



The Reader Response Notebook

Teaching toward Agency, Autonomy, and Accountability



Ted Kesler
Foreword by Kathy G. Short

THE READER RESPONSE NOTEBOOK

NCTE Editorial Board

Steven Bickmore

Catherine Compton-Lilly

Deborah Dean

Antero Garcia

Bruce McComiskey

Jennifer Ochoa

Staci M. Perryman-Clark

Anne Elrod Whitney

Vivian Yenika-Agbaw

Kurt Austin, Chair, ex officio

Emily Kirkpatrick, ex officio

The Reader Response Notebook

*Teaching toward Agency, Autonomy,
and Accountability*

Ted Kesler

Queens College, City University of New York



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
1111 W. KENYON ROAD, URBANA, ILLINOIS 61801-1096
WWW.NCTE.ORG

Staff Editor: Bonny Graham
Interior Design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf
Cover Design: Pat Mayer

NCTE Stock Number: 38403; eStock Number: 38410
ISBN 978-0-8141-3840-3; eISBN 978-0-8141-3841-0

©2018 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Printed in the United States of America.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy, where such endorsement is clearly specified.

NCTE provides equal employment opportunity (EEO) to all staff members and applicants for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, physical, mental or perceived handicap/disability, sexual orientation including gender identity or expression, ancestry, genetic information, marital status, military status, unfavorable discharge from military service, pregnancy, citizenship status, personal appearance, matriculation or political affiliation, or any other protected status under applicable federal, state, and local laws.

Every effort has been made to provide current URLs and email addresses, but because of the rapidly changing nature of the Web, some sites and addresses may no longer be accessible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kesler, Ted, author.

Title: The reader response notebook : teaching toward agency, autonomy, and accountability / Ted Kesler.

Description: Urbana, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018021522 (print) | LCCN 2018034058 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814138410 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814138403 | ISBN 9780814138403 (pbk) | ISBN 9780814138410 (eISBN)

Subjects: LCSH: Reading (Elementary)—United States. | Language arts (Elementary)—United States. | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Elementary)—United States. | Reader-response criticism.

Classification: LCC LB1576 (ebook) | LCC LB1576 .K456 2018 (print) | DDC 372.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018021522>

*This book is dedicated to my mom,
Dr. Regina Rachel Chanowicz Kesler, 1926–1973.
She taught me to serve communities
graciously, patiently, lovingly.*

Contents

FOREWORD: THE VALUE OF READER RESPONSE IN A TEXT-DOMINATED WORLD	ix
KATHY G. SHORT	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS AS A CLASSROOM TEACHER	xv
CHAPTER 1 A New Vision of the Reader Response Notebook	1
CHAPTER 2 Getting Started	11
CHAPTER 3 Expanding Possibilities	35
CHAPTER 4 Toward Agency, Autonomy, and Accountability	53
CHAPTER 5 Permeable Boundaries: Living Literate Lives in and out of School	81
CHAPTER 6 Changing Lives	117
APPENDIXES	135
APPENDIX A: RRN STRATEGY CHECKLIST	135
APPENDIX B: RRN GRADING CRITERIA	136
APPENDIX C: RRN STRATEGIES ANCHOR CHART	138

REFERENCES	145
INDEX	151
AUTHOR	155

Foreword: The Value of Reader Response in a Text-Dominated World

KATHY G. SHORT, *University of Arizona*

John Dewey (1938) argued that we live in an either/or society where educational movements often swing from one extreme to another. He believed that educators are better served by getting off the pendulum and pursuing possibilities that go beyond oppositional extremes. Rosenblatt (1938) took up Dewey's call and rejected the dichotomy of text *or* reader, arguing that reading is a transaction of text *and* reader coming together to create something new, an understanding that goes beyond either one—and changes both. This rejection of opposition lies at the core of the experiences with reader response notebooks shared in this book. These notebooks encourage students to immerse themselves into the fictional and informational story worlds of literature while thoughtfully considering those worlds. They are also a demonstration of how to move beyond the current pendulum swing that rejects the reader in favor of the text through the guise of “close reading.”

Current state and national standards and basal reading programs emphasize close reading of texts, recommending that students find and cite evidence in the text. Textual analysis is viewed as bringing rigor to reading. Any text read to or by students is used for instructional purposes, to teach something. If students respond to a text by talking about connections to their lives, teachers are advised to steer them back to the task of talking about the text. Text-dependent questions and evidence, not connection, are valued.

This focus on close textual reading is based in misunderstandings about reader response, specifically that reader response stays at a simple level of personal connections that do not lead to critical thinking or textual analysis. Although reader response does begin with personal connections and interpretations, readers are encouraged to move into an analysis of their responses through dialogue based on evidence from their lives and the text to develop their interpretations. Rosenblatt (1938) argued that students need to first respond as human beings and share their experiences of a story *before* a text is used to teach. Literature is not written to teach a strategy but to illuminate life. The first questions to consider are, “What are you thinking? What connec-

tions did you make?” rather than “What was the text about?” and “How does the text work?” Personal connections and responses are essential, but not sufficient, as readers also need to dialogue about their interpretations, critiquing those interpretations and examining whether they are supported by evidence from their lives and the text.

The examples of children’s responses in this book honor Rosenblatt’s belief that a reader’s first response to a text should focus on the book as an experience of life. The second response moves into close reading as students consider those responses by examining *both* the text and their lives. The reader response notebook strategies, such as “parking lot,” provide a means for students to gather their impressions as they read, a first response to a text. Students move from these first responses and initial sharing to more in-depth dialogue, using strategies that encourage them to examine character relationships, key moments, or significant issues through a sketch-to-stretch, web, or Venn diagram.

The Reader Response Notebook also uses strategies such as “the missing voice” and “power meter” to encourage readers to bring a critical lens to their reading, which requires *both* personal response and textual analysis. If readers are engaged only in textual analysis, they do not learn to question the text and the assumptions about society on which the text is based. They circle around within the text, engaging in evaluation but not critique of missing voices or issues of equity and power.

When readers engage in both personal connection and textual analysis, they consider multiple perspectives as a way to critique and challenge what exists in society, to examine who benefits from these inequities, as well as to imagine new possibilities (Freire, 1970). Readers need to go outside the world of the text to challenge that world and bring the text back to their lives to challenge their views. Encouraging readers to engage only in close reading keeps the text distant from their lives—they read as spectators instead of immersing themselves in experiences that connect them to, and take them beyond, their own lives.

Close text-based reading is a return to a narrow definition of what and how we read. History indicates that this type of textual criticism has turned off generations of students because it lacks purpose, meaning, and relevancy to ideas and issues that students care about. Many of us have painful memories of sitting in high school literature classes, struggling to come up with the “right” interpretation of the assigned text and taking a text apart piece by piece, destroying interest in and enjoyment of that text. Our connections and thinking were not valued, and we saw no relevance for that reading in our lives.

Rosenblatt provided a powerful indictment of this approach in 1938 and her critique remains valid today. We do not need to choose between personal

connection and textual analysis; the choice is not either/or but both. The risk of ignoring that choice is producing another generation of readers who avoid reading because it is painful school work instead of meaningful life work. *The Reader Response Notebook* put this theory into action by providing concrete examples of the invitations teachers can offer students to unite their lives with the world of the text to build understanding through reflection and dialogue. By redefining close reading from a reader response stance, this book provides a generative means of moving forward as educators who reject either/or pendulums and instead create our own pathways of understanding.

Works Cited

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Education and experience*. New York: Collier.
Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
Rosenblatt, L. (1938). *Literature as exploration*. Chicago: Modern Language Association.

Acknowledgments

It helped to announce to my various communities that I was writing a book. Community members invariably asked, “How’s it going with your book?” and I invariably had to respond that the book was in progress. “Still? Wow, it sure takes a long time.” Yes, I know. But I recommend this process to anyone who intends to write a book. By making my intentions public, important people in my life pushed me to a point of no return, and my only choice was to get the book done. Their expectations propelled me past rejections: there was no way I would ever be able to face these people had I given up.

In particular, thank you family members: my brothers, Mark and David; my sister, May; my dad, Michael; my mother-in-law, Rose Weinberg; my sister-in-law, Elana Weinberg. Then, a special thank you to my immediate family: my wife, Judy; my daughter, Korina; my son, Daniel; and my dog, Pilpel. They keep me grounded. You can never get too esoteric when you still need to walk the dog, take out the garbage, and sweep the kitchen floor. Most of all, they provide an undercurrent of love that enables my steady writing routine.

Thanks to Kurt Austin, who first saw the possibilities of this book when I presented the idea in an email and encouraged me to go forth with it. Thanks to the reviewers of the proposal and manuscript, who provided helpful feedback that inevitably improved the manuscript. Thanks to Kathy Short, who read the manuscript, gave me her endorsement, and wrote such a beautiful foreword. Thanks to Bonny Graham for making the final stages of book production creative and fun.

Thanks to my third-grade students, now adults, from the Special Music School in New York City. I feature some of their work in this book. They affirmed the creativity and thoughtfulness that was possible with a reader response notebook. Thanks as well to my graduate preservice students at Queens College. They lifted “just another course assignment” to life work. Their ingenuity inspired me to revisit this work with elementary school children.

Finally, thanks to the team at P.S. 144Q: Reva Gluck-Schneider, principal extraordinaire; second-grade teacher Jen Sussman; third-grade teacher Lori Diamond; fourth-grade teachers Deb Kessler and Lauren Heinz; and fifth-grade

teacher Lesley Doff. A special thanks to all their wonderful students during the years of this project. Obviously, the work that this book presents was only possible because of their exuberant commitment. They all, students and teachers both, took the ideas I presented and ran with them, producing results that far exceeded my expectations. It was the need to share publicly that the remarkable work they demonstrated was possible that made me determined to write this book. Thank you all!

Introduction: Origins as a Classroom Teacher

As a classroom teacher in New York City public elementary schools, I taught my students to write responses in a reader response notebook (RRN). Figure 1 was a typical student response, this one by Ethan, one of my third graders. Not bad. Ethan addressed a theme in *Uncle Jed's Barber-shop* (Mitchell & Ransome, 1998) and connected it to our read-aloud book, *The Wheel on the School* (DeJong, 1972), citing a piece of evidence from the former. My students' entries included summaries or responses to prompts about the main character, character relationships, or the most important part of the story. But their responses usually came at the *end* of reading, or what Hancock (1993) calls retrospective accounts. In addition, my students knew that I was the only one who read their notebooks and that I read them for the primary purpose of monitoring their reading and assessing their understanding. What happened to students who were reluctant or resistant writers, or who did not represent their best thinking about the texts they read in writing?

I wanted my students' responses to be more fluid, reflecting the messy process of constructing understanding during reading. I believe interpretation is a recursive process that involves revision of thought, what Hancock (1993) calls an introspective journey. But I also wanted response to reading not to overwhelm reading time; I was aware of the benefits of uninterrupted reading time (Calkins, 2001). So I started teaching and encouraging a broader range of RRN responses during interactive read-aloud and independent reading. Guided by the Reading and Writing Project of Teachers College, which was my source of professional development, I taught students strategies such as sketch-to-stretch, stop-and-jot, representational drawing, or using sticky notes to record thoughts in the margins of their books. When I conferred with students, I encouraged them to use T-charts for text evidence, to keep character lists, or to act as the illustrator, including captions, for books that had few or no illustrations. I taught students to keep ongoing lists in the back of their notebooks of "Books I Want to Read Next" or "Books I Love."

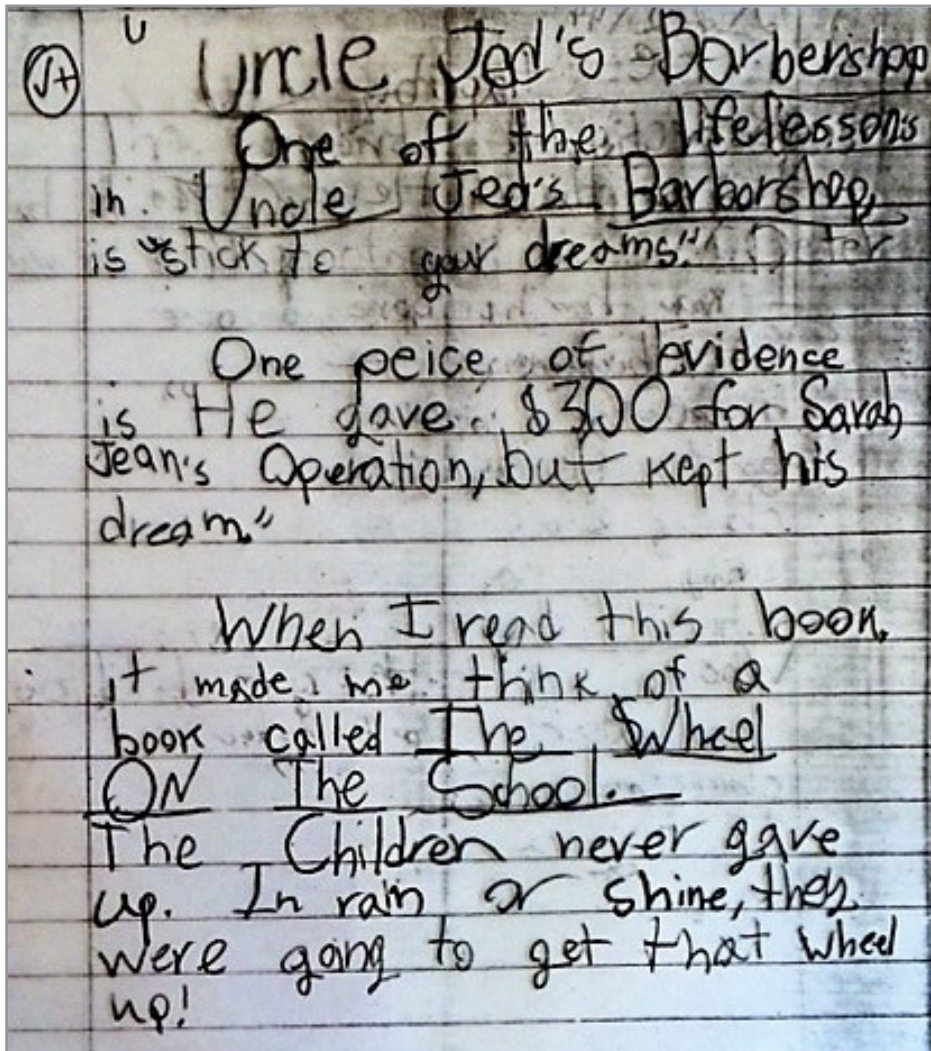


FIGURE 1. An example of student response in a reader response notebook.

During independent reading time, I held a conference with Luiko, one of my third-grade students. She was reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series. In our conference, Luiko explained that she was trying to picture each scene as she read *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937/2008), which made perfect sense. I had been emphasizing "making a movie in your mind" as we read as a way to envision the text. We often practiced this skill during our whole-class read-aloud time. Envisioning is especially important for strong comprehension of historical fiction because setting is such an integral part of the dramatic events. I knew Luiko's artistic propensity. Why not act as the illustrator as she

read and pretend that she was hired by the publisher to illustrate the book? What dramatic scenes might she illustrate? She shared two scenes she already had in mind and how she might draw them. She was clearly eager to do this work. I suggested she might include captions to build the connection for the reader from the illustration to the episode in the book.

Figure 2 shows an example of Luiko's reading work as she continued her independent reading. It was clear from her illustrations that she was under-

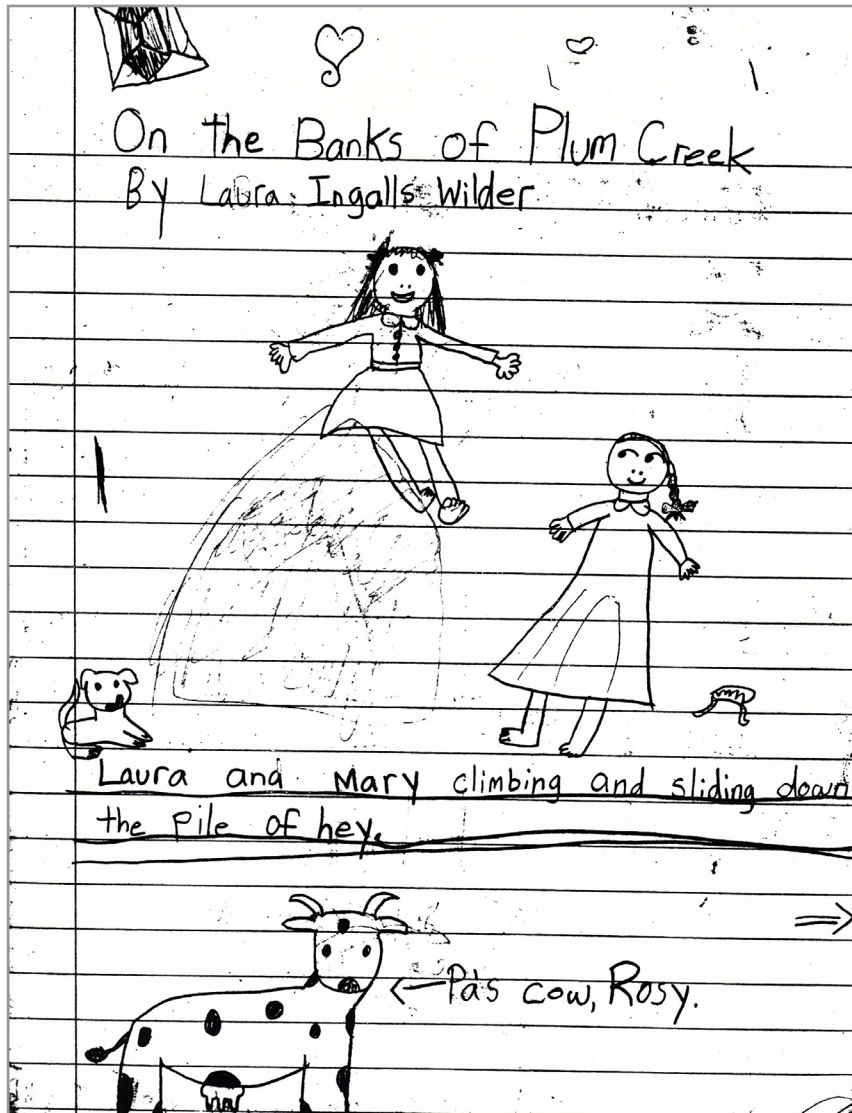


FIGURE 2. A sample of Luiko's drawings for *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

standing descriptive passages and key events in the book. Her work supported state and national reading standards that expect close reading, citing textual evidence, inferring, determining importance, summarizing, and comprehending complex literary texts independently and proficiently.

I experienced the benefits of opening up the RRN for more introspective thinking using a broad range of responses. When students finished books, their final responses became stronger because of the discussions and reflections on all the entries and other trails of thinking they had engaged in. My students became more deliberate, purposeful, and reflective readers.

Developing a New Vision

In my present position in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood at Queens College, focusing on literacy and children's literature, I began to explore more possibilities for the RRN with the graduate students in my language and literacy foundation courses. Now informed by theories of semiotic resources, expansive theories about texts and popular culture, and sociocultural practices from my doctoral coursework, I opened up students' reading lives to their favorite TV shows and movies, to songs they loved, to the use of drawing and color, to designing on the page, to co-opting digital forms and formats. Students were generative and imaginative in their notebook responses. The texts they loved were now sanctioned in an academic context for rigorous thinking, and they learned to bring that rigorous and creative thinking to academic texts. They realized there were multiple ways to show in-depth thinking beyond essays. They reported reclaiming their literate lives.

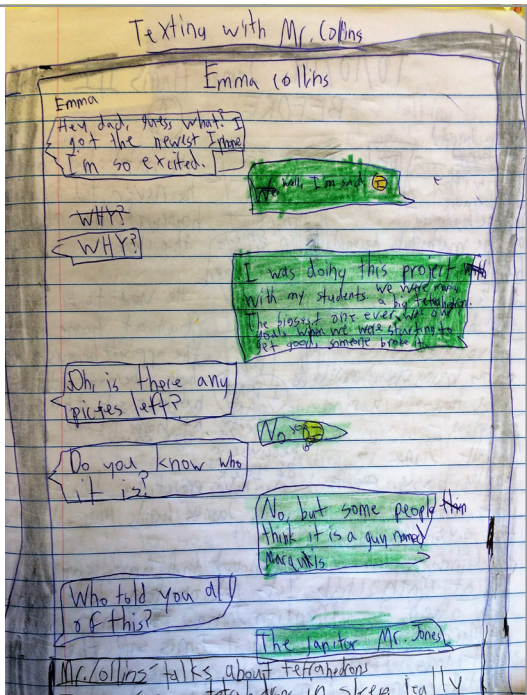
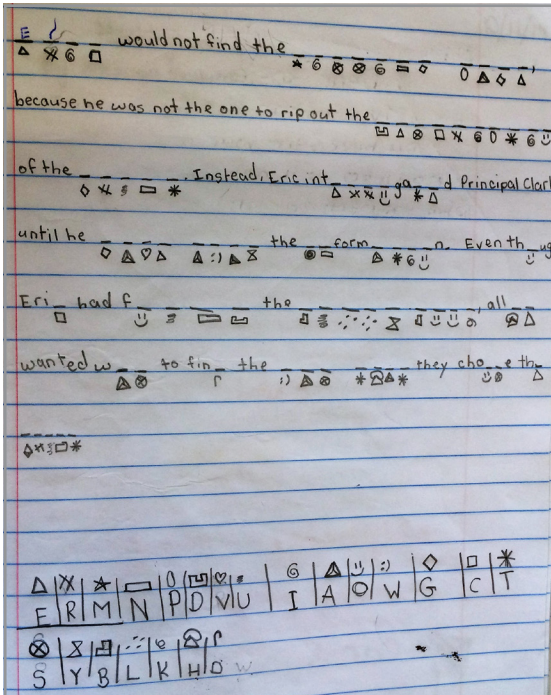
I knew then that I had to revisit the RRN with these new understandings in elementary and middle school classrooms. I brought this work to P.S. 144 in Queens, New York. The principal, Reva Gluck-Schneider, knew me from professional development work I had done when she was a classroom teacher. She introduced me to a group of teachers who epitomize professionalism: Lori Diamond, Lauren Heinz, Debra Kessler, and Lesley Doff. Later, Jennifer Sussman joined this group. These teachers trusted me with their limited instructional time while facing mandates and the demands of standardized tests. They opened up their classrooms and used their lunch period to meet with me each time I visited, on a speculation that their students would be able to use the RRN in the same creative, generative ways my graduate students had discovered if we just made these opportunities available to them. Did I really think elementary and middle school students could do this? I did, these teachers did, and their students

proved they could. But even we were surprised by what students could achieve when we truly value this tool for thinking and leading literate lives.

This book reports the amazing discoveries that I and teachers I work with have made so far using this simple, tried-and-true tool, the reader response notebook, in not-so-simple ways. I say “so far” because we continue to investigate and discover issues of serious concern in public education. Our interests so far include: (a) What range of reader responses might elementary and middle school students express if we open up a variety of resources to them? (b) How might we design instruction so students develop autonomy that matches their reading purposes in their use of reader response notebooks? (c) What does this variety of response show about students’ reading comprehension? (d) How does broadening what counts as text influence students’ literate identities and their development as readers? (e) How might we use their notebooks as tools to develop a literate community of practice? (f) How does this notebook work support students’ collaborative discussions and their written responses (e.g., essays), aligned with state and national standards? (g) How might we guide students toward self-assessment of their notebook work? (h) In what ways do these notebooks, used in the ways we are continually developing, become tools for students living literate lives? What we have learned so far is that by opening up what counts as texts and the possibilities of designing on the page, using a wide variety of responses, and by valuing these practices as important literate behaviors, we are expanding what it means to be readers and writers in school settings (Bloome, 1985) and who can join the literacy club (Smith, 1988).

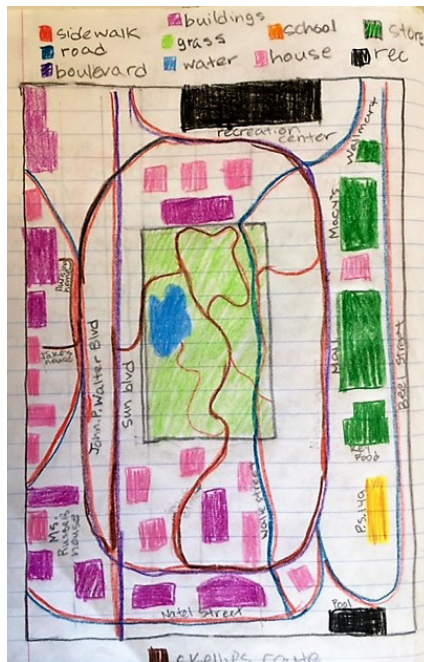
Some Examples

Figure 3 showcases three examples of the generative thinking in students’ RRNs from Lesley Doff’s fifth-grade class. In Figure 3a, Samantha used a coded message to reveal the motives of Eric, the protagonist in *The Bully Book* (Gale, 2013). In addition to showing impressive attention to detail, Samantha integrated the secret code used for messages that Eric receives and uses throughout the book to solve the mystery of the Bully Book that torments his life. In Figure 3b, Emma imagined a text message exchange between Mr. Collins, the seventh-grade math teacher in *All of the Above* (Pearsall, 2006), and his adult daughter, at a pivotal moment in the story, right after the tetrahedron project with his after-school math club was destroyed. In the book, we know only that Mr. Collins has an adult daughter and a son; we know nothing of his relationship with them. So Emma used a popular social media format to imagine this relationship. In Figure 3c, Elizabeth showed the route that Skelly, who has Alzheimer’s, took through the



(a) A coded message about Eric's message in The Bully Book.

(b) Imagined text messaging for All of the Above.



(c) Skelly's route in The Graduation of Jake Moon.

FIGURE 3. Examples of generative thinking in RRNs.

town on the night he wandered away from home unattended in *The Graduation of Jake Moon* (Park, 2002). Elizabeth both envisioned the layout of the town and synthesized textual evidence to trace Skelly's route. As in Figure 3b, Elizabeth identified a pivotal moment in the story; she then realized that a map might be the best way to depict the tension and resolution of this event. She purposefully applied resources for mapmaking, such as colors, shapes, symbols, and lines.

Who We Are

In this book, I share how to define, use, and develop the RRN so students can achieve a more creative level of reader response and lead more literate lives. I draw examples from my own third-grade students when I was a New York City public school teacher, from students grades 2–8, in classes that are currently doing this work in New York City public schools, and from my graduate students, who keep RRNs as part of our coursework. I fluctuate between the *I* voice and the *we* voice depending on the scenario I'm describing, to give some sense of my collaboration with teachers for the ideas in this book.

Most examples come from P.S. 144 in Forest Hills, Queens. When I brought this project to Principal Reva Gluck-Schneider in the spring of 2013, she was immediately responsive and quickly assembled an interested group of teachers to consider the project. P.S. 144 has a growing population of students that now exceeds school capacity. Since 2014, fifth graders are in trailer classrooms that take up part of the school playground. During the 2016–17 school year, P.S. 144 had 841 students, preK–grade 5, with one Gifted and Talented (G & T) class for each grade. Fourteen percent of the school population qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The ethnic makeup of the school was 36 percent Asian, 35 percent White, 18 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Black, 4 percent American Indian, and 1 percent Other. Students with special needs comprised 13 percent of the school population, and 5 percent were English language learners (ELLs). Class size in grades 2 through 5 averaged twenty-eight students. Across two and a half years, from September 2013 through December 2015, I spent one day every two weeks working alongside a self-selected team of teachers with their students. This team included Jen Sussman (grade 2 G & T), Lori Diamond (grade 3 G & T), Lauren Heinz (grade 4), Debra Kessler (grade 4), and Lesley Doff (grade 5 G & T). Before each visit, we would plan the ELA lesson for their students, including use of the RRN, and we held a lunchtime meeting to process the work, problem solve, and decide on next steps. We kept a blog, with satellite blogs for each teacher's class, to share our progress. We presented as a team about this

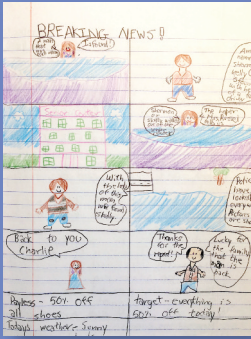
work at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention in both 2014 and 2015.

Summary of the Book

The book follows the trajectory of the reading response notebook work as it unfolds across an academic year. The first chapters describe explicit teaching of RRN strategies that we want all students to know and use. Later chapters demonstrate how students develop agency with the strategies we teach and generate their own; then, through ongoing sharing sessions, they develop autonomy. In Chapter 1, “A New Vision of the Reading Response Notebook,” I define the new vision of the RRN that is the focus of this book and how it differs significantly from the more standard uses of the RRN in schools. As well as explaining some of the theories this vision is based on, I present an expanded vision of what counts as a text in school, including popular culture texts. In Chapter 2, “Getting Started,” I explain how to launch this work with students, including expanding what counts as texts for students, using reading logs, and teaching a first strategy, all using the gradual release of responsibility model (Duke & Pearson, 2002). I also share students’ ongoing lists and how these lists develop their literate identities. In Chapter 3, “Expanding Possibilities,” I explore next strategies to teach, using an anchor chart to support students’ strategy use. I take you inside classrooms to hear how instruction unfolded for students to accomplish these strategies.

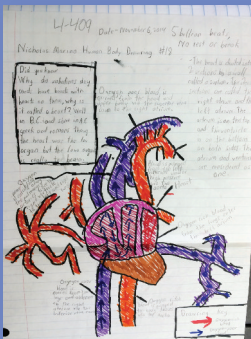
Chapter 4, “Toward Agency, Autonomy, and Accountability,” illustrates how we developed and implemented a checklist to support students’ independent use of strategies, describing share sessions that promote students’ reflective self-assessment, build a community of practice, and stimulate generative and creative responses. I discuss establishing grading criteria that hold students accountable for their work and then share ideas for using these grading criteria in manageable ways. Examples showcase dialogic classroom practices, such as conferring and small-group and whole-class discussions, with the RRN as mediational tool. In Chapter 5, “Permeable Boundaries: Living Literate Lives in and out of School,” you will see how the RRN becomes a tool that bridges students’ literate practices in and out of school. I share their generative responses that co-opt popular culture and social media formats, as well as school-based response formats for popular culture texts. The playfulness and flexibility that arises empowers students’ literate identities. Chapter 6, “Changing Lives,” features students’ reflections on how this notebook work helps form their identities as literate beings, and I consider what their responses suggest for our work as

teachers. I also share teachers' reflections of how this work is transforming their literacy teaching practices. Finally, I share some thoughts of next steps in our own journey using RRNs. Each chapter demonstrates how this work addresses and expands state and national standards expectations for excellent teaching and learning in the English language arts. In the appendixes, I provide anchor charts and grading forms. So—let's begin the journey.



The reader response notebook (RRN) is a tried-and-true tool in elementary and middle school classrooms. However, teachers and students often express frustration with this tool. Responses can read as though students are just going through the motions, with little evidence of deep comprehension. With this book, teacher educator and consultant Ted Kesler breathes new life into the RRN by infusing this work with three key practices:

- Encouraging responses to reflect design work, using a variety of writing tools
- Expanding what counts as text, including popular culture texts that are important in students' lives outside of school
- Making the RRN an integral part of a community of practice



Providing myriad examples of student work and explicit teaching in classrooms, Kesler, with a community of grade school teachers and students, demonstrates how students' creative responses lead to deep comprehension of diverse texts and ultimately help them to develop their literate identities. This book colorfully illustrates how to teach students toward agency, autonomy, and accountability in their reader response notebooks.

Ted Kesler taught grades kindergarten, 1, 3, and 4 in New York City public schools and is now an associate professor in literacy at Queens College, CUNY, where he co-directs the graduate preservice program for elementary grades 1–6 and directs the sabbatical program.



National Council of
Teachers of English

www.ncte.org

ISBN 978-0-8141-3840-3



9 780814 138403

90000

