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Shifting the Teacher Mindset: What Counts as "Real Reading"

The author shares how her epiphany about what texts she valued in her classroom pushed her to change how she defines what counts as "real reading."

One Teacher's Epiphany

I have always loved to read. I cannot remember a time in my life that I didn't spend my free time lost in a good book. So when I took my first middle school teaching job, it never occurred to me that my students wouldn't feel the same. After all, reading had always been my escape from the stresses of real life; why wouldn't they see it the same way? With so many wonderful books to read, who wouldn't grab the chance to sit quietly and dive into another world? And this was true for some of my students, but not all. Not even the majority. As is the case in much of the research around adolescent readers (e.g Becnel & Moeller, 2015; Schüller, Birnbaum, & Kröner, 2016), I only thought of books when I considered texts for my students to read.

That first year, I struggled to get my students, particularly those in eighth grade, to pick up a book. My own classroom library was very small (around a dozen books at the beginning of the year), so I gave my class opportunities to go to the school library as often as possible. Many would take advantage of the time out of the classroom to wander around the library and return to class empty-handed. No book. Nothing to read. As I built my library, I focused on two main resources for selecting books: the annual state book list, and my own preferences and interests. Thus, my library grew to include classic titles such as *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and more recent, state-recommended titles such as *Esperanza Rising.*

In that first year, I found one thing that seemed to get some of my less enthusiastic readers engaged with texts: I did book talks to share the books I had recently read. As the year went on, I made it a practice not to put any book into my classroom library until I had read it. This pushed me to read more and, thus, gave me more books to talk about and share with my students. Students began coming to me for book recommendations more frequently, and the books I featured in my book talks became the more sought-after books in my classroom. But I still had many students not picking up books voluntarily. I still noticed students doing book projects on movies (loosely) based on books. And I still had students whose reading engagement didn't seem to grow, despite my efforts.

Fast forward three years. I'm teaching middle grades language arts at a K-8 school in the same district. My classroom library has grown exponentially and now includes a variety of fiction and nonfiction books. I still read everything before it hits my shelves, and give regular book talks. I've added series that many of my students love, ranging from *Goosebumps* and *Cirque du Freak* to *Percy Jackson* and *Gregor the Overlander.* Students I don't even have in my class come to my room to borrow books and get recommendations. Yet I still have students who don't pick up a book without being pushed to do so. I still have students who only engage with books that are heavier on

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pictures than on text, like the *Guiness Book of World Records*. And I am not satisfied with that. I want to engage them all in challenging texts that will expand their knowledge and skills. I see every student who doesn't like to read as a failure on my part. I keep bringing in more books and strategies to engage them.

It took a lot of time and reflection before I realized that many of my "reluctant readers" were reading, and reading a lot. They just weren't reading the things that I was valuing in my classroom. They weren't reading texts similar to what was in our literature book, or what I was being given to prepare them for standardized tests. They weren't reading books from the state recommended book list or award-winning books. And because of this, they did not see themselves as readers. I had thought that I was providing what my students needed by making sure that I had a range of book levels and genres in my classroom library. And that was a good start. But I needed to do so much more. To support all my students in being engaged readers, I had to expand my own definition of what counted as "real reading."

I started by asking my students to brainstorm what they read outside school. We defined reading as engaging with a text for purposes including understanding how to accomplish a task, communicating with another person, learning new information, researching or making a decision, or to be entertained. This led to a lengthy list of texts including:

- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Text messages
- Social Media
- Video game guides (in print and online)
- Assembly directions
- Graphic novels & comics (including Japanese Manga)
- Menus
- Travel brochures
- Web pages
- Blogs
- Audio Books
- Fan fiction (stories written by fans; these are set in the original story's world and/or feature characters from the original story)

The list went on and on. It included a plethora of texts that were not evident in my own classroom library, which had privileged traditional print texts; mainly novels and chapter books, as well as a smattering of informational texts. This is a pattern that is seen in many classrooms, in which what students read hasn't changed much from that read by tthe previous generation (Wolk, 2010). I hadn't considered the relevance (or lack thereof) of these texts to my students' everyday lives.Many of my students who didn't read the texts that were part of my classroom library were still readers of texts from this lengthy list they had brainstormed. *They were readers*, but I had not seen that. So, neither had they. Although my book talks and personal knowledge of every book in my library was a positive step, it wasn't the end of my climb to a classroom of engaged readers. I had to show that *all* reading has value.

This discussion and resulting list of texts made me reflect on the types of texts I included in my lessons and my classroom library. I had focused most, if not all, my instruction on short stories, poems, novels, and traditional informational texts. I had communicated to my students that those texts were what had value to me. It had not been intentional, but it had been clearly communicated nonetheless. It was past time for me to send a different message to my students. Unfortunately, I was not alone in prioritizing traditional texts over other formats students engage with. A great deal of recent research on students' reading habits (both in and out of school) focuses on books as the sole or main option, often comparing preferences for digital or print format (Becnel & Moeller, 2015) or investigating patterns in childrens' leisure reading (Schüller, Birnbaum, & Kröner, 2016).

Shifting my mind...and my classroom

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Step one: Opening the Door to Relevance

The first and, in some ways, most frightening step in this shift was allowing students to bring in texts from home for independent reading. We discussed rules for bringing texts from home. They had to be school appropriate. Students would be expected to respond to these in their reader's notebook, just like any other text. The texts could be shared with friends and classmates, but they did not have to be loaned to anyone else. I would let them know ahead of time if they needed to be focusing on a particular genre of text (informational text, biography, historical fiction, etc.).

When I implemented this first step, I noticed a major change in one of my previously adversarial students. Ralph (pseudonym), one of my eighth graders, had spent the year finding excuses to get out of anything related to reading. Being in my language arts class for a 90minute block was a daily trial for him and, because of his desire to escape my classroom, for me as well. He had spent the year moving his eyes randomly across the pages of his literature book and listening to his peers' conversations during discussion to pick up what he needed to get by on assessments. During independent reading, he could often be heard snoring in a back corner.

His reader's notebook was filled with doodles, but few substantive responses to books. There had been parent conferences, heart-to-heart talks, and various attempts to get him engaged in class. These resulted in short bursts of grudging activity, but no lasting change.

The first day of bring-your-own-text independent reading, I told the students we would be focusing on informational texts. Ralph brought in a computer gaming magazine. I started the class meeting with a lesson on how authors use text features, such as sidebars and captions, to provide additional information to the reader in an easy-to-read fashion. I did a think-aloud that included a variety of these features to model how I, as a reader, use these features to support and enrich my understanding of the text. After this, I asked students to select an informational text that used these and similar text features and to reflect in their reader's notebook on how effectively these text features added information in their chosen text. Ralph sat in his favorite back corner intently reading and flipping pages in his magazine. He occasionally shared a short piece of information with a peer. His reader's notebook contained a four sentence reflection regarding one of the sidebars in an article he had read and how it added information about what his computer would need to run a specific game. He talked about how this information was valuable for people who were thinking about buying that game but wanted to make sure their computer had the proper specifications to run it. When we came back together for group sharing and reflection, Ralph volunteered to share his thoughts and we put a page from his magazine up on the projector for the class to discuss. Other students in the class engaged with Ralph's text and related it to other ways the author of the article could have communicated the information. Through this discussion, the class agreed that a sidebar was the best format for this information to be shared, as it allowed the information to be put in a format that was clear and easy to read. Ralph led this discussion with his peers and answered questions for those not as knowledgeable about computer gaming. That day, Ralph showed that he was a reader.

Over the course of the remaining semester, Ralph became less adversarial in my class. When conferencing with him during independent reading time, we truly conferenced more often; previously reading conferencing was time for me to try to convince him that he needed to be reading or threatening another parent conference because he refused to read. During whole class instruction, he was more willing to take part in reading from the texts in the literature book or from other texts I had selected for instruction. When I asked him why, he said that it only seemed fair since I let him read what he wanted most of the time during independent reading. Without my asking, Ralph had decided to compromise. By the end of the year,

Ralph would occasionally read something from my classroom library during independent reading time. Not traditional texts (aka print books), but other texts I brought in as I expanded my library.

Step two: Expanding Formats in my Library

Once I had opened my classroom to students' texts from home, I began observing and making notes about what they brought in, what they shared with peers, and how well these texts supported my students' engagement and literacy learning. This guided the expansion of my library to include a variety of formats. Some texts were easy to obtain - travel brochures, for example, had proven to be popular and effective for my less confident readers and were available for free at local restaurants and hotels. I even wrote to popular attractions that were in other parts of the country and received packs of information that I included in my library. Graphic novels could be obtained through the same sources I bought my more traditional text formats, and I began adding these to my collection. I also asked students and their families to donate texts like magazines and video game guides, as these tended to be tossed aside after their initial use. The local library also became a valuable resource, as they would often donate older magazines and would also let me check out other texts, such as manga (Japanese graphic novels), so that I could rotate these through my classroom library for students to read during independent reading.

As my library expanded, students began requesting new text formats. Menus became another short text available for students in my classroom. Local restaurants were happy to share a menu or two, and they were often already laminated! My classroom computers had bookmarks to student-appropriate fan-fiction websites and some of my students happily shared stories they had written and posted to these sites with their peers. These, too, were bookmarked so that my students could see themselves as both readers *and* writers.

Calvin & Hobbes became one student's favorite text for identifying dramatic irony. Although I had always loved reading comic strips, I had not considered them as texts for learning. Through *Newspapers in Education*, my classroom became inundated with newsprint, including the daily comics. Students began putting sticky notes on the pages that had particularly interesting stories or comics so that others could find them easily. Independent reading time became a scavenger hunt for interesting texts to share and discuss.

It took more adjusting for me, as I had always seen independent reading time as a time for silence. But as my students became more engaged with texts, they became more vocal. They wanted to share and discuss. Students began creating their own reading groups, sharing a text and coming together to discuss it after they had all read it. They told me it wasn't a literature circle, since they weren't reading novels. We debated and decided that literature could be anything we read. Slowly, we all changed our definition of what counted as reading. With that shifting definition, students also changed how they viewed themselves as readers. My experience is echoed in research showing that students whose out-of-school literacies are valued in the classroom have more positive reader identities (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008).

Step three: Integrating Various Formats into Instruction

Opening my students' independent reading to various text formats provided me an opportunity to explore how these texts could be utilized in conjunction with focused reading and writing mini-lessons. Students used context clues to make meaning of unfamiliar words in graphic novels and travel brochures. They discussed the author's purpose for writing letters to the editor, front page news stories, and advertisements. They shared examples of descriptive writing from fan fiction stories, novels, and editorials. But I still faced the question of how this would translate into success within the more traditional text formats

they would see on the standardized state test. I resisted the urge to toss aside the alternative texts my students were enjoying, and instead balanced these with the traditional texts that were typically more prevalent in the test. I saw my students transfer skills across text formats in my classroom. I breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that they would be fine on the test. And they were. Their only complaint: they weren't allowed to read a self-selected text to pass the time if they finished early. They wanted to be able to read! They resented not being allowed to do so!

Passing the Lesson Forward

My classroom today, filled with future teachers, looks very different from that middle school classroom where I spent so many years. Part of my library is crammed into my office, while the rest takes a large part of the basement entertainment room in my house. Students still borrow from my library, but browsing is not as easy. Part of my teaching includes sharing my own growth as an educator so that my students can learn from my experiences. I weave my own stories with relevant research so that students can see how the research applies to the classroom.

My college students are provided opportunities to explore a variety of text formats that can be utilized within the classroom. They analyze graphic novels, video game strategy guides, and other non-traditional texts for complexity, vocabulary, and the skills required to make meaning of the information within. We discuss methods for making reading relevant to their future students and for helping them see themselves as readers. Some of these pre-service teachers relate to this quickly; they did not see themselves as readers despite being highly engaged with many of the same texts we are analyzing. Their perspective shifts and they see that reading is much more than they had previously considered. And perhaps, just perhaps, they will help their own students see themselves as readers, too!

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