Reflective Essay

Literacy in Middle and Secondary Grades

Jacob Newton

University of Alaska Southeast

Abstract:

A reflective essay by definition is a writing that examines and observes the progress of the writer's individual experience, but that’s not what you want to hear. This essay will not be an essay at all. It will be my thoughts, feelings and aspirations revolving around literacy in the classroom. I will start where I started the class, just a bit naïve to literacy in the middle and secondary grades. Moving through the process of not understanding the differences between the discipline specific literacy strategies all the way to comprehending how to help students within my discipline unpack difficult texts. I will go over some of the key things that helped me with my own literacy understanding. Finally, by presenting questions I hope to provoke higher levels of thinking for whom ever may read this essay (which isn’t really an essay at all).

Entering the *Literacy in Middle and Secondary Grades* class the first day I felt an extreme amount of fear, anxiety and excitement all at the same time. I was the typical wide-eyed and bushy-tailed graduate student. Eager to learn, yet subconsciously expecting a lecture hall, I was more than pleased when we made it through our first day of instruction. “This is what a classroom atmosphere should feel like!” I thought. Throughout this reflective essay I will explain how in three weeks I went from the naïve substitute teacher I was to the well-informed certified dealer of knowledge that I inspire to be.

Taking a look back at the anticipation guide for this class was very interesting to me. It surprised me that I actually do not waver from my original viewpoints as much as I thought I would. Feeling strongly about reading and writing in all of the disciplines has always been something that I have felt, I just have never dug deep enough into my metacognitive self to examine it. One of the thoughts I did have entering the class was not being sure on teaching students to persist in reading even if the text is boring. My outlook on that has now solidified in believing that it is ok to encourage students to persist. There can also be ways of doing so as to deter the student from reading for the rest of their lives. Identifying with your own struggles as the teacher can show a sense of humility and similarity with the student. This will hopefully encourage the student to persist.

As we began digging into the discipline specific literacy techniques I was, to say the least, lost. I thought that literacy was just knowing how to read and write proficiently and all disciplines were read in the exact same way. Although there are similarities, I soon found out there are many different tools of unpacking literature for every discipline. Reading a science text versus reading a historical text can pose many struggles if you are applying the same tools for the job. If you try to use a hammer to remove a screw, the result is less than desirable (Lee, 2005).

Within the social studies discipline a few of the tactics that we discussed were ones that I have already implemented in a classroom as a substitute teacher. I’m not trying to sound like a know-it-all, but I have actually used some of them. Subconsciously, of course. For example, if would be reading a text to the students in a class I would frequently stop in the middle of the paragraph or even the sentence to explain what I was thinking. Little did I know I was chunking the text into thoughts that I seemed to find important for understanding. What I was not doing, however, was letting the students in on my strategy. In other words, I was not being very metacognitive of what I was doing so I was unable to pass that tool for understanding the text onto the student. In modeling it alone, some students will benefit, but not all of them. Knowing what I know now, I will probably make this a tool that is well known in my classroom and all students will have access to it along with an instruction manual for it (RfU, pg. 196).

All historians have developed this style of reading texts as if they were detectives. Whether that was learned or they are just doing it subconsciously it seems to be a universal tool. As an educator of young future historians, it is important to let the students in on this knowledge. By sharing with them strategies widely used by the professional historical community such as, curators, anthropologists, and Sherlock Holmes we as educators empower the students with a higher level of thinking. Opening their minds to new possibilities of understanding. I believe that is the whole premise behind academic discourse. Creating students that are not afraid to challenge the text and question the source. To be an independent thinker is what creates a well-rounded historian and just all around great member of society.

As an instructor, I will need to recognize that all students have one form of strength for literacy or another. It is my job to decipher what that strength is and help them use it to unpack historical texts. If it is a strength that is not useful in my particular class then it is my job to expand the student’s mental toolbox to contain the right tools for the job. This may take some time with each individual student, but it will really help them in the long run. Not only will it make the student a more effective reader in my class, but it will improve his/her literacy in the social studies disciple for the rest of their life (RfU, 2012).

While working on gathering my materials collection I began to realize some of the other strategies I use as a reader of history. History can also be a very visually stimulating topic. I know its cliché, but a picture really can be worth a thousand words. Sometimes unpacking an image can be just as tricky as a piece of literature. By using the observations and inferences strategy to look at images you create a great model for how historians look at pictures. What do we know about the image by looking at it? What will we hypothesize about it? These are great questions to create a deeper level of thinking about the topic you are investigating. Wow, investigating, what are historians if not investigators?

Along with the images I collected I found some amazing other forms of primary sources to incorporate into a lesson. Speeches can really be powerful especially when written by some of the most influential orators of our history. When looking at a speech we can really ask ourselves, what did they mean by that? What was happening at that time to influence those words? Speeches can be inspirational and controversial. It can open up great discussion and possibly even debate. I personally really enjoy conversations that come up from things that were said in a distant history which require great interpretation and clarification of meaning. As a social studies teacher I truly believe that primary source documents can help supplement the text book and spark interest in students who may otherwise be uninterested.

One of the instructional routines that I really enjoyed was the artifact share routine. This was probably one of the most engaging routines of all for me. I feel that I could expand on this lesson by use of artifacts specific to a time in which I am teaching to broaden their horizons on the topic. By using the observations/inferences routine in tandem with the artifact share, you can create a whole dialog of interacting between the students, the lesson and the time and place in history you are wanting their minds go. These hands-on style activities can spark a real passion for history in most students. Breaking away from the mundane regurgitation of facts from a textbook to a test can be very liberating for both the student and the teacher.

As I move into the world of education and become a dealer of knowledge I ask myself; is what I’m dealing the right stuff? How can I make sure that the students think for themselves all while gaining a deeper understanding of the content I present them? I would also like to know how to balance the classroom structure. How much freedom on projects, papers or assignments do you give to the students? When is it ok to hold them to a rigorous structure? I know that this journey will be a long and exciting one. All of my aspirations are placed on the students’ education and shaping young people to become honest, hardworking, good members of society. We should always have questions. That’s what makes us human beings. That is what makes us alive. If we are not learning we’re dead. I just hope that I can live up to my own expectations.

References

Lee, Carol D., (2005) *Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolecent Literacy*.

Schoenbach, Ruth., Greenleaf, Cynthia., & Murphy, Lynn. (2012) *Reading for Understanding*.