

Danielle Couture
Due: Thursday, 8/14/13

Section A: Book Club Review

Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action

I would like to preface this essay by stating that somehow I have never actually been part of an “authentic” book club before, so this was a new experience for me. I’m glad to say that it turned out to be really fun and interesting! I chose this book for two reasons. The main reason was that I thought it would be something really beneficial and applicable for 6th grade social studies, which is what I currently teach. The second reason is that, with the new Common Core State Standards in ELA for 6th grade social studies, the amount of authentic reading and writing has really increased for the 2013-14 school year. In addition to that, I have a number of both special education and at-risk students on my team, and I thought that this form of learning might be a way to help my struggling students learn some skills from their peers and take more responsibility for their own learning. I can’t say that my problems are solved, but this book *does* offer a number of theories, lessons, and suggestions that I believe (if implemented correctly) will definitely help in my classroom!

Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action is broken down into four main parts. Part One, chapters 1-4, provides us with some background knowledge on comprehension and collaboration (group work). It shares with us what studies and research have shown about them, both separately and together, and finally defines true inquiry as opposed to more simple project-based inquiries that can be less authentic. In Part Two, chapters 5-7, we learn about the ten fundamental classroom conditions necessary for small group learning to be effective. We also learn about the importance of incorporating technology with inquiry, and some strategies for doing so effectively. Finally in chapter 7, my favorite chapter, we are given 27 specific lessons for teaching important comprehension and cooperation skills and strategies to get kids ready to get started with inquiry circles. Part three, chapters 8-11, defines four specific models for inquiry: mini-inquiries, curricular

inquiries, literature circle inquiries, and open inquiry. Finally the last section of the book, Part 4, chapters 12 and 13, covers management concerns that arise with small group inquiry, such as assessment, grading, setup, and other commonly asked questions.

I really liked the “book club experience.” Hearing my group member’s differing takes on the same material I’d just read was really interesting. Plus there was some comfort in knowing we had a lot of the same concerns, such as how much time would be needed to implement inquiry circles, how to grade them on report cards, what happens if one group gets done long before the others, what if “student choice” topics stray far from the curriculum, etc. We also all had reservations about letting go of “control” in our classrooms, but would like to try, and agree that mini-inquiry will be the best course of action for us to “get our feet wet” with inquiry circles. Additionally, it was really helpful being able to bounce ideas off each other as to what we thought might work or not work with inquiry in each of our differing classrooms and grade levels.

As far as incorporating inquiry circles in my *own* classroom goes, I have to admit I’m a little apprehensive as I don’t like giving up control, but I really do want to try it. As a group, we all agree that mini-inquiries would be the best place for us to start, as it’s not too far of a leap from what we already do in class. Some of the other ladies in my group thought Literature Circle Inquiries might be doable in their rooms, since their students are already familiar with participating in traditional literature circles for ELA. Personally, I kind of like the concept behind Circular Inquiry, because I did a lot of in depth work for my undergrad degree concerning creating units from scratch using “backward design,” which is a key factor in circular inquiries. So far I’ve come up with two units where I think I would feel comfortable to begin implementing small group inquiry in some form, but I think my first “guinea pig/test trial” attempt at using small group inquiry is going to be on our “First Peoples of Canada” unit. For this unit there is a fairly in-depth website and webquest involved. It might be the perfect way to introduce the mini-inquiry model. I was thinking maybe I could do a different inquiry circle group for

each Native American tribe that settled in Canada. Maybe each group could decide what things about the tribe they want to know, like their tribe's methods of travel, what animals they used, what religious beliefs they had and practiced, etc. and start their research there with the website and webquest to guide them. This idea is still a work in progress, but I think it's a good starting point.

In my opinion, this book *was* beneficial to read and I'm glad I chose it. I would have to say that I liked the second half of the book much better than the first. For me, the actual lessons and descriptions of the different types of inquiry models are more useful than the philosophical reasoning behind "why inquiry" and information on research studies performed. Chapter 7 was my favorite chapter because it had so many applicable lessons for small group work and critical thinking strategies to use during reading that I think would be great to implement in my 6th grade social studies classroom. I was also proud to discover that some of the lessons and strategies described I have already taught and see my students using effectively!

So to recap, even if a teacher (like myself) isn't quite ready release full control and dive into the deep end of full-fledged, authentic inquiry circles, this book still has *a lot* to offer in the way of lessons for facilitating effective small group work such as how to disagree without arguing, lessons on strategies students can implement for different genres/types of reading, suggestions for how to assess and progress monitor students reading and comprehension while they're working with their groups, and specific examples of inquiry work using a number of different style models at multiple grade levels. For the reasons I've just stated, I would definitely choose to recommend this book to others, and I'm sure I'll be loaning it out this year to a few middle school colleagues!

Harvey, S., & Daniels, H. (2009). *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Section B: Professional Reflection of TE 842

Some background information pertinent to my reflection is that I currently have a major and certified endorsement in language arts as part of my undergrad degree, and I used to strictly teach reading curriculum support at the elementary level. However for the past few years I have been teaching 6th grade social studies, so I haven't really been using and refining those reading assessment and instruction skills that I used to need on a daily basis. Originally, I wanted to take this course because one day I may choose to return to elementary, or return my focus to reading support full-time, so I wanted to be up to date on the best ways to assess student's strengths and weaknesses and plan their instruction accordingly. I am really happy with my decision to take TE 842, because I not only feel my skills have been refreshed, but feel I have learned a lot of additional skills as well, and the best part is I don't have to wait until I'm teaching reading again to use them! I've been reminded that EVERY teacher is a reading teacher, regardless of the content area! I'm a little disappointed in myself for losing sight of this somewhere along the way, and my new goal is to foster some form of literacy instruction in my classroom every single day.

One aspect of my teaching that has been affirmed is my ability to accurately determine strengths and weaknesses in a student's reading, and target instruction for his or her individual needs. I came to this affirmation after completing the two group discussion posts. I was nervous to analyze and plan instruction for Abby and Nicky, because it's been a while since I've done that and I was a little worried that my answers might be wrong or differ from my group, but I ended up being really proud of the work I did there, because most of the time the "diagnosis" and I came up with and the strategies I suggested for instruction were very similar to the "answer keys" provided after the discussions were closed. This made me feel much more confident in my ability to recognize areas where a student might be struggling, and to provide helpful supports in those areas.

I wouldn't say that there are aspects of my teaching that I'm "questioning," but after taking this

course I definitely do think there are instructional practices I can really improve upon or add in my classroom. Now, instead of just having the kids read the text, I can teach instructional strategies for reading informational texts, and teach and encourage pre-reading. I can ask my own implicit and explicit questions and teach students how to go about inferring. I can listen for where the gaps in reading are occurring for individuals and work with my ELA counterpart to determine instructional strategies we can have in play both in social studies and ELA to help certain struggling readers grow. I can provide much more background knowledge on new social studies topics prior to reading about them in order to aid in decoding and understanding new vocabulary and reading comprehension, and much more. Most importantly, I will remember that just because a child is a 6th grader, does *not* mean that that child is reading and comprehending at a 6th grade level, nor does it mean they have all the necessary reading skills 6th graders should have. New knowledge of the Modified Cognitive Model also gives me a really helpful idea of what to look for in terms of what skills are lacking and what areas a student might need additional support in to “bridge the gap!”

Now that this course is completed, I plan on continuing to practice effective reading assessment and instruction by adding into my daily instruction the ideas I’ve just listed above. However, I will also be attempting to incorporate small group inquiry circles into my class for the first time this year. I’m excited about this because I feel, among other things, that this will be a great way for me to assess student’s reading and comprehension as they work, and it will also provide me with more time to work one on one with students who I may find to be struggling with different aspects of reading. In addition, to continue my own literacy instruction education I have just completed TE 836 – “Awards and Classics of Children’s Literature,” and still plan to take TE 846 – “Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners” and TE 848 – “Writing Assessment and Instruction,” which we know goes hand in hand with reading.

In conclusion, I am very happy with my decision to take this course. At the beginning of the

semester I thought I was just taking a “refresher” course in reading assessment and instruction in case I ever wanted to go back to teaching reading support or elementary full-time. Now, after finishing the course, I have realized that there’s so much reading assessment (and especially reading instruction) that I could be doing every day in my social studies classroom as well, and am excited to dive into doing so. I can’t wait to see what happens!