

Guest Editor's Introduction

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I was drawn to English education largely because of my love of books. I suspect that many of you were, too. The path from avid early reader to English teacher is not uncommon. Many of my conversations with colleagues inevitably drift toward what books we've been reading or teaching or hoping to read so we can teach them. Summer break, for most of the English teachers I know, is a time to work through the pile of books on the bedside table. Most of the teachers reading this will be able to point to a formative reading experience that revealed to them the magic and mystery to be found between the covers of a book.

My reading journey began with Golden Books, Dr. Seuss, and the collected works of Charles Schultz. I soon moved onto trailblazing YA authors like Judy Blume and S.E. Hinton. Before long I was spending long hours devouring gargantuan Stephen King novels. In high school a friend turned me onto Vonnegut and Kerouac; I, chock-full of pretension, toted around *Cat's Cradle* and *On the Road* as badges of nonconformity and coolness.

After I was asked to guest edit this section of *Wisconsin English Journal*, with its focus on the teaching of literature, I reflected back upon the literature instruction I received in high school. I graduated in the early 90s, and looking back at my K-12 academic reading experiences, I was startled at how conservative--how hugely traditional--they were. As far as I can recall, I was assigned no books written by women in my four years of English classes. I was assigned only one book by a person of color. (That book, though, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, was about the coolest stuff Crystal Lake South ever pulled on me. Kudos to Marcus Sullivan for having the guts to teach that classic, brimming with sex, violence, and allegory, to a bunch of wide-eyed suburban Chicago teenagers.) The authors we read and discussed in class--Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Golding, Homer--were pillars of the canon.

The classroom activities surrounding the reading of the books were likewise mired in traditionalism. I remember a lot of worksheets, a lot of multiple choice quizzes and tests. Not much writing. (A notable exception was the classroom of the esteemed Bill Weller, who dared to allow us to be creative. We wrote stories of metamorphosis while reading Kafka, made playlists of songs while reading *Crime and Punishment*. Mr. Weller's showing us a live performance of Talking Heads' lead singer David Byrne performing "Psycho Killer" is the second-coolest thing CLHS dropped on me.) Although the battles over the canon and rote learning assignments were raging elsewhere, the frontlines had clearly not yet reached the northwest suburbs of Chicago in 1991 (nor, I suspect, much of the nation's high schools).

Reading over the articles in this section, I am heartened to see that creativity, diversity, and progressivism are burning brightly in today's classrooms. I was invariably excited by the ideas put forth by the authors (ideas that more than once or twice had me thinking, "Yeah, I'm going to steal that"). Clearly, at least some of the students of America's middle schools, high schools, and universities are being challenged by reading experiences that are innovative and inclusive, thought-provoking and progressive.

Tim Janksy, in his article "Ancient Grudge to New Love: A Remix of Romeo and Juliet," takes a text that has seemingly been taught to every freshman since the Bard's death in 1616 and reinvigorates it through an innovative unit design, one rich in multimodal composing and intertextuality. The final activity of this "remixed" take on Shakespeare is the creation of collaborative music videos. I suspect my former teacher Mr. Weller would approve.

Innovative engagement with classic texts is likewise the focus of Amy Lewis's "Teaching Nineteenth-Century Slave Narratives: Engaging Student Scholars in the Production of Digital Story Maps." In this article, Lewis describes her experiences furthering her students' understanding of and immersion in classic slave narratives through a digital story mapping project. She describes how her students were able to better appreciate and contextualize the harrowing experiences depicted in these narratives through the

application of modern digital tools. The results are fascinating and inspiring, and applicable to a multitude of texts.

Two of the articles in this issue deal with the importance of allowing for choice in the literature classroom. Mary Beth Nicklaus's article "I Only Read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and Other Junior High Tales of Terror: Helping Boys Choose Books while Staying True to the Self-Selected Novel" discusses the author's struggles--and, ultimately, her successes--in moving her classroom of reluctant readers towards more challenging texts while keeping their reading experiences relevant and engaging. Patrick McFadden's "Book Reading, Baby!': An Adventure in Teaching Literature" describes the author's experiences in taking the framework of literature circles and evolving it to allow for student ownership, collaboration, and accountability. As in Lewis's article on digital story mapping, McFadden shows how digital technologies can be incorporated into the literature classroom to reinvigorate instruction.

The theme of reinvigorating classroom activities is also present in Aaliyah Baker's article "Establishing Safe Learning Environments for Open Discussion of Critical Issues." Baker argues that meaningful engagement with literature can best be fostered by moving students out of their comfort zones and into new territories of thought. Doing so requires the creation of safe academic spaces; Baker demonstrates how creation of such spaces can produce powerful classroom moments and meaningful student engagement with the text.

Sometimes moving beyond comfort zones means challenging the notion of what constitutes literature. In "Are My Songs Literature?" Lessons Learned from Teaching a Non-Traditional Text," Jim Carlson, Emily Mootz, and Krystle Thomas explore the benefits of expanding--or exploding--the canon in an English classroom. They document their fascinating experience teaching Kendrick Lamar's seminal 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* to a group of high school students. This experience allowed them to engage with larger questions of what "counts" as literature and how non-traditional texts such as rap albums can engage students in unique, powerful ways.

Such innovative, progressive English classrooms will become the norm if post-secondary programs adequately prepare pre-service teachers to think about the teaching of literature in new ways. Amanda Stearns-Pfeiffer, in “Practice-Based Instruction in English Teacher Education: Teaching Novice Teachers to Lead Class Discussions,” describes how focused, practice-based instruction on how to lead discussions can result in new teachers better able to create the conditions for meaningful, authentic classroom conversation. Stearns-Pfeiffer shows how pre-service teachers must be allowed to move beyond theory to actual practice, and offers several strategies to better equip emerging teachers with the skills to lead rich classroom discussions.

Elsie Olan and Kia Richmond also explore how to better prepare future English teachers in “Storying Our Journey: Conversations about the Literary Canon and Course Development in Secondary English Education.” The authors pose the question of how to further engage pre-service teachers in a wide range of texts, both canonical and contemporary. They also demonstrate the power of collaboration and conversation in creating more engaging, effective classroom experiences: it becomes clear that meaningful dialogue about teachers’ own practices and experiences can lead to classrooms ready to develop lifelong learners and readers.

As the guest editor for this section of *Wisconsin English Journal*, I was privileged to be reminded just how innovative and progressive the field of English education has become, and just how many ways we can foster a love of reading in our students. Enjoy, and I hope that you, too, are able to steal some of the potent ideas put forth by these authors and work them into your own classrooms.