Just looking at the table of contents of Wilhelm’s book reminds me of my lesson plan I had to create for my ESL methods class this semester. In chapter 7, Wilhelm talks about the sequencing of reading assignments and tasks based on readings. First, you must “frontload”—that is, activate background knowledge. This is the first thing I do in my lesson plan. This is one of the greatest ideas I have learned so far in my academic career. Many other great authors such as Stephen Krashen (2003), Deborah A. Wooten (2000), and the creators and supporters of content-based ESL instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) promote this idea of retrieving the background knowledge and experiences that students also have to link to new information (and help students retain that information).

**Know Your Teaching Values**

But before teachers can praise a methodology, teachers must know what values about their methodology do they have. Just as kids listen better to their parents and have stronger relationships to parents who explain reasoning behind rules of the house, how can you have rules of teaching and not know the reasoning behind them? Wilhelm says, “As professionals, we need to know, articulate, and justify our theory of learning” (2001). To teach we need to learn about our values for teaching and how we want to teach. To teach we need to learn about ourselves. In the book he also says, “If what we do one day does not work, or doesn’t truly fit our beliefs and principles, then we can change our actions. But we can only make positive changes if we are aware of our higher purpose and theories” (Wilhelm, 2001). I agree that we can only change things that we know to exist. We must be aware of our values of teaching and be willing to change them according to the needs of students.
Wilhelm also discusses the many evils of other kinds of teaching, specifically “teacher-centered” (I will tell you and you will understand or fail) and “student-centered” (figure it out on your own, kids). His view (and ultimately my own as well) is a “learning-centered” classroom—and that includes the teacher learning as well. To me, a learning-centered classroom sounds like teaching kids how to ride a bike or swim. You don’t just shove them down the street to watch them fall on their butt and laugh, and you don’t throw kids into a pool and wonder why they drowned. Wilhelm (as well as Vygotsky) says that students need enough encouragement and instruction to allow them to do things on their own. This moves them up a level in their ZPD and opens them up as a learner in a community of learners. This is the kind of classroom I want in the future.

I think Wilhelm wrote this book to wake teachers up. Although there is no book called “How to Become a Bad Teacher”, I think that a lot of teachers end up forgetting about their own academic past—their background knowledge that they haven’t tapped into. They don’t remember how much they hated studying all the dates for history class, and memorizing vocabulary for English without any context. In fact, somehow they think that this is the correct way to teach. I think of memorization as “academic bulimia”—just regurgitation and it is quite harmful to students.

Reading Fu’s book *My Trouble in My English* opened my eyes to the ESL side of things (1995). This book is about a family from Laos that has come to the U.S. for a better life—but first they must learn English. Tran, one of the school-aged boys, sees an ESL class to improve his English. He desires to express himself, to tell people about his culture and experiences, and to learn about the new country that he is in. However, all he gets is grammar instruction, even though he is good at grammar. The teacher gives him a worksheet with reflexive pronouns, and statements like “Do your teeth look this white?” The teacher asks Tran, “Whose teeth are these?” Tran correctly answers “mine”, but the teacher is looking for “your”. There is a sad miscommunication at this time and confusion. Another teacher hands him a short paragraph about war, which excites Tran. But instead of discussing its meaning and having a conversation about the topic, the teacher just goes over vocabulary and grammar in the paragraph. This makes me sad.
I think teachers don’t like Wilhelm’s idea of a learning-centered classroom, because unlike student and teacher-centered classrooms where the student is responsible for what they learn, more blame can be put on the teacher (2001). This makes me think that a lot of teachers are “pansies”. How can you teach effectively if you don’t have confidence in what you believe in? Also they may not like the fact that this would force them to actually get to know their students and make personal connections to them.

“Can't Swim? Well here’s a float”

Another problem I see that Wilhelm addresses is making assignments too easy. He states, “When you have assigned a task and the students successfully complete it without help, they could already do it. They have been taught nothing” (2001). This can be especially detrimental to special education students and ESL students. While some teachers may actually be trying to teach students to swim, for other students, teachers may just give them a float and pity them. It’s like saying, “You are too stupid to learn how to swim.” In fact, both special ed and ESL students just need more varieties of learning strategies taught to them—they need to be taught in a different way than other students. As Robert Jimenez notes, ESL students need some grammar, but more than that they need help with content areas since they can probably speak conversational English just fine, but specialized vocabulary for science and other areas make English more difficult (2004). Teachers think that they can handle diverse classrooms, but really without special training (and an open mind), they can’t. When I went to observe an ESL classroom for 5th grade, they pulled out the Spanish students to ESL class, where they sang songs and drew pictures. They handed these students a float. Jimenez also says that ESL students need more contact with native speakers (2004). In a literary and open classroom of learners, these students could share their experiences and become closer to their classmates instead of being marginalized and stared at for their differences. A learning environment can support and embrace diversity instead of ignoring and isolating it.
Wilhelm explains that not only do students need to be engaged in real activities with purpose and meaning in their lives, but also they need to be taught how to connect literature with real life (2001). I think this in itself makes learning fun. He says, “Engaged learning is fun because it is challenging, relevant, and purposeful but is supported in such a way that makes success possible” (Wilhelm, 2001). Krashen also believes that the best learning occurs when students don’t even realize that they are learning, mostly because they are enjoying it (2003).

**Against New Criticism**

I had a very difficult time with literature in high school because I was not allowed to have my own interpretation about readings—only the teacher’s (and Cliffs’). I struggled with English class and began to hate reading novels, just like the boy who wrote the poem at the beginning of Chapter 2 (Wilhelm, 2001). In his other book, *You Gotta BE the Book*, Wilhelm explains how painful New Criticism methods can be very harmful. He explains, “New Criticism is a highly systematic and formalistic approach to rigorous, analytical readings of literary texts” (1997). It sounds more behaviorist than humanistic. It emphasizes what the “rightness” of the text is. I had always wondered what it meant when there was a question about “what is the author’s message?” I always thought, “How did my teacher know what the author’s message is? Did she talk to them? Is there a secret book that only teachers have where the authors explain what they meant?” I became more and more disconnected with the class novels, thinking that authors just wrote the annoy the crap out of me, or so that teachers could have a job.

I was rarely with an English teacher that promoted a “democratic” classroom like Wilhelm does. He says that a democratic classroom promotes thinking about what a text may mean, and have many meanings depending on others’ perspectives (2001). Maybe my school was Communist.
Wilhelm gave a very powerful message in his previous book, which made me shout “yeah!” in my head as I read it. I don’t want my students stuck with hating reading as I did. In his book he said,

“If literature does not speak to student lives, then what good is it? If students don’t come to love reading now, when will they ever read later? If teachers cannot help students to read better, with more purpose, better attitudes and greater power, then what good are we? I am sick and tired of teaching the “classics” and blaming the kids who can’t answer my questions as ‘lazy’ or ‘below grade level’. If I am really going to be worthy of the title ‘teacher’ then I had better start understanding what this act of reading is all about, and I’d better find out how to let kids in on the secret” (1997)

He continues with the same message about connecting literature to life and helping students “enter the story world” that I support (and has a great appendix of strategies) (1997).

This kind of methodology (if you can call it that) really kills any desire to read. Perhaps Brian’s dislike of books in Wooten’s experience stemmed from teachers believing in New Criticism. By helping him make personal connections to books and activating background knowledge using “Writing Connections” activities, a boy that could otherwise have been marked as special ed opened up and revealed great reading comprehension and writing skills (2000). Take that, New Criticism.

**Learning and Comprehension Strategies**

Although I don’t believe that he comes right out and says it, but Wilhelm explains many learning strategies to teach students to help them in class (and out in the world). He explains “frontloading”, activities to get students thinking, and how to formulate questions that sound more subjective than objective (i.e., “Why does this happen?” instead of “Where did this happen?”) (2001). I have learned about the great effects of teaching learning strategies from many books and authors and how sad it is that many teachers just think that students either already know how to use them and don’t, or that
they just auto-magically appear in students’ heads. Teachers need to be a model for strategies.

Donald Deshler’s chapter in Bridging the Literary Achievement Gap exemplifies the need to teach learning strategies to special ed and ESL students instead of going “aww, aren’t they sad” and tossing them the float. Sometimes this is all they need to move up and get to the same level as their peers. Learning strategies act as academic survival skills and require personal connections, scaffolding, sufficient time and engagement in activities (2004). He also says that learning strategies need not be confined just to reading but all content areas (2004). There are also ESL methodologies that also believe teaching learning strategies is important for ESL students (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Michael Pressley (as well as Krashen) also takes into account comprehension strategies, which is also dotted throughout Wilhelm’s books (but again, not explicitly stated). According to Pressley, Vygotskian thought explains that strategies must be taught long-term and internalized, and students need opportunities to reflect on the impact of these strategies (2002), such as Wooten’s metacognitive pieces after writing connections (2000). Teachers need to put more focus on reading to learn than learning to read (2002).

**Fostering a Love of Reading**

Another point that Wilhelm wants to make but might not have explicitly said was there needs to be a desire to read outside of the classroom. If students are so hyped up in class over discussions about what they’ve read in class, it makes sense that students would want to read outside of class—provided there is time, since homework given is too much. Krashen brings this up, promoting it for ESL instruction as well. Reading and sharing is universal. If people don’t read, they don’t learn about the world. They are shut in their own little box. Who knows, maybe if more people read, there would be less war.

Krashen notes that having silent reading time promotes language development and great comprehensible input for non-native speakers of English (2003). He also explains this great idea of “flow”—the idea that people become so absorbed in reading that time seems to stop, and they fall into the book (2003). That sounds like a great place
to go. If only there were more teachers to help students unlock that door to the “story world”.

**The Learning Community**

One of Wilhelm’s ongoing themes is about “the learning community”. I think this is perfect. It’s the best way to learn about anything. To learn, people need to read new things and discuss how they feel about the new things, no matter what subject you are in (maybe it could even be possible for mathematics). I wish in my school I was in such a learning community. Not only did I shun from novels, but I myself was shunned. I began teaching myself Japanese language in high school, and no one understood why I would ever want to learn something outside of class. I was ostracized for…learning. Group activities were depressing. I was always the last one chosen and the one that ended up doing most of the work, if not all. To this day I don’t speak out much in class, not because I am shy, but have been conditioned to think that all of my ideas are too “weird”. A learning community would not tolerate that kind of thought in the classroom. Although it sounds sad, I want to use my experiences to make sure that does not happen in any of my classrooms.

The idea of book clubs and frequent open discussions sound great. It opens people’s minds, makes them more tolerant of differences, and makes the world a better place (while also making you very smart).

**An Indirect Example of Wilhelm’s Main Points**

While I was reading this book, all the teaching strategies and activities Wilhelm explains reminded me of one of my college teachers, Dr. Chou. He was my “History of China” teacher. As a comparison, I was also taking “History of Japan”. Although I like Japanese culture more than Chinese, I made a much higher grade in Chinese history. This is because he created a learning-centered classroom. When he assigned readings (which for most of the classes at that time I did not read because they were boring), we were forced to read them because he would assign reaction essays for them. He would have a
topic that involved changes in histories, historical personalities, or comparing and contrasting—not just boring things like “What happened in 1812?” In class the next day, we would discuss some issues we brought up in our essays. Sometimes he would use the essays as debate topics, and have role-plays where one side believes in one idea, and the other side in another idea. Rather than putting emphasis on memorizing dates and events (like my History of Japan teacher did), Dr. Chou emphasized changes in history and what could have caused the changes. In his class we did not have tests but essays (which can be harder than tests sometimes). I had only 2 tests for my whole grade for History of Japan. After probably 10 hours in 2 days of cramming all of Japan into my head and sprouting it as fast I could on a test, I made the lowest grade in my undergraduate history—a C—a C in a class about my favorite country in the world. I made an A in History of China. And to this day I know way more about China than Japan.

I don’t know if Dr. Chou ever read any of Wilhelm’s books, but I think he was a great example and I want to emulate that kind of classroom. Either that or my other teacher was just plain hateful.
I am including my philosophy within the book essay because they are so intertwined. I am even planning to buy Wilhelm’s books.

However, one point that few authors have mentioned yet is that people must learn about themselves first before they can learn about others and the world. Wilhelm mentions this when he notes that it is very important that teachers know not just what they are teaching, but why they are teaching in that way (2001). Just like many people say that one cannot love someone else until they love themselves, I believe the same goes for intelligence and knowledge. You must start with yourself and branch out from there.

**Journal Writing**

A great way is by journal writing. There are many different ways to integrate journal writing. Wooten’s reading responses through “writing connections” is a type of journal writing (2000). Being able to connect your past experiences with text through writing is a great way to open yourself to the world. Both Piaget and Vygotsky agree that personal development results from experiences in the environment and reflections on these experiences (Wilhelm, 2001).

Wilhelm also introduces an interesting idea of teachers writing journals about their classroom experiences—writing down what worked and what didn’t, plans, and ideas (1997). I did this without thinking about it when I made lesson plans in Jeju, Korea.

As I said before, I was ostracized by my classmates, but I think I gained my focus and strength by writing in a diary. It was my only release, and one of the only things that would listen to my problems. I still have my diaries and will cherish them.

Journals are also great for assessing students’ needs in the classroom and learning more about them as an individual, as well as a human being rather than just a student.
After students become aware of their own experiences, they need to realize that other people have experiences, too. They may be good or bad, different or similar. Now that they can understand themselves, they need to understand others.

To create this in a classroom, a print-rich environment is needed. Students should be allowed and encouraged to read about various things and to share their responses. Krashen vehemently promotes the idea of silent reading, and how just by reading and sharing, not only can ESL students express themselves to native speakers, but also learn from practicing the language (2003). All people need some help finding words to express themselves, and it’s hard to do that by yourself. All students need to have a love for some kind of reading to promote them as functional members of society.

ESL students in a class can make a story about their experiences (which would be great for social studies). This would not only improve their language skills, but also could bring a marginalized student into a learning community. Just think of how great a classroom could be if Tran from My Trouble is My English had more opportunities to learn about his classmates’ culture and if sharing his experiences made him closer to his community (1995).
Works Cited:


