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"Survey Says!": Feedback to Create a Culture of Self-Assessment

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Last November, the 12th grade college preparatory students enrolled in my Contemporary Nonfiction class at Chatham High School finished their first literature circles of the year. This year, the options included Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight, Open, Solo: A Memoir of Hope, The Color of Water, The Glass Castle and The Tender Bar. While this range of choice excites and exhilarates me (it's hard not to tire of the same canonical texts after 18 years) it can prove a turbulent transition for those under my tutelage. Book clubs take readers out of the well-worn comfort zone of teacher dependency and require a high level of autonomy. Readers new to the literature circle experience struggle to wrap their minds around the norm of being more accountable to their fellow book club members than they are to their individual instructor.

To structure the book clubs, I provided readers with my rubric for their assessment, along with a calendar of meeting dates. Students needed to set their reading assignments for those dates and agree to have notes on the section due each meeting. To plan, I utilized both Mini-lessons for Literature Circles (Daniels and Steineke) and Teach Like a Pirate (Burgess). Prior to "book club" kickoff date, I frontloaded readers with tools and practices that they would be expected to use within their book clubs, including creating fruitful discussion questions prior to class, asking follow-up questions to generate further inquiry, and reading for both "signposts" (Beers and Probst) and "yardsticks" (Roseboro). Further strategies and schemas also included those outlined in Falling in Love with Close Reading (Lehman and Roberts) and Book Love (Kittle).

From the onset, students had a pool of common language they could dip into as they read, took notes, and discussed their texts. Each meeting began with five minutes of open discussion within groups, during which students shared their notes and thoughts. I used this time to work the room and make notes on which students were "assets" and which were "liabilities" (Daniels and Steineke). Once the open discussion

window was past, I facilitated a mini-lesson to help readers take a deeper dive into their texts. These mini-lessons included: an evaluation of status as it applied to the people in each memoir; negotiating and articulating a hierarchy of quotations from the day's reading; creating sculptures with play dough or Legos to depict key moments; applying concepts within an informational text to extrapolate further meaning from their memoirs; and converting the prose of memoir into poetry to create new meaning and deeper analysis. From day one, students also knew that their summative assessment would be a collaborative slide deck and accompanying presentation to the class. As such, the mini-lessons served as formative snapshots of the group's collaborative progress over time.

Even though the students did very well for the most part, some things still felt awkward, and as we came to the end of one book, I decided to survey my students in anticipation of the next round of literature circles. In establishing a culture of reading choice in my classroom, I allowed students to give me the feedback I needed to provide more meaningful instruction for all stakeholders. Collectively, we all created a feedback loop, wherein my students assessed my instruction as I assessed their learning. As a result, after the next book club groups were formed, members collaborated and negotiated to construct their own group rubrics (Figures 1 and 2). It was important to me that my students understood that simply completing the reading and notes for book club was not enough; it was how they utilized their preparation to "make the juice worth the squeeze." Instead of naming the rubric categories with letter grades, I decided to give students "real reader" traits: Leader, Success-Oriented, Failure Avoidant and Needs Intervention. While there was a range and variety of terminologies used on each rubric, the process of agreeing on a common language for assessment and setting group norms informed student readers and set clear directives for each member. While the group constructed rubrics were not always grammatically flawless, I squelched the urge to swoop in with corrections in

mechanics and pronoun agreement. What mattered most to me -- and to the students -- was the ownership and articulation of accountability to each other. As an exit slip at the end of each book club meeting, readers now self-assess their performance on their group-created rubrics.
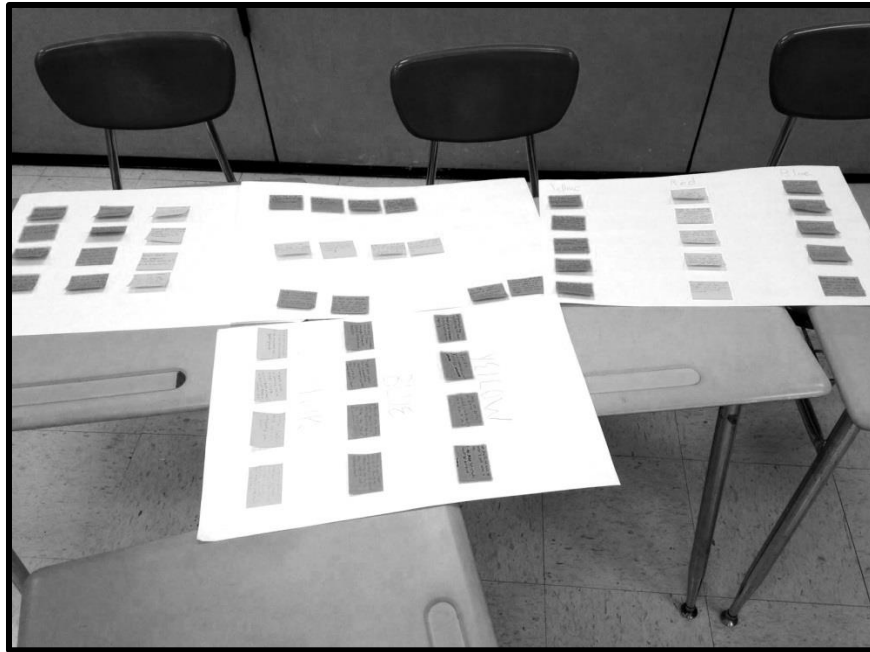

Figure 1: Students used Post-its to list desired norms, then created a
rubric to articulate and to self-assess.

	Leader	Success Oriented Member	Failure Avoidant Member	Needs an Intervention ASAP
Description of **what I did to prepare** for book club:	They have started the conversation. Also, they have analyzed multiple quotes and were completely ready for discussion.	They are ready for discussion and participate, but they could use more analysis and questions for the group.	They are sometimes ready for discussion, but rarely has analyzation and questions.	They would never have notes. Also, they would never participate in conversation.
Description of **what my notes look like** for book club:	They would have comprehensive sticky notes with descriptions. Also, they would take specific notes to show that they read.	They would usually have comprehensive notes with the sticky notes. Also, they would usually have specific notes.	They would sometimes have notes, but they were rarely comprehensive and specific.	They would never have notes in general, so they couldn't participate.
Description of **how I show my book club what I have learned/am learning**:	They would start the conversation and introduce new ideas that would enhance the conversation between the group.	They would engage in the conversation usually, but they could use more insightful quotes or questions to introduce new ideas.	They would sometimes engage in the conversation, but rarely added in any specific details or insightful comments to show they read.	They would rarely participate, and never had anything to say in group. Essentially, they never were able to show they read.

Figure 2: Group-Composed Rubric

In soliciting student feedback prior to this rubric drafting activity, I asked the students three open-ended questions:

1)   What do you want to KEEP DOING in book club?
2)   What would you like to consider CHANGING?
3)   What would you like to ADD to what we do?

After reviewing the readers' responses to my questions, I found that regardless of the category in which students responded, their feedback articulated three distinct truths:

Global Response #1: "We like rituals."

While freedom to choose is essential, grounding student groups in predictable routines is equally important. In response to my first survey question, one reader replied, "Keep the Day 4 meeting days the same for book club." I had no intention of changing the standard meeting dates (groups meet on every third day of instruction), but this response affirmed that the students wanted enough time to read a greater volume, insuring that there was enough text to talk about at each meeting.

Many responses to my first question were similar to this one: "I liked that we were able to create our own schedule and give ourselves a little more freedom with note taking." Evidently, my students want to task their time if they are given a structure within which to do so. My role was to find the "sweet spot" of structure, to give them the templates they needed, but then free readers to assign the pages in a way that worked within each group. Finally, the survey data on Question 1 indicated that the ritual of the mini-lesson was of high value to the students. "I liked the way the lesson plans were set up," one reader shared, "We had a specific thing to search for or explain that pertained to each of the books." This feedback encouraged me to continue crafting meaningful mini-lessons for future literature circles, and it also reinforced that I was getting better at this form of instruction. To me, the mini-lessons seemed very brief. After teaching full-class lessons for many years, mastering the art of the mini-lesson, keeping things brisk but specific, is an ongoing goal for me.

While it might seem contradictory, the data I gathered also indicated that the more predictable the rituals were that we followed, the more likely students were to engage in taking risks. Perhaps I might find the same routines a bit tedious because I repeat them with each of my classes, but the students did not find them stale or overdone. Our ritual of starting each meeting with five minutes of open discussion was mentioned as value added by most readers surveyed. One reader commented that "the five minutes in the beginning allows everyone to share their findings, which opens up a new discussion as well as creating new questions." While I used this time primarily to assess the level of preparedness within each book club, some readers were using it to discover what new knowledge they might unearth.

Global Response #2: "Teach us how to talk to each other."

In articulating what they would like to change or add to book club activities, students identified awkward talk as a gap area. "If the book was semi monotonous in its themes or occurrences, the conversation would die out quickly," one participant commented, "so it would be nice to maybe pinpoint certain areas to talk about." As I reviewed this comment, the adjective "semi-monotonous" and the verb "pinpoint" emerged. Reading between the lines, one translation of this participant's comment might be: "As soon as we get bored with the book, can you please step in, take over and tell us what to talk about?" Another likely version might be, "Can you give us a list of what to talk about?" While this is clearly the response of a student who is struggling to transition away from teacher centered instruction, the fact that this learner is sharing his or her frustration is a great first step.

Another student offered similar feedback regarding discussion in small groups: "I would have liked if there was more structure or guidance to the conversation. I feel that it would have been helpful and would have led to more interactive conversations." While this student also wants more structure, his or her intent is to uncover and pursue new ideas, not check questions off a "to-ask" list. In reflecting on these two readers' responses, I designed two mini-lessons on using quick writes and sentence stems to begin book club with written discussion.

Other actionable feedback included more requests for students to connect their learning, not only to themselves and to their group members, but to others in the class. "I would like to know more about the other books the groups are reading," one learner wrote, while another requested "more jigsaw discussions -- [we can] go around to each group and discuss what is happening in the book. That way they [classmates in other book clubs] can get a stronger idea about what the book is about before we present [final projects]." One of my proudest moments in reviewing student feedback came when I read the words of one student who suggested "some mini projects that represent the most significant scene that can also act as the closing statement." Without realizing, these learners affirmed several positive outcomes. Readers are able: 1) to see their work in book clubs as a community-building initiative; 2) to engage in audience analysis; and 3) to rehearse (mentally) formative activities so that their final assessments can be more meaningful and impactful to an authentic peer audience.

Global response #3: "We like creative and collaborative challenges."

As I considered how to assess differently for the next literature circle unit, these three learner responses guided my decisions:

> "I think it would be cool if we talked as a class and attempted to find similarities within our different books. This would allow us to get to know some of the books other pupils are reading while making text-to-text connections too."

> "I would like to add a research part to book clubs. I think that allowing us to research the author, what he or she looks like, and some of his or her background

would be very interesting and also help us relate more to the book."

> "I think a creative assignment that has to do with the book could even be a little more long term... Possibly having to write another scene/chapter, writing to the author, drawing or painting a scene, etc. and having it specifically pertain to a common theme in all of the book club books."

These readers' desires to connect their learning to others and to the world, to reach outside the four corners of their texts, suggest a cultural shift within my classroom. In their literature circle work, students have begun to create a sense of cooperative enterprise. They want to get better acquainted with those in class and to collaborate on meaningful initiatives.

Having taken this transparent approach in soliciting student feedback, I sincerely hope that more book club participants will respond to my next survey. Now, whenever we try a new activity, I share with the readers that their feedback helped inform my planning and instruction. Therefore, when I consider assessment, I don't think about what I assign. Instead, I consider assessment an ongoing cycle: What to keep? What to change? What to add? These are the questions that I want my students to internalize as their "rubric for life." Arguably, college and career success hinge on one's ability to self-assess, redirect work, and discern when it is best to pivot or persevere. I model this mindset each day for my students, trusting that as they enter institutions of higher education next fall, they will feel a more strengthened sense of autonomy and purpose in their work.

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