

Going with the Flow:

Motivational lessons for boys' literacy and learning

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

***Reading don't fix no Chevys, &
Going with the flow, Heinemann***

***Engaging readers and writers
with inquiry, Scholastic***

Introduction

- **Nikolai's story**: the importance of competence to risk-taking and learning
- **Drake's story**: the importance of immediate functionality

Method

I. Participants:

49 boys, 12 from three schools and 13 from a fourth, varied in terms of grade and track.

- A. Private boys' academy in Mid-Atlantic state
- B. Rural school in ME
- C. Regional suburban high school in New Jersey
- D. Urban School in New Jersey

II. Four kinds of interviews

- A. Activity Rankings
- B. Profiles
- C. Reading log
- D. Shadowing inside and outside of school

III. Four protocols (2x2 matrix)

- A. Landscape of action: male narrator/protagonist
- B. Landscape of action: female narrator/protagonist
- C. Landscape of consciousness: male narrator/protagonist
- D. Landscape of consciousness: female narrator/protagonist

ANDRE

Andre is a 16 year old junior in high school. Occasionally, Andre feels overwhelmed by family pressures. However, reading puts his mind at ease. When Andre reads a book, his mind is completely absorbed by the characters and the story.

His passion for reading developed at the age of 6 from reading Bible parables in church. Whenever his Sunday School teacher needed someone to read, Andre was always the first to volunteer. Instead of spending free time playing sports or video games, Andre chooses to go to the library three days a week so he can browse through the latest best sellers. Consequently he is not as popular as the rest of the boys at school are, but his grades and SAT scores are significantly higher than average.

After hearing a librarian speak at the city's annual career day, Andre is considering a career as a librarian or teacher.

Question What do you admire or admire most about this student and why do you admire this? What do you not admire or admire the least?

Thought Experiment

Think of something you really love to do; something you would be doing right now (instead of this!) if you possibly could be .

QUESTION

What are the characteristics of that activity that make you love it?

Would you rather?

- that your students communicated electronically with family and friends through email, blogs, chatrooms, MUDs

or

- that they used the Internet to do research for school?

(issue of personal connection, purpose - WHY read and write)

Would you rather?

- that a student be so involved in the life of a character (or historical or mathematical figure) that the student used the character's experience to think with

OR

- that the student became so involved with the author that the student began to try to write and think like the author.

(issue of narrative vs. authorial audience - HOW to read/write and HOW to teach reading and writing)

Would you rather?

- that your students read the newspaper every day
- OR
- a novel once a month
-
- that your students read lots of Animorphs, Sevens or similar series books
- OR
- a very occasional recognized quality text like a Newbery/ALAN award winner?

(issue of WHAT/kinds of texts and materials students should engage with)

Conditions of 'FLOW' experience

- clear **purpose**, **goals**, and **immediate feedback**
- what could be:
 - Make your teaching matter through Inquiry/
problem-orientations, essential questions

Conditions of Flow

- A **challenge** that requires an appropriate level of **skill** and **assistance** to meet the challenge (as needed to be successful)
- What could be:
 - **frontload, sequence** into-through and beyond (topical research to critical inquiry), assist kids through their zones of proximal development, cf. Tharp and Gallimore

Conditions of Flow

- a sense of **control** and **developing competence**: voice, opinion, choice, naming growing competence
- what could be: **think-alouds, drama/ action strategies**; use children's and young adult literature, popular culture materials; track how students are smart and how they improve

Conditions of Flow

- a focus on **immediate experience**: current relevance, make things, do things, immediate function, fun, humor, edginess and debatability and exportability
- John Dewey: *Democracy in Education*
- What could be if we focused on: **fun, choices, student-chosen critical inquiries** based on topical research into enduring understandings

Conditions of Flow

- The **importance of the social**: collaborative group work, peer assistance, social purpose, negotiating and sharing what is learned
- What could be: **collaborative learning**, fulfill the **contract to care** in schools

Thought Experiment #2

Think of something challenging and significant that you have learnt to do.

- How were other people implicated in your learning to do this activity... both distant teachers (authors, practitioners/ models in the world) and close teachers, fellow learners, supporters, et al . . . ?

Implied Social Contract: A teacher should . . .

- try to get to know me personally
- care about me and recognize me as an individual
- attend to my interests in some way (in or outside of class)
- help me learn, and work to make sure I have learned
- be passionate, committed, work hard, and know your stuff

Elements of text sought by the boys

- purposeful
- short; continual signs of progress/accomplishment
- connected, e.g. to current personal and world concerns
- usable structures/navigation - provides control
- the VISUAL - visual supports
- edgy; debatable; authorial reading: agree, disagree, adapt, critique
- exportable
- transactional; active; pattern seeking
- develops demonstrable applicable competence - both conceptual and procedural

Overcoming Habitus

Habitus

the common sense notion that the way things happen to be is just the way things have to be.

If we are going to overcome the habitus of boys, we will have to **overcome our own habitus.**

Barnabus

“

I've been in schools a long time . . . my whole life long
. . . and one thing is clear:

Schools aren't going to change for nobody, no how, no
matter what. That's just how it is. ■

”

Maurice

“

I ain't going to go learning all those adjectives and adverbs and all that crap, you know what I mean. That's just a waste of brain space to me. But that's what they've gotta teach. It's their curriculum and all that.

”

But I ain't going to learn that crap.

Bob

“

School is really REALLY old fashioned.

But I don't blame the teachers.

”

I mean, it's not their fault when they were born.

Question

What kind of curriculum meets these demands?

Answer

Inquiry and Design - a learning centered curricular structure that assists students to operate on curricular material, ask their own questions, solve problems, and create knowledge artifacts and performances that do 'social work'.

See *Engaging readers and writers with inquiry* (Scholastic)

Inquiry is the answer!

- Inquiry naturally meets all the conditions of flow
- Inquiry meets the requirements of the social contract
- Inquiry meets the conditions of the correspondence concept and curricular mandates because inquiry is what organizes disciplines and is what expert practitioners do

Worries about standardized assessments (and curricula)

- exacerbates habitus of decontextualized, information-transmission teaching
- misdirects attention away from the specific human beings we teach
- focuses on a supposed future instead of the challenges and pleasures of the present
- impoverishes the definition of a highly qualified teacher

Personal knowledge of teachers

- knowledge of the subject
- knowledge of materials and programs
- general pedagogical knowledge
- ***pedagogical content knowledge*** –
 - knowing HOW to teach HOW to do a discipline
 - how to teach particular students to use specific concepts and strategies in real disciplinary situations

Personal knowledge of teachers

- knowledge of students, including caring & communicating caring
- knowledge of educational settings, learning contexts, & their effects
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes, values, uses, applications

(Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Shulman, 1986,1987; Grossman, 1990)

Worries about minority or marginalized students

- If **your home literacies** are not privileged, you lack resources for success; if these literacies are marginalized, you are in a double bind.
- **Bridging** (Delpit, Lee, Mahari, Morrell) - use home literacies and popular culture texts to bridge to conventional literacies.
- **Expansions** (June Jordan, Michelle Foster) - expand the literacies and texts that count.
- **Inquire** directly into issues of race and or literacy (Michelle Fine).
- **Choice** - the more alienated you are from school, the more you need to be able to exercise choice and stake your identity through your work.

Data & techniques presented available in . . .

Reading don't fix no Chevys: The literate lives of young men.

Smith and Wilhelm, Russell Award for Distinguished
Research in English/Language Arts Education,
Heinemann, 2003.

- *Going with the Flow: Making school literacy more like life,*
Smith and Wilhelm, Heinemann, 2006.
- *Engaging readers and writers with inquiry,* Wilhelm,
Scholastic, 2007.

Essential Questions

- What makes a snake dangerous?
- What are the most amazing insect adaptations (how do creatures adapt to their environment)?

- What makes the best home?
- What makes the most vile villain?

- What makes the most memorable artwork?
- Who are the ten greatest modern bands?

- What makes a hero?
- What are the ten strangest medical conditions?
- What makes a great love poem?

Flow and problem-based play

- Vygotsky: “A child in play is always a head taller than herself.”
- Our informants were much more hip to current learning theory and research in cognitive science than the schools they attended.
- Yet everything they needed to engage and assist them is in our power to provide.

Clear purpose and feedback

- Learning as **identity work**: projective identity
- Affinity group principle: **insider identity**

- **Self-knowledge**: learn about self as you learn about domain
- **Correspondence conception**
- **Situated meaning**

- **Functionality**: higher purposes and payoffs
- **Extended engagement**
- **Visible signs of accomplishment**

- **Achievement Principle**: Continuous and multiple forms of feedback about self and pursuit

Appropriate Challenge/Assistance

- Probing principle/ environmental assistance
- Naming improvement/ visible signs
- Psychosocial moratorium: Risk-taking and failure as part of learning
- Multiple modal principle and multiple routes
- Concentrated samples: Foundational principles
- Subset principle: of real domain and practices
- Incremental principle/ sequencing: Learn the rules/genre conventions of game
- Material intelligence: stored in objects and tools
- Challenge to current conceptions /cultural models (edginess)

Competence and control

Insider principle: Co-producer of game/ knowledge

- Discovery principle: figure it out versus being told
- Regime of competence: operate on edge of ZPD
- Amplification of Input: Toolishness
- Multiple modalities/multiple routes
- Meaningful iterations: Practice, practice, practice and insured success (and practice is not boring)
- Intuitive expertise: tacit knowledge built over time
- Transfer principle
- Explicit help: On demand, just in time, . . .
- Intuitive knowledge principle

Importance of the immediate

- Active/ critical learning principle
- Design principle: appreciation of design, knowledge structures
- Embodied experience principle: knowledge is lived through physically and mentally
- Mindfulness: wide-awake experience of immersion
- Intrinsic rewards in context of the game
- Committed learning principle: Total and extended engagement eg. loss of self and sense of time

Importance of the social

- Assistance from multiple others in context of use.
- Affinity group principle: shared endeavors and knowledge eg. communities of practice.
- Semiotic domains principle: participating in use of semiotic tools.
- Dispersed knowledge: share with others.
- Distributed expertise: across learners, objects, tools, symbols, technologies, environs.

Themes from the conference

- central role and awesome power of the teacher
- primary challenge of motivation

- learning from critical incidents
- teaching for understanding - the importance of inquiry

- standards vs. standardization
- concept vs. content

- time for teacher reflection - assistance to teachers over time

Themes

- teach kids at their current state of being
- democracy as conversation

The politics of literacy:

Working through and around the politics (when there is no front door, find a side door)

Our limits are the limits our energy and imagination

Worries about the politics

What can we do?

- **Redefine literacy**

as use and critique of varied semiotic tools

- **Teach processes**

help them learn HOW to do things, develop competence, apply for function . . . situated learning

- **Use sequences**

develop interest and competence over time by building on existing interests/abilities

So what?

- **Use technology**

use technologies/arts to do work . . .

create knowledge artifacts and represent understandings

- **Read different kinds of texts**

lots of short pieces . . . choice in school really isn't choice . . .

read realistic fiction (Newkirk), nonfiction (Carter and Abrahamson), imaginative fiction, how-to (Mahari), electronic texts, popular culture texts (Wilhelm) . . .

close the gap between school and home literacies

What now?

- Talk back to authors

talk back to authors around contact zones, debatable and highly conflicted issues

- Change curricula

re-organize around inquiry themes and future concerns; create useful knowledge artifacts

- Change schools

provide more and different roles; ways of belonging; of being literate; of being human

What now?

- **Change contexts**

organize learning around problem-orientation, contact zones,
design context - read to do or make something - write to
communicate and solve problems

- **Change boys/ Critical theory orientations?**

meet them where they are, but help push them to be more diverse,
respectful; to take on more satisfying, respectful ways of being