

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.

Works Cited

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