



## Supporting and Teaching Student Choice

### Offering Students Self-Selected Reading

**A**lthough I was a high school literature and writing teacher for 25 years, and began offering high school students young adult titles when *The Outsider* and *The Contender* were hot off the presses, I am now in my seventh year as a college professor of English education who also teaches such general education classes as Introduction to Literature. In that class I sponsor a reading workshop requiring response journals and student-generated items used for reading groups discussions. Because the texts I choose for the course (all novels set in Iowa) have no *CliffsNotes* or other commercial cribbing material and are not widely enough read to have their own Internet sites sporting paper ideas, students in these classes *actually read* the novels. This reading and discussion of popular rather than canonical novels (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and *State Fair*, for example) prompts in many students the curious reactions of confession and self-questioning. Semester after semester I read students' admissions in their response journals that go something like

this: "This is the first whole novel I have read since middle school! — I never read the books assigned in English in high school. You did not have to. Listening in class and copying someone's study guide was enough to get by." (Here I note that The University of Northern Iowa has been ranked second in Midwest top public universities by *U.S. News and World Report* for six consecutive years. Our admissions are fairly competitive.) Like it or not, many good students do not read the books we assign in high school English classes if all they are asked to do is fill out a study guide and take a test on them.

The most interesting self-questioning comes from students who insist that they used to love to read in middle school. They will ask themselves in writing, "Why did I ever stop reading? I loved it then, and after reading some novels again, I can see why." When pressed to explain why they stopped reading, students offer the expected range of responses such as, "Sports and other activities took up all of my time" and simply "I had to work when I was not in

school or studying." But a handful of introspective students have pushed a little harder on this question and made statements that I think may have broad reaching implications for this "stopped reading" phenomena. They said, "I don't know how to find books I like." By this, students do not mean they do not know the location of the nearest library or which

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mall has a Barnes and Noble store. Being in the library or the bookstore only heightens the problem. "There are all of these books. How do I find the ones I like?" From this picture it seems obvious to me

that students who lack strategies for finding books they like have failed to learn an important skill integral to becoming successful, mature readers—and have, in the process, failed in developing the skill to learn from and enjoy books on their own outside of school.

In one chapter of *Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice, and Popular Culture* (reviewed by Susan Dunn at the end of this column,) Jeffrey Wilhelm celebrates the value of supporting and guiding student choice of reading:

“My point is that choice is a most excellent thing because it moves our students towards independence, towards agency, towards exercising their will, finding and loving their own questions, interests, answers, and pathways [ . . . ]. What we need is an intelligent balance and negotiation between shared and independent reading, a constant dialectic between guidance, preparation, and opportunities to fly on one’s own” (41).

While I believe teachers of secondary literature who have contemporary practices are well-suited to foster and teach choice, I am not sure we have recognized the importance of students learning to choose as a foundational component of mature reading processes. While student choosing of titles to read is often and importantly discussed in terms of censorship and students *right* to read, I propose we talk about students’ abilities to choose books for a variety of purposes as a fundamental educational goal to be attained by every reader. We will start the process of teaching choice when our students are choosing children’s books and books for young adults. But we

must continue this support through high school and college so students are able to find adult titles as well as great young adult titles such as *Speak*, for example.

For myself, even though I, as an English education professional, am definitely a slacker in terms of the volume of my reading for pleasure (perhaps twelve books a

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year), I do possess useable strategies for selecting appropriate reading materials. But I have come to understand that possession of these strategies that seem integral to mature adult readers may have come my way more through luck than through any design of my formal literature experiences in school. Using the behaviors of mature adult readers as a guide, we need to tease out the experiences that helped us develop our reading tastes and motivations and name the *choosing* skills that are based on those experiences and motivations. My last book was *Holes*, before that *Harry Potter and*

*the Sorcerer’s Stone* on tape (17 tapes that my family and I listened to in the car all the way from Iowa City to San Francisco last summer), before that, *Speak*, and before that, *Prey* by Michael Crichton. My next book will be *SeaBiscuit* by Laura Hillenbrand. These choices were all made based on my knowledge of how to choose to satisfy my tastes and my desire for social interaction with other readers, known and unknown, who were reading those books. I know that choosing reading materials to facilitate social interaction of many diverse kinds is one of the important reading behaviors we need to teach.

Current pedagogies for teaching literature in secondary classrooms suggest that sometimes students should select titles from a long or short list, a list defined by genre or theme or by some other defining categorization. A familiar unit design might include a common reading to establish a theme or genre followed by student reading groups that meet to select and discuss common group readings, which have been selected from a collection of multiple copies of multiple titles. Typically the teacher book-talks some or all of the titles in the collection to facilitate student choice. Sometimes book groups are organized around student title selection. Typically the titles for selection are chosen for student consideration by the teacher and/or librarian because they represent a range of reading levels, reading interests and content, and reading experience and sophistication required for success. This range might include canonical texts as well as texts written specifically for young adults.

Instructional variations based on the same set of textual resources might replace reading groups with individual students selecting titles and engaging in one-to-one, peer-to-peer, and student to teacher interaction through shared journal responses or literary letters. Other units might ask students to read independently within a theme or genre, choosing books from both classroom and building libraries (or from sources outside of school).

If this is the pedagogy to which at least some of us subscribe—specifically a pedagogy that invites and supports student choice of titles—specifically a pedagogy that without hesitation includes in the list of titles available for selection, books for young adults, even for classes in the upper grades of high school, then we need to be ready to articulate what educational goals are met by this component of choice and how the exercise of choosing is important to students' academic development. We might ask such questions as how is choice of reading material related to student “ownership” of learning? How does student self-selection of reading titles play into the Vygotskian model of “zones of proximal development” and facilitate enactment of instructional scaffolding? For example, it seems to me that student self-selection of reading titles could greatly enhance the qualities of “intentionality” and “appropriateness” which are key components of the scaffolding model (Applebee and Langer, 1983).

We need to be able to answer these questions to defend our instructional practices from challenges so numerous that just the ones that come to my mind read

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like a grim litany:

- Budget constraints that look askance at the expense of maintaining classroom libraries
- Advocates of whole-class, teacher-centered instruction
- Book challenges that seek to control choice in the curriculum
- Commercial “free reading” programs that limit student selections based on reading ability.
- Political edicts that mandate a canonical Greco-Roman, Western tradition.

What I hope is that we proactively assert that helping students develop the ability to choose their own reading is every bit as important an instructional goal as compositionists have successfully asserted *topic selection* to be within the range of important components in student composing processes. No composition textbook would be without at least a perfunctory treatment of brainstorming, webbing, or other topic selection and topic development activities. But what instructional materials for teaching literature or reading identify selection of book titles as an important component of learning to literature? What I hope is that we come to think of developing students' choosing abilities as part of what it means to teach literature and reading, and we come to demand from ourselves attention to that goal.

And we have to be ready to meet external challenges to choice with clear statement of what is lost to student development as readers when students do not learn to choose.

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## Professional Resources in Support of Student Choice

By Susan Dunn

High school students are difficult. As educators, we find ourselves searching through our mental archives on a daily basis trying to get our students excited about learning. I will never forget standing in front of a class of twenty-five giggling reluctant readers with my little brother's dinosaur figurines trying to act out a scene from the book *Jurassic Park*. I was constantly trying to find new and innovative ways to make my students excited about reading the way that I was in high school when I first picked up a copy of Stephen King's *The Green Mile*. I read that book cover to cover in four days. I forgot to eat, lost sleep and even convinced myself to read just one more chapter as I was driving in the car. I saw how a good book could pull you in, make you cry, and inquire about life. I also saw how reading one good book could lead me to find other good books. It is in this passion for reading that I have found my calling as teacher.

The books that I remember reading as a child and as a young adult were those that I picked myself. It is in this choice that I felt ownership of my own knowledge. This ownership is one of the traits that we all want to pass on to our students. It is through student choice that we can accomplish this goal. By implementing student choice in the literature classroom students are more likely to find motivation to read and become lovers of reading.

In our search for resources pertaining to student choice, we found a plethora of information about students' reading preferences in the liter-

ature classroom. However, few resources focus on teaching students how to choose in the literature classroom specifically. The following are reviews of two resources that could be of interest to teachers who intend to implement choice into the classroom. The first resource, authored by Alfie Kohn, focuses on the theoretical implications of choice in education. The second, a collection of proceedings from a conference held by the NCTE, focuses specifically on the practical implications of choice in the English classroom.

**Kohn, Alfie. "Choices and Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide." *Phi Delta Kappan* (1993): 8-20.**

In this article, Alfie Kohn illustrates the power of providing student ownership through choice in the classroom. Kohn describes how choice can have an astonishing effect on students' behavior and values as well as in academic achievement. While Kohn does not focus specifically on the literature classroom, his insight can be applied to various areas of education at all levels. Kohn describes the importance of giving students a sense of self-determination through allowing them to be in control of their learning and their lives; he argues that student choice can have lasting effects on academic achievement. Kohn states,

Every teacher who is told what material to cover, when to cover it, and how to evaluate children's performance is a teacher who knows that enthusiasm for one's work quickly evaporates in the face of being controlled. Not every

teacher, however, realizes that exactly the same thing holds true for students: deprive them of self-determination and you have likely deprived them of motivation. If learning is a "matter of following orders, students simply will not take to it in the way they would if they had some say about what they were doing. (1993)

Kohn supports his views on choice by speaking of the democratic classroom. Giving students a sense of ownership in their learning prepares them to live in society in the future. Creating a classroom that promotes choice will help to give students a sense of control over their actions and achievements. Kohn states, "Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have a chance to live in one today" (1993).

This article also touches on structural impediments, teacher resistance, student resistance and strategies for dealing with elementary-aged students' responses to choice and change. While Kohn focuses primarily on the elementary classroom, secondary teachers can benefit from his message as a valuable teaching resource for implementing choice into the classroom.

**Power, Brenda Miller, Jeffrey Wilhelm and Kelly Chandler, Ed. *Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice and Popular Literature*. Urbana: NCTE, 1997.**

In the spring of 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) held a conference at the University of Maine entitled



“Reading Stephen King.” The discussions that spawned this conference inspired the book *Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice and Popular Literature*. The book, edited by Brenda Miller Power, Jeffrey Wilhelm, and Kelly Chandler is a compilation of articles from conference attendees in response to the seminars, debates and commentary that fueled this two-day event. The book is broken into three main parts: Choice, Popular Literature, and Censorship. Within these three sections, one can find articles pertaining not only to a rationale for teaching King but also to how teaching non-traditional literature can lead to great things in the classroom.

## **Introduction**

### **“I Want to Be Typhoid Stevie” By Stephen King**

In this piece, King describes his life not only as a writer, but also as a reader. King speaks of his passion for reading, and how that love has become a desire that he wants to fulfill for his readers. King states, “What I want is to reach through the pages and grab the reader. I don’t want to just mess with your head, I want to mess with your *life*. I want you to miss appointments, burn dinner, skip your homework [. . .]” (15). King, a former high school teacher, explains the role that his books can play in the classroom. However, he is very humble about the influence that his writing can have on a reader. King states,

“I am [not] comfortable with the idea of being a poster-boy for the pleasures of reading, or the carnival barker outside, telling them to hurry-hurry-hurry: if they like what they read on the outside, they’re going to love what is on

the inside. I do what I do as well as I can, and if my work has led some readers to the work of others, or launched them on lives where the TV stays off for whole nights at a stretch, I’m very pleased.”(18)

King simply states that his books have the capability to take students to places that they have never been before and in order to let them fly, we must give them the freedom to spread their wings.

## **Choice**

### **“Of Cornflakes, Hot Dogs, Cabbages, and King” by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm**

In clever comparison to food, Wilhelm discusses the role of teachers in the construction of choice in the classroom. We must feed our minds in much the same way that we feed our bodies. Wilhelm argues that it is through a “constrained choice” that we will find success in our classrooms. Much as parents would teach their children to pick nutritious foods to make their bodies healthy, a teacher must guide students to selections that can be beneficial to them, even if they do not know that you are nudging them in one direction or another.

Wilhelm discusses the importance of teaching students how to make informed choices about their reading, thus resulting in “authentic” reading behaviors. Wilhelm poses the question, “So when does choice help students to read better and more enthusiastically, to stretch themselves in the context of their own purposes?”(47). To answer this question, Wilhelm looked to his students. The students had various answers, but the consensus focused on the importance of knowing the individual students and focusing on their needs

and interests. The students concluded that, “[t]he guidance of a knowledgeable adult can help match students to books that help them to become something new”(47). It is in the practice of constrained choice that students will be most successful.

Overall, Wilhelm discusses the role of the teacher in providing a positive environment that is conducive to students making their own choices in the literature classroom. Wilhelm, however, does not necessarily advocate the degree of choice that Alfie Kohn suggested in the earlier review. Wilhelm’s view of the teacher’s role in the classroom is best illustrated in an interview that he conducted with some former students at a basketball game. When Wilhelm asked his students about the role of choice in the classroom, they responded, “You made us think that we had choices, but you were always putting stuff in front of us.” Another student responded that limited choice was still choice. “Hey, when you go to a restaurant, you can choose a dessert, but only from the desserts they have.” Another student joined in with, “Yeah, if you could choose any dessert in the whole wide world you might never make up your mind...” (47).

### **“The Wanna Read Workshop: Reading for Love” by Kimberly Hill Campbell**

In the journey to create a way to get her students excited about reading, Kimberly Hill Campbell invented the “Wanna Read Workshop.” In her search for something new and innovative, Campbell went back to her own reading history. She recalls her “Sunday afternoon experience,” where she could cherish reading. In

her desire to create this experience for her students, Campbell adopted a classroom practice where students had a choice of what to read and received in-class reading time.

Campbell completely restructured her classroom to incorporate the “Wanna Read” Workshop every Wednesday. She provided students with a list of books in her classroom library as well as delivered book talks to get her students interested in new popular titles. Campbell states, “Isn’t [a] love of reading what we want for our students? If they can discover it through King, Steel, Anne Rice, Dean Koontz or John Grisham, isn’t that a good thing?” (55).

Campbell describes the application of the “Wanna Read” Workshop and its positive effect in her classroom. She also describes the doubt and criticism that she faced from her colleagues and from parents when she first administered the workshop. She illustrates her rationale for continuing to apply the workshop into her classroom.

## **Popular Literature**

### **“Canon Construction Ahead” by Kelly Chandler**

The question of teaching canonical literature versus popular literature is one on which English teachers find themselves divided. Kelly Chandler discusses the role of canonical literature in the classroom and issues a call to action for teachers to discover the educational implications of popular literature. In this article, Chandler addresses the longstanding debate about what constitutes good literature and what literature should be taught in schools. Chandler states, “Contrary to conventional wisdom, the literary canon has not remained static over hundreds of years.

Instead, its revision has been a constant, recurring process, with important implications for school curricula” (107).

Chandler uses the work of Stephen King to illustrate an author of popular literature with staying power. Chandler makes a comparison between King and canonical authors such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, authors who were incredibly popular yet the objects of critical disapproval during the time they were publishing. Chandler suggests that popular literature has a place in the classroom much the same as canonical texts. To argue this point, Chandler states, “I think we teachers need to quit taking the literary high ground. Trying to keep out the pernicious effects of popular culture is a losing battle. This does not mean that we give up teaching the classics or that we structure our courses around what students already know and have experienced, but rather that we acknowledge that the membrane between high culture and popular culture is, in many cases, a permeable one” (113).

Chandler suggests that teachers be more thoughtful in the books that they choose to teach, looking outside the standard curriculum or the book closet. Most importantly, he wants teachers to “recognize that as teachers of literature we are not merely inheritors of our cultural tradition, but potential creators of it as well” (114).

## **Censorship**

### **“One Book Can Hurt You... But a Thousand Never Will” by Janet S. Allen**

Janet S. Allen focuses on the threat of censorship in America’s schools and the effect that censorship has on teachers and students’ right to

learn. Allen suggests that, “censorship, and a fear of censorship, have created classrooms of disempowered teachers and disenfranchised readers” (175). Allen describes her experience of interviewing a variety of teachers on the issues of censorship of reading materials in the classroom. Overall, Allen found that the majority of the teachers that she interviewed were either afraid or had given up hope regarding the fight for controversial literature in their classrooms.

Allen discusses a method of developing rationales teachers can use to defend their choices of materials to use in the classroom. This chapter contains examples of these rationales.

This article also suggests ways that a teacher can build a network in order to be supported by their colleagues and community in times of censorship battles. Allen lists ways to build personal and professional knowledge for defending books, ways to influence school and district-level planning, as well as ways to develop and maintain community relationships that revolve around reading.

*Post Script:* As Susan Dunn noted above, our search for professional literature that teachers can use to articulate and defend the importance of student choice of reading materials produced what can only be described as “slim pickin’s.” I speculate the reason for this could be, in part, because the existing rationales for choosing could be dispersed in literatures under other headings, headings such as instructional scaffolding and student ownership of learning, to name two. In an effort to further this discussion we invite readers to send us reviews of other professional texts that have relevance to the issue for supporting and teaching student choice. (BB)