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## EXPLORING ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

Peter Smagorinsky and John Coppock

University of Oklahoma

Writing, according to Emig (1977), is a unique mode of knowing with an innate capacity for promoting learning. Yet semiotic theorists have called into question the privileged status of writing among composition theorists and educators in general. Schools tend to favor linguistic and logical/mathematical means of expression (Gardner, 1983). Wertsch (1991) has argued that educators should broaden their acceptance of the means through which students mediate thought and activity in school settings. Wertsch feels that when educators emphasize speech as the primary means of semiotic mediation, they do not consider "the diversity of mediational means available to human beings" (p. 93). He argues that educators should enable students to employ a *tool kit* of mediational means; in other words, educators should take into consideration the different forms of mediation to which people have access and respect the choices they make in selecting a specific means of mediation for a particular occasion. Such a tool kit might include dramatic expression (Rogers & O'Neill, 1993), choreography (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994a, in press), various forms of art (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994b; Walker, 1993), and other means of mediation.

In order to investigate the potential of nontraditional sign systems for enabling students to construct meaning in school settings, we conducted a case study of a student who represented his response to a short story by drawing a picture. Through the use of his graphic tool, he was able to both represent and develop his construction of meaning in response to the signs of the literary text.

### BACKGROUND

The research took place in an alternative school/treatment facility for recovering substance abusers situated in a rural community in the American Southwest. The focus of the study was "Dexter," a 16-year-old white male who had experienced frequent failure in school, including his initial schoolwork at the alternative school. As a young child, Dexter had a hearing impairment and according to family members frequently communicated by drawing pictures of things he wanted. In his final year of public school prior to entering the alternative school, he had failed all subjects except art, in which he had received an A, and physical education, in which he had received a D.

Dexter's alternative school class provided an environment in which alternative modes of expression were valued. His teacher came from an artistic family, was a

published poet, and owned a piano and organ store; in addition, he was conversant with Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, which stresses the role of nonlinguistic thinking and expression and promotes the arts as a curricular foundation. Prior to the data collection—which took place after two months of school—students in Dexter's class had participated in literary transactions that encouraged "transmediation" (Suhor, 1984), which is the "translation of content from one sign system into another" (p. 250).

#### METHOD

We investigated the processes involved in the creation of an artistic text in response to a short story, using a videotape to stimulate an interview with a student about his composing processes (cf. Bloom, 1954; DiPardo, 1994; Rose, 1984). The students in the class had been given free range to produce any text of their choice to represent their understanding of the story.

The story the students read was William Carlos Williams's "The Use of Force." The story concerns a doctor who narrates an account of a house call he makes during a diphtheria epidemic. The doctor must extract a throat culture from a young girl who has displayed symptoms of the illness. The girl battles him savagely and hysterically to prevent him from examining her throat, and her parents try to help the doctor by holding her down and shaming her into complying. Against his rational judgment, the doctor becomes lost in "a blind fury" to attack and subdue the girl. In "a final unreasoning assault" he overpowers her and discovers her "secret" of "tonsils covered with membrane." The story ends with a final act of fury in which the girl attacks the doctor "while tears of defeat blinded her eyes."

Through the stimulated recall interview, Dexter reflected on the processes engaged in as he read the story, chose his textual medium, ascribed meaning to the story, and produced his text. The stimulated recall interview produced a transcript that we subjected to analysis, identifying processes described by Dexter that revealed his constructive activity in transmediating the signs of the literary text into the graphic signs of his drawing.

#### RESULTS

Dexter revealed a number of processes involved in his artistic composition: (a) he drew on personal experiences to empathize with one of the characters, (b) he engaged in a graphic representation and transformation of the relationship between the two central characters, and (c) he situated his text in an intertext to establish the picture's perspective. All of these processes revealed (d) the dialectic function his text served in helping mediate thought and activity: His thinking both *shaped* the text he was producing and *was shaped by* his process of creating it. The following sections reveal how Dexter's composition of an artistic text illustrated and influenced his understanding of the story.

#### Empathizing with Characters

Dexter's empathy with the girl in the story appears to have been a starting point for his interpretation (see Figure 1; original size 11 x 17 inches). His original reading of the story had been at the literal level. He then began making connections with the characters. He referred to "When the mother was shaming the daughter, that part. I gave a lot of attention to it. . . . It's wrong, and, but I can relate something in my life to the story and [inaudible] draw." Dexter related a childhood experience that had influenced his depiction of the relationship between the girl and the doctor:

Well, when I'm sad, I always—when I'm a kid and I'm laying down, and, I was like seven or eight, six or seven, I was laying in my bed and I was afraid of the dark, and I was afraid of snakes, and so I brought in my cover-up and I'd be afraid something would come under. It was going to [inaudible], bad was going to harm, and when I put that blanket over me, I felt secure. And so when [the girl in the story] got up against the wall, it would be protective from what is behind her, but, um, but, but she still felt insecure, and so that is why that shadow is like, you know, that shadow, I claim, is being her shame.

Dexter's remarks suggest that his empathy for the girl initiated his interpretation of the story. In moving from response to interpretation, Dexter switched the perspective in his text so that instead of portraying the doctor's narration it represented the relationship from the girl's point of view. He created an image of a "hysterical" doctor, yet he said, "I read the doctor as being kind but, um, but I did see that the girl had her way she's, um, receiving him and thinks he might be, and that's the way she's

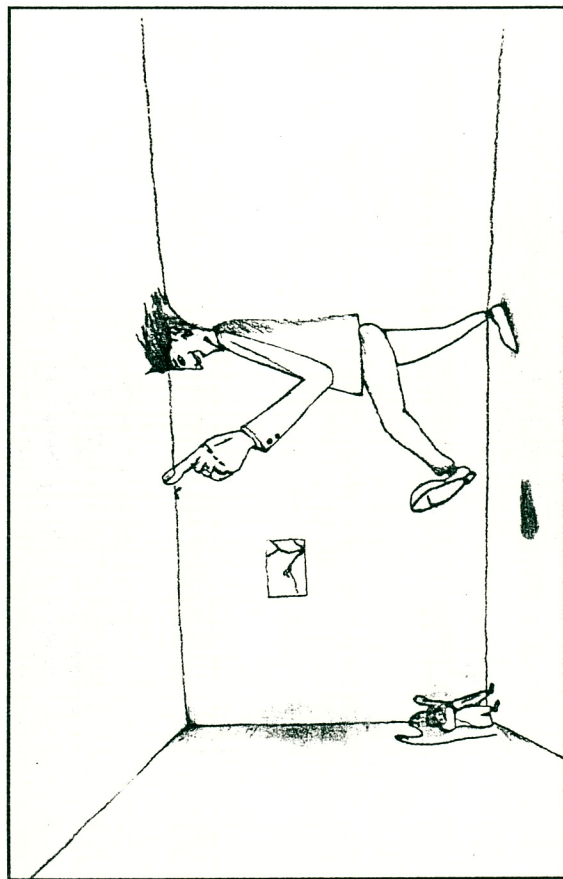


Figure 1.

receiving him." The reason Dexter switched perspectives for his text is "Because she was the one with the disease, the diphtheria, and, uh, also because, uh, because I can relate to her attitude when I was that age too."

The process described by Dexter illustrates how his empathic connection to the girl helped him move from an initial personal response to the production of a text that represented both his own and the girl's feelings of shame and fear. His text illustrates a shift in focus from Dexter's own feelings to the ways in which he saw those feelings played out through the girl. He was constructing meaning for the literary text by instantiating knowledge from his personal or cultural history. His transaction with the signs of the story was transformed through his transaction with the constraints, communication genres, and resources of the instructional setting to articulate a new relationship between the text he has read and the text he composes.

### *Graphic Representation and Transformation*

In order to convey his understanding of the relationship between the characters, Dexter depicted aspects of their personas through graphic symbols. The story is narrated by the doctor. The doctor does not describe himself in the story as a terrifying figure, but Dexter, taking the girl's perspective, drew him that way. Dexter's depiction of the doctor represented his understanding of the way the girl feels threatened throughout the diagnosis. He drew the doctor's hair to represent his "bizarreness." When asked why the doctor is shown stepping toward the girl, Dexter replied:

Dexter: To show control.

Q: How is he doing that?

Dexter: Well, he is controlling her, because he is controlling her emotions like—the way I think of it—before I was thinking, well, this is all these people's attitudes, the parents and the doctors, the doctor, and uh, the reason I was thinking the parents were wrong was because that's from she was programmed to honor her program the way her life's been before she learned to be, uh, to run from shame or feel ashamed a lot, and that attitude was put into the doctor too, because of the way she sees the doctor, and power comes from him making her get pushed back into the corner. He is afraid too to open her mouth to see whether or not she has diphtheria.

Q: So he is walking toward her? Is that why that last leg is up like that?

Dexter: Yeah.

Q: And that's the power?

Dexter: Yeah. Well, it's the power scaring her. It's supposed to be scary.

Q: Uh-huh. Earlier you said you thought the doctor was a kind man. Is that what you said?

Dexter: Yeah. I said in the story he was considered kind to my idea, but I went from the place of the girl and the way she was acting in the story to see how she, to see how the doctor was.

Dexter's interpretation of the story appears based on his empathy for the girl, even to the point of representing the doctor from the way *she* viewed him rather than the way *Dexter himself* viewed him as a reader. As he reports, the text he created was designed to convey a sense of power on the part of the doctor and a feeling of fear on the part of the girl.

In switching the perspective in his drawing from the doctor's narration to the viewpoint of the girl with whom he empathized, Dexter distorted the doctor's fist, hair, and walk to create a threatening effect.

Dexter represented other aspects of the story symbolically as well. Dexter created a shadow behind the girl to represent her shame. In contrast to the dark shadow, he drew a window to represent a sense of "contentment":

Q: Now there's a—is that thing, is that a painting on the wall, or is that a window?

Dexter: That is a window.

Q: Why did you do that?

Dexter: I wasn't sure, but I think that, it's like, it has a bird in a tree which I always [inaudible] thing, a little picture in color, I guess, but I was thinking I could show contentment being behind everything because, um, she did have it when the doctor refuses [inaudible] something good would resolve out of it or nothing would focus on that.

Q: Yeah, is that—why did you make it that size?

Dexter: Because if it were any more attention to it, then you could—it would be noticeable and the picture would be drawn wrong. It would be noticing the cheer.

In the story there had been no specific reference to such a window; Dexter created it to provide a balance that he saw necessary to the girl's feelings toward the doctor. His creation of the window again illustrates the ways in which he used size, proportion, proximity, and conventional symbols to render his interpretation of the characters and their relationship.

### *Situating his Text in an Intertext*

In formulating his picture, Dexter situated key images of his drawing in the intertext of a film he had seen. Our understanding of intertextuality issues from Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogicality, in which each "text"—that is, each sign or system of signs—achieves meaning as part of a greater whole. The meaning attributed to each text is socially constructed and therefore historical in nature, with each text derivative of, and interpreted according to, a prior text or set of texts. In this sense the notion of text is fluid and transactional, with each text serving to mediate and transform others. Every text is to some degree an appropriation of another and the basis for yet more.

In creating his graphic text out of "The Use of Force," Dexter described the following appropriation of a prior text from his experience:

Dexter: I got an idea of the way, the way this set-up is, how the drawing is, from an old Pink Floyd movie, *Breaking the Wall* [sic]. . . . It is like an old memory from when I was a kid, that, um, [inaudible] is getting out or whatever, this guy was getting out, and he was, like, and everything was real long, and the world was so big and he was this little, small, small person.

Q: Oh, so this whole idea of the perspective was from that movie?

Dexter: No, it came through my mind.

Dexter's account reveals the convergence of three texts: the images from the film, the associations Dexter makes from the signs of the story, and the signs that he con-

structs to depict his vision of the relationship between the two central characters. His graphic text is part of a continuum of texts that Dexter has had transactions with.

### *Dialectic Function of Text*

In discussing mediation, Vygotsky (1987) focused on *speech* as the primary psychological tool people use to negotiate, make sense of, participate in, and affect the world around them. This semiotic mediation of thought and activity through a psychological tool such as speech is a *dialectic* process; that is, the use of appropriate psychological tools enables people simultaneously to use their thinking to act on their environment, and to affect the development of their thinking through their activity in their environment. Dexter's account reveals the manner in which his thinking both *shaped the text he composed* and was *shaped by his process of composing it*. Rather than using *speech* as his means of mediating his thinking and activity, Dexter used a different psychological tool, *drawing*, from his "tool kit" of mediational means.

Dexter knew when he began reading the story that he would draw a picture to represent his understanding. The process he went through in composing his text additionally helped shape his thinking about the story. Dexter related that the meaning of the drawing changed as the picture developed. For instance, when he started his drawing Dexter had not been certain what the threatening figure would represent:

Dexter: I wasn't really sure if it was him going to be the doctor or not until the end of the story, I mean, until the end of the drawing, because I was thinking, well, it could be this person that she, that she has imaged in her mind and uh—or this could be an analogy of diphtheria, but then I said it doesn't matter. It's just a doctor. It was going through her mind, [inaudible] but I liked to read. The first time I'd read the doctor; the second, the analogy. It's just through that one story.

Q: So you mean, even after you drew the face and everything, it wasn't the doctor yet?

Dexter: Uh-huh. I mean it could have been a lot of things. It depends on your view point of the picture, but what I was thinking is—it was the doctor and then it was an analogy of the whole attitude of the story, and then it was the, her parents' attitude, or the parents, especially her parents.

Dexter's transaction with the literary text was mediated by his deliberate creation of his own artistic text. Thus, his artistic text represented both his appropriation of the signs of the literary text and his recreation of meaning through personally meaningful signs which he evoked from personal experiences, images from other texts, and artistic conventions.

## DISCUSSION

We view Dexter's artistic text as an illustration of what is potentially available in educational settings, particularly for students such as Dexter who have had difficulty performing within the communication genres (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994b) provided by conventional schooling. Situated in a context that approved and encouraged his own unique rendition of the signs of the literary text, he was able to make meaning

through tools that were appropriate to both his own historical and cultural means of communicating and the school setting that valued their use for literary interpretation and other aspects of rehabilitation therapy.

Dexter's production of his text took place in an environment that supported the use of cultural tools through which he and his classmates could construct personally meaningful sign systems. Dexter's classroom thus mediated the development of forms of literacy appropriate to the growth of individual students in their social and academic transactions. The classroom provided a context that enabled him to perform in a way that was valued as literate.

We are not arguing that schools should be restructured to accommodate one student. Yet we do see Dexter's case as representative of many students whose potential goes underdeveloped because the communication genres through which they are evaluated are narrow and thus preclude a great range of vehicles of meaning construction.

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