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Engl 486

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Reading Partner Project Draft #1

Names and identifying details changed to protect the privacy of the student.

● **Introduction**

- Charlie is an eighteen year old high school senior. Overall he seems to be a very proficient reader, using an analytical mindset and defined techniques when reading, regardless of the genre, but struggles with focus, reading-fatigue (getting tired or bored quickly while reading), and a confident articulation of ideas, both in written form and when explaining his thoughts aloud. He is aware of what he finds difficult with reading, and is not deterred by this, claiming he has a generally neutral stance on reading and while not particularly enthusiastic, holds no great disliking of it. However, he does have a distinct “comfort zone” of genres he tends to read most often, such as biographies, religious texts, news articles, and song lyrics.

● **Research Methods**

- **Surveys**
 - Two separate reading surveys were conducted, both consisting of short answer, multiple choice (“Yes/No”), check-list, and “Never-Sometimes-Always” style questions. The first was conducted during a one hour phone call, during which I asked the questions and he

responded to them aloud, while the second was filled out by Charlie on his own. Responses on the first survey were significantly longer, and provided more detail, indicating a stronger comfort with explaining thoughts aloud rather than writing them down, and he seemed to enjoy follow-up questions that forced him to think about his responses more deeply. However, the second survey showed slightly more confidence in abilities, perhaps because it was filled out after the Reading Protocol Activity and Poem Activity were completed.

- **24 Hour Reading Log**

- Charlie was given a chart that he used to record all the reading he did over the course of 24 hours. The texts he read were political articles, a religious newspaper, part of a book about hockey, and an Autolab textbook. The religious newspaper was the only text he read “just because it caught [his] eye,” while the others were assigned readings for school. Charlie admits not reading a lot in his free time, having no particular interest to do so unless an outside force prompts him to. He frequently seems to require extrinsic motivation of some sort, whether through the form of his father recommending reading material to him, or school required readings that result in a grade and/or further knowledge for the class.

- **Reading Protocol Activity**

- During a second phone interview, Charlie was asked to read Edgar Allen Poe’s short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*. While it is not a genre that he typically reads by choice, I figured it would provide an interesting

challenge due to the language style used, as well as act as a sort of reprieve from the non-fiction texts he gravitates towards. He showed a surprising amount of excitement at the suggestion. A star was marked on the pages after every 5-6 paragraphs, indicating where Charlie could pause reading and tell me his thoughts before resuming onto the next section.

- **Poem “Pop-Up” Reading Activity**

- Charlie was given a copy of Robert Frost’s poem, *Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening* to read. His initial instructions were to read the poem through once on his own, and afterward I would ask for his thoughts and immediate feelings and interpretations of the poem. I had prepared a series of guiding questions regarding emotional impact, possible secondary definitions of words, and specific lines that could indicate the poem’s meaning in case Charlie was confused or unsure after his first reading, as well as a bit of biographical information about Robert Frost that could help lead him to a conclusion or provide alternative ideas. In his previous interview survey, he had expressed uncertainty about his ability to read and understand poetry, but he proved himself to be far more skilled than he originally thought.

- **Patterns and Origins**

- **Pattern #1:** Heavy focus on reading as a means of gaining information about the world
 - During the first interview when asked, “Why do you think people read?” his immediate response was “So they can find information and learn.” He

then added “Or for entertainment,” but based on his initial response along with the books he mentions having a greater interest in, he sees reading primarily as a way of gaining knowledge, both in and outside of school. Specifically, knowledge about history, politics, religion, people, and major events. He has not read a fantasy, mystery, or comic book since he was very young, and does not seem to feel invested in fictional worlds and characters. However, there is a lot of potential for him to break out of this comfort zone, as proven by the Reading Protocol Activity. He struggled through the first few marked sections of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, commenting that he was having difficulty following along at some points and thought the narrator was “Probably crazy, maybe on drugs,” however, he showed strength in following the overall “feeling” of the plot, remarking how it started off extremely slow and suspenseful before becoming more rapid and anxiety-filled, before finally slowing down again until the narrator’s breakdown in front of the police. He even noticed the shortened, panicked sentence structures in the more intense parts of the story. In the following marked sections, Charlie began asking questions related to the symbolism and purpose of the characters and language involved, suggesting that perhaps the narrator was representative of the inevitability of death, and wondering why the narrator chose to compare the old man’s eye to a vulture. Charlie also seemed to have difficulty suspending his disbelief at times, such as why the narrator chose to go about killing the old man in the way he did. He was intent on seeking out a realistic motivation, and

was confused about what the purpose of the heartbeat was. Despite this, he challenged himself to “step into the narrator’s shoes,” and found it easier to follow along with the story after talking through his thoughts and being prompted by further questions. He shows an ability to adapt and develop reading skills connected to the Cognitive and Knowledge-Building Dimensions of reading. While he seems to identify himself as someone who reads to gain information, he is capable of breaking down even minute details and activating knowledge regarding text structure and past skills learned through school to better understand sections of the story he found to be more confusing. He has methods to assist in re-reading the text, searching for context clues and textual evidence to come to his own well-supported conclusions.

- **Origin:** The possible origins for this pattern likely lie within Charlie’s Personal and Social Dimensions. Growing up, there were lots of books and reading materials kept around the house, especially National Geographic magazines, political texts, bibles, articles on current events, and textbooks on strength training and healthy eating. His parents also provided plenty of fiction stories and comic books, and his mom would frequently read to him. Growing up, he would often be gifted or recommended middle-grade and Young Adult novels about baseball since he was active in a lot of sports at the time. However, he very much wanted to model himself after his father in many ways, and sought out reading material similar to what he was reading. Charlie would spend long periods of time talking to his father about what he was learning from these books and articles. His father

also favors nonfiction and historical texts, so that's what he would usually recommend to Charlie. In school, Charlie greatly enjoyed history classes, and thus chose to read more biographical works. School also required a lot of nonfiction, both in English and History, so that's what he is used to reading and his reading skills are specifically developed to break down and process that kind of analytical, fact-heavy writing.

- **Pattern #2:** Reading as a conscious, “technical” activity
 - This very much ties into the previous pattern, although with a slightly different focus. As mentioned above, Charlie exhibits a strong skill set in describing his reading process and techniques. It is very methodical and straightforward, focusing on evidence within the text to support any conscious predictions and interpretations he has. This was shown through both the Reading Protocol Activity, as well as the Poem “Pop-Up” Activity. After reading the poem through once, he was asked what he thought of it and he immediately said, “It’s about suicide, or at least suicidal thoughts.” He was far more confident with this conclusion than when he had read *The Tell-Tale Heart*, so I asked how he thought of that so quickly. Not only did he describe the vaguely ominous tone of the poem, but he also went through each line with me and pointed out the exact phrases and words he used to analyze the piece. He was aware of potential alternate meanings behind some of the phrases (such as “sleep” being a reference to “eternal sleep”/death), and he also possessed the cultural nuance to recognize the horse bells as a potentially religious

symbol. Rather than using his first read through the poem as an overview that he could glean very surface level interpretations from, he immediately sought out a deeper meaning. As soon as he reached the line describing the night as the darkest of the year, he wondered what the darkest thing a person could experience would be, and figured it would likely be suicidal ideation and/or severe depression.

- **Origin:** I believe there are many links to Charlie's personal life that likely contributed to this pattern, and can be explained best through the Personal, Cognitive, and Knowledge-Building Dimensions of Reading. Along with being very familiar with religious texts in general, he was raised Catholic, and Charlie is particularly devout. He spent a few years as an altar server, and many more years in religion classes and bible studies. He is very familiar with the church schema, since he was in charge of knowing exactly when to present the gifts to the altar and ring bells to indicate the start of different sacraments. This past experience with being exposed to bells in a heavily religious context meant that upon seeing the reference to the horse's bells, he figured it held some sort of religious symbolism and was intended to grab both the reader and the narrator's attention, similarly to how bells would be used to grab the attention of attendees whenever a sacrament was starting. Charlie is also very used to analyzing written texts for school, and is currently learning poetry in his English class, further supporting that he is equipped with specific techniques to help pick apart a poem's meaning. Finally, one of Charlie's major passions is music. He listens to primarily heavy metal and progressive rock, with the lyrics often centered around mental health,

trauma, and other rather dark themes. He enjoys reading through song lyrics and analyzing them, often commenting on the sometimes overlooked complexity behind what is being sung. Even in his spare time, he is reading and analyzing a form of poetry, whether he recognizes it or not. He is actively applying his reading skills to his personal life, further practicing and strengthening those abilities, and becoming more aware of what he does while reading a variety of texts. However, this high level of awareness is also what seems to lead to his rapid reading-fatigue. Seeing reading as primarily something done for school and learning can lead to burn-out, especially since he admits to reading very little, at least in the form of books, in his spare time. He finds it difficult to “get lost” in a book, finding his attention drifting from anything such as an odd noise in the room to the bland color of the pages. He is very aware of what he is reading and how he is reading it, but that can eventually become exhausting and boring.

- **Conclusions and Teaching Plans**

- I do believe Charlie has the makings of a “good” reader, he just requires a stronger sense of intrinsic motivation, an introduction to a wider variety of genres, and more opportunities for him to practice explaining his reading process and opinions on a text. He exhibits the metacognition needed to notice his own strengths and areas that he struggles in, while also not letting those traits fully define or limit his view on reading as a whole. If I were Charlie’s teacher, I would definitely include a lot of poetry and short story options for him to study. The shorter length would hopefully make it easier for him to maintain focus and prevent rapid fatigue, while also playing into his passion for songwriting. I would

also try to touch on any historical or religious references and inspiration in fiction and fantasy stories to appeal to his interest in more “realistic” texts while still exposing him to different genres and writing styles. Even though he was being very analytical while reading both Poe’s short story and Frost’s poem, he still expressed the fact that he enjoyed them immensely. They were a break from the mundane, research-based reading he does on a regular basis while still providing opportunities to look for hidden symbols and meanings. Therefore, if I were to introduce him to a longer book, I think it would be helpful to focus on something with a relatively fast-paced plot and lots of layers for interpretation. Charlie is also someone that benefits greatly from interacting with other people while reading. He already has a neutral sense of reader-identity, and expressed no hesitation in sharing even his less well-supported or explored ideas. He is extremely extroverted and relatively comfortable talking to most people. By setting him up in a “book club” style reading group with at least a couple other equally outgoing members, that would allow him to converse with others, explore a range of opinions, and would present the opportunity for myself or his peers to question him further, promoting deeper critical thinking.