Statement of Purpose

Literacy and Engagement: Relationships in American Literature

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February 2012

The analytical skills needed to examine literature in a survey course transcend the content area and become critical skills in all facets of education and work. The key goal in working with students and literature is addressing their innate and more likely trained behavior of providing the preferred answer. To establish independent learners, students must practice monitoring their own comprehension, recognize their failure to comprehend, and have corrective strategies for compensating for the failure. Strategic reading is essential in the learning process. It involves planning what to think about before reading, adjusting the effort during reading, and constantly evaluating the success of the ongoing effort to make meaning from text (Forget, 2004). Readers are too familiar with the QAR-the Question-Answer Relationship-a strategy for helping students understand that there are different kinds of questions at work in reading literature, and therefore, different places to look for answers (Raphael 2005). Questions that lead student focus should beg for inquiry where teachers have to actively coach students in how to question the text, interact with the material, and relate personal experience to draw necessary conclusions and provide applicability to a broader spectrum than content areas.

The physiological development of the brain is cemented is the use of language (Healey 1990). Mental focus, placing information into perspective, reflection, planning, and effective implementation are skills reliant on language. Deficiencies in these areas are a result of insufficiency of early language development through limited language interaction, the influences of television and technology which eliminates verbal interaction, and educational experiences that fail to stress language as interactive and problem oriented (Healey 1990). Literacy has been far too reliant on decoding as a means to accomplish classroom tasks. To reason effectively the developing mind needs to take charge of the learning process as an interaction between text and learner. Therefore, teacher modeling becomes highly influential in the correct use of language and thought processes. The engagement and interaction the student has with a text is a learned skill that is typically not accomplished by the secondary levels (Forget 2004).

Reading is not taught as a subject beyond the third grade. The assumption that skills will develop themselves beyond this time is alarming considering research suggests that we remember about 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see and 70% of what we discuss. Considering that 85% of the knowledge and skills that students are exposed to comes in the form of language, an interactive learning environment that harbors high levels of engagement with the text is superior to the passive reception of information traditionally found within classrooms. When students work cooperatively within the classroom to construct meaning they are assisting in the learning process (Forget 2004).

Grant Wiggins helps focus the relationship students have with literature by creating lessons that center on the vital important concepts focused on essential understandings. The textbook that I happen to use adheres to the practice of essential questions and becomes a thread throughout the entire year. The word essential has different connotations: important questions that recur, key inquiries within a discipline, and application for helping students make sense of complex ideas, knowledge, and application. The exploration of essential questions fosters important understanding and a greater coherence in content knowledge and skill. Questions that are classified as essential meet the following criteria: cause genuine and relevant inquiry into big ideas and core content; provoke deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions; require students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support ideas, and justify answers; stimulate vital on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, or prior lessons; spark meaningful connection with prior learning and personal experience; or naturally recur, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects (Wiggins 2006).

This approach to organization is a centerpiece of a more general and comprehensive approach. The application of an essential question creates a thread for the entire year; therefore, rendering an extensive look at the curriculum as it will shape the academic year of the student. There are three applicable questions that govern the textbook that Swanton Schools use for American Literature: What makes American Literature American; what is the relationship between place and literature; how does literature shape or reflect society? Each of these questions are threads throughout the units of the textbook; however, an in depth analysis and evaluation of the essential question can be completed independently. The focus of place and literature has guided the concepts presented through the mapping process. The skills become central to the assessments in which the text becomes a resource. The goals established point to the necessity of becoming a better reader by pondering vital questions through reading and reflection that can be applied to new texts and discussions.

Forget, M. (2004). *MAX teaching with reading and writing: Classroom activities for helping students learn new subject matter while acquiring literacy skills.* Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing

Healey, J. (1990). *Endangered minds: Why our children don’t think*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Raphael, T., & Au, K., “Reading Teacher” 59, 3. November 2005 p. 212

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Understanding by design, 2nd edition revised.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.