



Authentic Literacy Experiences in the Secondary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article is a resource for educators looking to offer personal instruction and literacy opportunities to secondary students. It provides a thoughtful and in-depth look at the workshop model in a high school setting. It offers methods and suggestions for setting up the workshop model to methods and strategies for diverse learners. The information will provide teachers with approaches to authentic and differentiated learning opportunities for all students in any secondary classroom.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Valerie Brunow is a high school English teacher at Millbrook High School in Millbrook, New York. She is a graduate of Manhattanville College and holds certifications and degrees in Secondary English Education and Secondary Literacy. She currently teaches ninth grade and electives for grades nine through twelve. In her career she has taught students in grades six through twelve, including; Regents, Honors, electives and small Literacy instruction groups. She has worked as a professional developer in Literacy and Curriculum. Valerie has a strong appreciation and respect for the need to increase awareness of Literacy instruction in the secondary setting. Valerie is an educator who is passionate about empowering students and giving them authentic learning opportunities. Valerie can be reached at valerie.brunow@yahoo.com



Literacy in the Secondary English Classroom

For nine years I have been working as an English teacher. I have served in a number of capacities teaching grades eight through twelve, honors courses, remedial courses, reading support groups, and electives. I am humbled everyday by my students' lives, insights, and my experiences in teaching them. Every teaching year is unique. The students constantly challenge me to bring new opportunities and material to the classroom. With the great onset and use of technology, this has become a necessity to reach young learners. As a teacher, I am constantly fine-tuning my craft, often looking for the next exciting resource to bring literacy to the fingertips of eager students.

Approximately five years ago, I began to see the significant shift in learners and a genuine need to transition my own thinking and methodologies. Year after year of handing students books that I loved to read and teach, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I began to notice students were not as excited as I was hoping. I could not imagine a student who was not enchanted by Boo Radley or could not be captivated by Atticus' stoic demeanor. This left me wondering – *how do I get them involved in this book?*



I tried a variety of tactics and techniques to get students engaged in the text. Some of these activities included creating original art, connecting songs to text and acting out scenes, but nothing was working. The disheartening realization came when a student finally helped me to grasp what I had been missing all along: “Mrs. B, this book is old and I don’t like the way they talk.” I was taken back and a little saddened by my students’ inability to connect with this classic. I have grown to love these texts and believed I would teach them for the remainder of my career. As I stewed over the comment, it became obvious what the problem was – the personal pronoun “I.” I loved these classics. I wanted them to see what I was guided to see so many years ago. I wanted them to read and fall in love with the characters as I finally did. “I” is not what my students needed – they needed their own experience. The next question became – *how do we, student and teacher, work together to give students an authentic learning experience?*

After struggling to find an answer and further prodding my administration, I arrived at Reading Workshop. The elementary and middle school teachers in my district were in the preliminary stages of a program from Columbia University, Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. I asked if I could join, hoping that maybe I could find an idea that could help. After some in school training sessions and a trip to Columbia for a week during the summer, I was overwhelmed by the new information I had been given. I was excited and ready to begin, except all of the materials, advice, and information were geared towards elementary and middle schools. I was still at a loss for what to do. The origins of the workshop are more formatted for the elementary school setting. More flexible access and time with kids is a highlight of allowing students to progress in materials at their level. Progress monitoring and student selected materials are the most binding agents of this model. Working in the high school setting and only having forty minutes per day in an average class of twenty five -- I felt the odds were not in my favor. However, I knew I needed my students’ investment in a program that had their interests and abilities in mind and so I set forth on my journey of research.

I began searching for a book or website that could offer guidance on how to run workshop-based instruction at the high school level. I found some incredible authors who give overviews or directions about how to manage various aspects of the process. The author, Chris Tovani (2003), of *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*, coined the term “Fake Reading.” Fake reading is what we see many students doing with books: flipping the pages, talking, changing books or saying they don’t like it. Tovani not only acknowledges the idea of “fake readers,” but offers ways to address it. She clarifies how often poor readers learn to avoid reading and lose the meaning of the text. This happens because many readers believe reading is purely the decoding of words (Tovani, 2003). Often students read for answers and to regurgitate information. Authentic reading practices push students to read as writers. In this expectation students not only evaluate the text for information, but for author style, choice and exploration of ideas. Sometimes texts that we put in students hands are beyond their reading ability level. If this is the case, students are simply decoding and not building comprehension or deeper reading skills. Students do not need to engage in “fake reading” when texts are on their reading level. The reading experience is more personal, meaningful and rewarding.

Another author who looks critically at the way literature and reading is being taught, specifically in high schools, is Kelly Gallagher (2009), author of *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*. Gallagher has discussed, at length, the importance of putting literature into students’ hands and teaching them how to read it, instead of



reading it to them. He states "...Shouldn't schools be the place where students interact with interesting books? Shouldn't the faculty have an ongoing laser-like commitment to put good books in our students' hands? Shouldn't this be a front-burner issue at all times?" (Gallagher, 2009, p.30). Fostering meaningful literacy practices is essential for student engagement and interest. Offering students an opportunity to choose texts and teaching how to approach texts helps to support reading investment. The workshop model blends personal interest with approaches to reading and writing that are differentiated to meet the needs of a variety of learners. I found these qualities and opportunities to be essential next steps for me and my students. Culling my newfound information and about twenty texts in my Amazon shopping cart, I began my journey into what my students may need and away from what "I" was used to teaching.

In my first attempt at the Reader's Workshop in my own classroom I was excited by the possibility of choice. However, this initial excitement also gave way to the overwhelming feeling of loss of control. I began to question how I would manage one hundred different students with, quite possibly, one hundred different books at one time. While many successes happened, there were still many kinks to be worked out. Some students became instant success stories, finishing books before I could schedule a conference to discuss the reading. Other students abandoned book after book or continued on their road of fake reading. It was important to me that every student have a positive experience with this process.

The "over-readers" were the most exciting and rewarding part of the workshop. These readers were finishing books so quickly I had a hard time keeping up with their pace. These readers are what most teachers yearn for, however, they were resistant to slow down their reading to implement practices, lessons and strategies. Helping students to find a good book was not the challenge here, but helping them invest in the learning that complements the reading could be a challenge. Modeling these strategies as a teacher leader and teacher reader helps to strengthen this relationship with students who are avid and excited readers. By showing students how you apply your practices supports students understanding and investment.

The next reader I encountered was the regular reader. This is the reader who feels comfortable choosing books and often will complete tasks suggested or lesson application. They tend to grow the most within the workshop model as readers and thinkers. They will help to model lessons and share their ideas. Regular readers thrive with opportunities to reflect on their ideas and often enjoy conferring and book talks. Engaging students who read regularly in one type of genre often benefit from series book recommendations or supporting them with new and interesting genres.

The most challenging readers, and often in the end the most rewarding are the book abandoners or continuing "fake readers." These students often have a hard time committing to reading for a number of reasons. Many times the actual process or act of reading is daunting. When a student is a reluctant reader their reading skills: speed, decoding, and comprehension are often lacking. This makes the physical and mental process of reading more challenging. Most of these students have been "fake reading" for years. The first step with a student like this is to find out personal interests and look closely at television shows or movies that they enjoy. Many times bridges can be gapped by finding similar characters from film to print. Another great option for these readers is to utilize graphic novels. These often support the desire for imagery mixed with text. There are wonderful graphic novel options for the secondary classroom. If the problem is specifically abandoning books - which I do let students do - then there are a few steps you can



take. I have students bookbrowse regularly. I also ask them to make a list of five books they are interested in so we are not looking blindly. I am also sure to meet with students who abandon and I follow many of the tactics listed above to help students invest in their reading. For students who do not normally read they feel incredibly accomplished when finishing their first book, whether graphic novel or short novel, these accomplishments pave the way for reading goals and expectations. It is rewarding to see a student go from reading reluctance to experience reading success.

Starting the workshop took a lot of time, patience, and reading, but I was able to get almost all of the students into books. Truthfully, there are always a few students that may not read completely and this case was not any different. However, a lot more authentic reading happens within this model.

I came to understand how important structure, planning, and consistency are in a workshop model. There are a few key elements of the high school Reading Workshop model that help to develop regular reading and success. One of the most significant elements of this workshop model is it allows for differentiation. It allows the teacher to support and employ a program that meets the needs of all students. It offers the opportunity to utilize varied methods of teaching for a diverse population of students.

Literacy and Diversity

We must honor students as unique individuals in the process of learning -- it is essential to understand that every student is diverse and comes equipped with a diverse literacy background. The definition of literacy itself has changed significantly over the last ten years. What was simply deemed reading and writing has taken on a new life. Simplifying literacy to the discrete skills of reading and writing is a framework that does not account for the needs of learners who do not have the same linguistic abilities or background knowledge.

According to the National Council of Teachers of English in their Definition of 21st Century Literacies position statement (2008):

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in this 21st century global society must be able to: Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology; build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought; design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes; manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information; create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts; and attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

This definition has given new meaning to the process and understanding of literacy because it respects and honors that literacy has moved beyond the origins of literate and illiterate. It certainly does not allow for the learner to be reduced to such simply stated terms which can carry significant life-long implications. Rather, this new definition illuminates possibilities for the



learner and the ways in which information is acquired. The new definition reflects a diverse twenty-first century learner group.

Acquisition of information and learning take on different forms at different grades levels. In the middle and high school years, these distinctions can be stark and uncomfortable for students. While ability gaps, background knowledge, race, and socioeconomics are not necessarily terms young adults and teens would use -- these are the markers for students that may make their learning experiences and achievement markedly different. That is why it is essential for education to offer experiences that embrace diversity, honor culture and individuality, and promote the growth of individual students in a classroom community environment. There are many ways in which we can reach students through diverse literacy opportunities.

As a teacher, it is essential to know your students. It is essential that teachers understand their students background knowledge and needs both as a person and learner. The Reading Workshop model in a secondary setting accommodates the array of reading level and abilities that students may bring to the classroom. By allowing students to access texts that are personal it can allow students to find texts that are culturally and personally important. It helps students to make greater links to themselves and the world around them. In using a workshop model it requires the teacher to meet in a conference setting with students. This helps to build trust in the classroom and show that reading and sharing ideas and information is a practice that all people are a part of and invested in on a personal level. Since students will be working in pairs and groups to talk about their individual books, it fosters a community of literacy and literacy practices. It helps students to forge relationships that connect ideas and experiences beyond the book. Most importantly, it affords the opportunity to build respect and community for students' growth and success. It allows students to collaborate over more rigorous mentor texts while still feeling success with independent appropriately leveled books. These expectations and principals of the workshop model value the individual reader while investing the classroom community in greater experiences and expectations as a collective group.

The Mini-Lesson

The mini-lesson is a crucial part of the workshop model. This is a short lesson, approximately seven to ten minutes in length. This lesson should be carefully planned around a specific unit or topic related the current area of focus or study. Topics are selected by the teacher and based on student need or curricular areas. The mini-lessons should help students to develop greater meaning and understanding of their individual texts. Mini-lessons can vary from focuses on reading skills and elements, to writing skills and expectations and can evaluate any aspects of reading or writing. Often, when choosing a mini-lesson set there should be a goal or theme that will work cooperatively to create a larger context in a unit. For example, learning to evaluate concepts of narration and perspective can be connected with the elements of tone and voice. Therefore, the mini-lesson can address the use of narration and can further suggest deeper meanings the author may have intended. Ultimately, you choose a mentor text that can be read as a class with support from the teacher. Working through the piece of reading, as a class, sharing the ideas you are trying to prove and guide students in the mini-lesson. After evaluating and synthesizing the text students will move to independent practice. In doing this, students will use partners as a resource, reflect on their texts and utilize new knowledge. Students show evidence and application of their mini-lesson in their reading journals. These serve as great sources of conversation for conferences and evidence of thinking for grading.



Mentor Texts

A mentor text can be a book, short story, poem, or any piece of writing used to teach reading skills and strategies. Additionally, it can be a video, podcast or audio materials. The text is used with the entire class as a model for a specific purpose. The mentor text is valued as the center of the lesson which will model a specific skill or strategy. A teacher should use texts that contain valuable examples for the mini-lesson or skills they would like to model. For example, a teacher may model a comprehension strategy showing how to make inferences based on the information provided in the text. Mentor texts should be rigorous to read and require deep thinking skills. The mentor text should be fairly short in length, but accessible for discussion and thought provoking dialogue. Kelly Campbell (2007), author of *Less Is More*, uses her experiences in the classroom and the power of short thought provoking texts. She offers excellent examples of how short texts, which can be used as mentor texts, can engage students in meaningful reading as a class. Campbell offers a variety of text references in various formats to help teachers find meaningful resources.

Choice as a Powerful Tool

Allowing students to read across a variety of genres and authors exposes them to literature in a plethora of forms and settings. Students can abandon a book in search of a text with greater interest and comfort. They should not abandon books constantly, but when given mini-lessons on how to choose appropriate books this may limit the issue. Classroom libraries are helpful and aid in book choice. Additionally, school and public libraries are great places to find books if resources are limited. Students can access texts via the web, which allows exposure to alternative texts and may help to meet the demands of budgets which may not allow for classroom libraries. Public libraries will offer aid and resources for students as well. Allowing students to use technology such as iPads, smart phones, iPods, Kindles, and Nooks may help to spark interest in and access to books.

Purpose – Making Reading Meaningful

In the Reading Workshop process every student should work towards defining him/herself as a reader. This provides the opportunity for students to read voluminously while still being exposed to mentor texts. Mentor texts have greater complexity and require a more demanding reading experience. By using the mentor text to model the learning process, students then venture off on their own to take their new knowledge and apply it in their own reading. This process of application creates an individual experience which engages the student in their area of interest and at their own reading level. Louise Rosenblatt (1938/2005) states, “The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the text” (p. 30-31). The mentor text creates an opportunity for students to be exposed to more demanding texts in a safer environment. Thus, allowing students to shift new knowledge to their independent reading level and apply instructional methods. Rosenblatt’s statement suggests student history can influence future experiences. Therefore, if a reader encounters a text that is too complex independently it may be a negative experience. However, if a student is supported in a more difficult process and given the support to be successful independently the future applications it will be positive. By making reading an experience for each individual it will change the reading experience for the student. Additionally, it allows for a more purposeful and rigorous experiences overall. It requires students to create work, develop and offer their insights as to how



they arrived at this place of understanding. Therefore, this system of supported practice and independent application is making the independent reading experience more valuable and comprehensive.

Reading Inventory Assessments – What Students Need

In an education world filled with testing, the last suggestion I want to make is to test students more. Nonetheless, by understanding how to match individual students with leveled books, we are enriching their learning experience. This can turn “fake” reading into “real” reading. There are many programs and books that can be purchased to assess students’ reading levels. There are many programs and methods by which teachers can evaluate students. Scholastic Reading Inventory, The Qualitative Reading Inventory, and Teacher’s College Reading Workshop Running Records are all possible avenues to explore. The information detailed below explains some of the qualities and options these programs afford the teacher and student.

Scholastic Reading Inventory

The Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) is a computer and web based program that can be purchased and administered to students. According to the Scholastic website the SRI is more specifically defined as: “Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) Enterprise Edition is a reading assessment program which provides immediate, actionable data on students’ reading levels and growth over time. SRI helps educators differentiate instruction, make meaningful interventions, forecast growth toward grade-level state tests, and demonstrate accountability.” The SRI is a program a school district must purchase along with licenses to administer it. Completed on-line the passages are smaller and the students choose a multiple-choice answer that reflects; inferences, comprehension, or contextual ideas a student assesses based upon the reading passage. While the passages are short, the task is more daunting as there is no predicted finish time and the test responds to the testers responses. The questions and passages are regulated by the online system. One of the drawbacks of this program is that the results are based solely upon student response. It does not allow for teacher discretion or interpretation. It also relies on student investment to the task for accurate scoring. At the conclusion of the administration the students and teacher are delivered a Lexile score. The SRI program has some notable benefits on the secondary level, including: ease of access for students and teachers, multiple testing at one time and built in data tracking.

Qualitative Reading Inventory

The Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) is a rigorous reading assessment tool. According to the QRI Pearson website this assessment text offers the following: “The QRI-5 has long led the field in offering students and teachers alike a reliable and easy-to-use informal assessment instrument. This Fifth Edition continues to emphasize authentic assessment of children’s reading abilities, from the most emergent readers to advanced readers. One of the keys to the success of the QRI-5 is that it contains narrative and expository passages at each pre-primer through high school level” (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010). The QRI is a means to measure some parts of reading ability or lack thereof. The QRI has many benefits; it is an intensive investigation of the student as a reader. The QRI gives information about fluency, decoding and comprehension. These insights are gained specifically by the tester. The major drawback is its limits for assessing the secondary level student. The QRI testing materials only offer generalized grade level option. These specifically evaluate: sixth grade, upper middle school and high school. Developmentally speaking, a ninth grader is different from a twelfth grade reader and this book



does not reflect those bands of reading ability. However, the passages choices in the book are interesting and varied. The QRI does require some intensive self training for the teacher. One of the greatest elements of the Qualitative Reading Inventory is its cost effectiveness for the teacher as no subscription is required and it contains a CD with reproducible materials.

All assessment tools offer great opportunity to gain insight about students' abilities. However, the best way to assess students is to use a mixture of tools and recognize your students' needs. Students are constantly being tested -- often they do not understand why or what for. By building a relationship with your students and sharing your reading life, students develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the information you gain about them. Regardless of the assessment used, it is essential to share your students' results with them. Making students a part of conversation about their progress presents them with the opportunity for reflection and growth. Working at the secondary level, I collaborate openly with my students and together we build a realistic plan for their reading lives. Tools like the SRI and QRI work well when combined with conferencing and interest inventories -- it can build a thorough picture of who a student is as a reader and what they need.

Leading by Example

The greatest tool a teacher can use is their own experience. If a teacher uses a mentor text and models their own thinking, it helps students to grasp concepts more thoroughly. Also, while mentor texts are generally shorter, they also tend to be more complex. This helps to expose readers to more rigorous texts in a safer environment. When a teacher models their own reading and the decisions they make as a reader, they can help their students make a greater connection to the text. If teachers create and use their own reading journal, it is a great tool during conferences and to share with the class. By crafting a reading journal, the teacher can create a resource directly connected to the teaching they hope the student learns. My reading journal contains evidence of thinking and mini-lesson strategies I have applied in my own reading. The journal is most useful if you are working in conferences. It is a quick resource that can be referenced and set expectations in guiding a student's practice. A teacher needs to make time to read as well. By modeling reading - quietly and purposefully engaging with a text - it helps students to see what this should look and feel like. If a teacher follows this expectation they will be able to share more with their students through their own experience. By reading regularly and responding in a reading journal it helps teachers to better understand and model the thinking we hope to see students use. Reading grade level texts will also give the teacher a wealth of ideas and books to suggest to students.

The Art of Scheduling

The schedule of the workshop may vary from day to day, but the elements should be consistent. Students should be prepared to understand that there are formats of the workshop that may vary from day to day. Students should have anywhere from twenty to thirty minutes to read in class each day. Students will have time to discuss book experiences and choices with a partner. Students can work on writing about reading in their reading journals during their reading or at the conclusion of the reading sessions.

**Two Schedule Options (based on 40 – 42 minute classes):**

Mini-Lesson (7 – 10 minutes)	Read aloud and discuss – Mentor Text (about 15 - 20 minutes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Reading (about 20–25 minutes) • Lesson Reminder/Interruption (10 minutes into independent reading) • Teacher conferences with small groups or individual students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Reading (about 20 minutes) • Teacher conferences with small groups or individual students.
Partner Share (about 3 – 5 minutes)	Class Share (2 – 3 minutes)
Class Share (2 – 3 minutes)	**For either model: Students should be journaling during various moments during independent reading.**

The schedule options can be alternating or used in a variety of ways throughout the week or the unit.

The Reading Journal

In order to build towards students defining him/herself as a reader, they must be able to reflect on their reading journey. By using a reading journal, students will keep track of mini-lesson notes, reading, and reflecting about their individual texts, insights and evidence of thinking during reading. Teachers should plan on crafting their own reading journal as a tool for teaching. The journal can be any kind of notebook. It is ideal to have a notebook where you cannot lose the pages easily. Since this should track students' learning, the various sections can be divided by post-it notes or paper clips. The reading journal can also be a great opportunity for self-expression. By allowing students to decorate the cover of the journal, it can reflect who they are and hope to become as readers. The reading journal also offers a great opportunity for assessment. I create rubrics that look at various elements of their reading journal. Focusing on an appropriate points range and looking for the following measures: neatness, evidence of thinking, evidence of mini-lessons, application of ideas, original thoughts and depths of applications. Students should have evidence of how they are utilizing the lessons taught in class and applying them to their independent practice. Additionally, these notes and insights provide and opportunity for students to create charts, reflections, and more formal pieces of writing about their reading.

Writing about Reading

Writing about reading is as important as reading itself. Students must understand that there is a difference between writing about reading for assessment and understanding versus enjoyment. Students must avoid simplistic responses about plot and basic elements of a story. The use of close reading strategies help students to complete these tasks more effectively. Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2012) state “The primary objective of a close reading is to afford students with the opportunity to assimilate new textual information with their existing background knowledge and prior experiences to expand their schema. The challenge is



in not becoming so focused on background knowledge and prior experiences such that we end up spending little time on the textual information” (p. 179). This suggests that by utilizing the mini-lessons and accessing the text through close reading students become authentic readers. Prompting students to move away from summarizing and towards analytical thoughts and practice. They must begin to look at the craft of writing as opposed to just writing about what they have read. These individual opportunities help students to develop more critical analysis skills because they must theorize independently. When using engaging mini-lessons and mentor texts, students can begin to understand the critical examination of literature. Once taking part in reflective writing in their reading journals, students have the opportunity to facilitate their thinking in reading. Students can also take their writing about reading into small group discussions. Writing about reading is also a great tool for assessment in the workshop model. Student can be both formally and informally assessed when writing about their reading. When students share general thoughts and insights about their reading, I generally give feedback but that is an informal assessment that helps me to understand my student better as a reader. With formal assessments in mind, I often use longer written responses; essays, reflective journal entries and application of lessons to grade students.

Individual Expectations and Experiences

Every student has an individual reading level and reading rate. Lexiles are a commonly used reference tool for rating reading level with book levels. A Lexile reading level can be evaluated through assessment. A reading rate is reading speed. The reading speed can be a fairly easy calculation. From my experience in meeting with a student in a conference, you can see approximately how much or how many pages can be read in one minute. This calculation may vary from book to book, but can be a base standard for the student. If it takes the student longer than one minute to read a full page, the book may be too difficult or the content may be too complex. If this is the circumstance, you should have a short discussion with your student about the book and have them read the same page aloud to you. This will help to assess some simple ideas about students’ fluency and decoding. When students are struggling with contextual words or phrases, you may prompt the student to explain what the text is about. If they are continuing to struggle to build meaning, it may be a good idea to talk to the student about abandoning the text for a more meaningful and relatable selection. The information about reading rate expectations cannot be pinned down to an exact number; however, there are many resources and valid information about reading expectations.

Student expectations should change frequently in the workshop model. Since the student is reading more frequently and exposed to voluminous amounts of text, their reading speed and level should increase and naturally the reading expectations should as well. Setting expectations should be a collaborative decision made by the student with teacher support. Working towards individual goals to meet student needs is the key. For some students this may be setting a specific number of books to others it could be to set a number of pages. Students should look at their reading endurance and fluency and make a decision based on their experience and hopeful expectations. Students ought to create a book list for future reading so that they are prepared to move into their next text with ease.

Rigor in Reading

Working in a workshop model enables a teacher to differentiate for each individual student. Additionally, scaffolding can be built into the workshop model rather naturally. Being able to create a rigorous and individually meaningful experience is the hope of any teacher. Since



students are working in texts that are uniquely aimed towards their skill set, it helps them and the teacher to create meaningful expectations for their reading. There have been various schools of thought on the various levels where students should be reading. The levels where students read: Instructional, Independent and Frustration. At the Independent level students are reading with 95% or better accuracy and the texts comprehension is easily understood for the student. At the Instructional level the reading poses more of a challenge but is understood by the student and read with approximately 90% accuracy. A Frustration level text is problematic and difficult for the reader with an understanding of less than 90% accuracy (Poirier, 2009). With research and evolution theory there are various opinions on what students should be reading at what levels. With the onset of the Common Core State Standards the suggestion is that students spend more time in rigorous texts. Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2016) state, “This is in contrast to most past discussion of this topic, which emphasized how overly complex text may impede learning. Such discussion therefore focused on developing various readability schemes and text gradients to help teachers determine which books might be too hard for their students. The new standards instead propose that teachers move students purposefully through increasingly complex text to build skill and stamina” (p. 58). For many secondary level students their textbooks are written at the frustration level. As Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey write:

Gone are the days when text was judged as difficult solely on the basis of sentence length and syllable count. We now know that many factors affect text complexity. With this increased understanding, teachers do not have to rely on intuition to figure out which books their students can handle. Instead, teachers can select texts worthy of instruction and align their instructional efforts to ensure that all their students read complex, interesting, and important texts” (p. 62).

In my experience it is a careful balance of texts that entice young and impressionable readers. It is essential that readers grow for successful reading in the future, however having the student invested in what they are reading is equally important. Mentor and group texts that are rigorous or Frustration level reading are best utilized in a setting that offers support, but encourages growth and risk. Quickly moving through texts in the Independent to Instructional ranges is key. Students benefit from reading these texts independently. The optimal environment will expose students to Frustration level texts with support and lessons to disseminate these texts. Learning methods to approach more complex texts in the Instructional level texts will help students to gain confidence in the process. By exposing students to a variety of levels and texts they will have a more authentic learning and reading experience. Additionally, by conferencing with other students and the teacher, it enables students to get one-on-one reading discussion experience. Students, over time, will learn to set goals based on their own growth and development as a reader.

Conferences – Making Greater Meaning

Conference time is one of the greatest assets of the workshop model. It affords teachers the opportunity to work one on one or in small groups with students. In his book *How's It Going?*, Carl Anderson (2000) states, “Conferring is not the icing on the cake; it is the cake.” In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, one-on-one time with students can be difficult to schedule. By giving students independent time to read and practice the skills, they have discovered in a shared text or a mini-lesson there is now time to work one-on-one or with student in small skill groups. A one-on-one conference with teacher and student should have a variety of focus points which can include: book discussions, mini-lesson development, individual reading



goals and reflections. Group conferences or strategy groups can target areas of weakness or strengths in a small group of students with similar needs. Meeting in strategy groups can help both students and teacher to help develop a skill further or to re-teach a lesson. Simply stated the conference is a lot like a conversation about a topic. Some basic established guidelines will help students to be prepared for conferences. For example, having students come to the conference with a question or something they would like to share is a great place to start. You want your conference to be purposeful. Give students guidelines and expectations for what conferences will focus on and offer next steps for them to move into more independent practice.

Anderson's book *How's It Going* is an unparalleled resource for any level teacher. It offers practical and accessible advice on conferring in general. The book often suggests to keep the process simple and the function of the conference clear. You want to establish the baseline, discuss information, answer questions, provide positive remarks and offer students guidance for what their next steps should be. It often helps if a conference is modeled for students to understand what their role is and what it looks like. I record samples with other adults and often play them for students. Helping students to create goals, in writing, they hope to accomplish is a great method for student achievement. By giving students the opportunity to set the objectives of their conferences and goals it puts students in a position to be an active participant in directing their learning. Often, one of the largest concerns among teacher is the classroom management aspect. If you are conferring with one students, how are the others held to task. I often utilize a working agreement system with my classes. In collaboration we brainstorm and compile the expectations and qualities of a workshop classroom. It is a working agreement that all students are a part of and in that are more invested in. Many times if there is failure to comply students will see that reflected in their participation grade. However, it is my experience that students like the workshop and the independence that comes with it. To that end, they are very respectful of our working environment.

Partnerships – Come Together

Collaboration is a quintessential component of the Reading and Writing Workshop model. Students should be working in reading partnerships throughout various units and lessons. These partnerships can last the length of books, semesters, or units of material. Partnerships are an indispensable component of the workshop model. Students can be partnered in a number of ways -- interest in genres, reading level, student or teacher selected partnerships. The partnership is a way to help students engage in conversations and material about reading and lessons. Typically a partnership can be a pair, but can also be a group of three or four. It is a constant and consistent relationship that helps to grow interaction and sharing knowledge in reading. When students engage in meaningful discussions about books it changes the way they value their own personal reading experiences. It affords them a more authentic experience with books and the ability to discuss them in meaningful ways. The teachers can help to facilitate the role of partnerships through modeling. Having another teacher to demonstrate or a student who feels comfortable modeling are great ways to share these interactions. Additionally, sample conferences can be recorded at another time and played for students. These offer the ability to replay them conveniently and post them on a classroom website. As teachers, our greatest goal is to prepare our students for the future. Having students make choices, discuss content and ideas employs a more practical real world experience. Partnerships can be chosen by the students or the teachers. The role of the partnership can be modeled in a mini-lesson for students. By



allowing students to discuss texts we give them greater meaning. It teaches students that we value books and the ideas and information we gain from them.

Assessment – How to Get the Grades

Rubrics are a natural ally in a workshop model. They work towards holding the teacher and student accountable and setting standards for the whole group. Since rubrics allow for growth and change, they are an excellent way to give students opportunities to set higher goals and develop skills. Rubrics can be used for the reading journal and overall participation in the workshop. Students should be directed that their journal writing will be the basis for more developed pieces of writing. Showing growth and having students engage in reflection can become meaningful pieces of grading in the workshop. The more basic elements such as reading speed, completed texts, and well-developed responses are all helpful to the grading process. Having students set their own goals and standards is an important part of this process as well. Specifically, I look to assess students in a number of capacities. Student engagement and commitment as participation is a great place to start in the assessment process. When students see that you value effort as an integral part of the workshop it offers an opportunity for success that they are confident is within their control. Additionally, writing about reading is a formal opportunity for assessment in the workshop model. I utilize the conferences as opportunity for grading as well. Students who come prepared to conferences with their materials and ready to engage show their commitment and understanding of expectations. Students often look forward to conferring and they are invested in this process. Finally, the reading journal and writing generated from lessons and notes are also assessment items. The journal itself receives a grade focusing on the following measures: neatness, evidence of thinking, evidence of mini-lessons, application of ideas, original thoughts and depths of applications. Finally, formal written assessments such as: essays, reflective journal entries and application of lessons can be great ways to measure student learning and progress.

Common Core Learning Standards

The Common Core Learning Standards website states: "The Standards set requirements not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines." The workshop model not only supports these activities, but helps students to complete these with more independence and greater exposure to text. The overarching goal of the Common Core is to get students to a place where they are "college and career ready." The standards further describe people who are college and career ready as those who can: think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate, to create and innovate. The workshop model not only embraces independence, but helps students to grow and learn in ways that are specific to their learning styles and needs. The Common Core Standards have created a new set of guidelines for many educators and the workshop model helps to meet many of these new changes. The workshop facilitates the use of best practices and methods such as scaffolding and differentiation.

Ideas for Lessons and Engagement

If students feel like a teacher respects and invests in them - the investment will be returned. During this process of overhauling my reading and writing curriculum, I came to understand more about students and how they learn. I also came to the realization that the teacher must meet the needs of their individual students not just the standards. I always aim to saturate



my planning with student-centered activities and differentiated instruction. However, I am constantly adapting and adjusting my planning to find new ways to teach material more meaningfully. Every year, every class, every student is different and that means the teaching needs to be different. I make it a point to give students a voice in their learning and to give them active and engaging roles in their learning. By pushing myself to use more innovative techniques and approaches, I hope to meet the needs of the students and better prepare them for the future.

To bring in an element of technology into the workshop, students will “Tweet” about what we are reading. Every Tuesday in our classroom is “Twitter Tuesday.” Students are given the opportunity to bring their electronic devices to class. At the end of class we “Tweet” about the application of our mini-lesson, current book recommendation or criticisms, and any comments students may want to make to bolster the classroom conversation. Students may compose a “Tweet” at any time we use #brunowbooks to keep all students connected to the thread. It offers a unique way for every student to voice their ideas and opinions about class and their individual texts. Students who may not have access to technology can use my computer or pair up with a partner and they simply sign the “Tweet” with their initials or name. I offer a live stream of these “Tweets” on the SmartBoard so we can view our discussion thread as a class. Giving students the opportunity to read texts and make applications in their own interests offers truly individual learning experience.

Conclusion

Readers Workshop is a rewarding and unique framework that helps to serve the needs for diverse learners. While the concept and organization can be a bit daunting to some, the results make the work very rewarding. Teaching is about building a program for what students need without sacrificing expectations. Readers Workshop affords this opportunity in the secondary classroom. As teachers we have the ability to provide students with opportunities for growth and evolution. As students’ lives become more complex, it is crucial to not be comfortable and complacent, but strive to create meaningful and engaging lessons. I have taken risks in my teaching and try to provide authentic and significant opportunities for my students to learn. The outcomes have been rewarding, and at the same time have also helped me to grow and learn. By valuing students as a group of individual and diverse learners we can provide them with authentic experiences in models like the workshop.

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