THESIS

UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF AFFINITY SPACES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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The new Common Core State Standards demand rigorous academic outcomes of public school students. Teachers of English Language Arts has been both strained and invigorated by these demands in recent years, and educational research, particularly on the use of technology for advancing literacy, has proposed some innovative solutions. This qualitative study will compare the implementation of two forms of ELA curricula, one based in recent literature and the other based in traditional instruction, for the purpose of measuring which is capable of better academic outcomes. I will use an action research design to carry out this study. My primary research question is: How does implementing affinity spaces in my 9th-grade ELA class compare to implementing my usual instruction with respect to student improvement on CCSS achievement targets? The outcomes of the study led me to conclude that my implementation of an affinity space curriculum, which is based in recent educational research, achieves better academic outcomes than my usual instruction, which is based in traditional teaching practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The modern American public school is awash in "technology."[1] Students are attached at the hip to their smart phones. Teachers and administrators scramble to make technology available and functional for the development of 21st-century skills. And, school districts strain under the weight of buying and maintaining equipment in a rapidly evolving techno-centric environment. In this context, the phrase, "technology supports learning" is, at once, one of the most studied, most complicated, and most problematic phrases resounding in the halls of public schools today. As a third year English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at a public school, I am continually presented with the challenge of making good use of technology to support my students' learning, particularly their learning of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), but this is no easy task. And for me, the difficultly of this task comes with more nuanced problems than simply, "my school doesn't have good computers" or, "my students are exceptionally distracted by their cell phones."

What I think is becoming too common, as teachers interpret and adapt to evolving technology, is the sunny side of using technology. Educational scholars like Kevin Leander (2010) and Anouk Lang (2011) are not alone in their optimistic defense of the possible benefits of technological learning tools. However, as healthy skeptic of this optimism, and as a teacher who has observed plenty of lackluster uses of technology in classrooms, I am obliged to specify the difficulties I see in this development. I find that indiscriminate optimism about using technology is just as likely to be ineffective in modern classrooms as it is to be effective.

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[1] This is a deliberately ambiguous usage of word that matches its frequently ambiguous usage in public schools. In public schools, and elsewhere, "technology" usually connotes digital software interfaced through smart devices and less often computer hardware and related equipment.

Furthermore, I would assert the implementation of technology to support learning is a nuanced challenge because it, often tacitly, imposes a *divide* between traditional teaching practices, which are often contingent on physical spaces and face-to-face interaction, and new teaching practices that attempt to employ digital learning interfaces through smart devices and computers. That is, the "traditional" teaching practices of, for example, direct instruction of a reading skill that students uniformly follow, are increasingly seen as *divided* from new teaching practices that, for example, have students learn a similar skill through an interactive digital interface. After all, the uniform attentiveness required for absorbing a skill from a lecture is fundamentally different than learning through interactive software. The modern public school teacher is caught between this divide, whether she knows it or not. Balancing the effective use of both is, therefore, is a precarious task.

For teachers, like me, who intend to make the best use of technology while not throwing the baby of well-functioning instruction out with the bathwater of outmoded practices, our main concern is to only employ the very best and most pedagogically effective tools and interfaces in ways that reliably reach our instructional goals. How can we make sure to do that?

The goal is ostensibly simple: I want to develop curriculum that effectively enables students to learn about ELA concepts and skills the way they learn about areas of their personal interest: avidly, immersively, and collaboratively. I see many of my students using the internet through their smart devices to enable their pursuit of social experiences, leisure activities, and topics of personal interest. I also see the divide between *their* way of using these tools and *teachers'* ways of having them use these tools. So, I hypothesize, there must be better ways of reliably tethering the content and skills of English Language Arts to the internet experiences

students naturally prize. Following Kathy Mills (2010) or Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2009), there are many reasons to believe careful progress has already been made.

Before I had even started teaching, I was inspired by James Paul Gee on this very topic. In his 2004 work *Situated Language and Learning*, Gee finds, and thoroughly analyzes, an ostensibly unlikely connection between the acquisition of literacy skills and the world of gaming communities. I was immediately charmed by this connection in part because I personally understood the draw of video games. But, I was compelled to study this connection because, as a skeptic of teachers' ability to use technology in ways that were analogously effective to students' personal use, I was convinced by Gee's *enunciation of the pedagogical features implicit for learning in gaming communities*. Moreover, I was convinced that I could employ those very features for ELA curriculum in my own classroom.

So, through healthy skepticism and inspiration from Gee, I devised the following comparative study of my own curriculum to do two things: 1) To put to the test Gee's ambitious and exciting proposal that the pedagogical features of "affinity spaces" emerging on the internet from gaming communities *could* be turned toward academic outcomes, and 2) to compare this "affinity space" curriculum against a curriculum that holds with traditional instructional practices without a technology focus. I also committed to carrying out this comparison using the most objective available criteria. Thus, we arrive at my research question: How does implementing affinity spaces in my 9th-grade ELA class compare to implementing my usual instruction with respect to student improvement on CCSS achievement targets?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Individualized direct instruction is no longer the most prevalent teaching practice in contemporary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, nor is it usually the monotonous, lecture-based instructional format "traditional" to public schools. To the contrary, the contemporary ELA classroom is now home to a great variety of student configurations, both grouped and individualized, as well as teaching practices, which often purposefully group students (e.g. Socratic seminars, fishbowls, book clubs, student-led inquiry groups, peer writing and editing groups, etc.) and which increasingly try to account for student interests, student-led inquiry, and social practices (Wessling 2011). Wagner (1982) showed that ELA teachers have implemented with increasing regularity a variety of non-lecture configurations, even those with student group learning since the 1960s, though such practices were largely unexamined and have frequently shifted in purpose. Then, it was studies like Webb (1989) that began to describe the types of collaborative, interactive, and elaborative practices that are present in student group learning with systematic language and categories suitable for qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, contemporary ELA classrooms, despite improved variety and better understood structures, still heavily rely on individualized instruction which usually emphasizes teacher-controlled topics; rote lecture, notation, and directed practice of ELA skills; and teacher-led inquiry (Carnine et. al. 1996; Carnine, 2000). In view of this, Gee (2004) notes the distinction between "situated" learning, which is exhibited in group learning configurations, and which are thought to be socio-culturally significant for students, and "direct" (also "skills instruction") learning, which is exhibited in individualized (and sometimes group) configurations and which

he finds to be often detached from socio-cultural significance for students. Gee presents a demand for further research on situated group learning in particular because he finds that social-cultural significance is a key component for generating collaborative interactive and elaborative practices.[2]

2.2 GROUP LEARNING IN MODERN ELA CLASSROOMS

Recent educational literature on the subject of group learning has attempted to determine and communicate the effectiveness of a variety of specific configurations and practices (Beers 2002; Young 2004; Gee 2004; Wessling 2011). These works promote the effectiveness of different types of learning groups (often regarding assessment standards like the Common Core State Standards[3]) and do not often compare practices. However, with some exceptions, these works tend to be theoretical and general in their commentary about the effectiveness of methods precisely because they mean to survey a large number of potential teaching practices that have some established value or that have been used to good effect in the writer's classrooms. Beers (2002), for example, surveys effective small-group approaches to cultivating reading comprehension in an ELA classroom. Similaryly, Wessling (2011) advocates for a thoughtful combination of both small group and individualized which may be tailored by literacy teachers to the type of standards desired. However, neither of these recent curriculum innovators provides definitive qualitative or quantitative data for the use of one kind of configuration and practice *over another* in a given context. They do aim at specific learning targets (like CCSS outcomes) but do not develop a comparative view to reaching those targets. Sources of ELA teaching theory, such as these, frequently recommend a range of "best practices", rather than a

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[2] This summarizes a major portion of Gee's 2004 work using Webb's (1989) "interactive and elaborative" terminology.
[3] Wessling 2011 is a good example of this.

comparative or data-driven approach.[4] So, even theoretical answers to the questions of best group learning practices, constructed in view of CCSS targets, such as Gee's promotion of setting student configuration and social practice to support "situated" learning environments for students, or Wessling's emphasis of contextualization, remain relatively untested in their ability to reliably attain their achievement targets (Gee, 2004; Wessling, 2011). Such research is applicable in terms of providing adaptable practice and general principles for creating good practice for teachers, but it doesn't give measurements of success for specific teaching and learning practices.

Lave (1996), Wenger (1998), and Gee (2004) each recommend that further, more specific research be carried out for the refinement of their respective (and allied) theories of situated learning, learning communities, and learning that empowers socio-cultural significance for students. This gives a compelling warrant to condense some of the recent theory into variables that can be studied using qualitative and quasi-experimental[5] methods. One such variable could be, "situated learning practice X", and it could be measured quasi-experimentally, in a real classroom, for qualitative evidence of achieving CCSS outcomes in comparison to, say, "individualized direct instruction practice Y."

These researchers, Gee (2004) and Wenger (1998) especially, have created a compelling warrant for using qualitative research by calling for practical implementation and analysis.

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[4] This is to be expected because such works are aimed at showing a variety of successful methods for teachers to implement. But, it should be kept in mind that it is, at least, an auxiliary purpose of these works is to provide vetted grounds for implementing specific instructional strategies. Thus, ELA teachers may find a lack of comparative or data-driven analyses of instructional strategies in the mainstream ELA literature. Teachers who are trying to improve their practice need instructional strategies that are comparatively superior to their other practices or superior in terms of results supported by data.

[5] Quasi-experimental methods mean gathering data using non-random and intact groups of participants, such as a class of students in a public school.

Specifically, they collectively identify the need for discrete comparisons of situated and non-situated learning to do more than create additional supporting theory by also creating well-defined achievement outcomes based on actual implementation of curriculum firmly rooted in their theoretical progress. Furthermore, Mills (2010) and Leander et al. (2010) have, more recently, called for research that produces qualitative and quantitative data that accounts for successes and failures of situated and social learning practices and, more specifically, is directed at adaptive implementation in the contemporary public school classroom.

2.3 AFFINITY SPACES

Gee explores the concept of the affinity space, and its implementation of situated learning, in his 2004 work *Situated Language and Learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Here, he develops his assertion from an earlier work (Gee 2003) that video games, and the digital spaces that have become commonly used for developing and sharing information about gaming, are essentially learning environments with applications to traditional schooling (Gee 2004).

Gee's connection between gaming and schooling is *not* about applying games themselves directly to traditional instruction or somehow using games to learn about school subjects. Rather, it's about understanding, and potentially borrowing, features of the web 2.0 digital spaces that gamers frequently create, use, and interact within for prospective use in school curricula. That is, Gee's work examines the learning environments of gamers, which include websites, gaming guides, and in-game learning practices, with the intent to apply the practices of effective learning in schools. This examination does at least three important things. It characterizes the various learning environments that gamers use and create as "affinity spaces" with special and clearly defined characteristics that are desirable for effective learning. It asserts that affinity space features that are visible in video game learning can be understood as situated learning. And, it

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proposes that affinity spaces are capable of strengthening a variety of weaknesses of traditional school curricula, most notably "extensive knowledge", "distributed knowledge", "student interests" (p. 88-89).

According to Gee, affinity spaces are either physical or, more often, digital spaces. That is, physical or digital places in which people are able to come together and interact in various ways. These spaces may take a wide variety of forms: a (gaming) website with forums, a "meet-up group", a coffee shop discussion club, a Twitch® gaming channels, a literary book club, etc. The *key* to the affinity space, and what distinguishes it from other spaces and learning environments, is that it is a free and open association of people with a common endeavor or interest (e.g. a topic, a game, an activity, a novel, etc.) This common endeavor is the central factor of the association between the people in the space. As an example, if you have an interest in Harry Potter, and are able to find and participate in a space (physical or digital) where other Harry Potter enthusiasts associate (i.e. gather, interact, share, and even create) you have found an affinity space.[6] If the space were to lose its common endeavor (being enthusiastic about Harry Potter) or if the participants should cease to associate, it would cease to be an affinity space, even if the contents produced by the group remained.

In addition to the essential feature of the affinity space, "common endeavor is primary" (p. 85), Gee outlines ten other definitive characteristics of affinity spaces that are relevant to how learning happens within the space:

Affinity Space Characteristics
1. Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, **is primary.**
2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share a common space.

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[6] Incidentally, many such affinity spaces exist for Harry Potter. Rowling's novels continue to inspire a popular and diverse range of affinity spaces, often using web 2.0 interfaces.

3. Some portals are strong generators.
4. Content organization is transformed by interactional organization.
5. Both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged.
6. Both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged.
7. Dispersed knowledge is encouraged.
8. Tacit knowledge is encouraged and honored.
9. There are many different forms and routes to participation.
10. There are lots of different routes to status.
11. Leadership is porous and leaders are resources.

Figure 1 – From Gee 2004

According to Gee, affinity spaces must exhibit some number of these characteristics, though they may do so in free and openly associated ways. To help clarify the relevance of these characteristics within learning contexts, I will further simplify them into six important concepts: Common endeavor is primary; everyone shares a common space; ways of accessing the space help produce and organize the space; knowledge of many kinds is encouraged and honored; there are many forms of participation, status, and leadership; leadership is porous and leaders are resources. These characteristics lend themselves to comparative study between learning environments that use them and learning environments that do not. However, the extent to which Gee explores affinity spaces is largely limited to gaming contexts. Thus, it falls to other research (this study being one example) to further explore, and perhaps develop, affinity spaces capable of applying their characteristics to school curricula. This is further described with regard to a particular space, "Genius.com", in the Data Analysis chapter below.

2.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL TOOLS AND STUDENT INTERESTS

Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009) outline the evolution of digital interfaces and tools developed for the purpose of teaching and learning literacy. They show that web 2.0 interfaces and tools[7], specifically, support interconnections of learners, content creation, remixing, and interactivity in ways that strongly connect to "desired competencies, teaching practices, and policies." (p. 255). This connection is part of both formal and informal learning across contexts that is based in situated learning theories; and, they argue, it points to a "learning ecology perspective." (Ibid). Given the potential and general accessibility of web 2.0 tools, Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes also say that research should take into account, and attempt to adapt, learning environments to "young people's participation patterns and creative acts with newer Web technologies in formal and informal learning environments" (p. 249). Gee (2004) notes, relatedly, that affinity spaces are just such environments, and currently enjoy just such participation patterns and creative acts. Mills (2010) echoes this, calling for mixed-methods research, "to identify factors that impinge on achieving specific pedagogical goals for digital literacy practices" (p. 262) specifically, leading to the investigation of, "the change processes by which technologies become integrated with literacy curricula and to develop new models of curriculum and assessment." (Ibid). According to her findings related to the "Digital Turn" in the New Literacy Studies, collaboration among members of online communities figures especially prominently, among other situated environments mentioned by Greenhow et al., in their potential to reach evolving curricular standards.

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[7] Web 2.0 refers to the second discernible movement of development of the internet (world wide web). It is characterized by dynamic content, user-generated content, and the development and proliferation of social media.

To compliment the literature about digital tools in education, it is also important to look at Mathison (1989), Brown (1994), and Barron (2004) and their related indications of the emerging discussion about the implementation of student interests in content areas curricula. Student interests have been unsystematically practiced in public schools for some time, but are rarely studied for merits or successes that might be implemented more reliably or systematically. Gee (2004) acknowledges that, "common interest [or] common endeavor" is important for learning, in isolation or in community, in situated ways (p. 84-85). Mathison (1989) surveys a series of "interest-promoting strategies" (described in real classrooms in significant detail within her article) which have varying strengths and weakness in stimulating interests in the students as well as varying strengths and weakness is their promotion of learning outcomes. This is evidence of the precarious nature of involving student interests in the classroom which, even in cases of their being present, is difficult to account for.

Brown (1994) shows that contemporary theory supporting communities of learners who are allowed to play a significant role in involving their own interests and setting up the community environment are better suited to informing the design of instruction, though they are often underutilized or ignored.[8] This suggests exciting, though not new, possibilities for implementing student interests with the specific focus of doing so in student-controlled ways.

Finally, Barron (2004) surveys five types of self-initiated learning processes (e.g. self-initiated research, projects, courses, media exploration, and mentoring) which are identified and evaluated for their implications on development of the learner. She finds strong reason to believe that further research refining how interests of students are allowed to "emerge" by teachers,

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[8] Brown's description strongly relates to Gee's (2004) account of learner activities that directly inform the design of learning "spaces" (also called "learning communities"). (p. 85-89).

specifically by creating a "learning ecology" context, will lead to better, though transformed, learning environments.

2.5 ACTION RESEARCH

One increasingly popular, and clearly promising, tool for the task of integrating affinity spaces, and the technology and students interests that come with them, is *action research*. Since Stephan Corey's pioneering action research on education at Columbia University in 1953, there has been substantial definition and adaptation in the methods of action research for use in the field of education. Important recent examples include Whitehead and McNiff (2006), Atkins and Wallace (2012) and Barry (2012). The rationale for action research in general is that those "empowered to adjust future action", given "the possibility for improvement", should focus their research on their own professional action (Sagor 2011). Also, Creswell (2012) concisely defines action research designs this way:

> "Action research designs often utilize both quantitative and qualitative data, but they focus more on procedures useful in addressing practical problems in schools and the classrooms. *Action research designs* are systematic procedures used by teachers […] to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting, their teaching, and the learning of their students." (22)

This definition makes clear the relation between the action research design and the demand from contemporary researchers for implementing actual curriculum based in the theory, and learning from the outcomes. Given a focus on the researcher's own professional practice, he or she then creates an "action plan" once the research is complete to positively affect future action using "data driven decision-making" (Sagor 2011). Action research combines the power and clarity of qualitative and quantitative research methods (e.g. data-collection through qualitative means such as field notes and quantitative means such as assessment statistics) with a purpose that goes

beyond informing the relevant academic field(s) of what is found in the study. Action research, in addition to being informative to the relevant academic field(s), directs the action of the researcher to adjust future action (e.g. make improvements in future instructional practice.)

2.6 CONCLUSION

The two, often overlapping, bodies of literature on "digital tools" and "student interests" described above provide compelling reasons for an action research study of the ways in which curriculum using affinity spaces in an ELA classroom could be specifically developed in contrast to a conventional ELA curriculum that does not use affinity spaces. I have attempted to show that an action research study is warranted through the combination of educational research understandings involving contemporary ELA practices, the affinity space, digital learning, and interest-based learning. Such a study would have the purpose of isolating and comparing the effects of affinity space learning with learning from the conventional practices of direct instruction, small-group work, and teacher-guided inquiry. Furthermore, it would be one appropriate way of following the calls for further research on situated learning that have manifested in the literature as, mainly, communities of practice, learning ecologies, and interest-promoting strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this chapter is to describe my research question, the setting and participants of my study, as well as the methodological choices behind the data I collected. First, I will explain my choice of action research as an appropriate research design. Then, I will describe the school, and my particular classroom and participants for which the study was conducted. Finally, I will discuss the specific methods that I chose for collecting, triangulating, and analyzing the data.

My research question is structured in terms of a primary research question, and sub-questions that correspond to the section divisions of the data analysis. I will state it here, with the intention that my rationale for this question in particular and my execution of the study will become clear over the course of the next two chapters:

> **Primary research question:** How does implementing affinity spaces in my 9th-grade ELA class compare to implementing my usual instruction with respect to student improvement on CCSS achievement targets?
>
> > **Sub-question 1:** Action: What implementation of learning with and without affinity spaces *is done* to improve CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?
> >
> > **Sub-question 2:** Change: What *improvement* occurred in student performance on CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?
> >
> > **Sub-question 3:** Relationship: What were the relationships between what was done to improve CCSS achievement targets in the control and experimental classes and the improvement that occurred?

3.2 CHOOSING ACTION RESEARCH

The process, methodology, and results of this study qualify as "action research," which is an increasingly common form of research in education in recent years. Because it is new relative

to other forms of research, however, it will require some explanation beyond the definition and description provided in the Literature Review above. The rationale for action research in general is that those "empowered to adjust future action", given "the possibility for improvement", should focus their research on their own professional action and the development of an "action plan" that promotes "data driven decision-making" directs the action of the researcher to adjust future action (e.g. make improvements in future instructional practice.) (Sagor 2011). Herein lies the attraction for educators conducting research. Educators choose action research because it combines their desire to conduct genuine and rigorous research about the educational world they live in with the need to advance their own practice. I have chosen action research for these same reasons. I carried out my research as an "active participant observer," which is the most common and appropriate role for the action research who is a teacher studying his or her own instructional practice. Mills (2014) states, "teachers, by virtue of teaching, are active participant observers of their teaching practice. When they are actively engaged in teaching, teachers observe the outcomes of their teaching […] As researchers of our own teaching practices, active participant observation is likely to be the most common 'experiencing' data collection technique that we use." (p. 85). While my study involved participants other than myself, and data-collection methods other than my experiences my participation in the study and the intention to create an action plan with the results was what makes the study an action research study. The results of this study were used as a basis for creating an action plan.[9] My conclusions provide a brief

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[9] This action plan was carried out through the teacher effectiveness evaluation system of my school district. Briefly, I accounted for and reflected on my practice (implementing this study) within that system as a part of my evaluation as a teacher in the district. I decided, as a result of both that process and this study, to continue the use of affinity spaces.

holistic account what that action plan was based on, but the focus of what follows is to use the data to form a comprehensive answer to my research questions.

3.3 SETTING

I carried out my study at Likewater High School, which is a traditional public high school located in a town of about 70,000 residents, in a Western state. The school is comparatively large in population, but not in size, for the region. There were over 1,700 students registered for the 2015-16 school year and about 100 faculty and staff. The building itself shows signs of its age, having opened in 1964, with little remodeling. It contains a maze of narrow hallways, low ceilings, and scarce natural lighting or windows. In terms of my personal perception of the school environment during the study, I observed the students and teachers alike did much to create energetic and generally friendly, though sometimes crowded, atmosphere in the hallways.

As a third-year teacher of English Language Arts (ELA) at Likewater and as an active observer participant in the study, my own classroom served as the specific setting for the study. My classroom was medium-sized, comfortably seating up to 30 students in individual desks. Posters and student work cover the walls presenting inquiry questions, student creative writing, art, extra-curricular activity promotions, and portraits of great thinkers.

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

I participated in the study as an active participant observer. I actively engaged as a teacher of 9th-grade ELA in the classroom and in observing the actions and changes in student learning in my classroom. I was an active participant in the study primarily by designing the curriculum (i.e. instruction, activities, and environment) in which the students learned but also by observing the students during instruction and activities and recording field notes after class

throughout the duration of the study. My primary research question asks whether implementing an experimental curriculum (situated learning through affinity spaces) will improve my students' performance on CCSS achievement targets to a greater extent than my usual instruction. Therefore, I was careful to design and implement my usual instruction to the best of my ability as well as design and implement affinity-space learning in accordance with the best available theory and practices of that type of learning. In the literature review, I discuss the literature on situated learning, affinity spaces, digital tools, and student interests. All of these played a role in informing my curriculum design, which is described to its fullest extent in the Data Analysis chapter below.

Two 9th-grade English Language Arts classes participated in the study. The first class, the "experimental class", had 24 students and met during the third period of the day. The second class, the "control class", had 27 students and met during the fifth period of the day.[10] The students' participation was limited to participating in instruction, activities, and assessments that were the curriculum for the class[11] and providing survey data of their participation with brief rating scale surveys at three intervals in the unit. These surveys took no more than one minute to complete, and no more than three minutes total for all surveys taken by each student. Consent for participation in the study was obtained using an informed consent form which required parental signatures from the participants, who were minors.

Because this was a public school class in which the district mandates that students receive ELA instruction, students enrolled in the class still participated in the class and the curriculum

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[10] The terms "experimental class" and "control class" follow the traditional experimental research design. In such designs, the experimental group receives the new treatments or conditions and is compared to the control group which receives pre-existing (or no) treatments or conditions.

[11] Likewater High School's district administration approved the curriculum plans for this study. The curriculum may therefore be considered aligned with school and district expectations for 9th-grade ELA instruction.

given to that class regardless of their consent. If they declined consent, their data was excluded from the study, but they were exempt from the course itself. Academic responsibilities of participants did not exceed the usual expectations of a Likewater High School 9th-grade student. The instruction, activities, assessments, and surveys all fit within the boundaries of an acceptable range of instructional and student reflection practices at Likewater High School. In other words, the students' participation was strictly as typical members of an ELA class, receiving instruction, participating in activities, and carrying out reflection on their learning that is considered to "meet expectations" for ELA curriculum, given my most recent teacher evaluation. Of my classes, I chose these 9th-grade classes for the following reasons: 1) 9th-grade ELA was the only course I taught that semester with district mandated CCSS standards, 2) 9th-grade English was the only class that I taught multiple sections, 3) the 9th-grade content and skills I taught lent themselves equally well to both the control and experimental curricula, 4) the 9th-grade class was new to the high school, so participant groups had minimal preexisting expectations or bias. These were compelling reasons for choosing these classes even though the classes were the only practical options for the study, which was fortunate.

In addition to the above participant groups, I also selected a small representative group of four volunteer students total to provide additional responses, in the form of a written questionnaire, about their experiences with the curriculum of the study. The selection of these students was on a volunteer basis. Out of the group of volunteers from each class, I then randomly chose participants until I had two volunteers from each class that was representative of different levels of academic performance, based on grade history. No incentives or rewards were given for volunteering or for being selected to fill out the questionnaire. If there would have been

no volunteers for the questionnaire, then that form of data-collection would have been omitted from the study.

3.5 METHODS

It was necessary to employ a set of methods that ensured validity and reliability in both my own observations as well as in the data provided by the student participants. This was especially important because I took the role of active participant observer in a study with my own students. I therefore systematized my research questions and added a triangulated set of data collection methods to each to ensure validity and reliability of the data (see the section titled "Triangulation" and Appendix A below). These methods comprise the main discernible forms in which learning in a public school classroom can be understood. That is, they take into account multiple aspects of the teacher and student perspective. Data will be collected according to the following methods:

Field notes are anecdotal records of classroom events that I took in class as able and after class as reflective notes. A variety of types of field notes were required, each a type of reflection recorded about consenting participants of the study in reasonable proximity to the events of the class, usually after school. The first type of field notes was "action notes", my observations of the degree of student participation in the instruction and activities of class that day. The second type of field notes were "improvement notes", my observations of how student improvement in the content and skills of the class corresponds to the instruction, activities, and environment that class is participating in. The third type of field notes were "relationship notes", my holistic observations and synthetic understandings of how the control and experimental class's actions and improvements compare to each other, and whether or not those actions and improvements are caused by the corresponding instruction, activities, and environment. Sagor (2011)

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recommends a corresponding structure within the three sections of research questions "action", "change", and "relationship" (p. 87-97). Since I adapted my research questions from the same structure, I designed my field notes to correspond with that structure. This is further discussed in the "Triangulation" section below.

I gave the "Extent of Participation Survey A" to all student participants during the study for the purpose of gathering student perspective about how active the students believed themselves to be in the given instruction and activities of their class.

How much did you do in class today? [Survey A]

None	Starting	Approaching	Meeting	Exceeding
I didn't do anything really. I didn't work productively and did little or none of what was asked.	**I did some** assigned work. I worked productively some of the time, but did less than half of what was asked.	**I did most** of the assigned work. I worked productively most of the time and did more than half of what was asked.	**I did all** of the assigned work. I worked productively almost all the time and did all that was asked.	**I did all** of the assigned work. I worked productively with **maximum** effort.
1	2	3	4	5

Figure 2 – Extent of Participation Survey A

This was a brief and easy to complete rating scale survey that used simple qualitative descriptors of degree of activity. Incidentally, my district considers this kind of survey to be in support of student reflection on their own learning and therefore supports, and it did not interfere with or exceed the usual curricular expectations of the student participants.

I gave the "Extent of Participation Survey B" to all student participants during the study at the same time as "Extent of Participation Survey A", for the purpose of gathering student perspective(s) about how they rate their degree of interest and degree of improvement in the material and the way the material was being learned.

2a. How interested were you in learning today? [Survey B]

None	Low	Medium	High	Very High
I was not interested in learning at all. I dislike the material or I was distracted the whole time.	**I was a little interested** in learning today. The material could've been better or it wasn't a way I like to work.	**I was interested** in learning today. The material was good and it was a good way of working.	**I was very interested** in learning today. The material was very good and I really like working this way.	**I was completely inspired** to learn the material today. This is exactly what I like to learn and how I like to learn it.
1	2	3	4	5

2b. How much are you improving in reading, writing about, and understanding poetry? [Survey B]

Already known	None	Low	Medium	High	Very High
I already knew how to **read** poetry like this.	I am not improving in **reading** poetry.	I am improving a little in **reading** poetry.	I am improving steadily in **reading** poetry.	I am improving well in **reading** poetry.	I am making huge improvements in **reading** poetry.
I already knew how to **write** about poetry like this.	I am not improving in **writing about** poetry.	I am improving a little in **writing about** poetry.	I am improving steadily in **writing about** poetry.	I am improving well in **writing about** poetry.	I am making huge improvements in **writing about** poetry.
I already knew how to **understand** poetry like this.	I am not improving in **understanding** poetry.	I am improving a little in **understanding** poetry.	I am improving steadily in **understanding** poetry.	I am improving well in **understanding** poetry.	I am making huge improvements in **understanding** poetry.
N/A	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 3 – Extent of Participation Survey B

This was a brief and easy to complete rating scale survey that also supports student reflection and the district also considered it to be usual curriculum. It contains formulaic and easy-to-read, but nevertheless qualitatively descriptive answer choices. This survey corresponds to CCSS category, which distinguishes "Reading literature" and "Writing" into separate categories with separate descriptors. "Understanding" was used in the CCSS standards as a holistic descriptor between standards categories that is usually asked to be "demonstrated" using the skills of reading and writing.

I gave the questionnaire to a representative group of students, randomly selected from among volunteers in both the control and experimental classes, as a means of gathering additional anecdotal data about the effectiveness of direct-instruction and small-group work on

learning about reading, writing about, and understanding denotative, connotative, and figurative

meaning in poetry from the perspectives of individual students (see Appendix B).

I gave formative assessments to all student participants at regular intervals as a measure

of two things. First, they provided an additional data-point of whether or not the student is active

in the class, as reported by completion of each formative assessment. Second, they provided an

account of each student's improvement toward CCSS achievement targets. The formative

assessments showed student progress on reading, writing about, and understanding the concepts

of denotative (or literal), connotative, and figurative uses of language and interpretation of

meaning. Note that in cases where both class were formatively assessed about the same material

(which was not all cases) students had the same formative assessments despite different

curriculum. This helped to ensure consistency in the study's account of improvement toward

performance of CCSS achievement targets. Also, note that students experienced the formative

assessments as "usual curricular expectations" of the class. All assessments were required by the

district and entrusted to individual teachers, like me, to create and issue as reliable assessments

of student progress and achievement. In accordance with these expectations, I created and issued

all assessments in this study.

I also issued summative assessments to all student participants of both classes during and

concluding the unit as a "final" measure of performance on CCSS achievement targets. There

were summative quizzes on the first two parts of the unit (denotative and connotative language

and meaning), as well was two "final assessments." One final assessment was given as a multiple

choice, annotation, and short response test that assessed major concepts and skills from across

the unit (see Appendix C.) The other final assessment was a poetry presentation that required

oral and written demonstration of understanding of a selected poem (see Appendix D.) It was

also necessary to carefully construct this assessment to be a fair, accurate, and a faithful measure of CCSS achievement targets RL.9-10.1,4, 7, 10 and W.9-10.2, 2B/D/F. Furthermore, it was necessary to construct this assessment with as little bias as possible for control or experimental classes. I therefore based the summative assessments on the formative assessments completed by both classes in this unit, with additional difficulty and rigor. This assessment also functioned as an assessment for the class so that students would have no external motives or biases for their own performance.[12] Students experienced the summative assessments as a "usual curricular expectation" of the class. These assessments, like the formative assessments above, were created and issued by me in accordance with the expectations of my school district.

3.6 TRIANGULATION

Each of the data collection methods in the above list was selected to play a role in triangulating a valid and reliable answer to one of my research questions. There are three different types of research questions, and three distinct sub-questions, that systematically play a role in answering my primary research question. Again, my primary research question is:

> **Primary research question:** How does implementing affinity spaces in my 9th-grade ELA class compare to implementing my usual instruction with respect to student improvement on CCSS achievement targets?

The three types of research question are suggested by Sagor (2011) as a generic model for an action research study. They are: "action questions", "change questions", and "relationship questions" (p. 87-97). My study poses a sub-question for each type, as well as further specified sub-questions for both the control and experimental groups. The three sub-questions are:

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[12] This is only to say that student motives and biases for performing on these assessments should be considered comparable, not significantly different, to their level of performance outside of their participation in the study.

Sub-question 1: Action: What implementation of learning with and without affinity spaces *is done* to improve CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?

Sub-question 2: Change: What *improvement* occurred in student performance on CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?

Sub-question 3: Relationship: What were the relationships between what was done to improve CCSS achievement targets in the control and experimental classes and the improvement that occurred?

The answers to these three questions, and particular the third question, when analyzed in terms of the data gathered across both classes, formed a thorough response to my primary research question. The answer to the action question accounts for what student's actually do to improve CCSS achievement targets. The answer to the "change question" characterizes the nature of the improvements that students make in their respective curriculum according to markers of CCSS achievement assessed of both groups. The answer to the relationship question, built from the action and change questions, clearly describes the nature of the connection between "action" and "improvements." It also provides the basis for comparing the results of affinity-space instruction and control instruction holistically, thereby answering the primary research question. Furthermore, I analyzed "action", "improvement", and "relationship" with regard to all of the data collection methods. Thus, the triangulation of the three research sub-questions will look across all forms of data collected (this is further described in Data Analysis chapter below.)

In addition to the system of research questions, each sub-question has a separate formulation corresponding to both the control and experimental classes (see Appendix A), the relationship question has an additional comparative sub-question, and each sub-question as a set of data collection methods assigned to in to ensure triangulation of data answering that particular question. That is, I used a total of at least four data collection methods to answer each formulation of each sub-question. This achieves triangulation for each formulation of each sub-

question because I collected data of: "teacher perspective", in the form of field notes and assessment interpretation; "student perspective", in the form of survey or questionnaire; and "assessment", in the form of formative and summative assessments, for each class.

In view of these forms of data, the role of triangulation of the data is to establish that the data are sufficiently varied and distinguishable so that if noticeable patterns or distinctions arose across the data, they would be insulated from interpretive bias as long as the patterns arise across the data forms. For example, if I were to find that student observations, teacher observations, and test scores each individually support the conclusion that the control class retained their understanding of figurative language with greater accuracy than the experimental class, that conclusion would be considered "triangulated" (i.e. reliable) because of the separate forms of data confirming the same result. Furthermore, this way of triangulating data provides the grounds for asserting a coherent synthesis of the data into conclusions of the study. The data forms collected are relevant and substantially informative using Sagor's (2011) model of research questioning for action research. In this way, my analysis is capable of showing that trends across the data give reliable answers to the primary research question and sub-questions. The reliable answers to these related questions may then be applied to my own future practice and implications may be drawn for analogous classrooms and teachers.[13]

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[13] Note that because this study is action research, the results of the data-analysis will be set out for a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the instruction, activities, and environment in the context of the study. Discussion of the future applications of the methods used and implications of the data on other public school classrooms will not be discussed.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the various types of data gathered over the course of the study and to explain the insights gained by the triangulation and synthesis of that data. As described in the methodology chapter above, the data is purposefully varied in accordance with recent theory on action research to gain reliability beyond just the teacher-observer perspective. Recall from the previous chapter that the collection methods were chosen to represent the main discernible forms in which learning in a public school classroom can be understood. The data gathered were observations in the form of field notes and student response in the form of survey and questionnaire. The demonstrations of understandings and skills during and after the study take the form of assessment statistics for both formative and summative assessments. All of these data were collected from the two classes studied at Likewater High School.

The data analysis proceeds with a systematic discussion and interpretation of the data for the three sub-questions. These sub-questions are structured in ascending order of complexity, so that the first question, "the Action question", is focused on the description of concrete facts that occurred during the study; the second question, "the Change question," uses factual observation in combination with relevant educational theory to show extent of change; and the final question, the "Relationship question," considers emerging themes, for each class and from the previous sections, that are shaped by the analysis of the earlier sub-questions (with an emphasis on the achievement outcomes of the study.) Furthermore, "the Relationship question" leads directly into the answer to the primary research question (see Conclusion) because the understandings gained

in view of the relationship between teaching causes and learning effects are essentially an answer to the effectiveness of the experimental and control curricula. For example, when it is shown that teacher and student observations of effective learning of figurative language comprehension is related to higher assessment scores, the conclusion is evident within that statement; implementing affinity spaces improved student performance in that way. In the Action and Improvement sections I endeavor to distinguish the data more overtly than in the Relationship section, which will be a selected analysis of important themes. One feature of this organization is that my field note observations are presented first because they help frame the other data. This organization is only for organizational clarity of the results and is not meant to suggest precedence or bias for my observations *over* the other data.

4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE DATA WITH CCSS ACHIEVEMENT TARGETS

In my research question, I use the phrasing, "student performance on CCSS achievement targets" to enunciate the goal of connecting the specific ways of learning that occurred in my classroom during the study with an authoritative expression of learning objectives. It is important to remember that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) achievement targets are widely accepted by my district upon descriptors of what students are supposed to be able to understand and do upon the completion of curriculum in their grade. The CCSS are divided by grade band. A two-year band, for my study the "ELA-Literacy.RL/W.9-10" band (i.e. English Language Arts – Literacy Reading Literature/Writing 9th-10th grade), lists the comprehensive achievement targets for students in 9th and 10th grades. I will now explain the connection between the language of the CCSS 9-10 band of achievement targets and the intended goals of the curriculum. Thereafter, all description of achievement, and learning in general, can be related back to this description, rather than tracking CCSS language throughout the data analysis.

Standard ID	Descriptor
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7	Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.10	By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2B	Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2D	Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2F	Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic.)

Figure 4 – Selected Common Core State Standards

 "CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4" is the most important CCSS descriptor for the purposes of my

study. It says that students must determine meaning of words and phrases in literary texts,

including *figurative and connotative* meanings. This is the essential conceptual content of the

curricula of my study. All the instruction and activities of the experimental and control curricula

are aimed at determining meaning and then representing it in a variety of forms, including:

"citing textual eviedence" (RL.9-10.1), "analyzing the representation of a subject in different

mediums" (RL.9-10.7), "comprehending poems" (RL.9-10.10), "writing informative texts" about

meanings (W.9-10.2), "developing [meanings] with well-chosen[…]facts…" (W.9-10.2B),

"using the domain-specific vocabulary" of poetic analysis (W.9-10.2D), and "providing a

concluding statement" built from and connected to analyzed poetic meanings (W.9-10.2F).

The "unit concepts" of "denotative language and meaning" (found in CCSS.ELA-

Literacy.RL/RI.3-8.4 bands), "connotative language and meaning", and "figurative device,

language, and meaning" are all laterally emphasized through CCSS reading standards as well as

integral to the descriptors about understanding and writing about meaning across the 9-10 band.

The achievement targets may be more simply put as: developing reading, writing, and

understanding of denotative, connotative, and figurative language and meaning and

demonstrating clear and accurate examples of that development for cumulative impact on

meaning and tone. My analysis of observational, survey, questionnaire and assessment data

refers to these achievement targets and scores and implies student achievement, or lack of

achievement, of these exact CCSS-related descriptors.[14]

4.3 ACTION: WHAT DID THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL CLASSES DO?

Sub-question 1: Action: What implementation of learning with and without affinity
spaces *is done* to improve CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental
classes?

I will divide this and subsequent sections by the classes studied. It will be prudent to

analyze each class in turn according to the specific data gathered for each for two reasons. First,

the quantity of data for each class alone is substantial and diverse, making organization

especially important for analysis in the "Relationship" sections. Second, and more importantly,

the variety of forms of data were collected according to the same system between the two

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[14] Note that this is essentially a simplification of CCSS descriptor language so that the data analysis can proceed with focus on what occurred in the classroom without becoming encumbered with terminological connections to CCSS descriptors. For example, "citing strong and thorough textual evidence" (RL.9-10.1) of the connotative meaning of Billy Collins' poem "Introduction to Poetry" was learned and demonstrated in the formative assessment during connotation unit section, but I will not reference the CCSS descriptor language there. Rather, I wrote in the field comments including, "students largely met expectations for understanding connotative language." There is a clear connection between this observation and the CCSS descriptor because the students met expectations by citing textual evidence that was verified by my observations to be correct connotative language in the poem.

classes. Comparison between classes will be possible for specific data forms (e.g. comparing the questionnaire data for each class) as well as across the data forms (e.g. describing how learning of figurative language was different between control and experimental classes) but only after each class is understood for itself.

4.3.1 Action data in the control class

I begin with an overview of the nature of the instruction and activities of the control class, what is also called "my usual instruction" in the primary research question, which is the most detailed view available of what the students did. This study takes place during my third year, and third attempt, teaching a poetry unit that intended to reach CCSS standards for reading analysis in literary texts, writing clearly and descriptively about that analysis to demonstrate understanding. During my earlier two attempts, Spring 2014 and 2015 semesters, the unit was focused on conveying the types of devices and meaning that students identified, analyzed, and eventually understood in poetry and song lyrics through direct instruction. Typically, I presented a lecture or led a whole class discussion in which the definition and analysis of, for example, the concept of what is literally said in a poem, was investigated and ultimately established for everyone in the class. I then rotated between selecting an established poem that I thought exemplified a device or meaning and choosing from pre-established lists of favorite song lyrics, rephrased into poems structured as "lyric poems"[15] that the students made at the beginning of the unit. Using the selected poem or lyrics, I then asked the students to practice identification, analysis, and written response by annotating, answering guiding questions, and creating short

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[15] The classroom term "lyric poem" is distinguishable from the technical definition of lyric poetry. The former term is meant to associate song lyrics, which are the most common and accessible form of contemporary verse, with the term "poetry." The latter term is a specific form of verse, suggestive of emotionally expressive verse, spoken in first-person, with regular meter. The former meaning will apply to all usages of "lyric poetry" and "lyrics" in this study.

constructed responses. I also used small groups, individual tasks, and whole class discussions. I supervised and evaluated various combinations of these activities which culminated in student-notes and formative assessment during class. The environment created by these instructional practices and activities ranged from energetic and intensive questions and discussion during lectures and activities to dry lectures and activities in which some students would noticeably disengage or become distracted. During active classes, students asked relevant questions, held attention on the board or in response to classmates, and intermittently wrote, discussed, and compared work with each other.

My rationale during these past units was to maintain control of the terminology and definition of the reading and writing concepts and skills and then to allow structured freedom of application of the concepts and skills until demonstration was shown. This rationale was, in principle, unchanged for the Fall 2015 control class, and it is the root meaning of "my usual instruction." With this rationale in mind, it should be noted that my usual instruction allows little control by students of the choice and structure of the concepts and skills learned, but does allow significant control of their response with specific words and phrases by which they apply those concepts and skills. I sometimes offered control to the class of which poem we studied, usually to enthusiastic response from the students. For example, in a typical class period we would read a poem of 4-6 stanzas, discuss or hear lecture of a feature of connotative or figurative meaning (e.g. expression of emotion or metaphor) and then work on applying that concept to specific lines in some set of the stanzas, often chosen by the student. The students would then demonstrate that they understood metaphor, for example, in two of the stanzas by describing the use and meaning of the metaphor in writing. In such examples, *I* remained in strict control of what metaphor is and *they* were in control of applying it and attaching appropriate descriptions. This general

structure, with the variables of specific concepts and skills, was carried out for the majority of lessons during the unit.

From the review of literature on instructional technique (Mathison 1989, Lave and Wenger 1991, Leander et al. 2010, Wessling 2011) I take the above progression to be well-established in the public schools and also highly varied in implementation. Wessling's (2011) work alone shows the versatility and potential effectiveness of the instruction that I would call traditional; though I do suppose from my experience teaching in public schools that the formulaic versions of these practices are heavily employed at Likewater High School and in many public schools in the United States. The point of calling these instructional techniques and activities "traditional" is not to suggest that they are somehow lacking in potential or versatility, but rather that they can be, and often are, formulaic in structure, including in my own classroom, though my implementation of that formula is unique to me.[16]

The structure of assessments and checks for the class during work-time were: regular coaching and assistance by the teacher (myself) aimed at teaching students to identify a concept by reading and apply it in writing; regular quizzes to make sure they were learning about denotative, connotative, and figurative language and device; and a summative test and project that specified from the beginning the types of understandings they would be expected to demonstrate. I observed with the latter assessment, the "Final project", that the students were generally hesitant about having something genuine to say about a chosen poem. Many students vocalized during analyzing activities that they didn't understand their interpretation to be

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[16] Note that if my instructional techniques were not formulaic and representative of widespread public school practice in this way, it would not make sense to call it "traditional instruction", a term that Gee also refers to. Thus the implications of this study, which hope to comment beyond comparing two of my own personal forms of teaching, *rely* on understanding my usual instruction as a form of "traditional instruction."

"correct", "important", or "what the author really meant". Many students hesitated with reasonable interpretations of choice poems in the absence of an authoritative (i.e. teacher-approved) meaning. This occurred even when they followed the analysis methods correctly or connected figurative meaning with themes of the poems. Instances of hesitation suggest a disconnection between analyzing poems as a class and applying that same analysis to a choice poem, as if the form of analysis was not grasped sufficiently to take action. Nevertheless, interest and activity was shown through on-task reading, discussing, and response-writing with higher frequency and greater detail during work on the project compared to reviewing and studying for the test.

4.3.2 Observational data of action in the control class

With the nature of the curriculum and rationale of the control class now explained, I will move on to a discussion of my observations and reflective understandings of what *was done* in the control class during the unit via the field notes. I must begin by noting that I observed tendencies within this control class that strongly matched my recollection of the previous two years of pre-AP 9th graders during the poetry unit. This is not to say that they didn't have their own peculiarities as a class, but rather that they exhibited common tendencies as a whole from my vantage point. The clearest and most relevant of these tendencies was the enthusiasm and confidence with which they pursued and asked about the conceptual content of metaphors and imagery. The class approached these two concepts, and their application within poems, with greater emphasis by individual students, seen by faster than normal responses to questions and higher frequency of correct application, above other concepts and skills of the unit. The students responded to questions about poetic concepts with background knowledge of these concepts during discussion and they responded actively and creatively to example metaphors and images

from every day use.[17] In this way, the control class found common devices with accessible meanings to be more interesting and applicable than the concept of connotation of emotion and tone, which are harder to be clever about.

Another clear tendency across this form of instruction was for the class to show signs of boredom when reviewing the controlled content, like definitions of concepts, that they had not yet demonstrated mastery of. Boredom (e.g. blank stares or cell-phone distraction) or the desire to move on (e.g. watching the clock or restlessness) tended to appear when I would begin a class with the stated intent to review and re-apply denotative or connotative concepts from a previous class that many students had misunderstood. A good example of this was on the connotation portion of the unit, which I ended perhaps prematurely, in the third week of the study when the students commonly couldn't remember what connotation was supposed to be and could not apply it with much descriptive detail to a chosen lyric poem. A majority of students were bored and detached in the review and resisted having to reapply it by putting forth less effort and carrying on side conversations. In that case, we ultimately settled for a short repeat of the lecture and example that went to their notes, rather than repeat the activity with a new poem.

My notes also indicate some noticeable differences between the degree of activity that fluctuated over the course of a class period. During the beginning of the unit, the section on denotation and literal meaning, multiple members of the class claimed to be interested in the choices of lyric poems but this interest did not appear to last into the denotative analysis of the poems during lectures and class discussions. Rather, the students busily read the poems, and listened to the accompanying music eagerly, then quickly lost interest, seen through frequency of

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[17] I often used whole-class discussion to connect background knowledge to current everyday examples of poetic concepts. Well-chosen exaggerated examples, such as "His stomps were thunder", bring relevance to the analysis along with clarity of the concepts—especially if they are created and repeated by students.

distraction, in the discussion of how to annotate respond to denotation. They eventually

reengaged when I gave independent opportunities to analyze the poem for denotative meaning,

but the pattern of sharply losing interest during times of whole-class lecture and discussion of

how to apply the concept to a stanza continued into the sections on connotative meaning and

figurative language and meaning. Students consistently demonstrated greater interest and activity

regarding the poetry itself when they had some control of their interaction with it and resisting

participation when they didn't. This posed a difficult problem (that did not arise in the

experimental class) in that lack of mastery exhibited in the formative assessments, which called

for review or repetition by my assessment, was met with resistance and inactivity by many

control class participants. That is, student behavior turned my choice of format for review into a

counterproductive lesson for many students.

4.3.3 Survey data of action in the control class

I collected answers to this survey three times over three surveys, once per unit section. In

the control class, the survey data for the control class regarding the level of activity is numerical

because it was issued as a rating scale. Nevertheless, it may be examined qualitatively because it

provides qualitative descriptors for students to report their experience. The survey question may

be seen in Figure 1 in the Methods chapter above. It simply asks, "How much did you do in class

today?" and provides a 1-5 scale of described responses. Below are the complete[18] responses of

the students:

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[18] Note that in some surveys, in the Survey B questions, students left questions unanswered. Because I'm analyzing this data for patterns in the aggregate (and not more rigorous statistical results, like statistical significance) I left absent responses out of the charts. The argument could be made to include absent responses as a score of "1" with the rationale that student's might not have answered because they didn't think the question was relevant to what they did in the class. I believe the former and not the latter treatment of absent data to be more accurate, though the data is admittedly imperfect.

Control Class [Survey A]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
How much did you do?	1	0	0	2
	2	0	2	1
	3	5	4	3
	4	16	11	12
	5	3	1	2

Figure 5

The clear emphasis of students on the score of 4 across the surveys shows that the control class believed themselves to be very productive. That is, they reported being productive to the extent that they did "all of the assigned work" ("4") in most cases, not just "most of the assigned work" ("3"). Also notice that very few students reported having done "little" or "no" work, and just as few reporting working, "with maximum effort" across the surveys. Another feature of this data is that the students had a consistent view of how much work they were doing. Students of the control class tended to answer the same across the three surveys. However, a minor downward trend can also be seen. In the second and third surveys, a few students lowered their scores from "4" to a lower score, and two students moved their scores down from "5." In general, there was more downward movement of scores than upward, showing that the students thought themselves to be marginally less productive as the unit progressed.

4.3.4 Questionnaire data of action in the control class

Each of the four questionnaires holds responses in which the volunteer student responders talk generally about the quantity and quality of learning that they did. In many cases students phrased responses in terms of actions taken by them individually. In some cases, responses discussed actions in terms of what the whole class was doing. And, the responses mention what the teacher instructed or asked for in very few cases. As a result, the questionnaire responses mostly give a sense of what the students did as individuals with some descriptions by which we

can make inferences about how they perceived what the teacher and class were doing around them.

In the control class, the clearest action description came from one student who commented both positively and negatively about the range of activities carried out. He said, "I liked the variety [of] ways we learned from personal, to pairing, to small groups." Later, he goes on to say, "no matter how much I didn't like it [a given poem] it helped solidify it in my memory." This shows the student acknowledges effectiveness of activities in virtue of their type and over time. In terms of action description, the other control class responder said, "Yes I do believe we learned a lot about literal, connotative, and figurative meaning…" but in the next question goes on, "what we learned was ok, but we should have learned more actual poems not as many lyric [poems]…" showing that she had envisioned other possibilities for learning alongside the ways in which the class was asked to learn. Both control class responders clearly state that they, and often "we" (the class), learned "a lot" about the main concepts and skills of the unit: literal, figurative and connotative meaning. Matching that statement with the survey response trend from the class, which reported that students in the control class did "most" or "all" of the assigned work on average, it is evident that questionnaire responders felt that they were active in the majority of class activities, at least in a general way. Though this was not the emphasis of their responses, their personal preferences and suggestions for improvement were, the responders felt as though they participated substantially with regard to "action." See Appendix B for an example questionnaire.

4.3.5 Assessment data of action in the control class

The formative assessment data provides a measure of what the students did as well as an account of how well they did as the unit progressed.[19] As a measure of what the students did, the formative assessment data, beyond what is already accounted for in the observations above (i.e. teacher observations of the level of discussion and verbal reports of understanding) is concrete and rather simple. The control class spoke and asked questions regularly throughout class activities, especially during periods of independent and group work. I typically gave ample time and opportunities for the completion of reading response and written response work. Students of the control class completed over 80% of in-class work and over 90% of quizzes. Absent student work is included in the 20% of missed in-class work and 10% of missed quizzes. Students who were absent completed make-up work at a rate of about 3 out of 4. Missed work was due to work not made up, rather than work refused, in most cases. Thus, the data of work completed matches the student's self-reporting of activity in Survey A above. Also, because of the more structured nature of in-class work (i.e. the students handed in more assessments of progress leading up to summative assessments) these figures give us a more concrete understanding of just how much work the students did compared to the experimental class. The control class did a similar, slightly larger, *quantity* of in-class work that was checked by the teacher. This will be further explored in the relationship section.

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[19] This account should be distinguished from measures of how students improved, which was the primary function of the assessments. For the moment, I am only accounting for how much of the formative and summative assessments were completed by the students. An account of how formative and summative assessments marked academic improvement and outcomes may be found blow in the "improvement" section for the control and experimental classes.

4.3.6 Action data for the experimental class

      With an emerging view of what happened during the control class' portion of the study under "my usual instruction," we may now look to the experimental class and the instructional practices, activities, and environment that I used with the intent to create "situated" learning in view of Gee (2004). Beginning with an overview, it is time for a thorough explanation of exactly how I envisioned and put into practice Gee's theory of the "affinity space" in my classroom.

      As described in the Literature Review and Methodology chapters above, the concept of situated learning is to create instruction, activities, and environment that provide opportunities for students to gain understanding and skills in socially and culturally significant ways.[20] This is no easy feat in most public school classrooms, where facilities and modern tools and technology are often limited. At Likewater High School, the achievement of "situated learning" in my classroom simply could not be measured in concretely defined terms. To illustrate, the idea of "cultural significance" is not measurable by reliable devices other than surveys, by which students might apply any number of meanings. Thus, I must evaluate across the data whether or not students really did access and absorb the class concepts and skills and infer that the affinity space properly involved social/cultural significance if it did. Concordantly, with "situated" implications in mind, I will also be able to more reliably evaluate the effect of situated learning on academic outcomes, which is my focus. This is why the "affinity space" is so integral to my study. In theory, the affinity space provides an explicit marker of social and cultural access

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[20] For my study, these socially and culturally significant understandings and skills are also vitally connected to student interests. This is the reason for Survey B, Question 2a. Student opportunities, within the instruction and activities, for choosing poetry and creating responses based on interests (e.g. topics, lyrics, themes, or other features of the poetry thought to be personally interesting) are *some* of the social and culturally significant ways in which they are learning. Other ways include using the affinity space and working as genre-groups, described below.

because it provides diverse, user-controlled, and often user-generated content that bear out the socio-cultural values of the user. If the use of a suitably rich and accessible affinity space were to lead to better academic outcomes, as Gee (2004) supposes they will, the presence of situated learning could be reliably inferred specifically *because* of the nature of affinity space, if it is properly executed, and what participation in them looks like. Furthermore, though the language of "situated learning" is not used in the description of the control class above, it must be acknowledged that markers of situated learning are assuredly present there as well.[21] My usual instruction, and traditional instruction as generally understood, does not, after all, *prevent* students from learning in "situated" ways. But, it also doesn't build curriculum on the foundation of spaces and tools that have the intention of emphasizing socially and culturally significance. Affinity space curriculum does.

For the poetry unit in the experimental class, the creation of "situated learning" and social and cultural significance in curriculum depended on the success of two features of the class not present in the control class. They were: the "genre group" and the "affinity space." The genre groups were semi-permanent groups[22] formed among the students based on their preference of music genre, specifically preference for that genre's lyrics. At the beginning of the unit, the students sampled and eventually chosen from among a set of lyric music genres that they determined to be their favorite *because of meaningful lyrics*. I then formed the genre groups from these choices. Thus, students were not simply selecting a music preference, but rather were

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[21] They are in most classroom contexts, insofar as some level of social and/or cultural significance is present in students.

[22] Students participated regularly in the same group, but were also allowed to change groups twice during the unit.

selecting category of lyric poems that they identified as preferred because of meaning, which we may reasonably infer to mean pre-existing social or cultural attachment of some kind.[23]

The second feature was the "affinity space" which, if we take Gee (2004) seriously, is not something that can be fabricated solely by a teacher, but rather must be produced by a community and interacted with. The concept of an affinity space is detailed in the literature review above. As a brief reminder, it is an accessible (usually digital) space in which people with a common endeavor or interest are enabled to interact and associate for the purpose of learning about that endeavor or interest.

Establishing a genuine affinity space was at once the riskiest and most fortunate component of the study. It would have been possible to create an affinity space that the students could access and use within the class, but such a space would have been lacking in terms of generation of content, leadership opportunities within the space, and especially sharing of knowledge. An attempt to do this would have likely resulted in sparse and implicitly limiting membership within the space for students. As it turned out, there was a high quality affinity space available for the exact purposes of the poetry unit – Genius.com.[24] Genuis.com is a digital repository of an enormous quantity of published poems and song lyrics. Since August 2015, the site (and App) is accessible in full on any device that can access the internet. It allows easy, intuitive access to the poems and songs themselves, analysis-posting, user and artist

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[23] The genre groups were a group configuration that I created for the purpose of supporting the use of the affinity space. There is nothing in the supporting literature to warrant this configuration, and Gee develops the concept of the affinity space as if individual users are all accessing the same space. However, it was natural to create affinity groups for the students, the "genre groups", that allowed students to collectively investigate the affinity space.

[24] Genius.com was released as a website in 2009 with the name "Rap Genius." It was originally intended for sharing rap music lyrics and interpretations. Since then, it was relaunched in July 2014 as an interactive site for lyrics, lyric poems, and traditional poetry (and more) that includes artist and user-generated content, especially interpretive, historical, and fan content.

commentary, community-curated line-by-line analysis and discussion, and forum posting. Furthermore, it is ideal in most of the eleven aspects of an affinity space listed by Gee (2004, p. 12-13). That is, it was easy to access, produce, and share within the space. Genius.com offered transformational content and encouraged intensive, extensive, individual, distributed, dispersed, and tacit knowledge to participants. Perhaps most importantly, it offered multiple routes to participation and provided leaders-as-resources that would normally be inaccessible in a public school. The site also accommodates modern web 2.0 links to social media and related sites and communities (though my unit did not make use of the full extent of these for the protection of the students.)

The experimental class used a combination of the "genre groups" and the Genius.com space to carry out the majority of their analyses. The genre groups provided a team-like support for members to establish and share tasks as well as search for and produce knowledge about lyric poems within their genre. Genius.com provided an inexhaustible set of lyric and traditional poems that students could interact with according to interest and social and cultural affinity.[25]

The structured, guided, and open-inquiry format of this progression is well-established in educational literature (Bruner 1961, Vygotsky 1962) on types of inquiry, but is not commonly implemented within English Language Arts education at Likewater High School, to the best of my knowledge. The likely reason for this is that these types of inquiry require a rich "portal" for accessing, understanding, and sharing content (Gee 2004). This is calls attention to both the

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[25] Recall that it is not the focus of this study to measure social and cultural significance in the students. Rather, it has been concisely shown that the affinity space, based on its nature, creates the opportunity for students to choose genre groups and poetry based on social and cultural influences. Thus, student learning as a result of affinity space use is the focus of the data for the experimental class. It can be inferred, though not measured, that this is *one type* of situated learning that has particular outcomes. This study will not report on *the degree* to which students being situated in general led to resulting academic outcomes, but will report on whether the degree of situated learning, such as it was, improved academic outcomes.

uncommon nature of the affinity space curriculum and it's distinctness, in practice and presumably in results, from "traditional" instructional practices that I, and my fellow ELA teachers at Likewater High School, have made regularly use of in the past.

4.3.7 Observational data of action in the experimental class

I was excited but also nervous about beginning the instruction and activities with the experimental class was exciting. The theory behind the use of an affinity space is to allow a significant amount of free reign to the student, and there was no way to predict whether or not these particular students in this particular context would effectively use or abuse that freedom.[26] This was unlike the control class because there was no precedent set from earlier years. Also, the goal to create a genuine environment of "situated learning" was a daunting one because there was no guarantee that, even if students used the space, that they would do so for genuine socially and culturally *significant* motives; they might have mainly frivolous motives.

With my CCSS achievement targets in mind, I knew that much of my job as the teacher would be to direct their focus on the space to learning about poetic meaning and demonstrate that meaning with various examples. The wide range of possibilities and routes they could take was open-ended, and concerning.[27] However, within my early observations of the class I noticed that the majority of students needed only the briefest introduction and tutorial, which was mostly focused on steering clear of inappropriate content, to get started. The students logged on to the

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[26] The combination of this freedom and the sometimes uncensored content of Genius.com meant that I was obligated to spend a significant portion of early classes on the topic of "classroom appropriate language, content, and lyrics." The expectation for appropriate use of the site was built in to earlier units (with a well-defined term "class appropriate" applied to instances of Genius.com lyrics.) Nevertheless, note that the use of web 2.0 tools like Genuis.com cannot reliably be insulated from inappropriate content.

[27] I learned along the way that, as a teacher, one has to be very confident in their own ability with figurative and connotative language and meaning to lead a unit like this because the students can present you with a wide variety of examples to analyze.

tablets and navigated to the site easily. Most students started learning about and trying out the site before I introduced it. With a few exceptions (students I helped individually access the site) my introduction to the site seemed beside the point because students largely didn't need my instruction to access and operate the site.[28] By giving a few specifications on what we were eventually going to use the site for (e.g. what assessments they would be expected to do) they starting working right away. Upon reflection and review of my notes, the cause of this early immersion was likely the immensity and comprehensiveness of the space. I told the students that practically every poem and song in history can be found there, complete with commentary and dynamic line-by-line text. A few students responded to this with surprise or skepticism, but most students put my claims to the test, further intrigued by their own searches which confirmed the point. This type of responsive exploration and interaction happened frequently for most students during most activities involving Genuis.com.

The students accessed the space through tablets, which were used in combination with the traditional tools of notebooks and a few printed handouts of poems to create an ongoing record of their findings of meanings for poems chosen for analysis by their genre groups. Given this set of tools that they could apply in a variety of ways, the other main instructional practices of the class were: regular coaching and assistance by me about how to select the right tool and to connect class-concepts with the content provided by the site; regular quizzes to make sure they were learning about denotative, connotative, and figurative language and device (which were largely built in to the analyses they were accessing); and a summative test and project that specified from the beginning the types of understandings they would be expected to demonstrate. I observed with the latter assessment, the project (Appendix D), that the students worked and

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[28] This speaks to the intuitive "accessibility" of a true affinity space that Gee describes.

talked enthusiastically together about lyric poems they had selected that could be interpreted in depth using the site, as if the access the space granted would make the work part more manageable and even fun. Individual students also often spoke with me before and after class in anticipation of further searching and accomplishment upon finding new content. However, the enthusiasm about the project also detracted from the importance and concern students showed prior to test because, as with the control class, students of the experimental class expressed enthusiasm for working on the project, not for preparing for the test. Preparation for the project resulted in higher frequency of on-task activity, relevant questioning, and in-depth teacher-student interactions. Preparation for the final test resulted in higher frequency of off-task behavior and unaccounted for usage of the tablets, sometimes for gaming and entertainment purposes.

4.3.8 Survey data of action in the experimental class

As with the control class, I collected answers to question about level of activity three times over three surveys, once per unit section. Again, the question (Figure 1 above) asks, "How much did you do in class today?" and provides a 1-5 scale of described responses. Below are the student responses:

Experimental Class [Survey A]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
	1	0	0	0
	2	3	1	0
How much did you do?	3	4	4	8
	4	11	13	5
	5	3	2	6

Figure 6

In the first two surveys, students mostly commonly answered a score reporting they believed themselves to be very productive, similarly to the control class. Surveys 1 and 2 were nearly

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identical in how students responded, with few students reporting "little" or "no" work, and few reporting working, "with maximum effort." Interestingly, Survey 3 varied from the previous two, with the highest number of student reporting the only did "most" of the assigned work and the second highest number reporting that they worked "with maximum effort." This means that, as a group, students noticed a sharper difference in how figurative language and meaning (the 3rd unit section) was developed using the affinity space than for denotative and connotative meaning. It is at least evident with this result that students saw the tool as either *more than usually* promoting of their activity when learning about figurative language and meaning or *less than usually*, but not similarly to the previous unit sections. I will also note that while students were more diverse in their responses to Survey 3, in both Survey 2 and 3 there was only one student who reported doing less than "most" of what was asked of them (which was unique across the surveys.) I will further examine the comparison of the action of the control and experimental classes in the Relationship section.

4.3.9 Questionnaire data of action in the experimental class

As with the questionnaire**s** of the control class, on the subject of actions taken, the experimental class responded specifically about their own experiences learning in the class and their own preferences and suggestions. Fewer examples arose of speaking on behalf the class or in terms of what the teacher did.

In the experimental class, the clearest action description came from a student who described the range of activities in which he had participated and felt improvement. He said, "I believe I have learned a lot about reading and writing connotative and denotative meaning, I did not know what connotations and denotations were, I now feel comfortable writing with and about them at length…" He later adds, "He [the teacher] allowed time to discuss and debate, and

helped us find our way to fully understanding denotative/connotative/figurative meaning through our own process." As with the control responders, this shows that the student understands the main concepts and skills of the unit, and additionally he has distinguished and tracked his own mastery of them to some extent. The second experimental class responder began her description of action with language identical to her peers, "I learned a lot." She later added, "They [the ways she was asked to learn] were good like how we got to figure it out ourselves." But, unlike the other responder from her class, she was quick to point and emphasize what she "would've liked to see […] and do" rather than what she actually saw and did. She specifies she would have liked to "go over things more" and study meaning "with other examples." She also says, she would have like to have the teacher, "explain things in a variety of ways so everyone understands."

While both experimental class responders state that they "learned a lot" about the main concepts and skills of the unit, only the first described his actual actions in detail that suggests full participation in the same sense as the control class responders. The second responder's emphasis on would they would've liked to do in place of affinity space curriculum suggests that they would have marked lower on action questions of the participation survey. If this is the case, while one experimental class responder felt as though he participated substantially, the other might be one of only a few from her class that did not participate fully or did not feel the social or cultural significance of the activities (i.e. was not "situated" by the affinity space.) This exception to the trend is so far only described by the responder as a preference for other ways of learning, but it may be illuminating in the improvement and relationship sections.

4.3.10 Assessment data of action in the experimental class

As in the previous section, the formative assessment data will provide a measure of what the students did as well an account of how well they did as the unit progressed. As a measure of

what the students did, the formative assessment data, beyond what is already accounted for in the observations above (i.e. teacher observations of the level of discussion and verbal reports of understanding) is relatively more complicated for the experimental class than for the control class. The experimental class spoke and asked questions regularly throughout class activities, but showed signs of being more insular and autonomous during their independent and genre-group work. My observations of their screens while walking around and helping individuals was nearly constant reading, selecting text, and in some cases creating responses. About 90% of what I saw on their screens was Genius.com lyrics, and what I heard was related discussing, pointing, often laughter and surprise from other user interpretations and comments. With the tablets, students demonstrated productive use of the space with the greater frequency than the control class on most days, but the statistic of 90% work completed (from the gradebook) means less because of fewer submitted assessments. The students also completed over 90% of quizzes. Thus, while the data of work completed appears to match the student's self-reporting of activity in Survey A above, it appears lower in terms of verifiable *quantity*, and it also contains work-types that cannot be verified aside from field note observations.

4.4 CHANGE: HOW DID IMPROVEMENT OCCUR IN THE CLASSES?

Sub-question 2: Change: What *improvement* occurred in student performance on CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?

This section is divided by the classes studied. Again, because the variety of forms of data were collected according to the same system between the two classes, it will be prudent to analyze each class in turn according to the specific data gathered for each. Comparison between classes will begin to take place at the end of this section (e.g. clarifying and comparing the markers of improvement observed in each class) as well as across the data forms (e.g. describing how learning of figurative language was different between control and experimental classes.)

This section, combined with the previous one, provides thorough and necessary grounds for the synthesis provided in the next section – "the Relationship question."

4.4.1 Improvement data for the control class

As seen in the description of "my usual instruction" for the control class (above), my instruction had an emphasis on what might generally be called traditional instructional techniques and activities. That is, with the control class I emphasized lecture and led discussion to control the major concepts and skills, I implemented typical group-work (i.e. groups that are put together to act as a generic team for a daily activity) to allow practice and refinement of understanding and skill, and then I assessed demonstrations of understanding and skill from formative responses of reading comprehension and writing. The generic structure of this progression is both well-established in educational literature as well as in ELA education at Likewater High School. My observations in the following section help to provide the means of evaluating the extent to which it was this formulaic structure that relates to a particular level of *academic improvement* for my students in my classroom, with an eye for comparison to the experimental structure.

4.4.2 Observational data of improvement in the control class

Within my observational notes about improvement, I found that the control curriculum was usually serviceable for building a sense in the students that a concept or skill has been learned during a given class period, but was not reliable for building a memorable understanding or skill that was applicable on other examples in future classes. This observation can be seen most clearly in the figurative language part of the unit, but follows in principle to denotative and connotative language. My lesson plans devoted a significant portion of figurative language and

meaning class time to learning about metaphor because metaphor is the most common and most accessible type of figurative language and it leads readily to other types. When learning about metaphor, I asked students to take note of the fact that metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things that share a characteristic. I then gave them two poems to read over two class periods that had clear and obvious examples of metaphor with clear as well as nuanced meanings. During the first class period of this activity, students easily noticed what the main metaphors were, but showed that they were struggling to describe the rather clear meaning that the metaphors had by guessing at the comparisons and sometimes giving disconnected or irrelevant answers. During practice, I worked with groups of students to consider possibilities and ultimately conclude particular descriptions of the metaphor's meanings and then showed good examples to the class. When reading the next poem during the second class period, and throughout the rest of the unit, many students successfully identified the important metaphors but struggled to provide a concrete description of what the metaphor meant. They were often unable to apply the examples of metaphor analysis that they had seen and done before to new poems.

On the same day as a given lesson, the control class was often quite accurate in their discussion and application of the poetry concept or device, showing good short term improvement. The field notes show multiple observations and one-on-one discussions with students who didn't know the terms and definitions and uses of the terms "denotation" and "connotations", but through lecture applied the terms to related background knowledge. However, the same students were also too quick to report understanding, claiming to have analyzed the poem "thoroughly" within five to ten minutes and wanting to move one. This was very clear in the lessons on denotative meaning in particular. The control class had a lively whole class discussion about how denotation and denotative meaning relate to the common

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contemporary usage of the word "literally." They were quick to absorb and start adapting the concept of "denotation of X" as, "literally X°." The background knowledge related readily because they were very familiar with correct and incorrect uses of "literally" in everyday speech. In later lessons, however, the many students couldn't remember the connection between denotation to "literally", and through during individual analysis of a new poem were comparatively inflexible in its implementation, often just repeating the same words on the page and calling it denotation, instead of rephrasing in literal ways as they had before.

In relation to their quick but sometimes cursory learning of major concepts, the control students also frequently showed inflexible application of the same concepts during later uses. To carry the denotation example further (though it also present with connotation and figurative device) the control class would remember what denotation was, with a little prompting, and then not be able to apply the concept without a rather explicit model presented on the board. In many cases, students would stall in a quick opening activity to establish denotative meaning (as review) before moving on to connotations and figurative device (the new concept for the day.) When an example phrasing was provided, they could move on, but without such an example a large minority would express confusion.

These and other examples point to inconsistent, and at times lacking, improvement that could manifest in a variety of ways. The inconsistency appeared to be brought on by features of the curriculum not absorbed due to the presentation or activities not matching the interests or previous understandings of the students during some of the lessons. The times of lacking improvement was not usually due to lack of definitional knowledge of unit concepts, they knew what metaphors are, nor of what the skill is they had demonstrated the skill before. Rather, for many it was a lack of lasting understanding and application.

4.4.3 Survey data of improvement in the control class

     I collected the survey data for the control class on the question of improvement periodically at the same time as the question of activity. The survey asked students to rate their level of improvement on a 5-point rating scale, but with a few additional caveats. The improvement question was divided into three sub-parts, asking students to report their level of improvement for reading, writing about, and understanding poetry separately. In addition, there was an answer choice off of the 5-point scale for students to report that they already knew the content being taught at the time of the survey.[29] See Figure 3 above.

Control Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
	1	1	0	3
	2	3	1	1
Reading	3	6	7	6
	4	6	2	3
	5	0	0	1
	N/A	6	4	5

Figure 7

Control Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
	1	1	0	3
	2	2	1	2
Writing	3	7	7	6
	4	7	3	7
	5	0	0	0
	N/A	3	2	4

Figure 8

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[29] This additional option was necessary because students who already knew much or all of what was being taught could not honestly report that they had made significant improvements no matter how well the content was taught. Without this option, they might honestly answer that they were not improving, which would suggest ineffectiveness of the curriculum. In this way, the "Already known" answer choice allowed some student data to be excluded from the measurement of improvement rather than mark against it, independently of the quality of the curriculum. The control class chose this option about twice as often as the experimental class.

Control Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
	1	1	0	3
	2	2	1	0
Understanding	3	8	8	9
	4	7	6	6
	5	1	1	1
	N/A	4	2	4

Figure 9

In the control class, the mean answer for the questions on reading, writing, and understanding was between 3 and 4, meaning most students reported at least some improvement and many reported steady improvement. In "reading", students reported a modest rate of improvement (an increasing in their rating of skill on average.) Their view of their own improvement decreased during the connotative unit section and then bounced back during the figurative language and meaning section. In "writing", students reported steady ability from the denotative to connotative unit sections, and larger improvement between the connotative and figurative unit sections. In "understanding", students reported consistently across the three surveys, with a medium (mostly 3s and 4s) report of improvement. The most common responses across all areas for writing were 3s and 4s, very similar to reading, with students often responding the same across the three survey questions in this class. The next highest rate of response was the "they already knew" the material. Interestingly, across all the surveys, students rarely reported that they weren't improving at all, most commonly during the figurative language and meaning section. Also, control students almost never reported that they were "making huge improvements", which may relate to the lack of interest and enthusiasm from both the field notes and Survey A. This will be further explored in the Relationship chapter.

The average of the responses was that students felt they were "improving steadily" and sometimes "well" in writing about and understanding poetry. Between 20% and 30% of the class

reported that they had "already known" the content at the time of the survey across the three surveys, with a low of 20% during the denotation and connotation unit sections and a high of 30% during the figurative device unit section. This was surprisingly high, considering the degree of detail that was discussed during lecture and class discussions and the presumably unique selection of poems by the teacher. Many of the poems were recent lyric poems or modern poetry (e.g. "Brand New Me" by Alicia Keys and "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins), not traditionally taught 9th-grade poems (e.g. Frost's "The Road Not Taken" or Shakespearean sonnets.)

These data shows that, while students recognized some improvement, the descriptor "improving a little" and "improving steadily" were the overwhelming trend in this class. Few students answered that they were "improving well" and there were very few and sporadic reports of "huge improvement" across all control class surveys. The data also show that large minority of students felt they had already learned what was covered that day. This could mean they felt that they had learned it just the previous day, which would match my observational notes about the control class being "too quick to get" the material and want to move on. It could also mean that the students largely felt the lessons weren't covering new material from previous years, or perhaps material wasn't presented in a way that made them feel as if they were improving.

4.4.4 Questionnaire data of improvement in the control class

Each of the four questionnaire responders also frequently described their experiences in terms of improvement. The most common, and also most generic response present in all four questionnaires was, "I learned a lot", written verbatim by each responder. But, each responder had a unique way of describing what that meant. Two responders implied more critical comments, and two others were very directly praising.

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In the control class, the more critical of the two responders said, "I learned a lot about literal, connotative, and figurative meaning", and by the time of the final, "everyone knew what they were talking about and everyone seemed to appreciate their poems too." Then, she politely added constructive criticism expressing a suggestion for better improvement in the future. She said, "the ways we learned were ok, but I think we should have looked at more [traditional] poems not as many lyrical" and "less lyrical poems [would be] taken more seriously."[30] This responder, while positive, seems to be expressing wishes that lyric poetry had been less emphasized, and the view that there was better improvement in the class during the non-lyric poems (Billy Collins, Maya Angelou). She also implies that traditional poetry is "real" poetry and lyric poetry are "just songs." She concludes, describing the end of the unit, that the unit concept of "figurative meaning was kind of confusing, but the connotative and denotative will stick." Interestingly, the traditional poems she refers to were studied during the figurative meaning unit section, which she ultimately described herself as "confused" about.

The second control class responder was more positive, perhaps unrealistically so. He said, "I do think I learned a lot in this unit, [we have] gone over views of this topic in the past but never in depth. It helped that we read current poetry/lyrics to learn from." This shows that he felt, at least ostensibly, that the unit concepts and skills were learned more seriously and fully than in his past classes. He also said, about the number and selection of poems, "the variety mattered […] helped solidify in my memory." This view contrasts with my observational notes of the class in general, which supposed that the class struggled with memory of unit concepts. Though, the responder notes, it was variety that led to better memory, not lecture or discussion. In fact, no

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[30] Bear in mind that this comment refers to the classroom use of "lyric poem" which meant contemporary poetry in the form of song lyrics for this student, and most others. See earlier footnote.

responder mentioned lecture or whole-class discussion in any of the questionnaire responses. He

concluded optimistically, "this will definitely stick with me in the future because of the current

poems to study from that we heard every day" referring to the fact that the control class also had

the chance to analyze contemporary lyric poems. He appears to have found those poems more

worthwhile than his classmate, who favored traditional poems.

4.4.5 Assessment data of improvement in the control class

In addition to being an account of the quantity of work done by students in the control

class, the formative assessment data provides a measure how much students improved as the unit

progressed. While I could analyze this improvement statistically, the varying and somewhat

unsystematic nature of the formative assessments during the study make that type of analysis

weak as a tool for understanding improvement because it would amount to comparing score

averages on assessments, which would depend on the tuning of assessment questions and grading

criteria rather than the intuitive sense, which I often used in grading formatives to compare what

was produced against what was modeled and practiced in class. So, I will be looking at the

general trend of formative assessment scores, given my observational notes, and comparing them

to the summative assessments scores for quizzes, the summative test, and the summative

presentation.

The data show noticeable improvement between quizzes, and significant improvement

between the quizzes and the final test and presentation. On average, students scored a 71% and

74% on quizzes, but scored an average of 82% on the final test and a 91% on the final

presentation. The formative assessment scores and corresponding observations show modest

quality, often at or just below expectations, though quantity of work turned in was high. Students

completed most formative checks for writing about denotative and figurative language and

meaning with a majority meeting expectations (by CCSS standard descriptors) and a few exceeding expectations. In the connotation unit section, overall quality of work was noticeably less; assessment of both identifying connotative language and describing connotative meaning were frequently below expectation and more students than usual did not turn in work.

When compared to observational notes at the time of formative assessment, the formative assessments report improvement that matched what eventually was reported in the summative assessment scores. The control class usually met expectations during formative assessments, with the exception of the connotation unit section, and this was marked by daily work scores and discussion participation. By the time of summative assessment for each quiz and during the final, their quiz scores were slightly lower than expected and their final test and presentation scores were slightly higher than expected. This shows that their improvement was more pronounced for summative rather than formative assessments.

4.4.6 Improvement data for the experimental class

My instruction had emphases on the genre group and the use of the affinity space "Genuis.com." Because of these emphases, the improvement marked through observation of in-class activities, as opposed to the other data forms, was more dependent on guidance of individual students and the genre groups. Through regular statements to the whole class, I told students that the genre groups were special because they had a common interest (their chosen genre) and a common endeavor, which was an assigned class concept to be applied to chosen poems. I also reminded the class regularly that the affinity space was to be used for both the purpose of finding lyric poems to analyze within their genre, but also that the web 2.0 tools available on the site were to be used to help inform their analysis. The result of this was

consistent use of the site for the purposes of collaborative research and interpretation, but much less often for producing content within the space.[31]

Each member of the group chose set of three "genre poems" to apply any given class concept (like denotation or figurative device) and a tablet to access the Genuis.com database entries and links to those same genre poems. So, using the class concept of connotative language and meaning as an example, I gave the students a brief lecture at the start of class telling them that "connotation" was going to be the central, briefly defined, concept that they would try to understand and identify within their genre poems. Then, it was the responsibility of individuals and their genre groups to explore and experiment with examples while I walked around and guided their inquiry one group at a time. I would also make periodic announcements during this work time to share the discoveries of certain groups that would be relevant to the inquiry of all the groups. Unlike the control class, I assessed demonstrations of understanding and skill through individual and group-level interaction and only a few formative examples of reading comprehension and writing.

I believe the above progression to be similarly well-established and varied in application in the public schools as the "traditional" progression discussed in the previous section. What sets my implementation of this inquiry approach apart from the variations available within the traditional instruction structure is not the group configuration, which was not especially different[32] from how the control class groups were organized, but rather the high quality of the

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[31] Though "user-generated content" is a major feature of the affinity space, and is prized by Gee, I was more comfortable, on this first time through the curriculum de-emphasizing the generation of content of my students online. They were producing content that was interacted with by myself and their groups, which was sufficient for the purposes of this study. The prospect of having students genuinely create content and interact with other users online remains a complication of affinity spaces that I did not explore.

[32] The "genre groups" were importantly different from the control class groups because they were put together based on interest and stayed together for a much longer period. What I mean to acknowledge here is that control

affinity space. Genuis.com had a sufficiently streamlined and rich repository of interactive poetry content that *enabled* genre groups to work within their genre (e.g. hundreds of Indie Rock lyrics with full interactivity were available for the Indie Rock genre-group to use.) Also, the site *enabled* many paths for both learning and reinforcing class concepts (e.g. connotative language and meaning.) My observations in the following section help to provide the means to evaluate if it is, to some extent, the inquiry that was enabled by the affinity space of Genuis.com that relates to a particular level of *academic improvement* for my students in my classroom, with an eye for comparison to the control curriculum.

4.4.7 Observational data of improvement in the experimental class

The observational field notes for improvement look substantially different from the control class in a few ways. The control class observations contained holistic descriptions of the class attitude and level of activity, as well as verbal exchanges that arose from students asking for help, wanting a check of their work, or expressing confusion. The experimental class observations had very view holistic descriptions of attitude because the consistent appearance of the class is that they were busy working. Lectures and group discussions weren't long enough to express an attitude, other than general attentiveness most of the time and specific students showing signs of distraction or socializing some of the time. Furthermore, the autonomous and group-based nature of the daily work meant that, while student asked for help, the majority of interactions were characterized by my listening in and inquiring alongside the genre groups. This

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class could have done this *as a variation on "traditional" methods*. Thus, it wasn't the "genre groups" that set apart the experimental group from the control group as much as it was the affinity space.

gave a pattern[33] to my field notes that emphasized progress that the experimental class students were making over problems they were having.

Within my observational notes about improvement, I found that the experimental curriculum was usually slow to build a sense in the students that a concept or skill has been learned during a given class period. Student regularly expressed that they "thought they had it", with a tone of uncertainty even as they demonstrated correct applications of concepts. Many student responses indicated they recognized that they could apply a major unit concept to the particular case they were working with (i.e. their chosen genre lyric poem for the day) but that the application wouldn't necessarily work for other cases. Students frequently asked me questions about the application of a unit concept to a new stanza that they had just applied in a previous stanza unsure of whether or not it qualified in the same way. This would often prompt additional discussion and guidance on my part about how the new instance was meant in the same way because of a different figurative pattern or different context clues. In this way, the students' slower pace of understanding unit concepts (e.g. connotative meaning) helped them think twice about whether or not they were understanding *the concept* even while they were actively applying it.

The independent-with-guidance inquiry format was reliable for building a memorable understanding or ability that is applicable on other examples in future classes. This observation can be seen most clearly in the connotation part of the unit, but was also well exemplified in

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[33] Arguably, this is a form of observational bias inherent in observing student groups autonomously working. That is, it's inherently easier to see when students demonstrate boredom or distraction during a lecture, during which the expectation is quiet attentiveness and note-taking. During autonomous work-time, a student may give the appearance of working and discussing about the affinity space while they're actually distracted or aimless "surfing" the site. This is a potential problem which independent inquiry in general and it is also why triangulation with assessment and survey data is important.

figurative language and meaning. In total, three class periods were devoted to understanding

what connotation is and how to write about connotative meaning. During the brief introductory

lecture on connotation, I introduced the term and distinguished it from denotation. I then showed

the class how to look for connotation in an example lyric poem that I had chosen earlier because

it had high quality annotations with connotative descriptions. We listened to the song while

viewing the lyrics on Genuis.com. I then clicked on the lyrics and matched my sense of what the

lyrics meant with the connotative descriptions provided by other users. This exercise took about

10 minutes. Then, the class was allowed to choose one of their genre poems and do the same,

writing about connotations using the website's annotations and my guidance for support. I did

not give them a detailed lecture on the definition of connotation and connotative meaning.

Remarkably, by the next lesson, a majority of students were already able to access and report

basic interpretations of connotative meaning, which were essentially emotional associations of

the lyrics themselves and the emotional states of the poem' speaker. We spent the following two

lessons formulating a class understanding of what connotation is (unspoken or implied

association between the words and emotion, usually felt by the speaker) and distinguishing it

from denotation, and from figurative device (which was set aside "another type of non-

denotative language that wasn't about emotion.") This example, which followed in principle for

figurative device and meaning, shows the extent to which I observed how the students gained, in

a slow and deliberate way, reliable memory of the unit concepts and the ability to apply them

across contexts.

4.4.8 Survey data of improvement in the experimental class

The survey data for the experimental class on the question of improvement was collected

periodically at the same time and in the same way as the control class (see Figure 2 above).

Experimental Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Reading	1	0	0	1
	2	2	2	4
	3	1	7	3
	4	9	5	7
	5	0	3	1
	N/A	3	1	2

Figure 10

Experimental Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Writing	1	0	0	1
	2	1	3	1
	3	1	6	3
	4	3	3	2
	5	0	5	1
	N/A	1	0	1

Figure 11

Experimental Class [Survey B]	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Understanding	1	0	1	0
	2	2	0	2
	3	4	10	0
	4	9	2	5
	5	1	5	3
	N/A	3	2	2

Figure 12

In the experimental class, the most common response to the improvement questions were evenly split between 3s ("steady improvement") and 4s ("improving well"), which is a comparatively strong result compared to the numeric scores of the other questions for that class and the same questions for the control class (discussed in the Relationship section below.) The median of all answers to the question was a 3, meaning almost all students reported at least a little improvement and the vast majority reported steady to strong improvement. In "reading", students reported a strong rate of improvement (i.e. all 4s except 2 N/A, one 3, and one 2) in the denotative unit. This decreased moderately in the connotative unit section, but returned in the figurative unit section. In "writing", students reported similar levels of improvement *when they*

reported in the denotative unit section (and eight students left the answer blank, implying that hadn't learned enough about writing yet to answer or that they weren't answering for the whole week, just that day.) In the connotative unit section, students reported less improvement than in reading, though strangely, a large number reported 5 in writing despite low scores in reading and understanding. In Survey 3 (figurative unit section) students reported the same level of writing improvement as for the connotative unit section. In "understanding", students reported the strongest overall improvement for each unit section, the highest number of 3s, 4s, and 5s.

Across the surveys, students reported high levels of improvement for denotative and figurative meaning, with some loss in connotative meaning. This contrasts with, what I acknowledged in my observation notes, to be fast and roughly *effective* application of connotative concepts (i.e. the students and I disagreed about how well they learned connotation.) Also, the comparatively high numbers of 4 and 5 responses show that the students felt they improved most in understanding poetry across the unit sections, but still marked at last "steady" improvement in most cases for reading and writing. Less than 10% of the class reported "already known" across the three surveys, which was not surprising given the situated inquiry format of the majority of class sessions. It would have been very strange if students had answered "Already known" for an inquiry formatted class in which they are supposed to pursue new examples and new iterations of the class concepts.

This data shows that students consistently acknowledged improvement. The most common descriptor reported was "improving steadily" and the second most common was "improving well." A significant minority of students reported "improving a little" and there were

very few and sporadic reports of "huge improvement" and no reports of "not improving" across all control class surveys.

4.4.9 Questionnaire data of improvement in the experimental class

As with the questionnaires of the control class, the experimental class responses related to improvement were generally positive but also showed constructive criticism. One responder gave high praise and specific examples and the other responder gave light praise, suggesting that some things could have happened better.

The more positive and specific of the two responders begins, "I have learned a lot about reading and writing connotative and denotative meaning. I did not know what connotations and denotations were, I know feel comfortable writing with and about them at length." In terms of improvement, this shows that the student believes he learned the main ideas of the unit. He also shows awareness of the difference between what he learned from the unit itself and what he had already learned. He wrote, "I was already comfortable with figurative language/meaning", suggesting he might have marked "already known" on the survey, but not that he didn't learn from being asked to review. In fact, he also reported, "my teacher presented questions and prompts clearly, after laying out a lesson plan that could adapt to speed over topics we knew about, and slow down on topics we weren't sure on." This view of being able to "adapt" suggests that he had found the flexibility to focus on new or challenging concepts of the unit *because* of the independent inquiry format. He closes the questionnaire by saying, "He [teacher] helped us find our way to fully understanding denotative/connotative/figurative meaning through our own process," suggesting the processes he was able to apply either personally, or in his genre group, made a positive difference in his learning. This view appears to fit in with about 20-30% of the class who enjoyed inquiring autonomously and reported high improvement in the surveys.

The second responder's comments about improvement were brief but illustrate a belief that she "learned a lot" and an appreciation for being allowed to, "figure it out ourselves." However, following this optimistic account of improvement, she reports that unit concepts weren't always "expressed in a variety of ways so that everyone can understand." This suggests that, while the responder acknowledges some value in independent inquiry of the affinity space, she either expected further (and varied) attempts on the part of the teacher to communicate concepts and skills of the unit *or* she didn't find easy access to unit concepts through the affinity space and genre groups and would have liked alternatives. While this student appears to be representing a minority view (also noted in the questionnaire analysis of action) that the affinity space did not amount to a flexible and valuable learning space, her perspective is nonetheless valuable for understanding that the affinity space does ask autonomy and self-direction to a significant extent. Students expecting traditional direct instruction would potentially find the experimental curriculum indirect and even disappointing.

4.4.10 Assessment data of improvement in the experimental class

The improvement for individual students in the experimental class is present in a few formative assessments, but does not lend itself to statistical analysis because of the less frequent (compared to the control class) and often collaborative nature of their assessments. Instead of statistical analysis, I will be looking at the general trend of observational notes during formative assessment and comparing them to the summative assessments scores for quizzes, the summative test, and the summative presentation.

In general, the data show low improvement (less than control) between quizzes, and similar improvement (compared to control) between quizzes and the final test and presentation. On average, students scored a 76% and 77% on quizzes, but scored an average of 84% on the

final test and a 94% on the final presentation. The formative assessment observations and scores show a high degree of consistency and quality with the work. Students completed most formative checks for writing about denotative and connotative language and meaning in the first two unit sections, with a majority meeting expectations and a large majority exceeding expectations. In the figurative device unit section, genre-groups became more distinguished in terms of quality of formative work; a majority exceeded expectations, particularly for lessons on metaphor and imagery, and small but significant numbers showed work below expectations or did not turn in work. This matches the observational note that while many students participated autonomously and asked for guidance, a consistent few disengaged or were not "situated" within the affinity space.

When compared to observational notes at the time of formative assessment, the formative assessments reported stronger improvement than what eventually was reported in the summative assessment scores. The experimental class excelled, by and large, in every formative assessment given and within the many one-on-checks for understanding that occurred between the teacher the genre-groups. Consequently, they performed consistently as expected in each unit section quiz, particularly the connotation quiz. On their summative assessments, they did not score as well as their formative assessments and quizzes led me to expect, but nevertheless averaged in the high 80% or low 90%. This shows that their improvement was more pronounced for formative rather than summative assessments.

4.5 RELATIONSHIP: WHAT WAS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION AND IMPROVEMENT?

Sub-question 3: What were the relationships between what was done to improve CCSS achievement targets in the control and experimental classes and the improvement that occurred?

This section will explore emerging themes from the previous sections that are shaped by the relevant theory and the results of the study. This will lead directly into the answer to the primary research question (see Conclusion) because the understandings gained in view of the relationship between teaching causes and learning effects are essentially a basic answer to the effectiveness of the experimental and control curricula. In accordance with my method of triangulation, described above, I have divided this section into two parts, each of which is relevant to the experimental and control classes respectively. In the first part, I will analyze the relationship between action and improvement in the control class. In the second part, I will analyze the relationship between action and improvement in the experimental class. It is important to carry out analyses that are still separated by class for the moment, because the each class was separate in its curriculum and is thereby expected to be distinguishable in how the actions of the class related to the measures of their improvement.

4.5.1 The relationship between action and improvement in the control class.

The major theme that arose across the action and improvement data for the control class was a clear contrast between their productivity, which was adequate, and the data which showed against them seeing their work as interesting, significant, and improving from the activities of the class. This contrast is most clearly seen between the student reports of action in Survey A, reports of improvement in Survey B, and the questionnaire data of improvement. Students reported that they were doing "most" or "all" of the work, while at the same time, they decreased in their reporting of "improving well" and almost never reported "huge improvement." This is connected to the control questionnaire response that, "we learned a lot" but "I think we should have looked at more traditional poems." Across these data, I interpret this to mean that both the type of poems the students were learning about (which included lyric poems) and *how* they were

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learning about them was perceived as inaccessible. That is, the control class perceived their improvement as hindered, despite "doing the work", by the types of poems and direct instruction practices through which the poems were taught.

The control students were often quick to act and produce classwork in accordance with the specific requirements of an assessment. They reported their view of this work in the surveys and questionnaires as moderately interesting and moderately leading to their academic improvement. However, the inconsistent interest and view of improvement in the surveys and the mismatch between their formative assessment data and their summative scores shows how hit-and-miss, and thereby not "situated" control class periods often were, which matches the field note observations of inconsistent discussion and group work participation. They showed interest and grasped unit concepts enough to demonstrate understanding in daily work, but did not carry that interest or application to other work. This can be seen in Survey B question on interest below

Control Class [Survey B] Results	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
How interested were you in learning today?	1	0	1	2
	2	7	5	7
	3	11	11	5
	4	1	2	5
	5	0	0	0

Figure 13

This figure shows that the student responses to the question of how interested they were over the course of the unit was relatively steady during the denotative and connotative units but declined sharply toward the end of the unit (figurative language and meaning) when the summative assessments were taken.

The control class also varied between showing signs of finding the curriculum to be socially and culturally significant (situated), during times of analysis of contemporary lyric poems, and expressing disinterest and impatience for applying what they learned from that analysis for other chosen examples, especially for finding examples of figurative meaning and language in contemporary poems. It is evident in view of the observational and questionnaire data that they would have liked more "variety", though not necessarily variety in the form of more contemporary poems or more choice about lyrics. From the questionnaire and observational data, the control demonstrated that they felt like they were learning best during earlier parts of the unit, in which concepts were easier to apply, and during clear modelling of poetic interpretation of traditional, not contemporary-lyric, poetry. Because of these factors, the control class did a similar, slightly larger, quantity of in-class work, but were not observed or assessed to work as autonomously or with the same degree of situated interest as the experimental class.

In terms of the CCSS outcomes, by the end of the unit, the control class had achieved academic outcomes that met, but seldom exceeded expectations in most cases. With particular regard to retention of unit concepts, demonstrated by medium to low quiz and test scores, I understand this to be a combination of not participating with genuine interest that led to autonomous experimentation and elaboration of the unit concepts and skills, as well as a general resistance to review. The final test and final presentations showed a lack of command and application of the unit concepts in new situations when compared to the experimental class. At the same time, the rote portions of the assessments matched the experimental counterpart. To use CCSS language (Figure 3 above) directly, by the end of the unit the control class could consistently analyze, determine, develop, write, and cite examples of denotative, connotative,

and figurative language and meaning within a variety of poems *if* those examples were conveyed through rote, repeatedly practiced, or directly modeled ways (as they were in the Final test, Appendix C.) They had an 82% Final test average. In cases where examples were conveyed in ways that required creative and autonomous application of poetry concepts (as in the Presentation, Appendix D), especially doing so using connotative and figurative meaning, the class was noticeably more inconsistent in their demonstrations (86% Presentation average.)

4.5.2 The relationship between action and improvement in the experimental class.

The major theme that arose across the action and improvement for the experimental class was a clear connection between their productivity and the improvement survey and assessment data that shows how levels of interest and consistently high scores steadily improved over the course of the whole unit. Thus, I find that the experimental class, in contrast to the control class, *was* largely situated due to the acceptance and utilization of the genre-groups and affinity space, and moderately more effective in CCSS outcomes as a result. The trend for higher interest level, survey answers of improvement, and assessment scores indicating learning imply together that a majority of in-class activities were genuine instances of situated learning.

The experimental class showed much more consistent signs of finding the curriculum to be socially and culturally significant (situated), during times of analysis of contemporary lyric poems. The can be best seen through their Survey B reports of interest (question in Figure 2):

Experimental Class [Survey B] Results	Score	Number of student responses per score		
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
	1	0	1	0
	2	3	5	4
How interested were you in learning today?	3	8	11	6
	4	8	3	4
	5	1	0	2

Figure 14

While Figure 14 is not strikingly higher than Figure 13 in terms of student reports, there is a significant difference between this report of interests and the control class'. That difference is in how their report of interest developed in Survey 2 and 3, at which time the curricula for both classes was more heavily focused on contemporary lyric poems. The experimental class was allowed to explore lyric poems in the affinity space, while the control class studied specific lyric poems together as a class. Here we see that the experimental class, while still having reports of disinterest across the unit, moved moderately up, while the control class moved moderately down. The most likely reason for this was the degree of freedom that they had over the selection of poems and the supports that the genre groups and affinity spaces naturally offered. It is evident in view of the observational and questionnaire data that many students found ample variety, significance, and choice within the curriculum, sometimes to an excessive degree (as suggested by of the questionnaire responders.) The daily activities being more in the students' control is a factor that should be considered to explain the high level of activity but low level of formative work produced, arising in tandem with higher levels of interest and marginally stronger summative assessments. The experimental class did a similar, slightly smaller quantity of in-class work that was checked by the teacher, but were observed to work as autonomously or with the same degree of situated interest as the control class.

There was a significant amount of freedom granted to these students that, if abused, presumably would not have led to meaningful accounts of learning across the data and relatively high achievement on assessments. However, they employed that freedom to marginal gains, and demonstrated greater comfort and command of the unit concepts, even though this was only marginally evident in the summative test. It was strongly evident in the final presentations.

In terms of the CCSS outcomes, by the end of the unit, the experimental class had achieved academic outcomes that met, and often exceeded expectations in most cases. This was particularly true with the final presentations. The inquiry format described in the action and improvement observational notes, shows a level of independent inquiry and eager initiative that clearly led to coherent and more autonomous presentations and more confident applications of unit concepts to the selected poems that were analyzed in the finals. These moderately higher outcomes, which are at least in part a benefit of situated learning, were not without some lost opportunity, however. The summative assessment outcomes were only marginally better even though the two classes were distinctive in most ways, including the degree of situated learning. In CCSS terms (Figure 3 above), the experimental class could consistently analyze, determine, write, and cite examples of denotative, connotative, and figurative language and meaning within a *wide* variety of contemporary lyric poems and some traditional poems. They could consistently demonstrate this whether or not those examples were conveyed through rote, practiced, or directly modeled ways or given to independent inquiry through the use of Genius.com. During the final test, which contained rote conceptual questions and interpretive questions that were only modeled and practiced by the control class, the experimental class performed at or above expectations. They had an 84% Final test average. During the presentation, which required interpret a choice poem through independent research and application of poetic concepts, the experimental class performed consistently above expectations (90% presentation average.) Four of the presentations of this class were of exceedingly high quality, well above the highest presentation quality of the control class.

5. CONCLUSION

The complex inner workings of my classroom have become much clearer to me now that I have reflected on the two classes of my study and the many interactions, observations, and assessments that were part of my teaching and their learning. I certainly don't think that this study was exhaustive in its consideration of how the two different curricula can be implemented. Admittedly, it wasn't even exhaustive in considering how I implemented them. However, I do think there are some strong indications of which curriculum produced better outcomes in accordance with my research questions. Once again, those questions are:

> **Primary research question:** How does implementing affinity spaces in my 9th-grade ELA class compare to implementing my usual instruction with respect to student improvement on CCSS achievement targets?
>
>> **Sub-question 1:** Action: What implementation of learning with and without affinity spaces *is done* to improve CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?
>>
>> **Sub-question 2:** Change: What *improvement* occurred in student performance on CCSS achievement targets for the control and experimental classes?
>>
>> **Sub-question 3:** Relationship: What were the relationships between what was done to improve CCSS achievement targets in the control and experimental classes and the improvement that occurred?

I asked whether or not implementing a curriculum built on an affinity space would lead to better or worse academic achievement than my usual instruction. The answer to this question, which has already emerged in part in the Data Analysis chapter above, is that the use of affinity space *can*, and in this case *did*, lead to moderately better academic achievement on CCSS targets for reading, writing about, and understanding poetry. In carrying out this analysis, I have discovered that the ways in which an affinity space curriculum is capable of doing this is importantly dependent on several caveats, which I will now explain and evaluate.

From the Relationship section of the Data Analysis chapter I found that the control class demonstrated less achievement of CCSS standards in their summative assessments. But the reasons for lower achievement were not what I had anticipated. In theorizing about the potential benefits of using affinity spaces, I always thought that students finding the space interesting and accessible would motivate them to work harder on the poetry concepts and skills. To the contrary, the control class showed me that hard work, in the absence of freedom of inquiry and a share of control over the content, doesn't necessarily lead to better results. Remember, the quantity of work was slightly greater with this group, and they were assessed more often. Thus, one of the caveats of affinity space use is that it doesn't employ student interests solely for motivational purposes, it employs student interests for qualitatively different ways of learning.

Another feature of the control class was that, while the participants of that class exhibited more, and often better, daily achievement, seen in their formative assessments and Survey A, they had worse *retention* of the unit concepts and skills, though not for rote summative questions. This is another counterintuitive result. I would have thought that daily work in an evidently less-situated environment would suffer, given the factors of boredom and distraction that were more frequently noted within the class. I would have also thought that retention of concepts like the definition of "denotative language", would last longer because of how directly and repeatedly they were communicated. But, the opposite is what was demonstrated by the control class.

So, while I am not surprised by the result of the control class' achievement of CCSS outcomes, which *was* moderately lower, I am surprised that some of the features of the class, that I would have normally considered strengths, didn't strengthen their outcomes in this case. The best illustrated conclusion I can make about the class in view the data is that, while the control

class didn't carry the same levels of interest or enthusiasm, they achieved only moderately lower outcomes through brute force. Admittedly this is a crude metaphor, but it follows for the nature of their achievement on the summative assessments as well. The control class did comparatively a bit better on the rote portions of the summative assessment (the Final test) having gained the necessary understandings and skills through relatively arduous lecture and repetitive practice near Final test time. They did comparatively significantly worse on the creative and independent portions of the summative assessments (the Final presentation) having struggled to retain and apply unit concepts and skills to new poems.

As for the experimental class, I can now safely report that they achieved better summative assessment outcomes in terms of CCSS standards, and I am encouraged by this result. The class' moderately higher achievement was largely in line with actions and improvements that I expected to see and that were clearly evident in the data. Looking back on my original intentions with the unit, I expected that the experimental class would benefit from the freedom and student control of the affinity space, the genre-groups, and the "situated" curriculum. The affinity space curriculum effectively employed the students' natural enthusiasm for interactive digital tools and the higher and more sustained levels of focus that they were able to muster for poetry content, especially lyric poetry, that captured their interests.

However, the comparatively stronger outcomes of the experimental curriculum must be acknowledged as only moderately stronger. The experimental class performed consistently better on both summative assessments by 2-5% on average. Now, with a firm understanding of the relationship between action and improvement in the experimental class, it is apparent that two factors limited the experimental class while another factor pulled more than its fair share of the curricular weight.

First, the experimental class clearly absorbed the important unit concepts and applied them in both rote and creative ways in the summative assessments. But, it is evident they also lost some of their potential for gain because of lack of structure and the unusual environment produced from a focus on independent and guided inquiry. At its best, this was an environment in which academic achievement was allowed to be worked at gradually and on the demand of the student rather than the teacher. The experimental class learned better, when they were learning. At its worst, this was an environment that felt somewhat lax and undirected, which carried with it a minority type of student experience that was another negative factor. Due to the independent emphasis of the affinity space curriculum, the experimental class contained a few students who neither excelled at the summative assessments nor reported positively of their academic gains through the surveys (and in one questionnaire.) This points to an inherent risk in the affinity space curriculum. It doesn't work well for everyone, and it especially doesn't work well for students who are expecting of, and committed to, more direct and traditional classroom situations (e.g. those whose social and cultural values are already represented in traditional instruction and who are "well-situated" there.) While I'd like to say that the affinity space curriculum is adaptable enough to compensate for this through teacher guidance, I must also admit that these few students showed lowered learning outcomes and less potential for effectively using the affinity space *across the data*.

On a more positive note, one factor of the study pulled more than its fair share of the weight – the affinity space itself, Genius.com. At the outset of my study, or at least when I became interested in Gee (back in 2012), this space did not exist. In fact, it did not exist in its present (more polished) form until after I had drafted a plan for a study using web 2.0 spaces (of some kind) to teach poetry. It was extremely fortunate, but not surprising I think, that a site like

this one has cropped up and gained popularity just last year. The site welcomes lovers of music, lyrics, poetry, literature, and many other forms of art in one easy search.[34] Furthermore, it prizes the connotations and contexts, the histories and fantasies, the figurative and denotative fictions and realities that people really care about, and really care to know about in the real world.

More research will be required to know exactly how effective affinity spaces can be in public school classrooms. As for me, and my plan of *action*, I am encouraged by the results of this study and I think I have provided compelling, but also carefully contextualized, evidence of the potential of this kind of curriculum. I intend to continue the use of affinity space curriculum for the teaching of poetry, and I am actively open to expanding the development of curriculum for other ELA concepts and skills in the future.

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[34] The Genius.com homepage is simply a search bar with the words "search lyrics and more" and a banner that says, "Genius is the world's biggest collection of song lyrics and crowd sourced musical knowledge." It has now become a set of related sites under the same name that also catalog literature, news, film, and sports.

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Map of Research Question hierarchy and its relation to the data gathered.

Action	What did the **control class** *do* to improve student performance on CCSS achievement targets?	1. **Field Notes** 2. **"Extent of Participation Survey A/B"** 3. **Questionnaire** 4. **Formative and Summative Assessments**
	What did the **experimental class** *do* to improve student performance on CCSS achievement targets?	1. **Field Notes** 2. **"Extent of Participation Survey A/B"** 3. **Questionnaire** 4. **Formative and Summative Assessments**
Improvement (or Change)	To what extent did the **control class** *improve* student performance on CCSS achievement targets?	1. **Field Notes** 2. **"Extent of Participation Survey A/B"** 3. **Questionnaire** 4. **Formative and Summative Assessments**
	To what extent did the **experimental class** *improve* student performance on CCSS achievement targets?	1. **Field Notes** 2. **"Extent of Participation Survey A/B"** 3. **Questionnaire** 4. **Formative and Summative Assessments**
Relationship And Conclusion	To what extent did the **control class** improve student performance on CCSS achievement targets because of my usual instruction that was done?	1. **Synthesis of Action and Improvement data.**
	To what extent did the **experimental class** improve student performance on CCSS achievement targets because of affinity-space learning that was done?	1. **Synthesis of Action and improvement data for the experimental class.**
	How does the improvement in performance on CCSS achievement targets in the **control class** compare to that of the **experimental class**?	1. **Synthesis of Relationship data from the control and experimental classes.**

APPENDIX B

Example Questionnaire – Page 1 of 2

Instructions: Please answer the following questions by writing in the space provided for each question. Because I value your time and appreciate that you volunteered for this questionnaire, please do not spend a *total* of more than 30-minutes writing your answers. **Thank you!** This questionnaire will be kept confidential and will not affect your grade. cut But, your input for this survey will be used for a real educational study!

1. **Question 1 – Do you think you learned very much about reading and writing about literal, connotative, and figurative meaning in poetry during our poetry unit? Why do you think that?**

Response: (You do not have to fill the space)

> I believe I have learned a lot about reading and writing connotative and denotative meaning, I did not know what connotations and denotations were, I now feel comfortable writing with and about them at length. I was already comfortable with figurative language/ meaning.

2. **Question 2 – Do you think the *ways* you were asked to learn about reading and writing about literal, connotative, and figurative meaning were good? If so, why? If not, why not? If both, explain.**

Response: (You do not have to fill the space)

> My teacher presented questions and prompts clearly, after laying out a lesson plan that could adapt to speed over topics we knew about, and slow down on topics we weren't sure on.

3. Question 3 – Do you think your learning about reading and writing about meanings in poetry stick with you in the future? Why or why not? Is there anything about how you did or did not learn this material that will make it last or not last in the future?

Response: (You do not have to fill the space)

This material can be applied in many Fields, when I write essays for job applications I can use positive connotations to show me as a better canidate. If I publish or analyze text this will help me (or my audience) understand the text better.

4. Question 4 – Do you have other thoughts or comments about what you learned or how you learned it that you would like to share?

Response:

I enjoyed the more or less laid back aproach my teacher took, he allowed time to discuss and debate, and helped us find our way to fully understanding denotative / connotative / figurative meaning through our own process.

APPENDIX C (SCANNED POETRY TEST)

Poetry Multiple Choice Test (Written Final)   **Name:** _____

1. What is a metaphor? (Choose the best answer)

a) A metaphor is when two words are compared. Usually they are an unlikely combination.

b) A metaphor is a comparison of two different things. It says one thing "is" another or "is like" another. They might be an unlikely combination of words but they have a shared quality.

c) A metaphor is any use of "like" in a phrase. It's just another term for simile.

d) A metaphor is a poetic device. A metaphor is like a poetic device.

2. What is imagery? (Choose the best answer)

a) Imagery is the creation of an image by the use of visually descriptive language.

b) Imagery is the creation of an image that helps the reader imagine the thing described.

c) Imagery happens in degrees. A good (or rich) image has a large degree of descriptive language.

d) All of the above.

3. How does shift occur in a poem? (Choose the best answer)

a) Shift occurs when there is a change in the denotation that usually happens between stanzas.

b) Shift is just a change in specific words from one line to the next.

c) Shift is when there is a change in idea or connotation that usually happens between stanzas.

d) Shift occurs any time there are two different things talked about in a poem.

e) Both a and c.

4. What is the difference between a lyric and a non-lyric poem? (Choose the best answer)

a) A non-lyric poem is written and does not have a rhythm or flow, a lyric poem is sung and does have a rhythm or flow.

b) Both lyric and non-lyric poems may rhyme and both are divided by stanza (or verse.) A lyric poem is usually intended to be set to music, a non-lyric poem is usually not.

c) A lyric poem rhymes and has verses, a non-lyric poem does not rhyme and has stanzas.

d) A lyric poem is about the emotions or feelings of the speaker; a non-lyric poem can be about anything *except* emotions or feelings.

5. Which of the following choices is true about the figurative device of "contrast"? (Choose the best answer)

a) Contrast is the opposite of metaphor. Metaphors don't use "like" or "as" but contrasts do.

b) Contrast is the same as metaphor. Both are trying to show similarities between words or phrases.

c) The purpose of contrast is to show differences between words, phrases, and ideas in poetry.

d) Contrasts cannot involve metaphors.

6. What is the best description of the difference between denotation and connotation?

a) Denotation is the literal meaning of the poem. If you have a poem that is denotative, that means that the whole thing is meant to be taken literally and there is no connotation.

b) Connotation is the concept that words and phrases in poetry have associations or connections with them that go beyond the literal meaning. Denotative meanings *can* have connotations.

c) Connotation is the concept that words and phrases in poetry have associations or connections with them that go beyond the literal meaning. Denotative meanings *cannot* have connotations.

d) Denotation is the literal meaning of the poem. Words and phrases in a poem can be understood denotatively or connotatively, but not both.

"Nowhere Man" – The Beatles

He's a real nowhere man,
Sitting in his nowhere land,
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.

Doesn't have a point of view,
Knows not where he's going to,
Isn't he a bit like you and me?

Nowhere Man, please listen.
You don't know what you're missing.
Nowhere Man, the world is at your command.

He's as blind as he can be,
Just sees what he wants to see,
Nowhere Man can you see me at all?

Nowhere Man, don't worry.
Take your time, don't hurry.
Leave it all till somebody else lends you a hand.

Doesn't have a point of view,
Knows not where he's going to,
Isn't he a bit like you and me?

Nowhere Man, please listen.
You don't know what you're missing.
Nowhere Man, the world is at your command.

He's a real Nowhere Man,
Sitting in his nowhere land,
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.

6. For "Nowhere Man" by The Beatles mark the stanzas with numbers in the left margin. Mark the chorus (if there is one) by writing "chorus" in the left margin.

7. If there is one, mark the shift in the poem with a clear horizontal line. If there is no shift, write "no shift" above the title.

8. Which of the following sounds, words, phrases, and stanzas are repeated in the poem?

I. Rhyming words, for example "don't worry / don't hurry"
II. The phrase, "Nowhere man"
III. Imagery of the "Nowhere man's" appearance
IV. "Nowhere man please listen…the world is at your command."
V. The metaphor of "blindness"

(Circle One):
a) I, II, III, IV, and V
b) I, II, and III
c) II, IV, and V
d) I, II, and IV.
e) II, III, and V

9. In the poem "Nowhere Man" by The Beatles, which of the following is the best description of *what is denoted in general*? (Circle one)

a) There is a man who is nowhere in particular and who is doing nothing in particular. He resembles us. Like us, he is blind, he doesn't know what he's missing, and he should wait.
b) There is a lost man, without place or purpose, who shows us how we are lost ourselves. He shows us how we are missing out on the good things in life. We should wait for those things, not struggle for them.
c) There is a guy that everyone calls "Nowhere man." He lives in a place called "Nowhere land." He wants us to come and live with him there.

10. Given what denoted in the poem above, which of the following is the clearest description of what can be understood from the figurative and connotative meanings of the poem?

a) The poem means we should all look inward, and see the trouble and darkness of our own lives.

b) The poem might really about an astronaut, floating in space. "Nowhere" could refer to being in space.

c) The poem speaks about a lost man, without place or purpose, who shows us how we are lost ourselves and how we are missing out on the good things in life. We should wait for those things and not struggle for them.

d) There is nothing in the poem that makes one interpretation clearer or better than another. Any interpretation is a good one, no matter what the poem says. The beauty of interpreting poetry is that anything goes!

Excerpt From "Leaves of Grass"

By Walt Whitman*

Who has done his day's work? Who will soonest be

Through with his support?

Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? Will you already

Prove too late?

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he

Complains of my gab and my loitering

I am not to be tamed, I too am untranslatable,

I sound by barbaric yawp** over the rooftops of the world.

*Walt Whitman is the most famous American

poet of the 1800s and this excerpt is from the most

famous and well-loved work of poetry in American history

**A "Yawp" is a loud shout or yell.

Questions 11 through 13 are all about "Leaves of Grass" above.

11. Which of the following best describes what the speaker is literally saying to his audience in Stanzas 1 and 2?

a) He is telling the audience to come for a walk so he can tell them some things.

b) He is telling us to walk with him and to stop being lazy.

c) He is asking who of us will continue working and who will follow him, before it's too late.

d) He is asking us to speak up before we give up. He's feels in trouble or maybe dying.

12. Which of the following best describes what the speaker connotes in the 4ᵗʰ Stanza?

a) The connotation here is that the speaker is yelling.

b) The connotation is using the word "untranslatable" to refer to the film "Lost in Translation."

c) The connotation makes an association with the circus, as if the speaker is a barbaric strong man or a lion that can't be tamed.

d) The speaker connotes a feeling of unstoppable spirit and uniqueness that is the basis for shouting to the world.

e) The speaker is crazy and shouldn't act so dramatic.

13. Which of the following is an example of figurative language from the poem?

a) "The rooftops of the world" creates a vivid image of all the houses in the world.

b) The metaphor of the spotted hawk, which the speaker means to stand for those who would criticize him.

c) The repetition of the word "tamed."

d) The dramatic shift between "Who wishes to walk with me?" and "Will you speak before I am gone?

e) All of the above.

Poetry Presentation

Final Semester Assignment

Credit: **35 Points**

Length: **3-5 minutes of speaking/reading**

Prompt: **Choose and analyze a (lyric) poem that is at least 16 lines in length and was not previously analyzed in class.** After analyzing your chosen poem, create a speech that describes the main idea of the poem using each of the forms of poetry analysis we've learned in class. Support your discussion with **all** of the following:

*Denotative meaning

*Connotative meaning

*Figurative <u>meaning</u> (not just a reference to an example of figurative language)

*At least **2** figurative devices (metaphor, imagery, symbolism, repetition, shift, or another chosen device)

Note: You may **emphasize** one of the above features over the others, but you should at least mention **each** feature within your speech. For example, you might want to focus on "connotative meaning", but you will still have to weave denotative and figurative meaning and figurative devices.

Performing and turning in the speech:

1. You will have the speech ready to perform by Tuesday (Dec. 14) You will be giving the speech either **Dec. 14** or during the **Final Period**.

2. When you give the speech you must have one of the following to turn in after you've given the speech:

> *Written notes or outline, neatly written on a piece of paper.

> *Written notes or outline typed on a piece of paper.

> *Note cards, with notes or paragraphs.

> *A full written out speech, either written or typed

3. You may either perform the speech or read the speech word for word (whichever you are more comfortable with.)

Optional things you may and may not include in your speech:

1. You may quote the poem.

2. You may have the class listen to a short excerpt of the song (Hoberg will pull up the song on Youtube before your speech and play the first 15-20 seconds.) You must give Hoberg the song title **before** Dec. 14 if you plan to do this (the song does not count toward your 3-5 minutes.)

3. You may **not** sing or perform the poem or use props or instruments.

4. If your poem as material that might possibly be considered class-inappropriate, you may not emphasize that material.

Structure and Rubric:

Focus:	Does the speech focus on a main idea for the poem? Does the first part of the speech introduce the idea and how it will be supported? Does the second part of the speech develop the main idea? Does the third part of the speech conclude on what meanings we have seen from the previous development?	___/10
Development:	Does the speech mention the title, artist, genre, and some denotative words used in the poem? Does the speech refer to some connotations made in the poem? Does the speech refer to some figurative language and meaning in the poem? Does the speech refer to a variety of lines in the chosen poem? Does it build *main ideas* from its sources (or between sources) that relate to the specific details? Does the speech last 3-5 minutes?	___/15
Organization:	Is the speech organized so that different main ideas are set apart and explained separately? Does the speech inform the audience of one main idea at a time with supporting details? Are connections between ideas clearly explained? Is the introduction at the beginning? Is the conclusion at the end?	___/5
Conventions/ Format:	Does the speech use proper English? Does the speech give credit (quote and cite as necessary) to the poem and any additional sources used to support the meanings described? Is the speech given in a formal and impersonal tone that leaves out "I believe" and "In my opinion" (and most "I" statements)? Is the speech spoken with proper volume to be heard?	___/5