

Scattering Light over the Shadow of Booklessness

Look, if I walked into my class dreamily thinking, “Today, I am going to scatter some light,” quite frankly, well . . . I’d get eaten alive by my kids. I mean these are teens. Urban, multicultural, reluctant-to-read, video-game-playing, hormone-surg-ing, iPod-toting, MySpace-on-my-mind teens. Any-one walking into a classroom striving to accomplish philosophical, think-tank literacy ideals that sound as if they were plucked from an erudite academic journal is going to have their bubble burst more brutally than the American housing market.

Then again, if you don’t walk in with a plan to scatter some light for your kids, they—and you—are going to be swallowed by the darkness.

Entirely.

So let’s call it like it is for a moment. The shadow of booklessness lurking over the lives of young adults in America today is a frightening, we-need-to-be-freaking-out-about-it problem. (Not that I have any strong opinions about the manner or anything.) So what’s my answer? My tool? My weapon to eradicate the plague of this contagion and replace it with white streams of hope, inspiration, passion, literacy, and enthusiasm?

YA literature, of course.

Real books! The fact is, I am one of YA literature’s most unabashed, biggest fans.

Look, sometimes in this world you just gotta put your stake in the ground and make a claim. For me, as a teacher, as a writer, as a parent, as a citizen of this country and the world, my stake is staked. I believe in using real books to reach real kids to impact real lives

in a very real, very tangible, very gainful, productive, and positive way.

Happily, I can also report I’ve banked a wee bit of success abiding by this philosophy. And others can replicate it as well. The fact of the matter is, scattering light begins by applying some common sense, not being afraid to point the finger, and remembering the needs of the kids we are trying to serve with our best efforts.

To begin, let’s get a couple of things on the table that are being swept under the rug. The textbook industry is fleecing America’s schools, in my opinion, and I have no idea how they hoodwinked so many smart people into buying into the idea that watered down, disengaging, tired, and oh-so-20th-century literary anthologies need to be the center of America’s academic curricular wheel, while real books—books that kids *love*—are being purposefully left on the periphery.

Or on the shelf entirely.

It’s hogwash!

Real books are not a luxury in the modern-day classroom. Real books are critical. They are essential. They are oxygen to the pulse of literacy! The fact is, every great language arts teacher I know uses real books in the classroom. Every last one of them.

Which books? I’ll get to that in a minute, but first, let’s face a few truths about incorporating a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction. It’s nonsense. And scripted curriculum is buffoonery. (Not that I have any strong opinions on the matter or anything.)

The fact is, I’d move off of this point right now,

too, if it weren't for the fact that American schools are currently spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year buying textbooks, scripted curriculum programs, and other resources of like ilk. Do I need to rehash the war stories about frustrated teachers in the trenches being mandated to use materials their kids inform them are loathsome? Do I need to retell the tales of how some teachers are being prohibited outright from using novels in the classrooms so that their instruction can be paced, controlled, legislated, and micromanaged from locations that aren't even on the same physical school site? Have you heard about the teacher who had to photocopy a short story from the textbook onto copy paper just to get her kids to read it because they simply refuse to engage with 5-pound, 1,300-page, deflavorized doorstops?

I will go to my grave believing that textbooks, as they currently exist, are just flat out not the best, most awesome, most excellent tool at our disposal if we want to make kids 1) more literate, 2) more interested in school, or 3) lifelong readers.

Textbooks are expedient. Textbooks are sanitized. Textbooks are ubiquitous. But textbooks are not our finest option. Not if we really want to elevate the literacy levels of America's kids.

Not if we really want to scatter light.

Oh, by the way, textbooks are also expensive. Egregiously so. Just imagine if we spent hundreds of millions of dollars every year buying kids real books?

It's a delicious thought, isn't it? However, to the corporate monsters that profit so exceptionally well off of the status quo, it's an outright nightmare scenario, and trying to change the current system seems to me like a fight akin to trying to change the way the insurance companies have a lock on American health care. However, as a real teacher, I know that not even my best students buy into the fact that on page 1124 of the *blankety-blank* textbook (no need to call out specific company names . . . or use obscenities here), there is something riveting that they absolutely can't wait to dive into deeply and read. And knowing *that* has made me realize that, for the most part, strong, college-bound students endure language arts textbooks, mediocre students survive language arts textbooks, and low-skilled students blatantly tune out and hate language arts textbooks.

Yet bust out *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* . . . or *Twilight* . . . or *Speak* . . . or *Crank* . . . or *Ender's Game* . . .

or *The Outsiders* . . . or *Monster* . . . or *Go Ask Alice* . . . on and on and on (just fill in the blank; there are scores of great titles) and reading becomes a different experience entirely for our students.

The research proves it, the practitioners know it, and the kids, well, they are pretty much dying for us to step up and get it. Real kids will read real books. That's been proven. And our schools are not offering these to them. It's comically tragic.

Essentially, we have backed ourselves into a dark, dysfunctional curricular corner in our schools whereby what's best for the people

we are supposed to be serving is being sacrificed at the altar of good ol' fashioned myopic greed. How about if we stop feeding the corpo-

porate gravy train that generates Wall Street-style money for companies that poorly provide for the literacy needs of our kids and start using real books to reach our real students? It's not like they won't read 'em. Matter of fact, it's clear as day that kids today are reading in spite of school, not because of it.

Did you hear what I just said? I've said it about a thousand times in my life but it bears repeating: kids are reading in spite of school, not because of it. I mean we've got teens lining up at midnight outside of bookstores (at midnight, for goodness sake) to get their hands on new titles that they are starving to read. Not for academic credit. Not for improved AYP and API scores in the land of No Child Left Behind. They are reading these books because they find them meaningful, relevant, interesting, and riveting. They find them to be of genuine value, and yet, our schools are doing virtually nothing to take advantage of this fantastic opportunity. It's like being in a golf tournament and not partnering up with Tiger Woods when the chance to do so is staring you in the face. (And by the way, it's a golf tournament where Tiger Woods would love to have you bring him on the team!)

No, reading is not dead. But it certainly seems that common sense is suffering from some sort of head trauma. Want research to back it up? Check out Kelly Gallagher's book *Readicide*, take a gander at the work of Nancy Atwell, read some Thomas Newkirk or Donalyn Miller. So many of the best, brightest minds in education are speaking to this point in an eloquent and articulate manner.

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Engagement leads to motivation. Motivation leads to comprehension. Comprehension leads to performance. That's my light-scattering recipe.

Maybe you want data to support how fantastically important literacy is to the lives of young adults? Go ahead and check the WalMart-sized warehouses of information about this very point, freely available

on the websites of NCTE, IRA, ALA, and on and on and on. Look, I could cite texts and footnote studies and reference article after article about this point, but the fact is nobody is disputing the monumental importance of getting kids to read.

It's lynchpin.

And nobody disputes that people like Stephanie

Meyer, Laurie Halse Anderson, Walter Dean Meyers, S.E. Hinton . . . the list goes on . . . seem to be doing a pretty good job of getting kids to really read.

It's self-evident.

Yet our schools, instead of acting like a matchmaker between kids and literacy by marrying them up with real books that they want to read is acting almost as a buffer to that which is so reasonable a strategy. The mantra of schools today is virtually steeped in a dogmatic, "You will read what we tell you, when we tell you, for how long we tell you" mentality.

"And then we will bludgeon you with bubble tests!"

Sheesh, no wonder kids are tuning out. It's belittling, it's totalitarian, and it's causing great, if not irreparable harm to one of the core "mission statements" we perpetually see in our schools, like some kind of political sloganeering: *We will create lifelong readers and critical thinkers.*

Goodness gracious, the emperor has no clothes!

If you want to create lifelong readers then you must instill a sense of the joy of reading. It's not rocket science. Lifelong readers read because they find personal worth and fulfillment in doing so (*D'uh!*), and yet there seem to be beavies of PhD folks who don't grasp this very plebian, very simple, very obvious idea.

Now being a mere commoner on the front lines, I know I must come across as a fella with a heck of a lot of chutzpah to challenge those who dwell comfortably in the white towers high on the hills—and in

the halls—of academia. Yet, I'd like to offer my own Einsteinian theory on how to scatter literacy light with real books.

Okay, brace yourselves, because I am going to go out on a far-reaching, stretch-the-limits-of-quantum-physics type of intellectual limb with this next idea: Teens will try harder when they actually care about what they are doing. Yes, I know, the Nobel Committee should be ringing me on the phone any day now. I mean, I just illuminated the groundbreaking notion that when kids care about what they are doing—particularly in school—they will try harder than when they don't give a poop. Engagement leads to motivation. Motivation leads to comprehension. Comprehension leads to performance. That's my light-scattering recipe. It's also why I believe so deeply in using real books.

Because kids love 'em!

This idea about engagement being so fundamental to achieving literacy success became spectacularly clear to me while watching a TV special about a group of high society ladies participating in a very heated Rose Bush Growing Competition. I mean, these women were nuts! They were doing things like meticulously examining the texture of flower petals and other such "stuff" (at least to me it was stuff; to them it was erudite and meaningful). Essentially, while watching these white-hat-wearing women, I clearly recognized that no one grows award-winning rose bushes unless that person is *really, really, really* into growing award-winning rose bushes. To be a champion, to be excellent, to be outstanding, notable, or remarkable in any such manner, you must be engaged. You must find the work meaningful. You must care.

Same with kids and books.

If the students aren't *really, really, really* into reading the books that we are asking them to read, why in the world should we expect them to respond to the literature in a way that shows any semblance of excellence, thoughtfulness, dedication, or commitment?

They won't.

When students don't care about the work they are assigned to do or the books they are assigned to read, they will often respond in a "give the least minimal possible effort" way just to get the teacher off their back—and how much intellectual growth are you ever going to get out of a person who approaches things from a "give the least amount of effort" mindset?

Not much. After all, what's the most frequent classroom reply a student often gives when asked to write a response to something they just read?

"How long do you want it to be?"

They rarely ask, "How much quality would you like it to have?" They almost never concern themselves with, "How introspective would you like me to get?" They don't ever raise their hands and bellow out, "How deeply would you like me to plumb the depths of character?"

We see this play out day after day after day in our classrooms. However, kids who adore the books they are reading will go over and above to respond creatively, critically, exceptionally. Don't believe me? Look at all the writing being done online by teens today about their favorite books. I mean, kids will stay up into all hours of the night writing fanfiction and such. Why? Because to do so is personally meaningful to them.

Once again, I have to rhetorically ask, how much of the literature being used in schools today is personally meaningful to the students? And why isn't it? See, that's the thing that rankles me most about our current approach to the literary material we use in our classrooms: the specific choice of text itself is pretty much superfluous. Our job in the world of being classroom educators is, first and foremost (according to the state), to teach the content standards.

Theme, figurative language, symbolism, characterization, denotation versus connotation—these are the elements that comprise the core content standards we have been hired to teach, and these are the literary elements upon which all our current "data" and "test scores" are being generated. (You know, the ones that accuse our nation of being a country highly populated by low-level kids.) Whether a teacher uses Ralph Ellison to teach theme or Walter Dean Meyers is irrelevant. The tests that measure the abilities of our students are not text-specific; they are standards-based. This means that as long as you are teaching the standards, you are, at least by the state's definition, "scattering appropriate light."

But I'll tell you this. It's a lot easier to improve the literacy skills of students and teach things like theme with a Walter Dean Meyers book that kids will read than with a Ralph Ellison book they won't. That might make me sound like a panderer, it might make me appear as a literary heretic, it might even incur the

wrath of the establishment, but guess what? The proof is in the statistical pudding that what we are currently doing is not working.

Face it, kids would rather take an F on an assignment and be left alone than have to navigate some of these incredibly dense texts we are "mandating."

By remaining obstinate in our ways and by continuing to use materials (like textbooks) that kids find blatantly boring, we lose an opportunity to become literary bridge builders, which, to my way of thinking, means starting with books that kids find personally meaningful as a bridge to the "great works" of literature. In other

words, by maintaining the status quo, we are doing a spectacular disservice to everyone.

How does one become a more proficient, more dedicated, more refined, more nuanced, and "better" reader? By reading. This we know. So why don't we allow kids to work with real books that genuinely speak to their own hearts and minds instead of solely to ours? Look, Jane Austen is gonna survive whether *Pride and Prejudice* gets shoved down the throat of a 17-year-old boy in Detroit or not. But is that 17-year-old in Detroit going to survive if he doesn't leave school with authentic literacy skills? Well, he might, but will he prosper?

Chances are not so hot, that's for sure.

Therefore, is the writing of Tookie Williams or Iceberg Slim really so bad a place to begin if that's what it takes to get a kid started on reading? Once the student is open to engaging with these more sophisticated texts, can a line not eventually be drawn to books like *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky or *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Dumas? Can't one similarly discuss criminality, oppression, injustice, societal hypocrisy, tyranny, and self-determination utilizing the text of any of these authors anyway? (After all, we would be covering Reading Comprehension Standard 3.7: Relate literary works and authors to the major themes of their eras.) But remove Tookie Williams or Iceberg Slim and you are, in a way, removing a walkway. A bridge. A means to gain access, especially for

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students who are reluctant to embrace the act of reading because all too often it's been nothing more than a minefield littered with "I don't get it/This is boring/Why do I have to read this stuff?"

There's a book out there for every kid. A real book. We all believe this. That's why I feel that as a teacher or librarian or a school, our job ought to be to find it, use it, and leverage it to create a path from one book to another book. Kids will find their way to great literature only after they have been empowered with the capacity to comprehend the nuances of great literature. Before that happens, there is no pathway of access. After all, as one who doesn't drink wine, I would have a very hard time intelligently illuminating why a bottle of Château Lafite is so spectacular. And just because someone tells me that it's so doesn't necessarily make it so for me. Yet warm me up with an introduction to Italian table wine, take me on a journey to the reds being poured in the South of France, crack open some of Napa Valley's cabernets, and walk me through a sommelier's class suited to my own particular palette, and then when you ask me to sample the Château Lafite and offer a response, I might not come off sounding like such an inarticulate ignoramus.

Dickens, Joyce, Hawthorne, and that crew, they are literature's Château Lafite, and the fact is, our system needs an overhaul. There's an immense

power laying dormant, the power of allowing kids to read real books, especially ones that they self-select. So as a front line soldier in an inner-city, Title I classroom, I think my own experience in applying this strategy warrants a bit of consideration. For me, the textbooks sit in the closet. But that doesn't mean we don't read. We read like fiends in my class. We read "old" winners. We read "new" favorites. We read "more obscure" delights. And my students, year after year after year, tell me they really dig the books they get to explore. Look, there is no one single book that is going to be the magic pill for all kids, so I don't even try to look for such a thing.

To scatter light, one must first light the torch. Isn't it time we finally made an effort to do so?

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NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2010: April 22

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 22, 2010. NCTE members will meet for a morning of briefings, an afternoon of visiting legislative offices, and a debriefing get-together at the end of the day. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.