Reigniting the Love of Reading With Penny Kittle

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For the first time in my career, I looked out at my class and wasn’t excited. In fact, I was the opposite of excited - I dreaded coming to work. Thirty senior students sat in my brightly decorated classroom with glazed looks in their eyes, brains on autopilot. Some were staring blankly at their open books, some were smirking at their phones not so conspicuously hidden within the folds of the pages, and some weren’t even bothering to hide that they weren’t paying attention. The lights were off, the audiobook was on, and no one cared.

I took in the indifference and lethargy and thought, I hate this. This wasn’t a management issue; it was an engagement issue, and it had been going on for quite some time. I had used every weapon in my arsenal. High interest and topically relevant books? Check. Fun and diversified discussion formats? You got it. Rearranging the room? Done. Groups, partners, individuals, YouTube, surprises and prizes, strict and lenient … I had tried it all. I got the same apathetic attitudes no matter what I did, and the kicker was I knew they still weren’t reading the books. Hence the annoying audio that now blared in my classroom. I guess I was hoping they could absorb the content through osmosis. There was no getting around it: I felt like a failure. I was supposed to be teaching everyone to read and appreciate literature, but it seemed like I was causing them to actively hate it. They were miserable; I was miserable. I just didn’t know how to fix it.

My parents say I came out of the womb with a book in my hand. I grew up in the age of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* and I loved every magical minute of it. You would never find me without a book. My teachers would often half-heartedly scold me for reading instead of completing my algorithms, but even I—the enthusiastic reader—occasionally faltered in English class. There were assigned books that I didn’t read. I pretended to read them, but I didn’t. Why would I follow the predictable tragedy of *King Lear* when the last battle of Hogwarts was unfolding? Why would I spend hours on the Mississippi River with Huck when I could be in Forks, running with werewolves and vampires? How could I possibly surrender time to a book I found vaguely interesting (at best) when there were wars to be
won and loves to be found in my other books? If I—a self-identifying bibliophile—didn’t have an urgency to read all the books the curriculum demanded, how could I expect someone who didn’t love books to do it?

Yet, that was exactly what I was doing in my classroom. I chose the books that they read because I had a degree and I knew better than they did. As a teacher, I was doing precisely what I hadn’t liked as a student. Ever the realist, I told myself that I was being presented with two choices: evolve or repeat. Continuing down this road was not an option for me. I refused to go one more semester with classes who fake-read books and hated English. I didn’t know what the change would be, but I knew there had to be something better than what I was doing.

My Background
I am a 28-year-old English teacher who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in 2013 with a double major in English Education and Spanish Education and I have a Master of Science degree in Educational Leadership from Carroll University. For the last six years, I have been working at Union Grove High School in Union Grove, Wisconsin, population 4,000, nestled outside of Racine between sprawling corn fields and newly minted industrial complexes like Amazon and FoxConn. The union district high school has between 800 and 1,000 students any given year, most of whom live in and around the rural town, but about 20% are open enrolled from Racine. Of our graduating seniors, about 71% go on to four year universities, 11% enroll in technical schools, and 18% have found their calling in the military or workforce. Union Grove High School runs on a traditional block schedule. Classes meet every day for one semester and are 83 minutes long.

Finding Penny Kittle
My frustrations with the curriculum, it just so happened, came to a peak while I was going through my master’s program. It was while I was chatting with a few of my cohorts that one of them mentioned Penny Kittle, an English teacher from Maine who had a successful formula for not only getting adolescents to grow as readers, but also for getting them to
authentically enjoy reading. Immediately on returning from class, I ordered and read her Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers (2013), since I was most interested in changing the way reading was done in my classroom. The first sentence of the synopsis had me nodding: “Penny Kittle wants us to face the hard truths every English teacher fears: too many kids don’t read the assigned texts, and some even manage to slip by without having ever read a single book by the time they graduate.” Through reading, it became clear that Kittle takes a progressive approach that might be daunting to some teachers. She asserted that students weren’t reading because they simply weren’t interested in our books. If we help them choose the right book, though, and give them time everyday to read, think, create, and reflect, we could craft a powerful love of reading and grow their skills simultaneously.

I know that her assertions throughout Book Love weren’t meant to make me feel like a failure, but they did anyway. I had always prided myself on teaching beautiful, classic literature in a challenging environment. “A book,” Kittle countered, “isn’t rigorous if students aren’t reading it” (p. xvi). I had also prided myself on giving engaging lectures and holding thought provoking class discussions. Kittle parried, “Students need to be reading and writing more than they need to be listening to me talking” (p. 57). Reading Book Love was a reckoning that made me reevaluate what I had been doing for the last five years, but I found myself agreeing with every statement she made, particularly about how standardized testing plays into education. Kittle argues that while districts (and politicians and community members) can become obsessed with test data, educators need to remember what’s important: “None of our local or national tests measure the joy students take in reading or their stamina for it. None measure our ability to create lifelong readers in thirteen years of schooling. Those are critical, haunting omissions” (p.137).

Kittle believes that English curricula should focus on growing reading stamina, reading fluency, and nurturing a love for reading. She lays out her philosophies in practical and applicable ways, even going so far as to include sample lesson plans and dialogues of her conversations with students. So many educational books are grounded in brilliant ideas, but they leave the reader wondering where to start and how. Not this book. I had a wealth of resources at my fingertips, a map of where to go, and a reignited passion to get me
there. As I finished Book Love and prepared for the quickly approaching new semester, I was excited, but so overwhelmed. Overhauling my curriculum for just one class would take time I didn’t have, patience I could hardly spare, and a recognition that this semester would be based on trial and error. Going back to an apathetic classroom, though, wasn’t an option when I had a chance to create a joyful classroom. I sat at the coffee house each weekend crafting new curricula and ransacked used book stores for new additions to my classroom bookshelf. The question that Kittle implies repeatedly throughout Book Love became my motto: If not you, who?

With more enthusiasm than I’d felt in awhile, I looked up my classes for the next semester. I had two sections of Senior English and they would make the perfect pilot group. A quick look at the data showed me the following:

- I had 55 total students, split between two sections
- 55% were male, 45% were female
- Average GPA was 3.3
- Four had failed a previous high school English course
- 11 I had taught in previous courses

I approached my principal to share my ideas for implementing a curriculum change and was fortunate to have the immediate support to roll out a Kittle-inspired curriculum. Getting our students to love reading? He was on board. Later, when I would explain this conversation to colleagues from other districts, I received some shocked looks. In their districts, they explained, they would never tell their principal that they thought their curriculum was not working and would never be allowed to try this new idea without tying it to every standard. I feel fortunate that I work in a district that encourages risk-taking and recognizes that the standards do not cover every skill we want to teach. Never have I felt nervous to try something new for fear of reprimand or judgment. I’ve always been given unconditional support for any new endeavors or curriculum. Teaching is not a stagnant profession and new ideas should be welcomed, celebrated, and explored. Failure might be a part of the exploration process, but that’s okay. It is the same message about failure and change that we teach every day. Perhaps we should practice what we preach.
My principal was as eager about this new venture as I was and he left me with just one command: “Let me know what I can do to help you.”

**The Standards and Data**
When talking with fellow educators about this new curriculum, I would receive the same question: How is this linked to the state standards? I knew this question was inevitable. We live in a strict testing culture where every lesson must be tied to a standard. I value the skills that the standards are trying to address, and while I understand the desire to prove the validity of a curriculum by showing precisely what skills are being addressed, I think we are overlooking one major flaw: Reading skills cannot be developed if no one is reading. And no one is reading.

The standards do not cover the joy of reading and they do not mention stamina, both integral components of successful students (and happy adults, in my opinion). If we are serious about creating a generation of independent thinkers who are motivated, empathetic, and patient, these *must* come first. When I notice a certain skill is lacking, I make a mini lesson and work with that student during individual conferences. But tying this curriculum to the current standards is not my priority. Reading skills work in concert with each other and can absolutely be taught through this curriculum because my students are finally reading in a meaningful way (and enjoying it!). Skill development and growth is always a priority, but again, these skills will not develop or grow if no one is reading. That has to be the first priority. My goal is not to make sure my students can do well on a standardized test that does not accurately measure their abilities anyways. My goal is to nurture a love of reading, help them increase their stamina, deepen their thought process, and grow their fluency over time.

**Daily Elements**
As I read through *Book Love*, I picked out the major elements that would work for my classroom. Knowing there was no way I could implement every idea, I decided to build up the new curriculum over time, step by step. A routine was established immediately, clung to ferociously, and credited much of the success to the habits formed because of it. Each
day began with three activities, without exception: current events, quick writes, and reading.

Five-to-ten-minute current event discussions fostered a familiarity with politics, economics, and human rights issues, while helping these young citizens learn how to discuss controversial topics in a respectful manner. It was also an opportunity to teach the skills of bias detection and other components of journalism.

Daily book talks helped students think about what they might want to read next. After current events, they pulled out their notebooks and flipped to their Next List, the list they kept of all the books they might want to read next. On the first day of class, I introduced eight books of varying complexity and genre via book talks, quick and simple and always using the same formula: start with the basics, give them a summary, read a passage, and pass it around. I started off by revealing the title, the author, other works by the author, and if I had read the book and liked it or not. Next, I tried to pique their interest with the summary, to give them an idea for the complexity and writing style with the passage, and to get the book in their hands so they could look at the length, page through it, and read some passages. After the first week, I only introduced three books a day, and after the second or third week, I was down to one a day. I also invited students to do book talks, and many took me up on the offer, whether they were currently in my class or not. The books I chose came from my classroom library, but I also frequently asked the librarian to borrow copies that I didn’t own. I took my students to our school library at least twice a semester, when our librarian kindly organized books into themes and helped even the most reluctant readers find something to read. Often, this is the first time they check a book out from the school library. At the start of the semester, I reserved 15-20 minutes for daily book talks, but this quickly dwindled to 5 minutes as the semester went on.

Quick writes helped them find their writer’s voice and be comfortable writing daily in a reflective and creative manner. I wrote right along with them as we answered questions, wrote about moral dilemmas, or engaged with mentor texts. I often shared my own writing and editing process before asking them to share their work. It fostered an environment of trust and constant improvement. Depending on the type of writing we did, this took 10-20 minutes.
After writing came everyone’s favorite part: reading time. At the beginning of the semester, we spent a few days just finding books that interested each individual student. The key to making this process work is finding the right books for the right readers. By the start of the week, everyone had chosen a different book. To start reading time, I might introduce a few new books that they may choose to add to their active Next List. Finally, we would read. Everyone would take out a choice book (myself included) and have silent, uninterrupted reading for at least twenty minutes every day. I would quietly conference with each student every few days, helping them through challenging parts, listening as they explained what had transpired since our last conference, and guiding them through choosing their next books. In the beginning, reading for twenty uninterrupted minutes was a challenge for most. By the end of the class, all of my students could easily read for upwards of fifty minutes and still want more time.

Class always began with this routine. From there, the day would be broken into one of two categories: writing workshop or podcast listening. When we were working on a writing project, I would create mini-lessons based on what I saw them struggling with or on a skill we were working on. We did fun, creative writing and worked up to argumentative, research-based writing in a multi-genre narrative. In all, everyone completed seven pieces of writing, ranging from narrative poems to research. We would practice a skill and then practice using that new skill. We would imitate forms and study beautiful words. Alternatively, when we were listening to a podcast, we would practice active listening skills and comprehension activities. I found that everyone adored the podcasts Serial and Criminal; many have told me that they are now active podcast listeners. Over the course of the semester, we did only two traditional whole class reads: Macbeth and One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

Because my goal was to improve reading stamina and fluency, I chose to follow Kittle’s advice for homework. Students were expected to read for two hours outside of class each week. When I explained this, they were confused. They asked how many pages were required in the two hours. That depends, I told them, on what book you are reading. I gave them this example: When I read Harry Potter, I can get through half of the book in two hours. When I read Wuthering Heights, though, I might only get through forty pages
in two hours. It all depends on the kind and level of book, and since we are all reading different books, it doesn’t seem fair to assign a page requirement. I saw some of my slower readers’ faces absolutely light up at the possibility of not falling behind immediately. I walked them through Kittle’s simple process for determining their reading rate and explained they had to redo this process for each new book they started.

Within the first few days of class, I gave my seniors a survey with questions about their habits and their thoughts on reading and writing. After asking about their lives, their jobs, their hobbies, and their dreams, I asked them about their past English classes.

| In your last English class, did you read all the assigned books, more than half of the books, less than half of the books, or no books? | All: 27.3%  
More than half: 38.2%  
Less than half: 27.3%  
None: 7.3% |
|---|---|
| Do you consider yourself a “good” writer? | Yes: 16.4%  
No: 83.6% |
| Do you write for fun? | Yes: 9%  
No: 91% |
| Do you read for fun? | Yes: 16.4%  
No: 83.6% |
| Is it likely that I could get you to enjoy reading during this semester? | Yes: 23.6%  
No: 76.4% |

Clearly, I had my work cut out for me; yet, I didn’t feel like this was an inaccurate representation of a typical English class.

**Results**

Undoubtedly, it was the best semester of my teaching career. Not only did my students read more than ever before, but I remembered why I became an English teacher in the first place: the magic of books! Everyone read every day, which I couldn’t say before. They wanted book suggestions and begged for more reading time in class. They read challenging books and wanted to have analytical discussions. Their stamina and fluency increased, along with their appreciation for a gripping narrative. Their writing improved,
and they became engaged world citizens. I watched them become calmer. I watched them choose to read rather than play on their phones. I watched them smile and laugh and share their books with their peers. I watched them fall in love with reading. I could give you anecdotal evidence all day long, but the results of the final survey speak for themselves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We tried something very different this year in Senior English. Did you enjoy coming to class?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did this class help you enjoy reading?</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you look forward to reading time in class?</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking back on your reflections and personal data, did your reading stamina increase from the start of the class?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel more relaxed and less stressed after our reading time in class?</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you read more books, the same amount of books, or fewer books than previous English classes?</td>
<td>More: 93%</td>
<td>The Same: 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you try to keep reading for fun after you graduate?</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider yourself a writer?</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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Some teachers argue that when students get the chance to choose what they read, they will pick easy books that they can get through quickly and with little challenge. I did not find this to be the case. In fact, some of the most chosen books were *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *A Game of Thrones*. They gravitated toward these difficult books and would often stop in before class to ask rather analytical questions. It was rewarding and relieving that the classic books I adored weren't being left to collect dust on the bookshelf.
Ultimately, my students read and enjoyed a high volume of books. Between January 15 and May 25, they read an average of 12.6 books. I hesitate to give this quantitative data because it does not accurately represent their reading journey, as it does not take into account the length of the book. For instance, one read two books over the course of these months. That seems like an underachievement until you consider that one of those books was the Bible. Another read Yancey’s 5th Wave trilogy over the course of these months. Again, this seems underwhelming until you consider that it was the first time he had completed a book in his high school career. I was continually impressed and humbled by how they challenged themselves without my prodding.

**Conclusion**

Seeing my students reading and enjoying their books, watching them grow as writers and being excited about creating and sharing ... I’m not sure how to go back to a traditional English curriculum. I loved teaching that class, and I’m not willing to give up that feeling. After piloting this class and sharing the results with colleagues, some members of my department initiated a book study on Gallagher and Kittle’s *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* (2018). It has been an eye opening and, at times, challenging course. The plan moving forward is implementing the Kittle theory in all of my classes. This will be a process and it will take time. For now, I am focusing on bringing Kittle’s philosophies into the Sophomore English curriculum, which demonstrates to both students and colleagues that fear of a strict testing culture should not deter our efforts to educate the next generation in the best way we know. Being open to change, after all, reflects a higher nature of the human condition.

**References**
