, they realize that there is an expectation of success. Learners are successful because they know that the expectation is that they will succeed.</p>

Responsibility: Learners need opportunities to make decisions about their own learning. Increased student responsibility improves the likelihood of learning engagement.

When students are given the opportunity to plan and prepare a readers theatre presentation, they are accepting responsibility for that presentation and the learning that takes place during the process. They become responsible for the interpretations of the literature and for the organization of the reading.

Employment: Learners need to practise what they are learning. As students practise, they gain control over their learning. They also gain increased confidence.

Practice is an essential component of readers theatre. Students are required to practise various roles and characters. This practise results in students reading with better understanding of the text, as well as, increased confidence and competence.

Approximations: Learners need opportunities to try things out, to make mistakes in the process of learning, and to recognize that the mistakes help them to improve their approximations.

During the preparation and practising of readers theatre, students support each other in trying out various roles and characters.

Response: Feedback is important for learning, growth, and improvement. The feedback needs to be specific, timely, and nonthreatening.

Feedback is a part of the readers theatre preparation process. Teacher and student feedback supports the students’ reading, group work, and interpretations.

Engagement: Engagement is the critical condition for learning. Engagement occurs when learners believe that they are capable and likely to engage in whatever is being demonstrated.

The conditions of engagement apply in the preparations and performances. Performing makes the planning and the practice authentic because it is for a real audience and purpose. Students feel

Learners are also more likely to be engaged if the demonstrations are given by those they trust and anxiety is minimized.

safe because they are supported by their group. They also feel safe because they do not have to rely on memorization, can read the text, and have practised with feedback. Students have a choice about what they read and how they will perform the text. Choice is a key component of engagement.

Cambourne's (1988) conditions for learning are one of the theoretical underpinnings that contribute to the success of readers theatre. These essential learning conditions are inherent in its planning, preparation, and presentation.

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory provides the second theoretical underpinning for readers theatre. The reader is crucial to the construction of meaning and to the literacy experience. The connection between the reader and the text is the foundation of reader response theory. "The relation between reader and text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 16). Rosenblatt suggests that reading is a transactional, recursive process involving the reader and the text. The reader brings past knowledge and experiences to the text and uses these to support understanding. Personal feelings, ideas, and attitudes influence the meaning-making process involved in reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). In the process of planning, preparing, and presenting readers theatre, readers make meaning based on their personal experiences, prior knowledge, and their negotiations with others about the text.

The experience of readers theatre involves readers actively engaging in transaction of text as well as discussions about the text. This engagement in meaning making helps the readers enhance and deepen their understating of the text and of themselves as readers. I have observed this time and again as I watch readers plan and prepare for readers theatre. According to Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987), "Reading changes readers, they know more when they finish reading than when they started, and they know more about the reading process when they come to the end

of what they are reading than they did at the beginning” (p. 20). Reading is both an active and a language process. Readers and authors have knowledge of language and both the reader and the author are active in constructing meaning. In preparing for readers theatre, readers are transacting with the text as well as interacting with others about the text. The text or the written material is the medium through which the reader and the author “transact.” This transaction between reader and author can result in significant changes to the reader.

Reading is a language process that involves the communication of ideas through syntactic and semantic systems. As children read, respond, and discuss with others while preparing for readers theatre, they explore the language of the text as well as express their own ideas and feelings through language. As a result, their language becomes more complex and sophisticated.

Social Interaction and Engagement

The interaction of young readers with others while interacting with text, as experienced in preparing for readers theatre, provides the frames and supports for independent thinking. The concept of interaction in social environments is congruent with Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development that suggests that students need guided practice in social situations to increase independent learning.

I prefer to use authentic children’s literature and to have students read, respond, and negotiate their way through the text to prepare it as a script. Calkins (2001) suggests that the teaching of comprehension through the use of children’s literature should be started in the very early grades. She advocates the importance of reading and talking about literature in the context of the classroom community and claims that literature can help us to understand ourselves and others and to “escape the boundaries of ourselves” (p. 14). Utilizing student reading and discussion of literature when planning readers theatre is exactly the kind of reading and talking that Calkins advocates. Children need to read and talk about books within the social context of the classroom for intellectual, as well as, personal reasons. As children discuss, negotiate, and plan readers theatre they are engaged in listening, understanding, inferring, and responding, all hallmarks of comprehension.

Calkin’s notion that enjoyment increases when reading is a social activity is confirmed by watching readers theatre in action. As I observed the undergraduate students socially and actively engaged in preparing for readers theatre, they enthusiastically reported an increased enjoyment of their chosen book as well as increased

enjoyment of the books that other groups had selected. When using literature in the readers theatre context, we can make reading matter for our students, and when reading matters, students are more likely to read.

Readers theatre is a solid way to promote student discussion about text in a meaningful, purposeful manner, regardless of the age or grade of the students. The engaged discussion in many classrooms, including the lively discussion that occurred in my undergraduate class as they negotiated their way to a presentation, is congruent with Allington and Stayter's (1991) observations of readers theatre in a heterogeneous grade seven class. The student discussions in this particular class, as in all the classes using readers theatre that I have observed, centered on interpreting and understanding various aspects of the text. Allington and Stayter note that students discuss their thoughts, ideas, and experiences, and critically examine the text to construct and reconstruct meaning over time.

The skills and positive attitudes developed by readers in preparing for readers theatre are important to transfer to independent reading, thereby increasing their proficiency. As Allington and Stayter (1991) suggest, the ultimate goal is for reading to be independent and for readers to actively engage in constructing meaning through critical thinking and analysis. We want readers to "lose themselves" in text and to find pleasure and gain information from their reading. Instructional techniques and methods, such as readers theatre, require a clear purpose based upon construction of meaning. Although readers theatre leads to an oral performance, instruction and preparation are based on making meaning of the text, thus enhancing student interaction with text and comprehension.

Classroom Research on Readers Theatre

Recent articles written by educators who have explored the merits of readers theatre for more than fluency development, report increased student enthusiasm for reading as well as increased comprehension. The following examples illustrate the success of readers theatre with respect to comprehension, engagement, and enjoyment for a range of readers in a variety of classrooms.

Griffith and Rasinski, (2004) observed substantial improvement in the reading ability of grade four students following an initial ten-week period, during which readers theatre was consistently used as a part of classroom reading instruction. Griffith was struggling to find a way to increase the reading comprehension of her grade four students. She understood, as do most teachers, that the goal for her fourth

graders was to think critically about the text being read silently. She felt, however, that students were missing something between the decoding of the text and thinking critically about it. After learning about readers theatre and its success for others, she decided to incorporate it into her reading instruction.

Griffith remarked, “I also saw deepened interest in reading. I began to see expressiveness emerge from the children’s oral reading during the guided reading block. I was actually seeing reading redefined and reading interest renewed by the students in my class” (p. 130).

Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/99) agree that, “readers theatre is a great way to develop children’s meaningful and fluent reading” (p. 326). These researchers conducted an exploration of readers theatre in two second grade classrooms within inner city school districts. Children in these, as in many, classes, displayed a wide range of reading abilities. The process used in their teaching is similar to what was described in the introduction of this article, and used in the class with the undergraduate students.

Martinez, Roser, and Strecker conclude that improvement of comprehension occurred because the children had opportunities to become the characters and to understand the characters’ feelings within scripted situations. Oral interpretation of the stories benefited students’ insights into literature as readers and listeners.

These same conclusions were evident in the journal responses of the undergraduate students after their brief experience with readers theatre. The undergraduate students also agreed that part of the increase in enjoyment came from listening to others as they performed.

As part of an action research study that focuses on motivational materials and instruction, Worthy and Prater (2002) observed and recorded the conversations of intermediate grade students while they prepared for readers theatre. They describe readers theatre as “one instructional activity that not only combines several effective research-based practices, but also leads to increased engagement with literacy even in very resistant readers” (p. 294). As the students in this research project practised, they were engaged in talk about the text. Their conversations centered on aspects and elements of the story; they discussed characters, setting, plot, emotions, and reactions. Worthy and Prater note that, following the presentation, the enthusiasm generated by readers theatre was carried over into student reading habits at home and at school.

Following a review of teacher comments Prescott and Lewis (2003) report that, "Reader's Theatre can also boost listening and speaking skills, enhance confidence, and transform reluctant readers into book lovers." They advocate that drama increases motivation and engagement as well as understanding of text. Readers theatre is a hands-on approach that values different learning modalities. It blurs the boundaries between reading and drama.

Casey and Chamberlain (2006), two elementary teachers from different school districts, who were both interested in improving children's reading fluency, oral expression, and motivation, developed a research project to explore the impact of readers theatre over a twelve-week period. Once again, the process they used is very similar to the process summarized in the beginning of this article which I used in my university class.

Casey and Chamberlain conclude that readers theatre provides an opportunity for young readers to experiment with language, to hear fluent reading modelled by teachers and peers, and to reread for a meaningful purpose. "By giving students opportunities to reread scripts in anticipation of a performance, teachers provide practice in a meaningful and purposeful context, and student confidence levels increase as they are well prepared for each performance" (p. 18).

Conclusion

Readers theatre is so much more than fluency instruction. It is a form of drama that helps to increase confidence in performing while supporting the development of key literacy concepts. Readers theatre requires students to make meaning of the original text as they decide what parts will be in the voice of the various characters; what parts will be interpreted by a narrator; and, where shifts in mood, tone, character, feelings, and events will take place. In this process of meaning making and negotiation, students begin to understand how stories and text are constructed; they begin to attend more to the techniques and elements that authors use. Such textual analysis is one of the most valuable aspects of teaching and learning. The preparation and performance of a readers theatre script, created by themselves or by others, lengthens the time students are engaged in the text. There is no doubt that this enhances understanding and learning.

Working from a social constructivist framework, I have highlighted the connections with readers theatre and Cambourne's conditions for learning, as well as with reader response theory, social interaction, and engagement. As Cambourne (1995) observed children in a natural learning environment, he found that immersion, demonstration, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximations, response, and engagement are all important factors for learning. Teachers continually strive towards creating these conditions in their classrooms. Readers theatre easily promotes these conditions and actively engages students in reading, responding to, and performing texts.

The undergraduate students with whom I worked sincerely wished they had experienced readers theatre while they were in elementary school. They saw how it increased not only their enjoyment of literature, but also their transaction with text, their engagement in social negotiation of meaning, and their confidence in performing text in front of others. Many of these students, like many teachers, had not thought of readers theatre in terms of both reading and drama and had not considered its impact on literacy overall. I am confident that these undergraduate students will use readers theatre in their classrooms and am pleased that, even from a brief but exciting experience with it in the university class, they could see its benefits and advantages.

By providing a reexamination of readers theatre, I hope this article provides some theoretical underpinnings and authentic experiences for those who use it so that they can better understand its value. I also hope that the article creates a curiosity and desire to "give it a try" for those who have just encountered the concept for the first time. I hope the boundaries between reading and drama are blurred and that we continue to actively engage students in authentic, hands-on, engaging activities that enhance learning and confidence. The combination of reading and drama known as readers theatre supports the ideas presented in this article: that "Reading literature within a classroom community is powerful because literature can help us escape the boundaries of ourselves" (Calkins, 2001 p. 14).

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Marlene McKay is a Ph. D. student and part-time instructor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Prior to entering the doctoral program, she had eleven years of experience as an English language arts consultant as well as over twenty years of classroom experience in Manitoba. Her book, *Story Vines and Readers Theatre: Getting Started*, written to support teachers' use of two inclusive teaching strategies, was published in 2008 by Portage and Main Press.