

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 theories and methods of reading and reading instruction were not introduced well to me 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 read while comprehending. 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 to work. Because of this, "when they don't understand or remember what they've read, they quit" (15). While I had attempted to get through the reading, I had not been able to comprehend the reading. Ms. Cheney's use of punishment was unsuccessful in getting my understanding of how reading works to change. 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). Instead of scolding about what I had not been doing for class, Ms. Cheney had the opportunity to give me a more engaging experience with the reading. By telling me to ask for help, when obviously I needed some if she was suggesting it, she perpetuated the problem by not providing me with

tools or resources to do better reading. Furthermore, by announcing my inability to complete the packet that I should not have a hard time answering such easy questions for the class to hear, I no longer had the motivation to do any work for her, now that I was completely embarrassed and ashamed in front of my friends and classmates.

The idea of “bullshitting” to get through my courses is a strategy Tovani mentions when discussing “word callers” by using a more academic term, “decoding.” A poor means of learning, decoding lacks the thinking and meaning to reading (15). While teachers throughout middle school and high school failed to provide positive reinforcement and the tools to read effectively, instead of decoding, Mrs. Danowitz finally introduced me into the power of understanding literature. The first breakthrough was her use of audio books. 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 behind the author’s words” (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. Using information from G. E. Tompkins, Wolfson states, “Tomkins (2005) 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 apply the reading process.

As Mrs. Danowitz continued the semester, she made an effort to keep her students engaged with the text. The comprehension questions used by prior teachers fell flat. Not only are comprehension questions not appealing to students they are also not promoting learning. Noden and Moss, high school teacher and professor at the University of Akron respectively, suggest that if a teacher uses discussion 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. Instead, Ms. Cheney could have provided stronger discussion and questioning by crafting them in a way that produced meaning to the students and 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). Milnor, Milnor, and Milnor, 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 doing questions like these, instead of basic comprehension questions, they offer that “these questions... 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.

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 us parody another famous literary work. By creating new work using existing literature, Mrs. Danowitz extended the learning of reading beyond or after 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. Brozo and Flynt follow up this point by referring to 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, 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.