The ABCs of attitudes toward reading:
Inquiring about the reader’s response

Psychologists use affect, behavior, and cognition to understand people. Teachers can use the same ABCs to learn more about readers.

The verb reading is transitive. People read something; they do not just read. Despite the nobility of the goal to increase literacy, nothing much can be known from the mere and sheer fact that a person reads. The reader response is more than a simple act of moving one’s eyes over text. Otherwise, discovering the ingredients of corn flakes by scanning the cereal box is equivalent to discovering human verities by reading medieval Japanese haiku. The act of reading should be distinguished from the reading experience—the reader’s response to a given work.

Literary theorists (Eagleton, 1983; Moore, 1997; Tompkins, 1980) might not agree on whether this distinction focuses on text or on reader; however, they would agree that literacy involves more than the decoding of phonemes. Current emphasis on reader response literary theory attempts to balance both stances. While reader may transform text, text may also transform reader.

If reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, it follows that the reader will be “occupied” by the thoughts of the author, and these in their turn will cause the drawing of new “boundaries.” In thinking the thoughts of another, little reader’s own individuality temporarily recedes into the background, since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focused. (Iser, 1986, p. 67)
Reading is an incredibly complex human behavior. All that we as observers of readers can know directly is the physical activity—the behavior—of the reader. The challenge, therefore, is to discover the nature of the reader’s response to literature when, perhaps, we can only know how the reader acts. Count the number of books borrowed from the library, weigh all the books read over the summer, itemize the books fitting into each identified genre, and attempt to interpret the reader’s facial expression. However, a human being’s behavior is but one domain of the three that psychologists study to understand the whole person—affect, behavior, and cognition, or ABC.

The three domains

Affect is the first of the three domains. We teachers are highly interested in whether our students like to read. If the act of reading is an act of drudgery—no matter how facile the reader might be—then reading is not fulfilling in the way we educators hope it is. Beyond the liking of reading, we are pleased to learn that a student has a preference for a certain kind of literature. Tanisha (all student names are pseudonyms) chooses to read biographies over science fiction. Halberd reads historical nonfiction and avoids romances. Rayleen is always ready to start another murder mystery. Nate is waiting for the next Star Trek novel to appear at the nearest bookstore. Students reveal what they like and dislike by showing an interest in specific genres or individual books. This interest can, again, only be inferred by the student’s act of selection. Interest and liking are affective (Spangler, 1991).

The second domain is of behavior. All social scientists observe behavior, from which they infer underlying processes and states. Behaviorists and cognitivists cannot at this time view mental and emotional processes directly, just as physicists cannot see the subatomic particles in the nucleus of an atom. Both social and physical scientists observe the behaviors of their targets and the aftereffects (or consequences) of that behavior in a given environment. Tracks of invisible particles in a cloud chamber lead to conclusions about the nature of certain kinds of matter without other direct evidence of their existence. In the same way, educators infer the nature of the reader response from the way the reader behaves. Observations of behavior are the foundation of all inferences about affect and cognition.

The third domain, cognition, is the one that educators tend to focus upon. Tanisha believes that science fiction is for the person who cannot deal with the here and now and must find some means of escape. Nate, however, thinks that science fiction is prophetic (he even knows that some classic texts of several religions have components of fantasy and science fiction, at least according to modern definitions). Caroleen knows that Edgar Allan Poe died impoverished. Believing, thinking, and knowing, each in the cognitive domain, are among our guides for our reading behavior, and now we are speaking of behavior once more. Knowledge is demonstrated through behavior.

The three domains are more conveniently called The ABCs, for Affect, Behavior, and Cognition. Researchers tend to study humanity in one of these domains, but not likely in all three at once. Studies of attitudes toward reading, for example, might focus on a, for Affect. On the other hand, teachers who require students to record the number of books read in a given period are emphasizing b, for Behavior. Research into the effect of persuasive writing on readers’ beliefs are focusing on c, for Cognition.

Unfortunately, such divided attention conveys the impression that the human being is able to be segmented or compartmentalized, whereas humans are whole organisms in whom all three domains interrelate, interact, and interdepend. Further, the irony is that all we as outsiders to the reader’s mind can do is study the reader’s behavior, from which we can only guess as to affect and cognition. We can only infer the A and the C from the B. Incredibly complexity thereby underlies any attempt to discuss reader response.

This ABC scheme has utility in the development of assessment strategies for the reader response. Planning the nature of the inquiry by specifying equal parts of A, B, and C will produce a balanced view of the effect of literature on the human being. Investigating literacy thus includes not only queries into comprehension and making inferences (C), but also choice and evaluation (A) in observations of reading (B).

In no way will we come close to exhausting the possibilities or to defining a canon for assessment,
due to the very complexity of reading and readers. We offer a beginning.

A is for Affect

Likes and dislikes. Preferences. Choices where no cognitive rationale or set of beliefs serves as guide. Paying attention. Evaluation of the worth of something. Moral values. These are all considered affective (see Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). and these can all be inferred, to varying degrees, from behavior (see B is for Behavior, next).

Whereas cognition is in the mind of the reader, and behavior is of the body, affect can be considered to emanate from the heart (or another organ)—when the Japanese describe anger, they say that the stomach stands up, Westerners refer metaphorically to bile, secreted by the liver, as the symbol of anger).


Under a microscope, the process of reading engages such powerful affective features that some forms of writing have greater impact on the heart than on the mind. For example, the following poem has minimal factual or declarative knowledge (see C is for Cognition, later). Its power is in the affective response that it arouses after the reader draws some cognitive inferences.

“Solitary observation brought back from a sojourn in hell”
At midnight tears
Run into your ears

(Louise Bogan, see www.tear.com/poems/bogan.observation.html)

The reader’s real-world cognitions lead to an understanding that the poet must be lying down, for the tears to run out of the eyes into the ears. The time is midnight. The poet is alone. Knowing this is secondary to the weight of empathy which ultimately grips the reader. Recovery from despair is subtle, because the observation is reported after a return from hell. Though the report that tears run into the ears is a simple physical sensation, a profound affective state is being implied. The reader is moved, and that is the affective power of the poem.

If the reader does not make the cognitive inferences, comprehension of the affective force of the poem cannot result. Even if comprehension occurs, it is insufficient for appreciation of the poem. Comprehension is, therefore, in most analyses of the reader response, necessary for appreciation, but not necessarily sufficient.

B is for Behavior

Behavior is the raw source of all our inferences about cognition and affect. We see the cramped look of a student studying the pages of an algebra book and we conclude that the expression is of intense concentration. The sudden smile on the face of a student reading *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1994) causes the parent to wonder which part the child has just read. The loud “I don’t believe it” followed by a loud slam of the book on the tabletop leads another reader in the library to speculate that the disbeliever has just finished reading an Agatha Christie novel.

A reader’s replying “Yes” to the question, “Did you like this book?” is a behavioral datum and nothing more. Whether or not the positive response authentically and accurately reflects positive affect may remain forever unknowable. Respondents are influenced by a number of other factors than the need to respond accurately and truthfully. Sometimes an answer is influenced by the respondent’s adherence to social norms. Answers to “Did you like *Huckleberry Finn*?” could be affected thus. If a student says “yes,” he or she could be accused of being a racist and a bigot; if a student says “no,” he or she could be accused of being a “knee-jerk left-wing, anti-American literary canon liberal.”

Inherent methodological dilemmas notwithstanding, behavioral data are the only source of inferences about the functioning of the reader. Assuming such data are not spurious, we can then talk about what we might be able to infer from behavior. For example, what we know about cognitions comes from observations of behavior.
C is for Cognition

The cognitive domain has been studied far more than the other two. What science knows about thought, dreams, mental imagery, spatial visualization, problem solving, comprehension, schemata, information processing, language processing, memory, signal detection, and a multitude of other cognitive functions is immense, when compared with what is known about affective and motor processes.

Much of what is addressed in theories of reader response is the cognitive—the declarative and procedural knowledge gained through reading. Declarative knowledge is represented by propositions that, if we were to make them concrete in their surface structure, might look like complete sentences. However, it is not rote or meaningless knowledge, despite the fact that some educators think that declarative knowledge is memorized facts.

Declarative knowledge is the content of thought, and is what procedural knowledge is applied to. Whereas declarative knowledge is knowing about something, procedural knowledge is knowing how to deal with that something in the mind. When asked, “In Laurence Yep’s *Sweetwater*, what do you think might have happened if the buildings rose out of the water instead?” the student uses procedures (strategies) to comprehend the question, address long-term memory, retrieve relevant information, and formulate an answer—the answer being the declarative knowledge that is conveyed as an answer to the question.

Declarative knowledge, therefore, cannot be taught separately from procedural knowledge. Teachers demonstrating the use of organization strategies to remember genera, phyla, and species in biology are showing students the use of procedural knowledge. Increased knowledge of the genera, phyla, and species is the declarative knowledge that results.

When inquiring about reader response, questions can deal with declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, though information gleaned about the reader’s procedures become declarative when it is explained or described. A low-level question about a reader’s declarative knowledge might resemble “What kinds of photos were in the album that is so important in Yoshiko Uchida’s book about the Japanese American internment?” A question about procedural knowledge might be “If you had to move suddenly and were allowed to take only what you would carry, how would you decide what to take?”

Notice that the teacher only knows about the reader what the reader expresses in behavior. The oral response to a spoken question, the option marked on a multiple-choice examination, the short-answer paragraph on a quiz, the contents of the portfolio—all are behavioral data. What lies behind the behavior is the great enigma.

Educators as sleuths: The ABCs in action

Discovering the impact of a book on the reader’s psyche, therefore, is a deep mystery. The very complexity of the reading process and the uncertainties of ascertaining reader response make up the ultimate dilemma. How can teachers both develop and assess the ABCs of attitude toward the reading experience, the reader’s response to reading?

The simplest yet most profound answer is to revolve reading programs around reader response. Planning diverse ways in which students may respond to literature can at least give multiple perspectives on any one student’s behavior. These perspectives, in turn, allow a more accurate inference of affective and cognitive factors of reader response.

Literature circles and dialogue journals provide teachers with simple, effective instructional techniques that directly involve students in responding to all genres (see Figure 1). Through individual responses, teachers can access student attitudes toward the reading experience and toward the printed script they are reading.

Dialogue journals initiate a private, personal conversation between teacher and student. The conversation is, granted, filtered through all sorts of screens (self-consciousness, for example, on the part of both teacher and student). But the purpose for using dialogue journals is to create a joint sharing of affective and cognitive responses. The intimacy of this conversation creates, at the least, a strong potential that both are accessing feelings and thoughts. Two people are talking, through print, about how they felt when they read the
book, what they thought before, during, and after reading the book.

"It is hard to read Desert Exile without feeling something...I had to leave the literature circle, to separate myself and regain my perspective. I am reminded that the cruelty of yesterday is still here today, not only to African Americans but to all minorities."

"I've been thinking about it, and I can truly understand why you chose the books you did...your choices have the imprint of a mother gently guiding her young uns through books they can relate to."

"I didn't think I'd get much out of reading novels. Much to my surprise, I have. It took more than one book to give me a bit of insight into myself. Odd, isn't it?"

"After reading this story, I understand my own parents better. I used to think they were cruel and unfeeling. I think, now, that like the parents in this book they wanted me to understand that I have to live without them some day."

No one can read those passages and say "Oh, I know exactly what they were feeling when they wrote that!" But one can say that at the very least there is a glimpse of thoughts and feelings. Self-reporting might well have been screened for impression management to avoid complete vulnerability; but dialogue journals give us the possibility for affective responses. Teachers and students have the opportunity to exchange thoughts on any given character or plot of the story—without concerns about being correct (in any sense of that word). The voices sound clearly in one's ears and can become a vehicle for drawing students into purposeful discussions in literature circles (Hansen-Krening & Mizokawa, 1997).

Literature circles encourage the free expression of readers' opinions, even disagreements with one another. They not only reinforce readers' evaluation, an aspect of affect (note the root word value in the word evaluation), but also reinforce the notion that reading often results in a highly individual rather than a universal affective response. For example, a literature circle was discussing Monica Sone's (1979) Nisei Daughter:

"This whole book amazes me. I don't understand how Sone can be so calm about all of this! Why wasn't she angry? Why wasn't her family fighting against internment? This passive stuff really bother me."

"Well, how do you think she should show anger?"

"She should yell and tell her family that she refuses to go to camp."

"Is that how you would show anger? Are you judging her behavior, her culture by your own standards? Why do you expect her to act like you would?"

Dialogue journals and literature circles become the means for teaching critical thinking, for taking students beyond "It was a good book and I liked it" or "It was junk." Teachers can ask students questions that will gradually move them into analyzing their responses. These questions can also help students delve into a given author's use of literary devices in shaping reader response. Of equal importance, questions can lead students to deal with issues of civic and social responsibility. Through reflection on these questions students begin to realize that their attitudes toward the
reading experience and the material being read are strongly influenced by the interplay between the author’s text and their own personal life experiences. Text is not static. It comes to life as the reader encounters it. Through this vivification, the reader learns to look at and reflect on his or her ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving (see Figure 2).

The second author (Hansen-Krenning) teaches a literature course twice yearly and uses a series of questions designed to draw students into considered reflections on the interplay between reader response and literature. These questions allow both teacher and students to assess attitudes toward reading. Students use these questions to access first their feelings toward text and then, gradually, to a deeper and more thoughtful examination of responses. The examination becomes fodder for affective and cognitive growth. Students must have a form both for sharing this examination and for attending to the responses of classmates—ergo, the further mastering of the behaviors of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The questions in the first column draw heavily on Rosenblatt’s (1938, 1976) discussion of reader response. The second column includes, in the latter half, questions drawn from the work of Meltzer (1994) who, as you can see, focused on the higher levels of affective and cognitive questioning. He left unsaid questions that novice readers must ask on their way to complexity. Hansen-Krenning gives the questions to her literature classes at the beginning of the course; teachers in the field generally hand them out when they introduce literature circles. They are used to facilitate development from simpler to complex levels of critical response to literature. Simultaneous attention to the ABCs will guarantee both growing mastery within these do-

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<th>Hansen-Krenning*</th>
<th>Meltzer**</th>
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<td>Simple</td>
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<td>What did I feel as I read this story?</td>
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<td>What is it in me, in my life and experiences that evokes this response?</td>
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<td>What did the author actually write?</td>
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<td>What is actually in the text?</td>
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<td>Does this verify my response and/or reveal my own attitudes?</td>
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<td>Did they have to be this way?</td>
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<td>Should they be changed?</td>
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<td>How do people go about changing their lives or the world they live in?</td>
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<td>What is the tension, the dialectic between my attitudes and what is actually written?</td>
<td>How are my moral, social, civic sensibilities triggered?</td>
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<td>How does this influence my attitudes, my response?</td>
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*Based on Rosenblatt, L. (1976)
**Taken from Saul, W. (1994)
mains and opportunities for the teacher to assess that growth.

Evidence from the students' responses

Teachers from our classes report that using the ABCs helps them categorize and assess student responses to literature, particularly when combined with the questions above. The ability to categorize response has been particularly helpful in the current climate of accountability. Teachers can demonstrate that they are, in fact, teaching critical thinking through the use of fiction and nonfiction in literature circles and dialogue journals. Some teachers used Hansen-Krenning's class on ethnic specific literature to combine literature circles, dialogue journals, and the ABCs as the basis for final projects in the Master of Education program.

There are, additionally, teachers from Taiwan, Japan, and China who are incorporating the ABCs as part of their assessment procedures in teaching American literature in their home classrooms.

Guiding students through using questions such as those listed does not mean that all students progress in either a uniform or tidy procession from simple to complex. As with any development, individual students may linger with any one set of questions. The student responses below provide ample evidence of both the ABCs of response and the individual differences between students.

In a journal entry, a male high school student wrote about Yep's (1977) Child of the Owl.

Dear Ms. C,

Did you notice those passages where PawPaw kept telling Casey that she needed to stop being so American, that she had to become what she really was—Chinese. I've been thinking about this a lot [sic]. How can people act as a nation if we keep telling them that they belong to separate groups? I think that PawPaw has to realize that Casey is an American and that won't ever change. I think the author wants us to realize that being Chinese and American isn't very easy for kids. (Carlson, 1992)

In the same class during literature circle discussion, another student commented, "I think PawPaw is totally weird. Why can't she get a clue?" The first young man asked, "Okay, where in the story do you think PawPaw was weird? Is that just your attitude about her, or are there places where the story makes you think that?" When student two could not find a specific passage, the first student countered, "Look, PawPaw took care of Casey: she fed her and provided love and a home. I don't think she was weird. She was an immigrant and was really caught up in her Chinese heritage." The young man's verbal behavior evinces his cognitive processes (Carlson, 1992).

The teacher using Uchida's (1982) Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family took notes during her students' literature circle discussions. Here we have a mixture of cognitive and affective responses from students in the circle:

"I think accusing Japanese of being traitors just because they looked like the enemy was wrong and the camps that they were put in were wrong, too. The U.S. government totally ignored the Japanese citizens' right according to the U.S. Constitution. Their actions were not based on the war as they stated, but they were racial actions taken against the Japanese culture. I would be frustrated and angry."

"I would find it hard if I was Japanese American. I think they must feel like they aren't all Japanese or all American."

"This is the first book that ever made me cry. I'm going to look for other books by Uchida. She and the other people in the camps were so strong. No matter what happened to them, they didn't give up."

A high school teacher told about her class that had just read Welch's (1987) Fools Crow and Hogan's (1990) Mean Spirit. In her journal (cited in Flinders, 1994), a student wrote:

You can see the endless hunger of the whites for land. On page 122, Welch wrote, "Already they have taken much of our land... they are like yellow wings who hop about eating everything in their path...," and page 341 [Mean Spirit], Michael Horse said pretty much the same thing, "We did not know the ends to which the others would go to destroy us. We didn't know how much they were moved by the presence of money." This is such powerful writing. If either author had ranted or raved, I would have gotten defensive. I think. But with these simple words I feel the sorrow of the Native Americans.
Final Comment

We are responsible for the balanced development of our students, and introspection is integral to that growth. Limited as our tools are for looking inside, we have to assemble a case from evidence that we can gather. Through the reader's B's, we can attempt a reconstruction of the A's and the C's. Although what we can know from the reader's response requires interpolation and extrapolation from concrete evidence, our views can be vastly larger, more brightly illuminated, and more richly textured than the simple knowledge that the children in our class read 112 pounds of books in 3 months over the previous summer.

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References

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