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One Teacher's Journey Towards a Secondary Whole Language Classroom

Diana Mitchell

"Can I have another ditto master?" Arthur asked urgently. "I just messed up on one column and I want it to be right." Recognizing his commitment to completing his group's four-page newspaper on *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, I handed him another ditto master without question. I sat back down at my desk and surveyed my eighth-grade class. Usually a bouncy, boisterous group, they were all bent over their desks in clusters intent on working on their newspapers. Each group had written at least six stories on the novel and were now transferring the stories and their sketches to ditto masters (long before we had anything as modern as copy machines!). Students talked quietly as they shared advice on what would make their stories and their newspaper effective. They knew their parents as well as the rest of the class would get copies of their newspapers, and they wanted it to really represent their involvement with the novel and with the characters. They had been very engaged in the novel, some crying along with me when the dogs died, so they wanted their work to be good. Involved in what they were doing, everyone was working steadily and sharing materials and ideas. But my classroom wasn't always like this.

Taking the First Step

When I switched from teaching social studies to English language arts, I didn't get it. I didn't see the big picture, didn't see that what I did in the classroom had to hang together, had to make sense.

I thought I could teach in pieces. I'd do writing one day, language studies another day, and spend every other day reading from our anthology. But

something didn't feel right to me and rowdy, inattentive student behavior indicated they could see I was groping to try to find a center for this English course.

It didn't come to me all at once; it started in flashes and insights I gained from the way students responded to assignments. When I realized unrelated parts and pieces of the language arts wasn't engaging students, I spent a lot of my time creating intriguing writing options to go along with the stories we were reading. Some students got into the assignments, but since we immediately moved on to another story, they couldn't see why they should invest much in responding to a story we would never talk about again.

I got the writing instruction part together first after I took a graduate course that gave me a theoretical basis on which to build a writing program. I think back to those days fondly. Every day I worked to get students involved and excited about a writing topic. This was followed by class talk, brainstorming, and the sharing of ideas. Finally came the writing, and each student usually completed a short piece by the end of the hour. Most wanted to share their pieces with others so the room burbled with noise. These were the days before process writing and whole language. All I knew was that what we did had to make sense to the students, and they had to see where we were going with it. We always published a booklet each semester for each class. I still have many of these booklets from the seventies, and the writing still strikes me as fresh and lively. So this was a beginning. I was good at creating an exciting writing environment, motivating students to write, and publishing the writing in one form or another. We

wrote class poems, stories from sentence starters, stories from experiences, encyclopedia pieces for a class encyclopedia, personal dictionaries on topics they loved. These were wonderful times because I worked with such responsive students and got great writing, but I realized I was doing little to bring reading and literature into my classroom.

Beginning to Connect Reading and Writing

Although I had enthusiastic students, I hadn't yet found a way to connect writing and literature—I hadn't figured out how to make it all work together as part of a broader context. It helped when my department in this junior high school moved us into teaching whole novels like *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor and *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. Using the novel as a base I began to see how if projects, assignments, and activities could be given in the context of a big overriding question or could be embedded in a unit, then the work seemed more important to the kids. I was learning about context—that the work of the class had to be part of something bigger, something we were exploring, or talking about, something we would come back to.

So I started with a rather simple organizing scheme: questions and activities before reading the novel; discussion questions and writing options during the novel, and then projects and activities to do after the novel. And this seemed to work. For instance, before we read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, my students wrote about a time a teacher or adult treated them unfairly, or they wrote about a time they had been discriminated against because of their age, race, or religion. We followed the writing up with lots of talk and eventually began to discuss why people discriminate against other people, bringing in examples of discrimination in today's society. We raised the issue of racism and how it showed itself in our society today. After this quick look at issues that would be involved in the novel, we were ready to start to read. Students wrote their reactions, responses, and wonderings in their literature logs, the notebook where they kept all responses to reading. These responses often opened class discussion.

Keeping the Focus on Student Learning

I also developed questions that asked students to think deeply, not questions for which I had ready-made answers. I knew that students balk at working to find answers that the teacher already has in mind. I realized, too, that I had to keep the content of the book at the heart of what

we discussed and somehow show my students that they can learn about themselves and about life from literature. During the reading of the novel, group and class discussions were centered on questions such as these:

1. Discuss Miss Crocker's actions. Have you ever been in a situation with a teacher similar to the one described? What kinds of feelings did you have? How did you handle the situation?
2. Why were the Berrys burned? What can you tell about society at this time by the way it was handled?
3. How do Jefferson Davis School and Great Faith School differ? How are issues of inequity in education talked about today?
4. Who in the book accepts his/her "position" and who doesn't? Give examples and draw conclusions.
5. How can you explain the behavior of the whites at this time? Have you ever encountered prejudice? Why is it so difficult for people to give up their prejudices?
6. Is the loyalty in the Logan family similar to the loyalty in yours? Are any of the characters like you or people you know?
7. What skills, attitudes, and support systems helped the Logans survive the oppression of racism at this time?
8. Why do you believe TJ didn't survive this same oppressive system?

Providing Students with Options

While the novel was being read, students had choices about what they wanted to work on because I wanted them to have ownership in the work they produced. They could choose to work on options such as the following or create one of their own:

1. Write about the bus incident from the point of view of the white children or the bus driver.
2. Assume the Logan children's part in the bus incident was discovered. Write a narrative showing how the whites would have handled it and how they might get revenge.
3. After the trial a newspaper reporter interviews a sampling of the townspeople. Select five characters and write a newspaper article with invented quotes in it explaining their attitudes towards the trial.
4. What do you think is in Stacey's treasure box? Write about what would be in special boxes belonging to other characters.
5. Cassie beats up Lillian Jean. Besides her physical strength, where does her power over Lillian Jean come from? Write a diary entry that Lillian Jean would have written that night.
6. Reread Mr. Morrison's story. Then create a

childhood for him and write his life story, filling in the gaps that we do not know about.

7. In this book several people get "in trouble." Stacey takes a whipping rather than squeal on TJ. Later, he decides to go to the Wallace Store and take his punishment rather than let TJ get away from him. Can you remember a time you made a decision and got into trouble for it? It could be a time you were yelled at or punished at home, lost a friend because of your actions, were suspended from school, and so on. Write about a time you made a decision that got you into trouble. Explain why you did what you did. Also explain what happened and how you reacted to the whole experience.

Using Group Work

Since I chose class novels carefully, students were usually very engaged in them and wanted the opportunity to talk to others in the room as they grappled with and made sense of the novel. Thus I structured group activities to allow for the social interaction which provided a way for them to respond in more depth. While an untrained observer might just see groups of kids talking when we got to this stage, I could see and hear that much more was going on. As I moved around the room I heard snatches of conversation about how they couldn't understand the seemingly sanctioned discrimination of the 1930s or how their lives would be different if they had parents like the Logans.

Group options after the novel was read included:

1. Make a map of the area in which the story takes place. Be sure to include the Logans' house, the town of Strawberry and all the stores mentioned there, as well as the church and the schools. Then trace the route that TJ took the night he got into trouble.

2. Rewrite scenes such as Cassie's confrontation in Strawberry into a skit for presentation to the class.

3. Write the front page of the newspaper the morning after TJ was arrested. Include title, price, date, weather forecast, as well as news stories about the murder and interviews with participants who helped "capture" TJ.

4. Assume you are a psychologist and explain why TJ's coping and survival skills were not as good as the Logans'.

5. Create dialogue for the scenes when Stacey gave TJ his coat and when the Averys came to return it.

6. Form an Eyewitness News Team consisting of anchorperson, sportscaster, weather broadcaster, writers, and camera crew and discuss the

events in the book. Present this in front of the class.

7. As a group do one of the following: write a scene that could have happened but didn't; write about what happened at TJ's trial; write letters between characters years later and tell what's happening in their lives.

8. Design a picture book which captures the essence of the novel.

9. Discuss the characters in the novel and create awards for them. These awards can be positive or negative. You can award a medal for the "Most Prejudiced Person" or "Most Loyal Person," etc. Decide what your awards will be and who will receive them. Then write two or three paragraphs explaining why you presented the award you did.

10. Go through the novel choosing quotations that are representative of the characters. Write each quote on an index card and write the name of the person who said it on the back of the card. Select a committee to choose the best quotations from each group and compile a classroom booklet of "The Sayings in Roll of Thunder."

11. Choose one of the following topics to do research on: sharecropping, the Depression, Reconstruction, carpetbaggers, lynchings, the confederacy. After gathering information, each group can make a presentation to the class.

12. As book critics, write a book review explaining the strengths and/or weaknesses of this novel in terms of the characterization, plot, diction, theme, setting etc. so potential readers know what they can expect.

Succeeding Through Whole Language

This approach succeeded because the work wasn't chopped up and piecemeal. It went from whole to part to whole. We started out with the novel (the whole). Skills were embedded within the meaningful discussions and writing about the novel. For instance, students learned about the mechanics of dialogue writing (the part) when they were working on dialogues between characters. Then students moved back to the whole as we discussed and did projects on the novel.

Using literature in the classroom is like inviting other people and situations into the class—they demand that we deal with them, they scream to be discussed. Because I believe this so passionately, our work centered around making meaning from the literature. This work is authentic because students share their work with each other or with other classes, and we often publish a class book with a collection of work from the novel.

Students also had choices on what they explored or thought about from the novel so they would take significant responsibility for learning

within the classroom. Student talk and writing centered on issues that were important to them. Much of their learning was fostered through the social interaction in the classroom. I did not focus on talk about the literary elements since identifying them is not the purpose of reading a novel. We did, however, discuss literary elements when students were ready to evaluate the book and talk about how the author created the effect he did. Then they were interested in discussing elements of plot and characterization and whether the setting was important.

Conclusion

I never considered myself a whole language teacher until years after I learned how to connect, create contexts, and to think in terms of how the students would interact with the material. I worked to make sense of what was going on in the classroom so it would make sense to students. Over time I understood the importance of creating a context for the work. Eventually, I saw how I could connect our work even further by talking and writing about how characters in one novel would react to a situation in the class or react to a character in another novel. Of course, I learned

this from a student. One day Jon, a seventh grader, was acting out in ways that disturbed other students. One student piped up, "What would Papa Logan say to you right now about your behavior, Jon?" The impact was immediate. Jon good naturedly explained how Papa would view his behavior and what he would probably say to him. From that incident I learned to consider characters as presences in the classroom.

And so it went. I listened and learned and read all I could get my hands on, and eventually I came across information on the philosophy and rationale of whole language. I was thrilled because I could see that the organizing principles and the philosophy of learning behind whole language were similar to the basis on which I was operating. Now I could move forward faster because I had a clearer idea of what I was doing and validation for moving in this direction. My own teaching philosophy had finally become whole.

About the Author

Diana Mitchell, co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project and President of MCTE, works with and writes for teachers.