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Cover Page Footnote

To ensure transparency, we disclose that Lauren Zucker, the first author of this manuscript, is also an editor of this journal. To mitigate any potential conflict of interest, several measures were implemented beyond the standard double-blind peer review process. In accordance with NJEJ policy, the authors' names, including both in-text and reference citations, were removed prior to submission. Rachel Besharat Mann, the third author, served as the sole point of contact for the submission. When the submission was received, Lauren Zucker informed the co-editors of her personal acquaintance with the author (without revealing her co-authorship), and a co-editor, Susan Chenelle, volunteered to oversee the peer review to ensure impartiality. The manuscript underwent a double-blind review by external reviewers. Only after the external reviewers' recommendation for publication and a co-editor's acceptance of the manuscript were the authors' identities revealed. Prior to publication, the co-editors conferred to evaluate the process described above and confirmed that a fully impartial peer review had occurred.

Cultivating Joy Through Digital Pleasure Reading: Whose Pleasure Is It Anyway?

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Many English teachers have fond memories of devouring classics and participating in high-level discussions in college seminars led by professors who thoroughly enjoyed deconstructing texts. Love of literature drew many of us to the profession, and we try to replicate our own joyful experiences with reading in our classrooms. For some students, it works. However, many students simply do not connect with the same texts that bring us pleasure. If we focus only—or perhaps even predominantly—on reading that is inaccessible because it is not relevant to their lives, we risk alienating students and contributing to what Kelly Gallagher calls “readicide.” Furthermore, as Gallagher points out, English teachers have a bad habit of taking texts that students might find pleasurable and killing their potential for joy with reading guides, quizzes, and teacher-centered activities. Katherine Marsh made a similar claim in a recent *Atlantic* article, “Why Kids Aren’t Falling in Love With Reading,” arguing that due to the influence of standardized testing, teachers across the grade levels have prioritized close reading activities over those that might generate more pleasure for students.

In short, we might be killing our students’ joy of reading in one of two ways: (1) we focus on texts that we love (or that

someone who wrote the curriculum loved), rather than on texts that teens find fulfilling, and (2) we make reading “schoolish” (Whitney, p. 55). If our goal is to engage our students in reading that brings pleasure, perhaps we should start by asking, “whose pleasure is it that a particular text invokes?”

Let’s reflect for a moment on our own reading experiences. While many English teachers love a particular classic tome, canonical author, or literary time period, there are others among us who prefer nonfiction. Throughout our own education, we were likely assigned texts that felt like a slog (how many of us actually enjoyed *The Iliad*?), and we abandoned them for something more pleasurable. In our current lives, it’s likely that many of us read short-form and/or digital texts for pleasure, and some of us may even prefer writing to reading. Even as English majors who teach English, our tastes are varied.

So why is it that when given a choice, we often choose a whole-class text, perhaps one that we ourselves love, and try to inspire joy in every student? Whose pleasure are we actually attending to? English is one of many subjects secondary students engage with during the school day, and very few of the students who enter our classrooms will go on to become English majors, lovers of classic literature. Our role as English

teachers is to prepare adolescents for the literacies they will need beyond the classroom. Our goal is to instill a love of text and learning. To that end, we need to broaden our view of classroom text and value the kinds of real-world texts that bring many teens pleasure. Increasingly, teens read digitally and in many forms. As English teachers, we can cultivate their love of reading in digital spaces, even as we help them to become critical consumers, close readers, and ethical users of digital texts.

Why Digital Texts for Pleasure?

By digital texts, we mean the range of short-, mid-, and longform texts that teens read on screens (Turner and Hicks). These texts may resemble print-based books (e.g., an e-book version of a print book), or they may include elements such as audio, images, video, hyperlinks, and interactive features. In a study of teens' reading practices, Turner and Hicks found that teens read longform texts (e.g., digital books, multimedia journalism), mid-form texts (e.g., blogs, articles, fan-fiction), and short-form texts (e.g., social media posts, messages, search results). Zucker found that teens were more likely to read mid- and short-form texts when reading online for both academic and personal purposes.

Reading for pleasure is often defined in the literature as voluntary reading practices across a range of texts (Cremin). While it can be argued that reading pleasure is a valuable end in and of itself, there's a history of research that correlates pleasure reading with academic achievement (Krashen; Torppa et al.). Building on this body of work, Wilhelm and Smith studied teens' out-of-school pleasure reading in genres not typically endorsed by schools (e.g., dystopian fiction, romance, horror) and found that teen readers experienced four distinct kinds of pleasure from their reading: "the pleasure of play, intellectual pleasure,

social pleasure, and the pleasure of work, both functional work and psychological inner work" (*Reading Unbound* p. 25). To cultivate lifelong reading habits, Wilhelm and Smith argue that teachers should centralize pleasure ("Two Principles"). In this vein, when we conceptualize the ways in which students read for pleasure, we would be remiss to ignore the vast majority of digital reading practices that engage youth on mass scales, including social media texts and digital fiction (Anderson, Faverio, and Gottfried). Through digital texts, we have the opportunity to tap into the varied pleasures that Wilhelm and Smith uncovered.

We know that student choice increases reading motivation (Guthrie and Wigfield). In fact, many adolescents report lower engagement with reading that may result from a disconnect between their interests and the texts assigned in class (Webber et al.). Thus, many English teachers have shifted their curriculum away from whole-class novels towards more student-selected choice texts as independent reading books or literature circle books. Giving our students the autonomy to choose their own texts while providing support to make informed choices can help them select texts that will bring them pleasure.

When they are learning in digital spaces, teens are able to seek out and interact with fellow readers online who share their interests (Ito et al.). In our studies of digital reading, we have found that teens adopted "connected reading" practices, finding new texts of interest to them, engaging with those texts in meaningful ways, and then sharing texts they valued with other readers (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). In fact, recent work has drawn upon literature and reading communities through digital spaces, including Jerasa and Buffone's exploration of BookTok, an online reading community through TikTok, and its parallels to

traditional reading circles often cultivated in ELA classrooms. Through this space, teens are able to create content related to texts on- and offline and engage in digital literacy practices, including discussion, that deepen their understanding of texts while allowing them to explore the digital spaces that permeate their lives.

The features and flexibility of digital texts can make reading more pleasurable. For example, accessibility features such as text-to-speech options, complexity or reading level adjustments, and display options can make a digital text more legible and/or comprehensible than a print version. In our conversations with teens about their digital reading, high school students have often described their appreciation for digital text features such as the ability to search within a text, the ease of accessing a dictionary, and/or the benefits of digital annotation tools such as highlighting or comments (Turner et al.; Zucker).

While changing the curriculum is not a small task, curricular standards may even lend themselves to this type of shift. English curricula may have traditionally been organized around texts or literary time periods or movements; skill-based standards allow English teachers to address those skills through a variety of text types, including digital texts.

Stretching Students' Comfort Zones

As English teachers, we have a responsibility to strengthen comprehension skills across a variety of texts and equip students with the skills they need to navigate society upon graduation. Through exposure to multiple texts, we may also foster a genuine love of reading and learning. One frequently overlooked way this can be accomplished is through the study of digital texts for pleasure. Though teens encounter a range of digital texts in their out-of-school lives, exposure in the classroom

may broaden their interests and introduce them to new ideas, increasing their ability to navigate these texts critically and efficiently.

Many educators and parents de-value digital texts, particularly short-form texts found through social media or news bytes, raising concerns about diminished literacy skills and increased screen time. And indeed, digital reading can amount to mindless scrolling, as Nicholas Carr famously argued in *The Shallows* and research has concluded (Annisette and Lafreniere), but it can also present opportunities for teachers to help their students engage more mindfully (Zucker; Turner and Hicks; Hicks). We know that teens read a lot of short-form texts online and are not necessarily evaluating those texts critically (Turner and Hicks; Besharat Mann). Without support for using these texts, shallow reading may increase as students scroll through texts quickly without engaging deeply or critically evaluating. Digital reading provides ample teaching opportunities to help students read more critically, think about misinformation, and notice algorithms. Authentic practice with these skills may help to strengthen deeper reading through short form texts, particularly when coupled with longer form texts in the classroom.

When readers see texts they encounter and engage with outside of school in the classroom, teachers can build upon these texts and challenge students with higher level, more complex texts. Readers are motivated by a certain degree of challenge (Guthrie and Wigfield), but if a text is too difficult, the student might be overwhelmed. Teachers can help students find their reading “sweet spot” with texts that are not too easy and not too hard. For example, we have the “five-finger” method to help young children evaluate the difficulty of a text: (“hold up a finger each time you encounter a word that’s too difficult; if you encounter more than five

words on a page, that book is probably too hard”). How can we tell when a digital text is too challenging? Vocabulary is one measure of difficulty, but there are many others. We need explicit instructional strategies to help teen readers metacognitively monitor their digital reading skills and self-select digital texts that are “just right.” We offer a few examples of how this might look in an ELA classroom.

Independent Reading via Podcasts

In Lauren Zucker’s high school English classroom, students select a podcast to listen to for an independent reading unit. Lauren first introduces students to the genre of the podcast (having learned that most of her students over the years have never listened to a podcast), and then previews a [curated selection](#) of podcasts, including many that have been recommended by Lauren’s former students. This contemporary “book talk” allows students to think about what topics might interest them. As their first assignment, they listen to the first 15-minutes of three different self-selected podcasts as a sampling before selecting one as their final choice.

Since Lauren may not be familiar with all of the choices and topics, she communicates the details of the assignment in advance, and enlists parents to support their child in their selection of an interesting and appropriate podcast, just as she does when students choose their own books. When a student is finished listening to a particular podcast—when they’ve completed all of the episodes, or when it is time to move on—Lauren requires that students’ subsequent choice reflect a different genre, to encourage students to broaden their interests. In other words, if they listened to *Serial* (which remains the top choice among Lauren’s students), they cannot listen to another true crime podcast next.

Ultimately, though, the true goal of this unit is to expose students to a new type of text that they will (hopefully) find pleasurable that might fit into their modern, adult reading lives. When they reflect on this learning, many of Lauren’s students have said that they appreciated the flexibility of a podcast and enjoyed listening while working out, waiting for the bus, or completing other homework.

Some may argue that listening to a podcast is not “real reading.” In our own research, we found that a majority of our students do not consider any of their reading of digital texts or participation in digital spaces to be “real reading” (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). But research shows that audiobooks and podcasts can promote reading interest and engagement (Best). Despite concerns that “ear reading” an audiobook is inferior to print reading, a recent study demonstrated that listening to an audiobook versus reading the same book in print activated similar regions of the brain (Deniz). Commenting on this study, *School Library Journal* stated, “it means readers worried about taking the easy way out with audiobooks can stop feeling guilty” (Yorio).

Fostering Inquiry With Interest-Based Reading

Jill Stedronsky’s middle school students read constantly. Sometimes Jill selects whole-class texts—book chapters, digital articles, videos—and models her own reading before asking her students to dig in. They use a “sparks and starts” journal to document their thinking and response as they read. They use “book thought” journals to capture their response to self-selected books, which they are free to abandon at any time. This reading leads them to inquiry questions, which they explore over the course of the school year, following paths of interest and finding texts that fuel their learning (Stedronsky).

Jill purposefully shares different kinds of texts—TedTalks, podcasts, blogs, infographics—to demonstrate that reading happens in all kinds of spaces and with all kinds of texts. Jill selects texts that can serve as mentor texts for her students, who gather inspiration from these texts and use them to spark their own writing about topics of interest to them. Her students, in turn, find texts that inspire them to keep reading. Jill values all of the texts they bring to the classroom as possibilities for inquiry fueled by passion. They find joy in their reading because it is authentic to their learning and their growth as humans (Stedronsky and Turner).

Making Space for Passion Projects

Both Ivelisse Ramos (high school) and Emilie Jones (middle school), who teach English Language Arts in an urban context, have incorporated “passion projects” (Jones, et al., 44) as full units. Students have the opportunity to research their own interests based on the question, “What am I passionate about? What are problems I want to solve? What do I want to create?” (45). They find that students investigate a variety of topics, reading many different kinds of texts along the way. Most importantly, students shared that the work was “fun” (p. 48).

Kristen Hawley Turner’s daughter, Megan, also found joy in reading when her history teacher adopted “20 percent time” (Gonzalez). One class period per week, Megan was allowed to explore her interests. She started reading about audio and video production and created a series of tutorials related to what she learned. Her reading continued well beyond the class and into the next year, when she wrote, recorded, produced, and distributed her own music album. Four years after her teacher allowed her to read what brought her pleasure, she continues to read daily to improve her craft

and to connect with others who have similar interests.

Inviting Conversation and Exploration in College Using Digital Texts

Higher education poses a unique space to incorporate digital reading practices, particularly as many universities incorporate digital classroom formats including Moodle and Blackboard to curate classroom resources. Rachel Besharat Mann’s undergraduate students engage with a mixture of digital and traditional texts that complement each other both in skill usage and content. Each week students immerse themselves in a particular topic and are provided seminal readings to ground their foundational understanding. Rachel invites students to explore digital commentary on topical ideas to help them gain understanding through multiple perspectives and to bring these voices into class for discussion. For example, in a unit exploring the impact of social media and adolescent mental health, Rachel had students search for commentary across the internet from a variety of sources they typically interact with (including social media itself) to read and bring to class for analysis. Students are encouraged to read user comments and public discourse. The parameters for this exploration were intentionally broad to allow students to use their platforms in ways they wanted to and to place value on texts they encounter regularly.

This type of learning activity gives autonomy to learners and entrusts them to navigate digital spaces authentically, lending value to their digital literacy practices while acknowledging the importance of digital discourse. Students are encouraged to engage in their traditional practices, including spaces where they communicate with others, to center their voices and drive discussion in the classroom. The aim here is to provide an opportunity for joy in this

acknowledgement—giving credence to the practices learners already engage in within the academic context. Students have remarked that these readings feel refreshing compared to denser course texts and appreciate the independence in finding texts they find enjoyable. Students are also encouraged to work together, facilitating the social aspect of reading and including their joyful practices in the conceptualization of reading for class. Social interaction and discussion around relevant texts can foster an appreciation and love for reading, creating a space for joy in typical academic reading tasks (Merga).

How to Incorporate Digital Pleasure Reading

We are not advocating for teachers to do away with print-based texts. And we acknowledge that many teachers are required to cover a certain number or list of texts in a given school year. However, we do see many missed opportunities and places where digital texts can fit naturally into a rich, diverse, and pleasurable English Language Arts curriculum.

For example, units on media, information, and/or digital literacy are natural places to integrate a variety of digital texts. While teachers may look to ELA resources such as Marchetti and O’Dell’s *A Teacher’s Guide to Mentor Texts* to select digital texts, we can draw upon our students’ literacies and cultures by inviting them to share their own digital texts, both as mentor texts and as recommendations for peers. Through exposure to a wide variety of texts, students may identify new text forms and genres to read for pleasure, both in and out of the classroom.

Research and/or inquiry projects that allow students to follow their passions, rather than teacher-designed questions or topics, can lend themselves to the inclusion of a variety of digital texts, including

infographics, social media posts, and online videos. Just as teachers might require students to incorporate at least one print source, teachers might also require students to seek out a variety of digital text types related to topics they care about. Content area teachers can model the ways in which they may use digital texts to find information about topics of interest. This scaffold gives learners a sound model for navigating digital spaces while acknowledging the legitimacy of digital texts.

When we picture sustained silent reading, we probably still envision a room of students holding physical books. But as described in the examples above, independent reading can be a time to invite students to read digital texts for pleasure, including those outside of the genres they typically gravitate towards. Educators should take care not to over-police the use of these texts to allow for authentic use of digital spaces and student autonomy.

Avoid Schoolifying Digital Texts

When we invite students to read texts they would select for pleasure outside of our classrooms, we must be careful not to appropriate those texts for activities that undermine that pleasure. We can provide the time and space for pleasure reading to be an end in and of itself.

Many English teachers have walked this fine line by asking students to analyze their favorite song lyrics as poetry. We can spark pleasure by asking students to share a text that is meaningful to them and engage in some light analysis—perhaps selecting and discussing a favorite quote—but we risk snuffing out pleasure if our instructions are too technical or burdensome. Our best course of action is to call attention to the kinds of reading that students do outside of class and value that reading as part of what

we do in class by asking students to reflect on when, how, and why they read.

If we want to engage students in reflective work around their digital pleasure reading, we can ask questions that gently prompt students to practice metacognitive monitoring by thinking about the choices they make as they select and interact with digital texts. Questions such as:

- Where did you find this text?
- Why did you select it?
- What do you think about it? How do you feel when you are reading it, and why?
- In what ways has this text influenced you as a person?
- How would you describe this text to someone else?
- Would you recommend this text to someone else? Why or why not?
- Will you engage with other kinds of texts like this one? Why or why not?
- Where or how might you find similar texts that will bring you joy?

There is still a place in our curriculum for close reading and critical analysis (the types of activities often associated with whole-class texts), but teachers can find their own whole-class digital texts to model and practice those literacy skills. If we are choosing only canonical literature for these whole-class moments, we aren't choosing the kinds of texts that bring the most people joy.

Added Benefits of Digital Pleasure Reading

When we invite students to read digital texts for pleasure in a classroom environment, they are likely to reap some added benefits. For example, we might open up new genres and modes for students to find things that they enjoy reading. As in the podcast classroom example, Lauren's students may realize that the podcast is a genre they enjoy and want to return to in the

future. Through students' personal exploration of digital texts, and from witnessing the selections of their peers, students can broaden their reading tastes.

Ongoing practice with digital reading also can boost students' digital literacy skills. Researchers have found that digital reading requires additional literacy skills beyond those required of print texts (Leu et al.) In our research, we found that while many texts are available in both print and digital format, teen readers have context-specific preferences when given a choice between these formats (Zucker and Turner). Teens must practice reading flexibly across contexts and can grow more comfortable reading and annotating in a digital format when given direct instruction for doing so (Hicks, et al.). English teachers can help students cultivate both comfort and pleasure across print and digital contexts.

Exploration of digital texts allows learners to explore online discourse surrounding historical concepts and current events. Recent research has pointed to the contentious spaces that often exist online, particularly through comments and interactions about different topics, that our students are faced with daily (Ortega-Sánchez and Alonso; Garcia and Mirra). Authentic practice within these spaces and student-led analysis of online discourse can help to create life-long learners who engage in these spaces safely and efficiently.

According to Naomi Baron, we are currently engaged in a "new great debate in reading," where we are forced to grapple with the idea of whether text medium — audio, digital, paper, and beyond—matters in reading. Though this debate has implications for a wide range of groups, it is particularly pertinent to English teachers who must decide how to address the proliferation of texts available through non-traditional modalities while meeting the

learning needs of their students.

Finding Pleasure (Again) in English Language Arts

We became English teachers because English Language Arts brings us pleasure. And while we are not training an army of future English majors or English teachers, it is a worthwhile goal to create a learning environment that our students find pleasurable. Creating space for students to develop their interests and interact with texts that bring them joy can help educators to instill a lasting love of learning and text. One way to accomplish this is by making space for digital pleasure reading. Encouraging these practices can expand the definition of reading and legitimate texts for our students and allow them to fully explore the increasingly digital world around them.

This is not to say that the study of classic texts or contemporary novels cannot ignite curiosity, pose a worthwhile challenge, or invite readers to think about the world in a new way. However, digital texts also have the potential to invoke these benefits, and by including them, we might promote more pleasure for a greater number of our students while still supporting their literacy development. It is our hope that through the incorporation of a wide variety of texts for targeted skill instruction and simply for pleasure's sake, English Language Arts class can be pleasurable for all.

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