

Exploring new ways for teaching reading and writing at the university

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Abstract

Ce travail est un compte rendu d'une expérience entreprise avec mes étudiants de deuxième année dans le module d'expression et compréhension de l'écrit. Le but est de mettre en pratiques une méthode d'enseignement basée sur un concept constructiviste qui vise à intéresser et à motiver les étudiants à lire et écrire à partir d'expérience vécues suivant un processus bien déterminé. Dans leur parcours d'écriture, les étudiants travaillent en individuel et en groupe. Ils sont appelés à utiliser des moyens technologiques d'information et de communication tels que : Internet pour des recherches de sites web qui peuvent les aider dans leur parcours d'écriture, le traitement de texte et toutes les fonctions qu'offre le Word, power point etc.

Le projet final n'est remis qu'après multiples correctifs et discussions. Il est remis sous forme papier et sous forme électronique via le Power Point. Les membres du groupe doivent présenter le travail oralement devant une audience constituée de leurs camarades et de l'enseignant. Ils doivent débattre et défendre leurs idées et accepter les critiques constructives qui visent à améliorer le travail. Il leur est demandé en fin de parcours de réfléchir sur cette expérience et de faire des propositions s'il ya lieu d'en faire pour développer des projets futures.

The majority of students in my classroom were not reading books, either that imposed on them in class or as a relaxation. They complained about the length of the assigned books and show reluctance towards accomplishing any homework. This fact puzzled me a lot and I had become increasingly concerned about getting them to read. In fact they were able to read but they did

show no interest for what they were reading. Anything dealt with was quickly forgotten. The problem lied in their lack of interest and personal involvement. I was so concerned about finding a way to let them appreciate words and feel what they were reading and writing about. Actually, along one year I undertook investigations through class observation, teachers' and students' surveys. I was able to reach a truth: at the university, reading classes were held in a 'traditional way' where students were required to read a passage and then answer a set of multiple-choice questions, decide whether sentences were true or false, or match words with their corresponding definitions. Even in literature classes, teachers assigned the book to be read and followed the well established, familiar pedagogic practice which consisted of analyzing the short story or novel (plot, characters, diction etc.). This practice proved to be inefficient. No matter how hard teachers might try to make this type of reading interesting and comprehensible to the learners, they most of the time ended with a tedious reading class in which students attended the course without enjoying and comprehending what they were reading and writing about.

Actually, I realized that among the reasons behind the lack of concern of students came from the way they were taught reading/writing module. Nowadays students are completely different from students of the seventeenth. They are more attracted by images, sounds, motion, video games etc... For instance, they learn about antic Greece, Ancient Egypt and Chinese mythology through video games as Titan Quest and Age of Mythology. These are Strategy games where the player plays an

active role; He had to create a virtual city, with inhabitants, with its natural resources and military forces. He is the manager of the social, cultural, religious, economic and military organisation of the city. In fact, he is achieving a personal project through different stages that he has to go through before getting to a higher level. Accordingly, I read a lot about possibilities of using a project-based curriculum and the new technologies of communication and decided to try them with a group of students in a 'writing/reading' course. The objective was to introduce students to the joys of reading, and allow them to recognize their own difficulties, ambitions, and challenges in the lives of characters from short stories and novels. This proved to be a truly dynamic experience of great meaning and relevance. I described some projects to my students, explaining that I would like them to do something similar. They agreed to give it a try. This paper will discuss this experiment

- A personal Narrative Project

In this project, Students were exposed to a short story: 'I am Kwakkoli' written by Bisco Hill in 'short Stories for Teens'¹¹ because I personally believe that Reading good examples of personal narrative is a powerful way to model good writing skills before students engage in their own writing of personal narrative.

Course objectives

In this course, students were exposed to a text of personal narrative to:

¹¹ Short Stories for Teens, VUEFand Ernest Klett Verlag, 2001, p. 11

- learn how to take advantage of the reading/writing connection to improve their language proficiency.
- to procure motivation and pleasure to students and to expose them to authentic English through reading, listening and discussing an authentic story
- to develop fundamental English reading and writing skills
- To produce a personal narrative

Procedure

The procedure followed was that of Cagnon and Collay's Constructivist Learning Design (CLD)¹². This design is made up of six elements, namely Situation, Groupings, Bridge, Questions, Exhibit, and Reflections. These elements were designed to incite teacher planning and reflection about the process of student learning. We developed the situation for students to explain, selected a process for groupings of materials and students, built a bridge between what students already knew and what we wanted them to learn, anticipated questions to ask and answer without giving away an explanation, encouraged students to exhibit a record of their thinking by sharing it with others, and solicited students' reflections about their learning. The project was as follows:

¹² Cagnon, Jr. & Collay, M. *Constructivist key questions to learning teaching for standard design*. 2001, pp. 5-17

Course title: Narrative Writing project

Level: 2nd grade

Situation

Phase1: Students were exposed to an example of personal narrative 'I AM A KWAKKOLI' to let them see that writers often write from experience. A discussion about author's experience followed.

Phase2

This situation called for the recall, organization and reflection of the students' traditions and customs. Students shared important events in their lives, focusing on the effects these experiences had on them. Others reacted by sharing experiences and reactions during the small group discussion and confirmed the validity of these feelings by giving their affirmations to the students who had shared their life story in the group.

Groupings

The class was divided in groups of 6 by virtue of personal affinities

Bridge

A discussion of details of different customs and traditions was held with the class. Students were asked whether they knew or heard about one important tradition in their family or social environment. They were asked to recall information about this. The class was led in analyzing the common content of everyone's story.

Questions

How would you start speaking about the most important tradition?

What was this tradition and what did it consist of?

In which circumstances did it occur?

How did you experience it?

Exhibit

All the groups had to present their stories orally. One group had to do a story map, a chain of event, a spider map or any other graphic organizer available on a students' learning web site.

Another group had to prepare an Analogy List through the use of compare/contrast matrix¹³. (Comparison and contrast of the subject) or PowerPoint presentation. Students had to write a personal narrative on one tradition chosen and assigned to their group. To be able to do the task, they had to listen to the presentations and had to recall the contents and organization of this kind of essay as discussed in the bridge part of the lesson

Reflection

Students were given time to reflect on the experiment, evaluate it and make any suggestion for improvement

- Week one (two 90 minute class periods)
 - Anticipatory Set (Lead-In): (1st 90 minute class period)

The session was opened with a PowerPoint¹⁴ presentation of the title of the story accompanied with an Indian music as a background to plunge the students in the mood of American Indian context. Successively, the handout of the story text was distributed (see Short Stories for Teens, VUEFand Ernest Klett Verlag. 2001, p. 11) and the audio CD version was played so as students could listen to the story and read in the same time.

¹³ Graphic organizers available at

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr2grap.htm>

¹⁴ See the accompanying CD

Then story map 1 (see below) was displayed on the overhead projector and the worksheet version was distributed. Students had to complete map 1 individually and then consult their group members to check their answers and correct if necessary before the class correction and discussion.

Story map1

Setting:
When: 1990
Where: the story takes place in the USA
The story is about: a tradition (naming ceremony)
Who was speaking? The narrator, a young boy

The beginning of the story

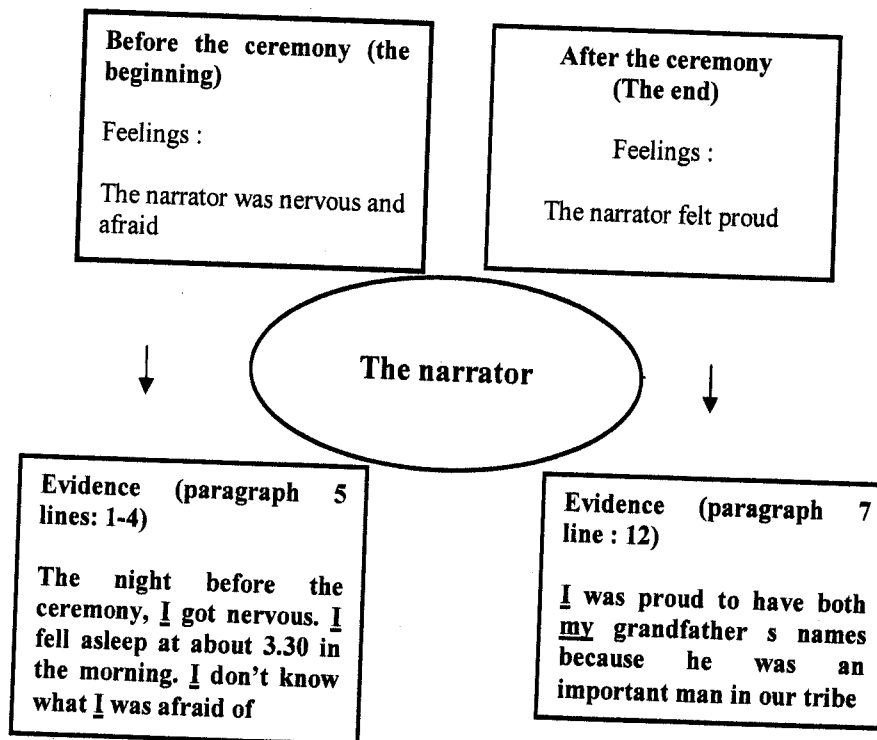
Major characters: The narrator (the young boy), the faith keeper
Minor characters: his father, his grandfather, his uncle Rick, his mother, his sister, the medicine man, the faith keeper, the chief and his dad's friends

Plot: It was about a naming ceremony which consisted of receiving an Indian name given by the faithkeeper. Young Americans of Indian origin participated in the ceremony. Consequently, they had an Anglo name and an Indian name. The Indian name attributed to the narrator was Kwakkoli, a type of bird. He was very proud of it and decided to visit his reservation as he grew up to learn more about his ancestors and their traditions.

NB: what is written in blue is the common correction performed by students.

After the correction students went on for a detailed understanding through the completion of the narrator portrait: They had to describe him before and after the ceremony giving evidence from the text. Because of time constraint, this task was given as homework.

The narrator portrait



Objective of lesson1:

The objective behind these two tasks was the global and a detailed understanding of the story and in the same time the identification of characteristics of a personal narrative:

- First point of view
- Beginning, middle and ending
- Descriptive details
- Identification of structure of good writing

Lesson 2 (2nd 90 minute class period)

The lesson opened with the PowerPoint presentation of the title of the story as shown in page 4 with the Indian music to recall the story. Then task 2 given as homework was corrected by a volunteer. Once the two worksheets (story map1 and narrator portrait) had been completed by all groups, time allotted to questions started. Each group had to ask questions about any point, any detail of the story. It was about vocabulary, definition of words or anything that remained unclear. The stress was put on the fact that writers might write from experience as was the case of Bisco Hill, the narrator of 'I am Kwakkoli'.

While correcting, the focus was then put on the use of I, my, me in the story (first point of view). This showed clearly that the narrator spoke about a personal experience, a personal narrative. The story beginning (introduction), middle (body) and ending (conclusion) were pointed out as well as the use of descriptive words and details and how they helped to describe what happened.

Then a discussion about traditions and customs was held. Students were asked to fill a box with different Algerian traditions. Students had to choose a tradition with which they had a life experience then recount a story linked to it. They had to write it on a poster and share it with the rest of the class. They had then to decide which group work to publish in their magazine. This was what they proposed:

Ideas Box¹⁵

1. Aid El Kebir
2. First day of fast (Ramadhan)
3. The great meal of 'Elaam' the first day of the Muslim new year
4. Aid El Fitr
5. The first child's haircut
6. Circumcision

Each group discussed the issue and agreed on one choice. Then each student within his group had to individually complete the narrative graphic organiser, and then confront his worksheet with his groups' peers to discuss their findings, organise their ideas, and finally complete one common graphic organiser to be used as an outline for their personal narrative which should be at least three paragraphs long.

- Week two (two 90 minute class periods)
 - Lesson 1 (1st 90 minute class period)

The lesson started with the presentation of each group graphic organiser to the rest of the class. Students used

¹⁵ Inspired from personal narrative at [www.writing a-z.com](http://www.writing-a-z.com)

their USB key and the overhead (data show). Immediate teacher's and peers' feedback was provided and notes were taken by the rest of the group for possible improvement. The whole class period was devoted to this task. With the final draft of the graphic organiser, students had to start the writing of the story individually at home and confront it to the rest of the group the following session, to write the final draft cooperatively using different ideas of all group members.

Hence, students used their graphic organiser as a guide to write their personal narrative. It reminded them what the story was about, what were the different events, the details and the ending. From their graphic organiser, students in each group had to draft the beginning of the group personal narrative (introduction mentioning topic, characters and setting), middle (body: three events including details), ending (conclusion: feeling or solution).

Moreover, each group had to present a poster showing clearly the concordance of the graphic organiser and the personal narrative. They had also to show how much they had respected the guiding checklist provided by the teacher.

- Lesson 2 (2nd 90 minute class period)

The whole session was devoted to the group revision of their individual drafts. They used the graphic organiser for the organisation of their writing. Additional ideas and details not included in the first draft were used, and ideas and details that, they judged, no longer worked were left out. Students also previewed the revision checklist (above) to guide their writing. Volunteers were invited to

read their group personal narrative aloud to students and shared whether each idea and detail made sense or whether other words could be used to make the story stronger.

Before the end of this session, students were provided with an editing guide that they could use to model how to check for capital letters and punctuation, i.e. to self-edit their final narrative draft.

- Week three (two 90 minute class periods)
 - Lesson 1 and lesson 2 (1st and 2nd 90 minute class period)

These two sessions were devoted to the exhibition phase where each group had to display the group personal narrative poster and submit it for teacher and peers evaluation. PowerPoint was used. Before the exhibition started, an evaluation criteria handout was distributed to enable students evaluate their peers' work as objectively and constructively as possible, and understand their own evaluation. The handout which was applicable to all levels was as follows:

Introduction	4. Developed introduction in paragraph form 3. Introduction with some details included 2. Simple beginning paragraph 1. Simple beginning sentence 0. Missing a beginning/introduction
Body	4. three or more developed ideas; each idea organised into a paragraph; several transitional devices 3. Three ideas each organised into a paragraph; some transitional devices 2. More than one idea organised into a body paragraph

	1. Ideas organised into sentences; ideas may be unorganised and difficult to follow at times; no paragraphs 0. No organised sentences; random words and/phrases
First-person point of view	3. used consistently 2. Used most of the time 1. Used inconsistently 0. Did not use at all
Conclusion	4. developed conclusion in paragraph forms 3. Conclusion with some details included 2. Simple ending paragraph 1. Simple ending sentence 0. Missing an ending/conclusion

NB

The following table criteria focused on the mechanics and format of the essay writing. It was used to avoid students' focus on marks, as noticed in project1 evaluation, and to enable a more constructivist reflection. The following was group 3 project sample that showed all the steps of the constructivist writing process

Group 3 writing project sample: Narrative Graphic Organiser

When?	Where?	With whom?
Thirteenth December	of at my grandparents' house	family

What happened?	Tell me more
Men sacrificed the sheep	Women wash meat and prepare it
What happened?	Tell me more
Lit a fire for the barbecue	Men cooked meat Women Prepared salads and fries
What happened?	Tell me more
Grandfather took photos	Watched photos on TV

Feeling or solution
Had fun, memorable Aid

Group 3 Personal Narrative Poster based on the graphic organiser

Level: 2nd year/Group 3

The ceremony of Aid El Kebir

Beginning

This year I spent the ceremony of Aid El Kebir at my Grandparents' house with my uncles and cousins. I went there with my mom, dad, brother and sisters early in the morning.

Middle

When we got there, we found all the family. Men started with the sacrifice of the sheep and women cleaned and washed the mutton in a joyful atmosphere. My brother and I helped my dad lit the fire for the barbecue. I picked a place to sit and watch the fire. We were all around it in a circle. Then my dad and my two uncles cooked the meat on a large grill. When it was almost done, my mother brought fries and salads and started serving each one of us. My grandfather then took photos of all of us at different moments without informing us. After dinner we watched the photos on television. They were very funny.

3
event
s with
detail

Ending

I was very happy. We had fun. It was a memorable ceremony because all my family was around me. This made me realize that celebrating ceremonies as this one with all my large family around was better than being alone. Our traditions are part of our heritage and should not be abandoned.

Students' Personal Narrative Project evaluation

- Week four (two 90 minute class periods)

This session was devoted to the reflection phase where students were given time to express their opinion and feelings toward the biography project. They were given a questionnaire to answer

Students expressed their satisfaction with the Personal Narrative course. The majority had a positive opinion and enjoyed the course. Most of them enjoyed the story and

were pleased to listen and to read it. They said this helped them understand and appreciate it. Four students out of thirty found the story too easy and expected a more challenging text (these had a more advanced level). In addition to this, students found the checklist of a great help since it guided them and helped them prevent mistakes. The checklist aided them structure their writing. Similarly, they liked working with the graphic organizers. The charts to fill enabled them go through the different steps gradually until producing their final personal narrative essay.

Bibliography

Cagnon, Jr. & Collay, M. (2001) *Constructivist key questions to learning teaching for standard design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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Webliography

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CV

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