Recognizing a "Different Drum" Through Close-Reading Strategies

Cynthia A. Lassonde
SUNY College at Oneonta

Every day 7,000 high-school students drop out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Students reading at basic levels are more prone to drop out than those reading at higher levels. According to the latest results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2005 Mathematics and Reading Trial Urban District Assessment, commonly called the "Nation's Report Card," the percentage of students reading below the basic level is high. Bob Wise, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education, has stated that

> For the most part, we stop teaching our children how to read when they leave third grade, and expect that they'll continue to expand vocabulary and comprehension skills on their own. While this may work for some students, others, especially those from low-income families, never make the necessary transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005, p. 3, italics in original)

This statement indicates students are unable to comprehend the vocabulary or content of the material in their textbooks enough to succeed with academic tasks. To increase graduation rates, we must focus on ways to improve the reading skills that students need to deal with increasingly complex high school courses. In light of this, increasing students' reading comprehension should be one of the nation's primary education priorities.

Based on my concern over this critical issue of students' reading comprehension abilities, I decided to explore the development of comprehension skills through close-reading strategies by spending time in a high-school classroom in a small, rural school district in upstate New York. As a college professor from a nearby teacher-education institution, I contacted and worked with an eleventh-grade English teacher to develop a unit on individualism with the goal of fostering the growth and development of the students' abilities to generate a meaningful and insightful dialogue with the writer through close-reading strategies. More specifically, from September through November, I collaborated with a teacher who we will call Dan to take an up-close look at how a group of 17 students enrolled in a heterogeneously grouped section of English 11 developed critical thinking and reading comprehension skills across multiple genres within the context of a unit on individualism. The focus question was:

> How do students use close-reading strategies to develop comprehension and critical thinking around texts?

Defining Terms and Looking at Related Research

Key concepts to unpack in this study are *critical thinking* and *close reading*. Spears (2003) writes that critical thinking requires the reader to keep an

open mind and suspend judgment until alternative points of view are considered. It involves developing a healthy skepticism about texts. Critical thinking has been referred to as the "new basics" in that it encourages readers to apply readings to the real world (Morrow, 2003). In this study, close reading is viewed as a group of strategies readers use to foster critical thinking as a response to texts. Close reading refers to the reader's use of various strategies to interpret text meaning. As one of the students succinctly described it in an exit survey, close reading involves delving "further than the words into a particular piece…to study the meaning and the message of the work."

Close-reading strategies were modeled and taught in this English 11 classroom. Such reading places emphasis on not only understanding vocabulary but on becoming sensitive to the nuances and connotations of particular passages, language use, syntax, and the unfolding of meaning in a text. Close readers pay attention to features such as the way sentences are constructed, the imagery that is used, semantics, cultural implications, structural importance, any emerging themes, and the view of the world the author offers. They consider small linguistic items such as figures of speech as well as larger issues of literary understanding such as tone and style. Following are two helpful websites that explain close reading and specific strategies further:

• http://mason.gmu.edu/~rmatz/close_reading. htm This website from George Mason University offers tips for close reading. It includes prompts and strategies such as paraphrasing and considering puns, metaphors, and puns.

•http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/genres /close_reading.pdf This Duke University site describes four steps for close reading: prereading/previewing/mark-up, interpreting, critical reading/viewing, and writing.

Current research indicates the key features of effective middle- and high-school literacy instruction include that teachers consciously weave connections to students' lives as they teach strategies for how to make meaning of texts

(Langer, 2000). Alvermann (2001) supports Langer's work by adding that effective instruction at this level develops readers' ability to talk and write about their comprehension of multiple genres. It encourages them to study and discuss the strategies they will use to respond to texts every day as life-long readers and writers. Students who are guided to practice and reflect upon the necessary skills needed to be close readers learn to apply these skills across texts and genres not only to perform well on high-stakes achievement tests but also to develop their literate lives.

Close readers interact with text as they participate in a silent dialogue with the writer to analyze, interpret, question, and perhaps challenge the writer's words. Based on transactional reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), the reader's role is to draw upon past experiences and present understandings to organize personal responses to text. Following this theory, readers "evoke poems" as they develop a relationship with the text rather than accept the teacher's predetermined connections with the text. Reading instruction should go beyond the study of discrete skills and strategies. It should provide opportunities for readers to understand how skills and strategies are integrated with life experiences (Langer, 2002). It is beneficial for adolescents' academic literacy to address issues of engagement.

Also relevant to this study is that one of the teacher's responsibilities and priorities was to prepare these students for the New York State English Regent's Examination. Integrating instruction, as the teacher has done through the unit on individualism that is the underlying thread of this study, allows teachers to shift the focus of test preparation from practice on the surface features of the test to meta-analysis of the knowledge and use of the strategies needed for students to be successful readers and writers of all texts (Langer, 2002). Integration provides opportunities for students to respond to texts in authentic, meaningful, and personal ways.

This research is a result of teacher research, described by Lassonde, Ritchie, and Fox (2008) as a method by which researchers "hold themselves

accountable for their practices and students' learning as they take a close look at themselves as well as their philosophies and beliefs related to education" (p. 4). In this study, Cynthia and Dan asked intentional questions about teaching and learning, organized and collected information, focused on a specific inquiry, and engaged in reflection and discussion around their reflections, with the common goal of facilitating teaching and learning and maximizing student potential. It is appropriate that teacher research provided the frame through which this study was conducted. By providing this insider or "emic" perspective, the researchers were able to mix theory and practice (praxis). Teaching and researching within the classroom context allowed the researchers to examine the synthesis of the multiple layers of the processes of teaching and learning that resulted within this context. This examination provided opportunities to view and analyze the rich contextual factors that were relevant to this study, so the researchers could make active and informed decisions about their work.

The Unit on Individualism

To encourage students to use close-reading strategies to respond to texts, the classroom teacher and I developed a unit on individualism to use with eleventh-graders. The unit focuses on six different literary works representing a variety of genres, authors, and degrees of difficulty and complexity. The works also develop a common theme of the individual and individualism, a premise that is relevant to the adolescent who is struggling with self-identity and realization. Literary pieces were chosen to help students focus on how authors and their characters have dealt with this notion of individuality and what it means to be you. A list of the six pieces follows:

"Life," a poem by Nan Terrell Reed

"Initiation," a short story by Sylvia Plath

"The Sculptor's Funeral," prose from *The Troll Garden* (1905) by Willa Cather

Herman Melville's "Bartleby," a radio dramatization by Erik Bauersfeld

"anyone lived in a pretty how town," a poem by e. e. cummings

"Self-Reliance," an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson

The pieces used in this unit were selected and sequenced to scaffold this group of eleventh-grade readers through the process of learning to read critically using close-reading strategies. Taken into consideration were the vocabulary and language used; diction; the complexity of the plot or theme; the use of metaphors and other literary devices (i.e., imagery, symbolism, and repetition); the organization; the relevancy to students' lives and experiences, and interests; and the structure and length of the pieces. The selections were intentionally chosen to connect with issues we perceived as relevant to this age group, population, and geographic region based on our combined extended personal and professional experiences. We felt students would be able, with assistance at first, to make connections that would lead them to insightful analysis and comprehension of several identity-related complex issues they were facing as male and female adolescents. We hoped the selections and ensuing discussions would help them clarify and develop informed positions and values. We sought to encourage them to develop an internal dialogue with texts and to feel confident and competent to voice this dialogue with peers.

Close-Reading Strategies that Were Taught and Modeled

Next, the strategies taught to the students to help them read these pieces more closely and critically were selected and sequenced so they could build upon each other to scaffold students' ability. With "Life," the students were guided to re-read for multiple purposes: first for enjoyment; second, for meaning and to predict the theme; third, to analyze the language, literary elements, diction, and content; fourth, for mood and tone; and finally, again, for enjoyment that comes from a better understanding than was possible with the first read. This process of re-reading was stressed and practiced with each succeeding piece. However, as

the texts got more difficult, students were guided to "chunk" and re-read sections rather than re-reading the whole piece with each step. For example, in "Bartleby," students re-read each act of the dramatization to monitor comprehension before moving on to the next act. With "Self-Reliance," they were instructed to chunk and re-read based on their judgment and their self-monitoring of their comprehension.

Another strategy that was taught and scaffolded through students' application of the strategy to progressively more difficult texts as they were provided less guidance and were expected to work towards independent close reading was relating what they read to personal and prior life and text experiences. Initially, they were encouraged to talk about connections they made to the content, particular phrases or passages, vocabulary, and so forth in a very broad aspect. These first small-group discussions paralleled brain-storming sessions in that all possibilities were considered and accepted. However, as they worked their way through the texts, they were taught to continually question whether the connections they were making were leading them toward logical and reasonable meanings. In other words, was it all making sense or had they somehow made an illogical connection that was leading them astray?

An additional strategy highlighted in this unit on individualism was honing students' written reflection and expression of their under-standing of each literary work. Writing was taught as a close-reading tool to support critical thinking. While reading "Life," the teacher modeled writing responses (i.e., interpretations, reactions, feelings, insights, constructed meanings, questions, observations, and reflections) to the poem in the margin while reading. Beginning with "Initiation," students were expected to respond through the use of a double-entry journal. The left side of the journal page noted concrete "happenings" from the text, while the right column of the page recorded the readers' responses. This strategy was modeled with the whole class the first day, and then its use was supported through "The Sculptor's Funeral." An additional strategy taught to the students was how to use a character web. With this, students analyzed a particular character by noting a) what the character said and did, b) what others said or felt about the character, c) how the character looks and feels, and d) how the reader feels about the character. These varied uses of writing as a tool to clarify understanding led to the expectation that students would combine their interpretations from the right side of the journal and from their character webs into a formal essay reflecting their interpretation and close reading of the text. Each of the strategies was first modeled, then guided, and finally students applied the strategies independently.

Other strategies students were taught to add to their toolbox of close-reading skills were using highlighters to note phrases or passages students felt were meaningful to them and would help them make personal and comprehensive meanings, using context clues to decipher meanings of vocabulary and passages they did not understand, and pulling out and examining the meanings and purposes behind particular literary devices (i.e., tone, theme).

Connections to the Standards and State Tests

This unit was designed to meet the principles of the *New York State English Language Arts Learning Standards* (available at the New York State Education Department's website at http://www.nysed.gov), which identify lit-erary response and expression and critical analysis and evaluation as two of the four primary strands for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These are skills that are also evaluated on the Comprehensive Examination in English in the literature-based tasks during the second session (Day 2) of the examination. In the first of the two tasks, students are provided with two literary passages that they are to read, respond to reading comprehension questions, and then write an essay developing a theme common to both selections. For the second task, students are to interpret a critical lens and apply that lens, that interpretation, to two works of literature from their own reading. These are complex tasks demanding students engage in not only literary response and expression but also critical responses and evaluation.

Methodology

The Participants

This qualitative study took place in a small, rural school district in upstate New York. The school's campus houses students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade with approximately 100 students per grade level. Dan, a pseudonym used here for the teacher, has taught at the high school level in this district for over twenty years. He is the chairperson of the district's English Department and has taught introductory English at the local community college as an adjunct faculty member. Dan is a reflective practitioner who routinely examines his own practice by talking with colleagues and students. As the department chair, he is a teacher leader who values open communication among teachers and learners. Although he stated that he knows it is valuable to keep a teaching journal, he admits that he does not do so regularly. Because of limited time, Dan did not regularly keep a running journal account of his reflections on his teaching practices outside of this study. Dan was eager for this opportunity to participate in this collaboration. He saw our work as a way to examine and potentially improve his practice and, as a result, students' learning. Students' needs shape his pedagogy. He wants his students to develop as life-long readers and learners. He also feels responsible for helping his students with their success on the New York State Regent's Examination without reducing literacy instruction to the teaching of test-taking strategies.

My background is in literacy. I have taught at the college level for six years. My research interests include teacher research and self-study, and methods for working with striving readers and writers. I hold permanent certification to teach special education and reading in grades kindergarten through 12 and to teach as a classroom teacher from preschool through grade 6. Before teaching at the college level, I was an elementary teacher for over twenty years. Twelve of those years I taught Language Arts at the elementary level in the same school district as Dan. My relationship with Dan prior to this collaborative effort was congenial. We had developed a mutual respect for each other's professional work and had opportunities to come together and share our ideas at various English Department meetings.

I approached Dan with interest in observing in his classroom based on his reputation in the district as a talented, knowledgeable, and well-respected teacher. For 10 weeks, from September through November, I visited Dan's classroom, sometimes as a detached observer and other times as a participant or facilitator of small-group discussions. We also regularly met outside of the classroom to reflect upon and discuss the curriculum and student responses. While we viewed our work together as collaboration, Dan stated he did not have the time to contribute to documenting the results of our work together. Therefore, while this paper represents our collaboration in the planning of the unit and during the data collection stage of the research process, Dan was not available to participate in the final data analysis, interpretation, and efforts at disseminating these findings. His availability, voice, and contributions were critical to this study.

The students in this grade 11 English class were varied in their physical appearance, preferences and interests, connections to each other and others, motivation to participate and succeed, dispositions and temperament, modes of thinking and learning, and literacy skills. Students also reported a wide range of variability in their personal uses of literacy. While several self-reported they were avid readers outside of the classroom, others stated they rarely picked up a book or other type of reading material outside of the classroom unless it was required reading. All stated that they had access to computers at home or school outside of class time and emailed or surfed the web at least two times per week for personal enjoyment. These variables influenced how and why students chose to adopt particular stances towards reading and the learning and practice of using close reading strategies, as well as how they progressed over time. While they were all of junior standing, several were supported by an in-class special education consultant teacher while others were enrolled in honors or Regent's sections in other content courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources consisted of classroom observations, teacher and researcher journal entries, videotaped visits to the classroom, informal interviews with several students and the push-in consultant special education teacher, collaboration between the teacher and the researcher, students' written assignments and journal entries, and pre- and post-survey responses. Dan shared regular journal reflections with me over the period. These reflections included self-study of his practices, of students' responses, and of our work together. Data was analyzed and discussed weekly and more fully at the end of the study.

Students were informed of the study and were given opportunities to ask questions. Signed consent forms were obtained from students and their families. Students were asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the study to determine their self-perceptions as readers. Also, they completed an exit questionnaire related to close-reading strategies. During the weeks of the study, several students were informally interviewed to clarify statements they had made during class and their developing understandings of critical thinking and the close-reading strategies they were practicing. The classroom consultant special education teacher also provided her insight as she responded to the researcher's questions during and after the observations.

Students' writing assignments were photocopied, analyzed, and coded for themes using Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative method of pattern coding and developing reflective remarks. Also, four readings were done using Gilligan's (1982) method of multiple readings. This method allowed the teacher and researcher to listen for variant voices, complex perspectives, and subtle meanings in the data. Following are the questions asked during each reading:

Reading #1   What strategies are the students using? How are they being used? What is the tone of the students' participation? (strategies and metacognition)

Reading #2 How are the students connecting to the unit's theme? (critical thinking and connection to their identities and lives)

Reading #3   What are the prominent recurring phrases, patterns, and themes?

Reading #4 What inquiries are emerging from the re-readings? What feelings and insights are the teacher and researcher developing as the data is read?

Results

Students used close-reading strategies to develop comprehension and critical thinking around texts in various ways, to different degrees, and for dual purposes (academic and personal). The title of this paper refers to recognizing a "different drummer." Rep-resenting diverse reading abilities, levels of interest, and degrees of motivation, as most classes do, these students collectively began to voice new identities for themselves as students and adolescents. This new self each unfolded is what I have come to call the different drummer within each student. In the process of learning and practicing specific strategies, the students began to think critically about the theme of individualization as they pulled ideas from the literature that paralleled their personal lives. Some did this more easily and more willingly than others, however.

How did this happen? Two dominant factors were noted in the multiple readings of the data. First, entwined with their perspectives of what it meant to be a reader and a "knower" capable of not just understanding but interpreting text had a great deal to do with their willingness to take on the role of questioning the author. Their confidence in their ability and being given "permission" to question the author seemed to influence their willingness to use the strategies, to connect to the text, and to take a critical look at their interpretations of the author's writing. Secondly, students' ability to comprehend the vocabulary used by the author as it led them to create a visual image of the piece as a whole affected their ability to engage in the author's work to the degree that they could effectively take a critical look. So what does this mean? The following section looks at each of these factors and how they were represented in the data and are supported by research.

To Be or Not To Be Skeptical: Permission to Question

As previously stated, to take a critical stance the reader must reserve judgment and carry a healthy skepticism that questions the text and the authority of the writer (Spears, 2003). During weeks one and two, there appeared a prevailing atmosphere of skepticism in the class, all right. But the skepticism that existed wasn't that to which Spears referred; it was students' doubt that they could transactionalize personal meanings from the text rather than find the "right" answer. Even though Dan and I explicitly encouraged them to make personal connections, they stubbornly continued to search for "the" meaning as if a text only had one meaning: that which the author (or perhaps their teacher) intended. By comparing survey data with students' writing from weeks 1 through 10, I noted those who made more progress in questioning the author were those who identified themselves as readers and said they read for pleasure outside of school. Further study would be needed to determine why that connection seemed to exist. Perhaps students who read for pleasure outside of school have a more personal connection to what it means to read and to be a reader. Data indicates these self-proclaimed readers did tend to take more risks in interpreting passages in class and in their written assignments for the readings. For example, following is an excerpt from an extensive and detailed analysis of "Life" that a self-proclaimed reader wrote:

> It started out optimistic, but ended on a longing note. The destruction of the dress metaphor into a rag is tied into the journal entry. There's a light tone. Vague but clear. Artsy, but poems are inherently artsy. Vocabulary is subtle until the end where she is absolute. She gets stronger as she goes on. You get a sense she's bitter. Flowing and beautiful turns into hardness. It deteriorates until she's bitter. Overall, I thought it was a beautiful study of life from a different aspect of viewing it. It has to make you wonder what happened in this author's life to make her write this poem.

This student not only questioned the author's purpose for writing the poem but also the tone and vocabulary usage.

In contrast, students who identified themselves as nonreaders wrote more literal entries. Rather than sharing their overall impressions, many listed what individual lines or phrases meant. The meanings they shared were ones that were discussed previously in class. Little, if any, of their own voices were inserted into their journal and written assignments; and there was no evidence of questioning the author. For instance, one student wrote:

> The poem starts off with "They told me," giving an insight that other people's views were looked upon in this poem. "Somebody tangled the thread" shows people toil with your life and it can sometimes become hard….

The entry continues on like this, listing phrases and interpreting them with comments heard from class discussions: a very this-is-what-the-poem-said, this-is-what-it-means approach. However, another self-proclaimed nonreader stated about "Life":

> Why didn't she just say that? Why do they have to make it so hard for you to figure out what they're saying? I don't get it!!!!!!!!

For this student, the craft of writing was a mystery. He expresses his frustration in his writing. He could not fathom why writing wasn't didactic and clear. He saw no purpose in spending time deciphering underlying meanings in texts or in writing in ways that would confuse people. To him, reading and writing, and perhaps being literate, meant conveying a message in ways others could clearly comprehend. While this student was questioning the author, his questions take the form of negating the author's craft rather than her message. He refers to "they," which implies his frustration with authors of all texts he struggles comprehending.

Over time, some students did make progress with risk taking and questioning the authors. We attribute that to our persistent encouragement

during class discussions, Dan's feedback and acceptance of students' perceptions of text meaning in written assignments (see example below in Dan's feedback to KM), and the modeling of several self-proclaimed readers in the class who took the lead in questioning the text and negotiating personal interpretations of passages and texts during class discussions. Also, insightful journal entries were shared with the whole class as models of the possibilities for interpreting the texts. We did see less listing of ideas and repetition of plot summary in their writing through weeks 3 through 10. Students began to take more risks in expressing overall themes, tone, and connections to their lives and their identities. Following is a student's response to "Initiation" along with Dan's feedback. Note how Dan's feedback encourages the student to think more critically about her connections to the poem.

> KM: Popularity to me is a "social status" that friends and peers "rate" you upon. What makes you "popular" is a large amount of "popular" or well known friends, the latest material objects, also considered in popularity is physical appearance. The better you look, the more of a chance you have at being popular…. So I say get to know people before you judge them.

> Dan's feedback: Can someone be popular AND be a good, decent person? Is it necessarily a bad thing to be popular? Were the people in "Initiation" bad people?

> KM: Well, they weren't murderers but like my mother says they were good people doing bad things. I don't think popularity is always a bad thing. I think everyone has the potential to be a good, decent person. I just think popularity in high school is considered to be like power and that can either be used for good or abused and used as an excuse to ridicule "lesser" people and have it be ok.

> Dan's feedback: If "popular" people ridicule or look down on others, I can't imagine why they'd be considered popular. (KM did not respond to this but went on to the next assignment.)

Furthermore, in our analysis of the pre- and post-surveys, students expressed an increase in their confidence in themselves as readers who could interpret difficult texts. They wrote these comments:

> We learned a lot of different ways to use to figure out what the author is trying to say….I liked using the markers the best to highlight things I thought were important. I learned that you don't just highlight everything but you have to pick out really important things.

> When there are a lot of hard words, don't give up. You can do things like re-read and ask yourself what's going on.

> It used to be hard to understand some of the things we had to read in this class. Now I kind of get it.

> I already used a lot of the "tricks" we learned but I didn't really know what I was doing. Now when I don't understand something, like in the science book, I can say hey, I'll just re-read it or use some kind of web or chart to help me visualize it.

A second dominant factor emerged from the evidence. That is, students' ability to comprehend the vocabulary used by the author as it led them to create a visual image of the piece as a whole affected their ability to engage in the author's work to the degree that they could effectively take a critical look. I refer to this as the vocabulary factor.

What's a "Scrivener" Anyway?: The Vocabulary Factor

Note that many of the texts chosen were written decades prior to the birth of these eleventh-graders. For example, written in 1905, "The Sculptor's Funeral" takes the reader to a time when train travel was common and characters "reckoned" and "conjectured." Vocabulary and dialect were challenging for most of the students. During a conversation with one student, she told me she relied heavily on using context clues to help her figure out what was going on. In her words, she

could figure out what was going on even without knowing what every single word means. You kinda get an idea by what's happening in the story and what the characters are saying…. It helps a lot when people are talking 'cause they use words you can understand.

She didn't take the time to look up unfamiliar words because there were "just too many of them." While she thought using a dictionary probably would help her understand things better, she stated that she understood "enough." She thought she understood the piece enough to feel she had the gist of the story and could complete the assignment satisfactorily.

Interestingly the use of context clues wasn't always reliable. I believe because the contexts were related to situations that were antiquated, such as the job of a scrivener (one who copied manuscripts or public records), students struggled with making connections to contexts and texts with which they were familiar and could readily relate to. One student told me while reading "Bartleby" he had a picture in his head of a "scrivener as an office worker standing over a Xerox machine copying page after page." This visualization of the definition provided by the teacher lead to an interpretation of Bartleby as working in a much more modern, fast-paced type of business as might be found on Wall Street today. For him, he had no patience for the novella because he said no employer would stand for a worker preferring not to work. For him, the story lost all credibility; therefore, he wasn't interested in figuring out what meaning it carried. He was not engaged nor interested in developing any dialogue with the author.

On the other hand, Dan kept emphasizing to the students that the rich descriptions of these selected texts could be used to help them visualize the context and the characters. He proposed that visualization was a comprehension strategy that would allow them to pause, reflect, and respond in meaningful ways. When I asked a student what she thought her teacher meant by this, she said, "You can't make a picture or movie in your head

if you don't understand what's going on….It means, ya get the picture?"

In mid-October, Dan was thinking out loud about students and visualization as we prepared for class one morning. He said

> Students complain about too much description, but it's that description that allows them to see. They want immediate gratification like TV and computers. Technology that's image laden. Texts offer opportunities to make their own images, but they cannot make visions themselves. Will any of them be a Bill Gates when they can't visualize a story?

I thought, in particular, that his last question was insightful. I began to think of visualization was more than a method for improving comprehension; it represented the psychological ability to imagine and perceive an experience.

Evidence indicates that when students were able to negotiate the vocabulary within a text and use their prior knowledge in ways that did not interfere with close reading, they began to visualize the overall meaning of the text. However, the consultant special education teacher stated that sometimes she noted that students in the class were misinterpreting texts as a result of misapplying their prior knowledge. In particular, when students drew literal meanings from texts, the meaning they took from the text hindered their ability to negotiate metaphors and plots. For example, she remembered a student interpreting the phrase "he's as full as a tick" quite literally. Because he created the image of a blood-filled tick in his mind, he was seemingly unable to go beyond that vision to imagine other possibilities. Yet, this literal meaning did not make sense in the text. Therefore, we must teach students to self-monitor their connections to their prior knowledge about a word or context.

The Different Drummer

In the beginning of this article, I describe how students unfolded new selves as a result of this unit on individualism. To wrap up the unit, students read Henry David Thoreau. They were

asked to draw their image of what it meant to them to hear a different drummer. Some of the images are provided here. It was clear in the ensuing class sharing of their images and discussion of the unit that students were able to peer into their lives and who they were as adolescents and readers as a result of their connections to the readings in this unit. Some comments made as students shared their drawings follow.

CB: If I choose not to drink beer with my friends, I'm making a choice….I'm saying I don't have to follow everything you're doing. When you choose not to do something, like Bartleby, you're really making a choice anyway. (CB's drawing was Figure 1.)

LG: Everybody's so worried all the time about what they look like and what they wear. I think like people who are Hip Hop or Goth and dress all the same as each other and stuff are trying to be different but end up just part of a group anyway…and, like they're not being different or themselves anyway….but when people are totally far out there…ya know…totally different…it's like nobody will talk to them…they're like weird…thought of as weird…so people shut them out….yeah, that's like the poem we read about the small town. (LG's drawing was Figure 2.)
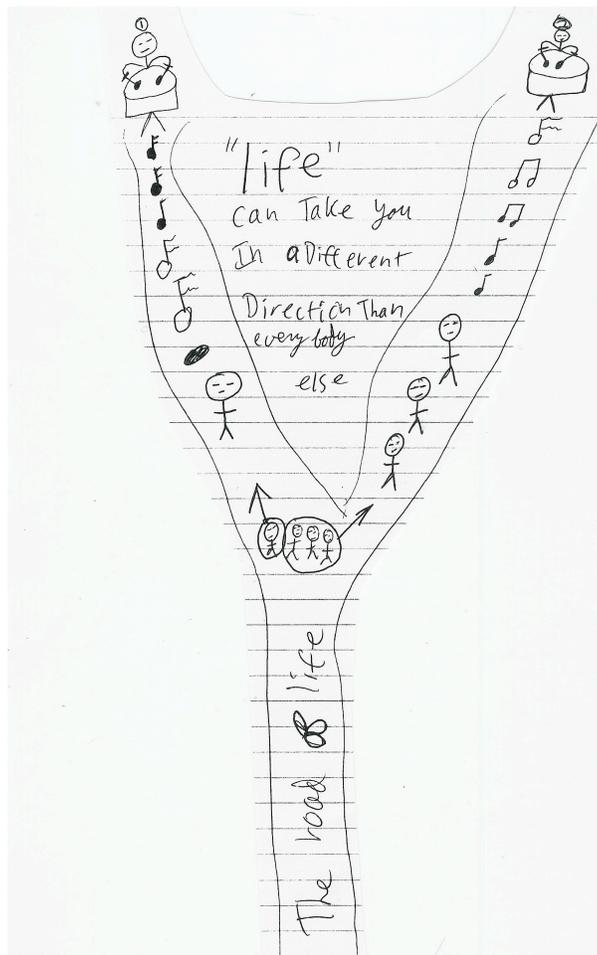
Figure 1: CB's Drawing
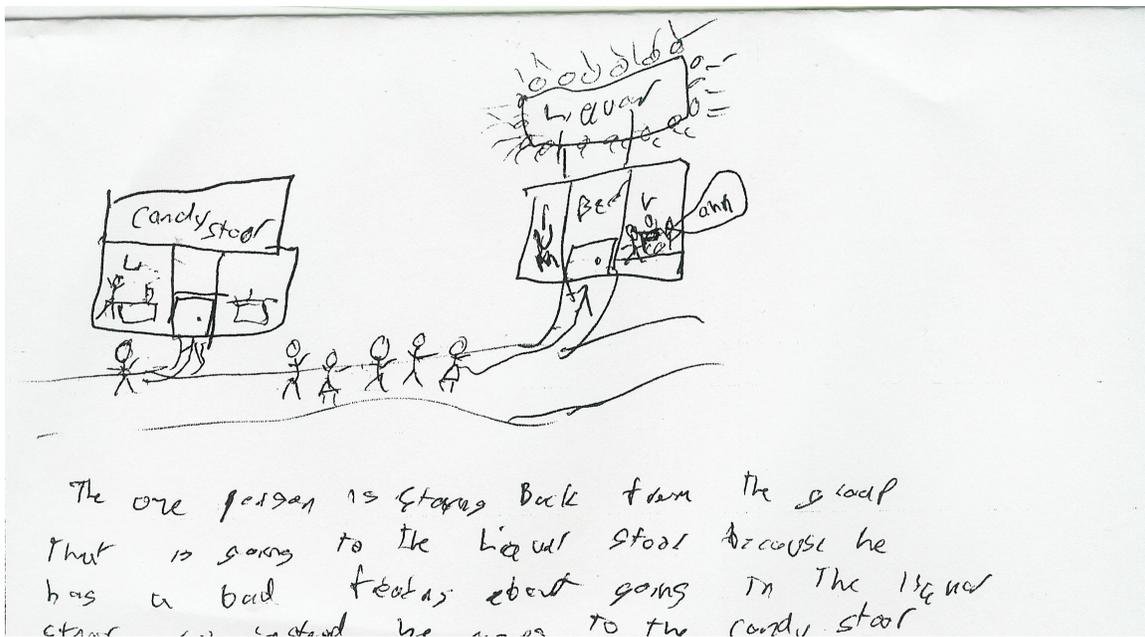
Text: The one person is staying back from the group that is going to the liquor stoor because he has a bad feeling about going in the liquor stoor so instead he goes to the candy stoor.

Figure 2: LG's Drawing
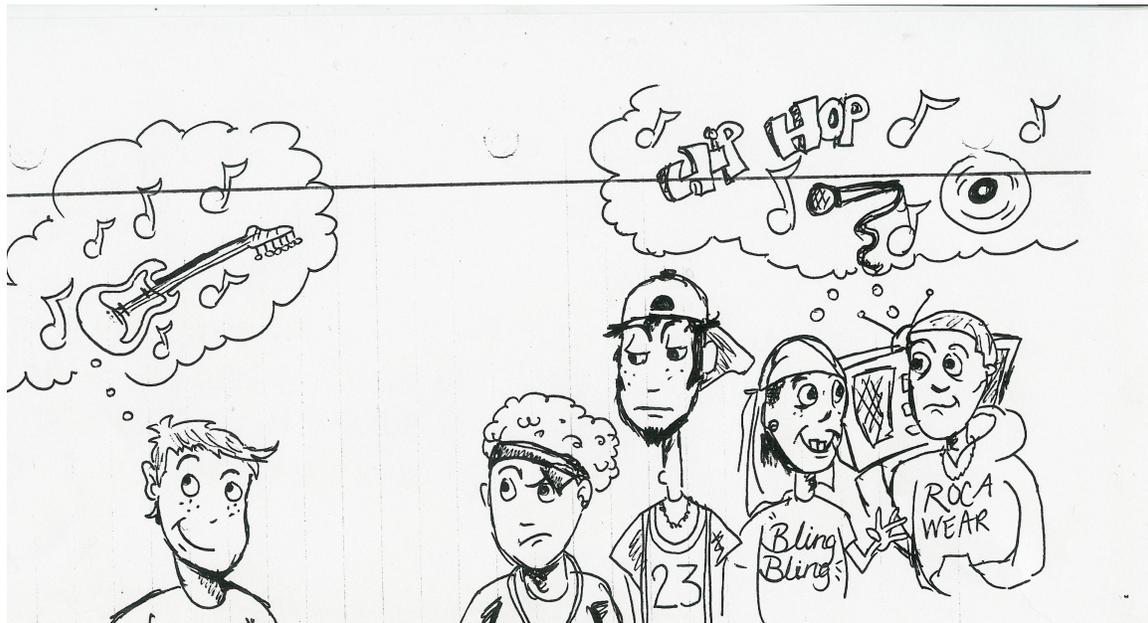
Figure 3: TB's Drawing

TB: You shouldn't be worried about following other people 'cause your life might take you down a different path. And that's all right. The Y in the picture kinda asks why you're taking the left or the right in the path. You can still go with your friends, but you have to ask why am I following them. See, I got that underlying message in my picture like the people who wrote this stuff. Ya get it? (TB's drawing was Figure 3.)

Conclusions

The students in this English 11 class were beginning to feel comfortable and competent in creating a dialogue around complex texts with the author, the teacher, and their peers. They voiced personal connections to texts by applying their interpretation of what those texts meant to situations they have or might find themselves in. LG applies the different drum metaphor to peers in the school who dress Hip Hop or Goth. CB relates it to the peer pressure he might feel if asked to go into a liquor store. These drawings and comments are evidence the students were beginning to transactualize personal meanings from text through visualization and discussion. They were developing a healthy skepticism and means to look closely at author intent, context, and their role in deciphering text meaning.

Requiring students to draw their visualization of this reading was an afterthought in our development of the unit. Initially, the unit did not include this piece. After reflecting on students' responses and discourse about previous readings during our data collection, however, Dan and I decided to add this assignment to gain insight into the students' thinking processes. We wondered what would happen if we asked them to illustrate the internal dialogue they were having and then share that dialogue with their peers. We agreed that this component helped us gain insight into their internal dialogue. We think this might be an important next question upon which to focus a study as more data than what we have would be necessary to form solid conclusions about visualization strategies.

Implications for Education and Research

High-stakes testing has the potential to narrow literacy curriculum (NCTE, 2004). Instruction that focuses on preparing students to take required examinations tends to reflect a one-right-answer or main idea model of reading that contradicts current findings in research that substantiate more engaging approaches to literacy instruction. Dan avoided this test model of teaching reading even though he describes one of his priorities for this course is to prepare students to do well on the New York State English Regents examination. It seems, however, that students highly anticipated that the right answer was what Dan was expecting. It took a great deal of encouragement and practice to get them to feel comfortable in taking risks in making their own meanings and trusting their own interpretations through close readings. By week 10 of this study, students were finding out they did have something to offer. The meanings they were taking from texts were supported by the texts and by their prior knowledge, and they were meaningful to them. We saw students' faces spark and light up when their insights were shared, discussed, and affirmed by their peers and teachers. High-stakes tests must include opportunities for students' to practice and demonstrate their abilities to read critically with margin to transactualize meanings.

Furthermore, it is important as teachers to introduce students to new contexts and ideas. Part of our job is to expand their world. However, we have to keep in mind that to fully understand new ideas, students must be able to connect them to something they have in their prior knowledge, or, as Dan tells his students, to "hang our hats on something." We must encourage students to discuss and retrieve what they already know about the topic or something they can connect to the topic. Then, we must teach them to self-monitor whether their prior understanding is relevant in the particular text they are reading, being careful not to let a misapplication of prior knowledge hinder their negotiation of the text. For students to be able to transactualize text and create the "poem" that Rosenblatt (1978) talks about, text has to have

personal meaning to them. As teachers, then, it is up to us to explicitly teach them strategies, such as those described in this article, to encourage them to make those connections and read closely.

Finally, this study adds to our understanding of collaboration and co-research. University-school partnerships commonly bring together college and K-12 faculty to ponder their teaching and students' resultant learning. This particular collaboration between Dan and I had its successes and its challenges. We did gain insight into the effectiveness of the unit. The evidence led to rich results that Dan has stated he will incorporate into the unit in future semesters and will shape his overall pedagogy. Dan also highly valued the time we spent just talking about the objectives and design of the curriculum. He stated that it helped him to clarify why he taught the way he did and how his teaching philosophy influenced his views on teaching strategies that would not only help students be successful on the State Regent's Examination but also apply to authentic life and workplace literacy demands. I was able to apply the results to my college classroom as well. I now look for the ways students seek meaning in course readings. I listen to their past experiences more intently than previously so I can better understand how they are interpreting text and classroom discourse. I no longer assume they are coming to the same understanding of text that I intend them to or assume they will based on the course and on my objectives. The professional development that occurred through this partnership mutually supported Dan and I to investigate our common questions and improve our teaching as it redefined what we understood about students' needs.

Time and personal objectives for the research became challenges to our collaborative efforts. They became barriers that limited our work together. I was able to donate time each week to meet with Dan and to be part of his class. As a professor at a university that values scholarship through research, my schedule allowed me the time to commit to this project. However, understandably, Dan's schedule as a high-school teacher required he teach the majority of the day. His "free" periods were dedicated to planning, assessing student work, and collaborating with

colleagues. Outside of school, he was involved in many personal and professional commitments that he, understandably, ranked as his priorities. Dan and I had similar reasons for wanting to collaborate. We were both interested in reflecting on practice and connecting it to theory to improve student learning; however, I had the added purpose of analyzing our findings for general purposes that could benefit other educators and disseminating our findings through publication. I attribute Dan's withdrawal from the collaboration in the final stages of data analysis and dissemination, specifically writing this article, to the fact that he had achieved his primary objective. That is, he had informed his pedagogy and as a result had concrete evidence to support the means to improve his teaching and his students' learning. As a researcher and tenure-track college professor with the expectation from my university to be published, I was the one who prioritized the need to share our findings with other educators in hopes that they could also improve the effectiveness of their teaching. I also saw an added value to sharing our research as a means to model teacher research methodology as a means of giving a voice to educators. Everyone brings something valuable to a collaborative table. We must learn to recognize what each member brings and respect each other's purposes, contributions, priorities, goals, and values. Dan and I continue to share a mutual respect for each other's goals and work and intend to work together again in the near future.

References

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2005, December). Straight A's: Public education policy and progress, (5)23. Washington, DC.

Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents. Executive Summary and Paper Commissioned by the National Reading Conference. Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Langer, J. (2002). Effective literacy instruction: Building successful reading and writing

programs. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Langer, J., Close, E., Angelis, J., & Preller, P. (2000). Guidelines for teaching middle and

Lassonde, C. A., Ritchie, G. V., & Fox, R. K. (2008). How teacher research can become your way of being. In C. A. Lassonde & S. E. Israel. (Eds.). Teachers Taking Action: A Comprehensive Guide to Teacher Research. Newark: DE: International Reading Association.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morrow, L. M., Gambrell, L. B., & Pressley, M. (Eds.). (2003). Best practices in literacy instruction, 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press.

high school students to read and write well: Six features of effective instruction. Albany, NY: National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement.

NCTE's Commission on Reading. (2004, May). A call to action: What we know about adolescent literacy and ways to support teachers in meeting students' needs. Available online: http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/literacy/118622.htm

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Spears, D. (2003). Developing critical reading skills, 6th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.