

Sponsoring Committee: Dr. Jack Dilendik, Moravian College
Dr. Connie Unger, Moravian College
Mrs. Dawn Moore, Warren Hills Regional School District

“...i think i just need more inspiration”:

**USING TECHNOLOGY AND TEXT TO INCREASE MOTIVATION IN
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Kevin Horn

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Education
Moravian College
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
2010

Copyright © 2010 Kevin Horn

Abstract

This qualitative research study examined the observed behaviors and reported experiences when alternative high school freshmen read pertinent young adult literature and used new technologies like wikis and podcasts to discuss and interact with the literature in the conducting of literature circles. The author set out to increase motivation to read in the students by creating a third space, a place both literal and metaphorical in which students' comfort levels are nurtured by various components.

Fifteen alternative high school students acted as participants in the study, which was conducted at a rural high school with a population of approximately fourteen hundred. While these students are not targeted for special education, most are disaffected, have behavioral issues, and have difficulty "fitting in" with the general population. Many test proficient in reading and writing, but simply do not have much interest in doing either one; in fact, most are oppositional when asked to do assigned work.

The researcher found that in addition to the variables employed in the study, other factors became important to the success of the class's efforts. Because of their aversion to school and their perceived regimentation of its authority, students benefit from the ability to have time to play when new tools and concepts are introduced, the time to speak "true words" either related or

unrelated to the curriculum, and the fostering of a comfortable environment in the classroom. In addition, the researcher concluded that students do indeed benefit from a certain amount of choice, but might become ambivalent when too much choice is introduced.

List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>Zits</i> comic strip.....	1
Figure 2. Social skills posters from the <i>Give a Boy a Gun</i> and the <i>Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> groups.....	61
Figure 3. Pastiche of student comments on role sheets.....	66-67
Figure 4. Ray's drawing of a tattoo for Brandon, a character from <i>Give a Boy a Gun</i>	81
Figure 5. Examples of Wordles created by students for <i>Tweak</i>	82
Figure 6. Pastiche of Ray's quotes.....	92
Figure 7. Pastiche of opinions regarding podcasting.....	105

Acknowledgements

I get by with a little help from my friends...

--John Lennon and Paul McCartney

You're gonna need to be patient with me

--Jeff Tweedy

If patience is money, I have overextended my line of credit at a score of different banks. Some of my lenders include:

- My students, who put up with my constant pleas of, “Wait—could you say that again? I missed the last couple of words...” as I frantically wrote your words down. You are the backbone of this action research. You have kept me on my toes every day, not knowing what to expect, but always knowing I will never be bored. You have taught me so much about myself, not the least of which is that I need to slow down, breathe, and smile more. Thank you—I could not have asked for a better group to immortalize in my study (That’s right, folks; M. Ed. students and researchers from all over will be reading about you for years to come! How cool is that?)
- My thesis support group, who kept me going in person, by email, and on Facebook. Thanks for lifting me up as I slumped down!

- My professors at Moravian. Dr. Zales, your classes were the first ones I took and the ones that hooked me into action research. Dr. Unger, your lit circles class rejuvenated my teaching and helped me readjust my educational philosophy. Mrs. Modjadidi, your modeling of differentiation in our own differentiation class showed that you practiced what you preached. Dr. Grove, I'm sure you play a mean guitar, but you play an even meaner cheerleader. Thanks for your calm and pragmatic aura. And Dr. Shosh: What can I say? That open house that drew me to Moravian seems like a zillion years ago. Your warmth and enthusiasm drew me into the program; your understanding and encouragement kept me there, and your literature review class (and promise of huge celebrations upon completion of our theses) showed me I could actually finish my thesis. Finally, Dr. Dilendik, thank you for putting up with my inane questions and incessant whining. I couldn't have asked for a more patient and kind thesis advisor.
- My mom and dad, who doomed me to a life as a teacher of English by reading me Dr. Seuss and leaving the books in my crib (Dad—I can still hear you reading *Put Me In the Zoo*), and my brother and uncle who read my thesis and were brutally honest.
- My own kids. Lije—what other seven year old begs his dad to read his thesis aloud and can recognize layered stories and pastiches? Dyl—your

ability to make me laugh even when I said I didn't want to kept me writing.

- Most of all, my amazing wife who gave me so much time to park myself at our dining room table with my laptop as if I weren't really there. Thank you so much for putting up with "The Incredible Disappearing Teacher"; you are my source of strength, my muse, and the love of my life. Now it's your turn.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
List of Figures.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Literature Review	
Consider Jeremy.....	1
Jeremy is not reading...much.....	1
Jeremy is a 21 st century teen.....	3
Jeremy may want to read, but his choices might not be available at school.....	5
Or, Jeremy might indeed be <i>aliterate</i>	6
Jeremy needs a third space.....	7
Jeremy may find his third space in literature circles.....	9
Best Practices	
Literature circles.....	10
Guidance.....	11
Mini-lessons.....	12
Broken rules.....	14
Motivation	
Showing our students we love to read.....	15
Giving them opportunities for social interaction.....	16

Celebration of reading and emotional connection.....	16
Catching their attention the non-traditional way, from graphic novels to technology.....	18
So, Again, Let's Consider Jeremy (and His Friends).....	23
Researcher's Stance.....	24
Methodology	
Participants and Setting.....	32
Data Sources and their Methods of Analysis.....	33
Trustworthiness of my Study.....	37
This Year's Story	
...in which we see how things are <i>now</i>	40
...in which we flash back to then.....	42
...in which we pave the way for the circles.....	44
...in which they write me notes.....	46
...in which I am stripped of my coolness and they are introduced to lit circles.....	47
...in which there is a huge pile of books on the table.....	51
...in which we pass the books.....	53
...in which we reflect upon the book pass.....	54
...in which role sheets cause controversy.....	62
...in which we discuss discussion.....	67

...in which technology rears its head.....	69
...in which we wiki.....	73
...in which I find out that all is not cool.....	82
...in which I grill them.....	85
...in which I am disheartened by attitudes toward discussion.....	87
...of turkeys, elephants, and chimps.....	87
...in which we return from Thanksgiving.....	94
...in which we podcast.....	98
...in which we make a difficult judgment call.....	102
...in which they pass judgment on podcasting.....	105
Findings.....	106
Conclusions.....	122
Next Steps.....	128
References.....	132
Appendixes	
A. Human Subjects Internal Review Board Approval.....	138
B. Principal’s Consent for Research Study Form.....	139
C. Student Informed Consent Form.....	140
D. Literature Circles Introduction Handout.....	142
E. Book Pass Handout.....	144
F. Sample Literature Circle Role Sheet.....	146

G. Self-Assessment Form.....	147
H. Technology Survey.....	148
I. Student Wiki Home Page.....	150
J. Student Wiki “Your Mission” Page.....	152
K. Motivation Interview Question Sheet.....	154
L. Podcast Evaluation Sheet.....	155
M. Podcast Assignment.....	156
N. Podcast Starter Worksheet.....	157
O. Final Survey.....	158
P. Literature Circle Books.....	161

Literature Review

“When I was in sixth grade, read meant I would go home, lock my bedroom door, and read the book.... But that’s when I liked to read. I haven’t read since eighth grade” (Lynch, 2008, p. 334).

--“Rob,” a tenth grade student

Reading is not a duty, and consequently has no business to be made disagreeable.

--Augustine Birrel

Consider Jeremy

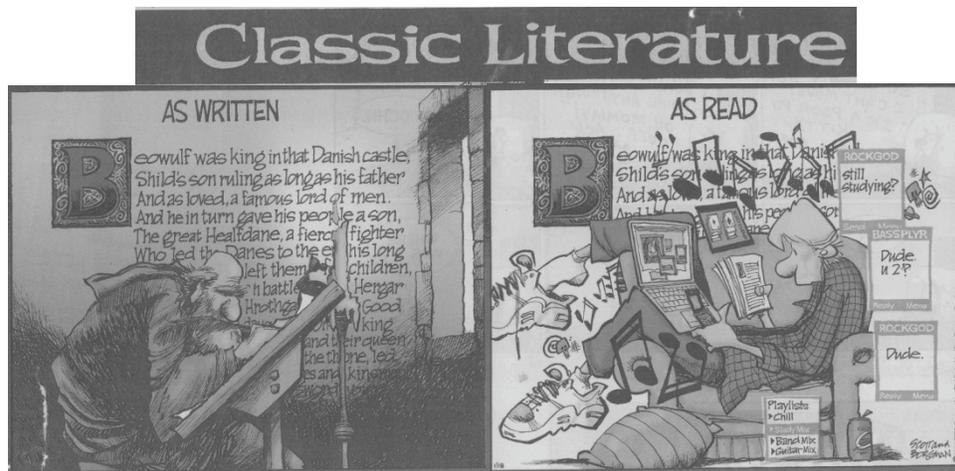


Fig. 1. “Classic Literature.” *Zits* comic strip by J. Borgman and J. Scott; © 2009 King Features

Jeremy is not reading...much. While Jeremy Duncan, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of the popular *Zits* comic strip is made of ink and paper, his real-life teen counterparts are exhibiting behaviors much like Jeremy’s in Fig. 1 above. First, Jeremy is most likely not really reading a whole lot: A meta-study with the

goal of showing how the decline of reading has severely affected us in past years, the National Endowment for the Arts' *To read or not to read* (2007) provides some alarming data. The study amalgamates multiple national sources of "federal, academic, nonprofit, and commercial" data (p. 24), to reach conclusions about how the members of a society that is heading toward aliteracy both function in and shape that society.

The study reached three major conclusions. First, "Americans are reading less" (p. 7). The findings show that the percentage of seventeen year olds who "never or hardly ever read" for fun rose ten percentage points between 1984 and 2004, from 9% to 19% (p. 7), and that only 22% report reading almost every day for fun, down from 31% in 1984 (p. 8). As students get older, the amount of time they spend reading decreases: close to 26% of college freshmen in 2005 read for pleasure less than one hour per day, while nearly 39% read little or nothing for pleasure (p. 9). Further, while 15-24-year-olds spend around two and a half hours per day watching television, they are spending only around seven minutes reading voluntarily on weekdays (p. 10). This is important, as the data suggest that "[r]eading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement" (p. 14).

Another conclusion of the study is that "reading comprehension skills are eroding" (p.5). For example, the study found a five percentage point decline from 1992 to 2005 in the number of high school seniors who read at or above the proficient level, from 40% to 35% (p. 11).

Finally, the study concluded that “[t]he declines in reading have civic, social, and economic implications” (p. 14). To illustrate, the study found that reading and writing are “top deficiencies in new hires” (p. 14), the best paying jobs usually go to good readers (p. 15), and that “poor reading skills are endemic in the prison system” (p. 18).

The study suggests possibilities for further research, such as how test scores and other data are affected by race and socioeconomic factors. The implications of the new digital media are also the subject of further research possibility: “[S]uch research could trace the effects of electronic media and ‘screen reading’ on the development of readers in early childhood” (p. 19).

Jeremy’s a 21st Century teen. What is Jeremy doing with his time, then? He is, as is depicted in the comic strip, losing himself in the new digital media described above. While many of us in the “older generation” who are digital immigrants tend to think that this is time wasted, statistics tell a contrary story, one that we might find surprising. That the media are “bad” for our students, as seems to be a common assumption, is disputed by data included in a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005). The study used surveys and diaries of 2032 students ages 8 to 18. The participants in the study were asked to self report on their media habits, e.g. how much television they watch per day, how they listen to music, what other activities they enjoy, etc. This study found some important information, including much that might be considered

counterintuitive. For example, according to the survey, “Young people who spend the most time with the media also report spending more time with their parents, being physically active, and pursuing other hobbies” (p. 14). To quantify one example, heavy media users from 7th through 12th grade (the term *heavy* denoted the top 20% of users) spent an average of two hours 30 minutes with parents, whereas light media users (the bottom 18%) of this age group spent one hour 57 minutes. Another surprising finding from the study showed that heavy video game users “spend *more* time reading than those who don’t play video games at all....” (p. 35). One last important finding shows that children continue to develop multitasking skills by virtue of the way they are using the media. According to the study, “About a quarter (26%) of the time people are using one medium, they’re doing something else media-related at the same time” (23).

The study concludes that the media are here to stay in our students’ lives. The changes from a previous Kaiser Family Foundation study conducted in 1999, only five years prior to the most recent one (*Kids & Media @ the New Millennium*) are staggering. Use of cable and satellite television rose, as did the ownership of video games. Internet access in children’s bedrooms doubled from 10% to 20%, and computers in children’s bedrooms increased by one third, from 21% to 31% (2005). It would not be outrageous to surmise that in the four years since the most recent study the numbers have continued to increase. Indeed, as this study points out, “this generation truly *is* the media generation.... Anything

that takes up this much space in young people's lives deserves our full attention” (p. 39).

Jeremy may want to read, but his choices might not be available at school. In a 1999 study, researchers found that many genres of reading material might not be accessible to students when they want it. Although this study took place in a middle school, the attitudes carry over to our high schools because, again, preconceptions about reading material happen at all levels. In this same study, 65% of sixth graders chose graphic novels as texts that they would want to read, second on the list next to “scary books or story collections” (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999, p. 18). Yet, according to the research, the genre of graphic novels is in short supply, at least in the schools profiled. Many teachers did not include graphic novels in their classroom libraries because they “felt pressure to provide and use *quality* literature in their classrooms” (p. 22). The term *quality* was interpreted by the teachers as “something from the library,” “something with educational content,” “classics,” and books that were not “frivolous” (p. 22). Two of the three librarians in the study did not want to carry graphic novels like *X-Men*, as they felt they were “inappropriate for...school” (p.22). They also cited shrinking budgets as a reason for a dearth in popular culture related materials like graphic novels (p. 22).

Or, Jeremy might indeed be *aliterate*. The books that Jeremy does find in school most often are what schools define as classics, the accepted literary canon. Membership to this club is very exclusive; most who belong are American or British white males who have either been dead for many years or are close to being so. This is not to say that writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and, of course, Shakespeare, have absolutely no relevance to today's students; good literature is good literature, and many of the issues raised in the works by these authors have timeless themes about love, life, and the human condition that transcend time. However, as Gallo (2001) contends, this literature was written for educated *adults* (not high school age students) to enjoy, not deconstruct, and “certainly not to be [tested]” on (p. 34). What Gallo maintains is that these classics are creating “an aliterate society” (p. 1). According to Sumara (2002) those who are aliterate “have not discovered how to lose themselves in a book” (as cited in Brinda, 2008, p. 489). What Sumara (2002) posits “is that schools tend to implement curriculum in which students quickly read several books and then teachers create tests to assess the ability of students to recall facts from literature” (as cited in Brinda, p. 489). This is precisely the style of reading which Rosenblatt (2004) would call *efferent*, as opposed to *aesthetic*, reading.

In *efferent* reading, “attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event” (p. 1372). *Efferent* reading is generally the type of reading that students associate with school. They must read

chapters from their geometry books in order to fully understand all of the concepts of a particular unit. For many students, this is what takes the joy of reading from them; they *have* to do it, they find themselves drifting off either into a daydream or even to sleep. *Aesthetic* reading is what Rosenblatt (2004) calls “the private part of the ‘iceberg’” (p. 1373). It is enjoyable because it draws upon the experience of the reader: “the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving the words and their referents” (p. 1373). Although there is an invisible line drawn between the two types of reading, Rosenblatt (2004) explains that the line is dynamic; we do not read in a vacuum, and are therefore not exclusively experiencing one or the other at any given time (p. 1372). It is what Rosenblatt terms the *efferent-aesthetic continuum*. How important a concept this is in trying to help re-instill the joy of reading to our students! Although we assume that efferent reading “builds character,” and traditionalists would say, “*This is how school reading should be!*” we cannot ignore the fact that to many students, something happens between kindergarten and high school that sours them to the activity of reading, rendering many of them aliterate.

Jeremy needs a third space. To help discourage this aliteracy, we need to recognize the necessity of creating physical and metaphorical contexts in our classrooms and teaching strategies over which students may feel ownership. Soja (1996) writes that we are “intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the

social construction of our embracing spatialities” (p. 1). Over the course of our lives, we meander through many of these social spaces, but we are constantly bounced between two primary ones. Our first space is one in which we are comfortable. These are the places that we do not have to worry about being judged by others, where we can be our “true” selves: reading in our rooms, seeing movies with our friends, eating dinner with our families. *Second spaces* provide us with regimentation; we are obliged to inhabit them and to answer to authority while we are in them: schools, houses of worship, etc. (as cited in Lynch, p. 366). Moje et al (1996) have put forth the idea of a third space:

In third space, then, what seem to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledges, new Discourses, and new forms of literacy. Indeed, a commitment to third space demands a suspicion of binaries; it demands that when one reads phrases such as “academic versus everyday literacies or knowledge,” one wonders about other ways of being literate that are not acknowledged in such simple binary positions (as cited in Lynch, p. 334).

What Moje is saying is that we need to meld the first two spaces; in other words, we must give them a new space in which the structured nature of authority can blend in with the easy feeling of the comfortable space. In doing this, we have a chance of success at bringing back the joy of reading to our students, to move

them from being turned off to reading to becoming intrinsically motivated readers, and therefore lifelong learners.

Jeremy may find his third space in literature circles. *Literature circles* according to Daniels (2002) are "...small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (p. 2). Daniels (2002) explains that students in the group decide how much to read and share the work of coming up with ideas to discuss. Meetings are scheduled and group members come prepared to exchange their thoughts on what they have read. Students may either read the material in the classroom or outside (p. 2).

The reason literature circles do work so well might relate to our human need to spiritually connect with not only the people with whom we discuss but also with the literature we enjoy reading. Rosenblatt (2004) attributes the introduction of the idea of *transaction* into an educational setting to Dewey and Bentley (1949). Rosenblatt takes Dewey's definition of transaction and applies it to the activity of both reading and human relationships. Transaction, according to Rosenblatt, makes the observer part and parcel of the observed. Emerson described his transactional experiences when walking through the woods metaphorically, as becoming a "transparent eyeball." In his work *Nature*, he writes "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all" (p. 8). The transactional process is almost akin to the sublime experience that Emerson

describes. The reader is not separate from the book, the speaker is not separate from the listener; in essence, they are interdependent upon each other and affect the behavior and meaning of the other. Rosenblatt (2004) connects transaction not only to reading, but to language itself. In a conversation, “(b)oth speaker and addressee contribute throughout to the spoken text (even if the listener remains silent) and to the interpretations that it calls forth as it progresses” (p. 1367). Rosenblatt cites Bates (1979), who uses the metaphor of an iceberg in water to represent the idea of the bearing of personal experience in the transactional process: “The visible tip represents what I term the public aspect of meaning, resting on the submerged base of private meaning” (p. 1366). Each of us has a huge internal well that stores the connotations we have assigned to each word we encounter as opposed to the agreed upon societal connotation.

Jeremy needs to keep this well alive and flowing; his love of reading hangs in the balance.

Best Practices

Literature Circles

Why literature circles? Simply put, “...interchange among students can foster growth and cross fertilization in both the reading and writing processes.” (Rosenblatt, 2004, p. 1389). Yet literature circles do not just happen by accident.

Like an intricately choreographed pas de deux, or a well-rehearsed acrobatic display, literature circles require much rehearsal, trial, and error to get right. Literature circles need properly balanced soil in which to grow; some of the nutrients in this soil in the form of recent best practices follow.

Guidance. So as not to be thought of as one giant student free-for-all, one of the most important elements in the application of literature circles in the classroom is teacher guidance (Daniels, 2002; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Casey, 2008). There are multiple opportunities for us as teachers to guide our students when using lit circles. For examples, from the beginning, students must be introduced to social skills conducive to conversation. Meaningful conversations are complex tapestries of ideas, and because our students bring their different personalities and experiences with them to the table, there must be an appropriate and agreed upon language of etiquette. According to Daniels (2006), the laying down of social skill rules is probably the most onerous and least fun part for teachers, but the most necessary for success of groups. He writes, “Most of us teachers seem to want to believe that if we have ‘a golden gut’ and ‘a heart for the kids,’ that they will collaborate skillfully (and magically) with each other in small groups. Oh so wrong” (p. 13). Daniels recommends some specific rules governing not only *what* is discussed, but *how* the material is to be discussed. For example, students must “take turns,” “honor people’s ‘burning issues,’” and “disagree

constructively” (p. 240). Some suggestions for mini-lessons that target these concepts follow in the next section.

Another area in which we must guide our students is in the choosing of books (Daniels, 2006; Samway, et. al, 1991; Atwell, 1998; Burns, 1998). Like the elements of meaningful conversation, the offering of books is not an “anything-goes” type of process. Daniels (2006) says the guidance of helping students to choose books must be “artful” (p. 11). In other words, we do not give them books that are not developmentally appropriate. For example, Daniels suggests that we read the latest reviews of books from “journals like *The Horn Book*, *The New Advocate*, *Language Arts*” (Daniels, 2002, p. 94) and others. Daniels (2002) also says to listen to our fellow teachers as to what books they have been successfully using with their students (p. 94). The importance behind choice, according to Samway, et al. (1991) is that “because many students have few opportunities to choose what they will read, they have few opportunities to become informed and independent readers” (p. 204).

Mini-lessons. Daniels & Steineke (2004) devote an entire book to the teaching of mini-lessons while implementing literature circles. They define mini-lessons as “short, focused, teacher-directed activities used before and after each meeting of literature circles, book clubs, or any student-centered reading discussions” (pp. 5-6). In addition to highlighting social skills, mini-lessons fall

into two other different categories, which recursively affect each other: “cognitive strategies that help readers to understand texts” and “the literary senses smart readers use to examine and appreciate what they read” (p. 7). Clarke & Holwadel (2007) use some of the most pertinent mini-lessons in their research study “Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them?” Both researchers examined Holwadel’s classroom practices using literature circles because even though they “thought [they] had given the students the skills to productively discuss a text,” (p. 21), many instances of student disharmony and discord occurred while literature discussion was supposed to be taking place (p. 22). One mini-lesson suggested by Daniels and Steineke that the researchers implemented was to use a membership grid before the actual discussions to help the students get to know each other, and therefore feel more comfortable in a small group setting. The membership grid uses such relatable topics as “favorite television show, favorite music group/singer,” or, questions like, “if you were stuck on an island what would you bring with you” (p. 24) and other prompts to inspire connection-making discussion.

Students were also shown how to compliment each other. The researchers made the students responsible for sharing with the class a poem of their own creation, and each student was required to give one compliment after listening to the poem. Clarke & Holwadel (2007) report that this exercise laid the foundation

for a more complimentary and encouraging atmosphere among the students (p. 25).

Broken rules. Because Daniels has been researching and writing about literature circles since the early 1990s, he has found that many of the original rules he created for literature circles were not necessarily in the best interests of group discussion and enjoyment of books. One area in which he has changed his stance is in the use of role sheets to guide discussion. In the first edition of Daniels's book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs & Reading Groups* (1994), he recommended that students take on specific roles to facilitate group discussion. In other words, if one student is responsible for one aspect of the discussion, discourse will flow more smoothly. One such role, for example, would be that of artful artist, whose "job is to draw anything about the story that [he or she] liked" (p. 123). He writes that students can find other ways to capture important information that lends itself to group consideration and to noting what is important to the individual student while reading. For example, students may "capture their responses in reading response logs, on sticky notes (the favorite tool by far), on homemade bookmarks (great for nonfiction), by using text coding, in drawn and graphic responses or in written conversations..." (p. 13) How exciting for our visual/spatial learners that drawing can be a form of prewriting, or for our logical/mathematical students that they may organize thoughts for themselves in a linear way on bookmarks. Although Daniels argues against using

the role sheets stringently, he does emphasize that teachers should give the students an opportunity to choose what methods work best for them.

Motivation

Showing our students we love to read. Teachers need to be role models to show our students that reading is a wonderful, meaningful, and important experience (Gambrell, 1997; Atwell, 1998). According to Gambrell (1996), however, it is simply not enough for us to read along with our students as they read. That practice is “a passive, rather than explicit, model of what it means to be a reader” (p. 20). Instead, we must “share [our] own reading experiences with students and emphasize how reading enhances and enriches their lives” (p. 20). Atwell (1998) suggests corresponding with our students about our reading experiences through written journals. Atwell views this as a way of not only modeling how we too enjoy reading, but also physically modeling an important collaborative process (p. 41). She writes, “I initiated written dialogues about literature because I had some hunches about the possibilities in using writing as a way to reflect on reading and about teacher-student correspondence as a way to enrich kids’ reflection through collaboration” (p. 41). As teachers, we wield a large amount of power to inspire: students cite teachers as one catalyst who disperse excitement about the reading process (Gambrell p. 20). As teachers, we can be the lightning rods that electrify our students’ passion for reading.

Giving them opportunities for social interaction. Gambrell (1996) cites McCombs (1989) and Oldfather (1993) as finding that “Current theories of motivation recognize that learning is facilitated by social interaction with others” (p. 22). In other words, the excitement of learning does not take place in a vacuum. Opportunities for students to network through book discussion also do not need to be limited by the four walls of the classroom. One student taking part in early research on literature circles (or reading clubs as they were called in this study) posited at the conclusion of the intervention, “We should have a book recommending service. Have people writing to us, ‘I like blah blah, I like *Song of the Trees*. Do you know of any other books I might like after reading that book?” (Samway et. al, 1991, p. 205). Many times, students take the word of their peers with more credence than the words we as teachers give them. The power of students to recommend books to their classmates and friends should not be underestimated; one student reported of a book to a researcher, “My friend Kristin was reading it and told me about it, and I said, ‘That sounds pretty interesting’...so I read it” (Gambrell, 1996, p. 22).

Celebration of reading and emotional connection. We as teachers must be spin doctors in a game of public relations to show that reading is an activity to be celebrated. We can start with the physical plant; classrooms that look more reading friendly can help to foster a sense of motivation in our students (Gambrell, 1996; Atwell, 1998). Our classrooms must be laden with books for the

students to peruse and to borrow. Atwell (1998) keeps “poetry bookcases, displays of new titles and recommended books, fiction and nonfiction paperback literature, and drama” (p. 160). She does not have her students sign out books because she feels as if it is too onerous for her to keep track of which student has what book; instead, she writes her initials in her books and basically hopes for the best (p. 160). In addition to books, the “atmosphere” of a classroom is telling of its reading friendliness. Gambrell (1996) notices that “elaborate reading corners (pillows, rocking chairs...), and more visual displays (posters, bulletin boards, etc.) that related to the celebration and value of reading” (p. 19) positively impacted motivation better than control classrooms (p. 19). Although the classrooms Gambrell (1996) cites are those of first graders, it is up to us as educators to continue to ask “what if?” with respect to nontraditional practices. We need to bring back those “safe” feelings students experienced when the students originally felt the joy of reading in their early childhoods. This emotional involvement of students in their reading is possibly the most important aspect of motivation (Long & Gove p. 359). They write, “Instead of ‘practice, practice, practice,’ we see the need for children to connect, connect, connect with texts emotionally” (p. 359). With our guidance and the modeling of an authentic love of reading to our students, we can help them to achieve this intrinsic love for books and the joy they can bring.

Catching their attention the nontraditional way, from graphic novels to technology. If, in the attempt to get our students to read, we are indeed competing with the new media that our students spend close to six-and-a-half hours with each day (Roberts, Fohr, & Rideout, 2005, p. 6), it is time to bring our best cards out. Although there are classics that our curricula dictate to us that we must teach, we need to come to the understanding that Generation M (Roberts, Fohr, & Rideout, 2005) needs something more in the way of text and assessment to help set them up for success. Gallo (2001) reports that our refusal to let go of the literary canon is creating “an aliterate society” (p. 33). The use of young adult literature for these reading groups is probably a good start, and there are more options which encompass the written word, such as graphic novels, and choices among the new digital media.

Graphic Novels. There is much consensus that the use of graphic novels in our classrooms can be of great benefit to our students (Versaci, 2001; Jacobs, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Carter, 2007; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006; Thompson, 2008). Versaci (2001) suggests surprising our students by using graphic novels in the classroom. He, like Atwell (1998) says that students find our book choices “dull, irrelevant, or both. But by placing a comic book—the basic form of which they no doubt recognize—into the context of a classroom, teachers can catch students off guard in a positive way....” (p. 62). Versaci (2001) explains that the unexpectedness and freshness of trying a new medium like graphic novels

helps with engagement. Frey & Fisher (2004) brought graphic novels into their mostly ELL urban high school classroom as a tool for the teaching of writing to students who were, for the most part, not English proficient (p. 19). When they did so, students became eager to write and opened up about their lives and cultures. They report that “students increased their mean written sentence length” (p. 24). Students used dialogue in their writing, increased the length of their stories, and chose “more sophisticated word[s]” (p. 24). They write, “Having begun with the idea that graphic novels were comic books at best and a waste of time at worst, we now realize the power they have for engaging students in authentic writing” (p. 24). Jacobs (2007) argues that by reading graphic novels, students may get a better grasp of the concept of writing style. He reports that the pictures and words work together to help us to better “‘hear’ the narrator’s voice” (p. 23). The concept of voice is one of the most erudite of the writing domains; that we have any available resource to help make the concept tangible is of the greatest importance. Again and again the thought that we must, if not send the entire canon on its merry way, at least ask it out of the room for a few minutes while we reassess our literary choices keeps repeating itself. Carter (2007) makes an eloquent argument: “In short, the English classroom that integrates graphic novels will be... a place of acceptance, diversity, deep and multifaceted reading and discussion that does not shy away from challenge” (p. 52).

Literacy 2.0. The paradigm of how we view literacy is undergoing an enormous change. Instead of our antiquated, one-dimensional vision of literacy as *I read by myself from printed text; I write by myself on a word processor*, we are beginning to experience a more participatory and multidimensional picture of what it means to be literate. According to Knobel & Wilber (2009), the concept of Literacy 2.0 “involves extensive participation, collaboration, and the distribution of expertise and ‘intelligence,’ along with widely dispersed access to human and informational resources” (pp. 21-22). Teens are no strangers to creating and synthesizing their own media content: a study by the MacArthur Foundation found that over half of all teens had done so, and a third have shared what they have created on the Internet (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2008, p. 3). Blogs fit this mold of creation and sharing. Synthesizing Literacy 2.0 with literature circles could create a new metaphorical space, akin to the ones suggested by Moje (2004, as cited in Lynch, 2008) in which the students might openly exchange ideas from a venue in which they are more comfortable than in the classroom. Although literature circles have heretofore taken the shape of face to face conversation about books, using Literacy 2.0 to change the look to a partly “in-person,” partly “over-the-web” discussion could add a new dimension to how students view discussion.

Wikis. One such venue is the wiki, which is a student-generated collection of web pages structured as the many discussing with the many (Ducate &

Lomicka, 2008, p. 9). According to Knobel & Lankshear (2009), wikis are purposeful collections of web pages, usually to discuss one topic. Wikis are dynamic, often embedding links to refer users to other pages, and are “collaboratively written” (p. 631). And, like blogs, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, wikis are part of the new tapestry that is linking together not only students, but people across the world in a huge digital network. Richardson (2009) says that we need to get used to this paradigm: “much of our students’ learning lives will be spent interacting in online, virtual networks, forming groups with others on the basis of their passions and their need to learn, all the while making complex decisions about whom to connect to, how much information to share, and how best to achieve both collective and individual goals” (p. 26).

The social nature of wikis appeals to this need. With our guidance, students can use wikis as an important and inviting tool to help each other to learn to dig deeply into issues that they want to discuss, inspired by the material from their literature circles. According to one teacher, ““The students are used to looking for a straight answer to a question. They don’t know how to delve into the research, what questions to ask themselves, and how to synthesize information; these are things they need to be taught”” (cited by Engstrom & Jewitt, 2005, p. 12). Teachers thoroughly modeling how to use wikis, and group members collaborating to help each other explore subjects through the not-quite-so-

ephemeral availability of the (digitally) written word should make wikis a valuable addition to the literature circle process.

Podcasts. According to Richardson (2006), “Podcasting is basically the creation and distribution of amateur radio...” (p. 112). Richardson (2006) explains that one of the advantages of podcasting is that one does not need to have a wide knowledge base of the technical aspects of broadcasting in order to create a podcast, and that one can do so by using simple tools (p. 112). Students can look to professionally produced podcasts from venues such as NPR as to how to model their own, but because students are amateurs and because podcasting belongs to non-professionals, endemic to the genre are crutch phrases like “’ums’ and ‘ahhs’” as are “[c]racks and pops” (p. 113). Richardson maintains that to “let production value overwhelm what might be really interesting content” is basically missing the point (p. 113).

Richardson (2006) maintains that bringing podcasting into the classroom makes sense, and brings with it myriad uses. Some examples he documents include an online student magazine for which the students created their own music by using a software program, a radio show produced by students incorporating different themes for each episode, and tours of places near a school, narrated by students (p. 116).

So, Again, Let's Consider Jeremy (and His Friends)

As stated above, there is a big chance that Jeremy and his contemporaries aren't really reading. The amount of time that students, both high school and college age, are reading for pleasure is going down (Iyengar, Sullivan, Nichols, Bradshaw, & Rogowski, 2007), and their consumption of media is going up (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Whether we like it or not, 21st century media such as new, inviting graphic novels to read, and social networking spaces, such as wikis and podcasts in which to participate, are here to stay. We can continue to pretend that skills that students have developed and continue to develop out of true interest exist solely outside of school, or we can help our students to become literate in exciting new ways while we discover the true power of what 21st century literacy will bring us. Ohler (2009) agrees: "Although experts may claim to understand the pedagogical implications of media, the reality is that media are evolving so quickly that teachers should trust their instincts as they explore what works. We are all learning together" (p. 11).

Researcher's Stance

How To Eat a Poem by Eve Merriam

Don't be polite.
Bite in.
Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice that
may run down your chin.
It is ready and ripe now, whenever you are.

You do not need a knife or fork or spoon
or plate or napkin or tablecloth.

For there is no core
or stem
or rind
or pit
or seed
or skin
to throw away.

I believe that we *can* and *must* help our kids learn to eat books, as well as teach them *how* to eat them, in the spirit of Merriam's poem advising her readers of the proper way of snacking on poetry. Most of my students have reported actually loving reading when they were young, that for some it was a magical experience being read to, and finally learning how to read themselves. In closely examining my own motivation as to why I believe that kids can truly recapture a love of reading, I would have to look back to my childhood, and to why I became an English teacher in the first place (which I would have to blame on my parents).

Even before having read Merriam's poem, I took her words literally. At age two, I ate a bunch of pages out of a copy of *The Cat in the Hat*, left overnight

in my crib by my mother. Soon after, I turned the *literal* eating of books into the more figurative (and palatable) devouring. Because I was never the athletic type (thoughts of having to be chosen for teams in gym class still, 30 years later, give me agita), I made sticking my nose in a book my way of life. Heaps of Dr. Seuss's and others' writings always cluttered my bedroom floor, uneasily piled stacks like architecturally unsound mini skyscrapers rising from the linoleum. Bedtime was always set aside as bonding time with my dad, and he would read to me about a plethora of colorful characters: a nearsighted sign maker losing his glasses and nearly ruining a town (*Mr. Pine's Mixed Up Signs*) or a little train looking for his place in the world (*Someplace for Sparky*) or a chausette-sporting fox taunting a curmudgeonly furry, yellow creature with tongue-twisters (*Fox in Socks*, of course).

As time went by, I would voraciously read almost anything I could get my chocolate encrusted little hands on, including cereal boxes, ingredients to Burry's Best brand chocolate chip cookies, and, of course, a wide array of books. I remember a flood of tears after finishing *Charlotte's Web* while I lay in my empty bathtub (it was "lights out" in my room, but no one had said anything about the bathroom), a sense of wonder about a girl named Annabel discovering she was a witch in *No Flying in the House*. I also used up scads of D batteries as the "emergency" flashlight I kept under my pillow illuminated yet more different worlds contained in the pages of my beloved books.

School, at first deceptively wonderful with its indoor jungle gym in kindergarten, unfortunately began to make reading a chore. The idea of reading-as-chore was as alien and ridiculous to me as the idea of eating-pizza-as-chore. But thirty-something years later, I still remember the horrible blue workbook with the institutionally boring reading passages that were proffered to me from the basal reader of the same color. That I was always in the highest level reading groups is beside the point; I now found school reading, as well as the way it was forced upon my classmates and me as we were stripped of our freedom of choice, loathsome. Yes, unlike many of my students, I continued to read at home, but the sour taste that I felt each day as I went to school as a student never faded.

So we flash forward to the present day. I have become an English teacher and after eleven years, I have become bored. And, as many of us do, I have gotten stuck in a rut: Give out *Gatsby*. Read it together. Give out the writing assignment or test. Do the writing process thing. And if I am bored, you can be sure that my students are. Those kids can smell boredom a mile away. So for the nonconformist I had always claimed to be, the *stick-it-to-the-man* kind of guy, here I have been accepting the “traditional model” of how a classroom is supposed to be run. And if my camera on myself zooms out a little bit, we see the classrooms around mine doing the same thing. Pull out a bit further, and surrounding districts follow the same procedure. I’m not saying that all English

classes look exactly the same; I know that many teachers are doing extremely dynamic things. However, I think our educational system needs an overhaul.

I want the paradigm to be shifted. I want to begin with my classroom, and then have the climate of my school change by sharing the results of what I find with my research. I want to show that offering choice to students to help in the differentiation of instruction is practical and necessary, simply because choice makes us feel important. I want intrinsic motivation to come more easily to students, and I believe that it can. I can show them that they matter, by not shoving the same cobwebby books at them, but by actually implementing and not just giving lip service to the idea that they can and should choose books and methods and schedules for themselves.

From my first day of teaching, students have resisted the books I have handed out. I remember being disillusioned, having loved canonical works like *The Crucible* and *Of Mice and Men* and realizing that students were not necessarily going to like them just because I did. “Make them relatable! Give them background context!” is the mantra of supervisors and administration. “You can draw them in by using prior knowledge!” While this is not entirely false, I have come to realize that the struggle to do so might not be worth the rate of return. It wears me (and them) down each day to keep tap-dancing to keep their interest, and even then, their interest is not completely internalized. If they are depending on me to “make it fun,” then they are going to forget the experience

soon after it is over. Sure, as an anticipatory set, the tapes of the Stanley Milgram experiment of blindly following authority strike awe in them, but Arthur Miller's language of *The Crucible* that follows lulls them into boredom.

And then we expect them to read and discuss as a large group, and then write papers, and then lather, rinse, and repeat. When does this happen outside of a classroom? When will they need this skill after they graduate? Does not most dialogue and discussion occur in what we call "the real world" in small group settings? Yes, we are wedded to the classics, because in my supervisor's words, "We need to give them a cultural literacy; there are things all of us should know." However, trying to keep a culture static is like trying to stop tidal waves.

Archetypes will change with or without us trying to keep them constant. Our main concern as teachers should be to show students how to practice higher order thinking skills, to make connections, and to become life-long learners.

I, by some wacky yet life-changing twist of fate a couple of years ago, found myself in a course solely about literature circles. In reading Connolly and Smith (2002), I found an experience that they had had with a graduate course that they took a lot like my own with Dr. Unger's class: "It was one of those classes that no one seemed to want to be over. Bill (Connolly) jokingly suggested that the class should get together for yearly retreats so the conversations could continue" (p. 16). I had used lit circles before, relying on my in class support teacher's knowledge of them to get me out of a sticky situation with my low level freshmen

a few years back. They were completely turned off by what we were reading, and were basically staging a revolt against anything I would hand them. Textbook with short stories, nope! *Romeo and Juliet*, nope. Nada. Then, my in-class support teacher, Maryanne McKinney, suggested that we try this thing called lit circles. She told me about them, and they sounded cool. However, knowing what I know now, I can tell you that the way we implemented them went against most of the principles of good “circleship.” We had books that were old and yellowed and really of little interest to the students, we stuck rigorously to the role sheets, and we told students how much to read instead of asking them to figure out the number of pages for themselves.

My serendipitous signing up for the Moravian lit circles class with Dr. Unger opened up a new world for me; I felt a sense of rejuvenation each time I thought of the possibilities. Dr. Unger’s class turned out to be the best thing that had happened to my teaching philosophy and, at the risk of sounding melodramatic, to my soul in general in a long time. Dr. Unger’s class empowered me to do what I was afraid to do for a long time: change not only my teaching style, but my values as a teacher.

In finally summoning up the courage to kill tradition, I started small. Dawn Moore, the head librarian at my high school, asked if I could persuade my classes to help her spread the word about award-winning young adult literature, and I saw this as the perfect opportunity to ease myself and my students gently

into the world of literature circles. They would be in groups of no more than two to three, reading the same book and discussing their opinions. I tied in my love of media and persuasion by giving them a final project of creating an infomercial for a library showcase to try to convince their audience members to want to read their book. The presentations were a success: the audience of students watching the library showcase applauded enthusiastically, eloquently discussed their prospective choices for books to read and why to read them, and we even made it into the newspapers, complete with photographs of my students “selling” their books to an enthralled audience.

After that, I knew that I could fully bring literature circles into my classroom.

And now, this year, I am again thrown a challenge: I am given a class of what our school calls “alternative” freshmen whose reputation of resistance to reading and most other things academic precedes them. I do not like to rely on preconceptions, so I will be judging them on their own merits. Still, these students who will be placed in their own self contained classroom for the first half of the day for their major subjects are in this arrangement for a reason, so I must psych myself up for a different experience from which I am used to.

I know that our students, disaffected or not, have an innate appetite for books, and this appetite can be brought to the surface. When we change *the way*, as well as *what*, we feed them, they will continue to eat and eat and eat. And so, I

am off to find out what will happen in my freshmen alternative classroom as we dine together on pages of text combined with digital tools with which they are familiar.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants in my research study are 15 students in what our high school has termed an “alternative” freshmen class, *i.e.*, students who are what Lenters (2006) would call resistant readers; yet this classification only tells a small part of the story. These students are, for the most part, disenchanted and disaffected with school for a variety of reasons, including their difficult home lives, problems with substance abuse, and resistance to acceptance of any type of authority. Many of the students demonstrate their disenchantment by refusing to do work, many times shutting down completely during class, resulting in lower grades than their college prep counterparts, and ongoing disciplinary problems. Many of them fight in the hallways, disrupt classes, and curse out their teachers. For these reasons, this new alternative program has separated these students from the general population of the school for their three morning blocks, where they stay in one classroom. They travel to the mainstream classrooms for their math classes and electives. The alternative program is still in its experimental phase at the high school, and its future is uncertain due to budget tightening and questions of cost-effectiveness. Fourteen of the fifteen students are Caucasian, one is African-American. Four of the students are female.

The high school at which I will conduct this research is a regional secondary school of approximately 1400, whose students run the gamut of socioeconomic strata. Many of them come from middle- to lower-middle-class backgrounds, and the school serves a mix of what I would call rural and sub-rural communities. The graduation rate as of 2007 was approximately 91 per cent, and the number of students planning to attend either a two-year or four year college was just under 78 per cent.

Data Sources and their Methods of Analysis

Throughout my research study, I gathered data, ending up with a three ring binder that weighed almost as much as a school bus and measured as thick as a New York delicatessen corned beef sandwich. I constantly looked and re-looked at anything and everything that I ended up with after each class period, hoping to find connections, breakthroughs, and gems of quotes from my students. Every day was different, and every piece of data I collected seems to tell its own story; yet when assimilated, the data tell an awesome story, heartbreaking and frustrating, silly and uplifting.

Interviews. One method of gathering data was through student interviews. At different times during class, I would call a student over to my desk (or wherever we happened to be working) and pose different questions that I had come up with. In the beginning, each time I would come in with a premade list,

and each time I would set out to ask those specific questions. However, in truly listening to their responses, it became apparent that if I wanted authentic responses, I would have to let go of some of those questions and create new ones on the spot in order to “go with the flow” of the conversation. To cut a student’s ideas off for the sake of getting to the next question would have been counterproductive. During the course of our interviews, I noticed that some students were excited to give answers and would elaborate quite eloquently, and some were nervous speaking one-on-one with me, tending to give one or two word answers. Ely (1997) writes, “...they see experience in ways we cannot. Honoring their voices allows us and others to see past the edges of our vision” (p. 315). Hearing what they had to say about what we were doing in the class proved to be an important experience in the bonding process between my students and me, and helped me slowly shed the preconceptions that I (unfortunately) held about them in the early stages of our relationship.

Field Log and Reflective Memos. I am glad that my school has a ready supply of small composition notebooks available, as they made great tableaux for writing down my impressions of events as they happened in my classroom. I informed the students at the beginning of the study that I would be taking copious notes while watching them, and that those notes would include not only what they were doing at any given time, but what they said as well. “I’ll be writing down what you’re saying as you say it.” They, at first, did not know whether this would

be “cool” or “creepy.” When they voiced their concerns, I assured them that the best way to get an accurate picture of who they really were was to write down their true words, most were amenable to the idea. Initially they were very aware of my scrawling down their dialogue, at times trying to trip me up by either stopping mid-sentence or suddenly making up nonsense words or talking really fast. Soon, however, they became used to seeing me with the composition book and pencil. After each block, I would sit down at my laptop and turn my entries into a reflective memo; *i.e.*, type up what was in my observer’s log and add my comments. This would help me to rethink how I viewed events or conversations; I noticed that many times how I perceived things as they happened might not have been correct. Sometimes what I thought was a sarcastic remark turned out to be genuine, sometimes what I thought was serious turned out to be said in jest. For this reason, I tried my best to write down exactly what I saw and not pass judgment until later. According to Wolcott (2009), “...we all too easily slip into reporting inferred behavior, with action and intent colored by the eye of the beholder” (p. 28). For me, this was a constant consideration, although I am sure my “eye” has probably “colored” more events than I am aware of. Poring over all of the quotes, narrative, and data in general from my field log helped me to make sense of what was going on while it was going on. During and after the study (but mostly after), I coded my field log; that is to say, I took bits of information and assigned them words to sum up what I thought was important in

that information. As patterns began to emerge in the codes, I was able to connect the code words and assign them into topics called bins. After that, I was able to take each bin and assign a meaning to it, converting it into a theme statement. Theme statements are a convenient way to summarize the findings of my study.

Surveys. Another component in my data collection process was my use of surveys, the purpose of which was, for the most part, to find general attitudes toward different components of my research. As with the interviews, surveys would yield some surprising results, yet unlike the surveys, many times I could quantify answers into statistics (albeit not the most scientifically accurate, but telling nonetheless). One such survey that helped to rejuvenate my study when it had begun to feel stagnant was a technology survey, which told me a story of students who were indeed familiar with much of the technology I was going to present to them along the course of the research.

Student Artifacts and Work. During the study, the students used a wiki to discuss their literature circle books and to “get creative” using what they had read. I was able to read through their conversations and although much of what they wrote was (by my standards, at least) silly, I could still tell that some had learned how to ask good questions and to answer them as well. In addition, they recorded the preliminary tracks for a podcast based on the books they had read, also allowing them a venue for their creativity.

Trustworthiness of My Study

The first step in ensuring that my study followed trustworthiness protocol was to apply for approval from the HSIRB of Moravian College (Appendix A). After my study was approved, I brought my building principal a consent form for approval to use the school as a location of the study in compliance with Moravian College's as well as my own school's policy (Appendix B). My building principal signed off with both his blessing and a look that said, "I'm trusting you; try not to break anything," as he often does. Afterward, I handed out the informed consent forms to the students (Appendix C). I had told them the first day of school that they would be taking part in a study, and many of them seemed excited, especially after I assured them that the study did not mean more work for them. I needed to constantly remind them to return the consent forms and even called the parents and guardians of those who had not returned their forms within a week. All of the students handed back their forms with the exception of one; therefore, that student's data is not used in this study.

Hendricks (2006) outlines different steps to ensure that research is trustworthy and valid. I have recognized that certain steps will be of more value to my study than others. For example, Hendricks cites Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s suggestion to utilize peer debriefing (p. 106). Just as many teachers realize the pedagogical value of pairing students together to reinforce their knowledge of a

topic by both reteaching and hearing a different perspective, so is the practice of one teacher discussing research with a disinterested (not to be confused with uninterested) peer helpful. My supervisor is a great resource; she is both easy to talk to and a font of pedagogical knowledge. She also has plentiful amounts of common sense and patience, too.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest using member checks (as cited in Hendricks, p. 108), in which the researcher discusses data with those being observed. I know my freshmen were amazed when I told them I actually like being a student, and when I told them how they are not only valuable to me on their own merits, but also a valuable resource for me to learn about how to help students in general, they seemed flattered. They truly seem to want to help out, and for them to do well I know it is imperative to treat them as mature young adults. Consulting with them to make sure what I have observed is accurate from their vantage points will help them feel a sense of ownership of the research with me.

Providing thick description of the setting and study (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Hendricks, p. 108) will be something I can easily do, as I have been known to be a bit loquacious. My problem might be that of *over-description*, something I will have to be cognizant of during my revisions.

I realize that I am already guilty of some bias. I know that the point of action research is to document what actually happens, not to paint an idyllic

portrait of what I want to happen. Yet, in going ahead with this study, I am placing faith in the process of literature circles and the possibility that students can love reading. Merriam (1998, as cited in Hendricks, p. 109) advises researchers to be wary and to “consider any preconceived ideas” I might have and to not hide them, but flaunt them (and hopefully how I got over them) proudly in my research.

Perhaps the most important component of trustworthiness is the triangulation of data (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Hendricks, p. 108). I plan to use a plethora of sources, including field logs, interviews of students, surveys and inventories, student artifacts, and reflective double entry journals to collect a varied type and large enough pool of data.

This Year's Story

I. ...in which we see how things are now...

On a snowy January morning, Dani summons me over to where she is comfortably stretched out in the back of the classroom. Her raised hand whips back and forth. On the streets of New York City, she would be hailing a cab.

“Mr. Horn Mr. Horn! I’m not writing about my mom’s car hitting the deer anymore, ‘kay?”

“You’re switching your topic?”

“Mmmm-hmmmm.”

We are in day ten of writers’ workshop and most of the students are in the final phases of their final drafts.

“Why?” I ask.

Dani is belly down on the butcher block table, pencil paused from furiously scratching graphite against wide ruled paper.

“I can’t get enough out of it to finish. But I’m gonna tell the story about the time we drove to Florida and we stopped at the hotel and I was so psyched to jump in the pool but I slipped and I broke my tailbone and I had to keep riding with the broken tailbone and it hurt like hell but I even went horseback riding.”

“Sounds painful,” I commiserate.

“Yeah it was.”

She smiles as she turns back to her paper, tip of her tongue protruding from corner of mouth, like the Peanuts characters do when they are focusing on writing their letters to Santa. The others are behind their laptops, also writing their memoirs. Most are almost finished, yet I don't mind that Dani wants to switch topics this late in the game. She is genuinely motivated to write this paper; I can tell this by her body language, her rare smiles, and her stub of a pencil. I know the smile could fade tomorrow and transform into the smirky frown she usually wears, but I am confident she will get it done.

Likewise Tanya, who is writing the last few sentences of her piece, a narrative about how her mom told her on her ninth birthday that they would be driving their mobile home from space number 101 in a trailer park in Mendocino, California to one in Illinois the next day where her mom's ex boyfriend would receive cancer treatment at a hospital. They would not be returning to Mendocino, ever. She is proud of her piece, and it is really good: authentic, visual, honest. I have nominated Tanya for student of the month, which she will probably not win, but her mom will receive a letter in the mail telling her of her daughter's nomination. They have all gone through the writing process of brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, peer revising, and redrafting, save for one

girl who, by her own admission, "hates language arts" and refuses to do the paper.

They have all been excited to take out their laptops these past few weeks. I finally feel comfortable with them, not like the outsider in my own classroom that I had felt like for the past few months. We have finally formed real bonds, made an authentic connection. I still cannot believe that this is the same Dani, the same Tanya that have been occupying space in the classroom since September. This is all very different to me from the feelings of frustration and near ineffectiveness the first half of the year, and I welcome it, bask in it.

* * *

II. ...in which we flash back to *then*...

On a warm August afternoon, filaments of dust, like snowflakes in a windstorm, dance in the sunlight beams streaming through the elongated windows of the classroom, and I look around, incredulous. *This is the room they gave them?* It's my angry voice, and it is a match which is beginning to ignite my amygdala. The dust frosts any exposed surface, from the butcher block tables in the back, to the black laminate, graffiti covered rectangular tables hijacked from the science rooms, to the rubber molding connecting the walls to the floors. Rectangles of faded color different from the current coat of paint, testaments to

the recently removed blackboards, student work, and signage cover the walls. Wires connected to nothing impotently dangle, light switches click but to no avail, the whole room itself frowns, sad with neglect. This room had been one of the art rooms until the recent construction project had given birth to three new ones—bright, shiny, sterile, and built for students who aren't like *my* students. This year marks the introduction of a new program for the alternative students, the “disaffected” ones. A camera panning across the room would reveal many sad stories. The opening credits to a movie made about the class would look like this:

* * *

INT.—CLASSROOM—DAY

*The camera slowly pans along the horseshoe formation of black tables, each long enough to seat two. First on the left is Michael. Only the top of his crew cut is visible, as his head is down on the desk. He lifts his head up long enough to tell us: “My best friend committed suicide the week before school started. The only book I’ve ever read is *The Cat in the Hat*. I’m a lot shorter than all of the other kids in the class but I feel taller. I like to play-fight in class with Patrick and Jack, especially when they try to kick and tackle me. Most of the time I’m too fast for ‘em, but, well, ya can’t win ‘em all.” He puts his head back down on the desk. The camera continues to pan to the right. Patrick’s hoodie covers much of his face. He talks,*

still looking down: "Yeah, well, I play football, but I'm pretty crappy at it. I'm clean now, but when I'm fighting with my dad, I mean, like knock-down brawls, makes me want to really start up again." Tall and lanky, Ray sits next to Patrick. He looks, in a weird way, like Abraham Lincoln: same beard, same posture, same pensive frown. "I came from the 'hood, one of the only white kids who lived there. I managed to not give in to all the drug use that was goin' on around me. Everyone was usin', but I got outta there just in time." As the camera continues to pan, we see more of the same types of stories: a girl whose dad who committed suicide when she was five and whose mother is nowhere to be found most days and nights, one whose mom told her the morning of her ninth birthday that they were moving halfway across the country in their double wide, and on and on and on.

* * *

III. ...in which we pave the way for the circles...

September ninth. I am just getting to know these students, and what I see each day disturbs me in some way, makes me sad, frustrated. And laugh a little as well. I have given them a paragraph to write about their first reading memory. The students' heads hang over their handout sheets like monks in solemn prayer. Upon their distribution and my instruction to write as much as possible, Minnie blurts out, "I can't. I'm not a writer!" I can't tell whether she is terrified or cocky. She

continues: “You’re going to read these? I can’t spell... I feel like a...” She points to her temple and raises her top lip to expose her front teeth, one of the many examples of student iconography denoting “dumbness.” I am angry at whatever has happened to these students, to *her*, to make them so quick to believe they are stupid. Minnie is among the majority of the students in the class who keeps repeating “I can’t do this—I’m in the dumb class!” when I give an assignment or ask a question.

“Yes, I’m going to read these, but not to the class, unless you want me to.”

As they write, they also talk:

Jimmy: Oooohh... You know that book *The Minuteman*? About the kid whose dad was a Minuteman? It was my favorite book, but my sister wrote on it.

Dani: Did it piss you off?”

Jimmy: I shot her with a BB gun.

I am obviously horrified that he shot his sister with a BB gun, but in some small way, I am secretly thrilled that he cared enough about a book to take such violent action.

School has been in session for about three weeks so far, and I am waiting for the college's HSIRB conditional approval status of my study to change to formal approval. We've been working on an oral history unit, and they seem to be completely uninspired by Icarus's flight, Echo's rejection by Narcissus, and the Prodigal Son's return. They sigh, squirm, and use their cell phones to text under their desks, looking to see if I can figure out that they are messaging their friends while they are supposed to be reading. I have become the *taker of cell phones*, and have fallen out of favor with Dani and Tanya after confiscating their Motorolas. Tanya had had hers out with three minutes left in the class two weeks ago and thought I was kidding when I asked her for it. "Really, Mr. Horn? You're really going to take this? There's three minutes left!" Dani did the same thing the next day. For weeks after, I am punished for my behavior with angry looks, refusal to do work, and one particularly theatrical moment in which Dani storms out of the room, with the words, "I (expletive deleted) hate you and your (expletive deleted) class!"

The painting of the classroom walls by students has begun. Painter's tape encircles fixtures, molding, switchplates. The wall on the right has started to turn yellow.

IV. ...in which they write me notes...

Exit Card for September 25th: *Write Mr. Horn a Response Note: What do you like about the class? What could make it better for you?*

“I personally like this class. I think the other students who complain about this class just don’t really care much for teachers. A certain student doesn’t like this class because they had their phone taken away during this class. I believe their attitude spread to their friends in the class.” --Sandra

“Honestly i hope this class gets better cause it sucks so far.” --Dani

“There’s nothing that I really like, but I don’t like book work...” --Anonymous

“i would want to work outside. other than that i don’t know what else can make it better. i still won’t like it because it’s school.” --Tanya

“We could do more group projects that would make people happier. But myself, I’d like comfy chairs...” --Ray

“to make this class better... i think i just need more inspiration.” --Anonymous

V. ...in which I am stripped of my coolness and they are introduced to lit circles...

I pass out the lit circle introduction sheets (Appendix D) and we begin discussing. He reads the part which says that lit circle discussions can lead to “having fun, laughing or crying.”

“*Cry?*” asks Patrick. “Whaddya mean *cry*? Like really *cry*?” I tell him that yes, people have actually cried during conversations, and he makes the “pffffft” noise, meaning he plans on *not* crying, thank you very much. I tell him, “You never know, Patrick, you might end up with a tear or two. You never can tell.” Speaking of conversations, while Jerry continues to read his section of the sheet aloud, I hear whispering, giggling, and more talking until the sound level reaches a crescendo that is impossible to compete with. By now, they have ceased trying to hide the fact that they are conversing. I stop Jerry from reading the sheet aloud and tell them I feel disrespected, that many times, like today, there is a power struggle between them and me, and I don’t want it to be that way. Ray looks down and says, “You used to be cool, like one of us, and now you’re just strict.” I tell him, “I don’t like to be strict, so what do you suggest?” He replies, “I don’t know, but I guess no one should complain anyway because nobody’s suggested anything.” I’ve been telling them all along that they can always share what they think or what they would like to change regarding the curriculum.

Ray’s observations make me come to an unfortunate realization about myself, one that is difficult to admit, and it is this: I *do* change how I present myself depending on how I am feeling. It’s tough not to, but I just don’t feel as if they like me. I don’t want to be teased by them, because it makes me self-conscious and, most importantly, interferes with my teaching. So, according to Ray, I have gone from being cool to being strict. But I think Ray is wrong. I can’t

help but feel that I am not being *strict*, because one can be strict with love. I'm just being defensive and childish. I need to take myself less seriously and let go of some of the *control*. Not the power, which I can still have without unleashing it in the form of anger, but the *control*, which can afford them the opportunity to make decisions for themselves, in the true spirit of literature circles. Otherwise, the tacit war of who is in charge will continue, and I fear that I will come up as the loser.

Minnie announces, "I don't want to do ANYTHING!" This is definitely not going the way that I wanted it to.

"We just don't want to *read*," Tanya pipes in.

I ask what they would rather do. As if it were a silly thing to ask, a pragmatic chorus of "Watch movies!" resounds in unison. Jimmy is obviously frustrated with the tension in the classroom, as well as the redundancy of the suggestion by many of the students that we should watch movies all day, every day, instead of doing work. He yells "I don't know why everybody is suggesting movies all the time—IT AIN'T GONNA HAPPEN!"

So I ask them, "How do we fix things?"

My hunch is that they are used to verbal confrontations with teachers, that they are used to driving their teachers insane, that they would rather be accused of doing the wrong thing so they have something against which they can rebel. I will

not budge, though; I will keep my cool. I want them to be a part of the process of healing this potentially divisive problem before it really explodes into something worse than it already is. I tell them, “If I’m coming in here feeling really bad, I’m probably setting a tone, and you probably can’t be feeling too great either.”

Again, maybe I’m projecting my feelings onto them, but judging by their body language and the way they act, I feel as if I am right.

We continue with the lesson. I explain transactional theory, and they seem truly interested by the concept that they can read the same book, yet their individual experiences make those books different. I introduce the quote from Rosenblatt (1970), “Without the reader there is no text,” and ask them each to close their eyes and visualize a blue chair. When each one has done so, I ask for their mental pictures of blue chairs. They talk of comfy chairs, school chairs, beanbag chairs, dining room chairs, in dark blues, light blues, baby blues, sky blues, even an aquamarine (*Hooray for Crayola!*). “Only two words and we can’t even agree on a chair,” I tell them. “How many words are in a book? Imagine the discussion possibilities...”

“Ooooooohhhh...” I hear.

Thanks to their paintbrushes in the past few days, the back wall is now black; the left one is red; the one behind me is blue.

VI. ...in which there is a huge pile of books on the table...

It's October 13. Before the bell rings, I put the young adult books in a mountainous, sloppy pile on the back butcher block table. I don't tell them to, but over they go, like lions at feeding time. First Patrick, then Sarah, cautiously circling at first, then giving a careful touch, which breaks the surface of the water of the books and sends ripples out to those who have not come up to the table yet.

Tanya picks up *Tweak*; Dani, Stephen King's *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*; Sandra, the trendy vampire romance/thriller *Twilight*.

Jack, ever the rule-follower asks, "Are we allowed to look at the books?"

Me: "Do you want to?"

Jack: "Uh Huh!!!"

"Okay—go for it!" I didn't suspect that the kids would jump up and take it upon *themselves* to rifle through the books at the table. It *is* an inviting pile: the colors and pictures of the book jackets meld together on the top of what was once a table for creating artistic masterpieces. The orange of *Tweak* against the black and white of *Twilight* and the pale green of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the face of the girl from *Before I Die* on top of all of the different fonts of *Cut*, *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, and *Speak*. The students are hungry, like mice on the top of a mound of unattended Halloween candy. Some even take the books

back to their seats with them, thinking that this is the point at which they are actually choosing what to read. Patrick sits at his seat, hoodie over his head as usual, but he is buried in *Give a Boy a Gun*. I am almost afraid to tell them that this is not *it*, that they are not automatically taking the books they are looking at. I know I will have to jump off of that bridge when I come to it tomorrow, but I just want to bask in the sunshine that is students holding books because they seem to want to for now. As some read, others talk about reading to whomever is listening. Minnie admits that her mother is a “reading stalker.” I ask her what she means.

“My mom’s a big reader. She grabs all the books whenever we go to yard sales.”

“Do you read the books that she reads?” I ask

The spell is broken. “Pfffffft...No!” Again, I wonder when her love of reading as a child disappeared. In a journal entry about her earliest reading memory, she had written, “My earliest memory of reading is when i read a book all by myself for the first time. it was when i was around six or seven and i was at home on my couch. The title is *A Fly Went By*. I was extremely happy when i finished reading. i was very proud of myself.” Where did her pride go? Did teachers help it to disappear? Her mom? What has caused her to be content with sitting at her table, arms crossed, announcing that she does not want to do

anything? By the time the second marking period rolls around, her grades will have dropped from a 3.2 to a 2.7. What were 80s and 90s will have dropped by about ten points.

VII. ...in which we pass the books...

October 14. We follow the procedure of a good literature circle book pass:

- Break students up into three groups (there will be five to six different book titles to choose from) and give each student one book, as well as a book pass sheet (Appendix E) and a sticky note. Explain the rules:
- No talking! You are making choices based on *what you want to read, not with whom you want to hang out.*
- Write down the title and author of each book on your book pass sheet.
- You will have two minutes to peruse your book (read some pages from any part of the book, read the blurbs or reviews that may be on the inside flaps, look at the cover, etc.), and then you will be asked to close the book. You will then have one minute to write your thoughts on the book pass sheet: circle a number from 10 to 1 (“Yeah!” to “Yuck!”) and jot down some specific ideas about why you’ve formed the opinion you have.
- You will then pass the books clockwise until you have repeated the above steps with all of the books.
- Again, NO TALKING!

- Take the sticky note, write your name on it, and the words “Top three” on the top and “I refuse to read this one!” on the bottom. Write your top three choices in order under the heading at the top, and the title you would absolutely never want to read on the bottom. Stick the sticky note onto your book pass sheet when you are finished and I will collect them.

From their feedback, I make up the literature circle assignments that night. The three books we are going to read are *Tweak*, by Nic Sheff, the true story of a teenager addicted to meth; *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser, a fictitious account of a school shooting; and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, a modern-day *Catcher in the Rye*-type story of an angst-ridden teen with a huge secret.

VIII. ...in which we reflect upon the book pass

I have come to the realization that the tables, arranged in a horseshoe pattern, are spread too widely across the room. They are football players on the line of scrimmage and I am the sole person on the opposing team. I ask them to push the two art tables in the back of the room together, which they do with a bit of grumbling: the tables are heavy and bulky and because the students are not in motion, they are living proof of the law of inertia. I ask them if they feel this is a good arrangement and Minnie says “yes.” All of the students are suddenly sitting

on the edge of the table facing outwards. I am puzzled and ask why. Jack says with a “gotcha” grin, “You told us to sit *on* the table.” I say “You know what I meant,” and smile back. Moments like this, good natured ribbing, make me feel as if we are making some baby steps toward getting along. They sit in their seats. Tanya, rebellious, still sits smirking on top. Ignoring her, I ask where I should sit; Minnie points to the head of the table. I ask why she thinks I should sit at the head, and Patrick tells me pragmatically, “You’re the teacher.” I ask back, “What if I don’t want to sit at the head of the table?” Patrick says, “You should. You’re the teacher.”

Jack brings over a tall stool (the art butcher block tables are higher than the long tables at which the students sit) and says, “You probably need this!” (a reference to my height, or lack of it.) We trade smiles, and when I sit down, not at the head, I ask who is having a good day. Some students raise hands. Jimmy says it’s a bad day because he has to be back in school after having been out for two days. It’s time to discuss the previous day’s events, so I begin.

“How did you feel about the book pass in general? Because I noticed a difference in how you were looking when you were reading the books yesterday and what you wrote on your exit cards.” I read them some of their comments:

“It was stupid”

“It was retarded”

“Never do it again”

“I think that we could have been able to discuss with friends instead of just not talking”

“Just read and summarize a friggin' book. I think we should just read a book the whole class approves of.”

I ask what the problem might be with that, reading and summarizing a “frigging” book that the whole class approves of. Tanya says, “We might not agree on a whole book.” That’s what I wanted to hear, but the class does not seem completely convinced.

Tariq apparently liked the book pass; he is one of the only students who seemed to, or will at least admit to it. He says, “I thought it was good—people who might not take looks at certain books, looked. Like, I saw that one, the *Wallflower* one that I thought was going to be stupid, and I was like, ‘that’s not so bad.’”

Then Jerry agrees, “It wasn’t dumb—I like to read *before* I read the whole book otherwise you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.” Patrick asks if we are going to have study guides, and I say “No, why, do you want them? Most

of the books don't have study guides." He says, "If I write about a book, I remember it more."

I ask them about the disconnect between how they looked when they were reading (happy and engaged) and what they wrote on their exit cards (miserable and discontented), and Tanya makes a very insightful statement: "Maybe people did enjoy it, but didn't want to admit it." Minnie says, "I didn't like the activity, but I liked the book." *Oh, Minnie, I think, smiling. Thanks for that. Maybe there's a small chance we can help you find your love of reading again.* Cliché and idealistic, I know, but I need to feel like I am doing *something* to help. I hold up the index cards on which they had put their top three choices and say, "Okay, who wants to find out which group you're in?" Tariq is confused.

"I thought we picked our books yesterday..."

Oh, oh. Here it comes. The class is going to revolt.

I tell him that he and the class had given their choices to me, and I picked from those choices. I tell them that if they didn't get their first choice this time around, they will next time. I announce the groups, and Patrick is angry. "I wanted *Give a Boy a Gun!*"

"You read that before, and I had told you if you read the book before, you needed to make a different choice."

He counters, “But it’s a different book to me now than it was when I read it.” He has invoked the spirit of Rosenblatt from last week’s discussion! Patrick, who talks about nothing but football, covers his eyes with his hoodie, and usually has his head on his desk, has just given me a refresher course in transactional theory. And here I am to reward him by taking away his first choice. In retrospect, I should have said, *Patrick, you’re right. As you’re reading, tell me about how this experience differs from your last experience with the book.* Instead, I tell him that that is a great observation to make, but it would probably have a negative effect on the conversation in the group. Tariq tells me, “Ummm, Mr. H, I read *Give a Boy a Gun*, too, an’ you put me in the group.” He asks if he can switch with a classmate, so I put him in a new group. Jimmy was absent yesterday for the book pass, as was Ray, and I tell Jimmy I’m not sure which group to place him in since he wasn’t here to choose and I want him to have choice. I ask him if he will read *Give a Boy a Gun*, and he says. “I dunno, let me look—how is it written?” Tariq tells him “It’s like Columbine written from different points of view.” Ray has not been a part of the group today—he has been sitting on the long desks instead of joining us. Jerry, frustrated, says loudly, “Can we just start reading!?” I tell him and the rest of the class not yet, we have a few things to do before we start, and I have to hand out permission slips anyway for the books.

“Why? Because they drop the ‘F-bomb’?” Minnie asks.

“Yes,” I say, “Some of them do, and they also have situations involving drug abuse, and sexual themes.”

“Which books have those?” Ray’s attention is now piqued; I can tell by his eyebrows, which are now halfway up his forehead. His iPod ear buds have been in the whole time and I have not asked him to take them out, as school policy dictates. I am afraid of confronting him and making him upset—I don’t want him to shut down, especially now, and he seems like the type who possibly could. I tell him pretty much all of the books do, and he smiles as if to say, “Sounds good to me.” I explain about the social skills—we need to learn how to discuss before we begin to discuss—and hand out Daniels’s list of important social skills for discussion groups.

“With your group, choose five of these that you feel are the most important, and number them in order, 5 being the least important. Do it as a group.” Jack, Michael, and Sandra go to their student table, but do not face each other and do not appear to be working together. Jack announces for the third time this period “This is stupid! I just wanna get to the reading!” Sandra says with a knowing smile, “He’s just being a rebellious adolescent.” She is very soft-spoken and has not said much this year so I am glad to hear her joke/observation. Apparently this breaks some of the ice that has formed, because Jack smiles too. As I write down what they both are saying for my observation log, Jack is

intrigued: “You’re writing me down? I feel loved!” I tell him, “You are!” He looks at his group members and says, “Okay, let’s do this!”

Minnie asks from across the room, referring to the social skills sheet, “What’s a ‘burning issue?’” I tell her, “It’s something that ticks you off about the book, or maybe something that reminds you of someone or something, or something you just really need to say.” She reacts: “Oooooohh!” and circles that one quickly to indicate she feels it’s important.

I observe their body language today while they fill out their most important social skills: Sandra is smiling, feet up on her desk, Tariq and Patrick share iPod ear buds. They lean forward over sheets and are not talking. I debate whether or not to remind them to discuss because discussion is supposed to be done as a group, but they are concentrating and focusing. I ask them after five minutes to share skills they like, and we discuss the one about trusting your group. I ask them “Do you feel that you can trust the members of your group?” but then I say, “Wait, wait” and I tell them not to answer, and they ask why, and I tell them because it might be too personal or embarrassing. Tariq says matter-of-factly, “It (the trust issue) doesn’t matter; it’s just books—it’s not our *LIVES*.”

The next day, they design their group posters highlighting their most important social skills (Fig. 2).

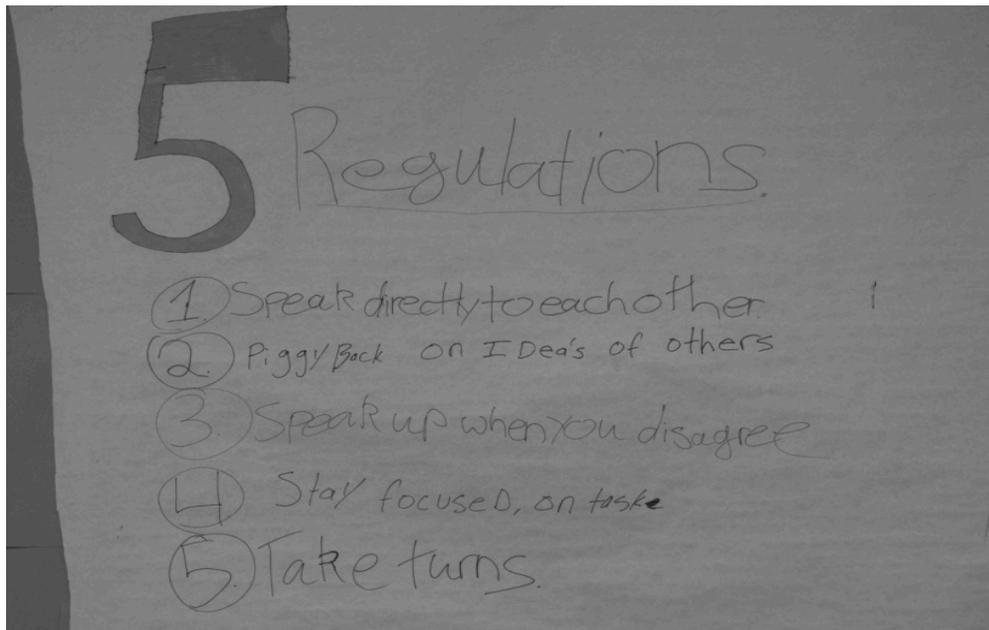
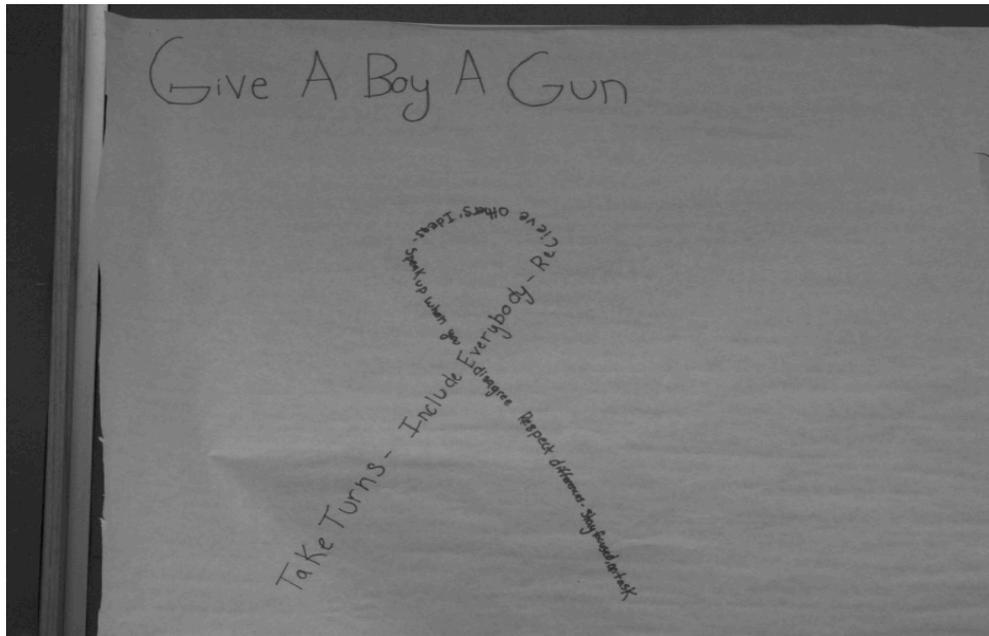


Fig.2. Social skills posters from the *Give a Boy a Gun* and the *Perks of Being a Wallflower* groups

IX. ...in which role sheets cause controversy...

We have begun the past few classes by pushing the butcher block tables together to make some small talk about topics non-academic, and it seems to help in management—in the other formation they are too wide and spread out and in this one we are closer first in a literal sense, and then as we begin talking, metaphorically. Today's topics range from Jimmy's probation for assault starting up again and how "they could come by at any time, to your house or to school and test you," Robert's current probation, Tanya's friend's winning \$3 in the lottery, but having to spend \$4 to do it. After a few minutes, we begin to focus on today's lesson. The day before, we had briefly used role sheets (Appendix F). Tanya asks if we have to use them today. I say, "I want to give them a fair try. I feel like we kind of rushed through them yesterday." Her eyebrows move closer together like bat wings; a smirk follows. "You said yesterday that it would just be for the day." She is right, I had said that, and I regret it—I have spoken too soon and now I feel like I shouldn't have made that promise. She continues as she jumps off of the table: "I don't like role sheets! I'm not doing this if we have to use role sheets."

Jimmy, once again playing the role of my defender, has had enough. He erupts like a volcano: "It's school! You have no choice! God, that pisses me off. If I was a teacher I'd be the most pissed off person in the world!" He tells me after

class, “It’s dumb to have a choice—they’re lucky they have *any* choice. You should take away the choice because anything you say, they’re going to say, ‘That’s stupid.’” Not wanting to lose the momentum we have accumulated, I realize it’s time to bargain with them.

“Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll read for a half hour, and then you can do something for me. We *can* drop the role sheets and make them disappear if you hate them that much. We *do* have choice here, but I’d like you to write down on the back of the role sheets, just a paragraph or so about how you feel about role sheets. Just saying ‘This is stupid’ isn’t good enough. I’d like you to give some reasons; make me understand. While you’re reading, though, *please* use sticky notes and model them after the questions on the sheets I gave out about discussions. I’d like at least 5 sticky notes today.”

They agree and I hand out sticky notes while they retrieve their books from the neat pile they have set up in the back corner. Tanya is still in a bad mood, and seems to be bringing her classmates with her into her funk:

“I sooo don’t feel like reading today!”

Dani agrees. “Me neither.”

Eva adds, “I’m sooo hungry!” I am going to need to petition Merriam-Webster to add “sooo” to the English Dictionary.

I ask, “Is there anything you could do to get into the reading mood? What would help you?”

All three look at me. “No!”

“Would discussing what you read yesterday help you?” Most of them are sitting on top of or lying on top of the butcher block tables. Many are not with their groups. Eva is organizing the rebellion now: “Reading is boring!” Minnie wants order to continue. She looks angrily at Eva and yells, “Just frickin’ *read!*” Patrick smiles playfully and taunts her, “Getting mad?”

Eva groans, “I give up!” I ask, “Do you really?” She says no and continues reading.

They read from 10:05 to 10:30. At 10:25, Tanya asks for a role sheet, and the rest of the students begin to get theirs to write their feedback. I ask them to show me their five sticky notes as they pick up their role sheets. I’ve reminded Sandra three times to do the sticky notes, Jimmy twice. He says, “I have nothing to write about—I don’t have any questions about what I read.” I explain other options as I have explained before: “Something that makes you mad, or sad, or happy.”

“Oh” he says, and writes only one.

Sandra only writes two.

When I ask Petey for his stickies, he throws his book at me. “I find that to be disrespectful, Pete. I would never disrespect you like that.”

“What—you said show me your sticky notes.”

“Yes, and you threw your book at me.”

“You didn’t say *come over to me* and show me.”

By now, I am exasperated. I picture sticky notes as fly paper, the students stuck helplessly trying to free themselves, arms flailing. “Would you please do that, Petey? Please open your book and show me the sticky notes.” I ask. For whatever reason, Jack feels a need to antagonize me and says loudly, “I did the same thing and you didn’t yell at me!” He turns to Petey. “He’s picking on you! Why is he yelling at you? I did the same thing!”

“No, Jack, that’s not it.” I am trying to throw water on a potential conflagration, Jack’s work of attempted arson. “You came to me and dropped the book in front of me. You didn’t throw it at me.”

“Yes I did!” Why is Jack doing this? Whether he is in a bad mood or resentful of my treatment of Petey, I need to end this conversation, which I do by promptly walking away. My co-teacher tells me after class that Petey gave himself a low number for the class on his daily behavioral self-evaluation for being disrespectful. Michael has done none of the sticky notes even though I have

reminded him three times and he has reassured me that he would. As the bell rings, he walks out saying, "I just didn't feel like doing them."

I am going to need to rethink role sheets and sticky notes.

* * *

I honestly don't care if we do them because it is not my decision. It shouldn't be anyone's decision. It's stupid that you would let someone ruin your idea. -Jimmy

I like these because it gives us ideas and I will know what we read keeps us intact... --Jack

There a waste of time boring, and stupid. So we deff. shouldn't have to do them :) P.S. lets not do them :) --Eva

I don't want to do the role sheets because they distract me. I'm normally a good reader but when I'm reading and I know I have to fill out a stupid role sheet it messes up my little movie in my mind.... The role sheets stress me out. When I'm stressed out I get bad grades, when I get bad grades, my mom gets in a bad mood, when she's in a bad mood, I get in a bad mood, when I'm in a bad mood, I'm not a nice person, when I'm not nice, I put everyone in a bad mood...chain reaction. -Robert

There is no point in witting it down when we can just discuss it in our group. -Minnie

I hate these damn things they just make me mad they don't really do anything for me they don't help me discuss the book so why do it. -Patrick

i don't want to use rollsheets because i think their pointless & stupid. if i wanted to know questions i could just ask them i dont need a paper to help me & they distract me from reading. -Tanya

I really don't care if we use role sheets or not. They may help but they make it feel TOO organized. --Sandra

I dont like these because it distracts me. Also it waste time from reading but also at the same time it will help you with wats going on in the book. -Michael

I really dont like rolesheets because I feel like it's a waste of time. Like if we read the book we know whats goin on. We dont need some papers to do that. -Tariq

Fig. 3. Pastiche of student comments on role sheets

* * *

X. ...in which we discuss discussion...

That Friday, after they have eaten their Friday bagels, I let them know they have a choice as to whether to “just read for the whole block,” or to read for a bit and then discuss. I begin explaining about self evaluation sheets (Appendix G): “I know you guys are used to self assessing since you do it every day, and this sheet involves your doing that.” We go over the categories on the sheet—I read them and explain them, and ask if there are any questions. We talk about good discussion skills—asking questions, answering, piggybacking—“Does anybody know piggybacking?” Tariq says it is “taking what they say.” I wait for the rest, and then ask, “And doing what?” He doesn't answer. I want to put it into terms he

can understand, so I use a basketball analogy. “Tariq, their words are a basketball. You take the ball and run, but don’t just hold it and not let anyone else have it.”

I want them to be in a position to run things; literature circles are supposed to be about choice, so I let them know that most of the classes will be working this way for a while, that they will be on their own to get things going and I will be there as their “guide on the side.” I ask who wants to just read for the day. Patrick’s hand waves. I ask who will be discussing, and other hands go up. Dani asks Tanya, “Can we just discuss—I really don’t want to read.” And then I stand off to the side. I want to see if they will motivate themselves, and I stand there with my field log open and pencil attached to the page and look at them. They are still sitting at the table, discussing things unrelated to the books. I resist saying anything, but I’m still standing with my field log. Jimmy comes to me and says, “Shouldn’t we get our books?”

“Yeah, I think that would be a good idea” (Should I have countered with the question, “What do you think you should do?”)

Jimmy yells: “HEY!! LET’S GET OUR BOOKS!” Apparently many of them do not understand that it is time to be doing either the reading or the discussing. Minnie asks me, “What are we supposed to be doing?” Some are still sitting at the butcher block table. And then, and then... Sandra, Jack, and Michael get up and get their books. Tanya asks Eva, “Wanna come with me to get my

book?” They get up and walk toward the books. It’s taken 7 minutes, but magic has happened and they are all getting their books. I have learned to be happy with small miracles in this class when it comes to self direction. Conversation begins, too. Minnie begins summarizing *Tweak* for Dani who has been absent and hasn’t read the book yet: “It’s about a kid who is addicted to meth, and…” Patrick sits next to them and is reading silently. Dani asks me, “Can I go in the hallway?” I say “Of course.” Patrick asks “Can I?” I peer out of the doorway a minute later, and they are all reading. Wonder of wonders! Back in the room, I listen to their little snippets of discussion. Jack has taken on the role of discussion director. “Can you make a connection between this and your life?”

Sandra: “This book is a person’s evaluation of human behavior because he gets to stand back and watch other people.”

Robert: “Why did you pick this book—this book’s kind of beat!”

Michael: “It was my third choice.”

Jack: “It was my second, but my favorite type of writing. He (the main character) writes letters. But I picked *Heavy Metal and You*. Mr. Horn, can I show Robert that book?” I get him a copy and he and Robert look on together. “This is the one I picked.”

Robert: “Oooohhh! I know someone else who would like this.”

XI. ...in which technology rears its head...

As we continue to read, I realize that it is time to address the technology component of the study. When I designed my question, in truth, I did not picture the population with which I am working now. I had been under the impression that my research subjects would be college prep sophomores. Not that there is anything inherently better about the college prep kids than the alternative students; I truly enjoy working with students of all levels. I just became really worried in the beginning of the year when I was talking to them about the pairing of digital images with writing to create digital stories, and no one knew what the heck I was talking about. In the beginning of the year, I had asked if they had ever created any type of digital content, and again, no one had said a word. What had these students done with the ones I had read about in the journal articles who were the web 2.0 participants, the MacArthur Foundation kids on the cutting edge of technology? I told myself I had blown it and then had one three-week-long anxiety attack. Sometimes solutions to problems that should be obvious evade me, and my wife had had it with my moping around one night and asked me what was wrong, why was I tossing and turning and sighing and grinding my teeth in my sleep? I told her that the kids are not using technology, and I would have to redesign the entire project, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad rewriting everything. "Of course they're using technology! You're telling me not one of them is on MySpace or Facebook? None of them plays video games?" she asked. "Now go to

sleep.” Of course, I did not, though. I went to my laptop and immediately designed the survey that restored my faith in what I was doing and convinced myself that I was not a complete idiot.

I hand out the technology surveys (Appendix , and Michael says, “Yo, why do you always make us do weird stuff like this? Just kidding—I actually don’t mind this.” They fill out their surveys with enthusiasm; they lean forward and the scritch-scratch of pencils against paper fills the room, which, by the way, now sports a completed paint job. In addition, the students have painted their names and inspirational quotes in a rainbow of colors on wall cinder blocks that they have laid claim to. The painter’s tape is gone.

When I go home, I eagerly tear into the surveys to see what they will tell me about a new dimension I have not yet explored with these kids. My dining room table looks like a ream of paper has exploded as I start tabulating the results, and here is what I find out:

- Twelve of them are on social network sites, like Facebook and MySpace, and only one is not. Bingo!
- Eleven of them play video games on a gaming system like Xbox 360 that is connected to the Internet. This allows them to play with others locally or from around the world. One boy spends as much as 52 hours a week doing this. The others spend about 10 hours a week playing the games. This is a

very informal survey, and I don't mean for it to speak for a large population, but it tells me that one of my assumptions was wrong, enlightened male that I am: I had assumed video gaming was a "guy thing," but I see that girls are playing as well.

- Nine of them own mp3 players, like iPods, and hours spent listening per week ranged from zero, to 80-100 to "all day."
- Most of them are spending a bunch of time on the Internet.
- Although they are not, for the most part, creating content for sites like YouTube (three indicated that they had created movies or videos or "a Halo 3 montage") they are looking at content made by others—five indicated that YouTube was one of their favorite websites.
- They text *a lot*—eight of them regularly text during school, six text sometimes during school, and only one indicated that she never did. And eight of them indicated that they always or sometimes feel more comfortable texting over talking on their cell phones. One very passionate response: "I HATE TALKING ON THE PHONE!"
- They are also multitasking, like our favorite cartoon character, Jeremy. AB wrote "...if I'm a bit busy, such as cooking or watching a movie, i'll text friends since its quicker." Another, "I like to text when I'm doing stuff and talk on the phone when I'm bored."

This survey is a real morale booster for me and a really valuable source of information as to what is going on in my students' lives from a technological standpoint.

XII. ...in which we wiki...

I explain that we are going to the library and we will be in the classroom there. They rise and march out the door, whispering and giggling, and I feel like there is a new energy in the air. We will see. We sit down in the newly built library classroom equipped with the latest Mac desktops.

Jack asks, "Do we have to sit with our groups?"

Me: "Actually, no. Since we're doing the wikis, you'll be able to communicate from your computer." They look surprised and a bit pleased; furtive glances and smiles and raised eyebrows abound. I am suspending some of the order I try to keep for the day, and they react well. I pass out the slips with their passwords that I've come up with. I want to show them that I pay attention to what they tell me about themselves, so I have tried to match passwords with personalities: Sandra has attended Japanese language camp, so I have made hers "domoarigato." Jack plays base-, basket-, and football, so I give him "triplethreat." I dim the lights and turn on the projector so they can follow along on the screen and on their own monitors, too. I tell them to watch the screen as I show them the website to go to,

Wikispaces.com. They sign in and we go over the “why were heres” and the “why we’re not heres” I have listed for them on the home page (Appendix I). They also have their directions for the day on the home page of the wiki, and on the subsequent days I give them the directions as well under the heading “Your Mission.” (Appendix J). As this is going on, students are already going to the discussion pages, and I need to refocus them, as it is not time to discuss yet; they really need more direction if this venture into cyberspace is going to be successful. Tanya and Eva continue to send messages over the wiki to each other even when I ask them to look at the screen. I should have told them not to turn on their computers yet, but they already have without my telling them to, and I wanted them to sign in, too. I’m worried that they are not going to know what’s going on because they’re more interested in messaging their friends about topics that probably have nothing to do with their books. How do I know this? Minnie asks, “Wait—how do I message someone?” We finish going over the preliminaries and I ask them to play around by checking out some other wikis by using the search bar.

Jack is angry at being told to check out other wikis: “Why do we have to look around? I know how to do this! And anyway, we learn by doing, not by watching. This is stupid!” If Jack becomes agitated, he will shut down, as is his pattern, so I need to treat this with humor or draw on his prior experience. I am glad his football coach also happens to be my co-teacher.

Me: “Okay, what’s your favorite sport?”

Jack (arms crossed): “Football. Duhhhhh!”

Me: “All right, so when Coach D—coach can you come over here?—so when Coach D wants you to figure out certain plays, what does he do before he has you go out onto the field?”

Jack: “Watch tape of the other team...”

Me: “A-ha!”

A few minutes pass, and I ask for an example wiki they have found. Michael has been looking at a very flashy one called “Second Life in Education,” so we look at it as a class. I tell them that ours is going to be kind of plain compared to this one, since I am just learning how to do wikis too, and maybe they could help make it flashier like the ones they looked at. I remind them to post their passages on the discussion pages and that they can discuss with any group they want—not just their own. In an interview, Sandra later told me that she thought this was a cool twist on just discussing one book: “I do like how other groups from other lit circles can ask about other groups’ books (not just their own), like ‘maybe I could read this one out of school.’”

I think the wiki concept is kind of neat, as they can meet with others without having to get up and move around, which often breaks the continuity of

discussion and kills any forward momentum a discussion has taken on. Then, like so many times before, Minnie shuts down again.

“I’m not doing this,” she announces to no one in particular or maybe to everyone.

I choose to ignore her for now since she is not addressing me, or at least not directly. Maybe she wants me to hear; actually, I’m sure she does. The rest of the class, thank heavens, is not affected by her negative energy, and they begin playing around. Ray has two computer monitors facing him at about 30 degree angles—one with the wiki website and one with Pandora, a website that streams music of the listener’s choosing. I ask if he works better if there’s music playing.

“Yeah, but I don’t understand what we’re supposed to be doing...where do I put the passage I wrote?” I explain to him where his passage belongs, and he gets busy. I admire his desire to do his work without much complaint, unlike so many of the other students in the class. In the short time we have been in front of the computers, most have figured out how to send messages to each other. Jimmy keeps asking about the usernames I have come up with to protect anonymity: “Who’s 05? 14?” He’s trying to figure out which user is which. Tanya asks if they can change their usernames so they know who everyone is, but I am worried about the confidentiality issue with the research. I tell her to let me think about it

for a day, that I hear that she really wants to change the usernames, and that I'm not saying yes or no, but I really understand and will consider it.

In the midst of all of this, Eva sends me an email: "hello there.im sitting in your class as i type.hhHhhHAHAHA" and I wonder exactly what the educational value of this wiki experience is for her. I suppose her communiqué shows a few positive things; for example, she's playing with the technology, and she's comfortable enough with me to joke around.

Minnie still sits at her monitor with only her school login page showing. She has not signed onto the internet, let alone Wikispaces.com. She sits with her arms crossed, eyebrows knitted, looking down. In other words, upset. I decide it is time to find out what is bothering her.

Me: "Min—are you okay?"

Minnie: "Fine." She is not fine.

Me: "What's the matter?"

Minnie: "Nothing."

Me: "Obviously that's not true judging by the way you look. Is it something I said?"

Minnie: "No."

Me: “Is it the activity?”

Minnie: “No.”

Me: “Is it something else in your life that I have no business asking about?”

Minnie: “Yes.”

Me: “Okay. I’m sorry you’re upset. Do you need the rest of the block to sit and be upset? It’s okay—we’re in the library again Thursday, and I know you’ll be able to work then. If there’s anything I can do in my capacity as teacher to help you, please let me know.”

I walk away unconvinced. I think she’s afraid of the technology for some reason. (At the end of the class as she is walking out, I overhear her saying to another student “I’m NOT on Facebook, I’m NOT on MySpace, I DON’T go on YouTube...” I remember her technology survey in which she adamantly and vehemently displayed her contempt for technology (except for texting, of course). I did not consider the possibility that a student would be technophobic for whatever reason—this is interesting for me. I had assumed all of them would feel at home in cyberspace.

Tanya points to a passage in her open book to Eva. “Look at this...” She reads aloud softly to Eva. I enjoy watching them share passages; other students are doing the same thing as they find the ones they want to share on their wikis,

illuminated by the light emanating from their monitors in the dark room. She says to me “There’s the ‘f’ word in this passage, which is why I edited it on the wiki page.” I am impressed (and pleasantly surprised) that she has used common sense and censored herself.

The conversation among the members of the *Give a Boy a Gun* group is silly for the most part. Mothers are insulted, inside jokes fly, and people are made fun of:



re: Boy with a gun

[whhsst11](#) Nov 10, 2009 10:28 am

wow #!4 your really dumb

[\[delete\]](#)



re: Boy with a gun

[whhsst14](#) Nov 10, 2009 10:28 am

son son son son

[\[delete\]](#)



re: Boy with a gun

[whhsst16](#) Nov 10, 2009 10:30 am

no name calling buddy!!!! or your gettin kicked out.

[\[delete\]](#)



**i hate you
guys now.**

[whhsst14](#) Nov
10, 2009 10:30 am

i really do.
now im crying

:(

 [\[delete\]](#)



**re: Boy with a
gun**

[whhsst11](#) Nov
10, 2009 10:30 am

ok ok guys im
sorry

 [\[delete\]](#)

I guess I expected this, but I am still a little disappointed. Yet I *am* happy that they are playing around—I guess everyone needs some time to play around with the technology specifically *because* it is new, and I feel like playing and practicing will make them better digital conversationalists once the novelty wears off. I leave the library actually feeling good—I have a gut feeling that things will go well with this; a new way to discuss books might provide some motivation to discuss books. They are in their element: instead of texting on a phone, they are using something akin to Facebook chatting. Tanya asks if they can post pictures, and I say yes. Ray draws a depiction of a tattoo that one of the characters from his book would wear to post on the wiki page (Fig. 4). At the end, I ask what they thought of the wiki. Michael feels they are “neat,” Tanya thought” it was creepy when I didn’t know who everybody was (because of usernames), but now...” she holds up a key to who everyone is by their usernames—she’s figured it out, and

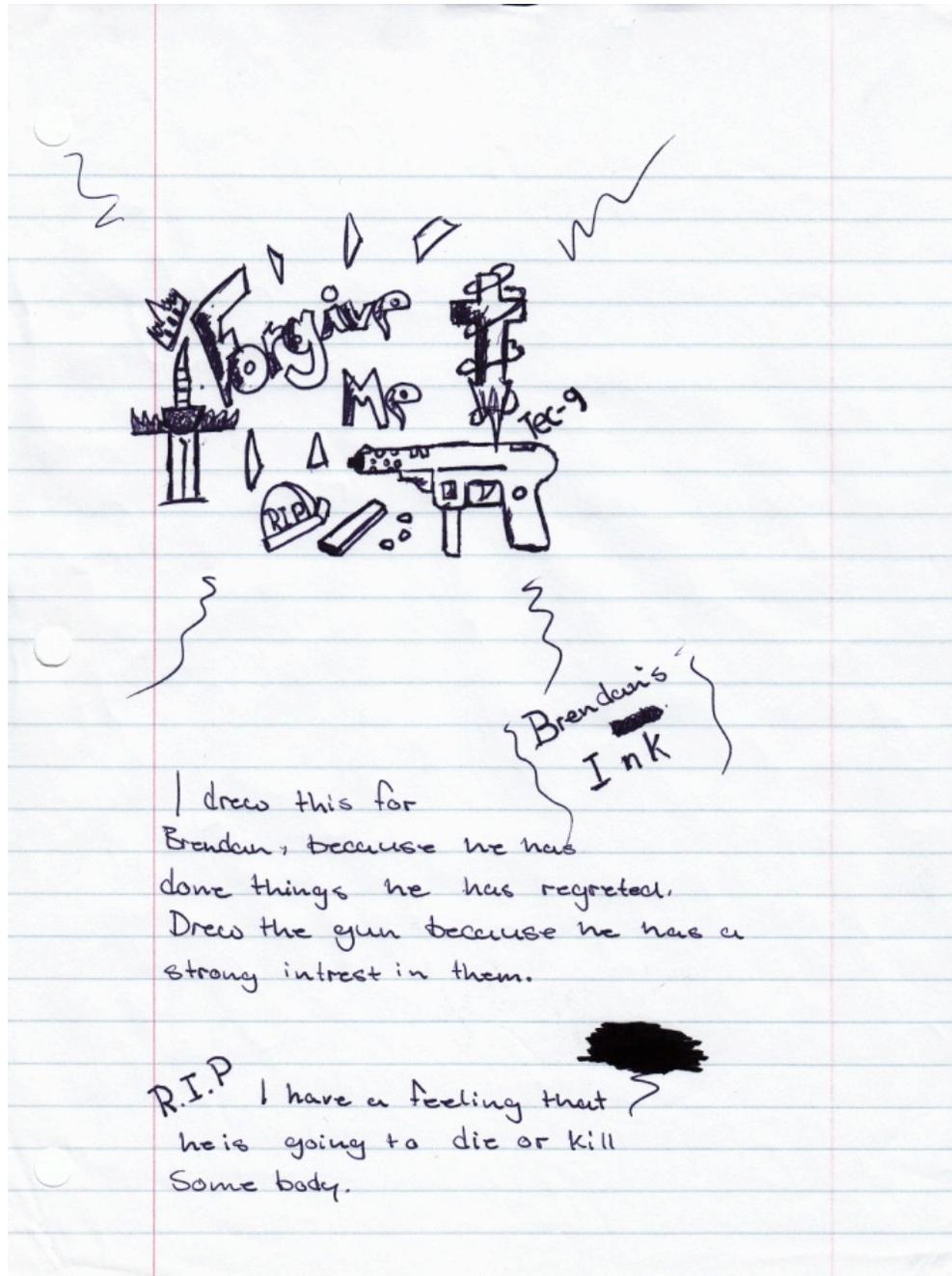


Fig. 4. Ray's drawing of a tattoo for Brandon, a character from *Give a Boy a Gun*

I'm impressed by her initiative and her organizational skills which are probably better than mine. So for now, the response is favorable—I think most think it was cool, too.

XIII. ...in which I find out that all is not cool...

We have gone to the library twice more since the first time; they have voted to do so, and in the spirit of literature circles and student choice, I have obliged them. By the time they have finished the third session, most have done

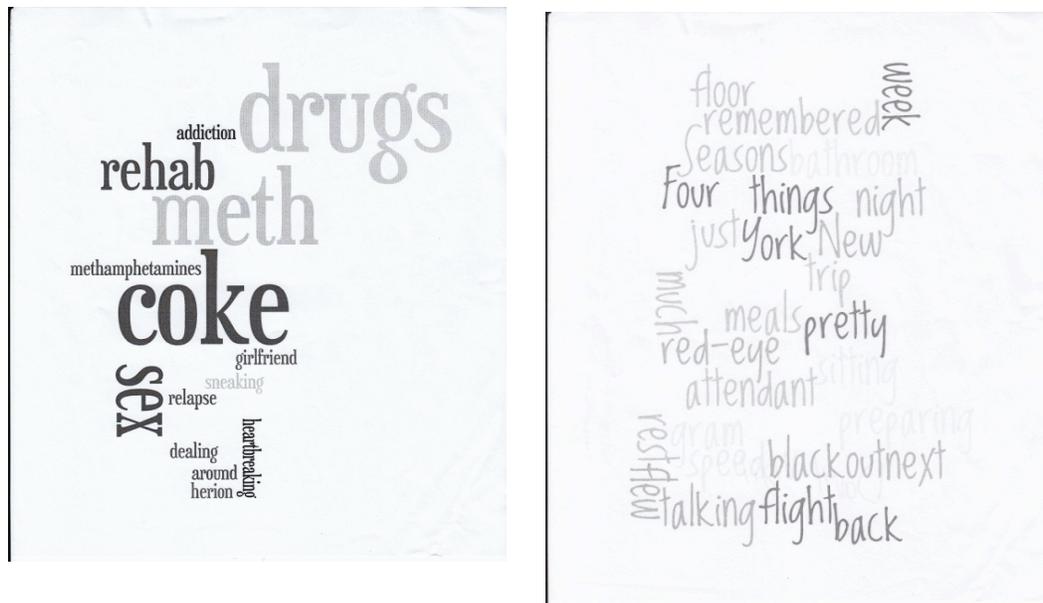


Fig 5. Examples of Wordles created by students for *Tweak*

what they were supposed to have done. They have showed me their Wordles (fig. 5); they have posted passages; they have digitally discussed. It has seemed that

they have needed the three days to get their work done. Yet, the following conversation ensues when I ask if they feel that they need to go to the library again, after I also tell them that they will need to have read their books by December 4, which happens to be in two weeks:

Eva (looks at me as if I have just told her she needs to spin straw into gold): “I can’t finish a book in two weeks!”

Me: “We’ve had the books since middle of October—do you think that’s enough time?”

Eva: “We haven’t had enough time to read because you talk too much.” I begin to feel that familiar sensation of shrinking to about two inches tall as they grow larger.

Me: “I do?”

Tanya: “And going to the library so many times...”

Ray: “I’m perfectly fine with goin’ to the library—you listen to music and work at the same time.”

Patrick: “The last day at the library was a waste of time.” Other students nod in agreement

Tanya: “Yeah—two times was good, but the third was overkill.”

Jack: “But we *voted* to go to the library the last time!” He is trying to defend me.

As long as we are discussing, I ask about the resistance in the class, “Like when I come in sometimes I feel like it’s you against me, and I’m wondering what I’m doing and what you’re doing to make it feel that way.”

Robert: “You’re like my eighth grade language arts teacher—I liked to annoy her. I’d go to her class and annoy her, and then I’d go to a different class and be the best student in the world.” He cocks his head smiles, pleased with himself, his long black hair spilling onto his Led Zeppelin concert tee shirt.

Patrick: “I think we should read as a whole class.”

Tanya: “NO, NO, NO!”

Patrick: “I like reading out loud—in a class setting I’ll read.”

Jack: “Why not read out loud with your group?”

Patrick: “It’s hard to read when other groups are reading out loud.”

Ray: “Gimme a book and Pandora and I’ll read all day.”

I *have* been giving them a book and Pandora, and still about half the class is not reading. I feel the tension level rise.

Michael: “Even looking at a book annoys me. You want the truth? I’m on page two.”

Eva says she’s not reading because I talk too much. And *that* is the part that frustrates me—she, like many other students in this alternative program, tends to blame others and outside circumstances for choices they make. And I cannot help but take it personally: If only I were doing something different, maybe they would find their motivation. Yes, some are truly motivated to read, but I feel as if the research project is causing others to grow tired of the literature circle model. Are we going on too long? Am I forcing them to do what I think is fun but is really just another “schoolish” assignment? And then, I forget that I am the teacher and need to model maturity, and I reply vindictively: I point out to Eva that I’ve stopped talking and yet she’s still not reading. She says it’s still my fault. I tell her I get the feeling she is trying to punish me in some way, and she tells me, “Duh. That’s the idea.”

At that moment, Robert, Eva, and Michael put their heads down on the table and I’ve lost them again.

XIV. ...in which I grill them...

The time has come to speak with them one-on-one. Many times when I ask them about how they feel during class, they feel it necessary to posture in

front of their peers. I want to keep them honest, so I come up with interview questions (Appendix K).

First, I want to know how much energy they are putting into reading; many times I do not know if they are just staring at the pages as they stretch out on the floor or are propped up against the walls of the hallways in which they so love to sit together. I am hunched over my laptop typing furiously as Sandra tells me she's not really having a great experience with her book, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. "Ummm...since I'm not really interested, I'm not excited to get to the next page, but it's enough effort for a book that's been assigned. It's different from a book that teachers usually assign because it's not really teaching much of a lesson, but you can try to relate, but I'm not really relating. Probably cause the kid's so naïve." Eva tells me about her reading effort level: "A lot because I'm ahead of everybody. I'm putting in the effort becuz I'm interested in the book, but I don't like discussing it. I don't mind writing about it, but I don't like talking." Jack is straightforward as well, and exudes confidence, although I'm not so sure I agree with his own assessment of his ability: "Not a lot of effort, but I like to read. I could probably be done with the book in a class period."

XV. ...in which I am disheartened by attitudes toward discussion...

When I ask about their attitudes toward book discussion in an interview about their motivational level, the responses are less than inspirational:

...it's ... like we're being told to (discuss). We don't get into deep conversations about meaning or what happens to us....many of us aren't enjoying the book, so we don't have much to talk about. —Sandra

Don't really like discussing. I'd rather read it.—Tanya

I didn't discuss (certain issues) with the group becuz I don't know them that well, and I didn't know if I could trust them...—Jack

XVI. ...of turkeys, elephants, and chimps...

What they are telling me about discussion disturbs me. I decide it is time to appeal to a higher power, so I call upon one of my most trusted mentors, Dr. Unger. It was her literature circle class at Moravian that rejuvenated me when I was in another little teaching rut a few years prior, and I know she can help if anyone can.

“Discussion is basically nonexistent,” I tell her on the phone that night.

“No matter which mini lessons I give them, no matter how much I play the room,

they just do not discuss. One of my students says she already knows how to discuss and why am I teaching her something she already knows how to do.” I keep explaining the troubles, the resistance, the fact that I feel like a fraud because most of the class blocks are spent with the students reading about ten pages per day. “What kind of lit circles are these?” I wonder aloud. “All of the other classes have read at home and come in and discuss. I’m going crazy.”

“I have a book I want you to read to them,” Dr. Unger snaps back. “It’s called *Faithful Elephants*. It’s a picture book for kids about a zoo in Japan during World War II. The keepers have to put the animals down because if the zoo is bombed, they will run through the city, and *I* can’t get through it without crying. I don’t know anybody who could possibly be unaffected by that book. Use it as a mentor text and they’ll love it and you can model discussion by how you respond to the book. Have them talk about their personal experiences while you read it. I’m telling you, it’ll work.”

She sounds so sure of herself that I don’t want to tell her that nothing will work and I’ve been toying with the idea of driving a forklift because you don’t have to teach kids about discussing and make them want to read. But I have faith in Dr. Unger, so I resolve to try what she has suggested as I hang up the receiver.

I start out the class the next day at the butcher block tables by hearing their “true words,” as that is a way to get them ready to discuss more “academic”

matters. I give them index cards and tell them to write “good” on one and “crappy” on the other. The next day is Thanksgiving break, so I tell them to put good thoughts about what they anticipate their break will hold and “good stuff that will be happening on Thanksgiving.” On the crappy card, they write “crappy thoughts and crappy things that will happen.” Their responses are both funny and heartbreaking: “Family fighting,” “Food bad,” “No Food,” “No one talks,” “No one shows up.” We discuss, and it turns out that most of the class is psyched for break despite the potential crappiness.

I hold up the book *Faithful Elephants*. There is no hiding the fact that it is a picture book, and I hear some groans and some “Whaaaaat?”s from the class. I tell them before I read, “Maybe this is backtracking a bit, but I’ve been listening to conversations that you’ve been having about your books, and I’ve heard some great stuff, but I’m not sure we’re getting the depth that we could be getting from our books. Do you agree with that?” Some nod, some shake their heads *no*. “So, I’m going to be reading a picture book to you—anybody ever hear of this one?” None has. Petey asks, seemingly disgusted, “Is that a kids’ book?”

“Yes, but I think you might like it, and sometimes if we look at something that appears to be simple, we can actually find that there are many deeper concepts to it, and many ways to take it apart. I’m not treating you like elementary school students by reading this to you; I just want to see how we can

go about discussing this.” Jack is not convinced: “Kid’s book-pffff” he swats the air and leans his chair back on two legs, arms crossed. I tell them that I brought it home last night and was going to try it out on my six and nine year olds but realized it was way too heavy for them. I begin reading and something amazing happens. There is complete silence and they slowly begin to lean forward in their seats. I stop every few pages and ask, “What are you thinking?” Ray is horrified. “He’s not going to starve the elephants. He’s gonna feed ‘em.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because he *can*’t—he’s *gotta* feed ‘em!”

Minnie offers more *logos* to the plight of the zoo: "But what if they run wild around the city if they get bombed? That’s gonna be bad—worse than killing the animals. Can you imagine a tiger (running loose in a city)?" The book is finished; the kids are silent. No one speaks. They are processing, mulling over what they have just heard, trying to make sense of zookeepers who must kill the animals they are charged with taking care of. Jimmy cannot get over the injustice and is almost pleading, as if his words could penetrate the pages of the book and change the outcome of the story: “How can you starve an elephant? How could you do that?” He is almost tearful. “My dog starved, like two years ago. He had a peach core stuck in his intestine, and he just kept getting skinnier and skinnier. Finally, you could put your thumb and finger around him, that’s how skinny he

was.” He tells us how, luckily, his dog did not die but needed an operation to remove the parasitic pit.

Ray is equally downcast. “That book was sad, to be honest.” I give Ray and the rest of the class a quote from the internet from someone who said that it was the right thing to do to put the animals down, that there was no choice. “I can’t believe what they were doing—like, they didn’t have to starve them. I see it this way: if they (the animals) were nice in the zoo, they’d be nice in the city...” Minnie snickers: “No way—they’re animals! Haven’t you heard of the pet monkey who ripped that chick’s lips off?” Some do not know the recent story of the “chimp lady,” so I explain how “Chimps are not the tuxedo and top-hat-wearing cute creatures that we think they are—they’re really powerful.” Ray nods: “I saw a movie once about monkeys on an island and they ripped this guy’s neck right off.” A text-to-text connection! A weak connection, but a connection nonetheless.

I ask, “What images stick out to you from the book?” Jimmy is still upset. “The trunks sticking out of the cages.”

“Good—that’s a literal image—a picture—right from the book. How about pictures that the author paints with words?”

As I was reaching for my teddy bear everything just went blank. I woke up in a hospital, my eyes saw the light barely and my heartbeat was faint. I had my face ripped off, 100 stitches in my face.

--1/26/10, On being attacked by a pit bull at age four.

He's noticed a nuance in the cover of the book *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer: God's hand supporting the chin of the boy in the picture, which I've never noticed. **"I looked up in the clouds the other day and I swear it looked like God giving me a thumbs up."**--12/4/09, Reflective Journal

"Books can be inspirational, making you feel like you have hope in life...I think about stuff in my future and hope that it will turn out like the good stuff at the ends of a lot of books..."

--11/16/09, Interview

I'm perfectly fine with goin' to the library—you listen to music and work at the same time. Gimme a book and Pandora and I'll read all day.

--On listening to Internet radio while working,
11/20/09

He looks, in a weird way, like Abraham Lincoln: same beard, same posture, same pensive frown.

"Mr. Horn, you're a 'G.'" I *think* this is a good thing. According to urbandictionary.com, Ray is saying I'm either "a gangster, a thousand dollars," or (and I hope this is the sense in which he means it) he's just used "a term of endearment."

Fig. 6. A pastiche of Ray's quotes.

Michael says, “No food in the stomachs of the elephants.” Ray is amazed at the fact that “it was a beautiful day the day the elephants died.” I have a text-to-world connection for them: “Me too—I remember September 11th, when I heard about the World Trade Center being attacked, and I remember looking out the window and thinking ‘this can’t be happening, it’s a beautiful day,’ almost like ‘bad things don’t happen on beautiful days...’” Ray comments on the seeming ambiguity and irony of the situation: “With beauty comes destruction.” Sandra and Tanya begin discussing the book with each other. The bell is about to ring, so I wrap up for them by recapping the possibilities of discussion that we have made use of today and that they may continue to make use of in their future conversations: text-to-self, -to-text, -to-world connections; predictions; the asking of questions; author’s craft; literal and metaphorical images. I mention the part of the handout sheet from the beginning of the unit that mentioned crying. “I know no one actually cried today, but I and some other people became really emotional, don’t you think? That’s books.” The spirit of the season has cast a spell (over me, at least), and I tell them I am thankful for them as a class. Ray, towering over me as he cleans up his papers, turns and says, “Mr. Horn, you’re a ‘G.’” I think this is a good thing. According to urbandictionary.com, I’m either “a gangster, a thousand dollars,” or (and I hope this is the sense he meant it in) he’s just used “a term of endearment.”

XVII. ...in which we return from Thanksgiving...

November 30. At the beginning of class, we push the two butcher block tables together, which has become a tradition of sorts. After a recap of how their breaks went (Dani saw her 105-year-old great grandmother, Jerry's family fought like he had predicted, but he did get his new iPhone), I hand out a sheet on which I have typed out their comments as we were reading *Faithful Elephants*. I want them to *see* what they have *said*, that everything we discussed were indeed elements of good conversation. Dani is not only unimpressed, she is downright belligerent:

“Why do we have to learn this stupid stuff? Why can't we learn the basics?

Conversation is instinctive—it's not like I don't have them (conversations)! I'm sorry--I'm just not going to have them about books after I'm done with school!”

CoCa (in a mocking tone): “Don't say that, you might have a little reading group one day!”

Dani: “It's instinctive—I *know* how to have a conversation! (she turns to Patrick)

Patrick, do you like football?”

Patrick: “Yeah—do you?”

Dani: “Yeah. (she turns back to me) See? Conversation! I ask my math teacher all the time (about why we have to learn complex material) too, and he says it's to

help us solve problems. Why can't we just learn the basic stuff?" She is growing angrier and angrier with each word.

Me: "Dani, even walking is kind of instinctive—it's a skill that you have to *learn* little by little before you can do it well. My job is to show you *how to think*... But you do have every right in the world to ask me about why you have to do what we do. I appreciate you asking." I don't feel I've explained adequately enough for her liking. I don't feel as if I could ever explain adequately enough for her liking. My trying to justify and explain why we do what we do in class frustrates her, and her resistance to most anything I try to tell her frustrates me. She groans and puts her head down.

They take some time to look through books to come up with conversation starters. Most of them do. As we go around the table, Eva goes first and comes up with something about making mistakes like Nic, the main character from *Tweak*.

Me: "What mistakes does he make in the book?"

Eva: "Doing drugs." I want to extend the conversation, so I ask why people choose in the first place to smoke pot or do other drugs.

Robert speaks from experience; he has been in recovery, and his parents are drug users as well: "Because you know in a few minutes you're going to feel good."

Me: “But what about when you don’t want to do them anymore?” Dani decides to lift her head up and join in: “He went to rehab and I did too, so it’s a connection.” I don’t press her for more information just for the sake of continuing the conversation; that would be insensitive, but I am thrilled that she has shared. I thank her and tell her that it is indeed a connection, and a good one at that. Jerry wants to start a new discussion thread, so he asks, “Can I give a quote?” We discuss his quote. We are moving along!

Next, Petey wants to discuss bullying in school from his book. I ask the class who has ever seen someone bullied in the hallway, and all hands go up. I ask who has defended the person who was being bullied. Two or three hands go up. They all take turns talking about the bully issue: “Depends on how bad they’re being bullied.” “If it turns physical.” I ask them, “Is it right to stand around and do nothing if someone’s being bullied?” Some nod yes; some shake their heads. I reiterate that this could be a great conversation to continue, and was inspired by the book, and that’s how I want them to approach discussion when they are in their circles. Sandra, inspired, says she would use a very emotional poem written by the main character from *Perks* to discuss.

Michael has remained silent for the whole of the discussion. I ask him why, and as he shouts at me, his fists are clenched and he looks up to the ceiling: “I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do!”

Me: “Take a part from your book and...”

Michael (cutting me off): “But I haven’t even read!” He *has* told me that when his group is reading, he follows along, and I have made a judgment call, maybe poor, maybe justified, and have allowed him to use that as his reading. He sits down and crosses his arms. I tell him that some people have said that resistance— He cuts me off to ask what resistance is. I explain that it’s fighting against something, and is often associated with fear, and I ask him what he might be afraid of. “I don’t know...reading.” He laughs.

I tell him that might not be far-fetched.

“What’s the worst thing that might happen if you read?” I ask. He shoots back, “Nothing. I don’t know.”

Me: “Maybe nothing, literally. Are you afraid you might not understand?”

Michael: “I read stuff and it doesn’t stay in. I don’t remember it.” I ask him if he knows how he’s done on standardized test comprehension sections, and he doesn’t remember. I tell him I want to check out his scores to see if that’s the problem. I offer to trade his book for Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*: “I don’t do this often, but I’ll let you read *Maus* instead, because it seemed like you liked it when you took a look at it a while ago.”

He says maybe.

XVIII. ...in which we podcast...

Our next foray into technology will involve podcasting. I find two podcasts on the internet that I want to play for them, one done by two Canadian women discussing the novel *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer, and another of two men reviewing the movie *The Road*, which has recently been released in theaters. I hand out a podcast evaluation sheet for them to fill out as they listen. (Appendix L) After we have finished listening, I give them the podcast assignment. (Appendix M) Many of them groan and complain that they cannot wait until we are finished with this unit. I feel as if discontent has been steadily growing, and indeed, there is a sense that this round of lit circles has been dragging on too long. Complaining is up, as are stalling, requests to go to the bathroom, and heads on desks. However, we begin the process of creating our own digital audio reactions to our books. After we go over the assignment and how I expect that they will use brainstorming and prewriting as part of their process, I allow them to get together and begin mapping out their ideas, with the aid of a “podcast starters” worksheet. (Appendix N) When I distribute the digital recorders, the reaction is just as I expected: immediately many begin recording gibberish and bodily sounds, both imitated and real. Just as when we began the wikis, they are getting used to something new by playing around, and I do not stop them. Some actually begin their podcasts.

For a second day, and then a third, some write, some write and record, and some just continue to fool around. On Day Four, I go over the podcast expectations again at the back tables. I tell them I want them to succeed at finishing the podcasts, and I want to help them, so I ask what I can do specifically to help. There is silence, and then Tanya suggests, “Record it for us! We give you the stuff written and you record it!” She has told me she hates the sound of her own voice.

I give her a *yeah, right* look and tell them they need to be done by the end of the block on Monday with their recording. Jimmy is still recording sound effects for his podcast. I tell him that I’m going to need his help with laying down the tracks—he says he’s never used Garage Band before, but he’s used audacity. I want to see if having him help, telling him *I need him*, will give him a sense of purpose.

As usual, Robert and Tanya are looking for the questions they drafted last block to discuss on the podcast, but cannot find them. Robert says, “Oh well, I can remember what I wrote.” This is a new Robert, though—he has been sullen, sleeping, and combative for the past few weeks, but now he has changed his outlook. A few days ago, he asked to talk to me and told me that he was changing his attitude because he knows he’s failing and wants to do well, and now he is all

smiles and cooperation. In addition, he and Eva, who had been dating for a few weeks, have broken up. This seems to have made him more at ease as well.

Tanya sits criss-cross apple sauce on top of her table writing more questions out and asks for my help: “Mr. Horn, can you think of other questions?” I look down at her paper, on which she has the following questions, written in pencil,

- What did you think of the book?
- Which character is your favorite?
- What is your favorite part of the book?
- Will Nic go back to rehab? and some others.

We discuss how those questions are good, and that they can also be expanded if she uses some “why” questions with them. Like many of the other students, she and Robert are having trouble grasping the idea of conversation; most of the students seem like they are tending to conduct the podcasts like an *interview* rather than a *discussion*. I tell them that discussion is more like an exchange of ideas and re-explain piggybacking. I suggest discussing text-to-self connections, “like what you have in common with characters.” I know that Tanya has been in rehab, so I tell her that they don’t have to share anything—she finishes the sentence—“...*personal*, no, wait, *private*.” I am glad she has gotten that concept

down, the difference between the two. I ask about the possibility of their discussing which parts they found boring. She says “the parts where Nic is in rehab.”

Me: “Why?”

Tanya: “It’s boring that he’s in recovery?”

Me: “Why?”

Tanya: “It’s more interesting to read about when he’s using.”

Robert: “Yeah—when you’re using, that’s when the crazy thoughts all come out.”

And suddenly, a real discussion has begun, and I explain that “this is the stuff that would be great in a podcast, and I wish the recorder was running now.” Tanya points out the irony: “Yeah, but now if we try to talk about it while it’s running, it’ll be all uncomfortable. You should just be recording and not tell us, like wearing a wire!” She’s smiling a lot more recently, too. I am glad, and I suspect she is as well, that we have gotten past the cell phone incident from the beginning of the year.

The second *Tweak* group is recording out in the hall, but only two members are out there. I ask how I can help; Patrick looks disgruntled and says icily, “You can get the other members of my group out here.” I go in to try, and

even though I remind Minnie and Tariq that they're needed out in the hallway, it's a very slow process for them to get there.

Jack and Sandra are done; so Jack tells me. He says they did two recordings, and he likes the first one better. I know, again, that it will be more of an interview than a discussion, but I take the recorder anyway, happy that they did something and took some pride in it.

XIX. ...in which we make a difficult judgment call...

Here is what has been happening for the past few days: Tanya and Dani claim they will only work if I let them stay in the hallway, yet when in the hallway, they are talking to students from the class next door and others who conveniently happen to be passing by. Dani claims, "But we're done..."

Me: "No, you're not. I really liked what you had yesterday; it's a good start, but..."

Dani (sullen and frustrated): "We did what we were supposed to!" I tell them that it's part of a process; discussion goes beyond one person asking and one person answering. Tanya says in one breath, "I'm not doing this I hate my voice being recorded I sound retarded."

In addition, Jack has told me that he's jealous of the other group because no one in his group is doing anything. Sandra is still finishing the book: she's on the last few pages, which she is racing through.

The *Give a Boy a Gun* group has not gotten very far on their recording, either. Jimmy has been creative, recording sound effects like gun-shots and explosions (clonking blocks of two-by-fours together for the former and blowing onto the mic for the latter) for his group's talk show podcast, but they have not gotten much further than that, and I have not been able to motivate them despite a stream of pep talks and threats.

Complaints are at a maximum, and we have not even begun to lay down the tracks they have recorded onto the Garage Band program on the computers to complete the podcast process. My gut feeling tells me that it is time to jump ship, that we could go on for weeks and weeks and still not finish because they simply have run out of steam. This is not a sudden thought; it has been plaguing me for some time. I realize that this research is to help find out if I can increase motivation, and it occurs to me that I might just be killing it. Fact: we have had the books for two months. Fact: some have not even finished reading the books and have pretty much given up on doing so. Fact: the level and frequency of moaning and groaning has been steadily rising.

Fact: it is time to pull the plug.

I clear my throat, hoping I am not doing the wrong thing. Am I teaching them to be quitters? Am *I* just the one who is tired of what we have been doing? No, I have learned to trust my instincts over the years. I will ask them what they think.

“Ummm...” I stand there, in front of my desk, looking around the room, and it takes the usual minute or two, the usual student or two’s *hey shut up guys, he’s trying to talk!* I have their attention, and I try to say what I have to say in a non-leading way. “Look, are you guys enjoying this podcasting exercise, because...”

Shouts of “NO!” and “UGGGHH!” permeate the room, and I think I have my answer. “We’re not really done, I mean, we still have to finish recording and lay down the tracks onto Garage Band, and...”

Someone shouts, “C’mon, Horn...”

“I guess I’m asking if you want to keep going, because we totally can; I see a lot of creativity, and...”

Patrick says, “We’re so done with this. I can’t stand it anymore.” I ask how many others feel this way. All hands go up, save for Ray’s, Dani’s and Jack’s. Ray pipes in, “I don’t really care one way or the other.” Dani agrees; Jack is silent. I say, “Okay, look, if there is anyone who would like to continue and

finish up the project, you can do that. Let me know and I'll give you all the help you need. If you don't want to, what would you think of being graded on what you have done already?" They nod.

The next day, I give them their final surveys. (Appendix O) And just like that, it's all over.

* * *

XX. ...in which they pass judgment on podcasting...

There weren't any positives. I don't like my voice, and I didn't like the thought of something recording me. —

Tanya

Negative? We can get way off topic and have trouble censoring ourselves. Positive?
We can liesurly(sp?) talk about the book.—Sandra

...you fell under pressure when you know there's a recorder around.—Jack

...we had to record our voices & most of the class didn't like that at all. ...we were wasting so many classes cause half the class was just (expletive) around.—Eva

no one really wanted to do it.—Dani

we ran out of things to talk about.—Minnie

...I'd rather be doing something else with my time (but) it helped me realize what went on in the book. —Patrick

Fig. 7. Pastiche of opinions regarding podcasting

Findings

Introduction

In looking back at all that has happened in my classroom during the last few months, I realize that what began as a study of using technology and text to increase motivation became so much more in breadth and scope. In the words of one of my professors at Moravian upon reading my mid-study reflective memo, “Kevin, this isn’t just a study; this is like group therapy.” I realize he was correct, and I need to include myself in this group. Teaching in an alternative classroom sets many hills to climb in one’s path. Before these students can learn anything academic, they need to trust you as a teacher. Because so many of the adult figures in their lives have either beaten them down or given up on them, or a combination of the two, they do not give away that trust easily.

I have highlighted many of the difficult situations that my students have gone through in their lives, ones that most people neither have ever had to deal with, nor will they ever have to. When I tell colleagues and friends of their travails, many times I am met with statements like, “Yeah, well, we all have stuff

to deal with,” and “Why don’t they just get over it?” I can see their point: we all have our albatrosses (many of which we ourselves have made the wrong choice of shooting) pendulously weighing us down, and if we are going to survive in this world, we need to learn to balance them. I want to turn these kids out of my classroom in June a little better equipped to deal with those hills of which we speak. However, I will say that most of these kids are just tired of overcoming the hills before them, and that is why my job is so difficult. Just tossing computers and audio equipment and slick young adult literature at them and expecting them to suddenly say, “Hey! This is *great!* Now I just *love* school and reading and discussing” is a bit naïve on my part. And that is why much of what I have taken from this study transcends my original question.

Play Might Be Beneficial in Encouraging Engagement

According to Vygotsky (1978), play is not just for fun. As teachers, sometimes students at play make us nervous. After all, there is a curriculum to stick to, a time frame to follow in the imparting of knowledge to the students. However, we forget that students are not ready to learn without the ability to solve the problems of the world around them, and this problem solving is encouraged by the ability to play, which “creates a zone of proximal development of the child....As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental

tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

On at least two occasions, when confronted with new situations like the wiki, many of the students’ first instincts was to *play*. For example, during our first day in the library to learn about and work on our wikis, I had intended for them to listen as I gave directions while projecting the image of the wiki on the screen, and then begin to discuss their books through the pages I had set up for them. What really happened was this: the students began to go to the discussion pages while I was still instructing them on what a wiki is, tried to figure out how to message their friends with what I could safely bet had little or nothing to do with their books, and cracked the “code” of the usernames I had assigned them.

Vygotsky (1978) tells us that that when the preschool child begins to have a need to have his desires fulfilled, and they are not, that child “enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized” (p. 93). I remember one of my firstborn son’s first toys, given to him by his grandmother. I remember lying on the family room floor next to him, rings strewn about like little donuts, explaining, “See the stacking rings? Here’s what you do: take the biggest ring and put it on the little post in the middle, then take the ring that’s a little smaller and put it on top of that one,” and so on. However, my son had different ideas about what to do with the rings before he wanted anything to

do with their intended purpose. He stuck them in his mouth, perhaps trying to see if they had a taste; he banged them on the floor to see what they sound like. Later, he stacked the blocks the way they were “supposed” to be stacked. Such is the same with the freshmen with the wikis. Their first instinct was to metaphorically taste the wikis and bang them on the floor. After doing this, their task of discussing the book and exchanging ideas seemed to go smoothly. I *had* planned to give them time to play around (at least what *I* would have defined as play) to find other wikis as models to what they might do with their own. I have a feeling that my definition of play differed greatly from their definition.

When I first gave the students the audio recorders for their podcasts, many of them seized the moment as an opportunity to experiment. While I had given them time to listen to a “real” podcast, evaluation sheets, and instructions on how to use them, some had different ideas of what to do with them. Jimmy began doing his impression of Steve Irwin, the late *Crocodile Hunter*, using his fellow classmates as exciting wildlife to narrate rather than reptiles as they went about their classroom business. The narration led to his epiphany that he could use the recorder for sounds to layer underneath his podcast, and he began improvising with different sound effects as a Foley artist would, that would be appropriate for his group’s project—clapping wood together as bullets, blowing into the microphone to mimic explosions.

The Speaking of True Words is Critical to the Comfort of the Student in the Classroom.

“Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.”

--Paulo Freire

Obviously, the transformation of the world must begin with the individual, and the individuals of my classroom, most days, seemed not to be able to transform the world, let alone themselves. A few days into my study, it became obvious to me that there was a big danger that the students were going to discuss what was on their minds and ignore what I had planned for that day regardless of what I did. What I realized I needed to do was to incorporate what they were discussing into class time and show that I valued what they had to say. I decided that a good place to talk would be in the back of the room where the butcher block tables resided, and that if we pushed those tables together, the students could face each other instead of having to look to the front of the room. Many of the classes began this way with students spilling out

Because I found that the tables were so conducive to “true word” conversation, any time I wanted them to open up I would point them in the direction of the tables. The day before Thanksgiving break, we gathered around and I asked them about what they anticipated for their time off. Some bemoaned the fact that their relatives were going to fight and that there might not be much in the way of food. They seemed to want to be heard not only by their classmates,

but y also gave the impression that they wanted me to hear about their lives as well. After most of the comments, they would glance over at me, likely to see what I had thought of what they had said. That same day, when I knew we had to do some remedial work to fix our “book discussion problem,” we read and discussed *Faithful Elephants* together at the tables. Conversation seemed almost effortless, and the depth of the connections to the book that they expressed were touching, authentic, and genuine. Jimmy’s disbelief that zookeepers could starve their elephants came out in a near-tearful plea: “How can you starve an elephant? How could you do that?” The story inspired him to talk about the pet dog he had when he was younger who had nearly starved.

We did the same thing on the day that we returned from break, and I noticed that the students were “on fire” with burning issues about their books. Dani, who rarely makes eye contact when she speaks to me, made a cogent and passionate case that learning discussion in school is redundant, that she knows how to converse. That Dani was arguing against working in class is not as negative an event as it might seem; Dani’s pattern is to simply curse, walk away, or put her head down when she is upset by something. That she was able to articulate an opinion without doing any of these was a breakthrough. Both Robert and Jimmy also wanted to discuss personal issues, like their drug addiction, in a way that connected to their book, and Jerry wanted to make connections as well.

The willingness to let themselves be vulnerable while discussing the wide varieties of topics at this table has amazed me; this is not a group of students who usually want to show that they do, in fact, have Achilles heels like the rest of us. Much of the time they are either posturing by flinging sarcastic comments at each other and at me, or pulling their hoodies over their heads, putting their heads on their desks, and shutting the rest of the world out. On the days that we opened with a round table discussion, class seemed to flow more smoothly than on the days we did not.

An Environment Promoting Student Comfort is Important in Fostering Engagement

It hasn't really changed, but it feels less boring in here.

--Ray

In the quote above, Ray is referring to the fact that we painted the room in colors chosen by the students themselves, and how the change affected his perception of the space in the room. He could also be describing the feeling of the students as we pursued other way of making the room more comfortable both for the body and the psyche.

As I detailed in my story, upon my first entering the room in the beginning of the year I felt like we were going to have to make some huge changes in order to make the room belong to the students, and the students needed to help to

implement those changes. One such way was in the painting of the room. While some feel as if this change was inconsequential (Petey said in his final survey, “No, its just walls with colors. It doesn’t help me nor bother me.”), to some it made a world of difference (Minnie wrote, “Yeah, I feel more comfortable. it’s like having a home away from home.”).

Soja (1996) writes about the importance of space and how it affects our lives. I tried to create a “third space” in the classroom in different ways. First, as I discussed above, one needs a comfortable physical environment to encourage the students to speak as if they are not in school, in a way that allows them to be honest and off of their guard. In this way, they may express opinions without fear of being judged and without fear of retribution from the teacher or the students. By using the butcher block tables, I feel that we established and maintained the aesthetic of an art room. In other words, what I at first thought would work *against* a learning environment for an English classroom (a worn out, tired looking room) actually seemed to do the opposite: draw out the positive, nonthreatening, non-pressured feelings more common to making sculptures and paintings than to discussing literature. In the mornings, they would gravitate toward these tables, often pushing them together without my cue, or at least asking if they could. When they sat around the tables during the discussions, I watched their body language. Many leaned forward as they listened and spoke, elbows supporting themselves, showing a sense of engagement; they would lean

against each other in a symbolic gesture of community; they would make eye contact as their peers spoke, listeners buoying their speakers' thoughts to continue flowing.

Anyone entering the classroom at any given time would see a group of students reading not at their tables, but strewn about the room like mannequins randomly tossed about in some sort of display. Dani's favorite position was to lie on her back on the butcher block table, arms extended with book open over her face. Petey would be seated on top of the counter in the back of the room, conjoined twins with Patrick, connected by iPod ear buds. Minnie and Tanya would ask my permission to go into the hallway, legs at approximately a 70° angle, book on floor between legs. Patrick wrote that he liked sitting in the hallway because it was "quiet" and "laid back." Eva enjoyed "laying on (the) desk most of the time because I gotta be comfortable in order to read."

Student Autonomy and Choice Can Lead to Both Motivation and Ambivalence

One of my predictions as I began my research was that giving the students choice in what and when to read and discuss, as well as where and how to read and discuss it, was going to give them a sense of empowerment and therefore increase their desire to work. Many times the students did react with enthusiasm. At many points during the research, Jack played the role of cheerleader for his

group and for the rest of the class. His encouraging tone when he told his group members to “get our books” and “let’s read” showed me that he truly possesses sparks of intrinsic motivation. I remember his studying me at one point as I was at my desk, hunched over my observer’s log. After a few minutes, he approached me and asked if I had an extra composition book like the one I was using. I told him I did, and he said, “Great—can I have it to write down what my group is discussing? I want to be the recorder.” Even though when I had given the students the option to use role sheets and most did not want to, Jack felt that adopting the role of writing down the group’s observations was important. Taking the initiative was a positive step for him. He was the one who had told me at the beginning of the year that he did not belong in this class with “the bad kids”; he was the one who was at first ostracized by students like Tanya who told me “I don’t like that kid”; he was the one who now felt connected enough with the class to be a leader in his own way, a role which still continues.

Judging by the way the students reacted to the table full of books the day before the book pass, it seemed that the students were not used to being given the amount of choice that they had in this case. I am reminded of the scene from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, in which a throng of hungry kids are presented with a barrage of different candies: caramels, lollipops, chocolates, and peppermints, their arms outstretched, palms and mouths open. I felt like the candy man watching them frantically digging through the analogous book pile. When

they picked up the different books, ooohing and ahhhing, they were no different from the kids in the candy store climbing the ladders and reaching into the candy jars to sample what was inside. The pile inspired the students to not only open the books to look at the contents right then and there, but also to take them back to their seats and begin reading, and then to even begin discussing reading in general.

In that same scene in the movie, the candy man tells them, “Willy Wonka was born to be a candy man; you look like you were born to be a Wonkerer.” I was proud to be the Willy Wonka of books (minus the singing, of course). And assuming that the definition of a Wonkerer is one who has fun choosing and then frantically chewing what was chosen, at that moment my students were Wonkerers. After the research ended, I asked the students as part of their final survey if they felt that the freedom of choice in reading helped them to want to read. Responses were mostly in favor of choice. Eva wrote, “I like choosing my books cause they gotta be interesting...” Minnie’s sentiments were similar: “Yes, because I only like reading if it’s a certain kind of book, i rather check a few books out and choose the most interesting one.” Robert summed it up this way: “Yes, I actually wanted to read it, it’s not like I was forced to read it.”

Yet the choice afforded to students by literature circles seems at times to promote ambivalence, frustration, and even a lack of motivation. One dark

moment occurred in the library computer classroom as we digitally discussed our books on the wikis. Students were given a choice of assignments to complete on the wiki home page and its links, and many executed their tasks without incident. However, technical problems interfered with a few students. Dani and Tanya chose to make Wordles for one of their assignments, choosing appropriate words to describe characters from their books and entering them into the Wordle program, which randomly arranges the words in playful fonts on an eight and a half by eleven grid. Unfortunately, the technology did not work the way it was supposed to, as technology often doesn't. The printing of the Wordles was complicated, as drivers had to be loaded and multiple steps had to be followed, and Dani's and Tanya's computers did not feel like cooperating, resulting in not only not printing the Wordles they had taken so long to create, but by wiping them out entirely. Upon their artwork disappearing, both Dani and Tanya became belligerent and refused to try again. "I did the stupid assignment," Dani grumbled. "And I'm not doing it again!" Many times, Dani's mood would influence the rest of the class's mood, and the atmosphere would cloud over and threaten rain storms. This was one of those times. Dani's frustration was not limited to that episode; in fact, much of the time we spent on literature circles was peppered with Dani's negative attitude and defiant behavior. A collection of images from her gallery of oppositional episodes would include

- her storming out of the room, slamming the door, and letting out a barrage of curses aimed at me
- her fists clenched in frustration as she refuses to accept the pertinence of what we are learning, including the lack of necessity of learning how to have a successful discussion
- her assertion each day that most of what we were doing is *stupid*, a word that has dominated her lexicon from the introduction of literature circles
- her head down on her desk, no matter how many times I try to refocus her.

I am disappointed that all of the choice and autonomy in the classroom has not hooked Dani. Her final survey tells a story of someone who might be in conflict about her feelings toward reading in general. I ask if it is important for students to read books; she responds, “no, but if *they* want to why not.” I ask if it is important for YOU to read books; she responds, “no, i’d rather not” and “don’t like reading.” Yet, a tiny glimmer of hope shines through with Dani. I asked the students to choose from a list of adjectives that they associated with their lit circle books, and sandwiching the negative ones that she chose (distracted, bored, confused), are two positive ones: fun and interested.

Like Dani, other students were also very frustrated and displayed oppositional behavior much of the time. Even when I thought I knew what was

bothering them, many times I was wrong. For example, I had thought that Minnie's episode during the wiki time in the library stemmed from her dislike of technology. Yes, her answers to the technology survey questions showed someone who was not as enamored of digital culture as many of her classmates. Yes, as we left the library the day of her shut down, I heard her railing against Facebook, MySpace, and other social networking outlets. However, I soon found out that she was angry at the fact that she had not made a B average because of my class. She has told me that she hates language arts and has for as long as she can remember, and that is why she does not feel like completing (and in most cases *starting*) work in my class. Recently she asked, "If I fail English this year, can I just take two Englishes next year?" I asked her if she planned on failing and she told me she did. "I just don't like this class, and I feel like we haven't learned anything." At this writing, she has not completed a major assignment since the conclusion of the literature circles, including a research paper on a topic of her own choosing and a narrative essay about an episode from her life in which she learned something about herself. I wonder if a big part of her ambivalence is, like I have observed in many of the alternative students, a lack of self worth and a dread of self reflection; after all, who would really want to relive the injustices, bouts of abuse, and let-downs that they have lived?

"I just can't," is her mantra in response to mine, which is "I know you can do this!" My words to her are accompanied by an encouraging head nod, smile,

and eye contact; her words are often accompanied by her struggling to keep her bottom lip from quivering and her eyes from tearing up. But, just as with Dani, I am confused by her attitude. Once, during her interview regarding motivation and literature circles, I asked her if she liked what was going on with how we are reading. She told me, "It's better than school...I guess its motivation, but I like reading anyway, some. My personality probably not, because I'm stubborn, so it wouldn't motivate me if I didn't like to read." It seems that many of the students themselves are confused about how they are supposed to act and what they are supposed to like.

Michael's story of ambivalence and frustration is perhaps the most pronounced. Michael's entry from his pre-study journal about his earliest reading memory reads as follows: *The early's memory is dr. suess and it's the only book I ever read. The book is called cat in the hat. I was 4 years old. Ive only read two books and they were kid books dr. suess the cat in the hat and sharks. Never a chapter book.* Judging by his entry, Michael was going to be a hard sell as far as reading and discussing, but I did think that choice of book might inspire him to give a try to a third book to add to his list, and his first chapter book. One conversation, initiated by me after sensing his extreme frustration, included the following exchange:

Michael (loudly): I HAVE TROUBLE WITH THE BOOK! ALL RIGHT!?! (I began writing down what he was telling me in my observer's log.)
Why are you writing stuff down again?

Me: By doing this, maybe I can help you to make things better for yourself. Is that okay to do? (he nodded) So you're having a problem with this book?

Michael: I have it with *every* book. (He put head down onto desk in the crook of his elbow)

Me: Where do you think the trouble comes from?

Michael: Big book, small words... Tell you the truth, I haven't read one page.

Me: Well, how can we get you to read?

Michael: I probably won't end up reading it...

Me: What have you been doing while we're all reading?

Michael: Just staring at the pages.

Me: Are your group members helping? How do they feel about the fact that you're not reading?

Michael: When Jack reads, I listen...

Me: Do you think it's like you're reading when he reads to you?

Michael (with a shrug): I guess...

Me: So, maybe that will have to do for now... Do you have the book open while he's reading to follow along?

Michael: No—I like to just listen.

Me: Does the group resent that you're not reading along, do you think?

Michael: No, Jack really helps me out.

In the interests of differentiation, I agreed that Michael could listen to his group members read aloud in lieu of his own reading if that would help him to become interested in the book and to understand what was going on in the book. If he showed signs of being an auditory learner, I did not want to interfere just for the sake of following traditional procedure. Yet this was not the end of his frustration. Even as a listener in his group, Michael continued his ambivalence toward the assignments by exhibiting off-task behavior, choosing instead to talk to other groups, engage other students in play fighting, and just sitting on his own, all behaviors that I could discourage but not stop. Toward the end, I offered Michael a chance to switch his book with the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, which he said he would try, but never did. The answers to his final survey indicated that he was bored, “could of worked alot harder,” and still didn't care about reading.

Conclusions

As a waiter at a tourist-infested restaurant many years ago in Waikiki, I was introduced to the concept of what my managers called “churn and burn.” On

my first night as bus boy, after I asked what the term meant, I was told that we needed to “get ‘em in, and get ‘em out.” As I had previously been in restaurants only to eat, I looked at dining out as an activity to be savored, to enjoy the company of the other people you were with, to eat and discuss and eat and discuss and eat and discuss. Walter, the long-haired surfer-type waiter to whom I was assigned clued me in.

“Dude, we make our money by getting as many tables per night as possible. If you let them linger in here, they’re just going to sit and talk and you’re going to go home with a smaller roll of dollar bills. I really need your help with this.” I felt uncomfortable, but because Walter had told me we didn’t want sitters, I obliged him, walking around the tables every few minutes, causing the diners to feel as if it were time to move on to the next form of entertainment for the night at a different venue, like a nightclub or a tiki bar of some type.

I tell this story because since 2001, when No Child Left Behind went into effect, I have felt a lot like my bus-boy/waiter self of twenty years ago. Instead of feeling the intense pressure of delivering a four course meal as quickly as possible, I am saddled with the rapid fire delivery of content material to cover all of the core curriculum content standards, which in turn should ensure success on the HSPA, New Jersey’s standardized test to assess the success of the students’ knowledge for the year. In our district, we have had to develop curriculum maps full of content that must be covered at a near-frantic pace, lest we miss something

and possibly infuriate administration, supervisors, and parents alike, as well as doom our students to poor performance on the tests. As language arts teachers, we awaken each morning with thoughts like, “If it’s Tuesday, it must be vocab prep.”

Do not misunderstand my argument. I am well aware of a few things that “must be,” such as the fact that as teachers it is our duty to give our students the tools to be successful (read: higher order thinking skills, problem solving skills, divergent thinking skills, etc.) However, NCLB in its current form does not necessarily achieve those goals. In fact, I would argue that it might actually discourage them. Many of the elements of my study run contrary to the tenor of NCLB, and yet I feel that without the freedom to explore teachable moments and to stretch material out to ensure the students are benefiting from what they are doing is discouraged by the legislation.

Diane Ravitch (2010), an Assistant Director of Education to former President Bush and a developer of NCLB seems to have changed her mind about the effectiveness of the program. In her recent book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, she writes of her favorite teacher from high school, Mrs. Ratliff, who helped Ravitch develop a love for literature that has lasted for the five decades since her high school graduation. Ratliff

...challenged us to meet her exacting standards.... She had a red pen and used it freely. Still, she was always sure to make a comment that

encouraged us to do a better job. Clearly, she had multiple goals for her students, beyond teaching literature and grammar. She was also teaching about character and personal responsibility. These are not the sorts of things that appear on any standardized tests. (p. 170)

Ravitch goes on to highlight the fact that she still remembers class discussions on literature and even thinks of the poetry from the class as a comfort when she is upset. “How would the experts have measured what we learned?” she writes. “An observer (from our data-driven society) might have concluded that she was a very ineffective teacher who had no memorable gains to show for her work” (p. 171). As teachers, are we allowed to trust our instincts anymore? Although numbers and data are obviously important in determining how to best help our students, were we not certified and hired into our districts because we were able to make judgment calls and use our “teacher sense” to teach our students? A number of elements that were prominent in my study are not accounted for under NCLB, yet are vital to a successful classroom. Two of them in particular that were highlighted in my study come to mind.

As I watched my students playing around with the wikis before “getting down to business,” I knew that they were on the cusp of owning the skills necessary to successfully navigate their ways around the networking aspect of the website. Had I taken away that time to experiment, afraid that what I was doing did not fit into the parameters of standardized test prep, the wiki would have

become just another activity forced upon them by an authority figure and another one to dislike. Vygotsky (1978) writes that through play, children's experience with concepts makes those concepts become second nature, as in the speaking of one's own language: "...through play, the child achieves a functional definition of concepts or objects, and words become parts of a thing." The tacit understanding by teachers of NCLB is that there is little or no playtime when teaching to a test. I remember when my oldest son was about to enter kindergarten and I expressed my excitement (and a bit of nostalgic jealousy) to my wife that he was going to be swinging on an indoor jungle gym, finger painting, and building highways with wooden blocks like I did at that age. She shook her head *no*. "Actually, he's going to be learning to read." If Vygotsky (1978) is correct (and I believe he is) that children need play in order to develop, the devaluation of play in our schools is going to lead to a generation of children who might have learned to read earlier, but more profoundly a generation of children who will have greater difficulty in solving the problems that lie in their paths as they try to navigate their way through life.

Another troubling loss perpetuated by NCLB is time for discussion of students' core beliefs, of what makes them *them*. As indicated in my story, through the encouragement of Freire's (1970) concept of true words in my study, I was able to infuse many teachable moments into the curriculum, as well as let each student find a comfort level by discussing matters personal to him or her:

Jimmy's preoccupation with his probation, Ray's inability to comprehend human cruelty to animals, Dani's love for her 105-year-old grandmother. In addition, the true word affords me the opportunity to know get to know each student on an individual level: his interests, likes, dislikes, life problems, which in turn helps me to differentiate instruction and tailor my lessons, style, or content if need be. Because of the "churn and burn" mentality of NCLB, teachers are more reticent to follow a path that is not in their lesson plans, no matter the potential for a positive learning outcome. We are discouraged to entertain thoughts of pursuing a discussion that might bring forth epiphanies about ourselves and therefore carve a tunnel of understanding of or connection to material because the next handout awaits.

Recently, President Obama has discussed the possibility of revamping the NCLB program. I hope that he takes into consideration the following:

- To judge the success of a child based solely on the results of a once-a-year test score cannot paint a whole picture of that child.
- To judge a teacher's success with his or her students by comparing results of one year's test scores to the next year's scores cannot paint an accurate picture of the teacher's performance.
- To discourage play for students whether in kindergarten or in a student's senior year is counterproductive to producing problem solvers who will help to make the world a better place in this new millennium.

- To allow a standardized test to drive the delivery of curriculum (and the curriculum itself) will not help to foster a love of literature, or of writing, or of learning throughout one's life.

I realize that in order to prove these last statements, I must rely on evidence that is more than the anecdotal information I have supplied in my study. I also realize that my interventions with my students will not turn all of them into lifelong learners. Many still claim to hate having to read. However, I do know that for many of the students within the population of this alternative class, reading became less of a chore, and many gained a new perspective on why to read. In Ray's words, "Books can be inspirational, making you feel like you have hope in life.... I think about stuff in my future and hope that it will turn out like the good stuff at the ends of a lot of books."

Next Steps

I have been asking myself a few questions since my study ended: Where do I go from here? What can I do differently next time to help the process of literature circles along in my alternative classes? What is going to help keep them hooked?

A few solutions come to mind.

First, I am going to need to give the students more ownership over what they read. I chose the books that I did for the most part because the protagonists' worlds are very similar to the worlds in which my students live. However, I am

not their age anymore, and I did miss the mark on a few of them. Some of the books I thought they were going to love, they ended up disliking. For example, Jack and Sandra found *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to be boring. Sandra wrote, “I don’t really care much for the main character because I can’t relate to him.” She also said that she was disappointed because she “thought more dramatic things would be happening.” As a forty-year-old reading this book, I thought the protagonist’s voice was authentic and his personality was relatable, and although many English teachers might find this next statement blasphemous, I felt it was a better book than Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*. Many of the students in the *Give a Boy a Gun* group also felt that their book was, in their words, “boring” and “repetitive.” Last, as I documented before, Tanya thought the parts of *Tweak* in which the main character was sober were boring as well. So, I have learned that just because I feel that students will find certain books relatable, there is no guarantee that they will. I feel a good remedy for this would be to research along with the students the yearly lists of top young adult books from the American Library Association, take the students on field trips to inviting book stores with comfortable couches, and let them explore on their own. From their suggestions I could make out my budget request forms and then hope for the best.

Next, as comforting as the cloistered nature of their classroom might be, I feel the student might be too sheltered. Some of them feel as if they have been stuck there because they are “bad,” that their classroom is next to the roaring band

saws of the woodshop, and the wailing engines of the auto shop because the school does not want to hear a peep from alternative students. The web 2.0 that I discussed in my literature review might be a perfect antidote for their self-fulfilling prophecies of “otherness.” There are many websites to which students can submit reviews they have written of books, or fiction they have written that is inspired by books they have read, or podcasts like the ones we began and prematurely ended. The participatory culture of the Internet can show these students that they *are* indeed heard and that others like themselves (and unlike themselves) want to communicate, using literature as a springboard to academic collaboration and possibly a friendship, as defined by cyberspatial parameters.

In the wiki and podcast activities, play spontaneously erupted for many of the students. I did not tell them to take time to do so; they made the time of their own volition. So here is my dilemma: In the future, do I set aside time at the beginning of each new activity designated specifically as playtime, or does the teacher labeling a certain time for play then make the play into work? In other words, that which we do for enjoyment, when ordered to do so, often becomes a chore. I suspect that I will have to leave this one up to the students; as play presents itself, I will need to take a deep breath and smile, knowing that they are feeling their way through unfamiliar territory in order to make it become familiar.

Part of what makes literature circles appealing to students is that they have a great deal of choice. As I found out and documented in my findings section of

this research study, choice has its positives and negatives. I found that the amount of choice might be a factor in how the student approaches his or her tasks, such as choosing books, choosing when and how much to read, what to discuss, and with whom to discuss it. I would be interested in finding out their attitudes toward choice itself, and I wish that I had passed out a choice inventory. I would like to do this to see if indeed too much choice might be scary for some, and to differentiate accordingly. No one says that every student or group need have the same amount of anything.

Finally, I think the success of any classroom lies in the ability for all to be heard, students and teachers alike. For me, the act of slowing down time through the act of writing student comments, dialogue, and actions in an observer's log has proved invaluable and now seems like a necessity. In fact, it is downright addicting. I have found that we misunderstand the intent of much of what we hear the first time, and by recording and re-reading we ensure that we grow as listeners, and in turn, reactors. What we choose to do in any given situation depends greatly upon how we perceive the situation itself, and by making reflection a priority, we can effect positive change in ourselves while helping our students to do the same.

References

- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Borgman, J. & Scott, J. (2009, Jan. 18). Zits comic strip. *The Allentown Morning Call*.
- Brinda, W. (2008). Engaging aliterate students: A literacy/theatre project helps students comprehend, visualize and enjoy literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 51(6), 488-496.
- Burns, B. (1998). Changing classroom climate with literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 42(2), 124-129.
- Carter, J. B. (2007). Transforming English with graphic novels: Moving toward our "Optimus Prime" *English Journal*, 97(2), 49-53.
- Casey, H. K. (2008). Engaging the disengaged: Using learning clubs to motivate struggling adolescent readers and writers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 52(4), 284-294.
- Clark, L. W., & Holwadel, J. (2007). Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them? *The Reading Teacher*, 61(1), 20-29.
- Connolly, B. & Smith, M. W. (September 2002). Teachers and students talk about

talk: Class discussion and the way it should be. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(1), 16-26.

Daniels, H., & Steineke, N. (2004). *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles*. Chicago: Heinemann.

Daniels, H. (2006). What's the next big thing with literature circles? *Voices From the Middle*, 13(4), 10-15.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Ducate, L. C., & Lomicka, L. L. (2008). Adventures in the blogosphere: from blog readers to blog writers. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 21(1), 9-28.

Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M., & Anzul, M. (1997). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. London: Falmer Press.

Emerson, R. W. (1849). *Nature*. Boston: Thurston, Torrey and Company.

Engstrom, M. E., & Jewett, D. (2005). Collaborative learning the wiki way. *TechTrends*, 49(6), 12-15, 68.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2004). Using graphic novels, anime, and the Internet in an urban high school. *English Journal*, 93(3), 19-25.
- Gallo, D. R. (2001). How classics create an aliterate society. *English Journal*, 90(3), 33-39.
- Gambrell, L. B. (1996). Creating classroom cultures that foster reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 50(1), 14-25.
- Hendricks, C. (2009). *Improving schools through action research: A comprehensive guide for educators*. (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Iyengar, S., Sullivan, S., Nichols, B., Bradshaw, T., & Rogowski, K. (2007). *To read or not to read: A question of national consequence* (Research Report #47) (United States, National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Research & Analysis). Washington, DC.
- Jacobs, D. (2007). More than words: Comics as a means of teaching multiple literacy. *English Journal*, 96(3), 19-25.
- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A. J., & Weigel, M. (2008). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* (Rep.). Chicago: MacArthur Foundation.

- Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2009). Wikis, digital literacies, and professional growth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(7), 8th ser., 631-634.
- Knobel, M., & Wilber, D. (2009). Let's talk 2.0. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), 20-24.
- Lenters, K. (October 2006). Resistance, struggle, and the adolescent reader. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(2), 136-146.
- Long, T. W., & Gove, M. K. (2003). How engagement strategies and literature circles promote critical response in a fourth-grade, urban classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 57, 350-361.
- Lynch, T. L. (2008). Rereadings and literacy: How students' second readings might open third spaces. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(4), 6th ser., 334-341.
- Merriam, E. (1966). How to eat a poem. In S. Dunning, E. Lueders, H. Smith, (Eds.), *Reflections on the gift of watermelon pickle*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Ohler, J. (2009). Orchestrating the media collage. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), 9-13.
- Richardson, W. (2006). *Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful web tools for classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- Richardson, W. (2009). Becoming network-wise. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), 26-31.
- Roberts, D. F., Foehr, U. G., & Rideout, V. (2005). *Generation m: Media in the lives of 8-18 year-olds* (Rep. No. 7251). Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Rosenblatt, L. (2004). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (5th ed., pp. 1363-1398). International Reading Association.
- Samway, K. D., Whang, G., Cade, C., Gamil, M., Lubandina, M. A., & Phommachanh, K. (1991). Reading the skeleton, the heart, and the brain of a book: Students' perspectives on literature study circles. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(3), 196-206.
- Schwartz, A., & Rubenstein-Avila, E. (2006). Understanding the manga hype: Uncovering the multimodality of comic-book literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(1), 40-49.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace : journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Versaci, R. (2001). How comic books can change the way our students see literature: One teacher's perspective. *English Journal*, 91(2), 61-67.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolcott, H. E. (2009). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Worthy, J., Moorman, M., & Turner, M. (1999). What Johnny likes to read is hard to find in school. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(1), 12-27.

Appendix A: HSIRB Approval



MORAVIAN COLLEGE

September 18, 2009

Kevin Horn
[REDACTED]

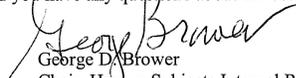
Dear Kevin Horn:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal: "Using Literature Circles to Increase Student Motivation." Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1379) or through e-mail (browerg@moravian.edu) should you have any questions about the committee's requests.


George D. Brower
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1379

Page 1 of 1

Appendix B: Principal's Consent Form

Authorization for [REDACTED] to Serve in a Research Study

Project: The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of using literature circles and 21st Century technology on the motivation and attitude of high school freshmen toward reading.

Researcher: Kevin Horn

Employment Affiliation: Teacher of English [REDACTED]

Location of the Study: [REDACTED] High School

Supervising University Professors: Dr. Rick Grove, Moravian College, 610.861.1300

Dr. Joseph Shosh, Moravian College, 610.861.1300

Procedures to be followed: Please see attached for timeline of research.

Time and Duration of Study: I will be gathering data on students whose parents and/or guardians have returned the informed consent form (attached) from September 1, 2009 to December 18, 2009.

Benefits of the Study: This research will provide insight into students' attitudes toward reading, and how we may better serve their reading needs. I hope to provide a link between use of "their" technology (e.g., blogs) and motivation to read.

Persons who will have access to records, data, and other documentation: I will have access, as will Dr. Rick Grove at Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA, and Dr. Joseph Shosh, also at Moravian College. All data that makes reference to a child's identity will be kept secured.

I understand that participation in this project is voluntary, and, and I understand that a parent or guardian may withdraw his/her child from this study by notifying me, either of my supervising university professors, or Mr. O'Brien, the building principal. I understand that all students will be participating in the same activities in class; only those who have returned the parental informed consent form will have their data used for purposes of the study.

Statement of Confidentiality:

The participation of the students is confidential. Only the researcher, collaborators, and supervising professors will have access to the students' identities and information that can be associated with their identities.

Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form:

I give permission for my school to participate in this project. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form. I have read this form and understand it.

I do not give permission for my school to participate in this project.


Signature of Principal _____ Date 9/30/09

Appendix C: Student Informed Consent Form



MORAVIAN COLLEGE
A SMALL NATIONAL TREASURE

Department of Education
1200 Main Street
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 18018-6650

TEL 610 861-1558
FAX 610 861-1696
WEB www.moravian.edu

September 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian:

In addition to being your student's English teacher, I am also a graduate student working toward my Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College in Bethlehem, PA. This year, I will be studying the effects that using literature circles along with technology such as blogs and wikis have on student motivation and achievement. Obviously, I am hoping that using these reading circles will increase students' understanding of what they read, the amount that they read, and their desire to read in general. I have been using literature circles for the past year or so with great success. The time period of the research I am conducting will span from September 1, 2009 to December 18, 2009.

What are literature circles? Simply put, literature circles are small-group reading clubs. Comprised of three to six students who choose a common book, the literature circles afford each student the opportunity to read books in which they take an interest. I offer students many different titles, and they pick which of these books they would like to read. Students are grouped by the books they have chosen. Before we actually begin reading, students learn how to make connections between the text and themselves, other texts, and the world in general. Your child will also be reading the required novels and plays for the course as well, both in whole class and small-group settings. I will be distributing separate consent forms for permission to read specific titles to your students at the beginning of each round of literature circles.

How will students respond to their reading? All students will respond in the same ways, whether they are participating in the research study or not. I will use data only from research study participants as part of my study.

- All students will complete pre- and post- reading surveys that deal with attitudes toward reading in general and with attitudes toward literature circles.
- All students will respond through discussion with their literature circle groups, either face to face or by electronic media, and as a whole class. I will observe students as they respond in this way and maintain anecdotal records as they respond.
- All students will discuss their reading experiences with me, and I will maintain notes as they respond.
- All students will complete short pieces of reflective writing regarding their reading experiences.

Is this research confidential? While the *results* from the research will be published in my graduate thesis, **all material relating to your child's identity will be kept strictly confidential.** He or she will be given a pseudonym for the purposes of the research. All paperwork will be kept in a secured file cabinet in my classroom. At the completion of my study, I will destroy all paperwork that references your child's identity.

What if I don't want my child to participate? Please know that you are under no obligation to sign the consent form or to have your student participate in the research. Students may also withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Because literature circles are part of my curriculum for my classes, students will complete the same work whether or not they opt to serve as research participants. Only data from participants will be used in my study.

- (over) -

Is there anyone other than Mr. Horn whom I may contact to discuss the research and its procedures?
You are free to contact my advisor at Moravian College, Dr. Joseph Shosh, at (610) 861-1482 or by email
at jshosh@moravian.edu. You may also contact the principal, Mr. O'Brien, at the high school at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] or my supervisor, Stephanie Bell, at the same number.

* * *

Consent Form to Participate in Classroom Research Study

Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form:

I give permission for my child's data to be used in this study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my own records. I have read this form and understand it.

I do NOT give permission for my child's data to be included in this project.

Student's name (please print)

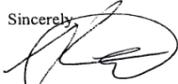
Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

* * *

Once again, thank you for your cooperation! Please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED] with any questions, concerns, or comments.

Sincerely,



Kevin Horn
Teacher of English

[REDACTED]@ [REDACTED]

Appendix D: Literature Circles Introduction Handout

Literature Circles

So there's this guy named Harvey Daniels who is an educator from Chicago, and he published this book in 1993 about how he thought students could learn to read better if reading were not just a solo activity. He wrote that lots of adults, since the first printed books were published, have gotten together to have meaningful conversations about what they've read (and also as an excuse to scarf down brownies and chips, too).

Another educational theorist (one of my favorites), Louise Rosenblatt, said that books don't really mean anything until we've read them. In other words, we bring our own experiences to everything we read, so each piece of text is something different to everyone (and even to ourselves if we read the same book at different points in our lives). If you and I both read *The Crucible* this year, each word, each image, each character, each theme mean completely different things to both of us because we are two different people. If I read it again next year, it will mean something new to me also, because I've grown as a person in those 365 ¼ days. Kind of cool, huh?

All of this comes into play with something we are going to be doing in class in different forms. We will be using books that we've chosen to discuss author's craft, to connect events and characters in books to our own lives, to appreciate language, to relate to each other.

Literature circles are cool because I get to treat you like adults—you choose the books, how much and when to read, what to discuss. This is not to say that literature circles are an “anything goes” activity—you can't just “like, hang out and chillax.” There are very definite rules governing how we run the circles, but we'll learn them as we go along. For right now, I want to tell you how lit circles look, and then I want to know what you think.

How they look:

- Groups of four to five reading the same book
- Using sticky notes or response journals as you read
- Passionate discussions!
- Using role sheets (in the beginning) to give specific tasks to each member of the group. Some example roles are connector (begins discussions about how book connects to his/her life or outside world), or luminary (picks specific passages because of cool language or words or images, etc.) Role sheets can be awesome or totally horrendous; we'll find out why.
- Giving everyone a turn
- Passionate discussions!
- Developing good social skills to help group members feel like they are valuable contributors
- Having fun, laughing, crying
- The teacher not “teaching,” per se, but facilitation, listening to your groups, steering and guiding you in different directions
- Did I mention passionate discussions?

One of the first experiences we will have with lit circles will be the “mini” lit circle—you've already chosen a Y/A book to read with a buddy or two, so we'll practice with that. I hope you have lots of questions and comments, because I really want to talk about this with you. Get psyched!

Now, please look at the back of this sheet and follow the prompts with your group.

1. Take your sticky notes and place them at certain points on the front of the handout you found intriguing in some way—ideas that struck you, confused you, made you smile, scared you. On the sticky notes, write about what, why, how, etc. Then, discuss them.

2. With your group, come up with some questions you have about lit circles.

3. With your group, brainstorm some potential problems you foresee with lit circles.

4. With your group, brainstorm some things that might go right!

5. With your group, brainstorm some social skills you will need to make lit circles work.

Appendix E: Book Pass Handout

Name _____
Book Pass Form

Book title _____

Author _____

Yeah! 😊 Circle a number below Yuck ☹️
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Book title _____

Author _____

Yeah! 😊 Circle a number below Yuck ☹️
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Book title _____

Author _____

Yeah! 😊 Circle a number below Yuck ☹️
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Book title_____

Author_____

Yeah! 😊 **Circle a number below** Yuck ☹️

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Book title_____

Author_____

Yeah! 😊 **Circle a number below** Yuck ☹️

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Book title_____

Author_____

Yeah! 😊 **Circle a number below** Yuck ☹️

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Comments

Appendix F: Sample Literature Circle Role Sheet

Discussion Director

Name: _____
Book: _____
Date: _____
Assignment: pages _____ to _____



Discussion Director: Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book and direct the discussion by asking each member for their input based on their current role. Don't worry about the small details; your task is to help people talk over the "big ideas" in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings and concerns as you read, which you can list below, during or after your reading.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Sample Questions:

What was going through your mind while you read this section?
What questions did you have when you finished this section?
Did anything in this section surprise you?
Can anyone predict what will happen next?

Assignment for tomorrow: p _____ - p _____

Appendix G: Self-Assessment Form

**Blackline Master
Literature Circles**

[x] Close Window

Self-Assessment Form

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Date Started _____

My Contribution to Group Discussion

Rate each entry as: 1 - Needs Improving, 2 - Satisfactory, or 3 - Very Good

Type of Contribution	Rating	Example
I shared my ideas and offered my suggestions.	1 2 3	
I spoke clearly and slowly enough to be understood.	1 2 3	
I answered other's questions.	1 2 3	
I remained on topic and helped the group stay focused.	1 2 3	
I encouraged others to participate.	1 2 3	
I disagreed without hurting others' feelings.	1 2 3	
I summarized or repeated my ideas when necessary.	1 2 3	
I gave reasons for opinions.	1 2 3	
I listened courteously and effectively.	1 2 3	
I tried to understand and extend the suggestions of others.	1 2 3	

My most important contribution to the discussion was:

My plan for improvement is:

Source: http://www.allamericareads.org/lessonplan/wyw/during/litcircle_blackline/self_assess.htm

Appendix H: Technology Survey

Technology Survey

1. I am on Facebook.
YES NO
2. I am on MySpace.
YES NO
3. I have played online games, such as *World of Warcraft*
YES NO
4. If the answer to #3 is YES, I spend _____ hours/week playing online games.
5. I play video games on a gaming system like xBox 360 or PS3.
YES NO
6. If the answer to #5 is YES, I spend _____ hours/week playing video games on a gaming system like xBox 360 or PS3.
7. I own an mp3 player
YES NO
8. If the answer to #7 is YES, I spend _____ hours/week listening to my mp3 player.
9. I download music for my mp3 player from _____

10. I spend _____ hours per week on the Internet.
11. Some of my favorite websites are _____

12. I have produced my own content for Internet sites such as Youtube, Fanfiction.net, or any other interactive site.
YES NO

13. If the answer to #12 is YES, the type of content I have produced is _____

(ex. movies, blogs, digital stories, fan fiction, etc.)

14. I text or have texted during school hours.

REGULARLY SOMETIMES NEVER

15. I am more comfortable texting than talking on my cell phone.

YES NO SOMETIMES

16. Please explain the answer to #15. _____

17. Circle the statements that apply:

- a. I will probably use more technology in the future than I do now
- b. I will probably use the same amount of technology that I do now for awhile
- c. I will probably use less technology in the future than I do now

18. Please explain the answer to #17: _____

Appendix I: Student Wiki Home Page

1. [Home](#)
2. [Your Mission for Today, 11.13.09](#)
3. [Your mission for today, 11.18.09](#)

[edit navigation](#)

☆ **home**

- [Page](#) ▾
- [Discussion](#)
- [History](#)
- [Notify Me](#)

EDIT

Welcome to the **HornCo®** Wiki!

Glad you're here! **First, let's look at our objectives**; in other words, what the heck are we trying to accomplish?

- **We are here to discuss your book.** I think this will be a great outlet for you to come up with ideas and share them with your group in a way that you don't usually use to discuss things.
- **We are here to have fun while discussing.** There are so many things you can do on this wiki in addition to discussing, like putting in a link to a website that might have something to do with your conversation, or putting in something else you've written, like a poem or a song, that was inspired by your book. You can even put in original artwork.
- **We are here to learn some new technology.** This is my first experience with using a wiki, so I'm learning along with you.
- **We're here to get to know each other.** I know that most of you know each other already, but discussions, whether online or face to face, can bring out parts of ourselves we've never seen before, or didn't even know existed.
- **We're here to be curious.** We'll be discussing the books we're reading together, as well as other groups' books.
- **We're here to help each other understand our books, to make connections, and to support each other.**
- **Basically, we're here to be a community of learners,** and being part of a community means respecting others and yourself.

What we're NOT here to do:

- **We're NOT here to make fun of each other, and that pretty much even includes doing it in a joking manner.** We want to create a place where everyone feels comfortable, and sometimes our words can cut when we don't realize they're cutting. This doesn't mean you can't joke around, but please watch how you are treating each other.
- **We're NOT here to fool around and not do the work.** This is a cool, new medium to use to discuss cool stuff, but I expect that you will be on-task during our sessions.
- **We're NOT here to abuse the computers, mess up the computer labs, and go nuts in general.** For the most part, we'll be doing this in the library, and you need to treat everything and everyone with respect. I've seen you lose yourself in your books when you are reading, and I know you're capable of great things!
- **We're NOT here to post inappropriate content.** On your wiki page, I've addressed the consequences for doing so, and they aren't pretty, so let's not even go there.

Let's look at some things you can do and some topics to address to discuss your book:

- Find a quote from your book. Type it onto the discussion board and tell why you chose it. Have the other members of your group comment on your quote and discuss what they think of it.
- Write a "Sofar." Since you haven't finished your book yet, tell your group what you think of it "so far." Give specific examples.
- Talk about what is or isn't realistic. There must have been a part or two when you went, "Yeah, that would never happen," or, "Holy moly! The author really got it right!" Tell us about that.
- What song do you hear in your head while you're reading the book? Why? Or, what song lyrics does the book remind you of?
- What movie does your book remind you of? Why? [Click on this link to go to the IMDB for inspiration.](#)
- If you were making the movie version, which actor would you have play the lead (or any of the parts)? [Click on this link to go to the IMDB for inspiration.](#)
- Would you want to be friends with the main character of your book? Why or why not? What advice would you give to the main character if you were friends?
- Do a Wordle of your book, or of one of the characters. Use at least ten words. Put the finished product on your wiki page. [Go here to find out what a Wordle is and to create one.](#)
- [Go here for some inspiration on other things to do.](#) It's the American Library Association wiki on book discussion groups.

Links to your Wikis:

- Perks of Being a Wallflower: <http://perkscircle.wikispaces.com/>
- Give a Boy a Gun: <http://quncircle.wikispaces.com>
- Tweakcircle1: <http://tweakcircle1.wikispaces.com>
- Tweakcircle2: <http://tweakcircle2.wikispaces.com>

Appendix J: Student Wiki “Your Mission” Page

1. Home
2. Your Mission for Today, 11.13.09
3. Your mission for today, 11.18.09

edit navigation

☆ Your Mission for Today, 11.13.09

- Page ▾
- Discussion
- History
- Notify Me

EDIT

What to do today...

Here are the required activities for today's session and the points they're worth:

1. Please make sure you have your eight-to-ten-line passage posted on your discussion board or a page you've created. Make sure it is appropriate. I know that much of the content of the books you are reading is not usually considered school appropriate in itself, but choose one that will inspire good questions in a tasteful manner. **The passage worth 25 points.**
2. Choose a group member's passage and come up with FIVE questions that the passage makes you think of. They should be GOOD questions, based on the questions that I just handed out to you. Remember: a good question does not have a "yes" or "no" answer. It forces you to think. It is not answered directly in the text. **That's worth 50 points (ten points per question...GOOD question).**
3. Do one of the activities that was on your sheet from last night, or one of the following, or come up with your own activity. **The activity is worth 50 points.**
 - Write a “Sofar.” Since you haven’t finished your book yet, tell your group what you think of it “so far,” in one paragraph. Give FIVE specific examples from the book to back up your opinion.
 - Talk about what is or isn’t realistic. There must have been a part or two when you went, “Yeah, that would never happen,” or, “Holy moly! The author really got it right!” Tell us about that in a paragraph.

- What song do you hear in your head while you're reading the book? Why? Or, what song lyrics does the book remind you of? Write a paragraph explaining why.
- What movie does your book remind you of? Why? [Click on this link to go to the IMDB for inspiration.](#) Write a paragraph explaining why.
- If you were making the movie version, which actors would you have play the characters? [Click on this link to go to the IMDB for inspiration.](#) Write a paragraph describing why you chose the actors.
- Would you want to be friends with the main character of your book? Why or why not? What advice would you give to the main character if you were friends? Write a paragraph addressing the above questions.
- Do a Wordle of your book, OR of one of the characters. Choose at least ten words that sum up the plot and/or the themes OR describe the character. Put the finished product on your wiki page. [Go here to find out what a Wordle is and to create one.](#)
- Find a link to a website that your character would like, or that would help your character. In a paragraph, write why your character would relate to the website.
- Create a drawing of your character or of a part of the book, or an abstract inspired by your book. Use the library scanner to scan it in and put it on your page.

Appendix K: Motivation Interview Question Sheet

Motivation Interview

Name:

Date:

Do you still like your book? Why or why not?

What page are you on?

How much effort do you feel you are putting into reading?

When you are supposed to be reading, do you really read?

How do you feel about being on the page you are on?

When I say "literature circles," what do you think about? What words come to mind?

Do you feel like you're actually doing any work?

How much do you actually discuss of your book?

What problems do you have when discussing?

What works well when you're discussing?

What needs to be improved with lit circles?

Do you look forward to reading time? Why or why not?

Do you feel we should be reading at home? Why or why not?

What would happen if you were to bring your book home?

What did you think of the wiki?

How seriously did you take the wiki? Why or why not?

How much effort did you put into your wiki?

Are we spending too much time, not enough time, or just enough time on lit circles?

Do you think they are a worthwhile activity? Why or why not?

Do you think literature circles have the power to motivate you to read?

What else motivates you to do work?

Do you look at reading as work?

Appendix L: Podcast Evaluation Sheet

Podcast Evaluation Sheet	
How does the podcast begin?	
How do the speakers introduce themselves?	
What are some things the speakers say to let you know what to expect in the podcast?	
What are some points that the reviewers make about the movie/book?	
How do you feel about the...	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ...pace of their speech? (Did they speak too quickly? Too slowly? Just right?)• ...enunciation (clarity) of their speech? (Did the reviewers use the right volume? Did they speak too softly or too loud? Did they mumble at all?)• ...language that the reviewers use? (Did you understand what they were talking about? Did they use words that were appropriate to their audience?)• ...chemistry of the reviewers? (Did they cut each other off? Did each listen to what the other had to say? Did they seem like they liked each other?)
What are some elements from this podcast that you can use for your own podcast? (What did you like?)	
What are some elements to avoid for your podcast? (What did you not like?)	

Appendix M: Podcast Assignment

Podcast Assignment

Here's what it's all about:

You will have a choice of what you want your podcast content to consist of.

Option #1: In your groups, create a podcast in which you discuss your opinions of the novel you've read. You need to address at least three issues that arise in the book, and those issues need to come from various parts of the book (beginning, middle, and end). You may do the following in your discussion:

- **Text-to-text connections** Think of another book, TV show, or movie that your book reminds you of.
- **Text-to-self connections** Think of parts of the book that remind you of things that you or someone you know has gone through.
- **Text-to-world connections** Think of things you've seen that remind you of parts you've read in your book.
- **Quotes from the novel.** Find a passage to discuss.
- **Anything else you can think of.**

Option #2: Same as Option #1, but combine groups to discuss the different books you've read.

Option #3: Create a talk show in which you interview the main character or characters from your book. Come up with at least ten in-depth, thought provoking questions for the characters. Remember the qualities of good questions and apply those qualities to the questions you come up with. Have members of your group play the characters and the rest play the interviewers. You must address events from the beginning, middle, and end of the book.

Option #4: Create a podcast review of your book. Discuss what you liked and did not like about the book. Consider the following:

- **Author's craft:** Does the author use the right words to describe the events? Does the author use metaphors and similes effectively?
- **Themes:** What lessons the book teaches, and how it teaches them. Use specific parts from the beginning, middle, and end of the book to illustrate.
- **Plot:** Did the events happen too quickly, too slowly, or just right? Were the events realistic or unrealistic? Were the events organized in the right way, or is there a different order in which the author could have presented them?

Option #5: Create a podcast structured by you—use your imagination! Discuss your ideas with me for approval.

Appendix N: Podcast Starter Worksheet

Name _____

Podcast starters.

Pick at least three of these (or make up your own) and discuss them on your digital recorder.

- Three character traits of the character I want to discuss are...
 - Examples from the book that tell me this are...
- A favorite part of the book is _____, because _____
- A part of the book I didn't like is _____, because _____
- The way I would end this book would have been _____
- Things I wonder about the book or character are _____
- Something that made me angry about the book is _____
- A part of this book reminded me of _____
- If the book were made into a movie, I'd recommend that
_____ play the part of _____
because...

Appendix O: Final Survey

Name _____

Final Survey

1. Describe what you had recorded on your digital recorder.
2. What are the negatives to recording podcasts?
3. What are the positives?
4. If you were going to do the recordings over, what would you do differently?
What would you do the same?
5. Why did you vote to be done with the podcast?
6. When you look back at the experience of reading and discussing your book, what are some words that describe how you felt during the whole process? Use as many different words as you need to. They can be positive words, negative words, or both.
7. In looking back at your lit circle experience, would you rather continue to do lit circles or to read as a whole class? Why?
8. What are some other things you did while reading your lit circle book (circle all that apply):
 - text
 - listen to music on an mp3 player
 - listen to music on computer (ex. Pandora)
 - talk on cell phone
 - played video games
 - other (please explain)
9. Do you find that reading is easier when you are multitasking (like doing the things from the last question while reading)? Why?
10. Do you find that reading is more enjoyable when multitasking? Why?

11. What physical position were you in for the most part while you were reading (lying on desks, lying on floor, sitting on floor, sitting in chair, etc.)? Why?
12. Does the fact that you were able to paint the room the colors that you wanted to help you to feel more comfortable in the room? Why or why not? Does this have any effect on your learning in the room? Why or why not?
13. Do you feel like you have ownership over the room? Why or why not?
14. Did you like the way you were able to choose your book (the book pass)? Why or why not?
15. Did your lit circle book interest you? Why or why not?
16. What percent of the time in class did you use to discuss your book with your group?
17. What percent of the time in class did you use to read your book?
18. Did you work as hard as you could have on our lit circle project? Why or why not?
19. Which words describe how you felt about your book? Circle more than one if you need to.
 - Fun
 - Excited
 - Looked forward to reading it
 - Engrossed
 - Concentrated
 - Distracted
 - Confused
 - Bored
20. Does using technology like wikis and podcasts make you want to keep reading?
21. What are some things you have learned about what makes good book discussion?
22. Is it important for students to learn how to discuss books? Why or why not?

23. Is it important for YOU to learn to discuss books?

24. Is it important for students to read books? Why or why not?

25. Is it important for YOU to read books?

Appendix P: Literature Circle Books

Chbosky, S. (1999). *The perks of being a wallflower*. New York: MTV Books.

Sheff, N. (2007). *Tweak: Growing up on methamphetamines*. New York: Ginee
Seo Books.

Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus a survivor's tale: My father bleeds history*. New
York: Pantheon.

Strasser, T. (1999). *Give a boy a gun*. New York: Simon Pulse.

Tsuchiya, Y. (1988). *Faithful elephants*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.