Intertextuality and Its Role in the Classroom

Sophia Rechin

Abstract: Within the English language arts classroom, our students come to us with a background of different experienceS or lack of such experiences. They have all read different books, seen different movies, been to different places, and lived vastly different lives. When a student approaches a new text, they bring to it all their previous experience and interactions. This manuscript will explore the ways in which these experiences, and the idea of intertextuality, can be used within the English language arts classroom in order to enhance things like student engagement and reading comprehension. We will look at ways in which it can be integrated within curriculum and used to the student's advantage.

Introduction

Within the goals and standards for English language arts education at the secondary level is the aim to help students become proficient readers, analyzers, critical thinkers, and to be able to do so in different contexts such as fiction, informational texts, etc. When interacting with these texts, students bring their prior experiences and knowledge, all of which influences how they engage with that text. It has been shown that student engagement is influenced by student's prior knowledge and their ability to relate their previous experiences to the text at hand. The idea of intertextuality, of relating texts to one another and to prior experiences, allows students to relate texts to one another, and to their own personal prior knowledge, deepening their engagement and ability to connect to the texts they are reading. Intertextuality can be used within the classroom to target and encourage these connections students make. With this comes the question of how educators can use intertextuality to encourage this deeper thinking, as well as independent reading of more diverse texts. How can educators use intertextuality in classroom strategies to increase comprehension and meaningful connection to texts? This manuscript will explore what intertextuality is and explain how it is present within the classroom, as well as explore what happens when intertextuality is not present.

During my time student teaching in a ninth-grade English classroom, I saw these trends of intertextuality within my classroom. My students, who attend an urban school and who are mostly of a low socioeconomic standing, respond differently to works presented throughout the year. With two works specifically, I saw a harsh contrast. In the beginning of the year, our class read George Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm* together. An allegory for the Russian Revolution, this novel explores ideas of control, power, and manipulation of a higher institution in a satirical way. While some students were able to connect it with their history studies of the Russian Revolution, at times it felt like a struggle trying to help students connect the themes to their own life. More recently, we studied Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1959). The play, about a black family living on the south side of Chicago in the late fifties facing financial problems, racial prejudice, family tensions, and struggles with identity seemed to grab the attention of more of my students. When prompted, they connected the play to their own families, their own

dreams, and aspirations in life, and saw the perspectives of even the most villainized characters. This shift in texts came with a shift in what kind of intertextual experiences my students were able to bring to that text, meaning that their prior knowledge and experience overlapped much more with *A Raisin in the Sun* than it did with *Animal Farm*. In this case, they were able to interact with it in a much different, and deeper manner. This manuscript will be exploring issues like this one and address ways that educators can scaffold different experience and textual exposure levels to a class. This presents educators with the question of how can we use the texts that our students already possess to teach new texts?

This idea of intertextuality should be explored because our students learn from what they already know. By helping students understand that all texts are affected or influenced by other texts, we can help them become members of the English language arts discourse community. When our students not only understand, but engage in the relationship among different texts, it opens new opportunities and skills for them as a reader, writer, member, and contributor of the ELA community. Everything within English language arts, and arts in general is connected, and is about the world. When students realize that the world is experienced through language arts, they will be able to better understand intertextuality and connect to the works they are exploring.

What is Intertextuality?

Intertextuality is the relationship or connection among texts. This can occur in different places and in different forms. For example, intertextuality can occur from one text to another text. This could be when a title or author of a text is directly or indirectly referenced in a separate text. When students interact with a text such as a novel, an article, or film, they bring to it an array of previous texts, interactions with other texts and their experiences with the texts. These previous texts could be things like other books they have read, movies they have seen, or even interactions they have had, the location in which they were raised, personal experience, socioeconomic situation, and other perspectives. Each of these texts is interconnected and effects the text the student is currently interacting with, and the way in which they engage with it. This specific type of experiential intertextual interaction is especially relevant within a high school classroom, because of students' limited experience with written literary texts. Most of student's experience comes from life encounters, media interacts, or personal experiences. How, though, can educators identify these specific types of textual experiences, and use them in their curriculum?

As previously explored, intertextuality, at its simplest definition, is the relation among texts, and our understanding of texts based on texts that came before it. Although the idea of intertextuality can be credited to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the term was coined in the late 1960s by Julia Kristeva, A Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic who analyzed different aspects of language. Kristeva's idea of intertextuality came during a shift between forms of thinking, going from the rather rigid walls of structuralism to the less orderly thinking of poststructuralism (Klages, 2015). This is of such significance because this surrender of rigorous and rationalized thinking took power away from the author of a text and gave power to the reader. Now, instead of there being methodological components

to a text, there was now suddenly room for the reader to make the text their own, to base their understanding of it on other texts and experiences.

Martin (2011) acknowledges the adaptation of intertextuality in disciplines and art forms other than literature. She explains a piece of art done by a photographer that seemingly related photographs to works of literary text. This discussion of intertextuality and the relations among texts other than works of literature brings us to the analysis of a text itself, and the further question of what we classify as a "text". The idea of a text as simply a written piece of work has long been abandoned, recognizing that a text can take many different forms. James E. Porter (1986) writes,

> "In fact, these critics have redefined the notion of 'text': Text is intertext, or simply Text. The traditional notion of the text as the single work of a given author, and even the very notions of author and reader, are regarded as simply convenient fictions for domesticating discourse. The old borders that we used to rope off discourse, proclaim these critics, are no longer useful" (p. 35).

The notion of a "text" within the discussion of intertextuality takes on countless different forms and occurs in different locations. Similar to Porter's excerpt, Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) discuss this briefly in their article titled "The Social Construction of Intertextuality in Classroom Reading and Writing Lessons". Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) note,

> Intertextuality is not limited to explicit or implicit references to other texts, and it is not limited to literary texts. Nor is it limited to imitation. Rather, intertextuality can occur at many levels (e.g., words, the organizational structure of texts, register levels, genre types, content, and the situational contexts in which texts occur)…" (p. 306).

When a student interacts with an intended text, they bring previous texts – and their experience with previous texts – to that interaction. One location, and maybe the most commonly noted location, in which a text can occur is in the text itself. This type of intertextuality occurs when an "explicit or implicit reference is made to another text" (Literacy - Intertextuality). Whether or not the reader notices or understands this textual reference made, the intertextual component still exists. Another, and possibly more complex, location of intertextuality is within the person or the reader. As previously noted, students bring an array of different texts when interacting with a primary text. These could take the form of "conversations, books, or other printed texts, narratives of personal experience, memories, and so forth. The person may use these previous texts to create meanings for the target text or to help with the process of comprehending the text." (Literacy – Intertextuality). Recognizing these different forms that texts take can help us as educators to navigate the intertextuality that occurs within our students, and how that influences their experience with certain texts. We can use these locations and occurrences to deepen their understanding of works and build on our student's prior knowledge and experience for their learning.

Intertextuality and the Classroom

In his article "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community" James E. Porter (1986) brings to light just how impactful intertextuality is in the classroom, but more importantly what its absence within the classroom teaches students. Porter's definition of intertextuality is based in Vygotsky's "web of meaning:" the idea that "all writing and speech arise from a single network" and he discusses how works of literature are just this; texts that have arisen from a network and understanding of other texts. (Porter, 1986). Based in pedagogical ideas, Porter believes that intertextuality provides important perspectives that are currently being neglected within the teaching of reading and writing. He discusses how pedagogy that is currently in place is in favor of a romantic, idealized author. An author who created a great work of literature completely independently and internally. While these "dashing and heroic" images of writers may appeal to our need for intellectual heroes, it undercuts the greater idea that authors are a part of a larger community of discourse, and that writing is a dependent and social action (Porter, 1986). Porter goes on to explain how many of our educational tools that we use in our classrooms, like textbooks and anthologies, reflect this author-as-an-isolated-hero message, and that it is, in fact, detrimental to our students learning how to write within the discourse community. Porter notes,

> Generally, this pedagogy assumes that such a thing as the writer actually exists – an autonomous writer exercising a free, creative will through the writing act – and that the writing process proceeds linearly from writer to text to reader. This partial picture of the process can all too readily become the picture, and our students can all too readily learn to overlook vital facets of discourse production. (p. 41).

Porter is bringing to light how when we "romanticize" the process of writing by only focusing on the individuality and autonomy of the writer themselves, then we are robbing our students from understanding how to participate in the larger community of the English language arts discipline. We are overlooking key questions that address how authors participate within a larger community of writers, and how discourse communities influence both writers and readers. Porter includes a quote from David Bartholomae, emphasizing "The struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that grant our entrance into a closed society" (p. 42). When we as educators focus only on isolated works, or we overemphasize the role of the author as a genius individual, we are not welcoming our students into the discourse community. We are not teaching them how to use other's work and continue conversations within the discipline, and we are restricting their ability to compose writing that contributes to English language arts. Intertextuality within the classroom, with its beliefs that all texts are interdependent, bring a whole new set of skills that our students must learn how to employ.

Strategies and Models

In their article "Teaching Textual Conversations: Intertextuality in the College Reading Classroom," Armstrong and Newman (2011) examine intertextuality within the

classroom and give models to support it. Although this article does address a post-secondary classroom, many of the reading models that are presented in this text can be adopted and modified for the middle school or high school classrooms. In the beginning of the article, Armstrong and Newman (2011) discuss the harsh transition that students experience when going from high school to college. They state that "as students begin to realize that the academic literacy practices expected of them in postsecondary contexts are vastly different from those they are familiar with from their primary schooling, this literacy transition often requires conceptual change related to their views of reading and writing." (p. 6). As reading tasks and expectations change from one level of education to the next, we as educators must adapt and prepare our students for this shift in reading practices. Armstrong & Newman (2011) present a model for reading instruction based on the connection of texts to combat this. They give a visual model, showing a large box divided into smaller boxes. Some boxes are empty, some have the words "Existing Schema" in them. Outside of the large box is "Supplemental Texts" pointing to some, but not all, of the empty boxes. This visual model shows that a reader's understanding and comprehension of a text is supported by the existing schemas and prior knowledge of that reader, but there will always be gaps in that knowledge (Armstrong & Newman, 2011). Because of those gaps, supplemental texts must be provided in order to support those gaps in knowledge. The larger box may never be completely filled, and those gaps in knowledge may never be fulfilled completely, but there will still be a much fuller and more filled in terms of comprehension of the main text (the big box) than there would have been otherwise. Armstrong and Newman state, "Using intertextuality as an instructional approach in a reading class allows students to practice the process of making connections or relationships between what is being read and what has previously been read on a topic" (p. 10). By implementing models that are directed by intertextuality, we can help our students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the text and see themselves as members of the English Language Arts community.

Conclusion

We know that the presence of intertextuality in the classroom opens a realm of thinking, reading, and composing writing that would otherwise not be present. The topic of intertextuality is such an important and relevant thing to discuss in our community of educators because it allows students to have an active role in the larger discourse community of English language arts. Students learn from building on their prior knowledge, and when we expand their prior knowledge and fill in our students' gaps in understanding, we deepen their learning and critical thinking. Instructing within the context of intertextuality allows us as educators to expose our students to the world of academic discussion, as well as seeing the deep relationship among texts and the world. The expansion of the definition of a "text" opens a discussion for our students on what experiences of interactions they are able to bring to a focus text. Integrating intertextuality in our classrooms helps our students to become better members of the English Language Arts discourse community.

References

Armstrong, S. L., & Newman, M. (2011). Teaching textual conversations: Intertextuality in the college reading classroom. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 41*(2), 6–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2011.10850339

Bloome, D., & Egan-Robertson, A. (1993). The social construction of intertextuality in classroom reading and writing lessons. Reading Research Quarterly, 28(4), 304. https://doi.org/10.2307/747928

Klages, M. (2015). *Literary theory: A guide for the perplexed.* Continuum.

Martin, E. (2011). Intertextuality: An introduction. *The Comparatist, 35*, 148–151. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26237266

Porter, J. E. (1986). Intertextuality and the discourse community. *Rhetoric Review, 5*(1), 34–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/466015

StateUniversity.com. (2022). *Literacy - Intertextuality.* Education Encyclopedia - State University.com. Retrieved May 3, 2022, from https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2184/Literacy-INTERTEXTUALITY.html

About the Author

Sophia Rechin is a graduate student studying Secondary Integrated English Language Arts in the University of Toledo's Licensure and Master's Program (LAMP). Sophia Rechin completed her Bachelor of Arts in English at Bowling Green State University, and will soon be teaching in Arlington, Virginia.