Readers Theatre, Bible, and fluency

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Readers Theatre has been a dramatic genre for many years. Only recently, however, has it been seriously applied to educational endeavors and, even then, seldom to the teaching of Biblical themes and related values. In view of the mandate to integrate literacy into every area of the school curriculum, this article explores how expression, fluency, and intonation of oral reading may be improved using Readers Theatre in faith formation classes.

Readers Theatre: yesterday to today

Readers Theatre had its resurgence in the 1945 theatre world of New York with the production of *Oedipus Rex*. The stated purpose of the production was "to give the people of New York an opportunity to witness performances of great dramatic works which were seldom if ever produced." Six years later George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in hell* was produced with just four readers using scripts with a minimum of staging. The following year, with three readers and a chorus of twenty, Stephen Vincent Benét's *Brown's body* was performed (Coger & White, 1973).

> *Readers Theatre sanctions peer interaction and fun*

English departments in American universities began taking Readers Theatre as a serious dramatic genre in the 1960s (White & Coger 1967). From there, the idea spread to middle and elementary schools as a means to teach content and fluency. However, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that Readers Theatre became an instructional strategy that was taken seriously. Even so, it wasn't until the twenty-first century that major language textbook writers began offering Readers Theatre scripts along with the reading series.

The number of returns from an Internet search for Readers Theatre scripts or books that address the writing, staging, or instructional implementation has increased exponentially over the past ten years.

Benefits of Readers Theatre

Anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of using Readers Theatre can be found in the literature (Rinehart, 1999; Moran, 2006; Tyler et al., 2000). Many teachers who use Readers Theatre in their classrooms have communicated with us concerning its value in enhancing overall fluency. Only in the last 10 years, has there been any quantitative research on the use of the strategy in the classroom.

A 10-week study on the use of Readers Theatre in a second grade language arts classroom showed an average rate increase of seventeen words per minute over the control group (Martinez et al., 1999). The work of Millin and Rinehart (1999) showed similar results. Keehn's (2003) study of second graders using Readers Theatre showed statistically significant gains in rate, retelling, and expressiveness by low achievement students, while the "high-achievement readers made statistically significant gains in measures of comprehension and word recognition".

Hudson (2006) provides a concise list of the benefits of Readers Theatre. Readers Theatre:

- provides an authentic purpose, legitimate reason, and motivation for rereading text multiple times;
- uses repeated reading to help students develop accuracy, rate, and prosody;
- helps students understand the importance of intonation and how it relates to context;
- improves students' comprehension of text through repeated readings and variations in interpretation;
- requires teamwork among students; and
- sanctions peer interaction and fun.

Readers Theatre, Bible study, and fluency

In Christian schools, Bible is taught alongside other academic subjects. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that biblical Readers Theatre scripts can enhance fluency whilst teaching biblical content.

There are three basic types of Readers Theatre: interactive, presentational, and echo. While the following examples may not be used as given, they will provide the reader with ideas for writing and producing scripts that meet the objectives of their Bible courses.

Since Readers Theatre is presentational and not representational drama, it is well suited for classroom use. Acting with the voice brings biblical themes to a heightened level of appreciation.

The readings below are given as samples of

the types of Readers Theatre that can be used in worship services, school programs, or Bible classes. The primary goal of these readings is to bring the biblical stories alive. The added advantage is the enhancement of fluency.

To demonstrate a variety of Readers Theatres, only sections of each reading are given. The precise manner in which these readings are to be implemented is open to the creativity of the instructor. To fine tune one of these readings for performance, such things as casting, voicing, and staging need to be considered (See Campbell & Cleland, 2003).

Conclusion

There is a host of Readers Theatre available on the Internet; however, it may be difficult to find a script to match one's curricular objectives. This is why we encourage instructors to develop their own scripts. Often Readers Theatre scripts found on the Internet or in commercially available sources are written with long lines, lending themselves to a form of round-robin reading. We advocate a style with a faster pace and a focus on deeper meaning! TEACH

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Sample scripts

Presentational readings

Presentational readings, as the name suggests, are carefully rehearsed readings designed for audience listening. Their impact comes from the use of the voice as a dramatic tool.

Title: ***Nathan and David***

Source: taken from 2 Samuel 12.

Length: 53 lines

Readers: 5 readers—readers 1 and 2 are Nathan, they carry most of the story line; readers 3 and 4 take the parts of the rich man and poor man respectively, reader 5 takes the role of David.

Comments: The interpretation of the story is open to the instructor. During the last 15 lines, the readers become more and more intense, at times, even raising their voices for emphasis.

Reader 1:	David, I am Nathan, a prophet of God.
Reader 2:	I have a tragic story to tell you.
David:	I am listening.
Reader 2:	In a certain town
Reader 1:	there were two men—
Reader 3:	I am very rich.
Reader 4:	I am very poor.
Reader 3:	I have very large herds.
Reader 1:	He had herds of cattle and sheep
Reader 2:	which made him very, very rich!
Reader 1:	The poor man had—
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Reader 2:	David began to rant and rave—
Reader 1:	And so he should have.
David:	If there is a God—and surely there is—
Reader 2:	said David,
David:	this rich man deserves to die!
Reader 1:	David.
David:	He must pay for the lamb four times over.
Reader 2:	David.
David:	Who is this man?
Reader 1:	David!
Reader 2:	David!!
Readers 1&2:	You…you are that man!

Title: ***There's only one 'I'***

Source: taken and modified from the authors' book. (Campbell & Cleland, 2003)

Length: 23 lines

> *"Acting with the voice brings biblical themes to a heightened level of appreciation"*

Readers: 17 readers (or adjust to suit number in class)

Comments: Make cards with the following words / letters: NATION, UNIVERSE, COMMUNITY, CITY, AUSTRALIA, A, L, L, C, R, E, A, T, I , O, N. Wherever an 'I' appears, it is printed in red; all other letters are black. If there are more than 17 students, two or three students may hold a given word card and share the matching line(s). Students holding the letter cards to form "ALL CREATION" stand in the back row. Those holding word cards sit in the front.

Narrator:	God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible
Voice 1:	for the fish in the sea,
Voice 2:	for the birds in the air, the cattle,
Voice 3:	for the Earth itself,
Voice 4:	for every animal.
Narrator:	Let them be responsible
Voice 3:	for fish in the sea
Voice 2:	for birds in the air,
Voice 1:	for every living thing on the Earth.
Narrator:	God created human beings; he created them God-like, reflecting God's nature.
Voices 1–11:	There's only one 'I' in all creation.
Voice 12:	There's only one 'I' in our nation.
Voice 13:	There's only one 'I' in our whole universe.
Voices 1–11:	There's only one 'I' in all creation.
Voice 14:	There's only one 'I' in our community.
Voice 15:	There's only one 'I' in our great city.
Voice 16:	There's only one 'I' in our Australia.
Voices 1–11:	There's only one 'I' in all creation.
Voice 12:	There's only one 'I' in our nation.
Voice 13:	There's only one 'I' in our whole universe.
Voices 1–11:	There's only one 'I' in all creation.
All:	I must be responsible!
Voice 17	(*as a mischievous aside*) And there's only one 'I' in responsible.

Possible extensions:

- Have the children raise their cards at appropriate moments.
- Have all children wear white shirts and red ties.
- Use a musical backing. (You may request Jo's melody in print or on tape, at no cost, by contacting her at jvcleland@aol.com)

Interactive readings

Interactive readings involve audience participation, and require audience members to adopt a particular role. The impact of this style of Readers Theatre is that the audience is absorbed into the story and becomes part of the action. Used in a classroom, this is a wonderful confidence booster for struggling readers, as they are one of a chorus of voices.

Title: ***The unmerciful servant***

Source: taken from Matthew 18

Length: 45 lines

Readers: 4 readers plus the audience. The two readers carry the story line; one person is designated as the King and one as the Poor Servant. The audience (or classroom) is cast as the unmerciful servant.

Comments: Casting requires readers to feel the anger, forgiveness, and frustration of the moment and be to express it with their voices. Typically, these four readers take their place in front of the audience. We have found it useful to practice a few lines for the audience, pointing out to them that they are the unforgiving servant! Interactive readings cast the audience to certain lines so that they must identify with the character of the text (taken from Campbell & Zackrison, 2003).

Reader 1:	The kingdom of heaven is like a king
Reader 2:	who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.
Reader 1:	A man who owed him several million dollars
Reader 2:	was brought to him.
The King:	I need my several million dollars, pay up!
Audience:	I can't pay!
The King:	Pay up!!
Audience:	I can't pay!
The King:	Sell his wife!
Audience:	Please don't!
The King:	Sell him!
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Audience:	Sell his children! Sell his lands!
Poor Servant:	Please don't!!
Reader 1:	The servant's servant fell on his knees
Reader 2:	and cried.
Poor Servant:	Be patient I will pay.
Reader 1:	But the first servant, ignoring the plea
Reader 2:	became an unmerciful servant by saying—
Audience:	SELL!
Reader 1:	The king was not pleased at all!
The King:	I forgave you millions, can't you forgive a few?
Reader 1:	And so it was in this parable
Reader 2:	that Jesus gave meaning
Reader 1:	to what
Reader 2:	forgiveness really means

Echo readings

Echo readings also involve the audience, but in this case, the audience echoes a key reader's words and mimics the nuances of expression. While at first glance it may appear that echo reading is to be used

only with young children who cannot read (indeed, it works very well with the very young), it is surprisingly effective with adult audiences as well.

Title: ***Jesus calms the storm***

Source: taken from Matthew 8

Length: 38 lines

Readers: A Narrator who carries the story line with the dialogue provided by what is called the Voice Leader.

Suggestions: The concept is straightforward. The audience is instructed to repeat what the Voice Leader says, imitating his/her voice inflection, emotions embedded in the voice, volume, and, at times, facial and body movements. The Voice Leader reads only one sentence or phrase at a time. Notice that the lines for the Voice Leader are purposely short.

Narrator: One day while on the seashore, Jesus said to his disciples,

Voice Leader: (Motion with the head to go) Let's go / to the other side of the lake.

Narrator: They got into a boat and began sailing. (Make the sound of the wind) A furious storm came up without any warning. The waves washed over the boat. All during this time, Jesus was sleeping. The disciples, who were afraid, woke him and said,

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Voice Leader: Why were you so scared? / Don't you trust me?

Narrator: Terrified they asked each other,

Voice Leader: (Terrified look) Who is this? / (Make sound of the wind) The wind / and the waves obey him.

Narrator: And so it was that the disciples learned who this man Jesus really was and the great power that he had.

Title: ***Joseph sold into slavery***

Source: taken from Genesis 37

Length: 32 lines

Readers: The Voice Leader represents Joseph's brothers while the Narrator carries the story line.

Comments: The audience does not need to see the script.

Narrator: Jacob's sons, except Joseph, were caring for their father's flocks near a small town. Jacob told Joseph to go and see if all was well with his broth-ers and with the flocks, so Joseph did as his father had requested. When his brothers saw Joseph coming, they started to talk among themselves.

Voice Leader: (Shake head in disbelief) Look, the dreamer is coming!

(Raise fist above head and pinch lips together) Let's kill him.

Narrator: To cover up their evil scheme the brothers decided to tell his father that a wild animal had eaten him. Reuben heard of the plan and tried to rescue Joseph. He didn't want Joseph to be killed.

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Narrator: So the brothers sold Joseph to the camel drivers. Joseph was taken to Egypt. The brothers took Joseph's robe, dipped it in the blood of a killed goat. They took the bloody robe back to their father and said,

Voice Leader: We found this.

Narrator: Jacob said, It's Joseph's robe! Surely he has been eaten by a wild animal! Jacob was very sad. He cried for many days. As for Joseph, the camel drivers sold him in Egypt to a man named Potiphar.

Voice Leader: Poor, poor Joseph what are you going to do?

Narrator: On the road to Egypt and slavery, Joseph purposed in his heart to serve the God of his father Jacob and to be faithful no matter what happened.

Full and additional scripts may be obtained by contacting Melvin Campbell: mdcamp2@att.net