

Promoting Extensive Reading through Blog-posted Book Reviews

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This paper investigates the use of book reviews as foci for student writing in a 2nd-year university English writing course. The course reflects a blended learning model, in which Extensive Reading (ER) provides input, and individual blogs serve as the primary output medium. Concerns about the quality and quantity of input students were getting encouraged us to incorporate ER concepts into the writing curriculum. Here, we discuss the linkage between reading and writing, and briefly review the ER literature for the use (or rejection) of book reviews and written summaries, before discussing the rationale and basic components of the book reviews. We conclude with some areas for future investigation.

The focus of Extensive Reading (ER) as a classroom approach has moved beyond merely providing students with opportunities to "catch reading", following Nuttall's (1989) aphorism, but also to look at new ways to encourage students to read as well as ways to expand their skill base through ER. In this paper, we discuss one way, using blog-based book reviews. This constitutes a mere beginning to ER, but readers may want to consider taking on some of the points we suggest as ways of connecting ER to other aspects of the curriculum.

Reading in Writing

We start from Peritz's characterization that "reading and writing are as inseparable as two sides of the same coin" (Peritz, 1993, p. 382) in considering close connections between reading and writing. More important is the fact that most writing is to some extent, in Leki & Carson's (1997) terms, "text responsive prose", that is, written in response to things we have read. Hirvela's suggestion that "reading is a prelude to writing that shapes writing" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 110) is another way to look at these connections.

We feel that in order to foster literacy, opportunities to link reading and writing are necessary, opportunities that would be to some extent controllable and teachable. We also want our students to be thieves in the sense that T. S. Eliot observed in

1921, when he wrote:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal...

The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.

In order to have students "steal," and use what they steal appropriately, situations where links between texts students have read and texts-to-be-written should be specific and explicit, so we can teach students to become both effective and legal thieves. Explicitly including reading in the writing class makes the link between reading and writing clear, and is in line with Grabe's recommendation that the two "can be connected more efficiently through extensive reading in combination with consistent writing practice" (Grabe, 2003, p. 249).

Reading and then writing reviews of books read makes the reading-writing link direct, and is the focus of this paper. There is nothing new about making explicit linkage from reading to writing. However, a brief survey of the literature permits us to highlight aspects of our proposal that are novel.

We previously referred to Nuttall's (1989) phrase that "reading is caught, not taught" (p. 229), which suggests that testing, or indeed monitoring of any kind, is contrary to the spirit of ER. This precept is very much alive, and in fact Day and Bamford (1998)

reject the notion of writing any type of summary, citing Dupuy, Tse, and Cook (1996), who say: "Students know that in the real world, people who read for pleasure do not do worksheets or write summaries of what they read" (Day & Bamford, p. 142).

Even if one feels that, ideally, ER should be unmonitored, the necessity to evaluate is a constant shadow. Even as some practitioners have argued for eschewing the use of evaluation in relation to ER, others such as Fenton-Smith (2008) and Helgesen (2008) have suggested a number of ways to monitor students' reading through a variety of review-like exercises and reporting on what students have read, with Helgesen arguing that the process of reporting reflects higher-level thinking. However, both of those researchers' suggestions are in the context of classes that emphasize oral communication, a notion made explicit in Waring (2007). Under those circumstances, the major locus for the introduction of ER into the curriculum appears to have been speaking classes run by teachers who see the value in ER. What distinguishes our approach is the introduction of ER into a writing class, where the use of book reviews promotes values specific to a writing curriculum.

Reasons to Incorporate Extensive Reading into Writing

There are both primary and secondary reasons to incorporate ER into writing classes. The primary reasons are that the books students read provide models of correct English at an appropriate level, and give students a wider range of topics and themes to write about. Some of the secondary reasons to augment writing with ER pertain to the institutional situation. Reading classes are often the province of Japanese English teachers, who in our experience often prefer a traditional intensive reading approach, and thus these classes may in practice not be a hospitable home for ER. Given these problems (cf. Takase, 2007), writing classes may provide a useful alternative entry point. Furthermore, providing this entry point, and having students check out books from a library-based Extensive Reading collection, can lead to increased library use. This serves to justify in budgetary terms the expansion of ER collections, which can be advantageous for all courses in which ER plays a part, as well as for self-access use by students. We also note again that most ER programs are based in oral communication classes, probably because the

primary first adopters of ER have been teachers who are non-Japanese (i.e., native English speakers), and these teachers often teach oral communication classes. In introducing ER under the aegis of writing, an alternative is provided for teachers and practitioners who would like to introduce ER into their schools.

The Evolution of Book Reviews: WinK Project and Blogging Context

Book reviews currently comprise a large part of the Weblogging in Kumamoto (WinK) project, which features blogs as the main software of choice. In this project, we use freely available blogging platforms that have few or no administrative management requirements. A detailed account of blogs used in this manner can be found in Lavin, Beaufait and Tomei (2008). For the project, which cross-links various courses at Kumamoto area universities, students are asked to post various content to their blogs. For a summary of the project, see Tomei, Beaufait, and Lavin (2007).

The development of our use of book reviews over the past five years mirrors the development of notions of evaluation for ER. Initially, we simply asked students to use their blogs to record the titles of the books they read, along with a few sentences about their book. However, as the course was based on writing volume, we encouraged students to produce more content reflecting what they had read. Book reviews used in this way can help students acquire and consolidate computer skills, and have become an important focus within the writing classes. However, our focus in this paper is on how book reviews enhance ER, so in the next section we discuss the structure of our assigned book reviews and the motivation for each aspect.

Structure of Book Reviews

Our approach has been to emphasize three elements: firewalled quotations, students' reactions to books, and appropriately formatted references.

Firewalled Quotation: Dealing with Plagiarism

The focus on Extensive Writing as the basis for the writing classes has led to problems with plagiarism. This problem can be divided into two parts: First, students may not know that unacknowledged copying is problematic; second, even knowing this, they may not have the skills to avoid it. Thus, we focus, first, on explaining that copying from another

work is acceptable only if the copied parts are clearly marked and the source is identified; and, second, on giving students clear strategies for avoiding inadvertent plagiarism. One example is what we call "the quotation mark test". As most of the books that students read for reviews include dialogue in order to move stories along, we insist that students avoid using any quotation marks within copied passages, and rephrase any passages that include them.

However, measures like this were only stopgaps. It became clear early on that we needed not only to explain what was disallowed, but also to provide students with workable models to help them avoid plagiarism. This led to requiring introductory quotations that are "firewalled" (placed at the top of posts)—ideally in italics, with page numbers. This encourages students to incorporate their own ideas as to what quotations best convey flavors of the books they're reviewing, while making clear that, in this case only, "stealing" is appropriate (Elliot, 1921; see above).

Body of the Review: Highlighting the Personal

While we have no strict rule for what is appropriate in a book review, we emphasize that the reader's personal reaction is the most important aspect. Answering questions such as "Why did you choose this book?" and "Which character did you like best?" helps students realize that, rather than simply retelling stories, their reviews should give other students an indication whether books are interesting enough to consider reading themselves. In fact, if a student explains that he or she chose a book such as the Oxford FactFiles book, *England* (Akinyemi, 2008), and goes on to describe a homestay experience in the UK, we are more than satisfied with that, though strictly speaking including personal experience may stretch the concept of book reviews to the breaking point.

References: Creating an Articulation with Upper-level Courses

We noted earlier that one of our motivations for using book reviews is to demonstrate the utility of ER to colleagues who may be more wedded to an Intensive Reading approach. One way we do this is by asking students to provide correctly formatted references to the books they have read. This specifically addresses a weakness students demonstrate when they come to write research and seminar papers, the ability to reference sources correctly. By working with ER texts,

students come to understand the difference between family and given names, and grow aware of important metadata such as publication dates and publishers' names as well.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the introduction of ER into a writing curriculum, presenting motivations and rationales as well as forms and structures for these assigned book reviews. Our task of teaching students how to write book reviews begins anew each year, as we reintroduce cohorts of students to reading—reading blended into writing in new or unfamiliar ways that we believe will lead not only to language acquisition from ER for almost immediate use in informal blog writing, but also to formal, academic writing practices.

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