

Identity, Reading, and Writing

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Writing re-creates identity: We write as we read, think, talk, dress, or play, using distinctive patterns that distinguish our personal styles from those of others. If we examine samples of our own and others' writings over a period of time, we can detect patterns of word choice, theme, imagery, and tone in those writings that characterize each of us as much as the shapes of our noses or our smiles do. We can express these patterns as an *identity theme*, to which all our statements and actions will be variations.

This notion comes from the work of psychoanalyst Heinz Lichtenstein who theorized that all persons achieve an identity through their earliest symbiotic relations with their parents (Lichtenstein, 1961). As infants, we "match" our undifferentiated **potential** to become a certain person with our mothers' and fathers' specific conscious or unconscious needs for us to develop into **particular** persons. As a result, some patterns of thought and experience become characteristic for us, while others become unlikely. Norman N. Holland has worked out the implications of Lichtenstein's theory for literary responses (Holland, 1973; 1975). Holland has formulated a model of "literary transaction" to describe the way we interact with texts through our *identity themes*. When we "transact" a text, constructing meanings and fantasies from it, we use what Holland called **DEFT** perception:

We perceive DEFTly – through defences, expectations, fantasies, and transformations. All, however, are aspects of a single principle: we perceive so as to match our identity themes (the essential sameness of ourselves) as best we can from the mixture of matches and mismatches our environment offers (Holland, 1976, p. 336).

Identity theory and the model of "transaction" offer us some new ways to think about reading and writing in English education. Our responses to literature, to anything we read, reveal our personal psychological styles. Instead of thinking of different readers as "imprinted" by an identical text, we can think of each reader as "transacting" a text according to his or her characteristic identity. And we can think of sharing responses — using our unique blends of **DEFT** perception — as an opportunity to mutually discover the ways our differing identities enable us to "transact" texts.

At the Center of the Psychological Study of the Arts of the State University of New York at Buffalo, Norman Holland and Murray Schwartz have developed a teaching method that calls for free associative written responses to assigned

readings as a means of exploring students' *identity themes* or particular styles of "transacting" literature (Holland and Schwartz, 1975). They call their teaching method the *Delphi Method* (named after the oracle's motto: Know Thyself). Teachers and students write weekly responses to assigned reading. These informal writings focus on personal associations with the readings, emotional reactions, or initial analysis — whatever gives the text relevance or importance to the individual. Before class, class members distribute copies of their responses to all other class members. During class time, the teacher and students discuss the week's reading assignment and the responses to it. At a certain point in the semester, the class format changes. Instead of reading assigned works, the class reads and responds to the collected responses of one or two class members, looking for the patterns, themes, images, and so forth, that will describe each person's *identity theme*.

The *Delphi Method* asks participants to pay careful attention to the specific style in which they structure their readings and writing. Such attention yields an intensely personal learning process. Class meetings usually remain unstructured, with teachers facilitating participation rather than lecturing. Teachers become role models for open, flexible, and sensitive attitudes toward others, and for composing thoughtful and sincere responses to students' work each week.

Neither teacher nor students need to become experts in psychology or the dynamics of reading response criticism to participate effectively in a *Delphi* class; they need simply to focus their human powers of observation and insight upon each other's responses as they might focus them upon literary texts. The following are comments one might typically find in a class using the *Delphi Method*:

You seem drawn to characters who share your values, but then when they do something you dislike, you get angry and feel betrayed by the character and the author.

You seemed to feel the novel forced you to have certain feelings that were unpleasant. You say, "The scene made me feel . . ." rather than, "I felt . . . during the scene."

You always use the passive voice, which makes me feel you don't want to be seen as the "I" or subject voicing your opinions.

Introducing the *Delphi Method*

Teachers can develop a series of assignments which introduce students to the *Delphi* process gradually. For example, students can begin the semester writing responses to printed essays or stories. After they have practiced writing responses and have become attuned to the different responses of different class members to the same texts, they can begin responding to each other's work.

It is also possible for teachers to adapt the *Delphi Method* to complement other methods and goals in writing courses: Teachers can have classes spend an entire semester reading and writing responses to each other's papers; or they can set aside one class per week over a semester for discussion of responses; or they can devote a few weeks of concentrated attention to responses. Teachers can also evaluate response in various manners: Responses can remain ungraded, with only the students' formal written work evaluated for grades; or students can develop their own criteria — such as effort or thoroughness — for self- or class-evaluation of responses and discussions; or students can write formal papers at the beginning and end of the semester and be graded on their growth as evaluators. In large classes teachers can divide students into small groups. The members of each group can exchange and discuss responses among themselves, with teachers rotating membership in the various groups.

The *Delphi Method* offers numerous advantages to writing teachers. It clearly demonstrates to students the individual unity underlying each person's reading and writing. Students become aware of the way they and others not only read texts, respond to texts, and write texts, but also of the way they view themselves and their world.

Students in a *Delphi* class can learn much simply by comparing their formal and informal writing styles. For example, students are apt to spot one student writer's use of the active voice in informal responses and the passive voice in formal papers. These observations can lead to a discussion

of that writer's feelings when she writes in each voice. Or they can probe another student writer's consistent use of abstract words, or strings of unsupported generalizations. Rather than judging such writing as flawed or mistaken, students in a *Delphi* class encourage one another to understand the link between their identities and their writing. Such insights can help students reinforce their strengths, reduce their limitations, and increase their control over their own writing.

By receiving a wide variety of responses to their work, students perceive that the comments their teachers and peers make about their writing relate to their teachers' and peers' distinctive styles of thinking, feeling, and communicating. This perception both undercuts students' potentially defensive reactions to comments they might otherwise assume to be personally judgmental or destructively critical and frees students to use comments about their writing as aids to their development as writers.

Because students in *Delphi* classes write directly to each other, they become sensitive to the impact writers' words have upon them, and they practice articulating this awareness in their informal responses to others. Because they often write carefully, seriously, and specifically to their peers in informal responses, their selection and use of words in formal writing situations usually improves as well. Another benefit of the *Delphi* method is that students receive extensive information about the effect their writing has had upon others. And finally, students receive more individual responses than a single teacher in a single semester can provide.

Students not only like to learn about themselves but they also like to know the way their life styles, values, beliefs, conflicts, and needs compare with those of their peers. The *Delphi Method* creates a writing class that offers rewarding interpersonal exchanges which build upon students' natural curiosity.