

2016

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Recommended Citation

Yon, Annie (2016) "Inspiring Students, One Novel at a Time," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 5 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol5/iss1/18>

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Inspiring Students, One Novel at a Time

by Annie Yon

As I sit with my third cup of coffee on my lap, I reflect on the benefits of the teaching profession, but also think about the countless number of strangers in the past who joked, “So you’re a teacher, huh? Must be nice to have summers off.” Although some people may assume that the best part of being a teacher is to have “so many breaks off” and to receive Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts gift cards from students, it’s not; nor is it even the “grateful” feeling of being rated a “highly-effective” score on the Stronge Teacher Evaluation System. Instead, the most heartwarming reward for an educator is the rejuvenation and exhilaration felt in seeing the slow, but evident, transformation of students’ social and academic growth.

When it comes to teaching, frustration, anxiety, and disappointment are inevitable: the frustration in trying to motivate some students who claim that “books are worse than old-school flip phones”; the anxiety to sufficiently prepare them for standardized tests such as the newly-adopted Common Core PARCC assessment; and the disappointment toward tepid students who are averse to learning since “Well, Miss Yon, realistically in our economy, jobs aren’t secured even if you get a college degree.” To transcend in the art of teaching, educators must consider the student’s family life, social incentives, and socioeconomic conditions. In addition, teachers need to remain tenacious, regardless of the groans and sighs we may hear, and most importantly, enthusiastic in motivating students to see literature as a journey through time, locales, and character-related perspectives instead of bulky, convoluted texts.

I have witnessed students’ apathy toward reading transform into excitement through differentiated class activities—literature circles, scene illustrations, skits, and Socratic discussions—that require full participation and interdependence on classmates. In the beginning of the year, a couple of my tenth graders trudged into the classroom while yawning and rubbing their eyes to keep them open; it was my period one class, which meets promptly at 7:55 a.m. After days of starting class with a 10-minute “Do-Now,” then transitioning into our reading of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, I quickly realized that it was “too early” for my enervated students to concentrate on the text merely through passive reading and writing paragraphs just because “the teacher said so.” Consequently, my students were introduced to Harvey Daniels’s model of a *literature circle*, in which they initiated a collaborative discussion on *The Lord of the Flies* by sharing information collected by each individual role. First, students were given the opportunity to choose a role for the literature circle that they were most confident and could succeed in. The roles included a “Discussion Director” to develop questions using the Bloom’s Taxonomy framework in order to lead their peers into higher-level thinking about the text; an “Illustrator” to draw key scenes to help students visualize the text and understand imagery; a “Literary Luminary” to analyze and bring attention to key lines from the text that help develop the narrative; a “Connector” to see relationships between the reading and the real world; and an “Investigator” to research the historical implications on the novel. Next, students were assigned into groups of five and asked to share the information and learn about the text through their peers’ findings.

As I circled the classroom and listened in on each group's discussion, I heard a director in one group ask, "How does fear affect the boys as the story progresses?" and "What is necessary to maintain a civilized society?" One classmate answered, "Sam and Eric join Jack's tribe because of fear. That's the quote I found. How does this line reveal the authority Jack has within his tribe?" In addition, the illustrator chimed in by presenting the drawing and explaining why the scene was relevant to the theme. In conclusion, my students took notes on their classmates' research, and purposefully conversed on the theme of savagery and civilization. The strategic roles in the literature circle promoted an engaging and stimulating opportunity for students actively to share their thinking about the core text without the teacher lecturing the whole period.

Similarly, I have noticed my students' indifference toward reading transform into appreciation of the text in my English 11 classes. For example, one of my students, Evan[1], seemed like a reluctant, passive reader. We would read Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* aloud in class, and he would sit with his shoulders slouched and head cocked on one hand. He read along with the class as he flipped page by page in sync, but it was evident that Evan lacked empathy for the characters and was disinterested in reading the text. I thought to myself: *We just read the dramatic scene of Giles being pressed to death after saying, "More Weight." Why is Evan so unmoved? Abigail just wounded herself with a needle to accuse Elizabeth's spirit of stabbing her. All the other students are outraged and frustrated by the Abigail's actions, but does Evan even care?* Evan sat there that period, passively listening to my questions and scrutinizing the minute hand on the clock. My face burned red, and I was offended. I had spent so much time planning to help students understand how the Salem Witch Trials provided an opportunity for the marginalized people to feel empowerment in their Theocratic society. How could Evan not see that? Nonetheless, I quickly accepted the fact that it was not Evan's fault that he was "bored." The Salem Witch Trial and McCarthyism were historical periods that he did not find relevant through reading and answering questions about. I needed to do something different.

I came to the realization that students are attentive and interested in opportunities that allow for them to be imaginative and creative. As a post-reading activity, my eleventh graders were asked to perform a skit on scenes from *The Crucible* that addressed one of the following themes: peer pressure, social and sexual repression, revenge and greed, and mass hysteria. After two 45-minute periods of students planning and practicing, they presented the next day. Students played the role of the accuser or wrongfully accused. In one presentation, Evan, dressed in all black, sat in front of his class and enacted the role of Governor Danforth. He banged his gavel on the desk, pointed to his group member (Proctor), and bellowed, "I have seen people choked before my eyes by spirits; I have seen them slashed by daggers!" At that moment, "Abigail" with a bonnet on her head collapsed on the ground, stared at the ceiling, and screamed, "Why do you come yellow bird! She's sending her spirit down on me!" The fourth group member, "Mary Warren," interrupted, "I'm not doing anything, Abigail! I'm here!" I have never seen Evan and his group members as animated and zealous about the text before this skit; they had their classmates' full attention and did a wonderful job bringing the text to life. I was proud of their enthusiasm in acting, effort in dressing up and bringing in props, and responsibility in memorizing lines.

When all groups presented, students sat in a circle and each reflected on the skits. Students claimed that when they visualized the scenes and embodied the characters, they were more empathetic; they felt "fear and frustration" of being accused as witches through illogical claims, and "powerful" in having people believe their false accusations. In our group discussion of the play, students further

conversed on the theme of hysteria and the importance of reputation in society. Moreover, they were finally able to make the connection between the Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism and write poignantly about the injustices and paranoia seen in both time periods. Students, including Evan, began to appreciate and comprehend texts that were once perceived as tortuous when they had opportunities to release their imagination, experience empathy, and collaborate meaningfully. Ultimately, with engaging activities, students can begin to see literature as a means to understand worldly historic, current and political affairs of our past, present, and future.

The teaching profession *is* honorable and rewarding. Hearing students' innovative ideas and reflections shared in class discussions as well as witnessing their growth in interpersonal skills prove that I have made an impact in a student's life. The hours spent giving meticulous feedback on essays, writing heartfelt letters of recommendation, and planning thoughtful, creative lessons while gulping down mugs of coffee are all worth it—especially when students recognize our efforts in the end of the year and take the time to express, “Thank you for inspiring and motivating me to challenge myself.” Maintaining a positive student-teacher relationship and staying connected to the importance of that rapport at a time when public educators are increasingly pressured to teach to the test reaffirm my decision for a career in pedagogy. The summer break and gifts are appreciated; however, the main perk of teaching is that we bathe in the Fountain of Youth each day, revitalized by the ebullience and laughter of vibrant students in the classroom.

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[1] Name has been changed

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Artwork by Izzie Boyce-Blanchard