WHAT'S YOUR READING HISTORY? REFLECTING ON THE SELF AS READER

Skills and strategies under development

Language Arts
1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
3. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
4. Uses the general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
5. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Life Skills: Working With Others
6. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
7. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Arts and Communication
8. Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings
9. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication
10. Knows a range of arts and communication works from various historical and cultural periods

Overview
What does it mean to be literate? How do our reading experiences shape who we are? In this lesson, students reflect on a formative reading experience and use it as a springboard for tracing their reading lives by creating timelines to reflect past and present experiences. They culminate the personal reading history project through reading, writing and/or discussion.

Materials
Student journals, handouts

Section 1: In-class Activities

1. Warm-Up

1). Tell students you are going to lead them through a guided meditation designed to help them recreate an important reading experience in their memory.

Begin by asking them to close their eyes and put their heads down on their desks. Turn the lights down or off. Read this script, giving them a few moments to reflect after each prompt:

– Today, we're going to take a trip back through your life as a reader. In your mind, put aside the reading you're doing for school and go to a place where you have positive feelings about reading…
– Maybe you are being read to or maybe you are reading yourself …
– Try to settle on a single memory … and dwell in it.
– What book is being read? What does it look like? Feel like? Are the pages thick or thin? Are there pictures? What colors and images stand out? What does it smell like? Where did this book come from? How did you happen upon it? Did someone give it to you? Did you borrow it from the library? If you chose it, what attracted you to it?
– Now, look around. Where are you? Indoors? Outdoors? Cuddled up on a couch or lying in the grass? Are you comfortable? Are you warm or cold?
– How old are you?
– Are you alone or with someone else?
– How do you feel?
– Now listen. Who is reading? A parent? Grandparent? Sibling? Try to remember the voice. Is it quiet or loud? Soft? Animated?
– Or, are you reading to or by yourself? What sounds surround you? Are you aware of any as you read? Do you imagine any as you read?
– What characters do you meet as you become immersed in the world of the book? Are they like you or different?
– Where does the book take you? Is it a real place or an imaginary one? What do you remember about the world of the book?
– How do you feel reading this book?
– How do you feel when it ends?
– Slowly bring yourself back to the present day. What sticks with you still about this reading experience?

Next, turn on the lights and ask students to open their eyes. Then, ask them to open their journals and freewrite about the memory they just experienced, incorporating as much detail as they can recall. If you'd prefer, you can do this exercise with the lights on, having them freewrite as you

guide them through the script. In either case, the point is to write to think – assure students their work here will not be collected or graded.

2). Invite students to share their experiences.

Ask:

– What kind of reading experiences remain etched in your minds?
– Why are reading experiences powerful influences?
– What does it means to be «well read»?
– What reading experiences are considered seminal for educated people? Why?
– What does it mean to be literate?
– What is cultural literacy? Information literacy?
– What other kinds of literacies are there?

2. Reading and discussion: In her essay «I Was a Teenage Illiterate», novelist Cathleen Schine discusses how she found herself «illiterate» at 26 and explores the reading experiences that shaped her.

I Was a Teenage Illiterate

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/books/review/Schine-t.html?gwh=305C33F55FFE2ECE0E1F8B833FF954A4

By CATHLEEN SCHINE

Published: February 26, 2010

At the age of 26, when I returned to New York after an inglorious stab at graduate work in medieval history on the frozen steppes of Chicago, I had a horrifying realization: I was illiterate. At least, I was as close to illiterate as a person with over 20 years of education could possibly be. In my stunted career as a scholar, I'd read promissory notes, papal bulls and guidelines for Inquisitorial interrogation. Dante, too. Boccaccio. . . . But after 1400? Nihil. I felt very, very stupid among my new sophisticated New York friends. I seemed very, very stupid, too. Actually, let's face it, I was stupid, and it was deeply mortifying, as so many things were in those days. But I have since come to realize that my abject ignorance was really a gift: to be a literarily inclined illiterate at age 26 is one of the most glorious fates that can befall mortal girl.

Of course I could not know that then, and in a panicky attempt to rectify the situation, I slunk in shame to the Strand and stood, paralyzed by the yawning vastness of the store and of my ignorance. I have a very distinct memory of coming home, sitting on the mattress on the floor of my tiny apartment, and staring hopelessly at the forlorn little collection of books on my window sill. A fat Latin dictionary. A fat dictionary of Christian saints. To which I added the skinny gray novel I had just bought. Out of every book in the Strand's famous miles of volumes, I had desperately, randomly,

impulsively grabbed a beat-up Modern Library edition of Anatole France's «Penguin Island» Oy.

Anatole France? Not Balzac. Not Flaubert. I'd never heard of them. I didn't know them from Maupassant. Or Anatole France, for that matter. As for English or American literature, I had never read Austen or Eliot or Dickens or Melville or James or Wharton or. . . .

I blame Dostoyevsky.

When I was a child, I was always allowed to stay home from school with even the flimsiest of maladies (had I known the word «neurasthenic» I would have employed it weekly) if I promised to sit quietly and read. I read «The Cricket in Times Square» and Beverly Cleary and books about horses and young Indian braves and biographies of George Washington Carver from the school library. At home, there were books by Albert Payson Terhune about collies (we had a collie) and my father's Hardy Boys collection and my mother's Louisa May Alcott novels. I read a lot. I was one of those children they used to call «readers».

So what happened between «Mr. Popper's Penguins» and «Penguin Island»?

«The Idiot» happened. In seventh grade I saw a copy of Dostoyevsky's novel in the library and, thinking it would be a funny book about a stupid person, began to read it. I read and I read and I read. I developed a crush on Prince Myshkin. He seemed so sweet. I did not know what epilepsy was, and I was too lazy to look it up in the dictionary. I did not know what naïve meant and was, again, too lazy to look it up. But I kept going, in my own naïveté, fascinated and absorbing perhaps a tenth of what was there. A tenth of Dostoyevsky is plenty for a seventh grader, I think. The problem is that now, when as an adult I might understand the other 90 percent, I have no desire ever to read Dostoyevsky again. Ever. Dostoyevsky ruined Dostoyevsky for me.

Which is why I am grateful to him. My Dostoyevsky phase, in which I lugged one heavy volume or another everywhere (there are photos of me stubbornly pretending to read on a sailing trip, on a ski trip, on the beach), lasted through most of high school. If you spend all your time reading books that you only pretend to understand, year after year, there isn't much room for anything else. In school, we were inexplicably forced to read «The Ox-Bow Incident», I recall, and there was some Shakespeare. But it was the '60s, and for one entire year I managed to get away with reading «The Forsyte Saga» (the television series, which was fantastic, was being shown on public television) as an independent study. I also wrote a paper on existential despair in «Crime and Punishment», «The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter» (assigned to the class) and (my one foray into contemporary

American literature) «Portnoy's Complaint». Look, I didn't say I wasn't pretentious; I said I wasn't well read.

A few oddities cropped up on my high school reading list, some unfortunate (like Robbe-Grillet: I had never read Emerson, but I'd read Robbe-Grillet?); and others like gifts from the gods (a heavy dose of Colette, thanks to my mother). But these were tiny islets upon the great, heaving ocean of my ignorance.

So, that day, the day of my illiteracy epiphany, I came home from the Strand and sat shamefaced on my mattress staring unhappily at «Penguin Island», which I had started and put down in confused boredom several times. Then I remembered a bag in the closet with stuff my ex-boyfriend had left behind, including a paperback copy of «Our Mutual Friend», his favorite novel. A few days later I emerged from that exquisite book and cursed myself for wasting so much of my life doing things other than what God in all his wisdom clearly meant for me to do for the rest of my life: read Dickens.

This was a defining moment; it was my discovery of the English language. It could never have happened if I had not been blessedly illiterate.

Imagine the satisfaction, the exhilaration when, not long after, I stood as a newlywed surveying my husband's bookcase. It reached from one wall to the other, from floor to ceiling. It had been culled and collected by a person of knowledge and taste, a product of Columbia's core curriculum, and . . . it was arranged alphabetically. I started at the upper left hand corner (Jane Austen! J. R. Ackerley!) and worked my way to the lower right (Waugh! Wodehouse! Woolf!). I got to read «Huckleberry Finn» for the first time when I was 35 years old. And when I eventually moved on to a different partner, there waiting for me was a new bookcase full of other books. I read «My Antonia» for the first time last month. That is a kind of grace.

If Dostoyevsky had not overwhelmed me at such a young age, and I had read «Huckleberry Finn» at 14, would I have reread it at 35? Maybe, but it wouldn't have been the same transcendent experience as discovering it as an adult. And maybe I never would have gone back to it: it took me decades to recover from «The Old Man and the Sea» and try Hemingway again. On the other hand, I did just recently reread «Buff: A Collie», and was stunned at how good the prose is. Italo Calvino, in «Why Read the Classics?», said that a work read at a young age and forgotten «leaves its seed in us». If that's true, and I think it must be, then I thank you, Albert Payson Terhune, and I suppose I must thank you once again, too … Dostoyevsky. And, oh all right – even though just the sight of your name reminds me of a time when I thought it was O.K. to walk around Manhattan barefoot, I guess the day has come to give «The Idiot» another shot.

Questions for discussion and comprehension:

– What exactly does the writer mean when she says she is «illiterate»?
– Who was Dostoyevsky? Why does Ms. Schine blame him for her state of affairs?
– On the other hand, why is she grateful to him?
– What other books have been influential in Ms. Schine's history as a reader?
– What do you suppose Italo Calvino meant when he said that a work read at a young age and forgotten «leaves its seed in us»? What are some books that have left their seeds in you?

Section 2: Activities

1). Explain to students that they will create timelines chronicling their reading history. Lead them through the process of brainstorming and drafting using the handout «My History as a Reader», and then using their drafts to create polished pieces that reflect who they are as readers.

Name: ________________________________ Date: ____________________

My History as a Reader

Part 1: Use the prompts below to reflect on your history as a reader.

Books I loved as a child:
Memories I have of seeing somebody read:
People I remember who loved to read:
People who read to me when I was little:
Books I loved reading in school:
Books I hated reading in school:
Books I have read on my own and enjoyed:
Literary characters I connect to:
Books that have captured my imagination:
Books and/or writers I am interested in, but haven't yet read:
Books I pretended to read or understand:
Other types of reading materials I read and enjoy:
Other memories I have about books and reading:

Part 2: Create a timeline, plotting at least twenty experiences you've had as a reader, beginning with the earliest memory you have of reading, being read to, or seeing someone read and ending with now. For each, note your age, the readers, titles, authors (if you know them) and the contexts of your experiences. Record what was memorable in just a few words.

The experiences you choose to record need not be wholly positive. Note positive experiences with reading above the line, and negative experiences below. You might be surprised to discover that you had positive and negative experiences with the same book.

In their final timelines, they should include all types of experiences with reading that have shaped who they are as readers today and illustrate the timeline using meaningful images, such as book cover art for favorite books, photos of characters or readers who have inspired them, elements of locations that they have visited or would like to visit, etc.

2). When students have finished their timelines, post them around the room and encourage wandering. Ask students to look for and note commonalities in their classmates' work. You might even hang blank sheets of paper underneath each one so that students can post comments.

3). Reconvene as a class for discussion. Ask:

– What reading experiences have been most influential in your life?
– How we encouraged and discouraged to become readers?
– What did you learn about yourself by creating your timeline?
– What did you learn about classmates by looking at their timelines?
– What did your classmates' timelines make you think about?
– Do you consider yourself «literate»? Why or why not? By what definition?
– Is it important to you to be «literate»? Why or why not?

Section 3. Going Further

Here are several ideas for taking this activity further:

1). Students use the freewriting they did during the warm-up and their timelines as the basis for crafting short autobiographies of themselves as readers. They might use «I Was a Teenage Illiterate» as a model for their autobiographical essay, starting, like Ms. Schine, with an assessment of themselves as readers today, then delving into their pasts as readers (using their timelines), discussing formative reading experiences, and finishing with a look forward to their possible futures as readers.

2). Alternatively, they read chapter one of Italo Calvino's «If On a Winter's Night A Traveler» and use it as a model for writing about their own reading histories, focused on one book that had a powerful impact on them.

3). Students bring in an influential children’s book or excerpt from a novel to share aloud with classmates for a read-around, along with the relevant section of their autobiography.

4). Lead a field trip to, or encourage students to visit, your school or local library or bookstore so that students can browse books that interest them. Then, have students create lists imagining their futures as readers. What books do they dream of reading? Why? Encourage them to think about what kinds of literacy they value and build their own personal reading list to reflect those values.

5). Circulate a variety of book lists, such as the College Board’s 101 Great Books (http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/boost-your-skills/23628.html), the American Library Association Booklists (http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestficya/bfya2011.cfm), Listology’s 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die (http://www.listology.com/list/1001-books-you-must-read-you-die),and/or one of the «Great Books» lists (http://www.interleaves.org/~rteeter/greatbks.html).

As students browse the lists, discuss what kinds of works are included and what and/or whose values these lists reflect.

6). Implement an independent reading project in which students undertake one or more of the books they have dreamed of reading.

(From *The New York Learning Network, March 4, 2010*)

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

How To Keep a Reading Log or Book Journal

A reading log or book journal is a great place to react to what you read. You can find out exactly how you feel about the characters; you may gain insight about the theme and plot; and you can expand your overall enjoyment of the literature. Here are a few idea starters. Feel free to build your own list of questions as you start your life-long habit of keeping a reading log or book journal. Read on.

Here’s How:

1. Write down your thoughts–after reading the opening chapter(s) of the book. How do your impressions change (or do they) after reading half the book? Do you feel any differently after finishing the book? Would you read the book again?

2. What emotions did the book invoke: laughter, tears, smiles, anger? Or, was the book just boring and meaningless? Record some of your reactions.

3. Sometimes books touch you, reminding you of your own life, as part of the larger human experience. Are there connections between the book and your own life? Or, does the book remind you of an event (or events) that happened to someone you know? Does the book remind you of what happened in another book you’ve read?

4. Would you like to be one of the characters (acquire a personality trait)? Which of the characters would you become, if you could? Why? If there’s something about the character that you’d want to change, what is it?

5. If you were the author, would you have changed the name of a character, or altered the location of a scene? What does the name mean to you? Do you have a negative connotation associated with the name (or the place)? What would you name the character instead? What would you use as a setting?

6. Does the book leave you with questions you would like to ask? What are they? Would you like to direct your questions at a particular character? What questions would you like to ask the author of the book? Are they questions that you may be able to answer by reading more about the author’s life and/or works?

7. Are you confused about what happened (or didn’t happen) in the book? What events or characters do you not understand? Does the use of language in the book confuse you? How did your confusion affect how you liked the book? Is there anything that the author could have done to make what happened (or didn’t happen) more clear?

8. Is there an idea in the book that makes you stop and think, or prompts questions? Identify the idea and explain your responses.

9. What are your favorite lines/quotes? Copy them into your reading log/journal and explain why these passages caught your attention.

10. How have you changed after reading the book? What did you learn that you never knew before?

11. Who else should read this book? Should anyone not be encouraged to read this book? Why? Would you recommend the book to a friend or fellow classmate?

12. Would you like to read more books by this author? Have you already read other books by the author? Why or why not?

13. Write a brief summary or review of the book. What happened? What didn’t happen? Capture what it is about the book that stands out (or doesn’t stand out).

14. Write about the characters? Which one is your favorite? Is there a character you hate/detest/despise? Why? What traits could you change about the characters that would change how you think about them? Do you think that any of the characters represent real people? Does anything about a particular character seem to be related to the author's true personality–who the writer is?

Tips:

- The practice of keeping a reading log or book journal can work well for poetry and other works of literature as well (although the questions may be slightly different).
- If you ever get the chance, you might find it interesting to read the diaries, logs or journals that great writers have kept about their reading experiences. You may even be able to compare notes. How do your reactions to books compare to the thoughts of famous writers?

What You Need:

- Paper (or book journal)
- Computer (you can keep an electronic book journal or reading log).
- Pen or pencil.
- Book to read.

(By Esther Lombardi, About.com Guide)