

What We Choose, and Why

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I was fortunate enough to attend the National Council of Teachers of English Convention in November, and found myself participating in several sessions related to the teaching of literature. One session, titled, “Starting off Right: First Literature Choices in the High School English Classroom,” focused on which text educators chose to start off the school year. There were five educators from five different schools or universities, each with a unique twist on which text he or she chose and the logic behind that choice.

The purpose behind the session was to spark conversation among the crowd. After hearing about the texts from each of the panelists, it was apparent that participants in the audience were welcome to share titles from their local contexts. There were some familiar names and titles and some questioning across the crowd about which grade some of the books were used. I found myself wondering, what was it about a particular text that could provide a meaningful experience for all students in a classroom? Can just one text do this?

One of the most interesting takeaways from this session was that out of all of the texts educators shared, there were no repeats, even within the same grade level. Some educators even said that they did not start the year using one text, but started offering choice right away. There were not many, but a few educators broke from the theme of book titles to talk about different digital texts they started with for students to read and explore in various ways. By the end of the session, there was no consensus on a text that might be the “best” with which to begin a school year; however, that was not the point. The focus of the panel and ensuing discussion turned into a meaningful examination of what different texts actually do for teaching and learning purposes in different contexts. From offering students complete choice to following a district mandated pacing guide, educators focused on why they chose particular texts, especially if they were breaking from perceived tradition.

Focusing on why educators chose particular texts was also a natural segue into how they taught literature. Even though this was not the focus of the session, there were important

contributions related to the teaching of literature, along with some disagreement. There was some pushback from the audience related to set curriculum, district pacing guides, and even the fear associated with blazing one's own path in the name of meaningful instruction. It actually turned out that one of the panelists was required to use the same purchased curriculum and pacing guide an audience member talked about. The panelist described how she stepped away from it almost immediately and continues to do so based on what transpires in her classroom without it. She also had a trusting principal who saw the progress students were making.

Whether discussing the first text of the school year or the last, the literature that we choose says something about how we teach. As Bergman (2017) points out, although teachers have varying levels of freedom when it comes to curricular choices, "it is important, whenever possible, to select texts that are culturally relevant; feature young, relatable protagonists; and offer ample opportunity for real-world connections" (p. 188). In order to incorporate literature that that speaks to the individual students in our classrooms, it is imperative that we take opportunities each year to reflect on the texts we use for teaching literature and why. This begs several questions. How often do we reflect individually and collaboratively on texts we use in the classroom and why? What access do we have to various texts or resources for continued reflection and practice? Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) well-known motto regarding the purpose of books resonates here. She states that books can act as "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors." I firmly argue for myriad opportunities for students to see themselves in what they read, opportunities to see out into the world and experience new and different things in what they read, along with space to step into what they read in order to question, try out, and co-construct the worlds available to them through literature. This does not happen with one text, but many. It does not happen simply in the act of reading, but through introductions to various texts, exposure, and myriad opportunities for discussion.

An imperative part of teaching literature has to do with providing time and space for students to talk about what they read. This reflects not only the integrated nature of the English language arts, but where students' motivation comes from when they read in different contexts, which are situated among different social values (Crumpler &

Wedwick, 2011). This means that we first begin to understand our students as people. This is how we make literature viable to all students and the many different strengths they bring into the classroom.

Whether you start the year with Faulkner or open up the classroom library with book talks and recommendations, it is what happens in the spaces with and around those texts where we get to know students, what they think, and where they are coming from when they read that will continue to matter through the semester, school year, and beyond.

References

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