

# Designing groupwork activities: a case study

Alan Durant

First published in Ron Carter and John McRae (eds.), *LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND THE LEARNER* (Longman, 1996), pp.65-88. ISBN 0-582-29323-5

[Also published in Slovenian as, 'Nacrtovanjeskupinskedejavnosti: studijprimera', and re-published in *SODOBNA PEDOGOGIKA*, vol 47 no 9-10 (1996), 484-98. ISSN 0038 0474]

---

One result of work in 'language through literature' or 'pedagogic stylistics' approaches to literature teaching over the last two decades has been the publication of an impressive range of materials for use in pairwork and groupwork (see, for exemplification of this range, McRae & Boardman 1984, Maley & Moulding 1985, Benton and Benton 1990, Durant & Fabb 1990). Many teachers now use such commercially produced materials. Over the same period, too, a considerable body of more theoretical and descriptive material has also built up, exploring general principles and priorities in such approaches (see, for example, Brumfit and Carter 1986, Short 1989, McRae 1991, Carter and Long 1991, Widdowson 1992); such commentaries and descriptions provide a helpful framework for discussing and evaluating practical initiatives in this area.

It is commonly agreed, however, that commercially-produced materials do not travel well: they work best when designed with a particular group (or at least kind) of student in mind, and with a sensitivity to linguistic, cultural and other factors which characterise a given teaching situation. Teachers, many people would therefore advocate, *should as far as possible develop their own materials, simply using published resources as a reference point*. This emphasis on local production of materials is inspired partly by recognition of a risk inherent in the circulation of commercial materials: that some teachers may come to feel dependent on them for good classroom practice, and so may become actually disempowered or even de-skilled by them (see Apple, 1982), despite the ethos of individual and group empowerment implicit in such work. Between the now well-established practical level of implementing workshop materials in the

classroom and the theoretical level of educational discussion, therefore, a less explored middle-ground exists, of general strategies for selecting suitable texts and designing tasks for classroom use. Not very much time is generally given in teacher-development or during in-service training to reflecting on how workshop materials can be designed, however, rather than merely used. What sorts of texts should be chosen? How is the basic idea for a groupwork activity decided on? How are tasks best formulated? What sorts of unexpected problem arise? These are difficult questions, both theoretically and simply in terms of useful practical guidelines, as they probe elusive areas of teachers' creativity and improvisation.

In this chapter, I consider a number of issues which arise in the design of groupwork materials, dividing my comments between brief consideration of each of the following topics: choosing the passage; devising the tasks; implementing the activity in a class session; and evaluating the learning which takes place. To focus my discussion, I have organised it around discussion of an activity I recently formulated for use at a specific workshop; and towards the end of the chapter I report briefly on participants' findings when I have used the activity on two experimental occasions. In presenting a particular activity in this way, I am not claiming that it is of special interest in itself; in many ways it is less sophisticated, and less original, than many activities to be found in published collections, or which teachers around the globe regularly devise. Nevertheless, using one activity as a case study does offer a concrete starting place for analyzing issues which arise when the attempt is made to translate spontaneous skills of individual improvisation (which teachers regularly deploy) into more public forms of agreed strategy or pedagogic planning.

As a way into the issues of selection and design which form the main concern of the chapter, therefore, consider the following activity, presented here in roughly the form in which it was given to participants:

**ACTIVITY: INVESTIGATING IMPLIED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE OPENING OF A NOVEL** (time: one hour, including final plenary session; pairs or groups)

The passage below (which is the opening of a novel) describes the novel's narrator waiting for two people arriving on a bus. In this activity, we explore *how much we can infer about the relationship between the narrator and those two people*; in doing so, we investigate the various linguistic clues offered about that relationship.

1. Please read the following passage [*allow 5 minutes for this*]:

I am standing on a corner in Monterey, waiting for the bus to come in, and all the muscles of my will are holding my terror to face the moment I most desire. Apprehension and the summer afternoon keep drying my lips, prepared at ten-minute intervals all through the five-hour wait.

But then it is her eyes that come forward out of the vulgar disembarkers to reassure me that the bus has not disgorged disaster: her madonna eyes, soft as the newlyborn, trusting as the untempted. And, for a moment, at that gaze, I am happy to forego my future, and postpone indefinitely the miracle hanging fire. Her eyes shower me with their innocence and surprise.

Was it for her, after all, for her whom I had never expected nor imagined, that there had been compounded such ruses of coincidence? Behind her he for whom I have waited so long, who has stalked so unbearably through my nightly dreams, fumbles with the tickets and the bags, and shuffles up to the event which too much anticipation has fingered to shreds.

For after all, it is all her. We sit in a cafe drinking coffee. He recounts their adventures and says, 'It was like this, wasn't it, darling?', 'I did well then, didn't I, dear heart?', and she smiles happily across the room with a confidence that appals.

2. Working in pairs or small groups, discuss the questions below, selecting responses from the

alternatives provided [*allow 20 minutes for this*]. For each answer you choose, add a note of words or expressions in the passage which suggest that this is the most appropriate response. For each alternative you reject, make a brief note of evidence which in your view disqualifies it. (If you think more than one answer is appropriate, add a note indicating why you think so.)

(i) Is the 'I' who narrates the passage

- (a) a man?
- (b) a woman?

(ii) Which of the two people is the narrator waiting for more?

- (a) the man?
- (b) the woman?
- (c) neither; both are awaited equally

(iii) Has the narrator met either or both of the two people before?

- (a) neither of them
- (b) one of them (indicate which).....
- (c) both of them

(iv) What relationship exists between the two people being waited for?

- (a) relatives?
- (b) casual friends?
- (c) professional colleagues?
- (d) some other relationship (be as specific as possible)

(v) What feeling(s) does the narrator have about the arrival of the two people?

- (a) excitement?
- (b) anxiety?
- (c) boredom?
- (e) some other feeling(s) (be as specific as possible).....

(vi) What relationship exists between the narrator and the two people being waited for?

- (a) relatives?
  - (b) casual friends?
  - (c) professional colleagues?
  - (d) some other relationship(s)
- (be as specific as possible)

3. When you have completed your responses to these questions, and discussed them briefly with other pairs/groups [*allow 10 minutes for this*], consider the information provided in the passage on the second, separate sheet [*this second passage needs to be presented separately, so that participants can't simply consult it as they respond to the initial series of questions*]. This second passage is the first half of the short biography of the author given at the beginning of the most recent, paperback edition of the novel from which the passage is taken.

Elizabeth Smart was born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1913. She was educated at private schools in Canada and for a year at King's College, University of London. One day, while browsing in a London bookshop, she chanced upon a slim volume of poetry by George Barker - and fell passionately in love with him through the printed word. Eventually they communicated directly and, as a result of Barker's impecunious circumstances, Elizabeth Smart flew both him and his wife to the United States. Thus began one of the most extraordinary, intense and ultimately tragic love affairs of our time. They never married but Elizabeth bore George Barker four children and their relationship provided the impassioned inspiration for one of the most moving and immediate chronicles of a love affair ever written - *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945).

4. Does this additional material affect your responses to the questions above? If so, how?

5. How much should an interpretation of this passage be based on information learnt separately

from the author's biography? How far does such information serve to *justify* one particular interpretation of the passage?

6. Make a note of some headings under which you might present an argument assessing how far, as readers, we project our own concerns and lives onto a passage we are reading.

Are readings which are not 'anchored' by reference to biographical or historical information...

(a) equally valid?      (b) incorrect?      (c) more inventive and imaginative?

(d) Add your own alternative description here if you wish:.....

7. Finally, during whatever time remains discuss how important it is for any given reading to fit with details of the language of the passage. Circle a number below to summarise your response to this question:

(not very important)      1      2      3      4      5      (very important)

---

Using the activity presented here as an example of a particular type of teaching approach, we can now formulate a number of questions which arise regarding how such activities are chosen and designed.

**Which comes first, passage or tasks?**

There is no firm answer to this, and for good reason. In some syllabuses, the texts are in any case already prescribed. Such courses are corpus-driven (and subscribe to some more general logic of text selection which has already been decided). In these cases, innovation lies in the originality and suitability of the tasks devised - especially in situations where the particular texts seem to the teacher inappropriate to the interests or current levels of linguistic competence of the students. In other cases, courses are skills-driven, and units are organised around such topics as

irony, figurative language, or implied meanings; the course objectives are conceptual or procedural, so many different texts could almost equally be used (so long as they provide instances of the topics in question). In such courses, selection of appropriate texts or excerpts is a far more continuous activity; and what becomes crucial is that the *tasks* are clearly focused in the particular concepts, terms or skills which constitute the syllabus (so that sessions do not become open-ended discussions of response, rather than work towards given - albeit narrower - learning objectives). Other courses again (eg. courses in 'commentary and analysis' or in 'extended reading') aim to offer general experience of reading; in these cases, it is the range or generic breadth of texts selected which arguably contributes most to the overall development of reading experience; and what is important is broad comparison and contrast. (Often, in fact, it can be effective to encourage students to choose the passages themselves, in order to provide an initial personal 'investment' or 'stake' in the materials being read and discussed.)

What is common to all three types of course is that, for different reasons, the initial choice of text is from the teacher's point of view less important than what is done with the text once it has been selected. The style of any text reflects choices which have been made in its production; and choice involves an underlying level of system which becomes amenable to analysis as soon as alternative choices (and so the consequences of choice) are assessed. By working outwards from a given passage, therefore, into the ways it might have been different, it is possible to use virtually any text as a resource in discourse analysis. The danger in 'language through literature' sessions is less that there will be nothing interesting to investigate than that the session merely opens the door on personal responses which it is difficult to channel back towards specified learning objectives without impeding the participants' enthusiasm and talents.

### **What sort of passage or text?**

Even if choice of passage is not crucial, passages *do* have to be chosen; so it may be helpful to make explicit some of the general principles on which texts are often deemed 'suitable'. The question of suitability is frequently formulated by teachers in terms of two distinct parameters

- difficulty and relevance - each of which deserves consideration.

*Difficulty.* As in other areas of ELT, especially the grading of class readers, difficulty in the language of literary passages is in principle measurable (for an introduction to readability research, see Alderson and Urquhart, 1984). As regards literary passages in particular, alongside questions of word identification and structural analysis (especially as regards idiomatic expressions), there are likely to be special considerations of stylistic difficulty (e.g. use of literary registers or archaism). And such specifically linguistic difficulties need then to be linked to referential issues (e.g. problems posed by culturally remote allusions), as well as issues of more specialised literary competence (e.g. awareness of specific interpretative techniques appropriate in allegorical or symbolic interpretation). Such issues posed in literature classes by specialised ways of reading are analyzed in detail in Montgomery et al, 1992.

With intermediate and more advanced learners, immediate difficulty with the language of the passage is less likely to be intractable than other kinds of obstacle. It is possible to support work on local language difficulties with established techniques, such as use of contextual clues to infer meanings of words. Difficulties as regards stylistic variety and implicature are more persistent, however, and are exacerbated by the fact that second-language users rarely have easy access to the social matrix within which to locate register variation, nuance, or bodies of cultural assumptions mobilised in inferential interpretation. Use of specifically literary excerpts is accordingly likely to be most effective where stylistic and inferential concerns form the main pedagogic interest, rather than specialised grammatical or lexical issues.

But in assessing the 'difficulty' of a passage it is necessary to consider not only the language but also what *tasks* are to be undertaken. It is possible, after all, to carry out very simple formal tasks (eg. classifying texts as poetry, drama or prose) on passages which are scarcely understood at all. The fact that 'difficulty' is a function of the tasks we create as well as of the language of the text itself is only obscured by our tendency to think in terms of an unspecified task of 'reading and understanding', which disguises a complex of unanalyzed ideas of what 'reading and understanding' means.



Because the nature of tasks affects considerations of difficulty so fundamentally, we need to distinguish our concept of 'difficulty' (a negative attribute, inhibiting productive work) from some notion of intellectual 'challenge' (the puzzle or unknown element which stimulates enquiry in problem-solving work). One person's challenge, of course, is another person's difficulty; so part of the skill in devising workshops involves ensuring that suitable support in tackling challenges is provided. In this context, it is usually more important that participants in a given session gain confidence from being able to achieve something they can value as a learning experience than that they have been presented with texts of a higher level of difficulty but only confirm their diffidence by being unable to carry out the prescribed tasks effectively.

*Relevance.* If literary texts are to serve the function in the language classroom of motivating and stimulating interest, then their relevance to student concerns is important. With this in mind, materials writers sometimes choose passages for the assumed relevance of their themes or topics. Passages grouped around topics such as war, love, nuclear power, green politics are often chosen, and are illustrated by pop songs, fashion magazine articles and adverts in addition to well-known poems or prose passages. Such selections are justified by the idea that students will already feel interest in and have opinions in these areas, and will therefore be more motivated to work on and discuss them than if presented with more remote historical or literary materials.

Some topics will clearly engage participants' interests more than others. There is a risk, however, that the tendency to second-guess student tastes can become patronising, to the extent that it draws on images of young people's interests held by teachers whose age and cultural experience and aspirations are often very different. And such selection of materials raises two additional problems. Firstly, some of the texts drawn from popular culture may be part of a deliberate anti-culture, which can be devalued by being appropriated into the classroom. The second problem is that one commonly asserted aim of literary education is to broaden students' reading habits and horizons; selection of already-popular materials only contributes to this aim if it forms part of a strategy of gradually introducing new and possibly unexpected materials,

providing fresh challenges and opportunities. When organised thematically, 'relevance' based work can become reductive, and often deeply ahistorical; even when selections are not exclusively of twentieth-century extracts, different cultures and previous ages tend to be read through present concerns; and, in travesty of many of the humanistic claims made by literature teachers, the densities of cultural and historical difference are turned into merely a sounding board for modern linguistic usage.

### **Selecting a particular passage**

Questions of difficulty and relevance underlie much of our discussion of the suitability of particular passages. Within such general parameters, however, it is also important to note more specific pedagogic constraints. In the case of the passage chosen for the activity above, for instance, two specific features merit consideration.

The first is that the extract is the *beginning* of a work. One effect of this that readers in the classroom are faced with a situation analogous to that of 'real' readers, inasmuch as there is no presupposed information from earlier in the work that would be available to general readers but which is denied to students carrying out the activity. In a useful chapter on selection of extracts, Guy Cook has shown how far passages chosen from later in works rely on preceding information; he concludes

As by far the greater part of cohesive ties are *anaphoric* (referring to the preceding text), the least destructive form of extraction is that which tasks either the beginning of a text or at least a part of a text which represents a new introductory departure in the narrative.

(Cook, 1986:152)

Cook's analysis provides backing for what is in any case common practice in many teachers' selection of extracts, including in earlier 'practical criticism' approaches; and while it is easy to think of famous beginnings of novels which have arguably been over-used, using the opening passages of works does have distinct pedagogic advantages. One is that it is possible to use the

prescribed task to initiate a sequence of other workshops or lessons which follow in a sequence loosely replicating the linear process of first-time reading (or traditional classroom 'working through' of a book). In the activity reproduced here, for instance, complex and changing perceptions of the relationship between the three characters are central; much of any later reading of the novel will almost inevitably be concerned with the representation of contradictory feelings already intimated in this opening passage. Using the opening passage as the basis for a hypothesis-forming activity in this way draws on a general feature of texts: that opening passages encourage especially strongly inferential activity concerning the possible significance of local textual details. In more general terms, too, using opening passages of works can motivate students to read further after the session, by offering a guided 'beginning'. (Again, this draws on a general function of opening passages: that of activating a narrative dialectic of enigma and closure which Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, describes as a work's 'hermeneutic code').

A second issue raised by the passage selected for this activity concerns the *suitability of its content*. Are there, in fact, topics which should not be talked about at all? In this extract, for example, the beginning of an adulterous relationship is presented without apparent moral judgement. The first-person narration represents the point-of-view of one of the people involved in the relationship; and the focus is on feelings rather than moral quandaries or dilemmas (while the feelings may vividly convey moral questions, those questions themselves are not explicitly formulated). As a result of the passage's point-of-view and other literary techniques, readers' sympathies are likely to become aligned with the narrator's view; and some teachers may feel that moral issues are in this way being overlooked or misrepresented.

One practical way of dealing with such issues of moral sensitivity is to ensure that a variety of texts is used: foregrounding textual sensitivity by frequently using potentially problematic material creates a delicate classroom climate. On-the-spot judgements of suitability are essential, as there can be significant variation even between individual cohorts of the same category of class (which is partly why commercially distributed materials can bring unwanted problems). Alongside evident ethical issues, a more directly pedagogic question also arises: that

distortions in the teacher-class dynamic can make subsequent activity-based work more difficult or even precipitate student hostility (which cannot always be discounted as merely formative resistance). When students become absorbed with the *choice* of text, they don't necessarily focus on the particular tasks or learning objectives associated with it; unless the shock value of a passage forms part of your instructional strategy, it may simply distract attention from your actual pedagogic goals and cloud responses in the activities you create.

### **Deciding on tasks**

To design a groupwork activity, at its simplest you simply gather together materials you think may be appropriate; then, instead of giving instruction (eg. by illustrating your points with reference to material you have selected), you 'translate' any ideas, skills or information you want to investigate into a participatory activity. Through carrying out the activity, students discover things for themselves, and are likely to become more motivated to learn than if you require them to respond in the more passive mode of listening, copying or taking notes. Working on problems and tasks leads to greater independence among students in their work, and can act as appropriate pre-activity to instruction or input, preparing students to engage with - but at the same time adopt a more critical and analytical attitude towards - material you yourself present. Work students themselves do in an activity also creates an agenda for later class discussion aimed at investigating difficulties and issues which have actually arisen in their own activity.

These elements form part of most standard explanations of how workshops work ('learning by doing'). But are things in practice really this simple? Is it even clear what the goals of an activity are (it is possible, after all, to have many enjoyable and apparently productive workshops in which it nevertheless remains slightly unclear how much or what kind of learning is actually going on)?

In general, what makes a workshop activity function as something more than directed discussion is its inclusion of a foreseen, determinate end-point. This can either be completion of a set of responses to given questions, or, generally better, a decision made regarding a central

question around which cluster a set of subordinate, prior or related questions (as in the activity in this chapter). Problem-solving work is built on the idea of an information gap, where something is left out in presenting the passage (e.g. individual words are removed from a passage in cloze procedure; the title is omitted and has to be guessed; part of the passage is not by the original author but which part is not indicated, etc.). Many different sorts of activities can be devised using information-gap procedures, and vary from ones which are highly directive and goal-oriented through to ones which are extremely open-ended and act more like a checklist of seminar elicitation questions. (For a list of different *types* of activity, generalised from a corpus of given instances, see Durant and Fabb, 1987.)

### **Formulating instructions**

A list of activity-types can be useful. But once you have decided on the general principle of the activity, how do you actually formulate the tasks?

A useful initial distinction can be drawn here between interrogatives and imperatives. While interrogatives can be short and direct, they tend to make the activity resemble a traditional series of comprehension questions, and imply a power relation at odds with the collaborative ethos of groupwork learning. (There may be a problem with the instructions in the activity above in this respect.) Interrogatives also raise issues familiar from studies of interview techniques (eg. in human resources management): questions of processing difficulties presented by double- and multi-headed questions, or of the different value, as elicitation, of open and closed questions. But there is also a more practical problem with interrogatives: that they do not specify the form in which answers should be given; and this can result in participants merely *thinking* of answers, but not keeping written notes on which to base responses or feedback during the plenary stage. Usually, therefore, it is better (where possible) to formulate instructions as tasks - in imperative form - rather than as questions: the aim of a workshop is to enable students to learn through doing, not to present them with simulated exam questions or conduct an oral elicitation by proxy. (In oral elicitation, you would in any case almost certainly mediate the abruptness of interrogatives with

preambles, follow-up questions and supplementary remarks or instructions.)

Irrespective of whether tasks are formulated as questions or as instructions, however, procedures need to be made fully explicit. (Indicating precise procedure is perhaps especially crucial in literature classes, where analytic procedures are generally very informal and ill-defined.) In designing activities, it is easy to underestimate scope for misunderstanding, even where there is goodwill from participants. And where groupwork is being introduced for the first time, activities can be sunk altogether by difficulties with the wording of instructions: with classes used to sitting and listening, participants need to be invited to move chairs or form groups, informed how long has been assigned for each stage of the process, and instructed whether they should take notes of their discussion, etc.

Making aspects of the workshop process explicit creates difficulties of its own, nevertheless. The resulting length and complexity of instructions itself becomes a problem. A page of dense and detailed instructions can be daunting, and displaces attention from reading the passage itself - shifting what should be encouraging workshop guidelines towards the register of regulatory examination rubrics. In addition, the more time participants spend in a first reading, the longer the silence before they start talking or working together. And particular care needs to be taken regarding the relationship between the complexity of instructions and the complexity of the tasks themselves. Sometimes an over-sophisticated metalanguage is used in instructions, given the tasks being prescribed (especially where teachers are determined to keep strictly to English-medium teaching). A likely result is that anyone who could read the instructions would learn very little from carrying out the tasks, and would probably find the workshop process trivial.

By comparison with expressing personal response, formalistic and classificatory tasks are intellectually demanding. While students do undoubtedly face difficulties in expressing personal views in class - especially in a second or foreign language - they are likely to be relatively comfortable with the *concept* of personal interpretation and reaction. In workshop classes, difficulty typically lies in channelling such responses towards a given analytic or problem-solving goal, working through issues in a systematic way rather than simply juxtaposing personal

reactions in an unresolved montage of individual points of view. In designing an activity, accordingly, it can be useful to build into the sequence of questions a gradience of difficulty, from concrete and specific to more open-ended tasks (as has been attempted in the activity above). As well as enabling work on later questions to build on operations carried out for earlier ones, such a design allows groups or individuals to find their own level or pace, and so facilitates mixed-ability or mixed-experience teaching.

### **Trying out the activity**

Before even starting, it is important to ensure that there are adequate resources available for what you have in mind. How much photocopying do you anticipate, and is there time (and money) to do it before the session? If a photocopier is not readily available, it may be necessary to consider other ways of distributing the passage - perhaps by a separate, prior session of dictation, or by writing the passage on the blackboard for copying. The size of groups you propose may need to depend on room-space and furniture (e.g. where chairs are screwed to the floor, groups of two or three people are likely to work better than larger groups, simply because eye contact and conversation are easier in smaller groups in such circumstances). By visualising the activity as precisely as possible as a process or event in advance, you may well be able to pre-empt procedural difficulties which could otherwise undermine the seriousness or interrupt the flow of the session.

On the first occasion an activity is tried out, problems are especially likely to arise with timing, since it is difficult to anticipate how long any particular analytic procedure will take. (It is not even easy to guess how long participants will take to arrange themselves in groups - since this varies depending on prior experience - or how long they will take to read through the passage and instructions.) Problems of an activity going too quickly are potentially as serious as it taking too long: you can adapt a session if participants finish too soon by having contingency plans for further work; but if you are forced to postpone tasks integral to the workshop to a subsequent session, or ask participants to finish on their own later, there is a risk of failing to deliver the

promised sense of a determinate end-point within the session itself. Be realistic about time: try only to create tasks that your participants - working in their actual given conditions - will be able to carry out in the time allocated. Think, too, of you own time: what will you do while students are carrying out the tasks? Will you leave them to work with each other, free from your own, potentially inhibiting presence? Or will you attach yourself to each group in turn, creating opportunities for small-group interaction that students are often deprived of, in classes with adverse staff-student ratios?

Before or during the session, it is also necessary to anticipate how you will handle participants' findings in the feedback stage. Procedurally, this may mean deciding whether you will note key words on the board; or ask group secretaries to move to another group and relay findings; or invite participants themselves to write on the board (encouraging a sense of shared ownership of the event and room-space). At another level - where practical procedures and learning theory interact especially closely - handling participants' contributions means dealing with the issue of whether there are 'correct' and 'incorrect' responses (as well as whether there are 'relevant' and 'irrelevant' ones). Undoubtedly there *can* be local misunderstandings (eg. about individual words, grammatical structures, or allusions); at the same time, you are likely to want to signal that you recognise many issues as being far more open to argument (e.g. does knowledge of a writer's biography help in interpreting a text?). As coordinator of the session, it falls largely to you to discourage participants from becoming fixated on the notion of correct answers, even as you seek to commit them, for the sake of the workshop, to at least interim decisions on the questions you ask. As in many other areas of teaching, exploring the *grounds* of different answers - in concrete observation, structures of argumentation, and in more general theoretical constructs - offers a way into comparison of different views; celebrating all responses equally as helpful contributions, on the other hand - while it does build confidence and confers value on participants' experience - can if carried too far detract from the point of anyone taking their contribution seriously at all.

Finally, if you intend to use an activity again, it can be useful to take notes of what



participants have said, as well as of directions - including apparent tangents - in which debate has developed. Such notes provide ideas for follow-up tasks, as well as ways of re-sequencing the existing tasks (since sometimes the routes through an activity which you yourself think likely are not the most obvious or interesting ones). In cases where the assumed lines of continuity - which depend on the accessibility of bridging inferences that need to be made between tasks - are not particularly evident to participants, you may wish to modify instructions in order to provide the activity with more obvious coherence. It may also be worth noting down headings which seem appropriate to the discussion which might take place during the feedback session, or particularly apposite examples from the text or analogies with other texts; in this way later uses of the activity can benefit from contributions (even, where appropriate, specific editorial suggestions) made by participants. One necessary restraint needs to be imposed on such preparation, nevertheless: that the activity shouldn't be allowed to become formulaic or mechanical as a result of what you take to be a predictability in the pattern of people's responses. As in other kinds of pedagogy, individual judgements need to be made regarding a conflict between the value of the teacher's detailed preparation and prior experience on the one hand, and the freshness of novelty and genuine interest on the other - even if this means rough edges in delivery.

### **Evaluating the learning which takes place**

It is generally recognized that workshop activities can generate interest, lively conversation and the appearance of work. But how do we assess whether anything is actually learnt? Little detailed or convincing research has been done on individual sessions, partly because empirical study and evaluation in this area are so complicated to carry out. The tendency, instead, is to assume informally that as teachers we somehow know from experience whether a session has been effective or not, without establishing criteria or indicators against which learners' achievements might be monitored.

It does seem possible in general terms, however, to say that where an activity has functioned effectively in the minimal sense of generating discussion and responses to the

questions asked, the following learning opportunities have been presented:

- (i) a new passage has been introduced and read;
- (ii) reading of the passage involves observation and 'close reading' skills to the extent that interpretative judgements offered in the feedback session are based on linguistic features;
- (iii) almost irrespective of the answers and comments offered, efforts made in responding to the tasks involve cognitive effort and organisation, especially analytic reasoning;
- (iv) some degree of discussion has taken place with a partner or partners, either in the target language or in the first language, but certainly *about* features of the target language (and some element of learning from peers may well have taken place during this dialogue);
- (v) a pre-structured sequence of analytic procedures has been worked through, which presents one possible model or template of a process of investigation;
- (vi) participants have been grouped together in ways which require them to use social skills to negotiate a task-related conversational register for at least the duration of the activity;
- (vii) in preparing for and presenting class feedback, speaking/writing opportunities have been presented (including debate and practice with technical terminologies);

We should note, immediately, of course, that a 'learning opportunity' is not necessarily a learning outcome. Some members of the group may have achieved a considerable amount under most or all of the above headings; but it is equally probable that other participants will have been passive and others again will have been actively resistant or cynical (taking the opportunity to talk about topics entirely unrelated to the session, or to satirise the process in which the class is engaged). Group dynamics are in these respects unpredictable and need sensitive handling. Despite criticisms that workshop-based pedagogies devalue teachers' creativity, much of whatever learning takes place will depend on the skill of the teacher in guiding discussion during the feedback session, especially to coordinate comments and findings with other areas of the students' studies (and in this sense workshop tasks enrich rather than replace the interactional dynamics of teaching).

In order to avoid becoming naively idealistic about groupwork teaching, however, the contribution made by a particular workshop session to a curriculum can be evaluated more concretely by making a direct comparison between the workshop and how the same resource of teacher, time, audio-visual aids and/or xerox could have been used differently. Where opportunities for learning are compared in this way with those provided by a lecture or open-agenda seminar, then despite all the evident difficulties results can begin to seem rather more favourable.

### **Discussion of sample activity**

The activity presented in this chapter, as I indicated above, has been tried out so far on two occasions. One involved a group of non-native speaker teachers from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds; these participants had advanced language skills in English, were used to groupwork, and were interested in analysis of the activity as part of a teaching strategy, as well as direct participation in it. The second occasion involved a group of twelve first-year undergraduate students, all native speakers, on a first-year undergraduate course at a British university.

On both occasions during feedback after the first stage of the activity, participants outlined hypothetical scenarios as a basis for their interpretation. In each case, the majority view expressed was that the passage describes an 'eternal triangle' or 'love triangle'. In response to Question 2(i), most participants thought the narrator must be a woman (claiming support for this view from the third line, where the narrator's lips are repeatedly 'prepared' in anticipation of the two people arriving). A dissenting minority on each occasion thought the narrator a heterosexual man in love with the woman who arrives on the bus (basing this view on the observation that the woman remains quiet while the two men talk, linking this information to the more general social script of 'two men struggling over a woman who is herself excluded from the contest'). Another minority thought the narrator possibly a gay man involved with the man arriving (pointing out that it is not only women's lips which can be 'prepared' with lipstick). Interestingly as regards later stages of the activity, no specific linguistic evidence was adduced for either of the minority views;

indeed, in discussion proponents of these two views offered no explanation of other, potentially significant details of the passage which seem to conflict with the view they were putting forward. Rather, discussion at this stage focused on the idea of *possibility in principle*: on an 'openness' in texts which could or should make them amenable to alternative, 'non-conformist' or 'dissenting' readings. One further variant on the 'eternal triangle' theme was also voiced: that the passage involves an Oedipal drama, in which the narrator is meeting his or her parents off the bus (though this view was challenged by other participants who thought it unlikely that the narrator would not have seen or even imagined his or her own mother ever before).

As regards Questions 2(ii) and 2(iii) - who the narrator is waiting for more, and whether the narrator has met either or both people previously - on each occasion there was consensus around the view that it is the man who is awaited more keenly. While it remains unclear from the passage whether the narrator has met the man before, there was agreement that it is the first time the narrator has met the woman. The paired phrases 'her whom I had never expected nor imagined...' and 'he for whom I have waited so long...' were taken to provide compelling evidence for these inferences. Attention was also drawn to the role of the connective 'but' in 'But then it is her eyes' at the beginning of the second paragraph. The adversative effect of this word, coupled with the way the pronoun 'her' is brought into focus by the cleft construction, was taken to signal contrast with what the narrator was expecting (i.e. that it would be the man who the narrator would see first after waiting so long). The sudden and unsettling effect caused by the narrator seeing the woman's expression ('at that gaze, I am happy to forego my future') was also thought to suggest that the narrator hadn't seen the woman before.

Relatively clear evidence, of the sort used in conventional comprehension exercises, was accumulated in response to Question 2(iv) concerning the relationship between the two people arriving. Participants concluded that the two are a couple, probably a longstanding married couple. The man, participants pointed out, is reported by the narrator as addressing the woman as 'darling' and 'dear heart'; and the fact that one person carries 'the tickets' and 'the bags' while travelling (the use of 'the' was considered significant), and narrates 'their adventures' on behalf of

both of them, was taken to indicate a couple rather than two unconnected individuals. Evidence from the passage's cohesive devices was brought in again, too: the 'after all' in 'for after all, it is all her' was taken to imply that the narrator makes clear his or her *presumption* of a close connection, or bond of primary importance, between the man and the woman (as does the final phrase in this context, 'a confidence that appals').

Participants' responses to Question 2(v), concerning the narrator's feelings about the arrival of the two people, explored several different kinds of evidence. Most obviously, participants took account of clear statements such as 'apprehension' being one cause of the repeatedly dry lips, and that the event is one which 'too much anticipation has fingered to shreds'. Alongside such statements, however, more contradictory feelings were identified in paradoxical, figurative wordings such as 'all the muscles of my will are holding my terror to face the moment I most desire'; desire for the man, detectable in the linking of phrases such as 'he for whom I have waited so long' with 'who has stalked unbearably through my nightly dreams', is coupled with a sense of guilt conveyed by the unusual semantic set employed in the description of the woman's eyes and expression - not colour, shape or size, but innocence, surprise and trust ('madonna eyes, soft as the newborn, trusting as the untempted').

In the final question of the first section (Question 2 (vi)), participants are in effect invited to combine and sum up their responses to previous questions; in doing so, most concluded that the narrator is a woman with strong but as yet unconsummated desires for the man (cf. the 'miracle hanging fire'), who is suddenly troubled by conflicting feelings of guilt on seeing the woman with him.

When provided with the second sheet, of biographical information about the author, on both occasions the dominant interpretation of the passage constructed by the group was considered to have been reinforced by parallel reading of the two paired passages. Indeed, several participants who had previously argued for alternative views decided that their readings were now 'wrong'. Discussion during this section of the activity on each occasion centred on the way the biographical blurb sets out to make its connections as direct as possible with the opening passage

(e.g. 'Monterey' in the passage, 'flew both him and his wife to the United States' in the blurb; the first-person narrator somehow desiring the man in the passage without having definitely met him, in the blurb knowing him from his poetry, etc.).

When participants came to consider Question 5 (roughly: 'how much does contextual information of the sort provided in the second half of the activity justify a particular interpretation?'), discussion became predictably more open-ended and wide-ranging. Along with statements of more formulaic positions drawn from critical theory, discussion focused on the fact that the passage is only a short extract from a much larger work; and argument turned on whether the contextually 'embedded' aspects of the book (such as its autobiographical relation to the life of the author) would take on a different significance if viewed in the light of the whole novel. Questions were also raised about how far a book can transform autobiographical concerns in the process of being written, and whether this should be perceived as fraudulent misrepresentation of a 'real' life or as valuable creativity.

Question 6 also elicited a wide range of different viewpoints. Views ranged from the opinion that the life and intentions of an author guarantee the meaning of the work to the view that we can make whatever we wish of a text, irrespective of local details (since it is creative reading which is important rather than more passive consumption of patterns written into the work). Each of these views - which of course reflect a spectrum of current critical positions - was presented in a precisely illustrated form, so creating opportunities for further work that might bring together various literary and cultural concerns of the curriculum.

Finally, Question 7 (which was added orally on the first occasion, then fully incorporated for the second) encourages participants to commit themselves to a judgement about the extent of the contribution made by stylistic features to the interaction of text with reader which makes up the reading process. Although the full 1-5 spectrum of numeric values was used in participants' responses, a clear majority opted for the higher end of the range (so suggesting that linguistic features *are* important). Debate in this brief, closing section of the activity touched on quite a number of topics: the valuably catalytic, emotive force of reading (through which deep personal

experiences and recollections are released, whatever the text itself actually says); ways of taking stylistic features coherently into account in a reading when there may be contradictions, ambiguities and indeterminacies in the text itself, or alternatively exploiting contradictions to open up the text for other, alternative readings; and I.A.Richards's disparaging notion of 'mnemonic irrelevances' or a failure on the part of some readers to follow texts closely because contingent memories and associations get in the way.

## **Conclusions**

In view of the large number of different concerns which surround the planning and implementation of any one workshop activity, a wide range of directions for further comment now open up. (This, in itself, contributes to the problem of analytic work on pedagogy: that there are so *many* variables in play). In this paper, I confine myself to two types of preliminary conclusion.

Firstly, it is possible, on the basis of comments I have made above, to visualise a series of follow-up activities to the workshop outlined here. Each could be designed along the lines I have indicated, and the series as a whole might be interspersed with presentations by the teacher and other kinds of study. One possibility based on the excerpt I have used above, for instance, would be to delete all gender-specific words and ask participants to fill them in, following this up with tasks based on point-of-view (again: who is the narrator?) and the role of gender assumptions and stereotypes in our reading. With later extracts it would be possible to employ other sorts of cloze procedure, investigating individual metaphors and patterns of metaphor which pervade the work. And activities which explore allusions and stylistic imitation - possibly using additional hand-outs to present source-texts and literary analogues - might help locate the language of the novel (including, of course, its title) in relation to literary traditions; such work would open up questions both of the meaning of the term 'poetic fiction' in general, and the suitability of Biblical imagery to adultery narratives in particular. As regards writing work, it is easy to see how tasks might be created inviting participants to compose dialogue for the characters as they get off the bus, or to

extend the conversation in the cafe. At later points in the novel, writing outwards from the text itself might involve simulating the style of newspaper and police reports, or reworking a passage in a contrasting idiom (e.g. in modern romance genre, such as Mills and Boon). Equally, it would be possible - again by examining the fabric of metaphorical language - to guide students' studies towards philosophical or moral issues raised by the work, or (with training teachers) into arguments for and against use of 'sensitive' texts in the classroom, or issues of the formation of a twentieth-century literary canon. Each of these kinds of study combines work on the novel itself with investigations involving other kinds of English discourse; and the value of such work would lie in the extent to which it is successful in using that broadened range of texts and tasks to reflect back on the specific kinds of choice made in writing the prescribed passage or work.

Secondly, it seems reasonable to ask whether the comments I have made above about workshop design allow any general evaluation of the activity presented at the beginning of the chapter. I think they do, at least in a few simple respects. It is possible to say, for instance, that in view of the points I have made above the activity remains problematic in terms of the number, length and style of instructions. This may be merely a question of local re-writing; or it may be that what is signalled by the complexity of instructions is a more serious design failure: that of trying to incorporate too many different topics or tasks within a single lesson-plan. It also seems reasonable to query the level of verbal skills presumed of participants; while complex issues are often expressed most succinctly by reference to concrete examples, it is questionable how many students can conduct the sorts of discussion reported above - and in any case no indication of the precise sort of student ultimately aimed at is provided.

In view of plausible criticisms along these lines, the general issue of focus needs to be re-emphasised. While the activity described above stimulated discussion and a certain amount of problem-solving work on the pilot occasions (in arguably more interesting ways than would have been possible within a conventional comprehension-class format), the risk remains of work diffracting in too many different directions. Open-endedness in an activity may offer a valuable stimulus at the beginning of a course on a particular work, where each of the many different topics



raised can be revisited in later sessions; or alternatively, it might be appropriate in a 'commentary and analysis' type class. Much of the interest of groupwork materials in 'language through literature' approaches lies, however, at least in my opinion, in the assumption that they can facilitate more specialised kinds of learning than merely general exposure to English discourse or enhancement of practical reading skills by group discussion linked to conversation and writing practice. If this is so, then it might be argued that an activity like the one presented in this chapter fails to focus sufficiently clearly on any one principal theme. Students are encouraged to investigate semantic sets, cleft constructions, discourse connectives, metaphors and other linguistic features, and to explore how these contribute to their interpretations of the passage; but arguably they do this in ways which do not allow conceptual development or targeted learner feedback as clearly as the more directed problem-solving work routinely presented in workbooks in linguistics or second-language acquisition. And whatever an activity's role in a course, it seems important to establish clearly a link between the focus of the individual activity and the focus of the overall course in which it takes place (something which is again not signalled in the version presented above.)

Given such difficulties with focus in activity design, one appropriate task for research - as much in relation to workshops and open-learning materials as in the development of experimental multimedia learning packages - would be to investigate and define specific educational purposes and values served by directive workshop learning, as compared with more open-agenda, discussion-based activities. In order that such research should not merely fall back into assumed educational values or impressionistic judgement, one useful interim project would be empirical analysis of data from a series of sessions involving the same single activity. Such analysis could draw on recordings of dialogue during the sessions to investigate cohesion and development within group responses, as well as examining forms of learner-teacher interaction. Work along these lines (which has been tackled in a slightly different context in Benton et al 1988) might finally enable us to link together, more concretely than current work permits, the existing richness of experience and case law in the field of 'language through literature' teaching with an equivalent

richness of research in the fields of reading theory, pragmatics and conversation analysis.

### References:

Alderson, C. and A.H.Urquhart (1984), *Reading in a Foreign language* (London: Longman).

Apple, M.W (1982), 'Curricular form and the logic of technical control: building the possessive individual', in, M.W. Apple (ed), *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education* (London: Routledge).

Benton, M., and P. Benton (1990), *Double Vision: reading paintings... reading poems... reading paintings* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).

Benton, M. et al (1988), *Young Readers Responding to Poems* (London: Routledge).

Brumfit, C.J, and R. Carter (eds) (1986), *Literature and Language Teaching* (Oxford: OUP).

Carter R. and M.N. Long (1991), *Teaching Literature* (London: Longman).

Cook, Guy (1986), 'Texts, Extracts and Stylistic Texture', in C.J.Brumfit and R.Carter (1986).

Durant, A. & N. Fabb (1987), 'New Courses in the Linguistics of Writing', in, Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe, *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Durant, A. and N. Fabb (1989), *Literary Studies in Action* (London: Routledge).

Maley A., and S. Moulding (1985), *Poem into Poem: reading and writing poems with students of English* (Cambridge: CUP).

McRae, J (1991), *Literature with a Small 'l'* (London: Macmillan).

McRae, J. and R. Boardman (1984), *Reading between the Lines* (Cambridge: CUP).

Montgomery, M. et al (1992), *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of Literature* (London: Routledge).

Short. M.H (ed) (1989), *Reading, Analyzing and Teaching Literature* (London: Longman).

Widdowson, H.G. (1992), *Practical Stylistics* (Oxford: OUP).