[Full Issue] Reviving Engagement in ELA

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REVIVING ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
Editors’ Note

Lauren Zucker, PhD
Montclair State University, Drew University, and Northern Highlands Regional High School

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 2023 issue of New Jersey English Journal (NJEJ). This year’s theme is “Reviving Engagement in ELA.” In our call for submissions, we asked authors to consider the following questions:

- 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?

This issue features work in three genres: poetry, reflective pieces, and research articles. This issue addresses a variety of topics, including student-centered writing instruction, early childhood vocabulary acquisition, and fan fiction. We are proud to share work from writers across the country, including pieces by early-career teachers and graduate students.

Erin Riley-Lepo and Kayla Teeling demonstrate how a student-centered focus on the process of writing can benefit both student and teacher in the secondary ELA classroom. In their approach to writing instruction, students assess their own work and that of their peers on a formative basis, thereby promoting student engagement and student-regulated learning.

In “Reviving 90s Sitcoms to Teach Black Linguistic Justice Concepts,” Teaira McMurtry describes how ELA teachers can use episodes from sitcoms like Amen and Family Matters to engage students in critical discussions about standardized English, code-meshing, and linguistic stereotypes.

Susan J. Chambrè urges early childhood educators to incorporate print exposure into daily classroom routines to support vocabulary development and provides practical suggestions for doing so.

Adam V. Piccoli shares how he engages his high school ELA students through research-based goal-setting strategies that support their subjective well-being.
In “Revamped Socratic Seminars: Great Ideas,” Morgan Taylor uses open-ended questions and online tools to encourage student ownership and active participation to foster a learning community and deepen subject understanding.

Yekaterina McKenney calls on English language and literature teachers to implement more creative writing -- fiction and fanfiction -- into their high-school instruction in order to increase student engagement and invigorate their teaching.

Poetic contributions, such as those from Brian Mooney, Darius J. Phelps, and Nicole Warchol, make powerful statements about violence and teaching.

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 June 2023, prior to publishing the current issue, our 250 works have 21,111 unique downloads from 165 different countries representing 1,429 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 junior Noreen Hosny of Princeton University, winner of our 2020 cover design contest. We are grateful to have had our last four 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. Thank you to our reviewers for their attentive work to our submissions. We also extend a special thank you to past NJEJ editor, Dana Maloney, for serving as Poetry Editor for this issue. Finally, we thank Valerie Mattessich, our NJCTE President, for her leadership and support.

2023 Muriel R. Becker Award Winner A.S. King speaks at the NJCTE Spring Conference.
New Jersey English Journal
2023 Issue, Volume 12

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.

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 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 1980s 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.
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.

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 hosted a workshop on classroom management with Berit Gordon (author of The Joyful Teacher) and several other workshops: “Flipping the Script: How to Bring Joy to Not-So-Joyful Things,” “LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the ELA Classroom,” and “ELA Strategies for Productive Disagreements.” We also held our Spring Conference on “Joyful Teaching: Reviving Engagement in ELA,” tied to this year’s journal theme.

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.

Members of the NJCTE executive board at the 2023 NJCTE Spring Conference “Joyful Teaching,” held at The College of New Jersey.
New Jersey English Journal, a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, invites you to share submissions on the theme, “Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA.” This year, we ask writers to consider ways to promote and sustain joy for both students and teachers in the ELA classroom. For students, what approaches can help them find joy in learning language and literature? For teachers, how can we cultivate joyful learning communities in our classrooms, departments, and schools?

We seek research and practitioner-oriented pieces (~1000–2000+ words), personal essays (~700–1000+ words), and original poetry related to this issue’s theme and geared towards an audience of P–12 and postsecondary English Language Arts educators. 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 encouraged to access past issues at <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/> to review successful submissions.

We invite you to respond to the theme “Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA” by considering such questions as:

- How can we help our students find joy in learning language and literature? How can we cultivate (or reclaim) it for ourselves as teachers?
- What are the new or tried-and-true ways we can cultivate joyful teaching and learning in our classrooms? What makes teaching and learning ELA joyful in the 21st century?
- What are the unexpected moments or sources of joy in our ELA classrooms? How can we build on them for ourselves and our students?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators collaborate to create joyful learning communities? How can we push back against practices or policies that disrupt joyful teaching and learning?

Submissions will be accepted until Wednesday, December 27, 2023, 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>.
Vocabulary and Print Exposure for Emergent Readers
SUSAN J. CHAMBRÉ
Kean University

Early childhood (EC) educators, referred to in New Jersey as preschool through grade three (P–3), play a critical role supporting young children’s oral language (OL) and vocabulary development (Gilkerson et al., 2017). Literacy rich classrooms initiate students into the world of language as a robust vocabulary diet during EC grades is key to subsequent literacy outcomes. Research indicates that struggles with OL and vocabulary acquisition are associated with failure to complete high school (Hernandez, 2011), and preschool language abilities account for nearly 70% of variance in ninth grade reading comprehension scores (Lyster et al., 2021). Early OL is especially critical since Farren and colleagues (2017) reveal that EC teachers spend 70% of the instructional day talking to children, interleaved between play and formal instruction. Clearly EC educators directly impact their student’s literacy abilities well after they leave the preschool classroom.

In my role preparing future classroom teachers, I guide future educators as they unpack multiple linguistic competencies such as vocabulary and emergent literacy skills. We discuss how integrating OL and vocabulary in impactful ways directly benefits students, resulting in higher scores on emerging literacy skill assessments (Barnes et al., 2017; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hadley et al., 2021, 2022; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). Supporting vocabulary acquisition is also critical as preschoolers face increased vocabulary demands from Common Core and NextGen Standards when entering grade school.

Learning standards and best-practices are just part of the literacy puzzle. To truly support OL and vocabulary development EC educators must also understand the role of home, school, and community language interactions (NAEYC, 2005; NAEYC, 2019). I teach my preservice teachers about how language interactions during the early years occur via social interactions with parents, caregivers, educators, and siblings. These interactions initiate young children into cultural language conventions (Vygotsky, 1978), the foundation of later text comprehension. However, not all talk children hear during the foundational years translates to later reading achievement. Children must learn to navigate between two talk types: casual talk and academic talk.

The first talk type, casual talk (CT), is caregiver-child language interactions that are concrete and focused on everyday living (Halliday, 1978). Academic talk (AT) is formal language of learning used in classrooms including technical talk of abstract concepts (Schleppegrell, 2004). For example, students engage in CT when saying, “they’re making food.” Conversely, children are initiated into the world of AT when they hear a teacher ask, “Who can predict what will happen after the concrete is mixed?” and state, more specifically, words like predict and concrete. Our role as educators is to guide children as they navigate between school and home talk, viewing home language as a compliment to AT in a term called “hybridity” (Hadley et al., 2022; van Kleeck, 2015).

While EC educators understand the importance of oral language growth, in my conversations with preservice teachers, I find little knowledge of language input via entry points referred to as talk types or registers (van Kleeck, 2015). These assumptions are supported by research about how little is known about the OL and AT training for EC educators and how best AT practices are implemented (Barnes et al., 2020). It is
important for EC educators and those preparing them to better understand integration and navigation between talk types, particularly since children enter school with varying exposure to OL.

Those who prepare future EC educators must also recognize that research on OL and AT does not always translate to classroom practice. Studies reveal a paucity of real-time minutes devoted to language instruction, thus limiting the number of academic words children hear daily (Barnes & Dickinson, 2017; Early et al., 2010; Winton & Bussey, 2005). Bratsch-Hines et al. (2019) note that students explicitly engage with OL and vocabulary activities only 9% of their school day. The National Center for Early Learning and Development indicates that students spend roughly 4% of their day completing OL activities (Winton & Bussey, 2005). These and other studies raise questions about how OL and vocabulary are enacted in classrooms and should prompt EC educators to reflect on their OL and vocabulary classroom interactions. Are we providing enough robust AT for our students? Do we audit our instruction to integrate high-leveraged language practices?

To answer these questions, we need to examine how AT and OL are enacted in EC classrooms. Studies reveal that most AT in EC settings occurs during shared-book reading, a literacy practice which promotes OL and vocabulary development (Hadley et al., 2022). However, multiple barriers are associated with actualization of OL and AT instruction, areas students clearly need adult support with. For example, limited daily shared-book reading is reported during the school day (Barnes & Dickinson, 2017; Cabell et al., 2013; Chien et al., 2010; Early et al., 2010). One might argue that AT occurs during other learning domains such as science or social studies. Yet work by Dickinson et al. (2014) reveals literacy-focused activities outside of shared-book reading result in less AT and little vocabulary gains are noted during small group instruction (Barnes et al., 2016; Cabell et al., 2013). Additionally, EC language practices are reported to lack uniformity and generalizability across the school day (Barnes et al., 2020; Dickinson et al., 2014). If observational research is demonstrating less than optimal OL and vocabulary instruction, maybe a shift in established classroom routines and procedures is warranted.

**Solutions**

Several tools have been forwarded as ways EC educators can support OL and vocabulary instruction. First, teachers can think strategically about their talk. One suggestion is extending teacher talk with sophisticated words (Dickinson & Porsche, 2011). For example, instead of responding, “when free play is done, it’s snack time,” teachers can respond, “after free play is concluded or finished, we will commence or begin snack time.” Other methods of supporting AT include enhancing talk interactions via high-demand questions (Butler et al., 2010; Dickenson et al., 2011) and promoting more conversational turns between teachers and students (Perry et al., 2018). Teachers can move beyond yes and no answers by prompting students with open prompt questions such as “Why is that?” or “Can you say more?” Finally, encouraging teachers to use more wait time with students is helpful (Hindman et al., 2019). Teachers privilege students who rapidly answer questions, disadvantaging those who require time to process language, particularly those learning English or those with underdeveloped language skills. Hindman and colleagues suggest allowing students closer to 2.7 seconds response time, more than double the 1.0 wait time reported.

While these suggestions are impactful, many EC educators may already employ some or parts of these practices. How then do
we reinvigorate our professional learning to reengage with robust OL and AT? One emerging line of research integrates several of these practices into a unified framework of vocabulary instruction with AT. The approach, grounded in theory, pairs vocabulary instruction with exposure to orthography or word spellings (Chambrè, 2020; Colenbrander, et al., 2019; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020).

Orthography is knowledge of word spellings, including one-to-one mapping of graphemes, letters, to phonemes, sounds. Orthography serves as a mnemonic element which binds to memory pronunciation, meaning, and word spellings (Ehri, 2014). When students see spellings, their pronouncements create word-specific orthographic images with vocalization serving as the “glue” to secure orthographic images to memory.

Research suggests that integrating print exposure during vocabulary instruction enhances vocabulary learning when compared to no print exposure (Chambrè, 2017, 2020; Colenbrander, et al., 2019; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020). Showing spellings also integrates two recommendations from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP; 2009): language-focused instruction and code-focused instruction (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Effects of orthographic facilitation on vocabulary learning are beneficial for typical developing children and learners with special needs (Chambrè, 2020). By incorporating print into classroom routines, EC educators can connect the power of print to the power of AT.

**Classroom Suggestions**

Print is routinely embedded in EC classrooms via morning messages, classroom labels, and bulletin board displays. Although some EC educators view drawing attention to print as developmentally inappropriate, research reveals that print exposure supports EC learners’ understanding of print (Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2004; Justice, et al., 2009). Further, young children who capitalize on orthographic exposure learn new vocabulary, since basic knowledge of letters and sounds supports mapping sounds to print (Chambrè, 2017, 2020; Cunningham, 2005; O’Leary & Ehri, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012).

Two existing classroom practices can seamlessly integrate orthography: read-alouds and daily conversations. These practices are cost-effective, utilize existing classroom materials (Justice et al., 2009) and are easily adopted after a short training period. Exposure to orthography occurs across multiple contexts and settings throughout the school day, such as read-alouds, science instruction, or mealtimes, but most critically during the reported 44% of unused instructional time (Farren et al., 2017; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2014; McGinity et al., 2011). Interleaving orthographic exposure with AT during classroom content, provides EC educators with a new means of engaging students with print, OL, and vocabulary.

**Read Alouds**

In EC settings, read-alouds remain the predominant form of vocabulary instruction (Cunningham, 2005; Juel, 2006). Read-alouds expose children to definitions of targeted sophisticated words found in high-quality literature. Some EC educators view read-alouds as a space for enjoying literature, not focusing on print (Justice & Ezell 2000, 2004), yet exposure to orthography, pronunciation, and meaning during read-alouds enhances vocabulary learning for young students (Silverman, 2007). Supporting vocabulary development with print during read-alouds fosters AT and benefits students’ OL development.
Practical Application

As outlined in Figure 1, EC educators should prepare read-alouds that support AT with orthographic exposure. First, select a text and specific vocabulary words. Begin by creating a list of all unknown words or phrases (see fig. 2). Choose as many as you like; you will narrow down your selection later. Next, pick three words to teach during the read-aloud. I selected *whistle*, *practice*, and *shadow* from Ezra Jack Keats’ book *Whistle for Willie*. Create a word card or chart with child-friendly definitions on the back. Preparing definitions ensures that explanations are accessible, brief, and consistent, avoiding wordy inconsistent off-the-cuff definitions. You may also decide to add images to the cards or chart, an additional layer to support all learners. Finally, mark specific stopping points where words appear in the text as a reminder to reference the print and definition (see fig. 2). It is unnecessary to stop every time, rather mark specific pages.
After preparing your words, preview the book using your usual classroom routines and existing teaching strategies which align with your district or school curriculum. Rather than planning specific vocabulary lessons, reinvigorate your existing practices by showing the word cards and definitions. Follow preexisting procedures closely, trying not to interrupt the flow of the read-aloud with lengthy conversations or multiple examples. Attention to print and definitions should be brief, simply pausing and pointing to the word card or chart, with students repeating and reading the word. After reading the book, include time for a final word card or chart review. Again, keep instruction as close to preexisting routines as possible. The goal is to reinvigorate your instructional practices, not develop new procedures.

Daily Conversations

The second suggestion for enhancing AT with orthographic exposure is raising one’s own word consciousness during daily conversations. Word consciousness is defined as the awareness of words and language (Graves, 2016). Word-conscious teachers foster discussions about new words, encourage students to ask questions about words, and help children delight in the nuances of language. (See table 1 for an example.)

For this suggestion, EC educators should pause and reflect about the words they use with their students. Take stock of the words you choose when teaching and begin to intentionally think about your word choice. Finally, and most critically, write words down for children to see and notice the spelling, thus reengaging your literacy and language practices in more nuanced ways. A word-conscious teacher interleaves novel words during classroom conversations and AT during all instructional blocks, especially during the 44% of unengaged classroom time!

Table 1
Sample Print Referencing Script

| Bella: Teacher, what is that a picture of? (points to bulletin board labelled “community helpers”) |
| Teacher: Bella those are pictures of different types of community helpers. Teacher points to the words “community helpers.” |
| Teacher: “Community” is a great word to know. It means a group of people who live in the same area. We live in Springfield, and all these different people help our community. Teacher points to the word “community.” |
| Bella: Yeah, my mom works at the post office! Teacher: That’s right; she helps our community – the place where we live – by delivering the mail each day. Teacher points to the word “community.” |
| Teacher: Who else here knows someone who is a community helper? Teacher points to the word “community.” |

Practical Applications

Teachers need to consciously think about writing words down for their students to see. When teaching insect body parts, jot down key terms on a dry erase board. When reviewing community types, words like urban, suburban, and rural should be readily accessible via a chart or cue cards on student’s tables. When students ask questions about word meanings, provide
definitions and spellings of the new word. Table 2 provides real-world examples of words kindergarteners heard and asked their teachers to define.

Another example of intentional word selection can occur by integrating print during morning message, a routine in which teachers provide information to students about their upcoming instructional day. The messages that greet students typically include simple sentences with factual information such as, “Good morning, Room 203. Today is Monday. It is sunny outside. We have art today.” This message outlines key events of the school day, but AT is notably absent. Teachers can reframe their morning message by using complex language, such as the following reimagined example (words italicized for emphasis). “Greetings, Room 203! Today is Monday. The weather is currently sunny. We have art following lunch.” Educators should be mindful to point to word spellings and draw attention to new vocabulary. By reimagining existing classroom practices, EC educators can boost vocabulary learning for all early learners by developing the habit of connecting pronunciation, meaning, and orthography. A small instructional mindset shift can reinvigorate your AT with powerful results.

Conclusion
A classroom that reconceptualizes the role of print will help facilitate OL and vocabulary learning for all students. In this classroom, teachers are mindful of their word selection, choosing to raise the level of discourse by integrating AT, not using words students already know and use. Read-alouds are carefully chosen and previewed to target high-quality AT words. Classroom discourse includes writing words for students to see. Word conscious educators also integrate open question prompts and wait time so children can describe their thinking, not simply respond yes or no. As a low-cost and easy-to-implement practices, utilizing existing storybooks and purposefully interleave attention to print with AT creates classroom conversations that actively promotes word consciousness. Pairing print with AT provides Educators with another tool to raise literacy achievement and reengage with OL and vocabulary development for all students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Unknown Vocabulary Word</th>
<th>Teacher Says</th>
<th>Teacher Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math: Reviewing shapes</td>
<td>Parallel</td>
<td>“Parallel is a math word that means when two lines are drawn next to each but never ever touch. They can be drawn for miles and miles, but will never touch. In this square we have two sets of parallel lines, across from each other on both sides.”</td>
<td>Points to sets of parallel lines on square projected on Smartboard. Labels both sets with different colored markers and writes the word “parallel.” Draws and extends two parallel lines with a yard stick. Students repeat word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Arts: Phonics lesson</td>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>“Nasal is something that is related to your nose. Nasal sounds are sounds that change because of air moving through your nose.”</td>
<td>Points to image of a nose on word wall. Writes word “nasal” next to image. Models for students how to hold their nose while saying the sounds /m/ and /n/.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Daily Announcement: Sporadic Teacher schedule changes</td>
<td>Sporadic</td>
<td>“Sporadic means when something is <em>supposed</em> to happen regularly, but there is a change, and it happens irregularly. So, we have Art every Thursday at 10:30, but, if every once and awhile, we have art at 9:30, that is sporadic.”</td>
<td>Following announcement, teacher pauses morning class work. On an index card, write the word “sporadic.” Moves to daily classroom schedule pocket chart. Selects one content card, i.e., Art, and moves Art card to different times in the school day. Hold word “sporadic” next to Art card.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


Graves, Michael F. *The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction*. Teachers College Press, 2016.


*Denotes children’s literature.

SUSAN J. CHAMBRÈ, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. She is a former classroom teacher and special educator with over two decades of experience in NY and NJ public schools. She currently trains future classroom teachers about best-practices related to literacy instruction and reading science. Her research interests include vocabulary development and teacher dyslexia knowledge. Dr. Chambrè can be contacted at schambre@kean.edu.
Creative Writing Must Play a Bigger Role in the English Classroom

YEKATERINA MCKENNEY
Winamacunnet High School

In his book *The Element: How Finding Your Passions Changes Everything*, Ken Robinson says, "Activities we love fill us with energy even when we are physically exhausted. Activities we don't like can drain us in minutes, even if we approach them at our physical peak of fitness" (93). Not many English teachers I know (if any) have chosen their profession because they enjoy grading five-paragraph essays, assigning how-to speeches, assessing students' competencies according to the one-size-fits-all rubrics, and training students for standardized testing. While these are, arguably, important aspects of instruction, often, they are also the duller, less-inspiring ones, leaving us drained emotionally and physically. Andy Molnar, an English teacher quoted in the book *Writing Unbound: How Fiction Transforms Student Writers* (Newkirk), points out the cause of such dissonance, "We didn't become teachers so we could teach academic writing or argumentative writing or informational writing. The passion was literature and storytelling... It's funny, it's ironic that we are not doing more of that in our profession" (Newkirk 130). As a high-school teacher with over twenty years of experience, I believe that English language and literature instructors must make a conscious effort to bring more creative storytelling into their instruction.

While many literature teachers already integrate some creative writing into their courses, the majority of such assignments are merely meant to supplement the more "academic" approach to the study of literature. From time to time, an English teacher may ask their students to rewrite a few selected scenes from a book using a different point of view, or to assume an identity of the literary character and create a series of fictional Tweets/diary entries/letters. There is no doubt that such "fanfiction" teaches students empathy by helping them better understand the characters and, by extension, people in the real world. After all, fiction is "a testing ground for practical psychological explorations in identity, in human flaws and pathologies, in the extremes of emotions— and darkness," says Newkirk (57). But it is precisely because of its incredible potential to show our students how to be in this world that creative writing has to play a bigger role in the English classroom.

I incorporate multiple opportunities for creative writing into all of my courses, from AP Literature and Composition to Senior Writing, World Literature, and Freshman English. One of the ways I do so is by implementing creative-writing summative assessments instead of tests and analytical papers. Although English teachers often feel pressured to dedicate their class time almost exclusively to the academic types of writing such as literary analysis and research papers, Thomas Newkirk argues that Fiction writing entails reflection, analysis, close observation, internal debate -- all broadly useful skills that can feed other kinds of writing, even the scientific report. To create characters in conflict, the writer must imagine opposing points of view—a skill needed in argumentation. Fiction writers are typically excellent reviewers, essayists, and nonfiction writers. They don't fall apart when they move outside of fiction - they excel. (8)
Since I usually utilize quizzes, journals, and discussions to assess my students' comprehension and retention skills during the reading units, I do not need to ask students to regurgitate the specifics of each text in the final summative assessment too. Instead, my summative assessments are designed to move students towards the more complex skills, such as synthesis and creation.

For a summative assessment at the end of my unit on Ancient Greek literature, for instance, I ask students to compose and present a dramatic monologue. Students may choose to become any character from Sophocles' Oedipus Rex—Oedipus himself, one of his daughters, Creon, a palace guard, a Greek god, or any made-up individual who just happens to be in Thebes at the time of the tragic events. In their monologues, I expect students to contemplate potential philosophical implications of the text. I also ask students to incorporate a few interactions with their imaginary audience into their monologues just as Plato does in The Apology. Throughout the years, I have heard monologues by disgruntled Greek gods, as well as by gods who choose to "troll" Oedipus out of mere boredom, confessions of oracles who make up lies to keep their jobs, Antigone's lamentations about patriarchal societies, Jocasta's meditations on the meaning of true love, and angry citizens' attacks on Oedipus as they blame him for their own shortcomings. As students present their monologues, they act out their characters' ire and glee, they cry, they mock, they respond to the imaginary insults from the crowd. Thus, in their speeches, students do not merely showcase their interpretation of the play and their analyses of the characters; they synthesize everything they have learned about Ancient Greek culture, engage in the process of creation, experiment with the genre of a dramatic monologue, and practice public-speaking skills. Their writing is usually imaginative and engaging, especially so since they write for a live audience, not just for the teacher. Rebecca W. Black describes fanfiction communities as places where "...fans are using language and writing to create and generate meaning that will be read and enjoyed by other members of the site, rather than graded and discarded" (Black 393). This particular assignment provides my students with a similar community where peers get to enjoy each other's performances, appreciate each other's humor and depth of thinking, and encounter a variety of interpretations. As a teacher, I too get to enjoy everyone's creativity, and, since I can often grade these monologues within a minute or two, I also get to save myself from piles of tedious, formulaic essays about Oedipus.

I resort to creative writing as a summative assessment at the end of my unit on Biblical allusions, as well. After we read a few original Biblical stories and analyze allusions to these stories in literature, art, music, video games, and film, I ask my students to create their own allusive narratives as a way to comment on the problems in our world. Just this year, students have chosen to write about the war in Ukraine, abortion laws, pollution, climate change, animal abuse, corporate greed, arranged marriages, jealousy, and materialism by retelling the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, Job's trials, Isaac's sacrifice, and Samson and Delilah's affair in contemporary settings. For this particular summative, students have to recall the specifics of the original stories (retention and comprehension), create connections between the original stories and the contemporary world (application), determine which of the stories will work best for their project (analysis and evaluation), decide on a suitable medium for their stories (application), and, finally, create their own
story (synthesis and creation). I require all students to supplement their creative product with an explanatory piece in which they describe how they have chosen to alter the original Biblical story and what their authorial intent was (reverse analysis). While my students work on their creative writing and other modes of art, I get to walk around and talk to them about their ideas; I get to watch them write, paint, compose music, and program *Minecraft* movies; I see them discard their original drafts and start over, share their work with peers, and revise it in order to convey their ideas more effectively. Students' thoughtfulness as they approach this assignment, their engagement and creativity, once again remind me why I have become a teacher to begin with.

Sadly, many English teachers I know refuse to assign creative writing to their classes because they feel that their students' fiction is inferior. And while I can see their point, I tend to agree with Newkirk:

> If we are attentive, fully open to the moment, to the novelty of the text, the singularity of the student—that's what's going to help us stay alive as teachers... If you take any student paper and copy four sentences onto Google, you will not find a match for them. [...] Those four sentences have never been written before. Your reading of that paper, your connection to that student, is a unique event in human history.

(116)

I have grown to savor my students' originality, their unique stories -- not their mastery, or lack thereof, of individual elements of storytelling. When I use creative writing as a summative, I grade students' fiction according to the school-wide reading rubric instead of the writing one in order to assess their ability to interpret a text. Having taught plenty of Creative Writing courses throughout my career, I have, of course, accumulated many rubrics for fiction writing. Our school has a formal narrative-writing rubric that I could use, too. However, I have noticed that such writing rubrics often stifle students' creativity rather than nourish it. After all, if I were to score Ernest Hemingway's writing according to one of these narrative-writing rubrics, he might easily be labeled as merely "sufficient" in terms of his idea development, syntax, and diction due to his minimalistic descriptions, seemingly simple vocabulary, and short sentences. William Faulkner would be likely penalized for his ambiguous language, missing transitions, and use of improper syntax. Sandra Cisneros would fail when it comes to employing a traditional plot structure -- exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement -- and for her reliance on fragments. And yet, all three are remarkable writers whose work is widely enjoyed for its originality, freshness, and their refusal to comply with the "norms." I want my students to explore issues and feel "rewarded for creating innovative texts that push the limits of traditional genres and formats of writing" (Black 393), not be penalized for being amateur writers.

Besides using fiction in place of major reading assessments, I often utilize it as practice, too, in order to help my students internalize specific literary elements. When I review plot structure with my AP classes, for instance, I ask my students to write their own short stories with at least three of the structural devices we have encountered in published fiction -- reverse chronology, flashbacks, repetends, in medias res, deus ex machina, etc. When we look at vernacular and formal diction and syntax, I assign another piece in which students are asked to either create two characters conversing in contrasting styles or to display some other kind of a shift from formal to vernacular. In World Literature classes, after we read an excerpt from *One Thousand and One Nights*, students write a story within another story within a third story in order to emulate
the technique Scheherazade employed to avoid an execution by the misogynistic sultan. There are no required word counts for these assignments, no expectations of rising action, climax, resolution, and no rubrics - the goal is simply to share a story with their peers while integrating some of the writing techniques we have examined in class. Although there are times when my students read each other's work and make suggestions for improvement, I usually prefer to let them simply experience each other's stories. To do so, all students are expected to share their writing with their classmates. To encourage them to feel safe while experimenting, I allow anonymous sharing. After I distribute all stories to random peers, each group reads its given stories, choosing the best one to share with the whole class. I do not establish any criteria for "the best piece" prior to the activity, stressing out the very subjectivity of the process. As a result, I have observed that it is this informal process of sharing with each other and not the rubrics and the rigid criteria provided by the teacher that sets a higher standard for everyone - most students want their peers to like what they write, and, thus, they write better. Lammers and Marsh suggest that participation in such writing communities "[scaffolds] students' critical analysis of how to write for and with the audiences in networked publics" and "can empower youth as they seek to solve real-world problems" (8). As their teacher, I am delighted to provide them with this opportunity. This activity also strengthens the bond between my students and me since they get to see me react to their stories alongside their peers. For a few minutes, I cease being an evaluator and become a reader like the rest of them, an individual moved by each shared piece of writing.

Whenever my students work on fiction to practice specific literary elements, I allow free choices of topics and genre. Many of them gasp in disbelief when they hear that, fully expecting me to prohibit them from writing about certain topics, but, since fiction is a "testing ground for practical psychological explorations" (Newkirk 57), I let my students explore the topics that draw them in. After all, Fyodor Dostoevsky did not kill anyone with an ax even though his Raskolnikov did, and Vladimir Nabokoff was not a pedophile unlike his Humbert Humbert. If any of my students seem initially intimidated by the freedom of choice and are unsure what to write about, I offer my assistance and a few prompts to choose from, including fanfiction prompts. Many best-selling authors have built their careers on fanfiction, including E. L. James, whose infamous Fifty Shades of Grey started as online fanfiction for Stephanie Meyer's Twilight series. Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson novels are derivative of Greek mythology, and so are Homer's Odyssey and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex; Shakespeare's Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet are based off other authors' plots; and Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is, in turn, derivative of Shakespeare's Hamlet, which is why I do not discriminate against fanfiction in the classroom. Over the years, I have read plenty of spin-offs of Twilight series, Walking Dead, The Last of Us, American Horror Story, and Games of Thrones, as well as scenarios from video games I cannot pretend to know.

Whether authentic or derivative, whether funny, tragic, sentimental, or dystopian, fiction-writing engages my students in learning. Justin Parmenter says, ...

... much of our curriculum [...] allows little room for freedom of exploration. For young people who are at a time in life when many of their decisions are made for them, this lack of power can be very demotivating and can negatively impact their interest and effort... When students are given opportunities to
experiment with their voices and create through their own original work, they feel a sense of place and they are able to feel in charge. Both fiction and fanfiction must play a bigger role in the high-school English classroom since by engaging students in learning, we engage teachers in teaching.

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Reviving 90s Sitcoms to Teach Black Linguistic Justice Concepts

Teaira McMurtry
University of Alabama at Birmingham

The vibrant Black hip-hop culture of the 1990s left an indelible mark on American culture. It influenced fashion, with brands like FUBU Sportswear and iconic items like Jordan shoes. Beauty standards were defined by hi-top fade/Gumby haircuts, "dookie" braids, and the elaborate nails of Coko and Flo-Jo. The feel-good flow of R&B and New Jack Swing dominated the music scene while activism surged with anthems like "Fight the Power" blasting out of boomboxes at the Million Man March. Legendary sports figures like The Fab Five and two-time-Prime-time Deion Sanders mesmerized fans while literally “changing the game.” Spike Lee Joints and the irresistible charm of Black sitcoms enthralled and delighted audiences. Growing up in the 1990s and becoming a teacher in the 2010s, I sought ways to incorporate 90s Black situation comedies (i.e., sitcoms) into language instruction. These shows encapsulated the essence of Black hip-hop culture, which shaped my identity and connected to the rich linguistic tradition shared by me and my students, spoken fluently at various levels. Despite being born in the late 1990s, my adolescent students were captivated by this seemingly archaic cultural medium. It effectively introduced them to vital concepts related to Black Linguistic Justice, which encompasses the pursuit of equality and empowerment for individuals and communities whose language and communication emerged during the era of U.S. chattel enslavement (“Linguistic Justice”).

Black sitcoms can be a powerful teaching tool as television shapes the United States’ image of itself and, if used with intention, could serve as a platform to challenge and transform ideologies that rely on harmful notions of human existence. Thus, shows like The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Amen—both black-produced shows—and Family Matters—the longest-running Black sitcom produced by non-Black writers—yield themselves to lively discussions about the rich complexities and racialized tensions of Black language use (“Seventy-Two Hours;” “My Fair Homeboy;” Zook; “Jailhouse Blues;” Giorgis). I have used The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air episode “Seventy-Two Hours” with my high school students to teach (a) misconceptions about the Black lexicon (i.e., vocabulary) via Hip-Hop slang terms, (b) concepts such as artful language use via linguistic-flexing skills, and (c) internalized anti-Black linguistic racism.

As such, in this article, I describe how the TV shows Family Matters and Amen could be used to explore how anti-Black language attitudes get propagated through mainstream media as well as how Black linguistic conscious raising is essential and empowering for those who embody and thus rely on Black Language (“Linguistic Justice”). Before detailing these teaching and learning opportunities, I briefly define Black Language and present why Black linguistic justice must be prioritized in today’s English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms.

Justice for Black Language

ELA instruction—if Black Language is regarded—has been historically hyper-focused on eradication methods to reduce its presence in speech and writing and deduced to a raucous dialect spoken by uneducated poor Black people of the past in
canonical classics, including Twain’s *Adventures of Huck Finn* and Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (Baker-Bell, et al.). This kind of language instruction further perpetuates stereotypes and mistruths about Black Language and continues to call for Black linguistic justice.

Black Language is a rule-governed linguistic system rooted in West African languages, a system that people of African descent in the U.S. have inherited and embody today. Black Language continuously influences and shapes the English language (“Linguistic Justice”). ELA instruction for all students, then, must be both artful and anti-racist (“Prioritizing Black Language”). In fact, an increasing number of states, to date, have revised or rewritten their standards to equalize emphasis on diverse ways of embodying the English Language in this increasingly pluralistic society. For example, Wisconsin recently revised its ELA standards to prioritize equity-oriented language arts practices. Recognizing the need for K-12 students to effectively utilize complex language in a variety of tasks, one of the overarching standards and key shifts from the previous set of standards is as follows:

[1]Iterate individuals are flexible; they respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline. Instruction and instructional materials for English language arts promote flexibility in language use by ensuring every student [l]earns in a classroom community in which educators are careful not to send explicit or implicit messages that one form of English is more correct or acceptable than another…[i]ntentionally determines how to use English in the ways that are most appropriate for meeting one’s communicative goals given the situation and audience (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 71).

Another noted inclusion in the standard is a rationale for languaging choices employed throughout the document that essentially aims to actuate such equitable goals, including the use of (a) “standardized English” rather than “Standard English”, (b) “code-meshing” over “code-switching”, and (c) a preference for “communicative competence” to indicate that standardized English may not be practical depending on the communicative event. Hence, as described in the revised standards, standardized recognizes that “political, social, and cultural privilege have determined and continue to uphold which varieties of English have prestige and are socially desirable” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 111). Using precise terms to name language such as White Mainstream English (WME) explicitly recognizes that language is not neutral or universally standardized. Likewise, employing the term “standardized" acknowledges the need for inclusivity, allowing for the presence and acceptance of all languages and language varieties within classrooms and society's linguistic landscape. Further, because race constructs ideas about language and vice versa (a la raciolinguistics), specifically here in the United States, justice-seeking standards such as these call for language instruction that is actively against racism in its focus and agentively artful in its design, such as the learning opportunities described in this article.

**Black Language Must Matter in Family Matters**

*Family Matters* was a popular, nine-season syndicated sitcom with a wide audience gathered around the television set on Friday nights for T.G.I.F (Thank God It’s
Friday; a popular sitcom lineup) to witness the annoyingly clumsy and clever mad-scientist nerd, Steve Urkel, who incessantly upset his neighbor, Carl Winslow, with his pesky antics. In the episode “Jailhouse Blues” of season two, Carl’s wife, Harriet’s “rude and unpleasant” second cousin, Clarence “Easy C”, comes to town and steals the company of their son, 16-year-old, Eddie, and 15-year-old Steve during an unlawful adventure. In a scene wherein Eddie introduces Steve and Easy C, Steve antagonizes the West African influence syntactic construction, optional copula (conjugated be verb) use that Easy C utters:

**Eddie:** Hey, Steve. This is my cousin, Easy C.

**Steve:** Oh, I’m Steve Urkel.

**Easy C:** Yo-ski bro-ski

**Steve:** [seemingly impressed] Howdy Doody. Put ‘er there. [The two exchange in an awkward directionally-misunderstood handshake].

**Easy C:** Yo, you a serious lil’ nerd.

**Steve:** No, I *am* a serious little nerd. You see, I use verbs; verbs are our friends. They help move along sentences.

Even inherent in the episode’s title, “Jailhouse Blues,” this episode—particularly this scene—illustrates how standardized language ideologies are upheld. It reinforces the notion that baggy-pants-wearing, troublemaking Black youth use a "restricted code" rather than an "elaborate code"—a limited vocabulary versus an expansive vocabulary, respectively—according to Bernstein's deficit-oriented theory (“Elaborated and Restricted Codes”). This portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes and implies an inherent flaw or inferiority in their communication style. To mitigate and halt these linguistic stereotypes, students' attention could be drawn by this by posing a few prompts such as:

- Notice and describe what is happening in this scene.
- Why do you think Easy C changes the topic after Steve hypercorrects his language use? Put another way, why might the sitcom’s writers choose to end this exchange between Steve and Easy C at the insult?
- What does this scene say about Black youth who may not use as much Black Language? What impact on the audience might this depiction have on these language users?

One could argue that because the show was written by mostly white writers who arguably did not understand Black culture and often rejected the input from Black writers who lacked seniority, *Family Matters* lacked Black authenticity (Zook). Whether or not the writers were conscious of this, this episode serves as a launch pad for discussions centered on issues of what Giorgis highlights as “negotiated authenticity,” which is how Black writers of Black sitcoms were expected to produce authentic expressions of Blackness but only the kind that is acceptable to wider audiences, particularly White viewers (“The Unwritten Rules” 34).

**“Homeboys” and their Home Language in Amen**

The sitcom *Amen*, specifically the episode "My Fair Homeboy," centers around the adventures of Earnest Frye, a cunning lawyer, and deacon, alongside his daddy’s-girl-daughter Thelma and Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory. In this episode, 17-year-old Clarence "So Fine" falls in love with Courtney, the daughter of Mr. Whitaker, a wealthy friend of Deacon Frye. In his pursuit of Courtney's affection and Mr. Whitaker's approval, Clarence is willing
to change himself into a "high-class young man" and assist Deacon Frye in securing a business deal with Mr. Whitaker ("My Fair Homeboy"). This means that he must learn to speak in ways that are aligned with White linguistic norms. In doing so, Courtney instructs that Clarence “So Fine” take some of his “common phrases and put them into English” ("My Fair Homeboy").

When he grows weary and frustrated at the undue ploy during this “rehearsal”, Clarence “So Fine” extemporaneously belts out: “This isn't even gonna work. This is a sham—a cruel charade. We should forego this scurrilous and deceptive undertaking” ("My Fair Homeboy"). This inherent ability to linguistically or utilize higher level—and even archaic—vocabulary is reminiscent of my student, Deion, who upon dismissal after class one day, pensively paused as he called out “aiight den” during the “dapping” process with his friend flex “Prioritizing Black Language”). With a mix of amazement and shock, Deion gazed at his hand still positioned in the air and expressed his bewilderment at his own verbal artistry, as he proclaimed: “Aiight den’...what a complex way to bid farewell to somebody!”

When students get to Clarence “So Fine’s” age, they have been exposed to this kind of seemingly archaic language throughout their PK-12 schooling experience (via canonical texts), but opportunities to experiment with language in culturally stylistic ways may not have been afforded. A problem-posing opportunity presented in this scene is to ask students: Does Clarence “So Fine's' use of WME after hours of skill-and-drill exercises indicate that the “language training” worked? This inquiry lends itself to several learning opportunities:

- Language skills are quickly acquired (and performed) once immersed in the environment where the language is spoken.
- Black youths’ “ways with words,” linguistic dynamism, and inherent ability to “code-switch” is underestimated (Heath). The act (and potential art) of switching or meshing codes in one communicative event is not the problem; the problem is the instructional imposition of eradicating BL and how getting Black youth to switch to WME remains an unquestioned, desired goal in ELA (“Articulate While Black”).
- While one can momentarily switch the way they speak, there are other factors that cannot be switched, hidden, or denied (i.e., race and class). Because language is a speaker’s audible marker of identity, the outing of code-switching for Black students can lead to a false sense of achievement and preparation for the “real world” (“Linguistic Justice”).
- There is not a single “correct” way to speak English; there are several stylistic ways one can use English (i.e., linguistically flex) to achieve a desired effect.
- Identity is subject to compromise if one is forced to speak in a way that is peculiar to him. As James Baldwin notes: “If (through language), I am forced to deny my origins, I become useless, an imitation white man...” (qtd. in “Black English Doesn’t Get Any Respect” 6).

*Raising Black Linguistic Consciousness*  
“My Fair Homeboy” demonstrates how language is inextricably tied to the embodiment and expression of identity.
Thus, it is important to maintain students’ native language patterns and to draw on this “linguistic capital” while obtaining what they define as success, which is not limited to economic prosperity (Yosso). This idea is affirmed—in a Black, sermonic tone—by Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory after Clarence “So Fine” becomes visibly uncomfortable after performing the rehearsed WME in front of his family, his love interest, and her father:

Clarence, I can’t stop you from going through with this charade, but you should know there is nothing wrong with you the way that you are or were. Hmm? Doesn’t matter how you talk or the way you dress or what school you go to. What matters most are your values and your integrity. (“My Fair Homeboy”)

Through Black Language, Clarence “So Fine” articulates this realization to Courtney’s father, proclaiming that he chooses his authentic self and, thus, publicizing the rise of his Black Linguistic Consciousness:

Yeah man, Courtney’s right! Yo, I’m not down with this frontin’. Just like the Rev [Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory] says: I gotta be who I am, man. Besides, this wig itches like crazy, man. (“My Fair Homeboy”)

This scene allows the opportunity to talk about the limitations and costs of code-switching and moves to the idea that BL articulates one's existence in the world. To hide it is to hide a sense of self. From this, students are then able to discuss other aspects of Black Language (i.e., phonology, paralinguistics, etc.). Thus, as most characters on the show did not use Black Language syntax or semantics, there were other linguistic characteristics that marked them as Black Language users (i.e., how they sounded and their complementing nonverbals). Mr. Whitaker, himself, pronounces the word “on” as “own” and “your” as “yo’”, when Clarence “So Fine” reveals the facade, strips himself of WME-parroting and the accompanying wig, and offers his Black cultural haircut: “You got stripes own yo’ head!” (“My Fair Homeboy”). These pronunciation patterns are consistent with the phonological rules of Black Language (“Talkin and Testifyin” 17).

While the languages that are juxtaposed are not explicitly named in this episode (i.e., BL and WME), the opportunity to discuss this phenomenon and lean into the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Black Language is presented.

Opportunities also arise to explore metalinguistic awareness, which involves studying how language operates and changes over time. Through this, students gain an understanding that language is in a constant state of evolution. They get to experiment with this as they translate BL phrases from the 1990s to Black Language phrases of today.

For instance, among youth of Clarence's age, the term "cappin'" would likely be used to imply "lying" or "being fake" instead of the term "frontin'.” Due to the persistent expectation for Black Language speakers to translate from Black Language (BL) to White Mainstream English (WME), there is an opportunity to explore Black Language as a distinct linguistic system by translating historical Black Language terms into modern Black Language equivalents (Boutte). This approach not only enables students to study Black Language independently but also allows them to educate authentic audiences about Black Language through their compositions.

Lastly, the concept of linguistic self-defense should be endemic to language instruction for all students (Hillard). Criteria for linguistic self-defense include (1) knowing one's own culture and language
origins and those who created it (2) knowing the culture in which the English language came to be; (3) knowing how languages are created or basic sociolinguistic principles of language. “My Fair Homeboy” opens the opportunity to discuss linguistic self-defense and its implications. Thus, if Clarence “So Fine” developed linguistic self-defense, the likelihood of his desire to linguistically flex might increase, and his confidence in intentionally employing Black Language might strengthen.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The two sitcoms discussed here share ironies that could be up for critical analysis, such as both “homeboys” in both are named Clarence who prefer to be called by their clever nicknames, “So Fine” and “Easy C” and who hold a fluent command of Hip-Hop slang that is frequently either mocked or admired by family or close acquaintances. Like *Family Matters*, if uncritically presented, the showing of “My Fair Homeboy” may become a pitfall to the stereotype that only “homeboys from the hood speak Black Language”; however, critical examination reveals the rich complexity that supersedes this single story. Hence, Black youth who are born and raised in systematically repressed neighborhoods are “verbal geniuses” (Smitherman quoted in “Dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” 8) who continue to advance Black Language (and the English language) with their brilliant “ways with words” (Heath). However, their intellect is often questioned or denied in classrooms.

Moreover, it would behoove teachers to show that Black Language has a diverse range of Black people who embody it in some form or fashion. This linguistic heterogeneity could be shown through the middle to upper-class Black Language users on another popular Black 90s sitcom, *Living Single*. Characters like Maxine “Max” Shaw, a sharp attorney, and Kyle Barker, a witty stockbroker demonstrate to viewers their dynamic use of linguistic and rhetorical features and they “perform” their identities through language (Weldon). Sitcoms such as this one not only destroy popular myths that Black Language is only spoken by poor and uneducated characters of the past or trouble-making African American youth from the “hood”, it also brings to light that linguistic flexing is—as novelist Toni Morrison articulated before the 1990s—“the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them” (“A Conversation With” 123) Thus, Max and Kyle (and other characters on the show) demonstrate the intellectual dexterity of concurrently employing standardized English and Black Language in one communicative event.

In essence, these sitcoms discussed here aim to actualize Baker-Bell’s invitation to accompany her on “the frontlines...to transform our language education and create something we ain’t never seen before!” (*Linguistic Justice* 101). It is this kind of artful instruction that begins to change the course of the long-running ELA tradition. Mastery of standardized forms of English becomes a by-product of antiracist language pedagogies as students will have the opportunity to analyze language in meaningful ways as they learn to navigate and create their world(s) wherein linguistically flexing is recognized as culture shaping and, thus, expected and encouraged. This kind of instruction calls for teachers to shift—as many state standards have—from what Bomer (“What Would It Mean”) calls “culturally colonizing, restricted, or tolerant” approaches to ELA curricula and instructional approaches to those that are what Paris and Alim (“Culturally Sustaining
Pedagogies”) coined as “culturally sustaining.” No matter where a language arts teacher begins, the efforts and end goal must be aimed toward linguistic liberation.

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TEAIRA MCMURTRY, PhD, was a former high school ELA teacher, literacy leader, and curriculum specialist in Milwaukee, WI. She is an Assistant Professor of Secondary ELA at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her research investigates the promising outcomes of centering Black Language in curriculum and pedagogy. Teaira can be contacted at mcmurtry@uab.edu.
Reflections on Rurality in the Classroom: Connecting to Curriculum through Place

Chea Parton
Purdue University

I grew up on an 80-acre farm, a daughter and granddaughter of farmers, and had always lived in the country. When I was in 7th grade, my (favorite) English teacher told us a story about when she first moved from a large city to our rural area. With an eerie tone to her voice, she told us that one autumn night, she saw lights moving back and forth, back and forth, outside of her window. She said that she had no idea what it could be, and it scared her to death. The only thing she could come up with was aliens, and she was so convinced it was a UFO, she called the police. You know what it was? A combine. My whole class of rural kids laughed. We thought it was about the most ridiculous thing we’d ever heard.

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After getting over the discomfort of going to a university that was 50 times larger than my hometown, I returned to a rural school as an English teacher. It wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be. I didn’t fit in as readily as I assumed I would. And I did that thing that English teachers do in schools with limited resources—I went to the book room and picked novels that looked reasonably intact and that I enjoyed as a reader. One of those happened to be Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, which I proceeded to teach to my sophomores.

One day during their book clubs, I went over to a couple of boys who I knew likely hadn’t read and probably weren’t talking about what they were supposed to be. Before I could ask them what they were up to, they asked if I’d ever read Where the Red Fern Grows. I had but it had been a long, long time ago. They then proceeded to wax poetic about how much they loved that book, about how much it affected them, about how they cried because it made them think of their own hunting dogs. I am both embarrassed and ashamed to say that rather than engage with them about that book and ask if there were any others that they also enjoyed reading, I (hopefully kindly) reminded them that we were reading The Awakening and that it’d be great if they could get back on task.

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What these vignettes illustrate is the importance of place—both where we’re from and where we are—to our connection to and engagement with both teaching and learning. Learning the literacies and languages and cultures of both familiar and unfamiliar places is crucial to teachers’ educational practices, relationship building, and the meaning students make of both the world and the world.

My English teacher’s struggle to make sense of the combine harvesting near her house mirrored her struggle to make sense of the rural lives and experiences of her students. And no matter whether I realized it at the time or not, those boys were readers, they just wanted to read something that they could see themselves in. They wanted a mirror, and for rural students, those are desperately few and far between.

Reflecting on Place and Practice: What Got in the Way?

There are multiple layers in these vignettes to how place was a hindrance to
student learning, but the major ones were related to the metrocentricity (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen) and urbannormativity (Thomas and Fulkerson) of teacher education—that is that the bulk of scholarship is on and reflects the perspective of urban and suburban teachers and students and assumes that this is the normative/right perspective to have—and how that manifests in classroom practice.

For example, because my English teacher was from a city and unfamiliar with rural culture, we never read rural books unless they were canonical (which tend to position rurality as pathological and something to be cured or fixed anyway). At no point were we asked to critically consider our rural culture, and we were always educated to leave (Corbett). There was no question that in order to be successful you had to go to college and get out of our one-stoplight town. It also meant that my teacher’s unfamiliarity with rural language practices led to a lot of correction that resulted in many of us working to unlearn our rural language variety and see it as substandard and incorrect rather than appreciating it as part of our rural identities (Parton). This resulted in a couple of hindrances to students’ growth: (1) some students refused to engage with the curriculum because of their appreciation for their rural identities and lifeways or (2) some students essentially unlearned their rurality which hindered their ability to think and make meaning from that perspective.

Because my English teacher and I were taught to be teachers in the same urbanormative system, I perpetuated these issues in my own rural classroom. For example, even though my teacher education program was at a land grant institution with a huge agricultural program that served rural students and graduated teachers who went to teach in rural schools, it did not offer the opportunity to consider the important differences of teaching in a rural school and community. We didn’t read a single piece of scholarship that explicitly discussed rural teaching and rural identities, nor did we discuss the different needs of rural students, teachers, and communities. We did, however, talk a lot about urban teaching and urban identities. We read canonical and young adult literature that were mirrors for those identities. And we talked about the specific needs of folks who live and learn in those types of communities. So, I made mistakes that got in the way of my students’ learning and identity development as rural people, even though I still identified as rural myself. I made assumptions about them and the value of certain types of curricula because of the dominant narratives and perspectives represented in my teacher education program. In this specific instance, my readers weren’t engaged with the book I chose because:

1. I chose it.
2. It takes place in 19th century Louisiana, which was about the farthest you could get from 21st century Poneto, Indiana.
3. They couldn’t see themselves in it and resented that they had to read yet another teacher-selected book about somebody other than them.

And, honestly, after finally reading some rural young adult literature, I get it. The connection I feel when I can recognize characters’ rural experiences, values, culture, language and connect it to my own – it is unlike any other reading experience I’ve had. I feel seen and understood in a way I never had before.

**Hindsight is 20/20: What I Wish I Would Have Done**

I wish I would’ve recognized the role of place to identity construction and cultural
practice. Even though I was a rural student, all of my education told me that being country, a redneck, a hillbilly, a hick, were all undesirable things to be and that I should aspire to be “more” than that. And so, that became my stance as a rural teacher. I wish I would’ve understood that rural is culture and that (even the undesirable aspects) of cultures matter, because we are always reading and writing through our own culturally-shaped experiences. I wish I would’ve put it together that those culturally-based experiences are always connected to place, so we are always reading and writing and learning through place. I wish I would’ve invited students to talk about it—to dig into their identities as complex rural people and to investigate how who we understand ourselves to be (both as teachers and learners) and how we engage with curriculum is inextricably connected to place.

I wish I would have recognized and taught my rural students that rurality is a complex and nuanced culture that has its own language practices and art, and that those are valuable despite the larger societal narrative that they aren’t. I wish I would’ve told them that their ways of speaking and being and creating aren’t incorrect or improper, they’re just different. I wish I would’ve said to them that they deserved to see their rural lives and experiences represented, honored, and recognized as more than a disease to be cured or the butt of a redneck joke in curriculum and popular culture. And I wish I could go back and change who and how I was as their teacher. But I can’t go back. So, I’ll just try to do better now that I know better. Which is why I created Literacy In Place (literacyinplace.com), a website that houses an evolving list of rural YA books as well as other teaching supports for rural teachers.

For more rural book suggestions, teachers could also check out the Whippoorwill Book Award for Rural YA Literature (https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com).

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whippoorwillaward.weebly.com.

CHEA PARTON is a former high school English teacher and current visiting assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at Purdue University in Indiana. Her research and teaching focus on bringing visibility to the experiences and identities of rural teachers, students, and communities as well as depictions of rurality in YA literature. She can be contacted at readingrural@gmail.com.
Our Lives Are Worth Celebrating

DARIUS PHELPS AND DR. BRIAN MOONEY

Teachers College, Columbia University and Fairleigh Dickinson University

1. Warning

Hear the alarm.
Sounds like books doused in accelerant.
Like “Don’t say gay” sharped on silver duct tape.
Like white supremacy taking to the mic
at your local school board meeting.

Hear the alarm.
Sounds like an insurrection.
Like Proud Boys huddled together
with semi-automatic rifles outside the Capitol.
Sounds like an AR-15 with an extended clip
in the hands of an incel.

Hear the alarm.
Sounds like fragile white masculinity
shattering into shards of glass
like an empty vase dropped from the sky.
Sounds like the word “groomer”
in the mouth of every so-called Christian mother
who is more afraid of a drag queen than a Nazi.
Sounds like white young men marching with tiki torches
towards the main entrance of your school.

Hear the alarm.
Sounds like a thousand dog whistles
blowing at the same time.
Sounds like the doors of a Planned Parenthood slamming shut,
leaving an empty medical building
as a symbol of our hatred toward women and their bodies.
Sounds like Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with cis men.
Sounds like another lockdown in my son’s preschool,
his little head poking out from under the table
as the sheriffs sweep the building in tactical gear.

Disclaimer: this curriculum has a warning label.
It says, keep away from children, so they don’t interrupt the design.
It says, see teacher as poison control /
as emergency responder /
as a crisis caregiver.
Listen to them when they write,
“YOU don’t know my sorrow, YOU don’t know my PAIN.”
Listen when they tell us,
This warning is not a metaphor.
Look outside. It is literally burning.

Listen to the alarm blaring.
Sounds like Mama whispering warnings in my ears.

We must protect our grace -
oppression and discrimination,
You are destined to face
it is rooted in our veins,
laced with our ancestors’ pain.

Hear the alarm.
If you listen close, it is not all doom.
Sounds like a song
in the key of vulnerability.
I know it is my soul’s duty to be the vessel,
this beacon of hope,
for these young men of color
for white folx who don’t understand

They must get free, too,
that their humanity is tied up in this shit, too,
they need to know their souls are at stake.

2. Signal

See the signal.
Looks like a bonfire of books burning,
words becoming ashes between our fingertips.
Sentences ablaze.
Truth, alight.
This signal is a trail of smoke
from a classroom engulfed
in the silent voices of tomorrow.
This signal is an EXIT sign
glowing through the haze and smoke,
so many years spent gasping for air
with the fear that I’d choke.

This signal sounds like a call for resistance,
for fists, for any means necessary
to refuse our death softly,
but to go out blazing and unholy,
tossing the teargas back.
Hear the signal. It is a rally for truths we shouldn’t even have to affirm. It’s for my 5-year-old daughter on my shoulders at the protest, yelling at the top of her lungs for a world she will inherit that is flooded with our sins.

Hear the signal. Sounds like levees breaking from the surge and people abandoned shouting from rooftops. Looks like long days and even longer nights wading through my own sea of doubts and insecurities, being the token black male figure. My evolution means nothing to their scripted curriculums and twisted facades.

This fire is my blessing to carry yet, they try to make it feel like a burden. Hear the signal ringing loud in the ears of anyone who refuses to hear the truth that we are stifling and suffocating our youth. They deserve to be liberated and loved.

3. Celebration

Hear the celebration. It sounds like dancing and defiance. Like joy, not in spite of, but in response to their denial of our humanity. Hear the celebration

Leave your home and join us in the streets.

Sounds like a mosaic of voices stitched together by radical love as the soundtrack of our classrooms and communities. Hear the music of our resistance. It sounds like singing. Like silver hymns. Like deep blue psalms. Sounds like prayer over a breakbeat. Like a classroom cypher and children drumming on desks.
Hear the celebration.
It sounds like, “Mr. Phelps, I need you,”
as their tiny, fragile hands
pick up my pieces and make me whole.
Listen to these rhythms of rejoice.
Listen to us becoming the promise
of a world that is not yet.

Hear this praiseshop in the key of abolition,
in the building of something new & better & more beautiful.

We walk this journey towards liberation, hand in hand,
refusing to be chained and shackled by fear and hate—
the vision of our ancestors—
is a guiding light,
a beacon,
reminding us,
we are all wounded healers.
so come, testify, bear witness,
dream with us beloved.

let’s face this together /
our lives / are worth / celebrating

DARIUS PHELPS is a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is a full-time lecturer at Medgar Evers College and Assistant Manager at Brooklyn Poets. An educator, poet, spoken word artist, and activist, Darius writes poems about grief, liberation, emancipation, and reflection through the lens of a teacher of color and experiencing Black boy joy. His poems have appeared in the NY English Record, NCTE English Journal, and many more.

DR. BRIAN MOONEY is an educator, poet, DJ, producer, and author whose research explores intersections of language, literacy, and popular culture emphasizing critical Hip Hop/spoken word literacies. His first book, Breakbeat Pedagogy: Hip Hop and Spoken Word Beyond the Classroom Walls, was published in 2016, with his work featured by The New York Times, BBC, Rolling Stone, and many more.
Pursuing Happiness: Teaching Scientific-Based Strategies for Subjective Well-Being in the ELA Classroom

ADAM V. PICCOLI
Pequannock Township High School

In recent years, a shadow of sadness has fallen on many of our students’ paths toward happiness. Heartbreakingly, many of them seem completely lost in the darkness. The idea that an enormous proportion of our students are currently struggling with social and emotional issues appears to be a self-evident truth, according to virtually every educator I know. Not surprisingly, recent data compiled by The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), discussed by Derek Thompson of The Atlantic, indicates that, from 2009 to 2021, the percentage of American high-school students who say they feel “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” increased from 26% to 44% (Thompson, 2022). This report indicates the largest portion of high-school student sadness ever recorded (Thompson 2022). While there are undoubtedly many factors affecting students’ engagement levels, the pervasiveness of mental health issues certainly has a significant effect. The negative impacts of depression, anxiety, and mood disorders on student engagement, achievement, and attendance are well documented in the relevant empirical literature (Humensky et al., 2010.; Gergans et al., 2013; Havik and Ingu, 2021).

A vast amount of evidence suggests that helping students and teachers increase their subjective well-being (SWB) may increase productivity in our schools. In a meta-analysis of 225 academic studies, researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener discovered that happy employees, on average, are 31% more productive, and creativity for these employees was three times higher than for unhappy employees (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Researchers also noted that in sales jobs, happy employees had 37% more sales (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This research suggests that learning, achievement, and student engagement might increase significantly if teachers and students learn strategies for better SWB.

Several years ago, Dr. Santos of Yale University created a course that teaches scientific-backed strategies for increasing SWB (Shimer, 2018). Dr. Santos’s new course, “Psychology and The Good Life,” quickly became the most popular course in Yale University’s 321-year-old history (Shimer, 2018). This popularity sparks a question: How can language arts teachers shine some light on the shadow of sadness and incorporate these strategies into our existing, often over-saturated curricula?

I have experimented with integrating SWB strategies into my reading and writing skills instruction for over a decade. Some of these scientifically backed strategies include the WOOP method for setting meaningful and attainable goals, writing about gratitude, understanding the complex relationship between money and happiness, valuing sleep and exercise, appreciating our deep need for in-person social interactions and meaningful relationships, the benefits of being in nature, and mediation. Below are several examples of writing, reading, and research tasks to seamlessly integrate these empirically studied SWB strategies into the ELA classroom.
WOOP Method for Writing Goals

The link between pursuing meaningful goals and increased SBW is well established in psychological studies (Klug & Maier, 2015; Pychyl, 2008). Psychologist Gabriele Oettingen first developed WOOP, a self-regulating method for setting goals that nearly all age groups can apply to virtually any personal goal (Oettingen et al., 2001). WOOP is an acronym for Wish, Outcome, Obstacles, and Plan. This method is rooted in a psychological principle called mental contrasting, which focuses on the contrast between the positive results of achieving one’s desired goals and the negative factors surrounding one’s obstacles (Oettingen et al., 2010).

In the wish statement, writers state a goal that is specific, measurable, and realistic but challenging. Setting a time limit for achieving the goal also helps establish a sense of urgency (e.g., one month). In the outcome statement, writers describe all of the benefits of achieving the goal, including the positive emotions they might experience. Then the writer needs to describe all the internal obstacles that might prevent them from achieving the goal. These internal obstacles are obstacles within the writer’s control, such as feelings of procrastination, temptations, or a loss of motivation. The last step in the WOOP writing process is to write a plan to defeat these obstacles in the form of an “if-then” statement (Oettingen et al., 2010). A student’s plan might sound like this, “If I am tempted to look at my phone, then I will put it on silent and remind myself of how good it will feel to get an A in English and begin to study.”

Writers need to write a minimum of four sentences for each goal (see Fig. 1).
Fig. 1. “WOOP Goal Writing / Student Sample following Oettingen’s WOOP Method.” (Oettingen et al., 2010). from Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School.Class handout. 2021.
In 2013 a study of teachers asked their 5th graders to “Think about an important goal related to school work” (Duckworth et al., 2014). Then researchers measured GPA, school attendance, and school conduct. The teacher then taught the 5th graders the WOOP Method, and the results were inspiring. Each metric – GPA, attendance, and conduct – improved significantly overall for these 5th graders. Researchers also noted similar positive results when adults used the WOOP Method to help them achieve their goals for physical exercise (Stadler et al., 2009). With proper caution, teachers can then encourage students address more personal goals appropriate to write about in a school setting (i.e., organize my room, save an extra $50 this month, or work out five days a week).

When I first introduced WOOP goal writing to my students, some of them needed help crafting measurable Wish statements and Plan statements that could reasonably address their stated Obstacle. However, they quickly learned this writing process as they reflected on their monthly goal progress. Some reflection questions I assigned to students each month included: “On a scale of 0-100, to what extent did you achieve your goal? What strategies worked/did not work for you to progress with achieving this goal?” Periodically assigning WOOP goal writing tasks has been an invaluable way for me to stay up to date with my students’ current interests and thus has helped me to build better relationships with them. My students have written about increasing their Algebra grade by ten points, completing all homework assignments in Environmental Science class, breaking a personal record in track and field, getting along better with a sibling, or simply getting eight hours of sleep per night, as seen in Figure 1. Overall, my students have reacted enthusiastically to this assignment and have expressed appreciation for its immediate and practical application to their lives.

**Gratitude**

Over the past several decades, numerous studies have produced strong evidence that practicing gratitude can significantly improve one’s SWB, as documented by Summer Allen of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley (Allen, 2018). Seligman and colleagues (2005) found that SWB significantly increased up to 6 months after participants wrote a letter of gratitude to someone compared to their control group (Seligman et al., 2005). Teachers can use the same gratitude exercises from these studies to help reinforce literary techniques, critical thinking skills, writing structure/organization, and writing mechanics. I give students a simple template to follow for writing a letter of gratitude or composing a greeting card (see Fig. 2).
**How to Write a Meaningful Thank You Letter / Greeting Card**

**Directions:** Write a thank you letter and or format your letter into a greeting card of your design. Choose to write to someone you feel grateful towards but have not properly thanked. You can choose a family member, friend, neighbor, or faculty/staff member in your school (e.g., teacher, coach, custodian, cafeteria staff, security guard, counselor, nurse, etc.). You can email this letter, hand deliver it, or ask your teacher to deliver it to the recipient. The letter should be approximately 200-300 words long. Use the template below or research how to write a meaningful thank you letter/greeting card.

**Template:**

Today’s Date

Dear (Person’s Name),

**Introduction:**
I am writing today to thank you for (briefly mention why you are thankful for this person).

or

Happy or Congratulations (state the special occasion you are celebrating with this person)!

**Body:**
I am grateful for (describe specific examples). This was important to me because (describe specific reasons, explain how this help made you feel.) Without your help, I would have (describe the difficulty you would have experienced without their help). I know that you (describe the specific efforts, extra work, time, energy, etc., they sacrificed to help you). I have learned from you that (briefly mention what you learned from them).

In the future, I’m looking forward to (briefly mention what types of interactions you hope to have with this person in the future).

**Closing:**
(Yours truly, Sincerely, Warm wishes, etc.)

Sign or type your Full Name

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Fig. 2. “Gratitude Letter Template.” From Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 2021.
My students are generally more engaged when given this real-life writing task compared to traditional expository assignments. Very often, as students begin writing these letters in class, their demeanor suddenly changes. Many of my students immediately seem calmer, less anxious and exhibit fewer task avoidance behaviors. After several years of incorporating gratitude letter writing into my instruction, students have shared many stories with me of how happy their loved ones were to receive their letters and how rewarding it was to give them this thoughtful gift.

Further, researchers Emmons and McCullough’s 2003 study on gratitude journaling revealed that simply by keeping a weekly gratitude journal for ten weeks, writing about five things to be grateful for, participants experienced significant increases in SWB compared to the control group (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). English teachers can use this exact method or modify the concept of gratitude journals in many ways. A quick and easy way to introduce gratitude writing to students is to challenge students to see who can write down a quick gratitude list in a set amount of time (see Fig 3.). During this brief activity, my students often discover that they have much to be thankful for in their lives.

**Figure 3**

**THE 3 MINUTE 30 THANKFUL CHALLENGE!**

**Directions:** As fast as you can (you will have only 3 minutes), write down 30 specific things, people, places, accomplishments, and opportunities you are thankful for. TIP: You can also think of ideas that you are thankful did NOT happen to you but could have (i.e., slipped on the ice and hurt your leg).

**RULE #1:** Each item must be SPECIFIC: Example: don’t write “food” → write “Godiva chocolate.”

**RULE #2:** You can only write down five items max within the same category. Example: XM car Radio, seat belts, heated car seats, Ford Mustangs, and Minivans, but you cannot write anything else related to automobiles after that.

Understanding Literature Through the Science of Happiness

English Language Arts teachers can choose from an array of SWB strategies to integrate into their literary instruction. Other science-supported strategies to improve SWB include being outdoors in nature, getting quality sleep, valuing social connection and interpersonal relationships, understanding the complex connections between money and happiness, and engaging in meditation and physical exercise (Haden, 2022; Killingsworth, 2020; Roberts & Duong, 2014). Figures 4, 5, and 6 are examples of how to teach these strategies while enriching students’ understanding of characterization, themes, plot, character motivation, and the impact of the setting of major literary works.

In Figure 5, among other SWB strategies, students will likely discover that sleep deprivation can easily trigger depression (Roberts et al., 2014).

In Figure 6, The Great Gatsby example, students are likely to find information rooted in Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues’ finding that emphasized the benefits of prosocial purchases (Dunn et al., 2014). Students might also find evidence from the Killingworth (2020) study, which concluded that happiness increases as one’s income rises well beyond the previously researched $75,000 limit.

Figure 4

Character Relationships in Chinua Achebe’s novel Things Fall Apart

**Directions:** Read the article from Psychology Today entitled, *Why Positive Relationships are Needed for Emotional Health* by Douglas Labeir, Phd (Labeir, 2014). Then complete the Research Task and Writing Task. In the Writing Task, use evidence from the novel, the Labeir article, and your research to help support your claims. Use lateral reading to help assess the credibility of the sources and authors you find. You are also encouraged to modify the existing research question or generate your own with teacher approval.

Research Task: What can a teen do to improve their relationship with their parents?
Use lateral reading to help assess the credibility of the sources and authors you find.

Writing Task: What advice would you give Nwoye to improve his relationship with his father, Okonkwo?
Fig. 4. “Character Relationships in Chinua Achebe’s novel Things Fall Apart.” Adam Piccoli, English I, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 2021.

Fig. 5. “Character Development in Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein.” from Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 2021.

My high school students often comment that assignments like these help make these stories more understandable and relatable. Consequently, I have noticed that their writing becomes more analytical as they use their SWB research to delve deeper into character motivation, conflicts, and themes. My students are typically highly engaged in these tasks because they see the relevant, real-life application of the writing skills (i.e., writing a letter of advice to a friend). Consequently, our class discussions are filled with more active participation as students refer to their research while making empathetic connections to the characters’ emotional states.

**Use SWB Strategies With Caution and Moderation**

Mauss and colleagues have found some evidence to suggest that in some situations, emphasizing happiness too much can paradoxically cause a person to be less happy (Mauss et al., 2011). If someone focuses too much on improving their well-being, they might start to miss out on the enjoyments that come from the pursuit of
happiness (Mauss et al., 2011). When introducing these ELA strategies for SWB to students, teachers should provide students with choice and offer these happiness-driven assignments among other more traditional research and writing tasks. Other psychological researchers found that the social pressure to be happy could decrease one’s SWB as well (Dejonckheere et al., 2022). Therefore, when conducting these SWB lessons, teachers must avoid creating a class climate with too much so-called toxic positivity. In another study, Ford and colleagues found that cultural differences can influence how people prefer to pursue happiness (Ford et al., 2015). Teachers are encouraged to modify the sample activities presented here according to the individual needs of their students. Some professional development instructing teachers how to utilize these strategies best might be well worth the time and effort.

The Torch of Education

The ELA strategies to promote subjective well-being presented here are a humble attempt to address the colossal problem of improving student engagement. Carefully implementing a few SWB strategies may help teachers and students enjoy school a little more and increase learning achievements across curriculums. These ideas might even facilitate redefining educators’ role within this rapidly technologically advancing world. Artificial Intelligence and other innovations are poised to change our world in ways we cannot imagine. However, despite the seething cauldron of mysterious technologies that promise to improve our lives, we still struggle to find purpose in life. We still struggle to find meaning in life’s tragedies as we stumble after happiness on a dimly lit road. If we can pass this small torch of knowledge to students, their shadowy path toward happiness may become a little brighter. In doing so, we might even brighten our path toward happiness as well.

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ADAM PICCOLI is a secondary special education teacher of ELA who teaches at Pequannock Township High School in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. He believes in teaching students practical applications of ELA skills. Along with teaching social-emotional learning, he is also interested in teaching students how to have productive disagreements and how to utilize artificial intelligence in the classroom.
## A Post-Pandemic Perspective: Challenges, Choices, Alterations

**JOSEPH S. PIZZO**  
*Black River Middle School, Chester, NJ*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine upended</th>
<th>No screen time necessitated for connecting</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted, altered, amended</td>
<td>Hands raised, hopes elevated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pandemic-induced restructuring</td>
<td>A common plea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandated, not negotiated</td>
<td>A pleasing return to normalcy</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-person transformed into remote, into hybrid</td>
<td>Students in classrooms,</td>
</tr>
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<td>Asynchronous offerings, emotional distress</td>
<td>The teacher moving among learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional resources, roadblocks</td>
<td>Listening, collaborating, conferring, encouraging</td>
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<td>Presumed maturity, required resiliency, youthful energy</td>
<td>Supporting creativity, discussing writing options together</td>
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<tr>
<td>Replaced by separation, frustration, confusion</td>
<td>In proximity, not chatting electronically</td>
</tr>
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<td>Skill gaps, learning loss, lack of routine</td>
<td>Surges of energy, fusion forming synergy</td>
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<td>Presumption of focus, mental strength</td>
<td>Fashioning a new pedagogy</td>
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<td>Ennui replacing resilience</td>
<td>Shedding distance and despair</td>
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<td>Disruption replacing resourcefulness</td>
<td>Minimizing distraction, energizing instruction, eager minds</td>
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<td>Falling leaves signal change: A new school year blooms</td>
<td>A return to concentration, collaboration</td>
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<td>Filled with anticipated hope</td>
<td>Presence, focus, engagement, participation</td>
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<td>The need for consistency, a constancy, a vision</td>
<td>Challenges addressed</td>
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<td>Classes with students in person</td>
<td>With patience, with kindness,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not framed by distance, not packaged in a screen</td>
<td>With understanding, with reasonable pacing</td>
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<td>Daily discussions with voices generating signals of life</td>
<td>Challenges and choices</td>
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<td>Within one common space</td>
<td>For lessons, for skills, for routines</td>
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<td>Smiles, sighs, inquiries, “Aha” moments</td>
<td>For a simple return to normalcy</td>
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<td>No distance mandated for learning</td>
<td>Focus and perspective</td>
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<td>In a post-pandemic classroom</td>
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<td>Challenges, choices, alterations</td>
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JOSEPH S. PIZZO is a 7th-grade integrated language arts teacher at the Black River Middle School in Chester and an adjunct professor of writing at Centenary University in Hackettstown. In his 50th year of teaching middle school and 31st year at the university level, Joe constantly reinvents his best practices to stay current in his field while being a writer who teaches writing, a PD workshop provider, and a podcaster who features authors, middle level books, and issues ([https://www.youtube.com/@josephpizzo2357](https://www.youtube.com/@josephpizzo2357)). He can be reached at joseph.pizzo@chester-nj.org and on Twitter at @ProfJPizzo.
Writing Is a Process, Not a Product: Encouraging Student Engagement Through Self-Assessment

ERIN RILEY-LEPO AND KAYLA TEELING
The College of New Jersey and Mount Olive High School

Teaching writing to students is challenging. The qualities of good writing can be subjective for teachers and students, which may leave both asking: What really is good writing?

A Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, Donald Murray, once said of the art of teaching writing, “Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness.” While teachers typically value the final product most, we need to take a step back and contemplate how we can help students “glory in the unfinishedness” of their writing. Let’s face it. No piece of writing is truly ever finished. So why do teachers place so much emphasis on the final piece if the piece, ultimately, will never truly be final? In addition, not every student product will be the same. What is good for one, might not be good for another. To help students define good writing for themselves, let’s turn our attention to the writing process, wherein students and teachers can address the question: What really is good writing?

To allow for both teachers and students to understand what good writing really is, both need to play active roles within the learning environment. To meet students where they are and help them arrive at where they want to be, teachers must engage in mutual decisions with their students. Teachers need to decide how to allow freedom within the writing process, and students need to decide how to execute their own learning goals. It is within this mutual understanding that both students and teachers can define what good writing is.

In this theoretical essay, we—two high school English teachers1—present theories on student-regulated learning (SRL), formative assessment (FA), and, ultimately, self-assessment (SA). Then, we share how these theories inform our writing instruction. In our classes, we found that these practices have helped us reconsider our role in writing instruction and renewed our students’ interest in their writing process, as opposed to a “finished” essay or the teacher’s final grade.

Theory

Our writing instruction is guided by theories such as SRL, FA, and SA. Below, we will provide a brief overview of these theories.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Students’ SRL happens when they set their own goals and then purposefully work to achieve them (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020; Zimmerman, 2000), and, therefore, SRL may impact student success within a classroom (Dignath & Buttner, 2008; Panadero et al., 2018). This occurs through “cognitive, affective, and behavioral practices” that move students closer to goals; however, these practices are not linear, but, instead, occur in a cyclical or iterative fashion (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). Students’ SRL may be bolstered by FA practices that involve constructive feedback, as this feedback allows for students to make informed future

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1 Since writing this piece, Erin Riley-Lepo has changed careers and is now a teacher educator at The College of New Jersey.
instructional decisions (Hattie & Timperely, 2007).

**Formative Assessment (FA)**

In the late 1990s, Black and Wiliam (1998) acknowledged a shift away from summative assessment, increasing focus on the importance of FA. Formative assessment occurs when teachers assign, assess, and provide feedback on student work as they are learning, which may increase student motivation and achievement (McMillian & Hearn, 2009).

The benefits of FA are myriad. It helps students better understand what they are learning, determines how they will know if they are learning, and aids them in determining the next steps in their learning (Panadero et al., 2018). One effective way for students to assess their own learning and progress is through peer and SA (Lee et al., 2020; Noonan & Duncan, 2005).

**Self-Assessment (SA)**

Self-assessment is the ability of students to seek feedback, reflect on said feedback, and then make judgments about their own learning (Noonan & Duncan, 2005; Yan & Carless, 2022). The benefits of SA are reportedly multiple; it can help students develop self-regulation skills (Shepard et al., 2020), identify and articulate learning targets, and provide feedback, which can prompt revision of work and facilitate learning (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020).

The theories of student self-regulation and the FA practices described above inform our interactive, unfinished writing practices. We enacted these practices in our English classrooms with the intention of helping our students set their own writing goals and make strides to achieve them.

**Practices**

Utilizing research-based practices focused on FA, particularly SA, we embrace a new writing pedagogy. Below are practices that we use within our classroom to help students recognize the benefits of becoming their own evaluator.

**Teacher Feedback**

The self in SA might mislead some to think that this practice happens in isolation. In truth, other relevant people providing feedback (e.g., teachers, peers) aids in students’ SA capabilities (Yan & Carless, 2022). Therefore, particularly at the opening of the school year, we model what productive writing feedback should look like. Some examples of the way we give feedback as students are writing are through whole group debriefs and individual conferences on writing assignments. After we return papers with feedback on them, we create a Cheat Sheet of common writing errors we see throughout the class’ writing. Students take this Cheat Sheet with them to use on revisions to their current writing assignment and on their upcoming writing assignments (see fig. 1). The Cheat Sheet in Figure 1 was provided to students during a whole class debrief. The feedback was for a rhetorical analysis essay; the common errors are divided into grammar and usage concerns and content and style concerns.

We also make a point to conference with each student individually. Although we acknowledge that individual conferences are time consuming, we want to emphasize that SA and peer-assessment are not inherent skills; they must be taught. Individual conferences are a time to model how to provide feedback about writing using rubrics, checklists, and domain-specific language. Students report that they feel more comfortable self-assessing later in the year.
because of the scaffolded lessons on giving and receiving feedback.

We would also like to note that this process is iterative, as writing is never truly finished. Often, students are provided with a chance to rewrite their work after our whole group and individual conferences.

**Analysis Essay Cheat Sheet**

**Grammar and Usage Common Concerns**

1. Passive Voice
   - No - This effect *is accomplished* by Chavez when he….
   - Yes - Chavez *accomplishes* this by…
2. Correlative conjunction
   - When you use “Not only,” you must also use “but also.”
   - Ex. *Not only* does Chavez use emotionally-charged words, *but he also* uses allusions to well-known nonviolent leaders.
3. Pronoun clarity
   - No - Chavez references King’s accomplishments by saying that *he* was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement.
   - Yes - Chavez references King’s accomplishments by saying that *King* was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement.

**Content and Style Concerns**

1. The audience was farm workers (unionized ones, specifically). Many missed the opportunity to address this audience or misidentified the audience.
2. Many addressed the Rhetorical Situation in their openings, but did not revisit it in their closings. Although formulaic, please do so.

Fig. 1. Analysis essay cheat sheet

**Checklist Reflection**

Self-created checklists and rubrics allow students to establish their own expectations throughout the writing process (see fig. 2). The Evaluative Checklist in Figure 2 was created as a whole class to evaluate an author’s purpose in literature. Students were struggling with how to evaluate the quality of how an author establishes a purpose in a text, so together they created this checklist to aid them as a step-by-step guide to reference while writing. While this checklist was more beneficial to create as a class, checklists can certainly be individualized to meet each student’s progress. It is unrealistic to think that all students are always at the same point in their writing journey. To embrace SA during the writing process, encouraging students to acknowledge their progress not only allows them to self-regulate, but also puts them in the position to evaluate their current progress and establish expectations of where they would like to be at their next checkpoint.

Research indicates that SA is defined in part by having students “identify strategies that improve their understanding and skills” (McMillan & Hearn, 2009). Students can do this through creating their own checklists and rubrics at various points during the writing process. Given that most students are new to this style of learning, we initially provide particular criteria (aligned with
standards) for students to choose from to add to their own checklists. Students have the opportunity to make their own decisions about which criteria to use as they evaluate their current progress and set expectations for further improvement within their writing.

By individualizing the writing process for each student, they are able to work through the process at their own pace. This provides students with a sense of agency and control over their unique writing process, allowing them to glory in the unfinished work as they progress to their own understanding of good writing.

### The Pact: Author’s Purpose: Evaluative Checklist

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State a claim about the Author’s Purpose</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Describe, Explain, Express, Persuade, Inform, Entertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support claim with textual evidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Provide <strong>textual evidence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o <strong>Explain the connection</strong> between the textual evidence and Author’s Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State a claim about whether or not the authors conveyed their purpose effectively/ineffectively</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support claim with textual evidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Example techniques: Good word choice, connections, repetition, theme, specific topic/main idea, summarizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Example techniques in <em>The Pact</em>: How did the authors convey their purpose to you? Details about life, personal experiences (struggles), diction (word choice), showed faults/strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Provide <strong>textual evidence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o <strong>Explain the connection</strong> between the textual evidence and their effectiveness/ineffectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Make a concluding statement to explain overall how and why</strong> the authors were able to establish their purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o <strong>Writer</strong>: All points connect and relate back to purpose, have a solid idea or prior knowledge of what to convey, instill emotions in your readers, being clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o <strong>Reader</strong>: Be able to make inferences, think like the author (put yourself in author’s shoes), details to visualize, context clues</td>
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Fig. 2. Class-created author’s purpose evaluative paragraph checklist

### Deadlines

The dreaded word: deadline. Every student’s worst nightmare. However, with SA, it does not have to be. Students’ SRL happens when they set their own goals and then purposefully work to achieve them (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020; Zimmerman, 2000). The use of flexible deadlines allows for students to evaluate when they are ready to turn in the writing that they have deemed good.

At the beginning of an assignment with students, we work through how to establish...
learning goals within a fixed time frame. Students have the freedom to evaluate their own progress with flexible deadlines, but we also are realistic and set final deadlines where all students are finished with an assignment. While a final deadline does signal the end of a writing piece, students have the time before that final deadline to work at their own pace. However, through the flexibility of being able to turn in work when ready, students regulate their performance through evaluation, which can activate students’ cognitive and motivational capacities (“Using Formative Assessment to Influence Self- and Co-regulated Learning” 4).

Being able to think about their thinking offers students the opportunity to try what works best for them and learn from their mistakes and successes. In this self-regulated environment, students can explore their own strengths and weaknesses in order to produce their best writing prior to a final deadline. In spite of the final deadline, students feel more autonomy to work at their own pace if the deadlines are flexible.

**Peer Feedback**

Although the focus in our classrooms has been on developing students' ability to self-assess, it is important to also acknowledge the role of peer assessment to aid students in continuing learning and strengthening their ability to self-assess. In our classes, students engage in co-regulated learning (Panadero et al., 2016), in which they give suggestions on each other’s writing with the goal of providing formative feedback for them to consider. However, it is important to note that this type of peer assessment is dependent on the quality of the feedback students are providing (Panadero et al., 2016), which is why we begin the year engaging in individual teacher and student conferences to model how to provide useful feedback. Students also use both the assignment rubrics and their checklists as the basis of their feedback. While these practices do not guarantee high-quality peer feedback, we found that students provided more meaningful and specific feedback for their peers that they can use as a sounding board to self-assess their own work.

Additionally, we encourage students to ask their peers for feedback on specific portions of their writing (e.g., thesis statement, quote integration, transitions), which aids students in achieving their specific writing goals, as opposed to the more general goals identified in the checklists and rubrics. We call these Conversation Starters (see figs. 3 and 4). The examples in figures 3 and 4 were oriented to a specific part of the writing process. Prior to having students engage in peer review, students were surveyed about what they felt they were struggling with during writing sessions based on the writing piece’s rubric. Using that feedback, these teacher-designed sentence stems were created to engage students in meaningful peer feedback by providing them with specific areas of focus in which to receive help on improving. Not only do we see students receiving the feedback and reflecting and revising their work, but we also feel that the students providing the feedback understand the requirements of each writing assignment more clearly and are, therefore, better able to self-assess when the time comes.
Start the conversation by asking your peer to focus on a specific aspect of your content that you would like feedback on. If you cannot think of one, then try using one of these these sentence stems to help you:

- I am concerned about my introduction because…can you look at…
- I am worried that my argument in body paragraph 1 is unclear…can you look at…
- I don’t think my topic sentences are connected to my thesis…can you look at…
- I don’t think I organize my conclusions well…can you look at…
- I am uncertain if my transitions are effective…can you make sure that there is a flow to my essay?
- I am not sure my voice is clear…can you please look at…

Fig. 3. Peer feedback: Conversation starters - content

Start the conversation by asking your peer to focus on a specific aspect of your grammar that you would like feedback on. If you cannot think of one, then try using one of these these sentence stems to help you:

- I am concerned about my spelling…please focus on…
- I am worried about my sentence structure…I think I use too many simple sentences…please look at…
- I forget to capitalize proper nouns…please focus on where I need to…
- I don’t think I stay in the same tense while writing…please focus on…
- I do not always add commas where they belong…please look at…

Figure 4. Peer Feedback: Conversation Starters - Grammar

Conclusion
To empower our students to set their own writing goals and work towards them in our classrooms, we, as teachers, need to ask ourselves: Do the decisions we make enable our students to make decisions without us?” (Kittle & Gallagher, 2021). While grades may be what students value most, they also need to embrace the reality of their current performance where good writing lives. But how do we do this? We go beyond providing students with agency by letting them write in their authentic voice and by allowing them to choose their own topics by utilizing student SA within the writing process, reinvigorating our writing teaching experiences and opening new doors for students to be engaged within writing instruction. We can, in addition, provide more authentic agency to our students, making our instruction of writing unique to every individual student through the use of SA.

While the art of teaching writing is challenging, we want to reiterate the importance of peer and SA as an attainable FA practice. By having students engage in SA through the writing process, not only are they able to make their own decisions, but they are also able to assess and evaluate their progress and growth through their own expectations, and that is what makes for good writing. We need to allow students to “glory in its unfinishedness.”
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ERIN RILEY-LEPO is a Visiting Assistant Professor who teaches at The College of New Jersey. Before accepting a position in higher education, she was a secondary English Language Arts teacher for 23 years. Her research is focused on equitable classroom assessment and researcher-practitioner partnerships. She can be contacted at rileylee@tcnj.edu.

KAYLA TEELING is a secondary English Language Arts educator who teaches at Mount Olive High School in New Jersey. Kayla engages in implementing research-based practices to keep current with pedagogical approaches that create a student-centered focus within the learning environment. She can be reached at kayla.teeling@motsd.org.
Creating a Productive ELA Classroom Environment
C. Schack, H. Wells, and G. Pickle
Eastern Kentucky University

A preservice teacher, Caroline Schack has observed five cooperating teachers over three and a half years of clinical observations. Each educator handled creating and maintaining a productive classroom environment differently; some teachers took a more hands-off approach (which often created an inconsistent and counter-productive environment), while others structured the class physically and procedurally around productivity (which fostered a healthy environment for students to productively learn). In his first year of teaching high school English, Hagan Wells discovered quickly the importance of the learning environment. After working as a long-term substitute for a semester, he was hired and excited to have his own classes. While the room itself was well organized and decorated to be inviting and welcoming, he learned that one of the most important aspects of the environment was keeping students focused and engaged. Finally, when Andy Pickle started his position as a creative writing teacher in early January, the class was in a state of disarray. The previous teacher left in October, due to a medical emergency, and the class had been taught by a multitude of substitute teachers until winter break. As a result, students perceived this class as “a write off,” requiring no engagement or effort. Pickle sought to help students understand the class’s purpose: to supplement lost writing skills throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare for future writing tasks.

Even though our teaching situations as practicing and pre-service teachers are vastly different, we each discovered that our common goal as educators is to promote students’ intellectual and socioemotional growth. Through implementing strategies, such as writing process pedagogy, flipped classrooms, and restorative practices, teachers can revive student productivity in the ELA classroom and significantly improve interactions within the learning environment.

Focusing on the Writing Process
Throughout her clinical experiences, Schack observed different teachers with unique approaches to writing. However, she frequently noticed an all too familiar lack of productivity during writing assignments. Several cooperating teachers only assigned high-stakes writing assignments and often received lower-quality papers from reluctant student writers. One reason students develop unproductive writing habits stems from the weight of large writing assignments and whether educators pay more attention to the final product or the student’s writing process (Anson 217). Because of the pressure of a large grade, students seemed unwilling to try new writing strategies, so they did not have the opportunity to develop their writing skills and style.

In contrast, one of her cooperating teachers frequently assigned smaller, low-stakes writing assignments designed to encourage students to focus on their writing skills. During these assignments, Schack circled the room as the students wrote. She saw that students showed more enthusiasm and engagement in their work. The students
enjoyed these assignments because they could easily experiment with different methods of writing without worrying about their grade; this experimentation allowed students to figure out what writing methods work best for them, which significantly improved the quality of their writing.

The second cooperating teacher Schack describes teaches with writing process pedagogy. Essentially, privileging the writing process fosters productivity by encouraging students to pay closer attention to the way they write rather than the quality of their final product. This shift in focus helps students become stronger writers because they concentrate more on learning and less on their work’s quality or their teacher’s reaction to their work (Anson 216). Even though students worry less about quality, writing process pedagogy does not necessarily lower student writing quality; it changes how the whole classroom approaches writing. When teachers use writing process pedagogy, instruction is centered on student growth. Conversely, when teachers emphasize the weight of the final product, they risk teaching students that the final product is more important than the skills the students develop through completing assignments.

Writing process pedagogy also guides students towards discovering different writing strategies. Teachers using writing process pedagogy often provide students with opportunities, such as peer reviews, to see how their peers write (Anson 224). Teachers can also encourage productivity by assigning daily writing prompts, reviewing different prewriting strategies, and guiding students through customizing their writing methods. All of these methods of implementing writing process pedagogy provide students with small opportunities to increase their autonomy; eventually, students may develop strong independent learning skills and be able to try more productive, autodidactic learning techniques such as flipped instruction.

Flipping Classrooms

Merging classroom management strategies with cultivating ELA skills helps produce an optimal classroom environment tailored to help students succeed in English. One such blending of classroom management with ELA instruction occurs in a flipped classroom model to improve students’ performance and interest in writing. In “Investing the Flipped Classroom Model in a High School Writing Course: Action Research to Impact Student Writing Achievement and Engagement,” Elizabeth Ann Florence and Tammi Kolski examine how this modern approach to instruction could be implemented effectively to impact the quality of students’ writing. Defined as “instruction requires students to access the initial content or lecture at home while completing hands-on, interactive activities at school,” the students enjoyed working at their own pace with the material outside of class and demonstrated stronger proficiency in the writing skills they were learning through the flipped model (Florence and Kolski 1042).

The utilization of a flipped classroom model not only makes students more productive and take ownership of their learning, but it opens the door for ELA teachers to be more hands-on with students and allows for students to collaborate in a deeper, more meaningful way. Wells first incorporated this approach in their journalism class. During their introductory unit for news writing, Wells posted the Google Slides presentation with commentary to Google Classroom and instructed students to go through the presentation and take notes on it before coming to class. This allowed his students to
spend class time analyzing examples of good news writing along with extending workshop time for students to write their own news stories and get feedback from their peers. The majority of end products from this unit earned higher grades than the following news writing unit that used more classroom lectures, a traditional instructional delivery model. As a first-year teacher, this successful use of a newer classroom management strategy not only allowed Wells to make his writing instruction more beneficial for students, but also showed him that educators must be willing to adapt with the changes in technology and society to get students back on board and engaged.

**Restoring Productivity**

Just as educators must be willing to adapt with technology, we must be willing to adapt to utilize new forms of classroom management. Classroom management (or a lack thereof) can be one of the largest contributors to productive or wasted instructional time, as well as barriers to productive learning. While the simplest answer for many teachers is to remove the “problem” student, this is counterproductive to what we actually want to accomplish. Removing the student from the classroom is the last solution educators should pursue because it reduces instructional time. Instead, implementing “restorative practices” encourages students to reflect metacognitively on instructional opportunities, while stressing empathy and understanding.

“Restorative practices” are rooted in “restorative justice, a way of looking at criminal justice that focuses on repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than on punishing offenders” (Costello, et al. 6).

In the ELA classroom, a restorative circle can be used to redirect students and reinforce classroom expectations. When initial redirection, loss of behavioral points, and calls home did not work, Pickle decided to try out the “restorative circles” strategy. When students circled up and were asked about how the actions of the few made them feel, they admitted that, rather than feeling amused as the offenders wished, they felt irritated or angry at those students because they were interrupting their time to focus and complete work. Through these conversations, students became part of the solution rather than singled out. They realized how their behaviors cause disruption in the learning environment and worked to correct their actions. “Restorative practices” like this circle can be part of daily affirmations or bellringer assignments. Through including reflective and restorative prompts (e.g.: “Think back on a time when you have hurt someone emotionally, or physically, how could you remedy this situation? Does your remedy include an apology and/or an understanding of the other person’s point of view and how they were wronged? Did your solution offer a resolution that benefited both parties?”) into everyday work and potentially larger assignments, it is possible that students can begin to see many situations wherein using restorative practices could change their perspective, allowing them a chance to grow. ELA courses, focused on reading, writing, and oral communication practices, provide the space for students to be able to learn to articulate their thoughts and feelings and produce work that reflects that newfound ability and level of understanding.

Whether a class uses writing process pedagogy, flips classrooms, or promotes self-reflective behavior, these strategies have the potential to improve productivity
in the classroom. Each of these not only put the students first, but they establish an environment that fosters self-advocacy, student autonomy, and communication. As practicing and pre-service ELA teachers, we see the effects of productive and unproductive environments every day. To give our students the best chances for success, we are invested in creating and maintaining a productive environment for students to grow. If we can help students grow socially, emotionally, and academically, then we are preparing the next generation for success.

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In the modern age, the best thing we can do for our students is to have them be the drivers of discussion and give them true ownership over classroom learning. “Discussion is the primary way that reading knowledge, meanings, concepts, interpretations, and understandings are passed around and learned. The richer the discussion, the greater likelihood that subject matter will be understood, integrated with prior knowledge, recalled, and applied in the future” (Blanton et. al. 2007). I had heard of Socratic Seminars back when I first started teaching. However, I tried them and wasn’t a fan. I also hate when I try something in class and my students remark, “Ms. Taylor, we did this last year!” Each time they make such a proclamation, my soul dies just a bit more. So instead, I modeled my format for a classroom discussion based on what I enjoyed as a student; I stole this ‘Great Ideas’ idea. During my freshman year of college, I took a class entitled “Great Ideas Seminar,” and it was amazing. The classroom was small, and the layout was a conference room. The students all sat around the two professors, and we talked about literature for the entire hour. Each person was responsible for doing the reading and coming to class prepared to talk. Before this class, we read the short text They Say, I Say, which is fantastic for teaching accountable talk and how to participate in a discussion. Though this book is specifically geared toward writing persuasively, it merits being used in an open discussion forum. Many of the claims posed by the authors of They Say, I Say mirror the work of Martha Nussbaum, whose stance is that education aids in social democracy with the premise of teaching students to be active participants in their democracy. Similarly, in the third edition of They Say, I Say, the preface reads: “Since reading and writing are deeply reciprocal activities, students who learn to make the rhetorical moves ... become more adept at identifying these same moves.... And if we are right that effective arguments are always in dialogue with other arguments, then it follows that to understand the types of challenging texts assigned in college, students need to identify the views to which those texts are responding” (Birkenstein, Graff, 2014). Essentially, Graff and Birkenstein are telling students to be constant questioners. I remembered how significant this was in my schooling and tried to come up with a way to use this in my classroom. I loved the opportunity to be an active participant in the learning process, as opposed to sitting in rows and being lectured.

Thus, my version of the Great Ideas Seminar began taking shape. First, I talk to my kids about what a discussion seminar looks like. We arrange all the desks into one giant circle; this way everyone is included. The kids have a copy of the text and a notebook/post-it or whatever is most comfortable for them to write on, so they can jot things down that they want to respond to or pull a quote or idea they thought of while reading. At the beginning, the kids create name signs of what they like to be called, since it is key in a discussion to refer to someone by name. As Kylene Beers says about this seemingly insignificant detail of students knowing each other by name, “the student is made to feel as if he or she certainly belongs in that room, as does everyone else” (Beers, 2002). This prompts students to acknowledge that they were
listening and is a way to affirm each other’s ideas. Eventually, they won’t need the signs, but it is good to start with them. Also, I have the kids rip up post-its into three strips. This was a modification I made later. The kids hang the three strips off the front of their desks. Once they have an opportunity to share, they remove a strip. This helps the class to visualize who hasn’t yet had a chance to speak.

This sparked a new idea I’ve yet to implement with my students: different ways of engagement. I cannot assume that my classroom is one of comfort for all students; I work hard to create a classroom community, but some students take longer to open up than others. Later, in that same chapter by Beers, I came across her step-by-step guide to allow our learners to feel more comfortable, by mulling over their ideas, sharing in small groups, then participating with the larger community. With this, I decided to do a first discussion trial run with my students in their small table groups. This process can span across a series of classes or within a singular class period, depending on the number of students and their base knowledge of discussion. This would also be a great opportunity to show them how to track their conversation the same way I do, so they know the different ways to contribute. In chapter thirteen of Beer’s When Kids Can’t Read, she explains that her students start in small groups for roughly ten minutes explaining the novel to each other. By having the students first share out their ideas in small groups, with the questions posted for them a day in advance to prepare, I believe we can get them to truly engage authentically in the conversation.

However, does it truly follow Rosenblatt’s aesthetic stance of experiencing a text if it is a requirement? Upon reflection, I thought of something a colleague of mine did. She had these makeshift passes she would use for tests and quizzes, so I thought I could apply that same idea to my seminars. Each student at the beginning of the year would receive three passes to sit out of the seminar and instead complete a written response to the questions - no questions asked! I thought this would allow my students who needed some time before entering the discussion the liberty to sit back and watch beforehand to ease their comfort. Also, being “affectionate and interested in cultivating the children’s emotional capacities along with their capacity for criticism” (Nussbaum, 2011) is key to being a good teacher. Especially in this modern age where social-emotional learning is at the forefront for our students, we don’t know on any given day what they may be experiencing. If I want the students to truly enjoy and engage with the conversations, then the discussion itself cannot become a compulsory activity. After all, “reading is a social process” (Beers, 2002).

Then, we talk about the prep that goes into that day to prepare for our seminar. The students are responsible for reading whatever it is we’re discussing, be it a few chapters, an article, a short story, etc. We talk about contributing to the whole, and how you need to show respect to your peers by partaking. We talk about the keys of body language to show respect for those talking, even if we don’t always agree with them. Again, the idea is really about creating a climate of community to invite more students to take ownership of their reading and participation. Then, a day or two before the seminar, the kids are all responsible for drafting a question. I usually assign something like this: “Read the first three chapters of ____. On Dotstorming, write one question per chapter you are dying to discuss.”

As part of this preparation, we discuss how to create open-ended questions, and
there is a full lesson wherein I teach students to differentiate between open and closed questions. I usually take a fun text and have them draft questions in table groups on post-its, and then have them categorize their post-its in a T-Chart. This provides them with the foundation for creating questions. Such examples could be something such as taking the question of, “Did Icarus die?” and transforming that into “Infer what could have happened to Icarus” or even, “What could be an alternate ending to the story if Icarus was found?” I even walked them through Bloom’s Taxonomy a bit to talk about pushing our thinking beyond just “How would you feel?” This way, they are given the sentence starter words to help them craft a higher-level question. I have the students become the crafters of the questions because, “by emphasizing each person's active voice, we also promote a culture of accountability. When people see their ideas as their responsibility, they are more likely, too, to see their deeds as their responsibility” (Nussbaum, 2016). I have students take ownership of the ideas discussed; therefore, it is no longer a teacher-mandated activity, rather they are willing participants engaging in the Socratic practice.

Lastly, in preparation, I have them dissect each other’s questioning by anonymously putting them on the board; we talk about what makes for a successful open-ended question. To start, sometimes I will also add questions to theirs so we can scrutinize effective questions. But I have also done the reverse. I have pulled up closed questions like, “Why does Jonas leave the community?” and we talk as a class on how to make that question a discussion question, instead of just a question that can be answered directly by reading the book. We revise our questions and discuss whether something sounds more like a test question or can be easily answered with yes/no, versus something where multiple people have different responses. Sometimes the students need more modeling to help them transition into creating the open-ended questions discussed in our introductory activity, using sentence starters when needed.

Now that the class has established the norms of types of questions and what to expect when we get to class, it’s time to figure out what it is they’re going to be discussing during our seminar. As I mentioned before, I teach the kids how to write questions. This is because no matter how great my questions might be, I am writing them from the scope of a teacher, and that might not be what the kids want to talk about. Therefore, I have them write the questions. DotStorming, an online collaborative brainstorming tool, also has the great feature of being able to vote on tiles. There are similar forums for this process such as Padlet or a Google Form, but in essence, it is a way to collect student responses and allow the class to look through a series of questions. The kids vote on their favorite question per chapter (they can’t vote for themselves), and then those favorites are the questions we answer. I used to reveal the questions the day of the discussion, but after talking with kids, they said that made them a little nervous. With “the right support, they [students] really can be successful” (Beers, 2002, 262), so, now I announce the questions the day before our discussion, either in class or on GoogleClassroom. This way, kids can prepare thoughts of what they may want to say, therefore alleviating the stress of more shy students and allowing more ambitious students to search for additional outside research — this then differentiates the lesson by default!

On the day of our discussion, once the chairs and such are prepped, I post the
questions for the class to see on the board. We debrief the rules and points, then the kids start. I give them the entire class period for the three questions (or however we are structuring the number of questions for the day) and guide them with the skills to advance the conversation to the next question on their own. I tell them that once they feel like they’ve been repeating a point over and over, they can ask to move on by politely interjecting in the group. If they agree, they move on to the next question. Each question does not need the same amount of time. It is up to the students to self-pace. This ties in with Nussbaum’s claim that “Young children are active, questioning beings whose capacity to probe and inquire ought to be respected and further developed” (Nussbaum, 2016). Some questions may just incite more debate than others, and that is okay!

Concerning tracking and assessing the discussion, I keep a “tracking circle” color-coded by various points. I catalog the discussion by creating a massive circle with the students’ names, then I follow the discussion with lines. Here is an example:

![Tracking Circle](image)

**Fig. 1.** Tracking circle for class discussion.

I would replace “Student 1,” etc. with each student’s name; I mirror the circle to look exactly like the circle in class that I am observing, so it is easy to follow. As shown in Fig. 1, I started with Student 4, who then “passed” to Student 1, then Student 3, Student 2, back to Student 1, to Student 4, and ended at Student 2. With this data so far, I can see that all students except Student 3 have spoken twice so far. I can also see patterns of who the students call on next, so I can make sure everyone has an equal opportunity. With multiple questions, I keep the same circle but use different colored pens to accentuate the different questions (see fig. 2).
As you can see, I overlaid the two questions, but it is easy enough to follow with the color coding. The kids get excited to look at the finished product once I start using fun colors. What I’ll notate now is that in totality, Students 1, 2, and 3 have spoken thrice, whereas Student 2 has spoken four times. That’s one portion of the point system. Students earn points for each time they share. I also award a point to the student whose question has been chosen, so they can start the day with points before the discussion even begins. This also aids students in various types of participation; they can talk frequently, or just one or two times. The points are evaluative of what they add to the conversation, not just how often they share, which is done through the awarding of bonus points. Bonus points are given for such instances as using cited textual evidence, by making connections outside of class (“we’re learning about X in Social Studies and it relates by _____”), and by using a person’s name specifically and recapping their point using *They Say/I Say* sentence frames (“I agree with _____ when they said ____”). This also stresses to students the idea of quality over quantity. Sure, they could talk five times during the discussion, or they could talk twice, and each time use evidence and build on their peer’s idea and maybe make a connection and still earn plenty of marks. It’s all about how they are contributing to the discussion. Afterward, I always hang up the circle drawings on our discussion wall, so the students can check in with themselves. Some try to get a lot of points; some just want to see if they are improving. A few of my sweet little ones in the past have checked to see who didn’t talk much, so they can make it a point to call on that person next time. I put little colored hash marks next to the student's names to denote this (see fig. 3).
Fig. 3. Tracking circle documenting class discussion of two questions and bonus questions.

I like to think that this system of discussion truly allows for students to be a part of an aesthetic discussion, as they are living through the text in their analysis as opposed to answering multiple-choice questions or something of the like through an efferent stance, coined by Louise Rosenblatt, wherein students, focus solely on the information in a text. Overall, it is a fantastic activity that truly puts the kids in the driver's seat of connecting to their reading and leading open discussions with each other, and at the end creates a tangible, clear map of student voices and contributions to reflect upon and grow with as the class progresses.

Works Cited


MORGAN TAYLOR is an Instructional Technology Facilitator for Hamilton Township School District who believes in the power of technology to enhance and support student learning & the education profession. She can be reached at mpt2136@tc.columbia.edu
Elegy for the Fall(en)

NICOLE WARCHOL
David Brearley Middle/High School

For Irma Garcia, Eva Mireles, & every educator taken by gun violence

She gathers them in her arms
like leaves. They pile into her
embrace.

But her body wasn’t intended to be
a shield against this
assault.

NICOLE WARCHOL is an ELA educator, who teaches both middle and high school students at David Brearley Middle/High School in Kenilworth, NJ. She believes all students can be empowered through creative play with language. She can be contacted at nicolemwarchol@gmail.com.