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READING SELF: READING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of their program at Kanda University of International Studies, learners are generally concerned with improving their speaking and listening skills, as for many it is the first time that they have had classes in which they are expected to use only English. As the learners move through the program, they become more concerned about developing their reading and writing skills. In this paper, I will introduce and discuss two classroom activities that I used in an elective self-directed reading course in which learners were able to choose authentic materials that they wanted to read. The activities were writing reading histories and examining how texts are read. These activities were implemented to assist learners in reflecting on their beliefs and experiences with reading in English. Through activities such as these, there is evidence that learners were able to establish a learning community to foster and support each other in their self-directed reading goals.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a written report of the workshop I presented at the FEELTA Conference in 2012. The purpose of the workshop was to demonstrate two activities that I use to build a learning community within an elective self-directed reading course. During the workshop, I highlighted two learning activities that I did with the learners at the beginning of the course, to encourage them to share their reading experiences. The first activity was writing their English and Japanese reading histories. Excerpts from learners' reading histories were shared

during the workshop. The second activity was a whole class activity in which learners work in groups to discuss and record how one reads different types of texts. The participants in the workshop were able to complete this activity and then discuss how it might be adapted to work in their own contexts.

2. BACKGROUND

The elective self-directed reading course was created to provide an opportunity for 3rd and 4th year English majors at Kanda University of International Studies to self-select texts that they wanted to read, to reflect on how they read those texts in English, and to practice strategies and skills to cope with reading authentic texts. The primary focus of the course was to help learners develop their metacognitive awareness of their activities before, during and after reading by recording and reflecting on their learning processes in a learning journal. They received feedback from their instructor during the course about their weekly goals, accomplishments and metacognitive strategies. The learners also participated in peer shares in which they shared their weekly goals and strategies for dealing with the texts that they were reading with each other.

For this course, constructing a community of learners was important because I assumed that many of the learners might not know each other. I did not want this to be a hindrance to the class because an important part of the course was the sharing and discussion of different strategies they were using to manage their self-directed reading. Most of all, I believe learners can and do learn from one another. Thus, a level of comfort with one another was particularly vital to this course.

To build a community of learners comfortable with sharing and supporting one another, I thought it would be a good idea to add reading histories to the curriculum for the course. Language learning histories have been used in other courses as a way for learners to think about and share their experiences with one another, and I believed the histories would be a good chance to for the learners to reflect on their experiences with reading, both in English and in Japanese. I also thought that I could have the learners share these experiences with one another so that they could see common themes and situations. Based on my beliefs, I assigned learners the reading histories.

Setting up the reading histories was simple as I had an outline to follow from another colleague who used language learning histories in her classroom. I adapted what she had previously used to the self-directed reading course. Prior to the learners outlining their reading histories, I added a timeline activity to the reading histories activity. I asked the learners to think about their English reading history first and then their Japanese reading history. I wanted them to start with how and when they were exposed to reading in English and Japanese. From there, the learners were able to create a timeline of their reading experiences, both good and bad. After they did this, they discussed their timelines with two different partners at different times in a single class. This gave them the opportunity to hear different experiences and also to organize their thoughts so that they would be prepared to turn their timelines into outlines for their written reading histories. In the next step, I encouraged learners to think about how their experiences have led to their beliefs about the reading that they do in English and in Japanese. They had to write their outlines keeping in mind that their experiences probably had an effect on what they believe about reading. After they completed their outlines, I reviewed them and asked questions such as, “How does this

experience connect to what you believe about your reading in English or Japanese?” The final step was for the learners to write their reading histories with a minimum of 500 words for each history. The English reading histories were posted on the class blog so that everyone could read them and comment on each other’s histories. At the end of the term, the learners had to write a reflection report in which they could refer back to their reading histories to draw conclusions about the beliefs that they had about reading at the end of the course.

Another activity that I believed would help establish community in the classroom, and at the same time reveal strategies and skills that learners are using for comprehension, was a brainstorm activity in which learners shared how they read a myriad of texts. Because the course allowed learners to choose their own reading materials, I wanted to make sure that they would have the opportunity to discuss the different skills and strategies that they might use to make sense of the texts they chose to read. Perhaps there were other strategies they might try because their peers had suggested those activities.

The set up for the activity was as follows. First, I placed learners up into groups. At each group table, I put a paper that had *nonfiction, comics, newspapers, novels, magazines, or textbooks* written on it. Next to each of them, I placed representative texts from our Self-Access Learning Centre so that the learners could see a sampling of the texts available for their use in the course. Then, I announced that we were going to explore how we read different texts. I gave them a handout that simply said, “How can you read these types of texts? (Write as many ways as you can think of).” I told each group to decide who would write down the ideas and then each group brainstormed. I gave them about 5-8 minutes to do this. After time was up, they rotated the texts and the handouts to the next group. Next, I explained that they needed to read the previous groups’ ideas before they added to the list.

Again, after 5-8 minutes they switched again until each group had viewed each type of text and had put as many ideas on the papers as possible. At the end, each group had their original paper and text. Next, the groups were instructed to read through the list again to make sure that they agreed with everything and to see what other ideas their classmates recorded for their respective text. After this, I asked the learners to decide which activities they would do before they read the text, both while they were reading the text, and after they had finished reading the text. They discussed their answers and ideas again in their groups and were instructed to write 'pre', 'while', and 'after' next to the ideas on the page that they had identified. This activity got the learners discussing different types of texts and sharing the strategies and skills that they use to read them.

In the next section of this paper, I will explain and discuss passages from learners' reading histories, and the brainstorming activity that illustrate how learners completed the activities.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Reading Histories

After learners finished writing their reading histories they posted them to our Edmodo site, and they were required to respond to another person's reading history. It is through these comments that one can see that the learners were beginning to make connections with one another through their shared experiences. An excerpt from one of the comments highlights this:

Hi, Learner A. Nice to meet you. I read your English reading history. It was so fun because I have some similar experiences with

you. When I was child, I have read picture book and I also couldn't understand the meaning of sentences, just enjoy characters and pictures. Additionally, I avoided serious reading topics like you said in the document so now I try to read them too! Good luck on your studying :-)

From this excerpt, one can see that this learner identifies with Learner A because of their shared experiences. One might also presume that the learner might feel motivated by seeing this history and finding someone else who is also like-minded with a similar experience. Comments like the one above were prevalent throughout the sharing of the histories. The following two excerpts are from learners who made a connection with the ideas presented by another learner's reading history (Learner B) and commented on that connection.

I didn't think about the importance of imagination that how I would feel if I were the character but I notice that I actually did the same way like you. When I'm listening my favorite music, I search the lyrics and think of the meanings then imagine the character (singer)'s emotion too.

This learner is responding to Learner B's reading history in which she expressed the idea that she likes reading because she can use her imagination. This learner had never thought about that aspect of reading before and realized through reading the other learner's reading history that in fact, she followed the same process. This recognition reinforces the strategy for both the learner who wrote the reading history and the learner who is commenting on it, because they are now able to see validity in that strategy. In a sense, the learner responding to the reading history did not learn anything new, but through Learner B's reading history, she was able to see herself and a strategy that she

was unaware that she also used. The next excerpt, in response to the same reading history, shows how another learner also identified with the strategies even though they both had different English reading histories.

I have quite a different English history. But I could find some similarities like "Predicting what happens next" and "how I feel if I was the character". It's good to have different experience and good to know different history.

I found that this comment, and the comments of other learners as they shared and discussed their reading strategies, justified this approach and procedure. Doing this activity at the very beginning of the course allowed learners the time to think about their experiences with reading, and to begin to see how others have similar experiences. I believe that beginning with this type of activity helped the learners honestly share their self-directed reading experiences later on, and they continued to learn from one another as a result.

3.2 Reading Different Texts Brainstorm

This activity produced interesting strategies and ideas about reading different texts. From observing the class during the activity, I can say that all of the learners interacted with one another to come up with the ideas for reading. They were especially engaged when they were reading the comments that other groups had written about the texts. Moreover, placing the learners into smaller groups for the discussions helped them have more interaction about the task. In the following section, I offer a few examples of the ideas that the learners have about how to read different texts.

First, I was surprised by some of the ideas that the learners had about reading textbooks. Some of the pre-reading activities the learners decided on for this type of text were: reading contents first, reading the title and imagining the contents, using brainstorming, getting information from pictures and researching about a text on a website. These ideas showed me what the learners thought were important activities for beginning to read a textbook. These strategies were not particularly surprising since I am sure that these are strategies they had learned from their academic reading classes. However, some of the activities that were suggested while reading did surprise me, such as ‘read aloud’ and ‘read with DVD and CD’ to understand the text. I think that the read aloud came from their experiences in high school and have carried over to college because many of the learners in the course described these activities in their reading histories. Also, as the learners carried out their self-directed reading and reflected on their experiences in their learning journals, many of them mentioned using this strategy as they were trying to understand a complicated text. In regards to the strategy using of a DVD or CD to understand the text, I was not aware that learners were using textbooks with these multimedia materials. This type of activity was helpful not only in allowing learners to see the similarities in their ideas about how to read texts, but also in making me aware of the different strategies that they believe help them to read texts.

Other interesting comments were written on the brainstorming form for how to read novels. For ‘pre-reading’ and ‘while-reading’ activities, ‘imagining the story’ was mentioned. This is a strategy that learners are aware of using to help make sense of the story. I was surprised to see the comment, ‘try to get rid of our stereotype to know the story more closely’. This was marked as a ‘while reading’ or ‘after-reading’ strategy, and

it was heartening to see that the learners were able to think this deeply about what might be represented in a novel. I was also surprised to see ‘memorize the information’, but this is mainly because there was no elaboration for this statement. I can only speculate that they thought that memorizing the details of the story was important. They also thought about imagining the society that the character lives in, and reading reviews of the novels. Again, these are English majors so certainly in their literature classes they have been exposed to these strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these two activities were used to good effect in my classroom to promote shared experiences and to build a learning community of readers who could feel comfortable sharing their strategies with one another. There is evidence that through writing and sharing their reading histories, the learners were able to make connections with one another. Through the reading brainstorm activity, I observed the interaction between learners and was able to perceive that they were forming a community. They were also able to share their strategies for reading different texts and discover new ones that they might employ in the future.

In this course, I used many other activities to maintain the community atmosphere in the classroom, but I presented these specific activities at the FEELTA conference because I wanted to give teachers some activities to help them understand what their own learners already know about reading. The benefits of the activities also include the help that they provide to build a learning community of readers who are secure with sharing

their reading experiences. This hopefully means that as the course progresses the participants are able to continue to learn from one another.

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