Negotiating a New Curriculum: Using Independent Reading to Increase Comprehension and Effect Positive Changes in Attitudes about Reading

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Introduction

Teacher research is a way to attempt to fix what is wrong in the classroom. We see something that doesn't work, we try out different solutions, and we hope to find something that will bring us even a little closer to our ideal classroom. We learn from the things that work, but just as often, we learn from the things that don't work. Teacher research is a way for the teacher to learn from her students, grow as a professional, and hopefully, become a better teacher. Nancy Atwell in her book *In the Middle*, made the observation that it is the teacher, and not necessarily the student, who needs to change or adapt to each new situation to bring out the best in the learning process:

> When I stopped focusing on me and my methods and started observing students and their learning, I saw a gap yawning between us – between what I did as a language teacher and what they did as language learners.   I saw that my creation manipulated kids so they bore sole responsibility for narrowing the gap, and my students either found ways to make sense of and peace with the logic of my teaching, or they failed the course. In truth, it was I who needed to move, to strike out for some common ground. I learn in my classroom these days because I moved, because the classroom became a reading and writing workshop, a new territory my students and I could inhabit together (Atwell, 1998, p. 4).

It is with this incentive that I began this project. What my students and I were doing in the classroom wasn't working. I needed to change it. I needed to move closer to them to find out what they needed and what I could give them.

The students in my Transitional English classes at J.E.B. Stuart High School are the kind of students whom Atwell had in mind when she wrote her book. These are not the high-achieving students who adapt well to academics and are intrinsically motivated to do well in school. My students are in their last year of ESL, are still struggling to learn English, and more than likely come from homes that may not put a high price on good grades or even education. Most of my students come from Central and South America where, they tell me, it would be unusual for them to continue school beyond the 8th grade. Now in America, many of their parents work in blue collar jobs where education is still not a priority. Few students think about going on to college and, based on their current reading and achievement levels, even fewer will get in. Throughout the year I began to wonder what I could do to change some of these culturally based attitudes and increase the students' reading comprehension and general performance in my class.

Reading seemed to be the best place to start. Stephen Krashen suggests that reading, in and of itself, is really the only way to become a better reader   And the act of reading will not just improve one's reading comprehension, but will actually benefit other aspects of learning as well. "Reading," Krashen writes, "is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however: Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers" (Krashen, 23). Krashen cites many studies where Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has dramatically improved student achievement. This is heady evidence in the war of the whole language approach over the direct instruction of skills.

In addition to improving the skills of my students, I wanted to sway their attitudes about school in general and about reading, specifically. This, truthfully, seemed a Herculean task. But if I could motivate them to read more, and if reading more would make them better readers, and if that, in turn, would increase their other skills, then it was worth the effort. But how? My students "resisted" the curriculum reading (Blintz, 604-614). Although many of them claimed they read for pleasure *outside* the classroom (I suspected these statements may have been made to please the teacher), the majority of them weren't reading *inside* the classroom. There was a marked dichotomy between what they wanted to do and what I was asking them to do. My task, then, was to "narrow" this "yawning gap" between what I was teaching and what my students were learning, between what they were interested in and what "school" told them to be interested in. I needed to bridge the divide and **teach** them to read, **get** them to read, and get them to **want** to read, on their own terms. In short, to make them "readers."

My research question then is twofold: How can I get my Transitional English students to want to read, read more, and as a consequence become better readers? And will increased reading in general have a positive effect on their curriculum reading and their other English skills? From these questions I devised four objectives which would direct the course of the research. The first two objectives are affective, while the last two are cognitive:

- A positive change in attitude about reading
- An awareness of the power and possibilities of reading
- A majority of the students engaged in independent reading
- An increase in reading ability and comprehension

Background

I needed to start with motivation, with attitude. I wanted to change the ethos of my classroom from one in which the attitude toward reading is at best apathetic and at worst hostile, to one that embraces reading as a tool for information, power and enjoyment. I hoped to create a culture in the classroom that supported reading as a desirable, even pleasurable, activity, one that could be shared with others or savored alone. To find out what interests students, Blintz suggests that we tune in to what they are reading at home. There is often a wide disparity between a student's reading stance at home and her reading stance in school. Students who are labeled "passive" or "reluctant" readers by their teachers may very well be "avid" readers outside the classroom. Such labels, he suggests, do more harm that good because they ignore the

student as a persona and rely only on classroom behaviors. By focusing only on curriculum reading, we are alienating a huge percentage of the students and forcing them to become "resistant" classroom readers. The curriculum, to these students, is an "imposition, an inconvenience, and interference." What students demonstrate in the classroom, then, is not "an explicit reluctance to read," writes Blintz, "but rather an implicit resistance to reading school-assigned materials" (612).

What is the solution? To overcome that resistance, we need to "value and legitimate what students are currently reading out of school, rather than bemoan what they are not reading in school….We need to recognize that out-of-school reading activities have a strong association with reading achievement" (Blintz, 614). In other words, we need to close the gap. We need to find out where the students are before we can ask them to try to get to where we want them to be. And as Atwell admonished, it is up to the educators to make the first move. We need to change our own pedagogy, curriculum, and attitude before we ask our students to do the same. If we can open up the curriculum to include student interests, if we can negotiate the curriculum with the students, so that they become stakeholders in their own education, then we have a better change of engaging them in the real work of learning.

According to author Mary Leonhardt, "the education establishment is primarily responsible for the endemic dislike of reading among kids" (3). By systematically marginalizing and denigrating their own reading choices (comic books, magazines, romance paperbacks, science fiction, etc.) we are pushing them away from the simple act of reading. We choose their books for them, implying that their likes and dislikes, their own interests, are not valid. If we let students choose their own reading material, if we encourage them to read anything they like, ANYTHING, as long as they are reading, we are more likely to "hook" them into reading and they are more likely to continue reading throughout high school and their whole lives. This approach, letting the students choose their own curriculum, addresses both my cognitive and affective objectives. I hoped that it would help my students to feel more positive about reading and that that in turn would lead to more engagement and eventually increased achievement.

Methods

As mentioned above, my overarching goal was to change the ethos of my classroom. I wanted to create a culture of reading where kids felt comfortable reading, wanted to read, and wanted to share what they were reading with others. I wanted to encourage my students to see the different purposes for reading and to become life-long readers. There were a few basic principles which guided my project:

- Reading is the best practice for learning to read
- Choice is an integral part of learning to read
- Teachers should model reading
- There should be frequent opportunities for students to reflect on, share, and discuss what they are reading
- The classroom should have an environment that supports reading
- Students should be real, responsible partners in curriculum development (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde 30-35)

Individual Reading Inventory

The first step in my research project was to obtain IRI scores on all of my students. I knew their reading levels should all be at or above 5th grade, as that was the threshold for their entry into in my Transitional English class. The results surprised me. Four out of my 17 students scored at 9th grade level or above. Two of the students tested at 4th grade level. The average reading level of the class was 7th grade. While test results may have been skewed because the tester gave respondents extra time and some coaching, they still gave me an idea of the comparative reading levels of my students. There was no clear correlation between the top performing students and those students with the highest reading levels. Conversely, the students with the lowest test levels were not the lowest achievers in the class. This supports the theory that motivation, even more than ability, is the key to performing well in school.

Interest Inventory

Considering the results of the IRI, I was anxious to administer a reading questionnaire to my students (see appendix A) to gauge their reading habits and attitudes. I was interested in their reading lives and their sources of motivation. Was there a connection between their exposure to reading as children and their current reading habits and attitudes? Did these habits and attitudes transfer from their native language to their experiences with English texts? And in order to find out what interested students, I asked about their home lives. By looking at what they read at home, what courses they enjoyed in school, what activities they participated in after school, I hoped to gain insight as to what might engage them in the English classroom. These results were also surprising.

Since few of my students really "got into" our curriculum reading, I had expected negative attitudes toward reading. All but two of the students replied that they liked reading "some," "quite a bit," or "very much." I had also expected that the students reading at the highest levels would be the ones doing the most outside reading. Two of the highest students read for pleasure "at least once a day," while two others read "once a week" or "once a month." At the same time, the two students who tested at 4th grade reading level claimed they read for pleasure "at least once a day" and "2-5 times a week" respectively. I began to believe one of two things: either Krashen was wrong, and increased reading does not increase reading comprehension, or that my students had not been completely forthright on the questionnaires. Nevertheless, I was still willing to believe Krashen's claim that "reading is good for you." And to get students to read, I searched for ways to motivate them.

Materials

Since proponents of FVR and SSR advocate a "print-rich" environment, I knew I wanted to provide as much reading material to my students as possible. To have an effective choice in reading, students must have access to a wide variety, as well as a large quantity of things to read. This posed a problem for me as we were limited by the amount of grant money available for the project. Therefore, I decided to start with the school library. Taking my cue from the responses to the interest inventories, I tried to select books that would match the interests of my students. I pulled about 100 books from the library shelves and brought my students down one afternoon. Several

students chose the books that I expected them to choose, and others found something they liked among my selections or back on the library shelves.

There were, as expected, a few students who could find "nothing" because they were interested in "nothing" and only wanted to read books about "nothing." I had anticipated this, and so the first thing I bought with the grant money were a dozen magazines whose titles had been suggested by the students. In addition to the library books and magazines, I also bought about 15 books from Barnes and Noble. These were books that I felt to be high-interest, based on my student surveys. They ranged from young adult novels about troubled teens to biographies of Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dog, Ricky Martin, and Michael Jordan. I wouldn't call what I created a "print-rich" environment, but there was a surplus of reading materials and students were able to test drive a book and switch to something else if they didn't like it. The magazines also offered an opportunity for those who couldn't find a book, were between books, or forgot to bring their books to class. I also encouraged newspapers and comic books, but did not provide these. Students were welcome to bring in any of their own materials as well.

Daily Reading

I provided reading time every class period for my students. (We meet on a block schedule, for 90 minutes every other day.) Although Krashen recommends five to fifteen minutes, and Pilgreen (2000) suggests fifteen to twenty minutes a day, I felt that a longer reading period was necessary if students were to get really involved. We usually read for about 25-35 minutes a day. I say "we" because I read as well. It is very important, I believe, for my students to see me as a reader as well, to see how absorbed I can get into a book and how much I enjoy reading. During our reading time, students were encouraged to get out of their regular seats and to sit on the carpet in the corner, or in arm chairs in various corners of the room. Sometimes we would play music of the students' choosing (but there was always a disagreement about the selection) and always we would have a "Reading: Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. Often it would take several minutes for everyone to settle down and this is one of the reasons we needed a longer "reading" period. Some students had to be separated because they continually talked throughout the reading time. These were the students who never really committed to one book or magazine. They leafed through something different every time and never really got "into" it. Other students got so lost in their reading that it took them awhile to "come back" after the reading period was over. These were the students who read multiple books, looked forward to reading, and clearly enjoyed it.

Reflecting, Sharing, and Discussing

Three weeks into the project, I introduced reading journals and roundtable discussions. These were ways in which students could reflect upon what they were reading and share their thoughts with other students. After each reading period students were given five or ten minutes to write in their journals in response to their reading. In addition, about once a week we would share something about what we had read. This activity was totally voluntary and I went first to model a sharing and discussion tactic. I read aloud a passage from my book and talked about why I chose it,

what I liked about it, etc. Some students mimicked me and others just summarized their books. This was a way to make reading more public and for students to observe other students getting excited about a book. Often a discussion would arise as students asked questions of the reader, or other students who had read the same book offered their differing opinions. This also became a way in which students expanded their exposure to a number and variety of books. If they heard something they liked, they might ask the reader of the book to borrow it after he/she was finished.

Assessment

Until now, this project had not involved any graded activities. It was true "free voluntary" reading. Students could read whatever they wanted to; they were not compelled to write in their journals or to share with the class. They were merely given an invitation to read and I watched as some eagerly grabbed at the chance and others reluctantly came along, dragging their feet. Janice Pilgreen, in her *SSR Handbook*, asserts that "non-accountability" is one of the essential "eight factors for SSR Success":

> In order to get the most enjoyment possible from their reading,
> [students] should feel no obligation associated with it. As
> habitual readers are well aware, the very knowledge that they
> have to do something with reading other than what they choose
> to do takes away from the magic. It keeps them from experiencing
> the enjoyment of just relaxing with a good book, which is the goal
> of an effective SSR program. (15)

But as the weeks progressed, I began to feel that this wasn't enough. Between reading periods, journal writing, and sharing, we were using up 50-70 minutes of each 90 minute period. Regardless of the positive outcomes of this research project, my students would still need to master the course objectives of 9th grade English and be adequately prepared for 10th grade English (to say nothing of the SOLs looming in 11th grade English). Whether or not Krashen was correct in hypothesizing that reading, just reading, is enough to improve other reading and writing skills, I had an obligation to my students to cover certain comprehension, analysis, and writing skills. I decided to add a variety of assessment activities which would target the skills that the students needed to acquire.

I was concerned about how my students would react to this change in tactics, but I felt that it was a necessary improvement.   The manner in which I introduced these assessments was, I felt, crucial to their success. First, I shared with the students the importance of these skills, and stressed that they were necessary to their survival throughout the rest of high school. I outlined certain goals that we needed to accomplish by the end of the year. Next, I asked them to help me create the assessments. The rationale for this, as with giving the students choice in reading materials, was to make the students stakeholders in their learning. Under certain categories, which aligned with the SOLs, I asked the students to brainstorm on different activities/assessments that they could produce for each category using their current reading material. I compiled their ideas and added some of my own to create an assessment bank. From this assessment bank, I chose activities and products which

would best fulfill our curricular goals. These assessments were accorded point values depending on their relative level of difficulty in Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, and Synthesis (see appendix B). Students were to complete one assessment at each level, for a total of five. They could keep track of their assessments and points using a Scoring Sheet I had given them (see appendix C).

Post-IRI/Gates-MacGinitie

At the end of the project, Individual Reading Inventories were re-administered to two of the students in the class, one who read two books and was very involved in the whole project, and another who read almost nothing and did not seem to engage at all. Each student tested at four grade levels above his previous IRI comprehension level (after a span of only 3 months).   These results, then, were not indicative of each student's achievement or engagement level over the course of the project, and may have been influenced by student mood, newfound seriousness about the testing process, or increased familiarity with the testing procedure. All students in the class were given a Gates-MacGinitie reading level test, but these results were also inconclusive as there was no pre-test score for comparison.

Feedback from Students

The final step in the process was to gain feedback from the students as to how they viewed the project and how they fared. On the last day of the project I administered a student evaluation (see appendix D). I was curious about what they read, their reading habits, their social interactions with family and friends regarding their reading, and their plans to continue their reading beyond the project limits. In addition, I wanted to learn their reactions to the choices offered in both reading material and assessments.   All but one of the students said they appreciated having a choice in their reading material, but the class was split on the idea of choosing their own assessments. Many students said they would prefer that the teacher "just tell them what to do."   Every student, surprisingly, indicated that having to do the assessments did not make the reading less enjoyable. For the most part, students said they enjoyed the assessments (!) but that they would like the opportunity to read "just for fun" in their English classes.

Reflections

As we came to a conclusion on the project, as the students scrambled to turn in their assessments and check all the boxes I asked them to check, I wanted to take a look back to see if my objectives had been met.

A positive change in attitude about reading. The feedback I received from students on the evaluation form was overwhelmingly, if not suspiciously, positive. Two-thirds of the students had recommended a book to a fellow classmate, over half had discussed their projects with their families, and all but one said they spent time outside of class reading for pleasure. If these answers were honest, I think that this shows a great amount of investment on the part of the students in their reading lives. All but three said they would like the chance to read for pleasure in their English classes and only one student said he would not continue reading on his own after the project was over. This showed some improvement over the number of students who earlier indicated that they never or rarely read for pleasure. It is hard to make a generalization

about the class as a whole, but I do believe there was an overall improvement in the attitude toward reading. We have achieved that by talking about reading, recognizing achievement in reading, and opening up the reading curriculum to include a wide spectrum of media and interests.

An awareness of the power and possibilities of reading. If nothing else, their participation in this project helped the students to see reading in a different light. They were exposed to a variety of genres and to new ideas about what makes for "good" reading material. I doubt that in their previous educational experiences they were given so many choices, or that their choices were unconditionally validated by the teacher. One student had this to say about his reading selection, *Go Ask Alice*: "It's nice….it has everything in it: sex, drugs, teenagers, family problems …"   I think he learned that there is a dimension to reading beyond what the curriculum offers; there are books which will inform you about things you need to know, entertain you with things you find fascinating. Another student seemed absolutely shocked that he would enjoy a book so much. I gave him *Got Your Back*, Tupac Shakur's bodyguard's version of the singer's death. "Man, this book is soooo good. I was reading it all weekend." The pure astonishment in his voice led me to believe that he had never read a "good" book before. Other students read about Ricky Martin, teen pregnancy, soccer, or survival. To many of them, it was the first time that they had read a book about a subject which truly interested them. I do think that a world of possibilities was opened up, at least for a few students.

A majority of the students engaged in reading. On any given day, there were always at least 5 or 6 students (out of 17, if all present) who were not, as I saw it, "engaged" in their reading. One student was fond of sleeping, another of doing his Spanish homework. Two girls continually tried to talk. Several "read" magazines by just leafing through the pages and looking at the pictures. Two or three boys "read" their books every day but never seemed to get beyond page 10. One girl "forgot" her book every day, or read a different book every day, or looked through a magazine. Few students showed the kind of consistency I was hoping for: reading the same thing every day, seemingly absorbed for the whole reading period, and making obvious progress. On many days I became frustrated with this lack of commitment. I felt that if I couldn't even "get" them to read a magazine for a 20 minute period of time, that the situation was hopeless. I tried unsuccessfully to help these students find some reading material that would hook them. I believed that if I just tried hard enough, made enough suggestions, brought in enough books, that eventually they would find something engrossing to read. With a sense of failure, and a little bit of relief, I finally gave up on two or three of the most resistant students. Fundamentally, the motivation to read must come from the inside, not from a nagging teacher. There were, however, those students who really did enjoy the reading period, who brought their books every day and were actually eager to start reading.   One or two of them were already what I would call "readers," but for the remaining students, getting "into" a book was a new experience.

An increase in reading ability and comprehension. Ultimately, any evidence of reading level or comprehension improvement must be anecdotal. The project only spanned about three months, not enough time to make a definitive claim about its cognitive effects on the students. Clearly, if we were able to extend this project over the entire school year, we would be in a better position to gauge the progress of the

students and check ourselves against Krashen's gains in reading achievement. But that is missing the point. The affective changes brought about by a project of this nature outdistanced the cognitive changes. Reading scores may improve, but that is not necessarily the ultimate desired goal. When a child reads for pleasure, actually *enjoys* reading, she is more likely to continue reading and to continue learning. At the beginning of the project I asked the students to turn in lists of all the books they had read. One student gave me a list of over 30 books. During the project he read another 4 or 5. This student tested at a 4.8 grade level on the Gates test, far below his grade level and far below many of his classmates. But I have never seen a child who enjoys reading as much as he does. On the last question of the student evaluation ("Will you continue reading on your own after the project is over?"), he answered, "Oh, yeah! I will, and always. That's my favorite." This should be our ultimate objective.

Conclusions

The problems that I encountered meeting these objectives may have stemmed from my own reading prejudices and may have been a function of the very nature of the research project. Few of the students lived up to my expectations in terms of attitude and engagement. Many of my students were uncomfortable with the amount of options they were given along the way, especially regarding assessment. I went into this project believing that students would be interested in opening up the curriculum and experimenting with their learning. I believed that they would jump at the chance (as I would) to read for "pleasure." I believed that it was important for all students to become life-long learners.

But many of the students had trouble with the open-ended nature of the project. They were confused about or unwilling to experiment with assessments; they just wanted me to tell them which ones to do. Not all students took advantage of the opportunity for independent reading. I had believed that choice in curriculum reading would engage those students who until then had not participated in class. Clearly that was not enough. There is a challenge beyond reading ability and beyond motivation. One of the problems is that students may have seen this as an experiment, and therefore may not have taken the project seriously. Another problem is that half way through the project I asked students to begin completing assignments based on their reading. This immediately moved their reading experience from one of pleasure to one of compulsion.

Choice in reading, in-class reading periods, and sharing are not for every student. Some prefer a more structured learning environment where choices are limited and expectations are clear. But a select few of my students truly flourished and grew as readers over the course of this open-ended project. As for becoming life-long readers, I no longer feel that that is an essential goal for every student. All of my students are proficient readers. Yes, they could read better and yes, they could read more, but they do read. For some students, that is all they will need to get them out of high school and beyond. But I do believe that more than a few of my students have seen the pleasure, the power, and the possibilities of reading.

Appendices and references available upon request