Personal & Culturally Relevant Reading in the Era of the CCSS

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Personal & Cultural Connections to a Text

This past January a group of New York City master teachers and their interns were invited to collaborate with the Institute for Learning (IFL) through Blue Engine, an organization that partners with high schools in New York City. Blue Engine’s goal is to help teachers provide high-quality instruction and increase the percentage of low-income minority students who graduate both high school and college (http://blueengine.org/). We worked together over a number of one day meetings with the goal of developing cognitively challenging tasks for worthwhile texts that would interest high school students. Through our collaborative work with these teachers, we rediscovered the importance of inviting students to move between the text and their personal and cultural experiences.

During one particular meeting, we worked with Judith Ortiz Cofer’s non-fiction essay, "The Looking Glass Shame." In her essay, Ortiz Cofer focuses on a phenomenon familiar to adolescents who live "simultaneously in two cultures." She names this "cultural schizophrenia" and allows us to see her caught in the contrary instincts between Latino and Anglo, between her mixed familial and personal expectations, and her infatuation with an Anglo boy.

At the onset of the workshop we set a course for ourselves to work closely with the CCSS and to write sequences of questions keyed to multiple reading, writing, and speaking and listening standards to support students to dig deeper and deeper into Ortiz Cofer’s complex ideas. This is work that responds directly to the key shifts noted in the CCSS – to create a sequence of questions that ask students to use textual evidence to support statements about the text after careful, close readings. We began by writing questions to prompt comprehension in order to give students opportunities to demonstrate that they understood the gist of Ortiz Cofer’s ideas and arguments before moving to more complex tasks.

However, a small group of master teachers began in a different vein. They began by writing questions that invited students to make personal and cultural connections to Ortiz Cofer’s text and to her experiences living in two cultures. Like Ortiz Cofer, the teachers are Latino and so are most of their students. Their students experience the tension of living between two cultures and the teachers recognized the importance of allowing their students to discuss the connections they had to the text. These
personal and cultural questions were meant to be woven into the comprehension work and to lay the groundwork for the analysis and inferential assignments that students would later do. The first of their questions invited students to use what they saw as key moments in Ortiz Cofer’s essay as a springboard to tell their stories about living in two cultures. The second invited students to reference Cofer’s definition of cultural schizophrenia to think about a time when they experienced this feeling of cultural schizophrenia.

**Moving Between the Personal/Cultural & the Text**

As we all know by now, the CCSS marginalizes personal and cultural academic work in favor of a particular type of close reading that focuses readers only on the texts before them. (Anyone remember David Coleman’s famous comment to NY educators: “No one gives a s**t about what you think or feel”?) When we displayed the group’s personal and cultural questions for whole group discussion, we began a conversation about the teachers’ convictions around students’ needs to make personal and cultural connections to texts while digging into challenging comprehension as the groundwork for further analysis and interpretation tasks. We talked about how such invitations for personal and cultural responses stood in opposition to the CCSS, which at times seems rigid in its implied requests that students keep their thinking within the four corners of the text. However, once we dug into responses to those two questions ourselves, we changed our minds about these questions being in opposition to standards based work. We realized that to tell our stories about living in two cultures, we explicitly referred to Ortiz Cofer’s stories in the text. We said things such as, “Ortiz Cofer’s experience with her parents’ push and pull between Latino and Anglo cultures, reminds me of my grandmother who lived with us and the ways she always argued with my mother about us kids speaking Spanish.” Each of us drew on evidence from Ortiz Cofer’s text to support a kind of cross-textual analysis with our own personal story. Everyone could apply the idea of living in two cultures simultaneously no matter their race or background. That’s at least partly possible because we all occupy multiple identities that are rooted in multiple cultures.

The same movement back-and-forth between our understandings of the text and our experiences emerged when we talked about cultural schizophrenia. We all experience some form of it living in America. We all felt torn in one way or another between such things as ethnic cultural practices and Anglo rituals, between being parents and being teachers, or between being liberal on some issues and conservative on others. Our comprehension emerged as a give-and-take with the text and our personal/cultural connections to it.

To explain our personal and cultural experiences, we referred to Ortiz Cofer’s in her text. We wove her writing and thinking into ours. We explained the connections. We made claims about her thinking and ours. We argued nuanced similarities and
differences. By discussing Ortiz Cofer's essay through the lens of personal and cultural experience, we moved outside of the four corners of the text at the same time as we moved deeper into comprehension of the text. In other words, we sharpened our understanding of Ortiz Cofer’s ideas by explaining our own experiences in relation to them.

**Explicating the Personal/Cultural & the Textual**

The workshop experience that day in New York City brought me (Tony) back to an essay that I wrote in 1982 called "From Story to Essay". It argues for engaging readers in personal and cultural responses as an integral aspect of working with texts, so that we come to understand how our backgrounds shape our understandings. The essay claims, from a body of research on reading, that “this process of writing in response to reading is heavily subjective, and, as such, depends on the reader’s models of reality, the text, and the context in which it occurs.” We bring our histories with us as we engage with text; it’s impossible not to. By explaining how our histories mesh with the text and the author’s ideas, we begin to understand ourselves as readers and writers, and, equally important, we begin to reveal “the myriad aspects of texts.” We do the cognitive lifting valued by the CCSS through explaining connections, making claims, and substantiating arguments with both textual and personal/cultural evidence.

After this workshop, it seemed to us that the CCSS insistence on only part of the reading/writing equation—the close reading of only the text—has taken us down a path we should revisit. While no one would want to argue that students’ explications of complex texts in evidence-based talk and writing shouldn’t be central to academic work, what’s less clear is what we lose when we neglect to invite students to do equally rigorous talking and writing about their personal experiences and cultural perspectives in relation to the texts they study. When that talk and writing requires the same evidence-based explaining and arguing so valued in textual explications, it’s difficult to imagine that we couldn’t help students see that evidence-based personal and cultural explanations are rhetorically and cognitively similar to evidence-based textual explanations and arguments.

As Maisha T. Winn and Latrise P. Johnson, authors of Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom, put it,

Culturally relevant writing pedagogy invites the voices of students and creates a space for them to take on issues that reflect their cultural, social, and personal experiences. It humanizes, respects, and considers the histories, perspectives,

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and experiences of students as an essential part of the subject matter, classroom practices, and content....Culturally relevant writing pedagogy legitimizes students' voices, knowledge, and experiences as official content of their class curriculum (p.22).

Our argument is that both the explications of the personal/cultural associations prompted by texts and the explications of the ideas and structures "in the text" offer students occasions to make their reasoning visible through their development of descriptions, explanations, claims, and arguments.