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“Why Didn’t They Get It?” “Did They Have to Get It?”: What Reader Response Theory Has to Offer Narrative Research and Pedagogy

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Abstract

In this paper we suggest that narrative representations that seemingly fail to reach an audience as intended may engage the audience in more meaningful ways. We use reader response theory to explore how an audience’s responses to a conference narrative presentation made available a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks and narratives to the readers/listeners. We assert that when various interpretive frameworks are made visible across the context of a narrative text by the readers’ or listeners’ responses to it, they can be examined for how they collude, collide, exclude, and compete for meaning. At the same time, conversations evoked by narrative texts and through other arts can generate greater understanding across and through cultural differences. This offers dynamic pedagogical possibilities through appealing to our horticultural approach of seeking out knowledge gained from conversations across divergent interpretive communities. Our point here is that the intentional creation of instances where students are challenged to

recognize the taken for granted notions that ground their worldviews through the arts in education and education in the arts affords indispensable opportunities to engage students in a richer type of teaching and learning.

Introduction

“Why didn’t they get it? Where did I mess up? Was I not clear? Didn’t they listen to what I was telling them?” Roland (second author) asked, shaking his head in dismay. He was trying to figure out how what had seemed to be a straightforward conference presentation about his experience with institutionalized racism had become a tense debate among two groups of women within his audience. One group of African American female educators supported his analysis of an incident with his white female supervisor as an example of institutionalized racism. Another group of white female educators insisted that Roland’s interpretation demonstrated sexist overtones, and had not acknowledged his and his student advisee’s exercise of male privilege.

“Well, I don’t think you said anything wrong, but I could see how the sexist interpretation could be possible. The supervisor, even if she was incredibly rude, may have had child care issues, and, being the supervisor, she might not have wanted to admit that to a student and an advisor whom she was supposed to supervise,” responded Becky, (first author), his colleague and audience member.

She continued, “I do think something related to women was happening there, because, except for you, the few men in the room did not say a word during the discussion. Something shut them up.”

Subsequent conversations on the drive home from the conference continued to probe what might have caused the apparent misunderstanding. Both of us, co-authors of this paper, wondered about the choice of narrative as a mode of representation, the quality of scholarship necessary to effectively persuade an audience to narrative representations, even remarking on the racialized obtuseness of the white audience that couldn’t or wouldn’t see the critical interpretation Roland’s paper offered. Becky observed that she had been thinking along similar lines as the white audience, but also supported Roland’s analysis, having heard about the incident when it had actually occurred. Roland commented on the possibility that he might indeed harbor the sexist assumptions of which he had been accused.

As a rapidly growing and developing area of research in education, narrative research faces growing pains as its scholars endeavor to build its legitimacy and credibility as inquiry, methodology, and pedagogy, as well as mode of representation (Barone, 2007; Ceglowski,

1997; Kim, 2008). Our questions touched on some of these issues as they raised doubts about the quality of narratives to communicate significant experiences and critiques, such as this one about institutionalized racism. Somehow one group in the audience was able to claim and prefer a divergent meaning for Roland's narrative than the one he intended. What did that say about his writing? What did that say about the strength and agility of narrative research to make powerful claims, especially claims about social injustice? What does narrative research require/expect from its audience? Is "getting it" the point? Do we choose narrative research as a methodology and mode of representation because it seems more "authentic" and therefore more trustworthy and more persuasive? Do we consider ourselves failures for failing to persuade? Or can narrative research do more than that? Can narrative research provoke? Can it engage critical conversations and nurture uncertainty? Do the audiences for our narrative representations have to "get it" for us to be successful scholars, or are we successful if they speak back to us? What kinds of meanings can we make from examining Roland's experience of his audience "not getting it?" In the course of that speculation and reflection, Roland found his question changing from "Why didn't they get it?" to "Did they have to get it?" That shift in perspective on the incident prompted broader considerations about the relationships among those who write research narratives and the audience for those narratives relative to the purposes and goals of narrative research representations in education.

These conversations touched on the work each of us were doing, and challenged us to collaborate on a contribution to this growing field. Both of us were studying and researching teachers' narratives of practice in teacher knowledge research and the scholarship of teaching research. Roland was analyzing moments of cultural conflict in college professors' instruction and their narratives explaining how they understood those moments through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy. Becky was using reader response theory to analyze classroom teachers' responses to teacher knowledge narratives and case studies. This experience offers elements from each of our research interests for further mutual examination: moments of cultural conflict, and educators' responses to a teacher knowledge narrative. Furthermore, our inquiry is enhanced by the fact that, as an African American man and European American woman, our racial and gender identities had been embodied in conflicting ways in the context of the conference session. This lends particular salience to our inquiry as we offer our individual narrative interpretations to talk about the complex transactions that take place across and through narrative representations and the responses they generate.

In this paper we suggest that narrative representations such as Roland's, that seemingly fail to reach an audience as intended, actually engage the audience in more meaningful ways. We will use reader response theory to explore how the audience's responses to Roland's narrative presentation made available a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks and narratives to the writer as well as the reader/listeners. We assert that when various interpretive frameworks are

made visible across the context of a narrative text by the readers' or listeners' responses to it, they can be examined for how they collude, collide, exclude and compete for meaning and at the same time generate more narratives. Such examinations shed light on the pedagogical potential of narrative research representations to seed conversations about cultural and interpretive differences, about the relationship between the author and reader/audience in terms of these differences, and about how both relate to the purposes for narrative research in education. Next, we argue that the possibility for divergent interpretations and multiple narratives should be a goal of narrative research representations, and perhaps even suggests criteria for quality in research narratives. Finally, we offer examples of some teaching and learning practices that encourage the horticultural and transactive processes suggested by reader response theory that fertilize and nurture communication and debate across multiple interpretive communities.

We will develop these points by presenting a series of narratives centered around Roland's conference presentation. Since one of our contentions is that narrative research representations generate more narratives, we want to illuminate the many narratives that comprise the broad narrative of this paper. Of course, these narratives range across many levels from macro levels of sociocultural discourses to micro levels of individual experience, which are shot through with narratives of race, class, gender, (dis)ability, geographic location, historical context, and recent personal history. So to say that Roland's first narrative of his experience as an academic advisor initiated an iteration of narratives resonates as well as saying that Roland's experience of institutionalized racism as an academic advisor was an example of a long history of such incidents. Based on his experiences in a particular university setting, Roland wrote a narrative to illustrate a case of institutionalized racism to be presented at a conference. That incident is the one highlighted in this paper, and is also an exemplar used in another journal article (Mitchell, 2005) with a pedagogical inquiry.

Additionally, each person in the conference session produced a story about the experience, even as each individual's experience is produced by and through and with multiple intersecting narratives composed through multiple intersecting interpretive frameworks. Attempts to graph or plot this would be ineffectual and non-productive. We plan to offer sections authored by each of us individually and then together as a token nod to this immensely complex process we are attempting to comprehend and relate to the purposes and products of our research inquiries.

Multiplicity of Interpretive Frameworks

The Initial Narrative and its Aftermath: Roland

The presentation that provides the data for this essay occurred at a national conference on qualitative research. The session in which the paper was presented explored teacher knowledge as it relates to educators' ability to provide service to their students. The paper that I presented was entitled *Searching for the knowledge that enables culturally responsive academic advising*. In the paper I described a first hand account of an African American academic advisor—myself—working in a majority European American university. The paper highlighted the confluence of discourses associated with racial difference that both hindered and enabled my ability to provide service to students of color.

I presented the paper to an audience consisting primarily of middle class European American women, who closely mirrored the class, gender, and racial composition of the broader field of education. Of the seventeen participants in the session there were four African American women, three European American men, and ten European American women, one of whom was the co-author of this paper. A central tension that my conference paper built upon concerned the political economy of race and racism within the university that positioned an advising office intended to provide academic support to all students as a non-welcoming place to students of color. Consequently, the paper examined the ways that the lone advisor of color negotiated his relationship with students of color and his European American colleagues, while still serving as a representative of the university.

It was my narrative depiction of the interaction between the advisor and his direct supervisor, the Dean of Academic Support Services, that led to the clash between discourses associated with race and racism and gender and sexism embodied by the women who debated their perspectives at the conclusion of the paper's presentation. The issue that sparked the debate was that several of the session participants took exception to the narrative's depiction of the supervisor, who was a European American woman, as being unsupportive of the African American student and the advisor at the center of the paper, and subsequently professionally inept. An example of this characterization from my paper stated:

As we talk, my supervisor comes out of her office and approaches the secretary's desk, then after a few words looks over at me. My back muscles tense as she strides straight to my cubicle door. After a perfunctory introduction she accosts more than asks the student, "Is there anything I can do to assist you?" She assumes this is a social visit. I never have social visitors to the office, but the fact that my advisees often stay and talk with me longer than they do with other advisors, and the fact that our conversations often involve laughter and African-

American vernacular speech, seems to have convinced my office mates that I am doing something other than advising. Annoyed, the student responds in a recalcitrant tone usually reserved for a police officer issuing a ticket, “Nah, I’m o.k.” My supervisor glares at him for a moment, shoots me a sharp gaze and then abruptly exits. (Mitchell & Rosiek, 2005)

Several of the European American women in the session closely identified with the supervisor in the narrative and critiqued the presentation as overly critical of the supervisor. In fact, one attendee commented that she believed that the critique provided in the paper was both fueled by, and could subsequently lend strength to, sexist critiques of a woman in a leadership position who was simply a cog in a machine that has a similarly appalling record of discrimination against women as it has against people of color.

This discussion led several of the African American women in the room to object to what they described as white women using the privilege of their white skin to mask pervasive inequities associated with race and racism within the US higher education system since its inception. Further, the fact that the presenter was African American and a new graduate student also led many of the African American women in the room to feel as if they were coming to the defense of a fledgling researcher in a vulnerable position.

In my presentation I emphasized that the article was not intended to focus on gender or sexism. In fact the opening section of the analysis portion of the paper stated:

Although this example offers a vivid depiction of unprofessional administrative behavior, that behavior is not the focus of this essay. Instead, we are interested in the experience of the advisor in the above story. Specifically we are interested in the experiences of university academic advisors who are serving culturally diverse clients. As the story illustrates, advisors in such settings can find themselves caught between divergent expectations of minority students and the majority culture of the university in which they work. (Mitchell & Rosiek, 2005)

In the conversations with colleagues after the session, we deliberated on an acceptance or rejection of the critique of the session participants. The white women in the room had pointed to the fact that on numerous occasions my narrative had reported that the supervisor referred to the student coming to the office close to closing time as one of the reasons that she was unwilling to provide service. The paper stated:

I notice my supervisor buzz into the lobby in full stride. She slows just long enough to make eye contact and then moves on. That means she wants to leave

right at five. The clock reads 4:45... Over the next ten minutes I hear my supervisor's door open and close several times. Each time I hear this, I compulsively look at the clock on my computer face... My supervisor suddenly re-enters my cubicle--its 5:10 p.m. She says to the student "Just come on in my office and I'll get you finished up...." Dismayed at the way it has turned out, I followed my supervisor from the reception area into her office out of the need for some sense of closure. Predictably, she reprimanded me for the incident, shouting, and telling me she could not leave me alone in the office with a student, that I should end all advising sessions by 5:00 p.m. even if I had to make up a reason. (Mitchell & Rosiek, 2005)

I did not speculate on the rationale for this type of behavior. However the white women in the session posited the possibility that the supervisor may have been a single mother with child care responsibilities that conflicted with the office staying opened later than the official 8 to 4:45 operating hours. They felt that the student was being inconsiderate of the office personnel in general, and that neither the male student nor the male advisor was taking into account the idea that the supervisor had personal reasons for closing the office on time.

Narrative of Dismay: Becky

On the other hand, the idea that child care was the issue for the supervisor immediately occurred to me as I listened to Roland's presentation. She could have been a single mom or the parent whose responsibility that day was to pick up the child from daycare. She might have had an appointment elsewhere, or another family or professional commitment. I wondered why it was expected that she explain why she wanted to them to leave so that she could close the office. The men's reluctance to close the advising session could have relegated the supervisor to revealing maternal or family responsibilities, something that women often have to do with men in the course of their professional lives, and a cause for many women to be overlooked for job placement or promotion.

I also thought about the student's thoughtlessness at showing up at an office for advising just at closing time, 4:45 PM. I wondered whether he had a quick question, had a time constraint that made this his only available time to seek advising, was unaware of how long it would take for advising, or was just unaware of office etiquette. Frankly, I sympathized more with the woman supervisor trying to close up the office, but hampered by university policy of no advisor left alone with a student, and having to deal with two men in order to do it, than I did with Roland and his student advisee. I, like the other white women in the session, appropriated the narrative in a white feminist framework, even if I also recognized the supervisor's unjustified rudeness and anger to Roland and the student. However, as Roland concluded with his analysis of the incident, I could see his point about the woman supervisor

embodying the historical exclusion of African Americans from the university, re-enacted on an individual scale. To my great dismay and discomfort, I realized that I might not have perceived that had not Roland brought it to my attention. I could see how personal and historical frames of reference shaped my interpretation of the interaction; I did not think of the advisor-supervisor relationship occurring within a racist and historicized context. My initial understanding of it was in an individualized white woman professional context.

Furthermore, issues associated with professionalism also surfaced from the white feminist group of the session participants, who suggested that Roland's comments in the paper may have simply been generated by a disgruntled male employee highly critical of a woman in a supervisory position. When Roland and I talked about the session afterward, we felt that both professionalism and gender were being used to undermine the *perceived* focus of the paper—criticism of a poor administrator—as opposed to the *intended* focus—criticism of a poor system—of which the supervisor was simply a representative. The white women were not looking at the same historical dynamics as were Roland and the black women in the room. Roland wondered if the paper had failed in clearly articulating its unit of analysis—the broader institutional structures—as opposed to a specific administrator within that structure.

Regarding this broader consideration, Roland pointed out that he considered the race or gender of the supervisor to be irrelevant because the individual working in the university context could have been a black man or woman and as a representative of a white supremacist institution could have behaved in a similar manner. Indeed, Roland even suggested that the lack of child care provision by such a large public institution could be another form of critique of its patriarchal policies. His explanation of the event remained at the institutional level rather than at the personal. Mine tended toward the more personal and individual. My understanding reflected a traditional white privileged focus on the individual; his reflected what DuBois named the double consciousness (2005/1903) of the larger contextual frame overshadowing and individual actions and their consequences.

But I returned to Roland's comment that the gender or race of the supervisor was irrelevant because a black man or woman as the representative of a white supremacist institution "could have behaved in a similar manner." I wondered about that statement because even if the supervisor as an African American man or woman had acted in a similar manner, the audience's response to Roland's account of the incident might have been different. Or I thought it could; perhaps this was another example of my individualist way of interpretation? I was thinking of the white women feminists, including myself—would any of us have appropriated the same sexist interpretation of the incident and "stood up" for a black woman supervisor's efforts to close the office? Historically, white women did not include black women in feminist politics, so my doubts about this seemed justified. Would the black women

educators have been more inclined to appropriate the sexist interpretation and condemned Roland's interpretation as patriarchal?

The Answer to Roland's Question: Becky and Roland

After more reflection in that vein, we concluded that a more beneficial consequence of that initial conflict was the realization that perhaps Roland's paper had not failed to communicate to the audience, but had very effectively, even if unintentionally, provided a way for many interpretive frameworks to enter into making multiple meanings for the narrative, only one of which was the discourse of institutionalized racism. Obviously the paper had provoked a debate among the listeners, one in which each side heard the others' interpretation and may have gained some insight into how each perspective was shaped through social, historical, and cultural experiences. Our educational colleagues from various academic institutions had engaged in a necessary conversation that both verbalized and embodied how multiple discourses are generated and operate between and through writers, readers, and listeners with potential to make meaning of all kinds of texts.

We considered the possibility that the merit of Roland's narrative inhered in the responses it evoked more than the narrative itself. The first seven pages of this essay pertain to the narratives created in transaction with Roland's initial narrative, and constitute the listeners' responses as the object of our inquiry. So our answer to Roland's new question, "Did they have to get it?" was "No, there was no 'it' for them to get, but their own meaning to construct." This answer points us in the direction of reader response theory as a framework for understanding how the relationships between readers and narratives make available multiple meanings, why that is important, and how those meanings can provide a way to think about the merits of narrative research scholarship not only as methodology and representation, but its potential to bring issues of cultural difference and social justice into relief.

A Framework for Understanding Readers and Narratives: Becky

Reader response theory provides a way to respond to the question, "Did they have to get it?" by framing "it" as the product of the transaction of meaning between writer and listener/reader rather than the transmission of meaning from writer to listener/reader. Reader response theory conceptualizes readers' responses to texts as co-constructing the meaning of the texts with the author, so that there is no single totalized meaning for readers to "get," excavate, or locate. A reader oriented approach was first conceptualized for the teaching of reading and literature by Louise Rosenblatt in 1938. Based on her reading of John Dewey's theory of experience as transaction (1958), she proposed a transactional theory of literature (1938/1995), that emphasized the give and take between the reader and a text as one of "Transaction...permits emphasis on the to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously

reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning...(which) 'happens' during the transaction between the reader and the signs on the page" (1938/1995, p. xvi). In sum, meaning does not stem from the capacity of language to create, stabilize, or express it, but from the abilities and resources of the reader to co-construct it.

At a later time, Wolfgang Iser proposed a theory of literature and criticism called "Aesthetic Response" (1974, 1978), later re-named reader response theory in the writing of Stanley Fish (1980). Iser suggested that the act of reading evokes an aesthetic response as the reader draws on her interpretive resources to engage the text. The character of the interpretive resources—cultural, academic, professional, historical, phonemic, linguistic, personal and/or experiential – and the degree to which the reader accesses them depend on the qualities and features of the text (1978).

More recently, Tom Barone extends reader response theory to educational research. Two of his works (Barone, 2001a, 2001b) offer illustrations and explanation of how reader response theory can be applied to examinations of representations of educational research, as well as critical reflection on the goals and purposes of such inquiry. The ways in which readers make meaning of narratives, the features and functions of their responses relate to the qualities and elements of the narratives and how they may be shaped by the purposes for which the writer composed the narrative.

Qualities of Narrative Texts: Indeterminacy and Textual Ambiguity

Iser (1974, 1978), Fish (1980), and Barone (2001a,b) agree that the most important element of a text that shapes the reader's response is the degree of indeterminacy of the text. The degree of indeterminacy of the text refers to the amount of interpretive space generated by the writer's choices relative to topic, genre, word choice, imagery, allusions, linguistic structures, tone and sense of audience. The degree of indeterminacy in the text relates to how much "textual ambiguity" the reader may encounter wherein the reader can insert meaning. Barone offers Bakhtin's distinction between epic and novel narratives as a way to mark these differences. Bakhtin (1975) asserted that epic narratives offer little indeterminacy or textual gaps wherein the reader can insert meaning. Such narratives offer a single perspective and lead the reader to a final and convergent conclusion to any questions or problems presented in the narrative. These narratives offer something stable that the reader can take away from the reading, evoking what Rosenblatt identified as an "efferent" reading stance (1938/1995). The reader engages the narrative in order to reach a conclusion or locate an explanation.

Novel narratives use more ambiguous language, leave gaps or silences in explanations or arguments, and rely on allusions, inferences, and/or imagery, that compel/invite/evoke the reader to insert meaning and co-create meaning for the text (Bakhtin, 1975). They require

more effort on the part of the reader to make sense of what the writer is communicating. Many of these texts offer multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives on an experience and can be polyvocal in presenting an array of voices on a topic or experience, or create or evoke spaces for many voices. These texts exhibit indeterminacy and open-endedness, or what Barone (2001b) calls textual ambiguity. This indeterminacy results in multiple interpretations of a single narrative and less certainty of any final meaning. Novel narratives evoke an “aesthetic” reading stance in which the reader focuses on what she is experiencing as she engages the text; the text “activates” something within the reader (Rosenblatt 1938/1995).

Interpretive Communities and Narrative Texts

Of course, every writer intends for her readers to possess the reading skills, dispositions, experiences, and background knowledge necessary to actualize the text in the way she intended to bring about the “activation” from the narrative. However, in reading a text, the reader can only pay attention to, select, and receive those elements of the text available to her through what William James called the “principle of selective attention” (James, 1997). A reader’s reception of the text is then informed by the interpretive resources in her “field of consciousness” (James, 1997) shaped by past experiences with reading this kind of literature, as well as other experiences and strategies that enable and/or constrain her ability to access discrete elements of the text.

Interpretive resources are not only individual, as emphasized by Iser, but also collective, historical and communal, as suggested by Stanley Fish (1980). Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities” broadens the scope of analysis to include the influence of membership in social, cultural, professional and/or historical communities on individual interpretations of texts. Fish describes interpretive communities as groups of people who share common historical, social, professional, and cultural experiences, traditions, habits, vocabulary, assumptions, practices, and attitudes that provide semiotic resources for interpretation of human activity.

For example, in the narrative that prompted this paper, Roland’s awareness of himself and the student advisee as African American males in a building on a campus that fifty years earlier would have forbidden their presence formed part of the context for the conflict with the white female supervisor. In the narrative Roland remarked on the artwork decorating the walls of the building depicting pictures of the university’s past—nostalgic reminders of a past that never seemed very distant for him in the face of the implicit racism he encountered on a regular basis in his office. The white women in the audience who challenged his narrative as patriarchal not only reacted because of their own histories as women who had suffered in taking leadership roles, but from the history of women’s oppression over time. History works as an active agent playing itself in all these contexts.

Reader Response: Appropriation of the Virtual Text

The meaning of a written text emerges when the sense that has been made of it is transformed through the reader's interpretive resources into a "virtual text" (Iser, 1974) unique for that time, space, and reader. When the reader holds the virtual text up to her lived experience she makes interpretive decisions about how it should be appropriated into her repertoire of practical knowledge and past experience. As Barone (2001b) explains, "The reader takes the text home into the world of her daily experience to see what it might say about familiar conditions, conventional practices, and the values and ideologies that support them" (p. 178). This bringing together of the virtual text with the reader's world of experiences and "frameworks of knowledge" (Hall, 1980), shapes how the reader appropriates the meaning of the text into a response.

Iser (1974, 1978), Fish (1980), and Barone (2001a, b) all suggest categories for ways readers appropriate and talk about texts. Those offered here reflect an adaptation of their suggestions. I propose three categories of appropriations—conventional, visionary, and critical—that apply to my work with teachers. Readers can appropriate texts in conventional ways that confirm their own beliefs and reinforce their own experiences. Conventional appropriations of texts indicate that the reader accepts the text—writer's perspective, topic, language, genre, tone—uncritically and undisputedly. Visionary appropriations are carried out by readers who, in Barone's words, "pragmatize the imaginary," (2001b p.178; Iser, 1974, p. 193), by responding to qualities in the text that generate a search for possibility or that challenge taken for granted assumptions.

Critical appropriations take three forms. Some can offer a critique of the text based on issues of social justice and equity, drawing informally or formally on critical theory and postmodern analysis to refute or challenge the author's propositions. Other appropriations focus on the silences, the voices and experiences not represented in the text, the "surplus of meaning" (Derrida, 1974) that generates divergent meanings for texts by virtue of what is not said. A third form of critical appropriation includes those that dispute the premise of the text; readers may redefine terms, rename experiences described, or shift attention from the writer's interest to their own concerns, sometimes with the effect of trivializing or pathologizing the writer.

Conflicting Responses: Seeding Conversations about Differences: Becky and Roland

We believe that the African American female educators in Roland's audience formed a conventional appropriation of his narrative as an example of how institutionalized racism shaped the conflict between the female white supervisor and the male black advisor and student. The historical and cultural interpretive strategies shaped by the African American community of which these women were members enabled this response, which identified the

narrative as one of the many surfacing in critical race theory scholarship (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). On the other hand, the white female educators formed a critical interpretation of Roland's narrative as an example of male patriarchy's discomfort under female supervision. The European American female educators claimed the third form of critical appropriation, in that they renamed Roland's experience as a patriarchal resistance to female leadership in a traditional male role. Interpretive strategies developed in a community shaped by feminist theory and politics informed this appropriation that, once verbalized in the session, challenged the perspective on the narrative as one about institutionalized racism.

The debate that took place during the question and answer session following the paper presentation constituted yet another narrative response, one of the conflict across interpretive differences. We remember wondering how white privilege fueled the feminist critique of Roland's analysis, and what that said about how gendered and racialized discourses collide and "trump" each other, or if they sort of lie side by side and people pick them up at will. Did the fact that the white feminist critique surfaced despite the strong narrative and analysis centered on the legacy and practices of institutionalized racism mean that it somehow exerted more power? Or was this an example of white privilege flexing its muscles yet again? What we did see was that both discourses were operating within the audience members' repertoires and that the narrative provided enough textual ambiguity to make them both available in such a way as to provoke debate. Especially since each of our positionalities were embodied by the audience, we could easily see how the frame of reference for each group informed the focus of their concern.

What Reader Response Theory Offers Narrative Research: Becky and Roland

By making visible the cultural, social, historical, and professional discourses that shape researching, writing, reading, and interpretation of narrative scholarship as individual and communal discursive practices, reader response theory offers several gifts to narrative research. First, it offers uncertainty and ambiguity by reminding narrative scholars that even though they have written from personal experience, identified their positionality, shown respect for those whom they are researching by putting into place all the ethical considerations espoused by fellow scholars, and conscientiously avoided any totalizing or generalizing claims, their work will not always be interpreted as intended. We suggest that no one is at fault here. Reader response theory reminds us that looking at the contested reception of Roland's research narrative by differing groups in his audience illustrates how listening to or reading educators' research narratives of practice is not at all a straightforward proposition. When listening to educators' voice(s) or reading their narratives of practice with an eye on the audience for those narratives, whether in heated debates at professional organization conferences, in advising sessions, or hallway discussions in schools, the context and medium for the expression of educators' personal experiences in narratives of practice constrain and

enable what they can say. In other words, the contexts in which narrative researchers' voice(s) and experiences in their work are expressed act as discursive filters on their expressions of that experience and how they are interpreted.

This is an important point because often times teachers' divergent, critical, or resistant interpretations of teacher knowledge narratives are discounted as wrong or lazy. As mentioned previously, our first response to the feminist objections to Roland's narrative was "Why didn't they get it?" accompanied with questions about audience racist attitudes or Roland's writing abilities. Reader response theory affirms the resistant feminist perspective on the narrative as significant and informative in that it reveals what else might be operating in the narrative for certain communities of readers/listeners, and also tells something about the features in the narrative that evoked that response. Differences and gaps between the narrative and its interpretations by listeners/readers as individuals and as members of various interpretive communities are not "mistakes," but are insights into both the crafting of the text and the semiotic resources of the audience.

Secondly, reader response theory offers the gift of, oddly enough, accountability. The array of interpretive frameworks available to both scholars and readers of narrative research problematizes assumptions about meanings of narrative research representations of educational practice such as predominate in narrative research scholarship, as more accessible, more persuasive, and more "authentic" than traditional more positivist oriented academic research on teachers. Keeping in mind that the responses of readers co-construct the meaning of narratives, and that the meaning as intended is not guaranteed, suggests that responses of diverse interpretive communities be viewed as a kind of criteria by which the qualities of a narrative are evaluated. Additionally, this suggests that the qualities of the readers' appropriations of narratives texts—conventional, critical, visionary-- together with the multiplicity and divergence of their responses contribute to attributions of merit for narrative scholarship. We are not proposing that the more interpretations the better the narrative. We propose that deliberations on merit consider the qualities of the relationships between these multiple interpretations relative to how they form a dynamic and relational narrative evocative of a multidimensional community that needs these meanings out in the open for examination and conversation. Looking at the quality of narrative representations in terms of the interpretive communities they evoke as well as the resulting relationships between those communities offers access to a relational view of narrative research that can expand our expectations and enactment of narrative purposes and goals. Evaluative judgments focus on the qualities of the relationships forged between narrative representations and readers' responses, rather than on the texts alone.

More specifically, accountability in narrative research points to the need for further thinking about the crafting of narratives as well as its application by teachers of narrative research to higher education and teacher education programs. Questions need to be addressed concerning what cultural and historical resources writers and readers use to produce meaning for and from texts. For example, writers should not assume that theirs is a transparent academic stance. The very process by which they select incidents and events to research influences their narratives. Their choice of topic, the theoretical frameworks in which they shape their inquiry, the audience for whom they write the research text manifest their presence in the shape and reception of the narrative representation. The responses of a variety of reading or listening audiences should be taken into consideration in terms of historical, social and cultural interpretations, so that the text evokes conversation between these various communities of interpretation, not rancorous argumentation.

Finally, reader response theory offers the gift of a horticultural process that calls for and can help produce communities of readers able to deploy critical knowledge that enables them to engage with texts that reflect cultural and historical practical knowledge different from their own. For narrative research in teacher education, we suggest that just more descriptive narratives of teacher practice may not offer as much possibility for expanding the number of interpretive communities readers can engage with, as do more consciously crafted narratives that develop implied readers and textual landscapes that connect readers to the writer and other readers. One of the functions of this type of narrative is to not necessarily be the definitive way of exploring an issue but to be viewed as one of many that fertilizes a community.

Educators at both the higher education level as well as in programs of in-service and pre-service teacher education, must seed the semiotic resources of communities of readers by developing interpretive communities of teacher readers in their respective programs. Obviously this a “horticultural” model, one acknowledging that the growth of communities of informed teacher readers is developmental and should be integrated in every aspect of any program of teacher education or professional development. Identifying and articulating all the various resources for interpretation available to educators from personal and professional experiences increases awareness of the many ways educators can mediate texts. Then educators at all levels can be better prepared to gain insights from reading about another teacher’s practice that is very different from their own.

Also important and closely following on the suggestion of developing interpretive communities of readers is to develop these communities as critical readers. As critical readers, educators can deploy analytical tools that enable them to sift through the various discourses that mediate their practice. These tools include the vocabulary and concepts that identify the

often hidden and unspoken constraints between groups of teachers and that translate into a schooling hegemony that privileges some and silences others. This provides a way for them to make informed decisions backed up with knowledge of how one interpretive community silences another and the consequences of that marginalization for the real people who inhabit that interpretive space.

What Reader Response Theory Offers Teaching and Learning Practices for Arts in Education and Education in the Arts: Becky and Roland

In the sense that the conference session described in this article enacted a “horticultural” pedagogical practice we now direct our attention to several examples of how this works for teaching and learning practices for the arts in education and education in the arts relative to cultural differences. The transactive features of reader response theory urge exploration of the relationships between a text and the responses it evokes from multiple interpretive communities and the relationships among those responses. An educator sows the seeds for these explorations by encouraging conversations about differences in social, cultural, and historical dimensions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability and by offering varieties of arts based representations; we suggest anything from narrative, to drama, to poetry, to visual representation to music that evokes the uncertainty discussed previously. By facilitating and sharing alternative student representations and interpretations in response to arts based creations, an educator can engage conversations among and with students about differences in meanings and interpretations and how those differences reflect differences in lived experiences relative to membership in various interpretive communities. Instructors and students gain more nuanced understandings of intersecting and conflicting interpretive communities not only by responding to provocative arts in education, but by responding to others’ responses to arts based creations. We offer the following concrete examples using both of these approaches from our own experiences.

Teaching and Learning by Responding to Arts in Education: Becky

Reader’s Theater

I remember participating in a reader’s theater conference presentation about the creative lives of women professors who had come from working class and poverty backgrounds (Clark/Keefe, 2003). Each participant wore a placard with a name and the professor’s background history—Hispanic European-American, working class, first generation college graduate—and read her part of the script standing in a circle, shoulder to shoulder. I found myself bearing the name of a Latina from a working class background and reading lines about my mother’s reaction to my decision to go to college, “Estas loca! You’re crazy! . . . and she was tired of working. She worked from ten at night until six in the morning . . . and so here I am telling her stuff that’s not even in her realm of thinking” (Clark/Keefe 2003, p. 5). As I

stood there in my European American body and read these words with my middle class socialized and educated voice, I embodied the dissonances in divergent interpretive communities to those watching the performance. The ensuing conversation among the drama's participants and the session attendees explored these differences and enabled this fertilizing process of which we write.

Briefly embodying and voicing a "different" experience afforded me a benefit I have sought to re-create in my own teaching. But I have learned that even with great resources, such as Johnny Saldana's *Drama of Color: Improvisation with Multiethnic Folklore* (1995) or Clark/Keefe's reader's theater, the disruptive experiences nudging students into questioning and examining their own assumptions and sharing them with others in the class requires seeding the ground with discussions of differences around race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Media in Popular Culture

In my particular geographical region, conservative Christian beliefs dominate, and are conflated with white middle class privilege. I have found that reading around Peggy McIntosh's list of white privileges (1988) followed by Schlosser's article on Christian privilege (2003) seeds the ground with concepts students refer to when talking about intersecting systems of oppression and privilege wielded through difference. One vehicle by which these systems have been sustained is through the arts, specifically media in popular culture. For this reason, it is important to not only use arts based representations as ways to engage and involve students across divergent experiences, it is important to ask students to critique the ways in which arts based representations both in what has been called "high culture," and popular culture, have proliferated damaging images and texts of marginalized and oppressed populations. Marlon Riggs' documentary "Ethnic Notions," (1989), explores how the arts in popular culture and media has mediated stereotypical meanings attached to race and racialized gender according to political and ideological interests. The film's movie clips and pictures of artifacts from commercial products produce conversations about current racialized images produced in arts based media such as movies, television and computer based visual art. On one occasion, discussion about the film stimulated a classroom conversation in my Master's level Multicultural Education class about Michael Jackson and representations of race that touched on the topic of the superficiality and malleability of meanings attached to race, and how economics enables or disables racialization.

Teaching and Learning by Responding to Arts in Education: Roland

Poetry

A recent illustration of the dynamic pedagogical possibilities afforded through appealing to our horticultural approach of seeking out knowledge gained from conversations across

divergent interpretive communities was on display in my Race and Gender in Higher Education seminar. In the class I used Ann Filemyr's (2000) poem *How I made it to 21 and became a successful professional instead of an inmate*, as a means to surface nuanced discourses about racial/cultural and gendered difference across divergent interpretive communities. The class enrolled approximately 24 graduate students: 14 African Americans, 10 European Americans, 7 men and 17 women. Like the conference presentation at the center of this research, the class had recently melted down into racially polarized factions. Despite the apprehension that these racial and gendered factions may cause the position that we forward through this research, this poem frames this apprehension as a valuable pedagogical opportunity in the hands of skilled instructors who can purposefully tease out opportunities for teaching and learning across gendered/raced boundaries.

Filemyr's poem is a particularly appropriate as a *pedagogical fertilizer* because it lucidly discusses the ways that the author gained a sense of liberty by first recognizing, and then letting go of the privileges associated with being white, straight, able-bodied, Christian, and a native English speaker. And as vividly portrayed through the poem, as she made varied non-traditional life decisions (that probably would have landed those outside the fore-referenced groups in prison) she had a deeper appreciation for life.

Against this backdrop, simply discussing the poem provides some insight into the structures that create factions among specific groups, but for our deeper aim, the establishment of a dialogue across subjectively grounded discourse communities, more was needed. Hence, I had my students form a circle and read the entire poem aloud line by line. The utility of this activity was driven home when lines like "because the school for girls like me was over crowded" were read by a man or "because I ate out of the garbage" was read by the typical all-American middle class student or "because I decided to love across the color line" by any number of the socially conservative black and white students, the poem was engendered and ultimately heard in a different way.

Prior to this activity, articulations of abject poverty, educational opportunities limited by patriarchy or intimate relationships structured by white supremacy were not openly discussed by the students in the class. Moreover, even if these articulations surfaced, they were rigidly attributed to specific segments of the population and subsequently fed into the prevailing polarization in the class. Consequently, the cognitive hitches afforded through hearing them randomly spoken by members of the class who may not usually occupy these stereotypical societal positions caused students to recognize the ways that they subjectively categorize and are subjectively categorized in the world. In the end, our point here is that the intentional creation of instances where students are challenged to recognize the taken for granted notions that ground their worldviews, affords indispensable opportunities to engage students in a

richer type of teaching and learning. This illustration of poetry and specifically an intentionally socially-engaged text like Filemyr's, in a diverse learning environment is a valuable tool for achieving these aims.

Poetry: Becky

Bill Bigelow's *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (1994) includes a dramatic dialogue poem between two women, one wealthy and one working class, entitled "Two Women" that was written by an anonymous Chilean woman in 1973. The dialogue represents their experiences during Chile's socialist revolution in the 1970's, which most American college students associate with Madonna's starring role in the 1996 movie "Evita," if they do have any knowledge of it. I have found it particularly useful in producing conversations about class differences because of the nuanced use of words to convey meanings in ways that cross cultural meanings from working class/poor in Chile to similar circumstances in the United States. For example, the wealthy woman's despair at her loss of wealth and status, parallels the poor woman's hope in her changed circumstances, as shown in these coupled phrases from the poem: (The wealthy woman's words are in bold-faced type.)

We had to eat rice.

We had rice.

My children were no longer given summer visas to Europe.

My children no longer cried themselves to sleep.

And I felt like a peasant

And I felt like a woman. (Anon., 1973, p. 112).

Asking students in my primarily white, female, European American middle class undergraduate teacher education class to talk about the women's changing circumstances was especially salient in the present economy, which has affected many of my students.

Learning and Teaching by Responding to Others' Responses to Arts in Education: Becky

The previous examples illustrate how drama and poetry elicit the "cognitive hitches" that lead to dialogue and the potential for understanding across cultural differences. This section offers an example of evoking students' responses to others' responses to the arts in education as another way to fertilize the ground for critical conversations. Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool," (1968) written in 1960, has been studied as an expression of the ironic coupling of youthful boastful invincibility with recognition of the immediacy of death and despair for black urban youth. However, utilizations of Brooks' poem by two particular contemporary individuals from different interpretive communities, and for two different purposes, speak to

the expressive universality that art forms such as poetry draw from and produce in ways that can engage cross cultural conversations.

Brooks' poem about the invincibility and despair of black urban youth written in 1959 from her experiences growing up in Chicago, was claimed in 1997 by a white teenager from a South Boston working class community as an expression of his experiences with the cluster suicides and deaths from drug overdoses of his friends and neighbors. John Ulrich chose "We Real Cool" to memorize for his entry to Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poem website, <http://www.favoritepoem.org/>, an online national poetry project. According to Ulrich's video commentary about what the poem meant to him during this time period in which 250 of his friends and neighbors attempted suicide, six successfully, Brooks' expression of innocent invincibility and sense of immortality ending in the jolt of the lines "We/Jazz June We/Die soon (1968, p. 465) was "telling my story... a perfect picture of what was going on in my neighborhood" (Ulrich, 1997). The video entry depicts Ulrich, a white youth dressed in a backwards baseball cap, baggy pants and an overcoat standing on a rooftop against an overcast gray sky framed by industrial buildings and old houses. He recites the poem in a quick punchy style shaped by a South Boston accent, and then as the video shows scenes of his family and his school, he explains how he first encountered "We Real Cool" during his high school English class and formed the profoundly personal meaning he has constructed to express his experience.

When shared with an undergraduate teacher education class, a student newly introduced to the concept of white privilege asked if this was exploiting black experience to claim this poem as an expression of a white experience. Certainly the fact that this was a new idea for many in the class pitched the class into a more open conversation about white privilege, black oppression and how class deeply entangles those conceptions. Exploring commonalities and differences between experiences of urban working class and poor black youth and urban working class and poor white youth problematized the student's question, which might never have surfaced had not she encountered Ulrich's response to Brooks' poem, and seen the poem embodied in a "different" body and experience.

An additional rich and provocative response to Brooks' poem is bell hooks' use of the poem's title as the title for her book about the toxicity of white patriarchal constructions of black masculinity, *We real cool: Black men and masculinity* (2003). Hooks' critical response to Brooks' poem contrasts with Ulrich's personalized response. She identifies the poem as expressing the crises in black masculinity perpetuated by "patriarchal imperialism" that idealizes violence as a way out of racial oppression that tragically serves the forces for social reproduction. hooks' themes echo the boastful tone of the poem's litany of the seven deadly sins, including "We/Sing sin. We/Thin gin," (Brooks, 1968) that ends in the abrupt awareness

of “We/Die soon.” This array of the original poem, the online video of Ulrich’s response to the poem, and hooks’ theorizing response to the poem in the form of her feminist critique of white patriarchy shape a provocative stimulus to graduate level classroom conversations about masculinity, race, adolescence, and class through critical differences.

Closing Thoughts

Reader response theory allows us to see readers’ differences in appropriation of texts as inevitable, but also as rich with information to guide in expanding our conversations in classrooms at all levels of learning and teaching, as well as in narrative research. As we regard relations between arts-based narratives and interpretive communities as markers of merit, we can deliberate on designing new genres of relational narratives that respond to nuances in understandings of educational and schooling experience for a wide variety of communities, and on examining how educators and education scholars learn to read and talk with each other about their craft within a critical community of readers.

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difference on teaching and learning; the development of a historically and communally informed type of teacher practical knowledge; and the exploration of new research methodologies for representing this knowledge.

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