



## Back to the Future—One Good Lesson at a Time

I love movies, and it doesn't matter what kind of movies. When you love them as I do, there is nothing except a good book that is as entertaining as two hours of convoluted plots, rich characterizations, and critical dialogues. As indiscriminate as I appear to be about my selections, I am, however, pragmatic about my movie habit: a movie must give me something to chew on. Undoubtedly, this is a universal and humorous idiosyncrasy of English teachers. We enjoy the unrelenting search for "deep meanings" and effective outcomes. One movie and its wacky theme, a theme somewhat related to outcomes, has continued to intrigue me. It's been a few years since the movie's debut, but when I visit classrooms, review old unit plans, research new pedagogy, and watch students learn, I continue to struggle with what practices will lead us nowhere, backward, to the future, and paradoxically, "Back to the Future." Let me see if I can explain a connection.

It seems like only last year that America watched the movie about Marty McFly, a typical teenager of

the Eighties. An aspiring musician in an uninspiring band, McFly spends time with his friend, Professor Emmett Brown. Although he appears to be nothing but a scattered and disheveled scientist, Emmett has created a time machine. It can not only launch people into the past and future, but it does so with style. The time machine resides within a plutonium-powered DeLorean car, and while driving the car at a speed that activates the machine, Marty McFly is hurled through an amazing trip back to three previous decades. After a series of outrageous events, Marty completes his important work; acts as Cupid for his parents so they can meet, marry, and eventually become his parents. With that done, Marty can move forward in time and get "back to the future."

In our work as secondary English educators, we know we should routinely consider the literacy practices that best meet the needs of our students. Times and standards change; we should also change. The lesson plans that fill our filing cabinets, and quite possibly even last year's lessons,

may be irrelevant to our students' current schema and need. For example, consider a possible similarity found between our Huckleberry Finn lessons and the incongruity found in "Back to the Future." When Marty McFly asks Emmett Brown a simple question about the type of fuel needed for the special DeLorean, he learns that some things have not stayed the same.

**Marty McFly:** Does it run on, on regular unleaded gasoline?

**Dr. Emmett L. Brown:** Unfortunately, no. It requires something with a little more kick. . . . Plutonium!

**Marty McFly:** Plutonium! . . . wait, are you telling me that this sucker is nuclear?

Although knowledge of fuel production and lessons from Mark Twain compare like apples and oranges, it is the relativity of our instruction that we are attempting to explore. In preparation for state and national assessments, students

would find more significance in “Huckleberry Finn” instruction that helps students “. . . read . . . literary texts from different periods, cultures, and genres” (USOE), rather than lessons which require learning an outdated Southern vocabulary or the life and times of Samuel Clemens.

Because we English teachers have always loved our content area, even when our own high school teachers transmitted information from yellowed and boring lecture notes, we may understandably underestimate the need to evaluate our practice. We like a diet of words, parts of speech, persuasive essays, metaphysical poetry, and classical literature. We like it, and students should, too. Could it be, however, that our practices make literacy instruction less attractive than it could be?

I cringe when I think of the weekly spelling and vocabulary lists I once doled out every Monday morning of the year. Doggone it! Learning to spell and vocabulary development was good for students, and new-fangled research that exposed the worthlessness of my lists was just nonsense.

The research was nonsense; nonsense until I realized students memorized my lists for Monday and couldn’t remember a simple definition a week later. With that sad realization, I began to understand the necessity of context. Even the brilliant scientist Emmett Brown needed context to understand the words of teenager, Marty McFlye.

**Marty McFly:** Wait a minute, Doc. Are you trying to tell me that my mother has the hots for me?

**Dr. Emmett L. Brown:** Precisely!

**Marty McFly:** Whoa! This is heavy!

**Dr. Emmett L. Brown:** There’s that *word* again: “heavy.” Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the earth’s gravitational pull?

Just a month ago, I enthusiastically began a class discussion, but I soon learned my students knew little about the content. Stating and then outlining the learning objective seemed easy enough, but the students had no schema or background information to draw upon. After ten minutes of shallow answers and confused expressions, I knew my teaching, no matter how pedantic, would not bring about comprehension. I could hear the words of Madeline Hunter in my mind: it was time to “monitor and adjust.” Although changing my plans spoiled my unit-plan-magic, backtracking was a necessary adjustment. Out went the prescribed lesson, and in came something new. While punting is never recommended, we managed to salvage the class period.

When my lesson wasn’t working, why didn’t I just continue my instruction and expect the students to fill in the gaps? The answer is simple. If we expect imperfect comprehension to effectively scaffold to future learning, it won’t happen. The unfortunate consequences will fall on our students, and in our unwillingness to change the way we teach, we will ultimately botch multiple lessons. Like our students,

poor Marty McFly experienced the frustration that can occur when proper schema has not been achieved. Imagine the confusion he experienced while innocently trying to order a soft drink . . . albeit a drink that had not yet been invented.

**Lou:** You gonna order something, Kid?

**Marty:** Ah, yeah . . . Give me a Tab.

**Lou:** Tab? How can I give you a tab if you don’t order something?

**Marty:** Alright. Give me a Pepsi Free.

**Lou:** You want a Pepsi, Pal, you’re gonna pay for it!

Effective teachers are those who constantly monitor what is working in a classroom. When learning is compromised, effective teachers determine what isn’t working and why.

The changing role of English teachers is shaped by new needs, new standards, and a new type of student. Yes, we must continue to be knowledge specialists, but remaining specialists will be the easy part. Our natural love of English obliges us to read more, write more, and analyze more. The challenge for the changing educator goes beyond our knowledge. The challenge calls for a reformation. It requires us to carry student-relevant knowledge by fresh strategies. It requires us to show new support for assessment-driven and quantifiable curriculum. Lastly, it requires

us to re-shape our practice and meet the needs of America's most differentiated consumer: our teenagers (Davies). The challenge to write our new future is exciting, especially when the alternative is to languish in the past. As English educators, we can help make the words of Marty McFly a promising reality: "Yeah, well, history is gonna change!"

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