Connecting Students and Literature to the Real World: Motivation, Choosing Literature and Literature and the Real World

Literature is almost always seen as an art form. It is something that is meant to take you away from the real world for a while. Literature is a worldview from another perspective, place, time, or world. The language used in this literature is just a way to pass on information to others. So, literature is just kind of a time capsule of information being passed down for years and years. It is a more solid and concrete form of oral information. It can last forever if we are careful with it. Showing that this, sometimes old, information is useful or relevant to our students can be difficult for teachers in the English language arts classroom.

Sometimes seeing and showing the rewards of reading is challenging. Not all literature has its relevance splayed out in the first few pages. Some pieces may not have any relevance to certain students immediately. However, this shouldn't deter you from choosing literature and using tactics to help you and your students choose literature that your class thinks is helpful to everyone. If you truly feel a piece of information is relevant to students' lives, then it more than likely will be. If students feel that a piece of literature is relevant to their lives, then you are doing your job right! Making them see and believe that literature is useful and interesting, however, can be very challenging for teachers. Teaching, like literature, is art.

Teaching is an art and a science. It requires complexity, not simplicity. It requires deepcontent knowledge as well as... 'local knowledge'—in our case knowledge of the students in the classroom and the community. (Christensen, Reading, Writing, 163)

There are a ton of things you can do to help yourself choose “good” literature for your students and help your students relate it to their own world. Motivation is a key to helping students understand how literature can relate to their world. If they don’t want to see something in the reading, they aren’t going to dig meaning out of it by forcing them to. Here are a few ways to get students motivated about the literature you want them to get through. Even if you are required to get through specific texts, these can still be applicable.

- Motivation

Have them choose the reading.

People enjoy making their own choices. Students will feel respected if you let them choose their own reading. Even if you have a “theme” for your unit, have them choose from a selected list of literature, or let them make suggestions to you from books following the same theme. When you select the literature for them to choose from, you should pay attention to your students, the conditions of their lives, and the events unfolding in the world around them (Chritensen, Reading, Writing, 164). Selecting literature that is relevant to them is crucial for their motivation.

If you absolutely have to work within some restrictions, such as assigned books or a certain period of literature, try to wiggle as much as possible. Still let students decide certain texts. Another good idea is have self-selected reading and require them to read a certain amount time out of their selected text every night. Allow them to read assigned books for their timed reading at night when you have to get through it. Allowing students to find out what they like and allowing them to not like a book or a type of book can really boost their confidence as a reader. Lausé states how she feels about the plight of classrooms in the US today. She says, “Selecting and reading books in school should not be a luxury, but it certainly feels like it to students accustomed to traditional English classes.” (Lausé 25). This is, unfortunately, often true in many classrooms across the United States. As teachers, we have the ability and responsibility to
slowly change how and what literature is taught, not only in our classroom but, across the United States.

Using a workshop to get students to read what they want and figure out what they like can boost their motivation to read and break away from “sticking to the script” that is standard English curriculum and canon in the United States. Even though some students may not know what type of literature they like immediately, they do have the ability to figure out what they like. “…While students may enter my classroom without skills, they don’t enter my classroom without knowledge or talent or potential.” (Christensen, Reading Writing, 165). This quote by Christensen shows how students may not always be the best readers or the most well-read students, but all of them have the potential to become a better reader. They all have the potential to figure out what type of reading they like and to choose literature that they find relevant and motivating to themselves.

Self-selected reading can be an easy grade for you to manage and for your students to accomplish. If you set a goal for a certain amount of time for nightly or weekly reading for students to do, they will probably do it. You could easily assess if they are reading by having them write about the reading in a journal or blog or you could just discuss the literature with them. Self-selected reading in the classroom will boost students motivation because they can choose what they want to read, and can read at their own pace. For example, not every student will like The Scarlet Letter, even if you are required to get through it. But you can still have students have their own self-selected reading on the side for them to get through as well. You can explain to your students that you are required to get through a certain text, and have them decide what they like and dislike about it, without forcing them to see what lessons they can pull from it.

Don’t make the reading a burden, but don’t make it too light either.

Students have a lot going on in their life. If you force them to read something they don’t immediately see as useful, they probably won’t bother reading it. However, if you expect too little out of your students, they won’t be challenged and still might not do the work you ask them to. A lot of students won’t do it because they see it as mind numbing busy work. Work that isn’t useful for them, just a grade in the book. Most of your students want a challenge. They don’t want to sit there and do busywork and not learn anything. They want something interesting and fun, not boring and arduous. If you challenge them just enough, the students will do the work. If you challenge them too little, they will just skip over it. If you challenge them too much, they will struggle.

You know you are expecting just the right amount when everyone is complaining a bit about the work; it’s like the body when it aches because you used new muscles, you strained them. (Burke and Krajicek 34)

Finding that balance between manageable but challenging can be extremely difficult. Especially since that balance is also different for every child. You may have to ask yourself, “If I require this of the whole class, will it challenge everyone equally? Do I need to adjust what I am doing to challenge everyone the right amount?” This can be a difficult balancing act and you may need to adjust your curriculum to get it just right.

You need to find a good middle ground of in class reading and outside of class reading, even if the outside is much lighter than the in class. You need to know what is going on with the students’ lives and compensate for that. Maybe you assign 20 minutes of reading a night, but if someone can’t do it one night, they can do 40 another night. You have to give your students leeway, because they are just students. They have a lot going on with other classes, and with their own lives. They are just people like everyone else. You can’t expect too much out of everyone or they will never accomplish anything. However, they are still students, and they should be given a challenge. Challenges will help them learn. If they aren’t being challenged they probably aren’t learning a whole lot in the classroom.

Linda Rief offers several tips on promoting reading including:

Give students…A balance of easy-to-read, just right, and challenging books. By reading books aloud to the students, we can choose books that are more difficult and thought-provoking because in the ensuing class discussions and written responses, we can help guide kids through layers of meaning, ideas, or innuendoes they may not pick up on their own. (Rief 51)

Giving students a wide variety of easy to challenging books can boost their confidence as readers as well as motivate them to want to read more often. One of our jobs as English teachers is to create life-long readers and writers. If we can keep from making reading seem like a hassle to students, more like an academic chore than something we can do to enrich our lives, we can hook them onto reading for a lifetime.

Read to them and let them read to each other.

Reading to students can give them an example of how an active reader will read through a text. It can also make a text more interesting by giving voices to characters and emotions behind those voices. If you read out-loud to them, it might make a daunting book seem less challenging and more readable. Even if a student says they do not like to read, most students enjoy hearing a story (Beers 290).

Reading aloud with expression is entertaining and puts the students into the story. If you are acting out a scene with your voice, you will be entertaining to your students. If you do this you will also be instilling interest in the story for your students as well as actually getting parts of a book read through. They may take the book home and read it on their own just to see what happens to those characters that you were acting out earlier. This can put real people and thoughts behind these characters in a story and make it fun for students.

Another form of reading aloud in the classroom could be audio-books. Audio books can usually be found online for pretty cheap. Sometimes the author will even be the one who reads the book. Sometimes the book is narrated with sound effects and multiple voice actors and actresses to help develop characters. These can be a useful tool to help students get into the literature and get more interested in the story. This can be a good tool to help students follow along in the book while listening to a fluent story.

With many pieces of literature, there is a screenplay counterpart. While this may help them get a feel for what is going on in a piece of
Teaching for Joy 60)

us compete against each other, fostered an “I’m better than you,” appeared fair, but made us internalize the fault. (Christensen,

tests] caused us to feel nervous, make us feel stupid, conditioned us to testing and to being told what to do without questioning, made

classroom summarizes how she felt after taking a test:

Giving these kinds of tests can lead to the idea that the teacher is the one source of true information, when really the teacher is just a

thoughts they have on the piece of paper. If they do this they will not only have things to reflect on and think about the text, but they will

Another way to help students become better readers is to help them actively read. A good way to help them do this is to have them

assessing each student’s issues could become time consuming as a teacher. However, these small issues with each student could

They are like little advertisements for the book and may motivate some students to read them. This is also a good way to see what type of texts students may be interested in. If a few students think the

...if you read aloud on a consistent basis, ask students to summarize what was read the day before, stop occasionally to discuss the

with students because it allows them to better comprehend what they are reading. With better comprehension comes better understanding

With all this reading aloud, it can be a good chance for students to actively participate in the class. Students will want to read aloud and

can be a good chance to model what active readers do while reading out loud to students in class. Whether reading it aloud, listening to audio-books, or watching the reading time to pause and ask questions of the text. What is going on here? Why did that happen? What do I think is going to happen next? If you model active reading to your students, they will begin to understand how to actively read better and more efficiently. Kylen Beers mentions that too often secondary teachers forget the value of reading aloud to students. She then goes on to explain how secondary teachers can use reading aloud to model good reading to students.

Make your students confident readers by helping them read better.

Students who often say they hate reading are also students who struggle to read. It is important to make sure if you want to motivate

Assessing each student’s issues could become time consuming as a teacher. However, these small issues with each student could

Another way to help students become better readers is to help them actively read. A good way to help them do this is to have them

Don’t require tests just to make sure they read.

While this can be a motivator for some students, it can make some students lose trust and respect in you and in their education. If you

can become a teachable moment for the entire class. If one student is struggling with one area of the text, maybe you could take that and

With all this reading aloud, it can be a good chance for students to actively participate in the class. Students will want to read aloud and

These feelings can be frustrating for many students, and that is not a good way to make your students feel after reading. Tests will probably not motivate students to read the text. Students can read a summary on any website and get the information they need to regurgitate onto the test, and probably still pass with a decent grade. That is not what we want to test for in our students. We want to see if they understood what the author was trying to do. We want to make sure they are connecting the literature to their lives and world. Certain tests are only going to do the opposite.

There are a ton of other useful ways to assess students’ completion of the text and comprehension. Discussion is one way to make sure they read, and to further their understanding of the text. A good way to start a discussion in the classroom is to have them free write after they have completed the text, perhaps suggest writing a few questions they have or things they want to say about it. Then have someone read what they have written and allow other students to answer or ask other questions. You will really see which students have and have not read by the questions they ask. You can also check to see if they read by how, and if, they answer other students’ questions. However, sometimes students are shy or sneaky and this may not be a fool-proof system to evaluate on. But, it is more helpful to the students than a test that they have to sit down and complete.

Help them connect the literature to their own writing.

For students, the best examples for writing come from looking at other people’s writing. As a teacher you should be using pieces of writing from a myriad of different authors as an example for how they could write something. This helps show the students that there is a person behind each piece of writing. It can help the students see that they are writers just like the people behind the books. Writing and reading are deeply connected. Readers are better writers and writers are better readers (Kittle 68). Since reading and writing have this deep interconnectedness, a student who understands what they are reading will attempt to mimic that type of writing style. That mimicking can improve the students’ chances of becoming better writers from what they are reading. This can lead to a deeper understanding of what they are reading if they are also better writers. Burke explains it like this:

A curriculum consisting of…different texts necessitates significant changes in other areas, most notably writing, since the study of how texts work invites the study of how they are made (Burke 35)

If students are writing about what they are reading, they can easily ask questions of the text by writing down their thoughts. By writing down what they are thinking about the text, they may comprehend the text better as well as become better readers who can answer the questions they have about a story themselves. Kittle explains:

We know we need students to write about literature because writing about it improves their reading. We need deep readers. They will likely learn and understand more about their reading when they write (Kittle 152)

This deep reading and understanding of the text is what we, as teachers, strive for. We want to connect our students to literature in a way that they understand and comprehend. If they don’t understand the text they are reading, they are not going to be able to connect the literature to the real world. And if they don’t write about what they are reading, they are not going to have a deeper understanding of the text.

Writing is an integral part of the reading process. If students write about what they are reading, they will get a better grasp of what is happening in the literature. If students read more literature, they will continue to write more often and better. Both of these are what we are trying to accomplish in the English classroom. If we accomplish either of these with most of our students, we are doing our job as educators.

Let your students collaborate.

Literature shouldn’t be a one person thing. Similarly to reading aloud, collaboration in literature can help students get into the literature and connect it to their lives. There are many techniques for allowing students to collaborate with their friends and fellow students. They could discuss the literature after they have finished reading, or even talk about the literature while they are getting through it. They could also blog about works they are reading or have read and share it online with their classmates or the entire world. One of my favorite ideas for collaborative reading and discussion is the literature circle. Readwritethink.org gives an instructional guide for students on how a literature circle could be run. This could easily be copied and handed out to students to get a better understanding of what they will be doing.

Literature Circle Process

1. Choose one of the available texts to read.
2. I’ll arrange the class in literature circle groups, based upon book choice.
3. First Literature Circle Meeting
   • Decide how much of the text to read and which role each of you will fill during the next meeting.
   • Make sure you have a copy of the correct role sheet.
Having a safe and comfortable classroom is a hugely overlooked and hugely important issue for students in the classroom. Safety can mean one of several things. It can mean that students feel physically safe in the classroom. Make sure students are aware that you will stop anything before it escalates to violence of any sort. Safety can also mean mental safety. You and your students are not going to make fun of anyone for any reason. If students do create any mental harm there will be severe consequences. Both of these kinds of safety can lead to real and honest sharing of work and feelings that they have created. If students fear they will be made fun of, they may not share whatever they think or have created. Maybe make a rule in your classroom, “What is shared in the classroom, stays in the classroom.” You could enforce this by making it part of their grade.

Other ways to get students collaborating on literature is to have them do group projects after they read. Students love doing fun stuff. Especially if they feel that it isn’t completely academic work. With that in mind, you could set different group projects at the end of a book or other piece of literature, and have them share it with the rest of the class. It doesn’t have to be completely academic. Sometimes group projects can be a lot more fun than working on your own in a classroom. You get to collaborate and it makes less work for each student in the group. They can also throw around ideas and brainstorm so they have many different ways to take a project and to finish it.

It doesn’t always have to be a piece of writing after they read something. They can create an art project, or a poem, or a video, or even act out a scene from a piece of literature they have read. It can be funny or silly or serious, but they will be learning. Doing a group project afterwards will not only help them enjoy the text more, but it will also help them comprehend what was happening in the literature. It will help them connect what they have read to their real life and to other students in a collaborative way.

Get parents involved, if you can.

Parental involvement is a key part in many aspects of a child’s life. If a parent hates reading and doesn’t read to their child, that child will likely also not like to read. This creates a cycle of non-readers. But, if we can show parents how important it is that students can read, and enjoy reading, it may break the cycle and can help students (and maybe parents!) become better, more motivated readers. Linda Rief tells about her struggles growing up as a reading neglected child:

Growing up, I was seldom read to, rarely introduced to books and authors, and helpless at finding books on my own. I owned few books. Through high school I read Cliffs Notes because I felt I wouldn’t know the answers to the test simply by reading the book. I don’t want these things to happen for kids. (Rief 55)

Those young years are immensely important for children and reading to come together. If they don’t make that connection at those years, it can be difficult to create a connection between student and reading once they hit middle- and high-school. However, if we involve the parents in this reading relationship, maybe parents can get their children more motivated about reading and show that reading can be fun and is an important aspect of life. While this advice may seem more appropriate for younger grades, it can also apply to upper-level students as well. If a parent hears that a student is reading or writing well, that student may become more confident in their reading. If you help a struggling student to become a better reader, and the parent learns about it, they will probably talk to their child about it. This can be beneficial for the parent, but also the student. Boosting confidence is a big issue with reading. If all the student ever hears is negativity about what they can do, they will only think they can do things poorly. But, if they get some positive feedback about what they are good at (and every student is good at something), or what they are improving on, that can be a big confidence booster for that student.
Comfort is another issue in the classroom. If students aren’t comfortable, they can easily get distracted from what they are reading. If students are distracted, they aren’t going to have the best comprehension levels. Even though it sounds unconventional, perhaps bring a couch or bean-bag chairs into your classroom. Let them lay on the floor while reading. Allow students to get in whatever comfortable position they want to as long as it helps them read. If it is an option, maybe use tables and chairs rather than uncomfortable classroom desks. Desks can be uncomfortable and you can’t really adjust them if the students want to. Desks also tend to take up much more room than tables and chairs. A set of tables and chairs can be moved around in a ton of different ways. You can completely move all the tables out of the way and leave only the chairs if you are having a discussion. Or if you are doing group projects, students can just get up and move to a table where they can all meet, rather than pushing desks all around the room. Little things like desks can greatly distract students from learning if all they are thinking about is when they can finally get out of this uncomfortable classroom.

Another aspect of comfort is noise. Limiting noise when students are silently reading seems obvious. Close the door, make sure nobody is talking, etc. But no noise can sometimes be just as distracting as a lot of noise. If possible, maybe have a fan in the classroom to create some white noise when it is time for sustained silent reading. This will not only help students from getting distracted from all of those outside noises, but it can also help relax the students and put them in a mood to read. If all they can hear is a clicking clock or someone tapping their foot in an otherwise silent room, they will probably get distracted. Those little things can become huge noises when there is no background noise present. A fan or even light classical music can remedy those distractions pretty easily.

- Literature and the Real World

Motivating students to actually read the material is one of the major parts of connecting students with the literature and the literature to the real world. The next step is to actually make the connection between the literature and the real world. If the students can’t see a piece of literature as something realistic or relevant, they aren’t going to care what is going on within it. If they aren’t interested they won’t make any connections with the literature. How students read and what they do after they finish reading is just as important as getting them to read in the first place.

Discussion should be just as important as the reading.

This is a huge part of the interaction between the reader and the text. If students don’t ask questions of the text, they will never get more out of the book than when they just finished reading it. But, if they continue to discuss the book with other students, the teacher, or even with other people on the internet, they will connect the literature with the world around them. When students discuss the literature, they are making the connection between the real world and the literature they are consuming.

There are a lot of ways to “discuss” literature. A good way to incorporate technology and literature would be to have your students blog about what they have written. Perhaps have their blog open only to other students, perhaps to the whole world. I am sure there are pros and cons to each, and you should discuss that with your students before doing it. With a blog, students could write about whatever they feel about the literature they are reading. Whether it was good or bad, why they feel that way, questions they have about it, or other topics surrounding the literature. Other students who are reading the same thing, from the same class or different, could comment on those posts and add to the discussion.

Another helpful way to discuss literature is to make it clear that you want students to have their own opinions about literature. If your students think that they are supposed to share the same opinion as you about literature, they may change what they really think to match what you think. That isn’t helpful for them. Perhaps you could even have students mock debate their views about a piece of literature. While this can be dangerous if it gets out of hand, if carefully monitored it can be a helpful tool to help students discuss and share what they feel about certain topics and it can also show that it is alright to have different opinions than someone else, including the teacher. When students discuss literature, they are really strengthening the bonds between what the literature is saying and what is going on in the real world.

I look for literature that helps us clarify our own lives and the choices we make. I select pieces that provoke us to think big thoughts, to argue about ideas that matter, to look at our lives and our choices, to help us understand why things are the way they are and to imagine how they could be different. (Christensen, Reading, Writing, 165)

Good pieces of literature should get students to ask questions about the literature and their life. These questions can be discussed in class, on a blog, at home, at a friend’s house, pretty much anywhere they want to talk about it. These discussions will ask the student to put themselves into the shoes of the characters. Were the decisions the characters made good or bad? Would you have made that decision? What would you have done differently? These are all good questions to ask of your students if they aren’t already discussing this amongst themselves and their friends.

In the end, discussion is the key to unlocking the full potential of literature in the classroom. Without a rich discussion after finishing a text, all of the information students get out of a piece of literature will be pretty much basic stuff. But literature with a discussion after reading it can show all sorts of different levels that a text contains and ideas that are in that piece of work.

Bring the real world to the literature.

Sometimes this can mean go actually visit the places and people described in the literature you are going over. A field trip to a place
that an author writes about or is from can immerse your students into the writing that the author has created. Seeing the physical side of any literature can be an eye opening experience. This experience can really show the students the “real world” side of the literature.

While it may be impossible for students to go to faraway places to see things that are in books they have read; you could tell them about texts that take place near where they live or in the same area as your school. If some students read it, they may take the initiative to go see what they are reading about. If enough students read about it, it could be a good chance to take a field trip and really see what is going on in the literature.

Seeing something in the literature doesn’t always have to be an exact location. Are they reading a story about nature? Take them to a national or state park. Get them thinking like the author and it could build a great connection between the literature, author, students, and the real world. Getting students out into these places is a good time to have them think like the author. Maybe even have them write a few thoughts down while there.

Visiting a place is even easier now than ever with the advent of Google Earth and other similar programs. You could literally take your students around the world to nearly any location they are reading about. Are they reading a story about India? You could take Google Earth and display it on a big screen and take the class on a field trip through the story they are reading. Many places that are too expensive or too far to go to can easily be accessed by Google Earth. There are even street level views of many places. People can also add personal photos of specific places on the Earth that they would like to share with other people. Your students can experience nearly any place in the world without leaving the classroom using this technology. While it may be more fun and exciting to go there in person, sometimes Google Earth can be just as useful at connecting the literature to the real world.

Talk to the author.

If students want a full grasp on the literature they are reading, maybe it’s possible to talk to the author. Talking to the author doesn’t always have to be as difficult as it sounds. Sometimes it’s as simple as looking at an interview about the piece of work the author gave, or looking at the author’s biography. Getting to know the author in one way or another makes the words seem less like some rare gem that took millions of years to make and more like a human beings piece of work. However, if the author is alive it is sometimes possible to talk to them cheaply and personally. Talking to the author can even be possible sometimes even for free or pretty cheap via Skype or other technological media. There are many ways to get behind the literature and see the real person who created it.

Many bookstores in larger areas will have authors come and read excerpts from their books, take questions, and talk to fans about their literature and themselves. This can be a cheap and exciting way for students to see, meet, and maybe even talk to an author of something they have read.

In the article Ways to Join the Living Conversation about Young Adult Literature, the author Jennifer Buehler examines different websites that students and teachers can explore to get a feel of the books and the authors.

Author websites also allow readers to discover the insightful and provocative things authors themselves have said about their lives and novels. Some authors provide these insights through special commentary posted on the website.” (Buehler 27)

Author websites can be like a behind the scenes look at what they are doing and sometimes even the processes behind their writing or explanations for their work. “These extras bring the messiness of the writing process into view, providing readers with inside information into aspects of a story…” (Buehler 28) Websites are a very cheap and very helpful look into what authors are currently doing and also a look at what they have already created.

Other ways to “talk” to the author is via podcasts. Many authors will produce podcasts to promote their book and talk about their writing, as well as share information about themselves. Listening to these can be another good way for students connect the literature they are reading to a real person behind all of the text. YouTube videos from the author are similar to podcasts, but with visuals. These can also be helpful as they let the students literally see the person who has created the book. That can help make the author more human and make the literature more interesting.

There can, however, be some downsides to trying to “talk” with the authors of these books. Many of these authors write as a job. Writing is very time consuming, especially writing large books to publish by certain deadlines. Attempting to email or write these authors can result in a snub that is not personal, but has to be done for the sake of their work. Most authors will want to try to respond to serious and heartfelt correspondences, but when students just want something from them or they are just much too busy, they tend to not have time for it. That is an important thing for students to understand. If an author doesn’t write back, it’s nothing personal. The writing process takes a lot of time and energy and they probably just don’t have the time to answer everyone who writes them.

Connect the literature to other classes.

Connecting literature to other classes can be a great way to connect the student and the literature to the real world. Talk to your co-workers, find out what sections of history, science, math (there has to be at least a few math stories out there!), and any other subject and try to find literature that they could choose from that would fit in with those other sections. If they can see what literature was produced during the 30’s in America was like because of the great depression, they can relate both history and the literature to the world they are living in.

Talking to other teachers and trying to sync up relevant texts with what they are going over in other classes could be a good way to make texts more relevant to the students and to maybe even make reading more interesting for them. If the students already know about a certain topic, it may be interesting for them to expand their knowledge on it by looking at real stories by real people from that
Use some practical texts.

When people think of literature that they learn in the classroom, it is usually some abstract story that we can analyze and apply morals and themes to our lives. But it doesn’t always have to be like that. In a classroom we could connect the literature to the real world by reading texts that give us practical advice on how to interact with the real world. Reading a survival guide or traveler’s handbook can be some practical literature that students can take information away from, but also could use it as a mentor text as well to create some of their own types of practical texts.

There are many things you could have students do to analyze practical texts. You can have them follow the instructions and see if they have any difficulties along the way doing whatever it is telling them to do. Ask them how they would improve it or how they would have written it differently. Seeing how literature functions as a guide for certain activities can change how students view literature and can also help them interpret functional literature, which will more than likely be what they will be reading most of their adult life.

These texts are not only interesting for the students to read, but they can also be useful for practical information. The students might not always be able to apply the lessons they took away from *The Scarlet Letter* but they might remember and apply the guide they read on how to change a flat tire or the manual they read on how to fix a broken floor tile. These practical texts can be just as helpful, if not more, for students as the information they learn from more abstract texts.

- Selecting Texts

Selecting texts that your students will be reading is a huge task. You may not always know every new great piece of literature that comes out every month. Coming straight from college, you may not even have much knowledge outside the realm of the “classics”. However, it is important for you to choose literature that the students can use and relate to.

It is time that we begin to take stock of the types of texts that adolescents find meaningful and significant and how we can mediate texts in effective and meaningful ways. If we don’t, the opportunity to build students’ textual lineages—that is, students’ personal connections to texts that they will remember years into the future as being meaningful and central to their human development—will be squandered. (Tatum 83)

Our students won’t always know all of the great young adult literature coming out, and it is our job as teachers to figure out what is out there for our students to read. It is also our job to figure out what they will want to read and what will benefit them. It does seem like a huge time sinking task, but it is accomplishable and students will learn if you try to find the right literature for them.

Choose literature based on your students.

Again, this is not only important for motivation of reading, but also very important in helping the students make the text relevant. If you give your students a short look into several books in the genre they are working in, they could probably decide several works that pique their interests. Students may not always know every piece of young adult literature that is coming out; however, you can help them choose something that is relevant to their interests by finding things they may have chosen if they knew about it.

The texts students will remember or find meaningful are texts that move them to feel differently about themselves, that affect their views of themselves, or that move them to some action in their current time and space. (Tatum 83)

We as teachers need to know what are students are like, what they like, and what they might choose to read if they knew what was out there. We have to know the communities which they come from, their families, their personalities, and what their interests are. If we don’t make that connection we can’t choose effective literature that will impact our students.

In the classroom, we have to know our kids as adolescents, we have to know the background of the community from which they come, and we have to know them as individuals in order to make good choices about the books on our shelves, the books we choose to recommend, and the books we choose to read aloud as a whole class. We have to know what interests them and what else *might* interest them. And we have to know books and how reading works. (Rief 55)

We need to use our knowledge of what our students are like to suggest literature that they will enjoy reading because they can connect it to their real world. Classrooms will be completely different depending on where you teach, and vary from year to year. You can’t choose ahead of time exactly what to read, because you won’t know if it will even apply to your students. Get to know your students and then help them find literature they will enjoy and give them options they will enjoy reading.

What is their situation?

When you select texts as a teacher, you should always seek texts that are relevant to the students’ situation. You have to know just as much about your students as you do about the literature you are trying to teach to them. If something is completely un-relatable to their situations, they probably won’t enjoy the text and they definitely will have no way to connect it to their lives. When students read literature that they can connect to their lives, they tend to read more in depth, ask questions of the text and themselves, find meaning
One of the biggest challenges I hear from my teaching colleagues throughout the country is finding literature that is both classroom appropriate and enjoyable for students. If students don't find the books relevant to their lives, they won't want to read them, and the reading habits they develop can lead to a lifetime of disinterest in books. It's also bad for them to feel that they can't relate to the characters or situations in literature, which can make it hard for them to develop empathy. Some students may not have gone through anything a character in a book has, but they can relate indirectly and make a connection to the real world outside of the classroom. They can develop empathy for these characters and can relate them to other people in the outside world.

Students can't always relate to the problems faced by characters in classic texts. They could see some connections to modern day problems, but it might make it boring for them. Classics are old and whatever information they contain is in a setting that is completely out of place with modern students. Students have a hard time relating to these old-timey values and situations. Sure, Romeo and Juliet can be related to parents not wanting you to go out with someone you love. They get that. However, at the first sign of wanting to kill yourself because you can’t be with someone, Juliet's parents would put her on some Prozac and take her cell-phone away and Romeo would find some other pretty girl. It doesn't make sense to keep trying to force literature on students who can’t relate. Alfred Tatum says:

"Students are grossly disengaged as teachers continue to teach texts emanating from a tradition of curriculum, an age-old tradition that has not evolved to pay attention to students' modern-day contexts. I see this quote is spot on with how students feel about the canon of texts we use in classrooms today. Kids today can read, will read, and will be forced to read tons of classics that they can't relate to immediately. It will bore them and it will drive them away from reading for pleasure. They will only associate reading with long hours of poring over old texts that they can barely read. It's not fair to the students to assign this stuff to them, they don't want to read it and they can’t relate it to their world and modern problems."

If students keep getting forced to read things that they don't see as relevant to their situation, they will eventually resent the act of reading all together, whether or not it something they would enjoy. As teachers, we should be picking out literature for our students to choose from that is not only relevant, but also literature that will interest and instill beliefs and values in the students. If you choose literature based on your students' situations, you will be choosing literature that they will find relevant and hopefully enjoy. If you don’t choose literature based on your students’ situations, you will be choosing literature that they won’t enjoy, find relevance in, and they will probably dislike you as a teacher and distrust you as a guide for literature.

Don’t choose classics just because they are classics.

That’s not to say “don’t read classics ever.” You sure can read classics in your classroom, and probably will be required to incorporate some form of classics into your classroom. But, don’t let that deter you from choosing literature to use in your teaching units that are outside the canon. The canon can be helpful to find the texts that stood the test of time (sometimes for reasons unknown) but as far as finding literature that relates to your students, it’s not much help. Tatum puts it:

Identity development is central to adolescence. Still, students' multiple overlapping identities are not often considered in text selections and text discussions. Rarely are discussions involving text selection for today's adolescents anchored by consideration for their adolescent, ethnic, gender, and linguistic identities. The advocacy for selecting texts in high school English courses is often grounded in preserving the canon: Students must read Shakespeare because he is part of the canon.

When classes anchor their work load of literature in the canon, the students tend to not care and not relate. I know many students who have a hard time figuring out which characters they can relate to in The Scarlet Letter. Not all of us live in a religiously led patriarchy that can legally brand people with marks when we do something deemed inappropriate. And that isn’t always the most relatable thing to show students, because we don’t live in a place or time that has those same habits. However, this text has been preserved as a classic and is still taught by many teachers (some required to, some not) in our country, regardless of readability and relevance. The canon can also be an issue of race. Who selected these texts? Most often the white male patriarchy is seen as having the most influence on the canon. Being as white males were in a position of power many years ago and to a degree still today. Many of the pieces preserved in the canon are what has stayed relevant according to the ones in power. Linda Christensen, who is a strong advocate for social justice in the literature classroom, poses these questions toward the classics:

Why are these books classic? What am I reading them and teaching them? Why do I want students to learn from these books? Why are these books classics? Why these authors? Who chose them? (Christensen, Reading, Writing, 165)

It could be debated that these pieces are the ones that are classroom appropriate. Deemed so by parents, administration, and other powers that influence the classrooms we teach in. It can be difficult to select reading that is both appropriate and relevant to students. Sometimes what students may find interesting, their parents may not want them to have any part in it, unfortunately.

Mike Roberts, contributor to English Journal, put these feelings as this:

"One of the biggest challenges I hear from my teaching colleagues throughout the country is finding literature that is both classroom appropriate and enjoyable for students. Either student interest wanes or the novels aren’t deemed ‘worthy’ by the powers-that-be."
Selecting literature is tough. Finding a balance between appropriate, relevant, interesting, and readable for students can be daunting. However, if you allow students to choose literature that they find interesting, and if you allow them to select from literature you know is appropriate for that student and that student can relate to, reading will flourish and that student will become a better reader. These students who read a wide variety of literature will find what literature they like, what they can connect to, and how this literature they are reading connects to the real world.

**Variety**

On promoting reading, and therefore promoting a connection to literature, Linda Rief suggests the following on variety of pieces of literature:

Give Students:

- A healthy mix of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that is culturally rich and diverse.
- Varied genres of writing from women and men, classic and contemporary.

Variety is also a standard at which the state expects us to teach. “12.1.8 By the end of the twelfth grade, students will demonstrate the ability to analyze literary works, nonfiction, films, and media” (Larson). We as teachers are expected to hit a wide variety of works in a small amount of time with our students. We can’t just read all novels or all poetry. We are expected to have our students read a wide variety of literary works.

Variety is a huge issue in a classroom. It can get extremely boring reading one type of literature over and over. It can get old reading fifty poems in a row and you can lose student’s attention. A good way to overcome this problem is to incorporate many different types of literature into each unit you create. Jim Burke also addresses this problem by saying, “What I don’t do (though it’s not to say it can’t be done effectively) is a one-hit-wonder big poetry unit. Instead,…I will weave a collection of poems throughout the unit” (Burke and Krajicek 56).

It is necessary to include a wide array of writing from abstract pieces like poetry to more functional literature like a guide of some sort. Functional writing is very often forgotten in the classroom. It is odd that a majority of our time in English classes is spent reading and writing pieces of art, when a majority of our time outside of academia is spent reading “functional” literature. Burke mentions the importance and lack of functional literature in the classroom.

We don’t always assign our students functional types of reading (or writing)—pamphlets, executive summaries, formal letters—which is odd, given that our own experience tells us that such documents are essential to our personal and professional lives. (Burke 35)

While it can be difficult to just throw in relevant functional literature, it is essential to somehow tie in as many types of literature as possible, including functional literature. These pieces can be woven into units by finding relevant pieces that flow together. Reading a story about a kid with a drug problem could lead to a pamphlet about drug addiction, which could then lead to a magazine article, which could lead to a television program, etc. This functional reading is some of the most important reading we will do in our lives. As Jim Burke puts it, “nothing happens if I can’t understand a Joseph Conrad short story, but I can suffer financial penalties if I sign a contract that I shouldn’t have.” It can sometimes be hard to see how to weave in different functional reading into a classroom that is generally seen as one that reads pieces of art, but it can be done. And it can be done effectively.

While functional literature is extremely important in everyday life, other more abstract forms of literature can be just as important and influential to who we are. Those pieces of literature shape our worldview and make us see who we are and who we relate to. All pieces of literature help us form who we are and they all help us in our day-to-day lives. It is essential to teach a very wide variety of literature to our students, not only to form better more well-rounded people, but to also help them figure out who they are on the inside.

Don’t stray away from unconventional literature. Here is a short list of things to try to include into your curriculum that will definitely interest your students and make them realize the breadth of what we call literature.

- graphic novels
- comic books
- magazines
- newspapers
- web-comics
- music lyrics
- raps
There are lots of different types of literature out there. Many of them students are reading and hearing for fun on their own, and they might not even know that they are doing something that could help them in the classroom. It could be helpful for students to realize that they can use that literature that they are consuming outside of class (comics, newspaper, music, etc.) as something more useful than something they just do for fun. If you allow your students to reference what they do (as far as literature goes) outside of the classroom, then you may be able to help them expand what they read on their own time.

- Conclusion

All in all there are a million different ways to set up a classroom so that you can connect your students to good literature and that literature to their lives. If you utilize the right strategies and give students the right texts, you can create life-long readers and writers. Creating those life-long readers and writers is our goal as English teachers.

We need to find literature that is relevant to our students, and we need to let them choose what to do with it. If we do that they will find information they can use and they will enjoy finding it. We need to motivate our students to actually want to read in our classrooms. If they don’t want to read in the first place, they are not going to do it. They will find ways around reading the text and get away with not doing any of the work you are asking them to do. We need to make sure they can connect the literature they are reading to the real world. If they connect what they are reading to the real world, they will be more likely to comprehend what they are reading and remember what they have read in that text for a lifetime.

We have a pretty difficult job as teachers of English. We will be expected to do a lot more than just teach reading and writing. We will be shaping minds of future citizens and giving them the knowledge on how to read and write in a society that demands good reading and writing skills. If we can reach at least some of our students and give them an education they can use, we have done our job well.

Works Cited


Placing literature "Placing Literature is a project in which the locations in your favorite novels are mapped onto the exact places from the books. MYSTERIES AND OTHER SUSPENSE STORIES (absolutenglish-972) - VOCABULARY AROUND THE GENRE - LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER, Roald Dahl - SILENT NIGHT, Mary Higgins Clark - SOLVE THE MYSTERY - READ - MORE LESSON PLANS FOR TEACHERS - QUIZZES - FOR FUN - LINKS. Principals Make Reading a School-Wide Goal Students pledge to read thousands of pages. First- and fifth-graders buddy up for reading. Those events and others are part of school-wide reading programs at two Minnesota schools. Plus ideas for integrating math and literature. Make It Happen: Awesome Author and Illustrator Visits Learn how to transform a school author or illustrator visit from an hour of entertainment into a life-long connection to reading and writing. Included: Tips for great author visits. BiblioCat Web Site Full of Resources, Feline Fun The BiblioCat Web Page provides teachers, librarians, and parents with practical, easy-to-find information. Included: Teachers comment about the site's usefulness.

iheartkafka
6 years ago
A very useful hub! I agree with a lot of your points; I often included independent novels in which we went to the library and the students strolled around, read book jackets and selected a novel that looked interesting to them. I think it's so important to instil the value of reading for reading sake.

Kris Heeter
6 years ago from Indiana
Very nice job. Reading at an early age is so important - it sets the stage for so much of their lives!

Brittany Kennedy
6 years ago from Kailua-Kona, Hawaii
Wow! This could be a couple of hubs! You did an amazing job on researching this topic! I will have to come back and finish the rest, but I read a great deal and really enjoyed how deep you dove into the pedagogies used to motivate students. Voted up, useful, etc!