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“Living the Story” Through Symbol: Motivating High School Students’ Engaged Reading of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

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I can remember well reading *The Scarlet Letter* in Ms. Kohlmer’s 11th grade English class but not, perhaps, for the reason one might expect. I was one of the few people who spent the allotted class time actually reading the book while many of my classmates took the opportunity to pass notes, sleep, or simply feign their diligence. I’m not quite sure why I read the book as I didn’t feel any particular connection to the story nor was there any effort to foster this on the part of my teacher. Lacking confidence and being shy, I think I was simply relieved to be able to sit and read in class on my own without having to share aloud any of my ideas, thoughts, or feelings about the book. It was safe, but I was certainly doing nothing more than getting the plot line and themes down for the required five-paragraph essay and follow-up test on Hawthorne’s novel. At the time, it was another required classic to check off the list to help me get into college. Now that I am older, somewhat wiser, and more experienced, I have a much deeper appreciation for the tangled web involving Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl. Part of this appreciation stems from the work high school teacher English teacher Allyson Young, my co-author, has done and continues to do in bringing the novel to life with her high school students. In striking contrast to my own introduction to the book, Allyson bridges into *The Scarlet Letter* by having students actively experience a similar public display of guilt and shame that so poignantly defines Hester’s reality in the novel. Before discussing this strategy in detail, we want to

briefly discuss the importance of pre-reading, especially with a novel like *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the setting, language, and culture is often a challenge for the modern adolescent.

In *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy, 6-12*, Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (2001) emphasize the importance of frontloading meaning as a crucial phase of teaching a lesson or unit, especially in terms of motivating students to read (p. 103). A key feature of any pre-reading strategy is activating prior knowledge. As Beers (2003) explains, “The challenge we face is to get [students] thinking about the selection and about how they will read the selection before they begin the text” (p. 74). The more students can activate and access meaning prior to engaging with and reading a text, the less dependent they have to be solely on that text for motivation, meaning, and comprehension. Using personal triggers is one strategy that prompts students to access prior knowledge and connects their personal experiences to a given text. As Milner and Milner (2003) explain, “The basic strategy is to stir memory; to consider personal attitudes, beliefs, and values; and to revisit experiences or feelings that the text may echo” (p. 107). While personal triggers most often take the shape of a written response, we also see the importance of extending the strategy to include active learning in the form of a more dramatic interaction with the text.

All too often, the main stance towards reading in school is an efferent one—the goal of which is for students to take information from the text, for example, in order to answer questions on a worksheet. Drawing on Rosenblatt (1938/1983), we believe it is important, especially in terms of motivating interest and engagement in reading, for students to have the opportunity to assume a more aesthetic stance towards their reading, one where they can also live through the text. Beers (2003) reveals that strong readers demonstrate stance versatility, meaning that these students are able to shift approaches to their reading depending on the type of text, the context and expectations for reading the text, and where they are in the reading process with the text. For example, students might approach

a short story or novel in class from an aesthetic stance as they try to forge personal connections with the reading, but they can then shift to efferent mode to complete assignments. Much like recognizing the importance of context—audience, purpose, and form—as a writer or speaker, we believe it is just as important to recognize context as a reader and be able to shift stances accordingly.

In “*You Gotta BE the Book*”: *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* (1997), Wilhelm’s research demonstrates that literary reading depends on a reader’s ability to enter and become involved in the story or world of the text, and on his or her ability to use that involvement as a means for interpreting characters, setting, themes, symbols, and more. One strategy Wilhelm highlights for engaging students, even his most reluctant readers, is drama. In one of the many spirited conversations with students Wilhelm shares, Kevin explains, “You have to live the story, Mr. Wilhelm. You have to be the book” (p. 110). Wilhelm explains that Kevin’s compelling realization would not have been possible without their work and involvement together in drama, where they shared their “inner experiences of reading” (p. 110). For us, extending the personal triggers strategy to include more than an entry in a journal or reader response notebook and incorporate some form of drama is one way to get at this important notion of “living the story.”

In one specific example of frontloading meaning and activating prior knowledge in preparation for reading Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, students are asked to think deeply about something from their past for which they feel guilt or shame. The extent of their guilt or shame can range from being minor to more substantial in degree. With the understanding that they will not be obligated to share their story if they do not want to, students free write on their personal episode of guilt or shame at the close of the first class in which the novel is introduced. Now that anticipation has been engaged, students are asked to create for homework their own personal symbol representing their guilt or shame—one they will then, like Hester Prynne bears her scarlet “A”, wear visibly on their chest for the

entirety of the following school day. The only stipulation is that the object cannot be everyday fare that might go unnoticed like a watch or necklace. The following list provides some recent examples of students’ symbols of guilt and/or shame:

- Carrie wore a CD strung around her neck to represent the guilt she felt for illegally downloading music from the Internet.
- Max wore a candy bar pinned to his chest representing the guilt he felt for stealing a Snickers bar from a convenience store when he was a little boy.
- Denise wore a large picture of an empty dog bowl representing her guilt for forgetting her responsibility for feeding all of the family pets and farm animals prior to leaving for vacation. Her parents had to call a neighbor to care for the animals.
- Janet wore a capital letter D representing the guilt she felt for putting her younger sister in the drier and turning it on when they were younger.
- Cassie tied the legs of a pair of pants around her neck to represent the guilt she felt in middle school for making fun of a schoolmate’s jeans because they were much too short in the legs.

While students are wearing their symbols throughout the day, the hope is that many of their peers and faculty will inquire about their objects and probe for their meanings. Most teenagers prefer to remain anonymous in their jeans and tee shirts, so wearing a bold symbol of shame most definitely draws attention in the hallways. Once class starts, students’ enthusiasm about the activity is high. Volunteers share their symbols and meanings if they want to and discuss their experiences of wearing their guilt openly. Some students, however, do feel extremely guilty and choose not to share the incidents behind their symbols. Both extremes provide for an engaged and insightful classroom discussion about the experience, as well as an

engaging bridge into the beginning chapters of Hawthorne's novel, where symbolism is abundant.

For a follow-up activity, students compose a written reflection on the experience of wearing their symbols. Focus questions include:

- What did you choose for your object? How did it symbolize your guilt or shame?
- How did people react to your symbol? Did they notice? What did they say to you? Ask you? How did you respond to them?
- How did the experience make you feel?
- Did you relive the experience with each new person who took notice? Describe this experience.

The written reflection becomes a way for students to process the experience more critically after the class discussion. The following list includes excerpts from recent student reflections:

- Linda described the experience as such: *"Throughout the day, I kept remembering what happened and told only a few of my really close friends about my symbol. The rest, I only told them that it was for a project in English. I'll never do it again, that's for sure. I'm partly disappointed in myself and maybe a little ashamed as well. But one thing is for sure, I'll never [drink] again."*
- Brianna wrote, *"It was a good experience, because the people that asked about my symbols confirmed my tendencies for jealousy and anger and for accusing people of stuff. I now know I need to try harder not to do these things."*
- Cassie wrote: *"Wearing the symbol made me think about how mean I used to be and how much I have matured since then."*
- Sean confided: *"Throughout the day, I was asked about my symbol. Though my actions were fairly innocuous, I found that the attention paid to my symbol actually intensified my guilt. Just as Hester was made constantly aware of her scarlet letter, I*

found that, to a lesser degree, I was made aware of my symbol. The glances, odd looks at the symbol, and any references inevitably brought up my guilt—an effective punishment."

• Angel, a new student, explained: *"Wearing the symbol made me feel stupid, especially being new to the school. I felt people would look at me weirder than they would if they knew me. Thinking about what happened, what I did, makes me feel like a bad friend. I feel like I let [Stacy] down."*

After discussing their experiences as a class and composing their reflections, students inevitably begin to realize the complexity of Hester's situation. While the students wear their symbols for only a few hours, Hester's punishment is for life—a constant public condemnation of her character. As such, the activity becomes the perfect bridge into *The Scarlet Letter* and into a discussion of the author's use of symbolism. Regardless of how slight or how serious their guilt is or how light or serious their symbol is, students always come away from the experience with a stronger appreciation for Hester's predicament as well as better sense of the novel overall. The activity allows them to begin to relate to Hester and understand how symbol can be such an important literary device.

Living Hester's story, even if only briefly, motivates student interest and engagement in the reading. Students are able to enter a challenging text from a compelling aesthetic stance as they dramatically reenact Hester's punishment from their own prior experiences. The activity also serves as an important catalyst for forging important connections to *The Scarlet Letter* and making the transition to reading from a more efferent stance—a process that continues during the reading process as they further compare and contrast their personal experiences of guilt and shame with those of the characters of Hawthorne's novel. I cannot help imagining how different my experience of Hawthorne might have been had Ms. Kohlmer engaged my class in a similar manner. While I would not choose to re-live 11th

grade English, I do relish getting to live Hawthorne's story vicariously through Allyson's students each fall.

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