

Making Meaningful Connections with Varied Literature Using Sketch Notes and Other Strategies

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Finding innovative ways to engage and motivate diverse readers to help them make meaningful connections from various forms of literature can sometimes be challenging. One strategy that has been gaining traction lately has been the use of sketch notes. This strategy has “fostered critical reflection and engagement with the text” (Mims & Whitefield, 2020, p. 172) in all content areas, especially literacy. So, what are sketch notes you might ask? Sketch notes can be defined as “visual maps combining written words and images while providing structure through variations of frames, dividers, bullets, icons, and connectors such as arrows and lines (Rohde, 2013). Simply put, they can be both visual representations and/or explanations of key concepts that the reader makes to go along with the text. “Sketchnoting can additionally be applied to organizing, planning, and making visual connections” (Paepcke-Hjeltness & Lu, 2018, p. 62). For instance, these notes can be used for multiple types of text – fiction or nonfiction, as a method for note-taking. Using sketch notes as a strategy can help students improve their comprehension, build a conceptual understanding of what they have read, and allow them to make personal connections to the text.

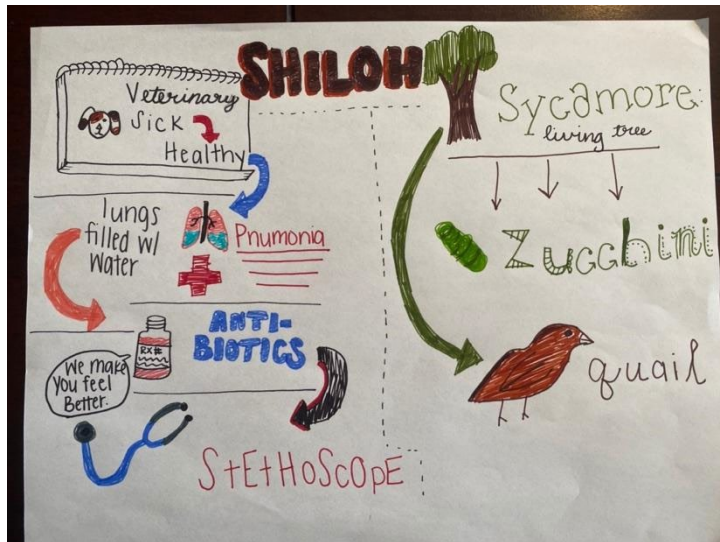
Improving comprehension can be linked to Paivio’s Theory of Dual Coding, “which suggests that humans process information in more than one way, like audio and visuals, or both visual and verbal forms” (Steinbrink, 2022, p. 1). Teachers often use picture books and graphic novels to help students comprehend certain story elements such as characters, setting, or problem and solution. In the same manner, teachers can also implement sketch notes as another tool to help their students make purposeful connections between the reader and the text.

The research is clear on having students take multi-modal notes to improve comprehension and build a conceptual understanding of what they have read. There is a distinct correlation between notetaking and information retention as demonstrated in the following studies. Yonata (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental research design where the talk-to-the-text strategy was implemented. “This strategy required students to stop and reflect on what they have read. When they stop for a while, they write all the information related to the text based on some questions given to them before reading the text” (Vasquez, Hansen, & Smith, 2010, p. 73). She found “the strategy provides a higher effect toward the comprehension of eighth-grade students in reading narrative texts” (p.71). Likewise, Lloyd et al (2022) administered an experimental study to examine the effects of annotating a historical text as a reading comprehension strategy. They found that the strategy “increased student engagement, reading comprehension, and therefore academic achievement in social studies” (p. 218). The text annotation strategy helped students find critical information quickly when they reviewed a text. Similarly, students can benefit from reading notetaking. According to Chang & Ku (2015), who studied “the effects of a five-week note-taking instructional program with 349 fourth-grade students found that the students’ note-taking abilities and reading comprehension improved over time with the greatest gains coming from poor readers” (p. 278). When using this strategy, one should write down their notes in their own words, instead of copying directly from the text. This will help create a “text to self” connection with the topic.

Sketch notes can be an important instructional tool for students to add their strategy toolboxes to make connections with what they read. Students often use the modalities that work best for them to learn new information and make meaningful connections. “Research suggests that learning styles and teaching styles should be well matched to enhance students’ motivation of learning” (Chetty et. al, 2019, p. 611). Adding sketch notes to the list of viable strategies would be both wise and prudent for teachers for several reasons. Many students may not be motivated or engaged to take conventional notes. Whether it is the content or not, some students just have trouble sorting through what is essential when reading higher-level texts in the classroom. Moreover, sketch notes can be a form of active listening where students can identify the main ideas and/or concepts through drawing. Students can create meaning by remembering important facts using this strategy. Most students value their sketch notes as a form of artwork and take ownership of their learning if they create it versus something that is given or reproduced for them.

How can teachers begin using sketch notes in their classrooms? Most experts would agree and say that any time someone uses a new strategy they should expect to make mistakes and be patient with it. Before the students can be successful, it is critical that the teacher master the strategy first. This doesn’t mean teachers should be at an expert level, but they should be able to model and demonstrate how to use the strategy for students to buy in and want to take part. Next, teachers should begin by repeatedly practicing so both the students and the teacher are comfortable using the strategy. Then, students need to practice with the teacher explicitly. Just like reviewing procedures and routines at the beginning of a new school year, one should practice the strategy regularly to ensure students are mastering it. Finally, as with anything in the classroom, teachers need to provide opportunities for student sharing and feedback with one another. We know students sometimes learn better from their peers than from us, so this should be recognized when using sketch notes as well.

Sketch notes can be used in a variety of ways to help students improve their literacy skills in the classroom. One sample of a way teachers can use this strategy is to introduce or reinforce story vocabulary. “Vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension refers to a kind of knowledge that facilitates text comprehension by single, double, or more words/characters’ semantic meaning identification, providing the possibility of necessary cognitive capacity for higher-level reading processes” (Dong et al., 2020, p. 2). Having students sketch or draw out the definition of the word helps them retain its meaning. For example, students may read a fictional story such as “Shiloh” by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and be given several vocabulary words – veterinary, pneumonia, sycamore, zucchini, quail, and stethoscope to create visual representations to help as they read the story. It is important to note that it isn’t about the quality of the artwork, but the student’s thoughts that fill the page for the teacher to consider. This is



where students can share their thoughts with others and start a discussion or dialogue with one another about the vocabulary to provide rich conversations with one another.

Students should be allowed to make connections with the content in the manner that works best for them. Not every student will benefit from using sketch notes, but again it is an additional tool to add to their collective toolboxes. The more strategies one can introduce to their students, the likelihood they will stay

engaged and increase their conceptual understanding of the topic at hand.

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