

# Points About Reading from Our Reading Workshops

KEY QUESTION: What does it mean to engage in reading (and then writing about) a difficult text?

## **Lesson Take Away #1:**

Re-reading makes a difference in our understanding.

## **Lesson Take Away #2:**

A problem in understanding a text is not evidence of your insufficiency as a reader. Encountering difficulty in reading doesn't mean you are a bad reader; it is a normal part of reading (in fact, it is a built in part of literature). The difference between strong readers and weak readers is strong readers have a higher tolerance for failure.

## **Lesson Take Away #3:**

Strong readers don't run from difficulty in reading. They confront difficulty and uncertainty and work to resolve it. Rather than cutting short their thinking and depend upon others for interpretation (interpretive dependency), they work to form their own interpretation.

*Taking someone else's interpretation as your own is like having someone else eat your dinner for you. A steady diet of that kind will lead not only to literary starvation but to a conviction that you can never eat for yourself.* --Louise Rosenblatt (as paraphrased by Sheridan Blau)

## **Lesson Take Away #4:**

Poetry and reading in general is often difficult but not inaccessible to readers who are willing to read it thoroughly and do the work of making sense of it. Just as writers create flawed early drafts, so do readers create incomplete or flawed readings of a text. It is through a "reading process" of reading and re-reading and working to make sense of the text that we come to the best understanding of texts.

## **Lesson Take Away #5:**

Confusion often represents an advanced state of understanding; it forms a generative force and motive for intellectual work to resolve the confusion. Confusion and doubt are often the necessary starting point for any act of interpretation. Strong readers endure the confusion of interpretive doubt and embrace rather than avoid the problems raised by interpretive challenge--invariably it will advance your understanding.

## **Lesson Take Away #6:**

Writing about your reading, even or maybe especially if it is only writing about what you don't understand, can be a useful way to assist you in your reading.

## **Lesson Take Away #7:**

Conversing with others about a text also is a powerful means of developing our understanding of a text.

## **Lesson Take Away #8:**

Notice that although you still had questions about the poem, you saw yourself as understanding it. That is, we can understand a text and regard ourselves as competent readers of it even though we still have questions about it. Just having questions about a text should not paralyze your reading and understanding about the text.

### **Lesson Take Away #9: What is the source of an authoritative interpretation?**

Our interpretations of a text can be sustained only if they are *supported by evidence located in the words of the text* or in the world from which the text emerges. Our interpretations, even though coming from our own values and experience, depend for their plausibility on an interpretation that is itself plausible in its reasoning from evidence. In that way, the study of literature teaches discipline of thinking--of a practice of evidentiary reasoning--that is the basis for effective intellectual work in any academic field or profession.

### **Lesson Take Away #10: Is there a single, authoritative (correct), fixed meaning of a poem or text? What if we can't fix on a single meaning? Does that mean there are no "right" answers and a poem can mean anything?**

Certainly, poems like "My Papa's Waltz" have multiple meanings that are plausible (i.e. there is substantial evidence from the text to support the interpretation). It is coercive (and even arrogant) to assert a single, correct interpretation of a text? BUT that does not mean that one interpretation might not be "stronger" or more plausible than another.

The standard by which all interpretations are judged is **the adequacy and persuasiveness** of the evidence that serves as grounds for that interpretation.

**adequacy = how good and how much evidence**

**persuasiveness = how reasonable the interpretations inferred from the evidence are (do they fit? do they make sense?)**

### **Lesson Take Away #11: The Slipperiness of Evidence**

Facts are never just facts (unfortunately). We depend upon evidence to support our interpretations and arguments, but that evidence itself is subject to interpretation. We also interpret facts and evidence we use to ground our claims. This fact calls into question the entire interpretive enterprise? BUT all fields of human endeavor are subject to interpretive uncertainties.

Dewey's "reflective thinking" is one method we can apply to make the best, most informed and reasonable conclusions. Successful arguments in the face of competing interpretations of the facts and evidence are judged based upon the adequacy and persuasiveness of the evidence presented.