

## **Unit 9 – Reading Projects: Building a Reading Life or Authoring Your Own Unit**

*June*

### **Building A Reading Life**

Over the past year, students have been given a variety of reading experiences, and they have undoubtedly grown tremendously as readers. This unit gives them time to savor their experiences, notice their growth and use their reflections as a way to create reading projects for themselves independently. It also gives us as teachers a chance to design our own unit of study, by carefully thinking back on the entire year to best ascertain and address students' growth and ever-present needs.

The goal of Independent Reading Projects is that readers will have a sense of purpose behind their reading. No longer will they read by randomly selecting books out of the P basket. They will know themselves as readers, their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes, and more importantly, they will know the strategies that readers use when initiating a rich, purposeful, independent reading life.

If you decide to guide all your students through Independent Reading Projects you may begin the unit by teaching them to look through their reading logs and reading notebooks to determine the kind of reader they are or have become during the year. Teach them to review these documents; asking themselves questions such as, "What types of books do I tend to read?" "Of the books I've read, which are my favorites?" "What genres do I tend to shy away from?" Your students will begin seeing patterns across their reading work, which might empower them to say, "I'm the kind of reader who loves to read..." Research shows us that a decline in summer reading has a huge impact on student reading progress. Therefore, you can teach students how to use their logs to assess themselves and set new goals for reading volume and stamina. Teach them to read over their logs for the year, asking themselves questions such as, "What reading levels have I moved through this year?" "How can I describe my reading volume and reading rate?"

Students might also use their reading portfolios to reflect on their reading lives. Looking across the year at their growth in a specific skill, you can teach readers how to notice their progress and set new goals for themselves as readers. Therefore, in addition to finding a collection of books to read, readers will also have new reading skill goals along with a sense of accomplishment in the progress that they have made across the year. They might also set goals for reading habits to work on volume or reading rate.

Another way students can reflect is by recalling significant reading experiences they've had across the year; help them think through the units of study your class has traveled through together. Perhaps they recall a partnership, club or read-aloud conversation in which they developed a huge insight. Or maybe they read a book that touched them so deeply that it changed the way they saw books they'd read previously. You might have students read through their logs and notebooks looking for 'landmark books,' asking the question: "Which books have changed me in some way?" "What about these books changed me?" You want students to use their landmark books to help them name the characteristics that they want to try to find in new books. Readers might discover types

of themes or archetypes that appeal to them. A reader may learn that books that contain the “fish out of water” theme really appeal to her.

Students might also reflect on their learning life across the curriculum. You can teach them to ask themselves, “What units of study in social studies or science or math really stuck with me or intrigued me?” You may want to teach students how our learning lives can serve as catalysts for reading projects. Where the curriculum may only have touched on The Great Wall of China, the reader can go much further with an independent reading project. In addition, you might want to teach that our day-to-day lives can inspire independent reading projects. This year there were a lot of articles and studies publicized about lying in general and lying in memoirs. A student may choose an independent reading project that reads several memoirs thinking about the importance of telling the truth or the project may be more nonfiction based on studies of lying.

As readers reflect, they will begin to notice their reading preferences and strengths as well as areas open for further exploration. This data can become a source for planning a reading project.

After students have had some time to reflect on their reading work, we might offer some possible options for reading projects. Some projects might emerge from their reflection work. Students may want to work on moving from one level to the next over the next five weeks. Others might want to challenge themselves by trying out a genre they haven’t read this year. Others might want to try to work on improving their reading rate, and instead of reading four books in four weeks, move to six books in four weeks.

As another option, however, we may want to use this time to teach our students that many readers in the world create projects out of an interest—a personal interest or a social/historical/world interest. We might ask students the question, “If you could spend the last five weeks of school reading books on a topic or concern in which you have a vested interest, what would that be?” Then, perhaps, we can give possible examples to give our students, modeling first, from our own interests or concerns. Some ideas could be:

- An interest in the collected works of a particular author. A Jacqueline Woodson study, for instance, could include her books as well as the film versions.
- An interest in fantasy books—but how different fantasy writers differ from one another. For example, one student read several J.K.Rowling books alongside Phillip Pullman’s books in order to do a comparison/contrast of their books.
- An interest in a social issue. For example, one student was interested in how girls are portrayed in the media, especially with body image. She decided to a series of “chick lit,” the highly popular books like, *The A List*, *The Clique*, etc., in order to examine how these books perpetuate the myths of body image to girls. You may extend this work to include film and video.
- An interest in what makes a classic book “classic” or in why awards are awarded to certain books and not to others.
- An interest in why some books are censored. For example, one student examined The Banned Book List and chose 4-6 books from the list to read—examining the

- politics of censorship, interviews with the authors, and her own impressions of the books along the way, putting together *Upstate* and *Catcher in the Rye*.
- An interest in a particular subject or person. For example, one student was really interested in the Mets. He read biographies of players, books about the team and its rivals, he studied current sports pages and made predictions about upcoming games, he kept a 'Mets journal,' he studied film clips, and he taught his class how to be engaged and knowledgeable fans and shared his passion.
  - An interest in the difference between “girl books” and “boy books” and if they should have those labels.
  - An interest in the social aspect of reading. Students could have a reading partnership with another student, parent, or group to see how they read differently, what they talk about, and what their individual readings say about the kind of people they are.

Teach students to begin by taking everything they have learned about themselves as readers to start gathering books. They might gather books around a favorite author, a nonfiction topic, a genre, an issue or a theme. For example, a student might have loved the class read-aloud, *Skinny Bones* by Barbara Park. He might, therefore, choose to collect other books by this author and create an author study for himself. Or perhaps, during the unit of study on *Social Issue Book Clubs*, a club might have begun reading books about *peer pressure*. For their reading project, some of those students might decide to continue reading more books that focus around this issue. There might be students who have collected lists of books recommended by classmates throughout the year; this is the perfect opportunity for them to gather these books and create a reading project for themselves.

Students may find a different way to focus their projects; they may decide to take on a consideration of their personal reading habits. Some students may decide that they would like to try and lift their reading up a level before the end of the year, to increase their volume from four books a month to six books a month, or to increase their reading rate from 20 pages in 30 minutes to 30 pages in 30 minutes.

We can make space for students to begin collecting reading materials in the classroom library by providing baskets labeled with the students' projects. This serves as an organizational support for students as well as a vehicle for making projects public: “Who else has a project like mine?” “Who might read with me?” “Who could use this book recommendation?” This will help students form partnerships and clubs around reading projects. After they've learned so much about building ideas through conversation, you'll want to encourage them at this point to continue this work independently.

Now that students have gathered materials (and perhaps other readers), they are well into their reading projects. You'll want to teach them to plan their reading, and to make deadlines for themselves. You might give them a blank calendar where they can plan the start date and end date of the reading of the books they've chosen. Show them how to plan the amount of time they'll be reading each day in school and at home, and to decide how many pages they'll be able to read during this time. Remind them what they have

learned about themselves as readers from the study of their personal reading data. How many pages do I typically read in thirty minutes? They'll use this information to set a deadline for their books. Students will also need to plan when they will meet with partners or clubs to discuss their reading. We can teach them to ask themselves (and each other!) questions such as:

- How will my study go?
- What will I do each day? How can I write that on my calendar?
- What will I read? What are my reading goals (skills-based)?
- How will writing support my study?
- When will I spend time reflecting on how my study is going and revise it when needed?
- When will I talk to my classmates about my project and their studies?
- How will I assess my project?

Help them answer these questions and make plans accordingly, as well as guiding them in ways to keep track of their work across the unit of study.

As you can see, this unit is a time for students to think about the skills and strategies they've learned this year, the progress they've made, and the work they can do to continue to strengthen themselves as readers. You might discuss and name the qualities of good reading studied across the year, and students might use these qualities to reflect on themselves as readers. We could pose questions that help students think about specific reading skills such as: "Do you reread when you meet up with confusion? Do you reread to think more deeply about your reading?" Or something more open-ended like: "How do you tend to develop ideas about the books you read?" Students can use these reflections as a way to make plans then remember to apply particular skills and strategies as they read.

Your conference notes might indicate that there are students in need of work in a particular area; you might pull these students together in small groups to teach strategy lessons that focus on particular reading skills or habits. For example, you may have several students who are working on improving their interpretation skills. They might each bring their reading-project books to the small group and apply the strategy to their independent projects. Students who are all working on increasing their reading rate might come together in a small group with you and practice a strategy on their independent project books.

In the end students are using their self-assessments and what they have learned about being a reader in your curriculum this year, to create their own study.