Increasing Student Engagement with Text
Exploring Student-Centered Activities to Build Literacy Skills

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Abstract: This article explores an issue faced by many ELA teachers: students' lack of engagement with text. The central idea is to determine the best way to help students become active learners who participate in the classroom and remember the content of what they read. Furthermore, this article stresses the need for all content teachers to regularly seek out and discover new and engaging learning activities that will help connect students to content-area texts. The three activities examined here are sustained silent reading (SSR), interactive notebooks, and literature circles, each of which has the potential to bridge student learning to help develop mastery in English language arts and beyond.

Introduction

Throughout the school year, Ms. Jones has assigned all class readings to be completed outside of the classroom, which results in little to no growth in student scores. She explains to students that it is important to complete the assigned readings because there will be a quiz the following day which accounts for 10% of their quarter grade. The next day, as promised, Ms. Jones asks students to clear their desks and take out a pencil for the quiz. To no surprise, there is a chorus of mumbles and groans about having forgotten about the reading and that the text was too boring to get through. Other students chime in, explaining that they did not understand the reading while another says that they really did read, but because the text was so boring they fell asleep with only two pages to go and can they have a minute before the quiz to review the chapter? The teacher shakes her head, explains that there are no valid excuses for not completing the assignment, and distributes the quiz to the class. Unsurprisingly, the grades display that the students did not do the reading and the teacher is once again entering less than desirable scores into the grade book.

This scenario describes the struggle teachers face to engage students in reading and writing. Content-area reading (English language arts, science, social studies, mathematics, etc.) is regularly assigned as homework so that class time can be utilized for deep thinking questions and discussion of the text. However, for our students to build strong literacy skills, it is vital that teachers in all content areas implement a variety of engaging learning activities that build student engagement with content-area texts.

Implementing Student-Centered Activities

One issue Ms. Jones faces is that she feels there is not enough time during the day for educators to instruct, assess, and still allow students class time to read the assigned text, thus, the reading is reserved for homework. However, we often forget

that many students do not know how to navigate higher-level reading on their own, so that precious class time we are often so worried about is not actually benefiting the students. If more teachers include a rotation of reading activities during class, students might be more inclined to read and thereby gain more knowledge of the content.

Teachers in the English language arts classroom know how important literacy-based skills are and that these skills are part of what drives the educational system, but how do we engage and connect reluctant students to these texts that are the foundation of our curriculum? It's simple; we use strategies that will draw students in and we think outside the box. We talk to our students; have conversations about what we are reading and tell them the good, the bad, and the ugly about our books. We transport them from the brick-and-mortar classrooms to the places that they are reading about by having them create colorful scenarios in their notebooks based on the setting and characters.

Modifying the Approach

The reluctance to read is not reserved solely for the ELA classroom, but is cross-curricular in the fact that students who are reluctant to pick up a book for English class probably aren't too excited about diving into a science book to explore scientific ideas either. For example, McCormick and Segal (2016) explain, "when determined science teachers face reluctant readers, they often choose to teach the content without reading" (p 42), meaning that they drift away from the text and move to more hands-on practices such as labs and exploration rather than assign a chapter reading that will not be completed.

Going deeper into the topic of student engagement, the authors acknowledge that while the labs and experiments in the science classroom help with understanding the content, reading the chapters is still a vital piece of the learning process. In order to complete science experiments thoroughly, students need to "use the language of science, which is innately connected to the reading and writing of the subject," (p. 46) which means exposing them to the text in a meaningful way, and not simply ignoring it (McCormick & Segal, 2016). This is why modifying the approach to the text is so important; students need to read, and by scaffolding that reading with other activities such as labs, group discussions, and writing, we can build strong readers who become immersed in a text.

Literacy-based learning is an important tool for all teachers and is not something that should be negotiated. Reluctant readers may be missing some pieces of the puzzle to reading, no matter the subject area, and therefore need the teacher to fill in the gaps of learning with student-centered activities that pull the students into the learning. It takes practice and patience for a reluctant reader to come around, but by modifying the approach to the text by including hands-on activities as the authors suggest, students may come around to reading beyond just the ELA classroom (McCormick & Segal, 2016).

Instructional Strategies for Reading Engagement

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is time set aside within the classroom routine in which each student participates in "uninterrupted, silent reading" for a set amount of time (Siah & Kwong, 2010, p 168). Many teachers and administrators have transitioned to SSR as a way to promote and encourage independent student reading in response to data indicating that many high school students are not reading at an appropriate level, and thereby unprepared for college-level reading (Siah & Kwong, 2010). The aim of Siha and Kwong's (2010) study was to see if there is a link between students having a specific time to read something that they enjoy and their individual value of reading. The idea was that when a student who does not find value in reading is offered time in class to read something of interest the value placed on reading will change for that student.

The researchers asked students how they would rate their value of reading (Siah & Kwong, 2010). The "value of reading" subscale was adapted from the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP; Gambrell et al. 1996) to assess their [students] value of reading in a way that would indicate whether students have a high or low value of independent reading (Siah & Kwong, 2010,). The questions created a foundation on which to build understanding of how students approached their SSR time in class and data by which to gauge the students' increase in reading. Students were originally categorized into two groups, "high value" (HVR) and "low value"(LVR) reading groups, in which "the results...showed that approximately 89 percent of the students in the HVR group reported that they were self-motivated to read leisure books during SSR, whereas only 71 percent of the students in the LVR group reported self-motivation" (Siah & Kwong, 2010, pp. 171-173). In short, SSR time in class would undoubtedly be beneficial to students who already hold value in reading, and could be encouraging to those students who have less value in reading-related activities as it is one way of helping students foster a deeper respect for reading.

Interactive notebooks

Interactive notebooks create a direct bridge between what a student read during SSR and their comprehension of the material. The cognitive advantage of pairing the two activities is that this encourages student thinking and action immediately after the information has been introduced. Interactive notebooks can be described as consisting of three types of activities (In, Through, and Out) all of which take place in one notebook (Waldman & Crippen, 2009,). As Waldman and Crippen (2009) explain:

> In activities provide a scaffold for class discussion by activating prior knowledge and motivating students immediately as they come into the classroom. Through activities allow the teacher to direct student learning from a fragmented conceptual knowledge to understanding. Out activities emphasize reflection on key concepts at the end of the lesson, before students go out of the classroom. (p. 52)

By incorporating interactive notebooks, students become interested in tackling the reading because there is a structured activity afterwards with a concrete goal. The hesitation is gone and replaced with the motivation to connect with the text on a deeper, more personal level (Mason & Bohl, 2017).

Interactive notebooks can be used to engage students, in any content area, through what Symonette (2018) refers to as Journal Jams and Think Tank activities. These are separate, informal tasks set out by the teacher that require students to be able to think both independently and in a group setting to help create an engaging, diverse discussion based on the text (Symonette, 2018). Journal Jams are a student's individual response to a text through free writing. Students write for a set amount of time based on a particular topic, after which they discuss what they read, "by jamming" with their peers (Symonette, 2018, p. 27). Alternatively, Think Tanks are set up so that students work in groups to discuss textual information they identify with, research the content, and then collaborate to write about the topic (Symonett, 2018,). This is a benefit as it creates engagement by offering students a sense of purpose connected to the text; it values their thoughts and ideas about the reading.

Interactive notebooks are ultimately a cross-curricular tool that will benefit student development throughout their academic career. By integrating active writing and thinking with interactive notebooks, students are on course to develop stronger metacognition. The idea is for students to find patterns in their thinking by having designated areas on each page "to document their thinking and changes in their thinking during the learning process. As a result, the interactive science notebook is an official record of both student thinking (on the left page) and scientific investigations (on the right page)" (Mason & Bohl, 2017, p. 39).

Literature Circles

One way that teachers can modify the reading curriculum in a way that engages students is through literature circles. Not only does this strategy have the ability to draw readers in, it may also improve reading comprehension for students who struggle with understanding during analysis (Brown, 2002). In practice, students are placed in small, temporary groups typically comprised of four to six students where each member of the group is assigned a specific role in which they are reading with a purpose (Herrara & Kidwell, 2018). The idea is that each member of the group has their role, which is assigned prior to the reading, and reads with that particular role in mind. This helps create a "balanced participation and equal opportunities for sharing ideas, expressing interpretations of texts, and responding to the contributions of others in the group" (Herrara & Kidwell, 2018, p. 17). Students read the text individually (during SSR time in class) and then meet up in regular intervals during class to discuss any questions, interests, or topics that are inspired by the reading (Herrara & Kidwell, 2018). This activity is complex because it is student-centered and requires that each group member participate in the reading, but it also relieves some of the pressure for certain students as it defines the purpose of the text in a way that more traditional reading assignments do not. The idea is that the literature circles create a more interesting and engaging way for students to connect with the text while also allowing them to be social and exchange ideas within their groups (Karatay, 2017).

Literature circles also help build engagement by encouraging students to concentrate on a very specific part of the text, thereby diminishing the risk of the student becoming overwhelmed if they have difficulty deciding which part of the text is important to them vs. what is important to the teacher. This strategy takes the guesswork out of reading as it provides direction for each student's goal. They are all reading the same text, but reading with different purposes.

While literature circles are seen as an activity used to build engagement with text in ELA, they do have their place outside of the English classroom. Whittingham (2013) conducted research on the validity of using this method in a science classroom. Not only did Whittingham want to know more about literature circles in other content classrooms, he also wanted to know if they worked while incorporating 21st century skills through online learning. He found that the application of literature circles within a science classroom "helped students internalize big ideas about science while also providing opportunities for critical and inductive thinking", which is a strong proponent of the use of literature circles as a way to draw students into reading no matter the content (p. 54).

Conclusion

Ms. Taylor has implemented SSR time since the beginning of the school year with the first ten minutes of each class period reserved for silent reading of the content-area text. Each day after SSR the teacher assigns a different task for students to complete in their interactive notebook based on that day's reading. One example would be for students to write a one-sentence summary of the pages they have read or creating a chart based on character development and filling in the appropriate boxes as they notice changes in the protagonist's ideas and behaviors. Other days the students are directed to create two questions based on the book; one level-one question and one level-two question in which the students will eventually exchange with their classmates.

Ms. Taylor verifies that her students are engaged in the reading by observing and conferencing with her students as they read. She can easily see which students are making progress and which are struggling based on their answers in their notebook. There is no anxiety about a failing grade, no worry that they won't remember the answer to a question, and no excuses for not reading; there is only student-created material based on the reading that allows the teacher to gauge her students' development toward mastery and understanding in an efficient, equitable way.

While the information presented is not an exhaustive list of resources and strategies teachers can use to motivate reluctant readers, it is enough to prove that there are literacy-based activities that may help build stronger student engagement with text. Students who possess the skill to read, but simply choose not to are not lost to educators, nor are they unteachable, they simply need to be redirected and learn to enjoy reading in an efficient, engaging way that works for them. If more teachers explore various activities to engage students, they are sure to find something that works. If we keep pushing the limits and break free from the textbook and desk formula that the American educational system has become, and allow students to really engage with the curriculum, students might just surprise us.

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