Layering language and novel study deepens adolescent learning

A teacher provides multiple pathways for students’ literacy learning.

Jane M. Saunders

There was noise and laughter coming from Sarah Matthews’ middle school classroom, a common experience, as students huddled in small groups to write scripts for a role-playing activity about a value word they had drawn from a bag. Their task was to produce and perform skits that represented the value without giving away the actual word, because the values were from a list that Sarah and her class had studied for the past several days. Examples from this list were: tolerance, cooperation, responsibility, integrity, conservation, compassion, wisdom, and imagination. The group in the front of the room was pretending to have just found a dog, and student-actors were frantically “knocking on doors” and asking neighbors if they could direct them to the dog’s owner. A later group surveyed the room, picking up trash and placing it in recycling bins. The former exemplified responsibility and integrity; the latter represented conservation.

This activity was directly linked to the students’ study of Richard Peck’s (2001) book *A Year Down Yonder* and was a launch pad for several other writing events that would occur as the unit unfolded. Prior to the role-playing activity, Sarah had students consider what they valued, asking them to write short pieces that answered the following questions: Which five (value) words describe you best? Which five words would you like people to think about you? Which five words are most important to you? Students wrote briefly to address the questions and awaited informal feedback from their peers. Because many of her seventh grade students had known each other their entire schooling career, they openly disagreed with one another’s choices and argued like siblings. How students built on these brief activities is elaborated later in this article; I use these examples first as an entry point into Sarah’s pedagogical practice, one that fostered a language-rich environment of collaboration in the middle school classroom.

I spent several weeks collecting data in Sarah’s classroom during the spring 2010 semester. This was significant because, in Texas, where most of my research took place, spring means one thing: test preparation. Her students were not exempt from this, and they sat for both reading and writing tests during the spring semester. Pineland Middle School, situated in a small town in East Texas, was culturally and linguistically diverse. At the time of my study, 62% of its population was either African American or Latino students and roughly 70% relied on free or reduced-price lunch. An experienced and passionate teacher, Sarah had taught for 27 years. Seventeen years were spent in nearby school districts, and in 2000 she transferred to Pineland, where her own children attended school.

Perhaps because of her years of experience, Sarah had felt less pressure regarding testing. She told me, “I incorporate the standards throughout the year and other than some last-minute reminders about how to approach the test, I let it take care of itself” (S. Mathews, personal communication, June 25, 2010). Sarah worried about scope and sequence documents provided by the district, which seemed to her to offer few opportunities...
for re-teaching or deeper study of literature as it connected to writing. While she strove to stay within the scope and sequence in terms of ordering the skills she taught, her planning was tied less to the prepared materials included in the curriculum guides and more from her vast collection of activities, enrichment books, and ideas drawn from trial and error experience and from conferences she had attended over the past three decades.

Sarah worked with both grade level and pre-AP students, but visitors to her class found little difference in terms of how she related to each group of students or in the manner in which she taught. From my standpoint, as a professor in the field of literacy education, I was intrigued by her capacity to generate multiple pathways toward understanding and to foster a space for self-efficacy to grow within students regarding their literacy learning (Alvermann, 2005). The original questions guiding this study were: How does Sarah position her students in the environment of her classroom, particularly in terms of power and agency? In what manner are students developing as critical consumers of text and writing as a result of their experiences? What pedagogical practices enhance learning for adolescent learners?

**Multiplying pathways**

Sarah chose the book *A Year Down Yonder* as an anchor text for a unit exploring several features of writing: idiom, figurative language, mood, and oral history. She told me that, while the text was written at a fourth grade level according to the Accelerated Reader program the school employed, she had selected the novel purposefully for its rich use of language. Sarah’s expectation was that students could quickly read the book and then focus more on its features and, in particular, its use of idiom, which I explore in greater depth later in the article.

Because *A Year Down Yonder* was set during the Great Depression and dealt with values and social mores, Sarah considered how to use these themes to help students bridge the gap in time and make the story relevant to their lives. Her plan involved the use of multiple historical and personal resources, both written and oral. To familiarize students with the time period, Sarah drew on varied texts, a practice supported by the research as a means of providing rigor and intellectually demanding work for students in the literacy classroom (Luke & Elkins, 2000). This exposure to multiple perspectives and multimedia is increasingly necessary, given the burgeoning amounts of information available to students today, both in terms of traditional media (e.g., books, magazines, film, television, news) and online sources. Sarah always endeavored to guide her students as they learned to “read their world” (Freire, 2005), to ensure they would be multi-literate and capable of critically examining multiple texts as a life skill.

Among the selections were copies of photographs by Dorothea Lange and video footage about The Great Depression drawn from United Streaming’s “History in Focus” library (Discovery Education, 2010). Working in small groups, students used the photographs to draw conclusions about the people and events featured, answering questions such as: What is happening in this picture? What problems or frustrations are suggested by this image? What is unique about this image that the photographer wanted to capture? While watching Depression era videos, students took notes and captured definitions from a list of terms Sarah provided. Among these were: New Deal, soup kitchen, Black Tuesday, Okies, Civilian Conservation Corporation. In addition to Lange’s photographs, Sarah included a family photo of her own grandmother, great-aunts and uncles, and great-
grandfather standing on the porch of a house in June of 1939, near the same year as the setting of *A Year Down Yonder*. There was paint peeling on the house, and several of the men were wearing overalls. Taken the day that her grandmother’s mother died, there were no smiles in the picture. Absent this contextual knowledge, students evaluated the photograph using the same questions noted above. Later, Sarah explained that this was a family portrait and that her grandparents, both “Okies,” survived the Depression and Dust Bowl in Oklahoma and lived for a short time in California during World War II.

By requiring students to draw on both written and spoken textual resources, Sarah … was helping students hone research skills that would be transferable to other classes.

Coupled with the study of values described earlier in this piece, this introduction to *A Year Down Yonder* provided the foundation for a closer examination of the language skills Sarah was hoping to cultivate in her students. By making the distant era more accessible for students through the use of multiple texts and personalizing the period through their teacher’s family experiences, students were prepared to connect the texts to their own lived experiences. To make this manifest, Sarah assigned two pieces of writing. One was for students to develop their earlier value paragraphs into fully developed papers; the other was to consider more deeply their own value system as well as the values embraced by other students’ families.

She asked students to interview an older family or community member about his or her life to gain this information. Sarah explained to me that, at the beginning of the year, she had told students, “I am going to ask you to do a lot of things that are challenging this year, both in terms of complexity and in the demands on your time” (S. Mathews, interview, May 5, 2010). This was one of those instances, and students worried about the project. Although many spent time with grandparents and visited with older community members socially at places like church or sports events, they rarely sat down and talked with them about their lives. Sarah helped guide their questions, offering ideas like querying elders about how the world was different when they were growing up, what they did for entertainment when they were kids, and what values they embraced and why. She recommended that students ask interview participants for advice about the future.

Jordan, who ranked courage, patience, creativity, power, and humor as his top five values, was intrigued by his grandfather’s focus on honesty. He wrote, “He believes in honesty because you never have to worry about anything bad and you will have a good reputation.” Jordan’s grandfather also advised him to be honest and trustworthy and to get his education. While Jordan acknowledged that these were important qualities in a person, he did not choose to rank them himself because “Of course you have to be honest!”

Angela’s values closely aligned with those of her grandmother, whose parents both died when she was twelve, and she was expected to “take care of herself so her older siblings wouldn’t have to worry about her.” She later got licensed to work as a hair stylist and was financially self-sufficient when she met Angela’s grandfather in the beauty salon where she worked. Angela ranked self-confidence, responsibility, and courage as some of her most important values and offered as an example her experiences babysitting her younger brothers.

It seemed clear in each of these cases that students’ values were informed and shaped, to some degree, by those of their elders, even though they were initially shy about the interviewing process. By inviting these stories into the classroom, Sarah was able to draw from the well of “literacy engagements [that are] informed by the students’ own experiences and identities,” (Campano, 2007, p. 41), thus positioning students as active participants in their educational journeys. By providing multiple pathways to the historical events described in *A Year Down Yonder* and by requiring students to draw on both written and spoken textual resources, Sarah also was helping students hone research skills that would be transferable to other classes.

**Assembling the idiom quilt**

I was intrigued to discover that Sarah had chosen *A Year Down Yonder* for purposes other than its link to students’ histories and its potential to engage them in personal
writing. She was also drawn to the text because of its extensive use of idiom—a literary device with which many of her students struggled. Sarah acknowledged two reasons for this: “One, many of the idioms used in A Year Down Yonder have disappeared from use in today’s world. Students don’t know what they mean, and yet they make appearances in books and, additionally, on our state-mandated tests” (S. Mathews, interview, May 5, 2010). The second reason was Sarah’s concern for students, many of whom were English language learners. Though many had mastered English in their speaking and writing, many still grappled with turns of phrase with idiomatic roots. As an example, she offered idioms she has seen from released state-administered exams.

They’ve used the phrases, “putting out a forest fire with a garden hose,” the “human cost,” and “smile that betrayed his words” in past tests. When I ask my students what these mean, many are confused and want to translate them literally instead of seeing them metaphorically. (S. Mathews, interview, May 5, 2010)

An additional concern was that students might also struggle to understand figurative language used continuously in texts represented in written, spoken, or visual forms. If students could not determine the differences between literal and figurative language, Sarah worried they would not feel prepared for high school and beyond.

To ameliorate this, Sarah asked students to identify phrases that seemed archaic or were unfamiliar to them in the A Year Down Yonder, like “wet your whistle,” “lost some steam,” the “fork in the road,” and “near the end of my rope.” Again using examples from her own life, Sarah explained how she used to hear “Get to your lessons” when her grandmother babysat her after school. She elaborated:

When my grandmother was in school, everything was tied to the textbook and their assignments occurred one after another, following the order of the book. We have a lot more fun now in school, I think, since we have so many more choices about what to do. But, when Grandma heard me say the word *homework* she translated this to the word *lessons* since it was familiar to her and that’s how her textbooks were organized. (S. Mathews, interview, May 5, 2010)

Students discussed the literal translation of several idioms and then considered more figurative translations. After students had collected idioms throughout the book, Sarah told the class they were going to create an idiom quilt. Students selected four different idioms they wanted to represent on a piece of colored construction paper. They divided the paper into four parts and drew “quilt seams” to mark off each section of their panels. For each section, students used an idiom in a complete sentence and offered enough details to make it clear from the context what the idiom implied. Sarah used a model from a previous student to demonstrate: “I got soaked to the bone waiting for the bus because it was raining cats and dogs” (J. Saunders, observation, January 27, 2010). In addition to the sentence, each section of the quilt’s panels included a drawing—what Sarah described as “the funny part,” in which students tried to outdo one another in terms of creativity. The model she showed to the class had a girl standing in a downpour of cats and dogs raining down all around her. While the picture represented a literal translation of the sentence, it was clear the student understood the metaphorical meaning as well. As students completed their work, a whole wall in Sarah’s classroom became a homage to idiomatic language, represented by more than 60 quilt panels stitched into a larger piece of art.

**Examining mood**

One of the reading tasks associated with the students’ study of A Year Down Yonder was to examine how figurative language (idiom and otherwise) helped shape the characters’ development. Building on this, Sarah began a study of how mood and setting influence plot. Students engaged in several activities to help expand their understanding of mood, including the examination of mood words present in the novel. Sarah then asked students to construct what she called “balloon mood stories,” which students wrote in groups. Directions for this short project called for each student to begin writing a story about a character and one day of his or her life. Students wrote for three minutes describing events that occurred involving their characters and the characters’ reactions to these events. After the first three minutes, each student passed his or her paper to another group member, who picked up where the story left off; the only catch was that the second student needed to shift the mood while keeping the character and the plotline intact. After several rotations, the paper was returned to the original author, who then went through the story
and assigned a mood word in the margins of the text for each rotation. Authors made subtle changes to maintain continuity and meaning in their stories and created an ending consistent with the plot.

Angela's story involved a volleyball player named Julie who was doomed to sit on the bench because of her incapacity to play the game well. When the best player on the team was hurt during a game, Julie was called on to play. The story shifted here, with Julie scoring a point. The mood assignments labeled next to these lines of text showed the progression of Julie's thinking from “shocked” and “anxious” to “courageous” and “pleased.” As the story continued, the star player intentionally tripped Julie because she now had the spotlight. Angela marked the text “envious” to describe this turn of events. By the end of the story, it became apparent that the star player had broken her ankle and would have to sit out the rest of the volleyball season. As a result, Julie felt vindicated and “excited” about honing her skills in the sport. By using this multi-authored approach, students could use analytical skills to determine mood. In Angela's case, the story, while short, made a full arc in terms of character development and plot; mood shifts woven into the text enhanced its meaning and the reader's understanding.

To reinforce how authors develop mood, Sarah supplemented students’ study with a pairing activity. Each pair was given a baggie filled with a set of pictures and a set of words and was asked to match the two together. One example from the picture set was a family at a sporting event where a boy was wearing large, foam “#1” finger on his hand. Three words that potentially went with this image were “enthusiastic,” “cooperative,” and “glad.” There was another picture with a boy laying his head down on a stack of books with the words “exhausted,” “tired,” and “weary.” There were more words than images, so students ended up with several options for moods depicted by the images. After completing the matching activity, students were given sentences that corresponded with the pictures and mood words. They were asked to match a sentence to a corresponding picture and then narrow their choice of mood words based on this pairing. In the case of the family at the sporting event, a pair of students chose the sentence, “The crowd went wild when the team scored a touchdown.” Revisiting the word choices they had originally paired with the picture, the students selected “enthusiastic” as a more precise description of the image than their other options, “cooperative” and “glad.”

**Layering**

This layering of related activities to reinforce particular skills was one of Sarah’s strengths and one of the reasons I had asked her to participate in a research project with me. Similar to the weaving together of disparate images to create the idiom quilt, Sarah’s students also intertwined their knowledge with one another amid multiple, related literacy events.

Visiting Sarah’s classroom at the end of the school year, I sat down with several students to ask about the progression of their relationship to writing. Students were excited because they had learned that in the two of Sarah’s classes that had taken state-mandated tests, all but two of the students had scored a 3 or 4 (the highest possible scores) on the writing portion—a significant accomplishment. Erica told me that she had no idea how much she loved writing; she only remembered one writing assignment from the year before, a poem, but she had spent so little time on it, she really could not recall the topic. Jeremy liked all of the feedback he had received from classmates on his papers and the times they had played “Park Bench,” a game in which students used improvisation or quick-writes to present an idea or story to the class. When I asked Angela which example of writing from her portfolio was the most intriguing, she pointed to a mystery, “Because it was the first time I ever wrote one.” I asked her which had been the most difficult to write, and she acknowledged, “The values paper, because I never really thought of myself in that way or how my values are based on other people in my life.” I had noticed a trend in Angela’s writing. Courage had surfaced in several pieces, first in her values paper and then in her description of mood from her “bubble mood” story. Perhaps this topic had been on her mind as she made the transition from child to teenager, or perhaps she had been layering it purposely to ensure she would not forget the concept.

**Final thoughts**

I recently reread Smagorinsky’s (2007) *English Journal* piece about Vygotsky and the social dynamics of the classroom, which got me thinking about why I enjoyed myself so much in Pineland. He asserted, “Writing for
the purpose of learning has a playful or experimental dimension” (p. 65), which certainly seemed to be a key feature in Sarah’s classroom and one that yielded noticeable results. Smagorinsky also acknowledged the importance of student interaction to cultivate “generative, constructive, experimental, developmental speech because there is no officially dominant leader” (p. 65) to inhibit student learning.

A confident and knowledgeable teacher … must maintain a willingness to let students grapple with difficult concepts repeatedly and collaboratively until they truly internalize their learning.

When I talk with preservice and practicing teachers in my university courses, I often ask them for their understandings of Vygotsky (1986). A noticeably scripted answer bubbles up repeatedly, which sounds something like, “He is the one who talked about the zone of proximal development—the knowledgeable other scaffolds the learning of another student.” I worry over my students’ common and incomplete understanding of scaffolding. I seek to trouble their notions, which imply an up or down motion—students either get something and they are helping someone else get it, or they do not and they are getting help. I tend to see the zone of proximal development and the use of scaffolding as openings of a series of pathways or passages that lead students to places of understanding. For this circumstance to exist in the literacy classroom, a confident and knowledgeable teacher must layer in multiple ways for students to come to that knowledge, and that teacher must maintain a willingness to let students grapple with difficult concepts repeatedly and collaboratively until they truly internalize their learning. Middle level educators can learn a great deal from examining the practices of experienced teachers like Sarah, who artfully weave a variety of activities in a manner that is recursive without becoming dull or redundant—a necessity for adolescent learners. Just as a quilt is the blending together of individual pieces into an artistic whole, Sarah’s pedagogical practice provided a context through which students stitched together their understandings of text and of their world.

Extensions

The English teacher described in this article provided multiple pathways for her students to comprehend the novel they were reading and to develop their literacy skills. Think about ways this approach might be effective in other content areas. How can teachers in all subjects weave together multiple activities and provide ways for students to learn new knowledge and skills together?

References

Alvermann, D. (2005). Literacy on the edge: How close are we to closing the literacy achievement gap? Voices from the Middle, 13(1), 8–14.

Jane M. Saunders is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas State University-San Marcos. E-mail: js99@txstate.edu