

# Reading with the Left Brain or the Right?

*Marna Broekhoff*  
*University of Oregon*

We all know the frustration of a class discussion that falls flat because no one has done the assigned reading. Reluctantly acknowledging the huge correlation between accountability and student performance, we resort to pop quizzes, comprehension tests, written answers to discussion questions, and other accountability “stimulators.” Such assessments, though, are unexciting at best, and punitive at worst.

There’s certainly a place for discussion questions about the thematic elements in a reading, as well as about structural and rhetorical issues. The left-brain, critical and analytic thinking that such discussion requires is essential in developing reading skills. However, for a change of pace welcome to both teacher and student alike, you may want to consider some right-brain activities, such role plays of themes in the assigned readings.

I tried role plays twice for the first time this fall in AEIS Writing 110, the first writing course for matriculated international students at the University of Oregon. I got the idea from my colleague, Belinda Young-Davy. For the second and third essays in this course, students were given short readings about family and personal relationships. Their writing assignment was to choose a theme from a reading and relate it to their own experience. Themes included arranged marriage, cultural identity and shame, parent-child relationships, poverty and education, and levels of friends.

After we had finished the usual class discussion questions, I divided students into groups and asked them to choose a story and prepare a five-minute role play about a theme from that story. The first time I allowed them to portray a theme by recreating part of the story. The second time, I asked them to choose a theme and apply it to new characters and a new setting. Their role play could involve a similar situation, problem, or solution to a problem. As each group performed, the rest of the class guessed which story and which theme were portrayed. For their second

role plays, I gave students a worksheet on which they could make notes about the characters, setting, plot, conflict, climax, conclusion, and important dialog.

Following the role plays, students evaluated their experience by responding to these questions:

- 1) Did the role playing give you any new insights about the story?
- 2) Did anything about your role play experience surprise you?
- 3) Did anything in the role plays you watched interest you?
- 4) Would you have preferred to write more in your journals and answer more discussion questions?

The majority of responses were positive, with comments that the role plays helped them understand the story and characters better, gain new insights into the theme and “meaning” of the story, understand other students’ viewpoints, solve conflicts in their journal writing about the story, and remember the story better. Several said that the activity was a fun social experience and new to them. Three out of fifteen, however, said they would have preferred more journal writing.

My own view is that along with providing a refreshing change of pace from the usual discussion questions, role plays encourage students to use their “right brains” while thinking creatively to synthesize a new whole. They accommodate different learning modalities, including the auditory and kinesthetic. They force the students to understand and internalize the themes of their reading. They make them active, rather than passive readers, who will remember their reading. Last but not least, the role plays are fun for everyone!

*Marna Broekhoff, from the University of Oregon’s American English Institute, has also taught in Japan, Turkey, and an Arizona prison. She has a Ph.D. in English and specializes in teaching writing.*