

A Judicious Lesson: A Whole-learning Reading Activity

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Varaprasad (1997:24) points out that a reading text is often used only as a "means to impart grammatical, vocabulary, and content knowledge" with little regard for the text's rhetorical and personal effect on the reader. However, a reading assignment in an advanced skills course can be a starting point for a communicative, whole-learning activity. Through reader-response activities, comprehension tasks, and gap-fills, the written word has the role of facilitator, enabling the students to practice their comprehension and language skills.

This article explains a unique activity using this approach in a tertiary-level lower-advanced reading and speaking course. Following a semester-long theme on crime and punishment, I decided to introduce my students to an authentic, idiomatic text dealing with a famous murder case in recent U.S. history.

Following Grellet (1988), I decided to explicitly incorporate the students' natural feelings, logical schemata, and cultural understanding into the text as they were reading it. Instead of treating the text as an authority that should be understood and trusted, I engaged the students' critical thinking skills, personal opinions, and logical arguments. I asked the students to take an active role in interpreting the text and formulating their own beliefs about the validity of various aspects of the text (including the author's point of view, intention, and tone). The activity thus met the criterion that "reading should be treated as a creative and challenging activity where students' questioning and interpretive abilities are triggered" (Varaprasad 1997:25).

Beyond comprehension

Having spent several months discussing various aspects of delinquency problems and solutions, my students were ready for a more difficult assignment. I wanted something which would not be open to an easy interpretation of right or wrong, guilty or innocent, because I had found the students lost interest in a subject as soon as they made a clear decision on the dilemma it posed. Also, because the students had very little knowledge of how the United States judicial system functions, I wished to explore the hierarchy of the court system (municipal, federal, the Supreme Court, etc.) and explore some of the cultural reasons behind the system.

I decided to use a modern-day, sensationalized murder case which still has not come to a firm conclusion. I chose the case of Jeffrey MacDonald, the U.S. Army Green Beret surgeon found innocent, and later guilty, of the murder of his family. The lead-up to this lesson had to be carefully considered, for the article "The Devil and Jeffrey MacDonald" by Robert Sam Anson (1998), published in *Vanity Fair* magazine, is full of intricate details of the murders, many of which could offend young-adult readers. Yet, because of the details and the fact that the case has not been finalized to many people's satisfaction, the article gives the students the opportunity to look for and draw their own conclusions about the case.

The article is quite idiomatically written, using many new expressions and colloquial vocabulary. The rhetorical aspects of the article are deliberately contradictory. The author ambiguously persuades the reader to believe Jeffrey MacDonald is guilty of the crime, and yet completely humane and devoid of the ruthlessness which such a crime would seemingly require. Thus, the students were focused both on understanding the language and the rhetorical devices used. See Varaprasad (1997) for details on critical reading strategies.

This article is 12 pages long and includes many pictures of MacDonald in prison and of his family life prior to the murders. Expanding the problem-solving framework of Willis (1996), I decided to spend three weeks (six class sessions) on the article, with at-home reading and in-class discussion and group work. I wanted the students to use the in-class time to go beyond comprehension and toward accepting the written word as an organic whole, influencing and influenced by the reader. The task culminated in the fourth week with a trial of Jeffrey MacDonald.

The assignment

Warm-up

Using the students' knowledge from our work earlier in the semester, we began discussing causes or motivations for murder. Most of the students had similar opinions: poverty, drugs, revenge, greed, anger, and so forth. We talked about the point of view that police might have toward homicide, and the students discussed thoughts of anger, resignation, and even revenge (e.g., "They should stop at nothing to catch the murderer"). I then introduced the idea of an innocent person being caught and incarcerated for a horrible murder. "How would it feel to be an innocent person found guilty of murder?" I asked. The students didn't have a clear-cut answer. They responded, "How do you know he's innocent?" and "Nobody would jail someone if he were innocent." They believed from the beginning that once someone is found guilty, he is clearly guilty.

This was the jumping-off point for "The Devil and Jeffrey MacDonald." As the article states, MacDonald had a seemingly picture-perfect life until, as he has testified, a group of drug-addicted hippies came into his home, attacked him, and butchered his pregnant wife and two young daughters. Because of sloppy police work and the cultural milieu of Fort Bragg, North Carolina in 1970 (where a clean-cut Army surgeon would typically not have been suspected of murder), MacDonald was acquitted of the murders in a military court.

Nearly 10 years later, after the U.S. Supreme Court allowed it, he was retried in federal court, found guilty, and sentenced to three consecutive life sentences. In the following two decades, he won his freedom through appeal and then lost it again in the Supreme Court. His case has been to the Supreme Court seven times, setting a modern record for a criminal proceeding. MacDonald is currently in prison and a new nonfiction book has come out detailing his innocence. His latest appeal may go to the Supreme Court again if a DNA test result is favorable to his case (Anson 1998).

Preparing for the trial

As part of the assignment, the students would hold a trial in the case of Jeffrey MacDonald vs. the United States Government. I explained the key roles in a U.S. court of law, which are discussed at length in the article: for example, prosecutor, defense lawyer, police, private investigator, and the judge/jury.¹ Before the students began to read the article, I assigned each student one of the five judicial roles above, which the student would act out through the reading of the text. I asked each student to read the text as his or her character would. For example, the students who had the role of prosecutor looked for clues to build a case against MacDonald, and the students who had the role of MacDonald's private investigator looked for concrete evidence that other suspects committed the crime.

In the beginning, this approach was difficult for the students to understand. Many of the students complained that they already had an opinion on the case, and they could not see the point of arguing something they did not believe. We discussed their notions of justice and I encouraged them to act as their conscience led them. Many defense attorneys, I added, believe their clients to be guilty.

I provided background information, a who's who list, and paper for noting evidence and the rationale behind the evidence. Over the next three weeks, the five groups (one for each judicial role) "investigated" the article. This activity provided a communicative, whole-learning situation in which the students discussed their views and reasoning, especially when disagreements over evidence broke out.

The students started off with the knowledge that they would not only have to comprehend the article but actively enlist the article in support of their own beliefs and their assigned characters' beliefs. The exercise thus engaged their critical thinking skills while adding a truly communicative aspect to the reading assignment. The students approached the text as a dialogue between the written word and their own opinions. Moreover, each student's comprehension of the text was changed by his or her judicial role. Their various perspectives made the students move beyond the "I know the answer, test me on it" attitude.

Each week, the first 45 minutes of class were spent on class discussions of the text they had studied at home. Thereafter (two additional hours over two class periods), the students worked in their assigned groups. I facilitated their discussions with open-ended questions, noting logical inconsistencies in their arguments and encouraging the students to look deeper into the text's implications. The students began to reread the article, or at least sections of it, several times. The assumptions, implications, and linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the article were discussed in the groups. I was pleased to see, after a slow start, that even the weakest students were trying very hard to communicate their ideas in English to the rest of the group and often resorted to pictures and descriptive communication.

The trial

In the fourth week we held the trial. It was obvious that each group spent a great deal of effort coming up with a strong argument. Each group displayed evidence taken from the article, adding the necessary inferences to prove one point or another. It was very satisfying to see that several groups, especially the police and MacDonald's private investigators, used some of the same evidence to support opposing viewpoints. The trial lasted for over an hour, with each group

acting quite independently of me as the teacher. The judge/jury group took control and guided the "testimony" and "evidence" brilliantly.

In the end, Jeffrey MacDonald was found not guilty of the murders and a further investigation was called for. The students also decided that hippies were not involved in the crime but that someone else must have committed the murders. Several people decided to independently pursue the case, for which I supplied relevant Internet addresses.²

Conclusion

We ended our month-long exercise by addressing aspects of language, culture, and rhetoric. In anonymous feedback reports, most students found the cultural information in the article to be the most important thing they learned, while the second most common comment was one of amazement that language had such depth. One negative comment was that there should have been a group representing Jeffrey MacDonald himself, an idea with which I am eager to experiment.

All in all, I found it was the students' abilities to become critically active with the written language and to make it their own that brought out the communicative efficacy of this whole-learning activity. These lower-advanced students are accustomed to having to understand English texts, but comprehension is usually the only goal. By asking the students to move beyond comprehension and into a critical dialogue with the text, their peers, and the teacher, authentic communicative activity was fostered. As for our trial, it is a shame that MacDonald could not use our defense team as his lawyers!

References

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¹ For simplicity, I combined the judge and jury into one role for the classroom trial.

² An Internet search of "Jeffrey MacDonald" will retrieve a great many Web pages on this case.