MICRONOVELS: AN ELEGANTLY SIMPLE APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Finding materials that engage adult learners in meaningful ways is an irksome task, especially when the academic needs of a beginning literacy classroom are incredibly diverse. Off-the-shelf curriculum often fails to meet instructional needs as the materials are either too simple or too disconnected from targeted learning goals. As a result, teachers find themselves in the search for worthwhile materials that engage learners in deep investigations of text while addressing mastery of College and Career Readiness (CCRS) content standards. In this instructional practice analysis, the author, a beginning level literacy teacher with the Minnesota Department of Corrections, explores the method of teaching single-sentence MicroNovels with the purpose of promoting beginning literacy students' access to and deeper understanding of print text.

Etched into the walls of an architecture school is an ideology that reminds the aspiring Louis Sullivans and Zaha Hadids to make their designs simple so that they can be complex. Often times, Meis van der Rohe's designs, like the Farnsworth House and the Illinois Institute of Technology's Crown Hall (Appendix A), are championed as definitive examples of this simple-complex ideology with their smooth surfaces, masterful details, and thoughtful choreography of human movement. Truly, in the simplicity of van der Rohe's structures and materials, his designs evoke complex engagements. Such powerful engagements with the built environment stir fledgling architects to make the most of every line and detail they place on paper.

How about corrections education? Is there something in this simple-complex ideology that speaks to a literacy instructor's efforts in designing and implementing relevant, best practice strategies for incarcerated adult learners? Let it be simple so that it can be complex. This article showcases one such condensed instructional strategy, the use of MicroNovels for beginning literacy development.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Though I was not a newcomer to teaching adults when I transitioned into my correctional facility's beginning literacy program[1], my first month of teaching in that setting was wrought with great professional frustration. With my previous experience in teaching at the high school equivalency level, I fell victim to the teacher trap that all I needed to do at the beginning level was reduce the level of difficulty, speak a little slower, smile more often, and provide more time for independent work. However, this mindset led me to distributing ineffective materials that failed to satisfy the instructional needs of my students, who were stuck beside me in

1 Students tested below grade level equivalent 4.4 on the TABE form E or M.

a quagmire of unending busy work. Even worse, I was failing to provide differentiated opportunities for each student to learn at his own pace and to demonstrate his knowledge of CCRS competencies at his own level.

In my teacher's heart, I knew that what I wanted was a beginning literacy, instructional strategy that engendered a variety of higher order thinking skills (Anderson et al., 2001), and that all learners could access, regardless of their literacy experience and language abilities. In essence, what I wanted was a one-size-fits-all, self-differentiating curriculum that engaged the diverse needs of all my learners on their first day of class—English learners (EL) and the English speakers alike. I grappled with the "Let it be simple so that it can be complex" ideology, and in that grappling, I questioned why it was that I continued to engage my students—willy-nilly—ad nauseam—ennui—in reading lengthy texts independently if they neither understood the basic principles of text structure and idea development (CCRS Reading Anchor 5) nor the effective use of evidence to answer text-dependent questions. There was more to this struggle than simply preparing my students for their next Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) assessment. I feared if my students were not taught the foundations of critical reading and critical thinking, they would be no better upon their release from the facility than when they entered.

Then, after an excruciating morning of shrugged shoulders, blank-stares, and ill-fated instruction, I sat in the quiet of an empty classroom and whispered to myself, "If my students struggle to translate a lengthy passage between languages, and if my students struggle to remember everything that is developed in a lengthy passage, then I should teach radically short passages and teach them to a deeper level of understanding." This syllogistic statement was the foundation of the "Let it be simple so that it can be complex" curriculum I was seeking. It was at that moment that the concept of MicroNovels was born.

DESIGNING A SIMPLE STRATEGY

On the drawing board, a MicroNovel is a single-sentence story that is chock-full of direct analysis details, plot elements, character development, and inference potential; a single sentence to read, translate, and investigate; a single sentence from which a myriad of CCRS-aligned, text-dependent, evidence-based questions can be framed; and a single sentence that embraces the CCRS's key shifts of text complexity, use of evidence, and development of knowledge. I questioned whether this condensed approach (Hadley, Eisenwine, & Sanders, 2005) could really be that simple, and whether it could really provide me with the kind of upward-literacy complexity I desired?

Having taught less-than-effective, off-the-shelf materials for quite some time, I knew that whatever I presented in a MicroNovel had to be interesting, challenging, and even a little mysterious—with awkwardly familiar characters, places, and events that dwell somewhere on the meandering path between Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon* and Stephen King's *Castle Rock*—stopping in *Spoon River* to ask Edgar Lee Masters for directions. If I presented warm little stories about puppies and their trip to the park, my experiment would result in failure because those kinds of stories simply do not resonate with my adult learners, and not just because they are incarcerated. But, if I presented an intriguing story about a fully-freighted mosquito's fatal attraction to the purple aura of an electric bug zapper, I might be able to get their attention. I find that adult learners value texts that contain a generous blend of humor, sensory details, thrill, and shock in order to keep them engaged. And, in order to put ten pounds of description in a five-pound sentence, I added em dash details to give each sentence a little extra oomph. Two governing equations became apparent in my explorations: (1) simple = complex, and (2) humor + sensory details + thrill + shock = engagement.

Likewise, I knew the text-dependent questions I presented had to be in the likeness and logic of what students would encounter on their next TABE assessment, otherwise a student would return from a testing

session and angrily announce to the rest of the class, "Listen up! Nothing he is teaching us is on the test!" Try restoring your teacher cred after that accusation! I scoured my guaranteed-to-improve, self-help test materials, identified the types of questions they asked, and then considered how I could recreate their likeness and logic by replacing key ideas with ideas that were relevant to one of my stories. To strengthen this concept, I used the CCRS Reading and Language competencies as question stems to develop scaffolded questions that drew students to higher order thinking skills (Anderson, et al, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2007), and gave direction to their exploration (Table 1).

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

When I handed out my first MicroNovel, *Pete's Thumb*, my students were leery of being guinea pigs in yet another one of my curriculum experiments. However, when I gave them the brief that this was a single-sentence story about a man who might have cut off his thumb on a table saw, they leaned forward in their desks with a bit of curiosity. I explained the process of how I would read aloud/Think Aloud (Song, 1998) through the story while the students whisper-read in time with me, developed a basic understanding of the story, and circled unfamiliar words. Then, I would ask for two volunteers to read the story aloud: the first volunteer to simply read the story aloud while we all followed along, fingers on words; the second volunteer to read the story aloud while everybody listened with eyes closed. From there, and without looking at the story, we would discuss what we remembered and collaborate our ideas in a graphic organizer. Through multiple close readings and discussions, I hoped students would engage and understand the text at a deeper level (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Once everybody understood the process, I read *Pete's Thumb*:

> They were nearly to the hospital's emergency entrance when Pete looked at the blood-soaked towel—wrapped around the place where his thumb had been—and suddenly realized, in his terrified haste, he had left the table saw running in the garage.

Right away there was discussion. "So, Pete cut off his thumb? Is this a true story?" It was difficult not to respond as I could hear their excitement, but I reminded the students that we still had to read through the text two more times before we would discuss our ideas collectively. The class quieted down, and the two volunteers read through the text. I could have heard a pin drop.

With our papers facing down, we went through the room and each student shared a detail he remembered. Everything was written on the board as part of our evidence collecting process. When we had exhausted our ideas, I handed out a series of open-ended, text-dependent questions in order to informally assess their understanding of the text against the evidence they had gathered (Appendix B). Again, the questions were in the likeness and logic of those they might encounter on benchmarking and credentialing assessments, and they were likewise aligned to state-adopted content standards (Fisher & Frey, 2007). I gave the students ten minutes to work through the questions independently and explained they would have five additional minutes to collaborate with a partner. Pencils went to work. A second pin dropped.

I walked around the room and monitored progress. I was amazed by my students' engagement in the activity. As the first ten minutes drew to a close, I opened the opportunity for the students to collaborate with each other. It was then that I realized I had found that which I had been seeking. The simple text was fertile ground for complex discussions. Students were even using my investigative rhetoric, "Where do you see that in the story? Where is the evidence?" The conversations were so poignant and energized that we sailed past the planned five-minute collaboration time, and per the students' persistence, I faux-reluctantly agreed to another five minutes of collaboration time. How could I resist? After all, I was watching the CCRS-Reading, Language,

and Speaking & Listening standards come to life. It was only when more and more questions required my "learned professional opinion" that we returned to whole-class discussion.

"Let's take a look at the first question: Who are the characters?" I asked.

"Pete," the class answered unanimously and with certainty.

"Anybody else?" I asked.

"Pete's wife," a student responded. Perhaps he was reflecting on his own personal experience with a table saw and subsequent trip to the hospital.

"Can you show me in the text where Pete's wife is mentioned?" I was pleased to hear other students point out that neither Pete's wife nor any other characters were specifically mentioned. We went through the litany of possible answers (doctors, nurses, people driving on the road, etc...), but each response was met with the same retort, "Can you show me in the text where "that" is stated?"

Then, from somewhere in the back of the room, a hesitant voice spoke up, "Well, it does say, 'They...,' but we do not know who the 'They...' is." Confetti fell from the ceiling and great ah-ha's were had by all. We discussed "They..." and its use as evidence—an indeterminate plural, subjective pronoun.

"Now, for question number two: Where are the characters?"

"In the garage...in a car...in an ambulance...on the bus...on the way to the hospital...at the emergency entrance." The answers came steadily, but it was clear there was a bit more hesitance because the students knew they would have to prove their answers through direct evidence from the text. Then, another voice spoke up, this time with confidence, "We do not know where they are. The only thing we know is that they are nearly to the hospital's emergency entrance." My students were catching on, and with each question, they were learning what it meant to engage the text at a deeper level.

When teaching this same passage to high school equivalency students, there was an amazing—almost mathematical—discussion regarding the word nearly. Students were able to identify that nearly would have different meanings based on how far Pete had to travel when he began his journey to the hospital (CCRS-L:5). If he lived in the hinterlands of the world, nearly could still be a few hundred miles away; if he lived in the surrounding countryside, nearly could still be a few miles away; if he lived across the street from the hospital, nearly might be the last few yards of ramp leading up to the hospital's emergency entrance.

In experimenting with MicroNovels in my facility's various literacy programs, I have found that text-dependent questions become self-differentiating depending on the demands/abilities of the classroom. While my beginning literacy students focus on gathering evidence and direct text-analysis, high school equivalency students engage in complex discussions about the evidence that is argued from silence (CCRS Reading Anchor 1). For example, they drew evidence-based conclusions about how Pete obtained the towel to wrap around his hand. Did "They" give him the towel? Likewise, they questioned why it suddenly became so important that he remembered he had left the table saw running. Was he afraid that one of his children might touch the saw? Or was he afraid that the neighborhood cat would wonder into the garage? But, where are "child" or "cat" mentioned in the text? One student arrived at the conclusion that we do not even know if Pete cut off his thumb as the result of a table-saw accident, or if his thumb was already missing and a new wound was inflicted on his hand. Based on a strict interpretation of the text and the lack of supporting evidence, he was correct.

I have found that teaching how some questions do not have answers is equally as effective as teaching how some questions have obvious answers. Teasing the text analysis a little deeper, I posed the question: "What color is Pete's towel?" Because our students are allowed to use their white, state-issued towels as scarves in

the winter months, most of the students initially claimed that Pete's towel was white. However, the classroom tide quickly reversed and students identified that there is not enough evidence to support that, or any, answer. They all agreed, though, that regardless of the towel's initial color, it was now soaked in red. Teaching that some questions do not have enough supporting evidence requires the students to draw conclusions and make inferences based on the evidence that does exist (CCRS Reading Anchor 1). The result is a strengthened understanding of the text.

I knew I had caught my students' interest when they asked if we would be doing any more of these "... story things." Calmly, as if everything was planned out and in ready status, I assured them we would, but then I spent the next several lunch periods frantically trying to tap into that fold in my brain where I had found *Pete's Thumb*.

Over the course of a few weeks, I developed twenty MicroNovels, some of which were finished and distributed to students, others of which are still on my digital drawing board (Appendix D). I kept pushing MicroNovel ideas to the limits of the simple-complex paradigm. After each exercise, I collected the student responses and assessed their level of understanding. If too many students missed a question, I considered either re-teaching the likeness and logic of the question or rewording the question to be more approachable. The perpetual revision process of each MicroNovel is responsive to the diverse needs of the students and to a stronger alignment to the CCRS's key shifts. Because of their simplicity, I find that MicroNovels fold nicely into all of those great reading strategies we have collected over the years but do not know how to incorporate into our instruction. Let it be simple so that it can be complex.

PROCESS REVISION

In subsequent iterations of MicroNovels, I focused on an even deeper engagement of the text via a collaborative Think Aloud (Song, 1998), and structured note-taking, rather than focusing on short-answer written responses. Additionally, in an effort to discuss grammar and the rules of writing, I made three grammatical errors in the text in the manner of traditional Daily Oral Language (CCRS Language Anchor 2). Prior to distributing the story, I projected a PowerPoint slide of *High Wire Publicity* (Appendix C), which is a story about a desperate author's high-wire publicity stunt gone awry. The students followed along as I conducted a Think Aloud and made scribble notes on the board about questions I had, interesting words I encountered, and cause/effect relationships I connected. When I was done with my Think Aloud, I had two volunteers read through the text while the rest of the class followed along, just as they had done with *Pete's Thumb*. Then, I shut off the projector and we discussed what we remembered through a student-generated graphic organizer. I was pleased with the level of discussion and the depth of understanding.

With our ideas exhausted, I turned on the projector and asked for volunteers to identify key pieces of evidence in the text: Draw a box around the characters. Circle words that describe. Underline cause and effect relationships. Squiggle-underline words that develop setting. Cloud-circle words that lend themselves to an alternative title. In this manner, there was increased student engagement and evidence-based discussion, especially among EL students and students who struggle with comprehension.

When we completed discussing the details of the story, we explored the three grammatical errors and their suggested revisions. I was sure to make corrections by using the standard editing marks that our high school equivalency program uses so that students develop a working knowledge of how to self-edit and how to make sense of teacher editing marks. Adding the revision component to the MicroNovel framework allowed for a deeper discussion of the same single sentence, and allowed us to venture into CCRS Writing and Language competencies.

CONCLUSION

Let it be simple so that it can be complex. In a corrections educator's daily effort to provide adult learners with meaningful and engaging curriculum, it is a strong practice to focus on depth rather than breadth. Using condensed texts, such as MicroNovels, that are replete with evidence and engaging details, affords beginning level literacy students the opportunity to master the skills of analyzing a text in a manner that yields a high return on teacher investment. Additionally, with regards to teacher investment, the self-differentiating nature of MicroNovels means that teachers can engage a wider range of student abilities through the use of a single activity. Moreover, students develop a greater sense of academic self-efficacy through their successful engagement of a text and participation in classroom discussions. ⌘

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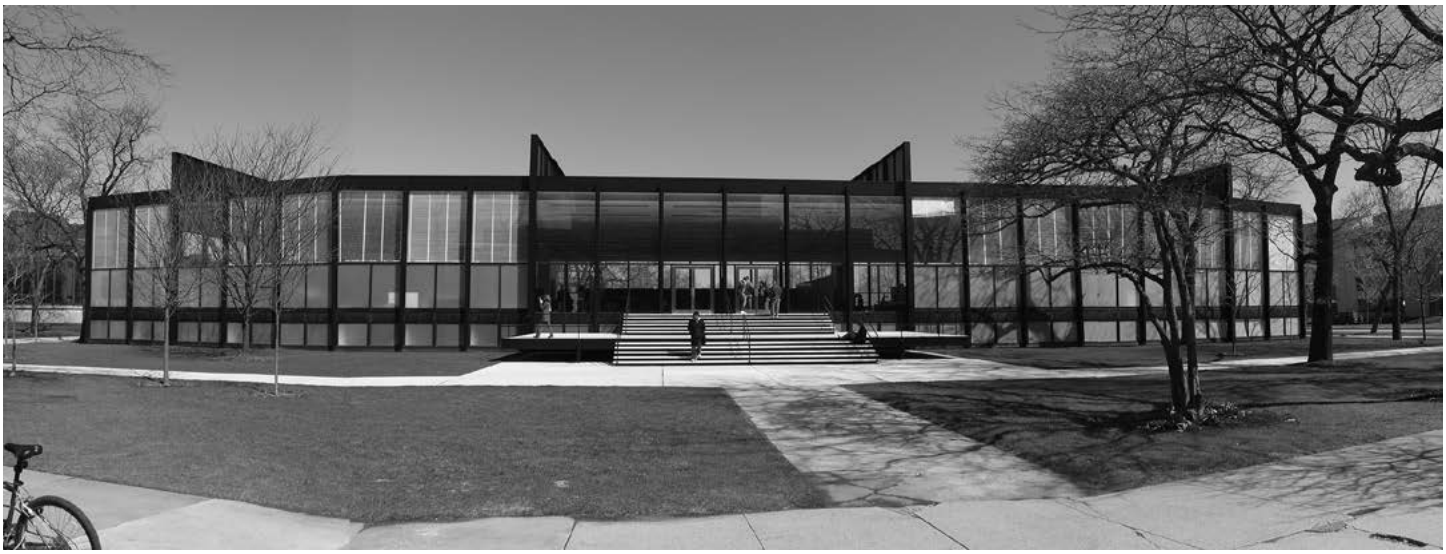
TABLE 1—CCR READING [CCR-R] AND LANGUAGE [CCR-L] ANCHORS TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

Cognitive Domain	MicroNovel Question Types
CCR-R:1	• Who are the main characters? • What evidence shows that Pete was in a hurry to leave the garage? • Where is Pete now?
CCR-R:2	• Summarize the story in ten words or less. • If Pete were going to create a safety poster for table saw use, what ideas might he include? Write a slogan or sketch a poster.
CCR-R:3	• Create a timeline of five events related to the story, either specific or implied.
CCR-R:4	• What does the phrase terrified haste add to the tone of the story?
CCR-R:5	• Would the following sentence be located in sequence before or after the story? Pete decided he would sneak out to his garage workshop to begin working on a Valentine's Day gift for his wife.
CCR-R:7	• Sketch a graphic that depicts key elements of the story. Label the key elements.
CCR-L:5	• How does the definition of the word nearly change based on Pete's initial starting point?

APPENDIX A—MEIS VAN DER ROHE'S SIMPLE/COMPLEX ARCHITECTURE

Image 1: Farnsworth House (Photo courtesy of the author)

Image 2: Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology (Photo collage courtesy of the author)



APPENDIX B—PETE'S THUMB HANDOUT

1.

They were nearly to the hospital's emergency entrance when Pete looked at the blood-soaked towel—wrapped around the place where his thumb had been—and suddenly realized, in his terrified haste, he had left the table saw running in the garage.

Directions: Answer each of the following questions using direct evidence from the story.

1. Who are the characters?

_____

_____

2. Where are the characters now?

_____

_____

3. Summarize the story in ten words or less?

_____

_____

4. Create a timeline of the events related to the story (specific or implied).

_____

5. What does the phrase, *terrified haste*, add to the tone of the story?

_____

_____

APPENDIX B—PETE'S THUMB HANDOUT (CONTINUED)

6. Would the following sentence be located before or after the story? *Pete decided he would sneak out to his garage workshop and begin working on a Valentine's Day gift for his wife.* [ ] Before [ ] After Explain your reasoning.

_____

_____

7. How does the definition of the word *nearly* change based on Pete's initial starting point?

_____

_____

8. What is a good title for this story?

_____

_____

9. Draw a picture of this story and label key pieces.

APPENDIX C—HIGH WIRE PUBLICITY HANDOUT

9.

To Pete, traversing a burning tight-rope across the Grand Canyon—while dressed as a giant squirrel—seemed like a catchy publicity stunt to sell his recent book, *The Epic Adventures of an Ambidextrous Suburban Squirrel*, until, that is, he gained the interest of a desperately hungry turkey vulture.

Directions: Answer each of the following questions using direct evidence from the story.

1. Who are the characters?

_____
_____

2. Where does this story take place?

_____
_____

3. Would the following sentence be located before or after the story? *It was then, with his stomach growling and the cupboard shelves empty of even the tiniest morsel, that Pete's eyes chanced upon a picture of the Grand Canyon—taped to the refrigerator—and his thoughts were filled with wide-eyed possibility.* [ ] Before [ ] After
Explain your reasoning.

_____
_____

4. How does the phrase *desperately hungry* shape the subsequent events of the story?

_____
_____

5. Summarize the story in ten words or less.

_____
_____

APPENDIX C—HIGH WIRE PUBLICITY HANDOUT (CONTINUED)

6. Create a timeline of the events related to the story (specific or implied).

_____

7. What is a good alternative title for this story?

_____

_____

8. Draw a box around the characters.

9. Circle words that describe *what kind?*

10. Underline cause and effect relationships.

11. Squiggle-underline words that develop setting.

12. Cloud-circle words that lend to an alternative title.

APPENDIX D—SAMPLE MICRONOVELS

Pete's Thumb
They were nearly to the hospital's emergency entrance when Pete looked at the blood-soaked towel—wrapped around the place where his thumb had been—and suddenly realized, in his terrified haste, he had left the table saw running in the garage.

Chainsaw Juggler
Though Pete's father had always boasted of his son's occupational persistence, after many years of trying to regain his waning confidence, Pete mournfully came to the conclusion that he simply didn't have the hands for chainsaw juggling anymore.

Drawn to Purple
The mosquito, now fully freighted with a delectable meal of a tender, suburban Schnauzer named Buttercup, felt itself magnetically drawn—like the tide to the moon—one ancient celestial lover to another—to the radiant purple aura of the bug zapper hanging in the hemlock tree above Stanley Schnibble's prized purple peony garden

High Wire Publicity
To Pete, traversing a burning tight-rope across the Grand Canyon—while dressed as a giant squirrel—seemed like a catchy publicity stunt to sell his recent book, The Epic Adventures of an Ambidextrous Suburban Squirrel, until, that is, he gained the interest of a desperately hungry turkey vulture.