



From Juicy to Rooftop and Other Lines in Between **Teaching Remedial Reading to First Year College Students**

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Abstract: The qualitative method of *story* is used in this article to discuss the author's work in teaching a remedial college reading course for the first time. The article highlights the instructional methods and community-building exercises used to critically teach basic reading to an educationally and culturally diverse group of first year college students at a predominantly White institution. The author discusses the approach to the course and interactions with students using a culturally responsive teaching framework. She illustrates how reading instruction can be contoured around music, popular culture issues and students' interests in order to exercise essential reading skill sets: critical thinking, active questioning, making connections and inferences, and ongoing reflection. The author describes the print and non-print texts used in the course that include music, short stories, poems, and a novel to exercise and improve reading and writing. The literacy instruction discussed reflects real-world connections between reader and text, and promotes student engagement and citizenship. The article outlines the author's ability to relate to and connect with students in order to strengthen their literacy skills, and encourage them to rethink their relationship with reading. A summary of students' feedback about their learning and impressions of the course is also included.

I. INTRODUCTION

My father has avidly played chess ever since I can remember. I have childhood memories of him moving, with precision, the hard plastic pieces across the board. I remember his eyes scanning his opponent's pieces and making his moves with minia-

ture grunts and chuckles. One day my mother asked my father why he never played chess with a particular family member. My father responded that he does not want to play someone who does not challenge him.

This story surfaced from the archives of my mind when I agreed to teach a remedial

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reading course for the first time to many students who were taking it for the second time. I knew this would be a challenge for my students and me. I learned from my father to embrace challenges because they have the power to push one toward excellence. This would be my first time officially teaching students whom I believed would be resistant and reluctant learners. Over winter intersession, I met with the coordinator of the Basic Reading Skills Program. Leading up to the meeting, I shared a plethora of ideas that I had for teaching this college remedial reading course. My ideas were non-traditional and veered off of the Program's structural path of reading instruction; I wanted to teach a novel and incorporate literature circles (Daniels, 2004) as a formal way of responding and interacting to the text. I did not want to use a reading textbook or crowd the course with the ubiquitous reading drill sheets. The coordinator was impressed with my ideas and wanted me to teach a section comprised of mostly course repeaters. I was looking forward to the challenge and was euphoric about my anticipated approach to the course.

II. STEP BY STEP: ESTABLISHING AN ENTRY POINT

One of Whitney Houston's hit songs in the early 1990s, *Step by Step*, told of the speaker taking her/his time to get herself/himself together. Like the song, I wanted to begin, step by step, building a relationship with my students. On the first day of class I greeted students with the song and lyrics to *Juicy* by Biggie Smalls a.k.a. Notorious B.I.G. I asked students to rearrange their desks and form a large circle. I passed out a graphic organizer that I created to make real-world connections between the reader and text (see Figure 1). As the handouts circulated and the edited version of *Juicy* played, one student cheerfully commented,

"I don't need the words, I know this." Another said, "Yeah, this is what I'm talkin' about." Others looked on in surprise and glee. I remember saying to myself, *yes! I think I captivated them.* I chose *Juicy* because of its rags to riches narrative quality. The song is the author's autobiographical journey from moving from the margins of society as a menace to secured fame with life's finest amenities. Although I am not a hip-hop maven, *Juicy* is considered the hip-hop anthem or mantra. I assumed that hip-hop would be a favorite among my students because of its large global fan base of people from different hues and age brackets.

After listening to the song and filling out the graphic organizer, I asked students to share their responses to *Juicy*. They all located and echoed images and words that pointed to Biggie's struggles and achievements. In an effort to have students make connections with Biggie and their relationship with reading and the course, students listed their struggles with the course, goals, and actions for achieving their goals on the graphic organizer (Figure 1):

Following the activity, I asked students to introduce themselves by sharing their name and academic major. I led a mini-discussion about how they would like the class to be run. For most, this was their second time taking the class and I was eager to hear their ideas. I did not receive as many concrete and meaty responses as I had hoped. I felt the comments were disjointed and held comic overtones so I moved to my plan B. I asked students to take out a sheet of paper and write me a note about their reading strengths and weaknesses (Figure 2).

Students reported many common weaknesses such as *losing concentration while reading [and when story is boring]*, *hard to find interest in a certain topics*, and *answering follow-up questions*. Conversely, students listed uniquely different reading strengths. The top two strengths recorded were the *ability to search for main idea* and *relating to*

Figure 1. Graphic Organizer for *Juicy*

Juicy by Biggie Smalls

Reflecting on *Juicy*, what obstacles did Biggie confront on his way to securing hip-hop fame? What message(s) did Biggie send to the world through *Juicy*? Use the chart to organize your responses.

Struggles	Achievement	Message(s)
Your Turn...		
Struggles WITH BRI (Basic Reading Instruction course)	GOALS FOR BRI	ACTIONS TO ACHIEVE GOALS

the readings. Other literacies and character strengths were included as a strength for reading like *being visual*, *being a good listener*, *good worker*, and *like to help if needed*. Asking students to self-assess is an empowering act. It involves metacognition and calls on many critical thinking skills that are used in reading. This exercise provided me with an idea of my students' relationship with reading.

The first assignment was to create an autobiographical poem using imagery and objects to describe self, and some of the poetic tools spotted in *Juicy*. I used *Hip Hop in the Classroom* (2004) as the inspiration for this assignment. We sat in a circle as we prepared to read our pieces aloud. I was surprised how eager students were to share. It was necessary for me to set the tone by reminding the class of the ground rules we created for our class community and for us

to be supportive of one another as we read and listen. I reverberated how this kind of sharing can be filled with trepidation, excitement, and uncertainty. A few students did not have their typed poems; I told them to bring it for the next class and swiftly moved to the next student share. I remember it being exceptionally quiet as I read my autobiographical poem. One student commented about how good it was. I thanked him and added that we all have some really powerful pieces and are in different places in our creative expressions, and must be proud of what we have produced. I openly applauded each student on at least one thing about their poem. A culturally responsive teacher makes it her/his mission to validate students' personal and academic selves and sees value in each student (hooks, 2003; Collins, 1992).

Figure 2. Students' Self-Assessment of Reading Strengths and Weaknesses

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
I'll always have an answer for any question	I need better comprehension skills. I probably just need to read slower so I can take it all in at once. I usually need to go back and read it more than once.
I am a visual learner	Test taking
Reading, analyzing, and notetaking	Understanding the meaning of reading comprehension
Enjoy reading	Answering follow-up questions
Read it over and over until I understand	Lose concentration while reading
Look for clues to main ideas	Reading slow
Using context clues and experiences	Getting distracted that I would have to read several times to understand
Relating to the readings	Hard to find interest in a certain topics
Understand big words and even if I don't understand what it means, I'll keep reading then understand it	Reading longer pieces
Can answer questions about what I read	Hard to read between the lines
Good listener	What do I need to look for in the story like what are they asking
Good worker	Don't like to read
Like to help if needed.	Not strong reader
Good writer	Reading between the lines because everyone has different interpretations
Ability to search for main idea	
Read well	
Desire to read	
Reflecting on reading because I use personal experiences	

III. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN PRACTICE

The second week of class, I introduced an activity called literacy autobiographies, a variation of Tovani's (2000) literacy histories. My class did not include a wide range of ethnicities or academic majors (see Figure 3). However, my students were diverse in their experiences and activities. The majority of students were African-American and Latina/o. To pay homage to the rich diverse backgrounds of my students and their literacy autobiographies, I decided to expand on Tovani's definition of literacy by including music, movies, television, art, and family stories. I did this to make sure I was not omitting any 'literacy' or deeming any 'literacy' inadequate. I began this exercise by modeling what I was looking for by sharing my own literacy autobiography.

Class, I want to share my literacy autobiography with you. As we defined literacy today, I want you to understand who I am a little bit more. I'm going to walk you through major increments of my life and my relationship with literacy. I don't, nor did I ever, think that I am some great prolific reader. I like to read but sometimes I rush it, get lazy, and do not make enough time for it. Some of my early memories with reading began with Aesop's Fables. These fables will always remind me of my father whose life lectures always cited something from Aesop. When I was in elementary school, I would order books from the book club. One of my most memorable books was Hot Dog Riddles. In middle school, I was exposed more to longer books—chapter books. I acquired a few Nancy Drew books which I never finished. I was never able to read more than ten pages and I began to associate pain with these books. I remember borrow-

ing A Tree Grows in Brooklyn from the library because it was one of the books that students in English Honors were reading. The book was thick and I thought if someone saw me reading it they would think I'm smart. Music is also a part of my literacy autobiography. The music by the OJays is very much embedded in my mind. My aunt would always play the OJays when I was over on the weekends. It was her cleaning up music...

I tried to deliver my literacy autobiography with acuity and the upmost candor. I feel this is crucial as a practitioner of culturally responsive teaching. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), the culturally relevant teacher reveals multiple sides of himself or herself to students and strives towards making connections with all students. My literacy pieces ranged from memorable texts to texts that I loathed and made me feel less than intelligent to music that reminded me of my family. I defined literacy in extensive terms to include music, film, and art. By students expressions, I could easily tell that their definition of literacy was myopic and linear, which is the prevailing paradigm in today's school. After my presentation, I opened the floor up for questions and comments. I pointed out how this type of engagement is similar to what readers do with print and non-print literature.

In the following class session, students presented their literacy autobiographies. One African American female student, who attended class sessions with a high level of readiness to work, shared Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and how this was the first play she ever finished and enjoyed. Another student, a White male student who was on the football team, revealed to the class that *Holes* was the first book he completed. He also showed a couple of rings that he earned in conference champion football. An Arab female student, who was an En-

Figure 3. Diversity of My 16 Students

<p>Race/Ethnicity/National Origin</p> <p>6 African-American 1 Arab 1 East Indian 4 Latina/o 1 Filipino 3 White</p>	<p>Gender</p> <p>8 females 8 males</p>
<p>Academic Major</p> <p>1 Accounting 1 Art 1 Biology 1 Business Management 1 Communications (Radio Concentration) 1 Nursing 2 Physical Education 3 Sociology (Criminal Justice Concentration) 5 Undeclared</p>	<p>Personal Activities and Background</p> <p>1 was on the swimming team 2 were on the football team 2 were on canoe rowing teams 1 had a parent who recently was released from prison (unsolicited information share) 1 was a single parent of an infant 1 had a brother who used marijuana daily 5 admitted to being mistreated by law enforcement officers at some point 1 was a daughter of a female police officer 6 spoke languages other than English</p>

glish language learner and never missed a class, presented a necklace and pen that were special to her and reminded her of family. I made observation notes and at the end of the presentations I reverberated that the literacy autobiography shares are all linked to a memory and with memories hold language and imagery. The books,

movies, television shows, songs, trinkets, photos, and oral stories all have relevance in the circle of literacy. The literacy autobiography presentations lead to discussing the different kinds of texts we were going to explore.

IV. BUILDING TIES BETWEEN THE READER, TEXT, AND WORLD

Culturally responsive teaching beckons the instructor to understand students' interests and weave these interests into instruction (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). I asked students to complete a pop culture interest inventory. This inventory asked them to list their popular culture interests and experiences, what they thought were my pop culture interests, and what I thought were their pop culture interests and experiences. To my chagrin, after students bombarded me with questions about how to fill out the inventory, I realized that the structural layout of the inventory was nebulous and required rethinking. My intention was to show students that they mattered to me. I wanted us to co-create an upbeat pulse for our class. I figured one way to do this was to find out students interests and experiences with pop culture in order to make creative and critical connections to the course content so we could further learn about each other and the world. I learned that many of my students followed sports and were athletes themselves.

It was two days after Super Bowl Sunday and football aficionados were still buzzing about one of the most sensational games of the century. The players: the Giants and the Patriots. It was the story of the underdog being triumphant, and the bellying mantra, *hard work eventually pays off*, and the little engine that could wrapped up into one. Having some knowledge of my students, I knew I had to comment on the game and what it meant to the Giants team and what kinds of larger messages we can glean from this victory and our own lives. As soon as I mentioned the word Super Bowl and Giants, students began to freely share their reactions to the game. This was the bridge into discussing strategies for effective and successful reading. The Giants used specific strategies to secure their beefy

champion rings and to be deemed the Super Bowl champions of the 2008 season. The idea was for students to understand that strategies are used in sports as well as reading. It was important for my students to understand that great readers are thinkers and they are not just born, they are created. Great readers practice. They bounce ideas off of others. They talk through what they comprehend and what is nebulous. Good readers use their experiences to make meaning as they read (Rosenblatt, 1976; Alvermann et al, 2006). Successful readers realize when their reading becomes immobile, and they use a "fix-up" strategy (Tovani, 2000) to get their reading moving again. The goal was for my students to grasp the importance of not only reading for understanding but to stretch their thinking. I explained seven strategies used by strong readers (Tovani, 2000, 17).

1. Use existing knowledge.
2. Ask questions.
3. Draw inferences.
4. Monitor comprehension.
5. Use "fix up" strategies.
6. Determine what is important.
7. Synthesize information to create new thinking.

I encouraged my students to employ these strategies as we read a variety of texts. Following *Juicy*, we read Hughes' *Harlem: A Dream Deferred* and *Child of the Americas* by Aurora Levins Morales. My intention was to create a stage for the voices of some of society's marginalized who conjured dreams of success and hopes of being accepted. Using the Socratic Approach, we discussed the pieces and what they meant to us. I used a plethora of open-ended questions from different lens and angles. The Socratic Method seemed to really push my students in their thinking and exercise metacognition. Eventually students began to realize that they could not just offer an answer or response without details or a rationale and knew that their thinking would be interro-

gated. This method allowed for ongoing critical construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of meaning and thinking.

I thought it would be fitting to teach Hughes' *Thank You, M'am*. It complemented the invisible journey theme that I did not initially mention to students. I was hoping that someone would make this visible by shouting it out during class or in their journal. I was wrong, it never happened.

I wanted to capture the moral decisions and dilemmas that bulge at the story's seams. I began by using a strategy that I learned in graduate school and never abdicated: the Notice-Connect-Question-Wonder (N/C/Q/W) reading/thinking strategy. This strategy can easily be used with print and non-print selections for all types of learners on all levels. The N/C/Q/W strategy can be stratified into four columns and serve as an excellent graphic organizer. I asked my students to list a couple of items for each category that apply to the story. Many of them noticed the physical attributes of the main character, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, while others questioned whether someone would really try to help a person out who has just tried to rob them. I remember one student, Marcus (pseudonym) who was quite vocal and had a positive and powerful presence—he always tried to “help” me and his classmates out. Marcus was a product of a neighboring urban area that constantly received louche commentary from locals and the media. I admired Marcus mostly because he did not put on any pretenses. He was who he was and did not make any excuses. He spoke his mind and was incredibly candid; he brought himself and his experiences to our class.

“Mrs. Jones *can't* be that old.” Marcus declared.

“What makes you say that?” I probed.

Pointing to the copy of the story he says, “An old lady would not be out at 11 O'clock at night.”

“Really? How many of you ever saw an old lady out late at night? Besides, what's your definition of old?” I pushed as I leaned forward in my chair with my chin cradled in my hand.

Multiple conversations along with some laughter filled the air.

“I don't know. Maybe 60 is old. I just figure she can't be that old walking the street at night—and she handled him like she wasn't playing. Okay, maybe she is old. But I know for sure this doesn't take place in the city.” Marcus stated with assurance in his voice and a kool-aid grin on his face.

A few others chimed in agreement.

“We're not finished with the age thing.” I said laughing as I looked out at our circle. “Great topic to bring up: setting. What makes you think that the setting is a city?”

“Ain't no way in hell anybody would be walking late at night in a place like the south, especially an old woman!” Marcus emphatically declared with a laugh that rocked the class. “I go down south and there's really no buses and if there are buses, they stop running early. Everybody drives where they gotta go.”

I commented on how many of the strategies we discussed in early sessions were naturally being used like prior knowledge to make meaning, inference, making personal or vicarious connections with the

reading, and most of all just plain good old thinking. I applauded Marcus on his thinking and encouraged others in their comments.

The following class session, we watched the short film version of *Thank You, M'am*. Before viewing the film, I asked students if they ever watched a movie that was originally a written story, and what differences or similarities would they look for. A few of the responses included: if the characters look different from how they're described in the story, if they act like they do in the story, and if the movie is exactly like the story. I emphasized that when written works are turned into movies or plays, they are someone else's interpretation. This interpretation may include deleted scenes, embellished scenes, recreated scenes, and very different characters engaged in dialogue not seen in the written text. I reminded students that when they read they too are interpreting.

As I placed the tape into the VCR, with his classic confidence Marcus said, "I bet she's a nurse. Watch. I figure if she's older she would not be hangin' out. She would be comin' home late from work. I figure what jobs do women have where they get off late?"

"Hmm...let's see." I said with a smile as I pressed the *play* button.

Marcus' prediction was great. Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones did work in a hospital as a nurse or nurse's aide.

Following the viewing, we were able to juxtapose Hughes' piece with the film adaptation.

V. TEACHING ROOFTOP: SOLIDIFYING THE READING AND WRITING CONNECTION

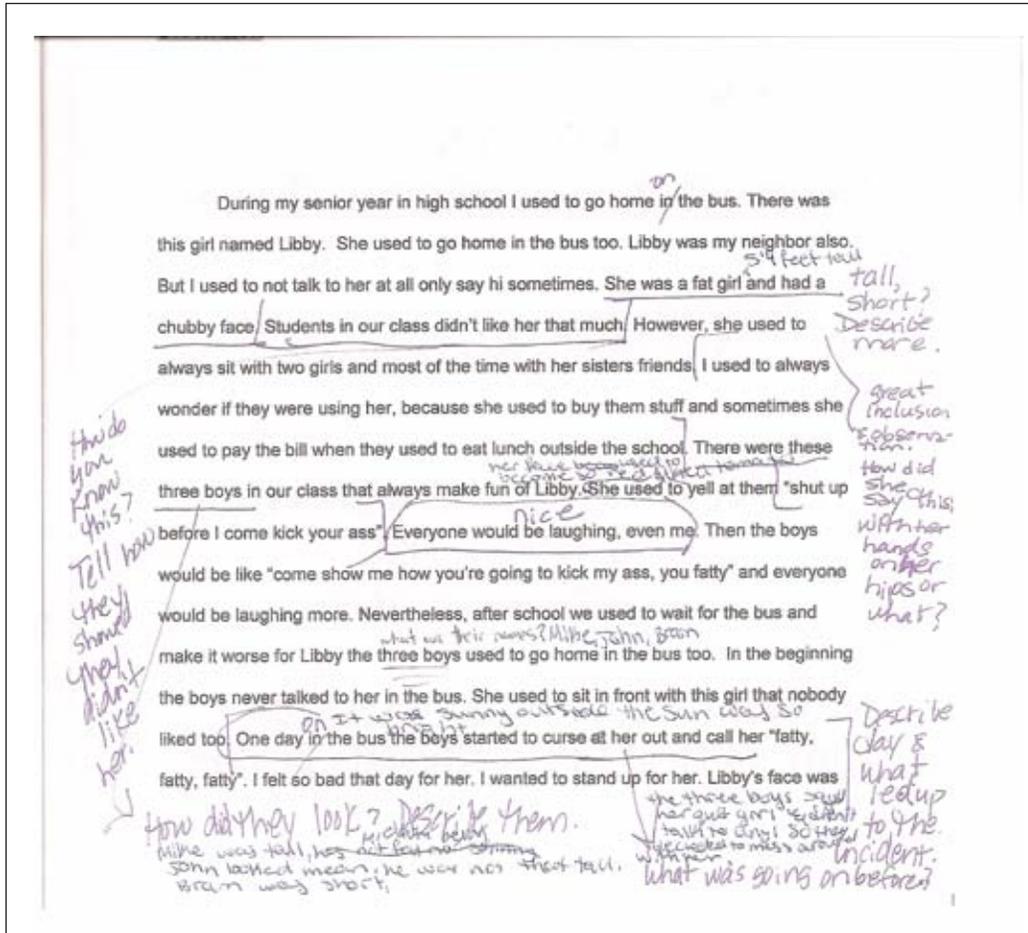
In addition to the 'texts' we read, one of the course requirements was to experiment with different kinds of writing. The autobiographical poem gave students li-

cense to introduce themselves in a creative way. Journal writing was a way for students to digest the readings in a variety of ways—through prose, visual representations, and graphic organizers. Reflection papers allowed students to think about the skills that they were learning to become more robust readers and thinkers. A writing exercise from Christensen (2004)—ally, bystander, perpetrator, target narrative—served as a way to preface our reading of the novel, *Rooftop*. I began this exercise with the old saying: "Stick and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I asked students to respond to this quote in their journals.

In *Rooftop*, all of the characters vividly move in and out of being either an ally, bystander, perpetrator, or target. Students had to write about a time that they were either an ally, bystander, perpetrator, or target. We defined each word and came up with general categories that someone would be an ally, bystander, perpetrator, or target. Some class time was devoted to brainstorming and draft writing. I brought in music a couple of times to inspire writing and create a light mood. I invited students to bring in music as well.

In our writing workshops, I sat individually with students talking about their pieces and ways to improve the piece. I included hand-written comments about each narrative and posed critical questions for students to think about as they revised their narrative. I wanted my students to think about all of the details of the time they were an ally, bystander, perpetrator, or target. I wanted them to think about that day—all the fine details, the words that were said, the smell in the air, the body movements, and the thoughts that ran through their minds. Almost all of the narratives focused on being a perpetrator or a target. However, one student's narrative focused on a time she was an ally to someone (see Figure 4).

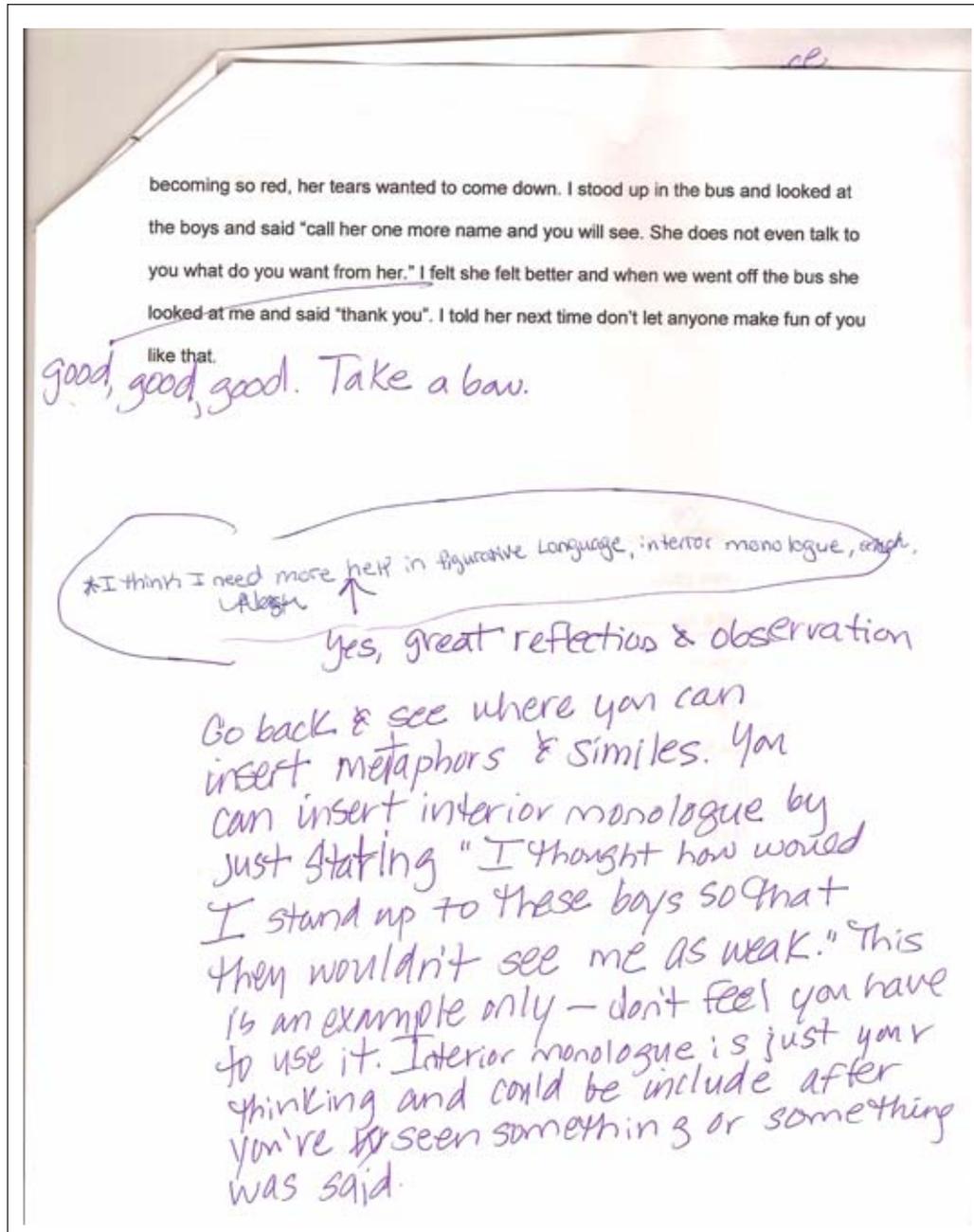
Figure 4 (A). Student Ally Narrative Draft (page 1)



I selected *Rooftop* for many reasons. The book orbits around issues of using and selling drugs, broken relationships, police brutality, politics, and young adults wending their way through these issues. Most importantly, *Rooftop* is about a young African-American male protagonist who decidedly transforms his thinking and confronts his fears by looking truth square in the eyes. This text was particularly important in teaching the theme of how one can rise from the margins and secure success. I wanted students to see themselves in the protagonist, Clay and realize that they can become better thinkers, readers, students, and citizens.

The N-word is used by a White character in the text. I used an editorial by a young African-American male who was incarcerated at the time in an upstate New York prison. In his piece, *The N-syndrome*, he talks about the etymology of the word, high profile people who used the word in the media, and why the word should be banished. We discussed how the author articulates his arguments. We examined the opening, tone, diction, syntax, imagery, author's intent, and support of intent. I asked students to define the N-word. Followed by critical questions: Why is the N-word used? Why is the N-word the prevailing racial slur that has a place in today's popular cul-

Figure 4 (B). Student Ally Narrative Draft (page 2)



ture? Who owns the word? Who can and cannot use the word, and why?

Since the book revolves around drug abuse and dealing, I used a discussion con-

tinuum to engage dialogue about whether a person who uses drugs is a victim or an abuser. One female student shared that her father was recently released from jail on

drug charges and how it is up to him to change his life. Another female student shared her escapade with drugs one weekend. Students responded by intently listening and expressing their fears in doing “hard” drugs. A few students openly admitted to smoking marijuana from time to time. This was very difficult for me to hear and not shout: *why would you mess up your minds and bodies?* I was pleased that students felt comfortable enough to speak freely. I shared some of the reported effects of drug use, stories about folks who used drugs and the impact it had on their families, and how some drug addicts turned their lives around and are living drug free. I recognize that I could have said or done more. I just was not sure exactly what.

Coupled with thoughtful discussions about the text, students worked in literature circles (Daniels, 2004) and assumed specific roles to discuss, illustrate, and connect with *Rooftop*. As a culminating activity, I wanted students to create some type of commentary on the text and submit it to an online newspaper for teenagers and young adults. I was not able to “sell” this idea to students. Instead we agreed on each group collaborating to create a mesostic poem about one of the characters or themes in the text. A mesostic poem is similar to an acrostic poem. However, the middle or center of the poem spells out a word. One literature circle created a mesostic poem centering on the *love* shared and expressed by the characters in *Rooftop*.

VI. STUDENTS’ FEEDBACK: THINKING THROUGH ASSESSMENT

Since this was my first time teaching this course, I was particularly interested in receiving feedback from students. On the final day of class, I asked students to anonymously complete a course assessment that I had designed. This course assessment falls under the umbrella of a classroom as-

essment technique (CAT) created by Angelo and Cross (1993) as a way to anonymously collect feedback from students about their learning and the instructor’s teaching. I explained the importance of the assessment and how it will help me to improve teaching the course in the future. This signified that I was an active student and learner as well. One section asked to list strengths of the course. Students’ responses included:

- *Conversations, Communication**
- *Writing**
- *We have a say*
- *Everything we read was interesting*
- *New techniques*
- *Everyone was able to give their thoughts without hesitation*
- *Reading Comprehension**
- *Vocabulary**
- *Reading Strategies*
- *Small class*
- *Very open*
- *Easy*
- *Fun*
- *Positive attitude*

—————
*Cited multiple times in responses

The course assessment was a testament to the type of thinking and discourse I tried to infuse into the course. What remained a central goal to me was for students to constantly think about their thinking. One question on the assessment that was most meaningful to me was: What is the one most important thing you walked away from the course with? Some of the most poignant responses included:

- *I found myself, while writing the narrative and journals*
- *Knowing that reading can be fun*
- *My pride. I know that pride shows no relevance to the course but I did gain pride because despite all the problems I have been through this semester, I learned how proud*

Figure 5. Literature Circle Mesostic Poem

LOVE EXPRESSED

Love can be noticed in so many ways,
and indeed never fades
Not when Clay and Addison got separated,
nor when their mothers got frustrated
Daytop is where they united,
and from there they confided
It was a place to come as one,
not thinking about whether they would get shot with a gun,
And leaving the past to just have fun

Daytop showed Love throughout,
EveryOne was a family without a doubt
The passion in everyone's beneVolent eyes,
The tears they shed when Addison diEd

Darrel, Addison's brother, didn't think no one cared
He wanted to do his own thing, but Clay was always there
Clay knew the streets wasn't for Addison's brother
He tried to help him as if he was his mother

The love you saw in Darrel's father eyes,
When he came to get his son was a big surprise
Clay and Addison's father didn't want him to down the same path,
The path Addison took that had a tragic after-math

Addison implied how Life can end,
He was an Outstanding and influential friend
He was a good brother, but Vulnerable to act,
He made his mistakes; on Darrel he left an Everlasting impact

I am of myself and what I've become and what I am capable of becoming.

- *I walk away from here with the knowledge to understand what I'm reading and to top it all off, I got inspired to read books.*
- *Understanding the unseen text.*

VII. CONCLUSION

I have always believed that good teachers place students at the center of teaching and learning. In my teaching of this course I tried to do this. I remained authentically interested in my students—their thoughts, their interests, their concerns, and their doubts. Their interests fueled and directed the course. From this, students were able to see their value and understand that they mattered. This was especially important because some of my students were academically wounded. I was most interested in teaching literacy and “texts” from a cultural, critical, and compassionate stance where students’ thinking would be validated and they would believe in themselves perhaps like they never did before. This required me to actively engage in perpetual reflection about how I can reach students more and what I can do to gingerly push them toward success. I do not believe that it was the teaching of any one particular text that made the course successful. However, it was the demonstrated efficacy of care and telling students about the shining brilliance that I see housed inside of them.

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