

Literary Letters: Developmental Readers' Responses to Popular Fiction

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ABSTRACT: *This article describes elaboration in “literary letters” (Atwell, 1984, 1987) written by developmental reading students. Nineteen community college students received instruction in “elaborative thought patterns,” or types of elaboration, to improve the quality of their responses to popular fiction. This instruction was part of a literature-based component intended to foster positive changes in comprehension and attitude toward reading. Data were derived from (a) letters analyzed according to a coding system, (b) questionnaires, (c) focus-group discussions, and (d) self-evaluations. Students demonstrated improvements in quality of elaboration; they also reported positive changes in comprehension, writing, literature discussions, self-efficacy, and attitude.*

Research suggests that reading deficiencies are the greatest obstacle that underprepared students face in college (Wirt, et al., 2002). The problem is so acute that only 51% of the high school graduates tested by ACT are prepared for freshman courses (ACT, 2006). In part, this might be attributed to a lack of practice reading books for pleasure. According to Atwell (2007), “the major predictor of academic success is the amount of time that a student spends reading. In fact, the top 5 percent of U.S. students reads up to 144 times more than the kids at the bottom 5 percent” (p. 107). It follows that readers who enjoy books and become actively engaged in the reading process are more likely to read extensively and to experience success academically.

The study instructor, a 22-year veteran of community college instruction, has observed that most developmental reading students are disengaged, passive readers. In her experience, use of a skills-based approach (Crismore & Busch, 1984) has yielded low retention rates and limited advancement in reading ability. To promote self-efficacy and enjoyment of reading, she has added a literature-based component to her reading courses. This component features self-selected popular literature with multiple opportunities for writing and discussion.

This article describes pedagogy employed in a developmental reading class and presents findings from action research using class assign-

ments and activities as formative data (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). The assignment we focus on is the literary letter (Atwell, 1984), an informal mode of teacher-learner correspondence: Students respond to books through letters and receive a personal reply from the instructor. In addition to writing a personal reply, for this study the instructor also “coded,” or labeled thought patterns in, each letter. The instructor theorized that by using the literature component and coding system students might report improved comprehension, richer responses in writing and discussion, greater engagement and self-efficacy, and improved attitudes about reading. Three questions guided the inquiry:

1. How would the depth and breadth of students' literary letters change when we taught them different ways of elaborating in their written response to reading?
2. Would students report that learning elaborative thought patterns helped them to better comprehend, write about, and discuss their novels? If so, in what specific ways did it help them?
3. Would students report changes in their perceptions of themselves as readers, their attitudes about reading, and their engagement with books? If so, what sorts of changes would they report?

After exploring the literature that informs our study, we briefly describe the pedagogy used and then provide a description of the formative data collected and analyzed.

Interactive Pedagogy in English and Reading: Research and Applications

Theoretical Foundations

The intervention of focus in this study is informed by several theories related to literacy education. The strategy provides instructional engagements that elicit and affirm aesthetic responses to literature (Short & Burke, 2001). As personal engagement with the text is affirmed, students become invested in understanding both the text and the reading process itself (Tashlik, 1987).

If indeed “everything about learning and developing is social” (Vygotzky as cited in Wink &

Putney, 2002, p. 62), then college literacy is not only an instructed process but also a “cultural learning process” (Gee, 2004, p. 11). A cultural learning process engages the learner through mentoring relationships and a set of expectations situated in an informal cultural context. Students can benefit from this added dimension of the literature-based component, as authentic interactions occur during literature circles, group presentations, and through written correspondence with the instructor. It is essential to provide developmental reading students with such opportunities for interaction (Sinagra, Battle, & Nicholson, 1998).

Although college literacy development can be influenced externally through the cultural learning process, there is also an internal transactional process (Rosenblatt, 1994), whereby the reader and the text create meaning synergistically. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory describes a continuum representing readers’ approaches to texts: At one end of the continuum is the efferent stance, in which readers focus on drawing information from the text; at the other end is the aesthetic stance, in which readers focus on the experience of reading itself. “Readers may respond to express their emotional reactions, to explore difficulties in understanding, to corroborate or verify their opinions with others, to build social relationships through sharing responses or to clarify their attitudes” (Beach, 1993, p. 6). To satisfy this great variety of purposes, teachers need to create a wide range of response strategies. “When there is active participation in literature—the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to the text—there will be many kinds of benefits” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 276).

Some aesthetic responses to text have also been described as “elaboration” (Stein, 1989). Elaboration is comprised of “the processes by which relationships are formed between the reader-writer’s background knowledge and a particular written text through inferencing, analogies, and connection making” (Schlumberger, 1991, p. 44). These processes are often required in college work and bear some attention in developmental education (Holschuh & Aultman, 2008). The term “elaborative thought patterns,” devised for this study, refers to the various types of elaboration that emerge when readers respond to text.

Pedagogical Tools

The literature review also revealed examples of relevant, interactive pedagogical tools. The first pedagogical tool was self-selected literature. When using self-selected popular literature, students had the freedom to choose materials they found compelling, an essential ingredient

in successful learning (Gee, 2004). In a study by Morris (1995), community college students who read self-selected literature in a workshop format made gains in reading skills that were equivalent to those made in a traditional reading course. In addition, they demonstrated improved attitudes about reading. Self-selected popular literature also afforded a prime opportunity for developmental reading students to gain the experience of “reading flow” (Flurkey, 2008). As students become completely absorbed in books, they experience the transcendent emotional state described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) which is similar to Maslow’s “peak experience” (as cited in Kramer, 1984) or Atwell’s (2007) “reading zone.” In a study by Nakamura (1988), high achievers experienced flow 40% of the time they studied as compared with 17% for low achievers. By offering self-selected literature, we hoped that students would enter a state of flow while reading and be motivated to repeat the experience.

Students had the freedom to choose materials they found compelling, an essential ingredient in successful learning.

A second tool is the literary letter. Similar assignments have been variously named “written dialogues,” “teacher-learner correspondence,” “literary gossip,” “first draft chat” (Atwell, 1987); “dialectical notebooks” (Berthoff, 1987); and “booktalking” (Sinagra, Battle, & Nicholson, 1998). The common denominator in these assignments is that genuine communication is written to an authentic audience with the expectation of personal response rather than critical appraisal (Atwell, 1998). Through such correspondence, an instructor can not only affirm students’ opinions about books but also model effective reading strategies (Stephens, Corey, & Chapman, 2003) and challenge students to think more deeply about what they read (Paris & Ayers, 1994).

Of the various assignments available, literary letters seemed to provide the best means for written dialogue between the instructor and her students. Our introduction to literary letters came from Atwell (1984), who described the letters she exchanged with middle-school students. These letters were first-draft, opinionated reflections to which the instructor responded. We hoped to expand on the successes of other community college instructors, specifically Henry’s (1992, 1995) work with developmental reading students who

wrote letters to her about self-selected literature.

Using a third tool, the coding system, the instructor provided feedback to students and evaluated the effectiveness of the literary letter. Kletzien and Hushion (1992) labeled student journal entries with “graphic thinking symbols” to represent the thought patterns that emerged. “Use of the symbols was probably the most powerful means of getting students to vary their responses and to stretch their thinking” (p. 449).

This study is based on assumptions drawn from the theories and research herein described. The teaching and research methods chosen reflect our belief that the reading process is both social and transactional and that reluctant readers can become motivated when offered appealing choices and a variety of response strategies. We also believe that, as students engage in a variety of literature-based activities, they can increase their sophistication in evaluating, revising, and reflecting on their understanding of both the text and their own reading process.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This research took place in a developmental reading course at an urban community college in the southwestern part of the United States during the Spring 2003 semester. The class began with 23 students and ended with 19, an exceptionally high retention rate for reading courses at the college. Of the 19 students who completed the course, attendance was exemplary, with only five who had more than three absences in the 31 sessions. There were 10 female and 9 male students of diverse backgrounds and ages. They included three Native Americans, six Hispanics, two African Americans, two Africans, and six Caucasians. Of these students, six spoke English as their second language and nine spoke more than one language. There was some diversity in age, as eight students were 17-20 years of age; seven were 21-25; two were 26-30; and two were over 35. Students were placed in the course because of their reading level as measured by the *Compass Reading Test* (ACT, 2008), the college’s placement test for newly enrolled students. Students’ raw scores on this test ranged from 68 to 79 out of a possible 99 points. Fifteen of the students were enrolled in developmental writing courses, and four were enrolled in freshman composition courses.

Of the four students who withdrew from the course, three did so within the first 2 weeks of the semester without explanation. The fourth student who dropped did so after completing about three-fourths of the course, but he was not keeping up with assignments nor was he attending regularly. Two of these students were males,

one Caucasian, and the other African American. The two female students were both Hispanic. The teacher researchers who participated in the study included the course instructor, a university reading professor, and a graduate student.

Instructional Design

The four-credit course was taught with a literature-based component similar to Atwell's (1987) reading workshop. This component comprised approximately 40% of the class time; the other 60% of class time was spent learning and applying reading and study strategies to academic texts and periodicals. Only the literature-based component was part of the study. Course materials included a minimum of four paperback books, a subscription to *Newsweek* magazine, and a 56-page packet of teacher-designed materials. The packet included handouts on a variety of reading and study strategies, directions for various assignments, rubrics for grading, self-evaluation forms, and record-keeping materials.

The literature-based component of the course was multifaceted. Students chose from a variety of books, wrote personal responses, and participated in discussions with others reading the same book. The students wrote literary letters and participated in discussions called literature circles. The instructor provided each student with two late passes that allowed them to turn in two assignments up to 1 week late without penalty. All students began the semester reading the same book, but as they became familiar with literature and the routines of the classroom, a wider degree of choice was introduced. A description of the procedures used for each book follows.

Book I. During the 1st month of the semester, the students read a teacher-selected book, *The Pilot's Wife*, by Anita Shreve (1998). They received directions for writing literary letters as well as a sample letter and a blank grading rubric. Students wrote three letters (Letters 1-3) about Book I. They also studied related vocabulary and reading strategies, met in literature circles twice, and completed individual reader response projects such as creating collages, writing letters to authors, and designing original book jackets.

Book II. During the 2nd month of the course, approximately 30 books were introduced by the instructor, and students were encouraged to explore others. Students browsed books for 15 minutes in the classroom library. After narrowing book choices down to five novel, students selected from these titles, and literature circles were formed with each group consisting of three to six participants reading the same book. For this second book, students followed the same procedure of writing weekly literary letters (Letters 4-6), meeting in literature circles twice, and

completing individual reader-response projects after finishing the books.

Book III. The procedure for Book II was followed for Book III. Students chose books, met in their respective literature circles, wrote literary letters (Letters 7-9).

Book IV. During the last month of the semester, students read individually chosen books, and each presented a 5-minute Book Talk to the class. They continued to write weekly literary letters (Letters 10-12), but the letters were excluded from the study because students were no longer reading group books, meeting in literature circles, and preparing group presentations.

Data and Analysis

Multiple data sources were collected and analyzed to better understand how students evolved as readers over the semester. The data sources included nine literary letters per student, a questionnaire with a corresponding focus-group activity, and a final self-evaluation. This meth-

Investigators rated the amount of support students provided for each coded response.

odology is common among teacher researchers (Short & Burke, 2001).

Literary letters. The first data source was the nine literary letters which students wrote as they responded to Books I, II, and III. Letters were returned weekly with the instructor's response, including the coding of elaborative thought patterns. Letters 3, 6, and 9 were selected for in-depth analysis because the final letter written about each book was most likely to show students' most sophisticated thinking. The 17 descriptive codes (see Appendix A and B or <http://dtc.pima.edu/~mfrailey/DevReadingResources/Index.html>) were based on our definition of elaborative thought patterns. The codes corresponded to four broad categories: (a) retelling/summarizing; (b) evaluation of self, author, and text; (c) personal response/reaction; and (d) going beyond the text. To analyze the letters, researchers coded phrases, sentences, or paragraphs according to the elaborative thought patterns that were manifested, referring to each one as a coded response (see Appendix B). They tallied the total number of coded responses.

In addition to categorizing and quantifying elaborative thought patterns, investigators rated the amount of support students provided for each coded response. They classified individual

responses into three levels according to the degree of support provided. Claims with little or no support received one point; claims with limited support, such as justification, background knowledge, and/or examples, received 3 points; claims with extensive support received 5 points. Examples of the three levels follow:

Little or no support: When the co-pilot pulled out that briefcase, I think it was a bomb, but I'm not sure (1 point)

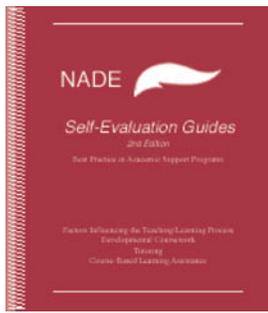
Limited support: I wonder if he fell in love with someone else and he couldn't decide what to do so he killed himself and all those people. Then it was intentional. I really don't think it was pilot error. (3 points)

Extensive support: I am looking forward to the end to see if maybe Kathryn and Mattie and maybe Robert will go down and investigate the scene off the coast of Ireland. Maybe they will find something like Jack is still alive and he is off somewhere drinking martinis on the beach. Maybe he got money out of the deal and he is rich with his mother and living like a king. That would make this real interesting. (5 points)

For both types of subjective analysis—the coding of elaborative thought patterns and judgments about the degree of support provided—researchers followed specific procedures to establish inter-rater reliability. First they discussed, reviewed, and agreed upon definitions and common understandings of the criteria for coding letters and judging support. Next, the instructor and the graduate student independently analyzed each student's letter. Third, the university professor examined each analysis for agreement. There was almost complete agreement between the instructor and the graduate student (550/571, or 96%, for quantity of responses; 556/571, or 97%, for quality of responses). In the few cases of disagreement, the university professor did her own analysis and then led a discussion with the other researchers to decide on a code and/or a level of support that all three researchers agreed upon.

During Weeks 3-6 of the course, the instructor provided her class with minilessons on the various elaborative thought patterns and their respective codes. To understand the coding of thought patterns better, students engaged in collaborative activities during which they coded sample excerpts from former students' letters.

After coding and evaluating the responses, researchers next recorded the length of each letter (Letters 1-9) and noted variations across the semester. Their supposition was that length might indicate the extent of elaboration. The in-depth analysis began with Letter 3, the final letter on Book I, because it was the first one written after the instructor had begun minilessons on elabora-



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tive thought patterns. Letters 6 and 9 were comparable to Letter 3, as each was the final letter written on a book. Researchers graphed the data and analyzed changes in students' writing as they moved through the semester.

Written questionnaires and focus groups.

Another data source was the tape recordings of focus-group discussions about the value of the literature-based component in general and literary letters in particular. To prepare for the focus groups, each student first filled out a questionnaire with the following questions:

1. How did the literary letters help you prepare for the literature discussion groups?
2. Do you think the writing of literary letters had an impact on your comprehension of your books?
3. We taught you codes. How did the knowledge of codes help you with your writing?
4. What kinds of changes did you see in your letters as we moved through the semester?
5. In what ways did the reading of paperback books and the writing of literary letters impact your interest in reading and/or your attitude toward books?
6. What do you think of the letter writing activity as a way to talk about books? What did you think about the literature discussions?

During class, the 19 students and three researchers were divided into groups, each composed of six or seven students and one research-

er. These groups discussed the same questions they had answered on the questionnaire. Using this dual procedure meant that input from students who were less fluent in one of the two forms of discourse would not be excluded. The discussions were tape recorded, and the responses were documented and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Merriam, 1998). That is, researchers transcribed the tapes of the three group discussions and summarized the student comments, noting the number of students who made similar claims.

Student self-evaluation. The third data source was a student self-evaluation. Students responded to a Likert-type set of questions, reporting their perceptions of themselves as readers (Very poor, poor, average, good, or excellent) and their attitudes and interests in reading (strongly dislike, moderately dislike, neutral, moderately like, or strongly like) at the beginning and end of the semester. Investigators calculated the mean score for the class and then looked at changes made by individuals. In addition, each student reported the number of books read during the semester, the total number of pages read, and the types of books read.

Findings and Discussion

This section provides results of the data analysis, including literary letters, questionnaires,

focus-group discussions, and self-evaluations. As these results are presented, we offer our interpretations and reflections.

Changes in Depth and Breadth of Literary Letters

First, researchers analyzed the types of elaborative thinking and the amount of support given for opinions. Then they looked at how these elements changed over the course of the semester.

Type and quantity of responses. The total number of coded thought patterns in the literary letters changed little during the semester. For the entire class, the total number of coded responses for Letter 3 was 198, the total for Letter 6 was 184, and for Letter 9 it was 190. The total number of responses remained consistent in each of four broad categories: Retelling; Evaluating Self, Author, and Text; Personal Response; and Going Beyond the Text.

Within the four broad categories there were 17 specific codes, the analysis of which demonstrated considerable variability. For example, as students wrote Letter 3, Letter 6, and Letter 9, they used fewer predictions (16, 7, 1); they used fewer inferences (29, 25, 18); and they varied their use of judgments (57, 39, 52). However, in all three letters, judgments and inferences dominated student responses.

Although responses in some categories decreased over the semester, in other categories

they increased. For example, students strengthened their focus on evaluating authors (3, 11, 8), connecting with other books and media (1, 3, 5), and discussing themes (0, 5, 4). Changes in the focus of student writing might have occurred for a variety of reasons. By midsemester, students had gotten more exposure and practice with the elaborative thought patterns and were becoming more aware of the variety of ways they could respond to their novels. Also, after students had completed a few novels, they had experienced different genres and authors and could therefore more easily compare books. In some cases, individual students changed their thought patterns to correspond with changes in the genre of novels they were reading. In addition, some books seemed to encourage deeper thinking than others, presenting lessons about life or profound ethical dilemmas that led to meaningful reflection.

Retelling was much more of a focus in Letters 1-2 than in later letters. Initially, an average of 36% of each letter was devoted to retelling. Analysis of these brief retellings revealed that the average percentage of the letter that was retelling actually declined to 22%. These data suggest that by the 6th and 9th letters 14 students used a range of elaborative thought patterns to respond to literature. Having quantified this range of thinking, the study focus turned to the quality of the responses.

Quality of responses. The quality of the elaboration was scored with a 1, 3, or 5, depending on researchers' assessment of the level of support offered for each response. There was a pronounced change in the quality of responses over the semester, particularly in Letter 6, the final letter for Book II. In Letters 3, 6, and 9 respectively, the scores jumped from 155 points to 238 points and back down to 182 points (see Table 1). The marked improvement in Letter 6 was probably due to the fact that students were receiving in-depth instruction and practice identifying the elaborative thought patterns at this time in the semester. As students began reading Book III (Letters 6-9), coding of letters continued but in-class instruction on the topic was no longer provided. At that point the focus was to encourage spontaneous thinking and writing. Between Letter 3 (when instruction in the coding of thought patterns began) and Letter 6 (after coding instruction was completed), the

quality of the responses improved in almost all 17 categories. Students were not only able to use a variety of thought patterns but were now able to support their ideas with more examples, descriptions, and reasons.

Number and length of letters. Of the 171 letters assigned during the study (9 per student), 159, or 93%, were submitted. The letters ranged in length from 126 to 964 words, with a median of 320 words. Letter 1 tended to be the shortest, probably because students were unfamiliar with the assignment. During the reading of the first book, students' letters ranged from an average of 266 words for Letter 1 to 357 words for Letter 3. By the reading of the third book, the average letter ranged from 309 words for Letter 7 to 361 words for Letter 9. In general, the length of the letters increased as students moved to the second and third letter of each book. Perhaps they had more to write about as they progressed through their books and discussed them in literature circles.

Student Perceptions

Late in the semester, students responded both in writing and in focus groups to six questions. Students reflected on the experience of learning and applying elaborative thought patterns through the writing of literary letters. They reported the

impact they perceived these experiences had on their understanding of their books and their ability to write and talk about them. Student comments are reported according to categories that emerged from the qualitative content analysis (Merriam, 1998). These categories included impact on (a) reading comprehension improvement; (b) writing skill improvement; (c) self-efficacy enhancement; and (d) attitudes about reading, self-selection, and writing.

Reading comprehension improvement. The 19 students discussed how the writing of literary letters impacted their comprehension. They provided a variety of responses that were overwhelmingly positive, such as the following: "the writing provided me with the opportunity to critically analyze my books," "it helped me organize ideas," "it stimulated my thought process," "it helped me go deeper into the book and read between the lines," and "it helped me question things more." One student stated, "the literary letters were the necessary pit stop I had to take while reading my book to help make sense of all the information I was taking in." Another student claimed, "I used to read a book and I didn't even know what was going on, they just looked like words to me and now I'm starting to understand the plot and stuff." Another student remarked, "literary letters helped me

understand and keep track more because once I wrote it down on paper, it's like a flashback remembering more about the book." Even students who were avid readers spoke of changes they noticed in their reading. One student stated,

I have always read books just for pleasure but what I have learned this semester is that every book has some kind of lesson that you learn from. I have read books in the past but I never stopped to think about what I've learned and now that is what I look for.

Writing skill improvement.

Students also reflected on how the knowledge and use of different thought patterns helped them with their writing. The most common response they gave was that the letters got them to stop retelling and/or summarizing the book. It helped them generate ideas about what they read. They became more aware of different ways they could think about their reading. One student remarked, "the codes were a good

Table 1
Quality Points Assigned to Coded Thought Patterns in Letters 3, 6, and 9

Thought Pattern	Code	Quality Points Assigned		
		Letter 3	Letter 6	Letter 9
Retelling/Summarizing	R	14	24	23
Evaluating Self and Author				
Metacognition	M	7	0	5
Evaluate Author	Ev@	3	14	8
Evaluate Book	EvB	10	27	16
Personal Response/Reaction				
Discover New Ideas	!!!	0	0	5
Connect with Books/Media	C	3	5	7
Respond Emotionally	☺☺	10	15	6
Predict/Set Expectations	P/Ex	12	7	8
Personally Identify with Text	ID	17	23	18
Visualize	Vis	2	1	5
Going Beyond the Text				
Make Judgments	J	43	44	34
Draw Inferences	I	18	31	16
Make Analogies	↓↓	2	3	2
Question Events/Characters	??	11	16	10
Rhetorical Structures	RH	3	5	7
Identify Themes	TH	0	17	8
Reflect on Personal Impact	Per Im	0	6	4

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guideline to show me how I was conveying my ideas.” Students had a new way to define what they were doing as they wrote.

Two students stated that they were now able to identify elaborative thought patterns during the writing process. Students became aware of their own thinking processes when they read books and wrote about them. “It was interesting to read where you have your assumptions and then you go and turn the page and something else happens that makes you sad, angry or just excited about each character. I did something in this class that I haven’t accomplished since the 5th grade which is finish a book.”

Two students saw the labeling of thought patterns as merely a system of evaluation; they felt the coding let them know if they were “getting things right” or “doing what was expected.” Two students remarked that they liked the concrete, specific information that coded letters provided. One student claimed that knowing her letter would be coded motivated her to pay attention and think before she wrote. Two students acknowledged that the letter writing provided the discipline they needed to keep up in the book, stay focused on the story, and “not get sidetracked.” They kept reading regularly because letters were due each week. Only 4 students felt that the writing and coding of literary letters didn’t really cause changes in their writing. Two of these students had the insight that any change in their letters was based primarily on the amount of time they dedicated to the assignment. One student ascribed the change in her letter writing to how much she liked the specific book. The fourth student said, “more sophisticated novels got me to do more in-depth thinking.”

Self-efficacy enhancement. Students also exhibited greater self-efficacy. They spoke repeatedly about new awareness of themselves as competent, capable readers. Further, they became aware of the process of metacognition. They described themselves as “making predictions,” “confirming inferences,” and “drawing conclusions.” Also, students were surprised by how much they read. The discipline involved in keeping up with their groups and the large amount of assigned reading forced them to read much more than they would have read on their own. One student, who was completing his 2nd semester in a course with a literature-based component, stated, “I wish I had taken a class like this in high school. I might have finished high school. I’ve gone through 12 novels since I had this instructor and I find reading enjoyable. I used to hate to read.” Another said, “Usually I would fall asleep after a few pages and struggle to read the rest of the book. But now I have com-

pleted 6 books, which is a huge accomplishment for a person like me that used to hate books.”

Students also had new confidence in their abilities as readers. One student commented, “I used to have to read a few pages and then go back. I don’t have to reread what I read. I read it once. It used to take me forever to read a book before.” Another stated, “I do feel that I have become a stronger reader and a quicker reader. I am able to read at a much faster pace and still understand completely what I read and get through more books!”

Attitude about reading. Researchers queried the students about how the reading of paperback books and the writing of literary letters influenced their interest in reading and/or their attitudes toward books. In general, students reported a notable shift in attitude about reading. They demonstrated this change through the number of books they read and the compelling comments made during focus-group sessions. In both written and oral comments, students

“Now if I go to a store and see a book, I actually pick it up and read the back.”

described the powerful engagement they had with books. The vast majority (14 out of 19, or 73%) of students felt that the experience had a significant or powerful impact on their interest in reading. Students made the following claims: “I now have a clearer idea of what I like to read,” “I learned my favorite genres,” “I discovered a new hobby,” “I discovered that books could be fun,” and “reading used to put me to sleep, now the right book can hold my attention.”

Three students stated that they were able to complete a book for the first time, and they found a profound sense of achievement in doing so. Students mentioned that they began to look for books when they were in stores, and they tried to talk to people outside of class about what they were reading. Three students were surprised to find that they were motivated to try new books after they had already read the number required for the course. One student commented, “I didn’t own no books before and now I do. I have, like, three at home and I want to read them after this one. It’s a change in the way I think about things.” Another claimed, “before I would never just stop and buy a book. Now everywhere I go, I buy books.” One student stated, “I’ve actually started to pick up books more, believe it or not. I’ve started to read more magazines. I read the newspaper more since I’ve been in this class. I’ve read more than I have in my

whole life, actually.”

Attitude about self-selection. Students reported appreciating being able to select their own books, as it helped them discover what they liked. The experience of exploring a variety of books opened their minds to diverse reading materials. The self-selection allowed students the opportunity to read books with which they could identify. They read about issues that were meaningful to them personally. One student commented on his selection process:

You know the good thing was we got to pick what we wanted to read so after reading the back of books and learning about them and reading and liking it, it changed my view on reading. It’s not boring. I thought it was interesting. Now if I go to a store and see a book, I actually pick it up and read the back and see what it’s about. Before it was just a book and I didn’t even pick it up.

After choosing an action-packed book (*Run; Winter, 2000*), another student made the following statement:

This is definitely my favorite book. I liked it so much that I read 150 pages in one sitting. I thought that I would never be able to read that much because I always had a hard time with reading books for a long period of time. I used to be able to read only like 20 pages, and that was the most. It was mostly because the books were just not interesting. Now I know there are books that I can enjoy reading and this is sure one of them.

Attitude about writing. Two students commented that they liked literary letters because they could develop a friendly, casual dialogue with the instructor. They enjoyed relating to their instructor as a friend through letters rather than reporting back to a teacher in the traditional book report format. There was more fun associated with the informal letter approach as opposed to a formal paper.

Two students reported that letter writing helped them apply some of the principles they were learning in their writing classes. Three mentioned that the extra practice with writing was good for them as they were developing college-level writing skills. More than half of the students felt more confident and at ease with writing by the end of the semester. The only negative comment came from a student who deemed letter writing to be useless. He was uncomfortable communicating on paper and would have preferred talking in person about his book. He did admit, though, that the letters helped him rethink his book, analyze the facts, and remember what happened.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Student Self-Evaluation

As a final course activity, students completed a self-evaluation by responding to a Likert-type scale assessing their self-perception and attitude toward reading and reporting on the number of books read. Students compared their perceptions of themselves as readers at the beginning and end of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, students perceived themselves to be “average readers,” with a mean score of 2.89 on a 5-point Likert scale. At the end of the semester they believed themselves to be “good readers,” with a mean score of 3.94. Almost all students showed a positive shift.

Students also reported changes in their attitudes toward reading. At the beginning of the semester, their average score was 2.78, or a little below neutral. At the end of the semester, the average score was 4.52, about halfway between “moderately liking” and “strongly liking” reading. Individual changes in scores were as follow: three students reported no change, nine students shifted up by 1 point, five students up 2 points, one student up 3 points, and one student up 4 points.

Students reported reading an average of 4.28 books ($R = 3.5-9.0$); the average number of pages they reported reading was 1308 ($R = 859-3,325$). This evidence suggests that students will complete extensive amounts of reading when given the opportunity and motivation. Several students commented on exceeding their expectations about how much reading they could do in a semester. Perhaps this realization will help them feel less threatened by the world of academics.

The changes students reported in self-efficacy and attitude, as well as the substantial amount of reading reported, highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for free reading of independently chosen books. As Atwell (2007) stated, “it’s reading that makes readers...frequent, voluminous, happy experiences with books” (p. 18).

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The shifts in quality and quantity of literary letters along with the changes in self-perception and attitude suggest profound implications for both practice and research. The literature-based component represented only 40% of the reading course. Therefore, we do not claim that a literature component of a college reading course can be used to replace instruction and practice applying reading and study strategies to academic texts. However, we do argue that, within the context of a developmental reading course, it is essential to provide time for “frequent, sustained,

pleasurable experiences with books” (Atwell, 2007, p. 18) that self-selected authentic material can offer. In other content areas, such as history, reticent readers might be better engaged in their readings and exhibit improved comprehension if more current readings, including historic novels, are used along with course texts.

A current issue facing the field of higher education is the retention and success of male students (Manno, n.d.; Mortenson, 2007). Although not part of our original study. We found male students completed this course at an unexpectedly high rate, with 9 out of 11 finishing the course, including 5 of the 6 minority males. In general, the male students responded enthusiastically to self-selected reading materials and literary letters. In fact, many of the comments quoted in this paper regarding the value of books were provided by male students. For the last 12 years the instructor has included a literature-based component, and she has noticed consistent improvement in the retention

Students’ experiences in this course provided them with a much-desired taste of success.

of males, particularly minority males.

The apparent positive impact of a personalized student-teacher relationship and weekly interaction between students through groups could be applied to other courses and learning environments. Specifically, it could be integrated into programs designed for at-risk students, including minority males, who need to improve their reading prior to enrollment in college courses. Further study might shed light on the impact of a literature-based component on male developmental readers, particularly minority males.

The teaching methodology described in this paper could be applied to alternate systems: For example, instead of corresponding with an instructor, students could correspond with peers. Individual students could be responsible for coding the letters they receive before responding to them. This adaptation would reduce the amount of coding the reading instructors face and, thereby, make the approach less formidable. In addition, it would provide more opportunities for students to develop and apply their understanding of the various thought patterns. This added dimension of peer-to-peer correspondence could work effectively not only in brick-and-mortar classes but also to create opportunities for meaningful interaction in hybrid and online classes. The impact of the student

coding experience and/or the dynamics of on-line peer correspondence through literary letters might also be explored in future research.

This study focused on changes in students’ written responses (literary letters) and their self-reported changes in reading and writing. A next step would be a controlled experimental study investigating students’ changes when compared with classes using other instructional designs.

Conclusion

This study provided persuasive evidence of the value of a literature-based component in a developmental reading course, instruction in elaborative thought patterns, and the use of a coding system with literary letters. Both data and anecdotal feedback from this study reflected an improvement in students’ processing of text and an increase in their quantity of reading. Further, students claimed to enjoy reading more. All these outcomes in the literature-based component of the course demonstrated improvement in reading abilities for underprepared students.

This instructional design illustrates an approach that can provide students with the tools they need to become not only confident, competent readers but also “skilled, passionate, critical, habitual” readers (Atwell, 2007, p. 12). Given the pervasiveness of deficiencies in reading for college-bound students (Wirt et al., 2002) and the impact that extensive reading has on academic success (Atwell, 2007), such an approach should be more widely implemented. This instructional design could be utilized with developmental readers in community college, university, and even in middle school and high school. In any case, students’ experiences in this course provided them with a much-desired taste of success in the academic realm; replicating this instructional design might provide the same successful experience to other underprepared, resistant readers.

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Appendix A

Abbreviated List of Elaborative Thought Patterns & Examples

Evaluating Self & Author

M—Metacognition

I have some questions about the book but I'll keep reading. I must say that this book has lots of words in it that I do not know but I have a dictionary to look things up.

Personal Response/Reaction

!!!—Discover New Ideas

This book shows how bad war is, what struggles kids faced fighting and killing people they didn't even know. They fought in a war no one supported. The book let you learn about stuff we never faced first hand. The Things They Carried

C—Connect with books/media

I expected this book to be a sweet romance like a Danielle Steel novel. I wanted the guy to get the girl back in the end. The Reader was a very different kind of book and the ending was perhaps more realistic than a typical romance novel but it was not as pleasant. The Reader

Vis—Visualize

Even when they talk about the food they are preparing, not only can I picture it but I can almost smell it and my mouth starts to water wanting a taste of the savory food that Tita makes. Like Water for Chocolate

Going Beyond the Text

RH—Rhetorical Structures

I always felt that way about the south. That beneath the smiles and southern hospitality and politeness was a lot of guns, liquor and secrets. A lot of secrets would end up floating down the Nansemond river. Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

TH—Identify Themes

After finding out that love was a burden and since that ring was a symbol of that love, throwing it in the ocean was a cleansing act. The end of the book showed us how you say goodbye to a relationship that isn't there anymore. The Pilot's Wife

Per Im—Reflect on Personal Impact

This particular quote has made me realize how important a true relationship with God is. Just the thought of being left behind scares me. I feel that now is the time to make myself right with God. Left Behind

Appendix B

Sample of Coded Letter (The Pilot's Wife, Letter 3)

Dear _____,

I am currently on page 252 of "The Pilot's Wife." At this point in the story Kathryn is still coping with the loss of her husband. In the midst of dealing with the loss, she is faced with many questions about her late husband. [R]

As I suspected the rabbit's hole got deeper. I don't think I was prepared for how deep it went. I was surprised when Kathryn decided to go to London. I was even more surprised when Robert said he would go. I think Kathryn was a very brave person to make this choice. Not only did she get on an airplane but went to London to confront her biggest fears. Robert seems to be the only one supporting Kathryn in her decisions. When Kathryn went to Murie Boland's house and saw her holding the baby, I felt horrible for her. Never once did I think Jack would go to such lengths to have a secret life. The author of the book does an excellent job of putting characters [sic] feelings in perspective, however the book overall is quite depressing. I am currently wondering how Kathryn will tell Mattie about Jack's secret life. I also wonder how Mattie will take the news about her deceptive father. Even more than I thought before, Jack is a complete jerk. I can't believe he would do that to Kathryn, let alone Mattie. [↓ ↓] [☹ ☹] [J]

Murie strikes me as an extremely coldhearted person. Never once did she consider calling Kathryn to inform her of Jack's deception. This says a lot about what type of person Murie was. This character reminds me of my ex-girlfriend. Both my ex-girlfriend and Murie show no concern for another person's feeling. While reading this part of the book, I started to get very angry. I couldn't believe what I was reading. At one point, I had to put the book down and smoke a cigarette. I felt like Kathryn's stress and anger were being transmitted to me like a radio station. With all of this going on, the cause of the plane crash still eats at me. I can't wait to find out what actually happened in the cockpit. Now that Jack's secret life's been exposed, I find it hard to believe that Jack would commit suicide knowing he was leaving three children behind. If he did however, it only shows he was extremely selfish. I'm still hoping that Robert and Kathryn will hook up. Also what will the impact be when Kathryn finds out what really happened on the plane? Well, I can't wait to find out what happens. [☹ ☹] [ID] [↓ ↓] [J] [P/Ex] [?]

Sincerely