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From Sound Bites to Sound Learning: Engaging One-Click Kids in Long-Term Study

Today's youth are accustomed to getting information in digestible, sound bites; short and sweet Twitter updates instead of the rambling emails of yesteryear, YouTube clips instead of hour-long TV episodes, typing a question into Google and clicking on the first answer instead of conducting authentic research. Arguably, this one-click culture has the power to chip at students' interest, and maybe even ability, to invest in the long-term commitment required to learn something deeply.

This becomes especially problematic for English teachers guiding students through literature that requires time and perseverance to comprehend, analyze, and truly appreciate the works studied. Many students won't understand Macbeth's dagger soliloquy at a first perusal. There's a time commitment involved in reading the passage, re-reading it, breaking apart complicated phrasing, looking up unfamiliar words in the footnotes or dictionary, and interpreting and analyzing for meaning. What are some ways we, as English teachers, can motivate students to engage in this type of process learning when the larger culture has accustomed youngsters to getting information pre-processed in neat, pretty bundles? Here are some ideas:

1) **Model close reading strategies by breaking long passages into small bits that students can read and digest.**

Looking at an entire page of Shakespearean language can intimidate many students. Analyzing a lengthy passage line by line, bit by bit, will help make the task of analysis more manageable. When tackling a complicated monologue, for example, I like to project the text on the board and use the highlight tool in Word to focus the students' attention to a single line or phrase. Using color to isolate small, specific lines and even single words helps students to focus on individual elements of a passage, as opposed to looking at an entire page

and becoming visually overwhelmed. In particular, I've found this technique to be especially helpful for capturing the attention of students who are easily distracted. Using neon colors, where appropriate, helps bring their attention back to the central idea.

2) **Mix up the order to give kids the big picture.**

When I teach the Prince's monologue in Act One, Scene One of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, I start by having the students read the passage aloud. Since *Romeo and Juliet* is typically the first Shakespearean text students are exposed to in my district, and this speech is one of the first monologues in the play, students may become quickly overwhelmed by the extended poetic language and euphemisms. After the students read, I repeat the "three civil brawls" line. "Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word... have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets," I quote to them. "What could this mean?" By drawing their attention to the heart of the monologue—the essential "sound bite"—students are less likely to feel encumbered by the rest of the passage. When they comprehend that line, it gives some context for understanding the rest of the text. Grasping the heart of the passage first, even if it means starting your analysis in the middle of it, will break the ice for understanding the monologue as a whole.

3) **Start with quick, easy concepts and build up to larger ones.**

I like to start a new concept by instilling confidence in the students with simple questions. Saying to a class, "Raise your hand if you've ever meditated," for instance, might hook students into what will eventually grow into a much more complicated discussion of Siddhartha's experience of meditation in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Starting with more complicated ideas—"What

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does Hesse mean when he writes that Siddhartha ‘becomes the heron’ when he meditates?”—is harder for students, and getting a discussion flowing might be easier by having them respond to more innocuous concepts that will prime them for those bigger topics. Getting in on the ground floor with a friendly, “are you somewhat familiar with this general idea?” type of question invites students into the area you’ll be discussing. This technique is especially great for building confidence in shy students so that they eventually feel comfortable delving into deeper critical questions.

4) **Use their love of technology to advance from familiar to unfamiliar territory.**

Technology doesn’t always have to be a Grendel in need of defeating! Writing lessons became a lot more exciting and interactive for students once my classroom was equipped with the technology to project a body paragraph on the board and I could invite students up to highlight and rewrite topic sentences with different colors. Suddenly, all of the students wanted to participate. Connect to students’ love of Twitter by asking them to compose 140-character (or fewer) exit slips summarizing what they learned that day. Finding creative ways to incorporate what they already know and love into your lessons just might encourage them to branch out into the unknown and exciting world of learning that awaits.

Jessica Rosevear is a high school English teacher in New Jersey. She edits the independent literary journal *Killing the Angel* (www.killingtheangel.com).

On Repeatedly Rereading Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Much have I cover’d in the English class,
And many weighty texts and tests assigned;
Through rough drafts of essays have I opined
Which students in good faith have writ *en masse*.
Oft to one fine novel had I giv’n thought
That ill-fated Shelley wrote as her chore;
Yet did I never love its frame structure
Till I re-read the text each time I taught:
Then felt I like some scientist gone wild
When grand ideas arise and must be born;
Or like a new-made creature, fashioned mild
And warped by cruelty—who becomes forlorn
For all men hate the wretched and defiled—
Pondering pages from a journal torn.

- Vanessa Rasmussen

Vanessa Rasmussen is enjoying her sixth year of teaching English at Vineland High School, where she has taught juniors and seniors in a range of courses, from basic skills classes to Honors classes, and is the advisor of the Student Literature Club. She is also an Adjunct Professor of English at Rowan University. She was awarded the M. Jerry Weiss Early Career Teacher Scholarship Award by the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English in 2011.