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Reader, Teacher, Text, Poem: Paying It Forward

Although teachers “pay it forward” every school day, at some point they retire, right? And go on to travel or do yoga or take ceramics or meditate or write that elusive novel. That’s what I imagined when I became a teacher, and for years, nobody talked me out of it. Until I met Louise Rosenblatt.

I was in graduate school, maybe my second year, full of optimism about the future of teaching and yet paradoxically terrified about the opportunity to become more advanced in my field. Our university periodically invited renowned speakers to present to students and faculty; we had listened to Brian Street discussing critical pedagogy, Jacques Derrida deconstructing globalization, and other critical theorists and researchers tackling stimulating topics to jaw over later at the pub.

So when I walked into the conference room to hear Louise Rosenblatt speak, I was primed for discussions about autonomy and agency and hegemony, ready for the intellectual world of ideas that took their heady uplift from the practices of education but never quite bubbled back down to the classroom floor. We had read Rosenblatt’s book, *Literature as Exploration*, and I had already been influenced by her presence and clear argument and intimidated by her classical education and influence as a female scholar in the 1930s when the book was first published.

What I was only starting to realize—as I took my seat in the conference room and took out my notepad—is that Rosenblatt’s reader response theories have paid it forward for eighty some years by taking a stance on behalf of the reader’s knowledge, experience, and connections. Her voice, and those of researchers who have come after, has been a clear response (pun intended) to the New Critics who see little room for the reader in the text. Her concepts are perhaps even more resonant today as the Common Core era focuses teachers on text-dependent questions that, if taken at face value and used exclusively, make it easy to forget the role of the reader—and therefore the life of the poem—in the study of literature.

When Dr. Rosenblatt walked in, she did not look much different from the pictures we’d seen of her on the posters—but the full effect of this tiny 96 year old woman standing tall, lecturing for an hour without notes on something as heavy as reader response theory is not to be underestimated. She wore purple, as I recall, her voice and face animated with educational fervor. But to our surprise, she focused not on autonomy, the subject position, or language theory—she spoke, in a clear, unwavering voice, about democracy.

Dr. Rosenblatt spoke of teachers taking a unique role in students' lives as participants in their local, state and national communities, building literacies to help those students gain an economic and social foothold in our society and to stimulate a lifelong pleasure of reading. To these, she added a reason for students to discern their relationship to a text in a critical way—is the text affecting them aesthetically? Why? What words or images or emotions are triggering that aesthetic response? Or, are they taking an informational stance on the text? Is it educating them about some issue or idea? What terms or structure or language are doing so? As students crabwalk back and forth along the continuum of efferent and aesthetic stances, they become aware of the texts' influence on readers both informatively and emotionally.

Dr. Rosenblatt reminded us that in a democracy, texts have power. Readers are voters, and their votes matter. It is too easy for readers to be swayed by the emotional force of propaganda designed as campaign “literature” or by pseudo-scientific claims made by well-funded special interest groups or even, these days, by news corporations funneling information through a narrow point of view. Dr. Rosenblatt was prescient as ever, given recent Supreme Court decisions that provide political campaigns with avenues for increased funding from anonymous sources.

That day in a conference room at the University at Albany, State University of New York, Dr. Rosenblatt paid it forward to an audience of future teachers, researchers and educators. She showed us that in addition to the personal, social and economic lives of our students, we are at heart influencing the future of our democracy.

A second, equally valuable lesson from Dr. Rosenblatt came not from what she said but in the life she lived. At 96, she had little tangible need for profit from such a speech. Certainly few of her contemporaries were on the speaking circuit. Yet as she spoke, it became very clear that by paying it forward to us, Dr. Rosenblatt kept her own purpose, youthful energy, and momentum going. And that's the thing about paying it forward—it pays you back. I try to keep that in my mind as I continue in my career as an educator—the more I can pay forward, the more positive energy and passion for teaching that I can retain and the more I grow.

I continue to share Dr. Rosenblatt's message of the power and necessity of responsive reading in a democracy. Her work clarifies the essential marriage between theory and practice, the constant need to seek a larger view, a longer view. Her work helps me put the text in its place alongside the reader, to argue for the role of teachers as educators of students rather than simply teachers of texts.

Dr. Rosenblatt also reminds us to take the long view of our career: once a teacher, always a teacher. Her career provides a glimpse of the kinetic energy that motivates educators to continue our difficult but good work. That momentum pays us forward with wisdom, grace, knowledge and a renewed respect for our profession.