

Improving Students' Higher Order Thinking Skills: Popular Culture in the Reading Workshop

The scene is still firmly etched in my memory: I was a novice teacher, leaving school disheartened after my lesson on reading strategies did not go as I planned. The students were not engaged in the material, nor did it seem that they understood how to use the strategies I discussed. Because of my lack of success, I felt, my students were not going to be able to make inferences while they read. I was going to have to find a new way to teach them to utilize their higher order thinking skills.

However, as packed up to leave my classroom, I heard some of my students lingering in the hallway and discussing their favorite hip-hop music. Their in-depth and insightful analyses of the songs of Tupac Shakur, The Notorious BIG, and several others showed me that the problem was not found in my students' abilities to use higher order thinking skills while reading. The problem was in my failure to make these skills relevant to my students. As I continued teaching, I developed ways to tap into the ways my students used reading strategies in their everyday lives to make sense of the texts that mattered to them. By doing this, I did more than make my classes a bit more interesting. I showed my students that the reading strategies we studied could give them the skills to understand the texts that were of primary interest to them, as well

as other works that they needed to read and understand to perform well in school and in the workplaces of contemporary society.

Toward that end, in this article I relate and discuss some of the ways I have incorporated popular culture into reading workshops in order to support and enhance students' abilities to use higher order thinking skills while reading. In my experiences as a middle and

high school English teacher, I have found that students often bring more of this ability (to analyze and interpret texts) to their reading than they give themselves credit for. Indeed, I have had other experiences like the one previously mentioned, where

students who struggle with reading and interpretation in class go on to demonstrate an ability to provide insightful and original explanations of texts that matter to them. Of course, perforce, I must note that the use of popular culture texts in the reading workshop is not meant to replace the books that are read in school. Instead, these texts supplement and enhance and reinforce the instruction in reading strategies that the students are already receiving. If a reading workshop is focused on questioning the author, for example, the use of relevant song lyrics or a clip from a television show can give the students additional support in attempt-

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ing to understand that questioning strategy. Succinctly, my argument is that, if students are given a chance to apply the higher order thinking skills and critical analysis to popular culture texts that are relevant to them, they will develop their understanding of how those strategies can improve one's understanding of any text, and they will be more confident in applying those strategies to the traditional and canonical texts they read in school. This can result in increased reading proficiency for readers at all levels, especially those who have felt disengaged from and frustrated by the act of reading books in school.

How Reading Instruction Using Popular Culture Can Change the Reading Experience

In this section, I will discuss three ways that the use of popular culture to teach higher order thinking skills has been beneficial in my middle and high school classrooms. The three areas in which my students experienced a great deal of growth were in their reading engagement, confidence in utilizing reading strategies, and metacognition of those same strategies.

My students' reactions indicated that their increased engagement came primarily from the relevance they found in the material. While these students had studied reading

strategies before, many had never done so in a way that allowed them to connect those strategies with the typically wide range of texts that represent their out of school lives. This comment, from an eighth grade student named Stacy

(all student names are pseudonyms), embodies this notion: "This is something new for me. I've learned about making inferences before, but I've never had a teacher use things that I do on my own time to teach me about them. This helped me remember what I learned in class, and made me more

interested in doing it." Stacy's comment suggests that applying reading strategies to texts that are relevant to her helped her become more engaged in actually using the strategies, and helped her remember how to use them.

The idea of relevance in English instruction is a topic that has long been addressed by researchers and theorists, if perhaps too often negatively. The writings of Paulo Freire are especially important to this issue, as indicated in the statement "the intellectual activity of those without power is always characterized as nonintellectual" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 122). Many of the middle and high school students we teach are certainly without power in many aspects of their lives, particularly their lives in schools. However, we as teachers can provide students with agency both by incorporating

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activities such as the analysis of song lyrics and television shows, that are meaningful to the students, and by confirming or validating the intellectual quality of such activities.

Along with engaging students in reading workshop lessons, I have also found this approach to be successful in developing the confidence of my struggling readers. Students' ideas about their own abilities, or self-efficacy, are frequently addressed in studies on literacy. As Bandura (1993) says "it is difficult to achieve much when fighting self-doubt" (p. 188). However, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) point out "self-efficacy beliefs don't extend from one context to another, especially if those contexts aren't clearly related" (p. 37). This statement relates to my classroom experiences because many of my students were confident in analyzing relevant aspects of popular culture, but did not express that same confidence in reading school-related texts and utilizing reading strategies to aid their comprehension.

With this said, one of my major goals in incorporating pop culture texts into the reading workshop is to eliminate some of the self-doubt in my students that Bandura mentions. I hoped, initially, to do this by showing them how they use higher order thinking skills in their everyday lives. A comment from Kyle, a ninth-grader, illustrates this: "This class showed me that I use these strategies all the time. I make inferences when I listen to a song, or I come up with predic-

tions while I'm watching a movie. Since I know that I do this a lot, doing it when I read seems easier."

Kyle's comment addresses a number of important topics. One of the issues it deals with is his increased confidence. Since our study of reading strategies in relation to examples of popular culture showed him that he uses

these strategies frequently, he is not intimidated by using them while he reads. Naturally, while there are other reasons why he may find the critical analysis of a text more challenging than analysis of a popular film or song, his confidence in using reading strate-

gies is a positive development and can only help him face such challenges.

Another important aspect of Kyle's comment deals with the reason behind his confidence: he has increased his metacognitive awareness of when, why, and how he uses reading strategies. Nancy Atwell (1998) writes "by using metacognition—by thinking about their thinking as they read—kids read more actively and analytically" (p.211). This was my experience with Kyle, as well as with many other students who made significant progress using this approach. By applying critical reading strategies to examples of popular culture, they became aware of the ways they use these higher order thinking skills on a regular basis. This awareness resulted in increased confidence for the students: since they made inferences, formed predictions, and questioned the author on

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an everyday basis outside of school, doing so with the texts they faced in school seemed much easier. For many students, increases in confidence led to enhanced reading performance. They became more aware of how to use these strategies and what specific strategies were used for, which could not but help the students become more proficient in applying the strategies to any reading engagement.

What Pop Culture In the Reading Workshop Looks Like In The Classroom

It took a significant amount of reflection on my successes and frustrations as a teacher to lead me to the decision to include aspects of popular culture in my reading workshops. As I suggest in the short vignette that opens this article, one of the first questions I addressed as a teacher was how to enable, encourage, and motivate students to bring the same enthusiasm to English class that they apply to the texts they discuss and analyze outside of school. I don't claim to have the only answer, but I do feel that the classroom activities described below are useful ways to facilitate students' learning to use varying reading strategies in a relevant way.

When I teach a reading workshop, I target a specific reading strategy or practice. These are typically related to higher order thinking skills and are framed in a way that describes what good readers do. After my students and I discuss a strategy in class, I write it on a piece of chart paper titled What Good Readers Do. This allows for the students to have a constant visual reminder of the strategies we have discussed so that they can refer back to them as they read. I begin the workshop with a discussion of the specific strategy, followed by a read aloud and think aloud in

which I read a text and model how I use the strategy when I read. This gives the students an example of how an experienced reader uses the strategy, and how the strategy is useful for enhancing one's reading ability. After this, we apply the strategy together in guided practice. I introduce a text to the class and we work collaboratively to use the strategy to enhance our understanding of the text. Sometimes the students will work in groups or pairs and report back, with me circulating and providing guidance, while other times we will have a whole class discussion with students offering their insights regarding specific instances where one can use the strategy, and the benefit that can be gained from it.

Later, when I incorporate popular culture into my reading workshops, I have already introduced and modeled the strategy. This helps me make clear to students that we are continuing to study reading strategies, and that the song lyrics or film clip we examine are a means to this end. I have mentioned incorporating relevant texts in order to engage students, but I also believe in engaging them in an academic situation. If I simply showed a video clip or played a song without any framing, my students would not accept it as an academic pursuit. Some would be engaged, but not in a way that corresponded to my objective of helping them master more analytic reading strategies.

After the students and I work together to apply the strategies we are discussing to an example of popular culture, we also apply the same strategies to a more traditional, school-based text. Part of the reason for this is to reinforce to students that they can use the same strategies to analyze and interpret popular culture and the books they read for school. A comment from Eric, an

eighth-grader, illustrates this: “It seemed a lot easier to question the author when I read after we talked about questioning the author in a Jay-Z song. Once we did the activity with the song, I felt more comfortable doing it with the poem that you showed us.” Eric’s statement shows how a relevant means of instruction can make students more comfortable in academic situations.

The following is an example of a specific reading workshop I have conducted that uses popular culture to support students’ understandings of a specific reading strategy.

Reading Strategy: Questioning The Author

Main Idea I Want to Convey to Students: Read actively and be aware of the choices writers make. Ask questions about what writers do and why they do it. Consider what we can conclude about the writers’ ideas and intentions based on our answers to these questions.

Read Aloud Text: “Plan For English B” by Langston Hughes

Example of How I Model the Strategy: I say, “I question why Hughes spends so much time describing exactly how he gets home. I can tell he makes a choice here to go into so much detail. One reason that he does this might be to show the difference between himself and his professor, who, based on Hughes’ description, probably does not live in the same place he does.”

Shared Reading (Popular Culture Text): “Numb/Encore” by Jay-Z and Linkin Park

Question to prompt discussion: “Why might Jay-Z choose to tell us that he went

from growing up in the Marcy Projects in Brooklyn to performing at Madison Square Garden? What do you think he intended for us to conclude about him from this? Why do you think Jay-Z compares himself to Michael Jordan? What might have been the goal of including this line?”

Shared Reading (Traditional Text): “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman

Question to prompt discussion: “Since this poem is about the death of someone who was apparently very important, why do you think the poem begins by describing positive occurrences? What might Whitman have wanted to get across to us through lines such as ‘the prize we sought was won?’ Why do you think Whitman ends each stanza stating that the Captain has died?”

Independent Practice:

The next component of a workshop on this strategy involves the students reading individually and applying the strategy of questioning the author to the texts they are reading. At the conclusion of the class, the students reflect on how they questioned the author, and what they found helpful about this strategy. I inform the class that, as we continue to discuss this strategy, we will refer back to texts we used in this workshop as examples of how questioning the author can allow readers to understand texts in more depth. One benefit I have found that comes from using popular culture texts is that students confidently come up with examples which they can apply to the reading strategies we discuss.

Finally, after the students have spent a significant amount of time studying reading strategies, I introduce a form of assessment that allows them to apply what they have

learned in ways that are both relevant and academically rigorous. In this assessment, the students are asked to select a reading strategy and present it to the class. They define the strategy, describe how it has benefitted them as readers, and model it with one text from our required curriculum, one they read for their own choosing, and a popular culture text that represents their outside interests. I have found this to be an effective form of assessment because of the way the students apply their understandings of reading strategies with a variety of texts, some from the curriculum and some from students' own choices.

In my experience, it has engaged and challenged both struggling readers and those who read more proficiently than their peers.

For example, one student, Joe, who made great progress as a reader during the time we worked together chose to use the reading strategy of making evidence-based predictions in his assessment project. Joe chose George Orwell's *Animal Farm* for his text from the required curriculum, Walter Dean Myers' novel *Handbook For Boys* for his free-choice text, and clips of the television show *Lost* for the popular culture component. In his self-assessment, Joe had the following to say about the activity: "This project helped me think about how to make predictions and think about the evidence behind them. I liked talking about how I make predictions when reading or watching these three things. Getting ready

for and giving this presentation helped me understand predictions and evidence." From this response, his improved interest in class, and the well-planned presentation he gave, I could tell that Joe's knowledge of reading strategies had improved. He became a more confident reader, and was much more skilled in using and identifying reading strategies.

A Culture of Respect, Relevance, and Importance

As I have continued to teach using this approach and have had the opportunity to

reflect on my instruction and my students' learning, I have determined that one of the most significant reasons my students have had success with the inclusion of popular culture in the reading workshop is the culture it creates in the classroom. Robert Tremmel (2006) discusses an English curriculum that works toward

"collapsing the separation between school and community"(p.29). While the approach discussed in this article doesn't completely eliminate that separation, it does make the English classroom an environment where students' outside of school lives and interests are respected and integrated in meaningful ways into the English curriculum.

When I first began using pop culture in my classes, I knew I wanted to make the course activities and assignments more relevant for students, but I didn't want to place them

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at a disadvantage when it came to knowing certain texts and strategies that they would be responsible for understanding as English students and high school graduates. In addition, it was important to me to keep the academic focus in the class. While I am a proponent of utilizing popular culture and elements of out of students' lives in the curriculum, I have grown to believe that these entities are most meaningful when presented in a context that helps students learn. For this reason, I make popular culture a valuable part of my reading workshops, but only a part. As indicated in the sample workshop plan described earlier, I include read alouds and shared readings with more traditional academic texts along with shared readings and analyses of popular culture texts. I have found that approaching the workshop in this way shows the students that pop culture is valued, but the other kinds of texts we study in the classroom are valued as well.

In my experience, incorporating popular culture into the reading workshop makes students feel like English class can incorporate their interests and out of school lives in an academically relevant way. My students have made great progress in their understanding and use of reading strategies, and I am very proud of their hard work and the results it has yielded. I believe that working with pop culture texts in this way has engaged my students, while increasing their confidence using reading strategies and their metacognitive awareness of why good readers use these strategies. The combination of relevant aspects of students' out of school lives with thoughtful reading instruction has given many of these students what they need to improve and develop as readers.

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