SHOW, DON'T TELL: READING WORKSHOP FOSTERS ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This article details the secondary English teacher's application of a reader's workshop to teach literature.

I wish I'd learned to teach reading early in my career as an English teacher. Granted, I intuitively adjusted my instructional support for my students, such as reading aloud the complex text *Romeo and Juliet,* but I didn't consciously know much about the science of teaching reading.

Earlier, I assigned reading as homework and then got frustrated that students didn't read at home. I resorted to summarizing the text, lecturing, or building study guides—worksheets with blanks to fill in as students "read." I didn't know how to set up my lessons with the clear intention of teaching students how to read literature. The reading workshop (see Table 1), coupled with more knowledge about reading strategies and processes, gave me a structure to teach literature *and* teach reading.

The workshop approach is not new. Before Donald Graves wrote *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983), my dad used the workshop approach in his shop class. He'd gather his students and demonstrate how to weld a trailer hitch before sending them forth to work on their own projects. Though the workshop model was prevalent in product-oriented classes, until recently, I did not use the reading workshop in my English class.

I believe that the workshop grows readers, crucial in today's schools where more than eight million secondary students read below grade level. Moreover, three thousand students— most with limited reading skills—drop out every day (NCTE, 2006). These drop-outs find reading troublesome and boring; their lockers are full of books they cannot read. Yet research shows that all adolescents can read (Allington, 2009) when teachers model strategies, offer diverse texts, hold discussions, and provide students the opportunities to process their thinking by writing, acting, and pursuing their own inquiries (NCTE, 2006). Reading workshop provides the structure for students to enhance their reading confidence, competence, and enjoyment.

But first a disclaimer: the workshop will not, all by itself, solve our students' reading issues. To make a difference, schools need to increase the amount of in-house reading time. According to John Goodlad (2004), high school students read about seven minutes a day. Students practice other

skills for hours, skills like driving, playing video games, and shooting baskets. This practice results in competence and enjoyment, without which students cannot be successful. So the classroom workshop isn't enough. If schools want competent, engrossed readers, they should provide an additional forty-five to sixty minutes of reading time during the day (Allington, 2009). However, because increasing school-wide reading is beyond my control, I want to teach reading while teaching my content in my own classroom.

Table 1	
Basic Reading Workshop Template	
Segment	Activity
Connect	Remind students of what we learned prior and connect with today's lesson…
Mini lesson	Text to Model:_____
	Tools: _____ (poster, journal, highlighter, post it notes, visual representation, discussion guide, etc.)
Guided Activity	Students turn to one another and take turn reading a paragraph apiece from the text and talking about the application of the strategy.
Link	Now, have students read on. Tell think about the strategy as they go.
Workshop Time/ Conferring	Confer with students about strategy and what they are thinking; keep some anecdotal notes
Content writing	Might have students do some quick writing in their academic journals, either what they noticed as they read or better yet how they connect the text with their own personal experiences.
Reminder	As they pack up to go at the end of the period, recap one or two key ideas to hold onto.

A Bit of Reading Knowledge

Knowing some basic principles of reading instruction helps me grow readers. These principles include scaffolding, teaching reading strategies, balancing instruction from literal comprehension to inferential reasoning, and using a reading process.

Being mindful of scaffolding, I adjust my instructional support. For example, my homework reading assignments are near my students' independent reading levels, meaning they can read the text unassisted at about 95 percent accuracy. Challenging texts, on the other hand, require more classroom support. Armed with basic knowledge about text difficulty, I match my instructional support with my students' ability to read texts (Beers, 2001).

Besides knowing more about scaffolding my reading instruction, I understand reading strategies— what readers do in order to decode and comprehend. Research claims that strategy instruction

helps students grasp the full meaning of texts (Tovani, 2000). These strategies are actions such as visualizing, questioning, annotating, and interpreting, which I demonstrate, showing students how I think my way through text.

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Six Traits and Bloom-like Strategies

Building Context
Knowing the author
Noting the text features
Recognizing the genre
Seeing the structure/mode
Realizing the historical time, cultural overtones, social issues

Decoding Words
Gaining fluency
(Pause, articulation, varied pace, pitch, volume)
Growing vocabulary
Decoding punctuation

Comprehending Literally—Reading the lines
Retelling, Summarizing, Paraphrasing
Questioning
Visualizing
Marking facts
Predicting

Interpreting Inferences—Reading between the lines
Inferring/Wondering
Analyzing
Finding the universal themes/symbols

Synthesizing—Reading beyond the lines
Making something new—writing, discussing
Making connections: text, self and world

Evaluating
Being metacognitive and monitoring oneself
Figuring out the author's values and comparing to one's own

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Figure 1. Six Traits of Reading mirroring Bloom's Taxonomy.

Another tool to balance my reading instruction is Dwyer and Thompson's Six Traits of Reading (1999), heavily influenced by Bloom's taxonomy. This Bloom-like model balances literal and higher order thinking while mirroring the reading process (see Figure 1). Building context, the first rung on the Six Traits ladder, means that before students begin to read, I guide them to be conscious

about the context of the book. Is it a novel or a poem? Is it historical or current? Is it short or long? I show students that before readers read, they bring their background knowledge about the genre, author and subject to the text, so that, like Velcro, the text's message "sticks." Also, good readers know why they're reading. They have a purpose. Am I reading to learn how to adjust the wallpaper on my phone, or am I reading to learn the meaning of life? When students understand their purpose in reading, they are more able readers. The reading process exemplified in the Six Traits model begins before reading, when readers develop background knowledge and set a purpose.

Decoding is the second step in the process, according to the Six Traits model. Decoding-type lessons include reading pace: skimming or slowing down, re-reading, or relishing text. When I read poetry, for example, I read quickly and then go back to soak up more meaning, listening with my brain's inner ear. When reading a biology text, I annotate, using a highlighter or notes, and slow down to grasp unfamiliar words and syntax. I model what I do when I run into unfamiliar vocabulary, how I visualize scenes, how I recognize foreshadowing or comic relief. During reading, readers monitor their comprehension, gathering key ideas and supporting details.

After-reading activities are interpretation, synthesis and evaluation. Working at the interpreting level, students figure out the themes and claims; they stand back and get the big picture and consider the author's world view including bias, point of view, and veracity. When students synthesize, they connect their own experiences to the text, they check the text against other texts, and they apply what they've learned or experienced to create their own products, be it a poem or a Lego's robot. Evaluation means students compare and contrast the author's view with other thinkers, judging the usefulness of the text to oneself, and wondering about the author's values.

Clearly, reading process and reading strategies weave into Bloom's taxonomy. Also, this taxonomy echoes the national reading standards (2010), which ask students first to read closely, noting key ideas and details, and then to interpret themes, synthesize and evaluate.

HOW THE WORKSHOP WORKS

To teach my students all the lessons I've learned about reading process and strategies, I use the workshop model that includes a mini-lesson, student reading time, and teacher conferencing (Bennett, 2007).

The mini-lesson is the first component of a workshop. My dad called this a demonstration. During the mini-lesson, students receive direct instruction, learning how to decode and comprehend text at increasingly sophisticated levels. Davey's (1983) think-aloud, a way to reveal what the teacher is thinking as he or she reads and makes sense of text, is an essential tool to *show, not tell*. Following the demonstration, I might guide pairs of students to practice together before launching into independent work. When students start to read silently, I walk among them, conferring: redirecting, asking questions, taking a few notes, or seeking teachable moments. Finally, I end the class period with a reminder of the day's lesson.

SAMPLE LESSON

Because eighth graders struggle with bullying and its flipside, victimhood, I want to build a sense of community in my classroom early in the year through reading, writing, and discussing, activities that Jeff Wilhelm says have the potential to transform students' thinking and behaving (2010). I want my classroom to be a place where everyone belongs, where students can walk in and breathe more easily, where all students feel connected with something or someone: the teacher, other students and the literature.

Therefore, I select an engaging novel for the whole class to read, a novel that is not too difficult, reveals the story of a bully transformed, and creates the feeling of common experience in our room. I hope together we can build my students' capacity to feel empathy toward others. The book I select is the novel *Touching Spirit Bear* (Mikaelsen, 2001). In it, the main character, Cole, is a bully who beats up a weaker boy and almost kills him. Cole is taken to court and given the option of juvenile detention or Circle Justice—rehabilitation on an island where he has to learn to survive. Circle Justice is based on Native American practice. The Native American who takes him to the island gives him advice about how to survive and warns him of a massive bear that roams the island. In a spine-tingling scene, Cole is attacked by the bear and eventually learns to tame his anger and hatred.

I decide to use a companion text, the picture book, *Thank You Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco (1998) to begin the unit. The main character is the author as a school girl, who is bullied on the playground because she cannot learn to read. I like to use this picture book for my mini-lesson because it has a touching message, it is set in school where my students experience put-downs and attacks, and it is viewed by my students as nonthreatening. I see no sense in intimidating my readers at the start of the year. This unit uses a whole class novel and a picture book, but these are not the only text combinations possible during workshop. Other texts include self-selected novels, textbook snippets, classics, newspaper clippings, poems, and speeches.

During the first workshop lesson, I plan to introduce the theme of bullying and victimhood, read the picture book, and help students connect with literature by writing a quick anecdote about a time when they were bullied. To introduce the theme of bullying, I post a T-chart on the wall. I label the left side *Characteristics of Bullies* and ask students to list some. I record their words on the chart--*angry, impulsive, lacking empathy, aggressive, domineering, power-seeking*. After reading the book aloud, I ask students to return to the chart, adding words on the left column and putting checkmarks in the right column if these traits are exhibited by the bullies in the text.

When I finish reading the book aloud, I ask, "Isn't it astonishing what some people do with their lives in spite of obstacles? I am amazed by the stalwart human spirit." Then I ask students to jot a quick write in their journals. I offer some ideas. "I remember a time when I was bullied, and it changed my life. I bet you have similar memories. Let's write about a time when a teacher saved you or a time you bullied someone or an incident when you were bullied."

My goals with writing are to have students connect with the theme of the text and bring their own life experiences to our classroom (Daniels, 2007). I tell students the drill: we write like our hair is

on fire and we don't cross out or worry about correctness yet. We race along trying to capture this butterfly of memory before it flits away. I set a timer for five minutes, and I write, too, modeling on the white board. I read my quick write aloud and ask students to share with one another, perhaps in a pair share, to honor the words and experiences (Romano, 1987). This mini-lesson stretches into a maxi-lesson, but there is always another day when the lesson is short and the reading time is longer.

A subsequent lesson might be to hold a discussion. I might ask, "What makes kids bully and laugh at the victim? Are kids monsters, cruel and mean, born to be bad?" Serious questions like this deserve serious discussion involving all class members. My version of a Socratic Circle requires all students to speak and build on the speaker(s) who went before. The discussion rolls around the circle of desks with students keeping score that they contribute and that they tag onto the speaker who spoke before them.

Anna: Well, I sure don't think all kids are monsters. I never bullied anyone in my life.

Sammy: Remember in third grade, Anna, when Jeremy fell on the playground and split his pants? I bet you laughed then. It's pretty hard to be perfect your whole life.

Taquisha: Well, I sorta agree with Anna cuz I'm pretty good about other people. I know what it's like to get teased. I was like that kid in the book and didn't learn to read until fourth grade and Mrs. Lesher took time to tutor me, just her and me. She saved me.

Grady: I think it's easier for girls to be good like Taquisha because boys hafta be, like, cool.

Another mini-lesson might be to help students understand the structure of text. This is an important concept built into the Common Core reading standards. In this case the text structure is the narrative represented with a plotline, the familiar pattern of organizing narrative. I draw the plotline and explain how the text begins with exposition when Polacco gives background, introduces characters including the grandparents who love literacy, and presents the problem: when Trisha goes to school she doesn't immediately learn to read. As the plotline ascends, other events happen--the grandparents die, the mother moves her family to California, and Trisha continues to have trouble in school. The turning point is when a teacher finally notices Trisha's suffering and begins to help her. I show students that the story resolves at the tail end of the plotline when Trisha learns to read and in the epilogue, when Trisha, an adult now and an author, meets the teacher who turns her life around. "Thank you, Mr. Falker," Patricia Polacco writes. "Thank you."

I create these lessons to demonstrate the use of strategies, reading process, and Bloom's hierarchy of thinking. The goals of the lesson also include having students write and discuss in response to texts. After the mini-lessons, students have time to read the central text, the novel *Touching Spirit Bear,* and apply the strategy they've learned.

CONCLUSION

Students learn how to read during reading workshop. I watch, I notice, I lean toward them to observe and fine tune my instruction. As an English teacher, I teach literature that ranges from nonfiction to fiction, from prose to poetry, and I teach students to respond to that literature by helping them be conscious about their thinking. In the end my goal is for students to know about the human journey revealed through literature and to love what reading can do for them all the rest of their lives as they deepen their comprehension and transform their hearts.

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