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What is really happening when I teach? : A self-study in a secondary English classroom

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What is really happening when I teach? : A self-study in a secondary English classroom

Abstract

As an educator in an urban school, determined to provide my students with the most effective teaching, I engaged in a self-study to examine my practices and evaluate effectiveness based on current research. I used Schulte's (2002) framework to build my self-study. Her indicators of a quality self-study are: 1) thorough descriptions of the context, data collection, and analysis, 2) thoughtful problemization of researcher and her practice, 3) indications for how study changed researcher's practice, and, 4) a description of how the new insights gained might contribute to knowledge base for other teachers.

What Is Really Happening When I Teach?
A Self-Study in a Secondary English Classroom

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"I build people, Bob, not tractors!" Barb Harken, ELA teacher, 1984

Mrs. Harken was my high school English teacher, mentor, and gateway to the world outside my home. I was seventeen and she was taking me to my first opera, *La Boheme*. Before the show, she brought me to her house for dinner. It was during the course of our dinner discussion with her family that she spoke that line to her husband. I do not remember the rest of the conversation, or how we even got to that point. However, I do remember realizing that I was one of the "people" she was building and I was extremely thankful. She was the first teacher that made me feel smart, she encouraged me to go to college, and she pushed me to take risks. She cared about me and my dreams, and I knew it. Because she saw potential in me, I did too. Had it not been for her, there is no doubt in my mind, I would never have even entertained the notion of going to college. Now, some twenty-five years later, as I work with my own high school students, it is my deepest desire that I, too, build people. It is my vision that I impact them in ways that make them feel just as empowered, just as capable, and just as important as she did me.

In this article I will discuss the self-study of my own practice designed to examine my effectiveness as a literacy education teacher in an urban high school, and especially my effectiveness with special education students.

The Necessity for Self-Study and Living Theory Method

I teach English and remedial reading in an urban school in a city with a diverse population in a state with little diversity. My school has 1154 students with 56% non-minority and 44% minority (WCSD, 2009). In my state, non-minorities represent

93.9 % of population, and all minorities combined make up the remaining 6.1% (U.S Census Bureau, 2009). My district has a higher proportion of minority and low income students than those in neighboring districts (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009). Within twenty miles of my school, there is a public and a private university; both of which have teacher education programs. Consequently, I am asked to host pre-service teachers of all levels. I welcome them into my classroom as I know most of them come from predominantly white, small town schools and have limited, if any, exposure to minority students. In their weekly reflections, many of these students have noted that they do not feel their teacher education programs fully prepare them to meet the unique needs of students in an urban district. Therefore, it is critical I model appropriate teaching practices and provide insight for them as they form their identities as teachers. My goal is that they leave my classroom feeling more prepared to teach the diverse populations represented in my district and feel they have learned an array of differentiated learning strategies in order to do so. Bullough and Pinnagar (2001, p.16) state that one of the guidelines of a quality self-study is to compel the researcher to help "improve the learning situation not only for self, but for others." Hopper and Sanford (2004, p. 59) assert, "Self-study, informed and influenced by voices and experiences of others in the context of a community, has the potential for powerful and ultimately, far-reaching effect."

Therefore, I opted for the living educational theory model of self-study in order to analyze my teaching practices and evaluate how they impacted my students (Whitehead, 1989, 1999). Bullough and Pinnagar (2001, p. 15) state, "There is always a tension between those two elements, self and the arena of practice, between self in

relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting.” (Laboskey, 2007, p.818) maintains, "Self-study researchers are concerned with both enhanced understanding of teacher education in general and the immediate improvement of our practice. We are focused on the nexus between public and private, theory and practice, research and pedagogy, self and other." And, since I open my classroom to all levels of pre-teaching candidates, including student teachers, I must better understand how and why I teach the way I do. I must be able to articulate my practices and share effective strategies with them. I must constantly ask myself, “How can I improve?” (Whitehead, 1989). It is only through self-study that I can determine if I am implementing what I know to be effective literacy education practices in my classroom and if those practices are meeting the literacy needs of my students. Further, those insights also would benefit the pre-service teachers that observe my classroom. Self-study "seeks to determine whether or not our practice is consistent with our evolving ideals and theoretical perspectives" (Laboskey, 2007, p.820).

Schulte (2002) declares self-study should provide indications about how the study changed researcher’s practice, and how the new insights gained might contribute to the knowledge base for other teachers. Also, as a relatively new teacher, it is important that I carefully examine my practices and select methods that are most effective for both my regular education and special education students. Samaras and Freese (2006) found that self-study supported new teachers' professional development and helped them navigate the early years in teaching. Self-study can be a useful tool to assist inexperienced teachers in purposefully choosing their teaching methods and shaping their practice to be more effective.

One key thread of self-study is the understanding that one always teaches self and that it is through constant self-reflection and self-understanding that we, as educators, understand education (Pinar, 1975). Self-study affords educators the opportunity to focus on what they can control: their choices, content knowledge, discipline, language and delivery. Self-study helps educators more fully understand themselves, and how and why they make the choices they do with their students. Those investing in self-study as research must walk a tenuous balance between self and methods. The fact is, there is always some degree of cognitive dissonance between what we aspire to be and what is actually occurring in our classrooms. There is an ongoing struggle as researchers attempt to be both critically self-analytical, and metacognitive but not self-absorbed, while still being methodical, truthful, and as objective as one can be when investigating one's self (Bullough, 2001). In the course of this self-study I intend to uncover what current research indicates are effective literacy practices, especially in urban schools and those transitioning special education students, and then compare my findings with my own practice to see if I am "walking the walk and not just talking the talk" (Guilfoyle, Hamilton, Pinnagar & Placier, 1998).

Literature Review

Current research on effective literacy education, especially among diverse learners, is multifaceted. To further complicate matters, there is no mutually agreed upon tangible standard for effective teaching. Rinaldo (2009) states, "Although there does exist some agreement on what constitutes 'dispositions of good teaching' there is no canon of attributable observable behaviors" (p.42). Therefore, in the following

literature review I will elucidate upon effective literacy practices gathered from a variety of sources with a specific focus on those practices that are beneficial for special education students who have been transitioned into regular education classrooms.

According to the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Framework, "Reading is an active and complex process that involves: Understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation" (2011, p.4). Additionally, mature reading involves thoughtful literacy - an ability to link the text with one's existing knowledge to arrive at a considered and logical response (Applegate, Applegate, McGeehan, Pinto, & Kong, 2009). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents also includes reshaping their self-perceptions as capable readers and writers, increasing their sense of self-efficacy and engagement, increasing background knowledge and expanding their repertoire of texts (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Comprehension strategies must be embedded in regular classroom curricular activities, multi-media texts must be included, and students must be taught higher level thinking and how to interact with text in meaningful ways (Alvermann, 2001). In order for struggling adolescent readers to read with confidence, they must practice the skills that good readers use innately. If students are to become independent consumers of texts, teachers must model appropriate reading and writing strategies (Greenleaf & Hinchman).

Moreover, Langer (2002), stated there are "pivotal elements that empower the best performing teachers and schools" to create literacy programs that are effective. She defines effective literacy teachers as those who create a classroom where, "You

see and hear students engaged in literature, practiced in writing, comfortable with intelligent literary discourse. These students are learning to write, talk about, and extract meaning from knowledge and experience in ways that school, work, and life demand in the 21st century."(Langer, p.9) She discovered that instructional practices of effective teachers fell into three categories: separated (direct or explicit instruction of skills), simulated (application of concepts within a specific reading/writing/oral task), and integrated (a real life application of skill/higher order thinking) .The commonalities that her research revealed among schools with effective literacy instruction were: English instruction took place using separated, simulated, and integrated experiences, test preparation was embedded in the instructional program, connections were cross-curricular, strategies implemented were designed to foster independent thinking and actions, lessons were created using generative thinking, and literacy was a socially engaging activity. When schools exhibited these characteristics, students from urban schools and low-SES schools were just as successful as those in more affluent areas. In many ways, these patterns were the leveling ground for students (Langer).

Paris and Block (2007) found highly effective secondary literacy teachers possessed the following traits: they used effective strategies seamlessly, they diagnosed and taught students who had reading deficits, they attended graduate school, they collaborated with students, they created intellectually stimulating literacy activities, they modeled expected outcomes, they created powerful learning environments in their classrooms, and they had high expectations for their students and self. Other commonalities found were effective teachers encouraged students'

critical thinking skills, they let them ask questions, they gave them choices, and they pushed them to become independent learners. Exemplary teachers anticipated some secondary students would have reading and writing deficits. These teachers evaluated which remedial reading strategies could best benefit their students. Effective teachers invested themselves in their students to create authentic relationships and build connections in their classroom. They used multiple forms of input systems (including text, technology, and other media), multiple forms of expression, (including individual and collaborative work) and a variety of assessments. They were committed to professional development and sought ways to share their expertise with their peers. They created a classroom climate that was safe and nurturing, and they had excellent classroom management skills.

Darling-Hammond (2000) states "Despite conventional wisdom that school inputs make little difference in school learning, a growing body of research suggests that schools can make a difference, and a substantial portion of that difference is attributable to teachers" (p.5). She also found that teacher quality characteristics such as certification status and degree in the field to be taught, as well as advanced degrees, positively correlated with student outcomes. A well-qualified teacher that is knowledgeable in his/her content area can have a stronger influence on student achievement than poverty, language background, and minority status. Hattie and Jaeger (2003), categorized teachers in three ways: as expert, as experienced, and as novice. They identified "five major dimensions of excellent teachers"(p.5), including: thorough content knowledge, guides learning, monitors learning and provides authentic, meaningful, feedback, attends to affective attributes, and influences student

outcomes. Duke and Pearson (2002) identify what good readers are taught to do: are active, have a purpose for reading, evaluate their reading, scan for content and then go back and read for detail, know and understand text structure, predict outcomes, assess reading needs and use fix it strategies, and critically evaluate what they read. In the report, *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), there were fifteen recommendations deemed necessary for effective adolescent literacy programs. They included: Direct, explicit comprehension instruction, effective instructional principles embedded in content, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, tutoring, a variety of texts, writing, integrations of technology, on-going formative and summative assessments, designated time for reading, ongoing professional development, and common planning time for teachers.

Torgerson, Houston, Rissman, and Decker (2007) found that both motivation and reading for pleasure decline when students enter middle school and high school. This seems to be especially true for students who were did not easily master the initial stages of learning to read. Consequently, once these students entered adolescence they did not read as much as their peers who were stronger readers, and there was a marked decrease in fluency and a lack of growth in both vocabulary acquisition and content knowledge. As if those qualities were not detrimental enough, these same students also struggled to internalize reading and comprehension strategies and found it more difficult to remain engaged with text while reading. There seems to be a recursive cycle across interest, reading strength, comprehension, and motivation: If students are strong readers, they view reading as a means to learn about interests, and if they are interested they will want to read more, the more they read the better they

read and the more they want to read. Jacobs (2008) suggests a curricular and instructional solution to this dilemma, "To address the problem of adolescents' lack of interest in school-based academic literacy, textbooks advised teachers to depend less on 'text bound modes of teaching that place adolescents in passive roles' and more on inquiry based instruction that allowed students to be active learners" (p.20). Teachers must also assist students in transitioning from the culture at home, the primary discourse, to the culture of school and the workplace, the secondary discourse (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). Students' lack of confidence in their reading ability coupled with their desire to prevent their peers from discovering their reading deficit, may be pushing some students into the third space. Benson (2010) defines third space as the discord between the academic world of the teacher and the cultural world of the student. The student appears to be part of the mainstream classroom yet is functioning as an outsider. To the teacher, it appears the students are doing what they have been asked to do, but the students do not feel they are part of the class. This use of third space by Benson is in contrast to the community building notion of third space as a bridge between two disparate cultures (Moje, et al, 2004).

Lapp and Fisher (2009) argue that motivating students to want to read is a critical component in developing good readers. Teachers must make reading accessible, exciting, and interesting. If teachers model what strong readers look and act like, and then share what they are reading with their students, those students are more likely to want to read as well. Lapp and Fisher suggest that read alouds/think alouds, independent reading time, and the introduction of literature similar to students' lives are all strong tools to elicit students' interest in reading, and eventually,

the desire to read. In contrast, when teachers do not take the time to model what comes naturally to good readers, students lose interest. This loss of interest in reading can have a larger impact on older students. Secondary students are often disaffected and disengaged from school (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

When teaching in a diverse setting, the transition of special education students into the general education settings becomes a critical aspect of everyday teaching. As of late, special education has been changing at a rapid pace. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) the diagnosing of learning disabilities (LD) has evolved from a discrepancy model to a comprehensive evaluation model. Research has clearly indicated that the discrepancy model is no longer effective and its use has been discontinued (Aaron, 1997). Currently, problem-solving teams and special education teachers evaluate students based on their possible responses to appropriate interventions, and responses to treatment to discern their placement (Dombrowski, Kamphaus, & Reynolds, 2003). Students are no longer removed from the general education population and sequestered in resource rooms in order to receive the academic supports they have been identified as needing in order to be successful. Instead, students are to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which they can meet their educational goals. This means that special education students are being transitioned to regular education classes as much as possible. Wilder and Williams (2007) found special education students fared better in reading classes when they were taught text grammar, plot development, and summarizing; students had higher comprehension and were able to make predictions as well. “Students with severe learning disabilities have many and varied instructional

needs, and the tendency often is to limit instruction to low-level tasks. (E)xplicit teaching of higher-level comprehension skills is both possible and effective” (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Kazden, 1999). Piggybacking, where students build on each others’ conversations, has also been shown to be helpful with struggling and developmental readers (Paxton-Buursma & Walker, 2008). John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) used complementarity to argue that “joint activity creates the potential for more and less experience learners to learn and transform together”. Students of varying levels can work together and cooperatively share learning.

Method

As an educator in an urban school, determined to provide my students with the most effective teaching, I engaged in a self-study to examine my practices and evaluate effectiveness based on current research. I used Schulte's (2002) framework to build my self-study. Her indicators of a quality self-study are: 1) thorough descriptions of the context, data collection, and analysis, 2) thoughtful problematization of researcher and her practice, 3) indications for how study changed researcher’s practice, and, 4) a description of how the new insights gained might contribute to knowledge base for other teachers.

Context

The goal of my research was to determine if I am an effective literacy education teacher and if I am aligning my practices with research-based indicators of effective literacy practices. I used Samaras' (2010) *Living Education Theory* to design my study. I used my findings to critique my teaching, to discern if it complemented what I knew are strong literacy education methods, to make corrections, and to improve my

teaching. This will also be an opportunity for me to alter my teaching and make it a more powerful tool to assist both the students and the pre-service teachers in my classroom. Another goal is that my experience would elucidate others' experiences in similar situations and aid them in becoming better literacy educators. Perhaps they can see either themselves or their students in my narrative and glean some insight that they could find helpful in their classrooms.

I conducted my research over the period of one week during one of my three ninth grade English classes. My class had twenty-four students and eight were designated special education students. There were sixteen females and eight males; sixteen were minority (eleven African-Americans and five Hispanic) and eight were Caucasian students. It was the final quarter of the semester and we were completing "*The Odyssey*," reviewing for an exam over it, and studying for a prefix/suffix/root word post-assessment required for all 9th graders. We began each day with an ungraded quiz on the active board over prefixes/suffixes/root words. After the daily vocabulary practice, we reviewed the previous days' readings, we worked together to finish reading the poem, and then studied for the exam.

Participants

This self-study as research focuses on me and my practices; therefore I am the participant in the study. As the participant of my own self-study I am both engaged in my teaching and examining my teaching. Through this process I examined my teaching within the context of my actions in the classroom. The data collected on my students' responses to my teaching is secondary to my self-study research and is used as additional support for the findings within my self-study.

Another aspect of self-study research is to engage a critical friend to examine the data and to provide essential feedback as the data are analyzed. My critical friend was a colleague at my school who taught similar courses. In essence, she, too, was a participant in my study in that she transcribed tapes, examined data, and shared her thoughts and insights into my practices.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources included 1) video tapes from classroom instruction, 2) my students' post instructional responses, and 3) my researcher log. I videotaped my ninth grade language arts class for one week while we studied Homer's *The Odyssey*. The videotapes from all five days were transcribed and analyzed globally to capture the instructional practices found within the lessons. The final lesson from day five was also analyzed in depth. This final class session was chosen because of the nature of the engagement and interaction with my students that represented an informal and authentic classroom experience. My critical friend transcribed the tapes daily. Once the videos were transcribed, both she and I evaluated them individually and then met to compare our findings. We both compared the videotapes to the list of literacy education guidelines (Table 1) that were collected over the course of my research and elucidated in the literature review above. These guidelines were used to evaluate the effectiveness in my teaching and my classroom practices.

The initial analysis of the five days of lessons involved examining the individual daily transcripts and the accompanying videos to determine the type and quantity of practices found. The focus within this analysis was global – each tape and transcript were analyzed using the checklist. Both my critical friend and I analyzed

the lessons independently, and then came together to discuss our analysis and results. For example, the transcript on day five had the following example of explicit vocabulary instruction: “T: So he has juxtaposed himself. Does everyone know what that means? Means completely flip flop where you are.” And when we met to confer, we both agreed that this moment represented Explicit Vocabulary Instruction.

Table 1

 Number of Literacy Guideline Occurrences in My Practice

Literacy Education Guidelines	Number of Occurrences
Providing Positive Corrective Feedback	8
Building Authentic Relationships	6
Using Critical Thinking Skills	6
Summarizing	5
Teaching of Self-Monitoring Skills	5
Connecting Text to Self	5
Engaging Actively with Text	5
Responding as a Whole Class	5
Teaching Vocabulary Explicitly	4
Questioning and Evaluating Text	4
Modeling Reading	4
Maintaining High Expectations	4
Using Literary Analysis	3
Using Read Alouds/Think Alouds	3
Understanding Text and Purpose	3
Connecting Text to Others and Society	3
Using Text to See Other Viewpoints	3
Self-Monitoring Skills	3
Providing Test Preparation Embedded in Lesson	3
Providing Student Centered Activities	3
Teaching Text Grammar	3
Using Real Life Applications	2
Teaching Generative Thinking	2
Using Multiple Media	2
Providing for Student Choice	2
Using Piggybacking	2
Attending Graduate School	1
Building a Safe, Nurturing Classroom	1
Using Reciprocal Teaching	0
Reading a Wide Range of Genres	0
Writing About Text	0
Diagnosing and Addressing Deficits	0

For the in depth analysis for day five, I used Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory method through a constant comparative approach for the in depth analysis of the fifth lesson. "The constant comparing of many groups draws the sociologist's attention to their many similarities and differences. Considering these leads him to generate abstract categories and their properties, which, since they emerge from the data, will clearly be important to a theory explaining the kind of behavior under observation" (p. 36).

Given that my self-study was on me and my practices, the statements made by my students were included in the transcript but not analyzed for coding. Only my responses to the students were coded, using the students' as a context for my language. During the first stage, I began coding the language in my transcript, and as I coded I began to compare new incidents in the text to see if they were applicable to the coded category I had created. As I developed more categories to reflect the data, I would go back and compare the previously coded data for suitability of fit. I came up with twenty-four initial categories. I then analyzed for commonalities across categories and attempted to let the data determine the larger categorical themes. During the second stage, integrating categories and their properties, I reanalyzed and collapsed the initial twenty-four categories into eleven categories, each representing shared characteristics. In the third stage of analysis, delimiting the theory, a final analysis of these eleven categories focused on the driving goal or purpose of each line of text being analyzed. This culminated into three specific instructional themes: encouraging student engagement, teaching, and classroom management. My final list of categories and number of occurrences are in Table 2. Table 2 provides the

overview of the initial codes for the final day, the consolidated codes, and the resulting final thematic categories of the transcribed video lesson.

Table 2 Category Codes

Initial Codes	Codes	Final Categories
Questioning	Questioning students	Student engagement
Probing for knowledge		
Validating	Validating student responses	Student engagement
Encouraging		
Affirming	Affirming student responses	Student engagement
Humor	Using humor	Student engagement
Releasing pressure		
Creating sense of community		
Total Student Engagement:		186 occurrences
Explaining	Clarifying	Teaching
Expounding		
Modeling responses	Modeling think alouds	Teaching
Modeling thinking process		
Modeling appropriate steps		
Instructing	Instructing Vocabulary	Teaching
Total Teaching:		52 occurrences
Validating student's individuality	Validating student	Classroom Management
Relating to student on personal level		
Disciplining	Disciplining	Classroom Management
Redirecting		
Making explicit expectations		
Gaining cooperation	Eliciting cooperation	Classroom Management
Getting students to see my view		
Creating a sense of community		
Giving students plan	Foreshadowing	Classroom Management
Letting them know agenda		
Total Classroom Management:		60 occurrences

For example, in the theme category of Classroom Management, one of the initial categories was Validating Student: "You guys are not going to fail" (T0038).

Another initial category in this theme was Relating to Student: "Bye sweetie, have a

good day” (T00312). During the second phase of analysis both these initial categories were merged into one of the larger eleven categories, labeled Validating Student. Finally, in the third phase of analysis this larger category was defined as a part of the Classroom Management theme.

Another source of data examined was my students' post instructional responses. The students provided anonymous, written feedback by responding to prompts (Table 3). The prompts were designed to elicit my students' thoughts on my teaching methods, my discipline approaches, my classroom climate, and their learning. These feedback comment sheets were collected and transcribed. Questions and responses were as follows. I broke the responses down into general categories that emerged and listed them in order of frequency.

Table 3

Student Responses from Post Instruction Prompts

Question Prompt	Student Response
1. What has helped you learn the most this year?	1. The way you teach (12) 2. Your sense of humor (4) 3. Class rules and order (3)
2. What has <i>not</i> helped you learn this year?	1. No response (7) 2. S's in trouble/your tone (6) 3. Disruptive peers (4) 4. Organization of class (2)
3. What do you think about the way I talk to you?	1. Like it (14) 2. Do not like it (3) 3. No response (2)
4. What is my strength as a teacher?	1. Motivate us (6) 2. The way you teach (4) 3. Like us students (4) 4. Humor (3) 5. Classroom discipline (2)

Question Prompt	Student Response
5. What is my weakness as a teacher?	1. You have no weaknesses (6) 2. No response (3) 3. Get too angry (4) 4. Yell too much (3) 5. Talk too much (2) 5. Should be meaner (1)
6. What is your opinion of my classroom discipline strategies?	1. Effective (10) 2. Need to be meaner (5) 3. Yell too much (4)
7. How do I discipline that is helpful?	1. You have a good attitude (5) 2. We are sent to hall to cool down (5) 3. No response (3) 4. We have to work hard (3) 5. You are strict (2) 6. Nothing you do is helpful (1)
8. How do I discipline that is <i>not</i> helpful?	1. No response (9) 2. Yell too much (5) 3. Nothing is wrong (3) 4. Discipline all for few (2) 5. Need more discipline (1)
9. What should I do differently next year?	1. Nothing (7) 2. No response (5) 3. Improve my attitude (3) 4. Don't yell (2) 5. Give more work (2) 6. Have more discipline (2)
10. What advice do you have for next year's freshmen?	1. No Response (6) 2. Listen to her (5) 3. Turn in work (4) 4. Don't chew gum (3) 5. Don't make her mad (1) 6. English is fun (1)
11. What did you enjoy this year that you did <i>not</i> expect to?	1. The different genres of literature (9) 2. No response (4) 3. How to write essays (3) 4. Vocabulary (1) 5. Mrs. Mnayer (1)

Question Prompt	Student Response
12. What have you learned this year that you did <i>not</i> like?	1. No response (10) 2. Nothing (5) 3. Vocabulary (2) 4. Advertisements (1) 5. Reading probes (1)

The third source of data I used was my researcher log. It included all my notes made during my data meetings, notes to self as I watched videos, read the transcripts, and read the results of my student response sheets. I also journaled on the days I found the results frustrating or insightful, or when I needed to clarify my thinking. These notes were used as a resource in the process of analyzing the transcripts, determining categories, and confirming contexts.

Results

In analyzing the five days of video taping globally for teaching practices, four major areas emerged as the most frequently used practices in my teaching: providing positive, corrective feedback; building authentic relationships; using critical thinking skills; and summarizing. (See Table 1 for the list of best practices in order of frequency.)

The data suggest that I want to provide my students with higher order thinking skills, but I also want them to be encouraged and safe while they learn. Relationships are extremely important to me. I believe that in order for students to be willing to share with me or the rest of class what they think about a text, they have to take risks. In order for them to be willing to take risks, my classroom has to be a space that they feel they have the liberty to be wrong. I very seldom tell my students they are wrong; instead, I listen for students to give the correct response to a question, point to them,

and then ask them to repeat it to the rest of the class. There were several times in the videos that students guessed wrong, and when I asked a student with the correct answer to repeat it, the other students would debate their case as to why their incorrect answer could be correct. I affirmed them for their reasoning, but reminded them that the correct answer, no matter how vigorous their argument, was going to stand.

The data indicate that I am not strong in areas of reciprocal teaching, reading a wide range of genres, writing about texts, and diagnosing and addressing deficits. Due to the nature of the unit, reading *The Odyssey*, and the limitation of the five days of taping, these practices were not evident. The unit format prohibits reciprocal teaching and being able to read different genres. We did write about the story, but it was a culminating activity that took place long after the initial diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the year. I spent the first couple of weeks of the year assessing and diagnosing the needs of my students and designing my lesson plans around those needs identified. At the end of the year, when I taught *The Odyssey*, I used informal assessments as we read and discussed the text.

The three major themes that emerged from the analysis of categories were: student engagement, teaching, and classroom management.

Student Engagement

Student engagement occurred 186 times in the day five lesson transcript. This is three times more often than the other two themes of teaching and classroom management. It became evident that this is the most important category for me with my students. I questioned, I validated, I affirmed, and I used humor; all in the name of keeping them

engaged and focused on learning. I believe that by keeping them engaged, I motivated them to want to learn. I discovered I used affirmations to encourage participation, but I also teased my students. Frequently, I used humor as a first response to a potential disruption or distraction with my students. For example, when a group of three female students, were clearly off-task and having a side-bar conversation, I addressed them by stating, “Ladies, what did we just say?” (T00232). They responded appropriately by stopping talking, facing me, and attempting to repeat what I said. When they struggled for an answer, clearly indicating to me and the rest of the class they were not engaged in the discussion, another student gave them the answer. The most vocal of the three, merely repeated what she has been told. I responded by saying, ‘I asked *you*, Sweetness, “So, why is that important?”’(T00235). She began to giggle, stated she was sorry and then responded correctly. She spent the remaining part of class completely engaged and did not get off-task again (almost to the point of hyper-over-engaged, to prove she was on task).

An area that was not addressed in the literature was the use of informal language and tonal shifts. In order to gain my students’ attention, I noticed that I frequently used informal language and changed my voice tone. When several students made a connection between *The Odyssey* and *Romeo and Juliet*, I responded, “Good job, putting that all together guys! You were really paying attention. You mak-uh me happy!” (T00208, T00209) stated with a lilting tone. When several students claimed they did not like *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *The Odyssey*, I told them, “Oh! (Imitating an arrow in my heart) You guys are breaking my heart!” (T00212). When discussing a character’s motivation, I asked, “Why did Telemachus pick that dude

first?” (T00269). And then, “After Antinous is dead, the other suitors start to freak out and claim he was the ringleader. Why did he laugh?” (T00272). When we discussed revenge, I commented, “Yes, it is better to wait to get revenge. Oh yeah, baby!” (Mimicking Austin Powers, T00276). As the students prepared to leave, I said, “later, gators!” (T00308). And as they continued to comment about the story as they were walking out of class, I remarked, “We are so very ‘mart, very ‘mart!” (T00310). This type of engagement seemed to encourage the students to interact both with me as the teacher, with each other, and with the text. It builds a sense of community and sets a tone in the class that is accessible to all.

Teaching

When I analyzed the transcript for day five, I noticed that I clarified frequently. For example, when students were comparing *The Odyssey* to *Romeo and Juliet*, I stated, “It’s about two characters that shouldn’t be together but find redeeming qualities in one another” (T00216). When a student responded correctly to a prompt, I validated his response and clarified the content within his answer, “Right, he doesn’t need to, he is already Penelope’s husband, and the king of Ithaca” (T00260). I would often repeat expectations, especially when my expectations were embedded in prompts for the students to discuss and engage.

Describe the dog, Argos. (T00158)

Students provide comments but do not describe the dog.

Yes. And describe his condition. Yes, describe his condition. (T00161)

Student provides brief description of the dog.

Yes. How is his condition symbolic of the condition that Ithaca is in right now? Yes, How is his condition symbolic of the condition that Ithaca is in right now? (T00163)

Student responds that no one cares.

Right. They aren't taking care of it. It's a sign the kingdom has gone down without Odysseus taking care of it. How do we know Argos recognized him?

Right. They aren't taking care of it. It's a sign the kingdom has gone down without Odysseus taking care of it. How do we know Argos recognized him? (T00165).

The tenacity on my part actually helped the students to focus and engage in the content being discussed.

I also taught by modeling the Read Aloud/Think Aloud strategy through asking questions. Through asking the following questions, I was modeling for the students the types of questions they need to be thinking about as they read. I asked questions about the reading, "And then he turns back into himself, only better. What does Penelope say to beggar?" (T00287). I asked questions about their connections to text, "Like Lost. How many of you watch Lost?" (T00219), and I asked them to take risks in class, "What is Odysseus's motive when he is talking to her? What is he really trying to find out?" (T00183). Responding to this question entailed inferencing and predicting, two higher order thinking skills.

Classroom Management

When it came to classroom management, I used humor and redirection far more than any other techniques. I have learned that I can gain much more cooperation from my

students when I use humor to redirect them instead of direct confrontation. Many of my students, when confronted in class, would rather be sent out of the room or given a referral to the office and save face rather than back down to a teacher.

I saw the use of my humor as a redirection and a way for me to invite students into the conversation. For example, a female student appeared to be off-task and gazing outside a window instead of participating in the class discussion on Odysseus. I said to her, “Sweetie, is there anyone else with you in your world or are you all by yourself in there?” (T00279). She smiled, and then told me she was all alone. Part of what makes this humor work is my willingness to have them respond to my comments. This creates an interplay between us that encourages engagement and fosters that sense of community. I then told her, “We have a test tomorrow and I would prefer you paid attention, so could you join us please?” (T00281). She smiled, giggled, stated she was sorry, and assured me she was going to pay attention. I replied, “Thank you” (T00283).

There were multiple times throughout the other videotapes that I asked my students a question and used “please” and then when they responded I said “thank you.” Later, when another student began to talk to his peers, I said, “A.[student’s name], my love, what are ya doin’ buddy? What do you need to worry about?” (T00124). He responded “me.” I questioned, “How many people does it take to keep you in line?” (T00126). He smiled and responded “Everybody!” Then, I laughed and said, “Everybody. Correct. It takes a village to raise A.!”(T00128). A little later, his pencil broke and he did not know what to do. He knew I did not allow students to sharpen pencils while we were having discussions, so he was torn. Noticing that he

was not writing any answers on his study guide, I said, “A., you need to put on your thinking cap.” (T00134). He stated that it was his pencil’s fault. In a teasing tone, I said, “So, your pencil has a mind and a personality of its own?” (T00136). He said it did. I responded, “So it is outwitting you?”(T00136). He laughed and said it was. I replied, “All right, as long as we all know what is really going on here.” (T00141), I motioned for him to get up and go sharpen his pencil. He sharpened his pencil and was engaged in class the rest of the period. Surprisingly, this type of interaction does not take on a negative tone by the students. They genuinely seem to enjoy the banter as evidenced by their actions and engagement in class.

At first, when I evaluated the results of the students' post instructional responses, there appeared to be a number of concerns with my teaching practices. I felt considerable frustration when I realized so much of my data, almost 20% (60/298), fell under the classroom management category. I thought that having such a high percentage of responses labeled as classroom management indicated I had poor classroom management skills. However, when I re-examined my transcripts, I noticed that much of it was preventative. One category that emerged, that I did not expect, were my students having issues with how I talk to them. Fully 11% (26/ 228) of the responses indicated they did not like the tone I used or they felt that I had yelled too much. And, since this was an issue for several of my students, I decided to further evaluate my language and my interactions with my students using the final day's' transcript.

After reviewing the videos and re-reading the transcripts, there were actually not any examples of me yelling at my students. I had reviewed the tapes for a closer

examination of the possible discipline problems that may have presented themselves and correlated with my students' comments about yelling. And yet, there were no discipline problems that emerged. I assumed the reason there were no discipline issues on the tapes was because we were at the end of the school year, finishing up reading, and studying for the semester exams. The focus on the end of the year activities may have eliminated many possible discipline concerns. Also, by that time, many of our most problematic students had been removed from school and placed in other settings (our district's behavioral center) or they had moved out of the school district. Yet my students had stated my "yelling" was a concern for them. There were, however, several instances where I did have to redirect my students. I noticed that when I did so, I addressed my students in a slightly elevated tone using terms embedded with behavioral expectations such as "Ladies" (T00232) and "Gentlemen, shhhhh!" (T00157). I also used familial terms, such as, "Guys" (T0088), "Sweetie" (T00279) and "my love" and "buddy" (T00124).

I also noticed I used self-deprecating humor when dealing with my students. After incorrectly spelling a word on the Active board, I said, "Whoa! It's important that Mrs. Mnayer can write well." (T00111). When I mistakenly called a student the wrong name, I referred to myself as a, "big fat loser" spoken with a comical voice and tonal shift (T00041), and then said, "Yikes, sometimes, I am not impressed with myself." (T00043). In re-examining this moment of engagement, the powerful message was that knowing the student's name was important, and to not remember was absurd at best. When a student who was often late assured me she was on time, I said, "Wow, way to mess with my head!" (T00048). This provided both humor at

recognizing her pattern of being tardy, but also validating her for arriving on time. When I handed a student the wrong paper, I said, “Sorry, Dude, I meant this one. My bad.” (T00156). Later, when I mispronounced a word, I commented, “I can do this. I have verbal skills.” (T00182). While at first blush, and stated out of context, these phrases and comments may seem harsh as words on the page, they are, in fact, examples of playful engagement. In the context of my ongoing commentary with the students and the rhythm of our interactions, these expressions reflect the ease found in our communications. And while this was true for most of my students, there were 11% who may have interpreted this type of engagement, which was both quick and elevated in tone, as yelling. This is an area of my teaching that I will look more closely at over the next year to see how I can continue to engage students without eliciting negative feelings of yelling.

Changes in Practice: Post Study

When I reflected on what I found during my research, I realized I needed to make several adjustments in my practice in terms of the way in which I engage with students within the area of classroom discipline. I needed to be mindful of how my students were interpreting my words and my tone. One of the books I read recently that was of great insight was, *The Ten Students You Will Meet In Your Classroom* (Gill, 2007). It addressed most discipline issues that secondary teachers would confront in their teaching. I saw many, if not all, of my students in the descriptors. And I realized I could use this information with my students, to help make the intent of my language transparent.

I took the content of the book to my class. I made a PowerPoint discussing the ten different types of students, as well as the suggested discipline strategies. I presented this to my students and asked them with which characteristics did each student identify. I listed the discipline strategies suggested in the book that really focused on how the teacher would engage with the students as a predictable expectation. I informed my students that these will be the discipline methods I will use. I shared the responsibility with them and asked them to provide additional insights on what will work for them. Specifically, I focused on the way in which my language and my engagement will be used to inform them of expectations. After that, I gave them the opportunity to work out a code or non-verbal cue that they can use to tell me that they feel my tone or attitude is not productive. In the past, I have used the nonverbal cue system with my special education students that had behavior plans, and I have found it to be most helpful for them to express their needs appropriately. It was my hope that by sharing this information and by having the students provide input specific to their needs, the ways in which I engage and the meaning behind that engagement will be more transparent.

Additionally, the use of videotaping in my classroom may also help inform me of my practice, my engagement with my students, and my students' responses to that engagement. I plan to videotape my classes weekly and to post the recordings on my classroom BLOG. Part of the rationale for doing this is to provide support to students who miss class. We have an absence rate of about 20% on any given day, and my students lose much learning time by me having to spend so much class time going back and reteaching lessons that other students have missed. By posting on my

BLOG, students can view missed classroom activities at any time and remain current. But I can also use these videos as an ongoing accountability measure for my teaching. I will watch the videos with my students and be mindful of my discipline and seek ways to respond proactively. Now that I am aware of what I am looking for, it will be much easier to notice and self-correct.

In reviewing the engagement within my classroom, I realized using classroom time more effectively is another improvement I can make. Although I was pleased by how much my students had learned and the myriad ways they were demonstrating their learning, I was also aware of how frequently I had to repeat myself and how many times I missed opportunities to use think alouds to help my students make additional connections. In retrospect, part of the power of self-study is to be able to recognize both what is happening in the classroom and what is not. Some additional activities I would like to see happen more often in my class in the future are: Posting questions on the anticipation guides to help my students make explicit connections between texts, themselves, and our culture; making text to text connections; scaffolding their current content with content that will be coming in their junior and senior years; and providing the rationale for why the activities and content being learned are necessary in order for them to be successful.

Insights for Other Teachers

When I reflect on what I have learned through this self-study, I think the most powerful lesson was that, even with the best of intentions, there are still choices I am making that are not helping my students learn. I can do an excellent job of using the most current, research-based teaching methods, my students could be gaining a solid

literacy education, yet they may still feel I am not meeting their needs. It was not the content of my teaching that caused them distress, it was my tone of voice and language choice. These are issues that one can only discover by risking honesty with one's students. The irony is that student engagement is, indeed, my strength. This is supported by the data. Yet, at the same time, it is within student engagement that I find my greatest need – to improve my communication with my students. I know that having my students feel safe and validated in my classroom is non-negotiable if I want them to take risks and learn from me. And I can see from the data that I do this. But I also see that I do other things that can undermine those positive aspects of what I am trying to accomplish. And so it behooves to continue to look closer at my practice, and continue to evaluate my actions and communication with my students in order to create that optimum learning environment for which I strive.

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