



2022

[Full Issue] What's Working? What's Not?

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



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2022) "[Full Issue] What's Working? What's Not?," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 11, Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol11/iss2022/14>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at 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.

NEW JERSEY ENGLISH JOURNAL



Editors' Note

Lauren Zucker, PhD

Northern Highlands Regional High School, Drew University, Montclair State University, and Fordham University

Susan Chenelle

University Academy Charter High School, Montclair State University

Katie F. Whitley

Bergen County Technical Schools, Montclair State University

It is our pleasure to introduce you to the 2021 issue of *New Jersey English Journal (NJEJ)*. This year's theme is "What's Working? What's Not?" In our call for submissions, we asked authors to consider the following questions:

- What should English Language Arts look like in 2022? In what ways should our classrooms and approaches evolve from past practices?
- What do we want to shift or let go of in our teaching and learning? Which of our widely-used or longstanding instructional strategies should be critiqued or overhauled?
- How can educators create more equitable, inclusive spaces and learning opportunities? How can we be more responsive to students' social-emotional needs and welcoming of their diverse cultural resources?
- How can we better prepare students not only to meet our curricular standards, but also to participate actively in their schools and communities, and/or on a national level? Curricula and standards aside, what skills and competencies do our students need?

This issue features work in three genres: poetry, reflective pieces, and research articles. This issue addresses a variety of topics, including culturally inclusive texts, climate change, teaching tragedy, and teachers' emotional regulation. We are proud to share work from writers across the country, including pieces by first-time authors and early-career teachers.

For example, in "Supporting Growth Mindset in the Post-COVID Classroom: A Case for Skills-Tracking and Goal-Achievement Strategies," Garrett T. Van Curen describes the benefits of a long-term goal setting and tracking system to create more equitable grading.

Lisa Wennerth's "Kairos: A Time for Educational Transformation" takes readers through her own journey to rediscover her purpose as an educator and the process through which she put this rediscovered purpose into action in her classroom.

In "Writing Our Climate Future," Shannon Falkner pairs infographics and narrative writing to expand students' background knowledge about the climate crisis and their imaginations in confronting it.

Annie Yon's students created podcasts to discuss how culturally inclusive texts help them learn about each other's diverse cultures and experiences and deconstruct stereotypes.

In "Identity Development to Support Disenfranchised Student Engagement," Jessica Hadid argues that building congruence between students' in-school and out-of-school identities through structured journal activities can enhance student engagement.

Poetic contributions from John Chorazy and Joseph Pizzo offer reflections on teachers' experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next year's theme will be "Reviving Engagement in ELA." Find the full call at the conclusion of these introductory pages and on our website: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/>

Since 2020, when we shifted *NJEJ* to a digital format and uploaded archival issues dating back to 2013, our journal has attracted a wide online readership. As of August 2022, prior to publishing the current issue, our 236 articles have 14,637 unique downloads from 148 different countries representing 964 institutions. We thank Montclair State University for hosting our journal on their library's Digital Commons repository, which helps readers find our pieces through search engines, institutional databases, and keyword searches.

This year's cover was designed by rising sophomore Noreen Hosny of Princeton University, winner of our 2020 cover design contest. We are grateful to have had our last three covers crafted by such a talented young designer.

We would like to thank and acknowledge those who contributed their time and expertise to this issue. We are grateful to the NJCTE Board for their support and recommendations. Special thanks to our reviewers for their quick and attentive work to our submissions. And finally, we thank Valerie Mattessich, our NJCTE President, for her leadership and support.



Attendees at the 2022 NJCTE Spring Conference, "Literacy for Living," held at Pascack Valley High School.

New Jersey English Journal 2022 Issue, Volume 11

New Jersey English Journal is a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (NJCTE). This journal is intended to serve our members through the sharing and showcasing of research, best practices, and ideas related to K–12 and college English Language Arts education, and to encourage diverse discussions and inclusion.

NJCTE OPPORTUNITIES

NJEJ REVIEWERS

NJEJ seeks educators with experience in P–12 and/or postsecondary English Language Arts to serve as reviewers. Reviewers are typically asked to read and evaluate 1-2 submissions per year. Instructions to join our reviewer pool can be found on the journal’s website:
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/>

WRITING CONTESTS

NJCTE offers several student writing contests. Please encourage your students to submit to them—and join us as a judge. For more information, see <https://www.njcte.org/writing-contest>.



Author and Keynote speaker Jeff Zetner accepting the Muriel Becker Award at the 2022 NJCTE Spring Conference.

AWARDS

NJCTE offers several awards for teachers and authors. Please consider making a nomination. More information about these awards and past award winners are listed on our website:
<https://www.njcte.org/awards>.

- The Marcia Holtzman Pre-Service Teacher Award honors preservice teachers aiming to work at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

- The M. Jerry Weiss Early Career Teacher Award honors teachers with one to five years of teaching experience.
- Our Educator of the Year Award recognizes an exceptional English/language arts educator—a dedicated, innovative, dynamic Pre-K–12 teacher, university teacher, supervisor, or administrator—whose activities have significantly and widely impacted New Jersey ELA.
- The Patricia L. Schall Visual Literacy Award award recognizes the significant impact of authors and illustrators who create works for young people.
- The Muriel Becker Award is the highest honor bestowed on a writer by the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English. It has been given annually since the 1980’s to a writer deemed by the Becker Award committee to be someone who reflects the best of positive ideals that inspire young readers to high achievement.

BLOG

Please consider sharing your work—a project, an anecdote, some words of inspiration, a classroom story—with our members around the state by becoming a "teacher who writes" for our NJCTE blog. Read the blog at <https://njcte.wordpress.com>. Email njcteblog@gmail.com to share your ideas.

CONFERENCES & PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

NJCTE hosts two conferences a year. We hope you will join us as an attendee or presenter! Learn more at <https://www.njcte.org/>.

Additionally, NJCTE offers professional learning opportunities throughout the year. In 2022, we co-hosted an author talk with Jeffrey Craft, and hosted a virtual Summer Learning Series covering topics such as “ELA Strategies for Productive Disagreements” and “LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the ELA Classroom.”

Looking to connect with New Jersey ELA educators and access high-quality, local professional development opportunities? Join NJCTE. Read more about member benefits at <https://www.njcte.org/member-benefits>. Subscribe to our mailing list at <https://www.njcte.org> for information about NJCTE membership and future events.



Photos from the 2022 NJCTE Spring Conference.



CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS
2023 Issue of *New Jersey English Journal*

New Jersey English Journal, a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, invites you to share submissions on the theme, “**Reviving Engagement in ELA.**” This year, we ask writers to consider ways to revive both student and teacher engagement in English Language Arts. For students, what strategies and content can promote their love of learning and literacy? For teachers, what practices can schools adopt or abandon to reduce burnout, reignite passion, and attract and retain new educators?

We seek research and practitioner-oriented pieces (~1000–2000 words), as well as personal essays (~700–1000 words) and other creative responses related to the theme and geared towards an audience of P–12 and postsecondary English Language Arts educators. In addition to submissions that respond to the theme, we also welcome poetry related to the theme. We welcome single and co-authored submissions from both veteran and early-career teachers, and we especially invite new writers, pre-service teachers, and graduate students to develop submissions. Writers are urged to read past issues at <<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/>> to review successful submissions.

We invite you to respond to the theme “**Reviving Engagement in ELA**” by considering such questions as:

- What gets in the way of student engagement in today's P–12 and/or higher education ELA classrooms? How can we revive it for our students, and perhaps ourselves as well?
- What do we need to change in ourselves as teachers to revive student engagement? What do we need to change for our students?
- Which practices and policies help new, mid-career, and veteran educators to thrive in their ELA classrooms? Which do not?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators create more equitable, inclusive and inviting learning spaces?

Submissions will be accepted until **Wednesday, December 28, 2022**, via <<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/>>. All submissions will be reviewed through a double-blind process by multiple peer reviewers. Submissions should not have been previously published or under review elsewhere. Manuscripts should follow current MLA guidelines for citations. All writing should appear in Times New Roman 12 pt. font, and authors' names and identifying information must be removed from all submissions. Send any queries to <njenglishjournal@gmail.com>.

Social Distancing: Closing the Gap Between Digital and Social Media Literacy Practices and Literacy Instruction

RACHEL BESHARAT-MANN

Wesleyan University

This semester, I taught an undergraduate course, entitled “Contemporary Literacy,” which explored the construct of literacy over time. Emerging from a year of Zoom courses, the students were asked to reflect on their literacy activities in digital spaces through a diary project over the course of one week. These media diaries changed the direction of my course as the students’ experiences showed a nuanced consumption of information through digital spaces, particularly through social media platforms as they overwhelmingly reported accessing news through Twitter and Instagram. My students acknowledged being a part of the “digital generation,” but pushed against this idea, with one student stating, “in many ways I think I overestimated my own self-awareness and underestimated my naivete as a digital consumer” in response to her acceptance of news she consumed through social media. Another student acknowledged how they “just take the news I skim as fact because they come from what I deem ‘reliable’ sources/publications. I really am just making a huge assumption and not critically analyzing anything I read.” Academic-related media usage was heavy with schools shifting coursework to online settings. A student stated they “needed to be comfortable with so many different types of platforms, communication styles, and skills” for completing school-related tasks.

Being literate in 2022 is seemingly complicated as the definition of literacy has evolved over time to account for ever-expanding modes of communication. Literacy is a “means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world” (UNESCO, 2018). As my students reported, these texts mainly come through digital spaces, including social media platforms. This is particularly true for adolescents who report near constant social media use (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teens increased their already overwhelming usage of social media platforms (Drouin et al., 2020). With the increase of text consumption through social media, educators have the crucial task of understanding text production and consumption and bridging these literacy practices into classrooms. Ethically, the implications of bringing these new literacies into the classroom could not be more relevant. As the very public discourse surrounding education seems to fear new literacies and their potential to undermine traditional skills, it is vital to explore the importance and academic merit of the literacies needed to efficiently comprehend online texts. Students need to receive explicit instruction in how to navigate digital technology, and specifically social media platforms, as the landscape of literacy evolves as we emerge from the pandemic.

Social media literacy is difficult to teach explicitly in schools, as the role of the educator is seemingly limited. However, social media literacy builds upon traditional literacy skills and includes digital, media, and critical literacy practices and a nuanced understanding of digital social practices that include empathy and understanding of multiple viewpoints that can be fostered in classrooms. This is especially important as students come to the classroom with varying experiences with digital technology resulting from a variety of demographic and background factors. I noticed varying levels of literacy, both digital and traditional, among the students in my course and had the unique opportunity to have them discuss their literacy activities through their individual educational experiences, highlighting discrepancies between

the way students are taught to practice literacy in digital spaces across the country. Specifically highlighting her prior schooling, this student appreciated the importance of learning digital skills: “I realized that a plethora of the digital and media literacy skills I learned in the classroom in elementary and middle school are skills I naturally call upon on a day-to-day basis.” This student also discussed this assignment, reflecting that completion was dependent on access to technology outside of the classroom, which is not feasible for all students in K-12 settings. Thus, educators have an obligation to bring these social media literacy practices into the classroom in authentic and relevant ways to create equitable experiences for all students to learn digital, media, and critical literacy skills that are crucial for success in contemporary society.

Teaching Digital and Media Literacy

Most of the literacy activities my students highlighted in digital spaces were academic in nature and were not scaffolded by professors. Digital literacy, which includes the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information online, use various digital tools, and create digital content in various contexts, is an essential part of being literate. This includes the basic understanding of how to turn on different devices and how to open different programs, which varies immensely between individual students. Teachers in K-12 settings have the opportunity to scaffold these activities through lessons that compel students to explore digital technologies in meaningful and reflective ways. In their reflections, my students praised this type of instruction as particularly helpful in university settings. A few commented about their friends who struggled to complete assignments resulting from their lack of practice in digital spaces. These practices ranged from not being able to find appropriate sources, to having difficulty citing sources, and even to understanding the basics of certain programs.

Teachers should incorporate use of digital platforms such as Google Suite and give students practice using word processing software such as Microsoft Word. These programs are collaborative and facilitate authentic learning as the skills needed can be applied to other digital platforms. When digital skills relating to individual programs become more automatic, students spend less time in frustration at technology and can use more energy on the task. There are meaningful and integrative ways to incorporate these programs in the classroom. For example, teachers can set up classrooms through the program of their choice (i.e., Google Classroom) and walk students through accessing them. This does not need to be a detailed plan for the entire course but can simply provide resources and activities. For younger secondary students, having them complete webquests in groups can facilitate this type of learning through practice and collaboration. Giving students steps to follow with specific instructions can help scaffold their learning and support them as they learn to navigate digital spaces independently. For older students, research projects can also support development of digital literacies, requiring students to practice finding and evaluating sources. These skills establish a foundation on which students can begin to learn the higher-level media and digital literacy skills that underlie navigating social media spaces.

Issues pertaining to social media platforms specifically, such as privacy, sharing content with extended audiences, social interactions through commenting and direct messaging, and profile curation are important to explore within the context of classrooms. Social media theorists suggest that active discussion of these issues in formal and informal settings can contribute to more efficient social media use, including critical analysis of information and management of emotional responses to situations online (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2021). As peers are often valuable learning mentors for adolescents, these types of discussion groups may be particularly

effective in helping students understand issues pertaining to social media. Valuing students' out-of-school literacies, particularly their literacy practices within social media, can be a powerful learning tool, especially for those students who may not feel represented or included by typical curricula (Krutka and Carpenter, 2016).

In terms of using social media in the classroom, facilitating meaningful use can be a difficult but meaningful experience. Educators can leverage platforms such as Twitter to help students gather perspectives on different issues. Teachers have also found success using social media platforms such as Twitter for review and asynchronous lessons (Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). Similarly, encouraging reflection on individual media use may help students become more self-aware of themselves as digital consumers (Zucker and Damico, 2019). As social media becomes more ubiquitous, automaticity in our use (i.e., mindless scrolling) limits deeper understanding of how we practice literacy in these spaces. My students recorded lengthy times where they did not recognize they were mindlessly scrolling through their apps until after lengthy time periods. During these scrolling periods, users are exposed to hundreds of messages that they may be integrating into their background knowledge without consciously doing so. These messages can have varying impacts on students due to a number of factors. From an equity standpoint, educators need to make students aware of the construction of messages through social media and teach students to use these platforms actively.

Social media platforms are a unique branch of media as social interactions and discussion become texts through commentary, direct messages, and shared posts that need to be analyzed both traditionally (i.e., decoded) and critically for understanding (Livingstone, 2014). In social media interactions and message consumption, teens need to understand concepts of media production that go into the creation of these texts, particularly the understanding that all media is constructed and has a wide range of implications, including political and ideological, and draw upon specific aesthetics and digital features to promote these messages (Aufderheide, 1992). After reading the students' media diaries, I chose to have my students critically analyze a piece of media upon completing study on media literacy. This media analysis project was well-received, with some students going as far as to analyze a specific social media platform through a critical and media literacy lens. As students learned through their study and then in practice, consumers of media negotiate meaning from these messages based on their individual perspectives. Many discussed their experiences with their chosen media from an emotional and individual perspective and chose to analyze these aspects of the piece more critically. As social media users are often shown content without necessarily searching for it, an understanding of media can help them to analyze this content more efficiently and can potentially limit harmful effects such as misinterpreting messages and consuming false information. This protective effect may be especially important for adolescents of color who may experience depression or anxiety due to the consumption of racist and discriminatory messages online (Tynes, 2018).

Digital Application of Critical and Social Literacy Practices

There are a multitude of practices outside of direct digital and social media use that can help strengthen student skills that can be applied in social media contexts. Specifically, teachers can strengthen critical literacy practices in the classroom that apply to media and social media literacies. Critical literacy, or the ability to identify purposes, motives, and potential biases of texts through multiple contextual lenses, helps bolster traditional reading comprehension and helps adolescents to form their views on the world at large (Vasquez, 2019). Burnett and Merchant provide a guiding framework for exploring digital texts through critical literacy

practices, encouraging students to ask the following questions: “Who is making what, and with whom and with what? What are the ethics of production? What is made? Who and what else is implicated? Whose interests are served? How do the different layers of making interface?” (2019). Through the media analysis projects, students looked critically at the messages of different texts and analyzed the digital affordances that may be used to enhance these messages. Encouraging this type of inquiry can help students strengthen their ability to deeply question texts from a variety of angles to enhance comprehension that will serve them in social media contexts. For younger students, practicing this skill early can help them to more fully comprehend texts received both digitally and traditionally.

One positive aspect of social media platforms is their ability to show multiple viewpoints through posts, comments, and shared content. Teaching critical literacy should include expanded access to multiple texts and structured inquiry of the messages implicitly and explicitly promoted by the text (Muhammed, 2018). This should include an analysis of where texts originate and how they are spread. As secondary teachers begin to explore multiple texts through digital spaces, teaching media and critical media literacy become not only important, but imperative to help students understand these messages to their full abilities. Teachers should provide texts explicitly promoting multiple viewpoints to practice critical literacy skills and perspective-taking rather than providing one text to explain a point. Providing opportunities for students to analyze multiple perspectives, particularly when these perspectives are conflicting, can help to increase comprehension by pushing students to think outside of their comfort zones and better integrate new ideas into their existing knowledge (Richter et al., 2020).

Finally, in terms of social literacy in the realm of social media, educators are positioned to encourage strategies that have been shown to help foster empathy, or the ability to visualize and feel others’ perspectives and respond appropriately, amongst students. Empathy develops through social interactions and discussions which can be facilitated in the classroom across content areas (Diazgranados, 2016). Writing activities, particularly when implemented with high frequency, have been shown to foster empathy (Çelimli and Higdon, 2019). When students are tasked to write about real-world experiences, they are made to delve into issues of empathy by having to visualize the perspectives of characters or key figures. In addition to fostering student empathy, it is also important for teachers to continue to develop their own empathetic skills and understand their shortcomings, as understanding the viewpoints of students has positive outcomes including increased student achievement (Muhammed, 2018).

Similarly, by providing students ample time to interact with each other, teachers are helping to develop the social literacies necessary to navigate relationships online. Small or whole group discussion can be specifically facilitated to talk about social media issues such as privacy and managing online friendships to help students troubleshoot areas of potential difficulty (Livingstone, 2014). Upon completion of both the media diary and the media analysis project, students were prompted to discuss these assignments in groups. Meaningful discussion of the major themes emerged and were later shared with the group at large. Many of the students discussed how they did not necessarily think about how other people could interpret different posts and shared content. At the end of the course, a few students even jokingly said that they would never again be able to mindlessly scroll through social media without thinking of these concepts.

When individuals consume texts, they integrate new information with existing knowledge and experiences (Richter et al., 2020). Similarly, consuming media and texts through digital media platforms such as social media contributes significantly to how adolescents view

themselves within the context of their relationship to others (Hobbs, 2006). As such, it stands that literacy, including digital, media, and critical literacy, is a key component to building one's overall self-concept and to help manage individual identities through reading information that surrounds us. As adolescents are engaged in the key developmental tasks of building their self-concepts and exploring their social and romantic identities, understanding the messages received through digital platforms such as social media is vital beyond the academic context. Educators can support the fluid nature of self-concept and identities for students through literacy practices that inspire students to challenge and reconceptualize their perceptions of themselves and others while also providing meaningful context to practice essential digital skills.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Monica, and Jingjing Jiang. "Teens, social media & technology 2018." Pew Research Center, vol. 31, 2018, pp. 1673-1689.
- Aufderheide, Patricia. *Media Literacy. A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*. Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program, 1992.
- Burnett, Cathy, and Guy Merchant. "Revisiting Critical Literacy in the digital age." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2019, pp. 263-266.
- Çelimli, Işıl, and Julia Higdon. "Putting Writing Into Perspective: Cultivating Empathy Through High-Intensity Writing Practice." *The Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 112, no. 6, 2019, pp. 710-720.
- Diazgranados, Silvia, Robert L. Selman, and Michelle Dionne. "Acts of Social Perspective Taking: A Functional Construct and the Validation of a Performance Measure for Early Adolescents." *Social Development*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2016, pp. 572-601.
- Drouin, Michelle, et al. "How Parents and Their Children Used Social Media and Technology at the Geginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Associations With Anxiety." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, vol. 23, no. 11, 2020, pp. 727-736.
- Hobbs, Renee. "Reconceptualizing Media Literacy for the Digital Age." *Martin, A. és Madigan, D.(szerk.): Digital Literacies for Learning. Facet, London, 2006*, pp. 99-109.
- King, Lauren, and Turner, Kristen Hawley. "Access, Readiness, and the Ethical Imperative of Advocacy." In *The Ethics of Digital Literacy: Developing Knowledge and Skills Across Grade Levels*, Vol. 2. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, pp. 13-19.
- Krutka, Daniel G., and Jeffrey P. Carpenter. "Why Social Media Must Have a Place in Schools." *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2016, pp. 6-10.
- Leu, Donald J., et al. "New Literacies: A Dual-Level Theory of the Changing Nature of Literacy, Instruction, and Assessment." *Theoretical Models and Processes of Literacy*. Routledge, 2018. Pp. 319-346.
- Livingstone, Sonia. "Developing Social Media Literacy: How Children Learn to Interpret Risky Opportunities on Social Network Sites." *Communications*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2014, pp. 283-303.
- Lo, Jane C., and Carol I. Adams. "Civic Literacy Through Literacy Instruction: Using Structured Academic Controversy in a Government Classroom." *Citizenship Teaching & Learning*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2018. pp. 83-104.
- Luke, Allan. "Regrounding Critical Literacy: Representation, Facts and Reality." *Theoretical Models and Processes of Literacy*. Routledge, 2018, pp. 349-361.
- McCarthy, Sarah J., and Elizabeth Birr Moje. "Identity Matters." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2002, pp. 228-238.

- Muhammad, Gholnecsar E. "A Plea for Identity and Criticality: Reframing Literacy Learning Standards Through a Four-Layered Equity Model." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2018, pp. 137-142.
- Nelson, Kathryn Scott. *Effects of Critical Literacy on Comprehension: Bridging Paradigms in Classroom Instruction and Educational Research*. Diss. The Ohio State University, 2015.
- Schreurs, Lara, and Laura Vandebosch. "Introducing the Social Media Literacy (SMILE) Model With the Case of the Positivity Bias on Social Media." *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2021, pp. 320-337.
- Tynes, Brendesha M., et al. "Online Racial Discrimination and Psychological Adjustment Among Adolescents." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2008, pp. 565-569.
- UNESCO Literacy. 2018, March 19. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>
- Vasquez, Vivian Maria, Hilary Janks, and Barbara Comber. "Critical Literacy as a Way of Being and Doing." *Language Arts*, vol. 96, no. 5, 2019, pp. 300-311.
- Zucker, Lauren, and Nicole Damico. "Online With Intention: Promoting Digital Health and Wellness in the Classroom." In *The Ethics of Digital Literacy: Developing Knowledge and Skills Across Grade Levels*, Vol. 2. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, pp. 101-111.

Professional Development

JOHN CHORAZY

Pequannock Township High School

It was on a Tuesday during the meeting after school
when someone asked what we were most proud of
since it all began—since March of 2020, a year
and several months at that point gone—what went well
in spite of everything that conspired against us, between us,
inside us, in the heart and mind and the body and the lungs.
How does one answer the dangerous rhetoric of hope?
All day I'd been wondering if the hosta I saw that morning
coming from the ground as new as a child from the womb
would be enough to feed the new deer that burst from
its mother's body ripe and clean and sad and brilliant
as the first deer on the first day of the new green earth.
Pride is empty. I am proud of being empty. Is it enough
for one thing to give its life up for another, to be empty?
Every moment, empty—a tender thread that ties and pulls
and carries us from life to death and hope and back again.

Writing Our Climate Future: A “Cli-Fi” Writing Process for Students in Anthropocene

SHARON FALKNER
Chatham High School

As my northwestern New Jersey school district enacts a second delayed opening this fall for rain (for rain!), it’s clear that climate change is no longer something that exists as an amorphous future danger somewhere else, but, instead, as a force that is here, now, and creating disruption to our daily lives...which is, of course, not to say that things won’t get worse. The reality is that things will get more disruptive at best - and more deadly at worst.

Our students today, unfortunately, are not unfamiliar with deadly threats and upended lives. According to the CDC, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought death to the front doors of more than 140,000 children across the United States (“The Hidden U.S. Covid-19 Pandemic: Orphaned Children”). And, as with climate change, in the best-case scenarios, it has merely disrupted the entirety of their lives for the last year and a half. That’s a pretty negative upside, to say the least.

As English teachers, many of us have opened our classrooms, online and in-person, to be places where students can wrestle and reckon with all that they’ve lost during the pandemic. As a result, we English teachers now have a model for how we might open our classrooms up for explorations of climate change as well, and do so for the same reasons we knew we had to give students the time and space to address Covid: it’s weighing on their minds and messing up their lives; they need to think through what these new realities and their potential for catastrophe mean for them as students, as children, and as citizens who will inherit larger and larger burdens caused by this global problem.

And, of course, as writers, our work should necessarily contend with life’s most pressing issues, problems, and emotions. As author Lauren Groff states, stories should ask difficult questions (Brady), and climate change is raising big and frightening questions for young people, who are largely wrestling with their fears without the support and guidance of their teachers (Kamenetz).

In my classroom, one of the ways that I invite students to contend with, think about, and write about climate change is through “cli-fi” narratives. “Cli-fi” (short for “climate fiction,” and a reimagining of “sci-fi”) is a genre that is exploding in popularity these days, in both young adult and adult fiction. On the YA side of the publishing house, students may have read *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith or *Dry* by Neal Shusterman, or *American War* by Omar El Akkad. In adult fiction, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* and N.K. Jesimin’s *The Fifth Season* have been published to critical acclaim and popular success. Also in adult fiction, there has been a whole spate of novels recently published that involve a protagonist wrestling with climate anxiety, as a kind of white noise amidst her more personal problems of work, love, friendship, and childrearing - novels like *The Life of the Mind* by Christine Smallwood, *Weather* by Jenny Offill, and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* by Sally Rooney, just to name a few. While these aren’t specifically cli-fi, they do address climate change within the diegesis of their plots in a way that might have felt futuristic just a short time ago.

So why shouldn’t our students also have the chance to imagine a future reality informed by climate knowledge? One might even argue that narrative writing that fails to address climate

change, at least tangentially, doesn't feel relevant and timely anymore, as increasingly, we're seeing the impacts of climate change in our own backyards (Renkl).

I usually begin the cli-fi unit by giving students time to scroll through [The New York Times "Year in Climate"](#) from the previous year. Just perusing the headlines helps students come to grips with the wide implications climate change has and does so without yet asking them to delve into details, which enables them to begin with the "big picture" before we drill down to specifics. After giving students time to scroll through headlines and skim articles on climate change, they post to a Padlet and explain the climate change impacts they learned about. They also cite the articles they read that taught them about these impacts. This Padlet offers students not only an overview of the potential impacts of climate change, but it also offers them a rich and succinct resource for potential ideas when they begin drafting their cli-fi stories.

Then, each day thereafter, we spend time reading infographics on climate change during the first part of class (Nediger). "Infographics" are an increasingly popular medium that news outlets are using to convey information succinctly and impactfully. Because most students need to develop background knowledge before writing cli-fi, infographics provide them that knowledge base. It's also a great opportunity to teach students how to read and interpret infographics, a genre they recognize, as it's fairly ubiquitous online, but haven't formally studied. And, as Penny Kittle says, "If you bring in really interesting information, kids want to write from it" (Marchetti).

The writer's notebook is a key training ground and playground for students to think about information and the ways in which information can fuel their creative energies. While we don't always need to tie our notebook writing to a current unit of study, Allison Marchetti advises us to think of the writer's notebook as a series of invitations for students to write, and one way to do that is to "[c]hoose invitations that correspond to the current unit of study with the thought that students might be able to generate work during this time that could feed their current writing" (Marchetti). Infographics work beautifully as exactly that kind of invitation to write, and writer's notebooks are also a great place for students to begin the process of analyzing data and building their media literacy skills as they simultaneously fire up their narrative writing skills.

In preparation for their cli-fi stories, students read infographics that either illustrate the nature and scope of climate change impacts or the solutions available to mitigate emissions, which is really key. With each infographic we read together, we write on and discuss the following questions, in order to help students develop their infographic literacy:

1. What do you notice about the structure/organization of this infographic? (Describe how it is set up.)
2. What does the data say? (Explain the key takeaways or big picture this infographic conveys.)
3. What does the data NOT say? (Explain what information is related to this content but is not accessible on the infographic.)
4. What do you wonder after reading this infographic? (What questions does this data prompt you to ask?)
5. What writing might emerge from this data? (What potential plots or conflicts for a short story might be inspired by this data?) (Marchetti and O'Dell)

For the first few infographics, we work through these questions together in a whole-class discussion, so I can guide students through the questions. The first infographic we read together is from the University of California and focuses on what accounts for "emissions," so students

have an understanding of the sources of the problem (“Where Do Greenhouse Gas Emissions Come from?”).

In order to read infographics effectively, we need to be attentive to the relationship between words and images, which usually means noticing variables within the images, like color, size, and shape. In this first infographic on emissions, students often note that the infographic is structured as a circle, in which various portions of the circle are marked off in different colors that coordinate to different sources of emissions, and the length of the circle each color takes up tells us how much each sector contributes to global emissions. They note that the big picture is that different sources of emissions have varying degrees of impact, with electricity and heating as the largest source, since that yellow bubble and its corresponding component to the circle are the largest. Reading this infographic helps students come to the understanding that reducing emissions will mean transitioning our energy systems away from fossil fuels, which is a key takeaway from the infographic. Students often comment that the infographic doesn’t tell us how these sectors create emissions—just that they do. One question they often have is the following: How does agriculture create emissions? (I’ll give them a few minutes to search for answers to the questions they have, and this question is always a fun one when students discover not only how much oil is involved in industrial farming, but also that cow burps contribute large amounts of methane to the atmosphere!)

The last question is designed to prompt students to think through potential story ideas and see the ways in which writers get inspiration from their reading. Some of the ideas students have had in the past for story ideas inspired by this infographic are the following:

- A third-generation farmer begins the process of shifting her family to biodynamic farming and the conflict that creates with her grandfather
- A high school student discovers a way to power his truck with hydrogen fuel cells tells his physics teacher about the invention, and the teacher tries to take the credit
- A coal miner protests the shift to more renewables that will be necessary to reduce emissions from electricity, fearing for his family’s livelihood

Once students have a handle on what accounts for emissions, they often want to know about countries that are responsible for these emissions, and [this infographic](#) from *The New York Times* is a useful way to address that question (Popovich and Plumer), as is [this one](#) (Carbon Brief), which displays emissions over time. Now that students have some familiarity with infographics and how they work, I ask them to spend some time reflecting on the infographics questions (above) in their writer’s notebooks, and then we share out and discuss their ideas as a class. At this

point, we still come together as a whole group to discuss their responses so that they can add ideas to their thinking during our discussion and deepen their understanding with teacher guidance, as this kind of reading is still new to most students.

Once students have a sense of what an infographic is, they are really able to appreciate the ways in which interactive infographics work to give readers a fuller understanding of a problem. [This infographic](#), also from *The New York Times* addresses what scenarios could reduce emissions enough to limit warming and is helpful in enabling students to understand why global cooperation is necessary to address climate change (Thompson and Ma). I like to give students time to play around and adjust the countries’ pledges to see what impacts different countries’ pledges have on the overall aim of eliminating emissions entirely. After only a few minutes, students come to the crux of this infographic’s big takeaway: if we want to meet the Paris Agreement’s emissions targets, every country needs to do quite a lot more. Students appreciate

and understand the ways in which the experiential nature of the infographic effectively leads them into this understanding and helps them see why and how infographics can be so powerful. After some time to reflect on the infographic questions in their writer's notebooks, we come back together again to discuss their ideas and add onto our responses.

Next, we look at [this infographic](#) on the impacts of one degree of warming to understand why something that seems so small actually really matters, in human terms ("A Degree of Concern"). For students who have more background knowledge about the Paris Agreement's pledge to limit warming to two degrees but aim for 1.5 degrees, [this infographic](#) on the difference in a half degree of warming can also be useful (Plumer and Popovich). Another useful infographic for visualizing climate change in human terms is [this one](#), from the Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture, and Food Security ("Big Facts on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security"). All of these infographics speak to the issue of climate change in human terms and detail the dangers for humans as a result of climate change. Understanding these human impacts helps students refine ideas for the cli-fi narrative that they will be writing, as they now see lots of potential settings and problems for their stories. By this point, students can reflect on the infographic questions in their writer's notebooks and debrief their ideas in small groups, helping one another to read and interpret the data.

Then we read [this NASA infographic](#) focused on sea level rise, since we're a coastal state, and this issue has real connections for students who spend time at the Jersey shore and love their beaches ("Infographic: Sea Level Rise – Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet"). This infographic is especially dense because it contains different segments. It's helpful for students to consider how the segments each work independently to convey information and also how they work together to convey the relationship between the causes of sea level rise, the impacts it could have, and the methodologies that scientists use to study the problem. Again, they can respond to the questions on their own and then come together in small groups to discuss their thinking.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we finish our infographic study by focusing on solutions. I want students to see that we have all of the technological innovations we need to mitigate emissions, and that the obstacles to change are more philosophical and political than technological. This understanding helps them to feel a sense of hope and a desire to be part of the solutions. It also helps them to understand how powerful literature and writing can be in impacting change. We read [this infographic](#) from *The Solutions Project* and look specifically at New Jersey (Our 100% Renewable Energy Vision—the Solutions Project). [These infographics](#) from *Vox* on the public's support for renewable energy help students see that these green energy technologies are widely embraced by consumers (Roberts). By now, we can jigsaw the reading and analysis of the infographics and have groups share their assigned infographic with the class and explain their thinking in terms of the infographic questions we've used throughout the unit.

Once students have an understanding of the scope and severity of the crisis, as well as an understanding of the very real solutions available to us today, they are ready to see some mentor texts in the cli-fi genre. I've found Omar El Akkad's "[Factory Air](#)" and Helen Philips' "[The Disaster Store](#)" to be engaging and accessible for ninth graders if we read and discuss them together. We read these stories in chunks, so that we can review, after each reading chunk, narrative writing skills like characterization, dialogue craft, and how the writer navigates shifts in time.

One of the key lessons I've found students benefit from is studying the ways in which the writer allows readers to infer information rather than serving it all up on a platter to the readers. We discuss the way that, for example, in "Factory Air," El Akkad doesn't tell us exactly who Dr.

Rahim is right away, but he gives us enough information that we can infer Dr. Rahim is probably a powerful figure in the company, likely the owner. When students begin drafting, they often dump tons of background information into their openings, and it's helpful to refer to these stories and remind them that good writers don't give away all of the details or readers would get bored and abandon the text. Instead, they give enough information that readers' brains engage in the narrative, making connections and figuring things out, which keeps readers hooked into the story. Good writers want their readers to have questions—questions that they want to know the answers to and that will propel them to continue reading to find out those answers.

At this point, the unit looks much like any other narrative writing unit. In order to enable students to focus on craft without getting bogged down in plot construction, I ask them to write only the opening to a cli-fi narrative. I find that this enables them to showcase their knowledge and ideas about climate change and its current and potential impacts as well as their narrative writing skills in a way that feels manageable and exciting without being overwhelming.

Before they begin drafting, students can look back at our class Padlet on climate impacts and flip through their responses in their writer's notebooks to get ideas for a setting and conflict. By this point, after reflecting on what writing might emerge from each infographic, students usually have a few potential ideas for their story's conflict and setting. Students' narratives often range from flooded cities to baking deserts or raging wildfires, and they often feature a protagonist who will play a role in fighting back against corrupt or simply indifferent governments, corporations, and communities. Cli-fi gives students the chance to imagine not only the potential for destruction but the potential for collaboration and commitment to a better future than the one currently on offer.

Given where things stand with regard to emissions, our best hope for a secure future, one that doesn't feel terrifying and inevitably destructive, rests in giving students room to imagine what is possible in the way of new ideas and new paradigms. It's that practice of imagining that builds in students the desire and know-how to, someday soon or further into the future, put their own imagined ideas into action as part of the last generation who can solve this problem.

Works Cited

- “A Degree of Concern: Why Global Temperatures Matter – Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet.” NASA, NASA, 19 June 2019, <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2878/a-degree-of-concern-why-global-temperatures-matter/>.
- Akkad, Omar El. “Factory Air.” *Guernica*, 8 Apr. 2019, www.guernicamag.com/factory-air/.
- “Big Facts on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security.” *CGIAR Big Facts*, <https://ccafs.cgiar.org/bigfacts/#theme=climate-impacts-people>.
- Brady, Amy. “Lauren Groff: Stories Should Ask Difficult Questions.” *Guernica*, 9 Apr. 2021, www.guernicamag.com/lauren-groff-stories-should-ask-difficult-questions/.
- Carbon Brief. “Animation: The Countries with the Largest Cumulative CO2 Emissions since 1750.” *Twitter*, 23 Apr. 2019, <https://twitter.com/CarbonBrief/status/1120715988532629506>.
- Kamenetz, Anya. “Most Teachers Don't Teach Climate Change; 4 in 5 Parents Wish They Did.” *NPR*, 22 Apr. 2019, www.npr.org/2019/04/22/714262267/most-teachers-dont-teach-climate-change-4-n-5-parents-wish-they-did.
- “Infographic: Sea Level Rise – Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet.” NASA, NASA, 6 Oct. 2017, https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/125/infographic-sea-level-rise/.

Marchetti, Allison. "Notebook Time: What It Is & Why We Do It." *Moving Writers*, 28 Sept. 2014, <https://movingwriters.org/2014/09/29/notebook-time-what-it-is-why-we-do-it/>.

Marchetti, Allison, and Rebekah O'Dell. *Writing with Mentors: How to Reach Every Writer in the Room Using Current, Engaging Mentor Texts*. Heinemann, 2015.

Nediger, Midori. "What Is an Infographic?" *Vennage*, 19 Nov. 2021, <https://venngage.com/blog/what-is-an-infographic/>.

Our 100% Renewable Energy Vision - The Solutions Project. <https://thesolutionsproject.org/why-clean-energy/>.

Phillips, Helen. "The Disaster Store." *Guernica*, 26 Mar. 2019, www.guernicamag.com/the-disaster-store/.

Plumer, Brad, and Nadja Popovich. "Why Half a Degree of Global Warming Is a Big Deal." *The New York Times*, 8 Oct. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-report-half-degree.html.

Plumer, Brad, and Nadja Popovich. "Who Has the Most Historical Responsibility for Climate Change?" *The New York Times*, 12 Nov. 2021, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/11/12/climate/cop26-emissions-compensation.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&ion=Climate+and+Environment.

Renkl, Margaret. "After a Summer without Butterflies, I Cling to What Endures." *The New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/09/13/opinion/nature-birds-migration.html.

Roberts, David. "New Global Survey Reveals That Everyone Loves Green Energy - Especially the Chinese." *Vox*, 21 Nov. 2017, www.vox.com/platform/amp/energy-and-environment/2017/11/20/16678350/global-support-clean-energy.

"The Hidden U.S. Covid-19 Pandemic: Orphaned Children – More than 140,000 U.S. Children Lost a Primary or Secondary Caregiver Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC*, 7 Oct. 2021, www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/p1007-covid-19-orphaned-children.html.

"The Year in Climate." *The New York Times*, 17 Dec. 2020, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/2020-climate-change.html.

Thompson, Stuart A., and Jessie Ma. "You Fix It: Can You Stay within the World's Carbon Budget?" *The New York Times*, 29 Aug. 2017, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/29/opinion/climate-change-carbon-budget.html.

"Where Do Greenhouse Gas Emissions Come from?" University of California, 5 Mar. 2019, www.universityofcalifornia.edu/longform/where-do-greenhouse-gas-emissions-come.

Identity Development to Support Disenfranchised Student Engagement

JESSICA HADID
Temple University

Working amid pandemic related constraints presents teachers with complex issues around student engagement. Problems like inadequate internet access, competing home responsibilities, and trauma may be more pronounced among disenfranchised students (Darmody et al., 2021). Alongside these issues are long-standing literacy gaps oriented along socioeconomic strata (Burris, et al., 2019), suggesting pandemic-related issues hurt disenfranchised student engagement disproportionately partly because they compound existing challenges. One approach to tackling engagement issues is to facilitate identity development through writing, aligning students' *in-school* and *out-of-school* notions of self. This article presents an approach that has met with success.

A student's *system of identities* (i.e., an individual's dynamic, situation-specific "chorus" of self-definitions and self-perceptions) plays an important role in shaping engagement. In part, systems of identities impact motivation through situational effects on cognition. Specifically, the elements and circumstances of a "place" (e.g., the physical and positional features of a classroom) affect what knowledge—within one's repertoire of prior knowledge—becomes accessible (Oyserman, 2015). Individuals experience their actions (e.g., engaging or withdrawing from a task) along a spectrum from congruent with their salient identity to incongruent (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). When minimal overlap exists between what stimuli resonate with a student's *in-* and *out-of-school* identity (i.e., incongruence), it is more difficult for the student to pursue academic goals because they view success as misaligned with their self-definition.

Disenfranchised students often experience less choice and reduced sense of control in classrooms, limiting their capacity to recognize and employ personal agency (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). Believing they do not possess resources to confront tasks, students may choose to avoid them. Even if they confront the task, lack of congruence between identities renders them more likely to perceive their efforts as neither relevant nor meaningful. In short, students' actions and behaviors (e.g., seeking help when confused) closely connect to how they define and perceive themselves in the situation. Whether a student sees themselves as a "skilled writer" or "deficient reader" while in English class, has long- and short-term performance implications. This suggests that identity development can—and perhaps should—be considered a form of classroom currency, particularly by teachers of disenfranchised students.

Curriculum designers and educators can address reduced engagement by supporting students' identity development, moving them toward the congruence associated with increased motivation. Classrooms serving students with low academic belonging are well suited to this endeavor because such students often struggle with writing fluency, inhibiting work output, and intake of text-based information. This is because composing written discourse *about* their reading content is a fundamental avenue for working through comprehension struggles. The phrase "write to discover" likely resonates with educators. It suggests that writing is more than a simple act of retelling. Writing can facilitate an exploratory "working through" of meanings in which the writer emerges with deeper conceptual understanding. What is unique about students' writing in

the quest to explore identities is that, although the content is conceptually complex, and therefore presents articulation challenges that promote growth, it is content about which the student holds expertise. Because students are the utmost authority on their own identity journey, they possess a sense of content area competence rarely felt by academically alienated individuals. This confers a sense of authority, while also building writing capacity, thereby supporting engagement.

A Possible Model

Fostering identity development through written discourse can take a variety of forms; this article presents one. First, I describe the setting for which I created and implemented the program, then the conceptual framework that informed its design, along with the program's basic structure. Next, I discuss my analytical approach to program assessment and my findings, and finish by examining why the strategies worked.

The identity development program described is currently in its second year of implementation. It is set within two (11th and 12th grade) opt-in honors English courses at a minority-dominant public high school in North Philadelphia serving a student body designated 100% "economically disadvantaged." The first year was delivered via an online platform due to pandemic constraints, while the current year has so far taken place in a face-to-face setting. The course's primary curriculum teaches students the tenets of argumentative writing, preparing them for the rigors of college level content. A typical class involves students reading an article pertinent to the unit's essential question, intermittently addressing a series of prompts, and drafting an essay in response to the reading. The identity development program was purposefully integrated within this existing curricular structure, and intentionally employs many of the same elements (e.g., semantic scales). While a standalone implementation is possible, it is less ideal. Integrating the program into students' existing curricula is more likely to bolster engagement by establishing task-relevance and continuity (Kaplan et al., 2014).

My aim was to facilitate identity development to increase congruence between students' perceived *in-* and *out-of-school* selves. I used the PRESS for Exploration model (Kaplan, et al., 2019) to inform design. The PRESS model stipulates four principles to support identity development: 1) promoting students' perceived self-relevance for tasks, 2) facilitating students' sense of safety in the setting, 3) triggering students' identity exploration, and 4) providing scaffolded strategies for that exploration. Previous interventions have used the model (see Granit-Dgani, et al., 2011; Sanai et al., 2016) to good effect, but this is its first application among majority-disenfranchised students, rendering it a working model.

The program consists of a series of biweekly journal activities (JAs) that are conceptually and topically connected to the in-place curriculum. Activities span the entire school year, becoming integral to students' writing practice. The JAs are reflective in nature; often introduce a theoretical lens through which students view their actions, behaviors, and self-perceptions; and encourage student writing that is conceptually complex, albeit stylistically informal. JAs often include group discussion before or after the student writing portion, eliciting organic conversation around students' ideas of who they are, who they hope to become—or avoid becoming—and how they might enact such desires. Although discussions are conceived of and launched by the instructor, they often transition to student-centered discourse that proceeds in unforeseen but productive directions.

To assess program effectiveness, I conducted a comparative case study that examined two students with notably different levels of engagement. I used a theoretical framework called the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI; Kaplan & Garner, 2017) to analyze the

degree and nature of students' development and its impact on classroom behaviors. The DSMRI applies a complex systems approach that accounts for a wide array of person-centered and contextual inputs (e.g., personal dispositions, constraints and affordances of the setting). This approach assumes that the identity system components (ontological and epistemic beliefs; purpose and goals; self-perceptions and self-definitions; and perceived action possibilities), which inform a student's motivation, are interdependent elements that give rise to a nonlinear development process. In this view, a single element cannot effectively be observed in isolation from its counterparts (Kaplan et al., 2019). Because the DSMRI accounts for this organismic quality of identity and motivational systems, I selected it to guide my coding and analysis of the primary data: students' written discourse in response to JA prompts and discussions occurring over one school year.

Case study findings suggest that the student exhibiting comprehensive alignment among his role identity components also demonstrated greater task engagement and persistence, paired with notable identity exploration. The student exhibiting fragmented identity components demonstrated inconsistent engagement and minimal exploration. These findings are in keeping with the tenets of Oyserman's identity-based motivation theory and uphold earlier findings (2015). Qualitative analysis also points to consistent levels of deeper and more authentic engagement during JA writing compared to general curriculum writing.

Two additional measures indicate program success. To examine program effectiveness more broadly—focusing on classwide engagement—I conducted regular classroom observations to record when and to what degree students were task-engaged. Detailed fieldnotes, taken two to three times weekly throughout each term, consistently show increased engagement during JA sessions for both the online and face-to-face implementation when compared to general curricula engagement. Further, students were asked to self-report their level of in-class motivation on a scale from 1-7 (1=low; 7=high) at the beginning and end of year one. Mean scores for juniors increased from 2.94 to 5.11 and for seniors from 3.4 to 4.93.

This information, paired with results from an exit survey at the close of year one, in which I solicited student feedback, suggests that the JA program both helped maintain engagement during online learning and increased students' sense that the learning was relevant to their lives. For example, one student noted that the JAs "allowed me to reflect on myself a bit, which I don't get to do very often in school." This increase in motivation is somewhat surprising. For context, among a sample of 482 students surveyed during the pandemic, most reported the online format to be less enjoyable, less interesting, and less solicitous of attention and effort (Garris & Fleck, 2020). Although the identity development program described here cannot lay sole claim to increasing motivation, it seems to have played a notable role.

Discussion of Results

Given the program's success, it is important to ask: *Why does it work?* Understanding this is crucial in successfully adapting and integrating identity development activities within other ELA curricula. While Oyserman's theory and the PRESS principles help explain this success, considering why the program works at a more concrete level is worth examining.

A key component of students' engagement is the value they place on tasks (Wigfield et al., 2017). Positioning the student as the primary subject of their own investigation, as is done across the JAs, enhances students' sense of task value while simultaneously supporting their sense of competence. Reinforcing this, many of the JAs help students conceive of and formulate ideas around their "hoped-for" selves. This integration of students' "possible selves" with their more

general self-concept helps them act on internally derived goals, aligning their in-the-moment decision-making with their long-term intentions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). When a JA asked students to review how they described their “hoped-for self” in an earlier activity, one student responded: “Now that I look at what I wrote I’m not really satisfied...it’s more of what I want than how I would get there.” The student then examines possible behaviors and actions to support their plan, specifying an intention to “learn as much as I can from school like finance, reading, writing, social science” as a means to achieve their “hoped-for self.” This exemplifies the process of students assigning value to their academic efforts in response to visualizing their futures.

Also affecting readiness to engage is students’ sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Master, et al., 2016). Centering the student’s own development within the academic task, as is done throughout the JAs, conveys a sense of importance to students about who they are, and who they want to become. Embedded within this message of importance is a confirmation to students that they *belong* in the learning community, that in fact it was built partly in response to their existence within it. This sense of being integral to the social and intellectual space of the classroom helps satisfy students’ basic need for relatedness, contributing to their motivation and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, the knowledge that teachers gain as they read students’ JA responses and listen to their discussions supports tailoring of content to student interests and needs and facilitates stronger teacher-to-student connections. Each supports students’ sense of belonging.

Helping students develop congruence among their *in-* and *out-of-school* identity systems is a practice that works. It builds student agency and has the potential to increase classroom engagement—a possible game-changer for disenfranchised students. While guiding students through a focused study of themselves is not among the CCSS in ELA, it fits nicely within them. Integrating identity work into ELA curricula fosters students’ sense of relevance, belonging, and competence, while also increasing their literacy capacity and engagement. These are key steps toward establishing students’ agency and general wellbeing.

Works Cited

- Burris, Pamela W., et al. “Examining the Relations of the Home Literacy Environments of Families of Low SES with Children’s Early Literacy Skills.” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, vol. 24, no. 2, April 2019, 154-73, DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2019.1602473.
- Darmody, Merike, et al. “Impacts of the COVID-19 Control Measures on Widening Educational Inequalities.” *YOUNG*, vol. 29, no. 4, Sept. 2021, pp. 366–80, DOI:10.1177/11033088211027412.
- Garris, Christopher P., and Bethany Fleck. “Student Evaluations of Transitioned-Online Courses During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, Oct. 2020, DOI:10.1037/stl0000229.
- Granit-Dgani, Dafna, Avi Kaplan, and Hanoch Flum. “Facilitating Identity Exploration in a Middle School Environmental Education Program.” *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 2011*, New Orleans, LA.
- Kaplan, Avi, and Joanna K. Garner. “A Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective on Identity and its Development: The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity.” *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 53, no. 11, Nov. 2017, pp. 2036-51, DOI: 10.1037/dev0000339.

- Kaplan, Avi, et al. "Design-Based Interventions for Promoting Students' Identity Exploration Within the School Curriculum." *Motivational Interventions*, edited by Stuart Karabenick & Timothy C. Urdan, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014, pp. 243-91.
- Kaplan, Avi, et al. "Identity and Motivation in a Changing World: A Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective." *Motivation in Education at a Time of Global Change*, edited by Eleftheria N. Gonida and Marina S. Lemos, Emerald Insight, 2019, pp. 101-127.
- Markus, Hazel, and Paula Nurius. "Possible Selves." *American Psychologist*, vol. 41, no. 9, Sept. 1986, pp. 954-69, DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954.
- Master, Allison, et al. "Motivation and Identity." *Handbook of Motivation at School*, edited by Kathryn R. Wentzel and David B. Miele, Routledge, 2016, pp. 300-319.
- Oyserman, Daphna. "Identity-based Motivation." *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Robert Scott and Stephan Kosslyn, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015, pp.1-11.
- Oyserman, Daphna, and Neil A. Lewis, Jr. "Seeing the Destination AND the Path: Using Identity-Based Motivation to Understand and Reduce Racial Disparities in Academic Achievement." *Social Issues and Policy Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 159-94, DOI: 10.1111/sipr.12030.
- Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being." *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2000, pp. 68-78. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68.
- Sinai, Mirit, Inbal Tossman, and Avi Kaplan. "Professional Identity Formation and Motivation of the School Counselors: A Case Study." *Biennial Meeting of the International Conference on Motivation, August 2016*, Thessaloniki, Greece.
- Walton, Gregory M., and Geoffrey L. Cohen. "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students." *Science*, vol. 331, no. 6023, March 2011, pp. 1447-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29783880>
- Wigfield, Allen, et al. "Achievement Values: Interactions, Interventions, and Future Directions." *Handbook of Competence and Motivation: Theory and Application (2nd ed.)*, edited by A.J. Eliot et al., Guilford Press, 2017, pp. 116-134.

An Argument for Simplicity: Have Learning Systems Become Too Complicated?

BILL MESCE, JR.

KEAN UNIVERSITY AND SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

As a college adjunct, adjunct pay being what it is, I typically try to stitch together a semester of classes at different institutions. Consequently, during the height of the first COVID surge, when campuses nationwide were closing down to carry on instruction, I found myself having to master three different learning platforms. When I received an offer to teach at a fourth school, for only the second time in my eleven years of teaching (I had a thirty-year corporate career prior), I walked away from a job because it required learning how to use a *fourth* online system.

Blackboard, Moodle, Webex, Cengage, Canvas—the variety of Learning Management Systems (LMS) I’ve dealt with on New Jersey campuses has left me not only supremely frustrated by the lack of standardization, particularly among public institutions, but wondering about the usefulness of these learning systems. I wondered if, in the quest to present a school as a technologically advanced campus, administrators had become enamored with the bells and whistles of these learning platforms instead of their practical applications. Was this a triumph of marketing over need? And that’s the key word: “need.”

Having experience in both the corporate and academic world, I’m not a fan of the idea that colleges should be run like businesses, but there is one thing about technology I did learn from my corporate experience: IT personnel were always enthused about what new office tech systems *could* do, but what kept them in

pragmatic check was management’s rejoinder, “What do we *need* it to do?”

In my eleven years of instruction, I’ve taught at a dozen different institutions, and while it’s a broad generalization, it’s my observation that most of these LMS acquisitions have been based on what these systems could do rather than what the end users—faculty and students—need them to do.

Use of an LMS presumes the school’s hardware, the commercial internet connecting institutions to the student, and students’ hardware will always work well and integrate smoothly; there will be no glitches, system crashes, weak signals, outages anywhere in that chain, or incompatibility problems.

Further presumption: Students universally have both internet access and access to quality home computers. When I’ve taught at urban two-year colleges where most of my students were low-income, this was a leap of faith more than a data-supported premise.

Another presumption is that because today’s student demographic spends so much time in a multimedia universe, they are universally technologically adept. My experience is that the hours they spend TikTok-ing, texting each other, Instagramming, streaming video on their phones, etc. have little correlation with their ability to navigate learning systems, and that for some—particularly older returning students—doing so can be particularly challenging. The difficulty is compounded in urban two-year schools where the

majority of my students deal with ESL hurdles as well as access issues.

The online instruction community, based on what I've researched, takes the stance that there are strategies to help faculty and students upgrade to the complexity of online learning systems. The idea that maybe these systems are overly complicated, that maybe not all of the bells and whistles are necessary, does not seem to enter the discussion, and maybe that's the problem: treating the increasing complexity of online systems as an inevitability rather than tech for the sake of tech. There's a fair bit of self-service in that stance in a market where e-learning tech company Racoon Gang was valued at \$250 billion in pre-COVID 2020. Blackboard, one of the most popular systems, doesn't publicly reveal pricing, but a 2019 article on Better Buys estimates that, at that time, Blackboard could cost a university somewhere in the neighborhood of \$160,000. Since we're talking tuition and even taxpayer dollars, perhaps we're due for a reappraisal or at least a consideration that perhaps lean and mean is a more cost-effective—and useful—technological path.

No one argues that remote learning during the current health crisis isn't a practical necessity but, again looking back on my corporate experience, weighing need against technological dazzle, I would argue that there are instances where simpler is better.

Community Building Through Classroom Routine: A Language Arts Class Opener

DEBORAH OVERSTREET
University of Maine at Farmington

In this time of pandemic teaching, we've all had to examine our classes and our practices to keep only what works. Our time and efforts are a finite resource; there isn't room for anything but the most effective choices. I teach a 6-credit reading, language arts, writing and literature methods class in my small regional public university's Elementary Education program. Building classroom community is both an early and ongoing goal in my class—and something I want my students to know how to do themselves since they're all likely to be teachers in their own classrooms within the year. As a professor who teaches students who are going to be teachers, not only do I teach content in my classes, but I also try to model pedagogy and classroom practices that my students can use with their own students. One example of this modeling is opening my three-hour class with the same routine regardless of that day's content or activities. I use this class routine to settle students, and I use the activities within the routine to build class both knowledge and community.

Community Through Routine

Even though Scully and Howell weren't writing about post-pandemic higher education, they were absolutely correct in saying that “in our era of rapid change and persistent uncertainty, traditions can provide stability and a sense of togetherness” (2008). Our routine, our class traditions help to create this. After the normal beginning of class (e.g., chatting with students, taking roll), we always begin with these three

activities: the Word of the Day, the Joke of the Day, and the Poem of the Day.

All three are assigned on the first day of class, and students sign up for their multiple due dates (different dates for each of the three assignments). I not only participate; I go first—both to model and to be brave. At the beginning of our second class meeting, I tell my joke, teach my word, and recite my poem. I'll be honest and say that it's a little nerve-racking. Even though I'm very comfortable speaking in front of a class, at this point in the semester, I barely know the students and telling a joke and reciting a poem make me feel strangely vulnerable—in a way that lecturing or leading a discussion never would. However, that's a good deal of the point.

Word of the Day

Many of my students are voracious readers with significantly large vocabularies; others are not. Since “knowing more words usually leads to better success in school” (Overturf, 2015), I want all students to have large vocabularies and to help their own students have the same. The Word of the Day presentation requires students to share a word with the class that they find interesting and useful. The “presentation” involves coming to the front of the classroom, writing or projecting the word on the whiteboard, demonstrating the pronunciation, explaining a definition, using the word in a sentence, and making a suggestion about how the class might remember the definition—all pretty standard. Class members keep track of these words.

Research tells us that a single exposure to a new word is unlikely to have much impact on learners, so to both model a practice that my students might use and to increase the likelihood that they might internalize the Words of the Day, there are two semester-long follow-ups. First, for each class meeting, students write a response to a reading (generally a book chapter or scholarly article). They are required to include a Word of the Day in each response. Using these words in their own writing helps to cement the words as part of their vocabulary. Since students may choose whichever word is most useful, they won't likely get to each of the words on our class list. However, every few weeks, I create a Kahoot¹ "quiz" using our words. Kahoots can be played by individuals or teams. We generally play in teams of two or three. Each Kahoot contains all of the Words of the Day from the beginning of the semester. It's quite stunning to see how using the Kahoot format turns a vocabulary quiz into a cutthroat yet good-natured competition for bragging rights.

Students frequently mention seeing our words out in the world, which I love. Even though students have only been exposed to 26 words through this activity, I hope to encourage their general interest in new and fascinating words and vocabulary study. I am convinced that being intrigued by words will have a very positive impact on their vocabulary and will also have a positive impact on their future teaching.

Joke of the Day

There's a surprising amount of research on the use of humor in the classroom, much of which addresses whether students enjoy it (they mostly do) and whether it affects learning (the jury's still out). My activity

falls somewhere in between. Students are assigned to tell a joke. It can be something that would appeal to a younger or adult audience (although it cannot be R rated or based on any kind of racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. material).

The students are directed to find or compose a joke. My directions include practicing the joke with other audiences, for two main reasons: first, so that students become more comfortable and fluent in their performance, and second, to ensure that the joke is actually funny. On the day of their joke, students come to the front of the class and perform without notes. The audience is always generous. If the performer is nervous or flubs their joke, everyone is gracious, understanding, and encouraging. Students often volunteer to tell extra jokes! They receive special accolades if their joke is grammar, writing, language, or literature related.

Some jokes are genuinely hilarious; others require more performance from the audience than the presenter. A pervasive feeling of "we're all in this together" is clear. Not only is my purpose to build relationships and classroom community, but also to help my students shed their inhibitions since teaching is, at least in part, performance.

Poem of the Day

Fully cementing my quasi-dinosaur status, I require students to memorize a short poem (or an excerpt of a poem) of their choice and recite it for the class. Generally, my students are too polite for open revolt, but they're clearly comfortable with a bit of grumbling about this assignment. Even though "much is written in educational literature pertaining to memorization...being outdated and basically evil" (Ediger, 1997),

¹ www.kahoot.com is a free website that allows anyone to make a quiz—really a game—that's played as a group online.

we talk briefly about the tradition of poetry memorization in school (for example, when I was in kindergarten, I had to memorize Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit From St. Nicholas," and in 7th grade I had to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and others). The assignment specifies that students should choose a poem or excerpt in the neighborhood of 50–75 words, although they always have the option to choose something larger. One semester, a particularly ambitious student enthralled the group by reciting the not-particularly-short Alfred Noyes' poem, "The Highwayman."

Each summer, I choose a poem to memorize to recite (I'm currently tackling Tennyson's "Ulysses"). My students will be teachers of young, or youngish, children, but I don't allow them to choose children's poetry for this assignment. I want them to explore poetry and find something personally meaningful because hopefully the poem will be with them indefinitely. When we learn something "by heart" (an intriguing and charming phrase far better than "by rote"), it becomes our own. My students are often quite nervous about this assignment—most have never had to recite anything. They often work together to choose poems and practice memorizing. During the recitation, if a student freezes or stumbles, they're supported and encouraged by the rest of the class. After each daily performance, there's a sincere round of applause. Despite this being a fairly minor assignment, students seem to view it as something of a rite of passage that bonds the group.²

I regularly invite other faculty members and administrators to recite poetry or tell jokes as part of our class routine. Students are always fascinated that people already

have poems memorized, since I never ask my colleagues to learn a poem to recite. Ours is a small university, so most of my students either have had or will have classes with these professors. This serves to expand our relationships outside of our class community.

Benefits

Each of these three brief assignments carries its own intrinsic benefits. Teaching a word helps expand everyone's vocabulary. The subsequent use of the words in both written responses and in team-based games deepens the learning. Telling a joke helps students become comfortable with the performative aspect of teaching. Reciting a poem puts students in touch with poetry in a way that most have not yet experienced. Students have significant ownership of the content of their performance in that, even though I assign a word, a joke, and a poem, they choose everything else. This allows a more personal connection to their material. These semester-long assignments keep new words, jokes, and poetry in the forefront of students' minds. I would argue, though, that the main benefit is cumulative. Each of these assignments get students to the front of the classroom, teaching and performing for their peers, and help them to form strong bonds and friendly relationships. When students are comfortable in class, they're more likely to "engage productively" (Boyd, et al., 2018).

As students participate as part of the audience (especially for the joke and the poem), they encourage each other and build community. Since "established social rituals make explicit core social values" (Boyd, et al., 2018) students can begin to see the group as a community. These practices and

² Poetry by Heart (<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/>) is a delightful British website that not only suggests poems for

memorization, but also runs a poetry recitation competition for children and teens. Many videos of students of all ages performing memorized poetry are available on the site.

ideas are hardly groundbreaking. However, they serve to significantly develop relationships and community. Additionally, each day, we start class on a positive, interactive, and entertaining note that affirms our group. I wholeheartedly advise everyone to create your own rituals and traditions based on your students, your class, and your discipline. They work.

Works Cited

Boyd, Maureen, Jarmark, Christopher, and Edmiston, Brian. "Building Bridges: Coauthoring a Class Handshake, Building a Classroom Community."

Pedagogies: An International Journal, vol. 13, no. 4, 2018, pp. 3310–352.

Ediger, Marlow. "Memorization of Poetry: Good or Bad?" *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1997, pp. 273–277.

Overturf, Brenda. *Vocabularians: Integrated Word Study in the Middle Grades*. Stenhouse, 2015.

Scully, Patricia and Jacqueline Howell. "Using Rituals and Traditions to Create Classroom Community for Children, Teachers, and Parents." *Early Childhood Education*, vol. 36, 2008, pp. 260–66.

English Language Arts (ELA) Strategies for Teaching Students How to Disagree Productively

ADAM V. PICCOLI

Pequannock Township High School

There is another pandemic spreading throughout America other than COVID-19. Much like COVID-19, it has put a strain on our national mental health crisis while pushing political polarization to dangerous levels. I am speaking about the insidious pandemic of unproductive disagreements. Frustration has plagued our democracy and interpersonal relationships as we struggle to have productive discussions over contentious issues. Our social/political disputes often end up deadlocked over which sources of information are the most credible, how to define words central to the debates, and even which facts are true and real.

While social media and internet search engines help connect us, these technologies have also boxed us into echo chambers. The algorithms insulate us and reverberate our existing opinions back while directing us away from hearing dissenting points of view. Unfortunately, this pandemic ferociously feeds on our innate cognitive biases (i.e., confirmation bias), emotional thinking, motivated reasoning, and toxic tribalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated our inability to reason with one another, compounding preexisting social-emotional issues and burdening us with an entirely new subset of politically divisive issues. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our unproductive disagreements are proving to be catastrophic to our social fabric and civility. Of course, disagreements are also a ubiquitous part of our students' daily interpersonal interactions. Students encounter disagreements when arguing for more points on an essay, quarreling with their parents about cleaning their room, or just negotiating their way through a crowded hallway. In considering more dire situations, New Jersey educators' professional development training on suicide prevention has repeatedly reminded educators that a severe argument with a parent often precedes adolescent suicides. Teaching practical strategies to argue constructively might be one way to help students build healthier relationships with their parents, teachers, and each other.

As educators, we are an essential element of the cure for the pandemic of unproductive disagreements. After teaching these strategies to my students for many years and sharing these ideas with colleagues, it is clear that both groups are hungry to learn these techniques. In a productive disagreement, students are encouraged to empathize, identify common ground, manage emotions, and use inquiry to persuade tactfully. The following are descriptions and examples of pragmatic strategies for productive disagreements in the ELA classroom. The strategies are based on research done by educators, psychologists, neuroscientists and have been field-tested in the language arts classroom.

Rogierian Rhetoric Style for Writing Tasks and Structured Class Discussions

Exposing students to a Rogierian Rhetoric style can help them develop a more collaborative approach to argumentative writing and class discussions. Dr. Paul Bator, a coordinator of the Writing Workshop of Wayne State University, wrote extensively on the benefits of using the Rogierian style rhetoric in formal writing. Rogierian style rhetoric was named after famous psychologist Carl Rogers and was later developed by Young, Becker, and Pike (Bator, 1980).

Bator describes the Rogerian rhetoric style: “by presenting a careful statement of the reader's position and delineating the areas of validity in the reader's position, the writer establishes a shared basis for further communication and interaction” (Bator, 1980). In the ELA classroom, when teachers require students to summarize the opposition's argument in the most robust version (i.e., steelman argument), students are therefore incentivized to see past their cognitive biases and clarify any misinterpretations they might have. John C. Bean writes that this approach is about “urging students away from egocentric vision” (1986). A de-emphasis on proving one's claim (i.e., trying to win the argument) can free students to focus on identifying common ground (i.e., common goals, interests, enemies, or values) with their opposition. Then, collaborative students can create a mutually beneficial solution to their dispute. Another benefit from using this method in ELA classes is that students often uncover that their disagreements are rooted in a semantic dispute or minor misunderstanding (i.e., having different definitions of words central to the debate). For example, in a Rogerian-style class debate on whether a character is a hero, students might ask each other, What is your definition of a *hero*?

If done genuinely, the Rogerian style requires the student to develop a sincere curiosity for their opposition's point of view and a healthy skepticism for their own. Teachers can remind students to be more skeptical by encouraging self-skepticism questions such as:

What life experiences might I have, or be lacking, making it more difficult for me to understand this person's point of view clearly? How might my perspective be incomplete?

Students can also convey self-skepticism when stating their rebuttal to minimize provoking a defensive reaction in their opposition. Here are some examples:

I might be wrong, but my understanding of the issues is X.

I probably have more to learn about this topic, but I thought X was true.

Anger Management

Anger can be a significant obstacle to having productive disagreements. When we perceive a threat, our amygdala (a part of the brain regulating emotions) becomes hijacked by neuro stress chemicals making rational thought less possible (Shapiro, 2020). To manage the “amygdala hijack,” Shapiro advises mindfulness practices for someone to gain control over the rational thinking parts of their brain (2020). In disagreements, our brains gain a clearer reasoning ability to process others’ perspectives if we manage our anger. In the context of a structured classroom debate, the teacher can guide students in simple mindfulness breathing techniques (i.e., taking deep breaths and thinking about your breathing) to help manage their anger in a disagreement.

Demonstrate Empathy to Decrease Defensiveness (Affect Labeling)

Writing about one’s negative emotions (i.e., personal journals) to improve physical and emotional well-being is a well-documented phenomenon (Baikie et al., 2005). Similarly, students expressing empathy for their opposition is a powerful tool to decrease defensiveness and maintain productive disagreements. A study at the University of California, Los Angeles, used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) to measure the negative emotional response seen in the amygdala when subjects demonstrated affect labeling (describing one’s emotions verbally) (Lieberman et al., 2007). This research suggests that verbalizing one’s emotions may help decrease activity in the parts of the brain associated with stress (Lieberman et al., 2007). Teaching students to describe their opposition’s emotions back to them (affect labeling) may help extinguish the opposition’s anger and or disgust during a disagreement.

Here is one example activity for using Rogerian rhetoric and focusing on affect labeling to demonstrate empathy for the opposition.

Directions: Should there be mandated school uniforms in our school? Explain why or why not. Write a brief response. Your teacher will help you exchange papers with someone who disagrees with you. Steelman your opposition's argument and describe their emotions back to them.

Student A: Forcing us to wear ugly uniforms is unfair, and other schools do not do that. I like dressing in a way that fits my personality, that shows who I am.

Student B (opposition to Student A): It seems like you really resent the idea of being forced to wear an ugly uniform and sacrifice your self-expression and individuality. You think it is unjust that our school would make us wear uniforms since other schools do not. Is that right?

Student B provides a strong version of Student A's argument and describes Student A's negative emotions. Therefore, Student A is likely to feel less angry and more likely to reciprocate the gesture to their opposition (Student B), and a productive disagreement can proceed.

The Problem Using Facts to Persuade on Emotionally Charged Issues

Experimental studies have suggested that confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, and motivated reasoning work together to minimize the degree to which facts can change our opinions on emotionally rooted beliefs (Taber et al., 2006). For example, one study from Stony Brook University attempted to measure to what extent facts could change someone's beliefs about affirmative action and gun control and found, "when reading pro and con arguments, participants (Ps) counter-argue the contrary arguments and uncritically accept supporting arguments, evidence of disconfirmation bias" (Taber, et al., 2006). Researchers from Emory University used fMRI brain scans and found that partisan political individuals exhibited motivated reasoning to ignore factual evidence threatening their chosen presidential candidate's credibility (Westen, et al., 1947). These studies imply that beliefs linked to our core values, identity, or social group will not easily change due to the introduction of contrary factual information. Most of us can probably relate to the frustration of failing to change someone's political views despite our presentation of a well-reasoned, fact-based argument.

Developing Inquiry Skills to Persuade

So how can we be persuasive without using facts? Research suggests that an effective way of changing people's minds is by asking carefully crafted open-ended questions to expose what researchers have first described as the "illusion of explanatory depth" (Rozenblit, 2002). I refer to these types of open-ended questions as "flashlight questions" because they flash light on what the opposition does not know. The desired effect is that the opposition struggles to answer the question accurately, and thus their confidence level for their belief decreases (Rozenblit, 2002). According to Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, and Sloman, their experiments using this inquiry technique found that people do not understand political issues as well as they think they do. These researchers asked subjects to rate their "level of understanding" on a proposed political policy on a seven-point scale, then to offer a detailed "mechanistic" explanation (i.e., How would that work?), and finally to re-rate themselves (Fernbach et al., 2013). Overall, the data analysis revealed that participants' confidence levels decreased significantly due to the questioning strategy (Fernbach et al., 2013). Below is one example of how ELA teachers can employ this inquiry strategy while teaching English literature.

Directions: Did character X make the right choice? Explain why or why not. Write an open-ended flashlight question to an anticipated opposing argument. Your teacher will help you exchange papers with someone that disagrees with you.

Student A (or teacher constructed): No, the character should have just run away instead of turning themselves into the police.

Student B: How would they find means of traveling, earn money, find food, or find shelter?

In this example, Student B has prompted Student A to reflect on why their argument may not work, persuading Student A to consider other points of view.

Caveats

The strategies presented here are a modest attempt at addressing an infinitely complex problem. Rogerian rhetoric, for example, is not very effective if your opposition refuses to reciprocate your courtesies or if their proposed arguments are emphatically wrong. Traditional argument and expository writing should remain a cornerstone of the ELA classroom. Also, ELA teachers should exercise caution whenever broaching divisive or inflammatory topics in school. The classroom teacher must always consider their students' emotional needs and respond accordingly. Although I have made the case to be careful using facts in emotional disagreements, facts are nevertheless the fundamental foundation for understanding a shared reality.

Opportunities in Chaos

Teaching Rogerian rhetoric and empathetic writing could provide our students with practical skills and shared values for discussing disagreements in and outside of the classroom. In this age of seemingly infinite information, we can search and find so-called “facts” to support virtually any claim we wish. Asking open-ended questions to guide one's opposition to discover relevant facts on their own is one persuasive technique for students to consider.

The chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic has made our need to discuss disagreements productively become increasingly more urgent. Now is a time when ELA teachers have unique opportunities to help students develop these practical skills. Educators need to continue to explore and research different strategies for productive disagreements. Professional development in this area might be one way we can all work together to help make the world a more peaceful and understanding place. I sincerely hope we can all agree on this.

Works Cited

- Baikie, Karen A., and Kay Wilhelm. “Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing.” *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2005, pp. 338–346. doi:10.1192/apt.11.5.338.
- Bator, Paul. “Aristotelian and Rogerian Rhetoric.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1980, pp. 427–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/356593>
- Bean, John C. “Summary Writing, Rogerian Listening, and Dialectic Thinking.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1986, pp. 343–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/358053>
- Fernbach, Philip M., et al. “Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding.” *Psychological Science*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2013, pp. 939–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23484453>

- Lieberman, Matthew D., et al. "Putting Feelings Into Words: Affect Labeling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli." *Psychological Science*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2007, pp. 421-8. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x
- Rozenblit, Leonid, and Frank Keil. "The Misunderstood Limits of Folk Science: An Illusion of Explanatory Depth." *Cognitive Science*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2002, pp. 521-562. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1207/s15516709cog2605_1
- Shapiro, Shauna. "Mindfulness Practices for Challenging Times: Emotion Regulation, Shifting Perspective, Compassion for Empathy Distress." *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*. Jun 2020, pp. 109-111. <http://doi.org/10.1089/act.2020.29277.ssh>
- Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2006, pp. 755-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3694247>
- Westen, Drew, Pavel S. Blagov, Keith Harenski, Clint Kilts, and Stephan Hamann. "Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election." *J Cogn Neurosci*, vol. 18, no. 11, 2006, pp. 1947-1958. <https://direct.mit.edu/jocn/article-abstract/18/11/1947/4251/>

COVID-19 Isolation: Daily Lessons

JOSEPH S. PIZZO

New Jersey Council of Teachers of English

A challenge

To enrich, engage, explain, excite

My students in isolation

Reflecting

On forcible removal

A March

From the classroom

The class

The building

The network

The ultimate reality show

Based on an unreal premise.

Shunted to the rear

Pushed away

A summer of speculation

Of supposition

Anticipated hopes for normalcy

Routine

Seasoned with excitement

With vision

A new school year filled

With holidays

With energy

With effervescence

Masked scholars

Masked emotions

Missed smiles
Eyes embracing wonder
Voices seeking comfort
Inspiration requesting oxygen
Reduction of isolation
A re-emergence of requirements
Routine
Rigor
Respect
Meetings at lockers
Expectations
Of stories
Of shared laughter
Of commonalities and connections
A temporal relief?
Will the holidays bring
Insidious tricks
Disguised with their
Baskets of treats?
Is gratitude and giving thanks
A pilgrimage
A gathering
A cruel hoax
A winter of discontent?
Can the merriment of December
The candles
The presents
The gatherings
The embraces
Become an uncharted adventure
A variant journey

Navigated
By an insidious Omicron?
Is the holiday spirit
Once filled with inspiration and hope
Now defined by an invasive
And devilish deception?
Are the fears of the Ides of March
To be revisited with rebellion?
Are the lessons being learned
Not confined simply to classrooms?
Are the pursuits of success being weakened
By the pervasiveness and fear
Of a returning unknown?
Are the lessons being learned
Teaching resilience?
Defining defiance?
Indicating a variant vulnerability?
Is the seemingly unlimited supply
Of ebullience and energy
Becoming a psychological pariah instead?
Has the coverage of curricula
Been masked
By frustration
And learned distance?
Does material matter more
Than matters of the heart?
Is the energy of learning
In teams
Diffused by distance
And directives?
Can the precautions

That inspire lessons
Be reasonably lessened?
Can the fears
Of infection and contamination
Be replaced by those
Of infectious joy and spontaneous laughter?
Can the threats and trepidations
Be replaced by sincerity
Simplicity
And congregation?
Will the challenges remain?
Does hope lie within the months ahead?
Can this COVID-19
Sea of separation
Be drained?
Can a bridge to return
Daily lessons
To routine
Rigor
And respect
Be reconstructed?
Can the once-familiar routine
Become expected
Rather than yearned for?
Can education
Finally be allowed
To educate
Rather than
Separate?
Must we settle
For a new normal?

We must create rather than cringe
We must inspire rather than interpret
We must connect before we construct
We must lessen our isolation
We must continue
To humanize
Our study
Of humanities

Do We Just Continue to Teach? An Examination of Teaching Through Tragedy by Teaching Tragedy

JANINE M. QUIMBY
Ridge High School

On the twentieth anniversary of the devastating September 11th attacks, a friend and former classmate from high school posted the following in her Instagram story:

I thought 20 years would be a long time, but I have been irritable and in a bad mood all day. I think some things don't leave you. Even 20 years later. Where I was. Announcements over the loudspeaker. Watching footage on an old TV. Crying. I feel like a lot of people remember what they were wearing, but I feel like I was in a fog and am missing whole chunks of time from those days after. My mom going in to help as an RN and being able to do nothing but hand out blankets and water. The ash on my car. Crying in the guidance office. The fact that my teachers were still teaching, and we were falling apart in front of them. Maybe they didn't know what to do either.

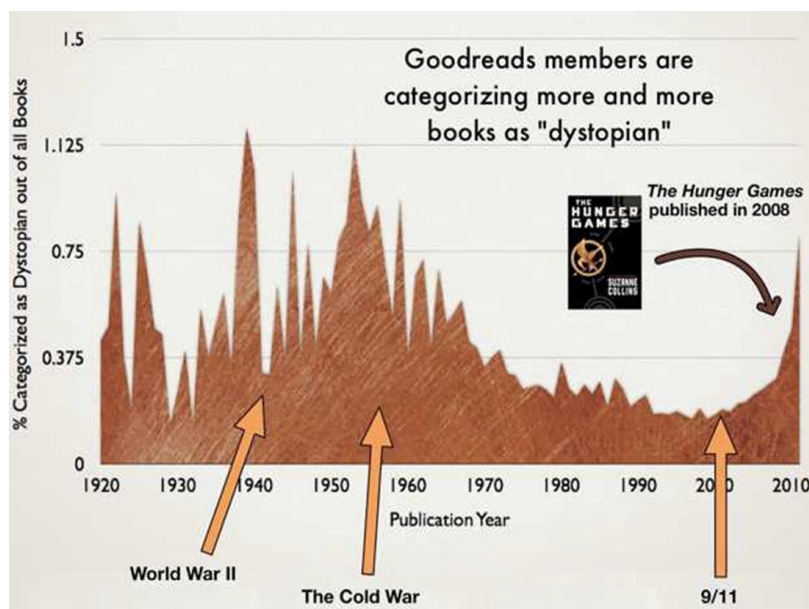
I was a high school junior when 9/11 happened, and much like my classmate's post, I remember details in fits and starts: What I was wearing. The announcements. The tears. The fear. The attempted resuming of normalcy in classes.

After reading her story post twice, I replied that I thought the pandemic elicited similar responses from teachers. We just teach. Tragedy after tragedy. I was a student twenty years ago when 9/11 happened, and I'm a teacher now. Two tragedies book-ending a path in education.

I began to wonder: *Is there a method to teaching during a tragedy?* Surely there's no playbook outlining what to do in the

event of a terrorist attack or worldwide pandemic. Hours and hours of undergraduate and graduate coursework in education prepared me to teach reading and writing, to explore controversy in texts, to navigate difficult topics in literature, but not for this. *Could the way out of this actually be through reading?*

During lockdown in March 2020, our school district required us to check in with students daily; I used a Google Form that required students to update me on their progress in the class and to keep me informed on how they were passing their days. Their responses surprised me. Many students found their way back to reading. Some admitted to scouring their parents' bookshelves amidst library closures. Others turned to TikTok (#BookTok) looking for the newest literary craze. Once we returned to face-to-face learning in September 2021,



students brought that book-loving energy with them. Our media specialist admitted that book checkouts were at an all-time high! *Could there be something here?* I was eager to find out.

In my AP English Language and Composition classes, students have two marking periods of independent reading assignments. They have control over what books they choose for their two marking-period-long projects. I imagined students wanted to retreat from the dystopian world we were currently inhabiting, horrified by what they saw and read daily. When I previewed their independent reading selections, I was astonished: *This Mortal Coil*, *The Road*, *Station Eleven*, *The Dreamers*.

I began looking for trends. In an infographic from the popular social media platform Goodreads titled, “The Dystopian Timeline to *The Hunger Games*,” the author showcases a timeline with book publication years ranging from 1920-2010, complete with markers for World War II, The Cold War, and 9/11. After each tragic event, the timeline shows a sharp rise in the publication of dystopian novels including *1984*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Delirium*, and *The Hunger Games*. Similar trends existed following the 2016 presidential election. In an article published in *The New York Times* titled, “George Orwell’s *1984* Is Suddenly a Best-Seller,” author Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura noted that *1984* “reached a 9,500 increase in sales” the week after the inauguration. Other classic dystopian texts such as *Brave New World* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* also began climbing Amazon’s best-seller list.

These startling trends led me here: *Do we teach during a tragedy by reading about tragedy? Are students able to make sense of what’s happening around them by reading about dystopian heroes/heroines who come out on the other side of tragedy?* Slowly, I

was beginning to realize that the answer is “yes.”

In class, students were identifying with Offred and Winston in ways they hadn’t in years past; they were, quite literally, becoming Katniss and Tris. Oceania and Gilead were beginning to feel like home; the characters’ plights were their plights. Whatever trend was unfolding around me, I needed to keep alive, as much as it pained me to feed tragedy with more tragedy. This is what they wanted. What they needed.

Reflecting on reading both *1984* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* for AP summer reading, one student noted that she “found [herself] relating to both Offred and Winston because they were both forced to confine themselves and limit social interaction with others, similar to the quarantine guidelines [they] had to follow. The way [the characters] described the feeling of being isolated and slowly losing touch with society was really relatable and [she] could kind of empathize with their feelings.” Another student commented that reading dystopian novels “in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic [...] greatly shifted [her] perspective of all the unprecedented tragedies that have occurred.” She admitted that “when the coronavirus first started to spread globally, [she] was faced with a reality that did not seem real [and] was unaccustomed to watching the death toll rise by the hundreds every day and seeing ordinary people attached to ventilators to hold on to their life.” However, she also noted that “by following the characters in their dilemma to grasp onto their identity as well as act under the regulations of their community where everything seems to go wrong, [made her] feel better about [her] current lifestyle.”

Students continued to nourish their desire for tragedy. While examining books during an in-class Book Pass Activity—where students have one minute to sample a text by examining its covers and, briefly, its

pages—multiple students asked for recommendations for books that would “make [them] cry.” Again, I was astonished. After nearly two years of lockdowns, alarming death tolls, and uncertainty, they wanted books that would purposefully move them to tears? I prodded a bit. I emailed one of the students outside of class because I couldn’t stop thinking about the request. *Why is it that, despite all of the surrounding anguish and hardship, she wanted to cry while reading for pleasure?* Her response was candid: “Honestly, I am not quite sure, [but] all I know is that I like the release that comes from crying at the end. It is a way for me to feel emotions without having to process my own, which in hindsight may seem unhealthy, but it is what works for me. I crave reading about heartbreak in order to relate my life to it, I read of family tragedies in order to prepare myself for life, I prepare myself by hardening my heart in self-defense. I am aware of the sheltered environment I live in; however, I have been forced to grow up too fast and books that make me sob, make me feel the age I am supposed to. So yes, the world is burning, our world is still shut-down, and war still rages on, but I desire to be sad about the simple things in life. In this simplicity, I am able to find peace, a way for me to escape the storm around me.”

That’s when it hit me: Students were achieving catharsis from reading about tragedy. In defining “tragedy” in the *Poetics*, Aristotle recognized that it’s “through pity and fear” that the “proper purgation [*catharsis*] of [...] emotions” occurs (Harmon and Holman 82). While Aristotle’s definition of “proper purgation” remains ambiguous, many have come to define catharsis as the emotional release that accompanies reading tragedy. Pity and fear, however, are difficult to manifest without a proper connection to the characters. In “Catharsis in Literature,” writer Ritu Singh

Bhal recognizes that a “significant part of what makes a work of literature cathartic [is that] the reader must have developed a strong identification with the characters. In other words, if readers aren’t able to ‘assume themselves’ in the characters—if they feel they don’t have any qualities or experiences in common—then they probably won’t.” While my student recognizes that she’s lived a sheltered life, she still yearns for that emotional release because, in those moments, she’s able to “assume herself” in those roles. Simply, she’s able to *feel*.

The last two years have certainly demanded much from students, for within that time they’ve been expected to enroll, unwillingly, in virtual classes, fear close encounters with their own friends and family, and grapple with mortality in proximal situations. Could I really blame them for wanting to feel their age? After all, wasn’t my own experience with 9/11 fraught with some of the same harsh realities?

Similarly, other students used their independent reading to reflect on their mindset during the pandemic. One young man admitted that reading *World War Z* during this school year enabled him to keep things in perspective: “I think I had that perspective [to look for and focus on the positive to continue to move forward] because I knew the situation was temporary, and that I anticipated this year to be back to ‘normal’ (which it almost is). In that way, the theme of *World War Z* mirrors my outlook during Covid—I maintained hope, and that is what kept me going even when I had no physical control over what was happening around me on a broader scale.” Considering the ways in which reading dystopian fiction has impacted her, another young woman thinks that students “gravitate towards dystopian novels in times of tragedy in order to mollify [their] own feelings about what [they’re] experiencing.” She elaborated further on dystopian world building:

“Falling into a fantasy world creates distance between us and our hardships, allowing us to cope better. Oftentimes, reading dystopian novels returns to us a sense of control and a feeling of security over our own lives. As the pandemic ripped our lives from us and isolated us, dystopian fiction allowed us to divorce ourselves from our difficult world and remarry a realm where we are in control.”

While the world around me bounced from one catastrophe to another, I found myself reflecting on other tragedies in my curriculum. Aside from the work we do on dystopian literature, we also read *Macbeth* in my AP class. *Would teaching an actual tragedy benefit students or make them retreat?* I was willing to gamble on the former, and that’s just what I did. Only, I was going to add an additional layer: Instead of just reading a tragedy, we’d be performing it as well. This choice was as much for me as it was for the students. We were, after all, entirely on Zoom during the first year I endeavored to try out this performance-based instruction. However, this year— after more than a year of virtual instruction—I was eager to have all of my students in front of me. During each class block, students selected roles and performed all five acts of the play. There were laughs (the Porter scene!) and much annoyance (Why couldn’t Macbeth simply let his destiny play out?). The plot of a tragedy is high stakes; so too is living during a worldwide pandemic. Another student summed up the situation aptly: “Every time we performed *Macbeth*, and it was hard to hear/understand someone through their mask, I’d think about how we are starring in our own tragedy right now.” In being able to “assume themselves” in characters and their circumstances, students were able to forge deeper connections with those texts. The pandemic is their tragedy, and they are the performers.

At the end of our *Macbeth* unit, I returned to one of my initial questions: *Why, during a tragedy, do we turn to tragedy?* In my mind, I thought students would seek out a different form of distraction (romances or humor, perhaps). Whereas many people directed their anxieties, agitations, and trepidations aloud on social media, students wanted to *feel* and *experience* their emotions in real life. Catharsis—pure and purgative—was the avenue. In her article titled “Catharsis in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies,” Fariha Khan recognizes that tragedy “arouses our feelings of pity and fear because we identify ourselves with the man’s sufferings and thus fear is awakened. The tragedy at first electrifies our emotions and then elevates our mind and broadens our vision. It liberates us from ourselves. Hence comes the refinement of our feelings and we find our mental frontiers opening up new horizons.” Through reading about tragedy and uncertainty, students experienced a catharsis they didn’t know they needed. When students feel as if they’re “starring in [their] own tragedies,” their fear has been awakened. While social media can offer an outlet, it rarely offers the emotional release so many young adults crave. Literature, on the other hand, can provide that release.

One student recognized the incongruity of reading more light-hearted books during a pandemic, noting that “[t]hose upbeat feelings sometimes felt awkward, seeing as how [he and] most of [his] friends were kept at home more than usual [...] dystopia and tragedy often seemed to fit the mood of the world around [him] better.” Another student realized that “when [students] see the world [...] idealized [...] through media and [then] see the world for what it really is as a result of true education, [they] realize that the world can be rotten sometimes.” Consequently, he found himself gravitating toward dystopian literature because “it isn’t so different from the world we live in.”

Drawing upon trends in Young Adult literature, another young woman enjoyed seeing how “dystopian fiction has grown, [and how] teenagers in a divided world can see themselves in [the] protagonists in extreme situations.” She also found it “reassuring knowing that adults writing novels are attempting to convey these feelings of confusion about morality and individual place in the world [and that they] want for teens and children to be seen.”

There it was: students were using tragedy as a reflective mirror, holding up the texts as reflections of their inner thoughts and turmoil. They didn’t want an escape; they wanted to feel the somberness. The news numbed them; literature awakened them. Achieving catharsis allowed them to process tragedy, not merely witness it.

When I engaged with my former classmate (who also happens to be a teacher) about her Instagram story, I told her that I thought the only way to teach through a tragedy was to, in fact, teach through a tragedy. She questioned whether teachers should be “normal” in order to be an anchor through a storm. My reply was that teachers are pillars of normalcy, and that’s why people cling to us. Think about what happened when our worlds were turned upside down in March 2020, how everything we knew was upended when kids weren’t in school full-time. Parents around the country were demanding the return to brick-and-mortar teaching. We are anchors, but we’re also the bricks.

We are the one constant, and we will continue to teach through this tragedy and the inevitable ones that follow. We are the anchors. And we will continue to teach. That’s all we know how to do.

Works Cited

- Bhal, Ritu Singh. “Catharsis in Literature.” *Professional Panorama: An International Journal of Management and Technology*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, <http://suffering.teacher.edutronic.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/144/2019/03/Catharsis-in-Literature.pdf>.
- De Freytas-Tamura, Kimiko. “George Orwell’s 1984 Is Suddenly a Best-Seller.” *The New York Times*, 25 Jan 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/books/1984-george-orwell-donald-trump.html>.
- Harmon, William and Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 9th ed., Prentice Hall, 2003.
- Khan, Fariha. “Catharsis in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature, and Translation Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, <http://www.ijelr.in/2.1.15/FARIHA%20KHAN%20128-130.pdf>.
- “The Dystopian Timeline to the Hunger Games.” *Goodreads*, 21 March 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/351-the-dystopian-timeline-to-the-hunger-games-infographic>

Supporting Growth Mindset in the Post-COVID Classroom: A Case for Skills-Tracking and Goal-Achievement Strategies

GARRETT T. VAN CUREN
Fair Lawn High School

As education moves towards a post-COVID world, the student mental health crisis and its impact on student motivation loom large. Recent studies have pointed to a link between decreases in student motivation and increases in feelings of depression and anxiety, coupled with a lack of support systems and face-to-face interaction brought on by sudden shifts to online learning (Tan, 2021; Usher et.al, 2021). In his introduction to *Tackling the Motivation Crisis*, Mike Anderson acknowledges that the on-going “motivation crisis” in the United States is nothing new, but the “COVID-19 pandemic seemed to make things worse...as schools across the globe shut down and learning moved online, even more students seemed to struggle with engagement” (Anderson, 2021). Additionally, according to a survey conducted in Spring 2020 of over 20,000 students in grades 5-12 across 166 public schools in nine states, only about a quarter of 11th and 12th graders said they could motivate themselves to do school work. That number was closer to about a third of 9th and 10th graders (YouthTruth Student Survey, 2020). The evidence suggests that student motivation has become a pervasive and insidious problem for teachers and students alike, and it is one that we all are likely dealing with in one form or another.

In an effort to tackle the aforementioned issue in my classroom this school year, I have begun to incorporate goal-setting and skills tracking, inspired by some of the tenets of Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), which provides an important lens through which to understand goal-setting and self-management. Specifically, I was driven by the idea of “mastery-based goal-setting,” which de-emphasizes short-term successes, and instead, advocates for a deeper, more enduring motivational pattern and a better chance of increased self-efficacy, or a belief that a student can succeed that is intrinsically motivated, even in the face of challenges and setbacks along the way, and even in areas the student may be new to or unfamiliar with (Shim et. al, 2013). The question for me, however, had been about how to meaningfully get students to see the value in perseverance and consistency in the face of adversity; specifically, how can I get students to invest in the belief that one can grow over time to meet one’s goals? To meet this challenge, I decided to place a greater emphasis on “soft skills”³ in my classroom, which I supported with the use of weekly student trackers and student-teacher conferencing.

To better assess my students’ comfort level with skills-tracking and goal-setting, however, I decided that on the first day of school this year, I would have my 9th and 10th grade English students create vision boards for one or more goals they wanted to set for themselves, school-related or otherwise. The responses were personal but tended to center on grades. Most of the goals were a variation of “get good grades” or “do better in math this year,” while others contained a bit more nuance and introspection. One centered around the recognition that the student needed to make better choices and stay away from negative influences in order to achieve better grades. As I went through each of my students’ vision boards, I left a comment:

³SEL has become a more positive reframing for critical life, or “soft,” skills like peer interaction, self-monitoring, goal-setting, etc. (Jones, Doolittle; 2017).

“How are you going to get there?” I asked them the same question in class the next day. I was met with blank stares. A few chimed in, “I’ll work hard” or “I’ll practice every day.” Though such intentions were important elements to the end-game, I asked them what that would look like, day in and day out, and how they would adapt to meet new challenges that might get in the way. This is where they struggled.

Students spent so much of the past year and a half like pencil-pushers, feverishly working behind their keyboards accepting work, submitting work, getting a grade—rinse, repeat. However, they hadn’t had to spend much time self-assessing or determining how they could adjust their practices to meet their ends. Additionally, most of the “end goals” weren’t established by the students; they were imposed upon them. The lack of emphasis on mastery-based goal-setting in favor of short-term goal-setting, like submitting Google assignments and ticking boxes for points, coupled with an absence of in-person support to help scaffold goal achievement, has made both figuring out what skills to develop as part of a student goal and how to define or achieve that goal, daunting for students. Then, I had an epiphany in one of the most unlikely places: SAT and ACT prep. In addition to teaching high school English, I’ve been an SAT and ACT prep instructor for 10 years, and I’ve found some of the skills I’ve used as an instructor uniquely transferable to my own classroom. These practices focus on goal-setting and weekly skills tracking with numerous opportunities for conferencing.

Influencing my pedagogy was Joe Feldman’s *Grading for Equity*, which explains that students need opportunities in the classroom to see how their actions and decisions impact specific outcomes in their learning. This is a process, he argues, that should be formalized and integrated into the structure of one’s classroom in order to help students monitor their thinking and decision-making, consider how they plan to achieve goals, collaborate effectively with their peers, and think about their own thinking, i.e., what works for me and what doesn’t (Feldman, 2019). Student trackers help to support this process of tracking goal achievement, while monitoring “soft” or SEL skills. Trackers are simply reflection data sheets students can use to record their performance over time, while helping them to reflect on how they learn, where they are progressing, and where they need to work on their skills. As Feldman emphasizes, student trackers help students develop soft skills while keeping a formal “log of their performance over time to identify trends, strengths and areas of struggle and for improvement” (Feldman, 2019). Trackers also “redefine the grade from being arbitrary and owned by the teacher to being within a student’s power to affect through self-assessment, planning, actions, and reflections” (Feldman, 2019).

Before setting up trackers, definitive goals need to be established with students. I begin preliminary sessions with new test prep students by asking a simple question: “What is your goal?” I’m bullish about this question because I want numbers so students hold themselves accountable and give themselves something concrete to aim for. It is also important that goals are realistic and targeted for the student. To guarantee this is the case, students need to be involved in setting those goals. Some students may say their goal is an “A,” having only received a parade of Fs, Ds, and the occasional C in years past. It’s unlikely an “A” is happening so suddenly. Getting students to set rigorous but achievable goals is something I spend time on in my own classroom, as well as with my test prep students. You’ve been having trouble breaking 1000 on your SAT practice tests? Let’s set our initial goal of scoring just 50 points over 1000 for at least the next two or three weeks (some flexibility to account for set-backs and bad days is crucial to keep the goal alive). You passed by the skin of your teeth in your English class last year? Then maybe a C- is the way to go quarter one. Once we do that, we can move on to a C+, maybe even

which I model on the individual and small-group reading conferences explored in Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle's *180 Days*. While my conferences are not centered around a piece of literature like the reading conferences explored in Gallagher and Kittle's work, I employ some of the same methodology as a framework: conferences are brief and frequent (generally once a week) and focus on the student's skills tracker. I ask questions that include, "What are you trying to get done this week?" and "How is _____ coming along?" While meetings are less formal and mostly conversational, they afford me an opportunity to check in with my students and help hold them accountable. If their goal is shifting or they find that they're having trouble achieving the next step, I suggest updates or other resources.

Ultimately, my aim throughout this process has been to instill a growth mindset in my students. As Carol Dweck reminds us in her pivotal work on growth vs. fixed mindsets, "students fare better if they believe that their intellectual abilities can be developed...than if they believe that their intellectual abilities are immutable" as students who have a growth mindset tend to see difficult tasks as a way to increase their abilities (Dweck et. al, 2015). Integrating skills tracking into the secondary classroom as a formative way to support student self-management is critical to fostering student growth and supporting social-emotional learning now more than ever. If the goal is to help students become more competent, more adept, and more intrinsically motivated students who can better monitor their own learning, then providing them with a concrete way to track their own learning skills helps demystify the self-growth process. These exercises leave both teacher and student with a trail to help track progress, scaffold learning, and digest reflections, so as to better understand what students have, what they need, and where they're going.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Mike. "A Motivation Crisis." *Tackling the Motivation Crisis: How to Activate Student Learning without Behavior Charts, Pizza Parties, or Other Hard-to-Quit Incentive Systems*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA, 2021.
- Dweck, Carol S., et al. "Growth Mindset Tempers the Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievement." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 113, no. 31, 2016, pp. 8664–8668., <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.160820711>.
- Feldman, Joe. "Practices That Build 'Soft Skills' Without Including Them in the Grade." *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2019, pp. 205–225.
- Gallagher, Kelly, and Penny Kittle. "Map a Year of Reading." *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2018, pp. 45–79.
- Jones, Stephanie M., and Emily J. Doolittle. "Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue." *The Future of Children*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3–11., <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0000>.
- Shim, Sungok Serena, et al. "Goal Structures: The Role of Teachers' Achievement Goals and Theories of Intelligence." *The Journal of Experimental Education*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2013, pp. 84–104., <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2011.635168>.
- "Students Weigh In: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19." *YouthTruth*, 2020, <https://youthtruthsurvey.org/student-weigh-in/>.

Tan, Consilz. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Motivation, Community of Inquiry and Learning Performance." *Asian Education and Development Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2020, pp. 308–321., <https://doi.org/10.1108/aeds-05-2020-0084>.

Usher, Ellen L., et al. "Psychology Students' Motivation and Learning in Response to the Shift to Remote Instruction during COVID-19." *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000256>.

Kairos: A Time for Educational Transformation

LISA M. WENNERTH
Windsor High School

With an appropriate amount of certitude it seems fair to call this period of time a kairos moment, a term used by the Greeks to describe the most opportune conditions (referring especially to time) for action. And, it seems that many of those who are directly involved in education recognize this call for transformation. As a high school English Language Arts teacher for fifteen years, I have been involved in small and large movements from technology to book banning to teachers rights, but there is nothing that touches the level of this global pandemic. Although there is no solace found in the loss of human life, this moment unveiled some truths about my teaching practices that I may never have questioned and felt necessary to change had the pandemic not forced me to look squarely at what wasn't working.

Similar to most transformations, mine was messy and imperfect.

First, I fell into a fairly deep depression, blamed the school system, and decided to resign from the profession altogether. While desperately looking for a new career, I fell into a deeper, heavier emotional space than I had initially found myself. In this darkness, the acknowledgement that teaching was not only a career, but a significant part of my identity, was illuminated.

One particularly hot summer day, at a bazaar with my daughter, I happened to come eyelevel with Noam Chomsky's *Miseducation*. On a whim, I bought it. Within pages, I felt my teaching spirit ignite for the first time in years. Almost immediately, I recognized that education wasn't the problem, my approach over time had become misaligned with my values about teaching and learning. This realization set me on a path of questioning, researching, writing, connecting, and embracing teaching in a completely new way.

Through Chomsky, I was reminded of the spirit that brought me to education in the first place. My high school English teacher, Ms. Kenney, was a student of George Hillocks at the University of Chicago in the early nineties. She brought his style of critical inquiry and thematic teaching into our classroom, transforming learning into something interesting, relevant, and meaningful. This was the experience I wanted to replicate for my students. I was also reminded of the fire with which critical pedagogues like Paulo Friere, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, and Henry Giroux approached education in an unapologetic and purposeful way. All of them had been formative in my graduate studies. Their work served as the framework for my master's thesis on fostering critical discussions in the classroom.

Somewhere along the way this fire dampened under stacks of papers, data dialogues, new technologies, committee participation, rubrics, grades, accountability, standardized lessons, and the myriad other diversions from the task of teaching. Despite my youthful desire to eschew the rigidity of standardized and dispassionate teaching that automatized student learning, it was less exhausting (and safer) to comply with the "rank and file banking model" (Friere) inherited by all public school teachers. Essentially, over time, I failed to be the critical and meaningful teacher my students deserved.

Now, quite urgently, I understood that in order to remain in education I had to begin again: to engage in the process of deeply challenging all I believed to be true or right about education. It was this reflection that pushed me to dive, head first, into the project of "unlearning" everything I knew wasn't working.

This process of “unlearning” yesterday's world led me to reflect on four critical questions:

- What and who is education for?
- In what environments and systems do we learn best?
- Why are we inclined to seek knowledge to begin with?
- How can I be of service to my students?

These questions brought me to a new place of fierce devotion to education and to the young people who enter my classroom as vulnerable and complex humans.

In my experience, there were two essential steps necessary for transformation. First, I found critical questioning to be the most crucial in unlearning past systems. The second step was finding the confidence for risk taking. The imperative need for risk taking led me to a more engaged study of educational research and theory.

This process was mentally stimulating and professionally liberating. The internet provides expansive accessibility to all types of scholarly research and new ideas. And now, I had the right questions to begin my search. I utilized Google scholar to curate relevant studies and articles. In less than a mere second, I found a multitude of answers within academic fields like cognitive science, child and adolescent development, and neuroscience. Many findings mirrored the indirect lessons of my English teacher and direct teaching of critical pedagogues, all of whom understood that learning is complex, messy, and contextual. These studies generated more questions and my curiosity, my passion to know more, was further ignited. As the research continued to propel me into new ideas about learning and teaching, I sought out educational blogs, books, and podcasts to learn from those who were implementing these methods in their classrooms.

By grounding myself in research and new teaching methodologies, I was able to take risks that I ordinarily would not attempt. To be clear, the teaching philosophies and practices that I settled on are not necessarily more correct than others, they simply manifested from deep personal reflection and their epistemologies were resonant with my beliefs. Notably, however, we must recognize that there are practices under the essentialist and behaviorist models of education that are harmful to students. These should be closely examined and deliberately removed if one is to foster an authentic culture of learning in their classrooms.

The process of critiquing and questioning my teaching transported me back to the theory of critical pedagogy, which I used to ground the application of inquiry-based learning (IBL). Both critical pedagogy and IBL are similar to the critical questioning and student relevant approaches of the Hilloksian methodology my English teacher had utilized when I was her student. While connecting Hillocks’s thematic, student centered approach to critical pedagogy and IBL, Ms. Kenney’s rationale for using essential questions to make content relatable and important became clear.

For example, when we studied Transcendentalism in US Literature she led with questions like:

- “What is civility?”
- “What is obedience?”
- “Are there justifications for breaking rules?”
- “Who makes the rules?”

These questions evolved into discussions, paired with texts that supported multiple perspectives and relevant stories. Her seemingly simple approach to teaching brought life and real curiosity back to learning. I now understood that she had carefully crafted her questions, deliberately created a discussion focused class, and intentionally chose texts to challenge our thinking and

biases. More so, I realized her approach was grounded in substantive research which gave me the confidence to fully implement this approach with my own students.

With a clear direction and well established research, I began planning and organizing my courses. As the summer came to a close and classes began, I had a firm grasp on the teacher I would grow to be.

What remains is a reflection on the manifestation of that work.

In my classroom, critical pedagogy primarily appears through my interaction with students. This takes its roots from critical theory which seeks to examine and understand how systems of oppression originated, how they are adapted over time, and how they are currently perpetuated and embodied by all members of any given society. Critical pedagogy looks closely at how teaching, learning, and institutions of education fail to challenge systems of oppression and oftentimes work to perpetuate and strengthen prevailing oppressive systems through what is taught, what is not taught; what is valued, what is not valued; who is worthy, who is not worthy.

When engaging with students I remind myself that I am working with and supporting complex human beings, all of whom are worthy of attention, love, and quality education. It's a reflexive practice that appears simple, but can be quite challenging as it requires a constant vigilance of ingrained biases and default settings that are typically tested by our most emotionally struggling students. This is where the practices of culturally responsive teaching and social emotional learning can be extremely helpful as they provide guidance for how to be proactive and supportive as opposed to reactive and punitive.

Inquiry Based Learning as a foundational practice allows me to step directly into centering everyday experiences around increasing student relationships, engagement, and curiosity. This methodology relies on questions to direct student learning as opposed to prescribed information given to students as facts to memorize. IBL can trace its roots from early constructivist and progressive learning theorists like John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget, all of whom were likely a part of most teacher preparation curricula. Today, IBL has taken a variety of directions and there are myriad ways to utilize this approach; however, I believe it's important to keep in mind that in the foreground of IBL, teachers are as much the learner as the students, and the focus is around curiosity and questioning.

In utilizing IBL with fidelity teachers have to be willing to engage in the process of inquiry with students, not for students, from the development of the topic and questions, to the research, to the project completion. Which means we need to let go of authoritarian control and trust that students are capable of directing their learning. A great place to begin is to ask students to consider what they value, what they would like to understand more, and what problems they would like to solve. A handbook from The Human Institute for Education called *How to Be a Solutionary* provides an excellent starting place for any educator on how to dive into this process so that it has real meaning for learners.

When introducing IBL I often share Rainer Maria Rilke's explanation in *Letters to a Young Poet* of "living the questions." While reflecting on Rilke's thoughts, we discuss that we may not solve a problem in a few weeks or that they may not find a direct and simple answer to their questions. What is important is that we learn to ask meaningful questions about what it means to be human and develop tools that give us hope for solving problems that are currently in the way of human progress and life satisfaction.

Under the general practice of IBL, researched methods like Universal Design Learning, Project Based Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Social and Emotional Learning (depending on the goals of the course) provide me with guidance to reach all students throughout

the semester or year. Because these teaching practices rely heavily on one-to-one and small group interactions, I am able to connect with what students are experiencing at any given moment. I notice when my language or method of communication becomes ineffective by the way a student will respond verbally and nonverbally. This recognition comes from the deliberate embodying of the practices that fit under the tenets of critical pedagogy.

The intention placed on relationships, allows me to notice when the general curriculum or the daily lesson I have chosen is not working for all of my students, or a group of students, or an individual student. When this happens, I do not shut down or blame my students for being lazy, ungrateful, or media-addicted troglodytes. Instead, I reflect, ask questions, and reassess my intentions and the goals for the unit or lesson: I ask, "What can I change to meet my students' needs at this moment?" I then ask them the same question so that we can collaborate in the process of learning. All of this works best when our course learning outcomes have been created, discussed, and frequently revisited together as a group.

These outcomes are a cross-pollination between our district's priority state standards for ELA and my teaching philosophy (developing priority standards was a two year process completed by the English departments in my district, without this hard work from our team, creating learning outcomes would have been a much more laborious project). Each learning outcome is tied directly to a concrete learning goal. For example, in eleventh grade a student's "argumentative writing" learning outcome reads: "Students write effective reason-based arguments to communicate ideas and beliefs, teach others, and make an impact on their local and global communities." I created ten of these outcomes for each course and focused on five per semester. The fewer explicit learning outcomes the better. Too many outcomes overwhelm students thus depreciating their investment in learning.

Without these outcomes at the forefront of what we do, it is near impossible to ask students to advocate for their own learning, as it is unclear to them what they are supposed to know or what they want to know. When I explain specific course outcomes early on, I ask students to articulate them using their own language and words and to revisit them consistently. This provides them the guidance to own and advocate for their learning.

I have found that a transparent foundational approach to a course empowers a student with two key critical tasks: the ability to ask, "How does this connect to my learning?" and "Is there a different way that I can demonstrate my understanding and process of engagement with this outcome other than what is provided?" For example, this year I had a group of students decide that they wanted to create an episodic podcast as opposed to a written analysis in order to meet a "close reading" learning outcome on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Their product met all the goals of the outcome and demonstrated a complex and rich understanding of Woolf's message about the inequitable barriers female artists endure.

In order for students to become advocates for their learning and assessment choices, I provide question asking techniques, encourage them to think metacognitively about their learning, and celebrate their vulnerability and risk-taking moments by amplifying the voices of those who choose a path of their own. I also utilize their work as models to inspire others. Some students, especially those that are high achieving and compliant, struggle to work outside the rigid structures they have operated under most of their lives. We have to teach, model, and constantly demonstrate how advocating for learning can be accomplished until they "unlearn" their own schooling habits.

At the end of the day, all of this will fall apart if I am the sole assessor of my students' learning. I cannot at once claim that my classroom is democratically student centered and be the

only one assessing their learning. If I cannot empower my students to measure their learning and believe that they are capable of such a feat, then I have essentially misled them. I have led them kindly, but under false pretenses, to an ultimate judgment that I hypocritically make for them, one that remains with them on a report for others to see and judge: celebrate or scrutinize.

For this reason, and many others, I am a firm believer in the gradeless or ungrading movement. There is ample and compelling evidence to support the argument that gradeless systems in education increase intrinsic motivation, eliminate cheating, and foster collaborative and safe places to learn (Kohn).

Critiques of grade systems date back to the early twentieth century, when grades and scores were beginning to take form. In a study published in 1913, I.E. Finklestein wrote:

When we consider the practically universal use in all education institutions of a system of marks, whether numbers or letters, to indicate scholastic attainment of the...students...and when we remember how very great stress is laid by teachers and pupils alike upon these marks as real measures or indicators of attainment, we can but be astonished by the blind faith...in the reliability of the marking system. (1)

This sort of criticism continues to evolve as educators and researchers report on the drastically inequitable and punitive consequences of point scales and grading systems, which inaccurately and arbitrarily measure the intelligence and learning development of any given student.

If teachers are able to create a more equitable and human-centered system of assessing students' achievements and growth, the pathways are already set. If this is not feasible, teachers can try methods like delaying the grade, allowing students to assess themselves, giving fewer (if any) high stakes assessments, celebrating collaboration without competition, removing hard due dates, providing revision opportunities, giving feedback without a grade attached, and simply placing less emphasis on the final product and more on the process. The choice to change the way we see assessment allows us to reach more fully into the uncharted territory of what education can be, by "unlearning" a system that is fundamentally flawed.

This is a *kairos* moment in education. As we attempt to reorient our lives, the institution of education has been presented with the opportune time for action. It is therefore imperative that we look forward and avoid rushing back to what wasn't working. If teachers and students begin to question and critique the failed systems that we see, perhaps we will be able to transform the educational experience to one that students desire to have and teachers feel inspired to facilitate.

Works Cited

Chomsky, Noam and Donald P. Macedo.

Chomsky on Miseducation. Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Finklestein, Isidor Edward and University of

Michigan. *The Marking System in*

Theory and Practice. Internet Archive,

Warwick and York, 1913.

Freire, Paulo.. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
Continuum, 2000.

“Institute for Humane Education | Educating
the Solutionary Generation.” *Institute for Humane Education*, humaneeducation.org.

Kohn, Alfie. “The Case against Grades.”

Alfie Kohn,

<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades>.

Rainer Maria Rilke and Reginald Snell.

Letters to a Young Poet. Mineola, Dover
Publications, 2019.

Call for Culturally Inclusive Texts in the English Classroom: Books as Mirrors and Windows

ANNIE YON
Fair Lawn High School

I remember sitting in my English class during my junior year of high school and reading *The Great Gatsby*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. I was entranced by Daisy Buchanan's voice "full of money" and her decadent lifestyle. I admired Jane Eyre's independence and pursuit of true love based on equality and respect. I cheered as Hester Prynne unraveled her luxuriant hair and ripped off the scarlet "A" from her chest. An avid reader, I devoured these stories, stepping into the fictional worlds and rooting for the characters to overcome their obstacles. However, as much as I enjoyed these stories, it wasn't until my English teacher played the films in class and asked us to create book covers for the literature we read that I saw how all the characters we read about were caucasian and looked nothing like me. I wondered, *do these stories even apply to me?* I began to feel a sense of otherness as I could never see myself in the heroic protagonists or fully relate to them on a deeper level.

Since the last time I stepped out of an English classroom as a high school student to the first time I walked into my own classroom as a teacher, to the present, I can't help but notice the problem that still exists. Seeing my shelves lined with American classics such as *The Crucible*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the anthology of short stories by Faulkner, Hemingway, and Crane, I am transported back to the past and reminded of the times I have felt invisible, my voice and story nonexistent. While "the canon" is safe and holds merit, they do not fully represent the stories of *all* my ethnic and culturally diverse students with their own "American" experiences. There has been ongoing controversy around "the canon," the lack of literary representation of marginalized communities, and the call to reevaluate the suitability of the texts that educators prescribe in the classroom; yet, significant progress has not been made. As educators, we must make it a goal to provide students with opportunities to read culturally inclusive books that serve as mirrors and windows or else we run the risk of perpetuating the issue of poor representation in the literature that we teach for more years to come.

The Issue: Lack of Cultural Representation in Books

The literary canon has long been revered in public education as representing the "depth and breadth of our national common experience," but the problem is that what was once defined as 'common'—middle class, white, cisgender people—is no longer the reality in our country" (Anderson 1). We live in a culturally pluralistic society; yet "millions of Americans—both White people and people of color—still don't come close to fully understanding people outside their mostly homogeneous immediate communities" (Guo and Vulchi 6), which can perpetuate anxieties, hostilities, prejudices and racist behaviors toward unfamiliar groups. The lack of cultural representation in books and "typecasting particular groups as dependent and helpless victims who make limited contributions of significance" exacerbate the existing issue. "Literature should represent ethnically diverse individuals and groups in all strata of human accomplishment" (Gay 33), because the danger of a single story, in which the characters are

homogeneous or typecasted, is that it “creates stereotypes that are untrue and incomplete... and it robs people of dignity” (Adichie).

In addition, the lack of culturally responsive texts contributes to marginalized children feeling a diminished sense of self-worth and invisible—their identities erased and voices irrelevant. For this reason, children need opportunities to read literature that serves as mirrors—helping readers reflect what they observe about themselves through relatable characters—and windows—offering views of new worlds, different realities and experiences. Bishop posits, “Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, as well as their connections to all other humans” (1). When books serve as mirrors and windows, they become more than just works of fiction; they become powerful tools in nurturing students’ self-worth and empathy, deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, and enhancing cultural awareness.

Student Reflections: Books Serve as Mirrors and Windows

With support and initiative in my district for more diverse books within our curriculum and independent reading choices, my juniors were encouraged to choose books from a culturally inclusive book list that my colleagues and I collaborated on. After three weeks of independent reading, my students were asked to create a 4-5 minutes long podcast in which they recorded their thorough review on their multicultural book of choice. Using the Anchor application by Spotify, students combined audio, text, and visuals to respond to the following questions:

1. What is the main premise or plot of the book?
2. How did reading this make you feel?
3. Which characters did you like/dislike and why?
4. Does this book connect to your own life in any way?
5. What did this book make you think deeply about?

In addition to creating a podcast, my students also participated in one-on-one reading conferences and group reading circles. Overall, the discussions encouraged students to reflect, make personal connections, and share any insights, questions, or takeaway ideas they had about their reading with an audience.

My student, Dania (all student first names are used with permission), read David Yoon’s *Frankly in Love*, a story about Frank Li, a high school senior stuck as a “Limbo,” his term for Korean-American kids who find themselves caught between their parents’ traditional expectations and their own Southern California upbringing. His parents pressure him to “date Korean,” which proves complicated when Frank falls for Brit Means, his smart, beautiful, and Caucasian classmate. In her podcast, Dania explained that the novel focuses on Frank’s “struggles with cultural identity, racism, family, and love” and is a “great coming-of-age story that demonstrates a teenager’s perpetual conflict of embracing his Korean culture and parental demands or assimilating to feel more ‘American.’” Giving her highest recommendation of the book, Dania shared that it teaches readers to “embrace both sides of one’s culture” as shown when Frank states, “I have one name. It’s Frank. I used to think I had two names; Frank, my ‘English’ name, and Sung-Mi, my ‘Korean’ name. But now, I’m calling Frank my first name and Sung-Mi my middle name” (Yoon 401). In our one-on-one reading conference, Dania concluded, “I really enjoyed *Frankly in Love*. As a Korean-American first-generation teenager myself,

Frank's struggle with his cultural identity, racism, and family pressure is something that resonated with me. This story gave me a sense of familiarity and relatability that I've never felt from a book." In this case, *Frankly in Love* served as a mirror for Dania to celebrate her own Asian-American identity.

My student, Sarah, read Tahera Mafi's *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, a contemporary novel about first love and the devastating impact of prejudice. The story follows Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl who is bullied for wearing a hijab, in post 9/11 America. In Sarah's podcast, she explained how she both sympathizes and empathizes with Shirin, especially in the scene when Mr. Jordan tells Travis and Shirin to look at each other and asks Travis what he thinks of Shirin as part of the lesson. Travis hesitates, "When I look at [Shirin] I don't see anything... I mean she doesn't, like—I just don't see her. It's like she doesn't exist for me. When I look at her I see nothing" (Mafi 81). Sarah claimed that even though Shirin is from California and is American, her entire existence is eradicated and students like Travis choose not to see her; Shirin is invisible when she is not a target of racist bullying. In addition, Sarah empathized:

Shirin is perceived to be a strong, confident young woman but on the inside she is breaking down from these hurtful comments. In a way, I can relate to her because deep down, people's opinions matter to me too. How could students bully her relentlessly without even getting to know her on a deeper level?

In our one-on-one reading conference, Sarah reflected, "Reading this book gave me perspective on Shirin's experiences and made me realize that you never know what people are going through." Ultimately, *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* served as a window for Sarah to learn about a Muslim-American's experiences post 9/11 as she was able to "step into [Shirin's] shoes" and look at the issues from the character's point of view. Even though Sarah did not share identical experiences as those of Shirin, she related to the teenager's desire to fit in high school and through this empathy and cultural knowledge, she "broke down stereotypes" she initially had.

Reading Conferences: Students Make Text-to-Self Connections

In our reading conferences, my students further shared their insightful reflections and takeaways from their book, which revealed that they made connections between the literature and their own lives. For instance, Ben read Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, a story about Xiomara, who discovers slam poetry as a way to understand her Dominican mother's strict Catholic expectations and her own relationship to the world. Ben enthused over how much he loved the protagonist's voice and empathized with the character:

Xiomara is an empowering character,
and I love how she finds her own
identity at the end of the book rather
than follow her parents' dreams for her.
My parents also have high expectations
for me and while I do appreciate their
involvement, I want to follow my own

path and spread my wings. Correspondingly, Ashley read Angie Thomas' *Concrete Rose*, a story about 17-year old Maverick who accepts the opportunity to make money through illegal acts to support his family. First, Ashley commented on how much she enjoyed the author's writing style and that the book was accessible because "Thomas captured the slang that teens use in their everyday lives." Then she reflected:

This story raises awareness on how racism goes deeper than being called a racial slur. *Concrete Rose* teaches you lessons on the disparity of wealth in America and how it directly affects people of color, especially Black teens. It addresses the importance of compassion, which I think we, as a society, need to be taught again.

Lastly, Ella also shared her insights on Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed's *Yes No Maybe So*, which follows Maya, who faces the harsh reality of growing up Muslim in a predominately white city, and Jamie, who struggles with anti-Semitism within his own home. Ella discussed, "Both characters are discriminated against just for being themselves, but they tackle the problems head-on and fight to fix the problems in their communities as activists." Overall, to Ben, Ashley, and Ella, their books served as both mirrors and windows; my students identified with the teenage characters who face parental and societal pressures and struggle to fit in, and they experienced the life of another person and their culture, which deepened their empathy and broke down any biases they may have initially had.

Small Group Discussion: Our Takeaway

My students' reflections in their podcasts and reading conferences revealed the advantages of allowing students to read books that serve as mirrors and windows. On the last day of our independent reading unit, I asked my students if they found these culturally inclusive books valuable.

Benjamin claimed:

Culture and race are part of one's identity. Reading my book helped me to see through Xiomara's eyes and walk in her shoes. If you find yourself only reading about people like you, you can't see what it's like for someone not in your situation. In order to form good relationships in our progressively globalized society, you need to step out of the group that you're only comfortable with.

Ashley agreed:

These books representing diverse cultures are important in American classrooms. Not everyone's experience in America is the same as the characters who are White in the books we read in the classroom. It's important to address stereotypes and learn to deconstruct them.

Dania concluded, "The characters we read about are predominantly Caucasian. It sets the standards of what is normal. White is normal. It diminishes another's culture and American experience." As educators, we are responsible for ensuring that *all students* feel visible and a sense of belonging in the classroom. By giving students opportunities in class to read culturally inclusive books, both teachers and students can honor their own and others' cultures, gain authentic perspectives, deconstruct stereotypes and any prejudices, and learn from each other to

promote equitable and culturally responsive experiences.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story," *TED*. 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
- Anderson, Jill. "Hooked on Classics." *Harvard Ed. Magazine*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/1/08/ hooked-classics>.
- Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *The Ohio State University*, 1990.
- Gay, Geneva. "The Importance of Multicultural Education." *Educational Leadership*, 2003 61. 30-35.
- Guo, Winona, and Priya Vulchi. *Tell Me Who You Are: A Road Map for Cultivating Racial Literacy*. TarcherPerigee, 2019.
- Howard, Gary R. "As Diversity Grows, So Must We." *Annual Editions: Multicultural Education*, edited by Nancy Gallavan, McGraw-Hill Education, 2014.
- Mafi, Tahereh. *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.
- Yoon, David. *Frankly in Love*. Penguin Books, 2021.