It’s All About the Book: Motivating Teens to Read

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We just had the most fantastic teachable moment, or should we say hour, because that’s when we shared book club time with 24 students we teach at Health Sciences High and Middle College. A typical conversation that occurred among a group of our students as they discussed their book club selection went like this:

Mykia: If I could meet Sharon Draper, I’d hug her. She made me so excited to read a whole book.

Doumas: Yeah, it’s like she knows us.

Dursa: Romiette and Julio [by Sharon Draper] is the best book I ever read. They act just like us.

Paola: I bet Sharon Draper has kids.

Paul: It says on the back that she teaches high school.

Mykia: There’s even irony in this book. Dr. Lapp, didn’t you say one form of irony is sarcasm? Malaka, my favorite character has so much sarcasm when she talks. She cracks me up. Listen to this. Malaka has just gone into Romiette’s shop. She asked her if anything is new and Romi tells her they just got some new kente cloth dresses. Malaka asks Romi if her Mom gives her the clothes and Romi says, “Give? You must be crazy! My mother is in business for the money. She pays me for workin’, so she expects me to pay for things I see and like. She takes it out of my check” (Draper, p. 101–102). Now listen to Malaka: “‘From what I’ve seen you wear, you must not get a very big check,’ Malaka laughed sarcastically” (p. 102). See what I mean. She says so many funny things. I was crackin’ up so much when I was reading this that I had to read it to my mom because she asked me what was so funny.

Sarah: I think it’s also ironic or irony that Romiette and Julio really are like Romeo and Juliet. Did you notice how the names and
situations are so similar? It makes me want to really read Romeo and Juliet. We were supposed to read that in ninth grade, but I didn’t really do it.

Amanda: Dr. Fisher, I just couldn’t quit reading the book so I finished it early.

Veronica: I did, too. We even called each other up on Sunday to talk about it.

Robert: I think she wrote some other books we can read.

Doumas: Let’s read all of them.

Paola: Dr. Lapp, instead of changing authors, can we read everything Sharon Draper’s written?

Like all teachers who have ever had their students ask “Can we read everything...,” this was music to our ears. We probably would have responded affirmatively no matter what they had wanted to read because getting students engaged enough to want to stick with a text is often a daunting task for teachers, especially those who teach adolescents.

As we reflect on this conversation, we are convinced that the impetus for this level of engagement was that we followed the lead of our students when they asked if they could partner with us to choose the texts, the topics, and the assignments for their English class. Here are the details of how this happened.

Who Were the Students?

Our junior class members were a mix of cultures and languages from predominately one-parent families. All but one of the students qualified for free lunch, over half of them spoke a language in addition to English at home, 35% of them were speakers of African American Vernacular English, and 15% of them qualified for special education services. Each of these students had histories of failure, and all of them read significantly below grade level at the start of the school year. As an example, one student was bullied so badly at a previous school that her grade point average for the year was 0.0. Another student had experienced physical abuse and lived in a foster home.

What Was the Curriculum Design?

Standards-Based Units of Instruction

As we considered the curriculum for the class, we decided to organize the state standards into manageable clusters. For each of the clusters, we identified an organizing theme question that would appeal to adolescents. Some of these were

- What’s your life worth and to whom?
- What are the consequences of your decisions?
- Juvenile justice and injustice, which is it?
- Racial profiling: What do people think when they look at you?

Next, we designed a series of instructional tasks that would ensure student engagement and involvement; support modeling of thinking, language, reading and writing; and promote learner independence. As a result lessons included teacher think-alouds and a series of instructional tasks such as whole-class jigsaws, reciprocal teaching, book clubs, online chats through Blackboard, independent reading, poetry raps, and plays. We hoped this model would facilitate student understanding and participation.

We wanted our students to be engaged in the English language arts standards and knew that assigning a whole-class novel would not result in the types of engagement, thinking, and conversations we wanted to experience with them. Accordingly, for each unit, we identified many types of texts students could read and have read to them, including newspapers, plays, poetry, and fiction and nonfiction pieces that were shared either in hard copy or online. Responses to the readings were always shared through oral and written conversations during our 55-minute class meetings. One day each week, students participated in a book club where they experienced books that were in some way related to the theme within a unit. This is where the conversation about Romiette and Julio occurred. The topic of the unit was Racial Profiling: What Do People Think When They Look at You? A sampling
How Were These Units Implemented?

**Read-Alouds/Think-Alouds**

As part of the classroom structure, students experienced daily teacher read-alouds/think-alouds in which we shared our thinking and understanding about a text. For the unit on racial profiling, we read a number of texts, including newspaper articles and books. For example, during the reading of the Wikipedia entry on racial profiling early in the unit (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racial_profiling), we paused after reading the section about motor vehicle searches and racial profiling and said,

> I think it’s interesting here, what the author does. I noticed the opening sentence and how it makes me want to read more. I want to know more about the application of racial profiling, as the author says. But then I notice that the author used some signal words to help me organize my thinking about the text. The author says “One explanation” and then shares the information but then says “An alternative explanation” and then presents the other side. I like the way the author framed this and presented both sides of the issue. I’m going to add that structure to my notes because I might want to use it in my own writing. For now, I know it’s helping me remember that there are at least two sides of this issue. I’ll read on and see what the author says next.

**Independent Reading**

In addition to the daily teacher read-aloud/think-aloud, students read books of their own choosing from a list of books organized around the topic. For example, Doumas chose to read *Race: A History Beyond Black and White* by Marc Aronson. As the only student in the class reading this book, he was able to add historical information about racism and prejudice to the conversations. For example, during a class conversation about slavery, Doumas referenced his book and said, “This guy says that until probably the United States, slavery had nothing to do with race. It was more about power and forcing people who lost to work for free.” Of course, this generated a great deal of conversation and debate as well as an instant need to access the Internet and find more information. Part of every class session involved students discovering questions and then searching for answers on their own. Our students, like those described by Leu (2008) and Leu et al. (2008), did not have sophisticated Internet search strategies. We had to teach them how to use the Internet in more sophisticated ways.

Also, as part of this unit, another student in the class, Jessica, read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. During one class conversation about racial profiling and self-esteem, Jessica shared her character Junior with the class. She said,

> “Discrimination isn’t just from people who are different from you. Junior, in my book, has it from both sides. At the white school, they’re mean to him. But the Indians back on the rez are just as terrible. So, I don’t think it’s just white–black or black–Mexican or Mexican–Asian; profiling and discrimination go all kind of ways, even against people of the same skin color.”

Mario added, “So true. We can be called sell-outs, schoolboys, or whitey-lover by our own neighbors. But I think that it’s worse when somebody with power uses that power to make your life worse.”

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**Figure 1 Text Selections for the Racial Profiling: What Do People Think When They Look at You? Unit**

Nonnarrative

Novels
- *The Day They Came To Arrest the Book* by Nat Hentoff (1983)
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1948)
- *So Yesterday* by Scott Westerfeld (2004)
- *Romiette and Julio* by Sharon Draper (1999)
- *Day* by Elie Wiesel (1962)
- *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers (1988)
- *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (1895)

Plays and Poetry
- *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (1953)
- *Stanzas to Freedom* by J.R. Lowell (1843)
- *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1958)
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Conversation continued and students debated the issue, drawing on the texts they were reading and the texts we read in class. Importantly, each student could enter the conversation, presenting evidence from a text, because they were all reading books they chose to read and were able to read.

**Book Club Reading**

As we have noted, a part of the each unit involved student book clubs. Before we share the organizational details of the book club, let us share the highlights that occurred during the first unit of book club participation.

- The students really enjoyed the selections we had made—so much so that each group decided to read more than one.
- They discussed the characters as if they were their classmates, using insights and sensitivities from their own experiences.
- They compared what they were reading in the novels with the facts being presented in the nonfiction and the news articles being read as a whole class.
- They took ownership of the topic and the texts and started bringing to class related articles and websites.
- Best of all, they took ownership for the book club experience and asked us if we could tell them the unit topics and questions for the remainder of the year and allow them to offer suggestions for related book club texts.

Their enthusiastic participation cemented for us the fact that adolescents, just like adults, will read if the book is a good read, if the book is accessible, and if they can have some ownership in the selection. We took their lead, shared the themes for the year, worked with them to select possible nominations, and then allowed the students to select which book they wanted to read. To keep the book club memberships fairly equal, students listed their top three choices and then we worked together to form the memberships.

**Book Club Time: A Social Event**

**Book Selection**

Our students often select the “coming-of-age” novel, in which a trusting, narcissistic adolescent encounters some of life’s realities about topics like sex, sexuality, relationships, death, crime, family, work, or travel. Through the personal, life-transforming experiences of the characters, our students find the inner windows to their voices. As we listened to their book club exchanges, we saw Rosenblatt’s (1946, 1985) and Gee’s (1996) theories in action. We saw the novel lay out the actions of the characters while providing a model our students used to craft insights about how they might personally respond to similar real-life situations.

- Views of a character’s life was, for them, an introduction to a Secondary Discourse they found intriguing. Secondary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization—for example, churches, gangs, schools, offices. They constitute the recognizability and meaningfulness of our “public” (more formal) acts.

Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit, which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (Gee, 1996, p. 127)

Through the characters, our students were able to discover possibilities of new voices and actions, which could be drawn upon if they ever encountered these new “public spaces” (Gee, 1996). Their involvement with these characters continues to occur in the more familiar but yet Secondary Discourse of school where many of them never expected to have such exposures through books, because these books of their choice were not the ones they had been traditionally invited to read as a part of their school curriculum. Grappling with the acceptance and rejection of features within multiple Secondary Discourses is often experienced by readers, but we found this to be profoundly so for these adolescents.
We are overjoyed that in addition to piquing their interests, their selections regularly lead them to a next text, sometimes even a classic. An example of this occurred during this unit on racial profiling. After one group of students finished The Day They Came to Arrest the Book by Nat Hentoff, they presented a whole-class share of what they had discussed in their book club. The whole-class share led to an online book rap. Based on their conversation, we made connections with other texts and shared these with our students. The result was a request from Robert to form a book club on The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain. The book club subsequently engaged in discussion about the motivations, actions, and reactions of the characters within the book and contrasted them with those of Barney, Luke, Harlem, and Principal Moore, the characters they met in Hentoff’s novel.

Their conversations included the identification of favorite characters and behaviors and comparisons across characters and with previously read books and movies. While these factors are often part of an effective bookshare, we were most intrigued by our students’ level of analysis of the decisions made by the characters as well as their acceptance or rejection of these behaviors as ones they would add to their personal repertoires.

For example, when Dursa offered that he thought that being bullied either physically or mentally made people stronger the conversation that ensued ended with a shared conclusion: Being bullied causes great inner rage, and unless someone you trust helps you to redirect it you can become similar to a Columbine killer or end up bullying your own kids or family members. This conclusion was arrived at after students shared their own experiences as bullies or being the prey of a bully. They compared the actions of the bully and the bullied to examples of the actions of the predators and prey they had seen on Animal Kingdom and also to an article they had read in U.S. Weekly about Michael Phelps. Michael’s mother had helped him to redirect the rage he felt—from being bullied because of his “big ears” and from being deserted by his dad—into swimming. The students concluded this conversation by deciding that they would make themselves available to younger students who were being bullied or who were acting as bullies. They also agreed that if they again found themselves in the prey or predator roles they would seek help from a trusted teacher.

Through this experience they exhibited all of the comprehension skills we so desire to see in our students. They analyzed, debated, compared across texts, synthesized multiple pieces of information, transferred the information to a unique situation, self-evaluated, and made a plan for action. To say it simply, they were very engaged and active readers. Parenthetically, they learned a lot of vocabulary along the way and developed increased sophistication with persuasive writing.

**Procedures**

We learned a great deal about operating book clubs with adolescents from our colleague James Flood. For example, he taught us that each book club needed a moderator. The moderator could be a teacher or a student. Jim favored student moderators and encouraged us to meet with the moderators in advance and to teach them the structure of the club and how to function in their role. He also reminded us that every student could learn to be a moderator, and he wanted to be sure that the job of moderator was shared so that every student experienced a leadership role within the classroom. Jim’s guidelines for moderators are provided in Figure 2.

In addition, Jim believed that student book clubs needed to operate within specific guidelines to be effective. Starting in the beginning of the year, we provided students with guidelines for participating in weekly book club discussions based on the work Jim did many years ago. Each student received a copy and we created a classroom poster of the guidelines (see Figure 3).

**Motivation: An Essential Component of the Classroom**

It’s easy to see from the examples we’ve shared that these students were intrinsically motivated to read and participate in these readings and subsequent discussions because their voices and interests were driving the text selections and conversations. We saw them become much less reluctant to read which is sometimes uncharacteristic of adolescents (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; McKool, 2007). We believe this occurred because they
had peer support to read, think, share, and to include within their self profile the feature of being readers; this dimension of their profiles began to be characteristic across their discourse settings. From these observations we affirm the findings of others (Kunjufu, 1988; Noguera, 2003; Valdes, 1996) who have found that the support of peers who value reading is a factor of major significance among adolescents who are being motivated to read. In the case of our students their interest in what they were reading and discussing with their peers spurred them to additional reading and expanded their views of themselves as readers.

Our year with the 11th-grade English class confirmed for us the importance of choice in student reading. For their English classes to be effective, we believe that students need to choose the books that they read. Our approach provided students a context for their choice—a theme, topic, or question the entire class was thinking about. In addition, our experiences this past year highlight the importance of interaction. Students have to interact with one another and the teacher about the texts they are reading. They have to be challenged, supported, and encouraged but at the end of the day, they need to have their say about the text. These transactions are critical if students are to accomplish a major goal of English education—to be changed by literature and to continue to read long after they have left our classrooms.

**References**


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