

## “Remember Most That I Wrote For Democracy”: Louise Rosenblatt, In Her Own Words

Although known for her many books and articles, it is Louise Rosenblatt’s call to action that needs to be heard and kept present in the minds of current literacy experts, teachers, and practitioners. I have limited my words to this brief introduction because I want people to hear what Dr. Rosenblatt said “in her own words”. This interview is comprehensive in details about Louise Rosenblatt’s personal and professional life from her own emergence into literacy, through her university years, and to her final years when her main concern was advocating for literacy professionals to write their congressmen because she “feared more for democracy in the year 2005 than in the 1950 when she began her fight”. I hope this interview echoes in the minds of its readers as much as it has in my own mind and that teachers as well as concerned citizens continue to share the legacy of Louise Rosenblatt by being moved to action by her words.

Dr. Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2004) taught at Barnard College, Brooklyn College, and New York University's School of Education. Upon retirement she taught doctoral candidates at Rutgers University, Michigan State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Miami, Coral Gables. In her later years, Louise Rosenblatt began spending her winters at the University of Miami as a scholar in residence where she worked in the Department of English and later in the School of Education’s Department of Teaching and Learning. It was at that time, as a doctoral student at the University of Miami, that I was mentored by and granted an interview with Dr. Louise Rosenblatt. After weeks of researching educational online databases, browsing the library resources, e-mailing the sources of 32,000 Louise Rosenblatt

GOOGLE hits, and visiting Dr. Rosenblatt at her home for a pre-interview meeting, I finalized my questions and began the interview.

Dr. Louise Rosenblatt holds a unique position in the fields of Education and Literary Studies. This legendary authority engaged in literary pedagogy and in literacy research for her entire adult life. A diverse and myriad anthology of classroom applications of Dr. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory includes comprehension strategies, Reader-Response journals, and reader navigation in hypertext (McEneaney, 1999). Her 1938 publication *Literature as Exploration* is still in print and is one of the most widely cited works of its type. In this and dozens of other publications such as *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978), she outlines a theory of reading as a transactional process. Dr. Rosenblatt's perspective of the reading process takes into consideration that the reader, the text, and the purpose for reading all contribute to a unique understanding to create what Dr. Rosenblatt refers to as "the poem". According to her, the reader selects out of his "experiential reservoir" to comprehend text. In other words, the reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality to create a unique understanding of the text. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his own resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem." (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 1978, p.12). Her research and writing provides a credible rebuttal to critics who teach stock interpretations of literature.

It was out of the context of teaching courses in Introductory Literature and Composition that Dr. Rosenblatt developed her theory of reading that proposed that efferent and aesthetic purposes for reading influences the meaning and comprehension of

a text. A superficial understanding of Dr. Rosenblatt's theory would be that reading informational texts demands efferent reading while reading narrative selections requires aesthetic purposes. However, a more insightful understanding of this theory includes an appreciation that aesthetic purposes for reading can enhance comprehending expository or informational texts and visa-versa. Her own writing exemplifies this concept as in her description of the reading process as a poem. This image increases the amount of attention to feeling while the reader's main purpose is still informational. In the same way, a piece of expository text may be presented to bring up a lot of images and feelings increasing the individual's comprehension of difficult technical vocabulary and unfamiliar text structures.

### Literary Beginnings

Q. We wanted to start with your background. Are there any instances from your childhood that impacted your interest in reading and literature?

A. The answer, of course, is yes. Everything seemed to encourage my reading. I really didn't go to school until I was seven largely because my parents felt that schools were too regimented. My father had read various and sundry theories and he thought that children shouldn't be sent to school so early because they were being regimented too early. We were living at Atlantic City and I guess I spent most of my time at the beach. So I just enjoyed life. As somebody said, "You were gathering experiences that you could then bring to understand your reading". So I learned to read very fast or I taught myself before I came to school because in a week I was reading in the first grade. I came home about a week after I had started and I said "I can read" and my parents said "Oh, no". So

they gave me something to read and I read it. I can't recall a time when I wasn't reading, from the age of seven on. I have an eleven-year-old granddaughter whose is a great reader also.

Q. Your graduate work included areas such as Anthropology and Comparative Literature. How has this interdisciplinary training influenced your work in literacy studies?

A. I had my B.A. with Honors in English from Barnard College, Columbia University. Then I went on and I had a year in France at the University of Grenoble where I was assimilating French. I took my doctorate in Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne (University of Paris) in 1931. By that time I was already teaching in the English Department at Barnard. When I was an undergraduate at Barnard in my sophomore year I roomed with Margaret Mead, a senior. She took a course in Anthropology that was practically a new science in those days. Franz Boas who was the professor of Anthropology in the graduate school at Columbia and also head of the Anthropology Department at Barnard College, the women's college. Margaret took that course and then decided that she was going to ultimately be an anthropologist. As you know, she became a very prominent one with a worldwide audience. I took Anthropology in my junior year because Margaret had been enthusiastic about it. I also became very enthusiastic. I must say that everything in my own childhood had led me up to the point where I would be enthusiastic about the importance of the culture and of the environment in the development of individuals.

When I was a senior, although I had majored in English and had my honors in English, I was faced with a decision as to whether I should go on and do my graduate

work in Anthropology or in Literature. The literature had always won out. I could have gone to Oxford for graduate work, but because of this anthropological interest I wanted the experience of another culture. That led me go to the University of Grenoble to have the experience of a foreign language and foreign culture.

By the time I got through with my work that year I had become interested in the idea of “art for art’s sake.” Some of the French writers like Flaubert, whom I admired very much, when they were criticized for the moral realism of their work, took the stand that they were just creating for art’s sake and they did not accept any limitations on what they had to present. I was very sympathetic to the freedom of the artist but at the same time I did believe very much in the social role of art. I was very much interested in why these people took this position and that is the subject that I went up to Paris and prevailed on the professor of Comparative Literature to approve. I wanted to see what the relationship was between the French writers who took this position and the English writers who espoused it. It became a study of English/French literary relations. So you see the anthropological interest in another culture always has been in the background.

My dissertation (I had to write the book in French) was published in 1931. I ended my study by saying there would be tension between society and the artist so long as readers didn’t understand what writers of literary works of art were doing. What an artist was trying to do was different. They needed to understand that if an artist presented an image of behavior it didn’t mean he was saying that was the way that you ought to behave. He was trying to tell you that that’s the way people behave. So I became interested in readers within this context so that both the literature and the anthropology coincided to create my interest in the teaching of literature and then ultimately in all

kinds of reading, literary and otherwise. So that's how I came into literacy, and why although I have a doctorate in comparative literature, I came to reading theory.

#### Reading Research

Q. What major trends and philosophies have contributed to your theory of literacy?

A. I've become known as, you might say, a representative of the application of the pragmatist philosophy to esthetics. While I was teaching at Barnard at Columbia University in the thirties, although I never studied with him, John Dewey was still a professor of philosophy there. I did meet him and I ultimately became one of the early members of an organization called The Conference on Methods in Philosophy and the Sciences that he and other philosophers organized. In that organization I came into contact with Dewey, Horace Kallen and a number of the other leading philosophers and people in the social sciences and the humanities. The meetings dealt with problems of methodology in all of these areas. The work of Charles Sanders Peirce as well as John Dewey and William James has been particularly important to my theory.

Q. You state in your article *The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing* (2004) that your theory of the reading process was based on extensive observations of problems that arose in the context of classrooms. What type of classroom interaction exemplified your experience as a researcher?

A. My teaching has always been in colleges and universities. I started out teaching courses in Introductory Literature and Composition as well as assisting with a course on Chaucer. As I began my teaching at Barnard, what I came to realize was that the kind of training that I had received as an undergraduate and as a graduate student was all

designed to prepare me to become a specialist in my field, concerned with the analysis and history of literature. I realized that in my classes most of the people were not going to be specialists in English. The question was rather, why should other people, who were not going to be specialists in English, why should they read literary works, why should they be prepared in the same way as the people who were going to be specialist. I felt that the needs of the general reader were not being thought of enough. All of the teaching was really based on what would be useful ultimately to specialists in the field. It was out of that thinking that I began observing the reading and I also developed the habit of interchange with my students. I was able to do that because the head of the department was interested—was favorable to it. So my research consisted in the observation of all of these different kinds of responses that the students were bringing and all of the different kinds of blind spots that they were bringing. I also became aware of the value of the interchanges, the extent to which they became aware of one another's ideas and found that other people didn't feel the same way that they did or had different standards or different moral attitudes. It was out of that context that ultimately I developed my particular approach to reading.

### Transactional Theory

Q. You have described your main theory of reading as “transactional.” In the field, people frequently refer to it as “reader-response.” Why do you prefer the use of the term “transactional/transaction”?

A. My assumptions behind “interaction” versus “transaction” gets us into the whole philosophic background of this quantitative/qualitative shift. You see Newton's theories and way of approaching research were very useful. No one denies the importance of the

work in Physics that was done under the Newtonian idea, which used the term “interaction.” But in that kind of approach everything can be pre-defined. Einstein brought in a whole different way of looking at the world. It was no longer a matter of being able simply to define ahead of time what was being studied, because ultimately everything depended on the observer or the method of observation. In subatomic research, either you can look at matter and see it as a particle, or you can look at it and see it as a wave, but always there is the fact that the observer has chosen a particular way of observing, so that the observer is always part of the observation.

John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley said that the notion of “interaction” was perfectly good, and still is good, for particular purposes, but we need a new term, “transaction,” for the relationship that exists between the human organism and the world. When I read Dewey and Bentley’s *Knowing and the Known* in 1949, in which they suggested “transaction,” I said: “That’s the perfect term for the relationship between the reader and the text that I’ve been describing all along.” We don’t want to start out thinking of the reader as a static entity and the text as something that already has the fully-formed meaning in it. Reading is “transaction,” during which each is continuously affecting the other. I suppose ecology is the field in which people understand this best—that the environment affects human beings, but they are also affecting it all the time, so that there is a transaction going on.

The continuous reciprocal influence of reader and text is similar, for instance, to two people talking to one another. What is said at the beginning of the conversation may take on an entirely different meaning by the end of it. What’s said affects the person who hears it, who then says something response that affects the first speaker. Rather than two

static entities, each person is being affected in the conversation and what comes next depends on what happened so far. The same thing is going on between the reader and these squiggles on the page. Squiggles on the page are just signs. Here I have borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce who said “There is not simply a sign and a signified, but there has to be some mind, some idea linking them”. For instance, in reading the word “pain” a French reader will link it up with the concept of bread and an English reader with the concept of bodily or mental suffering. So there would be two different “interpretants” to use Peirce’s term. (He used that term because he didn’t want anyone to think there was a mind with a lot of hard links sitting up there waiting to clinch things, but that it was connections going on in the mind.). I call my theory the transactional theory because I wanted to emphasize this dynamic relationship.

#### Aesthetic and Efferent Purposes for Reading

Q. In respect to aesthetic and efferent reading you refer to how schools pay too much attention to one or the other and never combine them both in studying a subject. Could you outline what you think is the most appropriate method or model?

A. I suppose I can continue what I was describing as the reading process because once you have this relationship between the reader and the text then you see it becomes very important to realize what each of us brings to that text. We bring knowledge of the language. We have to have the same code as the person who wrote the squiggles on the page, the text. When I use the word text, I mean just the signs on the page. I was very much influenced also by my work in Anthropology and Psychology to realize that each of us only brings a part of a segment of the language, no matter how much we know. In other words, the dictionary has so-called literal meanings, which is what most people

would link with it, but then it has all sorts of special meanings that words take on in special context or in special vocabularies and so on. Each of us brings to the text the sum total of our past experiences with that word. In that I'm summarizing Vygotsky. Now, Vygotsky understood and emphasized very much the social character of language. But at the same time he recognized that each of us has only this personal experience, which is the language for us at that moment. When I say our experience with those words in particular contexts that means that not only had we acquired an understanding of a literal meaning but also it had been in some special circumstance, and we have various associations with that word. Or, if the same word has been encountered in different contexts, we might have had different associations with it. That means that when the reader approaches the text and brings to it this reservoir of past experience of language and life, things get stirred up from this reservoir into our consciousness. We are selecting for attention what is relevant to our particular needs or interests or purposes at the time. And we are pushing into the background or ignoring what is irrelevant.

In reading, the reader is selecting out from what is being stirred up by the perception of the signs on the page. The reader has to select out from past experiences with those particular squiggles on the page what is relevant to that particular context. The selective activity of the reader, with particular assumptions, attitudes, and knowledge, becomes very important.

I became aware of the fact that when we read a text as a literary work of art, we are paying attention not only to what the words point to, their literal referents, but also to the associations or feelings being aroused. By paying attention to those associations, we

are letting them color the way we are thinking and feeling as we read. I term this, as you have noted, aesthetic reading.

When we are reading for knowledge, for information, or for the conclusion to an argument, or maybe for directions as to action, as in a recipe, we are not primarily paying attention to our feelings, we are reading for what we are going to carry away afterwards. I term this efferent reading. An extreme example of efferent reading is a mother whose child has just swallowed a poisonous liquid. She has snatched up the bottle and is frantically reading the label. She is interested only in selecting out what to do after the reading is over. In this context, the word “water” would not bring up the nice associations of water that reading aesthetically would. So it’s a selective activity that’s involved.

Another one of my favorite illustrations is the student who was became very excited about dinosaurs. He wanted to know about dinosaurs, and he wanted to know what were they really like. He became very annoyed because he said his teacher kept bringing him “stories.” He sensed the difference even though the teacher thought at that stage of the game it wasn’t necessary to differentiate. It is important to differentiate purpose at any point in the learning process.

Also, the same text can be read either way. I can read Shakespeare efferently, I can tell you how many images of pain there are in King Lear or something like that. But if I really want to experience King Lear as a tragedy, I have to be reading it very differently. Not categorizing or labeling. It’s often very valuable to know afterwards, to do it afterwards, after you’ve had the experience. So I would say about teaching: whenever you are having students read something, have them be clear about their purpose. You don’t have to give them this whole theory, but get them used to

knowing why they are reading this particular text. Then they will almost automatically adopt the efferent or the aesthetic stance—that is, pay attention mainly to the experiential or to the informative aspects.

### Multicultural Implications

Q. You are quoted as saying (1976) that traditional classroom instruction tends to downplay the rich cultural experience students bring to the educational arena. What do you think would be an appropriate model for teaching literacy across different cultural groups?

A. I think just the points that I've just have been making are relevant. Let me put it in a somewhat broader context in this way. I think that literature is a particularly important means of improving multicultural understanding. On the one hand it can help people to value their backgrounds. On the other hand it can help them to transcend their experience and to value other backgrounds and other individuals. You talk about people of different cultural backgrounds. The multicultural emphasis is right now on giving students things to read that help them to value their own background. I think that is too limited because they should also be helped to value other background. I think also, to get back to that first book of mine, I thought I was writing not only in order to save literature, but I was saving the world! I felt that democracy was being threatened. I saw what went on in the English classroom as being very important, because it helped people to think rationally about things that they were emotionally excited about. That was what I wanted particularly to get across.

When you teach reading and you teach literature it isn't just for them to have, but it's for them to be, something thing that they're emotionally involved in, and for them to

be able to think about rationally, to be able to handle their emotions. All of that enters into my thinking about multiculturalism.

Horace Kallen, Dean of the New School for Social Research and Alain Locke, who was a professor of Philosophy at Howard University and also at Harvard, suggested the term cultural pluralism. I feel that's a much better term than multiculturalism, because it emphasizes the pluralism but it also emphasizes the idea of diversity within unity. Of course, the unity is democracy. No matter what different backgrounds we come from to this country, the reason that we are able to maintain our own individuality or our own ethnic values is that we are in a democracy. If we don't value that, we are destroying the very basis for maintaining the things that we do value ethnically. So I feel that nowadays the tendency with multiculturalism is to be a little too concerned with asserting difference and not this diversity within unity, which makes diversity possible.

Q. In preparation for this interview I emailed several known experts of your theory to ask what one question they would ask you. Hans Kellner said he would ask you about your notions of stereotyped, rigid, narrow, stock responses---the things that students (especially rural students) bring to their reading. Obviously she had a sense of a broader outlook, and wanted to instill this vision in students with limited background. This attitude---the attitude of high modernism that dominated the Deweyite 1930s---has been challenged by Stanley Fish, for example, who suggests that all outlooks are stock responses, including his own. To what extent does Dr. Rosenblatt retain the allegiances of modernist cosmopolitanism (Kellner, 1999, para. 1)? In light of your transactional model of reading, where does one draw the line between the creative, personal interpretation of a work of literature and its possible misrepresentation?

A. If there is no absolutely single correct answer to what the particular text means—in other words if the text is not this ironclad set of ideas, if every reader makes the meaning, does that mean that there is no correct reading? Deconstruction seems practically at times to be telling us that ultimately every text can be made to contradict itself. I disagree with that, very decidedly. The deconstructionists share my premises they are also relativists. They are post Einsteinian. But they've jumped at the conclusion that ultimately everything just ends up at this kind of impasse. (They've been doing a little correcting themselves lately.) But that was the position they took and a lot of people swallowed. My answer was, we can always agree on what we consider to be standards for good reading, for a good interpretation. We can start with, "Is your interpretation coherent, have you left out and not paid attention to certain parts of the text, of the signs on the page, that you should have paid attention to," and so on. Different people read differently, and then we start to defend our reading, but we do it by going back to the text. That is why the text is important. By the time the deconstructionists got through with it the text didn't exist anymore, except as a starting point for sort of fantasy. Whereas I'm saying, you and I may have different interpretations of Hamlet and you may say to me, "Well, you don't pay enough attention to the scene with the mother, I have such and such interpretations of that scene". I'll say, "Well, I fit it into my interpretation in such a way," and we start to see that we both have coherent interpretations. It may be that then we have to decide on whether we can agree on the basic assumptions. Maybe you are psychoanalytic and I don't know about psychoanalysis. So it may be that we start to realize that our criteria are different. So there isn't confusion, there isn't chaos, but we have to recognize that there are not fixed

right or wrong, there are not questions with answers that can be easily marked as true or false.

### Political Implications

Q. What are your current interests?

A. I'm trying to do a fuller discussion of my previous discussion of the theory of writing. But I'm finding it very hard to write it in a different way because the writer is the first reader, and as soon as I use the word reader I have to explain what I mean about reading. I wanted to talk about writing first and then reading but I find I'm back to the same order as my previous essay. The main reason I'm not finishing is that I feel that everything I've been talking about is so much in danger at the present moment that that's what one ought to be thinking about. After all if children are tired or hungry or frightened or the roof is leaking over their heads or what not, for me to be worrying about whether they are learning to read efferently or aesthetically might seem to me a little visionary. I said earlier that I thought democracy was threatened at the time I wrote *Literature as Exploration*. I think that democracy is much more threatened now. Then it was threatened more from without and now it's threatened from within. The public schools and the whole idea of equal education for everyone are being undermined at the present time by what's happening both in our national and state governments. Whatever energy I have, I ought to be giving to that, so I've been writing letters, which is the only kind of action that is open to me at this point.

I have been particularly concerned with urging that professional and educational associations should set up an agency or agencies for quickly responding to misinformation in the press or to political moves that provide seeming solutions to

current problems but that will have undesirable long-term effects. I can't take the time here to document the amount of misinformation, of misinterpretation of statistical data, that even our more reputable media are disseminating about the actual situation in the schools and the problem of literacy.

What has happened is that we teachers have not communicated with the public enough, with the parents and particularly with the public that does the voting, to make them understand what it is we are trying to do for their children. If they accept some of these quick answers, these speedy answers to educational problems that are being offered to us, they may seem to be helping their children but in the long run they are going to create a world in which their children are going to have to live, where there will be terrible differences in wealth, in education, in health and in every other way. I feel we really have to be devoting our time and efforts to criticizing these shortsighted political solutions, and demanding revisions that's why I'm conflicted. On the one hand, I have this urge to constantly try to explain what I am driving at in my own thinking about reading and writing. On the other hand, I feel that all of us teachers ought to be concerned about this broader political, economic problem. I've seen cyclic changes, but in this cycle, maybe because of the economic affluence and concentrations of wealth, we find ourselves greatly at the mercy of people who may be very good at making or collecting money but who may not understand children or society or education. They've got the money, however, to propagandize their particular notions, sometimes well-meaning but neglectful of long-term educational and social efforts. We've got to at least rally numbers in the political arena.

Q. As one of the significant figures in the field of literacy what do you think is your most lasting contribution? What would you like to be most remembered for?

A. That I wrote for democracy.

Q. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

A. I think that I have said all that I ought to.

In sum, this interview allows us a detailed account of Louise Rosenblatt's life, theory, and political message. It is compressive in its details about Dr. Rosenblatt's personal and professional life from her own emergence into literacy, through her university years, to her final years when her main concern was campaigning for literacy professionals to write their congressmen because she feared for democracy. Dr. Rosenblatt's responses ran the gambit of the efferent and the aesthetic continuum. She focused on informational components of transactional theory to aesthetically moving example of advocacy for public education. Finally, Dr. Rosenblatt shared a poignant message in how she wished to be remembered most.

Support Democracy!

1. Follow Dr. Rosenblatt's example and write your congressman to support public education.
2. Defend classrooms with professionals (teachers) not teacher-proof programs.
3. Participate in social media to share your opinions.
4. Educate yourself about the lives, theories, and words of our literacy forefathers to be able to make critical classroom decisions on pedagogy and programs by standing on the shoulders of giants.

5. Apply Transactional Theory and teach expository and narrative texts by providing students with authentic, aesthetic and efferent purposes for reading.

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## More To Explore: Selected Rosenblatt Bibliography

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