



Column

Return to the Trenches

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I returned to teaching in a high school English classroom for one year to experience for myself the changes that had taken place in the last two decades. At the conclusion of the year away from higher education, I resumed my teaching at the university to share my experiences with teacher candidates. There was another motive for my return to the high school classroom. During the previous years, I had been instructing teacher candidates' pedagogy designed to help them engage adolescents in the candidates' literacy classrooms. Other than supervising candidates in the field, I had not been in the high school teaching field in over twenty years, and I wanted to take the opportunity to practice the different instructional strategies I was teaching my university students. The strategies utilized in my high school classroom created an experience for students to connect with the content by creating an environment of critical thinking with a specific focus on the students' interests by providing the students with choices.

The challenges set before me were overwhelming yet exhilarating as I taught six classes of English—two classes of freshmen boys and four of junior boys. It was time for me to discover what inspired and motivated 120 high school boys. My goal was to motivate and inspire students to read, research, ask questions, and think critically. An additional challenge was to ascertain how to ignite their curiosity and motivate them. How could I help these students to connect with and think beyond the words on the page and have a transactional experience with the literature and content? These were the goals I had as I returned to the trenches.

Motivating high school boys was initially difficult because of my large classes. Just as Dewey stated, "Everything is arranged for handling as large numbers of children as possible; for dealing with children en masse, as an aggregate of units; involving, again, that they be treated passively" (1900, p. 49). It seemed more like a banking system—deposit information, withdraw information when asked, and assess the withdrawal. Passive learning was not my style of teaching because students were not ATM machines. They were not engaging and connecting with the material, yet I wanted the students to be actively engaged in their own learning. The system that was in place created an instructional challenge, but I decided my first step was to work to understand the students' experiences and interests to help them make connections to what they already knew. In this way, students could restructure and reformulate their new knowledge by creating a positive, trusting, encouraging environment through conversation. My approach contrasted sharply with the banking system analogy. Discussion is a "free-flowing, open-ended, ungoverned, often chaotic exchange of whatever passes for thought in the minds of the participants" (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007, p.47). True conversations with our learners need to take place because it nurtures and encourages critical thinking.

"Education, therefore, must begin with psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits..." (Dewey, 1897, p. 78) Connecting to the individual student's interests was an obstacle, and the students initially remained quiet and drew away from conversation. In addition, they lacked interest in English class; however, I

discovered that risk taking in front of their peers engaged and interested them if they worked in small groups. As they worked collaboratively, I uncovered their interests and abilities based on dialogue within the groups. Conversations erupted, engagement ensued, and the discussions pushed their thinking as they questioned one another. A transformation in my students was taking place as they immersed themselves in the content, connecting it to their own experiences. The type of learners in my classes and their interests quickly became evident through the discussions and projects.

Creating a social community that connects students' experiences and interests is interactive and engaging and promotes educative growth. For example, when we studied myths and legends in class, the students created visual adaptations of the myths—the one stipulation was that everyone in the group had to appear in their presentation—all students had to be active participants. Before students began, they had to research the origin and contexts of the myths to uncover the ancient origin and the universal truths they would represent, but the visual representation was their choice. Some students wrote scripts and performed them in class; others used pantomime; and those who did not want to act in front of class used technology to represent the myths. Some students developed an iMovie with their groups while reflecting the myth's truths; others created video projects using still and motion pictures creating current versions of the myths. The projects exhibited students' critical thinking and understanding of the content, and the students stated in their post-project evaluations that they enjoyed both the options and collaborating with classmates for the presentation. Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, and McCormick (2010) reported that "giving choices and using online resources may...help improve the understanding of content area reading" (p. 643).

According to the student evaluations, the majority of the students stated that the presentations were engaging, and they put in more effort than they normally did with traditional reports. They had positive memories of the experience and still remembered the truths of the myths six months

later. High-interest literacy activities and instruction are integral to readers' success in literacy programs because adolescents learn literacy skills from their own daily literacy experiences (Rogers, 2004).

The myth project created a transactional literacy experience. Students could recall the content, and their understanding of the material created both an efferent and aesthetic response. Rosenblatt (2005) discussed readers having a transactional experience by finding literature that is personally relevant and connects with readers' lives. In this way, the literature will engage them and help them reflect and respond to the text, linking the ideas in the text to their own personal lives thus increasing its meaning and purpose. At the end of the year, the students continued to reflect on the experience and shared how it enhanced their learning of the material because they could connect it to their own lives and choose how to represent the myths. The experience was authentic, and their collaboration helped them uncover the truths in order to make the connections.

We, as educators, are to create an educative experience that "arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense" (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 3). My students reported that they enjoyed demonstrating their understanding of materials through the creation of PowerPoint presentations, videos, drama, written compositions, and projects of their choosing that stimulated their creativity and comprehension. They had to make connections with their learning experience by utilizing their own interests and applying the concepts to their own lives. In their evaluations, they stated that they had not connected to their own thinking or collaborated to challenge peers' thinking previously in their classes, and these high interest strategies transformed their thinking and made an indelible impression.

To create a literacy experience, educators must connect their content to students' interests and experiences to help them find meaning and purpose in their learning. Another example utilized in my classroom, took place when we were beginning Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Students engaged in inquiry as they researched the Salem Witch Trials.

Reading should be “related to the ongoing stream of his own life” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 64). With this in mind, students conducted research on their iPads, took notes, and participated in classroom discussions that demonstrated their understanding of this moment in our history and connected it to their own experiences and our more current history. Our conversations were fluid and followed the topics students uncovered through their research. Students connected Salem to other events and experiences that paralleled the occurrences of the Salem Witch Trials. Kitsis (2008) states, “students enjoy the chance to develop critical skills and knowledge in collaboration with their peers, while their instructors reap the side benefit of being able to use their finite teaching time more effectively” (p. 36). In addition to finding other historical connections, students chose books of various genres and reading levels that were inspired by the trials and presented these to their peers. The genres varied based on students’ interests. Students read nonfiction, fiction, biographies, graphic novels, and were able to find examples that reflected the Salem Witch Trials while reading books that interested them. “The adolescent reader needs to encounter literature for which he possesses emotional and experiential ‘readiness.’ ...that world must be fitted into the context of his own understanding and interests” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 65).

The theoretical research of Rosenblatt and Dewey inspired my pedagogy in the high school classroom. The literature generated the opportunity to lead the students into richer and more challenging literary experiences. The transactional response is key to the “personal nourishment that literature can give” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 68). Only looking at the author’s point of view or the information about the literature such as the facts of the story, the author’s background, or the literary elements ignores students’ responses and interaction with the literature. Because growth is active not passive, my goal was to stimulate deeper responses and connections to the content by inspiring, engaging, and challenging my students’ thinking. Literature should not only be an object to be described or manipulated, but also it should be a “live circuit between readers and books” (p. 66).

While reading the novels *Night*, *Farewell to Arms*, and *Great Gatsby*, students researched the era and the events surrounding the period of the novels in order to make connections. They created digital projects, videos, and re-enactments that both engaged and challenged their thinking. According to Ryan (2008), authentic learning experiences should be community-based, cross-curricular and connected to students’ complex textual lives. Not only does this engage the learner, but also it builds their comprehension skills. Not all students achieve the same outcomes in the same way because of the diverse needs of students. Using authentic projects help students build on their strengths and achieve outcomes because it utilizes key academic skills. All of these conditions matter if we are to engage students as successful, interested, and motivated learners.

Based upon the student evaluations, by providing students a choice to research and discuss an aspect of a specific period in history that interested them, their curiosity was ignited, and they were inspired and motivated to work. Being able to have a choice of presentation modalities also encouraged their creativity. Allowing for choice and connection, students took responsibility for their learning. Through this connective research, they became aware of the world around them. Ryan (2008) stated that students need to “be engaged through connectedness to the world, intellectual stimulation” (p. 191).

Intellectual stimulation emerged through research and discussions as students reflected and thought critically about history and related it back to the literature reflecting on the impact the events have had on the world around them. Teachers can still teach basics, but “they must be part of the new “basics” of multimodal texts, multiliteracies, technologies, collaboration, new ways of knowing, innovation, problem solving, and creativity” (Ryan, 2008, p. 191).

Thinking is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two

become continuous. Their isolation, and consequently their purely arbitrary going together, is canceled; a unified developing situation takes its place. The occurrence is now understood; it is explained; it is reasonable, as we say, that the thing should happen as it does. (Dewey, 1916, p. 83)

To have a reflective experience, every step and every phase must be connected to the whole. Students “must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come” (Dewey, 1934, p. 56). If students move too quickly, without thought and reflection, the actions lose their meaning; otherwise the actions become mere routines and arrest development, movement, and growth, and there is no consistency. A reflective experience forces us to “analyze to see just what lies between so as to bind together cause and effect, activity and consequence” (Dewey, 1916, p. 82).

At the end of the school year, my students were intellectually challenged and made to take risks that they did not realize they were capable of making. Their learning was active, reflective, and transactional. Their self-efficacy was strengthened, and they believed in their own learning. They understood the literature at a more critical level and made unexpected connections to their own lives. Many students read more than they ever had, and they felt safe in their learning environment as encouraging, supporting peers surrounded them.

One of the challenges to the literature curriculum at both the middle and high school levels is how to help students...develop conceptual understanding of all these knowledge sources to help them learn to appreciate and develop a disposition to read complex literary works across the lifespan. (Lee & Spratley, 2010, p. 10)

Returning to the trenches and seeing my students both excited about their own learning and believing in themselves made my journey to the trenches an experience I can never replace. I put theory into practice and witnessed how my students were

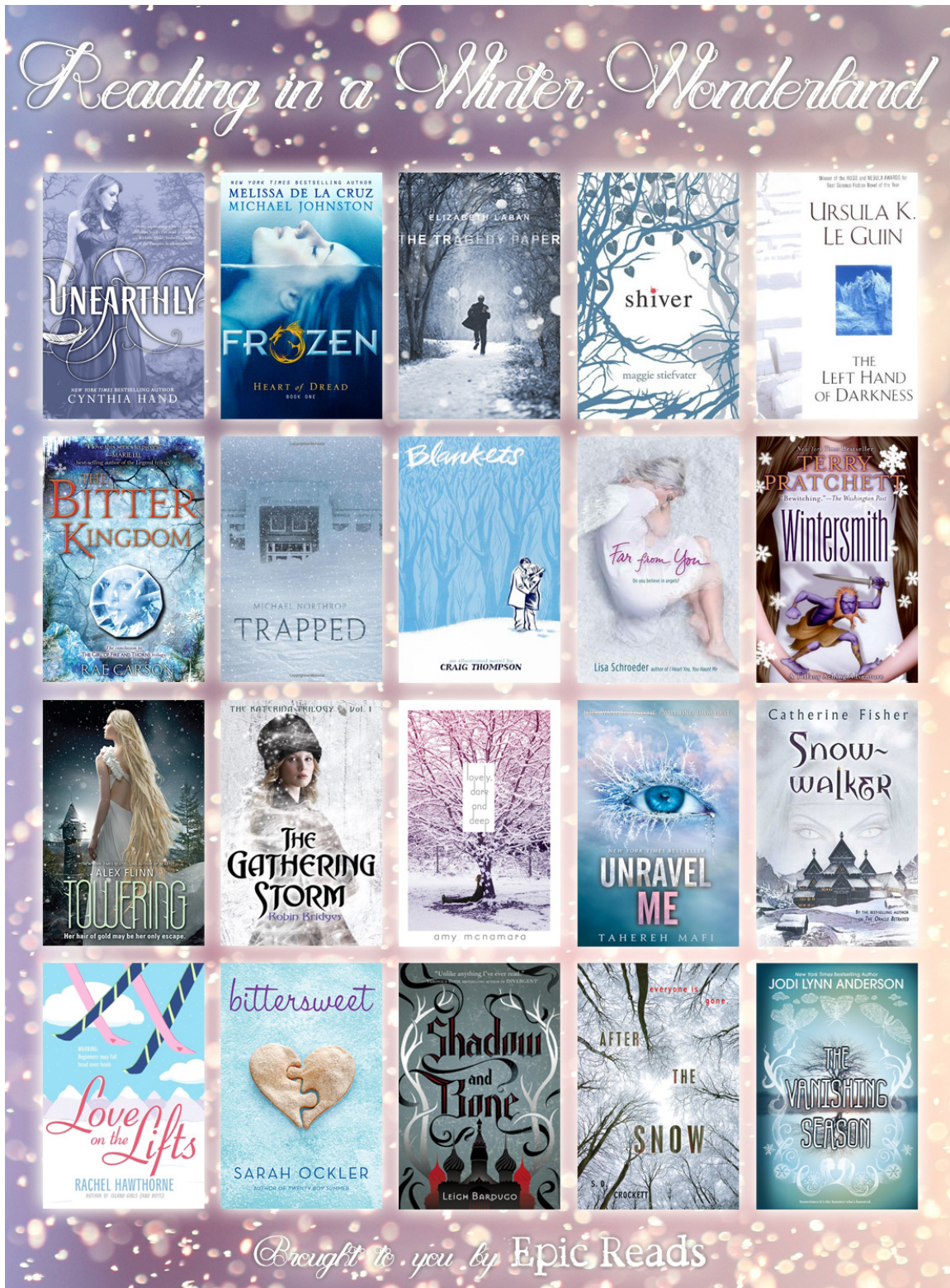
inspired, encouraged, and motivated based upon the pedagogy I utilized. Not only was my experience transformational for me, but also it was transformational for my students. I am excited to share my experience with my teacher candidates. In one year, I learned how to ignite the curiosity of adolescent boys. They need to have active, engaging instruction that allows them to make choices in their exhibition of understanding while connecting content to their lives. There are so many opportunities to offer students choices across all content areas to strengthen their literacy, and this one- year proved to be a success.

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