

SECOND
EDITION

WITH RIGOR FOR ALL

Meeting Common Core Standards for Reading Literature

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INTRODUCTION: TEACHING IN TROUBLOUS TIMES

The great world has spun many revolutions in the decade since *With Rigor for All* was first published. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted common English language arts standards. Young adult literature has proliferated, gaining wide readership among students and teachers. Digital communication is a natural and growing part of every teenager's everyday life.

Despite such changes, much remains the same for English teachers. Students still groan when asked to read demanding literature and still look for ways to pass the class without turning the pages. Assigned tasks continue to elicit knee-jerk complaints of boredom. Teenagers always prefer to talk than listen. Lest you harbor the belief that it has ever been otherwise or are new to the profession and think your instruction would have gone more smoothly if only you had worked in the good old days, take a look at what Peter the Hermit wrote in 1274. "The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they knew everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them. As for the girls, they are forward, immodest and unladylike in speech, behavior and dress."

For those of us who work in middle and high schools, the times have ever been and always will be troublous. For me, the "trouble" has always been a large part of the pleasure I derive from teaching. It goes with the territory. The challenge is to help the teenagers in our care come to care about living literate lives. Threatening them with the dire consequences of performing poorly on tests doesn't achieve this result. Demonstrating the intellectual pleasures to be had in the company of good books does. That said, I fear that too often in an effort to

make the curriculum relevant we lose the rigor. In our effort to provide students with readings that they can relate to, we sometimes end up teaching works that students can read on their own at the expense of teaching texts that they most certainly do need assistance negotiating.

This is not to suggest that we should stop putting contemporary young adult literature into students' hands, but rather to remind ourselves that we should be teaching in what Lev Vygotsky (1962) calls the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky wrote that "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (104). If students can read a book on their own, it probably isn't the best choice for classroom study. Teachers also run the danger of ruining books like Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with talk of foreshadowing and symbolism. Such stories are best when gobbled up and passed from hand to hand. Classroom texts should pose intellectual challenges for readers and invite them to stretch and grow. Reading demanding books makes students stronger readers and, over time, stronger people. Rigor versus relevance doesn't need to be an either/or proposition. Through careful text selection—distinguishing between independent reading and guided reading—it is possible to achieve both. The stakes are high. Without artful instruction, many students will never acquire the literacy skills they need to meet not only Common Core Standards but the challenges this brave new world is sure to deal them.

Schooling has long been equated with book learning. While book learning never much appealed to the likes of Huck Finn, teachers cling to the fundamental belief that a school day should be spent reading and writing. Education experts now tell us that today's students are radically different from those who populated our classrooms in the past. Weaned on the lightning-quick access and brilliant images of the Internet, these students no longer have patience for books. Addicted to the constant exchange of texting and tweeting, they need a highly interactive, digital learning environment. The evidence to support this view is powerful and persuasive. A 2010 study published by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that "today, 8- to 18-year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media across a typical day (more than 53 hours a week). And because they spend so much of that time 'media multitasking,' they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those 7½ hours." In response, publishing companies are busily at work developing instructional materials that look less like a book and more like a video game. Oh, brave new world, indeed!

In a compelling *New Yorker* article the novelist Nicholson Baker (2010) reports on a year spent playing video games with his sixteen-year-old son. He details the astounding number of times players kill and die as well as the gruesome images that fill their screens. "You are a gun that moves." One game Baker describes is set on Mount Olympus and seemingly pays homage to Greek

mythology. “*God of War III* has visual astonishments in almost every scene. You walk around on Gaia’s gigantic rocky body. You see her giant stony breast. You climb into her chest cavity and see her stony heart beating. You cut her wrist so that she falls away. The game, to a surprising degree, is about hacking away at half-naked women, or naked half-women. Whenever you see female breasts, you have a pretty good idea that the breasted person is going to die horribly, and soon” (59). I can’t help asking myself what effect hours and hours of intense engagement with such games is doing to the imaginations and imaginings of young boys. There are better ways to learn Greek mythology.

It seems to me that students today are a lot like Huck. Rough around the edges, they are instinctively philosophical and actively looking for ways to make sense of their world. When we, their teachers, back away from offering them the richness and complexity found in art, literature, music, and history because that panoply is foreign to students’ experience or because the texts are challenging, we abrogate our fundamental responsibility to broaden students’ horizons. Few young people will ever head off with Huck and “light out for the territory,” but many can take this journey as Emily Dickinson describes “without oppress of toll” through books.

Long before I owned a passport, I traveled through the Florence of Michelangelo in Irving Stone’s *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and spent a day with Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Ivan Denisovich in the Gulag. I went to the antebellum South in *Gone with the Wind* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Maybe I didn’t understand all the interchapters in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* as I gobbled up the novel in two days of nonstop reading, but I suffered with the Joads as they fled the Dust Bowl. I’m not talking here about teaching literature but rather about intense personal reading. Again and again the Common Core Standards say that students must read “proficiently and independently.” Why should it seem old-fashioned to ask students to put down their Xbox controllers and pick up a book or to pick up their e-reader and spend time with Tom Sawyer? If young people can find time for seven hours of playing video games and social networking, it shouldn’t be onerous to carve out an hour for reading—that is, if their English teachers have the will to work to make this happen.

Apart from a rare few, the young people I teach do not pick up literature with much enthusiasm. At first they groan, “Three hundred pages of poetry!” Then they moan, “I can’t do it. Not one word of what I read last night made sense.” They always hope that if they complain enough, I will abandon the text for something simpler. Instead I assure them that over the next few weeks I will show them how to unlock this text for themselves. I let students know that the satisfaction they will feel at meeting this textual challenge is an intellectual reward that I would not for the world deny them. Does every student experience this reward with every book? Of course not. But many students who never expected to be able to negotiate demanding literature find that with a little help from their

teacher and peers, the book isn't as taxing as they first thought. This dawning realization is an important instructional goal. Students are learning not to fear complex syntax or unfamiliar vocabulary. They are beginning to see that long doesn't necessarily mean boring.

Another goal I consciously pursue is love and respect for literature. In her provocative essay "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read," Francine Prose (1999) argues that:

Traditionally, the love of reading has been born and nurtured in high school English class—the last time many students will find themselves in a roomful of people who have all read the same text and are, in theory, prepared to discuss it. High school—even more than college—is where literary tastes and allegiances are formed; what we read in adolescence is imprinted on our brains as the dreamy notions of childhood crystallize into hard data. (76)

Who knows but that without determined middle and high school teachers, love and respect for literature will wither and die? It is a fortunate student that stumbles upon the works of Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Cormac McCarthy, Zora Neale Hurston, or Mario Vargas Llosa on her parents' bookshelf or chooses to peek between the covers if she does. But for as long as their English teachers continue to make these enduring stories come to life for young readers, the study of literature will remain a vital pursuit.

In *It's a Book*, Lane Smith invites young readers to consider what books have to offer that nothing else does. Books ask readers to look inward, to examine our beliefs in light of new information, to consider the world through different eyes, to take time for reverie and reflection. I fear we are becoming a solipsistic and hyperactive society that knows little about those outside our circle of electronic "friends" and almost nothing about the world outside our computers. As online advertisers become ever more adept at serving up what we most desire, the breadth of our engagement with the wider world diminishes. The Internet promised to open up the world to us. It seems instead to be narrowing the universe down to our buyer profile. As with fast food, our appetites may be sated, but how much nourishment are we taking in?

The revised edition of *With Rigor for All* offers ideas for making English classrooms sites where students can be nourished by literature—intellectually, emotionally, and morally. Despite their seeming aversion to work, students are hungry for such nourishment. For the record, I feel sorry for people who aren't English teachers. Who else gets paid for challenging young people to contemplate tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

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COMPREHENDING COMPLEX LITERATURE

On December 31 in 1838, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal, “As the least drop of wine colors the whole goblet, so the least particle of truth colors our whole life. It is never isolated, or simply added as dollars to our stock. When any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew, what we thought we knew before.” Every group of students I meet causes me to unlearn and learn anew. I keep hoping that one day I’ll get it all figured out, but some new particle of truth always seems to be coloring the water.

A few things have remained constant. During these years I have been mostly in the same classroom facing the same desks, gazing out over the heads of my students through the same dirty windows. On September 15, I hand out copies of *The Odyssey*. Stop by in February, and you will find me reading *Julius Caesar*. Despite these apparently permanent anchors, my course of my teaching continues to evolve. For example, in 2001, when one student, still in something of a state of shock from events on September 11, commented as we read *Beowulf* that Hrothgar’s mead hall was like the Twin Towers. I asked him what he meant. Mark went on to explain that Herot represented what Hrothgar’s society valued: prosperity, security, and community. The Twin Towers were visible symbols of such permanence for our society. When Grendel attacked Herot he was doing more than simply knocking down the doors; he was threatening everything Hrothgar’s rule stood for. The two planes had the same effect on America. Not bad thinking for a fifteen-year-old. I never taught *Beowulf* quite the same way again.

One drop of truth caused me, in Thoreau’s words, to “unlearn and learn anew.” Another drop was the realization that for many students simply rubbing up against books wasn’t going to make them love literature. It began to dawn on me

*Whether I shall
turn out to be the
hero of my own life,
or whether that
station will be held by
anybody else, these
pages must show.*

—Charles Dickens,
DAVID COPPERFIELD
(1850)

that if I wanted students to achieve the deep literacy I wrote about in Chapter 1 and that Mark was able to draw upon instinctively, I was going to have to experiment with a dangerous practice: direct instruction. Like many teachers, I am by nature an indefatigable optimist, believing in a kind of literary field of dreams. Build the ideal classroom, and they will come. Offer them books, and they will read. While teachers elsewhere have made such classrooms work, I was having trouble ignoring the fact that many of my thirty-six ethnically diverse students were not growing as readers the way I hoped they would. In my own English department I saw teacher after teacher abandon *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn*, insisting that second-language learners simply didn't have the reading skills to comprehend these difficult texts. Honors students, of course, continued to be assigned both.

This bothered me for several reasons. In September 2010, Lily Wong Fillmore, a scholar and long-time researcher into English language learning, made an impassioned plea at a conference sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers to teachers not to dumb down texts for English learners. Worried about the "gradual erosion of the complexity of texts" offered to students, Fillmore suggested that when teachers offer only simplified materials for students beyond the first year or two of their learning English, it is "niceness run amok." She acknowledged that for the first year or two English learners need altered or alternate texts, but asserted that all students deserve the challenge of complex texts. Fillmore's assertion seemed to validate what I had been arguing for years, that instead of searching for substitute texts, what teachers need to do is acquire the reading skills they need to negotiate rich, demanding texts.

The approach Fillmore recommends is supported by research from the Alliance for Excellent Education. In a 2006 report titled, "Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescents," they found that:

Fifty-seven percent of adolescent English language learners were born in the United States. The large numbers of second- and third-generation Limited English Proficient adolescents who continue to lack proficiency in English in secondary school suggest that many LEP children are not learning the language well even after many years in American schools.

- Of the 43% of English language learners who are foreign-born, those who enter U.S. schools in the later grades are more challenged than their younger peers because of the fewer resources at the secondary level and the shorter time that schools have to ensure that they learn English and master academic content areas.
- Given that these students are simultaneously learning the language and learning the content, they must *work twice as hard* (the italics are mine) in order to meet accountability standards.

We can't be afraid of telling students that they must work hard. In the disturbing book—disturbing, that is, for anyone who believes that education should promote social justice—*Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (1995) raises the perennially challenging issue of what happens to minority and underprivileged students when skills are devalued in the classroom.

A critical thinker who lacks the skills demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and a social status only within the disenfranchised underworld. . . . If minority people are to effect the change which will allow them to . . . progress we must insist on skills within the context of critical and creative thinking. (19)

Delpit suggests an alternative to less rigorous, child-centered methods. She goes on to explain:

I do not advocate a simplistic “basic skills” approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher-order thinking and reasoning. Rather, I suggest that schools must provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home. This does not mean separating children according to family background, but instead, ensuring that each classroom incorporate strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines. (30)

The Common Core and other excellent language arts standards like those of Texas and Virginia are based upon a belief similar to Delpit's that all children are capable of “critical and higher-order thinking.” While the descriptions inherent in these standards regarding what students should know and be able to do in order to be adequately prepared for college and the workplace often seem extraordinarily rigorous, the goal of the National Governors Association initiative is to ensure that every child in America receives a first-rate education.

How Stories Work

Lisa Delpit opened a new train of thought for me. Maybe the reason non-honors students did not have the “reading skills” teachers deemed necessary for negotiating demanding literature was that we hadn't taught them very well. I am not speaking here about teaching students how to read but rather about teaching students how stories work. In our urgency to abandon the lecture format, literature teachers may have adopted too passive a role. Clearly we want to continue to make genuine student response the keystone of the classroom, but withholding information about how a story works may make it impossible for some students to have any response at all.

One has only to consider Toni Morrison's *Jazz* or David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* to see that truly “novel” texts continue to be written. But authors build stories

with a common set of blocks, drawing from a stock of possibilities familiar to any experienced reader: A hero engages the reader's sympathy. A problem develops. A foil appears to allow the reader to see the hero more clearly. The problem intensifies. Help appears. More complications arise, but the hero prevails. All is resolved. Sometimes, in the words of the Prince at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, "All are punish'd."

While such story structures may be so familiar to an English teacher that they hardly bear commenting upon, this is not the case for many young readers. Some of my students have touched only books that teachers put in their hands and have never been impelled or compelled to read a single one from cover to cover. One approach to solving this problem is to create a vibrant independent reading program within every English classroom. Another is to use compelling literature to teach students how stories work. I do not believe it is a matter of either/or. Students deserve both.

Let me use Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* as an example. Now, I am quick to admit the weaknesses of the lecture format when employed day after day with teenagers. But the first pages of Mary Shelley's novel pose readers with a real problem. The story opens with a group of letters written by Robert Walton, an explorer adrift in the Arctic Sea, to his sister in London. Without a few words from me about the epistolary format and about the way the character of Robert Walton will become, like us, the listener to Victor Frankenstein's strange tale, many students are lost before they have even begun. The simplest of clues and guiding questions seem to help.

1. What do you notice about the dates of these letters?
2. Why do you think Robert Walton writes to his sister if there is no way for him to mail his letters?
3. What does Robert Walton reveal about himself in these letters?
4. Where does Mary Shelley (through Robert Walton) explain to you how the format of her story will now shift?
5. Can you think of other stories or movies that are structured like this?

My questions aim to tease out from students an understanding of how Mary Shelley's story is structured. I think it unrealistic to assume that the average student can simply be assigned these pages to read and that they will figure out the structure for themselves. Victor Frankenstein doesn't start telling the story students thought they were going to hear until page 30. If I don't offer some guidance—a kind of reader's map—through the first 29, too many will give up.

It also doesn't seem fair to teach novels like *Frankenstein* only to students who, through experience as readers, understand how a series of one-sided letters like

Robert Walton's works. When my colleagues in the English department demand that we simplify the curriculum for struggling students and replace classical literature with shorter, more accessible novels, I know they are motivated by kindness. Would it not be kinder to provide all students with the tools to handle challenging texts? Teachers aren't hired simply to assist students who hardly need them. They are paid to find ways that all students can develop as readers and experience the richness contained within the covers of great books.

I tell my students about how stories work. I remind them to pay close attention to who is narrating the story and to whom he or she is speaking. Where appropriate, I point out foreshadowing. I don't monopolize the classroom conversations, nor do I hold back when I feel that students are lost. One tool for helping students understand how stories work is Freytag's pyramid.

The nineteenth-century German scholar, Gustav Freytag, analyzed the structure of ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama, dividing it into five distinct parts. Contemporary plays do not always conform to Freytag's pattern in that the climax often occurs much closer to the resolution than the diagram would suggest, but the model is a valuable tool for analyzing the structure of stories.

Exposition: An opening scene wherein the audience is provided with background information necessary to understand and interpret the action that follows.

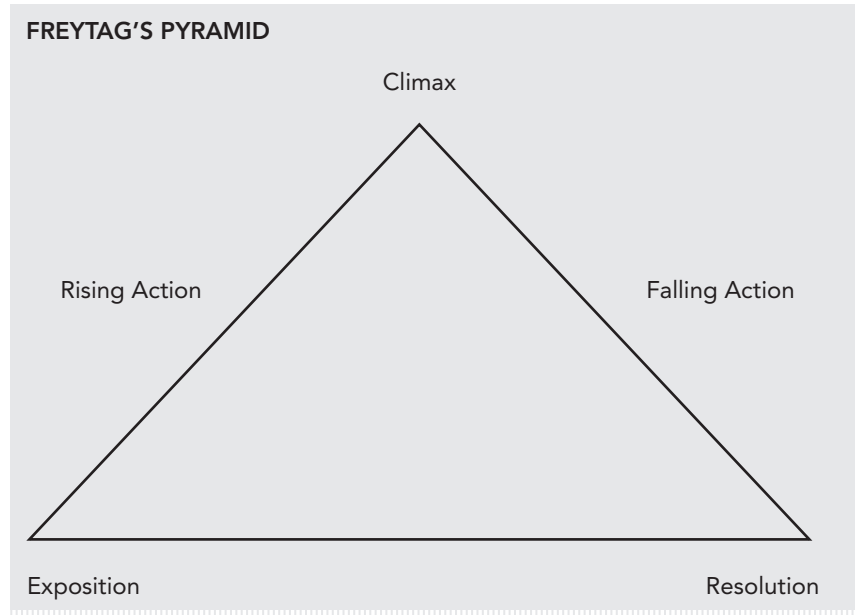
Rising Action: An event occurs introducing the main conflict of the play and complications arise that increase the tension and conflict between characters.

Climax: Traditionally situated in the third act of a five-act play, this is the moment of greatest intensity after which the direction of events is determined. It is sometimes referred to as the turning point or crisis.

Falling Action: Events follow as a result of the climactic moment. In tragedy the protagonist's fortune has changed irrevocably for the worse.

Resolution (dénouement in comedy or catastrophe in tragedy): Previous tension is released as the story is brought to its conclusion, and the audience is offered closure on the events witnessed. In comedy the dénouement is the successful unraveling of plot complications. In tragedy the play's conclusion results in catastrophe for the protagonist.

I find it helpful to introduce the idea of story structure by asking students to recall a story they know well. This might be the young adult novel they are reading outside class or a novel I know that students have all read the previous year, for example, Louis Sachar's *Holes*. Sometimes I use a film that most students have seen or a short story that we have all read recently. Together we chart the main events of the story on Freytag's pyramid, taking time to argue as needed



about the climax. There always seem to be many different points of view about what moment should be considered the turning point. I am much less interested in correct answers—which are, after all, only my interpretation of the story’s structure—than I am in the discussion.

Another approach I have used to teach middle school students about how stories work is to start with a reading of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s narrative poem “Paul Revere’s Ride.” The first stanza establishes the context for story the speaker will tell and the second the signal the historical Paul Revere set up to let him know whether the British would row across the Charles River or march out Boston Neck, “one if by land, two if by sea” (exposition). Then the complications commence as Revere must row quietly across the Charles and creep past the British man-of-war in the harbor (rising action) up to the climatic moment when he sees the signal: “A second lamp in the belfry burns!” His ride through Lexington and on to Concord make up the falling action culminating in Longfellow’s conclusion that “Through all our history, to the last, / In the hour of darkness and peril and need, / The people will waken and listen to hear” (resolution).

PAUL REVERE’S RIDE

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
 Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
 On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five;
 Hardly a man is now alive
 Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
 By land or sea from the town to-night,
 Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
 Of the North Church tower, as a signal light, —
 One, if by land, and two, if by sea;
 And I on the opposite shore will be,
 Ready to ride and spread the alarm
 Through every Middlesex village and farm,
 For the country-folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said "Good-night!" and with muffled oar
 Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
 Just as the moon rose over the bay,
 Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
 The Somerset, British man-of-war;
 A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
 Across the moon like a prison-bar,
 And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
 By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street
 Wanders and watches with eager ears,
 Till in the silence around him he hears
 The muster of men at the barrack door,
 The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
 And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
 Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
 By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
 To the belfry-chamber overhead,
 And startled the pigeons from their perch
 On the somber rafters, that round him made
 Masses and moving shapes of shade, —
 By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
 To the highest window in the wall,
 Where he paused to listen and look down
 A moment on the roofs of the town,
 And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
 In their night-encampment on the hill,
 Wrapped in silence so deep and still
 That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,

The watchful night-wind, as it went
 Creeping along from tent to tent,
 And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
 A moment only he feels the spell
 Of the place and the hour, the secret dread
 Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
 For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
 On a shadowy something far away,
 Where the river widens to meet the bay, —
 A line of black, that bends and floats
 On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,
 Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride
 On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.
 Now he patted his horse's side,
 Now gazed on the landscape far and near,
 Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,
 And turned and tightened his saddle-girth;
 But mostly he watched with eager search
 The belfry-tower of the Old North Church,
 As it rose above the graves on the hill,
 Lonely and spectral and somber and still.
 And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
 A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
 He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,
 But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight
 A second lamp in the belfry burns!

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
 A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
 And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
 Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet:
 That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
 The fate of a nation was riding that night;
 And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
 Kindled the land into flame with its heat.

He has left the village and mounted the steep,
 And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
 Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
 And under the alders that skirt its edge,
 Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
 Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock,
 When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
 He heard the crowing of the cock,
 And the barking of the farmer's dog,
 And felt the damp of the river fog,
 That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
 When he galloped into Lexington.
 He saw the gilded weathercock
 Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
 And the meeting-house windows, blank and bare,
 Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
 As if they already stood aghast
 At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,
 When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
 He heard the bleating of the flock,
 And the twitter of birds among the trees,
 And felt the breath of the morning breeze
 Blowing over the meadows brown.
 And one was safe and asleep in his bed
 Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
 Who that day would be lying dead,
 Pierced by a British musket-ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
 How the British regulars fired and fled,—
 How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
 From behind each fence and farm-yard wall,
 Chasing the red-coats down the lane,
 Then crossing the fields to emerge again
 Under the trees at the turn of the road,
 And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
 And so through the night went his cry of alarm
 To every Middlesex village and farm,—
 A cry of defiance and not of fear,
 A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
 And a word that shall echo forevermore!
 For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
 Through all our history, to the last,

In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
 The people will waken and listen to hear
 The hurrying hoof-beat of that steed,
 And the midnight-message of Paul Revere.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 2000

There is obviously much more to talk about in Longfellow’s poem than the simple narrative structure. But understanding the structure of the story Longfellow recounts in rhyme helps build student confidence with the text. I particularly love the image of the British ship’s masts as prison bars across the moon. We talk about how the simile illuminates the poem’s theme. The website for Paul Revere’s House is a rich source of information about the poem and about the historical Paul Revere.

I have had considerable success offering eighth graders extra credit—you know how students will do anything for extra credit, even those who seldom complete the assigned work—for memorizing as much of the poem as they could manage. I offered so many points for so many lines. Most students took up the offer, and we spent a delightful day hearing the poem again and again as they recited portions of the poem by heart. In a 2010 article for *Educational Leadership* called “The Case for Slow Reading,” Thomas Newkirk recommends memorization. He believes, as I do, that memorization entails a special kind of knowing, a kind I hope will last my students their whole lives long.

Connecting Literature to Life

I can always tell when students’ reading of a piece of literature is losing momentum by the snippets of conversation floating up to my desk. My tenth-grade students had read about half of *Frankenstein*, but they were restless. “Nothing happens.” “I fell asleep and missed the part where the monster came to life.” “Victor Frankenstein just rambles.” And most ominous of all, “Boring.” I love Mary Shelley’s novel and thought I had been doing a pretty good job teaching the Gothic tale of pride and prejudice (my own interpretation, which I love talking about to anyone who will listen), but something was missing. The students weren’t hooked. I knew they were keeping up with the reading because our discussion the day before about Victor Frankenstein’s passion for his research had gone well. Their eyes were dutifully passing over the pages, but their hearts just weren’t in it.

The lesson I had planned was going to be a close look at Mary Shelley’s use of language, examining how syntax and diction created the story’s tone. But experience told me that I had better think fast if I didn’t want to spend the hour asking questions nobody except me cared much about. Rummaging through my *Frankenstein* files, I found a magazine article about cloning that raised the question, “Are there some scientific experiments that should never have been

conducted?” Handing out copies of this essay to the class, I asked students what they thought. Are there some scientific advances that the human race is not and never will be able to handle?

Hands flew into the air. Students saw at once the connection between the moral dilemma of cloning and Victor Frankenstein’s creation. They argued that even the obvious medical advantage of being able to clone new hearts or livers would soon be outweighed by the cloning of super-soldiers. The science fiction buffs in the room had a field day telling tales of genetically engineered races destroying the world. I told them about Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* in which the main characters were clones created so their organs could be harvested for transplants. Many students had recently read *Brave New World* and used Aldous Huxley’s gruesome society as an example of what can happen when scientists rather than humanists are at the helm.

My role as teacher shifted from Grand Inquisitor to air traffic controller. “First Stephen, then Melissa, then Robert. We’ll get to you, Bryan. Hold onto that thought.” The hardest part was making sure students listened to one another rather than simply waiting their turn to speak. I complimented those who began their comments with a reference to something someone else had said. This helped. When the conversation turned to the question of whether science might someday make religion obsolete, I thought the windows might explode from the passionate intensity of their arguments. They had so much to say.

At the bell, the room erupted into a dozen conversations. A handful of students grabbed copies of *Brave New World* on their way out. I promised to bring my copy of *Never Let Me Go* to school on Monday. I shouted over the din that they needed to read Chapters 12 through 14 of *Frankenstein* over the weekend. Spent, I collapsed at my desk, reasonably certain that the principal themes in Mary Shelley’s novel had finally come alive for these readers. The rest of *Frankenstein* should make better sense now. And to think that some people consider teaching literature genteel, scholarly work. I resolved that at our next class meeting we would take another look at our rules for classroom discussion:

- Students must talk to one another, not just to me or to the air.
- Students must look at the speaker while he or she is talking.
- Students must listen to one another. To ensure that this happens, they must either address the previous speaker or provide a reason for changing the subject.
- Students must all be prepared to participate. If I call on someone and he or she has nothing to say, the appropriate response is, “I’m not sure what I think right now, but please come back to me later.”
- No side conversations, copying of math homework, or texting.

Yvonne Hutchison, master teacher at one of the most challenging middle schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, helped me create this set of guidelines for classroom discussion. She believes that we must assume that all students have important things to say but that many of them are unfamiliar with the rules of academic discourse. A few students seem to know these rules instinctively, most often sons or daughters of teachers. But if we want all students to participate in civil classroom conversations, we need to teach them how. We experiment with the wonderfully vague verb *suggest* when talking about literature. I encourage students to take risks with interpretation by starting sentences with “I wonder if the author is implying . . .” We practice arguing civilly what has been said with, “I can understand how you see it that way, but I . . .”

- Where did you see that in the text?
- If I were in this character’s place . . .
- Those lines make me feel as though . . .
- When I compare this with what came before . . .
- I can understand how you see it that way, but I . . .
- Does this word have other connotations?
- I was struck by the line where . . .
- I’m unsure. Can you please come back to me?

Rules of discourse are particularly important during Socratic seminars. Simply putting the desks in a circle won’t necessary result in the kind of student-run, text-based discussion that seminars are meant to foster. I find I must:

1. Tell students that everyone is expected to participate at least once during the seminar.
2. Explain to students that no one needs to raise a hand to be called on, but that they should be sensitive to each other, noticing when someone seems to have something to say but may be too shy to jump into the conversation. I give them the words they might use: “Luke, you look as though you disagree. What were you thinking?” If a student with a soft voice can’t be heard, I urge other students to ask him or her to speak up. This shows they really want to know what this person has to say.
3. Teach students how to deal with the compulsive talkers in their midst. Pointing out how even motor-mouthed Michelle must at some point inhale, I tell them this is the moment when others can politely interrupt. (I say this lovingly, and the Michelles in the class always laugh. They know that others stop listening when they rattle on for too long.)

4. Tell students that silence is a part of the seminar, too. It means people are pausing to think. If the silence goes on for too long, they might want to turn to the text that is the basis for the seminar and see if there is a passage they would like to ask one another about. They might decide to read the passage aloud.
5. Let students know that I will be sitting outside their circle and that I will remain silent until the last five minutes of class. I will be taking notes about things I observe occurring during the seminar and will share these with them at that time. My comments will not be about the text but rather about how students conducted themselves during the seminar. I focus on the positive behaviors, the subtle way students help one another join in the discussion, naming individuals who did this well.

In my experience seminars work best with twenty or fewer students. With my larger classes I have tried dividing the students into two groups, but it never seems to work quite as well. My presence—my silent, note-taking self, sitting outside the circle—seems to be a key piece of what makes students take the seminar seriously. I have yet to figure out how to clone myself so I can watch two groups at once.

One fall after students had finished reading both *Beowulf* and John Gardner's *Grendel* (the *Beowulf* story told from the point of view of the monster), I told students that instead of taking a test or writing a comparison/contrast essay about the two books, we would hold a seminar. Since the seminar would take the place of a formal assessment, everyone had to speak up and participate. Students readily agreed. As I wasn't going to be asking the questions or calling upon them, it was up to the students themselves to generate the discussion and, in so doing, to demonstrate to me their understanding of the two books.

Melissa began. "The last line in *Grendel* made me think again about how I felt about the monster. I mean the whole book sets you up to sympathize with him, but look how he finishes, 'Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all.*' That's really mean and malicious."

"I agree. It's blood-lust," remarked Bryan. "This is an evil monster who deserved to be killed."

Lisa saw it differently. "Wait, look at how he was treated in his life. No mother he could talk to. *Beowulf* out to get him, no friends, no one to teach him how to behave."

Roberto interrupted, "Grendel was just something in the *Beowulf*'s way, something for the hero to slay so he could win fame and have people sing about him."

"That's how it was in *Beowulf*," Lisa insisted. "But in *Grendel* you could see how the monster felt. You knew what he was thinking. In a way I think Grendel was trapped in a role. I feel sorry for him."

The conversation continued in this vein for the next forty minutes. To anyone who delights in watching teenagers learn, the interval was breathtaking. Students listened to one another, probed each other's observations, and made repeated reference to the texts. When it was over I beamed with pride, well disposed to each and every one of them. I let them know that this was the apex of literature study. The exercises we completed along the way were simply preparation for this kind of exchange, for just this kind of conversation among readers about books. After class Melissa came up to let me know that they really should have had more time for the discussion. I often wonder if students are as blunt with other teachers. No one ever hesitates to tell me what I should do better. Of course she was right.

I remember another group of students who had finished reading *Frankenstein*. It was the year when trials were all the rage in Los Angeles: the Menendez brothers, Heidi Fleiss, O. J. Simpson. From all the television time these trials were receiving, my students were experts on courtroom drama and procedures. Sophomore David MacDonald had the idea that we should put Victor Frankenstein on trial for the murders his monster committed. The class loved the idea. Within a few days roles were assigned, teams of attorneys had been to the library for research, robes were found for the judge, and court was in session. Students had the protocols down pat.

My favorite moment occurred when the defense put Dr. Alfred Nobel on the stand. Amy Krasnov asked the eminent scientist if he felt he should be held responsible for the destructive uses dynamite has been put to in the world. Dr. Nobel testified, "Of course not." To which Amy responded, "If Dr. Nobel is not culpable for the destruction his creation, dynamite, has wrought, then how can you, the jury, convict my client, Dr. Frankenstein, for what his creation has done? I rest my case."

Developing Students' Vocabulary

Not all of my students have words like *culpable* and *wrought* on the tip of their tongues. In fact, Amy had prepared her closing statement for the trial of Victor Frankenstein carefully and read from what she had written. She is also a compulsive reader. Students like Amy have large vocabularies, not from studying lists of words but from reading. Don't you often find that it is the readers in your class who garner the highest scores on college entrance exams like the SAT and the ACT? Prior to 2006 the SAT included analogy questions in an attempt to measure students' critical thinking. In my opinion this item type in fact measured vocabulary. (A cottage industry was developed that had its base in tutoring students how to guess on such items accurately.) Readers like Amy have little difficulty with analogy questions like the one shown in the example, but many other students have trouble demonstrating their understanding of the relationship expressed in the stem because they don't know what *tenet*, *predecessor*, or

recluse meant. I celebrated when the College Board eliminated analogies from the SAT in the hope that students would spend less time practicing with the item type and more time reading. Rather than focusing on assigning and assessing lists of words, teachers would do better to help students develop the habits of mind that make learning vocabulary as natural as breathing.

Technology can work to our advantage here. No longer do students have to leaf through the pages of a heavy dictionary. They can type *mizzen* into Google images and in seconds an illustration of the sail appears on their screen. When reading in electronic formats, search engines make finding definitions as easy as highlighting the word—if students take the time or if they are prepared to bother. Too often students simply skip over unfamiliar vocabulary. Researchers have discovered that even when we skip a word—which, if we are honest, is what most of us do when we come to a word we don’t know—our brains record the encounter. While a single sighting of a word is rarely enough to make an imprint strong enough to allow a reader to know the definition, McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Pope (1985) found that twelve encounters did.

Avid readers like Amy have repeated encounters with new vocabulary because their reading diet includes everything from Edgar Allan Poe to Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*. As a result, their understanding of unfamiliar words grows with every encounter. For example, the first time a reader sees the word *lorgnette*, one might take away from the context only the sense that the object has something to do with seeing. The second time, there might be a reference to a character holding the glasses and a sense that this is an old-fashioned object given the setting of the story. The third encounter might include some reference to the opera, adding the use of the object to its description. Steven Stahl explained this process in an article called “How Words Are Learned Incrementally over Multiple Exposures”:

As a person encounters the word again and again, word meaning grows at a relatively constant rate, dependent on the features of the context. That is, people show as much absolute gain in word knowledge from an unknown word as they show from a word of which they have some partial knowledge, all other things being equal. We found that students made the same amount of growth in word knowledge from a single reading, whether they began by knowing something about a word or not. Thus, vocabulary knowledge seems to grow gradually, moving from the first meaningful exposure to a word to a full and flexible knowledge. (2003, 19)

Children who are readers add between 3,000 and 5,000 new words to their vocabulary every year through incidental exposure. Consider how much greater this rate of word learning is than the 300 to 400 words per year that can be taught through direct instruction (Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987). This is not to say that we shouldn’t teach word study, but rather that students who don’t read

SAMPLE ANALOGY QUESTION

TENET is to
THEOLOGIAN as

- (A) predecessor is to heir
- (B) hypothesis is to biologist
- (C) recluse is to rivalry
- (D) arrogance is to persecution
- (E) tenor is to choir

much will always lag behind their reading peers in vocabulary development. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley (2003) report that high-performing twelfth graders know about four times as many words as low-performing students.

Many of the words that students encounter in academic settings rarely appear in conversational speech. When was the last time you used *deleterious* or *vicissitude* in conversation? I'm not sure I ever have. I'm also quite sure that no one ever taught me these words through a list of words. I have simply met them again and again when reading in various contexts.

To help my students build their vocabulary, I ask them to keep a running list as they read unfamiliar words. An easy way to facilitate this process is to hand out bookmark-shaped strips of notebook paper. Have students note the page number next to the word so they can find it again easily when they come to class. Instead of my choosing a list of words to learn, students choose their own. What I'm also trying to demonstrate here is that learning new words is a lifelong process. Though word walls seem like something students remember from elementary school, I ask students to contribute words from their bookmarks to a class list that I collect on a chart. Together we practice using affixes and roots to figure out the words' meaning. If that bears little fruit—for example, with a word like *hubbub*—we turn to context to see if somewhere in the sentence or surrounding paragraph there are clues to the word's meaning. My goal is to demonstrate the habits of mind readers instinctively employ when encountering unfamiliar words.

Students need a robust vocabulary not only to read literature but also to express what they think about what they are reading. For many their thinking, their ability to analyze what they read, is often compromised by the limits of their language. We can help by front-loading key words. These could either be key words important to the central meaning of the text or words that students need in order to talk about the text. Here is an example from the opening of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* as an example. Originally published in 1883, the story was first serialized in the children's magazine *Young Folks*. The influence Stevenson's Long John Silver has had upon our collective imaginations regarding pirates—from Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* to Johnny Depp's portrayal of Jack Sparrow in *The Pirates of the Caribbean*—cannot be overstated. I wanted my seventh graders to understand where the image of a peg-legged captain with a parrot on his shoulder had originated and to be able to discuss the character intelligently.

In *Bringing Words to Life*, Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan (2002) urge teachers to consider the utility when deciding which words to teach. They recommend focusing on words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains. These are not necessarily the longest or most unusual words in a text but rather the ones on which students' ability to comprehend hinges. In the opening paragraphs of *Treasure Island* young readers need to know what a *cove* is in order to visualize the location of

the Admiral Benbow Inn. They need to know what *grog* is in order to understand why the captain calls the inn a “grog-shop.” Beck et al. also recommend teaching words that add precision to students’ thinking, words that will help students express themselves with greater specificity. *Gruff*, *exotic*, *enigmatic*, *intimidating*, and *charismatic* can help students describe what they infer in this introduction about Long John Silver’s character.

After teaching students these words, I ask them to think of a person or character from a book or movie who could be described as *gruff*, *exotic*, *enigmatic*, *intimidating*, or *charismatic*. I ask students to write for five minutes explaining why they would describe this person in this fashion. Then students turn and share what they have written with a partner, and we listen to a few as a class. I then have students read the opening pages of *Treasure Island* looking for evidence that supports the use of these for describing the captain.

With *sittyated* and *mought*, I urge students to figure out for themselves what the captain means.

Words from the Text

grog

cove

inn

Words to Add Precision to Conceptual Understanding

gruff

exotic

enigmatic

intimidating

charismatic

TREASURE ISLAND BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17__ and go back to the time when my father kept the Admiral Benbow inn and the brown old seaman with the sabre cut first took up his lodging under our roof.

I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow—a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man, his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulder

of his soiled blue coat, his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails, and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white. I remember him looking round the cover and whistling to himself as he did so, and then breaking out in that old sea-song that he sang so often afterwards: “Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!” in the high, old tottering voice that seemed to have been tuned and broken at the capstan bars. Then he rapped on the door with a bit of stick like a handspike that he carried, and when my father appeared, called roughly for a glass of rum. This, when it was brought to him, he drank slowly, like a connoisseur, lingering on the taste and still looking about him at the cliffs and up at our signboard.

“This is a handy cove,” says he at length; “and a pleasant sittyated grog-shop. Much company, mate?”

My father told him no, very little company, the more was the pity.

“Well, then,” said he, “this is the berth for me. Here you, matey,” he cried to the man who trundled the barrow; “bring up alongside and help up my chest. I’ll stay here a bit,” he continued. “I’m a plain man; rum and bacon and eggs is what I want, and that head up there for to watch ships off. What you mought call me? You mought call me captain. Oh, I see what you’re at—there”; and he threw down three or four gold pieces on the threshold. “You can tell me when I’ve worked through that,” says he, looking as fierce as a commander.

Mapping Complex Sentence Structures

Did you notice that the first paragraph of *Treasure Island* is all one sentence? Readers young and old find such complex sentences daunting. Instead of ignoring the textual challenge this poses, we address it straight on. I remind students that punctuation is meant to serve as road signs for readers. We peel back the layers of opening phrases to find the core. Together we search for the subject and verb. (“... I take up my pen ... and go back to the time ...”). Suddenly the meaning becomes clear. As Tony remarked, “The guy is just saying he’s going to start writing the story!” Indeed he is. Particularly in the opening chapters of any demanding work, students need lots of practice figuring out who is doing what in sentences like Stevenson’s. Once readers grasp the elements of a writer’s style and the rhythm of the writing in their ears, the difficulty of negotiating such syntax diminishes.

Another method for working with demanding literature is to teach students about theories of reading. Most students have no idea that reading is a much-studied act and that entire schools of thought have been built upon the foundations of this primary skill. Few students have ever given much thought to their reading beyond, “I like to read” or “I don’t like to read.” In “*You Gotta BE the Book*,” Jeff Wilhelm (1997) describes research that he conducted in his

middle school classroom examining the habits of teenage readers. I cannot do justice here to the complexity of Wilhelm's research, but his case studies of three engaged readers point the way to classroom instruction that can help all students become able readers. Wilhelm found that "the response of engaged readers is intensely visual, empathic, and emotional. By focusing in class on the importance of these evocative responses, that is, entering the story world, visualizing people and places, and taking up relationships to characters, less engaged readers were given strategies for experiencing texts and were helped to rethink reading." (144)

Why do some kids love reading? What is rewarding and engaging about reading for these students? What do these engaged readers "do" as they read that makes the experience fun, satisfying, and engaging for them? Why do other kids hate reading? What in their experience has contributed to their negative view?

I realized that year after year I had encountered students who obviously resisted reading. But they seemed to be a minority, and eventually—I'm ashamed to say—I'd really just given up on them as far as becoming readers was concerned. It was when I encountered a whole class of them that I could not blame them instead of myself, the materials, or the method. Eighth grade remedial reading produced a crisis that required a new way of thinking about and teaching the act of reading. If I wished to pursue my job of developing readers, then resistance and lack of engagement were compelling issues that had to be deeply considered. (7)

Pursuing answers to his questions, Wilhelm experimented with incorporating discussions about reading theory and literary conventions into his lessons. What he found was that as students became increasingly aware of the fact that they were actually going to have to "do" something to make a text comprehensible, their frustrations decreased. Suddenly it wasn't that anything was wrong with them or with the text that was causing them to find a book incomprehensible. They simply weren't doing the things that good readers do when they read. As Umberto Eco (1994) explains, "Every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of the work."

Without diminishing the importance of good early reading instruction or the difficulties that children with disabilities face when reading, I would assert that many "poor readers" are actually lazy readers. This is not a reflection on their character. It's simply that no one ever told these students that reading was going to be hard work. Even when students dutifully skim the assigned pages, few think the homework reading demands from them anything more. Students plug in their iPods, kick back on their beds, and expect the book to transfer information from its pages to their brains. While such a passive stance might work perfectly well for scanning Facebook, it is grossly inadequate for reading Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*.

An exchange between two of Wilhelm's students—one an engaged reader, the other a struggling reader—demonstrates how broad the chasm is between students who do and don't know what a text demands of a reader.

John: I can't believe you do all that stuff when you read! Holy crap, I'm not doing . . . like nothing . . . compared to you.

Ron: I can't believe you don't do something. If you don't, you're not reading, man. . . . It's gotta be like wrestling or watching a movie or playing a video game . . . you've got to like . . . be there! (xiii)

I want students to know that it is not enough simply to cast their eyes over a page of print and expect the story to come alive or even to make sense. A reader needs to act. When reading a book like *A Death in the Family* by James Agee, I have to work very hard to figure out the perspective from which the story is being told. The setting of early-twentieth-century Tennessee is not one I know much about. Agee's gorgeous language can be a distraction from the straightforward business of following the plot. Every sentence seemed imbued with so much meaning that I often lost my way. I had to slow down, check how old particular characters were, and make sure I understood the relationships between characters. Reading a Patricia Cornwall mystery isn't nearly this much work. The payoff is enormous. Whilst I've read a half dozen Kay Scarpetta novels, I can't remember the plot of a single one. *A Death in the Family* is imprinted on my heart.

Louise Rosenblatt (1983) explains:

The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself. He responds to the little black marks on the page, or to the sounds of the words in his head, and he "makes something of the fact." The verbal symbols enable him to draw on his past experiences with what the words point to in life and literature. The text presents these words in a new and unique pattern. Out of these he is enabled actually to mold a new experience, the literary work. (278)

The challenge for any literature teacher is to make these "creative activities" visible to students. Struggling readers often have no idea about the things that expert readers do inside their heads when they read. According to Rosenblatt, good readers conduct a transaction with the text. The reader creates meaning from the words on the page while the text causes the reader to reexamine what he or she knows. The text and the reader interact.

What is so powerful to me about Rosenblatt's work is that she situates the study of literature at the center of every student's life. It is not only the college-bound or future English teachers who need what literature has to offer, but all students. She explains that "literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that

life offers” (6). For most students, for most readers of any age, what is most important is the human experience that literature presents. It is exactly this that drew and continues to draw me to Orhan Pamuk’s novels. “The reader seeks to participate in another’s vision—to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible” (7). No one has assigned me to read Turkish literature. I read Pamuk because I want to understand more about Istanbul, the crossroad between East and West. His novels don’t explain the history of politics of contemporary Istanbul, but they do help me read the news and help me think about the world.

A few years ago I taught a class of extremely reluctant ninth-grade readers. In this small class of twenty, there were seven special education students and five English learners. The four girls in the class staked out their territory in the desks near the door. As I handed out copies of *Romeo and Juliet*, I told the class that this story was going to remind them a lot of people they know and situations they have experienced. We worked our way through the play—acting out scenes, discussing the characters, drawing parallels to teenage life as they knew it. I had students write about arguments they had had with their parents and fights they had witnessed. We studied the formal elements of Shakespeare’s play, but only as they functioned in terms of our overall understanding. Feeling and connection had to come first.

Rosenblatt theorizes that literature is a form of personal experience and that as such it “has many potentialities that dynamic and informed teaching may sustain” (222). I interpret her discoveries as follows:

1. Literature fosters the imagination that a healthy democracy requires—the ability to understand the needs and hopes of others and the ability to see how our actions affect other people’s lives.
2. Literature offers readers images of behavior and attitudes different from their own.
3. Literature teaches readers about many ways of approaching one’s life, including a variety of philosophies upon which to base one’s actions and respond to the actions of others.
4. Literature can help readers make sound choices based upon learning from how characters behave at critical moments.
5. Literature invites readers to examine their own personalities and problems objectively.
6. Literature can help to free readers from fears, guilt, and insecurity by offering a broad view of what is commonly seen as “normal.”

7. Literature offers outlets for impulses that might otherwise find expression in antisocial behavior.

Many of the students in this ninth-grade class were adept at antisocial behavior. Getting them to sit still for more than ten minutes and to participate in classroom discussion without putting one another down was a daily challenge. But as we made our way through *Romeo and Juliet*, I felt that what Louise Rosenblatt described was occurring before my eyes. Much of their unproductive behavior was a result of their insecurity. As we talked and wrote about how the Montagues and Capulets, as well as well as gangs on campus, behaved toward one another, students seemed to expand their sense of normalcy. José, a bilingual student who has attended several different schools both in Los Angeles and in Puerto Rico over the course of his fourteen years, compared the Prince's final speech with our school principal's rule that anyone involved in a fight will automatically be expelled. Here is the speech from the play:

Capulet, Montague,
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!
And I, for winking at your discords too,
Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd. (Act 5, scene 3)

And here was our classroom conversation:

José: I don't think the principal's rule is fair because if someone disrespects me I'm not going to let it go, but I guess she doesn't want just to look the other way.

Me: Why do you think that is?

José: Oh, she probably feels responsible when anybody on campus gets hurt, which I don't agree with either, but I think that's just the way she is.

Michelle (the most excitable and outspoken of the four girls in the class): You know Theresa who was in this class the first week? She got kicked out for fighting and sent to Valley [Valley High School]. The principal didn't care who started it. She just expelled everybody.

José: I think she wanted to make an example for other kids. If Mrs. R. says "community" one more time, I think I'm gonna hit somebody.

Me: Don't do that, Roberto. You know it would break her heart to lose another student.

Careless interpretations of Louise Rosenblatt's emphasis on the importance of reader response have led some teachers to abandon the practice of close

reading. What is unfortunate about this loss is that student responses, however heartfelt, which are based upon casual or inaccurate reading can lead the reader into confusion rather than to understanding. Teachers need to take time in class to show students how to examine a text in close detail: word by word, sentence by sentence. Ann E. Berthoff (1999) claims that the chief means of teaching critical reading and writing is to “offer students assisted invitations to look and look again at words, sentences, paragraphs.” (676). Only then will they develop the skills they need to be powerful readers. Berthoff goes on to explain:

The disappearance of close reading is not to be confronted with the calm resignation (or secret jubilation?) evinced by those redrawing the boundaries. Without it, as the chief instrument of Practical Criticism, “reader response” is merely personal, merely psychological, merely opinion. The chief value of Practical Criticism is that it is—practical: it is pragmatic. Close reading teaches that the transactions with the text are always tentative and subject to the pragmatic maxim: “If we take it—metaphor, syntax, word, line—this way, what difference would it make to the way we read the rest of the poem? The opus? The age?” Close reading is entailed in critical reading. It is not an elitist, nose-to-the-text, words-on-the-page pedantry but the way of attending to the interplay of saying and meaning. (677)

The kind of close reading that Berthoff describes does not come naturally to teenagers. When explaining what they think about what they have read, most prefer a broad brushstroke rather than a fine line of reasoning. The challenge of the teacher is to help students refine how they examine a piece of literature without destroying their confidence as readers. I start with students’ responses but then ask prodding questions that encourage students to return to the text for answers:

- You say you hate the way Odysseus lies to everyone he meets when he returns to Ithaca. Let’s look at that scene with Penelope again. What is Odysseus trying to find out with his lies?
- The scene where Odysseus’ dog dies of a broken heart upon seeing his master is one of my favorite scenes, too. What does this moment tell you about Odysseus? Read those lines again. What does the state the dog is in suggest about the state of Odysseus’ kingdom?
- It is indeed “gross” when all the unfaithful serving maids are hanged. Look at the epic simile Homer uses to describe the scene. “As when either thrushes with their long wings or doves / Rush into a net that has been

set in a thicket, / As they come in to roost, and a dreadful bed takes them in; / So they held their heads in a row, and about the necks / Of all there were nooses, that they might die most piteously. / They struggled a little with their feet, but not very long” (Homer 1997, 309). Why do you think Homer compares the serving women to birds?

Teachers need to go beyond encouraging personal responses and push student readers to understand exactly what the author has done with words and sentences, syntax, and diction that elicited such a response in them as readers. Berthoff concludes her essay, which is called “Reclaiming the Active Mind”:

I have been suggesting that close reading and close observations soften and sharpen hard, dull wits (and bright, confident wits) because they offer occasions to enjoy a pleasure in the exercise of the mind. To practice Practical Criticism by rehabilitating looking and looking again and reading slowly—and again—would thus be to reclaim the Imagination, the agency of the active mind. (68)

When the bell rings, I want students to leave class exhausted by how well they have exercised their minds, yet happy about what they have accomplished.

As I reflect upon my own metamorphosis from nonjudgmental facilitator to a more assertive readers’ guide, I think that what prompted my development as much as Lisa Delpit’s research was the realization that most student readers are nothing like me. When I was growing up I did little else but read. It wasn’t a matter of having an unhappy childhood; I simply preferred characters in books to the children down the block for playmates. I read indiscriminately, helter-skelter, with no thought for improving my mind. I believed everyone and everything around me was boring. Everything except for books.

I remember a Christmas day when I was fifteen. Trying to please a most difficult teenager, my godmother had given me a copy of Erich Segal’s *Love Story*. I devoured the short novel in the interval between washing dishes and sit-around-the-tree-and-talk-about-how-much-the-babies-had-grown time. I hated the book. And loved hating it. Arrogantly scornful, I remember descending the stairs full of myself and certain that the sentimentality of Segal’s story demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt the patent intellectual inferiority of my entire family. I hasten to say that I have come to revise this point of view regarding my wonderful and most loving, forgiving, and indulgent family. I have penance done and, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, “penance more will do.” But at fifteen I defined myself against this book chosen by someone who thought she knew me.

When my teachers began assigning classics like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Once and Future King*, I was in heaven. I loved the fact that the books were long and that the authors had written lots of other books that

I could read next. I suppose if I had had more friends I might have discovered much earlier that most teenagers didn't share my enthusiasms, but as it was I continued for years with my nose in a book.

When I became a teacher I quickly realized that apart from a few avid readers, most students are unwilling to do the amount of reading that I had taken for granted. I adjusted. But what took me much longer to figure out was just how much help my students needed in order to be able to read demanding books. I had come to these books with broad textual experience and a huge reading vocabulary. I didn't know how much I knew and had no names to put to the things I knew, but in a deep way I understood how stories worked. Few of the students I teach possess what Alfred Tatum calls a reading lineage, a set of books that serve as important markers in their lives. While my students have enormous experience and vast knowledge about a range of things that I was totally ignorant about at their age, including many aspects of life I continue to find baffling, they would have difficulty identifying a chain of texts that have influenced them deeply, that have led to other books, or that they continue to reread. In *Reading for Their Lives: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*, Alfred Tatum (2009) describes his students wearing out a book with rereading when it contains a message they find compelling. His list of forty engaging texts includes *Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *Bang* by Sharon Flake, *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London, "The Masque of Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe, and *Miracle at Monty Middle School*, by Mary A. Monroe. These are the kinds of books I need to put more of into my students' hands.

M. E. Kerr wrote a novel engagingly titled *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*. Without meaning to, teachers often convey a similar message to students, "We'll teach you when you're more like us." Most teenagers will read exactly as much as is demanded of them. When my own son was sixteen years old, he would think nothing of stopping on page 43 if that was where the homework assignment ended—not even if he knew that the mystery was solved, the gun went off, the girl was saved on page 44. Discouraging? Yes. But as a teacher I need to learn to work with this.

Having a more realistic sense of my students' attitudes toward reading and their need for help when reading demanding texts has made me a better teacher. Does this make me inconsistent for changing my mind about my methods? Not if, according to Thoreau, the "least particle of truth can color our whole life." As long as I live, I intend to keep unlearning and learning anew what I thought before. It's my professional responsibility. It's also my passion.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

SECOND
EDITION

WITH RIGOR FOR ALL STUDY GUIDE

*Good Night, Good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow,
that I shall say good night till it be morrow.*

*Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing
animosity or registering wrongs.*

*Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate
from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized
by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones.*

Questions for Discussion

1. Carol Jago argues that if students find the books in your curriculum difficult to read, the solution is not to seek simpler texts but to help students become better readers. What do you think? What are the biggest obstacles you face? How can teachers work together to overcome these obstacles?
2. What concerns you the most about implementing the Common Core Standards for reading literature in your classroom? What resources do you need to help your students meet these standards? Think of ways to articulate these needs to the powers that be.
3. In Chapter 5, Carol Jago talks about making literature study “blissfully productive,” capitalizing on the way video games appeal to students. How does the way in which lessons typically are structured work against blissful productivity? Can you think of ways to bring more pleasure into the study of literature?
4. Chapter 6 explores Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s research on working in a state of flow: “Contrary to what we usually believe, the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” (1990, 3) Can you think of a time when you experienced this state of flow? Think of a time you observed students so absorbed in their reading and writing that the task itself seemed to disappear. What was it about the lesson that produced this effect?
5. One often hears the mantra that “assessment drives instruction.” How can you apply the ideas from Chapter 7 on testing that teaches to use classroom assessment to drive instruction in a productive rather than abusive direction?
6. Social networks and the online environment are a natural part of our students’ lives. How can we integrate technology into the teaching of literature in ways that enhance rather than distract from deep reading and deep thinking?
7. Think about your own experiences as a reader in middle and high school. What were the formative moments in your own literacy development, moments that possibly led to your becoming an English teacher? How might these experiences inform your instruction?

A Conversation with Carol Jago

- Q** You write with such passion about teaching literature, Carol. What's the source of this passion?

I take inspiration from Sin'ichi Suzuki. Most of us know the Suzuki Method as a way to teach very young children to play the violin or piano, but Suzuki was actually an educational philosopher. He wrote, "I want to make good citizens. If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth and learns to play it himself, he develops sensitivity, discipline and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart." (Suzuki 1986) That's what I want for my students, too.

- Q** But how does this apply to teaching literature?

*The Suzuki method employs immersion, encouragement, small steps, imitating examples, internalizing principles, contributing novel ideas to help students develop mastery over their instrument. The kind of instruction I've described in *With Rigor* employs these same ideas to the teaching of literature. When each step is small, students develop confidence. Though the goal—for example, reading *Macbeth*—may be hugely challenging, students feel they are making progress along the way.*

- Q** What do you think gets in the way of students making progress?

One issue is students' feelings of helplessness in the face of a big, fat book. Another is that students haven't heard fine literature from the day of their birth. Suzuki was onto something very important when he recognized the critical importance of immersion in music—or poetry, or stories—in the development of future musicians and readers.

I also think that it is really hard to sell books you don't love to students. If I were in charge of the world, I'd give teachers a great deal more professional discretion in which books they teach. Right now, our choices are often limited by whatever books we can find in the school bookroom. What if public access to online texts made the universe of literature available at no charge to every teacher and student? Call me a dreamer, but if the Vatican can put its library online, why can't the Library of Congress?

- Q** But isn't that a dangerous idea, giving every teacher total control over his or her curriculum?

I don't envision decisions about which texts to teach being made in a vacuum. English departments should put their heads together, read together in book clubs that include parents and students, talk

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about the pros and cons of particular titles, and make collaborative decisions. The Common Core offers examples of the kinds of texts students at each grade level should be reading. These can be used as touchstones for selecting books that everyone is excited about.

Q I've got to ask. When do you find time to read?

There's always time to do the things we love. Where do kids find twenty hours a week to play video games? Where do dog owners find time for walking their beloved pets? I'm never without a book—and haven't been since I was about nine years old. It's a habit—one I try to instill in my students. Lately I see everyone on a bus or train staring into a phone rather than into a book. Do people really have so many friends with so many important things to say? Or is it for distraction? I'd rather be distracted by art, by literature.

Your Turn: Guidelines for Curriculum Development

These guidelines for applying the concepts presented in *With Rigor for All* to your curriculum will be most valuable if used collaboratively in professional learning communities or within an English department study group.

1. Select a piece of literature you would like to include in your curriculum. Reread the Common Core's explanation of the three-part model for measuring text complexity in Appendix A.

Three-Part Model for Measuring Text Complexity

- (1) **Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.**
- (2) **Quantitative dimensions of text complexity.**
- (3) **Reader and task considerations.**

www.corestandards.org/the-standards

2. Consider the book you have chosen in light of the Common Core explanations regarding text complexity and the text exemplars for the grade level where you plan to teach the book. Develop a rationale for why you believe this piece of literature is a good choice for students.
3. Identify the textual challenges that this piece of literature is likely to pose for students. Using the index of *With Rigor for All* to help you find what you are looking for, find instructional suggestions for helping students overcome these obstacles. Common challenges include: vocabulary, syntax, background knowledge, figurative language, story structures, and length.

4. Adapt the ideas presented in *With Rigor for All* to the piece of literature for which you are developing curriculum. Remember to consider students with special needs who might need differentiated instruction.
5. Create a flexible pacing guide for lessons and homework reading assignments. Design both formative and summative assessments for the unit.
6. Acquire a class set of copies of the new book and have one teacher in your study group pilot teaching the text using the lessons the group has drafted.
7. Develop an instrument the teacher and students involved in the pilot program can use to offer feedback on the book and lessons. Survey questions you might use or adapt include:
 - What do you think you will remember one year from now from your reading of this book? Why?
 - Identify portions of aspects of the book that you had difficulty comprehending. What did you do when you found that you didn't understand what you had read?
 - Which of the assignments did you find most valuable, most fun? What did they help you learn?
 - Were there any assignments you felt were busywork or pointless? Please explain.
 - How did you feel about the way your learning was assessed? Was it too easy, too hard, or just right?
 - Would you recommend this book for next year's class? Why or why not?
8. After the pilot program is complete, examine and discuss feedback from the teacher and students who participated. Look for specific suggestions from the survey to help you determine what revisions need to be made to the sample lesson plans.
9. Read and discuss student performances on the summative assessment. Do they demonstrate the kind of learning you had hoped to see? Do they demonstrate progress toward the Common Core Standards in reading literature?
10. Revise, revise, revise! Email Carol Jago at cjago@caroljago.com if you have questions or concerns.
11. Implement (or jettison) the proposed addition to your literature curriculum.

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