I began teaching in 1985 when I graduated from college. I left the classroom after two years because I didn’t feel good about what I was doing, so I began my Masters of Arts in English and returned to the classroom five years later. Now, after many years of teaching high school English, I find myself back in graduate school, this time working on a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction.

The focus of this paper is about something critical to what I must learn before returning to the classroom. It involves teaching writing, and I love teaching writing, especially research papers. I dig MLA format, and I am learning APA format because I love a good research challenge. I have honed my 17-step program for writing research papers, from brainstorming to revising and editing, from journaling to integrating, from jotting facts on note cards to scribbling topic sentences on sticky notes. The students work through the process, if not with enthusiasm, then at least with a sense of knowing that they will take away a useful skill. This sort of learning is called “efferent.” Rosenblatt (1993) tells us that this “‘stance’ (from L. efferre, to carry away) is involved with analyzing, abstracting, and accumulating what will be retained after the reading” (p. 383). In other words, students are reading texts—nonfiction articles—and garnering evidence for their position.

I considered my research unit one of my best. I was never encouraged to do anything different because, in school, the message is “adopt the efferent stance” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 274). It was what I was supposed to be doing. But here’s the rub: students got good at completing the steps. They were really good at analyzing what the text said and meant, and at finding in the source what they needed to prove their points. But I was repeatedly disappointed in their
lack of having anything to say about what they were discovering. In other words, there was a lack of synthesis or original contribution. I didn’t blame them because it was happening too often—I was missing something. Good students were getting to the point of having used their source material, and then they were just drawing blanks. Rosenblatt (1982) helped me see the problem:

In predominantly efferent reading, the child must learn to focus on extracting the public meaning of the text. Attention must be given mainly to the “token” top-of-the-inner-iceberg, to organizing the abstract concepts the verbal symbols point to. (p. 271)

This described my students’ papers perfectly—they understood what I was saying and even what their sources were saying, but that was only the top of the iceberg. It was my “routine, contributing to shallow, efferent readings” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 275). They had no way of going below the surface. When readers lack a genuine experience “as they read, if they are reading with specific directions given to them by their teacher, with outcomes predetermined, even if for a good reason, the opportunity for transformation is lost” (Galda, 2013, p. 11). My thorough directions, although thorough, were perhaps actually getting in the way of their learning.

Of course they would say something in their writing, but they hadn’t had the time, space, or inclination to connect or interact with the texts they were reading. Something that Galda (2013) wrote resonated: “Our students need to experience a text in their own ways before we do anything else with the text … because if we don’t let them do this, they won’t care enough to go one step further” (p.12). Students could get to the bottom of the paragraph after having followed a nice formula like Main Idea, Evidence, Analysis, Link. Still, as a reader, I knew a spark—a sense of having evoked something meaningful—was lacking. I believe this spark had everything to do with the other end of the spectrum from efferent, which is the “aesthetic.” Rosenblatt (1982) tells us that “[a]esthetic reading, by its very nature, has an intrinsic purpose, the desire to have a pleasurable, interesting experience for its own sake” (p. 275). Despite all my nerdy enthusiasm, I doubt my students had found any intrinsic value in what they were learning.

Students weren’t experiencing the texts they were reading—in other words, there was no evidence of transactions because the texts didn’t matter to them. Perhaps the grade mattered; even learning how to navigate the process of writing a
research paper might have been motivating them to get through the assignment. After all, many would be headed to college the following year, and they wanted to be prepared. I was expecting them to have had an experience with the texts they were writing about without allowing them the space to have that experience. Rosenblatt (1982) explains that “reading draws on the whole person’s past transactions with the environment. Reading, especially aesthetic reading, extends the scope of that environment and feeds the growth of the individual, who can then bring a richer self to further transactions with life and literature” (pp. 273-274). This is what I wanted, but they hadn’t arrived at this richer self from which to draw for further writing or thinking. In other words, my students had not had enough experience on the aesthetic portion of the continuum to be able to think freely and creatively about research topics even if or when they were able to choose them.

This problem of emphasizing the efferent stance over the aesthetic is not isolated to my classroom. Rosenblatt (1982) asked, “to what extent does the emphasis in our culture on the primarily practical, technical, empirical, and quantitative contribute to the reported loss of aesthetic receptivity as the child grows older?” (p. 273). One need not look far to see how standardized tests and other NCLB and Race to the Top mandates have suppressed both teachers’ and students’ opportunities for creative curriculum in the classroom. For example, Coleman (2014), a contributor to the Common Core State Standards, advocates for only a close reading approach to text. In a talk he gave to Student Achievement Partners in Albany, New York, he made it clear that he advocates that students should be “focusing on questions that require [them] to pay attention to the text itself” (qtd. in Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm, p. 11). He considers any transaction with the text, such as personal connections or emotional responses, to be only “hover[ing] around the text” (2014, p. 10). Rosenblatt (1982) would disagree. She thinks that “to look only at the text and the author’s presumed intention, and to ignore as irrelevant what the child actually does make of it” is to ignore our responsibility as teachers because “we have a responsibility to develop the habit and capability for aesthetic reading” (p. 272).

The push for “close reading” texts leaves the reader entirely out of the experience. What Rosenblatt (1982) argues against is teaching that maintains that “first the child must ‘understand’ the text cognitively, efferently, before it can be responded to aesthetically”; she sees this as “a rationalization that must be rejected” (p.
After having seen how little students have to say after their efferent readings, I would agree. In order to encourage students to have something to say about their texts, “[e]vocation should precede response” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 273). In other words, the transaction happens first. Afterwards, the reader is free to think more critically or efferently or aesthetically about the text. It would then be up to them to experience their stance, be it efferent or aesthetic. My students had mastered what Coleman promoted: “text-dependent question[ing]” and text-centered comments (2014, p. 10). Those discussions did not go very far. What was needed was aesthetic, experiential engagement.

When students command an aesthetic stance, it is transformational. Again I look to Rosenblatt (1982): “In aesthetic reading, the child must learn to draw on more of the experiential matrix. Instead of looking outward mainly to the public referents, the reader must include the personal, the qualitative, kinesthetic, sensuous inner resonances of the words” (p. 271). With a greater sense of who they are in relation to texts, this gives them more to draw on, more to write about, more to talk about. This is not to suggest that an aesthetic stance is, as Coleman (2014) would suggest, a distraction or “anything to avoid confronting difficult words” (p. 10). This minimizes and reduces an aesthetic stance to be somehow less academic or rigorous than a purely efferent stance. But an aesthetic stance is “reading [that] can nourish both aesthetic and social sensitivities and can foster the development of critical and self-critical judgment” (Galda, 2013, pp. 11-12). To me, this is the purpose of teaching and learning. Without an aesthetic stance, that critical lens is diminished.

Before you think that an aesthetic response is all there is to reading texts, let’s look at the continuum that Rosenblatt (1993) talks about. In addressing criticism about creating polarity, she “stressed that there was not an opposition, a dichotomy, but a continuum between the two stances” (p. 383). An example that stands out in my experience of where the efferent meets the aesthetic is from several years ago as I sat in my dentist’s chair getting a particularly challenging tooth filled. This tooth was challenging for several reasons, but mainly it sat at a strange angle from my other teeth, and the cavity my dentist was filling was positioned oddly in relation to the tooth next to it. This was not a routine filling for Dr. Walker, but I trusted her and was quite unaware of her struggles with it. When she had finished, she sat back and admired her work, letting out a sigh of relief and saying, “Not bad, if I do say so myself.” I had trusted her before, but from
that moment, if she had wanted to pull every
tooth out of my head, I would have let her. At
that moment, it made me grateful to know
that not only did she know what she was
doing, but that she also saw beauty in it. I
knew right then that she was responding to
my needs as a patient and not just to a
playbook for filling teeth.

My research/writing lesson could be
enriched only with room for drawing in more
of the aesthetic. Rosenblatt (1982) tells us the
“quality of education in general is being
diluted by neglect of, sacrifice of, the rich
organismic, personal, experiential source of
both efferent and aesthetic thinking” (p. 274).
I don’t plan on dismissing the efferent, but we
need direction and directions sometimes. I
will be more mindful of where am I giving
students room to choose, to decide on what’s
important, to live the experience of what they
are reading. There is room for choice every
day and in every lesson.

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Gretchen McClain, currently on leave from
De Forest High School, is a second-year PhD
student in Curriculum and Instruction at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison; email
gmcclain@wisc.edu.

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