

LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM JOURNAL

July 9, 2005 – pre-initial interview

I decided to pick 'Elliot' for my case study today. I am very interested in learning how top level students became skilled in reading and writing and am curious about how to keep him interested in classroom activities when many students are not anywhere near his level. Elliot has great oratory skills. He's a member of the debate team at Woonsocket High School and contributes more to class than any other student. I'm curious to see whether his strong verbal skills translate into strong writing skills. At times he can be very overbearing in class discussions and we have to stop him from talking so others will have a chance to participate in the class. I've read through his journal and found that he is a decent writer for his age, but seems to write more like how he talks instead of making it a more formalized style. I'm very interested to see what his final paper will look like – if it will be more of the same informal style of writing or if he'll work to edit his paper into a form that is easier to read.

Elliot also has a lot of confidence in his abilities – I might even call it arrogance. I think that's what makes him very interesting. He's smart and he knows he's smart, and he's not afraid to take a leadership role in the class. Some high school students are embarrassed about being 'the smart kid', but Elliot doesn't really have that concern at all. He seems very interested in our class. But I have a feeling that he gets bored very easily at school. There are moments, when we're explaining things to the rest of the class that I can tell we lose his interest by working on things that are below his level. I'm very interested in learning points where he gets bored and developing a way to keep top level students motivated while working with lower level students.

July 11, 2005 – initial interview

I had my initial interview with Elliot today and discovered many things about him – some that I would have predicted and some that I wouldn't have thought. His family is Greek Orthodox and very dedicated to their religion. He talked about the value their religion places on education and how his parents always push him to excel in school. He said his mom gives him religious books to read outside of school and he usually reads them. But that's really all the reading he does outside of school, besides reading the newspaper a little. He said the religious books are sometimes interesting, but sometimes not and hasn't found any other books he's really all that interested in.

I was really surprised that throughout the entire school year last year, he only read 4 books for class. He's in advanced classes and the classes don't seem to be pushing him to read more. I also thought it was very strange that he couldn't remember any of the titles of the books he read the whole year. It seems like one of the stories Tovani told in Do I Really Have to Teach Reading? where one of the advanced students was frustrated by becoming a slower reader after learning all of the active reading skills. Elliot wants to read very quickly and 'get it over with' because (I think) it's boring to him. Maybe if he had more of a purpose for reading, if he could develop his own purpose, he would remember books he reads better. He finds school boring a lot of time, but some classes he finds more interesting than others. I think he is more interested in working for his debate club, an after school activity, than in doing school work. He does the reading for that club – all the case studies, and he even picked his topic for our class (the Patriot Act) as a way to prepare for debate this year. (Patriot Act is what they're going to be focusing on in debate tournaments during the school year) I think the competition aspect of debate

helps motivate him to do the extra reading. In school, he only does the necessary reading, he doesn't do any outside reading for fun. I'm curious to see if there is a way to motivate him to read outside of school. In turn, this will help him improve his vocabulary and writing skills.

July 14, 2005 – day after I gave Elliot an outside book to read

Yesterday I gave Elliot a copy of Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. When I was interviewing him, I found out that he is a lot like I was in high school. He's bored with school work and hasn't found any authors that excite him. I didn't start reading for fun outside of school until my senior year of high school because I'd never discovered authors I can relate to or even writing styles that I enjoyed. We read The Things They Carried in my English class and I loved the way O'Brien wrote. I was fascinated by his mixture between autobiographical sketches and fiction. I loved not knowing what was real and what was made up, and I thought it was an exciting way to learn about the Vietnam War (a topic we didn't even begin to cover during US History). So I thought Elliot might enjoy O'Brien's writing like I did.

When he came back to school today, he had already read the first short story and I was right – he loved it. He said his best friend had read the book and also enjoyed it. He liked the way O'Brien wrote and was interested in reading more. It's very interesting to see how Elliot is so easily motivated. Most of the other students in the class would not read outside of class just because the teacher asked them to. I'm learning a lot about upper level students by interacting with Elliot. It seems like if I give him a little bit of individual direction, he's able to go the rest of the way on his own. I think this is a strategy to give me more time with the students who need more help while keeping the upper level students from becoming bored with the class.

Elliot also seems to be very interested with the role of journalists and other political people when we discuss the media in class. Maybe this would be an interesting way to get him to work on his writing.

July 25, 2005 – Observation of Elliot in Biology class

8:00 – class starts with entrance ticket: “Think back to when you wrote the proposals, what was the hardest part, why? What was the easiest part, why?” I think it’s interesting how the teachers are using proposals as a way to work on science in the classroom – definitely a skill that scientists use in real life and I think it’s great they’re using it in high school. Only 12 students are there at that point, and Elliot is not one of them. Everyone is pretty much writing – this seems to be a normal routine.

8:05 – Elliot walks in. He was never late to our class when it was first period, so I’m curious why he’s late now. It’s the same with Julius and Diamond who are also in our class – they weren’t late or absent for our class, but walk in late here. Maybe it’s the building or a lack of motivation to be here on time.

When students finish the entrance ticket, they work on a brain teaser.

Diana hands out proposals, Jennifer hands out a worksheet for the lab. Students have pre-assigned groups for the lab. Judith is setting up the lab.

8:10 – Jennifer makes an announcement to explain the lab. She tells students they want to see if sugar and water with what they’re testing don’t produce carbon dioxide.

Students look very confused – it’s clear they’ve talked about this before, but the way Jennifer is talking about it confuses them. Elliot looks bored. He’s yawning, his head is propped up while Jennifer is explaining the directions. He usually looks engaged and interested in our class – maybe science is not his thing or maybe it’s just the morning.

8:15 – Jennifer decides to draw a diagram on paper because students aren’t understanding her. She does and they start to get it better. Elliot answers a question about science but he sounds disengaged – very different from when he answers questions in our class. He’s

usually motivated and wants other people to hear him. This time he answers in a very low voice while he's yawning – like he doesn't want his peers to hear him. Maybe he's not as confident in science.

8:23 – Elliot works with his group – they were one of the few who brought in materials, but they forgot to bring all of them.

Jennifer checks to make sure everyone has their material for class.

Elliot's group is working on the lab, but most others are not.

Jennifer tells everyone to start filling out their sheets.

Elliot is doing the writing for his group. His group members are taking pictures of the experiment.

Judith fills test tubes while Diana and Jennifer help individual groups.

There's a lot of talking going on in the room, but it seems like they're talking about the experiment.

8:33 – Elliot's group appears to be one of 2 groups that are working, all of them are writing.

Impressions: While he seems disinterested with science class, Elliot is also motivated to complete his work. He encourages his group to start working on the experiment and stays focused the whole time. Maybe the boredom is a show? Maybe he wants to seem cool? He behaves a little differently in science class than in our class, but he maintains the same motivation to get his work completed.

July 27, 2005 - Running Record and Final Interview:

I asked Elliot to stay after class today so I could take his running record and ask him final interview questions. He did really well with the running record. I gave him a very hard text from Chideya's Don't Believe The Hype which was on a 13th grade reading level. He read it pretty easily, only making a few errors and self-corrections. I think most of his errors came from trying to read too quickly. He might have been nervous that his reading slowly would have indicated to me that he wasn't a strong reader. I probably should have told him that it was ok to slow down and take your time when reading this section. The text was a brief introduction to African American history in the US and Elliot read a couple of general paragraphs then the beginning of a timeline. The timeline had names of people and places Elliot would have had to know in order to pronounce them correctly. Given the difficulty of the text, I think Elliot's reading level was very impressive.

During the final interview, I asked Elliot several questions about what he learned at BSHS and what he wants to work on over the school year. I was surprised how much he learned about bias in our class. He said that after learning how to find bias, and what language indicates something is biased, he would be able to use that in his writing. For example, if he wanted to write a perspective piece, he could use language that indicates opinion in his piece. But, if he wanted to write an objective piece, he knew which words to avoid. He also said that he learned a lot from the active reading activities we did in class. Elliot seems to be very focused on his debate team and worked to apply the lessons learned in our class to strategies he can use for debate next year. He'll turn in his paper tomorrow and I'm looking forward to reading and evaluating it later.

July 28, 2005 – After evaluating Elliot’s paper and discussing it with him

During class today, all the students were working on their news broadcasts (the final group project for class, to be performed on Friday). We wanted the students to work on these on their own, so it gave us time to work on evaluating the papers in class. I read over Elliot’s paper and it was kind of startling that his paper wasn’t written well. It looked like he was talking instead of writing, some words were misspelled, and there were several grammatical errors. I don’t think he tried very hard on the paper, but I also think this writing style he displayed is something he uses in school as well. It probably is a result of his focus on preparing for the debate. When he wrote, he made clear arguments, but did not back them up with evidence. He would use phrases like “you can not argue with the fact that” or “clearly this is unjust,” when the paper was supposed to be about how the media portrays the Patriot Act.

I met with Elliot after class to discuss the paper with him and I decided to read it aloud to him. After I finished, I asked him what he thought of the paper. He told me that it sounded like an opening statement for debate. I told him that he was right and asked if there should be a difference between speaking and writing? He agreed that there should be a difference and asked me to point out certain words or phrases he shouldn’t use when writing. I told him that arguments need to be supported with evidence and with reasoning. Unlike debate, where there is a time constraint to making all of your points at once, writing has no constraints. You can spread your main points out and spend time evaluating each of them. I also said to avoid unnecessary phrases like the fact that and therefore. He took the criticism very well and I think he was interested in improving his writing for the next year.