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Expanding Student Learning and Teacher Insights Through Book Club

Kelly Campbell

My introduction to Book Club began nearly two years ago when I had just started my graduate program at Michigan State University. One aspect of my first course entitled, Culture, Literacy, and Autobiography, involved the reading of ethnic autobiographies which we would then discuss in Book Clubs.

Revisiting the student perspective forced me to consider what the fourth- and fifth- graders I work with encounter on a daily basis. I was immediately reminded of what it felt like to receive grades, internalize comments in the margins of my papers, and take the risk of sharing my ideas with others. I was also considering what kinds of experiences inspired me as a learner. As the semester progressed, I wondered, What is it about these Book Clubs? Upon reflection, some interesting observations arose:

- My interest in the student-centered Book Club format was high. Being an active participant in each session increased my appreciation of the material and my enjoyment of the class.
- I was very thoroughly prepared for Book Club. Placing the focus on student-constructed meaning led me to read each assignment carefully, critically, and to take note of points that I wanted to address in group discussion.
- As I engaged in conversation with my peers, I often reconsidered my original viewpoint or

saw additional applications or interpretations of a particular idea.

- The student-centered discussions led me to appreciate the uniqueness of individual members and to admire the varied collection of talents, interests, knowledge, experience, and expertise amongst us. I felt a strong sense of community and collegiality developing in our Book Clubs.

Enacting A Change: Bridging Past Practice With New Ideas

Naturally, I wanted to know if what had been a powerful forum for my own thinking and learning could translate into my teaching practice. For the first five years, my reading program was rooted in quality children's literature. I was selecting books that had genre ties to our grade level outcomes, could sometimes be integrated with other subject areas, and that I felt would engage my students' interest. We would move through our novels as a whole group, with various prereading activities designed to get students ready to read, and post-reading activities designed to draw the students back into the text through reflection and action. The act of reading the text occurred in a variety of ways, including independent reading, partner reading, whole group read arounds, teacher read alouds, and audio cassette readings.

In general I was satisfied with my reading program. All of my students, regardless of their decoding skills, were being exposed to quality literature that they could enjoy and comprehend orally. I was aware, however, of limitations in this format. They included:

- A lack of emphasis on student-constructed meaning. There was still a heavy focus on what was inherent in the text structure, but not much consideration of how students were connecting with the text in more open-ended and personal ways.
- Moffet and Wagner state, "The sheer size of a classroom of students precludes enough attention, participation, and interaction—three essentials for authentic discussion" (79). Yet, much of our "discussion" was occurring in the context of the whole class, resulting in limited opportunities for sharing ideas and scaffolding from the contributions of others. It also meant that the same few eager participants were viewed by their peers as "The kids with all the answers."
- Although the students' literature logs are a useful evaluative tool, I felt like I was left with gaps in knowing all of my students as readers and literate thinkers. I had the most well-rounded picture of those students who consistently contributed to whole class discussions.

My goal, then, became initiating Book Club in my classroom. I wanted to create a safe, comfortable environment that would encourage participation by all. I wanted to help students to construct meaning within a social context that would allow for consideration of personal experiences, feelings, and opinion, while encouraging good reader skills like referring back to the text for support and clarification. I also wanted very much for my students to begin identifying themselves and their peers as "more knowledgeable others" (Gavelek 355), and to experience a true sense of learning community as I had with my Book Club.

Students came to me with a good understanding of the elements of story. This is important information that all readers need in order to support their comprehension and to craft their own stories. But in order for students to engage in

dynamic conversations with one another, they need to be free to move beyond what Rosenblatt would define as an efferent reading, where the reader takes away specific ideas and information from the text, to a more aesthetic stance, where, through shifting attention inward, the reader focuses on what is being created during the actual act of reading (7). Rosenblatt cautions that too much emphasis on technical aspects of reading can, over time, rob children of their aesthetic receptivity. She proposes that, "In the teaching of literature, then, our primary responsibility is to encourage, not get in the way of the aesthetic stance ..." (19). Thinking back to the conversations I had engaged in with my Book Club, I realized how much of it centered on our own personal connections to the stories we were reading and how much our understandings were enhanced when we related what we read to our own lives.

To encourage more diverse responses then, one of the shifts I made was in the kinds of questions I was asking my students. Kathy Short describes the disservice we do our students when, in an attempt to enhance their understandings, we orchestrate too much of the learning event. She states, "Teachers are encouraged to ask students questions about their experiences or provide some type of prior reading experience before students read. The problem with this focus on background experience is that the teacher provides connections for students instead of helping students develop strategies for making their own connections. The teacher does the critical thinking about meaning" (284-285).

I began by utilizing open-ended prompts such as those suggested by Cianciolo and Quirk. After reading I might ask, "What did you notice about this story?" or "What got your attention?" "What part of the story did you focus on?" "What in this story pleased you? Upset you? Caused you the most trouble?" (37-39). I also read about the variety of reflective techniques that Raphael and McMahon observed being taught in successful Book Club classrooms, and I began introducing these to my students as well. By teaching strategies such as critique, intertextuality, point of view, author's crafts, wonderful words, and special story part, my students began to develop a

repertoire of ways in which they could think about and ultimately talk about text in meaningful ways with others (102-116).

When I initiated Book Club in my classroom, I decided to invite the resource teacher to join us, and I also included the full-time instructional aide who was available to support the needs of an emotionally impaired student in our room. I was able to establish three, small, discourse communities which were grouped heterogeneously according to gender, ability, and learning style. Groups met three times weekly, and I rotated my membership amongst them. This was a critical component of my design because I really wanted an opportunity to observe my students in smaller settings and to have the flexibility to facilitate learning and to capitalize on teachable moments when I observed them.

Studying The Change

In connection with my graduate work, I decided to make the Book Club the focus of a practitioner research project. By collecting field notes, taping student conversations, and collecting work samples, I was seeking to answer two key questions:

- Does Book Club promote comprehension skills for students?
- Does the public nature of Book Club allow me to know and assess students more meaningfully than with traditional assessments alone?

In the initial stages of my data collection, I had a sense that something good was happening here. I observed students engaged in talk about text. They were using their written reflections as a springboard to discussion, but they were also learning how to let the comments of other group members guide what was talked about. Students were growing more proficient in building on the ideas of others (affirming, challenging, questioning, etc.) and were also exhibiting a willingness and an ability to maintain the integrity of the discussions even in the absence of an adult participant. I realized, however, that I needed to become more focused in my analysis. Midway through my data collection, I came across an article by Judith Langer entitled, "Understanding Literature." In it, Langer provides a framework for

helping us to understand how students comprehend what they read. Langer identifies a set of stances that a reader takes to a piece of text and explains that, "because they represent the strategies readers use as they make sense, the stances can help us to understand where to provide instructional support in response to students' sense making (813-814).

While I believed that these stances provided me with some interesting ways to catalog responses, I became especially interested in looking at some data related to "Amy," a student in my focus group who struggled with the decoding of text and had a history of negative attitudes about reading. Amy had worked with a resource teacher since first grade and had a very tenuous relationship with her current resource teacher which began last year as a fourth-grader and continued into this year. Amy was very vocal about not wanting to leave the room for support, and her resource teacher often shared with me that she found Amy difficult to work with and felt that they would never make any progress if her attitude didn't change. Knowing this history, I was becoming increasingly intrigued by the changes I was witnessing in Amy's attitude about reading since the implementation of Book Club and the subsequent growth I observed in her decoding, comprehension, and written language.

As I analyzed audio and video tapes, I was finding that Amy was highly engaged in the small group discussions. Often she would be the first to speak. Not only was Amy talking a lot, a dramatic change in itself from the whole-group format of the previous year, but she was also defying some of the research I was reading. Langer had noted that less proficient readers are, "more likely to resort to the first stance" (813-814). This stance, which Langer calls "Being Out and Stepping In," is where the reader is attempting to combine personal knowledge with material from the story in an attempt to get enough information to "step in" to the text (813-814). While it was common for Amy to make Stance One statements such as, "I didn't really get what they meant when they said ...," "I have a word that I don't really get ...," or, "I wonder if this is sort of like ...," it was equally common for her to exhibit deeper thinking about text. In a series of conversations related to Paula

Fox's *Monkey Island* as Amy discusses the text with a classmate her thinking exhibits all of Langer's stances:

(Amy) I have, um, this isn't about the island thing, but I figured out why, um, his grandparents don't want him. Because they told his dad when they met Clay's mom that they, um, wouldn't have anything to do with her or any kids that they had because she's Italian and stuff so that's why, um, um, Clay don't have nowhere to go...

(Amy) I think that Gerald should, um maybe like, um, get Buddy some clothes, like some nice clothes so he can go to work...

(Kevin) Yeah, and like some clean hair...

(Amy) Yeah, so he can get some money and then when he gets paid and he can afford some stuff, he can like pay Gerald back for everything that he did.

(Kevin) Yeah, that would make sense because...

(Amy) I have a critique of this book. I wish that, um, I wish they would just bring mom, or like another family member back so he doesn't have to go through all this bad stuff anymore.

(Kevin) Yeah, I wish that at least his mom would come back.

In these exchanges Amy demonstrates that her comprehension of the text surpasses Langer's Stance One. Comments and exchanges like the ones mentioned above were common for her. I especially chose a couple that included Kevin because he was a very gifted student in the class who succeeds in a range of activities and whom Amy would have, in the past deferred to because of her perceived notion of his superior intellect. I was thrilled on a particular day of videotaping by Amy's response when she found one of her ideas being shot down by Kevin. Kevin was building on the comments of others who were speculating on whether or not Clay would be reunited with his mother at the end of the story.

(Kevin) I don't think that she'll come back at the end of the book at it'll be like, you know, happily ever after, it'll be more like...

(Amy) Like *Hatchet*?

At this point, Kevin pauses, gives an odd stare, and then, with a condescending chuckle and shake of his head, continues with his original idea. Last year, it's doubtful that Amy would have interjected the question in a whole group discussion, but if she had, Kevin's reaction would most certainly have dissuaded her from commenting further. As I viewed this brief exchange through the video camera, I wondered how it would affect Amy's attitude for the remainder of the session. To her credit, she was soon re-engaged and later, when a lull in the conversation came up, Amy took advantage of it.

(Amy) Um, like Kevin said, like, um, having his mom come back or whatever, well IT DOES remind me of *Hatchet* because he wanted his parents back together, but at the end they never got together.

(Kevin and others) Ooooh!

To me, this represented a significant development in Amy's concept of herself as a capable student with worthwhile ideas. I believe that her newly found confidence and enjoyment of reading as a member of a book club was impacting her learning in very meaningful ways. Not only was she strengthening her decoding and comprehension skills, but her writing was flourishing also. It became obvious to me that, when provided with an opportunity to try ideas out with her group, she was actually very eager to share them again during the whole class community share. Her growing confidence in being heard by classmates also impacted her willingness to speak out during other large group discussions and had a dramatic effect on her ability to make oral presentations in front of the class.

So why did Amy defy what Langer had found to be true with many at risk readers? I believe that Amy's progress was directly connected to the Book Club structure which allowed her to use her own language and the language of others to gradually appropriate new understandings and

new skills. Gavelek's adaptation of Rom Harre's model of the "Vygotsky Space" depicts the way people learn first in social contexts before moving into independent applications (185-188). Corson, in writing about the literacy experiences of students Amy's age stated, "For older children, when they use more abstract terms, the word itself is the experience" (460). By allowing Amy to become engaged in a discourse community, she was participating in the social learning that leads to inner thought, and eventually allows her to reproduce and transform her learning.

Amy is not a case in isolation. I witnessed growth in many students of varying abilities. One of my favorite examples came toward the beginning of our Book Club experience while we were reading Jean Craighead George's *The Talking Earth*. In the story, Billie Wind, a Seminole Indian girl from Florida, is on a quest. Along the way she begins to discover, through thoughtful examination of the natural world, the ways in which the earth really was talking to her. The story is filled with examples of plant and animal life, many of which I am unfamiliar with. During one particular discussion that I observed, a group of students were struggling over a passage involving the predator-prey relationship of two animals. Suddenly, "Bob," a student who struggled for acceptance and positive feedback from peers, launched into a detailed explanation of the animals, sharing information that he had read about as well as telling us about a related nature program he had seen. Soon "Rick," the E.I. student in our room who also struggled with friendship and acceptance, joined in with Bob's description of the nature program which he had also seen. Finally, one of the girls in the group chimed in with, "You guys are so smart! How do you know all this stuff?" as others at the table smiled and nodded in agreement. This was a watershed moment. It not only represented the joint construction of meaning that was taking place. It also demonstrated the sense of community that was forming as students began to see and appreciate their peers in new and unexpected ways.

What I've Learned So Far

I had started out wanting to know if Book Club could promote comprehension skills, and all that I have seen so far tells me that it does that and more. Students have a chance to compare their thinking to that of others and will even modify and expand their original ideas and understandings. They have a chance to try out new language and hear new language, which, according to Corson's work, increases the likelihood that they will successfully decode new language when they encounter it in print. Students also begin to realize that they can think about books beyond the basic elements of story. And as they understand and appreciate the texts they read on a variety of levels, they begin to have the kinds of joyful experiences that create lifelong readers.

Creating opportunities for student discourse not only benefits the learner. It also provides unique and necessary insights for the teacher. Gavelek describes teachers as, "interactive decision makers" (18), and highlights the critical determinations we make regarding what to teach, when to teach it, and how to present learning so that it is practiced in ways that most closely mirror real-world applications. But these decisions will not be as informed as they can be if we only evaluate students by what they write in their reading logs and how they respond to the tests and other forms we create. We need to watch students as they create new learning in the moment. We need to hear their thoughts being played out in the conversations they are having with one another. By thoughtfully designing the learning activities in our classroom, we can create moments where the private thoughts of our students become a part of the public classroom discourse, and everyone, teacher and students alike, will be enlightened and enriched by it.

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