

# Statement

The Journal of the Colorado Language Arts Society  
Fall 2011, Volume 48, Number 1



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# Statement

The Journal of the Colorado Language Arts Society  
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# Call For Submissions

*Statement* is published three times a year and is one of the benefits of being a member of the Colorado Language Arts Society. The mission of *Statement* is to advance the teaching and learning of English Language Arts in Colorado. While we welcome readership beyond the Centennial State and we encourage submissions from outside of Colorado, what makes our publication most relevant for our members is content which addresses the interests and issues of Colorado teachers.

## Theme for Spring Issue: *Expanding Literacies*

Sara Kajder, Fall 2011 CLAS conference keynote speaker, writes in “Unleashing Potential with Emerging Technologies” (2007): “Posted next to my computer is a quote from Hephzibah Roskelly that fuels and inspires so much of my work. It reads, ‘Emerging occasions emerge only if teachers look’ (Kutz and Roskelly 1991, 308). Teaching with technology in the English classroom is about always looking, whether it’s seeing kids and the range of talents and literacies that they bring into our classrooms or it’s seeing the possibilities in a new tool that allows me to amplify curricula for the better. As the literacies that kids bring into our classrooms change (alongside the literacies that they need in order to be productive and competitive in the world outside of school), there is a very real pressure to make sure that what we teach is relevant and helps to push them to develop the skills needed to be self-directed, ubiquitous learners. I cannot do that without providing opportunities for them to read deeply, think critically, and write closely for responsive audiences that span the globe. [...] There’s no denying it. We’re past the point where we can keep doing old things with old tools, or old things with new tools. Students simply won’t allow it. No matter how savvy they might be or not be, they are all looking to us to push them, to stretch their thinking, and to teach them to use the tools of the truly literate in a rapidly changing world” (p. 229). What are you doing to push your students and their thinking to become “truly literate in a rapidly changing world”? What concerns do you have about the new literacy demands of our rapidly shifting society? What does “literate” mean in the 21st century? What place to traditional literacies hold in this context? **Deadline: February 1, 2012.**

## Theme for Summer Issue: *Stories from Our Classrooms*

Stories matter--so argues Yvonne Siu-Runyan, Colorado educator and current president of NCTE. She is not alone in making this argument. Jerome Bruner explains that narrative is as natural to us as language, that we order our world, our lives, and our memories through stories. He says that stories are so powerful that they can even dictate how we see the world. Think about the stories told right now about school and the value of the work of teachers. How do those stories dictate the way people understand what we do? It seems that the current dominant story about schooling centers on accountability and test scores, suggesting what’s most important in education, which has led to top-down reform measures that doesn’t always work. But we all know that there is much we do in our classrooms and with our subject matter that is difficult to measure with a test score. Lucky for us, Bruner explains, we seek to tell alternate stories, and those alternate stories can actually change the way people think about some aspect of human experience. Martha Nussbaum sees this as stories’ subversive power: stories order our world, define our world, and reflect how we think of our world. This is powerful--so powerful that simply telling a different story about some life experience can actually change what that life experience means, actually changing how people think about it. NCTE is moving in this direction with its new National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE). This aims to seek out schools where things are working in ways not necessarily measurable on the tests and to help those schools tell their stories.

If we don’t tell our own stories, we will be defined by the stories the world tells about us. So tell us a story. Be it a story of joy or frustration or heartbreak or hilarity, bring us into your classroom. Help the world to understand better what it is that we do. **Deadline: June 1, 2012.**

## Recurring Topics for Articles

The theme is only one source of inspiration for contributors. *Statement* is also seeking articles that address a variety of topics, especially written by Colorado teachers, but also from writers who can speak with authority about current issues or best practices in ELA. Contributors may wish to consider:

- Teaching ideas
- Current issues
- Outstanding lesson plans
- Book reviews
- Expressive writing by Colorado teachers
- Quick teaching tips
- Interviews
- Vignettes from the classroom
- Technology
- Reviews of professional research

## Submission of Photos and Artwork

We are always seeking original artwork or photos: classroom images, Colorado scenes, artistic representations, etc. We value contributions from youth and adults equally. We also enjoy featuring the work of professional Colorado artists. Please send images to the editor as a jpeg attachment. Student work must be accompanied by a “permission to publish” form signed by a parent (available on *Statement*’s website at <https://sites.google.com/site/classtatement/home>).

# Guidelines for Contributors

## Formatting Issues and Submission Process

Submissions to *Statement* should be in MLA style, using in-text documentation with a list of works cited if needed. Documents should be single-spaced and formatted in Word. Charts, graphs, or illustrations should be sent as separate files. Manuscripts should adhere to the “Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language” which can be found on the NCTE website at: <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/lang/107647.htm>.

*Statement* is a refereed journal, meaning that at least two outside reviewers will read each submission. Once the manuscript has been accepted, the editor may consult with the writer regarding revisions and may share comments from the editorial board as an aid to revision. In light of deadlines, we reserve the right to make minor revisions or formatting decisions. Because we recognize that many of our contributors are not professional writers but instead

actual educators, we will collaborate with contributors to ensure that the article meets the personal standards of the writer as well as the high standards of our readership.

In the body of the email which contains the attachment of the manuscript, include the title of the piece, author’s name, author’s job title, affiliation or place of employment, city, state, email address, and website (if there is one). Also include a statement verifying that the manuscript has not been submitted or published anywhere else. Contributors will receive an email acknowledgement once the manuscript has been submitted. Please direct all inquiries or submissions to the editor, Sarah M. Zerwin, at [sarah.zerwin@bvsd.org](mailto:sarah.zerwin@bvsd.org). Also see *Statement*’s website at <https://sites.google.com/site/classtatement/home>.

## Editorial Information

### *Statement* Editorial Board Members

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District Coach, Secondary Literacy  
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Mark Overmeyer  
Elementary Literacy Coordinator  
Cherry Creek Schools, Denver

### Editor-in-Chief

Sarah M. Zerwin  
Language Arts Teacher  
Boulder Valley School District  
[sarah.zerwin@bvsd.org](mailto:sarah.zerwin@bvsd.org)

### Before the Bell

Josh Curnett  
English Language Arts Teacher  
Eaglecrest High School  
[jurnett@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:jurnett@cherrycreekschools.org)

### Becoming Better ELA Teachers

Gloria Eastman  
Associate Professor of English & English Education  
Metropolitan State College of Denver  
[geastman@mscd.edu](mailto:geastman@mscd.edu)

### ELA in the 21st Century

Phillipe Ernewein  
Dean of Faculty Training & Development  
Denver Academy  
[www.rememberit.org](http://www.rememberit.org)

### ESL in ELA

Columnist Needed

### YAL Update

Marge Erickson Freeburn  
University of Colorado, Denver  
[Marge.Erickson@ucdenver.edu](mailto:Marge.Erickson@ucdenver.edu)

### Elementary ELA

Columnist Needed

Jill Adams  
Metropolitan State College, Denver  
[jadams82@mscd.edu](mailto:jadams82@mscd.edu)

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# Our Unspoken Assumptions

by Sarah M. Zerwin, Editor



Sarah M. Zerwin teaches language arts and journalism at Fairview High School in Boulder. She completed a PhD in secondary literacy curriculum and instruction from CU-Boulder in 2009. Her email is sarah.zerwin@bvsd.org.

Fifteen years ago, I started my teaching career. Just out of college, I was hired a few days before school started in a suburban high school outside of Seattle. I'll never forget the moment when the principal walked me to my classroom, pointed out my text books, said that he knew I had a lot of work to do, and left the room. I sat down at the teacher's desk and looked out across the classroom and wondered what I had gotten myself into. I had no idea where to start.

What I gleaned from my colleagues was that at minimum, I was expected to teach a certain set of books in each class. My ninth graders were to read *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Odyssey* and *Animal Farm*. For American Literature, my juniors were to read *The Great Gatsby*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Other than making sure I made it through those books and that I used the weekly vocabulary program that the rest of the department used, the expectations were not very clear. It seemed that the curriculum was nothing more than a set of books for each class.

Several weeks into that first semester, I was asked to take on a sixth class--another section of American Literature. Being yet still on a temporary contract, I thought I had no choice if I wanted to keep my job for the next year. So I gave up my one and only planning period, took on another class (giving me now four sections of American Literature), and tried to figure out how to manage 180 students.

We didn't have four class sets of any of the books I was expected to teach in American Literature. Having each class reading a different book would mean four preps just for my American Literature classes (and I still had two other preps that year). I moved to a reading/writing workshop model as the only way I could see to manage my six classes.

When my colleagues realized what I was doing, it didn't go over so well. But the curriculum expectations upon me began to crystallize when I started hearing about all the things I was supposed to be doing instead. My students were working at their own pace on individual writing tasks about books they were reading independently, but apparently I was supposed to lead them all through similar papers about the books we were supposed to read together.

Thinking I just needed to see the official curriculum to get on the right track, one of my colleagues gave me the official curriculum guide--a yellowed stack of pages with faded blue ditto ink. Not only had I never seen this document, but it was clear that this document hadn't been

used by any of my colleagues for some time. I honestly can't even remember what the document said. I just know that the curriculum expectations my colleagues were operating upon were not in that curriculum guide. My colleagues' expectations were clear to them but unspoken. They hired me assuming I shared them. Only when I didn't follow these unspoken expectations did I realize what they were.

Fifteen years, two states, two graduate degrees, and three schools later, this all seems so far away for me. But the story of my first year teaching lends perspective to the shifts we are seeing now in our field. We all carry unspoken assumptions about the content that we teach, about what books we should be teaching and what we should be doing in our classrooms with those books. This isn't necessarily bad. It's a good thing that I operate on the assumption that stories matter to us as human beings and literature is therefore critically important. The problem comes up when our unspoken assumptions get in the way of looking clearly at our students and at their world and figuring out what literacies they need to navigate it. One study I've read called these kinds of unquestioned assumptions "phantom policy" (Franzak) and showed how this policy was far more powerful in guiding teachers' curricular decisions than any official, inscribed curriculum. The study also suggested that decisions guided by phantom policy don't always enable teachers to best support the literacy needs of their students.

Where exactly does it say that ninth graders in American schools are supposed to read *Romeo and Juliet*? Nowhere. Yet in the three states where I've taught, this has always been the case. I'm not saying this is bad necessarily, but are we certain that this text best develops the reading, writing, and thinking skills our students need for their future world? Where exactly does it say that our ultimate goal is to teach students to be literary critics and have them write literary analysis? Nowhere, yet many of us coming out of literature programs in college often end up reproducing the experiences we had in those college classrooms, even when that particular goal may not best serve all of our students.

The problem with our unspoken, unquestioned assumptions is when the tenets that guide our teaching keep us from best meeting the needs of our students.

And now we have before us a national curriculum that may challenge the assumptions that many of us carry and hold dear about our subject matter. Our new state standards, which are essentially the national Common

Core State Standards (CCSS), ask for the inclusion of “informational” texts alongside literature. At one point in the Common Core Standards document, it even suggests the 70% of what high school seniors read for school should be “informational” text. Though the document does implore the importance of other subject areas helping with this, some ELA teachers see this as a real attack on some central, unspoken assumptions about our content area.

Since our state has adopted the CCSS as our state curriculum, and since our new state assessments will be anchored on these standards, and since Colorado Senate Bill 191 requires that 50% our “effectiveness” as teachers will be measured via student achievement on assessments, this movement has teeth. It’s not clear yet how all the pieces will play out or even if our state will have the money to make it all happen, but things are already in motion.

And the CCSS represent just one force acting upon us right now. A recent book by Jeff Wilhelm and Bruce Novak (*Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*) argues for the transformative power of literature for understanding the self and the community toward a truly democratic world—as long as we teach stories with that explicit focus. The authors ask us to re-envision what the teaching of literature can and should achieve for our students in their world that grows ever more complex. Words constantly hurtle at our students from everywhere in ways like never before. Short strings of words confront students in text messages and tweets and status updates. Long strings of words confront students in the ever-exploding numbers of websites on the Internet. Words marketing for students’ dollars are literally everywhere: on every football stadium, in every margin of a browser window, and upon every t-shirt. In essence, the very definition of literacy is ever-evolving due to the seismic shifts in the ways we communicate via the written word with other human beings.

Within this context, what of literature and stories? What sorts of texts do we owe our students to prepare them for their future world? What ought we to DO with those texts in our classrooms?

It’s clear to me that we cannot continue to operate on unquestioned assumptions.

We must continually evaluate the demands of the world where our students live and remember that the world they live in now and will navigate in their future is not necessarily the world that is familiar to us. We must work to place before our students the kinds of experiences with texts that will prepare them for that world.

And as for the assumptions about our subject matter that we hold most dear, we must be ready to defend them or have the courage to set them aside if we determine that they no longer serve our students’ needs.

### **Brief Preview of this Issue of *Statement***

I’m thrilled to be editing my first issue of *Statement* for the Colorado Language Arts Society, and I hope you’ll agree that it provides some thought-provoking ideas for Colorado teachers to consider in response to what the CCSS are asking of us.

In his column, Philippe Ernewein ponders the results

of a recent survey by the Association of Literary Scholars. The survey finds that fewer students across the country are reading the same body of literature as were several decades ago. The authors describe this as a critical problem and urge us to return to close reading of shared literary texts in schools across the country. Philippe reminds us of the 21st century landscape we must now navigate and argues for a new perspective on our literary canon. Also, I’m pleased to to publish an excerpt from a recent NCTE book wherein Sarah Brown Wessling, 2010 National Teacher of the Year, discusses teaching a theme vs. teaching thematically and offers a powerful vision of how we can weave informational texts with the literature that we teach. Following that is a piece by Jessica Flock, whom I met at the recent CLAS conference during her presentation about nonfiction graphic novels. I asked if she could write about a few of these engaging books and if I could publish her extensive list of nonfiction graphic novels as a resource for compelling informational texts. Now after reading Sarah Brown Wessling’s vision, I’m imagining how I could integrate some of these nonfiction graphic novels into my curriculum. And in a wonderful piece written during the Colorado Writing Project, Todd Hegert reminds us of the importance of liberal arts, an importance that cannot be measured on The Tests.

Toward my goal of making *Statement* more and more a place to find conversation about the issues that confront ELA teachers in Colorado, there are two features in this issue that I plan to be on-going: you’ll find a conversation about the focus of this issue between two Colorado educators (Elizabeth Maloney and Paul De Maret) and Ernest Morrell, the keynote speaker from the fall CLAS conference. You’ll also find the results of a survey I conducted via a link posted on the CLAS Talk Ning. Several Colorado teachers responded with their thoughts about these issues, and I think you’ll find their responses represent a diverse range of thinking about the the role of literature in our classrooms, the inclusion of informational text, and what this all means for our field.

And finally, *Statement* isn’t *Statement* without you! Please contribute your writing--I want to hear from you. You can see the calls for submissions for the next few issues on page two. Please enter into the conversation--the more we have the opportunity to talk with one another, the more we can learn from each other.

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# ELA in the 21st Century

## Sound the Alarm: Moving Toward a New Literary Canon

by Philippe Ernewein



Philippe Ernewein is the Dean of Faculty Training and Development at Denver Academy. He presents annually at a variety of educational conferences. Philippe also writes a blog about education at [www.rememberit.org](http://www.rememberit.org).

Sound the alarm.

This was my first reaction to reading the results of a survey conducted by the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers called “Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey.” Public school English teachers were surveyed about what works of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction they assigned in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade standard or honor courses. “The survey found little consistency among assigned texts. Even the top three most frequently assigned works, *Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Crucible*, appeared in less than 25 percent of the curricula survey” (ASCD: Education Update, Volume 53, Number 8, August 2011).

Sound the alarm.

The lead researcher of the survey, Professor Sandra Sotsky of the University of Arkansas said, “There is no canon anymore. It may look like a canon, but each school is doing its own thing and each teacher is doing his or her own thing.” One of the recommendations of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics and Writers is to return to “a progressively more challenging curriculum that is centered on the civic and literary heritage of English-speaking people” (28).

Sound the alarm and return to the reading lists and literary canon that we know best.

At first, I didn’t believe the results; it seemed impossible. It struck so close to what I thought was my solid professional content-area knowledge. The findings of the survey are basically describing the interior of the place I spend most of my time, a language arts classroom. As I started to process the implications of this survey’s findings, it seemed to challenge the literary canon that generations of high school students have read, analyzed, discussed and written about.

As written in the survey’s summary results, “The vast middle of our high school population may no longer receive the kind of English education that most Americans expect a high school to provide” (16). So, what kind of English education is the vast middle of our high school population receiving? More importantly, how can we make this education as effective and meaningful as possible and also best prepare them for their future?

I talked with other teachers, college professors and high school students. Did they know about the change? Why hadn’t I been told? I wanted to find out what others thought about this sea change.

To wrestle with this question further, I re-read one of my favorite books of the traditional literary canon, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, to remind myself of the power, beauty and truth that is held in so many of these classic works. I value these books; most are like old wise friends who have taught me many lessons over the years. Many books I’ve gone back to repeatedly and they often seem to have changed, although of course all the words are the same, and they teach me new lessons. While re-reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, this time I walked through the story with Atticus’ eyes, noticing and appreciating the powerful relationship he had with Scout and the thoughtfulness with which he approached conversations and lessons with her.

As I suspected, Harper Lee’s novel continues to have a deep and profound impact on my thinking and sense making of the world. There is rich synaptic activity that occurs as I analyze the text. There are metacognitive fires that are ignited as I wonder about how I will share this story with my daughters. Re-reading *Mockingbird* moved me to hear the alarm I sounded above. But it was less a warning to return to the traditional literary canon and more a call to forge a new one. A new canon where the framework is centered on thinking skills and specifically how to interact and make meaning of text. It is after all, the transactional experience that a reader has with a text that has the enduring value. This experience is navigated by thinking skills and strategies.

Borrowing language from Marc Prensky’s book, *Teaching Digital Natives*, the new canon needs to place the verbs of learning and teaching in the central position: apply, analyze, comprehend, compare, contrast and evaluate. According to Mr. Prensky, the verbs of teaching and learning change very little over time. The nouns on the other hand are in flux. Think about some of the nouns of teaching: book, pencil and chalkboard. For many of us in classrooms today, these nouns have changed to “interactive white board,” “word document” and “e-book.” But now think back to the verbs

that are an intricate part of our content and instruction: write, read, analyze, compare, contrast, synthesize and evaluate. The verbs have not changed since the time of Socrates and Plato. The verbs remain the same. As the instructional leaders in our classrooms, we own the verbs. They are our tools we use and model for our students to utilize as they read and interact with literature.

The constant energy spent in the educational arena on trying to keep up with the nouns will not help prepare our students for what's next. The focus must be on the verbs. The verbs are the essential tools our students need to navigate, shape and make sense of the world.

The rate of technological change has never been faster than it is today. This speed has had an acute impact on our teaching. I think it has been an unrecognized force that is fueling this sea change. While factors like teacher training and the demands of state standards and assessments are specifically noted by the authors of the ALSCW survey, they do not mention the role of new digital media, the flattening of the classroom, and specifically digitization as causes for the shifts in what is being read in our classrooms.

Digitization. This is a factor that cannot be underestimated. Not convinced? Check out [books.google.com](http://books.google.com) or Project Gutenberg at [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org) (whose website has access to over 100,000 free eBooks).

The gatekeepers have been over-run. The hinges have been taken off the doors of the publishing houses. Digitization is the storm that is helping to create this sea change. The classroom is flatter than it has ever been. Access to texts, whether a Facebook status update, newsfeed or classic Greek text, can be virtually instant. And while this access can be amazing, we have also all experienced when it can be amazingly dangerous if the students lack the necessary skills needed to successfully manage and critically think about that content.

The canon must evolve to incorporate and instill a love of learning and thinking critically about the many different types of texts and information we encounter everyday. If we are to prepare our students for an ever-evolving what's next, the canon must continue to evolve as well.

Now that information is becoming more and more digital, I have found many students seem to view everything that arrives in this medium as equally important: be it a blog, Wikipedia entry or Tweet. The focus on direct instruction around critical thinking skills and attention on executive function skills is paramount to fulfilling this mission.

The new canon must have two central components that support students in navigating the new and evolving landscape:

- Students need to be taught how to prioritize which texts and information have value.
- Teachers must model the critical thinking skills that

show students how to analyze, synthesize and effectively respond to texts.

To meet these goals, the best steps forward must include engaging our students in both the reader response model (stresses a personal interpretation of text) and close reading (stresses finding the meaning of a work, in the text itself, by analyzing the text's form, structure, theme, use of literary devices, as well as cultural/historical references).

If all we are doing with literature is in the reader response model, we are missing a tremendous amount of value, appreciation and learning opportunities of close reading. Using both the reader response and close reading models will better equip our students with the tools they need to be independent, critical thinkers.

As teachers, we must lead with those texts that invoked a spark in us when we first read (and re-read) them. Modeling what they meant not just to us, but also to the greater field of literature and culture. In tandem with these texts, we must lead by modeling our processes of thinking, meaning making and wondering about the seemingly endless streams of concepts, information and texts in our lives.

Sound the alarm.

Sound it for an evolution of our canon. Toward a thinking canon.

Let's invite our old friends Homer, Shakespeare and Orwell, but they don't need to be center stage anymore. If our students are thinking critically and utilizing their analytical skills, I think they will all be cheering from the sidelines.

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Prezky, Marc, *TEACHING DIGITAL NATIVES: Partnering for Real Learning*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, March 2010.

# 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Colorado Teen Literature Conference



**Morning Keynote Speaker:  
Todd Mitchell**

Author of *The Traitor King*, and the 2011 Colorado YA Book Award winner for *The Secret to Lying*.  
[www.toddmitchellbooks.com](http://www.toddmitchellbooks.com)

**Luncheon Keynote Speaker:  
Maggie Stiefvater**

Author of the Wolves of Mercy Falls Trilogy: *Shiver*, *Linger*, and *Forever*. For an interview of Maggie Stiefvater by Denver writer Brenna Yovanoff, author of *The Replacement*, visit <http://tinyurl.com/StiefvaterInterview>.

Date	Time	Location
Saturday March 31, 2012	8:30am – 3:45pm	Auraria Campus at the Tivoli, downtown Denver



**Registration:**

Adults \$50, Students \$25. Open February 1 – March 11, 2012. Visit [www.coteenlitconf.org](http://www.coteenlitconf.org) to register online or print a mail-in registration form.

**Teen Panelists & Grants:**

To participate as a Teen Connection Panelist or apply for the Magwitch Fund grants, CLAS-Bellin student grants, or Colorado REFORMA student grants, visit the website starting January 10, 2012. Applications are due March 2, 2012.

**Presenters & Exhibitors:**

The Call for Presenters will be issued online by November 1, 2011, and proposals are due December 1, 2011. Information for Exhibitors will be available online after December 1, 2011.

**Questions:**

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# YA Literature

## Dystopian YAL: Titles to Entice and Engage Teens

by Jill Adams and Veralidiana Gamboni



Dr. Jill Adams is an Assistant Professor of English at Metropolitan State College of Denver. She teaches courses in composition, young adult literature, and teaching composition.



Veralidiana Gamboni is a senior at Metro State College specializing in an Individualized Degree Program. Her focus includes Creative Writing (geared to YAL), Psychology, Speech and Woman's Studies. Her email is veralidiana@gmail.com

When the word *dystopia* is mentioned, book titles such as *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Brave New World* may come to mind. The field of Young Adult Literature is not excluded from these lists, for titles like *Z for Zachariah*, *The Giver*, and *The House of the Scorpion* also may be noted as classic dystopian novels.

Simply put, a dystopian novel generally explores social and political structures. Dystopian worlds are the opposite of utopian (a seemingly perfect society) and often have nightmarish situations at hand. The setting is often in the near future and sometimes is post-apocalyptic in nature.

There has been considerable debate during the past year regarding whether dystopian themes are too dark for young adults. Articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker* have brought the topic to the mainstream public instead of limiting the conversation to the YAL community. The issue was also addressed in the Room for Debate forum "The Dark Side of Young Adult Fiction" on *The New York Times* website. Many authors, including Paolo Bacigalupi (*Ship Breaker*), Maggie Stiefvater (*Shiver*) and others joined the discussion, as did Scott Westerfeld (*Uglies*, *Leviathan*), who noted that "Schools are places where teens are subject to dress codes, have few free speech rights, and are constantly under surveillance, where they rise and sit at the sound of a bell. Is it any wonder that dystopian novels speak to them?"

In our minds, YAL dystopian novels are generally page turners that involve complex ideas about society and political structures. Many of the protagonists are showing off their best characteristics as they overcome tremendous obstacles (somewhat similar to fantasy novels). Teens are pulled in immediately as active readers because they must figure out the situation at hand (What's going on here?) and what connections there may be to our own world. Additionally, many of these novels are series and therefore may keep the teen engrossed in the complex ideas and moving storyline for quite some time.

### Book Recommendations (in chronological order)

#### Classics:

If you haven't read these titles, you need to do so. Many are award winners, and they are also titles that will entice and engage teen readers.

O'Brien, Robert C. *Z for Zachariah*. New York: Simon Pulse, 1973.

Ann Burden is sixteen years old and completely alone. The world as she once knew it is gone, ravaged by a nuclear war that has taken everyone from her. For the past year, she has lived in a remote valley with no evidence of any other survivors. Then, the smoke from a distant campfire shatters Ann's solitude. Someone else is still alive and making his way toward the valley. Who is this man? What does he want? Can he be trusted? Both excited and terrified, Ann soon realizes there may be worse things than being the last person on Earth.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1993.

The story centers on twelve-year-old Jonas, who lives in a seemingly ideal world. When he is given his life assignment as the Receiver, Jonas begins to understand the dark secrets behind this fragile community.

Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. Stevens Point, WI: Candlewick Press, 2002.

For Titus and his friends, it started out like any ordinary trip to the moon – a chance to party during spring break and play with some stupid low-grav at the Ricochet Lounge. That was before the crazy hacker caused all their feeds to malfunction, sending them to the hospital to lie around with nothing inside their heads for days. It was before Titus met Violet, a beautiful, brainy teenage girl who has decided to fight the feed and its

omnipresent ability to categorize human thoughts and desires.

Farmer, Nancy. *The House of the Scorpion*. New York: Atheneum Books, 2002.

Matt is a clone of El Patrón, a powerful drug lord of the land of Opium, which is located between the United States and Mexico. For six years, he has lived in a tiny cottage in the poppy fields with Celia, a kind and deeply religious servant woman who is charged with his care and safety. He knows little about his existence until he is discovered by a group of children playing in the fields and wonders why he isn't like them. Though Matt has been spared the fate of most clones, who have their intelligence destroyed at birth, the evil inhabitants of El Patrón's empire consider him a "beast" and an "eejit."

Rossoff, Meg. *How I Live Now*. New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2004.

Fifteen-year-old Daisy is sent from Manhattan to England to visit her aunt and cousins she's never met: three boys near her age, and their little sister. Her aunt goes away on business soon after Daisy arrives. The next day bombs go off as London is attacked and occupied by an unnamed enemy. As power fails, and systems fail, the farm becomes more isolated. Despite the war, it's a kind of Eden, with no adults in charge and no rules, a place where Daisy's uncanny bond with her cousins grows into something rare and extraordinary.

Westerfeld, Scott. *Uglies*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2005.

Tally is about to turn sixteen, and she can't wait. Not for her license – for turning pretty. In Tally's world, the sixteenth birthday brings an operation that turns people from a repellent ugly into a stunningly attractive pretty and catapults them into a high-tech paradise where their only job is to have a really great time. In just a few weeks, Tally will be there. But Tally's new friend Shay isn't sure she wants to be pretty. She'd rather risk life on the outside. When Shay runs away, Tally learns about a whole new side of the pretty world--and it isn't very pretty.

Pearson, Mary E. *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*. New York: Henry Holt, 2008.

Jenna Fox seems like a typical teen recovering from being in a traumatic accident. As she regains strength, she realizes that some things in her life are fitting together correctly: Many past memories are absent, her grandmother reacts to her in an odd way, and her belongings are nowhere to be found. As she begins to watch childhood videos, she starts to develop that idea that her family is keeping a terrible secret from her....

Pfeffer, Susan Beth. *Life As We Knew It*. Boston: Graphia, 2008.

Miranda's disbelief turns to fear in a split second when a meteor knocks the moon closer to the earth. How should her family prepare for the future when worldwide tsunamis wipe out the coasts, earthquakes rock the continents, and volcanic ash blocks out the sun? As summer turns to Arctic winter, Miranda, her two brothers, and their mother retreat to the unexpected safe haven of their sunroom, where they subsist on stock-piled food and limited water in the warmth of a wood-burning stove.

Grant, Michael. *Gone*. New York: HarperTeen, 2008.

In the blink of an eye, everyone disappears. Gone. Everyone except for the young – teens, middle schoolers, and toddlers, but not a single adult. No teachers, no cops, no doctors, no parents. Gone, too, are the phones, Internet, and television. There is no way to get help. Hunger threatens. Bullies rule. A sinister creature lurks. Animals are mutating. And the teens themselves are changing, developing new talents—unimaginable, dangerous, deadly powers—that grow stronger by the day.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2008.

Welcome to Panem, a country controlled by the Capital and 12 district. It is a time of famine, drought, and war. Each year, a boy and a girl from each district are selected to be a part of the Hunger Games (the drawing system may remind you of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery"), a celebrated competition to the death that happens to be televised. This book has it all—dystopian themes combined with a thriller pace and a touch of romance to boot. Think of it as Ragu' spaghetti; it's all in there.

### **Current reads:**

These books have all been published within the last year years, thus becoming a part of the YAL dystopian boom.

Bachorz, Pam. *Candor*. New York: EgmontUSA, 2009.

In the model community of Candor, Florida, every teen wants to be like Oscar Banks. The son of the town's founder, Oscar earns straight A's, is student-body president, and is in demand for every club and cause. But Oscar has a secret. He knows that parents bring their teens to Candor to make them respectful, compliant—perfect—through subliminal messages that carefully correct and control their behavior. Then he meets Nia, the girl he can't stand to see changed. Saving Nia means losing her forever. Keeping her in Candor, Oscar risks exposure...and more.

Bacigalupi, Paolo. *Ship Breaker*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group Inc, 2009.

In America's Gulf Coast region, where grounded oil tankers are being broken down for parts, Nailer, a teenage boy, works the light crew, scavenging for copper wiring just to make quota--and hopefully live to see another day. But when, by luck or chance, he discovers an exquisite clipper ship beached during a recent hurricane, Nailer faces the most important decision of his life: strip the ship for all it's worth or rescue its lone survivor, a beautiful and wealthy girl who could lead him to a better life....

Dashner, James. *The Maze Runner*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2009.

When Thomas wakes up in the lift, the only thing he can remember is his first name. His memory is blank. But he's not alone. When the lift's doors open, Thomas finds himself surrounded by kids who welcome him to the Glade—a large, open expanse surrounded by stone walls.

Shusterman, Neil. *Unwind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

The second Civil War has been fought over abortion. To end the war, a compromise is reached. Abortion is no more, and taking its place is a practice called unwinding. This novel follows three teens' paths to the harvest camps, where their body parts will be donated (thus, it is considered that they are still living), and their lives will intermingle in unforeseen ways.

Condie, Ally. *Matched*. New York: Penguin Group Inc, 2010.

Cassia has always trusted the Society to make the right choices for her: what to read, what to watch, what to believe. So, when Xander's face appears on-screen at her Matching ceremony, Cassia knows he is her ideal mate... until she sees Ky Markham's face flash for an instant before the screen fades to black. The Society tells her it's a glitch, a rare malfunction, and that she should focus on the happy life she's destined to lead with Xander. But Cassia can't stop thinking about Ky, and as they slowly fall in love, Cassia begins to doubt the Society's infallibility and is faced with an impossible choice: between Xander and Ky, between the only life she's known and a path that no one else has dared to follow.

Doctorow, Cory. *Little Brother*. New York: Tor Books, 2010.

Marcus, a.k.a. "w1n5t0n," is only seventeen-years-old, but he figures he already knows how the system works—and how to work the system. Smart, fast, and wise to the ways of the networked world, he has no trouble outwitting his high school's intrusive but clumsy surveillance systems. But his whole world changes when he and

his friends find themselves caught in the aftermath of a major terrorist attack on San Francisco. In the wrong place at the wrong time, Marcus and his crew are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security and whisked away to a secret prison where they're mercilessly interrogated for days.

Lloyd, Staci. *The Carbon Diaries 2015*. New York: Holiday House, 2010.

It's the year 2015, a time when global warming has begun to ravage the environment. In response, the United Kingdom becomes the first country to mandate carbon rationing—a well-intentioned plan that goes tragically awry. When her carbon debit card arrives in the mail, sixteen-year-old Laura is just trying to pass her exams, manage her ecopunk band, and catch the attention of her gorgeous classmate Ravi. But as multiple natural disasters strike and Laura's parents head toward divorce, her world spirals out of control. A severe drought sparks fires and deadly riots; then the highest-category hurricane in recent history strikes London.

O'Brien, Caragh M. *Birthmarked*. New York: Roaring Book Press, 2010.

In the future, in a world baked dry by the harsh sun, there are those who live inside the wall and those, like sixteen-year-old midwife, Gaia Stone, who live outside. Gaia has always believed it is her duty, with her mother, to hand over a small quota of babies to the Enclave. But, when Gaia's mother and father are arrested by the very people they so dutifully serve, Gaia is forced to question everything she has been taught to believe. Gaia's choice is now simple: enter the world of the Enclave to rescue her parents, or die trying.

Oliver, Lauren. *Delirium*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2011.

Ninety-five days, and then I'll be safe. I wonder whether the procedure will hurt. I want to get it over with. It's hard to be patient. It's hard not to be afraid while I'm still uncured, though so far the delirium hasn't touched me yet. Still, I worry. They say that in the old days, love drove people to madness. The deadliest of all deadly things--it kills you both when you have it and when you don't.

Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2011.

Welcome to a post-apocalyptic community that is divided into five factions, each dedicating itself to certain ideals: Abnegation (selflessness), Amity (peacefulness), Candor (honesty), Dauntless (bravery), and Erudite (intelligence). All 16-year-olds must choose which faction they belong to, which means they could possibly be leaving their family behind. Protagonist Beatrice has to

make such a decision, and after her ability tests reveal something startling, she makes a decision that not only surprises herself but her family as well.

Aguirre, Ann. *Enclave*. Feiwel and Friends, New York, 2011.

In this post-apocalyptic world, teenagers earn a name once they reach the age of 15. Before that, they are known as brats. Once 15, you can become a breeder, hunter, or builder, and your job will help support the lives in your enclave (underground community). Deuce becomes a huntress and not only fights for survival against the monstrous Freaks (who threaten the various enclave communities) but from members from her community as well.

**Next on our reading list:**

One of the hardest things about researching YAL dystopian novels is that there always seems to be another title that you haven't read yet. I guess that's not such a bad thing.

Ness, Patrick. *The Knife of Never Letting Go: Chaos Walking: Book One*. New York: Candlewick, 2009.

Protagonist Todd Hewitt lives in a world where all women have been killed, and all thoughts of men and animals are broadcasted as Noise. When Todd discovers a hole in the Noise, secrets begin to be divulged.



# NCTE Book Excerpt

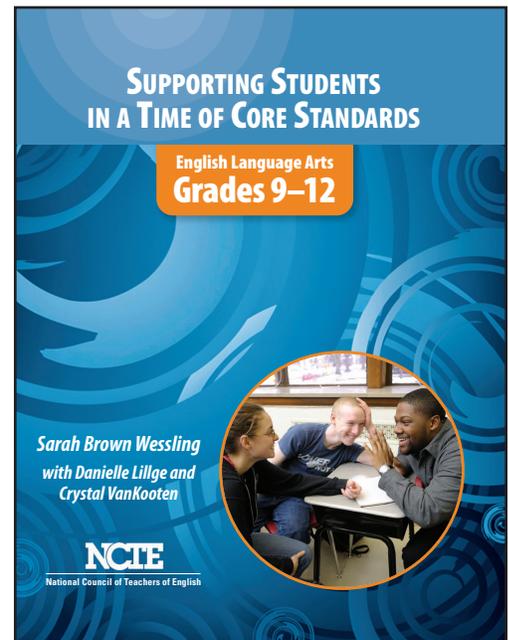
## Everything's a Conversation: Reading Away Isolation

by Sarah Brown Wessling  
*reprinted with permission from NCTE*

In the sections [...] that follow, I will invite you into my classroom, [where my] experiences in planning and implementing instruction can help you to think about how you can contextualize and build using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), established NCTE principles, and the instructional practices you already use that work well.

My teaching began twelve years ago, eleven of which have been at Johnston High School in Johnston, Iowa, where I have taught a range and variety of courses throughout my tenure. The suburban high school, currently comprised of 1,300 students in grades 10 through 12, has seen incredible growth in population over the past fifteen years, which has created a steady trajectory of adding teachers, managing ballooning class sizes, and ever-changing student populations. Each year, this community now welcomes more ELL (English language learner) students and those utilizing free and reduced-price lunch. While some courses at the high school are on a block schedule, all courses in the English department meet once a day for forty-four minutes. All but two course offerings (tenth-grade Integrated Language Arts and Advanced Placement Literature and Composition) are semester length. Students choose classes from a newly reconstructed set of course offerings designed around fifteen thematic topics (e.g., Teen in the World, Power of Persuasion, Reading the Screen, or Culture Clash). Designed around themes, these courses each integrate various strands of literacy—reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening—and each position fiction, nonfiction, and informational texts in the context of unit construction. These course offerings are designed for differentiation within each class, so all kinds of learners are included in any given classroom of approximately twenty-three to twenty-eight students. In addition to my work at Johnston High School, I served as a national ambassador for education as the 2010 National Teacher of the Year.

When you walk into my classroom, you'll find a Jackson Pollock print on the wall. At the beginning of the school year it usually doesn't take too long for a student looking at it to say something like, "I could be famous too if all I did was take paint and splatter it all over a canvas." I wait in anticipation for this moment of provocation, when a student unknow-



ingly invites a conversation about the difference between appearance and reality, the relationship between chaos and precision. I'm anxious to tell them about Pollock's immersion into process, his captivation with intentionality and his precision of practice that transcends into art. The work of Jackson Pollock reminds me that like quality instruction, what may appear chaotic is deliberate, precise, and carefully designed.

### Contextualizing

The way we design instruction with local context and the CCSS in mind determines the kind of learning that will emerge on the canvas of our classrooms. What we emphasize, what we say, and what we spend our time engaged in will emerge in what and how our students learn. So, we are deliberate, knowing that what happens on the first day and how it connects to the last day matters. We are precise, cognizant that the language of learning permeating our classrooms affects thinking.

In concert with my classroom accounts, co-contributors to this volume, Danielle Lillge and Crystal VanKooten, spent time collaborating in English language arts classrooms and have created companion vignettes that will take us into additional environments that are balancing classroom practice with standards integration. All the teachers in this volume have generously invited us into their classrooms to experience teaching and learning moments that illustrate how the chaos of their classroom life is indeed deliberate, precise, and carefully designed. The teaching and learning practices described highlight the ways these teachers work to enact NCTE principles that affirm the value of the knowledge and experience students bring to school, the role of equity in literacy learning, and—always—the learning needs of students while attending to the CCSS. Each of two teaching and learning vignettes within each chapter is preceded by a brief description of the context in which the teacher and his or

her students are working and is followed by an explanation of the teacher's journey to developing pathways to enact these practices because, as we all know, exemplary moments in teaching are the product of many years of studying classroom practice, discussing ideas with colleagues, and reflecting on teaching and learning. Charts following the vignettes highlight key teaching and learning practices and connect them with specific CCSS and with NCTE research-based principles, and finally, the "Frames That Build" sections offer exercises to help you think about how the teaching and learning practices highlighted in the vignettes can connect to your local teaching context.

It is our hope that these teaching and learning vignettes and the corresponding materials will serve as a reflection of the language of learning that already fills your classrooms, and that they will demonstrate a framework that allows thinking about not just what we do, but why we do it. We hope they will remind us that in the layers of local, state, and national values, the greatest intentionality comes from the classroom teacher who enters the complexity and emerges with a process that honors the learning in our classrooms. We invite you to step into these classrooms, reflect on them, and use their successes and challenges to further your own thinking about what bridges you can build between the CCSS and your own instruction.

### **Teaching and Learning Practices from Sarah's Classroom**

I remember noticing the time that spring afternoon during my second year of teaching. My ninth graders and I had spent the last forty-five minutes going question for question, point for point, and I had a sinking feeling as I realized this would be our last discussion of Maya Angelou: the posturing of points. Did it really matter if they could recall every what I put in front of them? I thought I had been using themes, such as power, to frame this unit, but actually, I was still teaching the details of a book, not offering for my readers the kind of authentic experience we all crave. I was teaching them how to read for school, not for life, and thus, I couldn't blame them for how I'd inadvertently set up this horrible forty-five minutes of point-mongering.

I vowed to rethink what it meant to be an authentic reader, to reread Nancie Atwell and Louise Rosenblatt with the eyes of experience wide open. I paid attention to my own reading habits, especially as I read challenging texts and worked to construct meaning with them. I quickly realized that texts cannot operate in isolation the way I was teaching them. I had been organizing my teaching around themes, but I hadn't really been using them to prepare students to read for complexity because I still was teaching the what of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* without the kind of context and texture that liberates students to read complex texts for layers of meaning.

The shift in how I created reading experiences has its

roots in that day. To realize that change, two things had to happen: (1) I needed a shift in thinking and (2) I needed a deliberate and honest implementation of that new paradigm. That day serves as a poignant reminder that there are all kinds of "moves" in our classrooms that quickly, silently, powerfully subvert our best intentions. In this case, using a highly objective test spoke more loudly about what I valued in a reading experience than any mention of our theme had up to that point.

So, my inquiry began in understanding how to craft a reading experience that scaffolded us to greater understanding and meaning-making. As I realized that teaching a theme and thematic teaching were distinctly different instructional endeavors, it also occurred to me that teaching thematically meant I had to design reading experiences in such a way that texts would talk to each other. I started by gathering a variety of texts that extended one main text in similar ways. *Romeo and Juliet* was preceded by excerpts of marriage stories from *Marry Me* as well as selected Shakespearean sonnets. Instead of watching a film version of the play, we juxtaposed excerpts of three different versions, working to establish how nuanced interpretations offered texture to our interaction with *Romeo and Juliet*.

Soon, even this approach gave way to more intentionality in text selection and, thus, more complexity. Later, I recognized that my centerpiece text was never as powerful without the benefit of other texts to provide context. *The Stranger* wasn't as powerful without excerpts of *Sophie's World*, Charlie Chaplin, or punk rock music to amplify it. Our investigation of it wasn't complete without juxtaposing Camus to Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* to offer contrast, to spark questions, to prompt curious distinctions. Before long, we were hearkening back to Salinger, Peter Kuper's graphic novel of *The Metamorphosis*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Even though we moved on to a juxtaposition of Flannery O'Connor and Mary Shelley, our discussion of good and evil was fueled by the likes of Mersault and the other authors, characters, and ideas that permeated our course. I had not only learned to teach thematically, but I had also learned how to design a recursiveness in text selection that mirrored and honored the kind of recursiveness we practiced as writers, thinkers, viewers, and readers.

### **Sarah's Journey: Pathways to Enact These Practices**

A consistent feature in the CCSS, one that extends across all grades, asks students to stop seeing texts as isolated pieces of work and to compare them to other texts. As the texts become more complex and students become more savvy, the reading goes beyond even compare/contrast and moves toward juxtaposing texts to reveal their layers and nuances. Certainly, one component of helping students read complex texts resides in the strategic instructional moves that guide and scaffold students while they are in the

Context texts	Fulcrum texts	Texture texts
<i>These accessible “anchor” texts create a reservoir of prior knowledge that gives context to the complexity of further reading.</i>	<i>These texts are often the traditional whole-class text or they take the place of that whole-class text.</i>	<i>While these texts often seem to be shorter, it also is effective to juxtapose two major texts to create reading texture.</i>
Film film excerpts informative pieces news/magazine articles blog radio show podcast short story poetry drama young adult literature brief fiction brief nonfiction graphic novel	book-length fiction book-length nonfiction short story or stories drama poem or series of poems film student selected text whole-class text	film film excerpts informative pieces news/magazine articles blog radio show podcast short story poetry drama young adult literature brief fiction brief nonfiction graphic novel

**TABLE 2.1: Sample Texts for Reading Complexity Circles**

process of reading the texts. Yet, as we interpret the CCSS, it's equally important to consider how we select texts and organize reading in a way that invites scaffolding and establishes layered reading of complex texts.

Reading, especially complex reading, doesn't occur in isolation. In imagining a reading experience that is scaffolded by design, that resists reading in isolation, and welcomes a situation in which texts “talk” to each other, I've used a concept (see Table 2.1) to design instruction that deliberately layers the reading of texts by way of conceptual reading circles (unlike student reading groups, these “circles” demonstrate how we can layer the reading of classroom texts). Just as I started with *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Stranger*, many teachers may begin by choosing their major or fulcrum text, the selection that is the centerpiece of any unit of study. The fulcrum text is one that offers distinct layers of meaning and complexity for the reader. It may be of considerable length, it may use nonlinear narrative structure, it may be considered a “classic.” This is the fulcrum text because it is the most complex and the work that comes before and after helps to tease out and maneuver its complexities. Students work toward reading independence with these texts.

Crucial at this point is letting go of the idea that our focus is teaching the content of the text rather than skills of reading and thinking. In other words, I don't teach *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I teach “courage,” and *To Kill a Mockingbird* is but one of the texts used to explore the idea of courage. Therefore, organizing a reading experience around an idea versus a book title becomes central to including both the context

and texture texts that expand the potential of the reading experience. A context text(s) anchors the reading experience by generating prior knowledge while connecting to student interests, motivations, and questions. It is accessible and it creates motivation. It may have teenage protagonists or be particularly brief. It deals with the theme or essential question in succinct or overt ways. It may set up vocabulary or scenarios crucial to the other texts; it anchors thinking.

The texture texts, then, are read either in conjunction with the fulcrum text or after it. Texture texts do just that: add texture to reading and thinking through their juxtaposition.

They may be read both simultaneously and/or after other texts. These texts may contradict another work, may focus in on one aspect of another work, or may illuminate another work in some fashion. These texts are often brief because they may be complex, technical, or appropriate for shared reading. As readers must tease out the implicit nuances of these texts, the opening for use of ongoing and specific textual evidence emerges as part of the classroom discourse. Perhaps most importantly, the fulcrum text from one unit then informs the reading and learning of the next unit. In a curriculum that is ongoing and progressive, the fulcrum text in one unit becomes part of the continuing discourse of the class and, thus, becomes part of the context for upcoming units. Just as *The Stranger* went from a fulcrum text in one unit to providing context for Flannery O'Connor in the next, this model creates a recursiveness in which even the units are no longer in isolation of each other.

Certainly, teachers come to this work of implementing reading standards with text complexity from various circumstances. Few teachers are able to imagine and implement without navigating many levels of school bureaucracy. Regardless of one's teaching situation, creating these kinds of reading experiences is possible.

In looking at Table 2.1, it's crucial to note that text types can quickly move from one column to another. Further, these columns are representative of different types of texts, rather than offering a complete list. In implementing reading complexity circles, it's less important to choose the "right" kind of text for each circle and far more vital to use the selected texts with intentionality. In other words, how the texts are used to scaffold the reading experience takes precedence over which texts are chosen. The same text could work in each of the three circles. For instance, a short story could be the fulcrum text of a unit, knowing that its purpose there is to spend extended time with the short story, teasing out its many layers. In another scenario, the same short story could be juxtaposed with a book-length nonfiction text and serve to provide texture or perspective to the nonfiction.

In yet another scenario, the short story could create context for the fulcrum text, a drama. Intentionality and execution of the design depends on using all three circles at any given juncture of a course. Simply envisioning a single text in three ways (the short story as representative of all three) underestimates the power and recursiveness of designing with text complexity in mind.

For example, I recently taught a course in which *The Odyssey* was one of the major texts. I began planning by determining which facets of the content I wanted students to learn. The power of allusion? The importance of metaphor? The theme of journey? I also thought about the skills that students should emerge from this unit with. The ability to read closely? The ability to analyze the literature? The ability to write convincingly about the text? Through this exploration, the essential question emerged: How do physical journeys fuel personal insights? With the question posed and the skills to focus on elevated, the content needed to fuel our inquiry. The fulcrum text, *The Odyssey*, became the text we needed to unpack the most.

To frame that text, I chose *Star Wars* and some excerpts from Joseph Campbell as context texts. The context texts allowed us to practice our skills and create a reservoir of language and ideas that enabled readers more access to *The Odyssey*. Then, as we read our fulcrum text, we added the potential for nuanced readings by juxtaposing *The Odyssey* with an NPR piece on veterans and violence along with excerpts from the Frontline episode "A Soldier's Heart." By making sure that students saw how these texts weren't isolated, but how knowing one lends depth to another, they were far more prepared to deal with the text complexity before them. Layering instructional design in this way also

created ongoing writing and speaking experiences.

As we consider enacting these practices, we each have the reality of our book closets to go to. On opening those doors, some may see an abundance of options, while others may feel constrained by what they see. Regardless of your reality, there is a place to begin. Certainly my journey has been a progressive one. Throughout my teaching experiences, I have found myself in a variety of scenarios that range from working within a fixed curriculum, to reorganizing reading experiences in a flexible curriculum, to imagining and implementing a department set of course offerings where all the classes are organized around themes. Taking the resources you have and organizing them using reading complexity circles (see Figure 2.1) can help you authorize your readers.

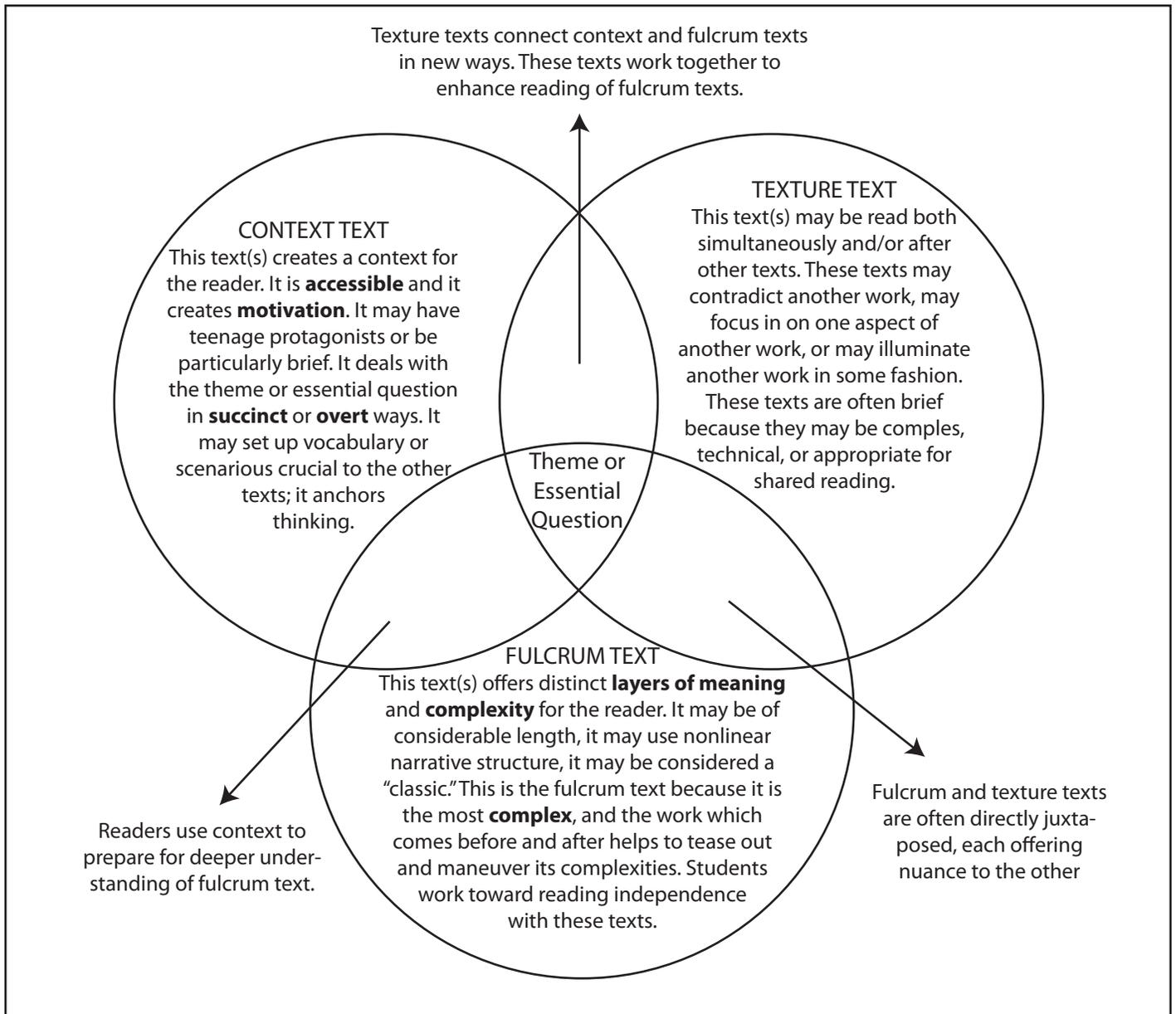
### **Working within a Fixed Curriculum**

As I started teaching, the curriculum already established by the departments was largely fixed with prescribed readings and sometimes prescribed materials. In cases like this, the process of crafting a reading experience begins with text placement.

Which texts are already next to each other in the curriculum? Do they have anything to say to each other? Can a few texts that are in close proximity to each other be grouped around a theme or essential question? Which short, accessible texts could I bring into the classroom to provide a context? How will the language of the theme serve as "reading Velcro" for each subsequent text? Often, in a fixed curriculum, the fulcrum text was canonical. Yet even with a traditional text at the center of unit design, I could still consider which texts to bring in from other units. I could also scour classrooms for unused resources that could add texture to the reading, discussion, and analysis of that major text. If you are using a textbook, ask if the selections can be reorganized around a theme or question. Imagine the selections becoming context or texture texts for other selections. Regardless of how tight the constraints on your curriculum may be, organizing study around themes, bringing in short anchor pieces for context, and getting the texts you have out of isolation and into conversation with each other will advance a more authentic reading experience.

### **Working with a Flexible Curriculum**

Several years into my career, as I acquired some experience and demonstrated competence in the classroom, the potential for a more flexible curriculum emerged. I volunteered for curriculum committees and found that I could still meet the local standards while reconfiguring how I went about organizing our learning. This flexibility enabled me to collaborate with other teachers in an effort to shift texts from one course or unit to another. In this case, there was the potential to rewrite or write in units of study where context, fulcrum, and texture texts align. In this case, it was



**FIGURE 2.1:** Reading Complexity Circles

helpful for me to reimagine the fulcrum text. Did it have to be the same whole-class novel whose place in the curriculum has seemed cemented? What if the text was nonfiction? What if it was poetry instead of a novel? What if it was contemporary instead of classic, or classic instead of contemporary? What if it was a literature circle or individual choice instead of whole class? In this case, reimaging the role of that major text as a fulcrum invites companionship with other texts where it may have been shadowed before. I also started to look outside of my closet and the department for resources. Could your library, school or public, find enough copies of a graphic novel to use as a texture text? Is there a young adult literature selection in a neighboring grade level that could create a context? Is there another department that uses full-length nonfiction texts that could be juxtaposed with the fulcrum text?

### **When You Can Create the Curriculum**

Most recently, as several influences aligned, my department and I had the opportunity to imagine and create a curriculum with the support of resources and funding. In this unique situation, the possibility of organizing not only units but entire courses around reading circles offered the potential for ongoing scaffolding from text to text, unit to unit, and course to course. As Figure 2.1 shows, reading circles bring multiple texts together.

### **Beyond Design: Meeting Readers Where They Are**

I think that many teachers have long taught to a set of standards. It's that intersection of content and skill all learners must have to be equipped as a member of a highly literate and quickly changing society. While teachers just enter-

ing the profession may draw from a defined set of national standards such as the CCSS to help them find focus and purpose in their work, those teachers who have already established an “internal compass” of sorts come to this work of integration with a unique challenge. While established teachers may quickly understand the standards, I have found, through my own efforts and by working with other teachers, it’s taxing to determine how the language and implications of the standards make it into our day-to-day work.

Wielding a blueprint of instructional design means we’ve created the capacity for students to construct their own learning; meeting them in that process comes next. Teaching readers to be thinkers means we must engage with our students as they work to comprehend what they read, to use explicit evidence to support their readings, to pay close attention to word meanings, and to integrate the ideas of several texts to support their own response. The language of the reading standards sends us a clear message: Students must be able to read carefully and closely, using precise evidence to support analysis. This means that we will help students to use their personal connections and responses to texts as entry points, knowing this practice creates access to a text. It also means that as we guide students to reading as a generative process, the way they exit a text may be precipitated on how they entered it, but they will emerge from the reading having attended to precise language and having interacted with its nuances. I often think of the kinds of questions that surround our work in the classroom as either entry questions or exit questions. In other words, we will ask the kinds of questions that give our students entrance into a text: the question that activates schema, that connects to what they know, that piques a personal inter-

est. Once they’re “in” we need to ask the kinds of questions that help them exit the text with a nuanced, layered reading. When we center our prised readings on the precise language of the text, we’re helping students to explore how or why.

So often, when working with standards, we subscribe to the subtext that if we teach all of the discrete parts (the grade band standards and even the further delineated interpretation of those, which often happens at the local level) then students will surely achieve the standard. However, it seems much more likely that if we teach to the anchor standard, and use the language of the grade band standards to inform our feedback and to guide our scaffolding, the purpose and focus of learning remains clear and steady. Otherwise, we operate with a compass that relies on our learners to make the connections and determine the learning purpose by virtue of being the only ones who have “done all of the grade band assignments.” It becomes part of our charge to resist a linear approach that compartmentalizes assignments corresponding to grade band standards and offer, instead, a recursive approach that moves in and out of standard and skill, recognizing that we aim to layer them for more authentic purposes rather than stack one task on top of another, hoping it won’t all topple over.

One way in which I aim to maintain a larger focus is through naming and enacting a process of reading, of thinking. In the beginning days of class, students talk not about what it means to be a good student, but what it means to be a good learner. As concepts of curiosity, playfulness, divergence, and perseverance enter their vocabulary, the focus of classroom work becomes not just acquiring a content-knowledge base or wielding a set of skills, but also on acquiring the dispositions that make someone an autonomous, lifelong learner.

At the end of every quarter, my students use a taxonomy of these dispositions to trace their progress as learners. Divided into six sections—reader, writer, viewer, communicator, thinker, and habits of mind—this taxonomy then fans out into two more layers. The next layer highlights words that would describe each section followed by a layer that describes the actions embodied by the learner. For example, a reader is also described as “active,” “critical,” and “voracious.” Some of the actions are “recognizing and building on patterns” or “challenging texts and conventional readings.” Students gauge their progress by highlighting just a couple of descriptors or actions they demonstrate. Through reflection and documentation, they connect the descriptions to their work and then choose a couple of new descriptors to pursue in the next quarter. This reflective invitation to the students serves as an outward reflection of the implicit process and about what inspires and guides my commitment to students: the belief in their ability to become autonomous, lifelong learners.

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# Non-Fiction Graphic Novels Across the Content Areas

## Social Studies and English

- *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* by Guy Delisle (2005)
- *Burma Chronicles* by Guy Delisle (2010)
- *Shenzhen: A Travelogue from China* by Guy Delisle (2006)
- *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007)
- *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi (2007)
- *Pride of Baghdad* based on real events by Brian Vaughan (2006)
- *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation* by Jonathan Hennessey (2008)
- *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (2002)
- *War's End: Profiles from Bosnia 1995-96* by Joe Sacco (2005)
- *Safe Area Gorazde: War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* by Joe Sacco (2000)
- *The Fixer* by Joe Sacco (2009)
- *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel* by Joe Sacco (2010)
- *Alan's War: The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope* by Emmanuel Guibert (2008)
- *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders* by Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefevre, and Frederic Lemercier (2006). Translated by Alex Siegel (2009)
- *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* by C.M. Butzer (2005)
- *Dangerous Woman: A Graphic Biography of Emma Goldman* by Sharon Rudhal (2007)
- *Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean* by Sarah Stewart Taylor and James Sturm (2/2/11)
- *Thoreau at Walden* by John Porcellino (2008)
- *Epileptic* by David B. (2006)
- *Monsters* by Ken Dahl (2009)
- *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso (2007)
- *America: God, Gold and Golem* by James Sturm (2007)
- *Houdini: the Handcuff King* by Jason Luttes and Nock Bertozzi (2008)
- *Journey into Mohawk Country* by George O'Conner (2006)
- *Gulf War Journal* by Don Lomax (2004)
- *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* by Dwight John Zimmerman (2009)
- *Last day in Vietnam* by Will Eisner (2000)
- *The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue* includes three stories by Will Eisner (2005): *A Contract with God* originally published in 1978, *A Life Force* published in 1988 and *Dropsie Avenue* published in 1995.
- *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by Will Eisner (2005)
- *Life, in Pictures: Autobiographical Stories* by Will Eisner (2007)
- *Che: A graphic Biography* by Spain Rodriguez (2008)
- *Che: A graphic Biography* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (2009)
- *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (2006)
- *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (2010)
- *J. Edgar Hoover: A Graphic Biography* by Rick Geary (2008)
- *Trotsky: A Graphic Biography* by Rick Geary (2009)
- *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* by Andrew Helfer and Randy DuBurke (2006)
- *Ronald Reagan: A Graphic Biography* by Andrew Helfer (2007)
- *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small (2009)
- *Maus I and Maus II: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman (1986 and 1992)
- *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman (2004)
- *A People's History of the American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* by Mike Konopacki and Paul Buhle (2008)
- *Wobblies!: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* by Paul Buhle (2005)
- *King: A Comic Biography of MLK, Jr.*, a three volume set by Ho Che Anderson (1993, 2002 and 2003)
- *A.D. New Orleans- After the Deluge* by Josh Neufeld (2010)
- *Fallout: J Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard, and the Political Science of the Atomic Bomb* by Jim Ottaviani, et al. (2001)
- *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and Persepolis II: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi (2004 and 2005)
- *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History* by Harvey Pekar (2009)
- *The Cartoon Introduction to Economics: Volume One: Microeconomics* by Yoram Bauman (2010)
- *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* by Ilan Stavans (2000)
- *The Cartoon History of the United States* by Larry Gonick (1991)
- *Cartoon History of the Universe: From the Big Bang to Alexander the Great* by Larry Gonick (1997)
- *Cartoon History of the Universe: From the Springtime of China to the Fall of Rome* By Larry Gonick (1994)
- *Cartoon History of the Universe: From the Rise of Arabia to the Renaissance* By Larry Gonick (2002)
- *The Cartoon History of the Modern World: Part I – From Columbus to the US Constitution* by Larry Gonick (2006)
- *The Cartoon History of the Modern World: Part II – From the Bastille to Baghdad* by Larry Gonick (2009)

## Science

- *Charles Darwin – On the Origin of Species: A Graphic Adaptation* by Michael Keller (2009)
- *Evolution: The Story of Life on Earth* by Jay Hosler and Kevin Cannon (2011)
- *The Stuff of Life: A Graphic Guide to Genetics and DNA* by Mark Schultz and Kevin Cannon (2009)
- *Squish #1: Super Amoeba* by Jennifer Holm (2011)
- *Babymouse #4: Mad Scientist* by Jennifer Holm and Matt Holm (2011)
- *A Cartoon Guide to the Environment* by Larry Gonick and Alice Outwater (1996)
- *A Cartoon Guide to Physics* by Larry Gonick (1991)
- *A Cartoon Guide to Genetics* by Larry Gonick (1991)
- *A Cartoon Guide to Chemistry* by Larry Gonick (2005)

## Math

- *A Cartoon Guide to Statistics* by Larry Gonick & Woollcott Smith (1993)
- *The Cartoon Guide to Calculus* by Larry Gonick (Dec 27, 2011)

Compiled by Jessica Flock

# The People, Fear, and War: A Trio of Graphic Novels

## A People's History of the American Empire

## The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation

## Safe Area Gorazde

by Jessica Flock



Jessica Flock teaches at a residential treatment facility in Laramie, Wyoming. She has taught ESL and social studies and is currently a Title 1 reading teacher. She is interested in social justice education, interdisciplinary and thematic teaching, Wyoming history, reading across the content areas, and being a reflective practitioner. Her email is [jflock@cathedralhome.org](mailto:jflock@cathedralhome.org).

### ***A People's History of the American Empire***

Howard Zinn, former bombardier for the Eighth Air Force in WWII, has written a graphic novel version of his original work, *A People's History of the United States*, first published in 1980. Zinn's historical perspective is controversial to many and inspiring to others. He brings the perspectives of ordinary and multiethnic peoples to the forefront of our lives in order to challenge the "official knowledge" presented in textbooks.

In *A People's History of the American Empire*, the story is told through cartoons and photos with autobiographical stories and historical vignettes. The book begins with an analysis of the "internal empire" and the final wars of displacement against Native American peoples and the massacre at Wounded Knee. The investigation continues through the Spanish American War, WWI and into the end of the 20th Century when Zinn examines U.S. intervention in Central America, Vietnam and Iraq. The remarkable and heart wrenching stories of ordinary people who resisted the oppression and tyranny of the American Empire are at the heart of Zinn's work. Zinn himself serves as the narrator and intersperses episodes from his own courageous and inspiring life into the narrative.

Published in 2008, Illustrator Mike Konopacki and Historian Paul Buhle combine efforts with Zinn to create a visually stunning and thought provoking read about the complex history of the United States. Our history represents a larger and more diverse mosaic than what is traditionally presented to us in public education. *A People's History of the American Empire* is a welcome perspective you should consider adding to your curriculum. Watch a YouTube video about the book at the link below, narrated by Viggo Mortensen and blended with images from the text. Viggo reads from an article by Howard Zinn, published in *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2008, Vol.22 #4 titled, "Empire of Humanity? What the Classroom didn't teach me about the American Empire."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arn3IF5XSUg>  
(8 min 35 sec)

### ***The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation***

Upon nearing the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2011 terrorist attacks in the U.S., it became apparent to my students and me that they needed and wanted to learn more about the event itself, the aftermath and the subsequent changes to national and world security during the days and years to follow. We asked the essential question, "How is life different in a post 9-11 world?" Utilizing *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, we examined multiple sources and reflected about the state of our world since 9-11-01. This book provided an accessible and engaging way for a variety of readers at different academic levels to gain a valuable set of knowledge about the important people, places and events of 9-11.

Jacobson and Colon combine over 60 years of experience in the comic industry to bring us a visually striking and comprehensive narrative which describes The 9/11 Commission Report by The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, originally published in October 2004. In addition, Jacobson and Colon have collaborated on several other projects to include: *Che: A Graphic Biography* published in 2009, *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* published in 2010, and *Vlad the Impaler: The Man who was Dracula* published in 2010.

### ***Safe Area Gorazde***

How are civilians affected by war? What constitutes genocide? What are war crimes? Are you interested in learning answers to these questions? If yes, then you need to read, *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* by Joe Sacco.

Since the end of WWII, there have been numerous accounts of genocide around the globe, even after we said "Never Again." Every war is filled with acts of bravery, moments of absurdity and humor, and horrendous moments of cruelty against humanity. The War in Eastern Bosnia is no exception, and Joe Sacco had created a poignant and significant contribution to the study of this war with his graphic novel.

The town of Gorazde, a Muslim Enclave in central Bos-

nia, is under siege by the Serbians. Joe Sacco, traveled there in 1996, to listen to and appreciate the stories of everyday people and report those accounts from the war to the world. Illustrated in comics, the stories he presents are both heartbreaking and hopeful. Many of the cities' inhabitants struggle through day-to-day life and persevere in spite of the devastation and anguish.

*Safe Area Gorazde* is graphic in every sense of the word. When sharing the stories and lives affected by war, it becomes impossible not to represent the death and destruction. Joe Sacco has represented the people of Gorazde with integrity and humanity which will translate well to students in the classroom. *Safe Area Gorazde* is an intense reading experience filled with the voices of humanity and the violent images of ethnic cleansing. As with all adjustments or additions to curriculum, be sure to understand your purpose in using this graphic novel and consider the emotional impact it may have on students.

Current graphic novels on my nightstand include:

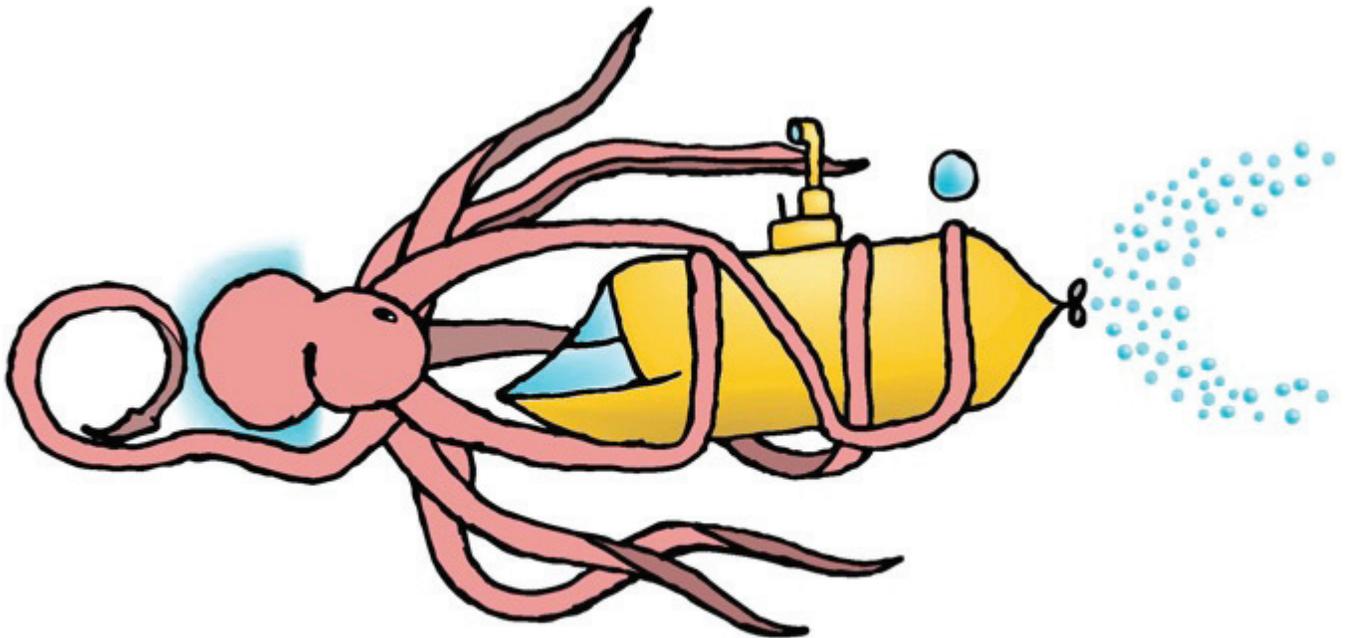
- *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* by French Photographer Didier Lefevre, the Artist Emmanuel Guibert, graphic designer Frederic Lemercier and translated by Alexis

Siegel, English translation published in 2009. It includes remarkable images in photograph and illustration which represent the war between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan in the 1980's.

- *A.D. New Orleans-- After the Deluge* by Josh Neufeld, published in 2010, is the other novel waiting in the wings. It appears to be a harrowing and eye-opening account of Hurricane Katrina's devastation to six lives in New Orleans, LA at the end of August 2005.

In addition, if you haven't read two classics in graphic novel literature make sure you check out *Maus* by Art Spiegelmen and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. I can't wait to feel "the punch" these graphic novels deliver to my students just like *Batman* and *Green Lantern* did for me when I was growing up.

The comic media industry has seen sophisticated growth and overwhelmingly stunning visual additions within the last 10 years, which are accessible, relevant and engaging for students. I strongly encourage you to consider adding a graphic novel to your curriculum. It might just be the "KA-POW" you need to jump start powerful learning, engagement and improved academic success in your classroom.



# A Conversation Between Three Literacy Educators

with Ernest Morrell, Elizabeth Maloney, and Paul De Maret



Ernest Morrell is a Professor of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is also the incoming Vice-President of NCTE. For twenty years Dr. Morrell has drawn upon youth interest in popular culture and participatory media technologies to increase academic literacy development and civic engagement. His email is [ernestmorrell@gmail.com](mailto:ernestmorrell@gmail.com).



Elizabeth Maloney has been teaching since 1990 and currently teaches fourth grade at Dry Creek Elementary in the Cherry Creek School District. She holds her B.S. in Elementary Education from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign and her Master's from National Louis University, Evanston, Illinois. She serves as a literacy liaison for her district and has been a voice for the elementary teacher by serving on various CDE Reading and Writing Standard Committees. Her email is [emaloney3@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:emaloney3@cherrycreekschools.org)



Paul De Maret has taught English and coached forensics for the past 12 years at Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins, part of a 20-year teaching career. He's also a contributing writer and national trainer for the College Board's SpringBoard English Textual Power curriculum. His email is [pdemaret@psdschools.org](mailto:pdemaret@psdschools.org).

From the editor: Here I present a conversation between three literacy educators--two from Colorado and one from a national stage. As explained in the previous issue of *Statement*, inspiration for this regular feature came from a conversation on the pages of *Adolescent Literacy: Turning promise into Practice*, a recent NCTE edited book by Kylee Beers, Robert E. Probst, and Linda Rief. Beers, Probst, and Rief argued that they wanted not a co-authored chapter by three national leaders in literacy education, but “something that suggested the starting and stopping, the rethinking, the interrupting, the contradictions (of self and each other), the hesitations, the silences, the rush of ideas, the spontaneity of the moment that comes when you put three very bright, very passionate, very dedicated teachers into one space” (p. 105). That’s what I am going for here. Teaching literacy is complex, and I hope that these ongoing conversations between Colorado literacy educators (and the occasional guest from the national stage) will capture that more effectively than anything else.

For this issue, I recruited two Colorado teachers: Elizabeth Maloney, fourth grade teacher from the Cherry Creek School District and Paul De Maret, high school teacher from Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins. I met Paul and Elizabeth when the three of us were on the committee to revise Colorado’s ELA standards. I thought their experience on this committee would lend important insight to this particular conversation. And since I had an oppor-

tunity at the fall CLAS conference to speak with keynote speaker Ernest Morrell, I asked him to take part in this conversation and he graciously agreed.

To these three educators, I posed five questions that you’ll see below. They each responded to the questions via email and then had the opportunity to read and respond to what the other two had said. What follows here is the resulting conversation.

*Editor: How do you interpret “informational” texts? What kind of reading does this mean? What sorts of texts does this include?*

**Ernest:** First of all I would like to thank Sarah and CLAS for inviting me into this very important conversation about “texts,” “reading,” and the future of Language Arts instruction. I generally consider all texts as providing valuable information, but I interpret the term to mean non-fiction texts. An informational text could be a magazine article, a blog on a website, or a recipe. The genre of text doesn’t change for me the tools and attitude I want my students to bring to that text.

**Elizabeth:** Ernest, I feel so fortunate to have heard you speak at the last CLAS conference this past September. I left not only inspired, but also incredibly empowered with amazing ideas to engage my students in reading and writing. I’m intrigued with your focus of “attitude” students bring to text.

Can you talk more of what that could look like in my fourth grade classroom, specifically around nonfiction?

Ernest: Hello Elizabeth. Thank you for your comment; I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to CLAS. It is a privilege to be writing this piece with you and Paul! By attitude I am referring to a sense of empowerment over texts, a healthy skepticism toward texts, and a set of tools that allow students to be critical of the texts that they encounter. Beyond decoding, the act of “reading” the word or the world should entail deconstructing texts. So I want students, be they in third grade or a graduate level course to be able to look at a website, a newspaper article, or a voter pamphlet and bring that critical attitude.

Paul: I’m totally with you on that, Ernest (and it’s a pleasure having this conversation with both of you!). Like you, regardless of the type of text, I want my students deconstructing it: they should read not just for information but also for spin; not just for evidence in support of a claim but also for evidence of bias; not just for ideas but for how organizational and stylistic choices emphasize or downplay the legitimacy of those ideas. In other words, students should approach the process of constructing meaning from informational texts (i.e. reading) with the same active attention to the interplay of language and meaning with which they approach literature.

Going back to the definition itself for a minute, I think the term “informational” texts covers both those texts we would consider “literary nonfiction” (as the CCSS labels them) and more conventional forms of expository—and, indeed, persuasive—writing. That means historical documents, personal narratives, classic speeches, political or philosophical or metaphysical manifestos . . . any instance in which writers craft language to convey ideas without the veil of fiction as cover. But “informational” also applies to the types of contemporary texts students frequently encounter which may be less “literary” but which still convey ideas. This would include newspaper and magazine articles, web pages, editorials, advertisements (which, at least, attempt to justify themselves as informational), political speeches, television segments, documentary films, etc.

Elizabeth: It’s so incredibly powerful to hear both of your perspectives. When I think of informational texts, my first reaction is “Yes!” I think about reluctant readers and note some boy students in particular who will eat this up! I think of texts such as biographies, newsworthy articles, loads of science and fascinating history. Fourth graders can’t get enough “true” stories full of facts about creepy creatures living far below the depths of our oceans or planets yet to be discovered. For curious young minds, this new push towards nonfiction can open endless possibilities for elementary teachers to support research and inspire criti-

cal thinkers. By using quality nonfiction books and articles as mentor texts, teachers will be empowered to integrate learning across content and curriculum.

*Editor: How big of a shift is this for the way you think about your job as a teacher of the English language arts? Does this limit or enhance what you will be able to accomplish in your work?*

Paul: I’ve always thought of myself as, first and foremost, a critical thinking teacher. For me, a text is a means to an end, whether it’s a canonical literary text, a film, the lyrics of a song, or a non-fiction article. What specific text I use to achieve the end (mastery of standards-based objectives—of the knowledge and skills they describe) is secondary to the end itself. I also approach texts, regardless of genre, as potential mentor texts for students; we read to see how writers make stylistic choices to create effects so that we can use these techniques in our own writing. As a result, I don’t see an increasing emphasis on informational texts as a huge shift. Perhaps the content of our curricula changes to privilege the canon less and other forms of discourse more. But the ends are still the same: to empower students to be critical consumers of texts who can also use what they read to develop strategies and techniques that allow them to become more sophisticated constructors of texts. In fact, I think the shift may enhance what I do by justifying a further trend away from the canon and towards texts that my students consume on a more regular basis. If I can get them to think critically about these, I’ve done something worth doing.

Elizabeth: Paul, I do agree that the end goal is indeed the same regardless of text. We do need to create “critical consumers of text.” I’m confident my fourth graders are not only capable, but eager to tackle high level sophisticated interactions across a wide variety of text and genre. To say this won’t be a change would be disingenuous, but I say “Bring it on!” Since the unveiling of the new standards, I find myself constantly on the hunt for good mentor texts inclusive of a variety of genres and across cultures. The new standards are calling upon elementary teachers to focus half of our attention to nonfiction. Of course this is a shift, but it is one I’m excited about. I’m searching for rich nonfiction that models not only meaningful content, but great writing as well.

I like the notion of going to the Internet to find short articles for quick lessons regarding issues that are current and real for my students. My concerns, however, are credibility as well as age appropriateness of the text for my students. I’ll be looking to my peers and outside resources for support in pointing me in the right direction. The bottom line is that if elementary teachers are armed with high quality text regardless of genre, the possibilities for meaningful

and engaging lessons are endless!

Ernest: This represents a significant shift in what we are asked to do in English Language Arts. As a first year high school teacher in the early nineties I cannot remember being asked to teach any “informational” texts. My curriculum consisted solely of novels, plays, short stories, and poems. I would supplement my units with informational texts like newspaper clips and documentary films, but there was no mandate to do so. I see the shift enhancing what I am able to do in some ways. For example the youth participatory action research projects require students to process informational texts and the writing assignments that emerge from these projects are very powerful. I also work with students to create oral histories of their families and communities and these projects require reading informational texts. However, I am a lover of literature and I believe that the discipline needs to maintain a strong grounding in the teaching of literature as we shift into the information age. I see this as being possible as we plan and implement multi-modal theme based units that include both fictional and informational texts.

*Editor: In your mind, what does the future world look like that you are preparing your students for? What role does reading play in preparing your students for that future world? What sorts of texts must they read to be ready?*

Elizabeth: To say our world is changing quickly would be an understatement, especially in the realm of technology. It's my job as an elementary teacher to prepare my students for careers that have yet to be created. We are told to teach 21st century skills, but for some of us, that definition can at times, be unclear. With that said, I don't know a teacher out there who doesn't value reading and writing as the foundation to higher level thinking and problem solving. We must create a society that not only reads, but reads well. I want to expose my students to every kind of genre out there and then some! It's a big job. Each type of text requires a different lens for comprehension. I try to empower my students to name their reading strategies as well as their thinking when working with texts. Putting the thinking power in the hands of the students rather than the teacher helps set the tone for high level comprehension. We must create thinkers, innovators and problem solvers while at the same time teach perseverance, commitment and focus for lifelong learning. I feel certain that reading and writing can be the link to bridge learning across content. I think we are going to need more “out of the box” thinkers as our problems of our country and our world become more and more complex. It's our duty to ensure that all students are able to understand and analyze using a variety of texts across genres, content and culture. Reading

instruction is supported when classrooms become opportunities for creativity, collaboration, and joy.

Paul: The bridge metaphor seems particularly insightful, Elizabeth. Helping students to internalize strategies for reading texts of all kinds is the ultimate bridge to making meaning in the future both within and across disciplines.

Ernest: I see the future as a blank canvas. As the artists and architects of the future I want my students to be literate, self-actualized, humane, and engaged. Reading plays a huge role in preparing students to shape the future because they must not only understand the world that exists, they must also be able to continually learn from others as they become producers of knowledge, culture, laws, institutions, and progeny. Students must read all sorts of texts including novels, poems, plays, films, advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles, essays, research reports, constitutions, and Internet websites to name a few.

Paul: Technology visionary Nicholas Negroponte once envisioned the idea of the Daily Me, a media environment in which individuals can selectively filter the information they consume, screening out anything they don't like or are not interested in and creating, in effect, a personalized media space. Personally, I'm a bit terrified of this, even as I see it becoming reality. That's because I fear the impacts for democracy when people suspend a critical attention to the biases of a text, accepting as gospel unwarranted, unsupported claims simply because they reflect their own values. Call me subversive, then (or maybe just blame the fact that I coach debate), but I think students need to read a broad range of expository and persuasive texts—including texts that present competing perspectives on a topic or issue—with an attention to how bias is revealed in both subtle and blatant ways, and with attention to conscious evaluation of the information and/or arguments being offered in the text. At the end of the day, we're all free to think what we choose to think; but I sure hope we don't mistake emotional or fallacious appeals for logical, carefully warranted arguments.

Meanwhile, I also think students need to be adept at adapting to different disciplinary and contextual demands as readers. Students will need to be flexible, tech-savvy consumers of texts, with strategies in place for consuming the rapidly evolving formats through which information is presented to them. Watching a news broadcast while the ticker scrolls along the bottom and a side panel presents a competing story already creates cognitive dissonance for me. Throw in some pop up tweets, some aggressive ads and links that offer me an infinite array of digressive options . . . Well, learning to filter through it all to find credible, relevant, timely information is itself a reading skill needing in the world of the future.

*Editor: What role does literature specifically play in preparing students for their futures?*

Ernest: In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison states that national literatures reflect what is on the national mind. Similarly, in his reference to African slave narratives scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. comments that we literally speak and write ourselves into being. I take these comments to heart as I think about the role of literature in our discipline. Narratives or stories initiate a sort dialogue with our cultures past and present that is lacking from other genres of texts. It is literature that provides this link to conversations about the human condition. When I think of students' futures not only as workers or contributors to the economy; but also as active citizens and as creators and transmitters of culture, the role of literature becomes invaluable to their preparation. Nineteenth century literary critic Matthew Arnold talks about the power and beauty of poetic language not just in poetry, but in every aspect of our lives. We see this language in our poems and songs, of course, but it also is heard and felt and seen in political speeches, in our religious texts, in advertisement slogans and also in protests signs or, as Simon and Garfunkel sang, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls."

Paul: If we want students to become more sophisticated thinkers, then we have to continue to challenge them with more sophisticated texts. I think literature catalyzes our growth as thinkers, and as human beings, in a variety of ways. First, literature provokes discussions of complex psychological and moral issues through its exploration of human experience. It also frequently presents oppositional frameworks that challenge readers to evaluate the status quo and their own assumptions about the world. Furthermore, it offers the basis for an infinite number of analytical or interpretive arguments, arguments that can only be persuasive if we can carefully select, evaluate, and present evidence (from the text itself) in support of our positions. Finally, it provides models of the ways through which writers use language to explore issues and articulate perspectives—and engages students, as readers, in the process of understanding how language can be used to affect change. Thus, literature can be used to make students aware of the huge power of language, power they can evoke through their own sophisticated use of it.

Elizabeth: Right on Paul! Words have power. That is our class motto. Words in speeches, poems, stories, songs and plays all create shifts in perspective, mood, emotion, and social action. I'm committed to flooding my students with the best of both works in literature and in nonfiction and I'm confident most of us in elementary feel the same. Literature will always play a key role in the classroom in that it's

very nature and themes demand self-awareness, point of view, and self-discovery. We can never disregard the value of literature. Let's not forget that "best practice" dictates "best teaching." We learn by doing. Reading is not a passive process. We need to provide time for students to interact with text both in speaking and in writing. With good teaching, regardless if the genre is literature, newspaper article, or blog, the outcome will be good learning.

Paul: I think we've all presented compelling arguments in support of literature's continuing relevance, but this relevance is undermined if students leave our classrooms resenting the experiences they've had with it. I think the terrible irony in Language Arts education is that so many students leave our classes hating literature. Why does this happen? I'm convinced that it's because they don't have the "time . . . to interact with text" that you talk about, Elizabeth, nor the opportunity to engage in the sort of dialogue you describe, Ernest. Howard Gardner says "Coverage is the enemy of understanding," so as more informational texts are incorporated into our classrooms we'll have to make compromises on how much literature remains--or undermine the value of the experiences students are allowed to have with it in the first place.

*Editor: Since you began your career as an educator, how has the purpose of reading in your classroom changed? What forces can you identify as the source for that change?*

Elizabeth: Early on in my career, I didn't focus with nearly as much deliberate attention to reading instruction as I do today. The forces in my shift are many. I'm extremely fortunate to now be in a district that values meaningful professional development as well as endless opportunities to tap into a variety of resources. My teaching environment and school climate values "process" as much as "outcome" and encourages teachers to continue to be learners. In my classroom, asking the right questions are valuable as finding the right answers. I work under leadership that checks for student engagement as part of an essential piece in evaluating learning and that definitely requires me to think and plan with engagement as a focus. Thanks to this support, I now have new tools that I never had early on in my career and I'm better equipped to reach a variety of learners. I find nothing more exciting than seeing students tackle text complexity, talk to peers about their thinking, and then write about their discoveries. If someone would have told me twenty years ago that I'd still be having this much fun, I never would have believed it. Now, I clearly see that reading instruction doesn't just "happen". It is a deliberate focus, every day, day in and day out. The final force in my shift is simply maturity. The longer I teach, the more I'm inspired to "do better" by my students. Opportunities to dialogue

with other professionals in forums such as these are not only empowering, but re-energizing!

Ernest: Over the past twenty years I have witnessed a significant change in the purpose and process of reading for students. Reading has always meant decoding, comprehending, and gleaning information from a text. As teachers we were to help students understand the main idea of a text and to use various strategies to synthesize information across a range of texts to arrive at a greater understanding of content. Of course this is still a significant part of what we do. However now I see reading as also meaning: (1) Interpreting texts; students now have more license to read “against” texts. They can question, critique, and disagree with the texts they read. They can also draw upon personal experience to challenge ideas brought forward in the texts they read. Indeed in many of our assignments we would be disappointed if students were merely to summarize what they had learned from the text without offering their own analysis. (2) Interpreting the world; I was an early career teacher when I read Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo’s *Reading the Word and the World*. The book had a profound influence on my life as a teacher and as a civic agent. As I came to understand that I could use the same tools that I used to deconstruct texts to re-interpret the world around me, I became a different kind of actor upon the world. Of course this is now a commonplace assumption in our discipline, but I can remember what a huge transformation this represented at a key moment in my life and career. I find this shift tremendously exciting in the power that it grants to the reader. Reader response theory, transactional theories, and critical pedagogy have something to do with this shift, but I also think that the information age has demanded that we produce more discerning readers that need to challenge the texts that they encounter.

Paul: I mentioned earlier my concern that students too often wind up leaving our classrooms with negative attitudes towards literature, and Ernest’s point on interpretation points to another reason why. When I began teaching twenty years ago, reading in the high school language arts classroom was generally viewed as a disciplinary activity devoted to the analysis of literary texts. Course titles (World Lit, American Lit, British Lit, Western Humanities) emphasized the dominance of canonical survey approaches to teaching literature. While an ever-increasing sensitivity to multicultural perspectives worked to expand the canon, teachers still primarily taught texts, rather than approaches to texts, so reading remained largely a process of understanding the “correct” meaning of a text—especially as a reflection of its place in the historical context of its creation. This paradigm didn’t allow much room for student interpretation of texts; after all, as one professor I had so bluntly put it, “That would be liking letting the blind lead

the blind.”

Thankfully, several key developments in education have justified my desire to steer classroom practice away from this approach. Foremost, perhaps, evolving standards have shifted our instructional objectives away from content and towards skills and concepts; but equally important has been the increasing influence of understanding by design and similar paradigms for ends-based, backmapped, scaffolded instruction. As a result, I now teach reading as both a set of broad skills that are cross-disciplinary and a subset of skills that are specific to my content area. Meanwhile, as research has increasingly indicated the cognitive connections between “reading” non-print texts and supporting the development of print literacy, I’ve turned increasingly to the use of other media to teach skills like the analysis and interpretation of style. Lastly, like Ernest, my experience with literary theory has transformed my approach in the classroom. I want my students to know there are myriad ways to read texts, each based on different assumptions about where “meaning” resides.

What unites all these developments is my hope that students will continue to read literature beyond high school. They will be more likely to do so, I’m convinced, if their experiences with reading literature in high school involve more choice and more empowerment to do so independently. Both of these lead to the kind of engagement you mention, Elizabeth—and without engagement, students are unlikely to become life-long readers of literature, nor critical consumers of other types of texts.

Elizabeth: I want to mention that it is so powerful to see that regardless of grades taught, the three of us are thinking of the “bigger picture” when it comes to creating critical learners and thinkers who engage in text. We are focused not only on who our students are today, but who they will become. LA is the subject that gives teachers a real shot at taking on the new rigor coming our way. To be able to “talk” to two brilliant and committed educators inspires me to go back to my class with hope, encouragement, and positivity for our future.

Talking with others in the field, beyond just folks in our buildings, is not just simply a luxury, but a necessity that will be all the more important as we dive deeper into bringing the new standards into action in our classrooms.

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# Colorado Council International Reading Association Annual Conference on Literacy February 1-4, 2012

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and many more

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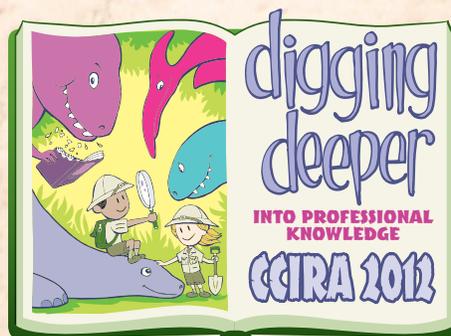
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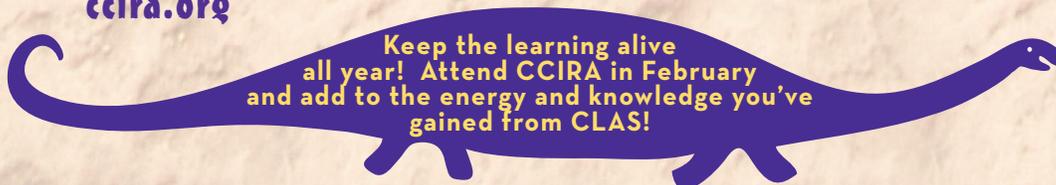
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# Statement Survey

## What Colorado Teachers are Saying about the Texts We Teach and How We Teach Them

In an effort to hear from more ELA teachers across the state, *Statement* invited teachers to weigh in on a survey connected to this issue's theme. Below are the responses from the teachers who completed this issue's survey.

Look for future surveys on the CLAS Ning (<http://clastalk.ning.com/>) and on *Statement's* website (<https://sites.google.com/site/classtatement/>).

### Survey Respondents:

Casey Luker, Skyline High School, Longmont

Susan Stokley, Kennedy High School, Denver

Laura Woods, Falcon Creek Middle School, Aurora

Maria Roberts, Peetz Plateau High School, Peetz

Paula Reed, Columbine High School, Littleton

Julia Barrus, Mountain Range High School, Westminster

*What do literature and stories mean to you as an educator?*

Casey: We try to be standards-based, so we use the literature to reach our students and practice the skills laid out in the standards. We have a very diverse population, where many students claim they have never read or they "haven't read since fourth grade" (and we are talking 10th graders here). One of the strengths of the standards is also an emphasis on non-fiction/informational literature, so we have been trying to also use current events and nonfiction pieces to supplement our fiction, too.

Susan: Literature, including stories, allows my students to make sense of their world and see how others might choose to face similar challenges in their lives. When I was young, I looked to literature for this reason as well. Literature also allows my writing students to see what good writing looks like--how authors use language to create worlds my students may not have an opportunity to experience in person.

Laura: Literature and stories are a way for our students to connect with the world around them. Texts should be chosen to expose our students to multiple experiences, cultures, and perspectives. They should be reflective of the student population you do and do not have at your home school.

I teach writing so I use parts of stories as mentor text in my instruction. I find examples of wonderful imagery, sentence structure, poetry, or plot line (memoir). I sometimes read just because I want the students to hear the

cadence and rhythm of good writing. I will also use trade books for examples of punctuation and grammar instruction.

I use nonfiction texts from a variety of media as jumping off grounds for expository and persuasive writing. For example, we read news articles and then choose a side on the position. We will write a commentary so the students will read many commentaries to get the gist of what they can look and sound like. I will have the students read an article about the power of advertising in their lives and then look at advertisements in magazines and on TV. They will then write to persuade and to inform after having read and discussed the elements of persuasion advertising uses.

Maria: Literature teaches life lessons, inspires compassion, fosters conversation and collaboration, and reminds us of the resiliency and strength of the human spirit.

Paula: In the past, literature has been a way of deepening students' understanding of what it means to be human. It has challenged young people (who tend to be narcissistic by development and culture) to look beyond themselves and their experiences. As a teacher with a degree in English and years of life experience, I led kids to delve deeply, look below the surface and past their prejudices in interpreting literature, skills that I believed are vitally important in life so we can understand all people better. Together, students shared ideas and thoughts on one book and learned to see things through each others' eyes. Through this shared experience, they had an opportunity to develop a sense of culture and had personal contacts with history.

This year literature has been totally devalued. It's mostly used to study writing techniques. Teachers aren't supposed to choose texts or lead a class through a discussion, so classes aren't supposed to study individual texts as a shared experience. We read fewer books, so kids will never learn the breadth of literary experiences open to them. I feel we are abandoning culture and robbing them of important experiences once offered in English class.

Julia: Literature and stories teach us how to be literate people, critical thinkers, and social analysts. I use literature in my classroom to show students how art can be used as a vessel to communicate and explore eternal truths about mankind, our past, and our potential.

*How will you make more space in your classroom for the "informational" texts that our new state standards ask us to include?*

Casey: For example, we have our semesters around themes. First semester is the Individual in Society. We read *Persepolis*, so we try to bring in background information on Iran during the Islamic Revolution as well as current event articles about the Middle East. We also have a lot of students interested in immigration policies, so we have brought in articles about immigration in Colorado (as well as in other states) and had them practice some of the writing standards around student-generated claims and support from articles.

Susan: I will link the informational texts to the literature. For example, when we read "A Rose for Emily," I also have my students read a newspaper article about a woman who preserved her husband's body in her house, to show students that this creepy story could actually happen.

Laura: Since I teach writing, I think the majority of the material we read in my class is informational. As I noted above, I use articles as jumping off points for students to choose a side of an issue and defend it, to learn about a writing technique and then emulate it, and to give them ideas of topics they may be interested in exploring further and then writing about.

Maria: I am not sure and that worries me greatly.

Paula: I've always believed there is value in nonfiction, but I don't understand why we've lost sight of how much "informational" reading kids do in other disciplines. Also, because I've always had kids write non-literature-based research papers in every class every year, they got a lot of informational reading in that way, but it had context and meaning for them.

Julia: My students recently evaluated websites for bias while searching for current events related to unit essential questions such as, "What is the American Dream and how has it influenced our current socioeconomic climate?" and, "What do firstperson narratives tell us about immigration today?" Prior to that, my students used the internet to explore first person accounts of the massacre at Wounded Knee and The Donner Party in concert with the work they did in Social Studies class.

*Does the inclusion of "informational" texts limit or expand what you see as the ultimate goal of your teaching?*

Casey: Expand. It is a real world skill that is necessary to be a participant in our society.

Susan: Oh, I definitely think it expands my teaching. Since students will be expected to write mostly informational texts in their post-secondary experiences, it is great to teach them how to articulate themselves in this genre effectively.

Laura: I would think it would expand the ultimate goal. Our students need to learn how to read information text - and that includes the plethora of material available on the Internet - so they can be informed and questioning readers. I'm worried about this generation believing anything that is in print because it's on the Internet. Too many of my students don't even look to see who is the author of the web site and consider his/her possible slant or bias.

Maria: I definitely believe it could negatively impact everything I do and hold dear as a teacher.

Paula: The inclusion of informational texts is not the problem. The problem is the extent to which these texts have edged out literature. There is a great deal of information to be gleaned from literature and that must be gleaned about other times and cultures in order to fully understand and appreciate literature.

Julia: Informational texts expand my teaching goals by increasing information literacy skills and reaching those students who have traditionally struggled with literacy. Many of today's students are far more likely to read and fully comprehend informational text (in magazines, blog posts and on websites) than they are to grasp the many layers of an artfully crafted fictional narrative. I like using informational text to incite interest for the social and timeless concepts expressed within fictional texts.

What kinds of texts are you currently using in your classroom?

Casey: an equal mixture of literary and informational texts  
Susan: mostly literature  
Laura: an equal mixture of literary and informational texts  
Maria: mostly literature  
Paula: mostly informational texts  
Julia: an equal mixture of literary and informational texts

What are some compelling informational texts that you have used successfully with your students?

Casey: Like I said above, mostly articles and current events that are around topics that relate to our students. Plus, a lot of our literature is based in non-fiction. *Persepolis*: graphic novel on a girl's real experiences growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. *Hole in My Life*: Jack Gantos's experience with deciding to smuggle drugs into the US in the hopes of earning enough money to go to a good college.

Susan: I use a little book I got at an AP workshop several years ago from Norton publishing called *The Norton Sampler*, and I am also constantly on the lookout for informational texts to use as models and supplemental materials in my classroom.

Laura: Right now I can't think of anything other than Leonard Pitts' commentaries. I have just read *The Grand Mosque of Paris* by Ruelle & DeSaix that is a nonfiction account of how the French Muslims helped save hundreds of Christians and Jews during WWII. I had two students read it and they were amazed about the story and that they knew nothing about it. This is how informational text can enhance a unit of study. This 40 page book can supplement the Anne Frank unit that so many 8th grade teachers use.

Maria: *Stones into Schools* by Greg Mortensen  
*River Runs to the Sea* by Elie Wiesel

Paula: Most of the informational texts we have read this year lacked any context to the kids, so I haven't been terribly successful. To the kids, it feels like I'm throwing random essays at them. When we used to read informational texts to understand literature or to write papers that were relevant to them, it was no problem getting them to read such texts.

Julia: *The Week*, weekly online news magazine

In a recent book by Jeff Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, the authors argue for the transformative power of literature for understanding the self and the community toward a truly democratic world.

How different is this from what you are already doing? Do you teach literature with this explicit focus? Why or why not?

Casey: This is what we try to do. We teach our students the levels of questioning and have students create their own questions over their reading that connect their reading to the real world. The hope is that they gain a larger understanding about how much of the writing (fiction and non) reflects our world.

Susan: Not much really, as an IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) teacher, I try to connect all texts to student experience and reflection. Each of our units of study are centered on one of the five areas of interaction which help students apply texts to themselves, their community and the greater world. MYP requires much reflection from students on how they would think and act in situations introduced in the texts we teach.

Laura: I don't think I look at it as a democratic world as much as an acceptance and embracing of our individuality that makes our nation a whole. For instance, I choose books where characters speak in their native tongue and then I encourage my students to pepper their writing with native words (even "mommy speak" is considered "native" in my classroom). I encourage students to choose a side and defend it with logic and evidence/support. I feel by doing this, I am helping create citizens who can hold an intelligent discussion about changes that will need to be made as our nation and the world ages.

Maria: Always. When I went to college my goal was to pursue a career in sociology/psychology; then I discovered that literature was actually the only way one could truly explore each of those.

Paula: I used to teach all literature this way. In American Lit, we traced American thought from the Calvinist concept of predetermined fate to the radical concept of intellectual and political freedom to the struggles of the 20th century both philosophically and politically. When I taught *Lord of the Flies*, I taught the philosophies of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. Now I do random assignments because we have been expressly told we cannot teach classes like American Lit. There is no flow of concepts regarding self and community, only a bunch of rather dry skills. Because "student choice and independence" are the focus, I can't lead a whole class through complex political theory and relate it to literature. They aren't reading the same book, and they don't spontaneously do this in lit circles. They've never heard of Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau.

Julia: I do teach literature with a focus on understanding humanity, our past, our present, and our future. I do not focus

on literature as a transformative power leading to a truly democratic world because I prefer for students to look at literature from all time periods and locations on the globe as it reflects all of mankind, not just those living in democratic locales. I think it's important to consider the voices of those living under tyranny, in indigenous communities, or even those who created myths and stories before the advent of "Democracy" as we know it today.

*Do the standards and the inclusion of "informational" texts pull us in a different direction from what Wilhelm and Novak ask of us? Or both of these forces put us on a similar path?*

Casey: Similar path.

Susan: Definitely a similar path. A long time ago, a humanities education focussed on both informational texts and literature. Students read "the Classics" which included a selection of both genres. I do not see a problem with this today.

Laura: I would think we are on a similar path. As long as we don't ditch the other forms of literature and become entirely informational text, we will produce literate citizens. I fear an illiterate nation because that is the nation that will fall to genocide and civil unrest. We need our students to exit their school years loving to read all types of text and knowing how to attack each type so that they can get what they want from the time spent interacting with it. For example, when I read an article, I may not finish it if I find the information not to my liking or needs. I will read faster than if I am enjoying a novel or trying to understand a textbook or

IRS form. Our students have to be that adroit with reading.

Maria: While I believe inclusion of informational texts could be beneficial, I worry insanely that said texts will eventually replace literature for all but the very well-educated people in our culture. Instead of being a mainstay for the masses, literature will become a treat for the elite ... Shakespeare used to speak to the commoners.

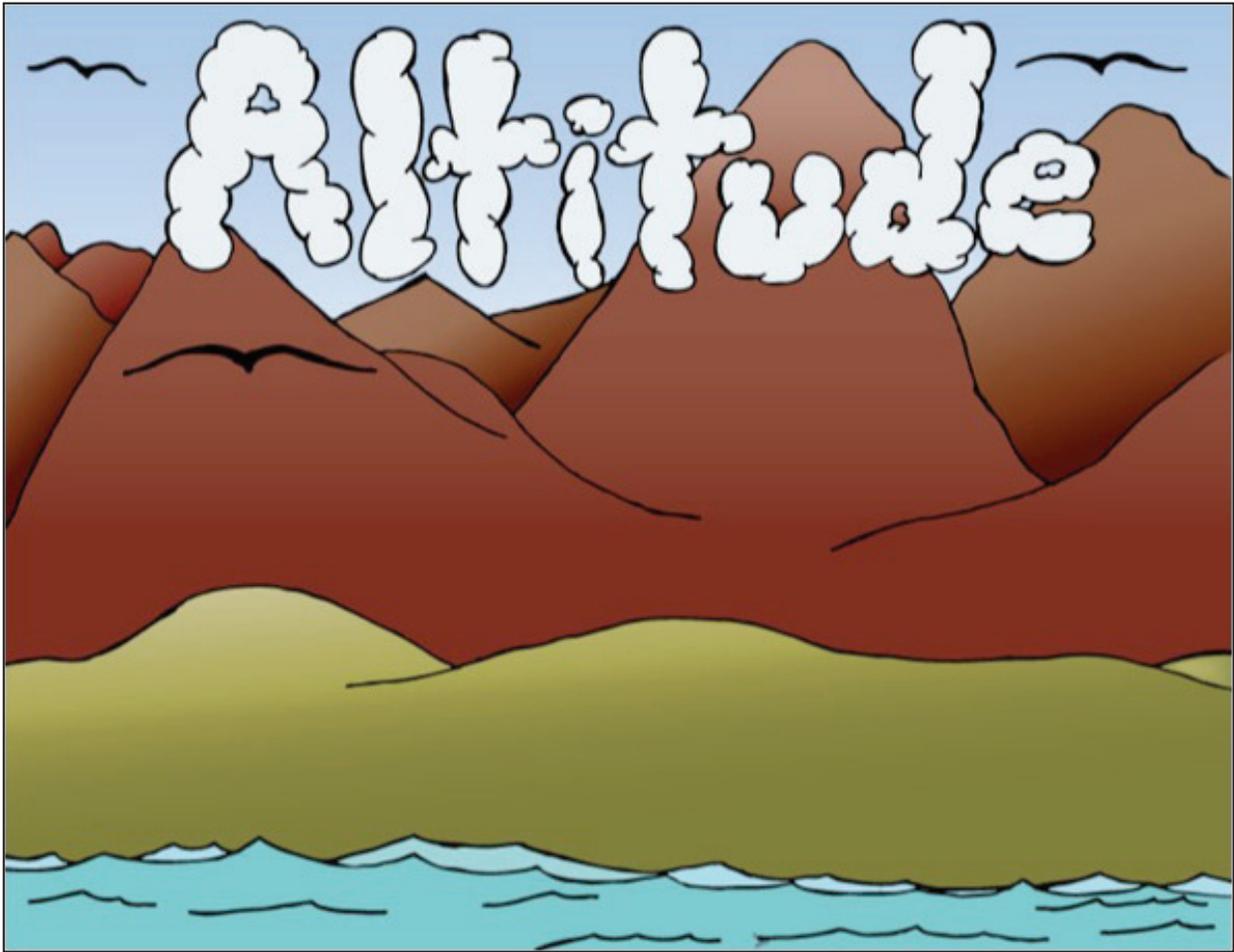
Paula: Again, deeply thoughtful inclusion of informational texts can greatly enhance the study of literature and deepen students' experience with literature. It's the inclusion of informational texts just to include them, just to check a box, that is pulling us away.

Julia: I don't believe they do, because informational texts have always been in existence. At one time, they were symbols carved into stone tablets. Now, they are blog posts that exist in no solid form. They withstand erosion and decay, and can be contained within a chip millimeters thick that weighs less than a gram.

*How much do we need to re-conceive what the teaching of literature and stories needs to be to meet the demands of our students' future world? Or how are you already meeting these demands?*

Casey: I think students want to know why what they do in class is important beyond the classroom. As English teachers, it's easy to say, "It's important because you can get lost in the story." But many students who hate to read, don't feel





that...so it really does need to have meaning beyond just a love of reading.

Susan: I don't think we need to re-concieve at all. What we need to re-think is what we are doing in our classrooms to prepare students for real world situations, ensure that they are finding their own processes and ways of thinking about themselves in the world and sending them out of high school as compassionate, empathetic life long learners.

Laura: We need to consider how students read off the Internet. That is another form of reading that we have not really discussed or addressed as a district or school. Is reading from a Kindle different than reading from a printed book? How does the audio book fit in? What about scanning the multiple pieces of information and graphics on a web page, search engine site, etc. Cell phones are another form of

electronic literacy that has not been addressed.

Maria: I have been the only high school English teacher in a K-12 building in rural Colorado since 1978. Our school is consistently ranked in the top 10 CSAP scores in the state and my students are brought up almost exclusively on stories.

Paula: As long as students live, they must understand the human experience. Perhaps as we become increasing technological and global, it is all the more important, as J. D. Salinger puts it, to "find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles.

You'll learn from them - if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry."

Julia: We need to include more multi-media and social networking within our teaching of literature and stories. People tell stories in different ways now. Often, that includes telling them in bite-size pieces that can be relatively easy to digest. Students tell stories using text-speech, which can be frightening for some adults in its similarity to "Newspeak." They also communicate with each other electronically. In order to reach our students, we must develop an awareness of these modalities and include them within classroom discussions about literature in all formats (including eBooks) to make the discussions current, relevant and accessible.

*In what ways do these forces impact how you see yourself as a teacher of the English Language Arts? Are we in the midst of an identity crisis?*

Casey: Not at all. I think we have a variety of students. Some who will love any book we throw at them and others who will resist the entire journey. We need to be flexible in order to help all students. What others may think is an identity-crisis we can just say is our identity

Susan: I don't think we are in an identity crisis. Our basic agenda is to teach students how to read closely and write clearly and with purpose. These can be taught with any text as a reading tool and a writing model.

Laura: I don't see myself in the midst of an identity crisis until the high stakes tests force us to give up literature for informational text. Then I will be at a cross-roads because I already struggle with creating a unit of study whereby students find themselves enjoying writing and the writing process and having to spend a huge chunk of time learning how to write to the test. These two pieces are not necessarily compatible.

Maria: My teaching career is winding down, I'm afraid. While I am passionate about what I do, I cannot see myself going down this path without a great deal of sadness, perhaps even insubordination if push comes to shove. I would like to see myself as an unrelenting, outspoken advocate for new teachers who want to share their love of the written word and the stories that flow from those words. I remember worrying before I started my first week of student teaching at East High in Denver that discipline and grammar would consume me and that my love for stories would eventually be eclipsed by reality. What I have discovered in the last 30 years is that sharing the right stories and the best writing

with teenagers inspires thoughtful and respectful decorum that in and of itself resolves all issues.

Paula: I feel like the most important elements of my job have been completely stripped away. I am working twice as hard to be half the teacher. I see kids who are not connecting to anything they're reading. We go through the motions: read the piece, analyze the style, attempt (usually badly) to reproduce the style. We ask kids to write deeply, but we give them very little to sink their teeth into. We ask them what they believe and to give their opinions but rob them of the depth of human understanding that the study of literature can give. We are all skills, no passion, no depth, no compassion. I am so glad that my own child is protected by the A.P. curriculum, where she will still be guided through great works of literature by a skilled teacher.

Julia: I do not believe we are in the midst of an identity crisis. We are in the midst of a transformation and a realization that teaching cannot remain static if it is to be effective. I see myself as a teacher of Language Arts and a teacher of critical thinking skills. I only hope that I can help students appreciate the arts and develop analytical thinking skills by keeping up with the external forces shaping our world. It seems they change faster than any of us born several decades ago ever thought possible.

*Anything else on your mind connected to these questions?*

Susan: No, I feel well prepared to meet the challenges of the Common Core Standards adopted by the CDE. I do think that we, as educators in Colorado need a stronger voice in decisions that are made on our behalf by politicians who have never been in a classroom as a teacher however.

Laura: Do whatever you can to keep a good balance of both. Our students need to be able to enjoy literature and we're screwing things up by forcing them to read and analyze text that is disconnected and of no interest to them. I worry about the number of high school graduates who cannot write decently when they enter college and do not read outside of their school assignments. We're losing ground.

Maria: So thankful for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this issue.

Paula: I think we're back to an inherent distrust of teachers. The goal is to make us all "proficient" in teaching a set of skills, but English, as a discipline, is meant to be much deeper. We are eliminating mastery of teaching the human experience. It's such a cheap trade-off, short-sighted and small-minded.

# Dead Magpie: In Praise of Liberal Arts

by Todd Hegert



Todd graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1978 with double major in Journalism and English. He has a master's of arts and teaching from Colorado College. He worked for newspapers as reporter and editor for 20 years before going back to school to get his teaching certificate. He has taught English at Palmer High School in Colorado Springs since 1999 where he has also advised the school newspaper and yearbook. He loves the outdoors and his grandchildren, ages 2 and 7. His email is Todd.Hegert@d11.org.

My wife is fond of saying, "That's why I love being married to an English major." Upon waking, Denise might ask me what the day is like. I'll look out the window and say, "the sun has cast a rosy glow over the mountains," or, "the fog is peeling back like gauze being removed from a fresh wound," or, "the mist has lifted to reveal a world being made anew."

"That," she'll say, "is why I love being married to an English major."

I tell this story at a time when the value of liberal arts education—of studying English, history, philosophy, religion—has come into question, if not under outright attack. New books like "Academically Adrift" by Richard Arum and Josselyn Wankel, and "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" by Professor X, reflect the erosion of liberal arts education and the proliferation of career-oriented degrees. An article in the June 6 *New Yorker*, "Live and Learn: Why We Have College," points out that the liberal arts sector of college education has shrunk steadily since 1970, and the dominant political theory of higher education in America today holds that the high cost of college can only be justified in terms of how it supplies workers fit for highly specialized vocations that help fuel the economy. "When Barack Obama and Arne Duncan talk about how higher education is key to the future of the American economy, this is the sector they have in mind. They are not talking about liberal arts education," says *New Yorker* writer Louis Menand. "Why should you have to pass a college-level literature class if you want to be a state trooper?"

Why indeed?

It's an argument I see being played out in my own students, seniors earning college-level English credit by taking an IB English class. Many of them proclaim with pleasure that mine will be the last English class they ever take. Having earned advanced placement credit that fulfills their college composition requirements, they intend never again to study a challenging novel, explicate a great poem, examine an aesthetic theory, or write an essay about any form of art or literature. Why should they? What use *Hamlet* or *Beloved*, Wordsworth or Plath, on their way to getting an MBA or becoming an engineer? Why bother with great literature? Why would anyone want to be an English major?

Nodding appreciatively at their honesty, I tell them that, first of all, it helped me woo a woman like my wife, and if they knew Denise, that would be reason enough. But for those who remain skeptical, I tell the story of the dead magpie.

Last summer, Denise and my granddaughter Paige reported a dead bird at the bottom of one of our window wells. I'm the one who takes care of the carnage around our house. The black widow that needs killing. The moldy remains of the mouse that had burrowed its way into the hollow frame of a basement window. The maggot-infested corpse of a squirrel I found inside a bag of fertilizer in the garage. The dying fawn in the lilacs. The featherless hatchling the cat had dismembered on the patio. Assorted characters of death and blight are my province. Or so my granddaughter reminded me several days later.

"Pop, Grandma says you have to get rid of the dead bird in the window well. Today!"

Peering into the shadowy depths, I see the remains of a magpie, its withered black-and-white body a full foot and a half long, wings matted and desiccated, eyehole blank, only feather, quill, and air left. The window well is grave deep, and when I lower myself in, I stand below the surface of the ground and look up into a vault of brilliant blue sky. I had brought a small pitchfork with me, thinking, I guess, that I would simply spear the carcass and dispose of it.

But the English major in me says "linger and consider."

I have had a running battle with our magpies. Perched in our trees and on our roof, soiling the patio railing, eating the food I put out for the dog and the birdseed for the chickadees and nuthatches, the magpies have mocked me with their arrogant caw, their screeching laugh. I look at this dead magpie, and the English major in me thinks, "Where be your jibes and gambols now, my chapfallen fellow?"

Standing in essence underground, it also occurs to me that, like Odysseus, I have entered a world of the dead, this magpie my blind Tiresias. "What prophesy can you give me? What news of death and life?" the English major in me asks. I think of Persephone trapped in the underworld, waiting for her time back in the sun. "What greater and lesser Elysian mysteries can you share?" I ask my matted magpie.

The English major in me also loves the esoteric language of birding. I can identify the feather types and parts. Umbilicus, calamus, rachis, vane and blade, contoured remige feathers and fanned retrice. Closely examining the magpie's body in its ruinous state, I can see that the barbules and barbices that knit the feathers together have decayed and lost their connections. I find a kind of occult pleasure in the knowledge of this secret language.

Finally, with a kind of ritual tenderness, I slip the pitchfork under the magpie. As I lift the magpie above my head, I see a sudden burst of sunlight and sky through its blank eyehole. A perfect orb of universe, a cosmos in a pinhole, an eternity of galactic time racing away through a puff of feathers! "My god, the English major in me thinks, "I have not just a dead bird here, I have a poem!"

When I present the carcass to Denise and Paige, they say only "Ewww!" and chuck it unceremoniously in the

trash. And the English major thinks, "O delicious irony" after the moment of cosmic vision I have just experienced.

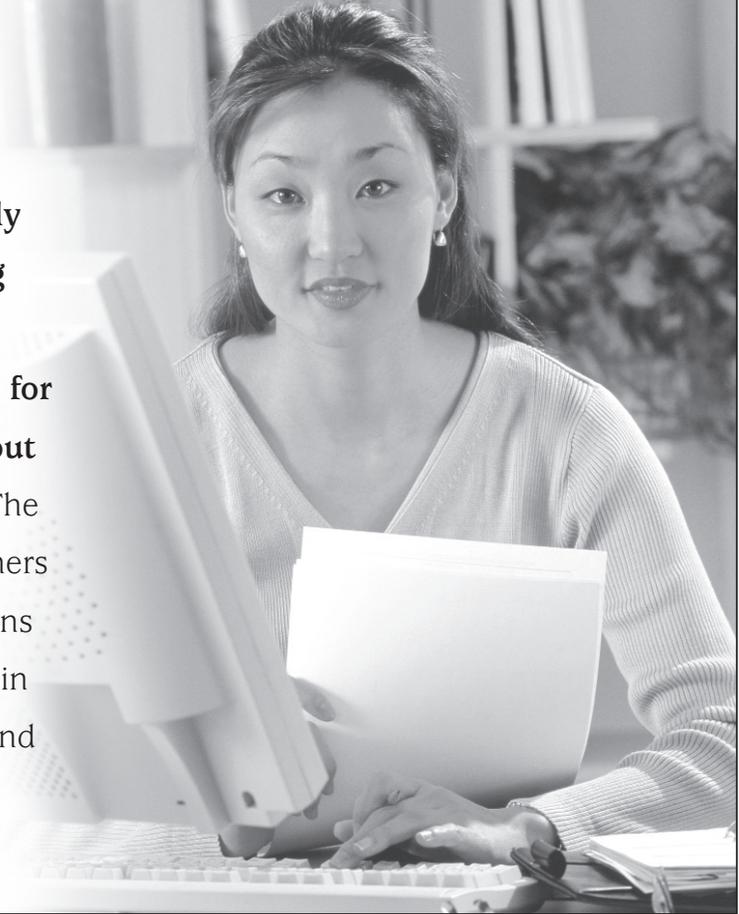
What has all this to do with a liberal arts education? Why does it matter that, with such gruesome work at hand, that I can recall lines from *Hamlet*, that I have read the classics and mythology, that I recognize the symbolic implications of my descent into the underworld, that I savor the gnostic language of birds?

If I weren't an English major, the experience of this charged moment would have been merely tedious and gross, the meaning I found in it consigned to the trash. But because of my liberal arts education, I can return from the grave thinking, "O beautiful, fascinating, cosmic world! O life! O death!"

"That," my wife might say, "is what I love about being married to an English major."

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# BEFORE THE BELL

## How Running a Marathon Can Keep A High School English Teacher From Having a Truly Disastrous Midlife Crisis

by Josh Curnett



Josh Curnett is a National Board Certified Teacher and a S.T.A.R. Mentor in Cherry Creek Schools. Email: [jcurnett@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:jcurnett@cherrycreekschools.org).

I am 41 and am having a midlife crisis. It doesn't help that I'm seeing my father's face as much as my own when I look in the mirror each morning to shave: same receding hairline and cannonball-like forehead. Same small, baggy eyes. Same chapped lips and red complexion. Same constellation of moles. Same bristly hairs poking out of the tops of my ears and nose.

Some older person apparently inhabiting my body these days says things like, "If you do that again, no TV or computer games for two weeks," and, "I can't decide if we should refinance or if the origination fees are too high," or, "It would be nice to take a drive to see the leaves." On the other side of that coin, I'm trying to stop my practice of using slang. I have realized that when I say something's "cool," "killer," "awesome," or even "bad," I sound to students like adults sounded to me when I was a kid. My forty-ish teachers would say something was "right on" or "groovy" or that they could "dig it," and though I did not know much, I knew that they were certainly far too old and too establishment to say such streamlined things any longer.

Here's the irony: I realize that 41 is not that old. It's not like I'm not driving a pewter-colored Crown Victoria with curb feelers; I don't have grandchildren; I am not nearly retired. I own exactly zero cardigans. I still enjoy Quentin Tarantino films, KBCO, and throwing the ol' Frisbee. I understand how to sync my cloud-based calendar with my cell. I prefer texting most people to calling them. I have an American Apparel tee shirt. I like the Apple store.

What the heck does it all mean? Would someone please just tell me what the heck it all means to be 41?

Since no one will—or can—just tell me what the heck this personal tectonic shift does actually mean, I did the only irrational thing I could think of (that did not involve leasing a convertible Porsche, leaving my wife and kids, enrolling in Hair Club for Men, and buying a tanning-salon membership) to figure it out: I decided to run a marathon.

When I made my decision to run, I was 40 years old and about 30 pounds overweight. It was February. I believe it was a Saturday morning with a gunmetal-gray sky. My running shoes, which I had used for a few years to walk the dog, mow the lawn, and get the paper in the morn-

ings, sat like a pair of sagging, defeated former Olympians in the front hallway closet. I looked out at the cold and semi-snowy landscape and, in my best NFL Films voice, said to myself, "Today was the day he became a man." The dog licked its mouth and stared at me intently, apparently feeling the gravity of the situation. I grabbed the running shoes. I put on sweatpants, my University of Georgia sweatshirt, my son's skiing glove liners, my wife's ear warmers, and a pair of old purple soccer socks and did a few stretches in front of the fireplace.

I headed out the door and began to run up the street. The coldness on my cheeks and chins exhilarated me. It was disorienting to see the landscape pass at more than a walking pace, like stepping onto a moving sidewalk at an airport. I liked the sound of my footfalls on the pavement and their crunch and pop through old, asphalt-and-dirt-flecked snowdrifts. My breathing increased rapidly. I began to sweat. The endorphins coursed through my bloodstream. I was experiencing a runner's high.

And then I got to the end of the cul-de-sac. I slowed to a walk, gasping for air. I ripped my wife's headband off and threw it in the bushes, and the glove liners were soon to follow. I clawed at the collar of my sweatshirt, trying to somehow create an aperture large enough for cooler air to bathe my heaving, sweaty flanks. I blew snot from my nose, which landed in gooey, oyster-slime-textured globs and webs on my legs. I looked towards the heavens and said, with gasps for breath in between each word, "What in the hell was I thinking?" I made it as far as the mailboxes, and then, utterly defeated by my quarter-mile journey, turned and walked back home. I picked up my discarded clothing along the way. Entering my house again, I poured a cup of coffee and opened the newspaper to relax after my workout. Elapsed time of first run? 10 minutes.

Fast forward seven months, all the way to three weeks before the marathon. I have taken the spark from that cold, humiliating February morning and have blown on it, cajoled it, excoriated it, worshipped it, and ameliorated it into a roaring, narcissistic inferno of marathon training. I have bought a pair of real running shoes at a real running store from a real runner, and I have a marathon training schedule

taped to my refrigerator that I triumphantly and obsessively mark off day by day by day. I am running down the sides of mountains and around entire cities for my twenty-mile training runs, which take four hours to finish.

My children are so jaded by their new running daddy that they ask, “When is your run going to be done today?” rather than, “Will you play with us?” My wife, who is as patient as Mother Teresa and as understanding as Mr. Rogers, is still pushing me on during this madness and has picked me up at countless predetermined locations around the metro area to help me avoid “route jadedness” (my invented term to rationalize why I need her there). She’s always waiting with a coffee and a kind word, never once remarking how bad I smell or how I’ve left her, again, alone with the children for half a day. Even when I wake up at 4:30 on a Sunday morning to run, she mumbles, “Good luck, honey.” She even understands when I need to crawl and roll around on the floor because my legs hurt too much or when I wax rhapsodic about an “unbelievable” podcast that got me through miles 13-17 that morning. She actually seems to care.

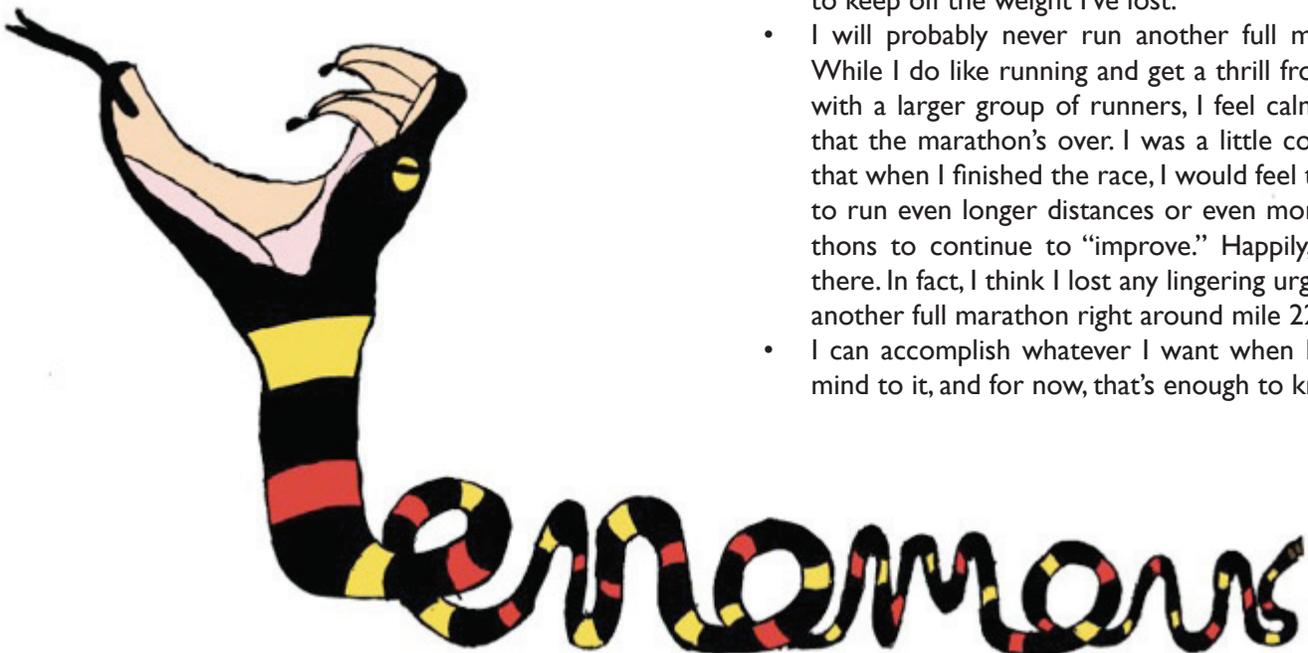
Hit “skip” again to Marathon Day. It’s a Sunday, it’s 4:15 a.m., and it’s black dark outside. I’ve barely slept. I’ve triple checked the gear I laid out the night before in a body pattern on my floor. Shirt, shorts, socks, shoes. I run through the entire pre-race check again. Socks? Check. Vaseline? Check. Gummi Bears? Check. Sunscreen? Check. Running shoes? Check. Race number? Check. Sunglasses? Check. Running hat? Check. Ego? Double check.

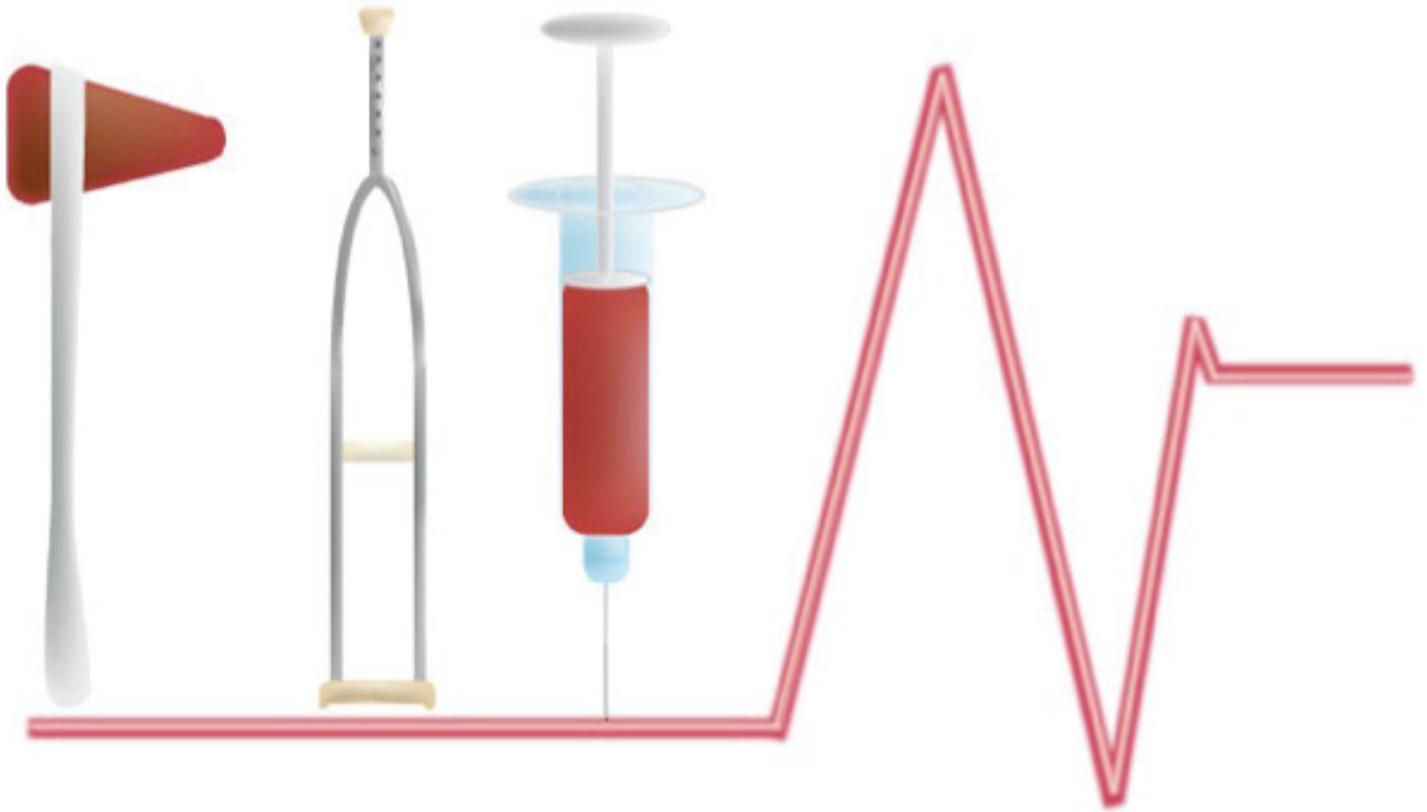
I’m now waiting at the marathon starting line behind about 10,000 other runners. Nobody is really talking to each other, and everyone in my wave (read: beginners) has the same “sweet mother of Jesus. I cannot believe I’m actually doing this” look. Nervous stretching. iPod adjusting. Little jogs in place. Jumping up and down. Re-tying laces. The occasional inappropriate loogie or fart.

The gun goes off, and it begins. As I finally pass the starting line, I realize that the first step into the marathon is the best one, probably even better than the finish will be. With that step into the course, I am finally, actually—literally—running a marathon. As the race progresses, I also begin to understand that this glorious run is most likely the end of this particular crisis-ridden chapter of my journey through midlife.

As I run the marathon, I find many answers that I had been looking for, things nobody could tell me—one step at a time.

- The marathon is but a metaphor for this horrible, insatiable need for me to prove myself to myself and to others. Maybe I can begin to let that once-healthy ambition go as I pass my halfway point in life.
- My wife rocks (and there I go again with the age-inappropriate slang). Let me rephrase that. My wife is a beautiful, deep, caring human being. She’s been supporting me on these Quixotic peccadilloes throughout the 15 years she’s we’ve been together. In fact, one of these zany adventures is how we met (but that’s another story).
- I want to be a really good example for my kids, and, for me, the marathon is an aberration of that healthy instinct. While there’s obviously nothing wrong with our son and our daughter watching me finish a marathon, the day-to-day, real work of parenting Ethan and Laney is much more important than putting on fancy running shoes and overcoming an ultimately self-created challenge.
- I’m a better (fill in the blank) when I’m physically fit. The extra flab accumulated during my 30’s is not the way for me to begin my 40’s. I am going to continue exercising regularly and eating more sensibly to keep off the weight I’ve lost.
- I will probably never run another full marathon. While I do like running and get a thrill from being with a larger group of runners, I feel calmer now that the marathon’s over. I was a little concerned that when I finished the race, I would feel the need to run even longer distances or even more marathons to continue to “improve.” Happily, it’s not there. In fact, I think I lost any lingering urge to run another full marathon right around mile 22!
- I can accomplish whatever I want when I put my mind to it, and for now, that’s enough to know.





# Closing Thought

Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril. It is totally misleading to speak, for instance, of “two cultures.” One literary-humane and the other scientific, as if these were of equal status. There is only one culture, of which science, so interesting and so dangerous, is now an important part. But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in words. This is why it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist.

--Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970, p. 33.



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