

Teaching Developmental Writing: Using Book Clubs in a University Course

The author reinforces the research supporting book clubs in developmental writing courses at the college level.

Students in my developmental writing classes were not reading the assigned texts and often claimed lack of interest. I'm new to teaching developmental reading and writing and had been relying on what had worked in my advanced academic English as a Second Language writing courses. But it wasn't working well, so I decided to try book clubs to increase engagement. In this critical reflection of my introduction of book clubs into my developmental writing class, I'm not claiming to have found a panacea for the low motivation to read I see in my classrooms, and that you're likely to see in yours. It's too early to announce the book club a success, but I have noticed a few things that are encouraging: students are reading their books, are actively discussing their books and connecting them to our lessons, and have taken ownership of their reading progress and discussions.

The reliability of developmental students to read assigned texts has been, in

my experience, intermittent. Perhaps we're working against a deep-seated dislike for reading because it's difficult, or boring, or both. Henry (1995) argues that most students in developmental literacy classes do not enjoy reading in most contexts. My own experience confirms Henry's analysis, as my students often admit to not having read a book since the sixth grade. They claim to have made it through high school by reading summaries on *Sparknotes*, relying on the comments of other students during whole class discussions, relating the broader topic of the reading to their own experiences, or waiting for the instructor to explain it. They avoid reading because they can get away with it.

Strategies I had employed in the past were failing. I had taught advanced academic writing for English as a Second Language speakers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and there was little need to teach them how to be good students.

A lead instructor generally assigned a topic for an argumentative paper, such as the effect of plastic bags on the environment or the dangers of texting while walking, and selected texts that all sections would read. The topics felt ridiculously dull, yet I taught them and heard little complaint.

At the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, my students are far more honest about their dislike for topics. Luckily, though the UW Colleges offers guidance for selecting texts for writing courses, I have a good deal of flexibility in selecting learning materials. This is my third semester teaching the course, and the first two times I relied on the recommended textbook, Green and Lawlor's *Read, Write, Connect: A Guide to College Reading and Writing* (2014), which included topics on financial literacy, fame and celebrity, public art, siblings, and education. I thought my students might enjoy those topics, at least more than plastic bags or text-walking, but I received more complaints than praise. At the end of the semester, I began thinking about having students choose their own readings.

The importance of text self-selection in increasing both motivation and skill is well known. We have known for decades that when students self-select texts, their comprehension increases from the elementary ages (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983) to college classes (Paulson, 2006).

Numerous studies point to quantitative gains in reading skills on standardized tests after students read self-selected texts for an extended period. However, these studies focus on reading instruction and not on integrated reading and writing. The goal in many such studies is to allow students to self-select texts for enjoyment and interest without much concern for reading level or rhetorical technique. In developmental writing, however, we are concerned with preparing students to read, discuss, and write about scholarly nonfiction. Though Henry aptly argues for the self-selection of fiction in college-level developmental reading courses, I was not convinced that having students read and respond to fiction in a writing intensive class would prepare them for future academic writing challenges.

Another concern was that self-selected books may hinder a sense of community. One reason whole-class texts are popular in writing classrooms is that we can have large group discussions that draw on multiple viewpoints. This sense of a classroom community is especially important for at-risk college students (Gabriel, 2008), but Henry uses an individual model. Most discussions about readings came in the form of letters written back and forth between students and between students and the teacher. I worried that without group discussions, we would

not be able to build a community for effective and friendly peer review and other activities that occur in a writing class, and that students would not get the practice of discussing readings. Therefore, I found no turnkey model for integrating self-selection into my developmental writing course.

Implementing Book Clubs

I turned to two resources from secondary education: O'Donnell-Allen's *The Book Club Companion* (2006) and Urbanski's *Using the Workshop Approach in the High School Classroom* (2006). Both advocate for the writing instructor to take the role of coach by modeling writing and reading strategies but remaining silent during discussions of readings to allow students to develop their own interpretations. Urbanski describes reading and free writing alongside them and giving time for student-directed small-group discussion often stifled by predetermined, teacher-authored questions. O'Donnell-Allen summarizes similar findings: when given questions to consider and discuss, students answer briefly and then move to off-task topics or sit quietly. I liked the idea of discussions without answer keys as a form of inquiry-based learning because others have argued that student-centered learning is especially important for the success of at-risk students (see Gabriel, 2008).

I began book clubs excited about the possibility that students would bring to discussions viewpoints that I had not considered. I was convinced that they needed to guide the talk about their readings, but I was, admittedly, also nervous. I worried what would happen if they did not read, or if they read but did not know what to say. To help them I provided guidelines borrowed from O'Donnell-Allen that included selecting and responding to quotations from the readings. I also required each group to keep a record of their discussions.

I provided a list of five books because of the possible time constraint for students researching and choosing their own. At the same time, I told them that they were free to abandon books no one was interested in. The class selected three: *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, *Moneyball* by Michael Lewis, and *Look Me in the Eye* by John Elder Robison. Afterwards, students collaboratively determine goals and ground rules. What did they want to get out of reading the book? How much should they read before each weekly discussion? What happens if someone is absent or arrives ill prepared?

Having students set ground rules and create their own schedules gives them ownership for their own learning, an important element for the success of at-risk college students and developmental learners

(Gabriel, 2008; Simpson & Nist, 2000). Most assigned far more of the book than I would have for each week, and all but a handful surpassed the number of allotted pages. There has been no difficulty getting students to stay on task and talk about the book. They are also writing letters to me that show insight into the issues the book brings up, who the audience might be, and what the purpose of the book could be. And because they have, in many cases, read ahead of me, I have not been there with a textbook answer key and a red pen. Instead, I keep an eye out for what they pointed out so I can give them my reaction. I feel more open to their ideas and less decided on my own.

Once a week, we have our book club meetings. Students arrive having read and taken notes and divide into their groups right away while I circulate as a friendly eavesdropper. Discussions usually start slow. Soon, however, small talk transitions into talk about the book. “Did you get to the part when.....?” is a common question they ask. I enjoy hearing this because it’s so different from the silence last semester when I asked students what they thought of the reading only to be met by silence. It feels like an actual conversation, possibly because we’re reading what the students feel are “real” books (Urbanski, 2006) or maybe because I’m discovering interesting points and issues and forming questions along with

them (Gabriel, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). Or maybe it’s both.

Their letters to me, too, demonstrate genuine reactions to their reading. Frailey, Buck-Rodriguez, and Anders (2009) argue that casual letters between teachers and students provide a structure in which to process their reading, improve comprehension and analytical abilities, and generally become more confident readers. It’s also a place where I can build a relationship with them, as suggested by Henry. For example, a student writing about *Wild* expressed such emotion for the main character that she felt that the book was making her feel more powerful about challenges in her own life. There was a scene in the book where the author reads aloud her favorite poem in the solitude of the wilderness. The title of the poem is mentioned but the words are not included. I found the poem online and shared it with the student, who thanked me and said she had not thought to look it up herself. I feel like I’m building the sort of trust that will help us work together on her writing projects.

The book clubs have been aligned with our first writing assignment, a rhetorical analysis. I’ve noticed students behaving more freely in their exploration of rhetorical modes, bias and tone, and audience and purpose. Because they’re

reading with more enthusiasm, they're discussing with more enthusiasm and are more likely to disagree with each other about the author's rhetorical choices. Some students love *Look Me in the Eye* and find Robison's tone funny and stories engaging. Others describe him as an obnoxious kid and wish they were there to tell him to stop his "shenanigans," as one student described his pranks, but still feel sad for him. They know I think the book falls short of its goal of describing Asperger's syndrome because the author's narrative focuses more heavily on stories of his drunk father than on Asperger-specific experiences, but they disagree with me. It's so refreshing to have students disagree with me.

I've also been able to be more honest about my opinions about a reading because I've been freed from the need to talk about how important it is to read. I put *Moneyball* on the book list because I thought sports fans would enjoy it. When they selected it, I began reading and very much disliked it. It turned out to be much more dull and dry than the movie and failed to hold my attention. I found myself skimming over economic sections and focusing on the baseball stories. When my students reported the same, I admitted my dislike, which turned out to be a terrific entry into discussions of audience, especially when comparing the book to the movie.

Writing about Their Books

Students have only a cursory understanding of each other's books. Following each meeting, the groups provide a brief summary of what has happened to that point, highlight what they find to be its most important or interesting element, and ask questions or make predications. I usually also ask if they would recommend the book and why. Students are not required to read the other books but are given it as an option to earn extra points. So far, no one has accepted that offer, so I've stressed that their rhetorical analysis papers must be written to an audience only vaguely familiar with their book.

For the peer review of the rhetorical analysis paper, I paired students with someone in a different book club. I had hopes that there would be less dependence on quotations since the writer could not expect that the reader would know where they came from or what they mean. At the same time, I feared that, despite lessons on analysis and thesis statements, the papers would omit critique of the author's techniques because of worry about their partner not knowing their book. However, I acquired a set of challenges on the day of peer review when only two of the ten students came prepared with a draft for peer review.

The lack of attendance on peer review day was incredibly disappointing because I'd thought that things were going well. Students were reading, talking, and writing about what they were reading. Attendance had already been problematic before peer review. It is, right now, difficult to know if the lack of attendance is because they dislike the book clubs (or other elements of class, such as the 7:45am start time) or because of other responsibilities.

Because I have yet to read more than two of the rhetorical analysis papers, any observations I make here about how the book clubs influence the quality of writing are purely tentative and pose more questions than answers. The students, much like in semesters past, used peer review to focus on mechanics despite guidance to focus on thesis statement, overall structure, and big picture ideas. While the focus on lower level writing issues is a concern, I'm encouraged by the students' enthusiasm. Both students said that they thought this was the best paper they'd ever written.

The confidence could come from a better sense of what they think about the book, even if they have not yet been able to articulate those thoughts in writing. These students have expressed analysis not yet well reflected in their rhetorical analysis papers. For example, one student spoke about how Strayed used storytelling, detail, and tone in

Wild that made her feel that she was walking alongside her on the trail to the point that she was exhausted after reading. This is a powerful analysis and a clear appreciation for the writing, but she had trouble demonstrating that passion in the rhetorical analysis paper. She wrote, "Through her tone and themes Cheryl Strayed connects with her readers on a personal level." The thesis does not misrepresent her analysis, but it falls short of expressing the full effect the author's storytelling on the student as a reader. Despite the shortcomings in these two drafts, I have confidence that students who are willing to revise their papers will develop the ability to better express their good ideas.

Next Steps

Students will also use the books as an entry point into larger conversations of interest. Soon they will be asked to select an issue covered in the book and locate and read sources in the *Points of View Reference Center* and *CQ Researcher Plus Archive* in order to write a position essay. Their letters have been a place to foreshadow this assignment, mostly through questioning. For example, a student reading *Moneyball* is drawn to the stories of Billy Bean's anger issues so I've been asking him questions about aggression and anger management in sports. My hope is to help him see that the

book highlights important social questions that others are also writing about.

As a whole I've liked the book club approach. Class time has been enjoyable and I no longer feel that I need to convince anyone to read. As a matter of fact, I struggle to keep up with them. The next unit of the semester will show if they continue to read when they are required to select texts that are more argumentative and less narrative. The fact that they rejected the two books that included more direct discussion of a social issue (*Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich) and included reviews of academic research (*The Happiness Project* by Gretchen Rubin) calls into question the source of their motivation. The draw for students may not have been that they were able to select their texts but that the texts they selected were relatively easy to read nonfiction written in narrative style.

With the implementation of book clubs I've seen an increase in the amount that students have read, an improvement in the quality and quantity of discussion about course texts, and a depth and originality of ideas I have not seen in past semesters. However, it's not yet clear if these successes will be reflected in student writing because students are still in the early drafting stages of their rhetorical analysis papers, and the majority of the class has not yet shared their papers with me. Despite the tentativeness of

my observations, I'm encouraged by ongoing experience with book clubs in this developmental writing class and plan to explore them further.

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