

2020

Student-Text Connections in the Twenty-First Century ELA Classroom

Zac Gibbins
Eastern Kentucky University

Chassa Norris
Eastern Kentucky University

Darius Powell
Eastern Kentucky University

Anna Allen
Eastern Kentucky University

Kaitlyn Lane
Eastern Kentucky University

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal>

Recommended Citation

Gibbins, Zac; Norris, Chassa; Powell, Darius; Allen, Anna; Lane, Kaitlyn; and Hamblin, Alexandra (2020) "Student-Text Connections in the Twenty-First Century ELA Classroom," *New Jersey English Journal*. Vol. 9 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Jersey English Journal by an authorized editor of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

Student-Text Connections in the Twenty-First Century ELA Classroom

Authors

Zac Gibbins, Chassa Norris, Darius Powell, Anna Allen, Kaitlyn Lane, and Alexandria Hamblin

Student-Text Connections in the 21st Century ELA Classroom

ZAC GIBBINS

CHASSA NORRIS

DARIUS POWELL

ANNA ALLEN

KAITLYN LANE

ALEXANDREA HAMBLIN

Eastern Kentucky University

In a clinical experience, I once taught William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Macbeth to 10th graders. This is one of my favorite plays because of its themes (and, of course, the witches!), so I was excited when my cooperating teacher asked me to complete a character analysis of Macbeth with students. But despite the popularity of witches, war, power-lust, and death with young adults in Harry Potter and The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, students seemed unengaged with the play. I could not understand it, until I realized that students struggled to connect the Shakespearean plot and language to their own lives. Students' engagements with literature often depend on their ability to connect a text to previous experience.¹

This experience points to a question that educators may ask themselves: *How can we connect our students to literature in meaningful and relevant ways?* From demographic shifts to technological advances, the 21st century English Language Arts (ELA) classroom addresses a variety of students' needs, which begins with the need for educators "to be advocates for and models of social justice and equity" (Boyd 333). Access to technology is one way to increase understanding among diverse students and to level socioeconomic

differences. In fact, when students are provided with access to digital tools, their technological literacy, engagement, ability to access, share, and learn information when using blogs and other websites, and eagerness to integrate new media increases (Beach 48). Laura Duerr builds on this argument further to recommend teaching across disciplines for a comprehensive, retainable learning experience. No longer optional in the 21st century classroom, links between literature and technology "sharpen understanding of specific disciplines" and "expand students' perceptions and understandings of their world" (Duerr 176). Finally, "alternative texts," or "multimodal texts," constitute another key, since they "require readers to integrate various semiotic modes (images, words, spatial arrangements, sound effects, etc.) to make sense of the text as a whole" (Low and Jacobs 323). Non-traditional texts—podcasts, videos, songs, comics, audiobooks—engage senses more deeply than static textbooks. Incorporating multiple genres in the ELA curriculum expands conceptions of the meaning of "text" and creates an authentic learning environment.

Authentic learning connects students to texts. And although no unifying definition for "authentic literature" exists, it is

¹ This opening reflection comes from one of the authors—all preservice ELA teachers at Eastern Kentucky University.

generally agreed that authentic literature is written for wide, general audiences and includes not only novels, but also picture books and nonfiction texts, and is developed from a text's relevancy through portrayals and vocabulary that draws upon colloquial terms, idioms, and other expressions that sound like "real life" (Ciercierski and Bintz 18). These claims to point to texts like news articles, podcasts, and blogs, which promote interactions with real-world writing (Kreamer and Heny 44–45). Students need to be able to relate to issues that they care about and recognize themselves in the characters—intersections of identity that include the complexities of teenage experiences, including how those identity facets interact with the experiences (Ciercierski and Bintz 21–22). In other words, authenticity in the ELA classroom is genre bending, relatable, and interdisciplinary.

Recognizing historically marginalized voices, perceiving text as multimodal, and situating cultural experiences as fluid accurately reflects our students' experiences in the world. Legislatures in Kentucky recently responded to calls for "authentic" ELA curriculum by revising high school curriculum to include alternatives to English III and English IV requirements while adding interdisciplinary principles to every grade level's standards ("KBE Approves"). Kentucky educators now possess both the freedom and the responsibility to evaluate approaches to disciplinary content. As pre-service teachers, we are uniquely positioned to contribute to this evaluation. In addition to our recent studies in evidence-based instructional research, we better understand what students want to read, what issues they care about, and what engages them most. By incorporating texts that are genre bending, regional, and interdisciplinary, we will connect (future) students to texts authentically.

Connecting through Genre Bending Texts

Genre bending refers to the incorporation of multiple genres in a singular body of work, producing a "hybrid" genre that contains elements from one or more mediums of text. Genre bending texts, while not new to literature, are increasingly present in ELA classrooms. For example, contemporary best-selling young adult novels like Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011), Mark Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), and Rick Riordan's *The 39 Clues* series (2008–2011) use various modes of presentation—photographs, letters, and collectible cards—to convey complex themes and multiple perspectives. Incorporating genre-bending texts in the class may feel overwhelming when compared to canonical readings, but the visual appeal of these books cultivates a level of interest that some high schoolers have not experienced since they were in elementary school.

Technology augments students' engagements with genre bending texts further. Patrick Carmen's *Skeleton Creek* (2009), for instance, incorporates videos to help readers visualize the plot. The novel follows Ryan and Sarah as they explore an old gold mining dredge in their hometown of Skeleton Creek. During the adventure, the two encounter the ghost of Old Joe Bush lingering on the property. The protagonists' efforts to solve town mysteries become increasingly difficult as they encounter many obstacles that bar them from their path. As readers progress through the novel's suspense, they must negotiate between reading the book and watching the corresponding videos on Sarah's personal blog where she documents their findings. Readers enter a code (often a canonical reference such as "theraven" or "thehouseofusher") into the browser to

watch Ryan and Sarah come face-to-face with the supernatural happenings that plague their small town. Educators call this kind of novel a “vook,” or a combination of video and book. In “What is This Thing Called A Vook?,” education scholars describe how students’ engagements with *Skeleton Creek* compel them to complete reading assignments so that they understand how the videos shown in class relate to the reading (Letcher, et al. 106). Students in the twenty-first century classroom are often more engaged with technology than paper books. In fact, many confide that this combination prompted them to read additional books in the series after the class reading requirements were over, and that *Skeleton Creek* is the first book that they have read in its entirety (Letcher, et al. 106–7). While we are not arguing for the elimination of paper books in the classroom, texts like *Skeleton Creek* can bridge the “digital divide” and promote enthusiasm for reading.

Connecting through Region-Based Texts

Regional literature also engages students with reading. By situating geographic place, dialect, and culture as its narrative frame, regional literature offers relevant connections for students living in the same region, while introducing and revising misconceptions about a region for students living outside of it. Rural Appalachian communities, for example, are often marginalized through media portrayals of poverty. Incorporating Appalachian literature into an eastern Kentucky classroom helps students to draw upon environments, characters, and social issues familiar to them, which increases their comprehension. Furthermore, teaching Appalachian literature in an Appalachian classroom illustrates how not everyone within a culture has the same identity in the same way that Alden Waitt argues that “[Appalachian] novels can help students

evaluate the intersections of race, class, and gender and correct historical amnesia and inaccuracies so as to empower and educate Appalachian students of all ethnicities” (93). These lessons apply to students’ reading of Appalachian literature from outside of the region similarly, since they must evaluate another region’s experiences alongside their own place-based experiences. Like Elizabeth Catte’s confrontation of Appalachian stereotypes in *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018), readers examine their biases by asking questions and conveying stories about relationships between place and identity, particularly related to race, gender, and class. Teaching regional literature brings awareness to students unfamiliar with a region and helps them to evaluate how stereotypes are developed and maintained in culture.

One example of regional literature that could be incorporated into a high school classroom is Silas House’s *Clay’s Quilt* (2001). *Clay’s Quilt* features male protagonist Clay, who learns about family and community as he grows up in a small Appalachian town. Due to a trauma-filled past surrounding the death of his mother, Annet, Clay strays from creating personal connections with anyone outside of his family. However, when he sees Alma playing the fiddle in a bar, he falls in love with her and embraces new beginnings. Clay learns more about his family and the town he lives in, and most importantly, what makes his home a home. In “Place, Pedagogy, and Literacy in Appalachia,” Amanda Hayes credits Appalachian literature with “play[ing] an important historical role in the development of place-based pedagogy” (74). Teachers in southeastern Kentucky (or, more broadly, Appalachia) might include the text *Clay’s Quilt* because students would already be familiar and invested with the featured

region. However, students who live outside of Appalachia would also connect to the novel through Clay's experiences that transcend geographic location. Choosing texts that feature one region demonstrates how place-based perspectives inform our interactions with those within and outside of our immediate communities.

Connecting through Interdisciplinary Texts

Even though most literature can be linked to another discipline through an examination of historical and social contexts related to the reading, interdisciplinary texts forefront two or more disciplines simultaneously to bridge disciplinary boundaries, especially in secondary instruction. In particular, combining historical fiction and informational texts in instruction helps to create this bridge. KaaVonia Hinton, et al. make the argument that social studies and English are "a natural marriage" because discussions link literary portrayals to the historical contexts that inform those portrayals (23). Teachers can use an informational article about how the First Amendment works, for example, to inform descriptions of protests in fiction. Incorporating interdisciplinary texts into the classroom connects literature to historically significant moments.

One young adult historical fiction example that lends itself to situating fictional portrayals within historical context is Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever 1793* (2000). In this book, protagonist Matilda Cook struggles to survive the yellow fever endemic in her Philadelphia hometown. Mattie relocates from her home, experiences death within her family, and takes in an orphan named Nell. She must mature quickly and persevere to provide for herself and the family she adopts in response to tragedy. This story of sickness, death, love, and triumph relies on both social studies and

English content. Instead of reading a social studies textbook's segment about yellow fever, *Fever 1793* promotes an authentic learning experience through connecting fiction to nonfiction. The novel allows students to experience what it would be like if they lived during that time through the eyes of the narrator. Alongside *Fever 1793*, students are motivated to read nonfiction accounts like an article on "Yellow Fever" (*The History of Vaccines*, 2019) that describe how the disease is transferred and treated, including complications and death rates. Students are able to fully comprehend the severity of the disease and the traumatic events that the fictional Mattie endured.

Incorporating texts that transcend disciplinary boundaries and expand upon approaches to literary instruction is one area in which educators have the opportunity to demonstrate their professional sense of innovation. Through innovation, teachers can create authentic learning experiences for students. As educators demonstrate their own innovations, they expand their students' horizons as innovative thinkers themselves. As preservice teachers, we recognize our responsibility to engage students as proactive innovators in the classroom. The literature that we integrate into our approaches to instruction should challenge students' perspectives, while also demonstrating engagement with "text" in the broadest sense—through multiple mediums and technological platforms that link these mediums. Genre-bending texts appeal to a variety of learners simultaneously, regional texts connect to students' previous experiences, and interdisciplinary texts work to link genres to illuminate relationships. Instead of asking students to connect exclusively to canonical texts like *Macbeth*, in which language and situations feel removed from contemporary students' experiences, educators can bridge ideas between popular media and canonical

selections. By engaging “text” broadly and across genres, we connect literature and students through contexts to develop a deep understanding about human relationships in the 21st century classroom.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Fever 1793*. Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- Beach, Richard. “Uses of Digital Tools and Literacies in the English Language Arts Classroom.” *Research in the Schools*, vol. 19, no. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 45–59.
- Carman, Patrick. *Skeleton Creek*. PC Studio, 2009.
- Catte, Elizabeth. *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*. Belt Publishing, 2018.
- Ciecierski, Lisa M., and William P. Bintz. “Using Authentic Literature to Develop Challenging and Integrated Curriculum.” *Middle School Journal*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2015, pp. 17–25.
- Duerr, Laura L. “Interdisciplinary Instruction.” *Educational Horizons*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2008, pp. 173–180.
- Fenice B. Boyd, et al. “Real Teaching for Real Diversity: Preparing English Language Arts Teachers for 21st-Century Classrooms.” *English Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2006, p. 329.
- Hayes, Amanda. “Place, Pedagogy, and Literacy in Appalachia.” *English Education*, vol. 50, no. 1, October 2017, pp. 72–89. NCTE.
- Hinton, KaaVonia, et al. “Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?” *The English Journal*, vol. 103, no. 3, 2014, pp. 22–27.
- House, Silas. *Clay’s Quilt*. 1st ed., Algonquin, 2001.
- “KBE Approves New High School Graduation Requirements.” *Kentucky Teacher*, Kentucky Department of Education, 4 Oct. 2018, <https://www.kentuckyteacher.org/news/2018/10/kbe-approves-new-high-school-graduation-requirements/>.
- Kreamer, H. Michelle, and Natasha Heny. “The Power of Authenticity: Empowering Student Writers through Meaningful, Real World Writing Experiences.” *Virginia English Journal*, vol. 69, no. 1, Summer 2019, pp. 36–47.
- Letcher, Mark, et al. “Off the Shelves: ‘What Is This Thing Called a Vook?’: Using ‘Skeleton Creek’ to Transform Students’ Reading Experiences In (and Out of) School.” *The English Journal*, vol. 100, no. 3, 2011, pp. 105–108.
- Low, David, and Katrina Jacobs. “Literature Circle Roles for Discussing Graphica in Language Arts Classrooms.” *Language Arts*, vol. 95, no. 5, 2018, pp. 322–331.
- “Yellow Fever.” *The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, 25 Jan. 2018, <https://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/yellow-fever>.