One Story Creates Another: Using Book Clubs to Promote Inquiry in the Content Areas

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Abstract

Book clubs provide an innovative structure to study course content. Teachers can supplement the use of traditional textbooks and primary sources by including narratives that provide personal perspective into world events. Although more typical of English language arts classrooms, incorporating the workshop model into content area instruction merged disciplinary-specific skills with the more advanced literacy skills expected of students in high school. This article describes how two teachers organized an inquiry-based instructional unit on World War II that allowed students to examine the stories of youth using a lens of "action and adversity." Students showed greater engagement and higher levels of self-directed learning when participating in book clubs over the course of the unit.

Keywords: Book Clubs, Secondary Education, Inquiry, Literacy, Student Learning, Workshop Model

Introduction

Regardless of our circumstances or culture, stories surround us. Yet, it is the very ubiquity of stories that can make us forget their power in shaping our decisions and actions, personally and professionally. Some stories, however, are better than others.

The "truth" of a story can be more compelling, albeit different, than the facts upon which it is built. Quite often, we have found that the actual people, dates, or events played out in a story do not always mean as much as the message gleaned from these facts. As educators, this discrepancy between story and reality fascinates but also puzzles us.

Why is it that what actually happened does not always merit the same interest as a story that may play fast and loose with the facts? Nonetheless, stories remain a powerful teaching tool; they bring life—in all its complexity, tragedy, hope, and diversity—to *life*. In sharing stories, we reduce the distance between what is real to us and what reality has looked and felt like for others.

Rethinking Instruction: The Power of Stories

Our belief in the power of stories and the ways that they can challenge and provoke led us to create a book club in a co-taught section of ninth grade modern world history. Although this class of 21 students was culturally and academically diverse, only one student was identified as an English learner. Eight students received special education support both in and out of the classroom. As a university faculty member who taught exclusively evening classes, Régine had the flexibility to join Joe's high school class for the duration of this project, which spanned the final quarter of the school year.

Throughout the year, students had participated in a variety of research-based inquiry projects and discussion activities. This preparation set the stage for a multitext book club experience. According to Daniels and Zemelman (2014), a book club is the classroom equivalent of the adult social gatherings in which individuals come together to discuss a text that they all have read. In that regard, book clubs are not formal classroom discussions wherein students raise their hands to answer teacher-posed questions. Instead, they are extended opportunities for students to exchange ideas and questions with peers who share an interest in a topic. To that end, we initiated the book club toward the end of the school year when many students were thinking more about the summer vacation than class content.

We had three broad goals that shaped our work in this project. First, through book clubs, we wanted to explore content in a way that made it personal and immediate. Second, we wanted to help students understand an era that shaped our contemporary world by asking them to read high interest, critically acclaimed narratives (fiction and nonfiction). And, third, we wanted to investigate how using the workshop model as an overarching design for the book clubs impacted student engagement and learning. We organized our work around the compelling question, "How do individual stories shape our perspectives toward broad historical issues?"

Workshops include brief and targeted mini-lessons that prepare students for extended periods of work time throughout one or multiple class periods (Tovani, 2011). Joe had been exploring a workshop model in his high school social studies class for the full year, whereas Régine routinely asked the preservice and in-service teachers in her education classes to consider the ways in which the workshop model might promote greater engagement across the content areas. In designing our book club unit, we believed that this structure might facilitate the inquiry, collaboration, and authenticity needed for students to develop and answer their own essential questions from class content.

Graves (1983) and Murray (1982) championed workshops in the classroom because they afforded students and teachers alike the opportunity to learn in an environment characterized by choice, structure, and community. They argued that these environments facilitated authentic discussion, collaboration, and intellectual risk-taking, which in turn led to a greater willingness to refine and revise thinking based on the exposure to multiple perspectives and meaningful feedback. Atwell (1987) later encouraged secondary teachers to ground all reading and writing instruction in a workshop approach since students learn best when the content they study is both interesting and relevant to their own lives.

Typically, classroom use of a workshop model is associated with instruction in English/language arts classrooms. Yet, the approach has its roots in apprenticeship that goes back thousands of years. The Code of Hammurabi, often studied in courses dedicated to ancient history, created teaching guidelines for artisans so that vital craftsmanship might be passed on to subsequent generations. Later, in the early Middle Ages, craft guilds emerged to not only oversee standards for a profession, but also dictate working conditions for apprentices. Still later, other fields such as education, religion, and agriculture took on components of apprenticeship to allow for novitiates to enter a field, ideally with the guidance and support necessary to become independent professionals.

Such thinking and action are closely aligned with the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978); his development of social constructivist theory in the early 20th century brought to educators' attention the importance of collaboration, community, and shared construction of knowledge (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). To that end, we believed that using the workshop model to investigate content would disrupt the traditional positionality of students and teachers in the classroom. Specifically, students could gain authority from their own study of diverse texts rather than depending upon the teacher to determine what was important to know and discuss (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991).

Social constructivist theory is pertinent here because it speaks to how knowledge is constructed and reconstructed across time and setting. For instance, disciplinary literacy concepts that have grown from a more generic premise of content area reading and writing (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). With disciplinary literacy, competence in basic or intermediate literacy skills creates a foundation for learning the more advanced language and thinking skills that are necessary to move a specific field forward. While necessary, basic and intermediate literacy skills alone do not initiate students into using the distinct epistemologies of multiple disciplines.

Disciplinary literacy focuses on what experts in the field *do* as well as *say*. Such positioning impacts their ability to develop new understandings while also viewing "difficulty as an opportunity to stop, reassess, and employ strategies for making sense of problems" (Newkirk, 2012, p. 121). Yet, many high school students still need support in strategic reading before they can be expected to read, interpret, and respond to texts like historians or other subject matter experts (Brozo et al., 2013; Faggella-Luby et al., 2012).

For these reasons, we valued the structure of a workshop model because it is student-centered and facilitates the use of broad reading skills and strategies, such as summarization, making connections, and inference. At the same time, we believed book clubs would create low-risk, high-impact activities through which students could hone disciplinary literacy skills specific to historical thinking.

How Workshops Lead to Inquiry

The book club unit was designed around an inquiry arc in which students examined critical questions, applied disciplinary concepts and tools such as corroboration and sourcing, analyzed

historical context, and moved toward informed and thoughtful conclusions (Fullan et al., 2017, Lent, 2016; Wineburg et al., 2011). In its *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, the National Council for the Social Studies (2013) recommended that teachers use such an approach to develop social studies curricula. More recently, Swan et al. (2018) have argued that the inquiry structure can, in fact, be used on a daily basis for teachers to plan both short and extended opportunities for students to grapple with questions, conduct investigations, and synthesize their learning. Based on our own experiences, we found that the inquiry process aligned nicely with the structure of book clubs as well as the components of the workshop model.

Learning from this previous work, we wanted to introduce workshops that would allow students to study the historical content required in the curriculum from multiple perspectives. To do so, we needed to move past traditional textbook content, as well as typical primary sources, to include stories in our teaching. These stories, both fiction and nonfiction, were a compelling way for students to explore issues and circumstances that can seem far removed from their own lives. Creating the book club, *Action and Adversity: Stories of Youth during WWII*, allowed us to do just that.

While there is no shortage of great books dealing with historical themes, the titles we chose were those books that followed the interwar period, which students had just studied, and had a protagonist roughly the same age as our students. Each title (*The Boys Who Challenged Hitler: Knud Peterson and the Churchill Club* by Phillip Hoose*; Between Shades of Grey* by Ruta Sepetys*; Eleanor's Story: An American Girl in Hitler's Germany* by Eleanor Ramrath Garner*; Requiem: Poems of the Terezin Ghetto* by Paul Janeczko*; The Art of Keeping Cool* by Janet Taylor Lisle*;* and, *Unlikely Warrior: A Jewish Soldier in Hitler's Army* by Georg Rauch) was named on at least one notable books for young people list (e.g., NCSS, ALA, Nutmeg, etc.)

While we were familiar with some of the books already, there were several that we were reading ourselves for the first time. The fact that we did not "know" the books in the sense of having taught them before actually gave our interactions with book club members more authenticity. Our voices when discussing the texts were equal to those of the students. We were not explaining what the stories meant but, rather, sharing our own insights in much the same way as the students. And, like them, we became more interested in the stories of each book as we heard them discussed in class.

Offering Choice and Empowering Students

Choice is an important element of reading engagement and motivation (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010); yet, choosing a book can still be difficult for many students. For this reason, we initially created stations where small groups of students could preview the books. Each station had a different book and a different set of activities to help students make their decisions. For instance, at the station for *The Boys Who Challenged Hitler*, one student read aloud the description of the book on the inside front cover and then they all watched a brief video on the book posted to Google Classroom. Finally, we asked students at this station to respond to this prompt: "Describe a time when you have been angry at an adult for not taking an action you strongly believed was necessary, not only for your own well-being, but for the well-being of the community or others."

After rotating through all the stations and completing similar tasks, students ranked the books in order of preference and, from these ranking sheets, students were organized into five groups. All students were assigned to either their first or second choices; one book, *Unlikely Warrior*, was actually dropped from the book club because it did not figure prominently in the rankings. The stations worked well in guiding students to choosing a text that appealed to them personally, and no students seemed unduly influenced by length or relative difficulty of a book based on first impressions.

Once we formed the groups, we dedicated one class period a week to book clubs, but this time was not considered an add-on to the curriculum. Rather, it became an opportunity to study historical perspectives of significant events from personal vantage points. Each of these texts dealt with causality; yet, the way in which they were written allowed us to examine that concept on a more intimate level.

Each story showed how adversity affected individuals in ways that were difficult to control, anticipate, or counter. Yet, the stories also showed what actions people did take and the resulting consequences—sometimes dire and sometimes nearly unnoticeable—but still clearly felt. Because we asked students to consider how individual stories shape our perspectives toward historical issues, questions around causality no longer seemed indistinct, impersonal, or anonymous. Making history personal might have been the greatest benefit of our book clubs.

The "Nuts and Bolts" of Book Clubs: Classroom Implementation

As an instructional approach, the structure of book clubs is also personal because it depends upon the active participation of each group member. Students get to know one another through the shared study of a single text. Each lesson followed the same format, which included sharing learning targets, doing on-demand quick writes, teaching a mini-lesson, discussing the texts, and then participating in a whole-class debriefing.

Learning Targets

Teachers began each lesson by sharing with students the learning targets for the day. Often, our goals were based on students' conceptual development and use of collaborative skills. For example, in one meeting, we shared with students that by the end of the book club that day, they would examine how the concept of *adversity* presented itself within their books, and that they would be able to share their own reactions and questions with their classmates. In that sense, we wanted students to see that the actual discussion process was just as important as the topics under consideration.

Quick Writes

Students and teachers engaged in a quick-write that focused attention on one particular concept that applied to all books under study (e.g., decision-making, identity, adversity). Asking students to articulate ideas about these topics prior to their discussions provided all students with entry points upon which they could build in book clubs.

Content/Concept or Skill-Based Mini-Lessons

Typically, the teachers presented a brief mini-lesson related to the day's learning targets and modeled strategies using their own selected excerpts. For example, when we wanted students to practice asking questions and building upon one another's comments, we engaged in our own back-and-forth discussion to show students how they might do the same in their groups. Mini-lessons are critical to a workshop approach since it is here that we are able to use previously collected assessment data and tailor our instruction to students' needs. Accordingly, when we noticed that students had difficulty sustaining conversations, we designed a mini-lesson to address that.

Book Club Meetings and Close Reading

The bulk of the period consisted of book club discussions and close reading activities. In an effort to keep the discussions authentic, we provided students increasing amounts of autonomy in how they proceeded with those tasks. To begin, students in each group created a calendar of reading and were accountable to one another, more so than their teachers, for the reading. We did direct students to come to book clubs prepared with questions and comments (written on teacher-provided graphic organizers or post-it notes, based on student interest), but the content of the discussions emerged naturally from the ideas posed by the group members.

Discussions almost always began with students sharing their quick-write responses, but even those were meant to be springboards for deeper inquiry. Since inquiries typically lead to more questions than definitive answers, we did not want students to think that we were looking for "correct" or "incorrect" interpretations of the texts. In fact, we often encouraged students to think about how the texts they were reading connected to the print and visual sources they examined on non–book club days.

Teacher Participation

As students met in their book clubs, we immersed ourselves in the discussions, too. In effective workshops, teachers confer with their students to assess their needs and provide guidance, when necessary (Tovani, 2011). Yet, our participation in book club discussions was organic. We moved from group to group, listening and sharing as members, not as the ultimate authorities. If students were misinterpreting (or having difficulty interpreting) a passage, we possibly provided some cues or prompts to direct their attention to the salient points. If group members were uncomfortable sharing their ideas (n.b., this will happen at first!), we sat down with the group and posed some open-ended prompts to get them started.

Overall, our role was dynamic since we were never exactly sure of the approach we would take until we started observing the groups at work. For our own recordkeeping, we relied on Tovani's Group Observation Form to record examples of positive observations as well as areas in which students needed to grow. Whenever possible, we recorded specific quotes from students (without using names) that either provided evidence of students meeting the learning targets or showed that more support would strengthen their ideas.

Debriefing: Let's Hear About the Other Books You're Not Reading

Finally, perhaps the most important part of the book club was the debriefing segment at the end of the period. Each week, we devoted approximately ten minutes for both teacher and student debriefing of the discussions. First, the teachers shared their own observations by projecting the Group Observation Form and highlighting powerful examples that we had noted from different groups. Next, one student from each group shared a brief summation of their discussions from that meeting.

We found it important for students to engage in this closing process since often the ideas they discussed manifested in multiple books. At that time, we encouraged students from other groups to add to the discussion and make connections to their own texts, essentially closing each period with a whole-class book club. As the weeks progressed, students needed less prompting and were more likely to spontaneously and courteously respond to one another.

Beyond the Book: Extending Learning

Students knew what to expect, but the routine was flexible enough to allow some additional, special events including a book talk with Janet Taylor Lisle, the author of *The Art of Keeping Cool*, an investigation of artifacts using a footlocker from the National World War II Museum, and a field trip to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Historic Site in Hyde Park, NY. We observed that the book clubs raised student interest in the era to such a degree that these experiences were especially successful and strengthened their final projects: digital museum displays.

The final project asked students to choose a historical theme from their text and immerse the audience in the events, attitudes, and artifacts that were depicted in the book. Initially, this is where most students had difficulty—not because they didn't want to do the project, but because they expected us to tell them what the theme had to be, which we didn't want to do. So, this led to many open-ended discussions where we reminded one another of themes that had emerged, such as the risks of taking action.

Once students determined a theme, however, we found that they repeatedly returned to their books for ideas on what to include in their displays, which were to include texts, audio/media, artifacts, and interactive activities. While rereading is key to "close reading," it can feel contrived or bore students if it's always teacher-directed. In our case, we found that students were more engaged in the rereading because it was linked to their own unique projects. Not only were students showing growth in their visual representations of their learning, their writing showed improvement in how to align themes from the text with global issues in the 20th century.

Teachers and students alike are creatures of habit. Teachers use strategies that have previously worked for them, and students expect the routine and consistency that they experience in other courses. Not surprisingly, then, taking risks in the classroom can feel uncomfortable, at least for a little while, for both parties. While there are some elements of traditional instruction within the workshop model, we found that book clubs in social studies classes fostered an inquiry-based culture. This shift requires some form of risk-taking: the teacher must give up "control" over the

direction of the learning, and students must become accustomed to the idea that new knowledge and new processes often lead to the generation of additional questions rather than definitive answers.

We All Learned Enough to Try It Again

Based on our experience with book clubs and incorporating workshops in social studies, students thrived in ways we never initially anticipated. One student, Mina, summed up her experience, and maybe her own surprise, by saying: "I read a *whole* book on World War II." Mark remarked that the coordination of the book clubs was "perfect," but "if any improvement could be made, [he] would recommend *more* books." This was especially remarkable because Mark refused to read any of the books assigned in his English class; and, by his teacher's own report, Mark asked if he could read his book club text from history class instead.

Other students commented on how the book clubs helped them discuss "heavy topics" and better appreciate the time period. In an ungraded follow-up survey we administered at the end of the project, 100% of students said that they would recommend their books to others, which is consistent with research on the importance of the development of classroom communities to increase students' independent thinking (Ivey & Johnston, 2015; NCTE, 2018). Students also asked to keep the books, which we hadn't planned on doing because we wanted to do the project again with the same books in the future.

At the end of the day, however, this became a request we could not refuse. Our instincts were right because, two years later, students still stopped Joe in hallway to let him know that they still had their books!

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