

f. r. o. Andrea

"4 pages"

URGENT. Please fax to H [REDACTED] Vienna  
cc B [REDACTED] R [REDACTED]

To C [REDACTED]  
A [REDACTED]  
D [REDACTED]  
Austria

Dear Christian,

Thanks for your card. Please find enclosed a short piece on literature teaching for your forthcoming issue of ELT News (Austria) published by TEA and the B. Council. I hope this fits the bill.

Mario.

*Mario*

MAPPING A STORY

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

( editorial note: please include a small, outline map of Italy, showing its correct North West to South-East orientation and including the major islands like Sardinia and Sicily)

If you ask a group of university educated Italians to very quickly draw a map of their country you will find they come up with fascinatingly different representations. Some see the country as running vertically from North to South. Some omit major islands like Sardinia and Sicily. A few people forget to draw in the Alpine frontiers, thus implicitly laying claim to the Holy Roman Empire! Many people tend to draw the areas they know well as larger than other areas.

If you look at a map of Italy in an atlas you will have to choose between different projections : Mercator ( makes Greenland look big), Peters ( makes Brazil look big), or more recent computer-constructed projections.

And yet most reasonable people would probably maintain that the physical shape of Italy is an incontrovertible, objective fact.

What does all this have to do with literature teaching? Well, for me, it seems that a central principle of literature teaching is the very simple realisation that each reader of a story or poem will map the text in a completely individual and idiosyncratic way and that the initial task of the literature teacher is to help the individual student to share, at least a bit, the richness and diversity of his or her perception of the story with other classmates. My contention is not just that each student will come to the story with his own associations and values but that the internal "text" he creates will be very different from his classmate's. This means that in a class of 25 students the teacher is dealing with 26 different internal texts, and it is vital that she does not assume that the 26th, her own, is the only one around. It is very easy to make this assumption.

## A literary mapping exercise

To give yourself a detailed understanding of how radically people's internal texts created from the same external text differ one from the other, why not try this little experiment:

- Come to class ready to tell the students a literary or other story that you really enjoy and empathise with. ( You could also bring them a text to read but this weakens the experiment as students read at different speeds; a telling puts them all in the same time-frame.)

- Suggest that they listen with eyes closed, if they feel comfortable with this.

Tell your story.

- Move away from the place in the room you told the story from and give the group time to digest what they have heard and to come out of their " listening trance ".

- Explain that you are curious to know HOW each student has represented the story to themselves. You have no way of knowing unless you question individuals. The questions that follow usually bring out interesting differences:

-----  
- Did anyone here have strong pictures in their mind as they listened to the story? ( Usually more than one student will volunteer to answer- choose one person and continue)

- Ok, Sabine, you had strong pictures. Were they still pictures or moving ones?

( if stills ) :- About how many stills do you see?  
- how exactly did you change from one still to the next?

( if moving ) :- How many cuts did you have, changes from one scene or angle to the next?  
- Was the rhythm of the movement fast or slow?

- Sabine, how far away from you were your pictures?

- How large or small were your pictures?

- Were you seeing in colour or in black and white or some other way?

( if in colour ) - did you have any dominant colour/s?

- Sabine, was light important in your pictures? What was the light like?

- Did your pictures have a frame round them or were they unbounded?

- Was perspective important in your pictures or were they flat-looking?

- Were you pictures blurred or well focused?  
- Were you looking at the pictures completely from outside or did you see yourself in the pictures? ( you will get many different answers to this question: eg: " I was completely outside"  
" I felt was there but I did not see myself"  
" I saw myself in the picture "  
" Oh yes, I saw myself as the main actor"

-----  
As you question the individual student others will try to break in and " agree " with her answers. They saw things the same way. Block them and focus everybody's attention for a few minutes on " Sabine's" unique vision. The point of the exercise is to get everybody else to become aware of and to respect the WAY she visualised.

Some of your questions will seem irrelevant to Sabine- when this happens move on quickly- don't make her feel bad about not being able to answer a particular question. Certain aspects of visualisation are more important to an individual than others- can you imagine Matisse without colour or Cezanne without depth of perspective?

All the above questions are about the sort of pictures Sabine created in her mind's eye, they are not about WHAT she saw. Don't let the student go off into visual content, keep her focussed on the HOW of the pictures, as this is more difficult to grasp and since nobody can accurately understand the content of the pictures without information about how she saw them.

- Question two or three more students about the sort of pictures they saw- pick people who reckon their pictures were very different in style from Sabine's.

- Ask students to work in threes and ask each other the same questions you have used. You may want to dictate these to the group.

- Give students a chance to comment to the whole group on things they found out about themselves or others that interested them.

### Conclusions

In the very restricted experiment outlined above you can look at the sub-areas of visual perception that are important to a student as she produces her only internal text of a literary story as she listens to it. The experiment does not deal with the content of the pictures and does not deal at all with other representational areas like sound, sensation, touch, smell, nor with feelings and emotions. It does not deal with the many other things literary criticism concerns itself with.

It is reasonable to suppose that in these areas , too, students will have widely divergent impressions , representations, ideas and reactions.

My proposal to you is that helping students to share their inner texts has to be the first rational step in the literature classroom. It makes no sense to discuss the "original" text when this has been superceded by multiple, glowingly enriched, inner texts. Literary appreciation work needs to be around the listener/reader's own text not around the superceded original.

Common sense?

If you try the experiment with your classes you may want to share what happened with other colleagues across Austria. Why not write a piece for ELT NEWS and so encourage others to do the same?

Note: The procedure outlined above draws on the work of the Neuro-linguistic Programming people. RIGHTING THE EDUCATIONAL CONVEYOR BELT, by Michael Grinder is the NLP book that most clearly focuses on matters educational.