

Literacy Inquiry Project

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Introduction

Linden High School is a grade 9-12 public school in the Linden Community School District, which is primarily comprised of the communities of Linden, Gaines, and Argentine, Michigan, which are all located in the very southwestern corner of Genesee County. It's a predominately rural area with a very ethnically homogenous population. For example, according to the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), of the 951 students enrolled at Linden High School in the 2012-2013 school year, 908 students were identified as white, while only 4 were identified as black, with a few Native American, Hispanic, and Asian students as well. It is also important to note that, although the district is almost completely devoid of racial diversity, there is certainly a disparity that exists in terms of average income per household, which is seen in the fact that in 2012-2013, 58 students were eligible for a reduced-price lunch, while 213 students were eligible for a free lunch. Thus, almost a third of the student population faces some sort of economic hardship at home.

It is with these ideas in mind that I set out to inquire about the varying literacy practices of the students that I interact with each day. Earlier in this course, I attempted to define literacy as a concept, and found two definitions to be particularly meaningful. Two organizations, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and Educational Development Center (EDC), both have working definitions of literacy that stem from the development of reading and writing comprehension skills. The ETS states that "How well adults can use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential is the definition of literacy." In addition, the EDC demonstrates that the power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write, but rather in an individual's capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. In the framework of this project,

I wanted to find out the value students placed on literacy practices and what literacy skills they brought to my classroom each day and, as a result of this inquiry, what I could do moving forward to address the needs I found.

I am currently completing my third year of teaching English at Linden High and, in those short three years, I have taught students at every grade level and have encountered students with a wide array of attitudes and feelings concerning the core subjects I teach: reading and writing. Primarily, I deal with students at the 9th grade level and, as such, I chose one of my freshman English classes as the subject of my inquiry. I chose this particular class because, at a surface level, it contained perhaps the least homogenous population of any class I had taught that year (two students were black, another student was mixed race, several students had IEPs or 504 plans on file, one student was a non-native English speaker). I thought, if given the right questions, this group would most likely be able to produce a set of results that were both highly revealing and informative to my future teaching questions.

Thus, I generated a survey that I passed out to each student near the end of class one day, about two weeks before the last day of school, and gave them approximately ten minutes to write their responses. I encouraged them to be candid and honest with their responses and told them I wanted to get a sense of them as readers and writers outside of school. However, for myself, I was primarily interested in seeing if this survey helped me formulate answers to the following questions: how do students' literacy practices outside of school affect their practices in my classroom? What effect, if any, does a student's background (in terms of learning disability, race/ethnicity, gender, and attitude toward school) have on their potential to be successful in my English class? Finally, given these various needs of students, how would these results impact my teaching practices in the future? After seeing the responses to this survey, would I then see my

students through a different lens? I was certainly curious to see if these questions were answered by a simple, seven-question survey.

Part 1: Data Analysis

After spending some time looking over students' responses to the survey, I was able to pull out several key elements of data related to students' literacy practices, specifically in regards to their attitudes towards reading and writing. What follows is a list containing each question from the survey and summarized information gleaned from analyzing trends throughout the class.

Question 1: 'List five things you've read in the past 24 hours (this does not have to include books, it can be anything: texts on your phone, articles, textbooks, etc.)'

Many students responded with examples about social media: reading tweets, text messages, and Snapchat messages. Quite a few students responded with the book we were currently studying (Chris Crutcher's 2001 novel *Whale Talk*), while still others cited material for other classes such as science textbooks, math story problems, and historical readings.

Question 2: "List five things you've written in the past 24 hours."

Again, social media was a key topic discussed, as was writing assignments for this and other classes. Of special interest were a few female students who discussed journals they keep. One student who has particularly struggled with writing assignments in class said that she wrote in a diary "every day or almost every day," and the student who is a non-native speaker of English (who recently moved here from Argentina) said she writes "handwritten letters to my family in South America."

Question 3: "What was the last book you read (not for school)?"

This was perhaps the most revealing or insightful question on the survey, especially since I added the parenthetical information about discussing a book “not for school,” which clearly proved to be a challenge for some students. Some students either said “I don’t know or “I can’t remember” or simply, “none” while others cited books they had read several years ago. Three male students wrote down *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which they said they either read in 5th or 6th grade. Several students mentioned a young adult book, including *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, the Harry Potter series, and the Percy Jackson series. Only one student read a piece of canonical literature: Jack London’s *White Fang*.

Question 4: “Do your parents read on a regular basis? If so, what do they read?”

The class was fairly evenly divided on this point. Almost half the class (14 out of 28 students) responded “no” or “not really,” while the other students either said “sometimes,” occasionally,” or “all the time.” Those students then addressed the second part of the question, with a variety of responses including the newspaper, books and magazines, and readings for work.

Question 5: “Do they [your parents] encourage you to read (not for school)?”

Again, the class was fairly evenly split on this question; however, some students who had responded that their parents do not read indicated that they were still encouraged by their parents to read. One student indicated that, while her parents do not encourage her to read, her older sister did.

Questions 6-7: “Do you enjoy reading or writing more? Why?”

Eleven students chose reading, six students chose writing, three students wrote “neither,” and three students wrote “both.” When asked to state their reasoning, those that chose writing indicated either that it was a form of personal expression or that they found it easier than reading because they had difficulties with reading. Those that chose reading discussed how it allowed

them to “get away from their daily lives” or helped them “wind down and relax,” and several students explained that they had difficulties with writing and found reading less challenging. Those that chose both indicated that it depended on what the subject was that they were reading about or writing on.

Part 2: Literacy Goals and Curricular Commitments

The formal title for the freshman English class that I teach is Analytical Composition and Literature; as such, the class places a special emphasis on analytical reading and writing skills. On the topic of reading, my curricular goal is to give students the skills they need to critically engage with a text, which involves practice in identifying and applying elements of story analysis such as plot construction, theme development, characterization techniques, symbolism, and literary devices. In terms of writing, the students in my class write several research-based papers which target skills such as using facts and evidence to support an argument, developing paragraphs with a clear and concise structure, and analyzing an author’s purpose in writing.

This set of skills that students ideally leave my class with are quite rigorous; however, in terms of a broader sense of literacy goals, I continually attempt to frame the work we do in class into the broader context of a student’s daily life. This idea is closely linked to the concepts that Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey discuss in their research on comprehension in secondary schools. They state that, “while English educators should not eliminate literary works from the curriculum, there should be a purposeful attention to informational texts that develop students’ essential cultural and historical knowledge” (Fisher & Frey 2014). My goal is to help students understand how the work we do analyzing a text or writing an argumentative, fact-based essay is

applicable to not just their other classes in school, but also how it can be applied to future careers and is an important skill needed to be college-ready.

Part 3: Integration of Adolescent Literacies and Literacy Goals for Effective Literacy Instruction

When developing this survey to give to my students I had several ideas in mind about the results I might find. The split that I saw in the class between those that, according to their survey results, enjoyed reading as a pleasure activity (as indicated by those who could readily identify the last book they read that was not part of the school curriculum) and those that did not was not surprising and, also not surprisingly, was closely linked with students' grades in the course. Those that did not enjoy reading tended to have a lower overall course grade than those that did. In addition, I found that the trend indicating that more students preferred reading over writing was not surprising as well, given that the vast majority of writing assignments in class are academically rigorous and highly formal and are far from creative pieces or open-ended writing assignments.

Clearly, in this classroom a tension exists between the type of reading and writing that students *enjoy* and what they are *expected to do* within the confines of the curriculum. David O'Brien and Deborah Dillon offer some insights into the idea of student motivation and break down the idea of student motivation into three essential questions: "Can I do this activity?", "Do I want to do this activity and why?", and "What do I need to do to succeed?" (O'Brien and Dillon, 2014). The second of those questions has proven itself to be the biggest challenge that I face in terms of motivating my students to be successful. Too often, students do not see the relevance of our writing assignments in class.

The current course curriculum that I adhere to is closely linked to the Common Core State Standards, which places an emphasis on analytical reading and writing in regards to informational texts. As aforementioned, the skills that are developed through critically examining and writing on informational pieces are easily transferrable and provide students with a framework for future careers or work at the university level. Randy Bomer and Michelle Fowler Amato offer suggestions for how to make writing instruction more meaningful for adolescents and the impact it can have on their lives. They state, “Because of this shaping influence, we should make sure we are focusing our attention- and, therefore, that of our students- on the most substantial, meaningful, and important dimensions of writing” (Bomer & Fowler-Amato, 2014). However, despite my best efforts, students still do not see this “big picture” and only see the curriculum as drudgery: an endless set of readings and writings with too much complexity and too many aspects to identify, analyze, synthesize, and so on. They seemed to be mired in the curriculum so much that they no longer feel intrinsically motivated to their work.

Thus, moving forward, I find it increasingly necessary to strike a balance between what the demands of the curriculum are and what students are motivated to do. Whenever possible, I would like to bring in outside print and digital media to provide students with the cross-text connections that will help them foster a sense of motivation in the classroom. If students can readily see the relevance of the text we are studying, whether that be through an article related to a key theme, a video clip demonstrating key character traits, or some other digital or new media platform to expose students to an important aspect of the text, then they are more likely to read the required texts and develop a passion for reading that extends beyond the school setting. In terms of writing, giving students an opportunity to write creative pieces in addition to the

research-based or informational writing that we do is crucial as well. However, within the framework of the information-based writing that students do, there are several ideas to consider in terms of student motivation. Primarily, Elizabeth Birr Moje and Jennifer Speyer discuss in their research on challenging texts in the high school classroom: “Another important way to engage youth and maintain their engagement even as they encounter lengthy print texts, is to build units on the issues and concerns about which they care deeply (Moje & Speyer, 2014). Indeed, if I can build in more argumentative essays that allow students to express their opinion on a current events subject, that would give students some much needed extra motivation, while also still adhering to the Common Core guidelines.

It is important to also understand that, as I witnessed in regard to this survey, students already do a great deal of writing but, as Bomer and Fowler-Amato state, “sometimes the writing youths do is different than the writing that is traditionally valued in schools” (Bomer and Fowler-Amato, 2014). In order for students to not become exhausted with the research-driven writing assignments, giving them a variety of writing opportunities, whether they be in the form of personal narrative essays, poetry writing, or open-ended short stories, can give students a chance to express themselves individually through writing and can help them discover their own talents and strengths in writing as well.

As a result of completing this inquiry and analysis, I am left with several ideas to think about in terms of my future instruction and, more importantly, the needs and wants of my students. Before this project, I had at least an idea of how the majority of my students felt about their reading and writing strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes; however, this project has helped me to see exactly the kinds of issues I face in my classroom on a daily basis and has given me a foundation for improving my instruction to meet those needs in the coming years.

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