Pratique empathique: journaux de lecture de réflexion au CÉGEP
Empathetic Practice: Reflective Reading Journals in the CEGEP Classroom

par

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Essai présenté à la Faculté d’éducation
en vue de l’obtention du grade de
Maître en enseignement (M.Éd.)
Maîtrise en enseignement au collegial

June 2015
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Pratique empathique journaux de lecture de réflexion au CÉGEP

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SUMMARY

In order to observe whether or not students appreciate the opportunity to learn affectively, this research was designed as an exploratory project aimed at identifying the ways in which reflective reading journals enabled students to respond empathetically to works of literary fiction. To understand the relationship between the act of reading and the experience of empathy, several questions were asked. The main question was: In what ways do reflective reading journals encourage students to read and understand works of fiction empathetically? Related concerns were taken into consideration: How do students describe their experience of empathy in response to the literary techniques such as plot and characterization? Students were also expected to consider the ways in which their thoughts on writing reflective reading journals underscored the need to forge empathetic awareness of the variety of opinions, experiences, and perspectives expressed in the works of fiction.

Since no control was exercised over the selection of the participants, the research project used whatever sample was available when the course was offered in the Fall 2013 semester. The students who had signed up for the course were required to submit a total of five reflective reading journals at five different times during the semester. Fifty reflective reading journals were randomly selected for this research project. To help students organize their responses with specific features of the works of fiction in mind, four prompts were presented. These guiding prompts were meant to encourage active reading by urging students to react to decisions made by characters or to ask them questions, to reflect on a pertinent bit of dialogue, and/or to consider the ways in which characters relate to each other. Each prompt also urged students to relate their thoughts to their personal lives. A content analysis of the students’ reflective reading journals was used to identify empathy-related themes. An inductive open
coding of this data was performed after the semester had ended and the students’ final grades were submitted.

Students were also asked to provide feedback to fixed-alternative and open-ended questions. A questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester, after all five reflective journals were submitted, evaluated, and returned. Students were surveyed on whether they believed reflective reading journals helped them to think deeply about characters and whether or not they considered it important to express their emotions in response to their reading of literary fiction. The open-ended questions asked the students to provide feedback on how they felt about writing reflectively and to explain whether or not they found the practice of writing reflective reading journals helpful in building self-awareness. A content analysis was performed on the students’ responses to the open-ended questions in order to see whether or not recurrent themes corroborated with the conclusions found in the literature on reading and empathy. The themes that emerged in the reflective reading journals and the feedback provided in the questionnaire indicated that students see the experience of empathy as an important correlative to reading, thinking, and understanding.

In general, students found this academic exercise helpful in providing a platform to inspire critical reflection, to express feelings, and to foster empathetic concern for others. The findings accentuated the students’ intellectual and emotional engagement with literary fiction. In sum, the collected qualitative data (themes and questionnaire responses) was consistent with the information found in the literature on empathy. This exploratory research offers evidence of the benefits of reflective journaling as a means to nurture the students’ empathetic imagination. The conclusions drawn in the literature on active learning, fiction, and reflective journaling provide English teachers with the theoretical support necessary to fashion learning practices that are meaningful and rewarding for CEGEP students at an affective level.
Résumé

Dans le but d'observer si les étudiants apprécient ou non la possibilité d'apprendre affectivement, cette recherche a été conçue comme un projet exploratoire visant à identifier les moyens que les journaux de lecture de réflexion ont permis aux étudiants de répondre avec empathie aux œuvres de fiction littéraire. Pour comprendre la relation entre l'acte de lecture et l'expérience de l'empathie, plusieurs questions ont été posées. La question principale était la suivante: de quelles façons les journaux de lecture de réflexion encouragent les étudiants à lire et comprendre des œuvres de fiction avec empathie? Des préoccupations du même ordre ont été prises en considération: Comment les étudiants décrivent-ils leur expérience de l'empathie en réponse aux techniques littéraires telles que l'intrigue et la caractérisation? Les étudiants doivent aussi examiner les façons dont leurs idées sur la rédaction de journaux de lecture de réflexion ont mis en évidence la nécessité de forger la prise de conscience empathique de la diversité d'opinions, d'expériences et de perspectives exprimée dans les œuvres de fiction.

Puisqu'aucun contrôle n'a été exercé sur la sélection des participants, le projet de recherche a utilisé un échantillon qui était disponible lorsque le cours a été offert à l'automne 2013. Comme le cours faisait partie du flux obligatoire, les 39 étudiants inscrits au cours ont été pris à partir d'un échantillon représentatif de la population du CÉGEP John Abbott. Le cours a été sous-titré "anglais 103: l'individu et la société", et les œuvres de fiction que les étudiants ont étudiées, ont été prises à partir de la première moitié du 20e siècle. Un post-cours de niveau d'entrée dans l'un des composant de bloc-anglais, ce cours "thèmes" s'est concentré sur de la fiction qui dramatise la relation fragile entre l'individuel et le collectif.

Les étudiants étaient tenus de soumettre un total de cinq journaux de lecture de réflexion à cinq moments différents au cours du semestre. Cinquante journaux de lecture de réflexion ont été choisis au hasard pour ce projet de recherche. Pour aider les étudiants à organiser leurs réponses avec des caractéristiques spécifiques des œuvres de fiction en esprit, quatre questions guides ont été présentées. Ces questions guides étaient destinées à encourager la lecture active en exhortant les étudiants à réagir aux décisions prises par des personnages ou à leur poser des questions, à réfléchir sur certain dialogue pertinent, et/ou à examiner les façons dont les personnages sont liés les uns aux autres. Chaque question guide a aussi prié les élèves à porter leurs réflexions sur leur vie personnelle. Une analyse du contenu de leurs journaux de lecture de réflexion a été utilisée pour identifier les thèmes liés à l'empathie. En raison de la nature inductive de la recherche, un codage ouvert des données a été effectué après la fin du semestre et les notes finales ont été présentées.
Les étudiants ont également été invités à fournir des commentaires en réponse aux questions fixes et aux questions ouvertes. Un questionnaire a été administré à la fin du semestre, après la soumission, l'évaluation et le retour des cinq journaux. Les élèves ont été interrogés pour savoir s'ils croyaient que les journaux de lecture de réflexion les ont aidés à réfléchir profondément au sujet des personnages et s'ils jugeaient important d'exprimer leurs émotions en réponse à leur lecture de la fiction littéraire. Les questions ouvertes avaient demandé aux étudiants de fournir des commentaires sur ce qu'ils pensaient de la rédaction de lecture de réflexion, et d'expliquer s'ils trouvaient cette pratique utile pour renforcer la connaissance de soi. Une analyse du contenu a été effectuée sur les réponses des étudiants à des questions ouvertes afin de voir si oui ou non les thèmes récurrents ont corroboré les conclusions trouvées dans la recherche sur la lecture et l'empathie. Les thèmes ressortis et les commentaires fournis dans le questionnaire ont indiqué que les étudiants considèrent l'expérience de l'empathie comme un important corrélatif à la lecture, la réflexion et la compréhension.

En général, les étudiants ont trouvé cet exercice académique utile à fournir une plate-forme pour une réflexion critique, pour exprimer leurs sentiments et pour promouvoir un souci empathique des autres. Les conclusions ont accentué l'engagement intellectuel et affectif des étudiants avec la fiction littéraire. Les données qualitatives (thèmes des rédactions et réponses au questionnaire) recueillies étaient cohérentes avec l'information trouvée dans la recherche sur l'empathie. Ce projet de recherche exploratoire offre la preuve des avantages de la rédaction de lecture de réflexion comme un moyen pour alimenter l'imaginaire empathique des étudiants. Les conclusions tirées de la recherche sur l'apprentissage actif, la fiction, et la rédaction de réflexion fournissent aux professeurs d'anglais l'appui théorique nécessaire pour façonner à un niveau affectif des pratiques d'apprentissage importantes et enrichissantes pour les étudiants du CÉGEP.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my research supervisor Dr. John (Jock) Mackay for providing encouragement and guidance. Thank you for your kindness and generosity. I also wish to thank Corinne for her unwavering patience. I don’t know how I could have completed this project without your unconditional love and support.
INTRODUCTION

CEGEP teachers should take heed of the curricular benefits of affective learning. Striking a balance between reason and emotion is a particularly important aim for the English teacher who wishes to instill in the students a passion for reading and reflecting. One way to nurture this sort of lasting learning experience is for teachers to challenge the notion that students are passive learners who read merely to retain information for an upcoming test. On the contrary, current studies on reading and writing instruction suggest that students find the experience of reading most meaningful when they get to reflect upon and write down what they are feeling.

The aim of this exploratory research project is to provide some insight into the ways in which reflective reading journals allow students to read literary fiction empathetically. The hope is, on the one hand, to build an understanding of whether or not students believe reflective reading is a worthwhile academic exercise. On the other hand, it is to see whether or not the findings in the studies on empathetic reading and the students’ personal feedback on the practice of writing reflective journals agree. Furthermore, it is hoped that the themes that emerge in the students’ reflective journals and the answers to the corresponding questionnaire items suggest an increased understanding of the relationship between reading and the possibility of empathetic concern.

One can argue that reading is synonymous with learning; it is a recurring educational theme that transcends departmental, disciplinary, and even possibly cultural divides. In effect, reading can be taken for granted as the only constant in the learning equation—that is, irrespective of the institution, the act of reading must be considered a mandatory feature of learning in and across the disciplines. This is especially true for the CEGEP learner who, depending on the subject or program of study, can be asked to read everything from axioms and graphs to the
periodic table of elements and metaphor. Yet, far too often students read merely in order to retain the required information for a quiz before moving on to other tasks.

The learning benefits of active reading and purposeful reflection in the CEGEP context cannot be overstated. In assigning reflective reading journals, teachers not only manage to encourage students to become aware of, and later identify with, their own personal attitudes and values. They also encourage them to think about the emotions elicited and to record these. Students are, in essence, pushed to balance autonomous and subjective outlooks with increasingly critical and self-reflective understanding. The journal therefore encourages the students to reflect on the conceptions of personal and social selves which they are exposed to during their experience of reading literary texts.

Consequently, as this study observes, empathy is enacted by involving oneself intellectually as well as emotionally, and by making the learning experience more meaningful through self-reflection. While a CEGEP student's time in an English class is relatively limited—in general one semester is equivalent to 60 hours of class time, meetings usually taking place twice a week for the duration of fifteen weeks—and since English classes tend to require consistent, sustained, and ongoing training in reading and writing, teachers may find it difficult to always have to devise and introduce new lesson plans to keep students motivated and actively engaged.

Training students to read analytically and with critical acumen is, put curtly, time-consuming and challenging, especially given the fact that CEGEP teachers encounter a plethora of learning skills and cognitive abilities in the classroom. However, in order to create a more emotionally and intellectually vibrant curriculum, teachers could consider assigning reflective journals as a desirable pedagogical approach for the promotion of active and lasting learning.
CHAPTER ONE: PROBLEM STATEMENT

Why is it important to assign reflective reading journals in a CEGEP English literature classroom? This researcher contends that keeping a reflective journal during the process of reading promotes reflective thinking. Studies corroborate by suggesting that keeping a journal of one’s feelings in response to a story helps readers refine their sense of self through reflective practice (Boud, 2001; Kremenitzer, 2005). The reflective reading journals can enable students to take stock of what they are feeling and, if and when shared, can help teachers observe how readers respond to personal feelings, concerns, dilemmas that fictional characters contend with. In sum, the reflective journal is a model pedagogical tool that encourages empathetic identification, underscores the importance of self-awareness and understanding, and bolsters metacognition (Schon, in Boud, 2001; Kremenitzer, 2005).

Since empathy requires active—that is, conscious and deliberate—mental involvement, the concept applies quite naturally to our imaginative interactions with humans (characters) found in fiction (Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011; Morson, 2011). As an infectious catalyst, empathy inspires emotional and intellectual awareness. It is the English teacher’s hope that exposure to literary fiction will not only help students acquire valuable insight into human experience; it may also help students adopt a responsible outlook upon the world. In other words, by reading works of fiction, students get to reflect upon the nature of identity not only in factual terms or on global scales but also on an individual, humanized level, consequently gleaning further insight into the human condition.

The interaction between reading and reflection, moreover, underscores the privileged place occupied by the reading identity in the learner’s self-concepts. Specifically, how learners see themselves as readers should
impact their voluntary reading engagement (Irwin, 2003). Urging readers to engage themselves in writing could afford researchers some light into what is going on in the readers’ mental and emotional registers. What is required from teachers and researchers, as Irwin (2003) suggests, is the willingness to encourage affirmative, sustained, and voluntary engagement in reading and writing as necessary correlatives to effective learning. By assigning reflective reading journals, teachers enable students to grapple with difficult but worthwhile questions about one’s self, beliefs, viewpoints, anxieties, and so on (Hiemstra, 2001).

Because the art and science of teaching relies heavily on the transmission of disciplinary knowledge and proficient development of intellectual competencies, teachers sometimes forget that equally vital for effective learning is to balance reasoning with emotional engagement (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Although most studies on fiction and empathy deal with Canadian and American undergraduate university-level samples, the topic remains the special domain of the CEGEP literature classroom in which students perform a balancing act between the intellect and emotions (Oatley, 2004). Such studies describe observations regarding the nature of empathetic reading, their theoretical bent focusing predominantly on the theory-of-mind (simulation), affective learning, critical reading skills, and the higher-learning ideals of self-reflection and awareness of social interaction.

Specifically, because students are urged to identify emotionally with the content of what they learn—and by reflecting upon their idiosyncratic feelings and those of the people they read about, as evidenced in the studies by Coplan (2004), Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela P, and Peterson (2006), Mar, Djikic, and Oatley (2008), and Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, and Peterson (2009)—they begin to forge an emotionally, intellectually, and morally responsible outlook. Therefore, in order to develop a nuanced appreciation for ongoing important contributions to the general field of literacy and literary education, it is necessary to set the
topic of empathetic reading within the framework of a discussion on the conceptual nature of empathy, on the affective processes inherent in self-reflection, and on the imaginative assessment of real-life experiences by means of the simulative function of fiction.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature on the psychology of reading purports to highlight the relationship between reading and the development of the reader’s capacity for empathy and self-awareness. Similarly, the research on journal writing also underscores the need for readers to engage with the learning material not only from a distance—that is, by writing objective, impersonal academic essays that conduct a formal analysis of texts—but also from within a more personal purview that encourages readers to stake an emotional claim in the learning experience. As a reflective practice, journal-writing helps readers not only to describe their thoughts in response to the reading material; it also encourages the building of emotional intelligence through self-reflection (Goleman 1998, cited in Jarvis, 2001; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The studies on learning/reflection journals and empathy draw encouraging conclusions about the benefits of reflective reading and writing.

2. EMPATHY

2.1 Definition

Before investigating the ways in which one gauges the function of empathy through the act of reading, one must first decipher the possible meaning(s) of what Mar (2011) deems a “notoriously heterogeneous construct” (p. 113). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the word “empathy” in two interrelated ways. It is, firstly, the “imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it” (The online Merriam-Webster). Empathy is further defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experience the feelings,
thoughts and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner” (The online Merriam-Webster).

There is, in fact, almost unanimous agreement in the research on reading that empathy entails the emotional willingness to enter another’s skin so as to better recognize and understand phenomena from the perspective of another person’s life experience. Since the occurrence of empathy comes out of affective engagement with the content of learning—that is, its subject matter—it is, according to Suzanne Keen’s conception of the theory of narrative empathy, “provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (Keen, 2006, p. 208).

Moreover, the research on empathy and reading defines the word “empathy” by placing it in its historical context and original usage. While the term found currency in the first decade of the twentieth century, its conceptual beginnings can be traced back to earlier nineteenth-century manifestations. The phrase sich einfühlen, for instance, was used by the German philosopher and theologian, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), to suggest the admiration for and subsequent identification with an object about which one desires a deeper cognitive grasp (Aragona, Kotzalidis, & Puzella, 2013). The German philosophers Robert Vischer (1847-1933) and Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) used the term in the study of aesthetics to explain the process of feeling one’s way into something else, whereas the psychologist Edward Titchner (1867-1927) used it to denote the experience of “feeling into,” a direct translation from the German term Einfühlung (Aragona, et al., 2013; Lipps and Titchener, cited in Keen, 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

This process of feeling one’s way into another person’s emotional experience becomes, in early twentieth-century philosophy, an imaginative turning away from one’s subjective conception of the world so as to better
appreciate the experience of a person other than oneself (Finlay, 2005). According to Hodges & Myers (2007), this form of empathetic understanding is premised on the individual’s ability to consider the outlook of the other person imaginatively, without appropriating or substituting the experience of the other as one’s own. A distinction between self and other is made, since empathy is occasioned only insofar as “one understands the other person’s experience as if it were being experienced by the self, but without the self actually experiencing it” (Hodges & Myers, 2007, p. 296).

### 2.2 Differences between Sympathy and Empathy

Since the original usages of the word, empathy has been regularly confused with the related notion of sympathy. While both terms denote forms of caring, they are not, as Anita Nowak (2014) posits, synonymous terms (TEDx Talks, 2014). Sympathy means feeling for someone else or caring for that person’s safety and wellbeing; it also connotes the ability to be moved by another person’s experience (Hodges & Myers, 2007). Empathy, on the other hand, is about imagining someone else’s emotional and intellectual states, and thus to some extent sharing that other person’s mental experience (Coplan, 2004; Morson, 2011). A deliberately imaginative exercise, empathy is about feeling with someone else’s emotional experiences (Eisenberg, 2000, cited in Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Furthermore, if sympathy encourages feeling for another person’s predicament, empathy triggers, in theory if not in practice, a sort of kinship, bridging the gap between the empathetic individual and the person cared for. Citing Vignemont and Singer (2006), Mar et al. (2011) describe empathy as a process of observing or imagining the sharing of feelings similar to those of another person, “knowing that the other is the source of one’s own emotion” (pp. 823-824). While sympathy means being concerned about another’s wellbeing (feeling for), empathy requires that, in deliberately imagining or simulating
another’s point of view, emotions, or intellectual mind frame, one become more actively and deeply engaged with the experience of others (Coplan, 2004; Morson, 2011). A practical distinction between the two often conflated terms would be to see sympathy as the act of feeling for someone, in contrast to feeling with someone, which is an act germane to the experience of empathy.

2.3 Types of Empathy: Affective and Cognitive

In their research on empathy, Hodges & Myers (2007) and, more recently, Nowak (TEDx Talks, 2014), distinguish between two types of empathetic concern: affective (emotional) and cognitive empathy. While it is often thought that the experience of empathy is a form of emotional attachment or a form of conflation between one individual’s feelings and another’s, the research suggests that, on the contrary, empathy manifests itself best when both emotion and cognition are taken into consideration (Hodges & Myers, 2007; Nowak, 2014). Hodges & Myers (2007) underscore the need to understand the interrelated functions of both emotional and cognitive functions inherent in empathetic responses. On the one hand, they describe three mutually dependent components in the experience of emotional empathy: tapping into another person’s emotional register by ostensibly feeling the same thing along with that person; experiencing sympathetic anguish and becoming sorrowful when exposed to another person’s pain or suffering; and feeling compassion or concern for the plight of others (Hodges & Myers, 2007). On the other hand, cognitive empathy does not distinguish between the need to feel and the need to think of the object of one’s empathetic concern.

Specifically, cognitive empathy stands out as the more comprehensive type of empathetic experience; it presupposes an ability on the part of one individual to not only register the emotional conduct of another, but also to take into consideration the thoughts of the other person, however different from one’s own the thoughts of the other may be (Hodges & Myers, 2007). This sort of
experience relates to the concept of altruism, which some would suggest underscores the importance of selflessness as perhaps vital to the experience of empathy (Keen, 2006). Altruism, according to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, constitutes “feelings and behavior that show a desire to help other people and a lack of selfishness.” More specifically, to behave altruistically is to assume an “unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others” (The online Merriam-Webster).

To expand on the notion of deliberate simulation of others’ experiences, Coplan (2004) defines “empathy” as a process that includes both intellect (cognition) and emotion (affect), entailing an act of imaginative “role-taking” or “perspective-taking.” This process consists of the imaginative “adoption” of characters’ emotional states, an important step toward establishing an effective understanding of the experience of empathy in works of literature (Heath, 2008). Coplan (2004) and Heath (2008) explain that empathy is occasioned dynamically when a reader takes up, as an imaginative experience, the psychological (this includes the emotional) states of characters so as to experience (and understand) what he/she experiences fictionally.

2.4 Reading and Empathy

Conscientious readers learn to perceive the act of reading as a process of simultaneous inclusion of emotions and reason: readers must understand the content of what they read, but they also experience feelings triggered by the subject matter and the narrative artistry that shape the content of what they are reading. More specifically, as Keen (2006) suggests, no judicious study of reading and empathy would consider cognition and affect as “quarantin[ed]” mental operations (p. 213). In reading fiction, readers open themselves up emotionally and intellectually to the experience of others and to the world around them. Empathy is occasioned imaginatively when both affective and cognitive processes are kept within purview of the learning experience (Coplan,
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2004; Keen, 2006; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). As Schonert-Reich and Hymel (2007) contend, knowledge that equates intellectual growth with the disinterested acquisition of factual information fails to account for the importance of developing “essential social and emotional skills such as compassion and empathy,” which are key to helping foster personal awareness and social responsibility (p. 20).

Empathetic learning, then, is a process of building emotional growth, since it allows readers to keep their emotions in full view (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Since the way individuals feel affects how they engage with their personal and social contexts, the classroom should accommodate and incorporate learners’ emotional approach to academic tasks as a significant part of the learning process (Schonert-Reich & Hymel, 2007). Furthermore, in order to fully appreciate the educational benefits of exposure to fiction, readers must rely upon and tap into emotional and intellectual registers so as to develop emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Thus, the practice of empathy necessitates the readers’ dynamic engagement in affective and cognitive processes that help them interpret and understand the fictional world presented within the text (Coplan, 2004; Morson, 2011). Also, according to Mayer and Salovey’s conception of the curricular function of emotional intelligence, reading stories helps students develop emotionally: “The ways in which the feelings of characters motivate their actions, which in turn moves forward the plot, is a lesson in emotional perception for young adults as much as it is in plot construction” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 20).

In one study, Mar et al. (2006) define empathy as predicated on the extent to which reader responses to fiction and nonfiction offer negative or positive indicators of social ability. The authors also make the distinction between fiction as a genre of narrative storytelling and nonfiction as generally informational in nature. Since works of fiction include representations of the actual world with events and “agents” forming a sequential plot, the authors
contend that these differ from works of nonfiction since expository prose does not necessarily offer simulative narrative parallels to the actual world, whereas fiction does.

As such, as one possible means of establishing an association between the types of reading, the ability of readers to put themselves in the story, and the possession of social abilities, the authors administered an Interpersonal Reactivity index (IRI) survey to 94 students from the University of Toronto (63 females and 31 males) ranging in age from 17 to 57. The survey (taken from Davis, 1980) consisted of a 28-item self-report measure of empathetic responses broken down into four subscales: (1) Fantasy, (2) Perspective-taking, (3) Empathetic concern, and (4) Personal distress. Students were asked to indicate the degree to which statements are self-descriptive. The items on the report refer to one’s ability or willingness to identify with the characters of the works of fiction. The authors used a five-point Likert scale to rate and measure the student feedback. According to the authors, the IRI method had been validated (Davis 1983), correlating reliably with other measures of empathy. The authors found a positive association between exposure to works of fiction and social abilities such as empathetic identification.

3. THE SIMULATIVE FUNCTION OF FICTION

Corroborating with the theoretical significance of theory-of-mind/mental simulation processes, the research on reading and empathy is explicit in its account of the benefits of reading in general and fiction in particular. Cognitive simulation is explained thoroughly by Oatley (2009), whose thoughts on the narrative/simulation interaction continue to influence research on the psychology of fiction. The idea—what psychologists call theory-of-mind—is that narrative fiction is a stand-in for a simulation that runs on the human mind and functions by mirroring emotions and thoughts of others in a constructed, that is, fictional environment. Becoming absorbed in a work of fiction, in other words, promotes
a form of transport from one state of being to another, a transaction between the emotional and cognitive registers of readers and that of fictional characters.

This sort of co-mingling between reader and character allows conscientious readers to distinguish between their emotional and intellectual outlooks and those of the characters (McRobie, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). Rather than remain passive recipients of the experiential content of the fictional world, the readers are required to actively engage with the narrative so as to form within their own minds recognition of the emotions and mental states of others (Oatley, 2009). This, in short, is what the research on reading names the process of empathy. Although the emotions encountered in works of fiction are features of the simulation, the feelings and mental processes triggered by the act of reading are real: the mind becomes a processor that allows readers to vicariously experience in real life the range of emotional experience they are exposed to in fiction (Oatley, 2010). Researchers agree that this negotiation between readers and the mental simulations prompted by fiction could improve social interaction and inclusive understanding (Coplan, 2004; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009; Mar et al., 2011; Nussbaum, 1995, cited in Mar et al., 2006; Oatley, 2010).

It is important to note, therefore, that readers of fiction not only tend to become more empathetic and adroit at imagining the emotional and intellectual plight of others; they also become less egocentric, more open to sociability, and willing to connect with the world beyond their immediate concerns (Mar et al., 2008; Oatley, 2009). As such, it comes as no surprise that becoming absorbed in a story usually comes as a consequence of the readers’ longing to identify with characters and their plight, however “unreal” these may be. A work of literature is unique insofar as it inspires in the reader an attentive concern for (or care about) the fate of fictional, that is, fabricated or unreal, human beings in constructed scenarios (Nussbaum, 2003). Understanding what motivates characters and learning to appreciate the nuances of their intentional and inadvertent actions parallel the readers’ real desires for personal and social
connection with their real contexts (Mar, Oatley, & Eng, 2003, cited in Mar et al., 2006).

Fictional representations of the characters’ consciousness also contribute, as Suzanne Keen (2006) argues, “to empathetic experiences, opening readers’ minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism” (Keen, 2006, p. 213). In keeping with the theory of simulation, it is helpful to note that, when used judiciously, the literary devices and techniques that writers have at their disposal become tools to help trigger the mental simulations that prompt readers to engage in empathetic identification and emotional transactions with fictional characters (Mar et al., 2008; Morson, 2011; Oatley, 2010).

Furthermore, what the research shows is that works of fiction—and the uses of first-person narratives, in particular—are influential in fostering an empathetic engagement between readers and the characters whose lives they examine and learn about (Mar et al., 2011; Nussbaum, 2003). The assumption here is that a more intimate rapport is struck when authors use narrative techniques—such as narrative point of view and characterization—that help bridge the emotional gap between the reader and the simulated world of the character (Ozyurek & Trabasso, 1997 and Rall & Harris, 2000, cited in Mar et al., 2006).

While critics generally agree that reading prompts awareness of the scope and potential for social engagement, the verdict on the sources of empathetic responses is largely in favor of fiction as opposed to other forms of literature like poetry, drama, or expository nonfiction (Mar et al., 2006). Some argue that readers of fiction become absorbed by the content of the literature, which in turn triggers the empathetic transaction between self and others (Mar et al., 2008). Since nonfiction is expository in nature, it remains an effective tool in learning about fact, data, and observable phenomena; whereas works of fiction typically use narrative structure (e.g., plot) and technique (e.g., characterization)
not only to move readers emotionally, but also to convey information about personal and social worlds (Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2011). Because fiction simulates fictional selves caught in an imaginative social universe, it continues to model the very real social world in which readers find themselves in life (Oatley, 2009).

4. SELF-REFLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING

4.1 Reading and Self-reflection

Interestingly, in their respective research on adolescents’ attitudes toward reading, Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening (2000) as well as Irwin (2003) highlight the significant impact of reading on individuals’ developing sense of self. Whereas for Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening (2000) reading is a catalyst for ongoing self-reflection, going beyond semantic, semiotic, or syntactical pleasures, Irwin (2003) proposes that measures taken to understand the role of reading in the average adolescent’s life should consider the ways in which affective constructs of adolescents’ selves enhance their perceptions of reading as an invaluable feature of learning.

Self-reflection is made possible by writing down one’s thoughts in response to the reading experience (Boud, 2001; Kremenitzer, 2005). Shedding further conceptual light on the possibilities of empathetic reading are studies that suggest a heightened interest in the relationship between reflective writing practice and the potential that these may have on the construction of self-awareness. The cognitive and emotive benefits of chronicling one’s reading experience in writing are highlighted in Creme (2005) and Jarvis (2001). Illustrating the need to foster a self-conscious awareness of the reader’s identity is the corresponding idea of the “readerly” self-construct. Central to Irwin’s (2003) argument on the need to help readers build a positive outlook on reading is George Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory (PCT)—the theory that individuals
create idiosyncratic views of the world by fashioning patterns through which to engage in that world in authentic fashion.

Irwin examines the influence that PCT has had on educational psychologists who reaffirm the notion, described at length in John Dewey (1938), that learning is never quite divorced from individuals’ personal constructs and their desire to engage in learning as an ongoing process of cognitive and emotional growth. Some students, it is argued, actively disregard knowledge precisely when it does not—or does not seem to—subscribe to previously established self-identities (Irwin, 2003). CEGEP students are still in the process of building their reading self-constructs. In granting them the opportunity to consider their personal outlooks in reflective reading journals, they are continuously encouraged to question the ways in which the construction of a reading self-identity corresponds effectively to the world as they see and continue to understand it.

Citing the work of Gerard Coles, Irwin (2003) reminds teachers that there is “a clear link between reading and emotional development” (p. 30), and that “learners need guidance to alter their self-concept in addition to cognitive skills assistance” (p. 30). An example of the importance of this dynamic approach to reading is found in a study conducted by Djikic et al. (2009), who define the potentially transformative impact that art, including fiction, has on one’s personality. According to the authors, reading consists of an interaction between an emotional engagement and possible personal transformation. One hundred sixty-six first-year undergraduate students (112 women and 54 men) from an undisclosed urban university participated in a controlled experiment aimed at registering the possible differences in participants’ perceptions of their own personal traits in works of fiction or nonfictional (controlled) accounts of the same content, the main difference between the two being the inclusion or absence of artistic (literary) form.
Both groups of students received course credit for their participation. The authors made use of questionnaires, such as the Big Five Inventory (BFI)—a 44-item scale measuring the big five dimensions of personality, including extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability/neuroticism, and openness—and an emotion checklist that prompts participants to indicate, on an 11-point scale, the degree to which they feel a particular emotion (such as sadness, anxiety, contentment, etc.) at a given moment. One group was asked to read a work of short fiction (Anton Chekhov’s story “The Lady with the Toy Dog”) and the other group read a text with the same content but in documentary (nonfictional) form. The authors used a five-point Likert scale to determine to what extent participants found the texts “artistic” or “interesting” followed by a Big Five Inventory scale measuring dimensions of personality and an emotion checklist containing ten emotions to help readers identify what they felt during the reading process. Compared to the nonfiction (control) group, participants in the fiction group showed more answers that were indicative of personal engagement with the reading material, thereby conveying potential cues for personal transformations.

4.2 Journaling and Self-reflection

According to John Bean (2011), journaling and writing short responses offer students much more than the ability to explore ideas about the formal—that is, rhetorical and analytical—scope of a piece of writing, however important this may be to the creation of aesthetic appreciation and reading comprehension. The focus on writing reflective journals is not so much on the systematic identification and explanation of a text’s implicit range of techniques and devices; the emphasis is rather on helping readers develop appreciation for reading as an act of exploration and writing as reflective practice in response to literature. Journaling, then, is seen as a desirable tool for the promotion of exploration and discovery (Bean, 2011).
Research also shows that keeping a written account of the reading experience helps readers develop their cognitive and emotional abilities (Creme, 2005; Jarvis, 2001). As Jarvis suggests, a well-rounded reflective response to a reading should, in essence, build on the reader’s affective and cognitive learning potential (2001). Put more succinctly, Creme (2005) argues that, as a result of using journal reflections as learning tools, the “very construction of a thinking and feeling, intellectually engaged writing subject itself fosters learning” (p. 293). In addition to the emotional and intellectual benefits, the experience of keeping a written record of one’s thoughts and feelings is valuable insofar as it promotes the interaction between the reading material and the reader’s personal life experience (Dyment & O’Connell, 2006; Hiemstra, 2001; Mills, 2008).

In pragmatic terms, writing journal reflections gives readers the chance to develop critical-thinking skills, allowing them to show what they know about the material being studied and whether or not the information garnered is grounded experientially (Dyment & O’Connell, 2006). Other studies go further by suggesting that engaging in this sort of reflective practice can help encourage readers not only to build an increased understanding of the reading content, but also to help them build awareness of the process by which their own perspectives develop, their ideas evolve, and even their personal views are challenged by the reading material (Dunlap, 2006; Dyment & O’Connell, 2010; Hiemstra, 2001).

The pedagogical aim of assigning reflective reading journals is, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, to inspire critical reception and understanding of subject matter by requiring in-depth or higher-order modes of thinking; on the other hand, to encourage self-reflection and the construction of self-awareness as worthwhile learning goals (Dyment & O’Connell, 2010; Hiemstra, 2001; Lund, 1985). Bean (2011) also outlines practical reasons why incorporating reflective writing—as a form of journaling in which students get to explore reading as process as well as reading for content analysis and the development of
understanding—is a sound pedagogical decision. In addition to fostering high-order thinking skills, autonomous reading and exploration of personal voice, students are given the opportunity to explore meaning rather than merely seek it in passive ways (2011).

5. RESEARCH QUESTION

This research project asks the following question: In what ways can reflective journals encourage students to read works of literary fiction empathetically? It is hoped that the themes that emerge in the students’ reflective journals and the answers to the corresponding questionnaire items shed increasing understanding on the relationship between reading and the possibility of empathetic concern. Also anticipated are students’ answers to the following questions, which pertain to the experience of penning reflection journals: Do the reflective journals help readers express their feelings? Do they afford readers the opportunity to take others’ experiences into consideration in thoughtful ways? And do they help readers become more conscientiously self-reflective?

While the general aim here is to examine students’ empathetic engagement with the act of reading and responding to works of literary fiction, this project also takes the following related questions into consideration: How do students describe their empathetic rapport with characters (fictionalized human participants in works of imagination), plot lines (series of events), and themes (central ideas). The purpose here is to observe whether or not the students respond emotionally to the works of literature, and to describe the ways in which they draw possible links between the events in the fictionalized worlds and the ones they encounter in real-life contexts. Also of interest is the corresponding need to observe the ways in which going beyond exposure to the fundamentals of literary techniques and rhetorical devices encourage a form of reading that is emotionally engaging.
Another secondary aim is to identify instances of empathy students tend to show in their reflective reading responses—a question inspired (and supported) by the distinctions made in the literature on empathy between affective and cognitive types of empathetic responses. In other words, the study considers whether or not, and how, the students might be concerned with the wellbeing of characters and identify the degree to which the conflicts inherent in the narratives resonate with them. Specifically, do the students’ reflective responses to the readings underscore an awareness of the potential impact fostered by exposure to the variety of opinions, experience, and perspectives expressed in fiction?

Finally, a third consideration is to ask what, if anything, the reflective journals may highlight about the ways students see themselves as readers. Although this line of query may prompt tentative speculation, it remains pertinent: to challenge researchers and teachers to consider what the observations provided in the reflections could reveal about the possible anxieties, concerns, and/or insights students have regarding their active participation in the act of reading. The acts of reading and responding to fiction can teach students to deliberate thoughtfully about ideas, but this should not impede their ability to identify and understand the degree to which the learning experience can also strengthen the empathetic imagination and deepen their understanding of the individual in a social context.
CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that the research methodologies for academic deliberations on reading and empathy should consider a wide array of disciplinary venues from the social sciences to developmental psychology, philosophy, and literary theory (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Underpinning this project on the topic of empathy and reading are the following theoretical approaches: affective processes, which take into consideration one’s potential for increased emotional intelligence, self-understanding, and social awareness; the cognitive effects of mental simulations; and reader-response theory, which emphasizes the role of reading as interpretive practice.

1. AFFECTIVE PROCESSES

The focus on weighing the importance of reading as an inviolable element in today’s post-secondary education continues to inspire psychologists, teachers, and academics to study reading from beyond the perspective of cognition. The taxonomy of affective domain developed by Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia (Krathwohl et al., 1956, as reported by Huitt, 2001) forms the significant backdrop to the present study on reading and empathy. Building on Bloom’s stages of cognitive development, the taxonomy of affective domain organizes the learning process in several steps of increasing difficulty. At the lower levels of commitment, affective learning ranges from a neutral exposure to/awareness of expert opinion to the ability to record notes and posit questions about the information received. Furthermore, it sees the learner moving from moderate emotional engagement to valuing and organizing information by selecting and arranging the learning acquired. Finally, reaching the highest level of emotional commitment, the reader is prompted to use the newly acquired learning as valuable social and cultural capital (Huitt, 2001). Moreover, one’s increased ability to develop awareness of the interplay between feelings and critical thinking
can, according to studies on emotional intelligence, lead to the promotion of “emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 5). This is theoretically relevant, since this project aims in part to describe the nature/types of empathetic responses students generate about the works of literature they read by drawing on cognitive and affective knowledge.

Mayer and Salovey’s four-branch model helps frame an understanding of emotional intelligence by defining it in terms of specific abilities. The first ability is to actively perceive emotions in oneself and in others. Reading fiction, in effect, allows one to identify emotional concerns and dilemmas that underscore plot and dramatic conflict. Secondly, in relating to emotions as depicted in stories and then using emotions during the process of deliberate reflection, readers rely on emotion as a facilitator of thought. A third process that bolsters an emotionally intelligent outlook is the ability to understand the relations between various emotional experiences; in the case of empathetic reading, this would entail that a reader refine his or her synthesizing skills in identifying and appreciating the nuanced significance inferred in the plethora of emotional occurrences found in fiction. Finally, the fourth ability requires that one manage emotions by comprehending the social implications inherent in one another’s emotional experiences (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

2. COGNITIVE EFFECTS: MENTAL SIMULATIONS

A key objective in the literature classroom is to put the emphasis on the generation of feelings, elicited indirectly or explicitly by the learners’ attitudes, beliefs, values, experiences, and biases. The act of reading allows readers to experience life vicariously by conceptualizing the social world found in narrative fiction (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Some studies claim that a steady diet of fiction improves empathetic responses: the more people read, the more they are able to adopt someone else’s perspective, consequently possibly transferring this sort of positive transaction onto the real world in forms of pro-social action (Mar et al.,...
If fiction provides a model social world that reciprocates the machinations of the real world, it may hold true that readers could possibly experience changes in attitudes vis-à-vis others, modify how they see themselves, and develop awareness of modes of social interaction (Mar et al., 2008).

Consequently, this project considers the influence of the cognitive formulations of mental schemas/simulations to explain the impact of fiction upon the readers’ empathetic engagement with the reading content. From this perspective, the researcher could investigate how readers come to understand and appreciate the lives they read about because the very same process of “schematic constructions of others used in everyday life,” as Gerrig states, “are the same as those used when understanding a piece of fictional literature” (Gerrig, 1998, cited in Djikic et al., 2009).

This reciprocal cognitive procedure—also known as “theory-of-mind” (or what some call a form of “mentalizing”)—holds that works of fiction simulate emotional and social experience by offering imagined worlds in which are found models of emotional and mental experiences that help readers make sense of their own emotional and social lives (Mar & Oatley, 2008). As a result of this interaction, readers may encounter ideas and experience feelings that they can adopt as their own, empathizing with the experiential unfolding in the work of literature, and consequently interiorizing others’ emotions and thoughts as new additions to their personal cognitive/emotional registers (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

3. READER RESPONSE THEORY

The practice of close reading—the act of deciphering meaning by observing, identifying, and assessing the relationships between words, syntactical units of meaning, and textual codes inscribed in the language of tropes within a text—has been a vital fixture of English studies and a mainstay in the classroom for nearly a century. Some even argue that it has become the principle mode of
reading pedagogy in today’s English studies curricula (Bialostosky, 2006). Close reading was the brainchild of the New Criticism, a school of thought that defined reading as a practice that brings closer together the reader and the features of the text.

First introduced in the early 1920s by English literary scholar I. A. Richards (1893-1979) and American modernist poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), and practiced institutionally well into the 1980s, this reading theory emphasized the importance of scrutinizing the inherent features of the text. Part of its aim was to encourage students to discard or dismiss extra-textual factors, such as the voicing of personal feelings, considering the influence of culture, or looking into the biography of a writer. These matters remained extrinsic to the text, it was argued, and as such to consider them would infringe on an authentic experience of reading a work of literature, since texts, the New Critics’ practitioners believed, were self-contained and self-generating carriers of meaning.

The belief that the text (and its influence) is an autotelic work of art devoid of outside “interference” has been challenged and its assumptions called into question. Recent studies show that the close-reading practice advocated by the New Criticism may have left a misleading mark on how student should be taught how to read, the manner in which they could engage with literature, and even the proficiency with which they may develop their skills in literacy (Barlow, 2007; Chick, 2008). In fact, studies pertaining to reading pedagogy conclude that a continued unbridled use of New Criticism strategies is probably doing student-readers more harm than good (Barlow, 2007; Bialostosky, 2006; Chick, 2008; Scholes, 2002). Specifically, instead of bringing readers “closer” to the texts—for instance by soliciting their personal input instead of merely relying on the aesthetic pleasures provided by a text’s verbal universe—the form of close reading that was used in the past may have pushed readers to inadvertently cultivate a suspicion of the cultural, personal, or social significance of forces extrinsic to the reading material. Yet these are the very forces, it seems, that can
actually contribute favorably to a reader’s increased understanding of and lasting relationship with a text (Barlow, 2007; Bialoskysky, 2006).

In effect, an increasing number of studies propose that today’s young readers are much more receptive to an education that is rooted in multiple literacies. In order to promote a desirable autonomous engagement with the discipline, English teachers are advised to create curricula that push students to make widespread connections not only with their daily forms of discourse (online media, social networks, and so on) but also with their own emotional and personal viewpoints—concepts and themes that the New Criticism methodology would surely dismiss as redundantly extra-textual (Chick, 2008; Loy, 2008; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Perkins, 1993). Some argue further that when the learners’ immediate personal and cultural contexts are taken into consideration and believed to be essential to the lessons taught, they acquire more motivation to learn (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

Readers are hence encouraged to become dynamic agents in the process of deciphering textual meaning. No longer performing the role of passive recipients of information, readers are now prone to be considered participants who not only actively seek out textual knowledge but who also consider the impact reading has on their budding sense of self. Where cultural and literary theories like the New Criticism previously considered the text to be a self-contained unit of knowledge through (and out of) which readers would access correct readings and interpretations, reader-response theory came to prominence as a school of thought by shifting the focus of investigation onto the act of reading and its effect upon the reader instead. In light of this change in ways of seeing the role of the reader, reader-response theory calls into question the previously held assumption that readers are vessels into which the text pours streams of information. Significantly, with reader-response theory, the reader now becomes the focal point of investigation in the act of interpretive reading.
The focus on the fictional universe and the simulated models gauged within the readers’ minds also confirms the importance of active participation. This idea that the readers and the text are working together finds its root in reader-response criticism, a theoretical approach to reading and literary criticism that takes as its fundamental premise the importance of the readers’ active participation in the act of creating meaning (Bressler, 1999). Reader-response theory is particularly relevant to studies on reading and empathy, since important light is shed on the role of the readers in addressing how they are affected, what they experience emotionally, why certain narrative techniques prompt empathetic outlooks, and so on. Similarly, a major premise of reader-response theory holds that the reading act is essentially a transactional process shared between reader and text, the contents of the latter eliciting emotions and even shaping the readers’ experience at the moment of encounter (Bressler, 1999). What’s important in this theoretical focus is reflecting on what transpires when reader and text interact or engage in emotional and mental transactions.

An important advocate of this change in the perception of literary education and the role of the reader, Louise M. Rosenblatt (1904-2005) argued that textual studies needed to move away from antiquated notions of text as the sole conveyor of meaning to a more transactional view of readers and texts as “partners in the interpretive process” (Bressler, 1999, p.66). What is entailed in Rosenblatt’s concept of interpretation-as-transaction is the notion that readers and the reading material now engage in a dynamic or mutual interaction. The reader brings to the task of reading certain predispositions—that is, personal beliefs, memories, and opinions—that could influence how a text is read and understood.

Yet, the transactional nature of reading also underscores the text’s ability to narrow the readers’ interpretive scope and to give shape to their perspectives (Bressler, 1999). In fact, reader-response theory puts the onus not only on the reader but also on the text’s ability to affect the readers. As a result, readers no longer take the back seat as they read; they no longer feel the need to defer to a
text’s inviolable status as predetermined and self-sufficient carrier of meaning. Rosenblatt and practitioners of reader-response theory see the act of reading as a process and the readers as responsive and indispensable participants in the creation of meaning (Bressler, 1999; Lynn, 1998). In sum, the text and the reader are not segregated; instead, they constitute an inextricable link that binds them together as equal participants in the reading process (Bressler, 1999).

That the focus of attention turns to the reader testifies to the need to understand what transpires during the reader-text transaction. Exactly what happens intellectually and/or emotionally when a reader engages with a text remains difficult to assess, especially since no two readers will experience the same exact thing—or adhere to the same individual preconceptions—throughout the reading process. It is also not the purview of reader-response theory to aim for unanimity of response or to impose approaches to interpretive exegeses. On the contrary, what transpires between text and reader remains dependent not on a particular interpretive end-goal in mind, but rather informed by the very spontaneous and simultaneous interchanges occasioned in the act of reading and reflecting. In other words, the purpose of reader-response is not to encourage readers to adhere to, or arrive at, similar conclusions, but rather to investigate what it is that takes place during the reading process (Bressler, 1999).

The emphasis of this theory is, therefore, the reader who, in phenomenological terms, becomes the very subject onto whose “active consciousness” the text and the act of reading inscribes meaning (Bressler, 1999, p.71). This emphasis on the person doing the perceiving—i.e., the one who consciously registers phenomena—is made explicit with Woflgang Iser (1926-2007), the German phenomenologist and literary theorist who believed that an object achieves meaning only insofar as an active agent (here, the subjectivity of the reader) identifies and absorbs this object onto consciousness (Bressler, 1999; Lynn, 1998).
In sum, affective learning, mental simulations, and reader-response theory are the three key elements of the conceptual framework that form the basis of this project. First, to explain how reading is an active, interpretive practice germane to the experience of empathy, this research considers the significance of concepts such as emotional intelligence, self-understanding, and social awareness. Secondly, shedding important light on the topic of empathetic reading are the cognitive effects of mental simulation. Specifically, works of fiction are considered as simulative models of emotional and social experiences with which readers are urged to compare their emotional and social lives. Finally, according to reader-response theory, readers are seen as motivated, active agents involved in a dynamic interaction with textual knowledge and the meaningful impact this sort of engagement has on their increasing self-awareness.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This exploratory project aimed to provide some insight into the ways in which reflective reading journals prompted students to read empathetically. Since the purpose of this project was to describe how the phenomenon of empathy is occasioned through the act of reading, the primary data consisted of a content analysis of the nature/types of empathetic observations found in students’ reflective reading journal responses and a corresponding questionnaire. The content analysis was conducted so as to identify empathy-related themes in the students’ reflective reading journal entries. The objective was to make inferences from the data collected in the journal reflection entries so as to gain inductive insight into the phenomenon of reading-spawned empathy and consequently describe the findings systematically by categorizing them, and thus increasing understanding of the experience of empathetic reading.

In addition to writing five reflective reading journals over the course of a 15-week long semester English course, students were also required to provide fixed-alternative responses to a number of statements/questions and feedback to open-ended items on a questionnaire, which was administered near the end of the semester. Three types of responses were solicited in the questionnaire. First, students were asked to provide specific information in response to demographic questions. Second, the questionnaire included four fixed-alternative questions about the process of writing the reflective journal. Third, students were asked to answer three open-ended questions about their experience of and feelings about writing reflective journals.

This data elicited by the questionnaire also allowed the researcher to draw a table describing the frequency of responses provided in the five-point Likert
scale survey questions. The data found in both the reading reflective journals and the responses to the corresponding questionnaire were described in detail, along with tables to complement the findings conveyed in the content analyses.

2. POPULATION: SAMPLE & CONTEXT

The accessible population from which the participant sample derived was the CEGEP student body at John Abbott, an Anglophone college situated on the western tip of the island of Montreal, in the province of Quebec. English as a discipline forms part of the General Education component of a post-secondary CEGEP education. As such, students from a wide array of disciplinary persuasions must successfully complete the obligatory four English courses in order to matriculate and receive a college diploma. The 39 students who enrolled in the course came from a broad cross-section of mostly 1st and 2nd year students at John Abbott College. Therefore, since this researcher had no control over the make-up of 39 students who signed up for this English course, the sample was neither entirely random nor completely convenience.

2.1 Context: Description of English 103—Literary Themes

Since no control was exercised over the selection of the participants, the research project used whatever sample was available when the course was offered in the Fall 2013 semester. Part of the General Education offerings that all CEGEP students must take, whether enrolled in a pre-university or professional program, English 103 “Literary Themes” is a post-entry level course in the A-Block component of English with a special emphasis on understanding the thematic aspects of literary works. The subtitle of the course was “English 103: The Individual and Society,” and the works of fiction that students were required to read were selected from the early-modernist period (1900-1950). While any number of modernist works of fiction could work well for the thematic scope
envisioned by the course, the three works selected here paint a particularly provocative picture of the relationship between individualism and collectivism.

In order to help them meet the learning objectives conscientiously, the course shows the students how to detect basic literary and rhetorical devices and techniques used in narrative fiction; it also gives them the chance to practice the active reading strategies introduced in the classroom; and it encourages them to sharpen their essay-writing skills. Students who signed up for the course were taught to identify, understand, and reflect on the ways in which the fictionalized representation of the relationship between individualism and collectivism challenges their ever-shifting understanding of private motivation and public conduct. In terms of content coverage, the course offered a wide-ranging glance at the aesthetic, literary, and philosophical concepts and themes promulgated by literary fiction in the early- to mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, students enrolled in the course were expected to situate the works of fiction in their cultural and historical contexts. Students learned about the literary applications of Freudian psychology; the changes in narrative approach in response to the destructive effects of war; and the influence of early- to mid-twentieth-century absurdist writers and existentialist thinkers. A range of related themes were also covered. Students considered the conflict between personal freedoms and public expectations. Discussion also touched on the notions of ambiguity, paradox, and the challenge against absolute knowledge. Nuanced topics such as alienation, the quest for self-understanding, and the yearning for meaning and reason in a world growing increasingly skeptical of such ideals also featured in the class debates. Moreover, important additions to the course coverage were the wider social implications of language as a political tool and technology as a means of manufacturing consent.
2.2 Brief Description of the Works of Fiction Used

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), The Metamorphosis

This short novel (released in 1915, in German as Die Verwandlung) is about a young, overworked salesman named Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into an insect. Samsa experiences a physical, emotional, and psychological change as a result of his transformation; however abstruse and difficult his plight, nothing seems more traumatic than the heartache and loneliness Gregor experiences as a result of his growing estrangement from his colleagues, employer, and, most importantly, family.

The story offers insight on the challenges a modern individual faces in his/her desire to live an authentic and meaningful existence. Left to fend for himself, Gregor turns inward and tries to reconcile himself with an outside world that becomes increasingly alien and threatening to him. The story poses provocative questions about family relationships, individual will, and social responsibility. It also allows readers to consider the wider metaphorical implications of Gregor’s strange transformation.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), The Outsider

Published in French as L’Étranger in 1942, Camus’ novella was considered a groundbreaking work of fiction depicting a protagonist who, as an unlikeable and misanthropic loner, spends his days doing little more than eat, swim, bathe in the sun, go to the movies, complain about his tedious job, and have meaningless sex. The climactic turn in the narrative occurs when Meursault murders an Arab on the beach, after which he is arrested, eventually arraigned, and in the end sentenced to die. Camus provides very little to help explain the motivations behind his character’s actions (and inactions); and the author paints a
picture of his “hero” as one who remains unable to experience any form of remorse.

In fact, Camus seems less intent on expounding the nuances of his character’s inner life than he is willing to show him as a mere shell of a human being who revels in one hedonistic act after the next. Readers get to spend a lot of time wondering about Meursault and what makes him “tick.” However, instead of offering simplistic explanations concerning his strange behavior, Meursault remains implacable in his unwillingness to show any remorse for any of his misdeeds. In fact, his recalcitrance seems to know no bounds. However unsympathetic this character may be at first glance, students find him contradictory, paradoxical, infuriating, and even often intriguing. Meursault boasts the ability to challenge collective will and social norms by flaunting his individuality without recourse to moral scruples.

George Orwell (1903-1950), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

When it was published in 1949, this novel was considered a work of such imaginative scope that its author was considered something of a prophet of doom. Today, Orwell’s novel remains one of the most widely read literary dystopias ever penned. Wide-reaching in thematic scope, the novel offers a grim look into life in a futuristic (fictitious) Britain. The citizens of Oceania are under constant surveillance, their sex-lives orchestrated by a pragmatic zeal for propagation devoid of pleasure. Every individual’s behavior is under perpetual scrutiny. Telescreens, wall-mounted TV screens that record one’s every move, are omnipresent. Even the command of the English language increasingly slips their grasp, functioning more as a tool of obfuscation rather than a means of communication. Particularly deleterious is the efficiency with which knowledge of the past is falsified by partisan propaganda, closely monitored by the government, and manipulated by the philosophy of revisionism and denial.
In short, the people of Oceania are mere pawns in a nightmarish bureaucratic state that controls their every move, censors their emotions, and criminalizes thinking. Winston Smith, the protagonist, is an understated and soft-spoken individual who harbors a secret desire to overthrow the authoritarian regime of Big Brother. Since it is impossible for Winston to rebel through collective political activism, he turns his subversion inward and begins to keep a journal of his secret aspirations. Eventually he is caught by the police forces, accused of thought-crime, and tortured until he relinquishes his individual rights and fully submits to the will of the governing powers. Students find this story riveting, as it seems to speak to certain anxieties that touch on their own concerns and misgivings about authority, political and technocratic control, and the abuse of power.

3. INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

3.1 The Reflective Reading Journals

Students were asked to submit reflective reading journals as part of the “Writing Activities” assessment weighed at 15% of the final grade. Students were expected to write a total of five personal reflective reading journals and to submit these at five different times throughout the course of the semester. One reflection was based on Franz Kafka’s story *The Metamorphosis*, two on Albert Camus’s novella *The Outsider*, and two on George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These works were purposely selected because each offers a dramatic display of individuals who, in heightened moments of personal and collective crises, undergo emotional and psychological transformation.

For each reflection, students were expected to write no less than 200 words and no more than 300 words. Since the reflections were assessed and graded, it was important for the students to know how their work was to be evaluated. Near the start of the semester, after introductory lectures on historical context
established the intellectual framework for the upcoming class discussions on the works of literature, the teacher explained the objectives of, and procedures for, the reflective reading journals. The topics and evaluation rationale were explained, and the journal prompts were introduced. Four statements were offered as prompts to help the students focus their attention on specific features of the stories’ plot and on the narrative development of characterization: both significant aspects featuring prominently in class discussions.

Prompt A encouraged students to pose a question or two to a character and to think up a response while prompt B urged students to find a statement made by a character and to reflect on its significance. Prompt C asked students to react to an action taken or a decision made by a character of their interest while prompt D pushed students to consider the ways in which two or more characters relate to one another. As an important condition stipulated on each prompt, students were expected to relate their thoughts in response to the prompts back to their lives.

The reflection prompts were expected to provide some “structured” guidelines without leading the readers on. The hope was to get students to reflect on features of the readings that pertained to the classroom discussions on character, plot, and dramatic conflict, among other possible focal points. Each prompt was to be used as a catalyst to get readers to zero in on highly charged passages in the narratives. (For a description of the reflective reading prompts, see Appendix C.)

3.2 Evaluation and Process for the Reflective Reading Journals

Since students were assessed a grade for each of these reflection exercises, the evaluation was based on two objectives. A maximum total of 3 points per reflection was to be awarded to students whose work met the expected word count and addressed one of the prompts. No further criteria for evaluation were implemented. For the sake of variety and as a means to deter repetition, students
were told to use at least two different prompts in penning their five submissions. In the end, five reflective reading journals were to be submitted, each worth 3 marks, for a cumulative total of 15% of the course grade. Importantly, grammar and writing slips did not factor in the grading scheme (students were encouraged to write freely).

A total number of 167 reflective reading journals were collected in five separate installments (five different deadlines spread over fifteen weeks) over the course of the Fall 2013 semester. Since the first reading—Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*—was relatively short, students were expected to submit only one reflection. The second and third rounds of submission were in response to their second reading, Albert Camus’ *The Outsider*, a longer work of fiction that commanded more attention. The fourth and fifth set of reflections were in response to the final novel, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a longer work of fiction that required more dedicated class time and fostered more discussion.

Students were asked to submit one copy of each reflection; the teacher/researcher made duplicate copies of each for his file. None of the reflections was coded or analyzed until the final grade for the course was sent to the Registrar’s Office. Each reflection was returned to the students no later than one week after the submission deadline. No marginal commentary, corrections, or written criticism were offered on the students’ work, with the exception of the few reflections that didn’t address any of the mandatory prompts.

At the end of the semester, the researcher selected a combined total of 50 reflections to be used as qualitative data for the research project. These 50 reflective reading journals were randomly selected: the researcher spread each round of submissions face down in a separate pile (so as to keep to blind random chance) on a table. The researcher proceeded to select every second reflective reading journal from the 1st round of submissions for a total of 10 samples. The same selection method was used for the subsequent rounds of submission: 20
samples were selected from the pile combining the 2nd and 3rd rounds, and 20 samples were taken from the pile combining the 4th and 5th rounds of submission. It is important to note that no student was identified in the research project, the data, or the commentary.

As shown in Table 1, out of a pool of 36 entries for the first round of submissions, 10 were chosen at random (27.8% of the 36 submissions); 20 were selected out of a pool of a total 65 entries (at 30.8% of the 65) for the second and third rounds of submissions; and 20 more were chosen as sample reflections from the final two rounds of submissions totaling 66 entries (that is, 30.3% of the 66).

The 50 sample students’ reflective reading journals were read closely several times before proceeding with a thorough content analysis of emerging themes. The content analysis performed was guided by the research question, and only the manifest content of the journals was considered for possible discussion. The data (textual information taken from the journals themselves) was selected for
a thorough inductive open-coding process: In addition to jotting down marginal annotations, salient phrases pertaining to the research questions were highlighted, and many headings were devised.

The qualitative data was coded broadly at first, the researcher identifying whether or not the entries demonstrated emotional concern for the characters, whether or not they described a personal account of the reader’s own emotions, and whether or not they highlighted personal experiences. So as to reduce the large number of possible categories generated during the reading process, statements found to be pertinent to the study were selected as representative themes, each of which were then classified according to whether or not they referred to the individual in relation to him/herself and the individual in relation to others.

3.3 The Questionnaire

The researcher had previously advised students by electronic messaging that a questionnaire would be administered one week before the end of classes (week 14 of a 15-week semester). In fact, the completed questionnaires were only due once all the reflective reading journals were turned in, assigned a grade, and one copy of each reflection was returned to the students. So as to maintain absolute (blind) anonymity of responses, a colleague from the English department, who was not involved in this research project, was asked (and agreed) to arrive to class and collect the completed questionnaires while the teacher/researcher waited in the hallway outside the classroom for 20-25 minutes while the students filled out their responses. This colleague picked up the documents, sealed the participants’ answers in a large department envelope, and handed these over to the researcher, who then stored the envelope in his department office, keeping the envelope sealed until the final student grades for the course had been submitted to the Registrar’s office.
The questionnaire, which consisted of four statements regarding the process of writing the reflective journal and three open-ended questions meant to generate student feedback on writing reflective journals, was an important element of the research project. It was hoped that some of the students’ responses to the questions would complement the themes revealed in their reflective reading journals and add insight into the effect this sort of writing exercise may have had upon them. Divided into three parts, the questionnaire not only solicited demographic information pertaining to age, sex, and program of study. It also asked students to answer four fixed-alternative questions meant to survey the impact that the writing of reflective reading journals may have had on them. (For more details on demographic and fixed-alternative questions, see Appendix D.)

The four “close-ended” fixed-alternative questions included in the questionnaire were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Students were urged to respond to the questions by circling the option they thought best represented the way they felt: they either strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed, or even strongly disagreed with the statements provided. The questions appeared as Items 4, 5, 6, and 7 in section C of the questionnaire as follows:

Item #4. Writing journals helped me improve my ability to think deeply about characters.

Item #5. Writing journals helped me identify imaginatively with the characters in the readings.

Item #6: Writing journals helped me consider my feelings/views on ideas from the readings.

Item #7: Writing journals helped me see emotions as an important part of reading appreciation.

This survey component of the questionnaire encouraged students to provide feedback on the degree to which they believed to think deeply about, or to identify with, characters; the questions also gave them the opportunity to consider whether or not they believed it was important to consider emotions, or to appreciate one’s
personal feelings as necessary steps to take in developing an appreciation for reading empathetically.

Finally, the last part of the questionnaire contained three open-ended questions, each one asking students to offer detailed responses to, or to expound on their personal feelings about, the experience of writing the reflective reading journals. The following open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire:

(1) Has writing reflective reading journals helped you express your feelings?

(2) Has writing reflective reading journals helped you understand the experience of others?

(3) Has writing reflective reading journals helped you become self-reflective?

Each question, it was hoped, would generate some detailed response that would shed light on the nature of empathy and its relationship with the experience of reading. While it was important to ask students to express their feelings, it was equally necessary that they took the opportunity to explain whether or not, how, and perhaps even why they found the experience of reading and reflecting helpful in building their awareness of themselves and of the lives they read about. In the end, content analysis was performed to identify patterns or themes in the answers. The aim was to see whether or not the findings were consistent with the information in the literature on empathy.

4. PROCEDURE AND ETHICAL CONCERN

Student participants were given a consent form (see Appendix B) to sign near the beginning of the semester, once the course drop/withdrawal deadline had passed and the course list had become official by the end of the first week of the semester. They were asked to read the consent form, which was distributed at the beginning of one class session by a teacher who was not involved in the project. The consent
forms were then sealed in an envelope, and only opened once the term had been completed and the final grades for the students submitted. Students who were under 18 at the time and who wished to participate were asked to bring the form home to get signed approval from their parents/guardians and to return it to their teacher at the next class meeting.

The data (the five ongoing reflective reading journals and the corresponding end-of-semester questionnaire) were collected in accordance to the ethical standards established by the Master Teacher Program of the Université de Sherbrooke. Moreover, the project was also granted approval from the John Abbott College Innovation Research and Development committee prior to the start of the research project and the collection of the data (see Appendix A). Consent to collect and use the data found in the reflective reading journals and the questionnaire was requested near the start of the semester. Students were also made aware that participation in, or withdrawal from, the research project, would in no way affect their academic standing in the course. Since the data collected in the reflections were kept confidential and questionnaire responses remained anonymous, students who had consented to participate in this research project ran no risk whatsoever. Finally, the students were also reminded that, upon completion of the study, results of the project would be made available to interested parties.
CHAPTER FIVE: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present two sets of findings: the data found in the students’ reflective reading journals and in the answers provided to the open-ended items on the questionnaire as well as the data generated in response to fixed-alternative questions.

The first set of findings will present the eight salient themes that were revealed in the reflective reading journals. Each salient theme will be described and followed by a summary explanation. Also, representative student quotes will be offered to highlight the theme in question.

The second set of findings pertains to the fixed-alternative and open-ended items on the questionnaire. Demographic information and details about the students’ program of study will be offered, along with some related observations. Also, a brief summary of the answers students provided to the four survey questions (fixed-alternative items) will be offered. Finally, the key themes that emerged in the students’ feedback to the three open-ended questions will be presented, each theme followed by a brief summary description. Illustrative quotes taken from the students’ detailed responses will be offered to emphasize each theme.

2. THEMES REVEALED IN THE REFLECTIVE READING JOURNALS

What follows is a brief account of the eight salient themes that emerged from each of the sample groupings of student reflective reading journals.
Table 2  
Key Themes Revealed in Reflective Reading Journals

| Reading Reflective Journal 1 (Kafka) | 1. The sense of self-worth and feeling appreciated  
|                                        | 2. Feelings of gratitude and responsible outlook  
|                                        | 3. Challenging routine and daily expectations  |
| Reading Reflective Journals 2 & 3 (Camus) | 4. The need to express and withhold emotions  
|                                        | 5. Acknowledging and understanding differing outlooks  
|                                        | 6. Individual voice versus conventional wisdom  |
| Reading Reflective Journals 4 & 5 (Orwell) | 7. Questioning norms and safeguarding individualism  
|                                        | 8. Lacking concern for others and gratifying one’s ego  |

3. REFLECTIVE READING JOURNAL 1

3.1 Theme 1—The Sense of Self-Worth and Feeling Appreciated

The first reflective reading journal generated seemingly disparate thoughts in response to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Some students chose to call into question the protagonist’s actions or consider the significance of a statement made, while others took the opportunity to relate certain events, descriptions, or bits of dialogue to their lives. While one student wrote about the protagonist’s contentious relationship with his family, another voiced a concern about the lack of encouragement the character received from his parents. Some felt angry at the thought that the protagonist felt underappreciated, was taken for granted by his parents, and as a result experienced a waning sense of self-worth.
One student went so far as to relate the protagonist’s experience of frustration with his family to the feelings of exasperation students themselves feel by being overwhelmed with school, a job, and a social life and not feeling appreciated for the hard work they do. Examples taken from the first set of student responses underscore the theme of the sense of self-worth and the need to feel appreciated:

“After the confrontation between Gregor and his father I was quite angry that after all the things he’s done for his family that he got no appreciation.”

“I can relate this [Gregor’s plight] to my personal experiences because who has not felt that their efforts to please their family or friends have gone unappreciated?”

“[Regarding Gregor’s relationship with his parents:] I can relate this to my life because as a student I often feel overwhelmed with seven classes, work, and a social life.”

“I occasionally feel like my effort is underappreciated by my parents who believe I’m living the easy life in college or think I’m not working hard enough.”

### 3.2 Theme 2—Feelings of Gratitude and Responsible Outlook

The second recurring theme revealed in the first set of reflections resonated with the students, especially since they were able to relate the feelings of abandonment and thanklessness felt by the protagonist as antithetical to their own current desires to feel grateful to their own filial contexts and surroundings. Their focus was either on feelings of indebtedness to one’s parents or on the nagging impression that one is always obliged to weigh the significance of choices.

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1 Editorial note: the researcher made the deliberate decision neither to improve expression flaws nor to correct any grammatical and syntactical slips found in the sample student responses.
Whether they related to the protagonist by describing details of their own family dynamics or repeated the importance of being appreciated by their parents, the students’ comments almost unanimously agreed that the lack of encouragement, understanding, and gratitude is what caused the protagonist to suffer. The following quotes highlight the students’ concern with the theme of gratitude and the acquisition of a responsible outlook:

“Gregor Samsa’s world really revolves around his parents; the job which consumes most of his life which he hates so much he keeps because he is working to pay off the debts of his parents….I always seek the approval of my parents and thus have found it at times difficult to always make my own independent choices to make them happy.”

“I felt bad for Gregor, but at the same time could understand why he did this because of my own life experience. I have never been given a reason to feel any obligation to help my parents financially, as opposed to Gregor. However, I do feel some sort of obligation to help them with whatever I can.”

“When I was in grade 10, school was becoming harder and more challenging. At some point, my grades started to drop, compared to my previous terms. It took me a while to figure out the exact reason for my unusual drop. It was nothing but the lack of encouragement and attention from family and friends. I had realized that there was really no one there to push me to try harder.”

3.3 Theme 3—Challenging Routine and Daily Expectations

Adding to the first set of reflections is the students’ apparent concern with the story’s thematic treatment of the linked notions of routine and the grind of daily expectation and experience. The responses also created a pattern of pointed remarks about how this fictional concern reflects back to the students’ own lives. Of particular interest, it seems, are the similarities drawn between the protagonist’s habitual daily actions with that of the students’ view of their own lives as often mindlessly repetitive and driven by rote.
Aware that the anxieties and concerns dramatized in Kafka’s story are fictionalized, the students nevertheless adopted a philosophical outlook that sympathized with the protagonist’s fear of isolation and entrapment in a nightmarish world of mindless repetition: although most don’t yet have to worry about professional obligations the way Kafka’s hero does, routine for students means going to school, returning home, doing homework and repeating these acts daily. Sample responses pertaining to this rather disparaging view of experiential tedium are as follows:

“I believe we all live a bug’s life. If you are to look at my life as a bug stuck in my room, stuck in my little box and not really having the opportunity to step out of this box, it’s not that much different to the life I was living before. We all have routines that we need to follow, daily duties that we need to accomplish. And if, by chance, we step out of this routine, we can literally feel our life falling apart.”

“We as individuals, are all “stuck” (in one way or another) in our everyday lives. Most of us either go to school to work, which forces us to develop a routine. This routine typically remains the same for most of our lives and makes us wonder if we are just like Gregor.”

“I can personally relate to Gregor because he’s trapped in a routine. We wake up, go to school, go to work then go home and do homework before going to bed. It’s a vicious cycle.”

4. REFLECTIVE READING JOURNALS 2 & 3

4.1 Theme 4— The Need to Express and Withhold Emotions

The second and third reflective reading journals were written in response to Albert Camus’ novella, *The Outsider*, a story that challenged students’ preconceived notions of heroism and character motivation as it prompted them to engage their ethical imaginations in the spirit of open debate. While Camus’ story of a young man, whose apathetic sensibility leads him to commit a senseless crime, is not necessarily an easy read, the story still manages to keep
the readers actively interested in the plot and narrative resolution; some readers also find the protagonist’s anti-heroic sensibility oddly intriguing.

Most reflections focused on the need to understand rather than to judge the protagonist’s motivations: readers were intent on offering interpretive and personal instead of evaluative and judgmental responses. While some students were able to take stock of the differences between the protagonist’s own life story and their own personal concerns, they nevertheless remained surprised of their own stance on issues like family, care, and attachment. Placed in situations similar to the character’s own, some expressed concern with how they would respond in moments of heightened crises, family trauma, and emotional turmoil.

In the end, there seemed to be consensus in the students’ responses that the process of expressing or withholding emotions antithetical to one’s own is something that needed to be safeguarded. The following sample responses reflect the readers’ interest in the turmoil inherent in the character’s emotional life and how this reflects on their own feelings about emotional expression:

“He seems very careless and doesn’t let things get to him and interrupt his everyday life. Me, on the other hand, I’m a very deep emotional person, and I take things to heart. I would have been a mess and in complete depression if my mother has passed away, his reaction just really surprised me.”

“His mother’s death has not had a very big impact on his life which is a bit surprising….If I were placed in his situation, the emotions that I would feel would be very different than to what Mr. Meursault feels.”

“Even though some people like Meursault and myself may not express our emotions…that doesn’t mean that we don’t care deep inside. Some people express emotions more than others but that doesn’t mean that the others don’t feel pain.”
4.2 Theme 5—Acknowledging and Understanding Differing Outlooks

Paramount to any worthwhile discussion on empathetic reading—its intellectual and emotional scope, as well as its impact upon readers—is the importance of the theme of acknowledging and understanding differing outlooks. As the research suggests, works of fiction are good at offering a dramatized representation of personal differences in outlooks. A special province of fiction is its ability to convey the manner in which humans from various backgrounds, holding unique beliefs and harboring idiosyncratic intentions, can clash and coexist. *The Outsider* resonated particularly well with students who found the weighing of divergent views in works of fiction as important for the nurturing of an inclusive imagination, as it is endemic to the construction of personal and social outlooks that are mindful and open to difference.

As with theme 4, students were quick to defend (but not necessarily condone) the protagonist’s right to think and feel differently than the norm; they were insistent on the need to understand rather than to judge and condemn. Even if the protagonist was seen as socially disconnected, students thought it worth their while to try to get inside his mind so as to identify and understand his motives. Here are some examples of constructive and empathetic concerns students voiced about the protagonist and his character flaws:

“There is nothing wrong with the way he is. No one is the same, we all take things differently. I’m sure everyone else who has read this book has thought of Meursault as a heartless human being….but who are we to judge?”

“Even though I don’t understand Meursault’s actions and they baffle me, I can accept them because everyone grieves differently.”

“Meursault shows very little grief over his mother’s death, which, in some ways, shocked me during my reading….While reading these passages, however, I tried to put myself in his mind and understand why he reacts in such a way.”
“Meursault’s interactions with others are very matter of fact, and observant. It is how he sees things, and how he chooses to address them which makes it seem disconnected. I think Meursault and I are on very different levels but do the same type of disconnected judgment of people on a day to day basis.”

4.3 Theme 6—Individual Voice Versus Conventional Wisdom

A sixth theme revealed in the second and third sets of reflective reading journals is one that students seem to take very seriously. Most responses were quick to gloss over the protagonist’s shady character and to overlook the morally suspect nature of his behavior and choices. However, several students wrote passionately about the character’s inability to filter an opinion through a social lens, as though this were a badge of pride to flaunt in the face of social convention or normative, acceptable behavior. Indeed, through his own subversive actions, opinions, and beliefs, Camus’ protagonist draws an explicit distinction between the warmth of convenient lies and the cold of uncomfortable truths.

Students were mostly amazed at his unwillingness to censor his ideas, his inability to lie, and his reluctance to placate others around him. Some students considered him to be a “genuine man,” whose recalcitrance pointed to the “hard truths” that he harbored and sometimes voiced in order to expose what seemed to be the flaws inherent in so-called normative social behavior. The following samples illustrate this theme:

“Although I was baffled at [Meursault]…I enjoyed reading it because I like the fact that Meursault isn’t afraid to express his true feelings [sic] he knows that what he thinks is going to seem bizarre and off to the rest of the society, however he still isn’t afraid to express it.”

“I continue to be amazed at Meursault’s actions…..He is an outsider….he doesn’t bullshit himself with societal norms and moral or ethical codes and conventions. He is just a genuine man living his life.”
“A way I can relate to Meursault’s choice on not to lie is that one of my pet peeves is lying. No matter what I will always choose to be honest regardless of whatever the consequences may be for telling a harsh truth.”

5. REFLECTIVE READING JOURNALS 4 & 5

5.1 Theme 7—Questioning Norms and Safeguarding Individualism

The final two reflective reading journals were in response to George Orwell’s infamous dystopian novel about a future whose technocratic way of life threatens to eradicate all sense of personal selfhood. The anxieties felt and fears experienced by Winston Smith, whose story is being told, come as a result of the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the drive to exert his individualism and the power of the collective restricting him from doing so. The students took the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the novel dramatizes the powerful influence of technology on the lives of the fictional denizens. This focus triggered a series of self-reflections on how students gauge the uses (and abuses) of technologies in their personal and social lives.

Orwell’s protagonist was relatable to some students because he was critical of the ways in which the uses of technology (in his case, in the form of omnipresent TV screens that monitor the protagonist’s every move) jeopardize his ability to remain authentic to his individuality and spirit of rebellion and keep him from being truthful with his deliberations with others. On a related note, students also expressed concern with the possible nefarious effects telecommunication technologies were having on their own lives. Examples of student responses that reveal an interest in these ideas are:

“Individuality has become rare. The majority of people have an IPhone and dress similarly to everyone else….People “dissemble their feelings” to go along with how the majority of people feel rather than sticking up for themselves, their feelings and opinions. Of course, this is a generalization because not everyone is like this,
but I personally think the vast majority of people, including me, relate to Winston.”

“As I grow older, I have noticed that simplicity in our society is becoming increasingly denounced, while complex technology prevails. Technology has become so ingrained in our society that it is extremely difficult to understand life without it, especially for my generation. We see these devices as tools which make life more efficient, but we do not see the negative effects in which it has on the individual.”

“In our social way—and for Winston in a very literal way—saying that he loves Big Brother is an action of survival. The reason why this is disturbing is because it brings forth the question of what are the things that I accept as straight truth, simply because to not believe them would be to go against societal norms, and make life less convenient? And in turn are these truths to any degree dangerous to how people view each other? ….these thoughts have simply (and positively) caused me to question things.

“The idea of the choice between sacrificing one’s self or a loved one intrigued me….I would like to believe that I would sacrifice myself for the betterment of someone else but it is impossible to know the decision without having experienced it. George Orwell brings to life an uncomfortable truth that it is human instinct to save one’s life before sacrificing it for someone else.”

5.2 Theme 8—Lacking Concern for Others and Gratifying One’s Ego

The fifth and final reflective reading journal gave students one last chance to engage with the novel in thoughtful ways by inviting them to pose a question about the plot, address a favorite line of dialogue, and/or make observations about the manner in which the characters relate to each other. As with the previous four reflective reading journals, the students’ responses were varied and thoughtful reminders of mindful and engaged reading. The recurring focus of these final reflections was on a series of related commentaries pertaining to empathy, desensitization, selfish concern, and the gratification of one’s ego—issues that come up in the novel’s dramatic conflicts between characters.
Orwell’s protagonist is at first caring and careful in his mingling with others, but with time he relinquishes his propensity for compassion. Students sympathized with him, but some remained unsure how to feel about his sudden lack of empathy for other people. Most deliberated on the possible motives behind his actions; some even ventured suggestions about why people, under emotional and psychological duress, choose to remain selfish. Particularly interesting was the students’ self-reflective considerations about the impact of such topics. Some examples include:

“Many people think that they are at the center of the universe and they think that they are the most important person. A similar point is made in the book as O’Brien says that “the Earth is the center of the universe. The sun and the stars go around it.” When people are in that mindset, they do not wish to help others unless they can benefit from it.”

“The Party wants absolute power, “pure” power. They do not care if it hurts anybody else, as long as they are in control. I have met people that do not care about anyone except for themselves.”

“People in Oceania are also desensitized to the death or vaporization of people. Winston shares that he is expecting Syme to get vaporized and doesn’t show any sign of sadness when he does, showing that he didn’t really care about Syme. This lack of empathy is also present in today’s society, as people watch stories on the news of people dying at war or suffering from hunger and often watch it without flinching or thinking about it twice. Desensitized to the suffering that people go through all around the world, we would rather complain about our everyday small problems than care about others.”
6. QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

6.1 Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Group</th>
<th>Number of respondents who completed the questionnaire</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39 students</td>
<td>31 students</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 39 student participants in the course, 31 managed to submit the anonymous questionnaire (79% of the sample). The interest level was evident; most students were willing to offer not only their feedback on the several fixed-alternative survey items but also their detailed thoughts in response to the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire.

6.2 Demographic Information About Respondents

![Age](image1.png)  
![Sex](image2.png)

*Figure 1. Age of Respondents  
Figure 2. Sex of Respondents*

Demographic data pertaining to age, sex, and program of study were collected from the participating sample for informational purposes only. No analysis was performed to suggest whether or not the information played a functional role in influencing the outcome of the study. Three age categories were
suggested. The largest group of respondents (90%) fell in the 17-19 years category; 2 students were in the 20-22 years category; only 1 student was in the 23-25 years category.

A nearly equal number of male and female students responded to the questionnaire: out of the 31 completed questionnaires, approximately 55% were by male students and 45% by female students. It is interesting to note the near-equal distribution between the sexes, as the pool of respondents for this project was entirely convenient and beyond the selective control of the teacher/researcher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-University Programs</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Technology Programs</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honours Science</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Publication Design and Hypermedia Technology (PDHT)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, Literature, and Communication (ALC)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This convenience sample of participating students is indicative of the sort of student distribution one finds in a General Education Block-A English class. In any given semester, a teacher might find an equally random co-mingling of students from different programs of study in CEGEP. In this case, the largest number of students who completed and submitted their answers to the questionnaire was 27, that is 87% of respondents. These students were in a two-year (4 semesters) pre-university program: 1 student was in Honours Science, 3 were studying in ALC, 5 belonged to the Science program, and the majority (18 students) were pursuing studies in Social Science.
While the majority of the student respondents were in a pre-university program, 4 students belonged to one of the 4-year technical or career programs offered at the college. The ability to answer the questions to the fixed-alternative and open-ended questions was in no way dependent on what the student was studying in his or her other classes. Still, it is possible that the student’s program of study could have affected responses. This is especially true of the reflections dealing with Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, since the novel draws on certain implications about technology that the students may have been considering elsewhere. Nevertheless, it was taken for granted that all students participating in the course were given the same opportunity and training to be able to adequately and confidently respond to the demands of the course and to reflect on the scope of the learning offered.

6.3 **Summary of Responses to the Questionnaire Items**

What follows is a brief summary of the answers to the four survey questions pertaining to the experience of writing the journals found in the questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale was used, allowing respondents (N=31) to circle answers that most closely corresponded to their feelings. For a more thorough explanation of the methodological rationale, the reader is directed back to the earlier sections on “Methodology.”
Table 5
Responses to Questionnaire Items #4-7

#4. Writing journals helped me improve my ability to think deeply about characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#5. Writing journals helped me identify imaginatively with the characters in the readings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#6. Writing journals helped me consider my feelings/views on ideas from the readings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#7. Writing journals helped me see emotions as an important part of reading appreciation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With regards to item #4 of the questionnaire, students who responded agreed almost unanimously with the statement that writing journals helped them to develop their ability to think deeply about the characters they encountered in their readings. In fact, while only 1 student disagreed (3%) and 3 others neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (at nearly 10% of the respondents), 2 strongly agreed (6% of respondents) and 25 (nearly 81% of the student-respondents) agreed.

The answers to item #5 were divided between three categories of response. With reference to whether or not writing journal reflections helped them identify with the characters found in their readings, 5 students strongly agreed (16% of the respondents), while the rest of the respondents were divided between 14 students choosing “agree” (45% of the respondents) and 12 selecting “neither agree nor disagree” (approximately 39% of the respondents). No respondent felt the need to disagree or strongly disagree with the question about writing reflections as a means through which readers can begin to identify with the fictional humans found in the stories they read.

Item #6 asked students to consider whether or not writing journals helped them to reflect on or consider the feelings and views elicited by the ideas encountered in the world of literature they studied. A majority of the respondents answered in the positive, 6 students (19% of the respondents) strongly agreeing with the statements, with 22 students agreeing (approximately 71% of the respondents). However, 2 students could neither agree nor disagree, and 1 disagreed with the statement that the act of writing a journal reflection helped to frame a consideration of feeling and thoughts triggered by the reading experience.

The distribution for the responses to item #7 was more uneven than the previous three question items. With reference to whether or not writing journal reflections helped them consider emotions as an important part of the experience
of reading, two thirds of the students felt strongly about the issue, whereas 11 of the respondents felt that they either outright disagreed or they took a more neutral stance. Specifically, 6 students strongly agreed with the statement (19% of respondents); 14 agreed (45%); 8 neither agreed nor disagreed (26% respondents); and 3 disagreed with the proposition concerning emotions (approximately 10% of the respondents).

7. THEMES REVEALED IN THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Three open-ended questions (Questions 8, 9, and 10) were included in the questionnaire. While the previous fixed-alternative survey questions (see above Questions 4, 5, 6, and 7) asked students to voice agreement or disagreement with statements pertaining to the experience of writing the journals, these open-ended questions solicited detailed, more elaborate feedback. All participants (N=31) offered responses, but some students were more detailed in their answers than others, and the commentary provided was better defined. The students’ feedback ranged from a simple yes or no response to a comprehensive and thoughtful answer. A content analysis was performed for each response to identify the possible categories of themes revealed in the answers.
7.1 Question #8—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you express your feelings?

Table 6
Key Themes Revealed in the Open-Ended Question #8:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme(s)</th>
<th>Sample Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Reflective journals help to convey one’s thoughts in organized fashion | “I believe they have helped, with both expressing my feelings as well as organize and express my thoughts clearly.”

“When one writes, he must have a certain organization and construction. Writing about feelings not only helps to express them but mostly to make them be clear in the writer’s mind.”

“Yes, not only because they provide the opportunity to reflect on my position on the novel or character, but also because the reading questions provide guide and focus my reflection.” |
| 2. Reflective journals help writers to express themselves freely and informally | “The journals have helped me express my feelings. I think that being able to write about the text being read in class in such an informal manner allowed me to express emotions and opinions that are otherwise not appropriate in more formal writing.”

“It definitely helps having a free narrative voice in the journals because I can literally just write exactly what I am thinking which obviously helps me express myself.”

“Personal reflections allowed me to express my inner thoughts and feelings toward characters. They are more personal pieces of writing thus allowing me to connect with the character on a personal level through similar experiences.” |
|---|---|
| 3. Reflective journals help readers relate to perspectives other than their own | “Often by relating to a character’s thoughts, words, behavior, or relationship with another character, the reader can realize certain feelings and concretely express them through writing instead of keeping them inside as confused thoughts.”

“By relating the character’s experiences to my own, it prompted me to express my feelings on paper.”

“It helped me take a moment to step back and view everything in a different perspective.” |
Question #8 revealed three themes. The reflective reading journals help to convey one’s thoughts in organized fashion; they help writers to express themselves freely and informally; and they help readers relate to perspectives other than their own. The majority of student responses underscored the importance of having the opportunity to express ideas and feelings freely. The reflective reading journals provided enough structure and freedom to encourage students to be focused and articulate in their answers. Apparently, students considered these writing exercises more liberating than the traditional essay format they are used to. The journals gave them the freedom and confidence needed to express what they felt/thought and how they experienced these.

Five students (i.e., 16% of the respondents) either didn’t feel strongly about the reflections or didn’t consider them to be helpful. In answer to the question of whether or not writing the reflective journal helped them express their feelings, one student answered, “Not necessarily, because it does not change the fact that expressing one’s feelings about a topic is difficult” while another said the responses simply “didn’t seem to come easy.” Only one student offered a curt “not really” in response to the question.

7.2 Question #9—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you understand the experience of others?

Table 7
Key Themes Revealed in the Open-Ended Question #9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme(s)</th>
<th>Sample Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflective journals foster understanding of shared insights with characters</td>
<td>“Yes, I think that writing journals really helped me understand the issues in the book through the characters’ eyes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Yes, it helped me relate to others and understand the points of view of others more easily and with less judgment.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Yes, this it has because thought writing the journals you take more time to understand the characters and their experiences.”

“Yes, they help me reflect on their actions and the emotional results that occur from the experience, thus giving me a perspective insight on the character.”

“The journals open our minds to the way of thinking of characters who might think differently than we do.”

Question #9 revealed one recurring theme: reflective journals foster understanding of shared insights with characters. Not only did some students suggest that the exercise helped them consider issues from a different perspective; it also allowed them more time to effectively identify, acknowledge, and consider different outlooks openly and thoughtfully, without recourse to judgment and criticism. Some even insisted on the need to use these journals conscientiously as a means to open oneself up to different ways of thinking and to welcome a possible change in one’s personal perspective.

Five students (16% of the respondents) offered either a curt “no” or “not really” in response to whether or not writing these reflective journals helped them develop an increased understanding of others. However, at least two of the respondents seem to have misunderstood the question to refer to the experience of their immediate peers rather than the experience of the fictionalized human beings. One student bemoaned not being able to read peer reflections while another suggested that “talking about the text in class” helped to build a more effective understanding of the experience of others, since “group discussions brought opinions” the student would not have considered alone.
7.3 Question #10—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you become self-reflective?

Question #10 revealed two themes. First, reflective journals challenge writers to understand their own personal experiences and opinions more effectively. Second, reflective journals foster critical thinking and questioning of one’s ideas. While some students described their appreciation for the opportunity to engage in self-reflection, others said that the reflective reading journal allowed them to clarify their ideas and feelings in writing. That the reflective journals encouraged critical thinking was also emphasized in several student responses, some even arguing that writing the assignment helped them rethink how they may have felt previously about the fictional characters and their stories.

Table 8
Key Themes Revealed in the Open-Ended Question #10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme(s)</th>
<th>Sample Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflective journals challenge writers to understand their own personal experiences and opinions more effectively</td>
<td>“I believe that they have. I think that we are always self-reflective for selfish reasons. These reflections however allow us to look at ourselves on more broad terms [sic] on a societal level and also on deeply personal levels.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“This helped me be self-reflective in a less vague and more concrete way. It helped me put my thoughts together in a clear way and understand and express my feelings in a clear way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It has helped me in a way with self reflection because now when reading something I automatically think of a way to personally connect it to better understand.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Reflective journals foster critical thinking and the questioning of one’s ideas

“Reflective journals foster critical thinking and the questioning of one’s ideas. In writing a journal, it causes me to go back and think about what I have read in order to rethink about how the reading made me feel.”

“Relating personal experiences to characters in the novels made me reflect on past decisions I have made, and more important, question why I made those decisions.”

“Indeed, I take more time to truly reflect and ask myself important questions.”

Seven students (that is, 22.6% of the respondents) claimed not to have found the reflective reading journals inspiring as triggers for self-reflection. A few students offered the expected curt “no, not really” and refrained from commenting further; one voiced a more cynical outlook on the notion of self reflection, claiming not to have found them helpful, since the student didn’t find the need to “reflect on day to day life.” Only one student stated an explicit reluctance to engage in self-reflective reading in the future: “I’m not sure if I would continue doing so for further readings.”

8. SUMMARY

This chapter offered a detailed presentation of the data found in the students’ reflective reading journals and in the answers provided in the questionnaire. Information pertaining to the range in age group and the students’ programs of study was offered in order to contextualize the qualitative data used in this research project. Two sets of findings—the themes revealed in the reflective reading journals and the information offered in response to the fixed-alternative and open-ended items in the questionnaire—were explained and
corresponding quotes were provided to illustrate the themes revealed. In the next chapter, brief discussions about both sets of findings will be provided so as to identify the ways in which the students’ reflective reading journals and the answers to the open-ended questionnaire items relate to the experience of empathetic reading and corroborate the ideas found in the literature review.
1. INTRODUCTION

This research project asked the question: In what ways can reflective journals encourage students to read works of literary fiction empathetically? Pertinent related questions about the experience of writing reflective reading journals were also asked: Do the reflective journals help readers express their feelings? Do they allow readers the opportunity to take others’ experiences into consideration in thoughtful ways? And do they help readers become more conscientiously self-reflective? The assumption was made that the themes found in the reflective journals and the responses to the questionnaire items would help increase an understanding of the relationship between reading and the potential for empathetic concern.

This final chapter presents a short summary of the themes revealed in the content analysis of each reflective reading journal before providing a brief discussion about these themes as they relate to the experience of empathetic reading. The discussion addresses the possible benefits that expressing emotions, thinking about other people’s experiences, and self-reflection can have on the active reader. Furthermore, a summary and discussion of the ways in which responses provided to the open-ended questionnaire items corroborate with salient ideas outlined in the literature review will also follow. Finally, observations about the possible implications, applications, and limitations of the study will be offered before closing comments are made.
2. THEMES IN THE REFLECTIVE READING JOURNALS

2.1 Summary of Themes Revealed in Journal 1

Three recurring themes were revealed in the students’ first reflective reading journal on Franz Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis*. The first theme was the sense of self-worth and the need to feel appreciated. The students’ work provided interesting insights about the protagonist’s strained relationship with his family, the importance of receiving positive reinforcement and encouragement, and the need to be acknowledged by others so as to validate one’s sense of self worth. The second theme that seemed to have resonated with the students was gratitude and the acquisition of a responsible outlook on life. The students felt strongly that the story underscored the difficulties inherent in the twofold responsibility of seeking approval from parents and making independent decisions. Finally, the third theme highlighted the individual’s wish to challenge routine and the grind of daily experience.

2.2 Summary of Themes Revealed in Journals 2 & 3

Three themes were also revealed in the second and third reflective reading journals on Albert Camus’ novel, *The Outsider*. Many submissions voiced the opinion that it is important not to judge an individual’s actions too hastily. The students’ feelings in response to the protagonist’s life experience were interpretive rather than judgmental. The first theme was the need to express and to withhold emotions. A second theme that could be inferred in the students’ responses was the need to acknowledge a difference in outlook. This was especially significant, since the protagonist’s case was divorced from the students’ own life experience. Most were clear about the need to remain open to different modes of behavior, divergent ways of thinking, or idiosyncratic opinions. Finally, the third theme revealed was on the clash between the voice of the individual and conventional wisdom.
2.3 Summary of Themes Revealed in Journals 4 & 5

Two themes were revealed in the students’ final two reflective reading journals on George Orwell’s dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The first was the need to question social norms and to protect the right to express one’s individuality. This theme was outlined in the students’ commentary about the ways technology was represented in the novel. The second theme revealed was the lack of concern for others and the gratification of one’s ego. In their comments, students touched on a number of interrelated issues like desensitization and selfishness to underscore their assumptions about why they behave the way they do.

2.4 Discussion

The details found in the sample responses that were randomly selected for this study clearly showed that students take a vibrant interest in empathetic reading and self-reflection. The eight salient themes that emerged from the content analysis performed on the students’ reflective reading journals indicate that the students found the writing exercise to act as an effective means to foster empathetic concern for others and as a trigger for self-reflection. As such, the themes provided corroborate the literature on reading and empathy. Not only was the experience evidently helpful in encouraging reflection; it also gave the students the opportunity to consider self-awareness as a catalyst for empathetic understanding of the plight of the characters (Misra-Hebert, Issacson, Kohn, Hull, Hojat, Papp, & Calabrese, 2012).

Another observation is that some of the responses underscored the importance of interacting with the readings and remaining open to different experiences and outlooks. Importantly, sample responses also insisted on the need to liberate the expression of individuality. These ideas also testify to the eagerness with which students seemed to use the reflective reading journals as a tool to facilitate the building of self-awareness (Dyment & O’Connell, 2006;
Hiemstra, 2001; Lund, 1985; Mills, 2008). The data collected from the reflective reading journals also suggested that, by reading the works of fiction critically—by considering the implications of textual details such as plot and character, as well as by making inferences about ideas—and by considering the emotional impact of what they were reading, students were actively engaged in a meaningful self-reflective practice (Coplan, 2004; Hodges & Myers, 2007; Keen, 2006; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Morson, 2011; Nowak, 2014).

Whether they were voicing their support for the characters’ opinions or agreeing with the protagonists’ need to receive acknowledgment from others, the students effectively managed to convey just how important they felt it was for them to engage in an intellectual and emotional transaction with the works of fiction. This form of co-mingling between readers and characters is in keeping with what the studies consider to be an important feature of empathetic reading (Heath, 2008; McRobie, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003).

A final conclusion to be drawn from the emerging themes is that the responses shed light on the students’ willingness to imaginatively enter another’s skin. This is in keeping with what Hodges & Myers (2007) refer to as the experience of empathetic understanding. An analysis of the sample journals confirms the findings offered in the literature on empathy: readers of fiction are willing to consider the plight of others, to imagine what it would be like to see the world from the perspective of another person, and to experience some sorrow regarding the pain of others (Hodges & Myers, 2007; McRobie, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003).
3. THEMES IN OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS OF QUESTIONNAIRE

3.1 **Summary of Themes Revealed in Question #8—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you express your feelings?**

Three themes were found embedded in the responses to Question #8. On the one hand, students made it clear that reflective reading journals helped them to convey their thoughts in organized fashion. A second related theme was how reflective journals helped the students express themselves personally and informally. And the third theme was that the journals helped students relate to perspectives other than their own by giving them the informal space in which to deliberate on their own as well as on the fictional characters’ feelings and thoughts.

3.2 **Summary of Themes Revealed in Question #9—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you understand the experience of others?**

Most students agreed that the process of writing the reflective reading journals helped them build an understanding of the experience of others. Specifically, the responses provided in the journals support the idea that the reflective reading journals help foster increased knowledge and awareness of shared insights between the reader and the fictional character.

3.3 **Summary of Themes Revealed in Question #10—Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you become self-reflective?**

The students also answered favorably the question of whether or not the reflective reading journals helped them become more self-reflective. Two themes were revealed in the student responses. The first was that reflective reading journals challenged the students to understand their own personal experiences and opinions more effectively; the second was that the journals
promoted critical thinking and fostered a willingness to question one’s own ideas.

3.4 Discussion

The answers to the open-ended questions about the reflective reading journals were found to be supportive of numerous conclusions about active reading, reflective writing, increased understanding of varying perspectives, and empathetic response.

First, the reflective reading journals forced students to organize their ideas, allowed students to express themselves informally, and gave students the space in which to reflect on their own as well as the fictional characters’ feelings and thoughts. That the students enjoyed writing informally supports the conclusion that the aim of reflective writing is to push the writer to discover and explore ideas and emotions freely rather than to explain and analyze the rhetorical features of a text (Bean, 2011; Creme, 2005).

Furthermore, students also considered the implications of giving free reign to their feelings in response to the readings. Most responses were clear that, even though guided prompts were used to frame responses in specific ways, these journals also made room for personal growth. Unlike the analytical essay and other traditional forms of academic writing, the reflective journals encouraged the free expression of feelings, promoted the exploration of self-awareness, and stimulated increased understanding of possible changes in emotional and/or intellectual outlook—ideas evidenced in studies (Dunlap, 2006; Dyment & O’Connell, 2006; Hiemstra, 2001). Even those students who did not feel particularly strongly about the characters in the books—or were critical of the characters’ motives, acts, and opinions—still acknowledged the powerful impact self-expression and reflection can have on one’s impression of reading and writing.
Corroborating the conclusions drawn by Boud (2001) and Hiemstra (2001), the student responses demonstrate agreement that the reflective reading journal is an ideal outlet that promotes a low-risk approach to the expression of feelings. Moreover, the students’ responses reveal that writing these journals helped them to reflect on and consider the feelings and views elicited by the ideas encountered in the works of fiction. This is also corroborated by the data found in the fixed-alternative responses preceding the open-ended questions (see Items #6 and #7 in Table 5).

In addition to focusing on the benefits of expressing one’s feelings, it was clear that the reflective reading journals provided the students a means to understand the experience of others. Most students believe that the journals helped them relate in some way with the characters either by identifying with facets of their fictional lives or by thinking deeply about the characters’ experiences (see Items #4 and #5 in Table 5). The research on empathetic reading offers weight to the assumptions students made about their rapport with fictional characters. The ability and willingness to enter another’s skin so as to understand facets of experience from a different perspective is paramount to the experience of empathy (Hodges & Myers, 2007; Mar et al., 2008; Oatley, 2009).

Lastly, the students were open to sharing positive feedback about the degree to which the reflective reading journals challenged them to consider their personal experiences and to think about their opinions critically, indicating agreement with what the literature says about increasing understanding and challenging perspectives (Dunlap, 2006; Dyment & O’Connell, 2010; Hiemstra, 2001). The journals fostered in the students a proclivity for posing (and addressing) questions about their emotional and intellectual reactions to fictional worlds and characters. This sort of critical self-awareness is an encouraging sign that the process of empathetic reading brings with it a possible change in outlook.
4. APPLICATION AND LIMITATIONS

4.1 Application of Findings

It is important to note that the observations made in this study do not pretend to speak conclusively about the correlation between reading and empathy. Although modest in scope and aim, the close reading of students’ reflective reading journals suggests a positive impact on the ways in which reading, thinking, and writing are taught in CEGEP English classrooms.

Serious consideration of the literature on empathetic reading could inspire changes in learning and teaching practices. The combination of intellectual rigor with affective engagement is a pedagogical ideal that cannot be taken for granted. CEGEP students who find themselves in an English literature and composition classroom need to be given the space and opportunity not only to think analytically but also to build awareness of the impact their emotions have on how they learn. Interpreting and understanding literature requires the readers’ active participation. Much more than the simple processing of information, reading works of literature is a transactional process. (See Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework, section 3 for more information about the transactional nature of reading.) Readers must contend with the ways in which meaning is constructed and how the emotions elicited may also influence their outlooks (Bressler, 1999).

The literature review and the comments provided in this study—in the content analysis of journal themes and the students’ feedback in the questionnaire—could provide assistance to teachers who wish to increase their understanding of the impact reflective journals can have on the students’ propensity for empathetic reading. Specifically, the observations presented in the study can serve as supporting theoretical framework for educators who wish to include reflective reading journals as part of their pedagogical approach. The
reflective reading journal presents a good opportunity for the teacher to create a balanced approach to interactive learning: though the teacher guides readers with trigger prompts, the reflective reading journals remain, in essence, a student-centered activity.

Also, a close investigation of the students’ feedback on the experience of writing reflective reading journals could prove beneficial to advocates of meaningful learning practices who consider the acts of reading and reflecting as necessary to increase the understanding of self and others. Encouraging students to record their feelings and thoughts about the fictional worlds with which they engage can grant teachers insight into how they think of, identify with, and manage to articulate the emotional impressions elicited by fiction.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Although the students’ applied work and feedback does relate back to a number of salient ideas and concerns raised in the research on empathetic reading and reflective writing, a number of limitations were identified in this project. Firstly, since this study used a small sample (N=39) taken from a broad cross-section of the student population at John Abbott College, the results could not be generalized. Although 167 reflective reading journals were submitted, read, and evaluated, only a fraction of the submissions was considered for content analysis (approximately 30% of the submissions).

In replicating this study, future studies might consider using a much larger sample of student participants or a bulkier sum of the journals so as to generate more themes and to build a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which reflective journals could foster empathetic reading. Also possible, but ultimately difficult and lengthy, would be to conduct a longitudinal study of the issue in order to develop a keener understanding of whether or not (and how) writing reflective reading journals might affect the students’ empathetic imagination over time.
A second concern is that some students failed to complete the questionnaire: 31 out of 39 students handed in their work and agreed to submit their responses as findings for the study. Particularly challenging was the decision to administer the questionnaire near the end of the semester, as students were busy preparing for final exams, research essays, and oral presentation projects for other courses. In addition, the concern was that the students would only be required to give feedback once all of the assigned reflective reading journals were submitted, evaluated, and returned. Future applications of this study might do well to consider breaking up the questionnaire into several components to be administered at different times throughout the semester. Doing so might present the researcher with an interesting opportunity to identify possible changes in impression and perspective students could experience during the process of writing the reflective reading journals.

A third difficulty encountered in this study was the impossibility for the researcher to know for certain whether or not the students were being honest in their responses about empathetic engagement or if their feedback was motivated by what Hodges and Myers (2007) suggest could be undisclosed factors. Specifically, since the students were aware that their work would be assigned a grade, their responses may have been influenced by their fear of being judged by the teacher or motivated by their anxieties about grades. These are concerns that were also suggested by Dyment and O’Connell (2010). Whether the students really engaged wholeheartedly and willingly with the assigned tasks or simply performed them because they were mandatory academic requirements in the course also remains a concern (Creme, 2005; Mills, 2008).

Finally, in response to the questionnaire, some students complained that they were not allowed to read each other’s reflective reading journals, since these students believed talking about their findings with their peers might have helped them understand empathy more effectively. Future research that may replicate the methodology outlined in this study therefore could consider urging
the students to communicate their responses with each other before submitting the work. Doing so might give the teacher a better sense of how students think on their own and in relation to each other, as well as gaining insight into why certain ideas and feelings affect them. While the idea of sharing journals about their uninhibited responses to reading might prove challenging and intimidating for some, the personal and social benefits, as Bean (2011) argues, might be worth the risk. One possible way to share work with others would be to use online options such as chat rooms, which are known to allow some degree of anonymity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the ways in which reflective reading journals can encourage students to respond to works of literary fiction with empathy. A specific aim of the study was to address related questions about possible benefits that expressing emotions, thinking about other people’s experiences, and self-reflection can have on the active reader. A content analysis was performed on both the qualitative data revealed in the students’ reflective reading journals and on the corresponding feedback provided on the questionnaire. As a result, the findings and conclusions drawn in this study offer valuable evidence in support of the findings on affect and cognition that are outlined in the literature on reading and empathy (Hodges & Myers, 2007; Nowak, 2014).

The literature on affective learning, on the simulative function of fiction, and on writing journals provide teachers sufficient theoretical support with which to fashion learning practices that are ultimately rewarding for CEGEP students. As manifested in the students’ work and feedback, empathetic reading entails much more than the expression of one’s emotional reaction to plot, setting, and other rhetorical stimuli. Instead, the process of empathetic reading also answers the need for the implementation of higher-order learning objectives like critical thinking and self-reflection. That this approach to learning can
inspire such a lasting meaningful educational experience in fact boasts widespread support in the research (Bean, 2011; Coplan, 2004; Creme, 2005; Dyment & O’Connell, 2006; Hiemstra, 2001; Hodges & Myers, 2007; Jarvis, 2001; Keen, 2006; Lund, 1985; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mills, 2008; Morson, 2011; Nowak, 2014).

Indeed, as this study shows, when given the opportunity to think about how they feel in response to what they are asked to read, students are all too willing to engage in active learning (Bean, 2011; Creme, 2005). For instance, the students’ reflective reading journals highlight the diligent commitment with which students are willing to think about and articulate the similarities and differences between their concerns with those of the characters (Coplan, 2004; Heath, 2008; McRobie, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). In fact, in their reflections students even drew links between the events in the fictionalized worlds and the ones they encounter in real-life contexts. This willingness to engage imaginatively with the emotional concerns of fictional characters is, as has been argued, an important step in establishing the possibility for empathetic identification (Coplan, 2004; Heath, 2008).

Sufficient theoretical and applicable evidence regarding the benefits of reflective journaling as a means to nurture the learner’s empathetic imagination was provided in this exploratory research study. The scholarship on the relationship between reading and empathy keeps growing, and its implications for the ways in which literature and writing are taught in the context of the student-centered CEGEP classroom must be addressed. The findings presented here, which extend current findings in the literature, serve, however modestly, to start this important discussion. Although exploratory in approach and speculative in the conclusions drawn, the instructional strategy explored in this study should nevertheless inspire CEGEP instructors who teach English to think very seriously about including reflective reading journaling as an integral part of their pedagogical approach.


APPENDIX A

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER
Mr. Naz Arabaghian  
504 Renaissance  
Pincourt, Quebec  
7Jv 0C1

Subject: Empathic Practice: Personal Reading reflections in the Cegep Classroom

Dear Naz,

In accordance with your application submitted on March 18, 2013, the College's Innovation, Research & Development Committee (IRDC) is granting you permission to solicit John Abbott College students to participate in the Research Project entitled “Empathic Practice: Personal Reading Reflection in the Cegep Classroom.”

By signing the Application Form, you attested that you would follow the John Abbott College Institutional Research Policy. If you do not have a copy of this document, please send an email to rosanna.fortunato@johnabbott.qc.ca.

Please sign and return a copy of this Approval Letter, stating that you will comply with our Institutional Research Policy, including the section on Ethics Involving Research on Human Subjects. Upon the College's receipt of the duly signed letter, you will be able to commence your research.

We hope that you will be able to share the results of your research, when completed. The Committee wishes you the best of luck in your endeavours and hopes that your research is a successful one.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Dorsnie  
Chair of IRDC  
Dean of Academic Resources

Naz Arabaghian  
English Dept  
John Abbott College
Empathetic Practice: Reflective Reading Journals in the CEGEP Classroom

Researcher: Naz Arabaghian
Email address: Naz.arabaghian@johnabbott.qc.ca
Dept /Affiliation: English
Supervisor: Dr. John (Jock) Mackay
Tel: 514-457-6610 ext 5260

Research Questions:
• In what ways do reflective reading journals generate empathetic responses to reading fiction?
• How do students describe their empathetic rapport with characterization, plot, and theme?
• What types of empathetic responses do the students showcase in reflective reading journals?
• What do reflective reading journals highlight about the ways students see themselves as readers?

Purpose of the research:
You are being asked to participate in the above research project in which I will be investigating the degree to which the use of the reflective reading journal bolsters empathetic reading and reflection. I plan on analyzing the types of responses generated in the journal responses so as to highlight recurring patterns and themes pertaining to empathetic responses.

What is involved in participating?
I am asking you to participate in this research project by:
a) Allowing the researcher (your instructor) to conduct a descriptive analysis of nature/types of empathetic observations found in your reflective reading journal responses.
b) Responding to a questionnaire/survey of your attitudes and opinions about your experience of keeping reflective reading journals sometime close to the end of term,

There will be no way for anyone reading the results of this study to be able to link any data with your name or student number. PSEUDONYMS WILL ALWAYS BE USED in any publications that may result from this study, as well as in the stored data. If you withdraw from participation as a participant at a later date, all data of any kind will be erased and/or destroyed.

Participation, or lack of participation in this research will NOT affect your grades in any way. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at anytime.

Confidentiality means that no person at John Abbott College, or any other organization will have access to the materials collected and that they will be coded and stored in such a way as to make it impossible to identify them directly with any individual. All names will be changed in the stored data and resulting publications. Data will be stored on a password secured hard drive, and will be destroyed after 5 years. All other type of information (audio-tapes, cd’s, paper copies) will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be erased and/or destroyed after 5 years.
**Student’s signature:**

STUDENTS: please tick the appropriate box, sign, date and return to …

- [ ] I have read and understood the information provided on the consent form, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary, I may withdraw from participation at any time, and my academic standing will NOT be affected in any way by consenting or not consenting to participate in this study.
- [ ] I do not consent to participate in the described study.

Student’s name (print):

______________________________________________________
First name, Last name

Student’s signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________
signature dd / mm / yyyy

Researcher’s signature: __________________________ Date: ____________
signature dd / mm / yyyy

IF STUDENT IS UNDER THE AGE OF 18, PLEASE FILL OUT THIS SECTION AS WELL:

- [ ] I have read and understood the information provided on the consent form, and I agree that my daughter or son may participate in this study. I understand that their participation is voluntary, they may withdraw from participation at any time, and their academic standing will NOT be affected in any way by consenting or not consenting to participate in this study.
- [ ] I do not consent for my daughter or son to participate in the described study.

Parent’s or legal guardian’s name (print):

______________________________________________________
First name, Last name

Parent’s or legal guardian’s signature: __________________________ Date: ____________
signature dd / mm / yyyy

Researcher’s signature: __________________________ Date: ____________
signature dd / mm / yyyy
APPENDIX C

REFLECTIVE READING JOURNAL PROMPTS
REFLECTIVE READING JOURNAL PROMPTS

A. In a short personal reflection, ask one of the characters in a particular scene a question and describe how the character would respond. What leads you to ask this question, and how does this scene or character relate to your own life experience?

B. Highlight and quote two or three lines spoken by a character that you enjoyed. In a short personal reflection, relate the character’s statements to your own life experience.

C. In a short personal reflection, describe your reaction(s) to the actions taken/decisions made by a particular character. Explain why you selected this character and address how this character’s actions/decisions relate to your own life experience.

D. In a short personal reflection, consider the ways in which two or three characters relate to one another, and explain how these relationships relate to your own life experience.
APPENDIX D

QUESTIONNAIRE
QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of this research project is to address the ways in which reflective journals help generate empathetic responses to reading fiction. The questionnaire—which will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete—consists of four statements regarding the process of writing the reflective journal and three open-ended questions to get your feedback on writing reflective journals. The results of this study will be made available to interested participants upon completion. Note that your responses/comments to this questionnaire will remain anonymous and confidential.

I thank you in advance for your participation.

Instructions:

A. Circle the response.

1. How old are you? Under 17 17-19 20-22 23-25 26 +

2. What is your sex? Male Female

B. Put a check mark (✔) next to the appropriate response.

3. What is your program of study?

CAREER PROGRAMS

- BioPharma - 235.C0
- Business Administration - 410.D0
- Computer Science - 420.A0
- Dental Hygiene - 111.A0
- Engineering Technologies - 244.A0
- Information & Library Technologies - 393.A0
- Nursing - 180.A0
- Police Technology - 310.A0
- Pre-Hospital Emergency Care - 181.A0
- Professional Theater (Acting & Design Options)
- Publication Design & Hypermedia Technology - 412.A0
- Youth and Adult Correctional Intervention – 310.B0

PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

- Arts and Sciences - 700.A0
- Creative Arts, Literature and Languages - 500.A1
- Double DEC: Science and Social Science - 200.12
- Visual Arts -510.A0
- Honours Science
- Honours Social Science (includes all profiles)
- Liberal Arts - 700.B0
- Science - 200.B0
- Social Science - 300.A0

PATHWAYS PROGRAMS

- Pathways to Science - 200.14
- Pathways to Social Science - 300.14
- Pathways to Police Technology - 310.14
- Pathways to Creative Arts, Literature, and Languages (CALL) - 500.14
- Pathways to a Career Program - 800.14

OTHER PROGRAMS (Please specify): ______________________________________
C. Circle the response that most closely indicates your feelings about each item.

4. Writing journals helped me improve my ability to think deeply about characters.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

5. Writing journals helped me identify imaginatively with the characters in the readings.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

6. Writing journals helped me consider my feelings/views on ideas from the readings.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

7. Writing journals helped me see emotions as an important part of reading appreciation.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

D. Offer your responses in the boxes provided below each question.

8. Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you express your feelings?


9. Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you understand the experience of others?

10. Has writing reflective journals based on the readings helped you become self-reflective?