# Exploding the Reading

*Building a world of responses from one small story,*
*50 interactive strategies for increasing comprehension*

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# INTRODUCTION

## How One Story Can Generate a Thousand Responses

What can we learn from having 40 teachers and 1000 students exploring one text at the same time in different school districts in Ontario, New Brunswick, and the Northwest Territories? This book examines *responding to text* in these K to 12 classrooms in order to observe how different teachers can work with a particular text selection to enable their students to respond individually, in groups, or as part of a shared whole-class event.

We know that every reader interacts with a text by making a personal and individual response, but as a teacher-researcher, I am interested in how those responses alter, extend, grow, and expand when we incorporate different modes of interacting with the text, especially with others who have read, listened to, or viewed it, as well. Choice of response modes will vary depending upon the text, student needs, student interests, the context for the experience, and the teacher's comfort zone and experience with different forms, formats, and media. I want to encourage teachers to incorporate a variety of response modes in their teaching of different types of texts.

In this book, Kindergarten through high-school students respond to the same story. This structure allows us to explore these questions:

- How will we as teachers help the students to work within the text, move outside the text, and then return to the text with deeper understanding?
- What will different groups take from each tale?
- What meanings will individual students take away from the experience?
- What will the artifacts of their experiences with the story — poems, oral tellings, visuals, blogs, art, transcripts, comparisons, research, conversations, or role-play — tell us so that we can extend our own repertoires of useful response modes for our students?

### Entering Worlds of Meaning

In 2011, Tara-Lynn Scheffel, from Nipissing University, and I spent some time with a similar project, where we had a novel reprinted chapter by chapter in the community newspaper for students in the North Bay area to choose to read.

*Exploding the Reading* is built around a single universal story, told in several versions and formats, about selchies, mythic creatures of the northern seas, who once a year take human form; thus was created the Selchie Project. This folktale has been a staple of storytellers for years, and its minimal narrative leaves much to explore through a variety of response modes.

What interests me is how children take from a story or a film only what they can process themselves. *The Lion King* is a good popular example: on stage, the puppets are the best I have ever seen, and they thrill the children and adults. Few kids are worried about the evils of colonization as they watch, but some older ones are, and the adults' responses vary according to their life experiences.

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*Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* represents the theory of Louise Rosenblatt, who has had an enormous influence on how we engage our students in negotiating meaning making with the texts they encounter. Response theory grows from her seminal studies on comprehension as an interactive process.

The insights emerging from the Selchie Project grow from the variety and range of students' responses as we look at the differences in the ages and stages of childhood, and yet find surprising commonalities. As a reader of *Exploding the Reading*, you will find that one text can, indeed, generate a thousand responses from students who have encountered it, depending on the context of the interaction. I have included different teaching/learning experiences with this folktale, discovering alongside the classes the learning that happens when we go beyond the words into worlds of meaning that develop and accrue from "diving into the deep end of the pool."

## Looking Back to See Ahead

I began by rereading my own thoughts on response to text, found over the years in my own writings, but never had I focused entirely on this aspect of literacy growth. A few years ago, my colleague Bob Barton and I wrote *Story Matters*, in which we developed our framework for a response repertoire. We organized the types of activities with which children could be engaged into 10 categories, or modes, of communication. These are reflected in the structure of this book. Here, I have collected bits and pieces from my previous writings on response to text and used them as anchors for adding my changing and deepening understanding of how response to text can function in contemporary classrooms.

I owe Ellin Oliver Keene a great debt because of her book *To Understand: New Horizons in Reading Comprehension.* She writes with elegance and eloquence in her conversations about literacy, weaving in her own life experiences that demonstrate the strong values of a literary and literacy education.

As I selected those past pieces of commentary and reflection on responding to texts, I realized how far we have come in discussing the value of student voice and personal interpretation as agents for meaning making; I also saw how supportive our response activities can be in expanding a student's comprehension of a text. I felt this construct would work as a plan for exploring a single text in many different classrooms, with different grades. I was able to add to, rework, and extend my thoughts, enriched by my visiting or discussing with teachers and students in different grades in 30 classrooms, and observing their explorations growing from one story, represented in different versions, from oral tellings to picture books to complex ballads. The responses of the different students could be examined within the frame of the 10 different modes, and we would be able to notice the ages and stages of development as seen in the students' work.

### *Opening up voice through response modes*

Gordon Wells, a colleague and friend for several years, had a strong influence on my work with response to texts, and his books *The Meaning Makers: Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn* and *Dialogic Inquiry: Towards a Socio-Cultural Practice and Theory of Education*, on my bookshelves forever, are still foundations for understanding how children make meaning.

In each telling of a story, the *story truth* will usually remain, but the voices will be unique to the specific experience. The heart of this project lies in the responses of the students: even though we all began with the same basic tale, each student has conjured up a slightly different story event determined by his or her past life and previous text experiences; at the same time, however, the societal truths of the tale can be found in the art of Kindergarten children (Laura Siwak's "The Inquiry Process in Kindergarten"), in the role-play of Grade 7 students (Grant Minkhorst's "How Creating Backstories Strengthens Students' Oral Reading"), and in the issues-driven debate of Grade 9 young people (Pina Marchese's "Interpreting Text through Argument and Debate"). As the students revealed and explored their personal interpretations with others, their personal stories may have altered, grown, become reframed, or extended. That is one of the joys of being together in the place we call school.

As teachers, we need to be aware of the range and of the merits and drawbacks of the choices we could give to or ask of students to expand their understandings of the text they have encountered. Traditionally, they have read and answered

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questions where answers may be found in the text, or they have become involved in activities that do not connect back to the original text. For example, book reports occur after finishing a book, generally during independent reading, often done at home — but I seldom see evidence of how students have expanded on the ideas generated by their first reading of the text. On the other hand, literature circles and book clubs, in person or online, offer opportunities to hear other viewpoints and to rethink one's original position on the ideas in the text with small groups of readers. Shared reading and discussion as a class can do the same, and moving into research on the Internet and exploring the deep issues and relationships in the text can move the students a long way forward in their understanding and meaning making. I wanted to become involved in sharing a text with students in order to expand their collective and personal meaning-making, their continually developing understanding of what they have experienced.

How much can we learn from working inside the text, then moving outside the textual frame, and then returning to the text with new-found perceptions and insights and information? This focus has been my work over the last 40 years.

The first reading of a text is not "a done deal" — students can have so many different interpretations of their original reading experience. How exciting and involving it can be when they begin to explore the impact of that text on their meaning-making lives!

## The Folktale as Text

I have chosen one folktale as the text: it is readily available online and in print, with lots of versions, different genres, different modes, with so many issues to catch our attention. A tale can be the beginning for exploring all the ways we as educators have for encouraging students to dig deeply inside the story and to discover the surrounds outside that particular text — the origins, the connections, the places, the values, the different perceptions readers have, the language structures — and to transpose that original text into other forms that let us look as if with different and critical eyes, to ponder what might have been, to challenge the information, to add the new learning to our construct of the world. I like the phrase "It takes two to read a book." We may need to bounce ideas off others to find out our deeper thoughts and to rethink our views.

Storyteller Bob Barton says that these "stories of the tribe" provide strong reading and listening materials for children. The context of long ago enables children to explore a variety of problems and concerns that have troubled humanity forever, but in a safe, non-threatening framework. The deeds of heroes, the schemes of tricksters, the lore of nations past . . . these can all serve as settings for the children's own development — family situations, societal difficulties, supernatural beliefs, and natural phenomena. Folktales or contemporary stories with folk quality help the children journey to another time: an imagined past, an analogous present, or an anticipated future. The words can offer powerful language learning for the child, story vocabulary, new and varied syntactic patterns, strong contextual clues (which permit them to explore meaning), and characters who struggle with life's problems, sometimes symbolic, sometimes very real. With such stories, the children are engaged in experiencing language more complex than their own.

Folktales have acquired significance as they passed through time. Stories of today are built on stories of the past. Folktales allow us to use their "bones" as they speak to the child in all of us, symbolizing deep feelings and using fantastic figures and events. No matter how ancient a story is, it's not just archeological remains (see Chapter 12), but a living tale we can examine, offering glimpses of a particular time or a particular culture.

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*A living tale open to multiple responses*

I want to involve the students in response modes that suit them, their progress, and wherever possible, their interests. For this project, some teachers had students researching aspects underlying the story; other students worked on interpreting and representing through visual arts or role-play; still others explored how to retell the tale in various ways: orally, in film, or through written forms. What will be helpful to you as a reader of this book is the range of responses, the variety of modes that encourage expression, rethinking, analyzing, and reflecting. Whether the experience lasts a period, a succession of periods, a day, or a week, we can gain so much from the students' thoughts and feelings and articulations about their reactions and responses to one story.

I found many versions of the selchie tale (some listed in the Appendix). These include tellings by Jane Yolen, Mordicai Gerstein, and Susan Cooper, which may be in your school library. There are also many versions to be found on the Internet, some ballads captured in song, and other stories connected by theme. As with all folktales and picture-book versions, the story addresses both child and adult. Sometimes the selchie is a woman; other times a young boy, and in one of the ballads, the husband of a human wife. But all the stories center on the interactions and the relationships between humans and sea people, the strangers who come to our shores.

Ása Helga Ragnarsdóttir is assistant lecturer in drama and theatre education, University of Iceland, School of Education. According to her, the story of the selchie people dates back to 1862 when Jón Árnason, the Icelandic folklore collector, published *Icelandic Folklore and Fairy Tales*. Árnason collected stories all over the country: stories that had been told man by man over the decades and of which no one knew the author. The stories attracted much attention and greatly influenced the nation's image and the independence efforts of Icelanders over the next hundred years.

> And what is a story? Something with a beginning, a middle and an end, of course. But the lasting stories are more. If they are lacking that bit of "inner truth," then they are of no value. Without meaning, without metaphor, without reaching out to touch human emotion, a story is a poor thing: a few rags upon a stick masquerading as a living creature. Storytelling is our oldest form of remembering the promises we have made to one another and to our various gods, and the promises given in return; it is a way of recording our human emotions and desires and taboos. Whoever dares to tell a story must bear in mind that the story is an essential part of our humanness. But of course it had better be an engrossing, well-told tale as well.
>
> Jane Yolen, in *Touch Magic*, p. 25

Yolen, Jane. 1981. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood.* New York: Philomel Books.

## Which Modes for Which Class?

In Chapters 3 through 12, you will meet teachers who have explored this tale with their classes, sometimes as a single lesson, other times as a longer unit. The teachers chose the modes of response that fit their curriculum expectations, or drew on the interests of the students, or introduced their students to a new or different way of thinking about this text. As some say in their articles, this is work-in-progress, within the frame of regular classroom work, sometimes with polished results, other times as organic processing. All of the responses can help us, regardless of the grades we teach, to observe the ideas and articulations of students, their stages of development, their values and beliefs, and their abilities with language and with artistic ways of communicating. And perhaps, their explorations will offer us new ways of approaching texts, different options for encouraging thoughtful responses, and a strengthening of our professional mandate for supporting and encouraging deep, skillful representations of learning.

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*Varied teacher approaches*

How each teacher shared the story was important. Did they read some of the tale and discuss it with the students? Did they read right through and then begin student responses? Did they prepare the students with some background for setting up the story experience? Did they show a YouTube clip on the great seals? Did they simply tell the story, children on a rug, the teacher wrapped in a cloth that represented the seal skin? The units they developed focused on fish, on fishermen, on the seas, on seals, and on transformations. We want to see responses that grow from their units or story, and to consider the depths young students can plumb.

Each teacher had the students respond to the story using a variety of different modes. The students responded as a class, in a group, or independently. Teachers either wrote up the experience with student work, or I wrote it up from our discussions.

*How students have responded*

I have sought to represent students from regular classrooms responding to text, deepening their comprehension, extending their meaning making, offering and changing opinions, making connections, researching data, using graphics, telling and retelling, reading aloud, writing in different genres, incorporating visual arts and music, role-playing, summarizing, analyzing — all the processes that we understand will support our students as thoughtful, critical readers and writers, who share informed opinions, who represent their ideas and feelings in aesthetic and artistic ways, and who recognize the power of words used well.

*Best practices for implementing response modes*

In my last few books, I have been fortunate to write alongside wonderful teachers, and here, I am continuing this approach from my position as participant, onlooker, and writer. There are 10 modes for responding. In Chapters 3 through 12, we will briefly discuss how to use each mode in a classroom. You will then find accounts of effective classroom lessons and units with students' voices represented in a transcript, through the arts, or as written work. This format can encourage all of us to continue our work as meaning makers with all types of genres and forms of text, and a great variety of responses.

This book, then, includes best practice examples of literacy learning and teaching, all drawn from a tale 200 years old, supported by a variety of connected texts, and most important, by responses from a thousand students. I am hoping that, as you read different accounts of colleagues, you will continue to expand your own repertoire of modes for student involvement with different texts. The ideas and suggestions grow from real classroom experiences generated by authentic expertise. But first, let us consider the meaning-making power of student response and its relationship to comprehension (Chapter 1) and aspects of organizing a response-based classroom (Chapter 2).

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