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Couple's Counseling: My Recovering Relationship with Reading

Great. Another novel. Another novel that I won't read, won't remember, and will have to weasel my way through for the next month. It always goes like this: The teacher gives us a novel. I read the first chapter or so. Then I give up because before I know it, I'm behind everyone else. I'm too slow of a reader to even bother trying to keep up. Don't even get me started on those damn comprehension packets! I am so pokey at reading, by the time I finish a chapter, I've barely retained enough information to recall when answering the questions.

I knew I had problems with reading, but I didn't realize they were problems that could be fixed. I just assumed my relationship with reading was always broken and unmendable. I wasn't focused enough, determined enough, and didn't care enough—at least that's how my teachers made it seem. Every so often, I was pulled out of English by my teacher to receive the third-degree about how I'm a "good student," but I just need to start doing the reading. That was the kinder scolding. Mind you, they didn't provide me with any reinforcement to help me actually do the reading—just to do it.

Then there was the one time when my seventh-grade English teacher, Ms. Cheney, took me outside the classroom but forgot to shut the door. She had noticed next to none of my yellow *Phantom of the Tollbooth* comprehension packet had been filled out. (I'm lucky I put my name on such a disgusting packet.) She dismantled my existence by discharging a lecture loud enough for the students inside the room to hear, "*You need* to be doing these and *you need* to be on top of

things and if *you need* help *you* should ask me or your classmates and *you should not* be having this hard of a time, these questions are easy, and *you need* to be doing my homework."

Basically, all I heard was, "You are lazy and there was no excuse for not getting something like a comprehension packet filled out." She topped off the persecution with a pink slip and an hour of detention for not getting my work done.

I was embarrassed as all hell. How am I supposed to "do the reading" if I have no idea why I can't? I mean, I can read, but I'm not sure why it is so difficult for me. I can't stop getting distracted, *and* I can't keep up with others, *and* I can't keep up with my peers, *and* I can't recite or recall a lot of what I read because I'm more focused on reading the words and getting through it than digesting *and* I can't get into the material *and* I can't ask for help when I don't know what the problem is. I can't. I can't. I can't.

I had come to the conclusion that I had a problem, but no one ever addressed reading as the problem or their teaching as the problem. The only answer left was that the problem was me and not doing my work, and from what they were telling me, there were no resources for that.

After the beratement, I shuffled miserably back into a classroom full of a big bunch of eavesdroppers that failed to hide their snickering. I slumped back into my desk with a red face, a free pass to afterschool detention, and with even more hatred towards our assigned reading. Actually, make that reading in general because at this point, I wanted nothing to do with it.

In time, I eventually got myself out of the scolding. I realized I wasn't able to break all ties with reading completely. Like it or not, reading was here to stay. I progressed through my English classes by the adolescent hairs starting to poke out of my changing face by using an ingenious technique that I like to call *bullshitting*. Man, did I have those teachers fooled. I honed this sneaky skill as I skirted my way through high school. By bullshitting, I could participate

enough to remain inconspicuous, pass assignments and tests to get a B or a C, and not have to read all that much. SparkNotes, skimming, and simply knowing where to look got me by. I read bits and pieces, just enough to swindle my way through another assigned novel. I mean, what was the point? What did reading those novels do for me besides bring me frustration and anguish? It's not like reading was giving me anything back in return. Those teachers just tortured us by giving us something to do. There just didn't seem to be much hope for me and reading. Reading and I had definitely gone our separate ways a long time ago—or so it seemed.

Senior English had something else in store for me and reading. English this particular year had a strange path. I took the first semester of Senior English in the summer prior to the school year. I'm not entirely sure what compelled me to take part of Senior English in the summer, but the English gods were aligning stars or something because I was right where I needed to be.

Mrs. Danowitz, my summer school teacher, packed the semester with a syllabus of short stories, *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. A concoction of intense and tiresome English entities that I figured I would have to trudge through with my bullshitting skills—in the gorgeous summertime, too! First came *Beowulf*. Thanks, Mrs. Danowitz, for starting us off with a dense fantasy from the beginning of the second millennia. I rolled my eyes while opening up the twelfth-grade anthology that was so large they had to split it into two volumes. I flipped to page 6,043—or something like that—and got ready to stare vacantly at the page. Until Mrs. Danowitz started the audio. *The audio*?

Don't think I am that absent from the world of reading that I don't know what an audiobook is, but the audio she was using struck my ears differently. The recording wasn't some failing actor sitting in a sound room with a monotonous voice reading with just as much effort as

I would have myself. No. This recording not only featured a strong-voiced heroic narrator, but the audio filled the passages with sounds, music, and suspense. The man courageously boomed the boastful introduction of the story like he was Beowulf himself. He thrust Beowulf's entrance out of the speakers; a flawless character description and superhuman qualities entrance. I could imagine this god-like being forming before my eyes. The passage engulfed me as this knight of high regards was brought to life. *Pause.*

Hey! I can't believe she just stopped it right there. Just as the reading was getting good!

Woah, woah, *woah!* Did I just say that? The *reading* was getting *good*?! I was immersed in the *assigned reading*?! Must have been some sort of fluke because there was no way.

Mrs. Danowitz asked us to pull out a sheet of paper. She had us put our name on the top of the page. For the next ten minutes, she had us write a boastful epic introduction of ourselves. I used terrible bubble letters to scribble my name above, and before I knew it, I had taken the intensity of the introduction to Beowulf and the recording to write a two-page bragging about who I am. I felt like a modern-day Beowulf. I was ecstatic. I understood and consumed what was being read. I could recall information, and I was not distracted. My focus was on the words, and for once, I felt that I was able to be part of the literature in an English course. My feelings towards reading were starting to shift; I just needed some more convincing.

Shortly after writing, we read our pieces to the class. I, still buzzing after the high of actually getting into the reading, stood up and announced myself to the class with just a tad less fervor than the narrator of the recording (but, you know, the spirit was there). My classmates may have looked at me like the odd kid that gets a bit too invested in the work, but at this point, I didn't care. I was starting to get the problem, and the problem wasn't reading. For once, I also didn't think the problem was me either.

The rest of the semester continued this way: I was skeptical about reading. Mrs. Danowitz proved me wrong about everything I had assumed about reading. Reading showed me that it was okay—no hard feelings. Everything between Reading and I were changing.

Being our class was a summer course, we had more flexibility to learn and absorb the reading in various ways. Mrs. Danowitz used videos, adaptations, and narrations to enhance the text in ways past teachers hadn't. She involved us. The reading involved us. She would pause and ask us questions (and not those lame comprehension questions either). Questions like, "How do you feel about the Lady of Bath as a character? Which character from Chaucer's *Prologue* would you eat dinner with?" The connections to myself and what I was doing with the literature were finally starting to kindle.

Another way Mrs. Danowitz surprised me was by showing us an episode of *Lost* in relation to *Macbeth*. By playing the clip, she showed us how literature influences the world around us, especially television and movies. "Shakespeare's plays," she explained, "can be found in references throughout media you consume on a daily basis." Using an episode of the show, she revealed how the characters depicted in this instance were references to the three witches that provide foreshadowing to the audience in the play. This opened a new world of understanding and the importance of reading. Going home and watching TV, I began to notice so many more literary references in common, mindless television, which built more appreciation for literature.

Mrs. Danowitz ended the semester by having us write parodies of something we had read in high school. *Uh oh*. Well, my options were limited, but ultimately, I chose *Romeo and Juliet* because I remembered the story and watching the two film adaptations—the 1968 version and the Leonardo DiCaprio version from the 90s. Having a surprisingly decent recollection of the play, I skimmed over the play again to remind myself where the events were

I decided the best way to interpret the play was as an 80s after-school special. I had a load of fun changing how the younger characters talked by using 80s slang. I used every cliché 1980s reference and quip I could pull together. I got up and performed my totally tubular parody myself. By request of my teacher and classmates, I used different voices for each character to enhance the performance—boy, did I ever. The class was in tears. Mrs. Danowitz was hunched over with laughter.

Through this project, Mrs. Danowitz opened my eyes. On my parody, she commented: "William, your understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* and ability to transform it into a new performance and adaptation was wonderful to watch." I couldn't believe it. A teacher noticed my *understanding* of the reading! I couldn't believe that I was finally getting the concept of reading.

The summer semester ended, and there was a large gap of time where reading and I remained distant, although I kept the idea of reading and I closer in the front of my mind. I couldn't believe how easy Mrs. Danowitz had made reading. I couldn't understand how my teachers didn't tell me sooner that audiobooks and video adaptations could help me comprehend what I was reading while staying at-pace with my fellow students. I felt cheated and lied to. Like really! I could've used anything to make reading easier, and it took until my last year of high school for someone to show me what those tools were? Maybe it was karma for all the bullshitting I had done over the years or perhaps the endless neglectfulness I had towards reading. Reading and I had some catching up to do. Thanks to Mrs. Danowitz, I learned how to be a better reader and how to find and use my resources to make my love and appreciation for reading even stronger.

Analyzing Reading Theories and Methods in Reflection of My Secondary Reading Experiences

When going through my experiences with my teachers and reading, there are many chances where things could have been improved much earlier. Unfortunately, the strategies for reading and reading instruction were not introduced to my literacy toolbox until much later in my education. My middle school teachers, in particular, provided no support or tools for me to become a stronger, more confident reader. Observing their practices in relation to Mrs. Danowitz's, there are key implementations that allowed me to flourish that would have been much more beneficial had they been presented to me years prior to Senior English.

After Ms. Cheney took me out into the hall and lectured me on asking for help, I realized I did need help, I just did not know what kind of help I needed. I figured that I was just not meant to be a good reader and that I was never going to have the tools to be able to comprehend what I read. Cris Tovani, a high school teacher in Colorado, calls students like me, "word callers." These are students who read without realizing that reading requires thinking. Because of this, "they don't understand or remember what they've read, they quit" (15). While I had attempted to get through the literature, I had not been able to comprehend it. I simply went through the motions, not realizing there was more to reading than the words. This became the reason why I no longer found reading to be useful and often gave up before getting started.

Ms. Cheney's use of punishment was unsuccessful in assisting me to grasp how reading works. According to E. Sutton Flynt, director of teacher education at University of Memphis, and William Brozo, professor of literacy at George Mason University, "teachers of content literacy who have a positive effect on student achievement […] possess a toolkit of strategies and practices for heightening engagement" ("It's All About the Teacher" 536). Ms. Cheney had an opportunity when she brought me outside the classroom: she could have taken the moment to ask

what I needed and where things were going wrong. This was her chance to provide me with some of that "toolkit of strategies and practices" to bring me back to where my classmates had been standing. Instead, Ms. Cheney denied improvement by telling me to ask for help, which obviously I needed since she was suggesting it. She perpetuated the problem by not providing me with tools or resources to do better reading. Now that I was completely embarrassed and ashamed in front of my friends and classmates, due to her announcing my incompetency and downfalls, I no longer had the motivation to do any work for her, especially when it came to literature or reading.

Ms. Cheney and other English teachers throughout my education also failed to provide me with positive reinforcement and strategies to read effectively. In turn, I turned to, as I specified as, "bullshitting" to get through my courses. Tovani mentions this idea when discussing "word callers" by using a more academic term, "decoding." Decoding, a poor means of learning, lacks the thinking and meaning essential to reading (15). Hiding behind skimming, study guides, and taking things at face value, I really had no skills in literature at all. By decoding, I was able to make sense of the text well enough to get by. This, as Tovani points out, provides nothing towards the depth and breadth that the action of reading requires.

While teachers throughout middle school and high school failed to instill literacy competency within me, instead of decoding, Mrs. Danowitz finally introduced me to the power of understanding literature. The use of audio books provided my first breakthrough. According to Gene Wolfson, associate professor of education, "audiobooks may be used with adolescent readers to improve fluency, expand vocabulary, activate prior knowledge, develop comprehension, and increase motivation to interact with books. Removing the restraints of word recognition and decoding allows a very positive focus on the meaning" (105). By starting the

semester with playing the audio recording of *Beowulf*, Mrs. Danowitz removed my engrained practice of "word calling" and allowed me to truly experience reading. This encouraged me to focus on the meaning of the literature, rather than simply reading the words.

The audio not only allowed me to experience true reading for the first time, but as Wolfson suggests, provided me with a completely new outlook on reading by blending literacy skills and strategies with comprehension. G. E. Tompkins, a professor emerita at California State University, Fresno, "describes the stages in the reading process as Prereading, Reading, Responding, Exploring, and Applying. The listening process can be alternatively described as Prelistening, Listening, Responding, Exploring, and Applying" (qtd. in Wolfson, 108-9). By implementing the listening process to *Beowulf* by having the audio play, I could connect and directly apply the reading process. The process of decoding the words was removed from my idea of reading, so I could take in everything else that reading involved. As Mrs. Danowitz continued the semester, she provided me with this opportunity by turning of the mindset of decoding and work on the process of reading and engagement with the text.

Another way Mrs. Danowitz built my literacy skills was the way she created and asked questions. In comparison to my prior instructors, their comprehension questions fell flat. Not only are comprehension questions not appealing to students they also do not promote learning. Noden and Moss, a high school teacher and a professor at the University of Akron respectively, suggest that if a teacher uses discussion questions as "only questions that can be answered from the text, [they deny] a number of rich avenues for understanding" (504). Ms. Cheney's comprehension packets really were packets of questions straight out of the reading. Questions such as, "Who does Huckleberry Finn live with?" or "How does Huck feel about Prayer?" do not provide students much depth or meaning beyond the text and displays the literature at face value.

Instead, Ms. Cheney could have provided stronger discussion and questioning by crafting her questions in a way that resulted in students finding meaning in the text.

Mrs. Danowitz was able to maintain student retention and connection to the text by asking engaging questions that involved the student with the text, not just merely recalling facts. Christenbury and Kelly, professors of English education, propose that teachers use a non-linear mode of asking questions, which they present as a Venn diagram (15). Milner, Milner, and Mitchell, three professors of English education, have adapted Christenbury and Kelly's work into a clearer strategy. They suggest creating questions that are "purely textual (text-to-text), the personal (text-to-self), and the global (text-to-world)." By asking questions like these, instead of basic comprehension questions, they offer questions that "encourage students to encounter the text from various angles, and the questions are designed to intersect and overlap" (35). By developing questions beyond simple recollection questions, students are engaged with the text and can relate to it beyond the classroom context. As a student who did not have much meaning or connection to the texts I was given before, having questions that made me consider my own thoughts and opinions alongside the text made the reading much more engaging. I was now able to put myself into the literature, rather than seeing the words on a page.

While reading *Macbeth*, Mrs. Danowitz provided us with examples of modern-day media that use pieces of the play to make references. By presenting usage of the play in common occurrences like TV shows and movies, Mrs. Danowitz allowed us to connect circumstances we consume on a daily basis. Tovani explains "that the connections the students are making allow them to read the piece more deeply. [The student] draws an inference… makes a comparison… asks a question… [and] creates a strong visual image. Each of these thinking strategies help readers become better comprehenders of text" (72). By building a text with references to outside

media and examples, Mrs. Danowitz established a stronger sense of background information. Not only that, but she also displayed relativity to today and to the students. This created a more meaningful connection for the reader and gave the text a better purpose.

Mrs. Danowitz continued to keep me connected to the reading by having the class parody another famous literary work. By creating new work using existing literature, Mrs. Danowitz extended the learning of reading beyond the text. One of Tovani's strategies used by successful readers includes "synthesize information to create new thinking" (17). The use of parodies demonstrated my ability to understand what I had read, synthesize the ideas and information, and create a new way of thinking or imagining the play. Brozo and Flynt would suggest that this presents the strategy of "self-efficacy" to students ("Motivating Students," 172). Brozo and Flynt provide a principle of self-efficacy from Guthrie and Perencevich, professors at the University of Maryland. They state that students build self-efficacy if what they learn and the activities they do interest them (qtd. in Brozo and Flynt, "Motivating Students," 173). By introducing a project where I can expose my own creativity and originality, pick the text to parody, and perform the finished product to my classmates, my sense of self-efficacy was strengthened.

Reflecting on what my teachers had been doing in regard to my reading prior to Senior English, there were a vast number of opportunities to instill literacy skills and strategies in me. The problem did not reside in me that I was an irredeemable reader, but rather, I was a student who required some guidance into the world of reading competency. Mrs. Danowitz, in her own way, removed the concept of decoding, or bullshitting, and allowed for the deeper connections and meaning of the text to grab my attention. Her ability to create engaging activities and questions opened up the avenue for stronger reading comprehension and the process of active reading.

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