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Detracked Ninth-Grade English: Apprenticeship for the Work and World of High School and Beyond

In this article, I argue that 9th-grade English can be a fertile environment for demonstrating that students who come to high school with diverse skill levels and from racially and socioeconomically diverse communities can learn with and from each other. It is not enough, however, that the 9th-grade English teacher believes that all students can succeed with challenging tasks and that she has a moral commitment to academic equity. Teachers must provide a focused, rigorous, and supportive curriculum that acknowledges and builds on the skills of high and middle achievers and establishes for low achievers a strong foundation that provides the scaffold for their taking on identities as readers and writers. I describe the 9th-grade English reading and writing curriculum developed as a detracking advocate and discuss the theoretical foundations for that curriculum. I also argue that if students are to be apprenticed into the academic life of a high school, detracking efforts must go beyond 9th-grade English.

I'm not the most confident reader, but I will read aloud when I have to. (Michelle¹)

I love reading to death. An example would be this weekend—I finished *The DaVinci Code* in 2 days by staying up half the night reading. (Kyla)

I don't like to read a lot. It is buring to me. (James)

Writing has always been something that I've valued. When I was little I would write stories and plays and dream of saving the world, sparking revolution with my words, but now, I settle for reading a book about revolution. (Sam)

I cannot write cursive. (Rodney)

I'm still not that good at reading and spelling but I do no how. (Tyrone)

I am not good in english because my lack of writing. (Andrew)

My ecseleration in english class is not very good, although I am good in english. (Ward)

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HESE EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS written to me by incoming ninth graders reveal a good deal about their sense of themselves as readers and writers. The letters also reveal the challenges I face in the months ahead-as an advocate of detracked ninth-grade English classes—as I work to apprentice all students into the academic and social discourses of the high school English class. According to Gee (1990), "a discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on particular roles that others will recognize" (p. 142). The roles I want my students to take on-first for themselves and then for others to recognize—are reader and writer. I see it as my responsibility to do everything I can to help them acquire the "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations that will mark successful membership" (p. 142) in high school English. My primary challenge in detracked ninth-grade English is designing a curriculum in which all students—those who arrive as advanced apprentices and those who are barely aware of an apprenticeship—can gain mastery over the various discourses they will need to be successful. Underlying my commitment to apprentice all ninth graders—Tyrone and James as well as Sam and Kyla-in these discourses is my belief that all students are capable of succeeding with demanding academic tasks.

In this article I argue that, given the right learning environment, detracked ninth-grade English classes are a fertile environment for demonstrating that students who come to high school with diverse skill levels and from racially and socioeconomically diverse communities can learn with and from each other. I argue as well that a well-balanced untracked ninth-grade English class is the perfect environment for demonstrating to students the truth of Smith's (1998) maxim, "You learn from the company you keep" (p. 9). That is the promise of untracked classes: low-achieving students working side by side—in effect, apprenticed—with middle and high achievers have the opportunity to identify with them and thus the opportunity to "see [themselves] as capable of becoming" (p. 11) successful school learners. I present the ninth-grade reading and writing curriculum (including specific texts, writing assignments, and strategies) I have developed over the last decade that focuses on acknowledging and building on the skills of high and middle achievers and on establishing a strong foundation for low achievers that will provide the scaffold for their taking on identities as readers and writers.

Setting the Tone, Rhythm, and Work Ethic

The first day of class, I move through various activities that make obvious my high academic and behavior expectations. Primarily, however, the first day establishes that ninth-grade English will be a protective and orderly learning environment where it is safe to ask questions, make mistakes, not know answers, or know lots of answers. When the bell rings, I hand out seating charts and have students silently fill in their own name and all the names of the people they know. After a few minutes, we begin introductions, each of us in turn saying and spelling our names and practicing remembering each others' names without the help of our seating charts. I then hand out a model for writing a self-introduction² that students are to write for homework and read to the class from the author's chair the next day. Next I ask students to write me a letter telling me (a) about their history as students since kindergarten, (b) how they feel about themselves as readers and writers, (c) any personal information they want to share, and (d) any specific things I need to know to make me an effective teacher. I then hand out and read a letter I have written to their parents discussing my beliefs about teaching and my academic goals for the year. If there is time at the end of the class, I have students begin working silently on their homework. I purposely make the first class a full one. I want to set a tone and a pace, to establish from the very beginning that every student will participate in class activities and that we will use the whole 90-min block³ every day for learning.

On the second day, I collect the letters to me and we begin reading from the author's chair. I ask for a volunteer and tell that student that when she finishes reading her piece, she should call on the next student. Giving students the responsibility to call on each other tells them that we all share responsibility for making the class work. At the end of class, I ask the students who did not complete the homework to stay so that we can talk about their completing it on their own or with me at the end of the day.

The third day of class, those students who have not yet read their self-introductions do so. I then hand out copies of "The Lesson," a short story by Toni Cade Bambara (1972) that brings to the fore important issues about social class inequities in the United States. Before beginning, I ask students to write about what they think the story is about and to share their ideas. I start the story, reading for several paragraphs as a model, and then ask for volunteers-assuring students that I will never force them to read orally a text they have not prepared. About one third of the way through the story, I ask students to write again: What do you know so far? What is happening in the story? I allow several minutes for this and then call on several students to read what they have written. I point out that I will never ask what the story means; I am interested in the meaning they make of the story. I then ask students to write what they think is going to happen in the story. After listening to several answers, I explain that what we are doing-sharing interpretations, reconfiguring them based on new insights, and making predictions-is exactly what expert readers do constantly as they read. Then I call on a volunteer to resume the reading. When he finishes, he calls on the next reader. Often students who are poor readers volunteer. When they mispronounce words or miscall words or leave words out due to miscues (Beers, 2003; Goodman & Goodman, 1994), I do not correct them and do not allow other students to do so. Only when a miscue leads to misunderstanding do I intervene. About two thirds through, I have students write again about what they know and what they think will happen. After a short discussion, we move on. When we finish reading the whole story, I have students write about the ending of the story before we talk about it. From the very beginning, then, I am establishing that reading is a meaning-making activity and that writing assists us in making meaning—not only of the text itself but also of ourselves as readers.

[Writing] teaches us, as Polanyi (1958) has put it, that "into every act of knowing, there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known (p. viii)." It is when students come to understand reading and writing in this critical way, as acts of knowing, that they come to see that reading lets us know writing, and writing lets us know reading. (Zamel, 1992, p. 481)

The next day I teach "I Go Along," Peck's (1989) short story about the inequities inherent in tracked schools. Again, I begin the story by having students write about the title and the first few paragraphs. Then we begin moving through the text volunteer after volunteer, stopping occasionally to write and talk. At the end I ask students to retell the story from the viewpoint of the protagonist. After we discuss their summaries, I ask students to predict what will happen to the protagonist the next day at the school. After they have shared this writing, I ask them to write about how the story resonates with their own school experiences. Here my point is not only to give students another day's practice with constructing meaning of a story; I am giving them directed practice in connecting literature to their lives and-most relevant to my work in creating a detracked class-to make explicit the effects high and low expectations have on school success.

By the fifth day, we are ready to begin a whole book. I almost always choose Fahrenheit 451 not only because of its theme—the emptiness of a society where books are forbidden-but also because it is relatively difficult and thus allows me to demonstrate my belief that when students work together they can succeed with complex texts. We begin the book as we do short stories—using writing and talk to construct meaning. With about 20 min of the period left, I assign the pages to read for homework and ask students to read silently the rest of period. Silence is important. I want reluctant readers to hear the quiet, to experience what happens to their reading when there are few noise distractions, and to get practice in reading silently.

The next day I hand back the previous day's reflections and give a quiz of three or four questions. In writing quizzes, I ask questions covering the beginning of the assigned reading to the end as well as questions that bring to the fore efferent and aesthetic reading stances⁴ (Rosenblatt, 1978). In Fahrenheit 451, for example, I might ask: Do you like Monag's wife? What in the text makes you feel that way? Afterward, in our discussions of the quiz, I often have students reread passages to clarify confusing points, to demonstrate the beauty of the writer's language, and to illustrate the value of rereading. Every day as we make our way through the book, we follow the same procedure: quiz, discussion, reading aloud, discussion, silent reading. Every day I hand back the quiz papers (with extra sheets stapled when they run out of room), with my comments but no grade. When we have finished the book, I give an overall grade on the quizzes, which allows me to reward students who do well on every quiz as well as those who start out slowly but get involved. For a final on the book, I have students write essay answers to prompts that ask them to analyze a character or event in depth or discuss the writer's purpose and the book's connection to today's society. Because we focus so intently and exclusively on the book, we finish it in about 5 days. Moving through books quickly is important. I want all students to experience reading as good readers do-reading for meaning, reading relatively rapidly, reading in big chunks. When we read a book fast, I know that not all readers read every part and that some of the poorest readers read only in class. But I also know that due to our discussions and the writing we do on the book, those students get a general understanding of the book that will enable them to connect it to texts we read later.

Guided by Delpit's (1995) ideas about how power is enacted in classrooms, in the first few weeks of school I explicitly teach all students—but especially those who "are not already [participants] in the culture of power" (p. 25)—the rules they need to learn to acquire academic power. I teach rules on how to construct meaning of short stories and a novel, how to write personal pieces and essay answers, and how to participate in

whole class discussions. I know, of course, that 2 weeks is not enough time to persuade students who have had little previous success in the classroom that if they follow these rules they can assume academic power, but 2 weeks is enough to set forth a promise and a taste of that power.

Creating a Class of Readers

Ten years ago I saw myself as a teacher who taught books; today I see myself as a teacher who teaches students to read books. The evolution in my stance is a result of my reading Rosenblatt's Literature as Exploration (1938/1983) and The Reader, The Text, The Poem (1978), Rabinowitz's (1987) Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation, and the work of such researchers as the Goodmans, Pearson, Samuels, Rumelhart, Coles, Smith, and Harste. Their work teaches me not only the need to build into my curriculum explicit reading instruction for all students but the immediacy of making reading the main focus of my ninth-grade curriculum.

Teaching Fiction

Guided by the work of Rabinowitz (1987), I gradually introduce students to various narrative conventions or, more precisely, "the ways in which Western readers' prior knowledge of conventions of reading shapes their experiences and evaluations of the narratives they confront" (p. 3). As I teach these conventions, I fold them into quizzes and final tests: According to Rabinowitz, writers give us details that influence us to make snap judgments about characters. What details does Kingsolver give you about Melissa (Missy) Greer at the beginning (of The Bean Trees) that influence your feelings about her? I also introduce Campbell's (1948/1960) hero's journey model and have students follow its workings as we move through a text. Here again, to reinforce how the various parts of the journey guide readers, I weave them into quizzes: So far (in The Color of Water) who or what are the threshold guardians and why are they trying to thwart Ruth? To reinforce various narrative conventions and aspects of the hero's journey, I use films such as *The Pathfinder, This Boy's Life*, and *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and illustrate explicitly through writing and discussions how skills used to construct meaning of films are many of the same skills used in reading books.

To give students language that adds sophistication to their analysis of literature, I teach literary terms—for example, protagonist, antagonist, willing suspension of disbelief, irony, flashback, foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbol. I encourage students to use these words in oral and written discussions of books and films, and I use them in quiz questions and end-of-book essay prompts.

Teaching Nonfiction

Early in the year, I use essays from the editorial and opinion pages of local and national newspapers to introduce students to reading nonfiction. The main strategy I use in teaching students to read nonfiction is subject, occasion, audience, purpose, and speaker (SOAPS). I hand out an article, read it aloud, and have students write down what they think the SOAPS are. For each of the letters, I ask several students to read what they have written. I do not comment on their answers because I do not want to position myself as the authority in the class; I want students to weigh their constructed meaning against that of their peers. When we have finished going through each letter of SOAPS, we read the piece aloud a second time and I ask students to write what they understood the second time as a result of the discussion and rereading. After a few days of directed practice, SOAPS becomes regular practice, usually at the beginning of class before moving on to the day's work. In choosing articles to teach, I select ones that deal with national and international issues because I want to expand students' political and cultural literacies. Once students understand how SOAPS helps them get to the core of a piece of nonfiction, I introduce other strategies to help them unlock the meaning of nonfiction pieces. I focus on the title and subtitle of the piece. I work through the essay's structure—how does the piece begin and end and why? I point out the importance

of paying attention to topic sentences and the purpose of extra space between sections in long articles.

Reading Canonical Texts and Choice Books

The most important thing I do to create students as readers is have them read-constantly. For several years (Cone, 1994) I have made it a policy in all my classes that I choose half the books and students choose half. I choose district-required books we read as a whole class-Romeo and Juliet or Animal Farm, for example; they choose books for small groups. In giving students a choice, I sometimes leave the choice wide open (with the exception of reading books that have been made into films) and sometimes specify categories—a book written by an immigrant, a book written in the last 10 years, a nonfiction book (after I have taught the SOAPS strategy), a banned book-or I ask them to choose among texts that are typically read in ninth grade at our school that I will not have time to cover with the whole class. In making their choices, students often select books that are not the typical fare of school (e.g., Flyy Girl, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Zodiac Unmasked). I do not censor their choices—as long as they convince at least two other people to read the book with them and they get their own copy of the book, what they read is fine with me. Giving students a choice of books allows them not only to choose the book they want to read but with whom they want to read-which leads to groups with a mix of achievement levels.

As with whole class books, we move through the self-selected books quickly. Every day when students are reading these books, I allocate time for silent reading, writing about the books, and discussing. I use the rest of the class time to teach lessons on paragraphing, sentence structures, punctuation, and vocabulary. At the end of the 6 or 7 days allocated for the books, I test students on the books using prompts that reinforce the various literary conventions and terms we have studied.

In summary, then, in teaching students to read fiction and nonfiction texts, I teach a limited num-

ber of reading strategies and genre-specific conventions. I focus primarily on summarizing, prediction, and rereading. I rely heavily on talk and writing as tools for building comprehension and confidence. I insist that students read whole books and whole short stories and read them at a pace that keeps them engaged.

This is not a writing class. This is a class of writers. That declaration is printed on a banner at the back of my classroom. It reminds me daily that my goal is to have students take on identities as writers—to write with a sense of purpose and an awareness of audience in their own voice.

Addressing Issues of Correctness

As I read students' papers, I make a list of misspelled and miscapitalized words and problems with punctuation. I use this list to create a dictation to clear up problems that require little instruction—making sure that I include teaching points for high-, middle-, and low-skilled writers. Dictations are never heavy-handed and never graded. Students check their own work against sentences their peers have written on the board or sentences I have written on an overhead projection transparency.

I use style sheets to teach grammar, style, and usage issues that need in-depth instruction. As I read and grade a set of papers, I note the most common problems. Here again, I choose items that address the needs of the most accomplished writers and the most struggling, from particular uses of the subjunctive, for example, to run-on sentences. Besides attending to the specific needs of the class as a whole, style sheets cut down on the time I spend writing comments on individual papers. Style sheets also guide revision: When students work in writing response groups, they refer to the style sheets to assist each other with proof-reading and editing.

Teaching Sentence Structures, Semicolons, and Parallel Structure

In the first month of school, I teach sentence structures. These lessons are never graded and are

a mix of writing and speaking. I keep the tone playful: I make up sentences using students' names in the room (e.g., Josephine wanted to start her homework immediately after school, but Michael convinced her to go to the JV football game to watch him play). Or I start a sentence and have a student finish it (Having gone to the football game after school, Josephine _____). When I teach compound sentences linked with a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase, I emphasize the kind of logic the connecting word or phrase sets up: Ahmad studied four hours for his biology test; however _____. Ahmad studied four hours for his biology test; consequently _____. Ahmad studied four hours for his biology test; moreover, ____.

In teaching parallel structures, I emphasize three patterns in particular: parallel infinitive phrases, who clauses, and verbals. Again we practice orally as well as in writing: Raquel is the kind of student who works hard to earn A's, to ______, and to ______. What I find in teaching these forms and requiring students to use them constantly in quiz answers, personal reflections, and essays is that students' writing gets sophisticated quickly—almost as if in insisting they write longer and more complex sentences, I am assisting them in thinking in more complex ways.

Genres

Because it is my experience that students come to high school relatively familiar with writing personal narratives, my writing curriculum focuses mainly on exposition and argumentation. Work on exposition begins with making a claim and defending it. I start out by explaining what a claim is (a statement of opinion) and show how to defend it with statements of fact. I usually start with a claim about our school-El Cerrito is the best school in the district-and enlist students' help in defending it. We work out the paragraph on the overhead projector-I write what they tell me to write. Then I have them make a claim of their choosing and defend it. When most students have finished, I ask several students to read their paragraphs aloud. To give students practice with making a claim and defending it, I use that form in reflections before discussions and in all quiz questions.

After teaching students to make a claim and defend it, I move on to personal arguments. The first argument is always a letter to a parent or guardian requesting something students want and imagine they could get with a little persuasion. To teach personal argument, I use the five-part model (introduction, concession, pro 1, pro 2, conclusion) delineated by Payne (1965) in The Lively Art of Writing. Before beginning the actual essay, I ask students to write down three things they would like their parents or guardians to give them or allow them to do. I then ask each student to name one thing on his or her list. Through this sharing, students often inspire each other to ask for something other than what they came up with on their own. To provide a model, I share a sample argument I might use with my mother if I were a high school student, which I read from an overhead transparency, carefully pointing out the logic of each part of my argument. Usually students take their letter arguments through three drafts. I read and grade the third draft, which they revise before giving it to parents and guardians. On a final draft essay that earns less than a C, I assign a grade of R for rewrite and meet with the writer at lunch or after school. In the next few weeks I wait to see new piercings and tattoos, pictures of new puppies, and news about later curfews and more allowance.

The Payne formula is the scaffold for a variety of essays: an argument about a rule that needs to be changed at our school, the significance of a minor character in a novel, and a New Year's resolution a friend should make. It is a form that allows me to address the needs of struggling writers and accomplished writers. The strugglers typically stick with writing the five paragraphs throughout the whole year; the more accomplished writers expand the form, opening up the concession to make claims and rebuttals, for example, or using four or five pro paragraphs.

The next form I teach is the argument-in-response-to-an-argument. This three-part form relies heavily on the SOAPS strategy. Before beginning the essay, we read the argument (usually an editorial, opinion piece, or short magazine article),

work out the SOAPS, and students decide whether they agree or disagree with the writer's ideas. To assist students in summarizing the writer's ideas, I give out a list of words (contends, states, claims, maintains) and show them how to excerpt language from the text to use in their explanation of the writer's ideas. In the middle part, I have students take a stand on the issue-make a claim and defend it—using evidence from their lives, reading, or studies. In the third part, I have them focus on what they want their reader to take away from the piece—a changed attitude, a new way of thinking about the topic, a plan to act. Once students are comfortable with the form's logic, I encourage them to complicate it-to discuss points of agreement and disagreement or to defend their stand with personal, literary, historical, and political references.

Once students have these two argument forms down, I move on to three others: essays that compare and contrast, essays that describe a process, and essays that define—emphasizing that all of these forms are extended claims and defense of claims and all have an argumentative edge. Talk plays a major part in teaching these genres. We start by going around the room announcing our topics as a way of helping others generate topics; we discuss the essay's organization with each other; we work in response pairs or groups.

Apprenticeship

You cannot be let into the game after missing the apprenticeship and be expected to have a fair shot at playing it. (Gee, 1990, p. 155)

I see ninth-grade English as an apprenticeship in which students read and write and talk and talk and write and read and thereby acquire and learn the discourses of high school English. Like Gee, I feel an urgency about the apprenticeship. As high school newcomers, ninth graders must be given the tools they will need as apprentices, and they must be given constant and reassuring practice using those tools. That is why my ninth-grade curriculum is so focused and recursive—every reading

assignment builds on every previous reading assignment, every writing assignment reinforces and complicates the previous writing assignment, every reading skill connects to a writing skill. That is why in teaching reading, I teach a limited number of strategies and focus on them throughout the year; in teaching writing, I teach a limited number of forms and practice and practice them. That is why I insist that students come to see me after school to work with me on revising a paper that is not polished enough to warrant a grade or to read with me when they have fallen behind in a book. That is why I call and e-mail parents to enlist their help when students cut class or come late, neglect an assignment, or fail to show up for an afternoon meeting with me. That is why talk and play and choice are integral to every assignment. That is why disequilibrium and mistakes and questions and risk taking are celebrated.

I am aware, of course, that not all of my students share my optimism about their ability to take control of their lives as academic learners and do not share my sense of urgency about their doing so. Even as they resist, however, my years as a detracking advocate have convinced me that they want academic power, they want to be *smart*. Reuben, a student in my current ninth-grade class, is a case in point. In the self-introduction he read from the author's chair the second day of class, Reuben ended his piece this way:

Ive been to Juvinille Hall 6 times in the past 3 years. Mostly for mistaminor gang enhancements and a couple of felonys. At 1st I thought it was gonna be bad but with hella friends there it was alright. The only books I read is Prison books, street books and shit. I like books that talk about the streets.

In his letter to me, he wrote about his life as a gang-banger.

Ive stolen, Ive fought numerous rival gangsters. Ive gotten jumped by other rival gang members. Ive seen moms cry because their sons do not getting up after been shot. Ive been shot at 4 times and belive me its nothing like the movies its <u>REAL</u>.

He ended his letter:

(P.S ive changed a lot so don't get any negative thoughts bout me O.K im just here to get my self a High School diploma. I wanna be Somebody not no loser gang banger.)

In his public identity Reuben comes to class with his hood up and headphones on. When we start to read, he begins to draw. He does not take quizzes on homework reading assignments, and he does not write down his homework at the end of class. And yet on the final day for the vocabulary test (which I give orally and individually), he lingers; when his classmates have left the room, he takes his vocabulary test. Other days he notices films on my desk that I use with AP students-City of God (Meirelles, 2002) and Bus 174 (Padilha, 2002) and tells me he has seen them. He asks if he can read a book on his own rather than with a group. Almost every day I see Reuben resist taking on the identity of academic learner and yet, in countless ways, he tells me that is who he is.

Students like Reuben remind me how essential demanding and focused detracked ninth-grade English classes are in empowering students to take on identities as high school learners. However, they also remind me that detracked ninth-grade classes are not enough. Reuben and students like him need demanding and supportive detracked ninth-grade science and math classes; they need 10th- and 11th-grade classes that will nurture them as increasingly skilled academic workers.

As a long-time detracking advocate I know only too well, however, the resistance to detracking—among teachers of all disciplines. As outraged as I am by that resistance and the immoral and demoralizing structural inequities it begets, I do not allow the resistance to paralyze me. I cannot. I have too much work to do. I have young teachers to influence and fellow detracking advocates to support. Most important, I have my students and their various needs and levels of expertise to attend to. I have to introduce Kyla (the DaVinci Code fan) to the complexities of Eco's The Name of the Rose. I have to find unboring books for James; rekindle Sam's revolutionary writing self by getting him to sign up for the school newspaper; convince Andrew that as he grows as an English speaker he will grow confident as a writer of English; assure Ward that I will not judge him by his low middle school grades in English. I have to teach Rodney that skill in writing is not about penmanship, Michelle that skill in reading is not about reading aloud, and Tyrone that writing and spelling are not synonymous. And I have to convince Reuben that he can "be Somebody not no loser gang banger." The challenge is his and mine and the company of ninth graders we learn with.

Notes

- 1. All names of students are pseudonyms.
- The self-introduction model follows this pattern—with five or more sequences: I am (name); I am a (noun; e.g., swimmer, reader, writer, sister, brother). (Explain that identity in a sentence or more.)
- 3. Our school operates on the so-called 4X4 block. We have two sessions per year—fall and spring. Each class meets every day for a 90-min block. In effect, we finish the coursework for a whole school year in one session.
- 4. According to Rosenblatt (1978), in efferent reading "the reader's focus of attention is primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (p. 23). "In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading He pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their references arouse with in him" (pp. 24–25).

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