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Call for Manuscripts

Status Update: Reflections on the Profession and Teacher Professional Development
Issue 56.2 (Fall/Winter, 2016)
Deadline: October 1, 2016

Our profession is not for the weak, nor is it for those unable to adapt to change. In Ohio, just a few of these recent changes include: RIT, the 3rd Grade Reading Guarantee, OTES, PARCC (it was in, now it’s out), virtual learning and teaching, College Credit Plus – this being a descriptive rather than exhaustive list. As these changes continue at a dizzying pace and policies are made in boardrooms rather than classrooms, it becomes increasingly important for teachers to be able to document these changes in terms of how they impact teaching, learning, and our profession – both the academic community at-large as well as individuals’ relation to and participation within it. Histories, both personal and collective, play an important role in making sense of the current status of our profession. They can also help us think about how we develop the next generation of ELA teachers.

This issue of OJELA provides a “status update” through reflective narratives, empirical and anecdotal evidence, creative expression, and recommendations, about the nature of ELA teaching in 2016. Veterans of the profession can help to shed light on what has changed and why; mid-career teachers can share how curricular and policy shifts have changed the roles they currently occupy; new and pre-service teachers can help us identify aspects of their professional development currently missing from teacher education programs. Most importantly, contributions to this issue help us to name what matters most and what we value, here and now, in our professional lives.

Literacy | Language | Social Justice: Students as Citizens and Advocates
Issue 57.1 (Spring/Summer, 2017)
Deadline: March 1, 2017

We often acknowledge the importance of “college and career readiness” in matters of ELA teaching and learning, but how do our students use their literacy skills in other areas of their lives as citizens of local, global, and “glocal” communities? As social movements play an increasingly important role in our media landscape, we might consider how these movements and the causes they support – from civil rights, gender equality, and immigration to disability, poverty, and health advocacy – might provide timely and culturally relevant material for teaching English language arts.

This issue asks ELA teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches to consider the intersections of literacy teaching and learning with social justice advocacy. What pedagogies and best practices support our students’ exploration of social, cultural, and political issues that are important to them? In what ways does teaching literacy with an aim of social justice complicate teachers’ roles as advocates, allies, or activists (and should we take on these new roles)? How might we teach students to read, respond to, and critique social justice issues and actions in ways that strengthen their literacy practices? What particular powers do the arts of language hold for teaching for social justice?

For more information, consult the author and manuscript guidelines on pages 4 and 5 of this issue.
Author Guidelines

The Ohio Journal of English Language Arts (OJELA) is the official journal of the Ohio Council of Teachers of English (OCTELA). Published twice per year, OJELA circulates to approximately 2000 language arts teachers of elementary, secondary, and college students. The journal seeks to publish contributions on all aspects of language arts learning and teaching. We seek a variety of submissions based on the issue theme. Submissions must be original, previously unpublished work.

Feature Articles
Manuscripts concerned with topics related to the issue theme. Submissions are invited for the 2015/2016 issues of OJELA on the following themes:

- Volume 56.2 (Fall 2016): Status Update: Reflections on the Profession and Teacher Professional Development
- Volume 57.1 (Spring 2017): Literacy | Language | Social Justice: Students as Citizens and Advocates

See the Call for Manuscripts section of this issue for theme descriptions and full calls for submission. OJELA editors also welcome articles on any topic concerning language arts teaching at any level.

Teaching Matters
Submissions focused on classroom strategies for teaching English language arts at any level, K-college. Submissions must be original teaching ideas. Descriptions of activities, practices, and procedures are welcome, but must be accompanied by rationale, explaining how methods were developed and used and for what purposes. Submissions might include a lesson's objectives, target grade level, appropriate assessments, and classroom handouts. Submissions to this section should build a kind of “how-to” knowledge for other teachers.

Conversations
Extended interviews with teachers, researchers, teacher educators, policymakers, advocates, or others involved in the field of English language arts who do interesting work. Interviews may focus on the issue theme or may be about any topic related to English language arts teaching. In addition to the question-and-answer format of the interview, submissions should include introductory and concluding sections to the piece. Submissions to this department should spotlight important contributions of individuals working within the field.

Creative Writing
Submissions of short fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry on the subject of teaching or teaching-related topics, in any genre.

Reviews
Submissions that provide short reviews of resources of any kind for teaching English language arts. Types of resources include, but are not limited to: books, media, software, websites, workshops, conferences, institutes, or learning communities. Reviews of classroom materials (e.g., young adult texts, learning management software) or professional development resources are especially appropriate.

Reader Forum
To encourage broader participation from readership, this venue is designed as a “letters to the editor” section of the journal – focusing on ideas related to articles published in the journal, featured themes, reader responses, or ideas in the field of English language arts teaching in general.

Submit queries and submissions for OJELA to editor Patrick Thomas at pthomas1@udayton.edu.
The following guidelines are intended to answer the most common questions related to preparing and submitting manuscripts to OJELA. More detailed questions and other inquiries should be addressed to the editors: pthomas1@udayton.edu

- Manuscripts should be submitted electronically. Manuscripts should be formatted using 12-point font, double-spacing, and either APA or MLA style. All pages should be numbered. In general, manuscripts are expected to be 10-20 pages in length.
- All manuscripts should be submitted as three attachments in Microsoft Word. The first attachment should be a cover sheet that lists the title of the manuscript, author’s name, address, school affiliation, telephone, fax, email address, and a brief author bio. The second attachment should contain the title of the manuscript and the manuscript text, which should be free of any internal references to the author’s identity. The third attachment should be a letter that guarantees that the article is your original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere.
- Authors should submit their submissions to: ojelaeditor@gmail.com

Style Issues: The readership of OJELA includes language arts teachers at all grade levels, so we recommend you adopt a conversational style that avoids jargon and highly specialized terms. The use of “I” is appropriate. We do not accept term papers or other lengthy manuscripts overrun with references. Manuscripts should also adhere to the “Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications,” available from NCTE (1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801-1096).

Accepted manuscripts are edited in consultation with the principal author. Because of publication deadlines, however, the editors reserve the right to make minor revisions without seeking prior approval from the author.

If you reference other writers’ work, please follow either MLA or APA style, as outlined in the current MLA or APA style manuals.

Tables, graphs, and charts are often difficult to read and expensive to typeset. Unless absolutely necessary, please do not submit manuscripts containing these items. Photographs and artwork are accepted with manuscripts, although you should keep in mind that permission to use images is required. Authors must obtain written permission from the photographer and the subjects in the photograph. (See Permissions Policy).

If tables, graphs, charts or other artwork are an essential part of your manuscript, you must submit these items as separate files. Embedded images will not be accepted. Charts and graphs that are drawn using numerical values must have these values accessible, either as separate line list items or on the art itself. This allows us to accurately reformat this information to fit the column width of the issue.

Art/Photography: We encourage readers to share art and pictures that reflect the learning communities in your school and your classroom. All reproduced artwork should be at least 8” x 10” and on high quality, opaque paper. Photography submitted as prints should be printed on at 5” x 7”—or bigger—glossy paper. Digital images must be 3 megapixels or better.

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Manuscript Review Process: The editors will acknowledge receipt of your manuscript with an email. We initially read all manuscripts to assure that they are appropriate to the journal. If we think your manuscript does not fit our journal, we contact you and suggest, when possible, other outlets for your work. Inquiries about possible manuscripts can be sent to ojelaeditor@gmail.com.

If we deem a manuscript appropriate for OJELA, we send it out to at least two reviewers. Reviewers make recommendations for publication and for revision. Once recommendations have been received by the editors, we make final decisions about whether to publish or not. If we accept your manuscript for publication, we will contact you and, more than likely, remain in contact with you while working through the revision/editorial process. This process usually takes three months.

How to Contact the Editors: Send manuscripts and correspondence to: pthomas1@udayton.edu or contact Patrick Thomas, Department of English, University of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469-1520, phone: 937-229-3463 or email: pthomas1@udayton.edu
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Igniting a Passion for Reading

In the early years, teachers spend a great deal of time on helping students learn how to read. Eventually the transition occurs where the focus shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” But behind the technical aspects of decoding and fluency, the goal of any teacher should be to instill a love or passion for reading. How do we do this? One great way to increase how a student engages and interacts with text is using sketching to stretch and expand thinking.

The Role of Metacognition

Before getting into sketching, we must first examine the role of metacognition. In Strategies That Work, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis tell us that “proficient readers, then, adapt strategies to their purposes for reading. But matching strategies to one’s purpose requires metacognitive knowledge – an awareness and understanding of how one thinks and uses strategies during reading” (16). As an elementary teacher, I started teaching my students that ‘real reading’ is an interaction between text and thinking. Tanny McGregor has an excellent chapter devoted to metacognition in her book Comprehension Connections. In it she offers a launching sequence for explicitly teaching metacognition with the concrete experience of “The Reading Salad.” She stresses that “taking time to explore metacognition sets a foundation on which to build” (11).

After investing in the direct teaching of what metacognition is, elementary teachers can immerse students in thinking about thinking. Through modeling, guided practice, and gradual release of responsibility, children start to let their thinking evolve. This is where I start to hear students moving beyond what we call “captain obvious” (in my classroom) to deeper levels of thinking. This is where the excitement begins.

When teaching metacognition, the focus is really self-awareness. It is helping my students improve their learning by better understanding how they think, process, and ‘unpack’ their ideas, attitudes, perspectives, and reactions. Marilyn Price-Mitchell describes seven strategies to improve metacognition, which include teaching students reflection and reflexive thinking; “reflexivity is the metacognitive process of becoming aware of our biases” (n.p.). In my classroom, my students often struggle with separating how they think or feel about a topic or event and this impacts comprehension. They are quick to project their attitudes onto characters or individuals they read about. Therefore, getting students to discuss how they think about a topic is the first step to being self-aware. We do this by thinking aloud.

I watch my students become more invested in text because they are interacting with it. They are thinking and reflecting and thinking some more. I found that some types of texts lent themselves more than others to deep discussions. Then I hit a wall with poetry. As a reader myself, I struggled with poetry because I didn’t know how to truly analyze words and phrases. I had trouble making sense of what felt cryptic to me. If I struggled, then how was I going to help students? My metacognitive process needed help because ‘thinking aloud’ wasn’t enough.

Sketch-to-Stretch

Somewhere I came across the sketch-to-stretch strategy. Not sure where I saw it first but a simple search today will turn up a wealth of results. I was teaching 2nd grade and using literacy stations during my reading workshop. One of those stations was “poetry” where I featured a poem that connected with a current theme or topic in the classroom. After introducing the strategy, my students couldn’t get enough! They loved how they could express what they couldn’t put into words with sketches! Over time, I discovered that I needed to redirect my students into more sketching and less coloring as thinking started to turn into full-blown illustrations worthy of publication. Sketching became over time a way to help my students process their thinking; we looked at it more as doodling to get our brains going.

Heidi Weber is a National Board Certified Teacher, Google Certified Educator, an OCTELA Outstanding Educator. She is a Gifted Intervention Specialist for 3rd and 4th grade in Loveland Elementary School in Loveland, Ohio.
Re-Discovering Reading

When I was moved to 3rd grade to teach language arts only, I created “sketch-to-stretch” notebooks for my students (we used comprehension notebooks so we could have a collection of thinking over time.) Then I moved on to 3rd/4th grade gifted reading. Sketching one’s thinking about poetry remained a popular station, especially when I started presenting poems with complex structures and word choice. Students enjoyed the challenge. I enjoyed the sketches and thinking students were doing. My readers were becoming very passionate about poetry because they could sketch to stretch their thinking. Some found they had trouble thinking about a poem without a pencil and paper.

About the same time I was helping students discover the power of the sketch, I was parenting a gifted ADHD child of my own who struggled in school. She was an avid doodler and after realizing that she often paid better attention when she was drawing, I began to advocate for her. Eventually her teachers accepted the idea of her doodling in class as a way to help her connect and take notes. Then I realized that I, too, was a doodler. My “doodles” were scribbles in margins to help me keep from losing my mind in lectures and meetings. Needless to say, I made the connection. Sketching really does help with our metacognitive process.

As I embraced sketching, it never really occurred to me to use it more frequently. It made sense in note-taking and in breaking down a poem. Enter Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst and their Reading Nonfiction: Notice and Note Stances, Signposts, and Strategies:

Often, when students declare that a text is confusing, they begin their lamentations with comments such as “I don’t see what it means” or “I wish there was a picture.” Those comments are clues that the problem in comprehending that text is with visualizing what the author is saying. When visualizing is the problem, encourage kids to use a fix-up strategy called Sketch-to-Stretch. (221)

SMH… Smacking my head, I realized that this was something I should have been encouraging all along!

We started with “I have a Dream”

Teaching gifted 3rd and 4th graders provides a unique challenge. I need to balance challenging texts with age-appropriate content. Sometimes that can be difficult, and sometimes that can be downright fun. Working under the theme of injustice and inequality, I presented my 4th graders with the transcript of Dr. King’s “I have a Dream” speech. It was a perfect choice to use for our work with primary sources. In Examining the Evidence, H. Austin and K. Thompson explain work with a source “involves keeping in mind what you decided was the purpose of the material and its intended audience and interpreting details in that light” (81). My students were familiar with the speech because they had watched short clips of it before as 3rd graders with me; they were familiar with the audience and purpose, so it was a perfect selection.

Ready to ‘closely read,’ I gave the text to my students. We had done work reading through word lenses before because “looking closely at word choice allows us to get to the heart of what people are saying and thinking; it helps us see their motivations more clearly and decide how we wish to understand them” (Lehman & Roberts, 33). Dr. King’s speech was filled with figurative language and complex vocabulary. For example

One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still badly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination…But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt….We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation

I knew it would be a tremendous challenge. After a first attempt at reading, my students were overwhelmed and right where I wanted them to be.

Immediately I saw the frustration on the faces of my students. I smiled at them; they know that is my goal: to frustrate them and work through it with them. This was the signpost Beers and Probst described as “Word Gaps” and where they “focus on tools kids might use when a lack of word knowledge gets in the way of comprehension” (169). Our primary tool would be sketching. Armed with notebooks, an assortment of flair pens (thanks Tanny!) and iPads to look up word meanings when needed, we got to work.

Our first stop was “Five Score Years Ago…”. Other phrases, such as “beacon of light” and “crippled by the manacles of segregation” captured their attention. As we got to the section where the ‘bank of justice,’ ‘default on promissory note,’ ‘bad check,’ and ‘insufficient funds’ loomed, we took many detours. Students sketched buildings labeled ‘bank of justice’ and captioned with explanations such as “they want ‘paid’ for what they deserve and that is freedom.” One favorite was a replica of a check with the heading of “freedom,” written to “the negro people” from “the whites.” (Note: we had extensive discussions on how we did not like the use of these terms but only used them in the context of the various texts we were reading.)

As the children talked, sketched, looked up word meanings, and sketched more, they were processing their thinking and igniting their reading passion. Sketches were serious. Sketches were humorous. Sketches were
elaborate. Sketches were simple. Students could not get enough. As our time for the day ended, they were BEGGING to take their heavily annotated copies and notebooks home to continue working. When I said not yet, they moaned; when I told them we would continue the next time we met, they cheered.

We continued exploring the speech for a few more meeting times. The excitement and enthusiasm never wavered. Engagement with the text was increased because we were expressing our thoughts and ideas through kinesthetic avenues; we were learning-by-doing. Sketching then became an outlet for exploring metacognition. As students sketched they were thinking about their own thinking! I was amazed at how passionately my students devoured the text. Complex phrases and challenging ideas were tackled with visual representations. Figurative language came alive.

Further Explorations

Next we ventured into other texts, reading excerpts from Through My Eyes to experience what Ruby Bridges went through in her firsthand account. Students processed their emotions of injustice with detailed images. They tried to make sense of why whites were so cruel and unkind. Their feelings were strong and their sketches conveyed it. Questions that couldn’t be answered lingered.

To explore why people of color were treated so unfairly, we went back in time and read Henry's Freedom Box, a wonderful picture book based on the true story of how Henry ‘Box’ Brown escaped slavery by mailing himself north in a box. We marveled at how determined Henry must have been to gain freedom from the horrors of slavery. Sketches of a man stuffing himself into a box held strong meanings for the children below the surface. This connected to what students were learning in Social Studies as they learned about Ohio’s role in the Underground Railroad: from Ohio Social Studies Standards 4th grade, history strand, topic heritage: “Sectional issues divided the United States after the War of 1812. Ohio played a key role in these issues, particularly with the anti-slavery movement and the Underground Railroad.” While students were gaining an understanding what a slave felt like, they were comprehending why individuals risked so much to help slaves escape.

Our next stop was with an excerpt from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, a realistic, historical fiction novel set in Mississippi during the Depression. Students gasped when they discovered what Little Man saw in the “new” textbook he was presented on the first day of school: the image of the insert where “Book Condition” and “Issued to” was depicted. After examining carefully, comprehension dawned on the children and they quickly sketched the empathy they had for this character with figures that depicted large frowns. Emotions poured out through each sketch along with words to describe what they inferred. While fiction, this text connected beautifully to everything we had learned so far. Students were reacting and asking to read more.

The text tour moved on to Little Rock Girl 1957: How a Photograph Changed the Fight for Integration. This text drew us into examining claims and evidence and the use of primary sources. Sketches were becoming more detailed and informational as students synthesized their understanding. One in particular captured the inequality with a drawing of two girls side by side. The white girl in the sketch had bold lines stretching around her to portray being treated extremely well; the black girl next to her had holes in her shirt. The accompanying caption declared: “Whites are billionaires compared to blacks. The whites think they are better.” As my students poured their feelings out into their drawings, they continued to go back to the text for more. It was at this point that students started locating more examples of integration struggles; they were searching online and doing their own research. One student discovered information on The Clinton 12 (see a great clip from the NEA at https://youtu.be/tvOjRQPkmE4). Not only was a passion for reading ignited, but a fire for learning more burned.

Fanning the flame

Eager to continue the topic and theme, I directed the children to a multimedia experience (text and video clip) on the Sept. 1963 Birmingham Church Bombing found at http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/birmingham-church-bombing. At this point, students were emotionally invested, but they had gained an understanding of multiple perspectives. They didn’t agree with the actions of white people but they understood how the culture and bringing for generations perpetuated the attitudes of the people doing abominable things they were reading about. We didn’t stop there because some students realized that these issues were relevant today so we read an adapted version of a Washington Post article on Beyonce and the Super Bowl halftime show controversy, courtesy of Newsela.com (https://newsela.com/articles/beyonce-superbowl/id/14897/)

Since I teach my students that reading can be more than just engagement with print, I like to develop listening skills with audio texts and read alouds. It is still the interaction of text and thinking, just through a different medium. I recorded my reading from Sharon Draper’s fictional piece, Stella By Starlight. It was a short audio clip of the first two pages. Without
the corresponding text, students focused on the tone and mood of the excerpt and were attentive to details. They conveyed the fear of the children hiding from Klan members; they captured the magnitude of the burning cross and the how horrific the site of the hooded figures must have been. They were captivated and moved.

Saving the most powerful text for last, I read aloud an experience from a child who was a part of the 1963 Birmingham Children's March in We've Got a Job by Cynthia Levinson. My students were hooked with the line “I want to go to jail” declared by Audrey Faye Hendricks in the prologue. This extraordinary book is a collection of accounts from different children who participated in the march and a wonderful text to wrap up our unit. For this final text, we spent more time just having conversations, yet our discourse was driven and powered by the metacognition done along the way. It was exciting to listen to deeper connections and understanding gained during our journey and experiences. See samples of more sketches under the inequality/injustice theme at: http://ohioliteracyandlanguagearts.weebly.com/sketching-to-build-comprehension.html

Beyond this Theme

During this unit, my students were concurrently reading a text at home for our weekly book club. I began to see my many of my students using sketching thoughts about the novel A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle.

The value of taking notes lies in the extra time and deeper connections with the content as you reframe ideas in your own words--and now, images… Sharing these notes fortifies confidence, relevance, and motivation when students use each other's notes to further clarify and deepen understanding. (qtd. in Pillar, 14).

They were teaching each other with their sketches. For example, as we approached the climax of the story where the main characters are facing the evil “IT” and trying to escape, one reader considered the theme of love vs. hate and the conflict between protagonist and antagonist in a simple, but powerful sketch. Sketching was transcending our work with informational text and transporting students into profound interactions with fiction.

My observations revealed a high level of student interest and engagement. Still I was curious about what students were REALLY thinking about this strategy, so
I gave them a survey about their thoughts and feelings towards sketching. My questions were:

- How do you feel about using sketching to take notes and process your thinking about what you read?
- Did you enjoy using sketching to stretch your thinking about different texts?
- How likely are you to use sketching again when you read, listen, or take notes?
- Anything you want other people to know about your experience with sketching to stretch your thinking?

Thirty-two students responded and 50% reported that they ‘would like to use [sketching] often’ and 31% selected ‘I want to use [sketching] all the time!’ Five students said they ‘might use [sketching] sometimes and only one said ‘it’s not for me.’ Students had a chance to add comments about how they felt and what else they thought others should know. For example, one student commented, “Anybody else out there, you will love this. It doesn’t matter if you’re horrible at drawing or if you can’t even draw a stick figure. What matters is you expressing yourself through drawing.” Another student stated, “I want [others] to know that your pictures don’t have to be perfect! And my experience has been WONDERFUL! I think anyone who likes to dig deeper into what they read would really enjoy sketching about that!” While sketching may not have been for all of my students, the majority enjoyed the experience and plan to continue using. View all responses at: https://goo.gl/0GNAJX

**Sold on Sketching**

I am sold on sketching to create passionate readers. My students are unpacking their thinking and leaving lasting impressions of their ideas: “While doodling has often been seen as frivolous at best and distracting at worst, the idea of sketchnoting is grounding in neuroscience research about how to improve memory.” (Schwartz, n.p.) These texts will leave a lasting impression on my students; I have no doubt. More than that is the passion sketching brings to reading. My students want to read and learn more. Mike Rohde describes sketchnotes as “ideas, not art” and emphasizes that “sketchnotes are a way to think on paper using images and words...even bad drawings can convey good ideas” (7). That is what sketching to stretch and extend our thinking as we read has done for us. However I think we are processing more than ideas; we are dealing with our feelings and emotions as we seek to understand. And isn’t passion about strong feelings and emotions? It is for us... thanks to sketching, I have created more passionate readers!

**Works Cited**


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**OCTELA 2017**

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Teaching on the Edge: A College Professor and a High School Teacher Examine How to Improve Small Group Discussions of YA Texts

Kevin Cordi, PhD

Classroom teachers assign group work consisting of reading and discussing young adult texts, but how much time is allocated in exploring the diverse ways that students contribute to the group? More often than not, the time instead is spent explaining the assignment. Do we model or discuss how students should engage in the group? How do teachers encourage participation? The idea of classroom participation is a “ubiquitous idea in education, yet it is rarely defined or elaborated” (Shultz, 2009, p. 1). As Shultz notes, “educators have few metrics for gauging and evaluating participation, especially in classrooms with large number of students. Although the term is common, the vocabulary to describe participation is limited. (p. 5).”

Sometimes, teachers simply ask students to participate and hope for the best outcome. With this method – or non-method – too often students resign from the assignment, choosing not to participate. One reason is that we do not assist them on how to be productive in-group discussions. As teachers, college and high school, we often organize students into groups but do we rush students to work in groups without guidance. We don’t recognize or explain the types of talk students engage in when discussing novels, especially young adult texts? High school teacher Betsy Carpenter and I decided to examine how teens used talk when discussing young adult texts in small groups. We studied how students in small groups “talk about talk” and from knowing how students converse, we wondered, could we improve their discussions about YA texts and subsequently our teaching when planning small group lessons around different ways to engage in a novel. Would this study eventually influence talk about text?

Fear of Group Work

It is common to think that middle and high school teachers are engaging in small group discussion, but according to McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, & Flanagan, authors of Talking in Class, (2006) this is not the case. They state,

While it common to think of a typical English classroom as one in which a teacher engages students in engaging discussions about the stories and poems that they have read, current research reveals that seldom does authentic discussion occur in middle school and high school English classes. (p. xiii)

First, we acknowledge that some teachers are fearful or even find group work unproductive. As Fisher notes,

The fear, of course, is that the moment students are placed in any kind of group-work situation, chaos will ensue. Most teachers have good reason to be concerned, based on their own experiences as learners and as instructors. (Frey, Fisher, Allen, 2009, p. 70)

Therefore, we needed to recognize that group discussions were rare in the classroom, and that instead, “teacher talk” became the dominant discourse (Corden, 2001; Nystrand 1996). In fact, Nystrand et al. (2003) found no effective dialogue “in low-track eighth-and-ninth-grade classes.” This is an area that teachers need to have critical talk with students, but they are not. Students who are not achieving need to ask questions and build conversation around their questions. As Zwiers & Crawford (2009) note in the many small group discussions they have observed:

We have seen many small groups in which students never recognize meaning, never build on one another’s ideas, just fill in charts, share their own answers to questions, allow

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Re-Discovering Reading

one student to dominate and do all the work,
and work alone next to one another. (p. 70)

We wanted to design a method that would allow students to engage in an authentic conversation. Nystrand distinguishes between authentic discourse, which is dialogic in nature and recitation, not monologic (Bakhtin 1981; Christoph and Nystrand 2001; Nystrand 1997). In reciting a response, the teacher knows the expected answer, however an authentic conversation is one that is open to further discussion and is more open-ended. However, as McCann notes, “Simply throwing out an authentic question, however does not guarantee that an authentic discussion will ensue” (p. 3).

**Group Work Can Work**

We draw from the idea that successful group participation occurs when educators “design tasks that cause students to talk with one another, to hear how their peers approach the content and then to be able to compare this with their own approach” (Vacca, Lapp, Fisher, 2011, p. 373). How do we make conversation in groups more natural or as Nancie Atwell (1987) and Leila Christenbury (1994) support that talk should be likening to the discussions that occurs around the “dining room table?” However, as Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube (2001) ask in *Strategic Reading*.

But how do we achieve this with students who have little experience with “dining room table” chats, or with reading itself? Like learning to write about literature, learning to engage with texts the way these texts ask to be read and learning to talk about literature in common ways are skills that must be modeled, explicated, supported, practiced, reviewed, and revised. (p. 125).

The key to make this type of discussion is to build the engagement. As Barnes (2010) notes, the talk in small group should not be about reciting back what they already know, but instead be exploratory. He notes that this group arrangement should be a way that “each pupil to relate new ways of thinking to his or her preconceptions” (p. 8). Britton notes the “learning floats on a sea of talk” but what happens when students don’t know how to swim? We need to first explain to our students what type of talk will keep them floating above water, or better yet, dive deep into learning.

Scardamalia (2002) discovered that this type of exploration occurs when students are engaging in a problem that draws everyone together. She refers to this work as “collective cognitive responsibility” (p. 67). In particular, she notes conditions when this responsibility occurs:

- The work must be connected to real-world problems
- The work must involve ideas that are improvable.
- The score of the work should not be overly prescriptive (groups find their own way).
- Group members should have shared responsibility for outcomes.
- The work should have embedded assessment that allows members to evaluate their own success. (pp. 75-76)

These were the guiding principles Ms. Carpenter and I kept in mind in the following study. We wanted to engage in authentic discussion for all members in the group.

**Our Study**

With the assistance of an ALAN grant, over a timespan of six weeks, I recorded and videoed 33GB of data of two Junior English classes (general level) discussions of the 2010 novel *Edges* by Lena Roy. We placed a digital recorder with each group. We listened to their small group discussions to learn how they apply what we ask and more importantly, does the talk lead to authentic conversations?

Stating this, we do recognize there is an initial need to perform for the microphone with each group, but with each use, this lessened.

**Preparing the Groups—Talking about Narrative Dimensions to Engage Students**

We needed to present new ways to look at narrative. First, we decided to introduce the students to the idea of narrative dimensions as a way to engage in the text. I grounded my work using Ochs and Capps’ book *Living Narrative* (2001). They apply specific language to address how narrative functions as an interactive way to make meaning. This includes the six dimensions of narrative: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. Then, we discussed how to apply them to young adult texts when we were and were not working with the groups. I initially drew upon this specific language when discussing the significance of narrative use with the high school class. Ms. Carpenter helped me chose language that was more accessible for the
students. The original language was distant for the students. We changed the terms. We still discussed the dimensions but now we asked them as a series of questions.

However, I soon discovered as James Barton (1995) points out that “leading an effective discussion can be one of the most difficult tasks of teaching” (p. 346). It was too much to have each group to look at all the questions; instead, we had them look for one dimension at a time per class period. We were asking them to examine too many questions at a time. As Christenbury and Kelly (1983) indicate, this can cause a student to hesitate or freeze over a response. This is why we changed it to one question.

Another early obstacle was that that we found that starting with literary terms (foreshadowing, denouement, rising action) did not help the students move quickly to asking authentic questions about the text. From listening to the tapes and asking the students questions, we decided early on that we were spending too much time defining terms, instead of being engaged in exploratory talk. From then on, as a practice, we avoided language that was couched in literature contexts such as rising action, denouement, and climax. Instead, we used language that concentrated on how the narratives in the novel were shared, interrupted, and debated.

We examined the actual talk in the novel; both what was said and why something might not be said. Students began to look less for who was the protagonist or antagonist or what was the turning point in a chapter, but instead, examined the novel as conversations of the characters and why characters chose to change or not and used the language of the characters to support decisions. They began to see the novel as a cast of characters whose interaction could change with each decision. This provided us a new language to discuss the actions and motivations in the novel.

Instead of looking for one or two changes that built the conflict, we examined the characters as a dynamic, interactive group of people making decisions that altered the course of not only the work of the book, but their choices. By concentrating on the novel’s narratives, the group discussions of the students about the narrative dimensions became energetic and understood.

**Narrative Dimensions**

Before discussing what occurred in the classroom, there is a need to address each narrative dimension. This will help support the dialogue and questions that the students asked during the six weeks that I was in the classroom.

In *Living Narrative*, Ochs & Capps examine stories in the context of everyday conversations; often the same type of discussion heard on a back porch. The discussions outlined in the book involve people talking with one another. Ochs and Capps state these reciprocal conversations occur can be understood by identifying narrative dimensions. These dimensions can occur in varying degrees. For example, a told story by a performer can have low tellership because only the teller is performing. However when a group tells together, they create high tellership. Our contention is that the talk that occurs in everyday conversation and the dialogue that occurs within a YA novel can also occur within these dimensions. These conversations can be fragments, neglected, extended, shared and/or discarded.

**How Interactive Narrative Applies to the Classroom**

From listening to the recordings, we noticed that in the classroom, students not only talk about assignment, but also about their personal lives. Each conversation emerges from the others in the group. It is a shared and active way to make meaning of what is said. When the conversations are voiced, they are, in a great sense, performed. “Performance re-situates narratives as an object of study; narrative is both making and a doing” (Bauman, 1978, p. 3). However, what is said can often be messy.

**Narrative a Messy Meaning**

Narratives and exploring them is a messy business: it is a “healthy disorder” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p.
Each utterance, broken or whole, contributes to the discussions. Narratives are sometimes shared in fragments, whole segments or they are dropped, neglected, or advanced by other narratives. These can be found in conversations that occur in small groups and in texts that students read.

**Using classroom model to discuss small group discussions**

Although students are often told to “work in small groups,” we wanted our students to see a model of what happens in a small group discussion before working in a group. I video-recorded college students discussing the graphic wordless picture book *The Arrival* (2007) by Shaun Tan. My college students struggled together to discover the book’s meaning. The high school students divided into small groups and discussed the narratives shared by a select person in the video. Each group began to stress who talked the most and who talked the least and why. They recorded who they thought had authority and who did not.

We discussed how the conversations developed, if they were fragmented, complete, or unfinished. This provided the groundwork for them to think about conversations that occur within their own group discussions.

**Setting the Tone with a Personal Told Story: Introducing the Dimensions**

I told the students about a story that I had researched. I interviewed Charlie Deleo, the man who was the curator for the Statue of Liberty for 29 years and after seven months of interviews; he decided he did not want to be interviewed anymore. I was working on an oral version of his story. This led me to discuss the idea of “tellability.”

Although he quit the interview, I explained that I still had a story to tell. I asked the students. Did I own the story? Did I have high or low tellability to share it? I explained that others were involved in the shaping of it, does that permit me any rights to tell it? It could be said that we shared tellership.

Tellership measures a teller’s involvement within a conversation narrative, as, “the extent and kind of involvement of conversational partners in the actual recounting of a narrative” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 24). I discussed how telling Charlie Deleo’s story helped me tell my grandfather’s Ellis Island story. Students discussed, and some even defended, that I had the right to tell both stories. In any case, the class began to see the significance of ownership of stories and the questions that surrounding it.

They began to discuss the tellership surrounding the Statue of Liberty story, and thereby were able to discuss the text as one that could be told by more than one person.

**Reading Edges**

The above activity set the tone to discuss these how these narrative dimensions operate in the novel *Edges* (2010) by Lena Roy. In this story, there are alternating narrators and the question of tellership and tellability are intentionally complicated. In many ways, the novel is co-constructed through the voices of the novel. Even though the novel is often written with one primary author, in this case two alternating, other character’s dialogue, the actual writer of the text in relation to the dominant voice is frequently in a dramatic interplay that helps co-construct the novel. A minor character’s dialogue is deliberate and if seen as part of a co-construction of intentional voices in the novel, the importance of the minor character rises.

When directed to examine the narratives embedded in the novels, students read deliberately for this co-construction of conversational narratives in a young adult text. We discussed how each character in a novel negotiates the meaning. Students began to read for these co-constructions. “The idea of co-construction has been examined as a new way of examining narrative and steering away from the distinction of the active teller and passive audience” (Norrick, 2000, p. 133). Students began to read for who was telling the story and who stopped them from telling. They examined the affordances outlined by the characters in the book and the author of the writing.

**Introducing the Text:**

**Language of Text/ Language of Students**

*Edges* is told by two narrators in alternating chapters within two distinct environments— New York City and Moab, Colorado. One way the novel alternates tellability and tellership is the way they use flashback and include magical realism. Animal spirit guides such as the Bear attempts to guide their thinking. The characters are influenced by the appearance of these images.

In the novel it is sometimes deliberately hard to separate what is real and what is fiction. For many of the students this is the first hybrid of this kind that they have read. This mystical novel allows for Betsy and I to talk about how the conversations of the characters support different environments within the novel. The narratives change with the environments.
Language of the text can deter investment

From listening to the students talk about the novel, we realized there were terms that were in the novel that the students needed to know. For example, many of these students from rural Ohio had never experienced a youth hostel or traveled outside of Ohio. When students engaged in small groups, we noticed the students would gloss over the words they did not recognize. Students expressed a hard time examining talk if they did not understand the references the characters were discussing. We had them chart unfamiliar words and assigned designated times during class to discuss them. We encouraged them to talk about what words confused them or gave them pause in their reading. They turned these in and from this we were able to provide mini-lessons on youth hostels, Kachinas, spirit guides, Hopi, and settings such as Arches National Park in Utah.

Once the students were more familiar with these terms, they began to understand the conversations around them. We then had a working knowledge of the places, vocabulary, and context of the novel, so we began to examine closer the degrees of talk used in the novel. Here is how we were able to address the novel and students’ talk about the novel by studying the narrative dimensions.

Tellership

When we pressed students on “Who is telling the story?” they were confused if the main characters of Ava or Luke or some omniscient narrator were telling the story. Students investigated the dialogue and concentrated on how and why something is said. Instead of asking general questions like “what does the main character want?”, a concept many students found hard to grasp, we examined how a character acts when someone was speaking to another character and why they chose to remain silent, interrupt the other, or talk to another person. By concentrating on the how and why of the discussions in the novel, students began to use a new language to discuss the text and their understanding of their own talk.

For example, Luke would talk about being angry but we would ask the students to provide reasons for the anger. Students shared that his father contributed to Luke’s lack of tellership because Luke was too busy trying to save his father from alcoholism that he could not tell his own story. He was not allowed to tell his story, because he was too involved with his father’s story. He spoke for his father when his father could not because of his illness. When pressed on what was his story, we discovered he had many stories with many voices to share them: student, artist, son, and protector. Some of these were hidden and some of them were disclosed depending on whom he was addressing.

However, some students were still confused with the idea of how a person in the book could take on someone else’s story and not their own. One way we were able to address this was to have the students create advice pages for the characters. One group created an advice page for Ava and suggested, “She should see a counselor because she has more to talk about than her drinking alcohol.” From changing the way that the students interact with the narrative of Ava by taking on the role of an advisor, they were able to see the problems she had. This would be difficult if we simply asked for a character sketch.

In these assignments, students became journalists to increase further investment in the character and the reasons that she has problems. Students referred to the narratives in the text to construct their own narrative of advice for Ava.

Tellability

We asked the students to whom the story belonged. This question continued the discussion of why something was said. We also discussed the idea of internal dialogue with external talk. Students needed to wrestle with this idea. This led into the students examining dialogue and asking why something was said. One student discussed how although we could hear Luke telling the story, it might not belong to him. She said, “It’s Luke’s story but it does not say I, I said this, I said that. We may not know it is Luke’s story.”

In order to further complicate the issue of tellability, we again turned to role to explain this. However, this time we used role in a dramatic contexts. Instead of concentrating on the novel we began to examine the way we could use role and role-play to create more rationale for character’s actions. We concentrated not on the novel’s story but instead the complexity of the character’s role. As pioneering drama educator Dorothy Heathcote (1984) reminds us,

Drama is not stories retold in action. Drama is human beings confronted by situations, which change them because of what they must face in dealing with those challenges. As ‘open-ended’ situation is easier for teachers who feel themselves to be novices than a story where the beginning and ending are pre-known (p. 48).
Instead of retelling the story of *Edges*, we asked the students to create a counseling talk show where the characters are provided advice by the moderator. At a point when one group re-examined the story as a “jazzy Dr. Phil show,” they discussed the drug and alcohol use of the characters. This made visible the choices or how and why certain questions should be asked or how best to represent the characters.

Here is a piece of the conversation:

“We could talk about how she (Ava) should see a counselor because her problem was more than because she was an alcoholic. We could ask why she really ran away?”

“I can dress up as Luke in my tie and wear my aviators and say why I ran away.”

“Luke would not wear a tie. He wore boots, jeans, his jeans stuck in his boots.”

“What is he, country? He is on a talk show.”

“Yes, but he would still wear his boots.”

“Today on our show, we bring in Luke, country, bear seeking, fantastic child.”

As we can see by the dialogue, the students did more than read; they discussed how his clothes voiced a character. One student was adamant on the way Luke should look. We talked about how the way a character is presented can also lead to tellability issues. For example when students first were introduced to the character of Hal in the book, they saw him as a vagrant, and some admitted they dismissed him. However, when Luke protected him from other people’s snide remarks, and Hal provided more dialogue, students began to understand and even emphasize with him. They saw how the author had skillfully made the character of Hal have less tellability in order to create empathy.

**Linearity**

We used this dimension to discuss how narratives move inside the text. Instead of referring to terms like linearity, we visually plotted the progression of the novel. Students organized the main events in the novel within a non-linear timeline. On the timeline students could visually plot a point in time when Luke is talking as a kid in New York but can quickly plot another time in the same chapter that showed Luke during present day. They were able to view how the dialogue was skillfully used to project a chosen time in his life. The book uses flashback and magical realism to direct and displace time; in order to grasp the novel, the students needed to understand how linearity was used and we examined how the conversations of the characters helped mark time.

The timeline chart helped the students realize that the novel could cut across time to make a point. We examined what was said and how the dialogue before helped the dialogue after. Students referred to this as “scattering” the actions of the text. I asked a group, “Can the novel be effective when it is scattered? A young lady replied:

“It depends on what they are talking about, if they are talking about their life stories, they can do that. When you are talking about your life, you can jump around and still tell the story you want to tell.”

Another student responded:

“The stories flow in a scattered way, with past and present memories. Luke is going through life and something triggers his memories. He is not exactly telling his current memory but his current actions in his life.”

**Embeddedness**

The class began to talk about how often an object or place was mentioned in a book. I discussed how the author deliberately embeds the conversations using repetition. The students counted how many times something were discussed and how it tied into the conversation. An example of this was how objects were discussed in the novel such as the Kachina or the spiritual bear. We examined the narrative context surrounding these objects.

At first, the bear was only in the supernatural events and dreams but slowly the novel embedded real world events with the supernatural such as when Jen tries to commit suicide and Luke sees the bear. We discussed why the author used the bear to not only mark time, but to allow the characters to speak about what was possible and what was not in the novel.

Characters’ conversations and belief structures were embedded. We discussed how a character such as Hal straddled the world of the unnatural with the existing world around the youth hostel.
Moral Stance
A great deal of the novel surrounds alcohol suggesting “ways to live” if you are overcoming an addiction not dictating the way to live. Students discussed each character’s moral reasoning. Characters like Jen who almost died from her drug use was not depicted in a moralizing way, the author did not say from her words, “Jen is bad or wrong,” but instead, readers examined her actions. This moved some students to discuss their experience with alcohol.

Some students began to weigh what the book said about places like AA based on their experience. One student said that an AA meeting was not friendly like it is depicted in the novel; he shared his experience of attending a real AA meeting. He recounted a stranger telling how he was strung out on drugs and the anger he expressed at the meeting. We used the students’ examples to how some novels scream we need to act or live a certain way or is it simply placing a window on how someone acted so the reader can make up their mind.

Learning from the Narrative Dimensions
Students viewed *Edges* as a series of conversations, not a book. The narratives dimensions helped the students dig deeper into the novel to discover why and how something were said. In order to help the students dig deeper into the conversations, we were able to use role to help students invest further into the actions and dialogue of the novel. Students even expanded the textual conversations to compare their experience with what was said in the novel.

What we discovered:
1. Students needed to be taught the narrative dimensions one at a time. We needed to make them less messy so students could understand how they worked. After that, students began to talk about them in relation to another.
2. Working with the narrative dimensions helped students understand how the author designed the novel. Each point of conversation was meaningful and contextual. We could use role to help students see the purpose of what was said from many vantage points: talk show, authors, and counselors.

Talk about Talk
We also had students examine how the small groups worked with discussing *Edges*. Students were able to address their talk in their groups. Even though we encouraged “peer talk” about the groups, many of them chose to write it down instead of voicing it. Students were more comfortable writing how the group was progressing. From these written accounts, we needed to provide more accountability for their conversation so Ms. Carpenter and I assessed them on their daily progress and how they used and talked about narrative dimensions in their work. Plus, the students did assess their groups as well. What was inviting was the students’ conversations began to change and become more responsible. We talked about how talking about our work could help improve our work in small groups. Conversation can be an organized system of learning. As Barnes (2008) states, “The communication system that a teacher sets up during a lesson shapes the roles that the pupils can play, and goes some distance in determine the kinds of learning that they can engage in” (p. 2).

Changing Group Conversations with Young Adult Texts
Throughout the six weeks, I shared with groups what was said about the groups without directly naming each. In some cases, students adapted the language of the narrative dimensions. I heard students saying, “You are not letting me tell my story” and “That is your moral code, not mine.” Students became mindful of how these dimensions not only affected the text, but also their conversation. They provided comments such as:

*I like that I kind of led the group and even though some people in the group don’t like others we are for the most part civil.*

*If my group was comfortable I’d pay more attention more because we are always behind in our reading.*

*Before I started I would talk all the time, but now I want to be focused.*

*Z. keeps annoying us. It is hard to get things done with him in the group. While everyone in our group has their book open, Z. says and I quote, “I don’t need my book open. I do much better listening without it.” But when it is his turn to read he does not know where we are or he says ‘I don’t want to read today’.*

The students did take responsibility for their actions. They also addressed the dimensions in their evaluation.
The book was not in order, I had trouble understanding.

I learned that stories can be good even if they are not organized. I also learned stories without a speaker can be very interesting.

I learned some things I didn’t know before like who has the right to tell a story.

The speaker is very important, paying attention to every detail is important, it is important to look for emotion.

The stories run together. The speaker is important because they are the ones telling the story; it has something to do with other people’s stories.

Students also responded to their work in groups:

I really haven’t changed the way I work in groups because I can easily adapt to the group I am in. Some may stay off task and if they get me too far behind I just keep going or if there is someone that loud and annoying and think they know what to do, I leave them alone and let them do what they want.

Other talked about change in their behavior:

I have learned to become more open and I have become less shy. I used to be very quiet and not really talk and to be honest I kind of just copied down some answers and turned it in, but now I am definitely more open.

Before I started I did not talk as much, but now I am more comfortable and talk and participate more than what I use to when in groups.

No one in my group really talked outside of school but we all pulled together with a common goal.

As a result, we did see change in our students, but the most direct change was in our planning.

When we knew how groups were progressing, we were able to adjust our teaching. When we could see that they did not understand all the narrative dimensions when we taught them simultaneously, we provided classroom time to connect to the readings by sharing their experience. When the students formally and informally assessed their groups, they did more than assess, they suggested changes that they would like to see made. We were able to adjust some of our instructions based on these conversations.

Although not every student adjusted their work based on the comments of their peers, over time they were more vocal about what was needed to make it work. As teachers of YA novels, we need to discuss with our students how well they are responding in groups. We need to address the understanding of the text but also how the progress of the group. An effective tool is to record them and listen to the recording later. When we did this, we discovered some people are more vocal when we were not around and we used this in discussing ways we could help them become more vocal when we are. We began to talk about how and why one person was talking and others were not. This led into more developed conversations on how we could use the narrative dimensions to allow more accessibility for the entire group.

When I left the classroom, I knew our groups were more productive both in comprehension of the text and their group work because the students had a part in making it so. I could see this because their language changed. They began to look for more of narrative dimensions in the novel which carried over when they talked about their group progress. Reading a novel as a series of conversations can help further the importance of talk from the character but also enhance the talk of our students.

**Working in Groups with YA Texts**

When discussing young adult texts, students need to be prepared to share their work with others. As Betsy Carpenter, the teacher who worked with me, said, “Group discussion gives kids a voice. Working in groups establishes a place where each student is comfortable to learn.” Instead of simply saying, “work in groups” as we discussed these texts, we took the time not only to explain group work, but also model and support it. A way to do this was to examine the text as conversations. We concentrated on the idea of a novel as a series of mixed and broken conversations. We did not rely on the standard literary language, but instead the dimensions of narrative to discuss the young adult novel.

As Carpenter said of her class, “We might not have used the literary language such as rising action or denouement, but they still understand the concepts of the language and they were talking about the concepts without using the specific words.” She stated that this made approaching and discussing the novel in groups “more accessible.” This student led approach to learning helped us realize that the stories in the text should be seen as in connection to the stories the students share
about the text and their real lives. These connections make for better conversations.

**Discoveries**

There is a need to discover effective methods in improving group discussions. We sought to improve the high school students’ understanding of young adult texts when working in a group, however, as a result of the work, we began to share a ‘new language’ drawing from conversational narratives when discussing adolescent novels and perhaps speaking in English class about readings. Students examined the novel by searching for the conversations within the novel. In order to discuss it, I modeled and they practiced using the narrative dimensions to discuss what was and not said by the characters in the novel. They related the importance of setting and objects in the novel as it related to the talk in the novel. Students began to adapt this conversation not only discussing the novel, but their own work in groups.

Although the students did not specifically address the terms used in discussing literature, they did adapt this new language when looking at both conversational narratives that occur in a young adult text and that they could use it when discussing in groups. We did not intend for this language to be discussed when addressing the text itself, but this occurred quite successful and almost by accident when discussing how they could use narrative dimensions in their conversations. Students began to examine the characters dialogue as intentional and directed, as well as misdirected, voice(s). As Bruner (1980) states, we think in story and by adopting a storytelling manner in discussing young adult texts, students were free to dig deeper into the rich narratives of the text. Story and storytelling is common and some would say an innate ability that students use to make meaning (Bruner 1980, Egan,1993) Why then do we not apply it more when reading young adult texts? After all:

We all have a basic need for story, for organizing our experiences into tales of important happenings. Stories, these ubiquitous discourse forms, are of great interest in language and literacy education, particularly in light of the increasing sociocultural diversity of students in our classrooms…. Moreover, through sharing
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stories—both children’s own stories and those of professional authors—teacher and children (young adults) create the potential for new connections that link them together inside a new tale. (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 2)

Storytelling helps build a common frame to talk. It is a personal way students know how to respond. Countless educators have wrestled over the disconnect between using literary language with adolescents, why not use a language that is more common with students such as the language of conversations? After all, students are always discussing who has the right to speak or how they because of age or constraints are limited in discussions, why not use these discussed topics to address their readings? It is messy business, but maybe we need to sharpen our eyes as we examine the words across the page as conversations, stories enacted by many characters, and see how this relates to a groups conversation.

When we concluded our work by having the students used role to create dramatic presentations, the storytelling skills they had studied became clearer. The students performed as Luke or Ava and created scripts that told their stories. They used this new language in creating their performance and scored high on this culmination performance that vividly used stories to demonstrate their understanding of the novel. After the last class, Ms. Carpenter’s next reading was The Crucible by Arthur Miller and we eagerly wait to see how they use narrative dimensions discussing this new work. However, this is another story for another time.

References


Restoring Student Interest in Reading Teacher Feedback through the Use of Video Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom

–Adam Sprague

Introduction

Studies have shown that the majority of native English-speaking undergraduate students have difficulty reading written margin comments from their teachers (Clements, 2006; NurmuKhamedov & Kim, 2010). Clements (2006) found that several students reported that once they experienced difficulty reading margin comments, the students were likely to ignore many of the remaining comments and become frustrated. White (2006) also found that written feedback often overloads students and confuses them. It may be even more difficult for non-native English speakers (NNS) to read written feedback from their teachers due to cultural differences and language barriers when studying abroad. One way teachers may be able to spark renewed interest in reading teacher feedback is by simply changing the modality in which their feedback is presented to students.

To examine this, I experimented with providing 29 undergraduate non-native speakers (NNS) video feedback during the Fall 2015 semester. The free screen-casting software Jing was used as a tool to provide students video feedback about their drafts on 3 different written essay assignments. Screencasts are simply digital recordings of whatever is visible on one's computer screen, typically accompanied by audio narration. Thus, any essay submitted electronically by a student can be recorded quickly and easily using screen-casting software like Jing and a microphone. Once recorded, the videos can be sent back to the student so they can view the video on their own digital device. Thompson and Lee (2012) have experimented with using Jing as a way to provide feedback to native English speakers (NS) and found the technology to be an improvement over written feedback; however, no studies have explored how the technology may impact non-native speakers at the undergraduate level. This study attempts to help fill this gap in current scholarship as the majority of current screen-casting research has been focused on how the technology can be used as a way to provide digital lectures to native speakers (Falconer, deGrazia, Medlin, and Holmberg 2009; Evans 2011).

Literature Review

There seems to be a recent growing interest in the use of video feedback in the classroom as evident by numerous recent investigations (Brick & Holmes, 2008; Ice, Swan, Diaz, Kupczynski, & Swan-Dagen, 2010; Moore & Filling, 2012; Stannard, 2007; Thompson & Lee, 2012; Warnock, 2008). Despite the fact that these studies have pointed to the fact that video feedback allows instructors to provide more individualized feedback, there has been little quantitative data gathered in regard to students’ feelings and perceptions about its use in the classroom.

Video feedback carries many of the benefits of face-to-face student conferences with a perceived distance that results in students feeling more comfortable using video than written feedback (Carabajas, LaPointe, & Gunawardena, 2003). Teachers prefer video feedback over conferences because video feedback allows teachers to have more control over what is communicated during the session and takes less time to complete (Mellen & Sommers, 2003).

While video feedback has been discussed in largely a positive light, recent reports have shown that most students would still rather meet with their instructor face-to-face than receive video feedback. Warnock (2008) found that students preferred face-to-face contact as the best way to get teacher feedback but also found that students greatly...

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preferred video feedback over written comments. Given the impracticalities of a teacher meeting one-on-one with every student on every writing project in a writing course, Warnock’s findings seem to encourage the consideration of video feedback in the writing classroom.

Students have also reported enjoying video feedback because it appeals to their own individualized learning styles due to the fact that video feedback contains both audio and image (Ice et al., 2010; Vincelette, 2013). Crook, et al. (2012) found that video feedback was especially helpful to certain demographics who may otherwise be unable to meet with their instructors face-to-face that had large families and other non-academic commitments. Specifically, the authors found that video feedback was “especially important for part-time, over-seas and distance learners” (p. 395).

Even though interest in the use of video in the second language (L2) classroom continues to be a popular research topic (Warschauer, 2010), scholars are beginning to point out the fact that “no studies seem to have explored [video feedback] on ESL learners’ texts” (McGarrell & Alvira, 2013). Hyland and Hyland (2006) have also argued that L2 scholarship is currently not paying close enough attention to emerging, alternative feedback techniques. This is startling when coupled with the fact that providing feedback is one of the L2 writing teacher’s most important tasks (Ferris, 2007).

**Methods**

Jing software was used to screencast in two sections of a college-level ESL writing for which I was the instructor of record. Twenty-nine of those students were surveyed about receiving screencasting feedback on essay drafts. The screencasts were produced using Jing software to create individual movie files to be shared and posted to the classroom management website for private student access. Handwritten feedback was provided to the students on the first essay of the semester, and video feedback was used instead of written comments on the second essay of the semester. On the third essay, students were given the option to choose which style of feedback they preferred.

During screencasting, yellow highlighting was used in Microsoft word to highlight significant problem areas, and written margin comments were utilized in addition to my own narration during the recording process. Narration was used to speak more broadly about the essay, and the narration never overlapped with what was written in the margin comments. In other words, students were provided revision suggestions in the audio of the video as well as provided written feedback in the form of margin comments that were visible in the video file. Students played the videos and paused the videos as necessary to read the typed margin comments, to view highlighted problem areas, and to contemplate suggestions provided in the audio of the video.

A survey was provided to all students during the last week of the semester that asked students to report which feedback style they would prefer on essay assignments in the future and to elicit a short explanation (500 words or less) why. Twenty-nine students responded to the survey and wrote written responses.

**Rationale for Feedback Technology Used**

One advantage to using Jing is that the software is free to use and also provides free online storage of created video files. Although other programs offer more features than Jing, many of the programs must be purchased in order to use them and can be quite expensive. It was with intent that I chose a free software platform so that this study could be easily replicated by future researchers without financial burden. Additionally, Jing also limits the length of feedback so that no video can be over 5 minutes in length, which was another strategic reason for selecting the software, due to the fact that Dunne and Rodway-Dyer (2009) have found that students are frustrated by and lose interest in engaging with lengthy digital feedback.

Another affordance to the Jing software is that video files remain in a secure, private location. Videos uploaded by instructors to Jing’s website are not searchable on the Internet and require specific passwords to be viewed that can be shared privately between the student and the instructor. Additionally, Jing is unique in that there is a small but growing number of educators currently discussing the software. Both Thompson and Lee (2012) as well as Harper, Green, and Fernandez-Toro (2015) have found that teachers, tutors, and students enjoy using Jing, citing that the software lead to increased student engagement and that Jing allowed teachers to be more clear with their explanations. Thus, this study contributes to these current, ongoing conversations.

**Discussion of Results**

Only 5 of the 29 non-native speakers (17.24%) reported a preference for written feedback, while the
remaining 24 preferred video feedback. Thompson and Lee’s (2012) study on native English speakers’ preferences regarding Jing and written feedback were quite similar, as they found only 2 of 19 (10.52%) preferred written feedback over video feedback. The results of this study may begin to highlight the fact that undergraduate students, regardless of their first languages, may prefer video feedback on essay assignments at the undergraduate level.

Additionally, many of the student participants reported that hearing the instructor speak to them reduced their anxiety, made them feel more confident, and made revisions easier. One student wrote, “The audio and video made it fun and easy to understand. It was very helpful. Better than reading your [handwriting].” This comment reinforces the fact that students found Jing to be more helpful, but we can also see how simply switching the modality from paper to the screen made the feedback “fun” to work with and easier to read.

A major concern in regard to providing students with written comments is that written comments can be easily misinterpreted. White (2006) found that most students read written comments in a scornful voice regardless of an instructor’s intention. The audio component of Jing helped reduce that factor, as one student stated that “video feedback is like being in [your] office. I know when you are happy or have disappointment.” Due to the fact that my narrated comments were provided in a conversational tone, this may have played a major role in changing how students heard the words on the page in the margin comments as well. Another student simply wrote, “Hearing was good. [The teacher] was very nice to me.” And one student wrote at length about how audio helped him get his work done. He wrote, “My child was very sick during the essay writing. I could not have read a paper then. Video let me listen to my iPad while I sat in her room and held her.” This may reinforce what Crook, et al. (2012) argued that video feedback may be especially helpful for older, non-traditional students.

Video feedback also seemed to help me improve my overall rapport with my students as 20 out of 29 students (68.96%) either requested to be my friend on Facebook or followed me on Twitter before the final week of the semester. Certainly, an educator’s goal is not to befriend as many students as one can; however, this seemed noteworthy as it was an unusually high number of students compared to other courses I have taught in the past in which only a few students contact me via social media. My students’ survey comments may shed some light on why so many of my students felt comfortable “friend” me on various forms of social media. Several students praised me as being a kind and helpful person. One student wrote, “[The teacher] took so much time for me. Making videos for me probably is not very easy. He was so kind and told me I could do it.” Another student wrote, “After the first essay I thought I was going to fail the course. I almost dropped [the course]. The video feedback explained so easy how I could improve my English. I do not want written comments.” Perhaps the conversational tone of the narration I provided to my students also altered my identity in their eyes to more of a helpful friend or tutor rather than strictly an educator. More research into this possible connection is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Still, despite the positive impact video feedback had on many students in this study, the fact that 17.24% of the students preferred written comments cannot be ignored. Further examining these students’ responses, I observed that all expressed at least one sentence that explained that they preferred written feedback because it was what they were used to getting in the past. For example, one student said, “It takes time to learn new things. I want to just read and finish fast.” Others spoke of how their learning style impacted their preference and stated that they preferred written comments because they preferred working with their hands. One such student wrote, “I like to hold the essay and cross out [errors] on my paper. I could not write on the video. I watched the video, but I did not like [it].”

Thus, simply providing all students with video feedback in a given course may not be the best way to provide feedback. I posit that the results of this study suggest that an individualized approach to feedback would be best. Teachers may want to consider surveying their students early in the semester to determine which feedback style they would prefer. However, many students may then avoid choosing video feedback for the reasons mentioned by students in this study; that is, that they have never received video feedback and may find the time investment of learning new software to be too demanding.

Negative Implications of Utilizing Jing in the Classroom

While the student participants in this study overwhelmingly preferred the use of Jing, there are concerns to implementing such software that educators should consider. One consideration
teachers must be aware of is that although screen-casting was found to be strongly preferred by students in both this study as well as in previous research, screen-casting can provide challenges to those not familiar with the software. Palaigeorgiou and Despotakis (2010) found that screen-casting software can often be difficult to access and use for both instructors and students. In fact, in Thompson and Lee’s (2012) study, the authors found that 2 out of the 19 (10.52%) student participants reported never understanding how to use Jing at all during the course. Although these issues did not present themselves in the present study, for these reasons mentioned here, sufficient class time should be given to students to learn about the software and ask questions before they are asked to use it on their own. It would be highly beneficial for a teacher to be comfortable enough utilizing software like Jing that they could make a tutorial for their students to use in class to lower the risk of problems like these arising.

Conclusion

Screen-casting allows instructors to provide students with in-depth feedback. Video feedback allows teachers to zoom in and highlight portions of an essay for discussion while scrolling through the document and using the mouse to point to key elements. The most significant finding of this study was that the majority of students in this study report that they prefer screen-casting over written comments for a number of varying reasons. However, even though students have responded positively to this multimodal teaching tool, additional research is needed to investigate specifically what it is about video feedback that is so compelling for both NS and NNS at the undergraduate level.

The use of video feedback may be one way to individualize the educational process for non-native and native English speakers. Jordan (2012) asked educators to rethink the ways in which we instruct and discuss NNS as we often label them as linguistically deficient and regularly instruct and assess all NNS students the same regardless of their diverse cultural backgrounds. He argues that we must make the writing classroom a space that values cultural and linguistic variance if we are to be “productive, pragmatic, and ethical” (p. 139). This study has highlighted the fact that educators may not be providing NNS with feedback in a modality that best matches their learning preferences as students seem to overwhelmingly prefer video feedback over written feedback, although very few instructors have implemented such software into their classrooms. Further research is needed to determine if providing students with digital feedback can help teachers reach students in more meaningful ways as well as increase our students’ comfort levels and overall interest in reading teacher feedback.

References


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Reading Styles Theory and Reader Preference in Approaching and Responding to Text

–Kenneth H. Martin, PhD

In her essay on “The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing,” Louise Rosenblatt (1994/2005b) states, “There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work” (p. 1). As the acknowledged founder of reader response theory, Rosenblatt maintains that any reading is a distinct event or transaction occurring between a specific text and an individual reader who has taken a particular stance toward that text and reading event. In this article, I examine the nature of reader stance and the possibility that readers have a preference for the stance that they take. I also consider how the expectations we impose for reader response may disrupt reader stance with adverse consequences for developing readers.

As a frame for considering the concept of stance, I invite you to consider who you are as a reader. What are your habits or rituals across text and time? For example, I know I am not just influenced but controlled by the disposition to read with pencil in hand. I cannot resist underlining text or making margin notes on whatever I read. Whether an editorial argument, information in history or science, or a novel “just for fun,” I am never more than a few pages in when I am compelled to go for my pencil. I know this about myself. This is my reading style. So, what describes you as a reader? As a teacher, you might also ask what style(s) describes your students or what dispositions you expect of them.

This article discusses research into styles of reading based on the concept of stance and the degree to which individual readers may exhibit a preference for one or another of four styles related to their purpose in reading and responding to text. After introducing a theoretical framework for the four styles based on Rosenblatt (1994/2005b) and Harre (1984), I define a profile for each stance. I then describe a survey designed to reveal specific moves that readers may make under the influence of each style and the results of administering this survey in a pilot research study. Ultimately, I argue that further research is warranted into reader preference for a particular style as well as the prevalence of certain stylistic choices, but that in any event consideration of these styles may assist teachers and their students to define their purpose for both reading and response to most effectively support those intentions.

**Theoretical Framework**

As explained by Rosenblatt, the act of reading is not, as traditionally supposed, a simple interaction in which the text acts upon its reader to generate a single, right meaning, interpretation, or experience. Rather, the outcome from any reading instance is the result of a transaction brought into being between text and reader. “The transactional phrasing places stress on reading as a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text recursively influencing each other…at a particular time in a particular social or cultural context” (Rosenblatt, 1938/2005a, pp. 292-295). Entering into this transaction, readers bring forward certain experience and language assets while pushing others back to arrive at a “selective attitude or stance” in line with their purpose (Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b, p. 10). Reading Styles Theory, introduced in this study, distinguishes four stances that a reader may take toward a text based on the aesthetic-efferen continuum in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and the private-public continuum from Harre (1984). Each continuum represents reader positioning with respect to audience and purpose in the reading event.

Linguistically, Rosenblatt’s transactional paradigm for reading involves two perspectives on language: the public and the private. Public language is the dictionary word meanings and modes of expression that those in a society generate, adopt, and secure in their effort to communicate and understand one another. Private language is the individual connotations and associations that we each carry — that is, “...the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words and their referents.”

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(Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b, p. 11). Together, private and public language make up the linguistic-experiential reservoir on which individuals draw in the reading transaction (p. 5).

Stance is the second and likely more familiar aspect of Rosenblatt’s model for reading. Stance is the reader’s attitude upon entering into a reading, an attitude that resides on a continuum stretched between a predominantly aesthetic stance and a predominantly efferent stance. The aesthetic stance plunges into the experience of the reading itself while the efferent stance concentrates on what can be derived or gained from the reading. As Rosenblatt (1994/2005b) explains,

The term efferent (from the Latin efferre, “to carry away”) designates the kind of reading in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event. In [the predominantly aesthetic stance], the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus on what is being lived through during the event. (p. 11)

Rosenblatt combines the dimensions of stance and linguistic-experiential reservoir to create a model for reading (and writing) events (Figure 1). In this model, the private and public components of language are closely associated with the aesthetic and efferent stance respectively. “The efferent stance draws mainly on the public aspect of sense; the aesthetic stance includes proportionately more of the experiential, private aspect” (Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b, p. 13).

Rosenblatt emphasizes that stance is a continuum, not a binary opposition (p. 10). Texts themselves frequently “fluctuate” or shift between the more experiential and the more analytical (p. 13). Moreover, texts may invite being categorized as efferent or aesthetic (e.g., an editorial versus a poem), only to be treated differently by individual readers (e.g., Frost’s Mending Wall may be read as a poetic description or as an argument regarding fences [p. 10]). Simply stated, neither text nor a reader’s orientation is necessarily limited to the efferent or the aesthetic. Each reading experience is governed by the reader’s agency of attention (p. 6).

Regarding reader agency, Rosenblatt relies on James’s concept of selective attention (James, 1890, cited in Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b, p. 6). Like any human pursuit, reading is a “choosing activity” (p. 8).

![Figure 1. The Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum](Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b). According to Rosenblatt, “any linguistic activity has both public (lexical, analytic, abstracting) and private (experiential, affective, associational) components. Stance is determined by the proportion of each component admitted into the scope of selective attention. The efferent stance draws mainly on the public aspect of sense; the aesthetic stance includes proportionately more of the experiential, private aspect” (p. 13).
We are neither interested nor able to attend to all of the stimuli with which we are bombarded, and so we focus on certain input while pushing other input into the background. These choices represent the reader’s agency or control over how to invest our attention according to our purpose in a given situation or time. “We are constantly selecting out of the stream, or field, of consciousness ‘by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention’” (James, 1890, cited in Rosenblatt, 1994/2005b, p. 6). As represented by Rosenblatt, however, agency is limited by the relationship between language and stance. Readers are apparently not free to control language and stance independently of one another. As readers take an increasingly aesthetic stance, they attend to a higher proportion of private language, and as readers take an increasingly efferent stance they are bound to a higher proportion of public language.

The study reported here did not discount Rosenblatt’s position with respect to the private and public aspects of readers’ linguistic-experiential reservoir. Nevertheless, this study sought to test the degree to which the private-public dimension of Rosenblatt’s model is married to the aesthetic-efferent dimension, and furthermore the strength and scope of that private-public dimension on its own. Indeed, this study was designed to investigate whether Rosenblatt’s private-public dimension might be extended beyond language into a second stance or axis equivalent in strength and operating independently of the aesthetic-efferent continuum, thereby creating four related yet separate reading styles (Figure 2). In creating these four styles — each a distinct stance along two equal axes — I rely upon Harre (1984) to bolster Rosenblatt’s original model. In this way, private and public become more than a linguistic choice or disposition and rise to the level of an intention that further contributes to the reader’s agency within the reading event.

Harre (1984) presents a multi-dimensional model for organizing psychological attributes — namely, “feelings and emotions, knowledge, intelligence, consciousness, etc.” (p. 42). For this study, I was interested in one dimension of Harre’s model: private-public display. As defined by Harre, display may be viewed as a question of audience: For whom is one’s exhibition, demonstration, representation, or expression of these attributes intended? Private or public display reflects purpose and influences reader stance to the extent that it affects how the reader plans to respond to a reading event. In other words, just as aesthetic-efferent is a stance for receiving the input of the text, private-public display is a stance for returning output from one’s reading experience.

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<th>EFFERENT</th>
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<td>what the reader takes from the text</td>
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| A | B | C | D |

**Figure 2. The Reading Styles Model** combines Rosenblatt’s aesthetic-efferent stance with Harre’s (1984) private-public dimension to identify four styles of reading along two dimensions or continua: (A) efferent-public, (B) efferent-private, (C) aesthetic-public, and (D) aesthetic-private.
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Harre describes the options this way.

If we consider the possibilities for the display of one’s psychological attributes, it is clear that these can be undertaken with oneself as the only audience, e.g. mulling over one’s plans to oneself, or one may go so far as to reveal a project publicly for the attention of anyone who cares to take notice. I shall call the poles of the dimension of display “private display” and “public display”.

Since displays range from revelations and productions for quite specific personal and private purposes to general open performances, the pole of display private-public encompasses a dimension which we could imagine to be continuous. (p. 42)

As Harre states, display is not only a matter of audience but also of purpose. There is intentionality in how we reveal our attributes. For example, if we feel love for an object (e.g., a poem we have read) we may choose to bask in that response all on our own, or we may choose to display that love in any number of ways (e.g., by smiling as we read silently in the presence of another, by reading or commenting aloud on the poem, by assigning the poem to students). It is this intentionality with respect to how and with whom we display our attributes that locates the reader on the private-public continuum and raises that dimension to the level of a stance equivalent to the aesthetic-efferent dimension.

Reading Styles Theory is based on Rosenblatt’s model for aesthetic-efferent stance enhanced by Harre’s concept of private-public display. This theory identifies four styles that readers may choose to adopt in processing and responding to text. As with Rosenblatt’s original model, these styles are based on continuous axes, and so the reader’s inclination or evidence of each dimension may be more or less pronounced in individual readers or reading events. With the two relevant poles most strongly present, the four styles are defined as follows:

- **efferent-public**: the reader intends to derive something from the text and has some intention or expectation (inclination) toward sharing what is derived with others.

- **efferent-private**: the reader intends to derive something from the text but has no present intention to share what is derived with others.

- **aesthetic-public**: the reader immerses him/herself in the reading experience with no present intention of sharing that experience with others.

These definitions rely on certain, recurring terms or phrases. “Immersion” in an experience indicates interest in poetic elements (e.g., word choice, rhythm) as well as emotions, recollections, images, and so on that may occur. To “derive something” is to obtain it, and that something in reading is commonly meaning, although it may be evidence for an argument, information for doing something, narration for historical knowledge, etc. “Sharing” may involve reading aloud or it may indicate summarizing, discussing, showing, or otherwise representing the text to another. The intention is to somehow draw the other into the text as the reader has been drawn into it — that is, to enjoy or benefit from either the aesthetic experience or its content.

The purpose of this study was to explore a model of reading styles in two dimensions — aesthetic-efferent and private-public. The guiding question was whether individual readers are inclined to read and respond to text in ways that might be associated with one of four reading styles. Secondary questions asked what characteristics or tendencies might be associated with each reading style and whether it might be possible to identify or predict a reader’s style based on descriptive profiles or a survey of various reader moves. Results with respect to these questions will be reported following a description of the study methodology.

**Method and Data Sources**

Based on reading styles theory, I drafted four reader profiles (Figure 3). Each profile represents one of the four reading styles. I also drafted a questionnaire with twelve sets of four statements each. One statement within each set postulates a characteristic or tendency associated with one of the four reading styles (e.g., Figure 4).

When I read I’m interested in an author’s train of thought and theme. I like nothing better than a good book discussion. I especially like discussing what various books have to say about life’s big, unanswerable questions. I am happy to summarize and explain books, am apt to quote or paraphrase things I have read, and make connections to current or historical events.

I can’t help reading for what I can get out of a book. I often stop and think about what the author has written and I make connections to other books. Even when I read “for fun,” I am apt to mark a passage or write a comment in the margin. In conversation, I
refer to passages I have read that relate to something
I am thinking about.
I just love sharing books with other readers—
discussing books is okay, but my favorite is just
reading together. I have a lot of books, frequently
recommend titles to others, and am apt to loan books
(even without being asked) that I think others would
enjoy/like.
I like to read for fun—relaxation, escape, you might
say. I read a lot of books—often fast. I have certain
authors I devour, and I do like to re-read favorites.
Picking a book apart isn’t big for me—I’m out for
what happens and maybe the particular way an author
has written something.

**Figure 3. Four reading styles profiles:**
(A) efferent-public; (B) efferent-private; (C)
aesthetic-public; (D) aesthetic-private.

**Set #4**
- a. I prefer to read in a quiet place where I can focus.
- b. It's difficult for me to read when there are
distractions around.
- c. I enjoy reading when other people are around.
- d. I can read with the television on, in a car, just
about anywhere.

**Set #8**
- a. I often read a number of books on the same
subject.
- b. I generally don’t skim.
- c. I enjoy skimming many books for good excerpts.
- d. I am a fast reader.

**Set #12**
When I read,
- a. I mark books for evidence that supports my
thinking.
- b. I make journal entries about what I read.
- c. I take note of cool quotes I can share.
- d. I remember parts that I like or care about.

**Figure 4. Sample sets of survey choices:**
(a) efferent-public; (b) efferent-private; (c)
aesthetic-public; (d) aesthetic-private. Sets 4 and 8 exhibited a
strong correlation in profile and survey between profiles
A and D. Set 12 exhibited the strongest correlation in
profile and survey between profiles A, B, and D.

Participants were asked to rank the four statements
in each survey set in order from “4” for the sentence
that best described them to “1” for the sentence that
described them least accurately. Participants were then
asked to read the four profiles and select the profile they
felt described them most accurately. The questionnaire
was conducted anonymously, and statements within
each set were scrambled randomly to avoid presenting
choices in any particular pattern of profile order across
the survey.

I recruited participants from a database that was
available to me of K-12 teachers predominantly in the
English language arts. This obviously suggests certain
biases within the sample — namely, participants were
likely competent, motivated, and frequent readers. As
to gender, the database itself is skewed toward females.

Data in this study presented various possibilities
for analysis, including the degree of correlation
between survey choices. Indeed, some patterns did
emerge across sets and may inform survey revision and
further study, but data on survey items or sets was too
slim to be more than speculative. In this report, I focus
on results regarding participants’ profile selection and
their overall selection in postulated survey choices. I
consider that lens more applicable to the question of
participants’ inclination, if any, in reading style as well
as what patterns across participants’ indicated style(s)
may have to say about the model. Toward that end, I
analyzed data in three respects: the degree to which
participants chose each of the four styles as a profile;
the degree to which participants scored on each style in
the survey; and the similarity (or difference) between
profile choice and survey score across the participant
sample. It is important to recognize that analysis relied
upon one central assumption: namely, that the profile
descriptions accurately represent the four styles and do
so in language that readers will recognize as appropriate
to their own style of reading. The survey was
administered to just 36 participants, all of whom were
inservice or preservice teachers largely in the English
language arts. As such, the results are merely a pilot
study and not definitive or generalizable. Each reader
will need to assess the validity and applicability not only
of the analysis but also of that central assumption on
which the analysis is based.

**Results**
Reading Styles Theory was conceived to extend
the work of Louise Rosenblatt and, by combining
Harre (1984), to create a model of four, related but
separate reading stances. The survey was designed to
test whether readers might exhibit a preference for
Re-Discovering Reading

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<th>A: Efferent Public</th>
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**Table 1. Results of reading styles survey.** Under each reading style (e.g., aesthetic-private), the number of participants that selected that profile is listed in the top, “Profile” line (e.g., 17 participants self-selected the aesthetic-private profile). The second, “Score” line lists the number of that profile total whose highest score on individual survey items fell under each style, A-D from left-to-right (e.g., for the 17 that self-identified as Profile D, 6 scored highest on profile “A”, 3 on “B”, none on “C”, and 7 on “A”; one participant scored equally highest in profile B & D). When participants’ highest score was tied in two categories a half was assigned to each category, yet in reporting results that half was counted as a one participant in calculating patterns.

one or another of the four styles. Despite the small survey size, certain patterns emerged across the 36 participants including a degree of congruence between participants’ self-selected profile as a reader and their score on the reading styles survey.

Overall, the percentage of match between profile and score was 58.3%. That is, 21 of the 36 participants scored highest on the reading styles survey in the same category as they had self-selected for their reading profile. (Table: 7 2/2 A + 2 2/2 B + 0 C + 7 1/2 D = 21/36. Each half as well as each full match is counted as one match.)

In itself, an overall match between profile and survey choices of less than 60% is limited, especially given the small sample size. However, two patterns within the underlying categories strengthen this finding and suggest relevant interpretations. First, rather than challenging Rosenblatt, results tend to support connecting aesthetic with private and efferent with public, albeit in new ways to the extent that survey questions go beyond linguistic choices to uncover moves associated with different styles of reader response. Second, participants demonstrated a preference for the aesthetic stance that may reinforce Rosenblatt’s indictment of schools that de-emphasize the aesthetic in favor of the efferent. At the same time, participants demonstrated an inclination toward the efferent that may further indicate schools are driving students from the aesthetic toward the efferent. I detail each of these patterns before turning to implications for reading and the teaching of reading.

**Self-selecting Profiles: Connecting Aesthetic with Private and Efferent with Public**

This research study as well as the reading styles survey was conceived in the notion that readers might exhibit one of four styles based on four elements in reader stance – a proposition that modifies Rosenblatt’s model of aesthetic and efferent reading by substituting Harre’s concept of private and public display or response. Rather than demonstrating anything like a distribution across the four styles, however, results in the study seemed to confirm the skew in Rosenblatt’s original model. Twenty-six of the 36 participants described themselves as either an aesthetic-private reader (profile D) or an efferent-public reader (profile A) — a striking 72%. I have already acknowledged the central assumption in this study that the profile descriptions accurately represented the four styles to participants. Nevertheless, a 3 to 1 preference along lines predicted by Rosenblatt connecting aesthetic with private or efferent with public tends to substantiate that connection. To the extent that confidence is warranted, it not only supports this first finding on participants’ profile preference but also related findings that follow from that profile choice.

The pattern represented in profile choice was also demonstrated in participant selections on the reading styles survey. Eight participants that self-selected Profile D also scored highest in survey choices associated with the aesthetic-private style; and all nine that self-selected Profile A scored highest in choices associated with the efferent-public style. Taken together, 47% of respondents made either the aesthetic-private connection or the efferent-public connection in both
profile and survey \((9 + 8 = 17/36)\). While this total is less than half of the study participants, their tendency is striking when compared with those that made the remaining two connections. Only three participants that selected Profile \(B\) also scored highest in survey choices associated with the efferent-private style; and not one of the three that selected Profile \(C\) also scored highest in choices associated with the aesthetic-public style. In other words, just 8% of respondents crossed over to a connection that is not predicted by Rosenblatt’s model \((3 + 0 = 3/36)\).

In total, 21 participants matched their self-selected profile with their survey choices. Of those twenty, 17 connected either aesthetic-private or efferent-public — that is, 81% fell within the model suggested by Rosenblatt. This finding bolsters the first that 72% \((26/36)\) self-identified as either profile \(D\) or profile \(A\). Both support Rosenblatt’s association of aesthetic with private and efferent with public. To the extent this association is real, it invites consideration of other findings along those axes.

Survey Scores and the Truth about Reader Style: Natural Preference vs. Learned Inclination

Profile \(A\) was selected second most often, as 9 of 36 participants reported that the efferent-public stance described them most accurately. While this is only about half the number that reported a preference for Profile \(D\), it is still equivalent to the ten that reported a preference for profiles \(B\) and \(C\) combined. Participant inclination toward Profile \(A\), the efferent-public stance, becomes more compelling when we consider participants’ survey choices. Here I distinguish participant inclination as represented by their survey score from preference as self-reported in their profile selection.

Each of the nine participants that self-selected Profile \(A\) also matched the efferent-public style in selections on the reading styles survey — that is, a 100% match in profile and survey score. No other style achieved even a 50% match. Simply stated, respondents that self-identified with Profile \(A\) also seemed to identify with those survey choices that had been associated by design with that preference. This speaks to the accuracy of these choices in revealing the efferent-public style.

Furthermore, among the 15 participants whose own profile and survey preferences did not match, 11 scored highest for Profile \(A\) in their survey choices. In other words, 73% of respondents who self-identified as profile \(B\), \(C\) or \(D\) but did not match their own profile in their survey scored highest on the efferent-public stance instead. It is perhaps most striking that 6 of the 9 participants that did not match style \(D\) in profile and score crossed over to Profile \(A\) — that is, in their survey score they migrated from aesthetic-private to the efferent-public stance. The apparent accuracy of the efferent-public survey choices coupled with the migration of respondents toward those choices, notwithstanding their stated profile identification, supports both the strength of the efferent-public connection and its apparent pull on participants. In particular, survey results for those that selected Profile \(D\), the aesthetic-private stance, seem to belie that self-reported claim.

There was no mechanism in the study for assessing a secondary profile for every participant. However, respondents were asked (a) if their selection of one profile was “a clear and easy choice” and (b) if not, “which other description was a close second.” Twenty-three respondents reported that the choice was not clear for them and identified at least one other choice as a close second. Not surprisingly, participants that had originally selected Profile \(D\) — the largest single group at 17 — were also the largest group to have chosen a secondary profile. While their largest single migration (5) was from aesthetic-private to aesthetic-public, more than half \((7/12)\) crossed over from the aesthetic-private stance to the efferent side, selecting either Profile \(B\) (3) or Profile \(A\) (4). This result aligns with that reported above — namely, a majority of participants that self-selected Profile \(D\), the aesthetic-private stance, indicated a secondary preference for the efferent stance.

Returning to the central assumption in this study that description of reader profiles is accurate and accurately interpreted by participants, the aesthetic-private style was their clear, stated preference. Almost half — 17 of 36 — reported that Profile \(D\) most accurately described them as a reader. It is worth considering the extent to which this profile selection represents who those readers are versus who they wish to be. In other words, were half of the study participants truly aesthetic-private readers or did they simply aspire to this stance? Were they longing to immerse themselves in reading and escape into an experience that is enjoyable and without obligation to others or themselves beyond the event itself? Of course, whether real or imagined, selecting the experience described in Profile \(D\) represents a preference for it. At the same time, other results revealed a possible inclination in the diametrically opposed direction, toward Profile \(A\) the efferent-public stance.

Multiple results in participants’ profile and survey selections fell into profiles \(D\) or \(A\) which strengthens Rosenblatt’s original model associating aesthetic-
Re-Discovering Reading

private and efferent-public, respectively; and I am inclined to admit that these results work against either aesthetic-public (profile C) or efferent-private (profile B) as anything more than a subordinate stance. Profile choice revealed a first preference for the aesthetic-private reading stance (Profile D); yet, profile and survey selections indicated a secondary preference for Profile A as well as a migration or inclination toward that efferent-public stance. I would argue that together these findings suggest at least the possibility that an aesthetic-private experience is a natural preference while an efferent-public stance is often a learned inclination.

Conclusion

I first became interested in this idea of reading styles as a graduate student studying Louise Rosenblatt. Later, I stumbled upon Harre's concept of public and private display and wondered if linking the two might help us to understand readers in ways similar to the idea of learning styles. Gardner (2013) distinguishes learning style as “a hypothesis of how an individual approaches the range of materials.” He cautions that styles are not all-controlling in how one learns but they are worth educators’ consideration in approaching students. This study was designed to explore this same consideration with respect to styles of reading. While results were not definitive, they do invite further research in various directions, specifically: whether readers have a natural preference toward an aesthetic-private or efferent-public stance (or indeed toward any of the four stances, however weak); whether it is possible to identify or predict a reading style by somehow assessing the moves one makes while reading; and, perhaps most particularly, whether an aesthetic-private stance is a natural selection and efferent-public a learned choice.

Further research aside, results of this study invite educators to consider the benefit to students (and themselves) in understanding and learning to distinguish where and when to adopt one or another reading stance. For five years, I have introduced the reading styles survey in my secondary English methods courses. Pre-service teachers take the survey and select a profile. Invariably, their results reflect those in this study. What is most interesting, however, is the discussion that follows my explanation of the four styles based on Rosenblatt and Harre. Students have been virtually unanimous that their school experience directed them toward an efferent and public orientation both in reading and in response.

The above exercise, conducted at the beginning of the semester, has two intentions. First, I want students to consider the influence of their own reading history and personality as a reader and the influence that may have upon students. Second, I want them to consider what they will want for their own students as readers. Do they want a “schoolish” experience in which every reading is a test of what students have gleaned, what they can take away and show to others? Or is there a place for each reading stance — room to honor individual reading styles or preferences that may differ as well as space for each student to try on different styles?

Rosenblatt herself (1994/2005b) emphasized the importance of acknowledging, navigating, and controlling different reader stances. Any failure to do so will impair readers and disadvantage school children. In her words,

The aesthetic-efferent continuum, or the two basic ways of looking at the world, should be part of the student's repertory from the earliest years. Because both stances involve cognitive and affective as well as public and private elements, students need to learn to differentiate the circumstances that call for one or the other stance. Unfortunately, much current practice is counterproductive, either failing to encourage a definite stance or implicitly requiring an inappropriate one. (p. 29)

Chief among counterproductive practices, Rosenblatt identifies an “overemphasis on the efferent in our schools” (p. 29) that I would argue continues to this day (Gallagher, 2009; Graves, 2002; Kohn, 2015). I would also argue that any danger inherent in overemphasizing the efferent is compounded by its association with public display. If an efferent stance includes a linguistic aspect as described by Rosenblatt then it is helpful simply to understand that aspect. If, however, the public aspect is something more, if it influences reader moves or presumes a particular kind of response, then those expectations risk discoloring the reader's experience with an overbearing demand to get it right for others. Such a demand is naturally counterproductive to developing a passion for the reading event itself, to self-directed reading and lifelong learning, and to the role of citizens in a democratic society.

An over-emphasis toward any stance risks infecting the way students envision response as well as reading with any text. A better understanding of reading styles may alleviate this risk by supporting more diverse ways of responding. Examples of public display abound in classrooms, whether efferent like class discussion or aesthetic like read-alouds. It's the private side of reading style that we find hard to accommodate in schools. Take
for example, independent reading — choice reading or sustained silent reading programs. Can we really trust these activities to work if we don’t somehow assess how students are using them? Yet, if we require something as simple as a conversation about the reading with a teacher, that expectation inevitably imposes a public display upon the student, thereby compromising the purpose for which choice was intended. Even if all we ask is for students to share a favorite excerpt of their text, the aesthetic becomes public. And what of the efferent-private stance? A colleague asked a question that frankly stopped me in my tracks, “How does one express the efferent-private stance?” She was not asking how do students prove to a teacher that they have taken that stance, but how does a reader achieve a stance that involves carrying something away without carrying that something to somewhere? This is a particularly stunning question for me because I am the model for the efferent-private reader with my compulsion for reading with pencil in hand. I have no intention of carrying what I mark anywhere but into my own linguistic-experiential reservoir. I may sound my reservoir for this item at some later time, but then again I may not. My intention or purpose during the reading event is strictly private.

These are but a few examples of the challenge inherent with incorporating reading style into the school experience of developing readers, and more detailed recommendations for practice are beyond the scope of this article. My point is that the kinds of response we assign for students influences their conception of reading. We cannot separate response from purpose; and so it is uncommonly important that we vary that response across the spectrum of reading style. Admittedly, this is a challenge that requires faith, both in our students and our community. Yet, if there’s no place in schools for the private response including in particular aesthetic-private response, then where will developing readers learn its value? To be sure, some will learn this in homes surrounded by those who read for no apparent purpose — a reality that may tend only to exacerbate already existing socio-economic discrepancies. As Richard Rothstein notes, “Middle-class parents are more likely to read aloud to have fun, to have conversations, or as an entree to the world outside. Their children learn that reading is enjoyable” (as cited in Kohn, 2015, p. 70). This idea that reading is enjoyable is the foundation for its lifelong pursuit whether for private pleasure or more public purposes.

The significance of this study is in its potential to enrich reading and the teaching of reading. For Rosenblatt and within the model presented here, our interest is in being able to effectively navigate different reading styles. Awareness and practice are essential to acquiring that competence. Readers, including students, may come to understand their own reading style in ways that will help them to select and approach both choice and required reading more effectively. They may learn how to vary their stance to read more productively and more enjoyably.

Teachers, of course, if they are better able to identify and understand different readers’ styles may better match students with texts and assist them in navigating any text. Teachers may provide students more options for reader response, not only for a class but also for individuals in ways that are personally most meaningful. Simply stated, understanding and taking into account reading styles may enable teachers to differentiate learning and students to better manage their own reading and response — moves that represent ownership as well as passion for the reading event — both characteristics of the lifelong learners we seek to promote.

References


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Teaching Matters

Teaching Beyond the Test with Emergent Genres

— Lisa Ciecierski, PhD

The great concern about preparing students for tomorrow — for high school, college, and career — has I’m afraid led to overlooking the fact that students are somebody today, and that now while the window is open, they are firming up the attitudes, dispositions, and values that will be the predeterminants of both their success in future schooling and in life itself. . . . The obsession with standardized test scores, may have made the reduced attention to broader, affective goals understandable, but certainly not acceptable. . .

—John H. Lounsbery (2015, p. 15)

Not too long ago, I was given a wonderful and unique opportunity. After teaching solely at the college level for five years, I returned to the classroom. For one semester, I taught seventh grade language arts in an inner-city classroom. This experience was unique because I applied what I knew to be theoretically and pedagogically “right” to a high-stakes, high-needs, assessment-driven school environment. I was often asked questions about when I was going to have my students write “formally” and how a particular lesson was connected to a specific standard. I can attest that everything I did would help my students prepare and be successful on the high-stakes test they would take in April and even though I only taught these students for three months before this test, they made great gains. However, our instructional practices did not look like traditional test preparation, and I believe our practices addressed what Lounsbury shares as being important to consider. In reflection, my experience echoes the words of Kelly Gallagher when he states, “Remember that good teaching is not about ‘covering a new list of standards; good teaching is grounded in practices proven to sharpen our students’ literacy skills” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 7). The purpose of this article is to share some of these practices. Practices that will not only help students perform better on the test but also develop a love of learning, a passion for engaged thinking, and a desire to explore unfamiliar territories.

I have learned from working with adolescents for over twenty years that while in the short term teachers may think preparing students for high-stakes tests is what is best, the big picture is what is most important. This does not mean that one has to be sacrificed for the other. Furthermore, test preparation does not need to look like test preparation. The purpose of this article is to share my experiences in relation to this statement. I begin by discussing how emergent genres can supplement reading instruction while still entertaining the idea of test preparation. Next, I address three specific entities of emergent genres: free verse novels, hybrid or blended texts, and graphic novels. Finally, I share final thoughts on how we can instill a passion for reading in students while utilizing these innovative books.

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Moving Beyond Test Prep with Emergent Genres

Students often groan when they hear the announcement that it is time to prepare for the high stakes test. Do they really need to know? There are books being published in a variety of genres and formats which provide unique opportunities to help students engage in the type of thinking required for high stakes tests without the monotony of test preparation. These books, often termed as books of emerging genres are becoming more and more prevalent. As a matter of fact, in 2015, the Newbery Award winner, two Newbery Honor winners, and a Caldecott Honor winner were composed in emerging genres, and so was the 2016 Newbery Award winner, a Newbery Honor winner, and the Caldecott Medal winner (see Figure 1).

Immersing students in reading different genres provides students with multiple lessons for interpreting text (Murray, 1968). Each specific emerging genre provides a distinct opportunity to teach areas shared in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) in a manner that does not look like test preparation and actually engages students in learning. According to Ivey and Johnston (2013), engagement and reading achievement are explicitly connected. “Engagement is the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success” (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 23-24). Therefore, if we can engage students in active learning and active thinking, their academic performance will soar beyond the test.

So, what are some of the emergent genres that should be part of our reading instruction diet, and how might these emergent genres be utilized for instruction? While there are numerous types of emergent genres, examples and teaching implications for free verse books, hybrid or blended texts, and graphic novels, are shared in this article.

Free Verse

This was my first book I have ever read in verse so the whole concept of verse was new to me. Overall, the biggest thing that stood out to me were the new text features. Seeing these new text features was neat and caused the book to be read in a style that I have never read before. The length of the book also stood out to me. It was relatively short yet the words within packed an incredible punch. This caused me to reflect upon the effort of the author when choosing words for my own verse project.

-Alex (reflection on T4)

Often times while reading books written in free verse like Death Coming Up the Hill (Crowe, 2014), T4 (LeZotte, 2008), The Red Pencil (Pinkney, 2015), and Serafina’s Promise (Burg, 2015) my students share that they are surprised by how much they learned in such a short time. They are also surprised by how much they think in a few number of pages. Free verse novels can often be read in a short period of time such as an hour or two and engage readers in “imaginative speculation” about the things left unsaid (Cadden, 2011). This type of thinking links well with CCSS.R.1: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it, cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from text” (2010, p. 35).

Because free verse novels are written in a concise manner, they leave much to the readers’ imagination.
There are many high quality free verse novels for readers to choose from. Figure 2 shares just a few. While reading free verse, students naturally make inferences, a skill that is often difficult to teach explicitly. As Alex (all names are pseudonyms) shared previously, this active thinking may transfer over to students’ own writing.

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<td>May B.  (Rose, 2014).</td>
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<td>Paper Hearts  (Wirostow, 2015).</td>
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<td>Up From the Sea  (Lowitz, 2016).</td>
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**Figure 2: Suggested Free Verse Novels**

Also pertaining to both reading and writing is a focus on CCSS.L.3: “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening” (2010, p. 51). When reading free verse, a reader’s attention is drawn to the deliberate decisions the author made. The author’s choice of what words to write on each line is important and often enunciates the meaning of the text. Sometimes authors of free verse “play” with the words to add meaning. This technique is particularly strong in *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014). When students write in free verse, they need to make decisions on where they break lines and how they present their words. Playing with words and purposefully putting words on lines are ways to add meaning to what is written. Making these decisions is a way to engage writers in deep thinking as they consider if they are communicating a message their reader will comprehend in their intended way.

**Hybrid or Blended Texts**

My students learned more about the Vietnam War from creating hybrid texts than they did from anything else we did.

—Caroline, high school teacher

This teacher’s words resonate with me, as I picture Mrs. Brown sharing with great enthusiasm how excited she was about her students’ learning. Her students engaged in an inquiry where they read *Death Coming Up the Hill* (Crowe, 2014) and *In the Lake of the Woods* (O’Brien, 2006). They used what they learned from these novels as well as what they learned from the research they conducted using a large variety of resources to create their own hybrid texts.

Hybrid texts creatively intertwine fictional text with nonfiction text. Readers need to be aware of what type of text they are reading to fully gain meaning and understanding. There are two reasons why utilizing this genre for instruction is worth considering. First, the Common Core State Standards indicate that 80% of what a student reads during the school day should be nonfiction. However, narrative writing still needs to be part of our students’ reading diets. Hybrid texts are one way of blending these. Second, when students read hybrid texts, they strengthen their learning in a fun way as they analyze the text as a whole to learn more about the topic and to see how portions of the text work together to create meaning. CCSS.R.2 shares that students need to “determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas” (2010, p. 35). Reading a hybrid text directly relates to this as readers process the whole text as they extend their learning. By reading both the fiction and nonfiction text, the meaning of the text is potentially enhanced. To comprehend a hybrid text readers “analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text relate to each other and the whole” (2010, p. 35).

There are many high quality hybrid texts (see Figure 3). However, reading hybrid texts is not the only way students can be engaged in this innovative genre. Students can also take a traditional picture book and utilize it to create their own hybrid text. Mrs. Brown’s class did just that. After reading two novels, they conducted research on the Vietnam Conflict and utilized what they learned to create their own hybrid text, using the picture book *Patrol: An American soldier in Vietnam* (Meyers, 2005). Students chose various pages of *Patrol* where they would integrate information that would connect with the plot. They needed to reflect and share why the decisions they made were reasonable. Students found this to be an engaging way to respond to CCSS.W.7: “Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation” (2010, p. 41), CCSS.W.8: “Gather relevant, information from multiple print, and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism,” (2010, p. 41) and CCSS.W.9: “Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to
support analysis reflection, and research” (2010, p. 41). Not only did these readers and writers learn more about Vietnam than they had learned before when creating their hybrid texts, they were engaged throughout the process, and asked to have the opportunity again.

| 28 Days: Moments in Black History that Changed the World (Smith, 2015). |
| If: A Mind-Bending New Way Of Looking at Big Ideas and Numbers (Smith, 2014). |
| Mr. Ferris and His Wheel (Davis, 2014). |
| Sewing Stories: Harriet Powers’ Journey from Slave to Artist (Herkert, 2014) |
| Winter Bees and Other Poems of the Cold (Sidman, 2014). |

**Figure 3: Suggested Hybrid Texts**

**Graphic Novels**

I couldn’t believe how many facts were interwoven into that short book! I learned so much about the Manhatten Project!

—Sandra – reflection on *Trinity* (Fetter-Vorm, 2012)

Graphic novels are not new but are becoming more and more popular not only simply for enjoyment but also across the content areas. As Sandra shares, it is often amazing how much the reader can learn, without even knowing it, while reading a graphic novel. These books are formatted in a way that it is not just facts that readers explicitly learn.

While on the surface, the graphic novel might seem simplistic, much like a comic book, the opposite is true. Ryan J. Novak refers to his first experience with a *Spider-Man* comic when he shares how this particular book proved to be an unexpected challenge to him because of its complexity. He talks about how the interaction between characters was complicated, and he was “left staring at the pictures and attempting to piece together the story” (Novak, 2014, p.1). He continues to share how his grandfather helped him read the comic book, determine which word balloons belonged to which character, and how to follow the action. Graphic novels are much the same.

Graphic novels are much more complex than what meets the eye. Authors use different types of balloons to show dialogue, thought, sound-effects, staging, and information. Being cognizant of this as a reader is important to fully understand what type of interaction and actions are taking place. For readers to comprehend the depth of the graphic novel, readers also have to be aware of the variety of uses and types of panels, frames, gutters, bleeds, and so on to add meaning.

What makes graphic novels so appealing? I believe it is the fact that the reader does not recognize the complex tasks they are engaging in. Even though they are engaged in sophisticated reading behaviors, they feel as if they are reading a comic book. However, graphic novels engage students in reading closely and paying close attention to the use of language. These behaviors particularly target CCSS.L.3: “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening” (2010, p. 51), CCSS.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (2010, p. 35), and CCSS.R.10: “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (2010, p. 35). Without even knowing it, readers are focusing on three academic standards; this does not even begin to address how much they may learn about a content area (see Figure 4).

| A Bag of Marbles (Joffo, 2013). |
| Gaijin (Faulkner, 2014). |
| Dare to disappoint: Growing up in Turkey (Samanci, 2015). |
| Human Body Theater (Wicks, 2015). |
| Sunny Side Up (Holm & Holm, 2015) |
| When the River Rises (Walker, 2015) |

**Figure 4: Suggested Graphic Novels**

**Final Thoughts**

It is the reader who is the arbiter of the text, who in turn is shaped by the tasks that accompany the text. To overlook the transaction that occurs between the reader and the task as it relates to the text would be a serious miscalculation.

—Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2016, p. 6)

Considering emerging genres such as free verse novels, hybrid or blended texts, and graphic novels are just a few of these types of books.
These books have great potential to kindle and nurture positive attitudes dispositions, values and strategic minds as they work toward and beyond meaningful comprehension of texts.

Good readers naturally engage in numerous techniques to bring meaning to a text. As educators, placing texts that require a variety of skills to comprehend into students’ hands does not just address various Common Core State Standards that students will be assessed on. It further develops reading qualities and dispositions that will support them in becoming lifelong learners: readers for today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

Gallagher (2009) advises us to “never lose sight that our highest priority is to raise students who become lifelong readers. What our students read in school is important; what they read the rest of their lives is more important” (p. 117). Creating lifelong readers and learners should be our greatest mission. When teachers use emerging genres in their classroom for multiple purposes, they are a step closer to accomplishing this goal.

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In an era when many students prefer watching movies or checking their Twitter accounts to perusing challenging texts, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (R&J) can be a “tough sell” (Baines). The questions from students seem inevitable.

“Do we really have to read another stupid, old story?”

“How are we supposed to relate?”

Although many teachers do their best to bring Romeo and Juliet to life, sometimes the charm of the Bard is not readily apparent to adolescents. Approaching Romeo and Juliet through themes—love, disappointment, family relationships, friendship—is one way to convince students that grappling with the text is well worth the effort.

Love, in particular, seems to be a topic that resonates with adolescents. According to scientists, falling in love produces a kind of pleasure in the brain akin to the effects of using a mind-altering drug, such as cocaine (British Broadcasting Corporation). According to David DiSalvo, who studies the psychological and physiological aspects of sexual attraction, individuals who are in love typically exhibit addictive, obsessive, and reckless behaviors. DiSalvo writes,

Thinking about one’s beloved—particularly in new relationships—triggers activity in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the brain, which releases a flood of the neurotransmitter dopamine (the so-called “pleasure chemical”) into the brain’s reward (or pleasure) centers—the caudate nucleus accumbens. This gives the lover a high not unlike the effect of narcotics, and it’s mighty addictive. (n.p.)

In act one, scene one, Romeo corroborates the scientific explanation of love in more poetic terms:

Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs;
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes;
Being vex’d a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears:
What is it else? a madness most discreet,
A choking gall and a preserving sweet.

Another approach to Romeo and Juliet is to study the play alongside a more contemporary work that explores similar themes. A recent young adult book that involves star-crossed lovers is Rainbow Rowell’s Eleanor and Park (E&P), an unconventional story about a smart, iconoclastic, poor girl and a popular, shy, half-Korean boy. The book is set in the thoroughly non-exotic suburbs of Omaha, Nebraska in 1986.

Of course, once you have read Romeo and Juliet, every subsequent love story can seem like a variation on the classic. If Romeo and Juliet is a glamorous, intensely emotional affair between rich elites, Eleanor and Park is an un-glamorous, roller-coaster romance between two awkward kids, neither of whom is

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wealthy. Eleanor is no feminine-and-passive Juliet. Eleanor is sarcastic, intellectual, and opinionated, with bright red hair, a full figure, and a wardrobe assembled from the discard box of the Salvation Army.

Similarly, Park is no Romeo. Romeo has scads of friends and is a well-connected, well-loved, “favorite son.” His best friend Mercutio considers Romeo to be somewhat weak and “too nice” to protect himself in a scuffle with Tybalt. Park has few friends; his brother is the star of the family, athletic and masculine. Park is short, well-groomed and, although he has some feminine features and is fond of wearing eye make-up on occasion, he is an accomplished master of martial arts, able to fend for himself in a fight.

Unlike Romeo and Juliet, who fall in love with each other in a time span of about three days, have sex, get secretly married, and then kill themselves as proof of the depth of their love, it takes weeks for Eleanor and Park even to learn to tolerate each other. And, when they do finally start to accept each other and begin to spend time together, it takes several more weeks before they attempt a first kiss.

Studying both love stories, side-by-side, offer plenty of opportunities for analysis and comparison. Both the play and the novel depict the exigencies and outrages of love, though in quite different ways. In both the play and the novel, a careless brush of the cheek does not slip by without dignifying the moment with a surfeit of adjectives and self-reflection. About love, author Rowell states, “When you’re that age, you have maybe the greatest capacity [for love]. You feel love with your whole body. You can be consumed by it in a way that you’re not when you’re older, and yet you don’t have anything to offer the other person. You don’t even belong to yourself yet. You can’t make any promises” (Acree).

In act two, scene two, one of the most famous passage from Romeo and Juliet, Romeo famously compares Juliet to the sun:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she...

In Eleanor and Park, it is Park who gets compared to the sun when Eleanor states, “Nothing was dirty. With Park. Nothing could be shameful. Because Park was the sun, and that was the only way Eleanor could think to explain it” (R. Rowell 49).

Eleanor's life at home includes caring for a gaggle of little brothers and sisters, fending off the lurid glances of her stepfather, finding sufficient food to eat, patching together clothes to wear to school, and using a bathroom that is absent a door or any sort of privacy. Park is the only “light” in Eleanor’s life.

Although consumed by an outpouring of emotions, both sets of lovers (in the play and the novel) struggle to establish viable, lasting relationships. Indeed, the antagonistic environment of the Capulets and Montagues in fourteenth-century Verona is not a far cry from the daily insults, innuendo, and instability of Eleanor and Park’s high school.

At the high school, Eleanor and Park attend the same English class. Their teacher, Mr. Stressman, is fond of Shakespeare, of course, and particularly loves when Eleanor evocatively reads excerpts aloud. But, Eleanor is skeptical about the idea of love at first sight upon which Romeo and Juliet is predicated. “They don’t even know each other,” Eleanor scoffs (R. Rowell 44).

Later, when Eleanor and Park are alone, Park tells Eleanor that he loves her and makes a sarcastic reference to Romeo and Juliet:

“I love you. And I can’t imagine stopping.”
She shook her head. “But you’re twelve.”
“I’m sixteen…” he said. “Bono was fifteen when he met his wife and Robert Smith was fourteen—”

“Romeo, sweet Romeo…”
“It’s not like that, Eleanor, and you know it.” (p. 237)

Interestingly, on the Goodreads website, on Rainbow Rowell’s personal website, and in most reviews of the book, this passage is presented as follows:

“Bono met his wife in high school,” Park says.
“So did Jerry Lee Lewis,” Eleanor answers.
“I’m not kidding,” he says.
“You should be,” she says, “we’re sixteen.”
“What about Romeo and Juliet?”
“Shallow, confused, then dead.”
“I love you, Park says.
“Wherefore art thou,” Eleanor answers.
“I’m not kidding,” he says.
“You should be.” (R. Rowell web)

However, this passage is not found in the book.

Eleanor’s levity resonates with students, particularly after encountering the dreamy, relentless seriousness of Romeo & Juliet. During act two, scene two, Juliet tells Romeo, “My bounty is as boundless as
the sea, My love as deep. The more I give to thee, The more I have, for both are infinite.” Eleanor’s rejoinder, “But, you’re twelve” presents quite a contrast to Juliet’s breathless declaration of love.

Of course, the relationship depicted in Shakespeare’s play ends in the death of both parties, while Eleanor and Park opt for more sensible solutions, giving them a chance to live another day. Park borrows a car and drives Eleanor the hell away from the toxic environment of Omaha, their high school, and her dysfunctional family.

Reading *Eleanor & Park* alongside *Romeo and Juliet* provides a kind of synchronicity that students appreciate. For teachers looking to keep alignment with Common Core or state guidelines, the pairing of these two texts help satisfy a variety of standards, including, “analyze the representation of a subject [love] … in two different artistic mediums [play and novel],” “how an author draws on a play by Shakespeare,” and several others (Common Core Standards).

But, checking boxes on a curriculum sheet is no reason to teach anything. You teach *Romeo and Juliet* and *Eleanor & Park* together because they are both great stories: old and new; tragic and exuberant; serious and playful. Reading one enhances the themes and aesthetics of the other.

**Works Cited**


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As teachers, we often say, read, and/or hear that we have to make our content relevant to students’ lives in order for them to truly engage and learn the material and skills they need. What could be more personal and relevant than a unit on students’ own lives? Reading and writing memoir provides teachers and students an opportunity to strengthen reading and writing skills while also improving students’ social skills, creating a student-centered classroom, and having fun.

Before beginning a memoir-writing project, it is important for both teacher and student to understand the definition of memoir and how it is different from autobiography or personal narrative. A personal narrative is typically a single story from one’s life following a problem-solution structure of organization, while an autobiography is a chronological/linear story of one’s life from birth to end. Autobiography is more formal in structure: “history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked” (Vidal, qtd. in Burke and Danielson 20). Memoir, on the other hand, is life writing that often contains an element of reflection, how the writer remembers his or her own life, “searching for life’s turning points, sifting and sense-making” (Burke and Danielson 20; Howard 33). Essentially, this definition is saying that students should write about not just what happened but why it is important to their lives and their development. Using this definition of memoir encourages student choice and self-discovery, and therefore increases chances for student success in the writing project.

Why Memoir?

Strengthening writing skills

The goal of a writing unit is always to improve student writing, but memoir writing has been shown to improve student writing more quickly, and sometimes dramatically, because “instead of cringing at the possibility of making a mistake, or resisting what they consider an irrelevant assignment, students struggle to get it all down as the weeks fly by” (Howard 29). Students not only increase in writing skill, but also writing confidence, and “the desire to make their stories stronger [teaches] them to appreciate such abstractions as development and organization” (30). I’ve also seen students grapple with the order of the stories within their larger work, deciding whether chronology or order of importance is the best way to tell their story. They begin to understand how smaller pieces work together to tell a cohesive and interesting story, and how well-organized writing makes the story easier to understand and enjoy.

Discussing how other stories are developed and organized also provides a model for students’ work, and so using mentor texts is an important method for helping improve student writing. Memoirs are interesting in that they form a bridge between reading informational texts and reading literature. In “Teaching Memoir,” Jennifer Sinor argues that “it’s the fiction writer’s toolbox that is most useful when crafting beautiful prose” (41). She also points out that memoir is more than simply writing down true

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Teaching Matters

stories, telling students, “It’s all in the art. You don’t get credit for living” (41). In order to write good stories, students need to understand the concepts of show don’t tell, using scene and summary to propel the plot, sensory detail, theme, complex characters, setting, dialogue, mood, voice, and figurative language (Sinor 41; Syctherz 33-34). In order to understand all of these elements of storytelling, students need good examples of their application, and that is what I search for in a mentor text.

Because memoir is personal writing, students should also be aware that they will still be held to the same standards of high-quality writing. Younger students might “say they can’t revise because ‘that’s exactly how it happened,’” but these moments should be used as opportunities to discuss point of view, detail, imagery, and figurative language (Howard 33). Students should also be reminded of the definition of memoir that we’re using, that memoir is not only the story being told, but also personal reflection on the importance of this story. To help students do this, Sinor has students keep writing journals and complete the following sentences:

“I am telling this story about ________.
But what I am really exploring is ________.”

(Sinor 42).

An example I’ve used with my students is “I am telling this story about my grandma, but what I am really exploring is how she has influenced my life through a love of books” when I describe my grandparents’ house and the wall of built-in bookcases that I loved as a child.

Improving social skills

The shared experience of writing memoir in the classroom and of sharing their writing helps students build a stronger sense of empathy and therefore a stronger classroom community (Burke and Danielson 20). While students are writing memoir, they are not only learning to write better, but learning more about themselves; when they share with one another, they are also learning about their classmates (21). In “Living History: Memoir Writers Teach Across Time,” Gail Hall Howard describes an instance of a student sharing her memoir with classmates, saying “her fellow students’ vigorous applause put a small dent in the insider/outsider divide” at the high school (31). This is an incredibly powerful description: sharing personal writing can help to diminish the separations between groups and cliques that inevitably exist in high school and therefore help students to feel more accepted by their classmates. Sharing personal experiences helps the classroom become a community as students begin to see that “teenagers do have meaningful experiences that have shaped and influenced them,” and that everyone has a worthwhile story to tell, including themselves (Howard 34; Baxandall 413).

If students will be sharing their writing, however, they should understand that they are not required to write a deeply personal exposé of their lives. They should understand that they aren’t under any pressure to spill their guts. As Gail Hall Howard explains, “some students would reveal less than others and still get the same grade” (Howard 34). She also suggests that “what is said in class stays in class” and that teachers could “offer students the option of handing in one assignment ‘for teacher’s eyes only’” (34). Since memoir writing can be an emotional experience, students should also be aware of who can provide support should they need it, like a friend or guidance counselor.

Reading memoir helps students grow in many of the same ways that writing memoir does, improving academic and social skills. Reading memoir helps students make sense of their own lives, their own stories, and “provides rehearsals for life” (Burke and Danielson 20; Syctherz 32). Just like writing memoir, reading memoir also helps students develop their sense of empathy. Students can look into another’s life and see how others navigate the ups and downs (Burke and Danielson 20). This kind of reading can give students what Ellen Hopkins, author of a number of best-selling Young Adult novels, says is “information they need to make sound decisions or overcome irrational fears” (59).

Creating a student-centered classroom

The structure of the memoir unit I have created and described here is an example of student-centered instruction. The students are writing about themselves, and so every day provides opportunities for student choice. I allow, and sometimes require, visual elements along with the written elements of the memoir project, which permits students to show their understanding in a way that works best for them. I have provided an example rubric here, but I have occasionally utilized a portfolio grading method for a memoir project. Rather than putting a lot of time into nitpicking all the individual elements of the assignment, I asked students to choose the five pieces they were the most proud of and then graded just those five pieces for the writing grade. I could still then complete the rubric by grading the effort and completeness of the rest of the project. This allows students a little more control over their final grade.
Having fun

In my classroom, the memoir-writing project has never been an entirely quiet project. It is often quiet when students are writing, though I usually play music softly during this time, but the assembly days especially can get lively. This is not because students are off-task, but because they are having fun. The creativity involved in creating a book about their own lives inherently makes this project more fun for students. The students have made all their own choices about what they have produced, and they get excited about it. Additionally, the increased sense of community that has been created through sharing their personal writing means students are now talking to each other more and asking one another for help rather than always asking the teacher.

This classroom community of openness and fun that has been created culminates in presentations of the final projects during the last few days of the unit. In order to prevent these presentations from being the boring and dry ones we often get from students, I frame this event as “open mic night,” even though it takes place during the school day. I have a microphone and stand in my room (with no cord, no amp, nothing to plug it into) and on open mic days, I set it up in the front and center of the room. Students love standing behind the microphone, even though their voices are not being amplified at all, and they are asked to share one piece of their writing with the class.

Teaching Memoir

The end products of this unit are that each student has read a memoir of their choosing and created their own memoir, made up of a number of stories from their own lives and incorporating visual elements. The final memoir product is typically some form of scrapbook. I have organized this unit to take six weeks and have found that this unit works best at the end of the school year, when students are naturally feeling reflective and know each other well enough to feel comfortable sharing personal stories with one another. The unit was initially designed for a high school English course, and so reading and writing are both integrated into the daily and weekly plans. I have also taught memoir writing in an eighth grade writing class using many of the same methods, though I eliminated the independent reading novel because the students were completing a number of other reading assignments for their literature course.

The day-to-day organization of this unit is a writing workshop format: the teacher presents a mini-lesson on a particular grammar or writing concept, and then the students are given a chance to practice the demonstrated skill with support from classmates and the teacher.

The first week of the unit focuses on prewriting and brainstorming and giving students time to find a memoir to read independently. The next four weeks are spent on drafting their memoirs, and while the last week is for assembling and presenting their work.

During the drafting weeks, Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday follow the same routine of bell ringer, mentor text read-aloud, and time for student writing, using the mentor text as a prompt if they choose. Wednesdays are spent on a focused grammar lesson followed by time for students to read their independently chosen memoirs. Each Friday is a workshop day during which students peer review each other’s work (this is a grade requirement for me) and share aloud the work they’re most proud of this week.

Every day begins with a bell ringer, which is either a journal writing activity or a grammar check, which is a quick grammar review activity to help students improve their writing. The actual concepts taught or reviewed in a grammar check would largely depend on student grade level and what has already been covered during the school year. Every class meeting will also include reading from a mentor text, whether that be whole-class reading or independent reading, and time for students to work on writing their memoirs. I also like to use this writing time for one-on-one writing conferences with students. I try to touch base with each student at least once a week during this writing time.

In addition to the daily content routine, I have a set weekly routine for bell ringer and exit slips. The bell ringer every Monday is a quote prompt, in which the students are given a quotation to respond to. I like that it involves more critical thinking than simply answering a question. The students are expected to think about the given quotation through the following questions

- What do you think this quote means?
- How does it relate to your life?
- How does it relate to things you’ve seen, read, or experienced?
- Dig deep into the quotation to find its importance and significance. Go beneath the surface.

Tuesday and Thursday bell ringers are grammar checks, and Wednesday is a freewrite. On Fridays, I
ask students to reflect on their progress during the week with the questions “What have you struggled with most this week? What questions do you have?”

When students have had some time to read and write in a class period, I have a set of specific exit slips that I use each day to allow students time to reflect on their progress and understanding, and which can also be used as formative assessment. On Mondays, I have student reflect on the writing they have done that day by filling in the blanks in the following statement, following Sinor's model: “I am telling this story about _______. But what I am really exploring is ________” (42). This helps to remind students that memoir is more not just the story being told, but personal reflection on the importance of this story. On Tuesdays, they write one thing they think they are doing well and one question they have about their writing. Since Wednesdays allow time for students to read, their exit slip is a question about their books and the lives of the people they are reading about. On Thursdays, students write a few questions they have for their classmates for Friday's peer review and share aloud activity and on Fridays students write a note to someone who shared a story that day.

Using Mentor Texts

The use of mentor texts is most important part of my memoir-writing unit. Each student reads a memoir of their choosing independently, and I utilize short read-alouds in class to give students exemplars and inspiration for their own writing. One important reason to use mentor texts is simply that the best way to become a good writer is to read a great deal, and if students are writing memoir, they should be immersed in reading memoir (Sycjterz 33). Mentor texts also “offer the engagement point for children to enter the writing journey of their own stories,” and can be used as inspiration for topics to write about (36). Mentor texts can teach students what is important and necessary to the genre of memoir.

It's important to choose mentor texts that provide examples of the skills we want students to master. The students can’t make use of every literary device or text structure in one six week unit, so it is important not to overwhelm students with too many texts (Sycjterz 35). Just focus on texts that show what you want the students to know. Before reading from the mentor text, explain to students what you want them to think about or notice while they listen. Afterward, give students time to talk about the text and what is interesting about it or what it does well and then provide them with a suggested prompt for their own writing based on the mentor text. Students always have the option to not write from this prompt, but they often find it helpful.

What follows are some examples of possible uses of mentor texts in your classroom, depending of course on the skills you want your students to focus on. All of these examples are from literary texts, but there are also a number of picture book memoirs that would be just as useful at any grade level.

Lucille Clifton's Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-1980 uses poetry, photographs, family history, personal history, and quotations from the Bible and Walt Whitman to tell her story. Some specific passages from Clifton's book might be difficult to use in a classroom, depending upon the school and age of the students, because of the racial overtones and some questionable language, but the poem “the 1st” could be relevant to students of any age:

what I remember about that day
is boxes stacked across the walk
and couch springs curling through the air
and drawers and tables balanced on the curb
and us, hollering,
leaping up and around
happy to have a playground;
nothing about the emptied rooms
nothing about the emptied family (21)

This poem addresses the excitement, as well as the sadness, of moving to a new house or neighborhood, something that many students have likely experienced. Students could also be encouraged to think of another event in their lives that is both happy and sad: going to a new school or grade, the birth of a sibling, a friend moving away. Much of Clifton’s prose memoir would also be great to use in a classroom, because of the way it tells family history intertwined with more recent personal events.

In Dust Tracks on a Road, Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates her knack for interesting use of language. Her use of figurative language and imagery is evident in her description of the tree outside her house:

There was another tree that used to creep up close to the house around sundown and threaten me. It used to put on a skull-head with a crown on it every day at sundown and make motions at me when I had to go out on the back porch to wash my feet after supper before going to bed. It never bothered around during the day. It was just another pine tree about a hundred feet tall then, standing head and shoulders above a
This passage is an excellent example of personification and imagery describing something that seemed scary to Hurston as a child. In addition to showing students ways they can have fun with language, this passage could also be used as a prompt for students to write about something that scared them when they were little, like the monsters in the closet. Her stories about Miss Corn-Shuck, Mr. Sweet Smell, and Miss Corn-Cob could also be prompts for students to write about imaginary friends and stories they made up as children, as well as an example of colorful and creative use of language (54-57).

Chanrithy Him’s memoir, When Broken Glass Floats: Growing up Under the Khmer Range, could be used in a similar way in the classroom. Her descriptions of her parents in the beginning of the first chapter of the book could be used as examples of characterization for students. She describes her mother both directly and indirectly, saying,

She was a bright girl, and strong in her ideas. As a child, she would sneak away to be Buddhist temple to learn to read and write in Khmer, and to read Pali, the language of the Cambodian bible. In time, she picked up French as well, a skill that was forbidden for women. Parents didn’t want a daughter to have an education for fear she would write love letters before they had had a chance to arrange a suitable marriage...This was the girl Pa fell in love with. (27-28)

This passage wonderfully describes the mother through examples of the things she did to rebel against her parents. It also subtly describes the culture in which these women were raised, which is very different from the culture my own students are growing up in. It could be used to prompt students to describe their own parents and their parents’ relationship, or simply to explore ways to use indirect characterization and to “show, don’t tell.”

Managing Writing Time

There are a few keys to making in-class student writing time effective and efficient. Routines and expectations must be established for the duration of the project so that students are focused and on-task. This is especially important if you intend to use writing conferences to talk to students one-on-one about their writing progress; the other students in the room need to know what to do while the teacher talks to one student at a time.

One way to keep students on task during writing is to do plenty of pre-writing for the project. One of my favorite brainstorming activities for this project is the “ABC Brainstorm.” It is a simple activity, but one that gets students thinking and remembering while also getting them talking to one another about shared memories. Students are instructed to think of something for each letter of the alphabet that relates to themselves and their lives. I may give them a few questions to help them think, such as,

- Who or what is important to me?
- What are some awesome things I’ve done?
- What are some things I want to do (goals and dreams)?
- Where are some places I’ve been or want to go?
- What are some important things that have happened to me or will happen to me?

We do this on one of the first couple of days of the unit, and if they ever find themselves with writer’s block, students have a list of topics to refer to.

In addition to the ABC Brainstorm activity described above, I often allow students a class period or a portion of a period to brainstorm as a group. This leads to a lot of reminiscing and laughter about shared experiences and helps students to eliminate less significant memories in order to focus on what is important to each individual. This also prevents them from distracting one another during writing time later when they suddenly remember “that one time,” because they have already talked about it. For further brainstorming and idea sparking, I also use a small book called The Writer’s Block, which is filled with tips and ideas for stories, including pictures and single-word prompts (Rekulak). Sometimes a single idea like “sibling rivalry” can lead to very meaningful stories.

When working with mentor texts, remember that the goal is to draw students’ attention to a particular writing strategy or subject, so you have to do more than read the portion of the text—you have to talk about it. Make sure to point out what the author is
Teaching Matters

doing that you think is interesting. Ask the students what they think about the piece you’ve chosen. Talk about how the students can use the same strategies the author is using. To model writing skills further, write your own pieces inspired by the mentor texts and share your writing with the class. Show them how you took inspiration from a mentor text and what effect it has.

Just as this project allows many opportunities for student choice, there are many opportunities for teacher choice. My assignment sheet says students are required to include fifteen “chapters” in their final project. Depending on what we have done in class and the level of students, the word “chapter” can mean a number of different things; it could be a poem or a drawing or piece of art with a short written explanation. I often encourage students to consider different forms of writing, as well, and have received final projects with bucket lists, song lyrics, letters to their future selves, and a number of other creative written and artistic “chapters.” There are so many options and directions to take with this project that you, the teacher, can make it as open or as specific as you want.

Closure

By the end of this project, students have a personal project they can be proud of, that they have spent a lot of time with and worked hard on. A memoir writing project like this yields high quality writing, brings the class together as a community, and exposes students to the stories of a variety of others’ lives, both in their books and in their class. I have found that students’ world views are expanded through the use of mentor texts and that their enthusiasm about reading and writing increases. They create truly beautiful projects that demonstrate how much they have learned, and what more could we ask for as teachers?

Works Cited


Quote Journal Prompts:

“A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one.” —George R. R. Martin

“Adolescents are not monsters. They are just people trying to learn how to make it among the adults in the world, who are probably not so sure themselves.” —Virginia Satir

“An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which a person faces and uses his experience.” —James Baldwin

“Identity is an assemblage of constellations.” —Anna Deveare Smith

“If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday.” —Pearl Buck

“It is our choices, Harry, that show we truly are, far more than our abilities.” —Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J.K. Rowling

“Mistakes are the portals of discovery.” —James Joyce

“Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” —Albert Einstein

“The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself.” —Thales

“The only causes of regret are laziness, outbursts of temper, hurting others, prejudice, and envy.” —Germaine Greer

“The only disability in life is a bad attitude.” —Scott Hamilton
“The thing is most people are afraid to step out, to take a chance beyond their established identity.”
– Demi Moore

“When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, ‘I used everything you gave me.’”  – Erma Bombeck

“You only live once—but if you work it right, once is enough.”  – Joe E. Lewis

**Memoir Project Assignment**

For the next few weeks, you are going to write. You are going to write about YOU: about who you are, what’s important to you, where you’ve been, where you are (physically, emotionally, mentally), and where you’re going.

**FINAL PRODUCT: a scrapbook memoir**

**Requirements for Final Product:**

- 15 chapters
- Visual elements—photos, drawings, graphics, art, decorative elements like stickers, scrapbooking materials, mementos
- Pages must be bound together in some way (string, binder, folder, etc.)
- Cover page with a creative title
- Table of Contents

**Grading:**

**Final Product:**

- 70% writing quality
  - Organization: each chapter is focused around a central idea, it’s all in an order than makes sense
  - Content: writing holds the reader’s attention, relevant details enrich the writing
  - MUGS: mechanics, usage, grammar, style (word choice, sentence variety)
- 10% completeness
- 10% effort & neatness & visual appeal
- 10% meeting deadlines

**Final Memoir Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finished Memoir</strong></td>
<td>Organization: Organizes and develops ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing demonstrates consistent control of organizational structure (effective beginning, middle, and ending); focuses around a clearly presented main idea; Chapters are presented in an order that makes sense.</td>
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<td>Writing demonstrates inconsistent control of organizational structure.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Writing demonstrates lack of control of organizational structure and does not focus around a main idea. Order of the chapters makes little sense or seems haphazard.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content</td>
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<td>Writing tells an important story with effective and specific examples; Showing rather than telling; Holds the reader’s attention consistently.</td>
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<td>Writing provides few facts and/or details to support the importance of the story; Inconsistent use of “show don’t tell”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Language: Sentences and Vocabulary</td>
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<td>Language is vivid and lively, and sentences are varied, or Language is precise/clear. Content specific word choice.</td>
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<td>Language is simple and there is little variety in sentence types, or Some ambiguity as a result of word choice. Some use of unclear pronoun references.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conventions: Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation</td>
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<td>Writing shows complete control of writing conventions with very few errors.</td>
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<td>Writing has some control of conventions. Errors minimally interfere with meaning.</td>
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<td>Serious errors in conventions interfere with meaning.</td>
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<td><strong>Effort</strong></td>
<td>Timeliness Neatness Efficiency</td>
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<td>Put forth your best effort in every aspect of completing this project. Final is visually attractive and well-constructed.</td>
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<td>Worked hard but maybe slacked off in one area.</td>
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<td>Tried but could have done better. Did not work up to ability level. Was regularly observed not using time effectively.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting Deadlines</strong></td>
<td>Stayed on task Met deadlines Progress made daily</td>
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<td>Always on task. Turned in all rough drafts by deadline.</td>
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<td>Sometimes off task. Missed deadline one or two times.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequently off task. Frequently missed deadlines.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Completeness</strong></td>
<td>Has every element required by assignment sheet</td>
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<td></td>
<td>All elements demonstrate high level of organization.</td>
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<td>Missing one-two elements.</td>
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<td>Missing more than three two elements.</td>
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Suggested Mentor Texts

Picture Books
• Bahr, Mary. The Memory Box
• Browne, Anthony. My Dad
• Browne, Anthony. My Mom
• Croza, Laurel. I Know Here
• Howard, Arthur. When I Was Five
• Hurst, Carol Otis. Rocks in His Head
• Perkins, Lynne Rae. Pictures from Our Vacation
• Polacco, Patricia. The Keeping Quilt
• Polacco, Patricia. Mr. Lincoln's Way
• Polacco, Patricia. My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother
• Rylant, Cynthia. When I Was Young in the Mountains
• Scillian, Devin. Memoirs of a Goldfish
• Scillian, Devin. Memoirs of a Hamster
• Yaccarino, Dan. Every Friday

Chapter Books
• Bridges, Ruby. Through My Eyes
• Clifton, Louise. Good Woman
• Codell, Esme Raji. Sing a Song of Tuna Fish: Hard-to-Swallow Stories from Fifth Grade
• Erdrich, Louise. Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country
• Erlich, Amy. When I Was Your Age, Volumes I & II
• Fletcher, Ralph. Marshfield Dreams: When I Was a Kid
• Frank, Anne. Diary of a Young Girl
• Fulghum, Robert. All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten
• Gantos, Jack. Hole in My Life
• Greenwald, Sheila. Rosy Cole's Memoir Explosion
• Gruwell, Erin. The Freedom Writer's Diary
• Him, Chanrithy. When Broken Glass Floats
• Hurston, Zora. Dust Tracks on a Road
• Jimenez, Francisco. The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child
• Kingston, Maxine. Woman Warrior
• LeMelman, Martin. Mendel's Daughter
• Lowry, Lois. Looking Back: A Book of Memories
• McCourt, Frank. Angela's Ashes
• Myers, Walter Dean. Bad Boy: A Memoir
• Say, Allen. Drawing from Memory
• Scieszka, Jon. Knucklehead: Tall Tales and Mostly True Stories About Growing Up Scieszka
• Shutz, Samantha. I Don't Want to be Crazy
• Tan, Amy. The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life
• Walls, Jeannette. The Glass Castle
• Weisel, Elie. Night
In Ray Bradbury's dystopian America, where citizens no longer read or even think, the protagonist, Guy Montag, discovers, “There must be something in the books, things we can’t imagine...” (Bradbury 48). He comes to realize the value of literature in a society where literature is feared and forbidden. When interviewed about his purpose for writing *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury claimed, “I was not predicting the future, I was trying to prevent it” (Walsh). As an English teacher, I often feel likewise. How can I instill a love of reading and learning within my students? And not just a love of reading in general -- how can I help them to love, or at least to appreciate, *literature*, when Nicholas Sparks churns out a new book each year and when every halfway-thought-out sci-fi series is made into a movie franchise?

I constantly receive questions and complaints about the rationale behind my curriculum, and the questions don't just come from students. I've had well-intentioned parents ask, “Why does the reading have to be so hard?” or ‘Why can't you read something that the kids will enjoy?’ My traditional answer was: we read these types of stories and novels because they're classics. But when that became insufficient, I decided it was time to dig deeper into my pedagogy, to find some research to back my practices, and to develop a rationale strong and clear enough to satisfy students and parents alike.

During my research, I discovered a wonderful resource, *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. In it, the authors define and contrast commercial fiction with literary fiction. This text breaks down a concept that all English teachers and lovers of literature intuitively understand, but may not be able to articulate on their own. Commercial fiction, according to *Perrine's Literature*, can be described as “legal thrillers and romance novels that make it up best-seller lists,” which are written primarily to “make money” and help readers to escape the tedium and stress of their lives (Arp and Johnson 62). Conversely, literary fiction can be described as being composed with “serious artistic intentions” that “hope to broaden, deepen, and sharpen the reader's awareness of life” (62).

Because of the differences in their purpose, the way that we consume each type of fiction is different as well. Commercial fiction “requires no serious study or intensive study” while literary fiction begs for deliberate re-readings (61). Furthermore, *Perrine's Literature* adds, there also lies a difference in elements and reader expectations. For example, while reading commercial fiction, readers generally expect “a sympathetic hero...a defined plot...a strong element of suspense...[and] a happy ending” (65). Clearly, the differences between commercial and literary fiction are vast, but the essence of the text's argument is perhaps best conveyed in this one poignant statement: “Unless a story expands or refines our thinking on a significant topic or quickens our sense of life, its value is not appreciably greater than that of video games or crossword puzzles” (61).

Equipped with this information, I was ready to share what I'd discovered with my students. My first step was to create a Powtoon (animated slideshow design software) presentation outlining the differences between commercial fiction and literary fiction. I asked the students to watch the presentation at home, take notes regarding the content, and come to class ready to talk about it. They arrived in class the next day unconvincing and unenthusiastic... until we started discussing.

*Katie Kilgour has been an educator for twelve years, and currently teaches sophomores at Jackson High School in Jackson County, Ohio. She possesses a Bachelor’s degree in Integrated Language Arts and Master’s degree in Reading Education, both from Ohio University. She hopes to instill a love of literature in each of her students.*
Early on in the discussion, the majority of students stated that literary fiction just seemed “harder” or “stranger” than commercial fiction, but one student had a different perspective. She claimed that she had an epiphany during a portion of the presentation that describes literary fiction as containing “shades of morals’ rather than a clear right vs. wrong’ (Arp and Johnson 106 – language mine). To her, it was now obvious -- discussing complex literature would lead to better group discussions and more self-discovery than reading and discussing commercial fiction. With that single statement, the discussion shifted. Rather than pointing out the things that didn’t like about literary fiction -- its required re-readings, often troublesome endings, and complicated language -- students were now mentioning literary stories that we had read previously that they couldn’t seem to forget. They spoke of the complex characters with unknown motivations in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the ambiguous ending to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” and assumptions they made while reading Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif.” Finally, I began to see progress toward my goal of creating readers who appreciate rich texts.

This initial class discussion was illuminating, and it inspired me to take this journey a step further. I decided to create an entire unit that revolved around the theme of “the value of literary fiction,” using the feature text, Fahrenheit 451. In past years, I felt that students had been less than appreciative of Fahrenheit, and I wondered if knowing and analyzing the differences between literary and commercial fiction might allow for a greater appreciation of the novel. And, really, what better text to use in a unit about the value of literature? Bradbury had said he wanted to prevent a future of non-readers with this book, so I decided to put him to the test.

We began the unit with a deep study of Fahrenheit, analyzing the structure, style, and themes. Overall, I was pleased to see how they interacted with the text. They annotated the entire novel, traced motifs throughout, composed a literary analysis essay on a topic of their choice, and engaged in thoughtful classroom discussions. Then, rather than simply ending the unit after our study of Fahrenheit, I asked the students to choose a piece of commercial fiction to pair with it. Their selection only had to meet two criteria: (1) it had to be commercial, and (2) it had to be dystopian. Students weren’t required to annotate or analyze this novel as they read, since they already knew that the purpose of commercial fiction is to entertain; they were simply asked to read and enjoy.

After reading their novels, I asked students to engage with them by comparing them to Fahrenheit. First, I had them do a simple comparison of the two novels by creating a visual Venn diagram (using illustrations, quotations from the text, and words or phrases to compare), giving them free reign to compare whatever aspects of the texts they wanted. Some students compared the worlds created within the novels; others compared the protagonists or the antagonists. Overall, the end products were satisfactory -- students were able to

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**Figure 1:** Student Comparison of Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 & Thomas’s Intentional Dissonance
cite textual evidence (a recurring objective in my classroom) and to compare various aspects of the novels.

Next, I asked students to evaluate the literature -- and this is where the magic occurred. Students began by developing a set of four criteria to define what constitutes "good" fiction, in other words, what they look for in a book. After reading both novels, students reviewed and rated each one, using these criteria. Their responses contained items such as: a suspenseful plot, empathetic characters, compelling relationships, an engaging storyline, etc. Much of their chosen criteria was predictable, but not all of it. To my surprise (and delight), many students chose to include within the top four things that they desire in a piece of fiction, that it be literary, rich, or thought provoking.

Figures 2 and 3:
Front Cover (Evaluative Criteria) and Body of Student's Evaluation of Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 and Aguirre's Enclave.
Teaching Matters

They were able to see value in literary fiction -- to realize that with complexity comes depth and with close analysis comes revelation. They were able to accept that “a literary work may be more demanding of the reader in terms of its language, structure, and complexity,” because they knew that exposure to literary fiction would allow them to gain “an enhanced understanding of life.” (65).

I claimed that this journey was about searching for a rationale strong enough to convince others that what I’m teaching is worthwhile and important. To some degree, that is true, and it certainly was true when I began. Throughout the process, though, I discovered that, in a greater sense, my pursuit of this project emanated from a need to remind myself of value -- the value of literature, and education, and hard work in a world where it’s much easier to get lost in the fluff of a predictable romance or zone out in the comforting blue light of a screen. Years of complaints and resistance chip away slowly at even the toughest of us. The questions and criticisms wedge themselves into our brains, one by one -- Why don’t I choose texts that they would choose themselves? Why can’t I choose something more upbeat? Am I expecting too much of them? -- until we find ourselves facing the big question: Is it really worth it? This project brought me and my students face-to-face with this question, and the answer came to us just as it did for Bradbury’s Guy Montag -- yes. Unequivocally, yes.

I can’t say that all of my students now love to read classic literature or even that they all appreciate Fahrenheit, but I can tell you that they come to my class ready to do the work of unpacking complex pieces of literature. They no longer question my list of required reading; instead, they look at reading assignments as a challenge and an opportunity to better understand the world in which we live. In Fahrenheit, Guy Montag asserts, “We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were really bothered? About something important, about something real?” (Bradbury 49). Ray Bradbury was in the business of bothering people, and now, having gone through this process, I’ve discovered that I am, too.

Works Cited


Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ms. Candice Weddington, M.A., for her careful review and editing of this manuscript during its preparation. Her contributions were invaluable to the successful completion of this work.
“Wait, did they really change that?” asked one student.

“Why?”

She and a few other book club members sat in the classroom watching *The Maze Runner* after school.

“I liked this scene in the book better. It was more dramatic, impactful… Is impactful a word?”

Just one year before, this student and the rest of the newly created book club at Akron Digital Academy had never read an entire book—not one!

Deficiencies in reading and writing for high school students are a growing problem. In fact, Bloomberg reported, “Students in the high school class of 2015 turned in the lowest critical reading score on the SAT college entrance exam in more than 40 years, with all three sections declining from the previous year… The reading score of 495 is the worst since 1972, according to data provided by the College Board” (Kitroeff and Lorin, 2015). At Akron Digital Academy, we set out to correct this growing trend using an unusual method: we redefined the traditional book club to create something new, something that had never existed at this school or at any other we knew of—a book club for non-readers.

**Our Book Club**

Akron Digital Academy is an online public community school with a physical location in downtown Akron, Ohio. We enroll approximately 400 students in grades 6-12; students receive online instruction for their entire curriculum. Students may also choose to come to our physical location to receive face-to-face enrichment and tutoring services, or just to work in our fully staffed computer lab.

Over ninety percent of our school’s population is considered economically disadvantaged, and average family educational attainment is low. Approximately 60% of our population is non-White. Many of our students come from households that experience food insecurity and transient housing. Frequently, students come to us having attended a variety of schools and having experienced little academic success.

Analysis of reading and writing test scores for our students revealed overall low performance and significant learning gaps. We needed to do something to address this problem. According to a two-year study by the Chicago Schools Academic Accountability Council, increased reading time during the school day had a large impact on improving student reading scores (Cromwell, 2004). To address the needs of our struggling readers, we identified the high school students with the lowest reading comprehension and fluency scores. Some, but not all, of these students were identified for special education services. With reading and writing scores so low for these particular students, this was an attempt to save them from falling through the cracks and bridge the literacy proficiency gap in reading and writing.

Before beginning the book club, we needed to identify high-interest texts that were accessible to our learners but would still push them to improve. Our goal was to identify modern novels that would

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*Weston Kincade is a teacher and novelist. He currently teaches 9th and 11th grade English language arts at Akron Digital Academy. Melissa Shirley, PhD is a former high school science teacher and current Director of Curriculum and Educational Technology at Akron Digital Academy.*
Teaching Matters

interest our students yet provide a diverse look at the world. We were not focusing on classic literature like *Moby Dick* or Shakespeare. We wanted to find books that would interest non-readers, stories they could connect with, so we focused initially on fiction. We also sought to locate novels having broad appeal to students with a variety of cultural backgrounds and interests. We perused lists of award-winning young adult fiction, then researched each one, checking review after review. And clearly, it was important to find books that would still be accessible to students who were typically at least three grade levels behind in their reading ability. By the end of the search we had narrowed the list down to six novels, with a few backups. Our selections included:

- *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry
- *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *The Skin I’m In*, by Sharon G. Flake
- *The First Part Last*, by Angela Johnson
- *Scorpions*, by Walter Dean Myers
- *Bang*, by Sharon G. Flake

Finally, we were ready to begin the book club in earnest. According to James R. Squire, “Directing attention to specific skills is important since we know those skills that are not taught are not acquired. But teaching the specific skills in a holistic context is critical” (1983). We started the book club with that in mind and experience from teaching middle and high school English for years. We began with thematic warm-ups, discussions, and sometimes articles about the effect particular types of books like “dystopian fiction” are having on teenagers and why they have become so popular. We pulled information from published articles in *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, and elsewhere. These materials helped book club members to become interested and buy into the idea that these books were worth reading.

Our target students were assigned to attend a twice-weekly book club during the usual homeroom time. Within the first couple days of book club, we started reading aloud, taking turns after reading a paragraph at a time. By the end of the second week, they were hooked. Students were coming to class having read ahead and anxiously looking forward to how other students would react to certain events when we read them aloud. Soon we were able to assign chapters to be read at home, and students would confidently come to school having done the reading and answered the guided reading questions we supplied them.

**Impact**

One week, we received several emails from colleagues who were concerned about some arguments students were having in other classes and in the hallways. It turned out the students were debating a particular character’s motivations in *The Giver*, and when we enlightened the teachers, they were astounded. Considering the lack of motivation commonly seen in quite a few of our students, the fact that book club members were delving deeper into these books, characters, and questions without prompting outside our class was impressive. Book club members even came to class excited about revelations they’d had regarding events in the story, predictions, and suspicions about character motivations. The books and characters were becoming real, and a whole new world was opening up to these non-readers.

By the end of the first semester, book club members had read three entire novels, written poetry, letters from characters’ perspectives, and even their own short stories, and all of the students had moved from reading a paragraph at a time in our round-robin readings to pages at a time. Moreover, these non-readers had become book lovers.

Many of our students have not been successful on state graduation tests, but the results for one of our members led us to consider the impact of book club in wide-eyed wonder. For example, Deandre’s test scores had been low throughout his schooling, and a low passage rate on previous administrations of state tests reflected this. However, during the spring of our first year of book club, Deandre passed his state graduation tests in Reading. He has since displayed increased confidence in passing additional graduation tests, and the drastic improvement we had seen in Deandre’s reading score encouraged us to continue with our non-traditional book club.

By the end of the school year, our small group of non-readers had read six novels, and what was more, they insisted that we put together a recommended list for summer reading. They even volunteered some books they were interested in but had not yet read for next year’s book list. It was a great first year, and these students had grown immensely in both their reading and writing skills, but also their confidence in approaching the world. Teenagers who began the school year as quiet, sometimes depressed, unmotivated students had gained the motivation and confidence to speak out in class and approach educational tasks with more vigor and a more cooperative work ethic. Even though that had been our intent originally, the book club members’ improvements were astounding.

We found that the atmosphere developed in book club creates a sense of loyalty and something
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for students to look forward to. This is likely due, at least in part, to our focus on “respect.” The club rules all encompass the idea of respect: be respectful of others, your environment, and yourself. Since our book club is founded on respect for each other and the students’ “buy-in” to the books and activities we are doing, this relationship creates a sense of loyalty to the other members, the teachers, and the school’s book club in its own right. As an unexpected result of this sense of loyalty and school belonging, the embarrassment of not having completed work or not attending regularly is normally something most students want to avoid.

Students in book club have become loyal friends, peer tutors, and even friendly competitors when it comes to assignments. Often one will come to us outside of class, saying, “I’m ahead. I read to page eighty-five. Do you know if William reached that part yet?” It always brings a smile to our faces and allows us to inquire about their thoughts on the book or particular scenes. Their answers are normally a product of deeper thought, forcing them to consider what they read in a way they had not thought about before. Every moment can be an educational opportunity, in or outside the classroom. And no matter how much we challenge them, book club members’ newfound love of literature and loyalty to each other keeps them coming back. This buy-in and sense of loyalty is fundamental to the group’s success, and has positively impacted a number of students’ attendance at school and overall work habits.

The development of respect lends itself to student comfort too. Creating lessons and assignments that build on students’ past experiences is essential but can prove problematic at times because the experiences can be so traumatic and personal. However, these past experiences are what they are passionate about and can help students become more motivated to participate if they feel they are in a safe and respectful environment. This resulted in something unexpected during the first semester of book club.

Students in our literary club have become their own family microcosm. One day, James revealed to me personally that he lost his little brother to a drive-by shooting while the little guy was playing on the front porch of their house. As time passed and the book club members grew closer—creating this microcosm of trust, loyalty, and respect—James disclosed this difficult experience to the entire group. Additionally, within the first semester James had taken another club member, Michael, under his wing, offering advice on the intricacies of life. Later in the semester, after one particularly touching class where we read about a character losing his sibling in a similar way, I was surprised to see James turn to Michael. He had tears in his eyes when he said, “You know, you really remind me of my little brother.” Within moments the two had embraced in a brotherly hug. I’m not sure how long it lasted, but it seemed like a few minutes passed before they separated and began walking to their next class.

Book Club Activities

In book club, we emphasize student-centered activities that facilitate student progress in reading and writing through more creative and often kinesthetic activities related to the books we are covering. For each session, we implement activities that support reading, peer discussion, and creative writing. Some of our specific strategies are described below.

Reading Strategies

To help improve students’ reading abilities, we often spend at least some of the book club period reading aloud or silently and performing during-reading activities that will be used in later projects.

Most frequently, we use round-robin reading, switching from one reader to the next after a few pages. We originally began by reading a paragraph per person aloud, but as students progressed, they wanted to read more and more. They simply kept reading when it was their time to switch. We allowed this, extending each person’s reading length a bit each class before picking the next person to take over. Students have also sometimes read to each other quietly in pairs for activities,switching back and forth of their own accord.

Similarly, we sometimes have students create guided reading questions as they read through a book. Doing this prompts students to look at the story from a different perspective and to think about it more deeply since we require that a certain number of each chapter’s questions have to be more insightful, not simply “What did Roger say when he kicked the tree?” or other surface-level questions.

Discussion Strategies

According to the Center for Instructional Development and Research, class discussion is a powerful tool in an educator’s toolbox that helps facilitate a better understanding of core concepts and the implications those ideas can have on students’ lives, but this rarely happens by accident. Good discussions are prepared in advance and purposefully led.
Teaching Matters

Wittrock (1990) elaborated on another important characteristic, reading comprehension, stating that reading comprehension is built by creating relationships between ideas within a text and one’s own knowledge, past experiences, and beliefs. In book club, we build these relationships between text and self through daily discussion question the students respond to on a sheet of paper. Then we discuss their answers and prompt them to delve deeper through additional questions. This helps students consider themes, characters, and situations in the plot, but also acts as a refresher about what we covered in an earlier class or what should have been completed for homework. After a discussion, students tend to be more invested in the topic and can comfortably approach that day’s lesson with the knowledge needed.

Writing Strategies

An important part of building overall student literacy is to have students respond to their reading in some kind of written form. Gillespie and Graham (2012) recommend that language arts instructors “allow students to work together to plan, write, edit, and revise their writing” (n.p.). They go on to explain the importance of writing activities that require students to use inquiry skills and delve deeper into certain aspects of the text. In book club, this is often accomplished by having students construct a poem, read and respond to a news article through journaling, or write a short fiction piece drawing on past experiences. Such writing assignments are used as pre-reading, during-reading, or post-reading activities.

We have written addressing a variety of topics. For example, club members will often write short stories, poems, letters from particular characters’ perspectives, or journal entries, allowing students to put themselves in a particular character’s shoes and consider his or her motivations and intentions. We try to brainstorm different ideas and prompts, sometimes scouring the internet ahead of time, but every writing assignment we do ties into the book we are covering and gives them plenty of room for creativity.

Initially, it was a challenge to convince book club members to engage in longer writing assignments. However, once we explained the purpose for the assignment, what we wanted them to get out of it, students delved into both the assignment and the book itself, better appreciating what they were about.

Increasing motivation to write was not sufficient. We also needed to help students improve their writing skills. “When we are committed to a goal, we are more likely to learn as a function of positive feedback” (Hattie and Timperley, 2011, p. 99). Continual encouragement and comparison of student writing to already published works has been an important component of convincing students that they are capable of strong writing.

After the first few creative writing projects, the club members started to recognize their own skills. In editing and reviewing their work, we would highlight the things we loved about their stories, even comparing them to scenes in books we had read, then offer up suggestions for how to make the stories even better and improve their writing at the same time. The more students write, the more they take pride in their work and are more open to future creative ideas they might have. Proponents of creative design David and Tom Kelley (2013) argue in their book *Creative confidence: Unleashing the creative potential in all of us* that everyone has the ability to be creative, and creative confidence “is like a muscle—it can be strengthened and nurtured through effort and experience” (qtd. in Boss, 2014). Now, when we mention a writing activity, rarely are there sighs or bowed heads in book club. With the knowledge that they are capable of creating something astounding, students pull out their journals or find a fresh sheet of paper and quickly grab a pen, asking, “So what’s this one gonna be about?” with a look of anticipation.

One activity in particular the book club members and teachers enjoy is called “Camera Shot Writing,” an activity developed by a fellow teacher that we adapted. In this teaching strategy, each student uses window markers to draw a camera on one of the classroom windows, making sure to include the lens. The teacher provides students with an engaging prompt to focus students’ observations. Then, students spend a few minutes watching what is going on through their camera lenses, making notes of their observations to use in their writing.

We used Camera Shot Writing to support a lesson on poetry, using “Litany”, by U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins. We asked students to consider the many metaphors and analogies he makes, to keep them in mind as they look through their makeshift camera lenses and use them as a model for their own writing. They were to watch for change and activity—things they could incorporate into their own poem. The focus of this activity was on observation and how the world can pass you by, changing constantly. Using another Collins reference, book club members wrote their poems starting with the phrase “Sailing Around the…” and finishing it based on the observations from
their “cameras”. This is inspired by Collins’s acclaimed short story collection, *Sailing Alone Around the Room*.

**Recommendations**

Considering these students were assigned to this club without ever having read a book, we knew our initial hurdles would include getting students to buy in to the club, the books, and the lessons themselves. We also identified low motivation and absence of external accountability as potential barriers to student participation. We incorporated specific approaches to reducing student anxiety about their reading comprehension and writing abilities. Our initial solutions to these potential problems are below in the hopes that others may learn from them.

According to Linda Nilson, the best way to get students to connect with any kind of reading is to explain not just what the story or article is about, but “explain why you chose the readings you did, as well as their purpose, value, and relevance to the course” (n.p.). This is one of the initial steps we normally begin with, explaining what we hope students will get out of the book and why we chose it.

Adolescents are often more concerned with social interactions than academics. Our students have also rarely experienced academic success. Together, these influences can limit students’ motivation to participate. To combat these influences, we approach each project, book, and activity with optimism and passion. We use their successful improvement in reading to prove other activities can be fun, too, such as creative writing. There is often a disconnect between the published word and what students feel they can create. Bridging this gap by making positive comparisons between their work and that of authors can increase a students’ motivation to read widely and write creatively.

Since book club was not part of a credit-bearing course, our options for holding students accountable for attendance and participation were limited. Yet, we felt that participation was crucial to improving their literacy. As an encouragement, we worked out a system with the language arts teachers to provide participation credit toward their overall English grades. This gave our reluctant learners tangible recognition of the additional reading and writing they would be completing as part of our book club.

With our struggling readers, one important practice we recommend is pausing the reader upon encountering an essential statement, vocabulary word, or confusing topic. When this occurs, we will normally ask what they think it means, wait for answers, and quickly go over the meaning in terms of the story and its implications. Normally the more astute readers will grasp the concept upon the first reading, but students with lower reading skills may not at first make the deeper connections. However, we would advise against doing this too frequently, for it can sometimes make comprehending the text for poor readers more difficult if there are a multitude of interruptions. It is a balancing act, as described in Chalt’s Stages of Reading Development (cited in Stahl, 1990).

Students often find that the hardest part of writing is simply the beginning. The key to helping students is, for us, to approach writing with passion by demonstrating that writing can be fun, that their imaginations can unfold like the petals of a flower, and that every written piece starts with an ounce of truth. A common phrase we use at the beginning of our creative writing projects is “Write what you know. Start from there.” Countless times early on we could see students struggling to come up with ideas, until the light came on and they looked at us skeptically, finally asking whether a character could do this or that, or simply whether an idea was good.

**Future Plans**

The success of our first year of book club led us to continue the project for a second year, albeit with some changes. We now invite any interested student to participate; last year’s members even convinced a couple friends and siblings to join us. In the second year of book club, administrators, special education teachers, and support faculty have even started the year recommending book club to incoming students as a great opportunity for remediation of reading and writing skills.

Students are willingly writing, offering more constructive criticism, and peer editing each other’s work with more confidence. Other teachers have commented on the improvement in their writing skills, and it has translated to other subject areas. A non-traditional book club is not a quick fix, but it can bridge the reading and writing gap of students who have fallen behind while fostering a passion for literature.

Book club members are still open and respectful of one another, and the new additions seem to be attracted to the family microcosm in addition to the great books. The respect and loyalty developed last year need to be adopted by incoming book club members. Too much growth in a short period can
alter an environment drastically, so we would like the club to grow slowly and maintain the qualities that have benefited students most. Continued modeling of behavioral expectations has been an important factor in maintaining the environment.

With the increase in numbers of participating students, we also hope to publish an anthology of student writing. The peer editing they would need to do for this would help students with their grammar and writing skills. And we know our students would be thrilled to see their own work in print, just like the books they have been reading! We purposefully incorporated more creative writing projects in place of smaller lessons this year to help encourage more progress in writing.

Only time will tell.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Alecia Wydeman for her invaluable efforts in helping fulfill the special education and instructional needs of our non-traditional book club and Zach Rozler for his original efforts to create “Camera Shot Writing,” which proved to be a tremendously effective teaching strategy.

References


Mariana peered into the computer screen, a mug of English Breakfast Tea beside her. It was not yet dawn on this third day of Christmas vacation. The light from the computer illuminated her furrowed brow. She worked in her father’s home office, reading essays by her AP seniors on Google docs. Her husband slept, as did her two children—daughters seven and nine. She heard gentle snoring in the quiet of her parents’ house. She reached for the mug, changed her mind, brought her hand to the mouse, selected “comment,” and began typing:

Your narrative lede dramatizes the dilemma, and if you get to your argument right after it, readers will follow you and want to know more, as I do.

She read what she’d written, thought: Gabby’s a good thinker. A little drunk with language, maybe. Not unusual for a smart 17-year-old. She’s a better writer now than she was in August. Knows there’s more to writing well than the number five.

Mariana lifted the mug and sipped. She glanced at the time: 7:07 am. She’d been at work an hour-and-a-half. She’d responded to 22 of 47 essays. Maybe she could do two more before the girls awoke. Or one. She never responded to drafts as fast as she thought she would.

The semester would end three weeks after break. She wanted students to have her response before school resumed so her input could be part of their revisions.

Mariana drained the tea, now cool and extra sweet with the honey that had settled to the bottom of the mug. She resisted the urge to rise from her father’s comfortable chair, pad downstairs to the kitchen, and brew herself another. She set the mug down and opened Armand’s essay.

That was my daughter, a high school English teacher for 16 years, visiting my wife and me with her family over a recent holiday break. To show her dedication, her commitment to helping students write better, her touch of idealism, I wrote this narrative. In the words of the CCSS, I sought to “develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.”

I’d witnessed Mariana working not only at my desk but also with her laptop at the dining room table, the couch, the kitchen island, a wicker chair in the sunroom. Images remained vivid: light from the computer screen on her face, steam rising from the surface of the tea, the thump of her fingers on the keyboard. And because I’m a sentient being, I imagined the heft of the mug and the sharp sweetness of honey. Over forty years I’ve pried the same trade as she, so I easily recall fashioning comments to bolster and nudge.

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and great writing teacher Donald Murray called narrative “the mother of all genres.” He might have said “the mother of all thinking.” Writing narrative with significant detail so it lives on the page is generative. Descriptive language generates more language, detail, and thought. The scene sharpens in the writer’s mind like a Polaroid photo. With this sharpening, the writer sees more clearly and understands more complexly. When writers deeply understand what they are narrating, they are better able to make abstract statements about it, if they choose. Readers, of course, are benefactors of this enhanced seeing and understanding.

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The Conference Room Table

Narrative Foothold

Along with arguments and informative/explanatory pieces, narrative is one of the triumvirate of text types and purposes of the CCSS. Don’t be deluded, though, about what the CCSS values most. Narrative is a stepchild, an unwanted one. The CCSS links narrative with creativity, and it wants little to do with creativity. Appendix A of the CCSS notes,

The narrative category does not include all the possible forms of creative writing, such as many types of poetry. The Standards leave the inclusion and evaluation of other such forms to teacher discretion.

Here’s one implication of that statement: If teachers are so inclined, they may skip teaching students to write many of the possible forms of narrative. Reject this implication.

Instead, use your teacher discretion to include narrative in your courses. Narrative enables students—even linguistically talented ones—to get a foothold in their journey to develop skills, attitudes, and habits that help them become better writers. I attest to this, not only through the writing of thousands of students I’ve taught over the years, but also through my experience as a struggling 18-year-old writer sitting in a university classroom in 1967, unprepared for the kind of writing the academy required, clearly over my head. I slogged along with Cs in freshman composition. I wrote essays of exposition, comparison and contrast, classification, analysis, definition, argument, rhetorical analysis, and personal narrative. I was abstract, lofty, and wordy.

In high school, I had been touted a fine writer, got As and B’s writing abstract arguments about literature, been told I had a “flair for journalism.” On a self-sponsored essay I gave to my teacher in which I disagreed with the thesis of Simon and Garfunkel’s “I Am a Rock,” she wrote, “Tom, you sound just like one of those English poets!”

And there I was at Miami University getting Cs from the doctoral student who taught my section of English 111 . . . until I wrote personal narrative. I had a story to tell, a good one. I wrote after midnight on a Saturday, so motivated was I to relate the events and characters of the day I skipped school as a high school freshman, which turned into a debacle. One poor decision after another, one bit of coincidental foul play, and some stereotyping had led to suspicions, erroneous conclusions, the rounding up of my friend and I by a local police officer, and a week of lunch periods spent in the principal’s office.

The doctoral student read aloud my paper and another student’s, anonymously, without our permission, a common practice in those days. My paper was an example of a good personal narrative; the other was an example of a poor one. I kept mum during discussion, but secretly glowed (so much for solidarity among students in the dog-eat-dog world of academic survival). I got a B+.

More important than the grade, though, I gained confidence. Writing narrative gave me a foothold of success in my mediocre first semester of college. We are storytelling animals. Narrative is in our DNA. We want to see people in action. We want to know what happened and why, what set events in motion and how people involved behaved. Relating stories is natural to us. And we can learn to relate them more effectively.

Don't Settle: Narrative Summary and Dramatic Narrative

Not all narrative is created equal. Literature and our lives are filled with drama, but in our writing we often settle for less. We narrate but we tell. Readers understand, but they don’t stir with tension. Their interest isn’t piqued. Here’s narration that settles for less:

_The mother and daughter stood in line at Dunkin’ Donuts, having a disagreement. The daughter wouldn’t back down; the mother looked vexed. After several minutes, the daughter won._

That’s narrative summary. It has its place, certainly, and serves the purpose of summarizing when necessary to bridge scenes or remind readers of previous events. Narrative summary, however, sacrifices color, sensory detail, nuance, flavor of speech, and dramatic movement. In the paragraph above, you know the setting. You know the sex of the people and their relationship. You know they disagreed, although you’re left to guess what that’s about. You know which one prevailed.

Ho hum, I say. So what?

I happened to be standing in line behind the mother and daughter that morning in the Hynes Convention Center in Boston. I observed the verbal jousting, the body language, the feistiness of the preadolescent girl coming into her own as a wielder of logic pitted against an unreasonable adult.

Here’s the scene recounted through dramatic narrative. Take note of what it contains that you _didn’t_ visualize in the first version. And take note of what the additional detail and drama spur you to imagine:
Just ahead of me in the long line to get into Dunkin’ Donuts stood a mother and daughter. The mother wore a wide black headband that held back curly brunette hair. She bounced one leg, moved aside the sleeve of her jacket with one finger, and checked her watch. The daughter—a girl about ten—wore a red stocking cap and matching mittens. She sighed.

“Don’t be impatient. The line’s moving fast.”

“It’s not moving at all,” said the girl. “I don’t even want a doughnut.”

“It’s too late now. Look how many people are behind us.”

The girl rose to her tiptoes and looked past her mother, over my shoulder. I stepped to the side.

“We could go to Starbucks,” said the girl.

“You can’t get breakfast at Starbucks.”

“What?” The girl’s eyes widened. “You can’t?”

“Not really. It’s for coffee.”

The girl pulled off one red mitten. Her forefinger shot straight up as she began counting: “One, we could get a scone. Two, chocolate marble pound cake. Three, a banana nut muffin. Four, a croissant—”

“That’s not breakfast,” Mom said, fluttering her eyelids.

The girl pounced. “But a doughnut is?”

“I just want coffee,” said Mom. “We’re already in line.”

“And I want a Starbucks hot chocolate.”

Mom rolled her eyes, checked her watch again. “All right, but it’ll take longer. I don’t want any complaining.”

The girl plucked off the other mitten and shoved it in her coat pocket. They stepped out of line and headed to Starbucks (Romano 2015)

The Conference Room Table

- Lead students into locating indelible moments they have witnessed or experienced. Let them talk with discussion partners who get them to say more. Have students choose one indelible moment and narrate it, capturing detail, nuance, and subtleties. Write with the students so you can model the writing process afresh.

- Hound—yes, *bound*—students to hearken to the sensory images involved in the indelible moment, as Ray Bradbury recommends: “If your reader feels the sun on his flesh, the wind fluttering his shirt sleeves, half your fight is won” (1994, 38).

Narrative as Essential Deep Structure

Thomas Newkirk’s latest book, * Minds Made For Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts* (2014), is must reading for every teacher responsible for teaching students to write—all of us. Newkirk’s subtitle is a swipe at the CCSS with its emphasis on argument and its bogus distinction between argument and persuasion. Writes Newkirk:

... narrative is the deep structure of all good sustained writing. *All good writing.* We struggle with writers who dispense with narrative form and simply present information (a major problem with some textbooks)—because we are given no frame for comprehension. Mark Turner, a cognitive psychologist and literary critic, put the claim this way: “Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, of explaining” (Turner 1996, 4-5, qtd. in Newkirk 2014, 19).

Newkirk claims that we have “literary minds that respond to plot, characters, and detail” (2014, 145). Accomplished writers know how to use our craving for narrative to enhance their persuasive writing. In “Tamir Rice and the Value of Life” (January 11, 2015), *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow argues for a basic respect for life that should govern all police-civilian encounters. To persuade readers, Blow reconstructs a compelling narrative of horrific events. Amid the story, he comments and imagines to contextualize and amplify the tragedy. Readers don’t just understand. They witness the killing of Tamir Rice:
On Nov. 22, two officers responded to a 911 call about a “guy” in a park pointing a gun that was “probably fake.” (By the way, Ohio is an open-carry state, so having and carrying a gun is not a crime in and of itself.)

The guy was Tamir. He had a pellet gun. There is no indication in police statements that he ever fired it.

One of the officers, Timothy Loehmann, shot Tamir within “1.5 to two seconds” of arriving at the park. Two seconds. So quickly. In the blink of an eye. And yet, according to the Associated Press, the officers say that they ordered Tamir to put his hands up three times before he was shot. According to the original statement released by the police, “The suspect did not comply with the officers’ orders and reached to his waistband for the gun.”

All in one and a half to two seconds? Really. Take a moment and time yourself giving three commands, imagining a response from Tamir and making the decision to shoot. Maybe it can be done in less than two seconds. But to my mind, it strains credibility.

When one of the officers called in the shooting, he said: “Shots fired, male down, black male, maybe 20.” Tamir was 12.

Tamir’s 14-year-old sister, TAJAH, was in a nearby recreation center when she said she heard a gunshot. She said someone told her that a boy had been shot—her own brother.

She raced to his aid, but as the video shows, one of the officers tackled her, handcuffed her and stuffed her into the back of the police cruiser, just feet away from where her brother was bleeding out onto the snow-dappled ground.

She could not reach him. Her arms could not cradle his body and plead for him to hang on. Her hands could not stroke his cheek, and she could not whisper hopefully, “It’s going to be O.K.” Her eyes could not gaze into his and say what sisters are able to say without saying anything: “I love you.”

Tamir deserved that, but the officers made sure that she could not provide it. Four minutes passed without anyone offering the boy aid or comfort. Four long minutes he lay there, still alive, with the bullet in his abdomen (2015).

The shooting and the failure to render aid to the dying boy evokes a “white-hot level of righteous indignation,” Blow concludes. He isn’t done using story. In swift narrative paragraphs he reminds readers of the circumstances of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown to build his case that if black lives matter, these boys and men would not have been victims of lethal force in the first place, and they would have received aid.

Blow narrates to make readers viscerally imagine Tamir’s killing and consider its implications beyond what they might have seen in the widely broadcast video of the shooting. After the excruciating narrative that provides me with that “frame for comprehension,” I am persuaded by the reasoned and rhythmic eloquence of Blow’s penultimate paragraph:

The plaintive voices of the dead call the living to action. So, in the demands for justice, timorousness must be the enemy, tirelessness must be the motto and righteousness must be the compass (2015).

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### The Conference Room Table

With your students examine writing that employs narrative to inform or persuade (or to argue, if you believe that winning an argument without persuading anyone is a worth rhetorical goal). Move them to use the power of narrative in their own essays.

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Before students write persuasive essays, ask them brainstorm their topics to identify places within them where they could create narrative to help readers imagine the problem they are writing about.

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For example, on the topic of bullying—before taking a stance and offering solutions—the writer might craft dramatic narrative so readers visualize and nearly experience that scene after school in the park when a character suffers bullying. Or the writer might use specific narrative summary to recount a wide array of bullying scenarios.

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In a persuasive essay about Prince Hamlet’s religious values, the writer might create narrative that recounts points in the play when his religious views collide with his impulses and behavior.

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In taking a stance about whether Jonas survives or perishes in the final scene of *The Giver*, have students weave narrative details of the snowstorm, the bicycle, the sled, baby Gabriel’s physical condition, and Jonas’ psychological state. Put the observable, narrative facts of the text in the reader’s mind, then make a case.
Conclusion

We didn't need the CCSS to know that narrative is a vital part of our lives, a vital part of this enterprise of communicating through the written word. Lead students to immerse themselves in creating both lived and imagined indelible moments. Let them practice turning narrative summary into dramatic narrative, which sharpens their perceptions as they notice detail, nuance, and dialog. Their thinking will quicken and their writing gain energy. Teach students to use dramatic narrative in their persuasive essays to pique readers’ interest and engage the logic of the senses in their effort to influence the logic of the mind. The tools crucial to all forms of discourse, Newkirk reminds us, are “...the narrative thread, the anecdote, the story of human interest, the apt metaphor” (2014 28).

And now to narrate indelible moments from our 2014 family trip to Italy and convince them that another trip is overdue.

Works Cited


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It felt strange to me as I walked through the halls and peered into the rooms of the Kilcawley Center on the campus of Youngstown State University (YSU). The rooms were silent now and most of them dark on the last Friday before spring break. I was a little early for my appointment, so as I walked over to Dr. Jeffrey Buchanan’s office I couldn’t resist the urge to look in on the spaces that have had such a lasting influence on me. As I passed each door I was flooded with vivid memories: The Bresnahan suite was just down the hall – there I led a group of students in a *dream-cast-this-festival-book* exercise. That was such a good moment when the students proudly called out detailed plans for scripting and casting the novels that they had read. Around the corner was The Esterly Room where I led a poetry workshop one year and a word game session another, both full of engaged and happy kids from several different school districts across Mahoning Valley and beyond.

Then there was the Ohio Room which, to this day, I can only imagine as it exists during the three days of the YSU English Festival: stuffed with about eighty people, teachers and volunteer YSU students, staff, and faculty. The volunteers walk the floor in arcing circles around the round tables where the teachers score the 600 or so essays that have been written that morning by students attending the festival. They score them holistically according to their pre-festival training and the best 200-300 are carted across the hall to the Hynes Room where another set of thirty or so volunteer teachers, students, faculty, and staff pour over the lot, ranking them according to writing traits. It was here that I first volunteered. I still remember fondly what became known as the dance of the scorecards. I pass out papers and collect them when scored then redistribute them for a second reading, check for agreement in the evaluations and, sometimes, send out the controversial papers for third reads.

Depending on the year, anywhere from twenty-five to forty of these papers will be selected to receive prizes ranging from cash and book store gift cards to books and author signed materials. My phone’s alarm sounds and I head for DeBartolo Hall and the interview. I imagine it will be nice to see him after being away for two years.

Dr. Buchanan is a professor with an interesting role to fill. He is a member of both the English Department and the Teacher Education Department at YSU. It was in his role as teacher-educator that I, as a student, first met him but he soon had me over at the festival with the rest of the volunteers. I sought his advice on many things through both my M.S. and M.A. degrees, and even after graduation when I returned as a Composition instructor in the English department. He always made time in his

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schedule for me and offered useful guidance and advice. A longtime member of OCTELA, and a past editor of *OJELA*, Buchanan was promoted to full Professor of English in 2013. He has many duties in addition to the English Festival, including coordinating the English Education program and teaching methods courses. He also supervises student teachers, advises majors, teaches writing and general education literature courses and, at the graduate level, courses in the teaching of reading and writing. Dr. Buchanan also works with WROTE, the Mahoning Valley’s OCTELA affiliate, and somehow still finds time to publish; like his essay in *CEA Forum* in May, 2016. With all those duties to occupy him, I can’t help feeling excited as I wait, that he once again made time to see me.

Dr. Buchanan arrived modeling the newest edition of the official YSU English Festival T-shirt: tan with black lettering and what has become the traditional word cloud with the authors and book titles from the upcoming 2016 April edition of the festival. Amid the stacks of books and festival material we took seats in his office to talk about the event.

**JWR:** For those who have never seen it, can you describe a little of the size and scope of the festival?

**DR. B:** Yes. The festival spans three days in spring, one day for 10th – 12th grade and two days for 7th – 9th grade because there are more of them interested and willing to come to the festival. It is usually between 800 and 1,000 kids each day and there are at least 50 schools that are involved each day. So that means communicating with each of those schools and getting the students registered. Teachers are responsible for collecting the small registration fee—it’s $8; it’s quite small—and they are responsible for encouraging students to read the required seven books on their age group’s booklist. The work also includes getting them here; so that means ordering busses and each school provides a judge and a monitor so we have to oversee all that and account for the fact that there are going to be 50 busses on campus each day. We alert the food services that there will be between 800 and 900 kids between 11:30 and 12:30 that will be looking for somewhere to eat. Other details include securing space for the events and activities; arranging, a year in advance, to get an author here and getting a contract. It is also about physically getting the authors here: booking a flight, picking them up from the airport, booking a hotel.

**JWR:** Do you do that through agents?

**DR. B:** Yes, for some. Others like to do it differently. And then they get here on a Tuesday night. We can’t just drop them off and plunk them down in front of a TV and say “see you tomorrow”; so it’s dinner Tuesday night, which is, of course, a wonderful thing. And then there are the specifics of the festival too. Each day there is an impromptu writing contest which gets about 500 to 600 entrants so we have to get those read. They get read holistically twice each, and then maybe a third of them go on to be read twice more and many of them even further evaluations to get a more precise reading in the traits scoring. There are other contests too. There is the art contest and the Candace Gay essay contest, which is submitted beforehand. We just read those in two-hour chunks over two days this week. So there is always something going on. And we award prizes so we have to get the prizes.

**JWR:** How does that work? Is it funded from the outside or something?

**DR. B:** No funding for prizes, most everything is donated. The publishers don’t do as much of that as they once did either. And then there are financial awards as well, which are provided by an endowment fund. When Candace Gay passed away from cancer, at the age of thirteen, her parents set up an endowment in her name. Those monies, in addition to providing awards, are another reason we have been able to keep the registration fee low.

**JWR:** What does it take to keep an English Festival running for 35 years?

**DR. B:** I want to answer that with something like “magic dust,” because it’s such a hard question. I mean, there is a practical answer which is a committee of people who are attending to all of the details that have to be attended to: everything from choosing possible book lists and reviewing and re-imagining the program and the activities and all sorts of things to the person who does all of the administrative work like extending invitations and contacting schools and responding to the schools who want to become involved. In some ways, because it is built already and has been since I’ve been here, it’s a matter of duplicating and trying not to get in its way because it has a momentum of its own that kind of rolls over.

**JWR:** So the festival has a life of its own?

**DR. B:** A bit, yeah, because no one person does so much that they are irreplaceable, except for the one administrative person. But then there is another
way to answer that question, which is to say that it
takes hard work and dedication and a desire to keep
it going because it is valuable and it does important
things, and there is legitimacy to that answer too.

**JWR:** So this thing didn’t begin as such a
monumental endeavor with 3,000 students did it?
What was the beginning of it like?

**DR. B:** I think that the story that Dr. Gary
Salvner tells, because he was around for that first time,
is that it started as an essay contest and they wanted
to bring the entrants to campus. Gary says that they
made all these plans to bring them and somebody
said, “well what are we going to do with them when
we get them here?” And so from that question the
festival was born and the activities were created.

**JWR:** What are the activities like now - aside
from the essay contest, what sort of things do the
students do at the festival currently?

**DR. B:** There is always a Young Adult Lit
author and students get to see them and hear them
speak. In anniversary years we try to bring in three
or four authors even. And then there’s always the
Houck Lecturer, which is not exactly a Young Adult
author but rather someone who has a scholarly or
peripheral interest in YA Lit. We have got Steve
Bickmore coming this year and we have had people
like Lois Stover, Scott Dikkers and Jim Blasingame.
There is a music contest and an art contest and we
have the Butler Institute of American Art close by
and they work with us during the festival.

There are smaller book discussion groups; there
are workshops about writing poetry and others about
writing prose, and trivial pursuit sessions. There are
writing games sessions too in which the students
collaborate with students from other schools to
produce some mixed genre or multi-genre writing.
The students are assigned tracks by their teachers
and when they arrive and mix with students from
other schools all day. There is even a journalism
workshop in the morning where the author is always
interviewed —and they do the interviews just like a
press conference—and then write articles based on
that experience. We ask the teachers to match the
sessions to their students’ strengths and interests
and at the journalism session for instance they are
expected to have done some research before they
come as well.

**JWR:** Never a dull moment!

**DR. B:** Well, while every session is not for
every kid, we are trying. We have to keep reminding
ourselves of that because we don’t want things to get
stale. The music contest is relatively new and comes
from that way of thinking.

**JWR:** That sounds like a lot of sessions. How do
you get people to staff a huge thing like this?

**DR. B:** Well, they are all volunteers—which is
what’s so amazing about it—and they are professors
and instructors and grad students and people from
the community; there are local librarians who like
to get involved. Over the course of the festival
the Mahoning County Library sends six or eight
librarians to lead sessions on the books. Some of the
teachers lead sessions. We also draw on our expertise around the campus and many of the volunteers keep coming back year after year. We also like to get students who are studying to become teachers involved, too. I mean ... I always say [to those future teachers], you have got a group of kids who have done the reading, and who want to be here, so this is going to be the easiest teaching you ever do, and it’s all going to be downhill from there.

**JWR:** How do schools use the festival to encourage students to read?

**DR. B:** We have a list of seven books and it varies by age groups. The books vary; there is fiction, nonfiction, we try to do some poetry and we have done some short story collections. We ask that all the students will have read all the books but as to motivating kids to do the reading, it’s really up to the teachers to monitor that. At some of the larger schools, some competitions—you know that there is a limit to the number of students a school can bring—so the schools and the teachers select the students to fill those limits. We hope that kids who come here have a good experience so that they say I want to come back; so we do the best we can here to give them a positive day.

**JWR:** How do authors get selected and the book lists get populated?

**DR. B:** We have a sub-committee that makes the selections and many of them learn about authors through ALAN and NCTE, and there are various criteria we look for.

First we want to present our kids with quality books and authors have got to have a number of books because we are looking for authors we can use across different age groups, so you need to have some range in writers. We also want to make sure that the writer interacts well with students because we want to make the presentations interesting for them. The year we had Laurie Halse Anderson here—and I think I’ve told this story before but maybe not all *OJEL-A* readers have heard it – usually right before the awards ceremony we clear the Chestnut Room and give the Authors some time to compose themselves and to rest. Anderson though, stayed in the room the whole time and—there was this long line of kids waiting to see her –she must have spent about five minutes with each of them, and she stayed until she had seen every one of them. Some may have been there in line to get an autograph but for most of them their primary purpose was to talk to her and that is the power of her book, *Speak*, and she takes that seriously and she insists that we let them talk to her. We have been fortunate to get authors that work well with the kids *and* write great books. Like this year is Matt De la Pena. We had him booked and then he won the Newberry Medal!

**JWR:** What kinds of students are served by the English Festival?

**DR. B:** The official rule I think is a 75 mile radius from YSU but we do allow schools from outside of that radius designated as our out-of-district school. We have schools that come from out-of-state; those teachers really work to bring their kids here. We have had a group from Kentucky and a group from South Carolina. I think that the festival is as diverse as our tri-county plus area can get.

One of the intentions of the festival was to try to make reading and writing attractive for kids who weren’t all that engaged in it, or who don’t readily want to do those sorts of things and I think that purpose sometimes gets lost, when it’s the kids who already enjoy reading that want to come to the festival. I think we would like to do better in drawing kids for whom getting hooked on reading would be a real beneficial thing. We preach to a lot of people who are already in the choir but, you know we try; we have got more rural areas in Columbiana county and northern Trumbull county ... and of course places like Boardman, which is suburban, and then we have Youngstown and Warren, which are more urban kinds of populations ... and we are seeing more and more English Language Learners all the time. So there is still work to do there!

**JWR:** Would you be willing to allow observers to come and—

**DR. B:** —Absolutely! We have done that in the past with people who have expressed interest and we welcome them. We’d like to know that they are
coming though. We would like to accommodate them and help to tailor their visit toward what they are hoping to see. One of the things we like to do is get them involved if we can. In my mind, that works best.

JWR: What might you say to someone who sees this festival, understands what it is and feels that they need to duplicate it in another region?

DR. B: When you inherit something like this somebody hands you a box, and in this box is all kinds of stuff but when you are new you really don’t know. I would say that they would have to invent it for their own situation and context. My first festival was the 25th so this had a long history before I got here. We have a lot of built in momentum here and a lot of people that make that happen. There are a lot of people who are dedicated to the festival’s values and to what it brings. What is it that they say? “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (Margaret Mead). I think that you would need that small group of really committed people. Like Nancie Atwell starts her book In the Middle “I confess. I started out as a creationist.” But she implies that that a teacher should be an evolutionist, that nothing is a finished product, that it is always adapting and changing. You don’t create a classroom in a big bang and that captures my sense of the English festival. It has to evolve as times change. Activities may have to be revised or retired. We should try new things. And people wanting to start a festival could do it little by little. I wouldn’t try to duplicate the whole thing the first time; I’d add something new every year.

JWR: What is the prime requisite for someone who does what you do for the festival?

DR. B: Well first, anyone on the committee would say you have to be a little crazy.

JWR: What does this festival mean for the teachers?

DR. B: I can remember that one year—because we ask undergraduate and graduate students to help out at the festival—one of the student helpers from the college was assisting in the trait scoring room, shuffling papers, sorting, stapling and moving them through the teacher scorers’ tables; it’s not glamorous work but for people who want to be teachers, it is fascinating to see behind the scenes like that. This one particular young woman sat down next to me during a lull in the chaos, and she looked at me and said, “Dr. Buchanan, one day I’m going to be in this room.” You know, this year will be that year. She is a teacher, she is bringing her students and she will be scoring papers. So this sort of thing happens.

JWR: So then would you say that the English Festival is a grassroots movement to save the Humanities?

DR. B: Well the festival is promoting the values of the Humanities. I mean, we want kids to read and we are saying that reading and talking about books is important. The festival says we are going to make a place for those discussions and we are going to reward you for reading. While awards aren’t the purpose of the festival we are going to enable that rewards system, and we are going to support reading, and we are going to say publicly that these things are important. We are always looking for people to come check the festival out and come stand with us.

We shook hands and parted ways but Dr. Buchanan’s words stayed with me. This stuff is important and I think that the people doing this work are also important. Without dedicated people like Dr. Buchanan, and Dr. Salvner for so many years, and so many others, we might leave these humanizing forces (and our students) to chance and the influence of popular media alone. Dr. Buchanan and those who serve the festival, and the students, in their colleges, in their schools, and in their communities, (and sometimes in both at once) help us realize just how important these things are and they also offer great ideas and inspirations toward promoting those values. It starts with holding up literacy as a virtue in ways that draw attention and grant access.

To learn more about the YSU English Festival, visit http://www.ysuenglishfestival.org/index.html or email Dr. Buchanan at jmbuchanan@ysu.edu.
As the school year draws to a close, students await their summer reading lists. Unfortunately, teens are not always jumping for joy when they see the assigned titles. Often, learners are required to read classic novels that overwhelm them and drive them to online summaries. Students want to complete their assignments, but without instructional support, they find themselves struggling to successfully read the books. Classic novels can serve tremendously important roles in language arts education. They provide challenges necessary to stretch fluency, strengthen comprehension, and build vocabulary. They enlighten readers and remind them that life’s journey is more universal than one might imagine. However, without instructional guidance, the classics may not always generate the passion that will create lifelong readers. Allowing young scholars to choose the titles that are inspiring to them is crucial to cultivating a love of reading. Giving readers some direction, though, can be part of positive pedagogical scaffolding. Indeed, encouraging teen readers to connect with young adult literature will build a bridge and help them to rediscover the love of a good book.

Summer Reading for Discovering Diversity and the Verse Novel

*Brown Girl Dreaming*
Jacqueline Woodson

_ Brown Girl Dreaming_, a verse memoir, tells the story of Woodson’s journey, as an African-American girl, through her childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. Woodson was born in Ohio, so there is an immediate connection with sense of place (she was here; I am here now). Her family moved, so there may be an additional connection of leaving behind one home to move to another. Woodson uses an epigraph (“Dreams,” by Langston Hughes) before her memoir begins. If the book is given as a summer reading assignment, teachers might ask students to analyze Hughes’ poem, create a list of their own dreams, and form some immediate self-to-text connections. As a follow up, students could examine the poem “American dream” (88) and contemplate the fight for civil rights in a country that is supposed to be a “land of the free.” Students will gain insight into American history from this memoir, and they can begin their own voyage of self discovery as they read about Woodson’s life.

Readers of _Brown Girl Dreaming_ might be surprised to learn that Woodson struggled in school (see “gifted” on 169). Many adolescents will identify with Woodson’s challenges, and this will make her an author with whom they can relate. Deceptively simple, Woodson has wonderful writer’s craft. For example, she addresses diction in “the right way to speak,” as she reflects upon her mother’s strong disciplinary response for saying “ain’t” and other words that might serve as Southern cultural identifiers for children who have moved to the North (68). In “new girl,” Woodson describes the melancholy of losing her best friend to a girl who has moved next door. She includes the fact that her new neighbor shares a cultural heritage with her former best friend (both families speak Spanish and are from Puerto Rico). Young adults will appreciate the poem’s sad tone (“the world feels as gray and cold as it really is”), and they will understand the impact of fractured friendships, teen drama, and cultural connections.

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Deeper Learning

Readers can readily make connections to many poems in Brown Girl Dreaming. “What If?” (295) could serve as a springboard for thinking about what life might be like if things didn’t happen in a person’s life. “What I Believe” (317) provides students with another chance for a personal connection; its framework of parallel structure could be studied for form and function. Upon returning to school, learners could write their own basic version of this poem at the beginning of the year, read it again at the end of the year, and write a final version that incorporates their growth as students.

Brown Girl Dreaming won the National Book Award in 2015, and people of all ages and from all places will enjoy it. In “composition notebook” Woodson celebrates the way in which a simple school supply inspired her to write. What a wonderful idea for an inexpensive gift for students—a composition book to call their very own. What a precious present for language arts learners—a nonthreatening place to write, draw, and think. Brown Girl Dreaming is filled with truth and inspiration; it will resonate with anyone who has searched for his or her own sense of identity.

Summer Reading for Science Fiction and Fantasy Lovers

What will happen in the future? Is the world doomed? What if people could fly? Is magic mere imagination, or does it really exist? Science fiction and fantasy readers love these genres because they explore possibilities of what might come true, and they transport readers beyond the mundane. The Hunger Games, The Fifth Wave, The Selection, and Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children are popular books that would be great suggestions for students who haven’t read them yet, and there are newer titles that may prove equally inspirational. These tomes can create great springboards for discussion and comparative analysis of works such as Brave New World, Fahrenheit 451, or 1984. More importantly, the stories can offer a chance to escape reality, ponder possibilities, and enjoy the reading journey.

Red Queen
Victoria Aveyard

As America listens to political pitches for the upcoming presidential election, it is not uncommon to hear commentaries about poverty, segregation, veterans, and power. Though fantasy, Red Queen provides gateways to examining each of these social issues. The narrative frames itself around a population that is separate; Red commoners serve the Silver elites. Colors are used because they describe the shade of blood within the bodies of those in each group. The Silvers are especially intriguing because they possess a wide range of supernatural powers. Mare, the seventeen-year-old protagonist, takes readers on an electrifying and thought-provoking ride—she is an impoverished Red anomaly who possesses magical powers that are believed to be reserved for the Silvers. Her brothers are away at war, and her father is a disabled veteran. When Mare’s secret power is discovered, she is involved in a cover-up, whisked away, and betrothed to a Silver; she must figure out how to survive and help her own people against the treacherous world of domination, exclusion, and magic.

Readers will find themselves captivated with the fantasy elements of this book and the words of wisdom sprinkled throughout the narrative. In one scene, Mare realizes that the king and queen create an image that helps them to appear unstoppable: “To look powerful is to be powerful” (97). In another scene, her instructor reminds her “words can lie. See beyond them” (127). Red Queen is a page-turner that students will relish, and many readers will like the book well enough to read the two additional titles in the series. The novel will readily translate into textual connections and language arts lessons, but it can also help students to think independently about the world around them, imagine what magical powers would be the most commanding, and enjoy a book for the sake of dreaming away a day.

An Ember in the Ashes
Sabaa Tahir
$11.99. ISBN: 978-1595148049

A gripping fantasy about Maia, an orphan and impoverished slave who lives in a world strikingly similar to ancient Rome, An Ember in the Ashes will keep readers engrossed for nearly five-hundred pages. The story presents a society in which the Martials have conquered the Scholars. Maia fights to save her imprisoned brother from the Martial Empire; meanwhile, Elias, an empire soldier, battles against the power he is supposed to enforce. Tahir’s writer’s craft is interesting, engaging, and memorable. As the story opens, Maia’s brother is returning from somewhere mysterious, and “He smells of steel and coal and forge. He smells like the enemy” (1). Vivid depictions, varied syntax, and themes of courage and justice create a cinematic tale of what it means to be an unstoppable warrior.

The perfect mix of history, fantasy, and dystopian elements, Ember and the Ashes will keep readers up all night as they cheer on a rebellion and remember that even in the darkest moments of horrific violence, there’s always a ray of light.
Deeper Learning

Summer Reading to Support English Language Learners

Pedagogical options abound for using YA literature with English language learners. First, it can deliver universal coming of age stories to which all teens can relate. Who hasn’t disagreed with a parent? Wondered about the future? Daydreamed about true love? Next, YA lit can provide a pathway into the English language. Some stories, though certainly not all, are told using simpler, accessible sentences that can be studied for language acquisition. There is no one-size-fits-all book for any learner, but YA literature can inspire ELL students to read texts in English and explore their thoughts about life in a new nation.

The House on Mango Street
Sandra Cisneros
$11.00. ISBN: 978-0679734772

The House on Mango Street is a novella that delivers insights into the Hispanic culture via accessible stories for English language learners. This is noteworthy because Spanish is the most common first or home language for ELLs, and it is spoken by 71 percent of all ELLs (Soto, Hooker and Batalova). Esperanza, a Mexican-American girl who has just moved to a new place with her family, narrates The House on Mango Street. The book’s 44 vignettes highlight the journey of growing up; the stories will enable students to transact with the text while developing fluency.

Moving to a neighborhood can be unsettling for teens, and the thought of starting over might be daunting. “Cathy Queen of Cats” highlights the point that not all neighbors are waiting with open arms for new arrivals who happen to be different. This chapter might be used to discuss the racist assumption that a neighborhood could decline as new families (particularly those who don’t speak English) arrive. Students can study the syntax and play with the words in this chapter. For example, Cisneros writes: “Cathy who is queen of cats has cats and cats and cats…”Cats asleep like little donuts. Cats on top of the refrigerator.” (12). Readers might be asked to think about why the parallel structure is used here—and how using repetition and parallel structure creates a different level of emphasis and meaning. As an exercise, students might describe a person or place they know by using this same structure. Learners could also delve into the irony of the judgment Cathy makes on other people. This chapter provides an honest look at the judgment some ELL learners might face, and it could frame a practical language lesson on syntax and diction.

A central metaphor in the book, as identified in the title, is the importance of a house in a person’s life. Students can read or listen to audio of the short chapters and analyze the importance of house and home, connotatively and denotatively. For example, readers could target the chapter “No Speak English” and contemplate the theme of isolation: “Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light” (76). In discussing Mamacita’s nostalgic feelings toward home, students might be asked to provide textual evidence to support this analysis—simple words could be listed (homesick, cry, etc.). Such an analysis would allow for text-to-self connections, as most anyone who has ever left a home behind can relate to the sense of loss and change that comes with the transition.

As a culminating discussion about the meaning of home, students might be directed to Esperanza’s personal ideal: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house...With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed” (108). This passage, from the one-page chapter “A House of My Own,” reveals a young girl’s dreams in a relatable way. Esperanza emphasizes the personal artifacts that make a house a home. Students can read this piece, potentially examine the use of alliteration and parallel structure, and contemplate the protagonist’s assessment. Do they agree with her? Do people need to make the place where they live “their own”? A short writing could be assigned to compliment this piece, allowing students to use Esperanza’s framework—but substituting their ideals for a home. If students do not yet have the capabilities for such an assignment, they might study simple adjectives that would correlate with their vision of “home.”

The House on Mango Street is not a new title, but reading it can be a new experience for teens who are living through change and trying to learn a language. Three decades after it was written, readers will find that it contains real conflicts to which any teen can relate. Growing up has many challenges, and exchanging thoughts with a text can often stretch young minds to create their own new ideas.

Work Cited
On the surface, my friend Tyler Davidson and I are an unlikely pair. I am a lecturer of writing at a university; he is a convicted murderer currently serving life without the possibility of parole. I am old enough to be his mother; his last birthday made him a legal adult. I teach courses on Prison Literature and Culture where I exhaust the perilous infractions of Social Justice and regularly ask myself and students, “What is freedom?”; Tyler lives that dark reality day in and day out.

Tyler was supposed to be my interview subject. I was writing a novel about a juvenile in an American prison who’d been sentenced as an adult. I thought that Tyler would be perfect for the gig because he had been sentenced for his participation in murders that occurred when he was between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. Drawn to his story, I followed the media coverage and found out that Tyler was also accessible; he’d been placed in a prison only thirty minutes from my home.

When I received Tyler’s response letter to my request for an interview, I had the strangest feeling that I’d made contact with a long-lost friend. Perhaps he was someone I’d known in some other life? A sibling separated from me at birth? Far-fetched, certainly, but that strong recognition of him never left me. I learned why when I read through Tyler’s handwritten letter in clear cursive script. Both Tyler and I are artists at heart: me a writer and occasional painter, he gifted in sketching and free form poetry. I’m happy to help with your book, he wrote. Send me your questions and I will reply in a letter with my answers. He concluded with a request, almost as though he’d used the space of the letter to build up to it: I’d like to learn how to write better. Do you think you can help me? I carried his first letter in my pocket for days reading through it when I had a few minutes to spare. I considered his request at length and understood that he was ultimately bartering with me, as trade is the form of currency in prison. He had something I wanted and I had something he wanted—nothing in Tyler’s world of steel and metal bars is free. I thought: perhaps we were meant to help each other.

My correspondence with Tyler felt like I’d stumbled into a time warp—old school in every way. Despite the fact that Tyler was a teenager, and by that very definition should have lived on electronics, the internet, and social media, he hated anything that ran on a battery or had to be plugged in. A good thing, I guess, for someone who’s incarcerated and has very little access to such items. That meant, however, that every letter from him was handwritten and snail mailed. We did not talk through the prison phone system as Tyler couldn’t trust those old, wired lines of communication and he requested my own letters to him be handwritten—something I hadn’t done since I was a kid. You have bad handwriting for a teacher, he wrote and I laughed. I’ve heard that very sentiment from many students who have tried to decipher my scrawled script on the classroom write boards.

I had a plan to help Tyler: get him reading (anything at all) and then to write about what he was reading. My letters to him always began with a few questions I wanted answers to for a character in my book. A description of what I’d currently be reading followed, along with newspaper or magazine clippings regarding political events, legal/prison issues, or pop culture from the world outside his prison gates. His letters always answered my questions thoughtfully, adorned with lengthy descriptions of his surroundings and what he was doing with his long days. One letter mentioned the limits of his prison library, something I strongly suspected. Soon, along with my letters, I began sending Tyler essays to read. I also sent paperback books, used ones I found in second-hand stores or that someone had donated to me for Tyler. I sometimes ordered him brand new books from Amazon on holidays.

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those with their crisp pages and shiny covers and hard spines unbroken. I wasn’t just sending Tyler novels and poems and stories, but whole worlds where he could escape his reality, even if it was only for a few hours. Ironically, the letters that he wrote to me forced him back into the world in which he lived. His pain-staking descriptions of what everything around him looked like, the behaviors of other inmates and guards, his worries and frustrations all brought with it the stark reminder that nothing in Tyler’s reality was temporary.

Prison literature, however, became our main discussion board filled with our comments and observations nailing back and forth to each other. We started with the obvious: Stephen King’s “Hope Springs Eternal: Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption” and on to The Green Mile. I’m reading every word. Tyler wrote me, and I love it. We moved on to memoirs from those who were incarcerated and those that had been exonerated. Our letters examined character development, images, themes, and all the great elements of literature English teachers love to talk about. It turned out Tyler was a critic of sorts, who loved to tell me what the writer should have done. I was the type of reader who just enjoyed the book’s ride. Tyler, I found, favored the Classics while I loved a good mystery or true crime narrative. All the while, Tyler’s sentences and writing skills improved as well as my understanding of what it meant to be incarcerated at any age. Both of us whole-heartedly agreed that freedom was a good book no matter where you found yourself reading.

The turning point in our literary adventure was a worn copy of a book I’d been using in one of my courses: Prison Writing in Twentieth Century America edited by Bruce Franklin. Of all the books we’d read and discussed, this was the one that seemed to touch Tyler most. In this collection, he read the words written by inmates long gone: Jack London, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Jack Henry Abbott, Etheridge Knight, and Malcolm Braly. Don’t forget that the women have something to say, too, I encouraged him, and so we discussed Assata Shakur, Patricia McConnell, and Kim Wozencraft. He read every single word of that prison writing collection, something I hadn’t even done, only scanning to see which selections would work best for my classes. Tyler’s letters were suddenly filled with the excitement of learning and reading the voices of those who had served time just like him. Did you know that Agnes Smedley went to prison for birth control pamphlets? Pamphlets—not even the real deal! Or, I always wondered what happened to men who refused to go to war like Robert Lowell. Then, finally, what I’d been hoping for happened. He wrote me, tentatively: I realized something I never thought of before. Maybe I could be a prison writer, too.

I smiled for days. I smiled so big my face hurt.

***

When I arrived in the visitation room of the prison eight months after our initial letter exchange, I expected a barrier between me and Tyler, a glass wall where we would talk to each other on old, tear-coated prison telephones. Instead, I found myself standing toe-to-toe with six and a half feet of Tyler, an inmate who’d somehow become my friend through a flurry of written words and well-worn texts. And I was gasping for a full breath.

A life-long asthmatic, I always carry my rescue inhaler, or as I like to call it, my puffer. It’s always in my pocket, bag, or somewhere very close to me. While I don’t suffer from many asthma attacks, the puffer has become my security blanket. I panic without it; my breath which might have been full and flowing moments before suddenly becomes jagged and shallow without that plastic tube of security. If you’ve ever suffered an asthma attack, you understand the terror a lack of oxygen brings with it. It’s like drowning inside a roaring ocean with no water. Sand quickly fills every bronchial tube from the inside out until there is only the pinhole of a wheeze, that desperate wait for air. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been without my puffer. That all changed when I entered the prison gates.

There are a number of guards and security checks one must go through in order to get to the visitation area of a prison, and if one doesn’t clear them all, the visitation is cancelled. You are escorted off the property. There are no excuses or negotiations. Rules are rules. Period. And that includes the rule of no medication in the visitation area.

If I wanted to meet Tyler, I’d have to take my puffer back to my car and enter the prison without it. I tried to reason with the older guard with an enormous belly. “I need this,” I said. “It’s a medical condition.”

The guard puffed out his wide chest complete with a shiny name badge. “Then you need to leave.”

“What if I go into a full blown asthma attack?”

He shrugged. “We have a nurse.”

His answer only elevated my anxiety levels. I’d seen prison nurses and medical care delivered on late night episodes of Locked Up Raw; and I hoped to never personally experience it. I looked around at the other guards for some support who were all suddenly interested in the toes of their scuffed black shoes.

“I don’t have all day,” he barked at me. “Give up the inhaler or leave.”
I held the plastic tube of medication, turning over that weight of safety in the palm of my hand.

“MOVE!”

I turned and shoved the glass doors out to the parking lot hard. I cursed that guard all the way back to my car. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had yelled at me. I’m a professor, after all. I work in a place where rules are questioned and ideas are golden—**no** is not a word that is frequently used in higher education. Instead, we explore options. We look for opportunities. We try a different method and create alternatives. I hadn’t come up against a world of such black and white rules since high school and I hated it. I felt like a young girl who’d been chastised and I wanted to go home. I wanted to shake that fat guard and scream in his face: *I’m not the one who committed a crime. I’ve done nothing wrong!*

The bottom line was I’d come to meet my new friend; I’d come to learn more about Tyler’s world. He waited for me inside, and I knew he didn’t have many visitors. I also knew that in order for him to have a visitation, he had to go through a strip search twice—on the way in and the way out. If he was willing to go through that to meet me, I at least owed him my presence. Asthma attack or not. I placed my puffer in the console of my car and locked it up tight.

My breath hitched without the safety of my puffer, but I made that walk back to the prison entrance and through all of those checks. I even managed a smile for the guard who clearly enjoyed his power way too much.

So, there I was, puffer-less, standing before Tyler as we each sized up the other.

*Breathe in, I told myself. Breathe out.*

Finally, I offered my hand. I wanted to touch Tyler. It felt important somehow, that physical touch between two people who have never met face-to-face. When his bear-sized hand wrapped around mine, skin to skin, his eyes softened and a smile spread across his face.

“I’m so happy to meet you in person,” he said.

And I finally took a deep breath.

Tyler and I sat knee to knee with only a short table between us—I shifted all around, nervous and unsettled inside my hard seat. I couldn’t figure out what to do with my legs. Cross them at the ankle? At the knee? And what about my arms? I was suddenly ultra-aware of the space my body occupied. I felt naked without the usual distractions I surround myself with in social situations, and I longed for my cell phone, laptop, music, or even the murmur of a television commentator. Anything to take this laser-like focus off of each other. I finally settled on crossing my legs in a big 4 and crossing my arms in my lap, a position of protection.

Tyler, though, sat before me on a plastic molded chair with his legs spread comfortably and his ginormous hands easily folded inside his lap. He was freshly shaven and his short hair was brushed back from his face with some sort of gel, hair so carefully combed I could see the grooves from each comb tooth. His prison blues had *Davidson* ironed to the right breast pocket and his heavy work boots looked brand new. I was struck by his open and calm nature, particularly given that at the time he was a nineteen-year-old facing life in prison with no chance of parole.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked, nodding to the array of vending machines. “Coffee? Or my favorite, Mountain Dew?”

“Coffee, please.” I had to lean forward to hear him.

“Black.”

I felt his eyes on me as I weaved between the other visitation tables in the room. Most of the other chair sets were filled with male inmates and their loved ones, some visiting with children, some visiting with the elderly. When the vending machines took a few moments to spit out our beverages, I felt grateful for the brief time to gather my thoughts, to steady the shake of my hands. Clearly, the extra dose I’d taken of my anti-anxiety medication wasn’t working. That cold bottle of Mountain Dew never felt so good inside my sweaty hands.

Tyler watched my knees anxiously bounce as he sipped his coffee. Just as observant in person as he was in his letters, he said, “It must be weird to be here for the first time.”

I nodded toward two wall-sized hanging fabrics, one with a mega-huge American flag and the other with a bizarre rendition of a large, circular staircase with flowers around the white, wooden posts. “What are those tapestries for?”

Tyler smiled in a way that said he found them humorous. “Family and visitor photographs. They don’t want the prison to appear in pictures the way it really is, so we get these crazy photograph backdrops.”

When an inmate and a woman stood before the staircase for a photo, they looked like a prom couple. Tyler laughed with me. “It always reminds me of wearing one of those t-shirts with a tux coat and the rose iron-on. I mean, why bother?”

Suddenly the prison’s pathetic attempt to hide reality was related back to a book we’d both read and Tyler and I were off and running, riffing off one another with observations and truths and images and metaphors from...
the readings we'd shared. Soon all the inmates, visitors, and guards around us disappeared and together we left that dingy visitation room and transported to another world in a way that only books and characters can offer. Both Tyler and I are drawn to the redemptive qualities of literature, the Andy Dufresnes of fiction, the Sister Helen Prejeans of memoir, and all those forgotten voices in prison poetry that echo from somewhere deep inside a cell. There is a forgiveness inside these kinds of work where second chances are given and new life is granted with the panache of glorious images and tear-producing symbols. Who wouldn't want to stay inside those worlds so far from the one in which we both sat for our visit?

When our discussion turned to an element of freedom, I told him about the ways we discuss freedom in my class. I told him that I could always rely on a student to start the conversation with some variation on the philosophical belief that no one is free unless everyone is. Freedom—that lofty ideal we struggle to define all semester and rarely come to an agreement on what that esoteric concept means.

Tyler's brow furrowed. “Freedom doesn't need to be so difficult.”

“What do you mean?”

Tyler shrugged. “Remember that letter you sent me a while back that explained your usual work day? I've thought a lot about that, about how incredibly free you are. I thought about how I'd do just about anything to have that day be my usual.”

I couldn't help but laugh: my job as a version of freedom? Don't get me wrong—I love my job. I love to write and teach. I love interacting with students throughout my day on campus and in office hours, even if I do have to sometimes negotiate uncomfortable conversations about failed work or too many missed classes. My days were generally filled with smiling people who held doors for each other across campus and called out, “have a good day!” when they left my classroom. I always teach four classes and grade the work of nearly 85 students a semester. As all teachers know, it can be a drudgery and getting through those stacks of essays is a thankless job in many cases. There are times when I've also envisioned my career as something that held me down, taking away my time from the dream career I'd rather have as a full-time writer, and locking me into a location I might not have otherwise chosen for myself.

“Think about it,” Tyler said. “You choose whether you will go to work or not. You choose what you will say to a room full of students. You choose the texts and the paper topics. Even outside of your work, you hold so much freedom. I wish I had the option to spend as many hours in a stocked library as you do.”

I listened as Tyler detailed my daily habits as acts of freedom: I had the ability to take a long shower at three in the morning and the choice of what I would wear every day. I decided whether I would go outside on a given day or not, and I chose what I would eat and drink.

“You even have the freedom of choosing a dentist who won't immediately pull your tooth because it hurts,” he said. “You don't get it. Freedom is more than an idea—it something you are offered every second.”

I never thought about all the options I had in my life before, not in this sort of a way. A shower in the middle of the night as an act of freedom? Holding class as a version of freedom? Really? And I hated going to the dentist no matter what the procedure. Freedom, Tyler seemed to be saying, was all about options and acknowledging the choices I'd been given. Was the answer to the question I'd so long considered really all about the lens I'd been choosing to view my life through?

Before I knew it, the guards were calling for the end of the two-hour visit. Tyler was taken away for his strip search and I was funneled out through a series of checks before I could leave the prison grounds.

While I waited for the final check, a woman about my age stood in front of me in line. She had a beehive of a weave stacked on top of her head with thick strands of bright pink wound throughout it. “What's your man in for?” she asked. “Drugs?”

“He's not my man,” I said and purposely ignored her question about Tyler's crimes. “He's just a friend.”

She shrugged. “It's all a racket, you know. Crime does pay, just not for us.”

Tyler's crimes. That was the one part of his life I wasn't completely comfortable discussing with anyone. I wasn't really sure what I believed—the story that came out in court or the media's interpretations of his actions. Tyler was ultimately found guilty of taking part in three murders and attempting a fourth. There were other charges as well, but the wash of it, the real rub, was cold-blooded murder that was planned well in advance. There was no evidence, however, that Tyler killed anyone. His full participation as the driver of the vehicle, though, and his presence during the planning phase with the murderer deemed him equally responsible in the eyes of American law. Tyler's judge gave him no breaks—he would spend the remainder of his days in prison without the chance of parole.

I wanted to believe Tyler was a forced accomplice and that he'd been threatened with death if he didn't
I wanted to believe that he was somehow struck with a debilitating shock at the horror of it all and unable to ask anyone for help. I was desperate to believe in the possibility that Tyler hadn’t committed any crime other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time and with the wrong person. But the truth that I absolutely could not get around was Tyler did something terribly wrong. Not just once, but four times. His hands that had shaken mine also held the shovel that dug the graves and buried those victims. His hands wrapped around the barrel of a shotgun and hid the arsenal of weaponry in his home, under the very bed he slept in every night. And he never ever said a word to anyone about what he’d taken part in until the detectives tracked him down and he realized there was no way out of the situation. Lives were forever altered because of Tyler’s actions. Pain ricocheted out from the location of those murders in waves, bringing grief and sorrow to all it touched. I’d read Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* once as a graduate student and then again when I started corresponding with Tyler. At first, I’d read Capote’s flimsy attempts to excuse the crimes of Perry Smith, one of the partners who had broken into the Kansas farmhouse in 1959 and brutally killed the Clutter family, as a symptom of a crush he had on the killer. I now understood Capote’s grasping need to find a reason for Perry’s behavior as something much more than just a crush. Capote saw the soul within Perry Smith, someone who was sensitive and even kind at times. He saw someone he completely resonated with, and to acknowledge the fact that this person also had it within him to kill brings on a terrible conflation. I felt it, too. I want to believe what Sister Helen Prejean proclaims, that we are all so much more than our worst acts. I want to believe that our pasts do not define our futures. But there are many times that I am not sure what I believe.

During one of my visits with Tyler, after we’d met a few times and had grown comfortable together, he was released into the visitation area and was not himself. He drank his black coffee quickly, his eyes scanning the area around us and over those who occupied it. He couldn’t focus on our discussion of the book we’d both been reading, one that featured all the letters of Vincent Van Gogh to his brother, a book I knew Tyler loved.

“What’s going on?” I asked, taking a swig of my Mountain Dew.

He shrugged. “Sorry. I don’t really care about Van Gogh today.”

“Are you okay?”

He finally looked up at me then and his slate-blue eyes met mine. “I’m not sure how to say this.”

My breath rate quickened and by habit, I reached into my pocket for my inhaler that wasn’t there. “Say whatever you need to.”

Tyler looked at me as if he were deciding whether or not I could handle whatever he was thinking. Finally he said, “Today was the day. Three years ago today, the first victim was killed.”

The anniversary! I hadn’t even thought of it.

“It feels like a hundred years ago, you know? It feels like a different lifetime.”

“So much has changed for you since then.”

He nodded and we sat facing one another with the stupid little table between us for a long time. He didn’t speak and I didn’t either. I needed him to take the lead. We’d rarely spoken of his crimes, but when we did, I felt a strong breath of cold air, like those ghosts surrounded us, and a creeping chill scattered up my spine.

Tyler sometimes wrote briefly about the murders in his letters, quick lines that let me know he was thinking about what happened and working through his own feelings about the victims. Sometimes Tyler would tell me on my visits, always speaking barely above a whisper, about what his lawyer had said or about a memory from that awful time period in his life. He spoke of drinking too much, of attempting to black out what was going on his life as if there was no way he could possibly face it sober. Once, when I was feeling particularly brave on a visit, I asked him if he was telling me everything. I asked him if there were parts of the story that he’d held back, even from himself. He looked at me then, with the saddest eyes I’d seen in a long time. He said, kindly, “I said everything I could remember in court. That’s the story. That’s what happened.”

I suddenly felt ashamed, and I’m sure my face reddened with embarrassment. Did I have a right to demand the truth? Did I even want to know what happened? There are private moments in any event that happens in our lives, thoughts and feelings and actions that are ours alone to know and understand. It’s our freedom to choose who and when we disclose those moments. Even in the best-loved tales, the most time-honored stories, the narrative does not unfold all at once, but with the grace of a flower slowly unfolding as it reveals more of itself to the reader. Understanding of a narrative grows deeper with each reading, and can change for us as we grow emotionally and physically. And sometimes there are parts of a story we are never meant to know or understand.

“I’m sorry you are in this situation, Tyler,” I told him on that anniversary date. “It’s an important day. A day to show respect above all else.”
Tears pricked his eyes and he blinked them away fast while frustration filled his voice. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I can do. I’m so sorry and I’ve said it a million times. A million times!”

Tyler leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and wiped his face with his paw of a hand. His posture, so angular and rigid with anxiety, reminded me of who I was speaking with: a nineteen-year-old who’d faced tremendous tragedy in his young years. A nineteen-year-old who had been thrust into a very adult world much too fast. It was very easy for me to forget Tyler’s age because he spoke and acted like a man in his forties. His life experiences had aged him far beyond his years. It took moments like this to remind me that he really was the age of my students at the University, the same students who sometimes forgot their assignments and occasionally slept through alarm clocks or chose to party rather than study. Unlike my students, though, Tyler didn’t have the luxury of those sorts of age-relative life lessons.

“Maybe it’s enough to remember him,” I offered. “You can show respect by acknowledging that life and the part you played in what happened that day. Maybe later you can find a quiet time in your cell and talk to him in your mind. Say whatever you would say if he was standing right in front of you.”

“Do you really think he will hear me?”

I shrugged. “It can’t hurt to try, right?”

Tyler agreed and his posture finally softened. I got him more coffee and cheesy Doritos, but our conversation never returned to Van Gogh that day or any other book. Instead we talked about something else we both loved: junk food. Despite my physician’s firm insistence that I am no longer a nineteen year-old, I continue to eat like one. Tyler and I laughed that day about food that never expires and always tastes good, like Ho-Hos and those chocolate cupcakes with the squiggly white curls across their top. We pinned over Twinkies and those marshmallow bunnies at Easter and the way salt still lines your lips long after you’ve eaten Pringles. We connected over rumors we’d heard about how fast food “meat” was really made and the supposed cleaning agents that fill the soda pop I love to drink. We joked about the freedom to have sugar highs and how neither one of us would be able to peel ourselves off the ceiling for the next few hours. But we did not speak of the truth surrounding us that day. There are some things in this life a person cannot free himself from, some realities you cannot escape no matter how many apologies are issued, no matter how much remorse is shown for your terrible deeds. These realities aren’t all related to the land of literature where forgiveness and redemption reign. In these stark cold realities, there isn’t a good book where one can get lost. There isn’t the escape hatch into another world of characters that can make the given situation better.

I never finished that novel I was working on about the youth who was incarcerated that led me to first write to Tyler. Its bare bones are saved in a file on one of my desktops somewhere. It turned out I wasn’t even willing to put a character through all the harsh realities I’d learned from Tyler’s experience.

Our friendship continues after two years, and we write regularly. I try to visit every few months, a feat that has been made more difficult since he was transferred to a distant prison. But our letters still snail between us, and nothing makes my day like finding an envelope in my mailbox with Tyler’s cursive writing addressed to me.

Tyler’s latest letter waited inside my mailbox for a few days until the snow and ice of winter gave way. I sliced open that cool, white envelope and unfolded Tyler’s words about how he’d been filling his days since he’d last written. He told me that he’d gotten new books from some of his family members this year for the holidays. For the first time since he’d come to prison, he had a small stack waiting for him to dive in, places where he could escape for a while. I pictured those books inside his foot locker, one escape hatch from reality stacked upon the other. I forgot to tell you something, he concluded the letter. Did you know that on clear days I can stand in the yard and look over the fence? I can see the old prison they used for the set of the Shawshank movie. I folded up Tyler’s letter and sat on my couch in the quiet for a long time. I held an image of Tyler standing in the prison yard at a tall six and a half feet looking out over the barb-wire fence. It made me smile to think of the winter sun on his face, the warmth across his shoulders, and the grass beneath his feet. It made me laugh to think about when he first read the story of Shawshank and how I told him I was certain Red and Andy were still living together on some remote Mexican beach drinking Margaritas with bright pink umbrellas and carving chess pieces out of seashells they collected along the shore. And then it brought tears to my eyes to think of that fantasy world of literature, that freedom, so very close to Tyler and yet so terribly far from his reach.

*Author’s note: I have changed the name of the inmate in this essay for his privacy.
Review for Write What Matters: For Yourself, For Others

A Review by Constance Kowalski

Write What Matters: For Yourself, For Others

By Tom Romano • Oxford, Ohio, 2015 • 142 pages.

“We wrote what we knew about. The material we worked with was right out of reruns of old movies on television. When we were done writing our stories about soldiers and war and heroism, in which we were the main characters slogging through jungles, flying P-140’s, or operating submarines, we traded our stories across the aisle. In the brown atmosphere of those afternoon study halls, above the worn wooden floor, beside the long bank of windows, I found out what it was like for my voice to travel beyond me without speaking. I saw my voice take hold of someone’s attention amid the enforced silence of study hall.” (Romano, Crafting Authentic Voice, 7)

Romano describes his friend: “He jabbed a finger at my story, grinning broadly, nodding vigorously. He kissed his fingertips! That self-sponsored writing and sharing between 12 year-olds hooked me.” (Romano, Write What Matters For Yourself, For Others, 2015. xi-xii. Hereafter, references from this book will simply be listed with page in parentheses.)

Write What Matters For Yourself, For Others, is Tom Romano’s seventh published book about writing. (A list of his work is included in “Print Works Cited” section of this article.) In this newest book, Romano repeats what he most firmly believes about principles of the writing process: “Write what matters.” Write to express, communicate, clarify, learn, and hold onto what you don’t want to forget. Writing leads us to perceive and feel and think because writing shapes the way we see the world. (xii)

As he continues to write about writing, he is masterminding this craft for himself and for us. He suggests advice about developing productive writing habits, going naturally to a page to write what matters, compelling readers’ attention, and revising! He’s been a teacher of writing in high school and college and so writes to teachers, students, and All Writers!

To begin at the beginning, he first examines where, then how to write. He drafts with a gel pen on a yellow legal pad and later types it into his computer. After that, he prints the piece with wide margins, double spaced and begins his revision(s). He isn’t telling you how to do it, he’s telling you how he does it. You need to find what works for you. He repeats this in many ways giving you the license to decide! “Trust the gush,” he says. Reread your work to make it better. Find the most accurate word for your meaning. Use your senses to describe. Listen to conversations. Use dialogue. Incorporate figurative language. Keep a notebook.

In Chapter XXII, “ Dwelling in Your Words” (107-115), Romano explains that there are specific areas of a piece you can examine with a critical eye. My review will follow the sequence of those topics and will refer to other parts of the book where he details what he considers most important.

The Lede (the journalist’s spelling)

In Crafting Authentic Voice, Romano says, “[s]trong leads are the first step in getting readers to forget about why they are reading and simply read to satisfy a voracious need to know, a need created by the writer.” (2004, 188)

In Write What Matters, Romano suggests presenting a dilemma, or a sentence that’s provocative or paradoxical; describing something vividly; presenting arresting information; placing you in the

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middle of a situation; creating tension you seek relief from, or a question you want answered. (80) Most importantly, Romano says that you will write for yourself, and produce writing that works for others.

Precise Words and Interesting language

One of Romano’s mantras, “trust the gush,” comes from Walt Whitman:

The secret of it all is to write in a gush, the throb, the flood, of the moment - to put things down without deliberation - without worry about style - without waiting for a time or place...You want to catch the first spirit - to tally its truth. (qtd. in Wallace, 1982, 284-5)

Romano refers to this as “first genius.” He cajoles to write without hesitancy, or procrastination, to trust the gush of language that is ready to spill. (6) But there is little doubt, Romano is an avid believer in revision and so admonishes us to reconsider our word choices. (109) For example, “Did the thief go away, abscond, disappear, flee, or vanish?” He recommends that you use your writing notebook to “jot” language you find “clever, odd, indelible, surprising, eloquent .... ” (39) He advises to hunt the passionate, accurate word. Sometimes, there are words you take a liking to, he relates, as years ago, in a Barbara Kingsolver essay, he encountered *bunfizzled*, and has been using it ever since. (35)

Sentence Length

For this important topic, I refer to *Writing What Matters*, Chapter XV, (63-69) “Break the Rules in Style.” Tom Romano boldly states, “Be bad now and then...be ornery, rebellious, defiant (in order to) clarify your vision!” (63) He refers to what Winston Weathers famously called such rule breaking, “Grammar B,” an alternate to Grammar A, which is the standard, traditional, conservative form of written English enshrined by most publications, standardized tests, and almost every English teacher.” (*An Alternate Style: Options in Composition, 1980*)

Donald Murray states,

It is the responsibility of schools to teach the rules educated people follow most of the time when they speak, write, read, successfully communicating with each other. But it should also be the responsibility of schools to teach the other times when the rules can be broken to achieve clarity...The history of language is the history of change; the rules evolve.” (1998, 161)
Utilizing Grammar B, you could write a list, construct a labyrinthine sentence, use a sentence fragment, or create spelling variations for dialogue (orthographic variation)... The important thing is to write what works about what matters for yourself and for others. (69)

**Verbs**

Romano quotes Poet Mary Oliver, when he repeats, use “verbs of muscle.” “Did the man *jump* or *leap*? Did the girl walk or *lisp* or *stroll* or *shuffle* or *stride*? Check your verbs. Could it be stronger? More colorful? Maybe not. But often, yes.” *(A Poetry Handbook*, 1994. 111-2)

**Placement and Payoff**

Beginnings are crucial but endings are critical. The ending is the last thing you’ll say to your reader. The end is the prime spot to look and look again. (113)

**Weeding the Garden**

Revision, revision, revision... Romano rewrote a paragraph eight times. (100) He refers to what Donald Murray calls revision, “participatory reading”, where you make the original version sharper, the argument stronger, the explanation clearer and the writing compelling. *(Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers*, 1990). Romano also dislikes adverbs and states they are “often completely unnecessary.” *Befriend revision,* he prods, and then acknowledges:

Kim Stafford’s coined phrase for this principle is “the second genius.” Somewhere in the first draft lies an opportunity to make great discoveries by adding what fits, and then by cutting what doesn’t make the richest additions. *(The Muses Among Us*, 2003. 36-7)

He claims that the best thing he has ever read about eliminating wasted words is a five page chapter titled “Clutter” in William Zinsser’s, *On Writing Well*, 1998:

> Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn’t be there.”Up” in “free up” shouldn’t be there. Examine every word you put on paper. You’ll find a surprising number that don’t serve any purpose. (13)

Romano says he watches for what Zinsser says is wordiness, redundancy, extra verbiage that insults the reader, needless words in a sentence that steal energy from what is strong...just as weeds do in my vegetable garden. Romano says if inexperienced writers shrink from revision and think, “that’s good enough,” they are shortchanging themselves. (100-101)

Writing with faith and fearlessness is the primary theme of *Write What Matters*. As a Writer, I found this latest book to be motivating and inspiring. Romano often supports his ideas about writing through referencing what other writers write about writing. In this book, he encourages me to write and points out ways to improve my manuscripts.

In this review of *Write What Matters For Yourself, For Others*, I have given you a lot of his printed words, but you will have to read it yourself in order to hear his voice.

In *Crafting Authentic Voice*, Romano borrows a story from Julia Cameron. *(Right to Write*, 1998. xvii) The following is my adaptation of that story.

Tom Romano arrives at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter has out his questionnaire. He asks him the big question, “What did you do that we should let you in?”

“I convinced people they should write better,” he says.

The great gates swing open.

**Works Cited**


___._. *Crafting Authentic Voice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 2004


As the OCTEALA 2016 Conference began, there was enough energy and vitality at the Doubletree Hotel in Worthington to rival a Buckeyes home game. Educators from across the state began appearing at 7:00am on the dot, eager to bask in the professional camaraderie and scholarly work of the two-day conference. With an impressive roster of keynote speakers, including Freddie Heibert, Rainbow Rowell, Louise Borden, Dr. Timothy Rasinski and Sharon Draper, OCTEALA 2016 was rich with opportunities to access the tools to innovate and the inspiration to create.

The day began with an invigorating keynote from Freddie Heibert, who has made literacy research accessible for educators through her work on the TextProject, a website with high quality downloads for teachers to utilize at no cost (textproject.org). Heibert led her audience through a concise, yet thorough exploration of the English language and the ways educators can develop the body of knowledge and vocabulary of their students. Heibert questioned “Why does English have so many words?” and guided us through a three part plan of attack to assist in lightening this immense burden for our students. She pointed out that a small group of words does the “heavy lifting” in English and explained that students need to recognize these words and their multiple meanings.

In order to address this, we must increase the volume of reading. Educators also need to focus on teaching prolific “synonym networks” and “topical networks” in order to expose students to rare words and connect them to their base word knowledge. Finally, she reflected that knowledge matters in proficient reading and urged educators to develop bodies of knowledge within ELA instruction. Her passion and humor captivated conference attendees and her strategies and resources were presented in a manner that made us feel like we could go back to our classrooms on Monday and immediately get to work.

A lunchtime keynote from YA sensation Rainbow Rowell served to remind the audience of the power of reading and writing in the lives of our students. Rowell was heartfelt and hilarious as she opened up about her writing process and her protectiveness regarding the characters she has created. She takes umbrage with the fact that reviewers consistently refer to her characters as “misfits” because to her mind they are far more authentic than the typical characters presented in YA fiction. These types of characters are crucial for our students because they reflect their own experiences back to them. Rowell also spoke of a teacher who motivated her and potentially changed the track of her life by helping her find direction in her schooling. This lively talk, presented as a fireside chat led by Mr. Joshua Younge, served to reinforce our love for literature and our dedication to inspiring students to incorporate reading into their lives.

The afternoon keynote by children’s author Louise Borden was a heartfelt thank-you to educators through images and quotations. The presentation made clear the inextricable relationships between readers, writers and teachers. Borden discussed her work as a writer and validated the educator’s role in bringing her work to readers. She shared her own life and reflected on recent tragedies — among them, the catastrophic Sandy Hook shootings — that bring our role as educators into sharp focus. Her presentation included a tribute slide to the many teachers in her own life and this quotation by Donalyn Miller, “For my part, I resolve to lead my students to books and show them how to find their way back without me.” What a goal to aspire to, and what a wonderful talk to allow us to refocus on our roles and celebrate who we are capable of being for our students. This was a wonderful note to end on as day one of the conference drew to a close.

Saturday morning began with a sing-a-long led by esteemed reading education expert, Dr. Timothy Rasinski. Intent on reminding us all of the power and importance of art, Dr. Rasinski decided to show (as opposed to merely tell) how the simple act of singing can build both fluency and fun in the classroom. Great teachers teach by example, and Dr. Rasinski was no exception as he allowed us to experience the benefits of song; the lyrics of a song expose students to multiple words, the memorable quality of a melody helps to retain those words, and the pure joy singing infuses learning with pleasure. Through a series of quotations pertinent to the important connections between creativity and knowledge, Dr. Rasinski illuminated the importance of bringing art into the classroom and the value of remembering that teaching in itself is an art form, not merely a series of drills leading to a test. He reminded us why we love this profession and provided us with examples of effective instruction, such as how to utilize speeches and picture books to enhance our learning objectives. He made clear the benefits of creative expression and the importance of imagination in the quest for knowledge.

Nicole Brickman serves on the Executive Board of the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts. She teaches 7th grade English language arts at Wedgewood Middle school in Columbus City School District.
The final keynote was delivered, appropriately, by an acclaimed author who is also an accomplished educator. Sharon Draper has a unique understanding of what educators face through her experiences in the classroom and her interactions with student readers around the world. With her signature wit and dynamic energy, she gave us a glimpse into her experiences as an author while also connecting to our struggles as teachers and making us feel valued for the role we play in our students lives. The letters she shared from her readers made us laugh, cry and feel confirmed in our beliefs that books can be life changing. Draper also spoke of her own experiences as a teacher in Ohio and pointed out the importance of the continuity of conference because without this community of teachers, we aren’t going to make it. She shared her experiences traveling across the world and being asked to account for why we test so much in our country. As one person remarked to her “If we want an elephant to grow, we feed it. We don’t measure it.” She ended her talk by asking us all to stand and hold hands. She led us all in a recitation of a variation on “Let the Circle be Unbroken,” changing the words to form a promise that we stay connected to each other in this community of teachers. As tears formed in our eyes and we applauded, she pointed out that she guaranteed herself a (much deserved!) standing ovation.

In addition to this stunning array of keynotes, OCTE LA 2016 was brimming with valuable sessions that addressed the needs of teachers from the preschool level through to the post-secondary level and gave insight into making learning more accessible for students in every content area. Presenters provided strategies to boost comprehension and writing skills, assist struggling students, inspire creativity and increase reading participation. Through engaging sessions with hands on learning opportunities and generous sharing of resources, conference attendees were provided with multiple strategies to begin using immediately when they returned to their classrooms the following week.

It was clear from the events of this conference that keynote speakers, presenters and attendees were united in their mission to draw inspiration and knowledge from this professional development. “Synergy” was certainly an apt title for conference, as the experience as a whole was far greater than the sum of its parts.

If you are reading this, then my review is actually fact, not opinion.

On Saturday, February 27, 2016, I attended a game-changing OCTE LA Spring Conference breakout session entitled, “Finding Your Voice as a Teacher-Who-Writes: Preparing Your Manuscript for Professional Publication.” I did so for two reasons. The first, ignorant of and intimidated by the process but aware that the best teachers of writing write themselves, I wanted to challenge myself. The second, Patrick Thomas, OJELA Editor, OCTE LA Board Member, NWP alumnus and knowledgeable teacher, was the presenter. As you can tell by now, he did not disappoint.

Wide-awake at 8:00 a.m. with just fifty minutes, Patrick armed his attendees with a wealth of information. He gave us copies of OJELA and directed us to the Author Guidelines and Manuscript Guidelines pages that clearly answered many of my questions. Knowing I was not ready to write a 10-20 page manuscript, I quickly realized the array of non-threatening genres a novice like I might start with, such as conversations (interviews), creative writing, teaching matters (strategies) and reviews. My peers and I cited confidence, time and lack of ideas as obstacles to becoming published. We were soon taught that the journal articles we read have always been edited. I did not have to be perfect. I would have help.

Ironically, I was gaining confidence and ideas as I sat there. Finding time would prove more challenging, but Patrick had an answer for that too. He gave us a handout that described three ways to organize writing groups and shared about his own writing group experience. Like anything else, we learned that if it were a priority, we would make time for it. Some would decide to find time when Patrick shared venues that actually pay their writers, such as Salon, Slate and The Awl. I, however, decided to start with this review, finding time to write for OJELA because it boasts an 85% acceptance rate, publishing as many pieces as possible and because I was quite thankful for this session. Although we were told that it is acceptable to create a pen name and/or use a pseudonym, I am proud to use my own name here. Thanks to Patrick’s wonderful OCTE LA session, I am finding my voice as a teacher-who-writes and stepping up my game. You can do it too.

T.C. Messer is a National Board Certified Teacher at Hilltop Elementary School in Beachwood, Ohio, where she teaches deaf and hard-of-hearing students.
Recently, I was asked to provide literacy coaching to teachers across the curriculum at an underperforming middle school in a large, Midwestern, inner-city school district. One day I was invited to attend a department meeting of English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers after school. The assistant principal facilitated the meeting. She wanted me to introduce myself, meet the ELA teachers, and basically “just sit-in and observe.” The purpose of the meeting was for teachers to raise questions and discuss strategies they were using to increase reading scores on the state standardized test.

The assistant principal reminded teachers of the agenda for the meeting and then opened it up for discussion. After a short, and awkward, period of silence, teachers shared a variety of instructional strategies they were using in the classroom. One teacher shared a strategy with the group. Her voice caught my attention. She stated:

Like everybody else, I am trying to help my students score better on the state test. So, I looked at several of the released samples of readings that will appear on the test. I think they are terrible, and so do my students. First of all, I don’t think they are real readings. They are more like short passages or little excerpts from a longer text. The real problem, though, is that they are not relevant to my students’ lives. My students can’t see themselves or anybody else in any of the readings. They moan and groan whenever we practice reading these passages. Even though I know these are not good readings and my students hate them, I have the students read them because they are the kinds of readings they will encounter on the test. I don’t feel good about it. On the other hand, I feel like it is my responsibility to prepare them for the test.

This time, unlike before, there was no awkward period of silence. One teacher quickly remarked: “I know how you feel. I do the same and feel the same as you.” Another teacher stated: “I don’t know if it is only the boring readings, but might be. My students just hate to read anything now.” Still another teacher, speaking directly to the assistant principal, was more assertive: “I do it, too, and my students don’t like it either, but I thought using our test-preparation program was what we were supposed to do.” The assistant principal acknowledged that familiarizing students with the test and preparing them to take the test was not the only goal, but certainly was an important goal. She reminded the teachers that the district needed to see positive results on the test and encouraged them to keep that goal in mind.

**Reflection**

Afterwards, I spent time reflecting on this meeting. This was a poignant reminder that these teachers and administrators, like others throughout the country, are working in a highly charged, test-driven, high accountability school climate. This school, and others across the district, is under constant, intense pressure to raise test scores. This pressure is exerted in different ways. One is the warning (many teachers interpret it as a threat) that the school will be closed and teachers will lose their jobs if test scores do not quickly improve. The reality is that they may be right. Test results really do matter. In actual fact, they are perceived as the thing that matters most.

The purpose of this article is not to present a diatribe against state testing. Much criticism already exists in the professional literature on the controversial topic of testing in general and teaching to the test in particular (Posner, 2005). It is also not intended to argue that standardized testing is the main problem that plagues schools. Testing is omnipresent, used throughout our society, e.g. business, military, politics, etc., and supported by the majority of the public as an essential tool for measuring performance (Volante, 2004). Education, however, continues to receive the most attention and “standardized tests continue to be touted as the most
important measure of student performance in schools” (Mitchell, 1997, p. 1).

Rather, the purpose of this article is based on the notion that good intentions sometimes have bad consequences. Specifically, it uses the teacher voices above as an opportunity to critically reflect, not on the intended consequences, but rather on the unintended consequences of teaching to the test. Here, I focus on one unintended consequence, namely, that the intent to increase test scores in the short term by teaching to the test may in the long term unintentionally result in a decrease in student positive dispositions toward reading.

I begin with a brief review of research on teaching to the test. Then, I present findings from professional literature on the notion of disposition and its relationship to reading. Next, I describe the importance of nurturing dispositions in reading and end with a test set of high-quality and award-winning literature that can be used by teachers (and parents) to nurture a love of reading.

Teaching to the Test

Testing is a common practice. It is used in many professions as one measure to decide whether individuals are admitted to a professional field of study, e.g. medical, law, engineering school, as well as promoted to a higher rank or position, e.g. military, law enforcement, firefighting. Teaching to the test, however, is particularly popular in the field of education. Many schools spend much money and many teachers devote much instructional time preparing students to take state assessments by engaging them in test-like activities (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985). These activities are often referred to as test prep, test rehearsal, and test familiarization.

There are many test prep programs available for purchase on the commercial market. Basically, these programs recommend teaching to the test in two ways: item-teaching and curriculum teaching. Item-teaching is when teachers organize their instruction either around the actual items found on a test or around a set of look-alike items... curriculum teaching is when teachers direct their instruction toward a specific body of content knowledge or a specific set of cognitive skills represented by a given test. (Popham, 2001, p. 16)

Teachers teach to the test, enthusiastically or reluctantly, for many reasons. One reason is that teachers live and work in a high-stakes testing world. One reality of this world is that high stakes really mean high consequences. For example, important decisions about retention, intervention, promotion, and diplomas are often attached to student success or failure on some state-mandated tests (Traub, 2002; see also, Kohn, 2000). All too often, however, the overwhelming emphasis on high-stakes testing underwhelms the problems with teaching to the test.

Problems with Teaching To the Test

There are many problems related to teaching to the test. To begin with, there is little evidence to suggest that teaching to the test is likely to stop or even slow down any time soon. If anything, as high-stakes testing remains high, or even increases, more instructional time is likely to be used for test prep activities and test practice worksheets (Darling-Hammond, 1997). What is problematic about this trend is that little, if any, research supports the practice of teaching to the test. Allington & Gabriel (2012) note that “there are no studies demonstrating that engaging students in test prep ever improved their reading proficiency – or even their test performance” (15). Teaching to the test does not increase test scores; rather, it consumes valuable instructional time. It also has a “dumbing” effect on teaching and learning as worksheets, drills, practice tests and similar rote practices consume greater amounts of classroom time (Sacks, 2000).

Moreover, teaching to the test narrows the curriculum. Instructional time spent on test prep often overemphasizes basic-skill subjects and neglects more critical, high-order thinking skills (Herman, 1992). It reduces the depth of instruction in specific subjects and narrows the curriculum so that non-tested disciplines receive less attention during the school day. It also alienates those students whose academic strengths lie outside commonly tested subjects. It is a particularly popular practice in schools serving at-risk and disadvantaged students, where there is the most pressure to improve test scores (Herman, 1992).

Looking more broadly, teaching to the test has negative consequences on the teaching profession as a whole. The pressure to do well on high-stakes tests is intense and can sometimes have unintended consequences for teachers (Stiggins, 1999). Using more and more instructional time to prepare for and administer tests only creates and exacerbates teacher feelings of frustration and disillusionment with the entire testing process (Levinson, 2000).

Ultimately, teaching to the test not only is problematic but also seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, it makes common sense to many people. However, if teaching to the test increases student test scores, it comes at a high price for students and teachers. For students, the price is the cost of learning. Their scores may increase, but their learning does not change (Shepard, 2000; Smith & Fey, 2000). For teachers, the price is that they no longer encourage students to explore the concepts and subjects that interest them (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). Perhaps the ultimate price, however, is that teaching to the test
helps create a discouraging, if not negative, disposition about teaching, learning, and schooling.

**Disposition and Reading**

Much instructional time is used to teach students to read by learning to look at answer options to multiple-choice questions and then search short passages to find the clues to selecting the correct answer (Neil, 2003). All too often these students cannot explain what they have just read even though they got the test item correct. The implication is that there may be a significant number of test wise students who lack important comprehension skills. Again, the concern is that teaching to the test may unintentionally create a negative disposition to reading.

“Disposition” is a messy term. What is a “disposition?” It is defined as a pattern of behavior in a specific context (O’Byrne & McVerry, p. 363), “a pattern of behavior constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control” (Katz, 1993, p. 16), and “frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing” (Da Ros-Voseles, & Fowler-Haughhey, 2007, p. 1; see also Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Simply stated, disposition is a way of thinking, a personal attitude. With reading, disposition is the way students think about reading, that is, the perception, interest, and attitude a student has about reading (Paris, Lipson, and Wixson, 1983) and about themselves as readers (Serafini, 2004).

From birth, dispositions about reading evolve. They are fluid and change based on the literacy environment in place at the time. For example, learning to read (the skill) and loving to read (the will) are not the same thing (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Most students learn to read. Too many students, however, do not learn to love to read. They have the skill but lose the will. In many cases and for many reasons students shift from a positive to a negative disposition about reading. Reading instruction involves teaching skills and nurturing positive dispositions at the same time (Biggam & Ittery, 2009). If students learn to dislike reading passages (“my students hate them…”) they may also learn to dislike reading altogether. In other words, students may gain skills to read but lose the will, the disposition, to use them.

**Nurturing Disposition**

Teaching reading and nurturing disposition is not the proverbial chicken and egg problem – which comes first? They both develop concurrently, almost synergistically. How teachers teach reading significantly influences student development of positive (or negative, or somewhere in between) dispositions about reading. Students with positive dispositions not only learn to read well, but also learn to love reading. They have healthy perceptions of and attitudes about reading and intentionally make it an important part of their lives. In essence, teaching reading and nurturing disposition is equally important.

A good place to start is by recognizing that, unlike test prep programs and activities, “frequent, voluminous reading consistently correlates with high levels of performance on standardized tests” (Atwell, 2007, p. 34). Reading broadly, instead of reading narrowly (test prep passages and answering multiple choice questions), is a good thing and a good way for students to spend their time in school. Let’s also acknowledge that texts do not always have to teach something like specific content area information. They should, however, always nurture positive reading dispositions. Let’s also recognize that high-quality and award-winning literature in the classroom have much potential to nurture positive dispositions. One potential is that literature can show positive images of readers and the value and enjoyment reading has brought to their lives. Jeremiah Learns to Read (Bogart, 1997), More Than Anything Else (Bradby, 1995), Goodnight Opus (Breathed, 1993), Willy’s Stories (Browne, 2014), Ali’s Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq (Stamaty, 2004), and Carlos Likes Reading (Spanyol, 2001) are a few picture books that can help nurture positive dispositions about reading and readers (see Appendix A).

**Concluding Thoughts**

For better or worse, high-stakes testing is a reality and not likely to decrease, much less go away, any time soon. Test practice is not likely to slow down or disappear either. Therefore, it is important to be cautious not to let test practice become the reading curriculum, or even a major part of it (Santman, 2002). Real reading, broadly and deeply, should always be the reading curriculum. It is also important to be cautious about the notion that test practice helps increase test scores. There is just not much, if any, evidence to support that notion. Even if teaching to the test could increase test scores, it is important to be cautious about what happens to reading disposition in the process. What is gained by teaching students to test well but grow to dislike, even hate, reading? All students leave school with a history of reading test scores. Too many leave with negative dispositions about reading. Like positive dispositions, negative dispositions often last a lifetime.

For now, it might be worth keeping in mind the words of one inner city high school student and one inner city, elementary school teacher. When asked about taking state standardized tests, the student stated:

Well, I do okay on the state test. I score about the same each year. It’s not that I like school and like reading and writing and that’s why I score okay. It’s because I want to graduate, go to college, and get a good job. Most of my friends, however, are not like me. They want to go to college, but don’t like reading and writing, and definitely do not like school at all. I think that is why they score real low every year. Like me, they’re smart enough to score okay on the
state test but don’t because they just don’t care about school.

When asked about teaching reading, one inner-city, elementary teacher stated:

When I taught inner city second and third grade, one of my goals was to pass on my passion for reading to my students. I used many picture books as morning read alouds to promote this type of thinking with my students. Our classroom had a “book fairy” that would leave these types of books (wrapped in wrapping paper) around our room for the students to find. That alone created SO much excitement about books.

It is important to hear both of these voices, especially the voices of the student’s friends. One voice should make us cautious; the other should make us hopeful.

The high school student sees the forest (life after graduation) and not just the trees (reading, writing, and test taking in school). Mind you, he does not have the most positive disposition about literacy and schooling, but he sees those as the trees not the forest. Fortunately, he is more focused on the forest - a quality life after graduation. Unfortunately, his friends are less fortunate. For many reasons his friends have developed deeply felt, negative dispositions about literacy and schooling over time. In many ways these negative dispositions interfere, if not impede, success at school and on tests. In fact, they may interfere so much that it raises serious questions about whether poor state test results is an indicator of poor reading and writing skills or an indication of student negative dispositions about reading and writing, or both.

The elementary teacher also sees the forest and the trees, but views them as a whole. The forest and the trees have a symbiotic relationship, each depends on the other. For her, teaching reading (trees) and nurturing positive dispositions about reading (forest) are interconnected, if not the same thing. Simply put, learning to read and developing passion for reading go hand in hand. Her readers are lucky to have her as a teacher.

References


A Closing Lesson

Appendix A: Literature to Help Nurture Positive Dispositions
