

**Increasing Engagement in Academic Writing Using Frerian Teaching Methods in a High
School English Classroom**

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Abstract

This action research project investigates the research question “How can using Freirean teaching methods to teach academic writing affect students’ engagement?” It aims to determine how using seven of Paulo Freire’s suggested pedagogical strategies through various classroom systems, teaching strategies, and in-class activities impacts students who previously had limited enthusiastic or willing engagement with academic writing. This expands existing research on the effects of using Freirean teaching strategies in English Language Arts classrooms for literacy and creative writing instruction to their potential uses for academic writing instruction. This research was conducted in a 9th- and 10th-grade ELA classroom with 23 students in a small, rural Oregon high school. Data was collected in the form of written observations, lesson plans, and submission data over the course of one six-day academic writing unit. Three primary findings emerged from this research. I found that these new strategies caused students to be more engaged, created initial but quickly overcome difficulties, and increased students’ use of SEL skills. These findings suggest that Freirean strategies should be pursued and researched further for academic writing instruction.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

My K-12 education likely seemed like an easy one to a casual outside observer. I quickly realized that if I could determine what a teacher wanted from me and produce it exactly, I would receive praise and affirmation from my teacher, parents, and even peers. This was simple to do for me, as I never struggled to understand instructions, read, write, or ask the right questions. Additionally, I was summer schooled by my mother, who ensured I knew nearly all the material that would be taught in the next grade before I ever arrived. As a result, I despised learning content I had not been pre-taught, which to me meant bending over a tiny wooden table for hours, sweating in the summer heat over assignments I could not understand. I learned nearly everything I knew until the 6th grade through tears and arguments with my mother, who did not make her motivation for summer schooling her children clear. Regardless, I did learn, and when I was finally back in school each year, I knew far more than my peers. I learned primarily from workbooks, which meant I had limited study strategies that only helped me study independently. I avoided thinking critically, as I only did it under exhausting circumstances to escape them as quickly as possible, and had no desire to learn anything that did not come naturally to me. I learned very little in the classroom, but I had a wealth of information that my teachers adored and graded well. This was my first hint that the school system did not work perfectly. Nearly all of the other students in my class who were considered TAG, or Talented And Gifted, had extensive resources outside school to assist them, as I did.

Eventually, I became advanced enough in school that when my parents requested I skip the 5th grade, I was allowed. In class, I would finish my work as quickly as possible and return to my greatest passion – reading – so I spent significantly more time reading than working in

school. This is perhaps the only time I would voluntarily engage in critical thinking. Otherwise, I would rush through any required bout of critical thinking so it would be over sooner. My teacher agreed I would be more engaged and challenged if I moved up, and so after some testing, I began middle school. There, I suffered a bit. My peers all called me the 5th grader, and I was a deeply sad child who generally thought myself smarter than everyone, so I had few friends. Then, I got a B in math. My entire self-perception came crashing down at ten years old. I had never gotten a B before, and I was devastated. I cried, I blamed the teacher, my parents admonished me, and I decided, before winter break ended, that it was probably my own doing and that I was not smart after all. The first time I did not have a grade pre-learned, I felt like a failure. When I returned to school, I tried harder in class to ensure I never got a B again. Accidentally, I discovered it was much more rewarding and even enjoyable to engage in class to try to learn, rather than to impress a teacher or quickly return to a book. Had my classes prioritized learning over grades, I would have enjoyed school much sooner. While I cannot know this with certainty, I am sure many of my teachers would have liked to prioritize learning over grades if they had been given the choice. Regardless, engaging in class introduced me to the passion that now guides my life—literature as a community endeavor.

ELA showed me that reading was not merely independent escapism, but a reflection of culture and a tool for connecting with others. In my 6th-grade ELA class, we regularly had class discussions. In the first semester of 6th grade, I would participate in discussions the required two times and then read for the rest of the class. Second semester, I began to pay attention to the discussions and actively participated. My teacher, Mrs. Larios, made me feel as though my contributions were insightful and valuable. I began to love our class discussions and became one of the main participants. We also started to discuss how books influenced the real world and vice

versa, a concept I found fascinating, and began pondering in my free time. This passion for literature would guide me through my B.A. in English and lay the foundation for my motivation to become a teacher. Being in community in middle school saved my academic career from my own decision that I was a failure.

To me, school was primarily a delight after I discovered I should be learning. However, I watched my friends in K-12 education struggle immensely academically. I was indescribably lucky to have the dominant teaching strategies work well for me. Many of my friends who were not as lucky went unsupported. As often as I was praised for my grades, they were ridiculed for theirs, as though their inability to learn the material was their own fault. In fact, I saw my friends and peers demonstrate their capabilities and intelligence in countless ways through programs such as 4-H and sports. The vehicle for our academic materials was preventing many students from learning, not any inherent shortcoming in them. I could see this was unfair even as a child. My success did not make me blind to the inequities in my school's teaching strategies and disciplinary systems, and much of the reason I would like to be a teacher is to help combat these inequities.

I had an easier time in school because, primarily by chance, I fit the mold students are expected to fit. Our capitalist system was built on racism and many other forms of discrimination, and so our schools perpetuate these injustices (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p. 48-49). In the words of bell hooks (1994), "...it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom" (p. 29). Capitalism "requires the existence of a mass underclass of surplus labor" (hooks, 1994, p. 29), and our schools are built to uphold capitalism. As Boggs (2012) shares, "At the core of the problem is [a]...model of schooling that sorts, tracks,

tests, and rejects or certifies working-class children as if they were products on an assembly line. The purpose of education...cannot be only to increase the earning power of the individual or to supply workers for the ever-changing slots of the corporate machine” (p. 137). I did not know this when I was in school. The only shred of awareness I had was through seeing my friends struggle to learn, other peers describing feeling like prisoners, and watching my own academics be prioritized by teachers, parents, and other adults over everything else in my life, particularly my physical and mental health. So long as I succeeded academically, no one in my life could understand that I might be struggling in other areas. This communicated to me that most people thought people who were good at academics must be somehow better than other people, and those who struggled with academics were somehow less-than.

School is important. It builds the set of knowledge and skills we will use for our entire lives. However, this just means it is all the more important to have schools center community, accessibility, and understanding. As a K-12 student, I knew something was wrong with our system when I saw myself being prioritized over others because I had great grades. Teachers gave me special opportunities and advice that my friends never received. Actions that other students were punished for went unnoticed when I did them. I knew we were all equally deserving, and did not understand why success was so much easier for me. It could not have been that my struggling peers did not work hard enough, as I watched many of them work harder than I did. I learned as a child that something was broken in our system. I learned as an adult that structural inequities were the breakage. Many of my peers disengaged from school early in our education. Structural barriers students face contribute to this disengagement and make re-engagement more difficult. Many elements can prevent students from engaging with academics, from financial hardship forcing students to work instead of study, to institutional

racism causing students to be unfairly regulated and punished in and out of school. Teachers need to be aware of these structural inequities and do what they can to mitigate their effects on students' engagement in class. This project is one piece of ensuring that I take steps to do so.

When my mother taught me, I was barely engaged in learning. It made learning nearly impossible at times and incredibly unpleasant. Students cannot learn without being engaged, and students cannot engage without the proper instructional techniques from their educators. The only way to deliver equitable education is to find ways to engage all students. In the U.S., this means finding ways to circumvent the structural discrimination that prevents students from engaging in school. Students' self-efficacy is an important part of engagement, and it must be fostered and encouraged despite prejudice against various marginalized groups.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

In 1968, Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he discussed the pitfalls of the banking method and the importance of engaging students directly. This book focuses on the education of oppressed groups of people, and has therefore assisted me in developing my thoughts around the idea that structural barriers prevent engagement in education. I will be using Freire's theoretical frameworks to guide my Action Research Project. Freire observed a pedagogical strategy he called the banking method, a method of instruction frequently used by educators that harms students. In this model of teaching, teachers narrate information to students, attempting to deposit the knowledge in them. Teachers assume that their students bring no prior knowledge to the table and are incapable of teaching anything back to a teacher.

This model poses teacher and student as complete opposites of one another— one all-knowing, one utterly ignorant. While suffering under the banking method, students must absorb knowledge they have no way of truly engaging with. This model props up the oppressive

systems in education systems by dehumanizing students and regulating what they can learn to what a teacher believes, and squashes creativity and engagement in students. In the banking method, students are expected to learn information without ever reflecting on what that information means. This leads to a process of learning and forgetting for students, which makes school feel unimportant and unworthy of engaging with. School seems further unworthy of students' engagement if the narration an educator teaches fails to relate to students' lives in any way. I was able to learn effectively from the banking method, even if my teachers' narration did not relate to my life or interest me. Learning from books that could do nothing but narrate and fail to communicate with or relate to me taught me to learn despite these things. However, I imagine that most of my peers did not possess the collection of over 10 summers' worth of learning how to learn from the banking method that I did. I happen to be able to learn from the banking method fairly well—most students are not so lucky.

In his book, Freire outlines the reasons oppressors can never lead to the liberation of the oppressed— that only the oppressed are capable of liberating themselves, because only they are qualified and motivated to do so. Given that most teachers in the U.S., including myself, are white, it is important to humanize our students and give them the power to guide their education (Howard, 2020, p. 41). White teachers cannot liberate our Students of Color; Students of Color must be allowed to assess what they need and, with assistance from their educators, implement it (Freire, 2014, pp. 44-46). The banking method makes this impossible. We need to abandon the banking method, which prevents marginalized students from communicating with us on how we can best educate them.

Freire did not merely provide criticism of the banking method, but also its solution: communication, and what he coined problem-posing education. Freire explains that in

problem-posing models, teaching must be a partnership, rather than a subjugating relationship. This requires many elements for success. To accomplish this, students and teachers should attempt to humanize and understand one another. Teachers should acknowledge that students are conscious beings and engage those conscious minds in their instruction. Students' prior knowledge should be treated as an asset and engaged in the classroom, rather than ignored. Further, teachers cannot explain what is necessary to learn by appealing to their own authority on the subject; they must have faith in their students and explain concepts genuinely. For problem-posing to succeed, students must be treated as autonomous beings with pre-existing, valuable knowledge, and teachers must be acknowledged as fallible beings rather than merely respected because of their position. Teaching this way requires dialogue with students. According to Freire's problem-posing model, students should not be asked to memorize information, but rather be posed problems they solve through a learning process that they and their teacher are on together. Through working on problems grounded in the world, rather than theoretical ones, students will hopefully find themselves more creatively engaged in class. Freire combines all these elements into a teaching strategy that aims to engage students and develop their critical thinking skills. Freire teaches that engaging students necessitates hands-on thinking and activity, rather than rote memorization, culturally relevant topics and examples that are meaningful parts of the curriculum, and faith in students' ability to be creative, interactive contributors.

I experienced the banking method many times while in school. I believe this is why I required pre-teaching to succeed, while many of my peers struggled. Only when some of my middle school teachers began educating me utilizing other methods did I begin to engage wholeheartedly in school. Open dialogue, the use of prior knowledge, and genuine explanations

of motives in the classroom helped me enjoy learning and want to do it. Helping students enjoy learning should be a priority, as it leads to engagement and, therefore, effective learning. Humanizing students by avoiding the banking method is an important part of engaging them for this reason.

Additionally, to me, the banking method seems incapable of accommodating differentiation. Students with differing needs cannot all be taught the same way. Teachers cannot know where students find success and struggle, what their needs are, etc., without communicating with students. Differentiated teaching strategies are necessary to increase engagement and allow students to communicate their needs (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009).

Freire's assertion that teachers need to abandon the banking method in favor of problem-posing methods is one way to begin circumventing barriers in education, and therefore, barriers to engagement. This theory is ideal for guiding this action research project for that reason. Freire provides several strategies for teaching that can be applied directly. Grounding the topics in my class in their potential real-life applications, rather than in hypothetical situations, as Freire suggests, is one method I rely on. I have observed that explaining to students the reason we are learning something, even and especially when the reason is to develop their critical thinking skills, can help them engage when they are only interested in 'practical' knowledge. Structuring the class around interactions among myself, students, and their peers allows students to connect their prior knowledge to other connections they find personally helpful. Open dialogue between students and me keeps me updated about their understanding and progress. Centering class activities around interaction with material, rather than lecture and notes, requires students to think about what they are doing, stopping them from getting through class by going

through the motions. Teaching students about the global context of the lessons they are learning will help them see how they can apply the knowledge we are gaining together.

I have observed that many of my students are very resistant to writing. Most of them do not find writing assignments engaging, and many of them do not see how writing, particularly the way we do it in class, will be useful to them in their adult lives. I believe this is because my students' previous and current educators, myself included, likely use the banking method for writing instruction. My mentor teacher's and my reliance on the banking method to teach writing, even as we use more modern, student-centered approaches to teaching other aspects of our course, seems to arise from a lack of popular, progressive ways to teach writing. For example, every high school I have ever been to as a student or educator, or that I have heard about from peers, still relies on the five-paragraph model for teaching academic writing. This model is ineffective for several reasons, yet we cling to it as educators (Brannon et al., 2008). To me, forcing students to use the five-paragraph method seems the epitome of the banking method. In my ARP, I plan to use Freirean teaching strategies to teach writing and study the difference it makes for students' engagement with writing in my class. I focus on seven specific strategies: using the problem-posing method, allowing students as much autonomy in their writing as possible, valuing students' funds of knowledge, maintaining an open dialogue with students, prioritizing activity over lecture, humanizing myself and my students, and connecting my lessons to their global contexts.

Freire's theoretical frameworks align with the issues I have observed during my K-12 education and as a future educator, which is what originally drew me to his work. His solutions are both far-reaching, discussing the nature of oppression itself, and classroom-specific, providing specific suggestions to educators, and seemingly address the problems we have both

observed. This allows me to guide my project as a whole within his framework and provides specific changes I can make in my teaching to study their effect on my students.

Connection to InTASC Standards

As a teacher, I would like to create curricula and use teaching strategies that engage students. My goal of engaging students comes with several sub-goals. To engage students, I need to support their ability to learn, remove barriers to learning, teach in ways that help them enjoy learning, and ground my lessons in how they matter in the world at large and in students' lives. To do this, I intend to use theory developed by Freire to improve my teaching so that it does not perpetuate structural barriers and the poor teaching strategies often present in U.S. K-12 education. The InTASC (Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) standards I intend to address fall primarily within the instructional practices learning targets. I believe I will also address Standards 3 ("The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self motivation" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 21)) and 5 ("The teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 28)) through my pursuit of dialogue with students and between students, and my grounding of lessons in a global context.

Through creating an open dialogue with students, through class discussion, formative assessments of many kinds, individual discussions, and more, I seek to address Standard 6: "The teacher understands and uses multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress, and to guide the teacher's and learner's decision making"

(Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 9). These different data points, formal and informal, will guide the class. They will allow me to adjust instruction as the class progresses and plan future classes. They will also help students assess the areas they are successful in and the areas they have not yet fully grasped.

Freire discusses the importance of humanizing students and using information that matters to them in class. By drawing on my knowledge of my students and the communities they are part of, literature on diverse and differentiated pedagogical methods, and several sources on my content area and curriculum, I will address Standard 7. This standard states: “The teacher plans instruction that supports every student in meeting rigorous learning goals by drawing upon knowledge of content areas, curriculum, cross-disciplinary skills, and pedagogy, as well as knowledge of learners and the community context” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 9). Standard 8 outlines how teachers should use a diverse set of instructional methods to help students understand the material and apply it meaningfully, which I intend to do through consistently updated and new strategies for teaching and engaging my students.

Summary

During my K-12 education, I realized that engagement is the most important part of learning. If students are not trying to learn, odds are, they never will. Students stop engaging for numerous reasons, but I most frequently observed two reasons as a student: lack of support and lack of material that felt important. Most often, students do not try to learn material they feel they will never be capable of learning, and frequently, they do not try to learn material that feels insignificant to their lives outside the classroom. Students who do not fit the mold that U.S. schools were designed to teach will encounter barriers to accessing material and to feeling its

significance, even more than their peers. One of the most frequent teaching strategies, the banking method, exacerbates these issues.

Paulo Freire asserts that the banking method, as an instructional strategy, perpetuates educational barriers and oppression. The banking method's strict narrative structure does not allow students' prior knowledge to enter the classroom, prevents creative work, prevents teachers from learning how their students are progressing, and removes students as active participants in their education. To counter the banking method, I will do research implementing Freire's problem-posing method. Using this method, I hope to engage students in learning by reducing potential barriers posed by the U.S. education system. Taking Freire's advice, I will ground my lessons in their community and global context, utilize students' prior knowledge, center my classes around communication, and design class writing activities that require students to engage directly with the material.

These strategies will address several InTASC standards, including the instructional practices and learning targets of Standards 6-8. These standards will be fulfilled through using diverse instructional methods, having students interact with me and one another, and consistently communicating and assessing students, using that data to guide the class.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To guide my project, I conducted research, compiling studies on classroom engagement, Paulo Freire's teaching strategies, and teaching in equitable and inclusive ways. These topics all come together in my research question: How can using Freirean teaching methods to teach academic writing affect students' engagement? In my research, I hoped to uncover ways to fully engage students in the material I teach, as students cannot learn unless they are engaged. Students cannot fully engage with inequitable education strategies. Specifically, I seek to avoid the banking method, a teaching strategy Freire observed that involved narration from an educator to students expected to passively listen and memorize, as it is unengaging, does not develop students' critical thinking, and often reproduces inaccurate and prejudiced information (Freire, 1968, pp. 71-72, 74-75). Paulo Freire created the problem-posing method to oppose the banking method, and I plan to implement this strategy in my teaching (pp. 79-81). The literature I reviewed focuses on removing prejudice from the classroom (a critical step toward meaningfully engaging students), on practically implementing Freire's theories, and on creating an engaging course. My key search terms included "problem-posing," "English Language Arts," "Freire," and "engaging pedagogy." I located articles using Western Oregon University's library website and the education-centric databases it offers, including Teacher Reference Center, Gale OneFile: Educator's Reference Complete, Professional Development Collection, and EBSCO Education Full Text. I also included formative articles for my understanding of my topic from my graduate coursework, all of which fall under the topic of equitable and inclusive education.

Annotated Bibliography

Adjapong, E. S., & Edmin, C. (2015). Rethinking Pedagogy in Urban Spaces: implementing hip-hop pedagogy in the urban science classroom. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching and Research, 11*, 66-77.

This article presents research on how implementing the hip-hop pedagogical practices of call-and-response and co-teaching as daily teaching practices can increase students' engagement with and understanding of the material. The authors' research was conducted at a public urban middle school in the northeast U.S., which predominantly served Black students and students experiencing extreme poverty. The first author conducted the research, implementing co-teaching and call-and-response in his classrooms, primarily in 6th-grade science classes. According to these researchers, coteaching is a process of giving a student the lesson plan ahead of time and allowing them to teach the lesson after adapting it to their own style. The call-and-response method is just what it sounds like: the teacher calls and students respond, turning them into active participants in the lesson. The data sources for this study included a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to students, video vignettes recorded in class, and student focus groups based on the questionnaire. The theoretical framework the authors used to conduct and analyze the research was culturally relevant teaching, specifically, bringing hip-hop culture into the classroom through hip-hop pedagogy. They looked at the idea of cultural capital, the value something has as assigned by culture, trying to use the cultural capital of hip hop in class to give the class enough capital to get students engaged. Additionally, they hope that, through this process, the subject of science will begin to accrue its own cultural capital for students once they engage with it. The authors found that all students would

eventually participate in call-and-response, and the students who were able to teach lessons reported enjoying the experience and the agency it gave them. The questionnaire revealed that the vast majority of students listened to hip hop music, enjoyed its incorporation into the classroom, and wanted to see it incorporated even more. Additionally, the survey revealed that most students enjoyed science in general and that particular science class specifically. The videos showed students responding to hip-hop pedagogy, even while sometimes ignoring other approaches when they were incorporated in class. Overall, students engaged more when hip hop pedagogy was used, enjoyed class more when it was, and were able to relay information to each other more efficiently through hip hop pedagogy than their teacher could using traditional methods. The positive impact of hip-hop's cultural capital was undeniable. These findings reveal the necessity of accessing students' funds of knowledge when teaching them. Using pedagogical methods that relate to students' lives increases their engagement with the material. These methods can be used in any classroom, and they helped me to understand how I might use culturally relevant teaching to engage my students in their learning. The data collection methods used in this study are a great strength of the study, as data were collected from the perspectives of students and teachers and in three distinct ways. Unfortunately, this valuable research was collected in only one 6th-grade science class, greatly limiting the study's repeatability.

Drouin, S. D. (2018). Laboratories of Democracy Utilizing Problem-Posing Education in Our Classrooms. *Multicultural Education*, 26(1), 31-34.

Drouin sought to incorporate Paulo Freire's problem-posing method into his classrooms to make his teaching more helpful and authentic. Freire (1970) conceptualized three phases for teachers to implement in his text, *Problem-Posing Education*, and this author's research follows the implementation of each phase in his class. Freire's definitions of the banking method guided Drouin away from certain teaching practices, while Freire's problem-posing framework guided him toward stronger alternative teaching practices. Phase one of the process is documenting problems, so Drouin's students brainstormed issues in their school. After a free write, Drouin facilitated a class discussion about these issues, implementing dialogue in the classroom, as the problem-posing framework dictates. In phase two, Drouin and his students examined the causes of the issues they identified through research. Phase three is community engagement, where students go out into the world and try to create change. During this phase, Drouin's students met with school and local officials to try to realize the changes they sought. Drouin found that using this teaching model forced him to adopt the problem-posing method. For example, Freire's theories demand that teachers not present themselves as all-knowing experts. Allowing students to pick their own issues meant Drouin was uninformed about the particular topics they were working with. The teacher and students had to learn from each other in this situation because they were learning together. This means teachers need to be facilitators. Rather than being informed about every issue, teachers need to be experts at researching, identifying issues, uncovering root causes, and reaching out to organizations and people for information or to effect changes. However, Drouin found that this democratic teaching method did not diminish his authority as a teacher. Students learned deeper lessons because of their authentic engagement, and Drouin's facilitation of

the problem-posing method made that possible. Students engaged more willingly and deeply with the material when using the problem-posing method. One strength of this article is its acknowledgment of how “messy” this process can become. The problem-posing method leads to authentic and engaged learning. Still, its authenticity comes with topics that are difficult to understand, which the teacher may not know much about, and can be emotionally difficult as well. Teachers must learn alongside students in this framework, but that is incredibly difficult and risky. Going into a lesson without knowing what students will or should learn makes planning difficult and adapting on the fly imperative. Additionally, when students’ civic engagement efforts fail, it can be incredibly disheartening. Despite this “messiness,” the problem-posing method promotes engagement and is something I can use to circumvent the banking problem. Drouin’s methods are limited by his small sample size in the study– the only students studied were his current students.

Farag, A., Greeley, L., & Swindell, A. (2022). Freire 2.0: Pedagogy of the digitally oppressed. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(13), 2214-2227.

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The authors of this article forge a connection between Paulo Freire’s theories in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and classroom technology, suggesting that Learning Management Systems (LMS) negatively affect students. Published in 2021, Farag et al analyze post-pandemic data on how and why LMS such as Google Classroom and Blackboard are used and the effects they have on students. Farag et al. argue that the role of technology in the classroom is cause for concern, but digital use in classrooms needs to

be critically examined, not eradicated. Most LMS exacerbate the banking method, dehumanizing and oppressing students. Farag et al. explain that viewing learning as something to be “managed” as part of a rigid “system” limits students, and posits the teacher as a manager– someone with all the knowledge in the room seeking to “bank” that knowledge in students’ heads. Rather than critical thinking, LMS are designed to prompt memorization and recall. Further, the human interactions prompted by LMS assignments are prescribed and limited, robbing students of authentic engagement and interaction even when they claim to do the opposite. Farag et al cite research from Greta Gotez (2021) that finds that the individualization and isolation that LMS promote in education disproportionately harm marginalized groups as well. The article also addresses universal educational issues with technology use, such as whether teachers are subjecting students to potential data mining and the reality that many educational software companies are for-profit rather than backed by pedagogical research. However, they state that digital use in classrooms can be reimaged to support student learning. Farag et al. acknowledge that digital literacy is a necessary and teachable skill. Unfortunately, while the authors acknowledge the importance and potential of technology in the classroom, these concepts lack the specificity they used to criticize the technology options. They suggest using Freire’s problem-posing model to question LMS and teach digital skills to students, but do not describe how teachers might do this, suggesting that future research is needed.

Franco, M. J., & Unrath, K. (2015). The Art of Engaging Young Men as Writers. *Art Education*, 68(3), 26-31.

The authors of this paper researched how visual art support could enhance literacy learning among K-5 male students. They employed a VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) framework to shape how these boys engaged with writing in their remedial writing program. VTS is an instructional method based on teamwork between a psychologist and a museum educator. It is a constructivist approach that uses sequenced visual art to prompt critical thinking and communication in a collaborative group. VTS employs seemingly simple questions about art from a facilitator to produce the collaborative construction of knowledge based on observations, prior knowledge, and peer contributions. This process encourages evidence-based reasoning, dialogic teaching, higher-order thinking, and respectful debate. The research involved providing boys with motivational art activities that led into writing assignments, in the hopes that this would help them imagine, write, and develop stories of greater quality and length. The researchers led weekly 8-12-minute VTS discussions on narrative-focused artwork, after which students participated in an art-making activity, allowing them to record the ideas and narratives that resonated with them during the discussion. Each session ended with purposeful creative writing tasks that aligned with the lesson's VTS and artmaking elements. Data were recorded through weekly videos of the VTS dialogues, informal interviews with the boys while they were engaged in writing and artmaking, and blogs written by researchers and photographers. The boys in this study responded enthusiastically to the VTS. They participated vigorously, and instead of their enthusiasm declining over time, it intensified. They demonstrated higher-order thinking skills and meaningful connections between the art, their comments, and their peers' comments. The boys were observed using their drawing as essentially graphic organizers for their

thoughts and writing, and post-art-making writing contained more words, sentences, and ideas. The process of participating in VTS and writing also brought the boys quite noticeably closer emotionally. Asking these students to use skills they were already proficient in, to work with people and topics they knew about, and to do so regularly instilled higher levels of self-efficacy, engagement, and perseverance. As the study progressed, the boys' positive extrinsically motivated writing behaviors became increasingly more intrinsic. This article could have been strengthened by specific examples of the boys' activities and the art pieces they worked with. However, it provides a compelling case for bringing media beyond texts into the ELA classroom. It shows that enthusiastic engagement with writing is possible for students of all interest levels if teachers meaningfully incorporate alternative writing methods and assignments.

Howard, T. C. (2020). Changing Demographics. In *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms* (2nd ed., pp. 33-50). Teachers College Press.

This text analyzes data on the achievement gap and related historical events, and offers suggestions for its causes and potential solutions. Howard examines this issue through a historical lens and argues that any analysis of the achievement gap, an inherently race-based issue, must be situated in its historical context. The origins of the U.S. and U.S. public education are both deeply tied to racism, which causes the achievement gap we see today. Howard looks at statistics on grades, standardized testing, graduation rates, expulsions and suspensions, and placement in SPED and AP courses. Howard acknowledges that these methods of assessing achievement are faulty. However, they

demonstrate a clear injustice regardless. The data used for this analysis is from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). The data clearly reveal the achievement gap. Students of Color and students in poverty score much lower than wealthy White students in nearly every educational area the text includes. Howard cites Rothstein (2004), who states that some researchers have suggested that the achievement gap is due to social issues that are not caused by schools and cannot be solved by them. Howard disproves this with data showing that the achievement gap is clear before schooling begins. He explains that if schools did not cause the gap, preschools should combat it, and despite being the primary demographic of preschools, Black children still “achieve” the least in pre-K-12 studies. Therefore, the solutions for this gap should come partially from schools. Using a historical lens, Howard documents the causes of the achievement gap. He begins with the eugenics movement, citing Selden’s 1999 analysis that demonstrates how the movement’s characterization of White people as biologically superior to People of Color justified higher-quality education for White people. Howard states that White people still benefit from educational practices, policies, and structures that prioritize them because of this. He cites Anderson (1988) and Siddle Walker (1996), who state that these benefits exist because many groups opposing integration still believed in the biological superiority of White people when educational systems began to change in support of integration. The eugenics movement also created lower expectations for Students of Color and limited access to certain programs, according to Irvine & Irvine (1983) and Kozol (2005). Deficit-based thinking also contributes to the achievement gap, as it frames students’ failure to succeed as a failure of the student because of their identity rather than the school system, according to King (1991) and Pine & Hilliard (1990).

Another cause of the gap between the opportunities and resources available to White students vs. Students of Color, perpetuated and originated because of racism, according to Darling-Hammond (2007). Further, Howard cites Steele (1992, 1997), who explains that stereotype threat refers to the idea that racial stigma has influenced schools for so long that these stigmas are embedded in school policies and practices, and that students are aware of them. This harms their self-efficacy. Howard summarizes that institutionalized racism as a whole causes the gap, because schools were built on racism and perpetuate it still, knowingly and unknowingly. He posits that combating these issues requires structural change, and above all else, high-quality teaching. Howard states that effective teachers are the best way to fight the achievement gap and help underserved students. Students cannot succeed if we do not know what is preventing them from doing so, and this text provides a foundation for understanding an enormous struggle felt in U.S. schools every day. Any research on U.S. schools should be guided by an awareness of and preparation to address the achievement gap. This text is an excellent summary of scholarship on the achievement gap and brings together many valuable resources to provide an overarching view and important takeaways for educators. However, it is ultimately a summary of other scholars' and researchers' work and cannot fully represent all the sources it references.

Howard, T. C. (2019). Examples of School Success for Culturally Diverse Students. In *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms* (pp. 126-144). Teachers College Press.

This study analyzes successful schools as exemplars to guide teachers on how to best close the achievement gap. The author selected four charter or public Title I schools, which served predominantly Students of Color and students on free and reduced lunch and showed improvement in core academic areas for at least two years. The author spent a total of 1,000 hours researching these schools, observing classrooms, staff meetings, day-to-day operations, and professional development, teaching professional development, interviewing teachers and administrators, attending after-school programs, and having informal conversations with staff. Using a framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, the author makes five observations based on research on why the schools are successful, stating that successful schools have strong visionary leadership, rigorous coursework, early academic intervention strategies, open discussion of race, and strong parental and community involvement. Strong visionary leadership is necessary for school success, and the author defines this as a principal with a clear vision for transforming the school for the better and a willingness to put in the work to achieve that vision. Visionary leaders have an authentic belief that their students can succeed; they set the bar high and expect students to reach it. They need to be deeply knowledgeable about and involved in their communities. Effective instructional practices among teachers include multitasking, building community, assessing in multiple ways, and effectively managing a class. Rigorous coursework that prioritized depth over breadth and almost no off-task time were hallmarks of effective instruction across the four schools. Academic intervention helped students succeed by identifying struggling students early on and immediately enrolling them in destigmatized academic programs that could help them. These schools also talked openly about race. The achievement gap cannot be solved by ignoring it, and

discussing race with colleagues helps teachers address racism, which affects education deeply. The last trait Howard observed in all four schools was deep parental and community involvement. These methods helped students and schools succeed. Culturally relevant pedagogy is key to student engagement and success, and this research provides a framework for engaging with it. This was a formative text in helping me develop my understanding of teaching practices I should employ to engage students and avoid the banking method and the racist ideas it perpetuates. Howard studied these four schools in depth, and the research is strong. However, Howard studied only four schools, limiting the study's scope.

Jones, S., & Chapman, K. (2017). Telling stories: engaging critical literacy through urban legends in an English secondary school. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 16(1), 85-96.

This article demonstrates that using urban legends to teach literacy, rather than the typical canonical texts, provides a way to bring diverse material into the English classroom and to allow students to engage with authentic, engaging, and critical material. Research for this article was done in the English classroom of the second author, Katie Chapman.

Located in Derbyshire, England, she researched two classes of 21 mixed-ability, 13-14-year-old students. With the first class, or Class A, she taught four lessons, collecting data from students' written work, creative, reflective, and analytic, on local urban legends. The next year, she adapted these lessons for Class B, which was composed entirely of new students. This time around, she recorded their discussions about urban legends to collect data. The authors use the theoretical framework presented to English

students at universities in England as part of their ITE courses to guide their research. Secondary English teachers are given increasingly regimented and limited plans for the texts and genres they should include in their courses. The research for this article began as a way to incorporate a broader definition of literacy, as presented by ITE courses, and human connection into the classroom. Using urban legends manifests from an effort to include local literacy practices, oral storytelling culture, and communal stories and retellings. By including students' stories, Chapman incorporates Freire's theoretical frameworks, which are based on dialogue. The authors found that using urban legends drew on students' funds of knowledge and elicited immediate, enthusiastic engagement. The relevance to students' lives encouraged them to share their experiences and thoughts, engaging in educational dialogue. Using urban legends allowed students to critically engage with the texts, as they were willing to question them. These lessons taught students about the structure and strategies used in storytelling, as well as the reasons people tell stories. Students were more creative with their writing, ideas, and conversations when engaging with the urban legends. It allowed the voices of marginalized groups and critical conversations into the classroom in an accessible way. Students' enthusiasm led the authors to adopt the "pull" method rather than the "push" method, in which students generated ideas and knowledge rather than having teachers "push" them. What the author describes as the "push" method fits Freire's description of the banking method in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Teaching urban lessons was an excellent way for Chapman to effectively teach literacy skills without being limited to the mandated curriculum. This article demonstrates a well-researched, practical, and effective way to teach students several important literacy skills. While not every pedagogical

approach is directly named, Chapman integrates several culturally relevant teaching methods. Teachers with students in an area uninterested in urban legends specifically may need to find another way to access students' funds of knowledge; however, the ideas presented here of using oral storytelling and dialogue in teaching remain sound. This article was critical to my understanding of how to implement ideas from several theoretical frameworks, particularly when brought together.

Lammers, J.C., Magnifico, A.M., & Wang, A. (2022). Playful Multiliteracies: Fan-Based Literacies' Role in English Language Arts Pedagogy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 66(2), 80-90. <https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/jaal.1253>

This article presented research on how altering typical ELA assignments to include “playful” assignments grounded in fandom-based literacy can help teachers make their curricula more engaging while still meeting academic expectations. They use a multiliteracy framework that recognizes the vital need to include digital and diverse literacies in the ELA classroom. For their research, they recruited teachers from a class they taught on fandoms, online spaces, and the media creation process. This July 2019 course was a week-long, graduate-level class. The class connected its content to the ELA classroom, and the study followed volunteers as they implemented it in their classrooms the following year. Four teachers volunteered for the study, and the paper focuses on the experiences and outcomes of the three secondary teachers. For data collection, the authors collected syllabi, plans, facilitation documents, their own feedback, class notes, and photos of the teachers' whiteboards. They also interviewed participants for 30-42 minutes each at the beginning and end of the school year and conducted quarterly

surveys. The study found that teachers reconceptualized what counted as curricular reading and learning. Incorporating fandom-based literacy allowed for scaffolding, the reimagining of assessment, and the encouragement of student participation in reading, analysis, and composition. Students were able to demonstrate knowledge, reading comprehension, and empathy, explore narrative, deeply analyze literature, and more through writing fan fiction. Using fan fiction, students were able to reinforce their knowledge, reconceptualize ideas, and give peer feedback. Teachers were still able to meet state standards in composition, drafting, analyzing literature, and more using this alternative assignment method. Importantly, the teachers in the study reported that students were more motivated and engaged in coursework when they were able to incorporate fan-based literacy writing and skills. Some students were more inclined to submit fan-based literacy assignments than their other assignments. This proved to be more than a new way of assessing, as after implementing these assignments, students' skills in other areas improved, and their essay topics became more diverse and creative. This is an incredibly helpful method to think about when conceptualizing how I can engage students in class. The importance of dialogue in ELA is undeniable, and using this method would allow students to engage in dialogue with me, with each other, and with class materials. This accesses students' funds of knowledge, develops their academic skills, and encourages meaningful participation. These are all goals I have for my classroom, which I may be able to achieve by incorporating the suggestions in this paper to create fan-based literacy assignments.

McGrail, E. (2007). Laptop Technology and Pedagogy in the English Language Arts Classroom. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 15(1), 59-85.

The research McGrail conducts aims to understand the experiences, practices, and reasoning behind ELA teachers' practices in the Laptop Initiative (LI), a term referring to the mass integration of laptops into the general education classrooms of the schools McGrail studied. This study collected information on teachers' experiences with and opinions on the LI. Thus, the theoretical framework is difficult to pin down. The author acknowledges several frameworks used by others to inform their opinions and policies on technology; however, the author does not use a single framework, as this study focuses on the opinions of other ELA teachers. They state they will use a qualitative framework to examine practices and their meanings, and that the meanings are influenced by the institutional beliefs and contexts of teachers. The study was conducted in several San Francisco-area schools that were part of the LI, and the ELA teachers engaged with it. These teachers varied widely demographically, but were all provided with training on the use of several software programs. Data were collected primarily through extensive interviews in which teachers were asked broad questions about ELA, their classrooms, and technology use. After about four months, questions specific to individuals were added as well. Secondary information for the study was collected through class visitation and teacher artifacts. Through this research, McGrail primarily analyzed the arrangement of physical space in teachers' classrooms, the level of structure in assignments, the pedagogical strategies teachers used to implement technology, and the community-centered nature of teachers' approaches. The author found that one of the major issues teachers had was the functionality of the furniture in the room, especially

technology-related equipment. Teachers arranged their rooms in diverse ways, all with their own issues, sometimes compounded by technology. Some teachers provided highly structured assignments and expectations for technology use, leading to a lack of student ownership in their pursuits. This led to off-task behavior, compounded by the internet's access to diverse technological distractions, which are often more engaging ways for students to use technology, as they afford active participation and autonomy. Teachers who used technology as a tool for constructivist pedagogy had much more success keeping students on task, as students had autonomy in their learning. Technology use based on problem-posing and collaborative inquiry was associated with higher rates of academic engagement; however, some of these teachers failed to get their students to work together meaningfully. Desk arrangement and assignment structure contributed to computer-imposed isolation. Teachers who used instructional activities based on open communication and problem-solving, drawing on Freire's educational ideologies of cultivating critical thought and shared control of the learning process, had the most success academically and in getting students to work together. These teachers had students pick the technology tools they used and taught them to use technology as a literacy tool. However, even these teachers could have supported their students better had they had a greater understanding of technology themselves. The author found that logistical issues will always hinder teachers, and these contribute to negative technology outcomes. Additionally, technology will always have access to distractions more engaging than education if teachers do not allow students to participate in meaningful knowledge construction and interaction. To create positive technological outcomes, administrators must develop better plans to support their teachers by improving

classroom environments and teachers' professional development. The main issues laptops presented were social isolation, limited interaction, and off-task behavior. To combat this, teachers need a good understanding of both technology and pedagogy, so they can combine the two to create the best possible uses of technology in the classroom. This study is dated, as it is from 2007. It also has a relatively small scope. Despite its age, it presents findings that are still relevant to teachers today who still struggle with the place technology should have in the classroom and whether it hinders or promotes engagement. This paper teaches us that teachers should regularly revisit their practices, develop their technology knowledge, and work toward better teaching with technology.

Rushek, K. A., Batchelor, K. E., Beaumont, J., Shaffer, A., & Barrett, D. (2024). VSCO Stickers Unpeeled: Engaging Critical and Multiliteracies Pedagogy with Preservice English Teachers. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 20(1), 1-26.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the results of ELA PSTs (English Language Arts Preservice Teachers) collaborating on a multimodal project analyzing stickers through a critical feminist and critical literacy lens. The authors use critical feminist pedagogy, multiliteracies, and critical literacy to conduct their analyses. They believe all types of media, or multiliteracies, can lead to critical literacy, or the ability to meaningfully engage with, learn from, and critique messages. They turn a critical eye on the patriarchal perpetuation of the dominant voice of men and look at inequities between genders. The researchers developed three curriculum-building workshops intended to disrupt widely taught texts and present new ways to develop critical literacy. The cohort participants decided democratically to use critical feminism as the theoretical framework

to guide the workshops. This article focuses on one focus group within the workshops, which analyzed feminist-marketed VSCO stickers. VSCO is a photo editing and social media app. Still, the word came to represent a subculture primarily among teenage girls in 2019 that lost popularity shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. “VSCO girl” was a phrase associated with several popular trends, including using a Hydro Flask and decorating it with stickers, phrases like “sksksk” and “save the turtles,” wearing very large t-shirts with small shorts, and more. Researchers bought thousands of stickers in popular multi-packs marketed to girls and analyzed the messaging they presented. The focus group was trained in qualitative data methods, including literature review and constant comparative analysis, to identify themes in the stickers and their deeper meanings. The data collected included audio and video recordings of the workshops, workshop artifacts, and a post-program qualitative survey. The focus group found that the stickers were overwhelmingly the product of consumerism, with many seeming to be relics of now-forgotten internet jokes. The aesthetics of women and girls change rapidly with trends, and so do the stickers marketed to them. Teenage girls are constantly stereotyped and subconsciously labeled, and these stickers attempt to capitalize on that by marketing those labels back to the people assigned them. Additionally, many VSCO-style stickers promote performative activism. Some stickers seemed intended for virtue signaling, but any politically controversial topics, such as LGBTQ+ content, were distinctly absent. Despite the seemingly wide variety of stickers, there was a noticeable lack of “masculine” activities and interests depicted on them, as the stickers seem to assume girls will not be interested in sports, history, math, superheroes, etc. These findings reveal potentially helpful modern feminist realizations, such as the connection

between consumerism and girlhood that many companies try to push. They also showcase how ELA PSTs used critical literacy stances in nontraditional media. The process they used to do this is an excellent teaching tool for using multiliteracy to develop critical literacy. These PSTs' future students will be able to develop these skills, as their teachers will understand how to transform any text into a studiable one. The study focused mostly on the results the focus group found about its stickers, to its detriment. The results of the program's multiliteracy applications were much stronger and had much wider potential applications than those of common themes found in stickers. However, the process presented is helpful for understanding how to teach critical literacy across any media. Given that anything can be a text, and that part of ELA centers on teaching students to understand, analyze, and use texts, this is a helpful process to use when teaching with unconventional texts.

Schneider Kavanagh, S., & Rainey, E. C. (2017). Learning to Support Adolescent Literacy:

Teacher educator pedagogy and novice teacher take up in secondary English language arts teacher preparation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(5), 904-937.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217710423>

This article analyzed research done on novice teachers and how what they learned in a summer program affected how they taught their students. The first author taught a six-week summer intensive course on teaching secondary English, and the researchers then obtained videos of those novice teachers teaching the following year. Their data consisted primarily of 24 videos from novice teachers' secondary English classrooms. Most of these teachers were in their early 20s and had no teaching experience. These 12

teachers worked at two charter schools, both of which served predominantly Black students and low-income students, many of whom struggled academically. They also exclusively co-taught with one another. Other data included 13 hours of video recordings from the first author's methods class, taught to novice teachers. The authors analyzed their data using a sociocultural theoretical framework, stating that individuals are agents in the production of the social systems they are part of. They viewed the practice of teaching and of literary studies as cultural reproduction and negotiation, through which teachers exercised their agency on their social structures. Analyzing the data through this lens, the authors came to three primary conclusions. Firstly, the novice teachers were taught to facilitate text-based discussions with representations, decompositions of the discussions, and practice facilitating, but while teaching novice teachers to attend to literary studies, the first author primarily discussed scholarship. Their second finding was that when these novice teachers began teaching, they supported students' discussions of texts but did not support them to read or discuss literature in a way that reflected literary studies. This mirrored the way they were taught. The third finding was that the novice teachers relied on moves taught by the first author but used them flexibly, adapting them to different situations and responding to their classroom contexts. In their classrooms, the novice teachers used the practices that were taught to them in the summer institute by being named, represented, and practiced. The novice teachers did not use the practices that were taught to them through only a discussion of scholarship in their classrooms. This shows that stated learning goals and diverse teaching methods succeed, while narration does not. This proves the importance of teaching with dialogue and shows that teaching methods quite directly impact the application of knowledge. This also means

that information gleaned during research should be named and analyzed so it can help the researcher improve as a teacher and benefit future researchers. This article helped me think critically about how I will conduct my research and what I can learn from it.

However, one limitation of this article is its scope, which includes only one repetition of this study and only 12 teachers in its data pool.

Zuin, A., & Rodrigues de Mello, R. (2024). Educating with Paulo Freire: Teaching and learning on the digital culture. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 56(10), 988-998.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2024.2336025>

Zuin and Rodrigues de Mello seek to prove that teachers must include the context of the information they and their students collect on the internet, because in the digital age we have boundless information at our fingertips that lacks the necessary information to frame it, leading to the constant reproduction of bigoted information. They researched by collecting data from four books written by Freire. They then discussed this data, organizing it into key concepts that provided meaningful insight into education and learning in a digital culture. They use Paulo Freire's concepts from *Pedagogy of Hope*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and *Pedagogy of Freedom* to reframe the relationship between students and their teachers as one based on dialogical communication. Using Freire's problem-posing and dialogue methods, teachers can remove communication barriers perpetuated by technology. According to Freire, any teaching technique, and as the authors extend, teaching with technology, cannot exclude discussions of the origins of information and the historical and political context for what, how, and why information exists. Mechanical memorization refers to the process in which students are expected to

memorize and reproduce information presented by a teacher exactly, without critical thinking. This reprocessing perpetuates prejudiced views and is made easier than ever by digital platforms, which produce information without context, often based on algorithms that may be biased by prejudiced information and connections. However, digital platforms can also be used to combat mechanical memorization if students are encouraged to use them for digital archiving and deep learning. Students should use the “mechanicalness of the digital memory” to learn about the context of their information to combat the banking method, or mechanical memorization, which perpetuates uncritical and potentially harmful knowledge. Rather than passively absorbing information from the internet, students should archive it through not only collection but also classification and interpretation based on the historical continuity of information. In this way, the authors apply Freire’s educational philosophies to digital learning, offering an ethical approach to teaching students with technology that avoids reproducing thoughtless prejudice. This article proposes what seems to be an excellent way to use technology, something mandated in most U.S. classrooms, while avoiding the banking method. However, the research is hypothetical and has not been applied to any students. This application of Freire’s tested and supported theories to technologies is logical and promising, but the theories themselves are not yet tested or supported.

Summary

This research demonstrates the importance of using culturally relevant pedagogy and dialogic teaching methods. Accessing students’ funds of knowledge is critical in helping them to engage in coursework. It is one of the main ways, though implemented in diverse ways, that

researchers I came across managed to do so. Keeping in mind the achievement gap and the history of racism in U.S. schools informs teachers of how to better teach, allowing them to engage students and use problem-posing more effectively. Teaching using collaborative, constructivist, and communication-based methods keeps students engaged and helps prevent off-task behavior. Students learn better when they construct knowledge and have agency in their learning. My research also demonstrated that technology and multiliteracy are major topics in ELA education right now, and need to be taken into account when researching and planning lessons.

Chapter 3: Methods

Action research is a method of research that enables educators to examine their teaching practices. Sagor (2000) states that action research is “...a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking action.” (p. 3). Sagor explains that, rather than producing results to be consumed by other educators, the primary purpose of action research is to inform the researcher of how to alter their own actions. As the primary beneficiary of the action research, the researcher learns to be a more effective educator through research that is directly relevant to their inquiries and students. It is also a very rewarding experience for educators, who see in their research results about the effect they have on their students.

Sagor (2000) explains that action research occurs in seven steps. Firstly, a teacher will select the aspect they want to focus on in their research. They will select a topic that is worth the time it takes to research—one that will make a “...central part of a teacher’s work more successful and satisfying” (p. 7). With this focus in mind, the teacher will clarify the theories, values, and beliefs that will guide their research. These will provide the framework for the research they conduct. Given the selected issue and framework, the teacher will then develop guiding research questions for their project. They will collect data to answer these questions in their classroom. This data must be collected from multiple independent sources to ensure its reliability and validity. The teacher will analyze this data via these two questions: “What is the story told by these data?” “Why did the story play itself out this way?” (p. 6). When a teacher has answered those two questions, they will know more about what they studied and have the tools to understand what they can improve about their teaching practice and how. The teacher will then report their results however they see fit, for example, through formal publication or informal conversations with colleagues. Teachers can then take action by applying their research in the

classroom. Informed by what they have learned, teachers can grow as educators and avoid repeating past mistakes.

This process is the appropriate tool for my study because it helps teachers improve their teaching practices, which is precisely what I intend to do. I am not yet a licensed teacher, and thus should conduct research to improve myself as an educator, rather than to try to improve others' practices. I care deeply about engaging students in academic writing, as it is something most students I have met strongly dislike and attempt to avoid. I do not want this for my students, and through action research, I will find ways to combat this issue.

I followed each of the seven steps Sagor defines while conducting my research. I selected a topic by focusing on an aspect of my teaching that could be more successful: increasing students' engagement in academic writing. This is something I have struggled to do throughout the year. I selected Freire's framework because it offers a pedagogical theory that could help me meaningfully investigate my topic. I resonated deeply with Freire's pedagogical theories when I encountered them initially, and I had begun using them and observing their effects informally. Based on these steps, I developed a research question to guide my research:

- How can using Freirean teaching methods to teach academic writing affect students' engagement?

With this research question in mind, I began collecting data to answer it. I developed a unit that used Freirean teaching methods to teach academic writing and collected data from my lesson plans, students' submissions, and my CT's and my observations. I then interpreted the data, as detailed later in this chapter, and what you read now accomplishes the step requiring action researchers to report their findings. I will apply the knowledge I gained through this process in my classroom while planning and instructing indefinitely.

Participants and Setting

I conducted my research at my clinical placement for student teaching. This school, which I will refer to as North Valley for privacy, is located in rural Oregon. It is situated in a deeply agricultural community and is a K-12 school with approximately 100 students enrolled in its high school each year. Only approximately 6% of the K-12 student population at North Valley was a part of an ethnically or racially minoritized group, and most students identified as Christian at the time of this research. My action research focused on a mixed-grade English classroom with 9th- and 10th-grade students. In the class, I had two students on 504s, two students on IEPs, one student who could not use technology, and no students who were emerging bilinguals. There were 13 male-identifying and 10 female-identifying students in this class of 23.

Students at this school tend to have deep funds of knowledge related to agriculture and their peers. Most of my students had attended North Valley since elementary school, which means they had known their peers, many of their teachers, and the school's culture since they were small children. Students at North Valley tend to know the roughly 25 peers in their grade incredibly well and are generally familiar with everyone else in the high school as well. Most of my students had some connection to agriculture, either through family members' professions or involvement in FFA. FFA is the largest extracurricular program at North Valley and is formally known as the National FFA Organization. While the acronym FFA used to stand for Future Farmers of America, it no longer stands for anything, in an effort to encourage the participation of students with a more diverse array of interests. The organization teaches students career and life skills using agricultural education, which involves North Valley students even more deeply in agriculture. During the 2025-26 school year, there was only one teacher for each subject at North Valley's high school, except for agriculture, which had two teachers. Most students were enrolled

in agriculture, animal science, or shop classes with these teachers. My students were a tight-knit group with abundant knowledge of agriculture, running a business, and each other. My students' fund of knowledge included things such as the ability to fix their own cars, the willingness to volunteer for group projects, the ability to explain best business practices, and the knowledge necessary to design a model for breeding animals effectively. My students tended to have unique thought processes when approaching problems and assignments.

I worked with this group of students from September 2025 to June 2026, and, at the time of this research, I had known them for six months. I was at a disadvantage because of this, as most of their teachers had known them for several years. Students were more familiar with their other teachers, but through my efforts to genuinely get to know each student, they have grown comfortable with me as well. The teachers at North Valley have the knowledge to provide differentiation for every student. They are incredibly familiar with each student's interests, prior academic experiences, family situations, and preferences. I frequently consulted teachers when designing lesson plans and units to leverage this wealth of knowledge as I continued to improve my own. I had become skilled at connecting my lessons to students' lives, using knowledge of the community and school culture to make content relatable to my students. However, I still struggled to engage students in assessments. In everyday instruction, activities, and assignments, my students were willing to put forth genuine effort nearly every day. When they were expected to do things that felt more 'academic' to them, they displayed behavior that suggested a lower level of interest and engagement. During units that interacted directly with academia, such as essay writing units, my students would participate less often in class, partake in more frequent off-task behaviors, volunteer to share aloud with the class less often, and more. While deciding on the research I planned to do, I was working to improve my ability to garner students' buy-in

for everyday things and for summative activities as well. I knew my students, and they knew me, which meant my classroom operated with a great deal of mutual respect during learning. I hoped to translate this rapport and respect into engagement with activities that felt academic to students, such as academic writing.

Data Collection and Analysis

For my project, I collected data in four ways: written personal reflections after each class, observations from my CT (cooperating teacher), data on students' grades and submissions, and my lesson plans. I collected data from one six-class unit on essay writing. After each class, I reflected on times when students seemed engaged in the lesson, whether they were more engaged than they were in our last essay unit, and any other observations I had about their level of engagement. I also journaled about the specific teaching strategy I was using to influence my students' engagement, and any other thoughts I had about the effects of Freirean methods on my students. My CT recorded her observations throughout the lessons. I wrote extensive lesson plans for my lessons, which I also recorded. The recordings were used to corroborate the observations made by my CT and me, thereby increasing the validity of those sources. I used the lesson plans to analyze the intentions I had for teaching and the structure of that class. I used the observations made by my CT and me to analyze the effects the lessons had on my students. I used these two sets of observations to validate each other, looking for discrepancies or differences of opinion between the two data sets. I found that while we both observed things the other had not, most of our observations supported each other's, and none contradicted each other's. I collected data on the grades my students received on their essays during this unit, the essay in our last academic writing unit, and the grades they received before and after revising their outlines for this unit. I also collected data on the submission rates for the essays and

outlines in both writing units. I used this to further analyze students' engagement in this writing unit, as compared to the previous unit, and confirm the two sets of observations. I used the lesson plans to confirm the causes we determined led to certain outcomes as well. For example, I observed in my journal that connections to real-world contexts increased my students' engagement. I analyzed this claim by examining my other two data sets. My lesson plans detailed how I intended to make real-world connections in the lessons during which I made this observation, and, further, the data from my CT showed that she observed a higher level of engagement during these lessons as well. Each finding I had was analyzed based on the data presented by at least three of my data sources in this manner.

Sagor (2000) encourages teachers to pull data from places that already generate it (p. 76). In using my lesson plans and grading data, I am using the data naturally available to me. This saves time on data collection from two sources, allowing the number of sources strengthening the validity of my findings to increase. Further, Sagor asserts that "To analyze data on students' achievement, nothing is more valid than the work they produce" (p. 100). By analyzing students' work, or their submissions and grades, I can see some of the effects of my teaching practices. However, because I am studying engagement, I will need to look at students' behavior as well. Sagor (2000) states that "Student behavior is data. Furthermore, it occurs all the time, right in front of you. The problem is that, unless you deliberately capture these data in a timely fashion, they are likely to fade from your memory" (p. 80). Sagor recommends a few ways of obtaining observational data, including journaling and clipboard notes. Through journaling, I will be able to provide longer reflections on students' behavior and the context that informs it. My CT's observations in short notes throughout class will give me information about exactly how and when things happened, as they will be written in the moment. Collecting data from four sources

allows for the triangulation of my data, which is important because using several triangulated independent sources is one way action researchers can ensure their data are valid and reliable (p. 113).

After collecting this data, I analyzed it using open coding. Sagor (2000) explains that action research data analysis can be a nine-step process (p. 125-126). I followed these nine steps to analyze my data. The first step Sagor describes is assembling all the data you plan to use. I compiled my data through a few processes, including transcribing handwritten observations, locating and transcribing assessment data, and copying and pasting in lesson plans, before organizing it all in separate tabs of the same Google Doc. Steps two through five include skimming the data for possible categories to sort it into and creating categories based on patterns noticed in the skim. I skimmed all four of my sources and developed categories based on the types of data I noticed most. These types were: level of engagement, level of engagement compared to previous units or activities, use of Freirean methods, evidence of success due to Freirean methods, failures of Freirean methods, issues in the lessons, and different things to do in the future. I categorized the data type of “use of Freirean methods” further, splitting it into the seven methods of Freirean teaching I planned to use when designing the unit. These included valuing students’ funds of knowledge, using problem-posing, prioritizing activity over lecture to avoid the banking method, engaging in direct communication with students, attempting to humanize my students and me, promoting students’ autonomy in their learning, and discussing the real-world connections our lessons had.

Step six of this process is to reread the data and attach the appropriate code to each piece of data that requires one. I did this by assigning a color to each code, then combing through each of my four data sources and highlighting any data related to that code. Step seven is to compile

this data by putting the information associated with each code in a single place. I did this by creating a table with each of my seven codes listed above in two columns, and copying and pasting every part of each data set for the associated color into the left column below it. Step eight is to look for significant trends in the data. I searched for these and then completed step nine, preparing a list of findings based on those trends, by noting down all my observations in the column below each code on the right. I included my thoughts about trends in the data as a whole below the table. After completing this data collection, I felt it would be helpful to have counts of how many times certain things were mentioned. I combed through each data set and counted the number of times each of the seven Freirean methods I employed was mentioned, the number of times engagement was mentioned, and the number of times students' SEL (social emotional learning) was mentioned.

Through coding my data, I was able to identify trends, including which teaching methods led to what level of engagement, how students' level of engagement evolved over the course of the unit, several different effects of the implementation of Freirean teaching methods, how students' communication, openness, and access to funds of knowledge appeared in the unit, and the nature of the issues that occurred during the unit. After I defined these trends, I identified what they had in common and grouped my findings into three themes. I combined all trends related to engagement into a theme, all trends related to the effect of using Freirean methods aside from engagement into a theme, and all trends related to issues in the unit into a theme. From this process emerged my findings, sorted into effects on engagement, effects of the novelty of Freirean methods, and increased usage of SEL skills.

I asked two people to review my data analysis to ensure my conclusions and process were logical and sound. I began by asking a peer of mine from my undergraduate degree, Colin Davis,

who has experience in data analysis as a mathematics major. I walked them through my data collection and analysis process before asking them to review my results, requesting that they point out any logical errors, unfounded claims, or areas for improvement. This was extremely helpful in creating my themes, as I originally selected three very different themes to focus on. Davis agreed that my process was sound and that the trends I had discovered were present, but they suggested another way to sort them. This method of sorting trends divided my trends into three mostly equal parts, rather than one theme supported by most of the data and two much smaller themes. This allowed me to analyze each trend fully, rather than brushing past some and overvaluing others. I also asked my CT, Morgan Crawford, to look over my data analysis. Given her familiarity with the project, data, students, and educational research (having conducted research while getting a teaching license), she was well-equipped to identify ways to improve my analysis. She pointed out two aspects of existing trends I had missed. This included students' increased responsibility for their materials over the course of the unit, and that some of the issues I had noticed were caused by the new teaching methods, while others were unrelated.

Researcher Positionality

In many ways, I can relate to my students. The vast majority (over 90%) of my students are White, involved in agriculture, and living primarily in rural Oregon. I am White and grew up in rural Oregon as well. While I never intentionally involved myself in agriculture, my friends and peers growing up frequently lived on farms and were highly involved in FFA. However, I attended a high school that was significantly larger than the one I work at now. While observing my students' engagement, I needed to acknowledge that, while I shared many identities with them, their engagement differed from the engagement my peers and I had in high school. I have been out of high school for four years, which allows me insight into my students' behaviors and

experiences. Four years is long enough for significant changes to occur, and I needed to remind myself that things at the school I work at are different from the way things operated four years ago. For example, when I was in high school, students were allowed to have their phones during passing periods, and I did nearly all of my work on a Chromebook. Now, schools tend to ban phones and pull away from digital work. My peers and I were often on Chromebooks while actively working in high school. However, if I glanced around my classroom and saw Chromebooks out at my placement, it was usually a sign that my students had disengaged from the lesson.

When collecting data, I needed to understand how my positioning as a young teacher with identities similar to my students' but a different educational history affects my ability to evaluate students, particularly given that my data relies heavily on my own observations. For example, at North Valley, students take classes with their entire grade most of the time. The ability levels present in any given class tend to be very diverse. Engagement, in my experience, has meant the entire group of students doing mostly the same thing. Engagement at North Valley looked different. Students had a diverse range of ability levels and different needs. When I was observing for engagement, I needed to know what that looked like for each student and observe them individually, rather than looking for a group-wide behavior. For example, while working on an assignment, I would typically have some students working independently, some asking peers for help, and some needing active support from me. None of these groups of students were failing to fully engage with the assignment to the best of their ability, or putting in less effort than their peers. They simply put in effort in very different ways.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

When I began my action research, I wanted to determine if using teaching methods developed by Paulo Freire could increase my students' engagement in academic writing. I sought to answer the research question "How can using Freirean teaching methods to teach academic writing affect students' engagement?" by collecting data from four avenues during a 6-day academic writing unit. Before the unit, I wrote lesson plans that I followed while teaching. I analyzed these lesson plans for mentions of the Freirean methods I decided to use, recording how many times I planned to use each method. I then compared that data with my other data to confirm its validity. During the unit, my cooperating teacher recorded handwritten observations throughout the lessons I taught, and I journaled about my observations after each class period. I used these data sources to analyze the connection between the specific Freirean methods I employed and their effects on my students' behavior and engagement. I also analyzed our observations for changes in my students' behavior between our previous academic writing unit and the one I studied to analyze the combined effect of all the methods I used. After the unit concluded, I compiled data about my students' grades on their essay outlines and final essay drafts from this unit, as well as their grades from their most recent previous essay assignment, and submission data for all of these assignments. I used this data to draw conclusions about students' engagement as it extended to submitting their assignments and revising them.

After analyzing my data, I found that three primary themes emerged. These themes are: effects on engagement, effects of the novelty of Freirean methods, and increased usage of SEL (social emotional learning) skills. Below, each theme is supported with data and examined. The first theme is supported with data collected from my lesson plans, both sets of observations, and submission data from all assignments. The second is supported primarily by data from both sets

of observations, and students' outline grades as well. The third is explored using only observational data and information from my lesson plans, as the findings are not relevant to grading and submission.

Effects on Engagement

Through data analysis, I found that Freirean teaching methods can likely increase student engagement not only in academic writing, but in class generally. Certain strategies I employed had seemingly direct effects on my students, increasing their engagement, the quality of their work, and their enjoyment of the unit. Throughout the five lessons I conducted action research on, I implemented Freirean methods in specific and planned ways often, and in unplanned ways when my lesson plans needed to be adjusted to keep students in the zone of proximal development. When planning the lessons, I decided on seven methods of Freirean teaching I would attempt to directly use (Table 1). These included:

1. Valuing students' funds of knowledge
2. Using problem-posing
3. Prioritizing activity over lecture
4. Engaging in direct communication with students
5. Attempting to humanize my students and me
6. Promoting students' autonomy in their learning
7. Discussing the real-world connections our lessons had

In my journals, I detailed the specific method I was using before discussing the result I saw in my students' level of engagement in the lesson.

Through collecting and analyzing data from my lesson plans, I found that I had planned to use these seven strategies with varying degrees of frequency and intended impact (Table 1).

While planning, according to the data collected from my lesson plans, I valued creating opportunities for students to use funds of knowledge, using activity rather than lecture to teach, giving students autonomy in their learning, integrating problem-posing into our activities, and humanizing my students and me equally. While they had equal frequency in my lesson planning, some of these instances of planning were intended to have a larger effect than others. While designing ways to give students autonomy in learning, I intentionally created six opportunities for them to exercise their autonomy. Firstly, I required students to plan a few broad areas, as defined by stoplight writing, allowing them to choose the structure of their outline and its specific details. I asked students to plan in the way that was most helpful to them, rather than by using a specific model. As another, I allowed students who received a passing grade below 100% on their outline to choose whether to revise their outline or move on to writing their essay. However, four of these instances were the basis of the structure for the entire class period, giving students independent work time and allowing them to pace themselves through the unit. Further, with the exception of my explanation of outlining and stoplight writing, I did not lecture in this unit. I intentionally had students engage in an activity rather than listen to a lecture six times, but again, these decisions formed the basis for our entire unit. These activities included selecting evidence by moving to a particular wall of the classroom, analyzing articles for relevance as a group, collaborative grading, rephrasing casual statements so that they used academic language, using most of the class time for independent work time, and peer feedback sessions. I humanized students and myself while encouraging them to use their funds of knowledge. Throughout the unit, I regularly discussed the resources available to students, including me, as well as their peers, internet resources, other adults in their lives, and more. I encouraged them to use the knowledge they had and trust it, and trust each other's knowledge as well. When I designed six

(or seven, in the case of humanization) opportunities for students to use their funds of knowledge, use problem-posing, and see themselves and me humanized, I created six intentional but isolated opportunities. They were not the basis of the unit, but rather elements of it that I ensured were present to some degree each day.

Table 1

Planned Instances of Freirean Methods in Lesson Plans

Strategy	Total Mentions	Lesson				
		1	2	3	4	5
Opportunities for students to utilize funds of knowledge	6	1	2	1	1	1
Problem-posing-based activities	6	2	1	1	1	1
Activity over lecture	6	2	0	1	1	2
Open dialogue between students and me	15	2	4	5	2	2
Strategies used to humanize students and me	7	1	1	2	1	2
Opportunities for student autonomy in learning	6	1	1	2	1	1
Real-world connections to the lesson	3	1	1	0	0	1
Total	48	10	10	12	7	10

Note. This table demonstrates the number of times I planned to use each Freirean method in each of my lesson plans.

While analyzing the unit, I found that when I designed it, I neglected to plan fully for integrating real-world connections into my lessons. I had three intentionally planned instances of this, despite the fact that I ended up discussing it every day while teaching. I pre-planned a discussion of the importance, use, and transferable skills of outlining, academic writing, and revision. My students responded incredibly positively to this element of my teaching, which I had not anticipated. I prioritized planning other elements over real-world connections, which ended up having the largest noticeable effect on my students in practice. The strategy I planned to implement most often was open dialogue with my students. I planned 15 specific opportunities for this to occur throughout the unit, with nearly all of those opportunities designed to persist through an entire activity or period. These opportunities included primarily 1:1 check-ins with students, collaborative grading, and peer feedback sessions. Further, I planned specific things in these opportunities that allowed me to incorporate all the other elements into the lessons. The core of my unit was open dialogue and communication between my students and me, particularly while valuing their ideas.

I discussed this method in every day of my journal, with a total of seven mentions. Some of these include: “Conferencing with students has become extremely productive, and I could not be happier about that. They genuinely listen to what I have to say, share their thoughts about their work and my feedback...,” “...over half of the class actively asks me to read over their work, help them develop ideas, and clarify things like citations and formatting. At this point, the entirety of class is dialogue between me and students about outlines, grading outlines, or drafting essays,” “We still had good conversations about their outlines, they were just mostly separate from conversations about their grade. Honestly, for the best I think. I was able to ask students if they felt certain sections of their outline prepared them for their essay adequately, and students

were willing to say no.,” and “Everything today was entirely based on dialogue...this ‘conversational teaching’ I engaged in produced high-quality theses from each of my students.”

The second most mentioned method in my journal was explaining the real-world connections of the lessons, including how the skills they were building could be useful to them in the future, and the reasoning for the lesson. I discussed this with my students three times, as planned, referencing previous discussions about how what we were learning could be useful during the three other lessons. In my journal, I referenced the effects of this method five times. I observed that discussing the importance of and future uses of outlining, “...helped engagement.” After discussing the real-world connections of academic writing, I observed that my “Students seemed more engaged in class than they typically are...” Our discussion of the importance of peer feedback led me to state that students “...began looking at the board to see instructions and follow them and occasionally using the sentence frames offered as well.” I observed that when I referenced these conversations, students “...were more engaged...” and “...recalled our previous conversation and added more reasons academic writing could be important to dedicate time to.”

I discussed the promotion of students’ autonomy five times as well, but wrote slightly less in volume about this method. These comments included comments about the positive effects of giving students autonomy: “I made an effort to let them develop their own strategies, questions, answers, and ways of thinking, and they definitely rose to the occasion,” “...moving at the pace of the class helped a lot. Each student was engaged with the material all class,” “Many students have started working all class period who had not been engaged without consistent support throughout the period before,” and “Students who are engaged and working (most of them) are writing essays that showcase unique ideas, a great ability to choose relevant evidence, and good writing skills.” They also included a comment about the potential negative effects of

giving students autonomy. I stated, “...some students cannot keep themselves on-task yet.” I discussed the effects of attempting to humanize students and me twice, sharing feedback my students felt comfortable sharing with me, recounting that “One student said ‘This wasn’t even bad actually.’ Another said I almost had fun.’ I also got ‘Yeah I still don’t like writing but this could’ve been worse’ and ‘I think this is a good way to write essays’ as well as other similar sentiments, primarily unprompted,” and discussing how it helped students “...understand that I am a resource, but so are their peers and plenty of other things.”

Using activity over lecture and problem-posing were not directly mentioned in my journal. These two things were integral parts of every lesson and nearly every activity in each lesson. I did not mention the specific effects of these two methods in my journal, as it was difficult to parse out the effect they had, given their presence in every moment of data collection. The reflections I had about students’ actions in this unit, compared to their actions in previous units, referenced the usage of Freirean methods generally most often. These reflections consider the combined effect of all seven distinct methods I focused on. Using activity over lecture and problem-posing had an undeniable, large effect on my students, which I only gained insight into while considering the overall effect of my Freirean methods. Given the nature of how certain strategies lend themselves to individual analysis and interpretation while others do not, I will discuss how each strategy promoted positive learning outcomes for students as I am able, and then address how this shift in teaching methods as a whole affected learning outcomes.

The strategy with the largest observable effect on my students’ engagement was the connection to real-world contexts. In my journal, I discussed the metrics I used for measuring engagement, stating that engagement looked like students having “...eyes toward the front of the room or writing, no side conversations, and ‘alertness.’” I described “alertness” as a combination

of body language and facial expressions, student-to-student, that indicated they were paying attention. I also added that “For disengagement, I look for: eyes down, off-task behavior (reading, drawing, etc. but only if they are unable to answer questions about the lesson while doing these things. Some students can crochet, draw, etc. and still engage, others cannot or do not), and primarily, side conversations.” When I used the strategy of connecting class to real-world contexts, I saw a noticeable increase in the behaviors that indicate engagement to me and a dramatic decrease in disengaged behaviors. This large behavior change occurred during instructional parts of class, at least, only while I connected class to real-world contexts.

I made these connections primarily by explaining how what we were learning could teach students valuable skills, and how those skills could be directly applied in adult life, and explaining why we were learning what we were. For example, I explained that learning to write using stoplight writing would give students the tools they needed to write convincing, academic, long-form texts, which could be useful in a wide range of careers. I also explained that formal writing had certain conventions, and we followed them to ensure that others could read and understand our writing and evaluate it seriously. I acknowledged that much of academic writing was rooted in systemic marginalization of different groups of people. Still, it was necessary to learn about it, as it was currently widely accepted and showed no signs of changing soon. I told students it was important for them to learn about so they could choose how they participated in the writing world, with all the information they needed to make those choices. I mentioned that people looking to attend college would need to understand academic writing, as it would be directly and immediately useful to them, and that, as freshmen and sophomores, they would find academic writing directly useful in their next few years of high school. I delivered this style of explanation, acknowledging what we were learning, the assets and drawbacks of learning it, and

why I believed it was important for them to know, for learning about researching relevant sources, creating an outline, and using stoplight writing and academic writing generally.

After these explanations, my students' engagement levels visibly increased. I noted in my journal for the first lesson, which connected the content to real-world contexts, that my students understood my instructions more easily than they typically do, displayed fewer off-task behaviors than they ordinarily do, and demonstrated active listening more often than they typically did in a lesson they had expressed disinterest in. I stated, "Students seemed more engaged in class than they typically are... They all dedicated at least some time to choosing their questions, rather than quickly choosing before talking about unrelated things or doing something off-task... they were visibly more interested not only in the activity, but my explanation of it. I answered almost no clarifying questions about what the activity was, and they all did it." Rather than disengaging because they were not interested in the topic of the class, as many of my students usually do, they displayed a level of engagement consistent with lessons they expressed a natural interest in. Further, the work they turned in after I explained why the lesson was important demonstrated genuine effort and mastery. My students often turn in work that demonstrates genuine effort and mastery; however, some students do this for each assignment. Typically, I have between three and 15 students who are interested in a given lesson. Whoever is interested that day turns in their best work, while other students will turn in work that meets the minimum requirements. After employing Freirean methods, including explaining the real-world connections of our lesson, I observed that most of my students actively worked on their activity for the entire period, and many of them requested help so that they could do their best. They accomplished the majority of the work I intended for them to do within the allotted time.

During class periods when I employed these types of explanations rather than simply reminding students of them, my CT observed that students were more engaged. She mentioned things such as students “independently completing essays” during worktime, students choosing to “spend time” thoroughly combing through sources, and specific observations that most students had participated in or completed the activity that day. For instance, she noted that “Students *all* picked articles and essay topics independently” during the class intended for students to choose an essay topic and relevant articles to support it, in which I connected our lesson to the real-world importance of evaluating sources. She mentioned students’ engagement a total of eleven times in her observations. She did this once per lesson during the lessons without connections to real-world contexts (with one of those being to note that it was not present). During the three lessons that connected their content to real-world contexts, she mentioned the presence of engagement twice for one lesson and thrice for the other two.

Utilizing activity over lecture increased engagement, evidenced primarily by my data showing the effectiveness of Freirean strategies generally, and by a counterexample that occurred in the unit. In my journal, I noted that student engagement was lower than it typically is once, while all other 14 observations indicated it was higher. This is not to say that throughout the unit, my students were more engaged than they are on a typical day-to-day basis. They were engaged in several parts of multiple lessons; however, I mean to say they were more engaged than they typically are in academic writing units. During the single observation that engagement was lower, my students were listening to me explain the concept of stoplight writing. There were opportunities for conversation and interaction throughout, but particularly toward the beginning of my explanation, I observed that students were mostly listening. This method of teaching does not fully align with Freirean teaching practices, as at that moment I was using lecture over

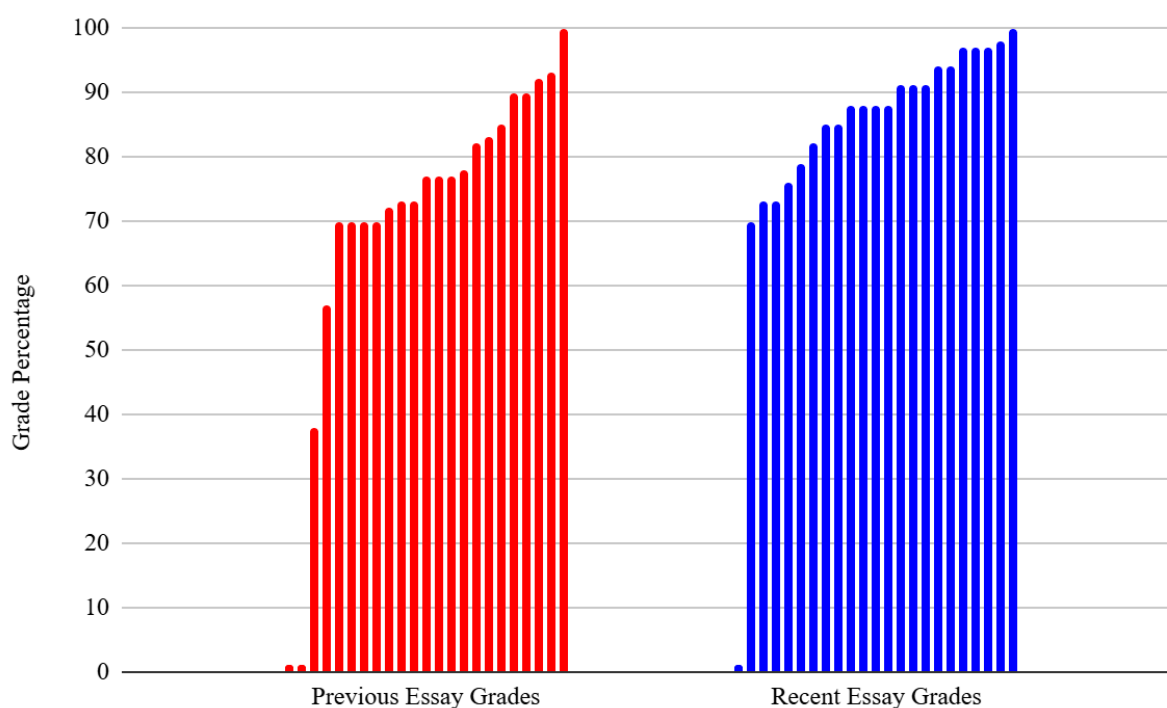
activity. However, I felt the new writing format would allow students much more autonomy in the content and structure of their outlines and essays, allowing the rest of the unit to align with Freirean teaching practices. During the moment in the unit when I was not utilizing Freirean teaching techniques to increase engagement, my students disengaged. While I cannot point to a precise example of activity over lecture directly improving my students' engagement, as I do not have comparative examples, the one moment I did not use activity over lecture, engagement plummeted to its lowest point during the entire unit. While using strategies to humanize my students and me did not appear to correlate with positive learning outcomes directly, they led to the results discussed in theme three. They potentially contributed to the overall effect of using all the strategies during the unit.

The combined effect of the methods I employed was far easier to collect data on, and indicates that learning outcomes altered by Freirean methods were positively affected. During this unit, I re-explained instructions far less. During one journal, I wrote, "Usually I re-explain to six students (mostly the same ones every time). Today I re-explained to three (still a part of my typical six)." This indicates to me that either my students were more engaged in the instructions and therefore understood and remembered them, or that I explained my lessons in ways that were more accessible to students during the unit. Either way, this teaching style improved my students' ability to understand activities and concepts. Not only this, I noted in my journal that it also saved time on both re-explaining concepts and re-engaging my class after they lost focus. My students also turned in work at a much higher rate this unit, indicating that they engaged more than usual with the physical assignments. I noticed this while grading, and my CT noticed it observationally.

Every one of my students submitted an outline before the unit was over, and every student submitted an essay within two weeks of the due date (one of those weeks was Spring break). Only two of my 23 students did not have a passing grade on their outline when their grades were finalized, and all but one student chose to revise their outline (Figure 2). For the essay, only one of my students did not receive a passing grade because they used AI to generate their essay, which violates North Valley's academic policies, and I was unable to assess their mastery accurately. Conversely, in our last essay, four students received failing grades, with two of them never submitting an essay (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Previous Essay Grades Compared to Recent Essay Grades



Note. This graph compares the essay grades students received in our previous academic writing unit (depicted in red on the left) to those received during the studied academic writing unit

(depicted in blue on the right). The grades are expressed as a percentage of 100.

My CT noticed this uptick in submissions as well—several times she noted that “all” students completed something, underlining the word “all” for emphasis. In previous units, not all students completed any individual part of the essay process. There was at least one student at every part of the process who never completed it, and many who completed it significantly after the intended completion date. While observing the first lesson, she observed that “Students all picked articles and essay topics independently.” While observing the second, she wrote, “All students able to draft thesis statements.” During the fifth, she wrote, “Many students fully completed essays.” This is abnormal for my class. Having all students submit something (although there was a single incident of plagiarism) for the outline and the essay is a higher rate of submission than we typically experience. In a previous unit, we had all but three students submit an essay, and all but five submit an outline. These are far more typical submission numbers for this group of students. My CT also mentioned evidence that students were engaged every day that was unrelated to submissions.

Often, she would note students’ activities that aligned with the learning goals and activities, such as students “Accessing book, accessing materials, use of class materials to support learning,” and “Independently completing essays” during a class period primarily dedicated to independent work time on their essays. She also stated that students “Generally made progress” during a different lesson and mentioned that students were using Chromebooks on-task. Generally, the use of Chromebooks in my class decreases student engagement because they are distracting. However, I noticed they were using them productively, and my CT specifically mentioned that she did as well. I stated students were “...using their Chromebooks exclusively for classwork as well, although I could have missed short periods of distraction, of

course,” and my CT stated, “Used Chromebooks on task.” This indicates a high level of engagement with the lessons’ topics, as students remained engaged in the intended activity without the use of any specific accountability measures, such as software like GoGuardian, with the entire internet accessible to them.

The level of participation observed by my CT and me throughout this unit is abnormal for my students in an academic writing unit. Regardless of the class period, strategy being employed, or activity the class was doing (aside from the exception of when lectured on stoplight writing), we observed in my students a high level of engagement. This is ordinarily not the case in an academic writing unit. When reflecting on my students’ engagement as compared to the previous essay unit in my last journal, I summarized my thoughts by stating my students were “definitely more engaged with this essay than the last one.”

Effects of the Novelty of Freirean Methods

I introduced Freirean methods into my teaching of academic writing because I believed that using the banking method to teach it was actively harming my students. Prior to this unit, my students experienced two academic writing units that relied on the banking method this year, and potentially more in their education as a whole. My students settled into the routines and realities of being expected to write with little autonomy over their writing process and results.

Introducing these new methods of teaching academic writing had undeniable positive effects on my students, but also resulted in significant challenges. While analyzing my data, I coded for “Failures of Freirean methods.” I used the word ‘failure’ to refer to any issues that impeded learning during my lessons and were directly caused by my implementation of the Freirean method. After looking at all these failures, I found that they could be sorted into two categories: issues that were present when I used other teaching methods as well, and issues I believed were

caused by the recent introduction of these methods. For example, the Freirean methods throughout the unit were much more effective at advancing students' learning and engaging them when used in small groups or one-on-one than when used with the entire class. However, my instruction is nearly always more effective in small groups or in one-on-one instruction. The issues caused by the novelty of the Freirean methods were far more extensive. They included the lack of structure created by promoting students' autonomy in their learning and students' hesitance to participate in new systems I developed to allow me to use Freirean teaching methods.

Using Freirean methods in teaching necessitates the release of significant responsibility to students. The entirety of this unit was made with GRR (Gradual Release of Responsibility) in mind, which scaffolded students' experience with this new level of responsibility. Over time, students had more responsibility given to them. However, it was much more autonomy than they typically have, especially for a summative assessment. I observed that some of my students struggled to use their newfound freedom responsibly at the end of this scaffolding. Ultimately, some students did not submit their essays on time or even approach the finish line when the due date arrived (though they all finished by the time two weeks had passed). The observations from my CT included one observation that detailed a lack of engagement from students: "Students needed reminders to work on drafting." The independent work was undeniably challenging to some of my students. However, this challenge appeared to lessen over time. My CT observed that students were struggling to remain on-task while drafting during lesson three, but in lesson five, observed: "Students working at own pace with due date in mind." This is exactly what the objective of increasing my students' autonomy over their learning was: to allow them to operate at their own pace, while keeping in mind the learning goals and constraints of our unit. In my

journal for lesson three, I discussed the difficulty I was having keeping a few students engaged in our activity. I stated that some of my students “...cannot keep themselves on-task yet. Today was a lot of reminders about the importance of working on the work in the time they are given.” In my journal for lesson five, I wrote that I observed many of my students had “...started working all class period who had not been engaged without consistent support throughout the period before.” This improvement over time indicates that, while my students struggled with our new classroom system of prioritizing independent work time, the difficulty they had may have stemmed from the recent introduction of the system rather than from a flaw in allowing students significant autonomy.

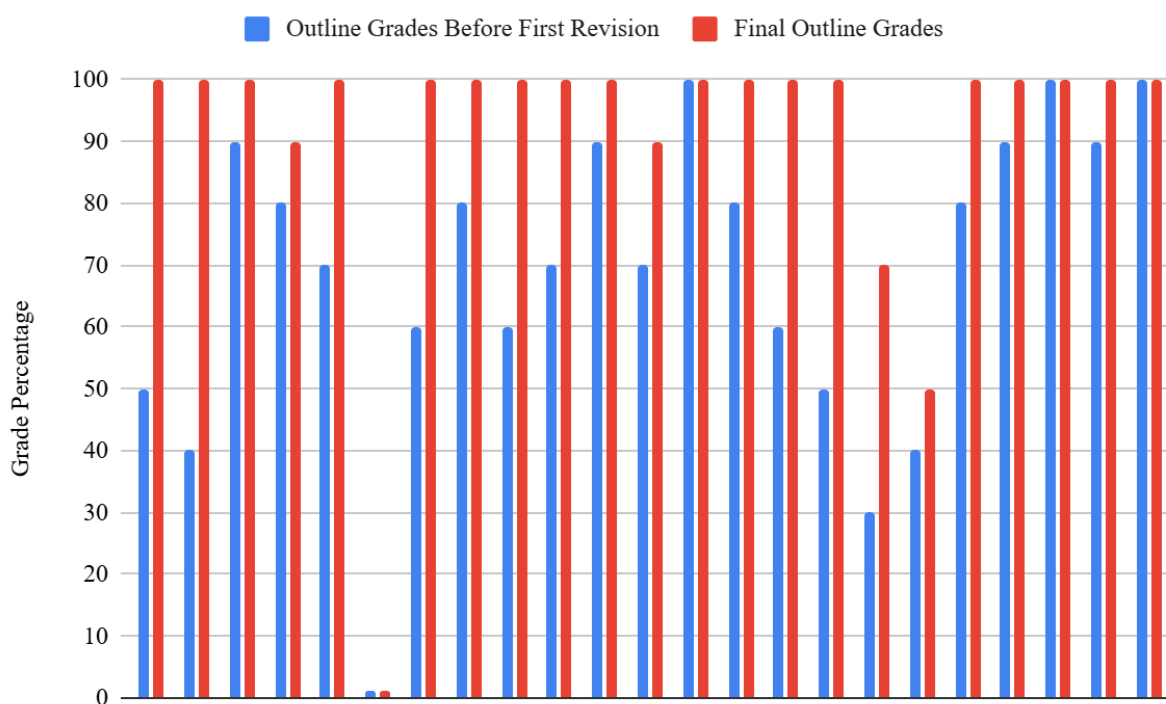
My students were challenged by an increase in autonomy in one other primary area as well. I did not require students to plan out every part of their essay in their outline, as I wanted them to have the autonomy to outline in the way that worked best for them. Certain things, such as including context for the paper in the introduction, were necessary aspects of academic writing that I taught students about and asked them to use, but did not require them to outline. I observed that some students had a difficult time understanding that I had not required them to plan out every required aspect of the essay. While encouraging them to plan what they needed rather than what I determined they needed, I inadvertently created an environment in which they believed the essay’s minimum requirements were fewer than they actually were. My students were used to being required to plan every aspect required for a strictly formatted essay in their outlines. When this was no longer the case, this misconception created confusion in class. However, it is difficult to determine whether students struggled with this increase in autonomy because the increase negatively affected them or because they were unused to this method of outlining.

I observed that the new feedback systems I implemented to support the use of Freirean teaching methods that presented challenges were primarily the collaborative grading process and the conferencing that occurred throughout the unit. The collaborative grading process did not work perfectly. I observed that my students were initially hesitant to assign themselves grades and to discuss their opinions of their own work. Some students mentioned being uncomfortable with the idea of giving themselves 100%, even if they believed they had earned it, because they were unsure whether it was “allowed.” Others expressed that they felt I should be assigning grades and that they had no way of knowing whether they did well. Every new system I have implemented in my classroom has required an adjustment period before it is fully effective. The collaborative grading system was still in that adjustment period for the entirety of this unit.

While the collaborative grading system did not go perfectly at first, most of my students did two or more rounds of collaborative grading. Their willingness to reflect on their work, take authority while assigning themselves a grade, and make changes increased with each round. As Figure 2 demonstrates, most students made enormous changes in their outlines, resulting in potentially vastly different grades between their first and final drafts. The issues in the collaborative grading process, therefore, seemed to be connected with learning a new system, rather than the actual functioning of the system. The data from students’ outline grades shows that all but a single student chose to revise their outline at least once, and only two students finished the unit without a passing outline grade. Implementing the collaborative grading system created some initial issues, but only improved over time and ultimately resulted in positive learning outcomes.

Figure 2

First Outline Grades Compared to Revised Outline Grades



Note. This graph compares the grades given to students for the first draft of their outlines (blue) to those for their final outline drafts (red). The grades are expressed as a percentage of 100.

Similarly, regularly conferencing with my students is something I observed to be effective in lesson two, but I mentioned that it seemed “...students do not engage with them beyond what they perceive to be absolutely required by the level of respect they show me as their teacher.” Conversely, I observed in lesson six that my conferences with students had improved immensely, and that students would “...genuinely listen to what I [had] to say, share their thoughts about their work and my feedback, and [were] not only willing to work with me to make a plan for writing and revising but some actively request to do so.” Despite any issues caused by increased autonomy and new class systems, the strategies I implemented had a variety of enormous benefits; however, even before finishing collecting and reflecting on my data, I wrote the following in my journal:

I think my Freirean methods are having a lessened effect because students are unused to them. Giving them freedom after they have had a lack of it means they think their freedom is a new way of having constraints, rather than fewer restraints. It's frustrating, because I think my research will reflect that this change in methods had great positive effects but quite a lot of problems as well.

The adjustment period that my students needed to experience the full benefits of these new methods of teaching would require far more time than we had in our five-day (in reality, six-day) unit. However, even given the difficulties this adjustment period presented, my students were able to write and revise their essays based on my use of Freirean methods. The feedback students received throughout the unit, through regular 1:1 check-ins and consistent open dialogue, led to frequent direct revisions of their work and helped them improve their writing. Students' essays in this unit received higher grades on average than their essays from their previous unit. While this may have been caused by a number of things, including the experience of writing their previous essays, these grades seem to indicate that the implementation of new systems to allow for teaching using Freirean methods likely boosted learning outcomes, or at least, did not hinder them.

The lack of structure, and therefore productivity, created by an increase in students' autonomy over their learning and my students' hesitance to participate in new systems that allowed me to use Freirean methods of teaching appeared to be the only issues in the unit created by the implementation of Freirean methods, based on my and my CT's observations. There were other issues in the unit, but they were not directly related to the new class style my students were experiencing. For example, I expected students to have a much easier time writing theses than they did. I anticipated that they could write their theses in 15 or fewer minutes, as they had

demonstrated mastery while writing theses in the previous unit. Instead, we spent nearly an entire class period writing theses. This transformed our 5-day unit into a 6-day unit. This was good for the class, as I ended up leaning more heavily into Freirean methods during our impromptu lesson on thesis writing. This created an opportunity for teaching through open dialogue, and all my students wrote high-quality theses by the end of class. The original issue was caused not by a failure of Freirean methods, but a failure in lesson planning and evaluating prior assessment data. The novelty of the Freirean methods actually helped me correct the mistake I made in planning. My students did not enjoy thesis writing and went into our thesis-writing activity with low expectations. Teaching thesis writing in a completely new way, based on open dialogue rather than a presentation followed by rigid steps to follow, increased my students' engagement in the class immensely. In my journal, I observed that students were disengaged and struggling to complete a thesis at first. This is why I switched to an impromptu thesis-focused class. After this switch, I observed that my students were able to focus on this specific task longer and produced high-quality results. As mentioned in the previous theme, my CT noticed this as well, observing that every student wrote a thesis during that class.

In my journal, I wrote extensively about this mistake I made: what I believed caused it, how I remedied it, and the experience my students had throughout. I believe my thoughts about this lesson encapsulate many of my thoughts about the research as a whole, so I have listed an excerpt from my journal below:

... I underestimated the support my students would need while writing theses based on the last essay units' data. We ended up spending nearly the entire period on thesis writing, and I was unprepared. I knew my students needed more time, so I gave it to them...I think I ended up using more Freirean methods than I originally planned to. The entire

lesson was guided by checks for understanding and students' progress on their theses. I ended up working 1:1 with every student, some for only about 30 seconds, some for several minutes...Everything today was entirely based on dialogue. This lesson was observed by my university supervisor, and she gave me the critique that I was using "conversational teaching"...I am attempting to use conversation to teach, and I did not know that the term "conversational teaching" existed...this "conversational teaching" I engaged in produced high-quality theses from each of my students. Their theses demonstrate much more engagement with topics, understanding of the book, and higher-order thinking than their previous theses. Some of this is due to the practice of doing it once before, to be sure, however, I think the conversations with students and the group, 1:1 check-ins, and moving at the pace of the class helped a lot. Each student was engaged with the material all class, which is why we didn't move on. My students spend over 30 minutes simply crafting a thesis! Engaged in one writing task, revising it, asking for help, and producing an excellent finished product and the foundation for their essays!

The mistake in the lesson was addressed through the use of Freirean methods. Using open dialogue to teach allowed me to see students' needs as they developed and help them progress in their learning. Giving my students the autonomy to work at their own pace and produce a thesis in whatever way worked best for them resulted in every single student producing a thesis by the end of class. The data regarding students' level of engagement with the activity and assessment data indicate that the lesson accomplished my intended learning goal. Another mistake I made in this unit was detailed in theme one: I used far too much lecture while explaining stoplight writing, which caused my students to disengage. I observed in my journal that when I altered my approach slightly, explaining the real-world connections the lesson had, engagement improved

significantly. However, in my journal, I mentioned that I would still attempt to use activity or problem-posing to introduce the concept in the future. All of the things I thought needed to be changed to further support learning were changes that would increase the unit's alignment with Freirean methods. Approaching the unit, I was hopeful about Freirean methods, but concerned that they might create a lack of structure that would harm students' learning. However, in practice, none of the alterations I would make reflect that I felt more structure was necessary. My students faced challenges due to the drastic increase in their autonomy and the introduction of new class systems, but they experienced many positive effects as well. When I reflected on this unit, even directly after teaching it, I felt those changes were positive, the challenges they presented due to their novelty, and that using these methods had the potential to create even more positive effects for my students.

Increased Usage of SEL Skills

My research was intended to determine whether Freirean teaching methods could increase my students' engagement in academic writing, but it unexpectedly affected their openness, willingness to connect, and the frequency with which they incorporated their funds of knowledge, perhaps just as strongly. I did not intentionally journal about any topics other than the Freirean methods I used in class and their effects on my students' engagement. While discussing these methods, my experience teaching, and my students' experiences in class, I ended up focusing on students' increased willingness to communicate genuinely with me and remain open to new ideas, nearly as much as on engagement. When I asked my mentor teacher to note down observations on my unit for data collection, I explained the seven specific methods I implemented. I informed her I was studying our students' engagement in class. Despite this focus area, I discussed engagement 15 times, and my students' SEL 13 times. My CT mentioned

engagement 11 times in her observations, and SEL seven times. My students increased their usage of several SEL skills in this unit, primarily by accessing their funds of knowledge more frequently, remaining more open to feedback, and communicating more frankly, including asking for assistance. They also further developed their skills to manage their time responsibly and participated in more collaborative learning.

Ordinarily, my students do not make connections between our class and their funds of knowledge or other classes. However, they began to do this during the unit after being prompted to do so at first. I noted this in my journal for lesson three, and my CT wrote “Students connect concepts in research/articles to other classes (social studies) and prior essay units” in her observation chart for the same lesson. Discussing the value of students’ funds of knowledge and detailing the opportunities they had to do so led them to employ their funds of knowledge both after being prompted and later independently. I prompted students to use their funds of knowledge in various ways throughout the unit. In our first lesson, I asked students to find relevant pieces of evidence by deciding which of two pieces of evidence were relevant to an argument I provided. I created these examples with my students’ funds of knowledge, interests, and experiences in mind in an effort to make the lesson more engaging. I encouraged students to think about what they knew from their lives and use that information to determine which piece of evidence was best. For example, I asked students to determine whether evidence about the treatment of farmhands or information about how cattle were treated would be more relevant to an argument that the dairy products of a particular cattle farm were healthy. This allowed students to use their knowledge of how the treatment of farmhands and cattle affected a farm, and which components of a farm contributed to the health of its products. Most students responded that the treatment of cattle was relevant, citing information they learned while

working on farms, in FFA, or through other interactions in their personal lives. Others responded by citing their knowledge of the influence farmhands can have, stating that if their treatment were severe enough, they could tamper with the farm's processes in various ways.

In this activity, students practiced determining what evidence was relevant, rather than just related to arguments. They used their funds of knowledge to apply the logical thought processes we learned about. This allowed them to use information they were comfortable with to expand their thinking. However, this was a very explicit opportunity for students to do this, and it is logical that they would have accessed their funds of knowledge in this scenario. They were given another explicit opportunity in lesson two, but no explicit opportunity in lesson three. In lesson two, I specifically asked students to reflect on their knowledge of the topics our research questions related to to inform their thesis statements. I asked them to reflect on their experiences and how those experiences helped them form opinions on morality, independence vs. community, and how society functions and affects different groups. I ask them to use this knowledge to determine which question was most interesting and to form an opinion on their selected question. Students, again, took this opportunity, and many of them discussed specific experiences they had that influenced their opinions of the book and the controversial themes within it. In lesson three, I told students they should use their knowledge of writing and trust it to shape their outlines, but I did not give examples of how they might do this or emphasize its importance as I did the day before. Despite this, students asked if they could reference personal experiences in their essays, and how they could include the knowledge they had from sources outside the articles. Three of them acknowledged that it was atypical to do this in class and requested permission to do so. Seven of my 23 students referenced experiences or knowledge they gained outside class in their final essay drafts. Before we began our peer feedback workshop, some of my students were

reading each other's essays and asking for each other's help in class. During these instances, my students referenced knowledge about writing that they learned during this unit in my class, the last unit in my class, knowledge from other classes, and, in a few instances, knowledge they gained from places such as reading, on YouTube, or from another peer who had looked at their essay.

The feedback my students gave and received indicated more than access to funds of knowledge: it demonstrated an increased openness to feedback, willingness to request assistance, and effective communication. In the past, my students have been resistant to the idea of revision. Many of my students have expressed viewing multiple drafts as a waste of their time. One of the reasons my students have given me for disliking academic writing, though not the primary one, is that academic writing requires extensive revision, which many of them find irritating and disheartening. It requires them to acknowledge what can be improved, and some of my students have explicitly told me that is unpleasant for them. However, in this unit, when feedback was a conversation, rather than a mandate, my students found more value in the idea of improving their essays. They were also willing to receive feedback from peers openly and make changes based on it. Having open conversations with my students made them more willing to speak openly in return, and that helped us make significant progress toward learning together. We discussed their work during the collaborative grading process for the outlines and during feedback sessions for their essay. Ordinarily, my students change their work as little as possible during revisions. I observed in my journal that my students were very open to revising their outlines and essays throughout the unit. All but five of my students revised and regraded their outlines before writing their essays (Figure 2). Three of these students received a 100% before revisions. My CT observed that my students "Revised on the spot!" When reflecting on this at length in my

journal, I wrote the following about lesson four: “Conferencing with students has become extremely productive, and I could not be happier about that. They genuinely listen to what I have to say, share their thoughts about their work and my feedback, and are not only willing to work with me to make a plan for writing and revising but some actively request to do so.” This is a large shift in their attitude about revision toward willingness to communicate about their work and alter it.

My students also demonstrated an increased willingness to ask for help with their writing. Before I shared any of my thoughts or advice on their writing or outlines, I asked students to tell me what they believed the strengths of their work were and what the areas of improvement were. I valued this input by communicating guidance based on it. I also delivered feedback to all of my students by sharing various changes they could make and the impact those would have on their writing, rather than recommending they take certain actions. This gave my students autonomy over their work while revising it. They used this autonomy frequently by consulting me further about the choices they had made and asking what the effect of other changes would be. During essay work days, in the past, I have circled the room, looking for anyone off-task and helping students as they raised their hands. In this unit, I could hardly walk around, as I had a student asking me to read their work, give my thoughts, or confirm the advice of a peer nearly perpetually. However, my students were still independent. While some students struggled with their increased autonomy, others demonstrated the necessary skills to manage independent work time. While I was constantly helping students, I had 23 students, which meant I helped each student a few times per class. I had many students who asked for help when they needed it, but made enormous progress while working individually. My CT noticed this increase in responsibility as well. She noted that students were working at their own pace with the

requirements and their goals in mind on two separate occasions. She also observed in lesson five that students “...needed no reminder to gather materials at the beginning of class.” In my journal, I noted that students’ increased responsibility in each lesson. This included an observation in lesson six that “Many students [had] started working all class period” who had not been before. Further, every student turned in an essay within two weeks of the deadline, and 20 of my students turned in their essays on the day it was due. In our previous two essay units, at least one of my students did not turn in a final essay draft, and only 16 and 14 students turned their essays in on the day it was due.

As I mentioned briefly previously, my students gave each other feedback on their drafts. However, they did this well before I required them to. My students had several collaborative learning opportunities in the unit before they began writing their essays, and their peers were involved in their writing processes early on. I did not require my students to give one another feedback before the final day of our unit, but I mentioned that it may be helpful. Ordinarily, my students do not engage with what they perceive to be extra optional work. However, I observed that many of them voluntarily provided feedback to their peers throughout the drafting process. When my students picked their essay topics, I had them discuss their thoughts and opinions about the questions with a peer before choosing. I had them consider things such as what they would write for each topic, what underlying themes in the book connected to each question, and what they found interesting about each question. I observed the following about this activity in my journal about lesson one:

Last time we did an essay, they picked [their research questions] individually.

Incorporating the idea that their opinions matter and they should spend a lot of time considering the questions before choosing one helped students see the value in certain

questions and feel more excited to answer them (as opposed to only dreading them). My students had leads for their essay questions as they approached them, which not only helped their self-efficacy for the entire project but meant that they had someone to talk about their ideas with from the moment they began considering them. In our second lesson, I asked my students to help each other turn their main ideas into one “umbrella thesis” that encapsulated their points into one broader statement. In our third, they looked over each other’s research to check that each article their partner had selected was relevant to their essay topic. Given these three explicit opportunities for collaborative learning, it is obvious that my students were frequently engaging with it. However, our explicit opportunities for collaborative learning included only these three until we began the peer workshop in lesson six. Despite this, I observed that not only did my students seek their peers’ advice, constructive criticism, and ideas, but they also approached their peers to ask how their essays were going. They were invested in the work their peers had done after helping them build the foundational elements of their essays and sought updates on their drafting process.

Aside from all the SEL skills my students demonstrated engaging in more willingly or with more observable skill than they typically do, my students simply enjoyed this unit more than our previous academic writing units. I journaled the following after lesson six:

I had several students tell me they enjoyed this unit much more than our previous writing unit (though not with those words). One student said, “This wasn’t even bad, actually.” Another said, “I almost had fun.” I also got “Yeah I still don’t like writing but this could’ve been worse” and “I think this is a good way to write essays” as well as other similar sentiments, primarily unprompted.

My students were noticeably in better moods during this unit than in our previous academic

writing units. They were engaged more willingly, more willing to speak to me and each other, more honest with their struggles, more responsible with their materials and time, and more willing to bring their funds of knowledge into classwork.

Concluding Summary

In this chapter, I presented the data collected over the course of my study. I triangulated several sources of data, including: journals written after each class period detailing my thoughts and observations, observations made by my CT throughout the class periods, grade and submission data for assignments during the studied unit and from before it, and data derived from analyzing my lesson plans. The outcomes of this research were detailed in Chapter 4, with the primary findings being:

1. Connecting academic writing topics and activities to their real-world applications and causes increases student engagement.
2. Using Freirean teaching methods increases student engagement and improves learning outcomes.
3. Implementing new classroom systems to support Freirean methods causes an adjustment period with short-term negative effects on learning outcomes.
4. Freirean methods of teaching increase the likelihood that students will use SEL skills.
5. Utilizing Freirean teaching methods, particularly open dialogue with students, increases students' grades, submission rates, willingness to revise their work, and willingness to communicate.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

This chapter has three purposes. It will address the connection this project has to similar research and connect the findings from chapter four to the literature discussed in chapter two. It will address the limitations of this research and make suggestions for future research that could meaningfully expand this project, and it will conclude the project with an overview of the purpose and findings presented throughout.

Discussion

Scholarship on Freire's theories and students' engagement in class as a whole frequently addresses the implications of these topics for the increasingly digitized environment students find themselves in (Farag et al., 2022; McGrail, 2007; Zuin et al., 2024). My study differs from this norm, as I did not use digital tools to attempt to further Freirean pedagogy in my unit. While my students used technology in this unit, I had them use technology only to draft and submit their essays. In this, my instructional approach to technology was quite different from that of other similar studies; I chose to remove the element of technology from my unit as much as possible. I did this in order to limit the effect it had on my results and students' engagement, as I intended to study Freirean pedagogy's effects on my students' engagement in academic writing, not its effects on their technology usage. My study also differs from other scholarship on similar topics, as I attempted to demonstrate how using these methods would affect engagement, whereas many studies demonstrate that the banking method is ineffective instead. For instance, Schneider et al. (2017) demonstrate that narration, or the banking method, is an ineffective teaching strategy. I did not attempt to prove the ineffectiveness of the banking method, but rather, the effectiveness of a particular alternative. While I did not design my study or teaching methods to prove the ineffectiveness of the banking method or attempt to address the effects of technology in my

classroom, my strategies aligned with many of the strategies in these studies. Their foundational work, which proved before I began that technology can increase autonomy and distractions, and the banking method is a poor teaching strategy, allowed me to operate on these assumptions. I was able to factor these findings into my planning and instead focus on extending the findings of other scholarship on increasing engagement in writing to academic writing.

My study extends the findings of many other studies that focused on integrating Freirean pedagogical methods or strategies designed to increase engagement in writing. For example, Drouin (2018) studied how using the three phases of teaching proposed by Freire in *Problem-Posing Education* affected his teaching practices. Drouin found that it forced him to use problem-posing and other Freirean teaching methods, resulting in deeper and more authentic engagement and learning from his students. Rather than using these phases, as I focused on Freire's text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I implemented Freire's methods differently, and focused on more than problem-posing. Drouin used Freire's methods for teaching writing, but not academic writing. My study utilizes Freirean teaching methods, as Drouin's did, and we both found that they increased students' engagement, but my study extends Drouin's findings and applications of Freire's methods to academic writing.

Many other studies on increasing students' engagement with writing instruction bear these same similarities and differences to my study: they utilize Freirean methods, explicitly or otherwise, to increase students' engagement and learning in non-academic writing. Franco et al. (2015) found that higher-order thinking and literacy skills could be increased through the introduction of visual learning materials for young male students. Jones et al. (2017) found that broadening their definition of literacy and connecting students' funds of knowledge increased students' engagement in English class. They accomplished this increase in engagement through

methods that aligned with Freire's pedagogical framework using urban legends. Lammers et al. (2022) used fandom-based literacy, allowing students to access their funds of knowledge, exercise autonomy in their learning, and engage more readily in class, to teach students necessary literacy and writing skills. Rushek et al. (2024) also demonstrate how critical literacy skills can be developed through analysis of nontraditional media. Each of these studies provides strategies to assist students' learning and engagement in writing instruction. However, none of them address how educators might do this specifically within *academic* writing. Most of these authors used teaching materials, assignments, and texts in class that were nontraditional to accomplish goals aligned with Freirean teaching strategies. Conversely, academic writing often requires students to analyze texts within the Western literary canon, using traditional, rigid writing structures and methods. I find academic writing is particularly difficult to teach without the banking method, given these requirements. My study extends the results of other studies examining the connection between Freirean methods and writing engagement by modifying many of the strategies used within these studies and recommended by Freire to teach academic writing specifically, rather than general writing and literacy skills. My study examined how Freirean methods could assist in teaching writing when teachers cannot rely on nontraditional texts and assignments.

Limitations

After I analyzed the data from my lesson plans, I found my study was limited by the practical methods I used to implement Freirean pedagogy. Specifically, it was limited by my decision not to prioritize problem-posing more heavily and my inability to use Freirean methods rather than the banking method in every section of the unit. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2014) discusses the benefits of several teaching methods and practices, but emphasizes

problem-posing as the primary way to combat the banking method. My study did not emphasize problem-posing; I developed my unit using seven of Freire's recommendations, with problem-posing as just one of those. Continued study of how Freirean pedagogy could affect engagement in academic writing should likely emphasize problem-posing as a primary pedagogical strategy. Further, while lesson planning, I missed at least one opportunity to engage further with this pedagogical framework using problem-posing. I found it difficult to use Freirean methods to circumvent the usage of the banking method to teach academic writing, as academic writing necessitates the usage of strict formats and conventions. As a result, I ended up using a lecture in one section of my unit to explain stoplight writing, and I defaulted to the banking method to explain writing conventions. Only after completing my study did I realize I could have asked students to discover these rigid conventions themselves through problem-posing, using mentor texts to identify the different structures, writing moves, and elements in typical MLA-format literary analysis essays. Teaching using mentor texts, rather than an explanation of conventions, to further the usage of Freirean teaching methods and the use of problem-posing would be valuable to study further.

My study was also limited by its methodology. The unit I studied lasted only six class periods. While I compared it to a previous unit, this is still an incredibly short period of time to analyze the effects of teaching strategies across. I also studied a single 23-person class, which is a small sample size. The class I chose to study may have skewed the submission data I analyzed as well. The two 9th- and 10th-grade English classes at North Valley are ability-tracked. The class period I studied was the class period that contained the group of students that the school decided performed better academically. If data from both classes were considered, the submission results would not be quite as extreme. For instance, I had every single student who

submitted their own work receive a passing grade during this unit in the class period I studied. While my other section of this class achieved higher grades than they typically do, they did not all receive passing grades. If this study were repeated with a larger sample across multiple units, these findings would be more reliable. I also implemented many of the Freirean methods in this study for the first time in this unit. This meant my students' reactions to the new teaching methods were a reaction to me utilizing Freirean methods and a reaction to changes in their classroom norms and procedures. The validity of this study could be increased by a repeated study that compares data collected before the methods were implemented with data collected several units after the strategies had been implemented.

A practical limitation of this study is that I planned and wrote a unit completely from scratch to integrate Freirean methods, which may not be possible for many educators. At North Valley, teachers have the freedom to alter their teaching methods, specific topics, and more, provided they teach to state standards and ensure every student meets each standard before the year ends. This level of freedom allowed me to alter the way I teach essay writing completely. This study analyzes data resulting from a unit created to fulfill Freirean pedagogy, rather than a unit altered to incorporate it. This may be unrealistic for many educators, who face constraints created by things such as curriculum requirements and limited planning time. A more useful study might examine how educators can integrate Freirean pedagogy into existing units in impactful ways.

Conclusion

My action research practically applies Freirean pedagogy in the high school English classroom, and finds that it is likely Freire's methods provide a framework that can increase students' engagement in academic writing. This research extends Freire's work by providing data

on how his suggestions can be useful to teachers in the specific field of high school academic writing. Teaching students that they should think, act, or write in certain ways because that is how things have been done in the past has the power to cause irreparable harm through confirmation of harmful stereotypes and reduced opportunities for critical thinking. Academic writing is often taught in a way that does this, asking students to follow a format not because they have determined it is the best way to write, but because that is how they are “supposed” to write. This creates a lack of autonomy, creativity, and the ability to connect their funds of knowledge, among other things, for students as they write. This study demonstrates how Freire’s methods are able to address many of the challenges teaching academic writing presents to educators and offer an alternative to the banking method. Not only did this teaching method increase my students’ engagement in class and in their work, it also increased their willingness to use SEL skills, their academic performance, and their enjoyment of academic writing. These findings indicate that as educators continue shifting away from the banking method, using Freirean pedagogy to do so while teaching academic writing has the potential to create a more engaging, educational, and affirming environment for students.

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