Disabling Assumptions

“What Do You Know That We Don’t?": Foregrounding Other Literacies in Class Discussions

What would it look like if students could be leaders and experts in the classroom—if they could set the agenda, lead a discussion, or teach each other what they know? What follows is one modest alteration to business-as-usual, a slight shift in what abilities are foregrounded in an English class. This change subtly alters assumptions about what learning is, what literacies exist beyond reading and writing, and who can learn from whom.

Students are used to being asked to develop their literacy skills in reading and writing. They read books, keep reading logs, get quizzed on plot developments and themes, and get tested on their comprehension on standardized tests. They also write—in class and for homework. If they’re lucky, they get to write in a variety of genres and for a variety of audiences. But it’s safe to say that to prepare for standardized tests, students today get much practice constructing a thesis and supporting it with specific details. In short, certain (limited?) views of reading and writing literacies are front and center in many ELA classes these days. What’s more, those students good at reading and writing are typically well known for these skills within their classroom society and may be seen as the “smart” students. Also known, perhaps, are those students who are not so good at those particular literacies and may have their intelligence judged—falsely—based on their perceived ability to read and write conventional texts.

This system of categorizing students, whether formal or informal, is not good for anybody. Students with language-based learning disabilities might be especially disrespected in this system. And students good at typical reading/writing tasks might not learn to explore other literacies. However, students who may or may not be stars interpreting canonical texts might have other sophisticated skills. And those students who can ace typical reading and writing assignments might enjoy the challenge of further developing a literacy not as relentlessly practiced in class and tested. Here’s a way to scope out other literacies important to learning and critical thinking today.

Using American Born Chinese to Reveal Students’ Hidden Expertise

Recently I taught Gene Luen Yang’s prize-winning graphic novel, American Born Chinese. As anyone familiar with graphic novels knows, and as those unfamiliar with them soon learn, graphic novels require a certain level of visual literacy and background in that genre’s conventions in order to get the most out of these texts—or even to follow their plots. Different genres have different conventions, and the more readers know about the various literacies involved in reading/watching/listening to these genres, the more those readers can understand, interpret, evaluate, and analyze them.

It’s common knowledge that paying attention to stage directions is critical to understanding Tennessee Williams’s plays. In reading Shakespeare, it helps to know something about which characters get to speak in blank verse and which ones in prose. It also helps to know what Exeunt, Aside, and Alarum mean. Similarly, in reading graphic novels, it’s important to know in what order to read speech balloons (or bubbles). An experienced reader of this genre will also know that differences in how the speech balloon is drawn will indicate whether a character is speaking to another character, thinking, whispering, yelling, or speaking a foreign language. The first and most obvious strategy, of course, is to take a good look at the art, the visual depiction of the scenes—a critical step I had...
to remind myself to do the first time I read a graphic novel, word-based reader that I am.

One day, after my students had read through *American Born Chinese* at least once, I wanted to tap into the expertise of students I suspected had more experience than others in reading this genre. I asked, “Who has read at least two graphic novels before we started this one? Please raise your hands.” As luck would have it, there were about seven students in this class of 30 who had. I handed out orange index cards to those students whose hands were up. Then I said, “Please jot down on your card some lesser-known graphic novel conventions that we haven’t talked about yet—some important tips for reading this genre. What do you know that we don’t?” I gave white cards to everyone else and asked them to also write down conventions they knew, or had recently learned, or some frustrations they had with reading graphic novels. I gave them all about three minutes to write on the cards.

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While everyone was writing, I quickly went around the room and put three or four nearby students—the newbies to graphic novels—into a group with an “expert,” someone with an orange card. Then I explained: “For the next ten minutes or so, those of you with the orange cards are the experts in your group on graphic novels. Using *American Born Chinese*, please point out several graphic novel conventions, traditions, or terms you think some people might not know at first.” I also encouraged everyone to share what they knew or to discuss their experience reading this genre. After about ten minutes, I asked the “expert” in each group to explain to the larger class the lesser-known convention they shared with their small group.

Students were free to “pass” if they had nothing to add. But most group leaders/experts had already practiced their explanation with their small group and were eager to teach. (Readers who want deeper analysis of *American Born Chinese* should explore the references in Further Reading.)

These were lively discussions, both within the small groups and afterwards. The “expert” graphic novel readers in the class taught us more about point of view, “bleeds,” cinematic terms like “long shot,” “medium shot,” and “head shot.” They taught us about “graphic weight,” “motion strokes,” and how reading manga differs from reading American comics. This student-expert activity challenged the assumption that the teacher holds all knowledge about the text and is the only one qualified to show students how to read it. This activity also challenges the assumption that word-based literacies are the only ones that matter in English classes or in the world. To read a graphic novel with any kind of sophisticated understanding requires attention to facial expressions, to placement of figures, to perspective, to spatial relations, to intertextuality and cultural allusions, and to time-honored graphic novel traditions.

I learned from my students during this activity and told them so. The students who got to showcase their expertise in reading this genre were a mix of those who frequently contributed to class and those who rarely did so, those who were good writers, and those who were not. But when teachers ask for input on different areas of expertise, they will hear a variety of voices, and everyone can see that there are different ways to be smart.

**Multiple Literacies and Disabling Assumptions**

Why write about these multiple literacies in a column devoted to challenging assumptions about disability? To be regarded as a “good student” who is “smart in school,” most people need only be good at reading print-based texts and writing about them occasionally. Some language-related disabilities are measured partly through a person’s ability to read and write about word-based texts. While speaking and listening skills get some attention in standards lists, it’s still possible for many students to get their good grades without ever speaking much in class or developing excellent listening skills. And while visual literacy is beginning to get the attention and respect it deserves, students with advanced skills in this area may still not be recognized for this intelligence, assuming their teachers seek it out. If students see only one version of intelligence that’s rewarded...
in school, they may internalize harmful views of themselves if they don’t conform to that definition. And those already good at conventional reading and writing may not push themselves to develop in other areas if they see no need to do so in order to succeed.

Small changes to the questions we pose, the activities we arrange, and the tasks we ask students to do can provide opportunities for more students to show what they know and what they can do. And we all learn. 

Further Reading

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