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Independent Reading in the Classroom

Annette Johnson

When I had Nicole as a 7th grader she was reluctant to read. She told me within the first few weeks of the school year that she had never finished a book in her lifetime. She “just didn’t understand what was going on.” Nicole also struggled in other subjects.

Danielle, as a 7th grader, read all the time. I never saw her in class without a book in tow. She was a student who thrived on learning and was always prepared to learn, through her own choice reading, when she finished an assignment.

I had both these girls in one classroom. As the teacher I chose all the reading material and the writing assignments. Sometimes I chose short stories from the textbook, and sometimes I chose novels to read as a class. Often my students wrote about what they read, or I would give a writing assignment where I chose the focus of the paper. I wanted my students to become lifelong readers and writers, but wasn’t sure my assignments were enough to encourage them. I struggled with the choices I made for my students because I was afraid Nicole might not understand a piece or Danielle might be bored with what I had chosen to assess them on. I still struggle to choose material that will stimulate as well as challenge all of my readers and writers.

So often this is the case in the classroom. We have students who have a good grasp on the grammar system, such as Danielle, and others that struggle. We have students who love to read and

others, like Nicole, who have never owned a book of their own. Does it mean that kids like these should be taught according to their learning styles or given different material based on their reading levels? Those may be answers, but what I did instead has become a favorite assignment for my students and was so effective that I have repeated it over and over again.

I had a college class where I was asked to contract for a grade, something that had never been asked of me before. When I signed the contract, I did so reluctantly. I didn’t think I would be able to read 36 young adult books, write a paper for each one, read three professional books, and be able to work on the other classes I had signed up for, but I did. I worked extra hard for my “A” that semester, yet enjoyed every minute of it. I still don’t know why working so hard felt so good, but I decided to give the concept a try in my 7th grade classroom. I have now worked through the kinks of the unit, after using the assignment several times with 7th graders on up to 11th graders.

The Independent Reading Unit uses contract grading, the writing process, vocabulary, journal writing, and has a creative aspect. The idea of contract grading helps students to set and realize goals. The contract I have them sign sets up the entire assignment. I allow each student to contract for a grade of “A,” “B,” or “C” by choosing from the page amount I have set up. They understand ahead of time that simply contracting for a grade

does not mean they will earn that grade. Each must meet all the criteria to be eligible and perform exceptionally in all areas. The contract is simple, and both student and teacher sign it. The criteria are the same for all grades except for the number of pages read. Students know ahead of time how long they have to accomplish this goal, so they plan what they need to do and how they will accomplish it. As a teacher it is refreshing to not dictate due dates, rather listen to students ask questions each day as they sort the assignments out. Students choose what to work on in class and what is homework. Some students don't have a dictionary at home, so these are the ones who need to do their vocabulary assignment in class. Others like the atmosphere of the classroom to use as reading time. The students each take ownership of their learning by prioritizing what they need to accomplish.

Students never engage with a book in the same way, so why should each assignment be the same?

One requirement of the assignment is, for every book read, a "final copy" response paper must be turned in. In this response the student gives an opinion about the social issues in the book, backed up with evidence from the book. These papers not only help me judge the students' reading and comprehension, they also help me look at the books from the students' perceptions. Some students choose to read four small books and write four papers while others choose to read one long book and write just one paper. I have found these two aspects of the assignment go hand in hand. Reluctant readers are often the ones who choose shorter books. Also, they are often the ones who need to strengthen their writing skills, so the extra practice provides wonderful learning experiences for them and a chance for me to have additional contact with them during one-on-one conferencing. They get invaluable time with me without it appearing that I am singling them out for special lessons.

Another area where both the teacher and student benefit is vocabulary. As students read, they jot down words they don't know or can't define, or words they have always had trouble spelling. Each word needs to be defined, the part of speech stated, and written five times each. Ten vocabulary words are due on Friday each week. Often I get the complaint "I can't find any words I don't know the meaning of." My response is always "You are probably reading below your level." Kids are smart. They realize this fact as soon as it is pointed out to them, and we find a book better suited to their level of reading. This small assignment surprised me when I started doing this unit. Knowing the basic reading level of each of my students has been invaluable to me as a teacher. It reminds me to mix up the assessment of my reading assignments when I am the one who chooses the material. I want all my students to engage in the material we read, so I either give choices for writing assignments or assign group work so students learn from one another. Students never engage with a book in the same way, so why should each assignment be the same? If I give them choices they can pick which one they can best succeed with. Having students choose their own vocabulary also teaches them not to be afraid to look up something that is unfamiliar to them. It is a way of allowing them to be researchers. Kids often want answers given to them quickly. We can diffuse this need by demanding more from our students.

I require daily journals in my classroom throughout the school year to ensure my students write daily and to allow them to form opinions about subjects. I continue to assign these daily journals during the Independent Reading Unit, but I have them write at the end of the class, after their reading. I sometimes will give them prompts, but mostly I leave it up to them what to write. I ask the students to write about their reading for the day. Sometimes I give a specific focus, but usually I let them decide what to write. If no reading took place for the student because they worked on a paper or other aspect of the assignment, I ask they write about what they accomplished that day. It keeps

their goals in mind.

The last part of the unit is creative. Students like to keep this assignment for last. I look at it as a type of dessert for them because it is something fun and different. This part of the assignment has changed every time I have done this unit. Sometimes I ask the kids to do a type of oral report about one of their books, using props. Other times I ask them to make a diary or pamphlet that relates to a character in their book. Usually, though, I allow them to choose what they want to do with the assignment. I have had maps made, cartoon books created, papier mache characters made, performances done with musical instruments, and movie posters created. The list is endless, and my classroom seems to come alive with the projects created. Don't get me wrong. Not all kids love this part of the assignment, but most can't remember the last time they got to do something like this for English class. It is a fun outlet and very eye catching for anyone who enters the room. Once, a struggling 11th grade student created a map of Brian's adventure as he saw it unfold in Gary Paulson's *Hatchet*. I was touched. This was the first book Jeff had ever read. He went on to read *The River* and *Brian's Winter* and later read Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jeff gave reading a try, starting with his choices, and learned to trust my choices as a teacher. He also started to care about his grades in his other classes and gained enough credits to graduate the following year. Somehow seeing himself succeed in this aspect helped him to realize he could succeed in other areas too. In his evaluation, he thanked me for helping him with his papers.

At the end of our time together, I ask students to do an evaluation of their teacher and the class. One of the questions I ask is what was their favorite assignment. More than half of my students claim Independent Reading as their top choice. Andrea, a 7th grader, wrote: "I liked the Independent Reading Unit because we set our own goals and it gave us something to work towards for ourselves." Lindsay, a 10th grader, wrote: "In-

dependent Reading was easy and much more fun than bookwork. I read more on my own than I would have if I had been assigned to read. It gave me a chance to read books that I didn't otherwise have time to read. Some of my friends have recommended books they read during the unit so my list has grown."

The Independent Reading Unit is a unit that touches on many aspects of the English curriculum while allowing students to make their own choices. Students often don't realize how hard they are working. They seem to be more engaged when they are in control of the material they read.

Three years after I met Nicole she came to my room to show me a book she received for Christmas. She couldn't wait to finish it because it was about a girl just like her. Danielle continues to push herself and has won two awards for her writing efforts in school. In my eyes, these two students have both succeeded. The payoff from this unit is far better for them and much better for me as well. When I see students reading and writing on their own, I know many of them will continue their efforts for themselves and not because it was something they were assigned.

About the Author

Annette Johnson is a member of MCTE, NCTE, MSRD and is a frequent conference presenter. She teaches English 10, English 11, and Senior Law at Breckenridge High School.

The Gift

Bob Gassen

On May 17, 2000, I entered the back door of Notre Dame High School in Harper Woods, Michigan, holding a paperback copy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although this book was faded and worn, held together with yellowed mending tape, it was in remarkably good condition, considering the service it had given to me. I had first used this book in 1965 as a senior at Notre Dame. Three years later, as an English major, I made use of the critical commentary at the back of the book while I studied Shakespearean tragedies. Then in 1976, I again used the reference works when studying Shakespeare as a graduate student in English. On numerous occasions, I have used this old Signet Classic *Hamlet* when teaching Introduction to Literature at Hutchinson Community College in Kansas. After teaching English for thirty years, I decided to give this book to Mr. Conrad Vachon, my senior English Teacher at Notre Dame. This book, along with a number of others that I had saved from high school, undergraduate work, and graduate study, meant much to me. To some extent, it was symbolic of my scholastic attainments, and I wanted to give this worn copy of *Hamlet*, one of the crowning achievements in the English language, to the man who had introduced me to the power of language.

If a young person is lucky, he becomes involved with the right adult at the right time.

At the end of my junior year, the dean of studies at Notre Dame asked me about my career plans. Although I had no career plans, I told him that I wanted to become a writer. English was one of the only courses in which I had earned a B grade. I enjoyed writing and put occasional effort into it. On the

strength of my remark to the dean and my B's in English, I ended up in one of Mr. Vachon's senior English classes with the smart kids, those who enrolled in fourth-year Latin and calculus and were prepping for colleges such as Brown, Boston College, and Michigan. My only impression of Mr. Vachon prior to my senior year was of a skinny guy with a hooked nose and an almost continual scowl, a no-nonsense teacher who walked quickly through the halls. He reminded me of a rooster wearing black, horn-rimmed glasses.

Conrad Vachon praised me once during my entire senior year of English. Before starting class one morning, he saw Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* on my desk. "You're reading *A Moveable Feast*: I'm impressed, Gassen." That was the only time he was impressed with me. What I didn't mention to Mr. Vachon was that, the day before, I was killing time in study hall, which was located in the library. While doodling in my notebook, I noticed a book with a multicolored dust jacket on one of the shelves and began reading it out of curiosity. Just before the end of the hour, I checked out *A Moveable Feast* and read it all. Hemingway made writing seem like such an adventure that I even wrote some of my essays for Mr. Vachon in a drugstore restaurant to imitate Hemingway's account of writing in restaurants. I didn't know who Hemingway was and had no recollection of reading any of his fiction, but at that time, I was only beginning to really care about anything.

If a young person is lucky, he becomes involved with the right adult at the right time. In my case, I was doubly lucky. As a cross country coach, Mr. Bill Raymond made me believe that mediocrity was my lot in life only if I allowed that to happen.

From him, I learned that if I wanted to excel as a runner, I would have to have the determination to win and put in the requisite hard work. As an English teacher, Mr. Vachon demonstrated what commitment and passion for a profession and a field of study really meant. In Mr. Vachon's classes, we didn't take study halls or discuss any issues not pertinent to the lesson at hand. Under him, we studied the craft of writing—such as formulating a thesis and improving verb density. We read and discussed such works as Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. We memorized John Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud," Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of Year," and Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. I still remember sitting at an old Formica kitchen table writing Donne's "Death, be not proud" sonnet over and over until I had, to use Mr. Vachon's phrase, "committed it to memory." At that time, I had no idea what this poem meant. It could just as well have been written in a foreign language. But what was important then was that I was beginning my apprenticeship in the profession of language. Several years later, I came to appreciate Donne's ingenious Italian sonnet, and a few years after that, I took an entire graduate course entitled Age of Donne. But I had memorized "Death, be not proud" in 1965, and to this day, I can recite it and the other poems that I memorized in Mr. Vachon's class.

As an English teacher, Mr. Vachon demonstrated what commitment and passion for a profession and a field of study really meant.

I'm not suggesting that requiring students to memorize a number of poems and read a voluminous amount of literature is a necessary characteristic of good English teaching. However, Conrad Vachon brought such intense passion and conviction to his teaching that I really didn't mind the work. In fact, years later, when preparing certain works of literature that I previously studied under Mr. Vachon for college classes that I was taking, I would hear his phrases and ideas echoing in my mind. When discussing Joseph Conrad's *Lord*

Jim in a college class, I remembered Conrad Vachon lecturing in the cafeteria while team teaching with Mr. Robert Kelly and Father Richard Cochran. His emphasis that Jim was "one of us" still reverberates in my memory. By the end of my senior year at Notre Dame, I knew that although I had a long way to go, I wanted to teach English like Mr. Vachon.

During the first semester of my freshmen year at college, my mother sent me an article about Mr. Vachon as the new coach of the Notre Dame cross country team. I knew that Coach Raymond had taken a sabbatical to study at Arizona State University and was wondering who would coach cross country. When I read the article, I scoffed at the idea of Conrad Vachon being a coach. I should have known that he would put forth the same passion and commitment to coaching that he put into teaching English. As a student at Notre Dame, I dedicated myself to running. Coincidentally, when I went to college, I channeled that dedication into the study of English, and Conrad Vachon dedicated much of his energy into coaching cross country and track, eventually producing championship teams and nationally renowned runners. Perhaps it is just as well that Mr. Vachon began coaching the year after I left Notre Dame. I don't think that I could have dealt with such intensity both in the classroom and on the track.

As I passed through the gym and began walking down the main hallway, I looked into the room where I had Mr. Vachon for senior English. Further on, I approached a faculty member walking in the opposite direction. "Excuse me, I'm looking for Mr. Vachon." He gave me a solemn look before telling me that Mr. Vachon had recently passed away.

Before leaving, I spoke briefly with the principal, Father John Sajdak, about Mr. Vachon. As I walked out the back door, still holding the book I had intended to give Mr. Vachon, I remembered Horatio's famous line to the dead Hamlet: "Good night, sweet/Prince,/and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

About the Author

Bob Gassen, free-lance writer and frequent contributor of articles to professional journals, teaches composition and literature at Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, Kansas.