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EXPERT MASTERCLASS

Whole Novels for the Whole Class

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Speaker

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Summary Paragraph/Key Points

A teacher from a very diverse school, Jackson Heights, Queens, and with thirteen years of teaching experience under belt, Ariel Sacks devised a unique student-centered approach to teaching reading and literature in secondary school.

The “Whole Novel” approach innovates directly from the classroom, based on Ariel’s experience with 7th and 8th grade. Crediting her mentor, Madeleine Ray (Bank Street College of Education), for the idea for the method, Ariel then worked in the field for ten years to expand upon the theory. She encourages every teacher to try this methodology, try some adaptations and even start with some shorter texts. “The key to helping students analyze a text is to encourage them to read the whole thing first,” Sack explains.

She describes how we need to consider why students read and their inspiration to read. For children, this begins with “a love of story”.

“Our brains are specially wired to pay attention to stories. We process what we think and what we learn, and we pay attention to stories because our brains are set up to do so. All humans do this and have over time. We are story-tellers,” claims Sacks.

Stories are stored in our memory as actual experiences, but our brain does not necessarily differentiate between the two. Children always have something to say about what they experience; as response is part of the natural story process. Therefore we need to understand how children respond authentically to a story.

Sacks paints a mental picture of a movie theater. Imagine how you would feel at the movies if the movie paused and someone asked you to tell them how you feel about the movie so far, and to write about it, before re-starting this movie. This “strange





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experience” replicates how children feel when interrupted when reading, however in the traditional model of teaching novels, this is what we do. We ask children to respond to a chapter. There is a lot of “stopping and starting” and a lot of teacher-questioning, which influences the experience of the child. This prevents the children from “experiencing the story”. Sacks describes this as “an alienating experience... children don’t like the reading experience in class, and often read their own books under the desk.”

The “whole novel” approach addresses this issue and proposes a solution.

1. Let students read the whole book before analyzing. The goal is to support students to access and experience the story in their own way. This enables teachers to differentiate support for students in their own unique process, and facilitate community among readers. This also prevents students from starting with the questions about the text, and allows them to plunge into the story.

Text selection is critical. Sacks acknowledges the movement around “choice reading”, and she advocates this in parallel to “whole book reading”. This allows students to develop their own interest in reading in the style that they like independently, and also to bring those skills into a shared text for the whole class to read.

2. Give students reading time in class – this is very important as the teacher can support students through the process. Sacks often pools students to confer between themselves, and also offers audio support for those children who would like to listen. “It is so critical for children to be read to or to listen to stories,” Sacks explains, “It is important, however, that these children also have the opportunity to read without the audio.”

Students have a schedule and a copy of the book to take home – it is imperative that they spend at least 25 minutes a day reading. Sacks starts with 10 minutes per day for “transitional language learners” and for more general readers, she encourages 20 – 25 pages per day. This enables her to individualize each reader’s needs, and for the faster students she selects other books which are connected thematically or stylistically, or by the same author.

3. Teach students to recognize and articulate their authentic responses as they read. Sacks recommends students use “sticky notes” in the book, as a way of monitoring direct response and offsetting plagiarism amongst students. The main objective is to encourage students to “pay attention to their thoughts.”

“I keep it simple. I tell them stories at the beginning of the year, folk tales and short stories that they may even know. I ask them for their thoughts, and teach them to distinguish between their types of response,” describes Sacks.

4. Use small group mini-projects to build comprehension and investigate literary elements. For example, students will dramatize and draw scenes from the book. “This brings the classroom and the text to life”, Sacks explains. “It’s so much





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fun.” These ways of creating a visual from the text are classic methodologies, such as character mapping with additional dimensions such as adding quotes. This enables them to clear up any miscomprehension of the story and make connections between plot-lines in a visual way.

5. Allow students to drive the content of discussions and analysis. Sacks does not craft her own questions, as she believes this radical approach should be student-led. She brings half of the class together whilst the other half works on creative writing, a topic which helps them enjoy and express their reading. Middle school children particularly love killing off a character from a book, or they can write a poem from the point of view of a character. In the group discussion, every student speaks once and Sacks types a “script”. Once everyone has spoken, Sacks takes on a facilitator role, encouraging threads for discussion and probing for examples. This process takes six days, with each group taking three rounds for discussion. During this time, debates and differences in perspective emerge. These create an “authentic occasion” for a close reading of the text, whilst simultaneously Sacks encourages students to find evidence from the text.

Sacks identifies “magic words” for facilitating student-centered discussions: a set of simple questions to help the students delve a little deeper into a discussion:

- What do the rest of you think about that?
- Can anyone find a part in the book that shows that?
- What in the book is making you say that?
- What did the author write that makes you think that?

She also outlines three stages of whole novel discussions, to shape the three days during which each group discusses the text:

1. Authentic, Surface Level Response: gut reactions, strong feelings, debates emerge
2. Evidence-based Analysis: questions are explored from stage one, evidence is found to back up claims and a re-reading is encouraged to gain a deeper understanding.
3. Analysis and Critical Interpretations about the author’s meaning and intentions - these become the basis of literary essays. Sacks types up the notes and give the students transcripts to help the students recall their arguments, positions that they are invested in and of which they have tried to convince their peers.

Sacks has developed a cyclical flow and new style of model to respond to the text, named “The Reader Response and Analysis Cycle”.

This goes against the “traditional model” wherein a truly subjective response does not typically happen, as the teacher controls this stage a lot by offering their own interpretation of the story, with pointed questions.





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She offers the metaphor of a painting. “Imagine if you only saw a corner of a painting. Could you analyze what a painter is doing in just one corner? Yes. But the teacher comes in with the perspective of the whole painting.”

To get to critical analysis stage with struggling readers, we need to take care with text selection. Teachers can begin with oral storytelling, or films to share the process. If we keep it high-interest and offer a lot of support, Sacks claims that students will be able to unlock the whole novel for themselves and gain a richer experience.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: Instead of breaking text analysis down chapter by chapter, we should allow children to develop a love of reading by giving them the opportunity and support to read and assess an entire novel.

