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MLA Citation for this article:
Students are engaged in a deep conversation about the nature of Mersault’s crime. Was it first-degree murder, second-degree murder, manslaughter, or temporary insanity? After separating themselves into the four corners of the room, they attempt to convince each other of their points of view. They address each other politely, but most speak with conviction. Every student in the class is paying attention. At times, when a student feels that another has made a valid point, she will move to an opposite corner indicating that her opinion has changed. Each corner has at least a few copies of *The Stranger* open so that students can refer to the text to support their points. There is a quiet intensity in the room and, as with any debate, occasional bursts of excitement or drama. This is not an honors-level class; it is, instead, a heterogeneous eleventh-grade classroom. Students’ reading levels range from fourth grade to well beyond grade level. It is a class that addresses the central question of a heterogeneous classroom: How can a curriculum engage the students who struggle, while at the same time challenging the high achievers?

Teaching in a heterogeneous environment is an opportunity that, at the very least, pushes educators to examine and broaden their practice. It is no coincidence that, as more school districts implement heterogeneous classrooms, theories such as Gardner’s multiple intelligences and practical suggestions such as McCarthy’s 4Mat have gained acclaim. Educators understand that there are many ways to approach curriculum. As Howard Gardner stated in a 1997 interview, “What I argue against is the notion that there’s only one way to learn how to read, only one way to learn how to compute, only one way to learn about biology. I think that such contentions are nonsense” (Checkley, par. 29). Many educators have realized that modifying classroom practice so that it reflects the diversity of intelligences in the classroom enriches teacher practice, curriculum, and student engagement. For high school English teachers such modifications are more than ways to make the heterogeneous classroom more effective; they are ways to pull students away from the abyss of lifelong illiteracy.

**Meeting New Challenges**

As an English teacher who has worked at many different levels, I found myself facing a new set of issues when I started teaching four sections of an eleventh-grade class entitled World Literature. World Literature is a required course for all eleventh graders at Souhegan High School. The classes are fully heterogeneous. The reading list includes, among others, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Camus’s *The Stranger*, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Dai’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, García Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, and Mehta’s *A River Sutra*. It is a challenging curriculum, and students come to eleventh grade expecting to be pushed. Such a reputation is positive for many students who look forward to meeting the challenge. Many love the idea of being introduced to the world’s cultures through literature.
They are excited about the fact that they have not even heard of many of the books on our list. For them, World Literature is an adventure. Others, however, approach junior year with a vague sense of dread or worse. After struggling through my first year teaching the course and watching a number of students give up or drop out, I knew that I had to alleviate the negative effects of the course’s reputation, while maintaining the positive attributes.

Reading problems that are unresolved by eleventh grade are usually deep seated and difficult. Students have developed patterns of interactions with school and, if those patterns are negative, a teacher faces a formidable challenge in reversing them. It comes as no great surprise that “literacy problems unresolved by high school continue into adulthood” (Coles 20). What, then, could I do with the students who were really struggling in World Literature?

As my second year began, I was determined to convince students that reading could be an enjoyment, not just an impediment to their schoolwork. My effort centered on three books that we read entirely in class, mostly out loud. The approach was very simple. Early in the year, the students and I discussed different types of reading and some basic reading strategies. I asked students to reflect, in writing, on themselves as readers. This process was valuable because it sent an initial message to students that I valued reading, and it also gave me information about how individual students perceived reading.

Then, as we began Camus’s The Stranger, students were asked to choose one of three groups. They could be read to, they could join a group that shared reading aloud or, if they preferred, they could read silently. (Probably the biggest challenge in all of this was finding three spaces relatively close to my classroom where students could read.) We read three to four days each week. On reading days, we devoted 25–40 minutes of a 55-minute class to reading. For the remaining time in each class, I answered clarifying questions, we discussed the day’s reading, we prepared for more formal discussions, or we shared journal reflections. The process had built-in accountability because everyone knew that we would discuss the reading immediately. In the beginning, I provided guiding questions. For Chapter 1, for example, the questions were: “Closely consider Meursault’s reaction to his mother’s death. How do the people around him respond to his reaction? How would you respond to Meursault?” As the students developed understanding together, however, they began to develop their own questions for inquiry.

Initially, I assumed that students would stay in the same groups but, as we moved through the unit, students and I realized that moods varied. Some days a student might want to listen, other days to read silently, and on other days to read aloud. It was an important lesson; as almost every student moved through every group, we all realized that an individual’s reading preferences are dynamic and that it is difficult to define someone as one specific type of reader.

**Engaging with Confidence**

As the unit evolved, students’ sense of drama while reading led to a natural project, dramatizing the text. Students chose from a number of scenes to act out in front of the class. These included “the beach,” “Raymond’s apartment,” and, of course, “the trial.” One student approached me and asked if, instead of reenacting the trial, his group could retry Meursault because “he was insane, he wasn’t guilty.” The entire class paused, we looked up various legal definitions of first-, second-, and third-degree murder, and we had our discussion-debate. Such interactions with students are indicative of the level of engagement that I witnessed during this entire unit. For that reason, this approach quickly became a valuable addition to my teaching repertoire. In addition to proving to students that I valued their reading and understanding, it gave all students the luxury of feeling confident when they came to class.

This confidence was reflected in their contributing to more in-depth discussions. Students seemed comfortable writing and sharing thoughtful reflections, and the quality of critical essays increased as students felt more confident about exploring their own ideas. Overall, there was a noticeable difference in the number of students who felt successful. Students for whom the way into the classroom was typically blocked by a reading difficulty were suddenly discussing ideas in complex literature. One particular...
student, who was known for his ability to distract a class and who was identified as having special needs, informed me at the beginning of the year that he did not do well in English. As we read through *The Stranger*, though, he became very engaged. About midway through the unit he approached me after class to say he was “one of the deepest thinkers in this class.” In addition to that sort of triumph, in-class reading gave me the time to push students who typically excelled in English.

As more students became comfortable reading, I was able to ask individuals to read aloud to the group that chose to listen. While I continued to read for part of the time each day, I suddenly had potential time every reading day to conduct separate discussions with each group or with individual students. At least a couple of students in every class asked for supplemental reading. I gave those students two pieces of literature to consider: *The Overcoat* and Other Short Stories, introducing them to the absurdist writing of Gogol to compare to Camus’s existentialism; and Eliot’s “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” allowing them to compare Prufrock to Meursault. Everyone in class benefited as those students offered another perspective to class discussions and were able to bring more depth to their final essays. Thus, my primary goal of engaging the students who struggled while challenging those who excelled was met.

### Developing Independence

There are, of course, more specific goals in the English classroom. An important goal is to push students to do the difficult work of reading a challenging text on their own. While reading aloud in class does not directly address this, it provided me with the opportunity to model independent reading for students. Reading became theater, as I read and paused to think out loud about something that happened, comparing the text to something else we had read or relating it to a previous scene. Students quickly learned that I always keep a dictionary close by, and I was secretly delighted as students encouraged me to “get back to the story.” We began to have minidiscussions as students engaged in the exact process I had modeled. We also maintained a list of researched words. Through these activities, students began to develop an understanding of what it looks like to work through a text.

The issue remained, however, that upper-level students who were unable to read still required reading instruction. Unfortunately for those students, my classroom resembled many others where “reading itself is not specifically taught in high school; it’s simply expected” (Kropp 124). I, like most teachers, would never purposely ignore a student’s lack of skill. However, sending books home with students and rarely reading in class mean that teachers never actually see their students read. Reading problems are, in effect, excused away by “poor student” descriptors: “John does not complete his homework. Sarah is continually disengaged during class and rarely contributes to discussion.” It was not until we read together in class that I realized that some of my students’ difficulties were actually problems with decoding; I needed to acquaint myself with how to teach reading. While many elementary school teachers are familiar with how to teach phonemic awareness and consonant blends, high school English teachers are understandably far more interested in teaching how to understand meaning and synthesize ideas. Both processes are imperative in creating readers who enjoy reading and do it well.

As I witnessed students’ reading difficulties and saw specific patterns emerge in students’ reading, I sought the advice of other professionals in the building. Case managers, the reading specialist, and the school social worker were invaluable as I tried to work through the issues involved in my students’ reading. I found myself consulting books about reading and language as I attempted to buttress my knowledge of the complex issues involved in literacy. These included “You Gotta BE the Book” by Jeffrey Wilhelm; *Teaching Reading: Language, Letters and Thought*, edited by Sara Brody; and *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* by Louisa Cook Moats. Eventually, I realized that there had been deficits in my education because there had been no serious attempts to confront issues associated with reading difficulties.
Learning “to Love to Read”

Judging from student reaction in both written responses and the work they completed, the units in which we read out loud were great successes. After completing *The Stranger*, we read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and finished the school year with *Macbeth*. On their end-of-the-year feedback forms, students made comments like, “Reading in class was very effective, the class discussions helped me find new insights into the reading.” Another student stated, “Reading in class was so helpful for me. When reading with a whole class, people can interject their observations and ideas immediately. . . .” Another student, who began the year telling me he did not care about school, wrote, “I love reading books in class, it helps me a lot. I think every teacher in every class should do it.” And finally, a note from a student that any teacher would cherish: “I loved the books we read. I learned, because of you, to love to read.”

The positive feedback from students was also reflected in the work they completed. In units that we read in class, 3 to 5 percent more students turned in major assignments. Such a small number is significant because it represents those few students who are so withdrawn and seemingly unreachable in other units. This approach also had a positive impact on a traditional assessment, the critical essay. On essays about books that we read in class, students’ grades improved; the class average was four to five points higher than on books that students read at home. Simply put, everyone did better. While there might be a number of ways to interpret or explain such data, the important thing is that successfully meeting a challenge gave students the motivation and confidence to push themselves the next time.

Every English teacher knows that reading well means far more than decoding and basic comprehension. When I gave students who struggle with basic reading skills a chance to engage in discussions about literature, to analyze and imagine a text, I saw something wonderful. Those students who are normally disaffected came to life. They rose to the challenge and loved it. At the same time, I saw them approach their other challenges of decoding and basic reading comprehension with renewed interest. But they were not alone; every student in my heterogeneous class benefited, and why not? We all love to be read to, to allow our minds and imaginations to sink into a great story. I am certain of that each night when I read stories to my one-year-old daughter, each morning when I pop in my audiobook for the drive to work, and especially when I hear twenty-three high school juniors groan in protest when it is time to stop reading.

**Works Cited**


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