

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN READER'S THEATER INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Reader's Theater is a transformative and influential instructional tool for reading with far-reaching benefits for all students. Teachers are critical players in the use of Readers Theater in classroom; the effects of Reader's Theater are a direct result of a teacher's involvement. These effects include an increase in word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension development. This article outlines the facilitative role of a teacher as they incorporate Reader's Theater into their literacy rotation.

Children love performing for classmates and others. Reader's Theater is an ideal approach for capitalizing on this desire to perform and simultaneously improve students' reading outcomes. Moreover, the easy-to-implement nature of Reader's Theater make it an easily accessible activity for any classroom. In Reader's Theater students read and perform a script. However, Reader's Theater entails no memorization of lines, costumes, acting, props or scenery. The performing students simply stand in front of their audience with scripts in hand and read. Because of its minimalist nature, Reader's Theater requires readers to read with expression and fluency in order to convey meaning to an audience.

Reader's Theater is perhaps the most imaginative, instructional, literature technique available for students (Ratliff, 2006). Further, Reader's Theater is a diverse tool that benefits students across content areas. In 2007, Kinniburgh and Shaw proposed a strategic plan for using Reader's Theater using geology and other science-based content. Concurrent with this idea, Plankis, Ramsey, Ociepka and Martin (2016) demonstrated how this literacy-based activity could be used with students in grades 3-8, as a way to promote science themes such as sustainability and awareness of environmental problems. Vasinda and McLeod (2011) discovered the benefits of pairing podcasting with Reader's Theater, while maintaining the elements of this proven literacy strategy. Reader's Theater has, also, been used to promote fluency and enhance social development in children with learning disabilities at the elementary level (Garrett & O'Connor, 2010).

Ideally, Reader's Theater is structured around a weekly schedule, which can be easily adapted and modified to any literacy block. Throughout the week, Reader's Theater students are expected to rehearse (an authentic form of repeated readings) their assigned script to develop automaticity and prosody (expression in their oral reading). This rehearsal and the concurrent monitoring and feedback from the teacher is important, as it ensures the performance is meaningful and satisfying for the student and audience members. A key element in the success of this approach is the teacher, who has the role of facilitating and promoting reading fluency, comprehension, and engagement

throughout this process. In previous articles we have documented the value of Reader's Theater in promoting the abovementioned benefits in reading for students (Young & Rasinski, 2009; Young & Rasinski, in press). We have, also, considered how teachers and students can find and create scripts on their own (Young & Rasinski, 2011; Young & Rasinski, 2016). Additionally, we have highlighted, the inherent value of this writing and reading experience, as a stand-alone activity (Young & Rasinski, 2011; Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). Our aim in this article is to add clarification to the teacher's role in Reader's Theater.

We have heard well-meaning teachers express their opinion that Reader's Theater is great because the role of the teacher is minimal – assign the script, allow for rehearsal, and listen to students perform. However, we think there is much more teachers need to do in order to make Reader's Theater a regular and productive part of the reading curriculum. In this article we explore, from our own experiences, the 'characters' that teachers play to make Reader's Theater work in their classrooms.

SET UP A REGULAR INSTRUCTIONAL ROUTINE

The first role of the teacher is to make a commitment to make Reader's Theater a regular and ongoing part of the reading curriculum. In order for Reader's Theater to improve reading it needs to be done on a regular basis, not just for special events. With that commitment, teachers need to develop a weekly routine or cycle for making Reader's Theater work. In a previous paper, we suggested a weekly routine that included opportunities for students to focus on comprehension and word study as well as fluency (Table 1). This is just one way that Reader's Theater can become integral to the classroom English/Language Arts (ELA) agenda. However, there are other ways that teachers can organize their Reader's Theater curriculum. The critical feature is to give students a daily opportunity to engage in some aspect of Reader's Theater – hearing, rehearsing, and performing authentic and engaging scripts.

Table 1
Reader's Theater + Comprehension and Word Study Format

Day	Building Fluency with Gradual Release	Comprehension	Word Study
Monday	Teacher models texts to be performed on Friday. Students follow along and discuss the quality of the teacher's reading.	As a whole group, generate questions while reading the script.	Choose, discuss, and analyze unknown words. Then, add these to the word wall.
Tuesday	Choral reading of script.	Students choose their scripts, and the teacher helps students generate a summary of their respective scripts.	Choose, discuss, and analyze interesting words. Then, add these to the word wall.
Wednesday	Small group rehearsal. Teacher "coaches" students, as they practice.	Students are assigned parts and rehearse in their assigned groups. Teacher circulates among groups providing encouragement and talking about meaning of the script.	Choose, discuss and analyze root words and/or affixes in words (if any). Then, add these to the word wall.
Thursday	Practice – Dress Rehearsal	Class does a run through of the scripts and texts to be performed. Afterwards, students retell the script in their own words to a partner.	Choose, discuss and analyze content vocabulary (if any). Then, add these to the word wall.
Friday	Grand Performance. Students perform for an authentic and supportive audience of classmates, parents, and other visitors.	After the performance, students discuss what they liked most about their script and what could have been done to make the script even better.	Read and discuss word wall chorally

(see Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017)

FIND AND CREATE MATERIALS FOR PERFORMING

Indeed, it does take time to locate and prepare scripts for the weekly implementation of Reader's Theater. The process, though sometimes cumbersome, is quite fun. To begin teachers, scour the usual locations for scripts, including libraries, basal readers, or old files. A favorite place to search is on the Internet. There are hundreds of scripts and would-be scripts available (see Authors, 2017 for more information on locating scripts). Your school or local branch librarian would be a great resource to utilize in your search for scripts. Fredericks (2011) insists that "when teachers and librarians join together to promote literature collaboratively, they are opening incredible windows that expand the influence of that literature and extend learning opportunities for youngsters as never before" (p. 5). For Reader's Theater to be a successful and dynamic feature of an ELA curriculum, Fredericks (2011) suggests that a substantial level of cooperation between the teacher and the librarian is essential.

If you are exploring a thematic unit, use Reader's Theater scripts to support your instruction. For example, there are several winter/snow themed scripts available on www.thebestclass.org. Other times we might choose all nonfiction related to a single topic, such as Texas History (Rasinski, Murphy, & Young, 2014). Additionally, poems are versatile and flexible pieces of text, which can be adapted into a Reader's Theater script (see below for an example of Baa, Baa Black Sheep). Some weeks, you might script poetry for their performances, mixing in modern, humorous, or classical children's poetry. However, a teacher chooses to search, it is important to remember that the perfect script does not exist for students. Therefore, if you are unable to find a script, then create one with your students. The overall purpose is to practice reading, using a variety of materials.

Reader 1: Baa, baa, black sheep,

Reader 1: Have you any wool?

Reader 2: Yes, sir, yes, sir,

Reader 2: Three bags full;

Reader 1: One for the master,

Reader 2: And one for the dame,

Reader 1-2s: And one for the little boy

Readers 1-2: Who lives down the lane.

One can probably surmise that searching for and creating scripts requires time and effort. Once found, many of your scripts may be recycled throughout the school year. In the end, we make sure the number of parts from each script add up to the total number of students in our class, print them,

and get ready for a new week of Reader's Theater. As a tip, we recommend printing a few extra copies of each script, because students, no matter how amazing and responsible, might misplace their scripts from time to time.

MODELING FLUENT READING OF SCRIPTS

One of the great advantages of using Reader's Theater in the classroom is that it requires students to read with expression or prosody in order to communicate meaning to an audience. Before students can read with prosody it is usually a good idea to demonstrate to them what expressive or experienced reading sounds like, i.e. cadence, voice inflection, and pace. When introducing scripts to students, teachers can; in addition to providing background to the content of the script; read portions of the script to students. Here is where the teacher director can offer a prototype for the voice of the character. This will add to the background, but also give students a sense for the type of expression that is appropriate for the script. Following the modeling of a script with a brief discussion of how the teacher used her or his voice to communicate meaning and emotion will draw students' attention even more to the role and need for expressive reading in Reader's Theater and beyond.

COACHING STUDENTS DURING REHEARSAL

Once scripts are assigned to groups of students, teachers might think that their job is largely done. Students can rehearse (engage in repeated reading) on their own. The truth of the matter is that to make Reader's Theater work in the classroom the teacher is always engaged. True, students can work independently in groups; however, teachers should be constantly observing and coaching the various groups. As the teacher visits different groups, he or she will find that Reader's Theater offers many opportunities for teachable moments and mini-lessons. For example, teachers may create mini-lessons that focus on interesting words in the scripts, emphasis on particular words and phrases, adjusting pace, appropriate posture while performing, the need to read with volume as well as expression, etc. Teachers should remind students of the rules they need to follow when rehearsing in groups. Most importantly, teachers can listen in as students rehearse their scripts and provide positive and formative feedback. Nothing is more motivating for students than to hear the teacher tell them how good they are doing as they develop their assigned script for eventual performance.

PREPARING FOR THE GRAND PERFORMANCE

The reason students will actively engage in a week of rehearsal is the actual performance of their scripts at the end of each week. This means that the teacher needs to consider and plan for various aspects of the grand performance. Relevant questions include:

- Where should we have our grand performance?
- How should we prepare the stage? Are there props or other items required?
- Will we use a master of ceremonies? If so, who should it be?
- Who should we invite? How should we invite them?

- How will we seat all the people we invite?
- What is proper audience behavior that is expected during the grand performance?
- Should we provide audience members with copies of the scripts that will be read?
- Will the grand performance be video recorded for posting on the classroom website?

ALLOWING FOR AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Reader's Theater is a shared reading experience. We often think of it unidirectionally – performers to audience. However, there should also be opportunities for the audience to provide feedback to the performers. This is usually in the form of applause that is provided after each performance. But more specific feedback can be quite effective in helping students improve their proficiency in Reader's Theater. After each performance, the master of ceremonies might ask audience members to provide positive comments on the performance. Additionally, a rating sheet provided to each audience member could allow for more specific feedback on targeted aspects of the performance (e.g. Were the performers sufficiently loud? Did they read with expression? Was their pacing appropriate?). Indeed, the feedback sheets could actually be used as a way to turn the grand performance into a bit of competition where each performance is rated and the highest scoring performance receives an award. Another consideration is whether or not the performance is recorded for future reference or, even, as an evaluative tool. Students may choose to evaluate their own performance, thereby increasing their motivation for their next performance opportunity. Additionally, if the performances are recorded for the classroom website, parents and others who may not be able to attend the grand performance in person, may be allowed the opportunity to comment on recordings of the performances. In such a case, it may be necessary for the teacher to moderate the comments in order to ensure that only appropriate ones are posted.

MONITORING PROGRESS

The qualitative and quantitative feedback provided in each performance can be summarized regularly to document and demonstrate progress made by students doing Reader's Theater. This information may easily lend itself to goal-setting opportunities for students, as well. Reader's Theater is more than an opportunity for students to engage in an enjoyable and engaging reading activity. The rehearsal and the focus on expressive reading involved in Reader's Theater make it a powerful, instructional activity for building reading fluency, often called the neglected element of the school reading curriculum. With that in mind, the teacher may choose to assess students' fluency development on a regular (e.g. every 6 to 8 weeks). This would involve simply having individual students read a grade appropriate passage for one minute. From that minute of reading the teacher can check word recognition accuracy/automaticity by calculating the number of words read correctly in the minute. Expression or prosody can also be assessed using a fluency rubric such as the multi-dimensional fluency rubric found at www.timrasinski.com. Over the course of time, the teacher will have referential evidence of students' growth in both word recognition accuracy/automaticity and prosodic reading.

On the surface, Reader's Theater may be thought of as a fun reading activity, which it is. However, when used as a regular part of the classroom curriculum, it can, also, be a very influential instrument for improving a variety of components of reading and social development. Fredericks (2011) describes Reader's Theater as an opportunity for children to share and interpret stories with their peers. This teamwork and social exchange involved in Reader's Theater are among its many positive consequences. In order for Reader's Theater to take on this more academic role the classroom teacher must take a proactive role in helping Reader's Theater achieve its full benefit for all students.

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