

Reading Choice in the AP English Classroom

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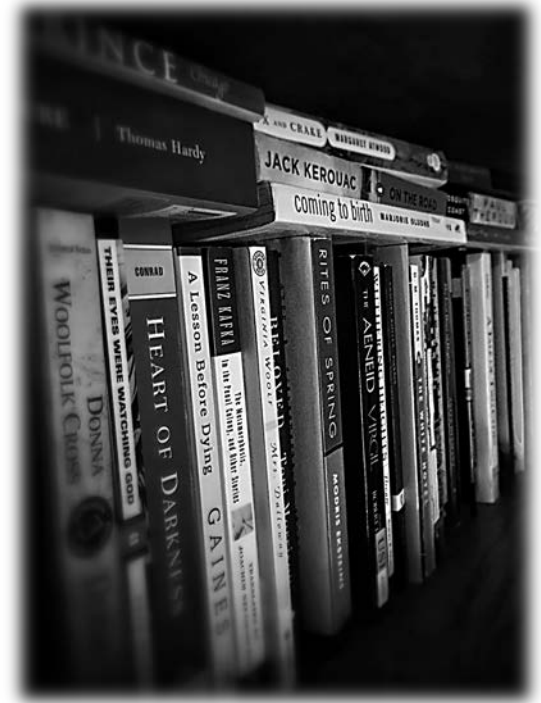
AP English Literature Reader, Table Leader

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Concerns when teaching novels

When we teach novels, the challenges are—

- ▶ Choosing readings that provide rigor, depth, and complexity
- ▶ Finding engaging content
- ▶ Differentiating instruction
- ▶ Combating student apathy
- ▶ Preparing students for the AP exam (be honest!)
- ▶ Accessibility—instruction, resources, Lexile
- ▶ Teacher's desire to share the joy of literature and increase student learning
- ▶ Student's desire to read something interesting and increase his/her learning



What students say about Reading Choice

"Listening to the connections people made with their own book, *I feel like it strengthened my own understanding* of my book."

"It really showed that *all problems are human problems* and there's nothing new under the sun. It is *interesting how different authors and cultures deal with the same problems and issues.*"

"I liked the book. I liked the book. I liked the book. I cared about the characters. I cared about the author. I cared about what the author was trying to tell me. I cared about making a good argument for his sake. I cared about what you were trying to teach through this novel."

"I LOVE reading choice!"

"Our books were interesting for individual reasons, but all the themes were relatable and related and allowed for more diverse and interesting class discussions."

"For the first time since 6th grade, I actually read the books. Listening to others talk about their books inspired me to read them, too."

"It allows me to engage a book I find interesting, and if I'm interested, then I learn more. Simple."

"The freedom to choose was refreshing. The topics are all closely related, which gave different viewpoints of how someone can go on living being discriminated against or after a tragedy—different views on life, in a way."

"Having a reading choice allowed me to *feel more in control of my learning*, which makes students more willing to learn. I liked that we had many similar themes and underlying plots. It helped me recognize common themes and *understand the human condition isn't a solitary one. Everyone is connected.*"

"I've never had an option for reading choice, and it got me more excited to write about something I was able to choose."

"I feel that by having a choice in reading and projects, I can grow in a way that is my own and that suits me as an individual person."

"Reading choice allowed me to collaborate with others who I usually didn't work with and some people I've been in class with for years and have never spoken to."

"Usually, if I don't like a book, then I just cheat and look up what each chapter is about. I didn't do that with reading choice. #yolo #sparknotes"

The AP English classroom

3 Main Instructional Difficulties

- ▶ Do we teach the “classics” at the expense of contemporary novels? (Or vice versa...)
- ▶ How do we find time to read both with any kind of depth?
- ▶ How do we get students to enjoy reading again—and *actually* read the assigned works?

Three Organizational Strategies for Creating Reading Choice

Parent-Satellite Reading Lists

- ▶ Good for summer reading programs
- ▶ Choose one "classic" novel and a second and/or third "choice" novel, depending upon how many works you want students to read over the summer
- ▶ Create a predetermined list of 2-5 contemporary or near-contemporary works
- ▶ All works should have one common thread

Theme-based Reading Lists

- ▶ Good for middle-of-the-year units
- ▶ Choose 2-3 novels that focus on particular theme(s), plot events, symbols, motifs across works
- ▶ Great for teaching students how to find theme, identify motifs, and understand character development and motivation
- ▶ Shows different ways authors have to tell the same tale

Literary-Theory Reading Lists

- ▶ Good for late-year reading
- ▶ Choose a series of texts, 2-6, depending upon the genre and theory you are examining
- ▶ Builds on nascent critical theory already discussed in other units
- ▶ Can use short stories
- ▶ Great for introducing secondary critical resources from databases like JSTOR or WorldCat
- ▶ Provides models for analytical/critical writing

Parent-Satellite Reading Lists

When students have more time to read—

- ▶ Provides a central text with a common ground for all students to discuss
- ▶ Provides a foundation for study of the “choice” texts
- ▶ Students identify textual connections, which creates critical readers and thinkers
- ▶ Introduces new ways of reading and thinking about literature

Sample Reading

Parent Text:

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Choice Texts:

- Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*
- Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*
- Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*
- Jamie Ford's *Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

Theme-based Reading Lists

A mid-year unit or two or three—

- ▶ Provides the opportunity to teach theme...again...and again...
- ▶ Reinvigorates students and improves reading skills since they often read more than just one (peer pressure *can* be our friend)
- ▶ Students feel a sense of “control” over their assignments and are more likely to read and participate in meaningful ways
- ▶ Introduces diversity and variation into the classroom for students to discuss and make textual and real-life connections
- ▶ Students learn about each other and are receptive to alternative viewpoints

Sample Reading

- Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*
- Thrity Umrigar's *Space Between Us*
- Kim Edwards' *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*

OR

- Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*
- Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*
- Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*

Literary Theory Reading Lists

2nd Semester readings—

- ▶ Builds on earlier units of study
- ▶ Focuses on critical theory: Post-Colonial, Gender Studies, Ecocriticism, New Historicism, Marxism
- ▶ Can be personalized for each class' "personality"
- ▶ Broaden students' scope of thinking
- ▶ Introduced pre-term paper to reinforce critical analytical writing about literature
- ▶ Can be done with short stories, poetry, novels, or nonfiction essays

Sample Reading

Gender Studies:

Woolf, Atwood, Chopin, Plath, Alice Walker, Doris Lessing vs. McCarthy, RL Stevenson, Conrad, EM Forster, Kerouac, Chuck Palahniuk

Post-Colonial:

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Tayeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

So you're saying...



I can't or shouldn't teach single-text units?

Not at all! Single-text units are necessary for student learning

- ▶ Students need the instructional focus and class structure of single-text units of study
- ▶ Single-text units provide the groundwork for multi-text units
- ▶ Single-text units teach basic analytical skills and modes of thinking
- ▶ Some students prefer single-text units because they are used to them, they have trouble focusing, or because they have skills deficiencies that need remediation

Facilitating Multi-Text Units

Small group Student-centered activities

- ▶ Initial teacher-created small group questions
- ▶ Student-created questions for exploration in PBL and/or blog or seminar discussions
- ▶ Class discussion boards
- ▶ Projects

Project-based Learning

- ▶ Small group same text
- ▶ Small group multi-text
- ▶ Same text, multiple classes, schools
- ▶ Multi-text, multiple schools

Small group and Whole Class Seminar

- ▶ Small group discussions: same text and multi-text
- ▶ Whole class
- ▶ Across classes, schools

Small Group Student Activities

Types of Activities

- ▶ Teacher created questions answered in small group focusing on themes, motifs, symbols, character development, conflicts, etc. Teaches foundation skills for analysis
- ▶ QFT's (teachthought.com): vary steps depending upon purpose
- ▶ Class discussion boards, blogs



Small Group Student Activities

[Projects \(teacher-assigned\)](#): Inferno project, movie trailers, pop-up books, silent movies, PowerPoint presentations



Project-based Learning Activities

Student-created, focused studies

- ▶ Small group, same text: identify a theme, symbol, motif, conflict, character to explore
- ▶ Small group, multi-text: identify a common issue in a text and research its impact
- ▶ Same text, multiple classes/schools: explore cultural and/or geographical responses to ideas, concepts presented in text
- ▶ Multi-text, multiple schools: explore common issues and cultural/geographical responses to the issues

Project-based Learning Activities

Key Components of PBL

- ▶ Direction/guidance—can be defined by the teacher (“write a book”) or the student (“we can best convey this knowledge by writing a book”), depending upon the objectives
- ▶ Essential question(s) and a “need to know” (QFT’s)
- ▶ Authentic product, authentic audience
- ▶ Reflection, metacognition, self- and peer-assessment

A really great resource for PBL ideas is www.bie.org.

Seminar Discussion

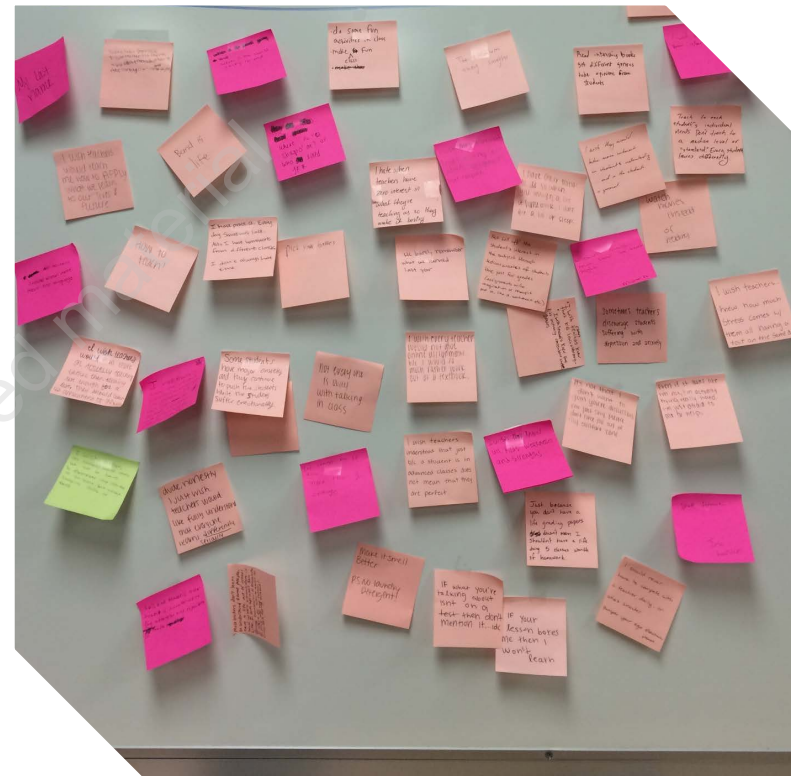


- ▶ Same text: students create QFTs in Group 1, switch to Group 2 and discuss questions created
- ▶ Split class into 2-3 multi-text groups: bring QFTs from same text group to discuss with multi-text group
- ▶ Across classes, schools via blog or discussion boards
- ▶ Teacher splits time among the groups to listen and facilitate discussion

Small Group

Seminar Discussion

- ▶ Small group multi-text groups facilitate discussions on separate days
- ▶ Same text and/or multi-text groups identify most important 2 questions from QFT to post for whole class discussion
- ▶ Discussion often lasts several days
- ▶ Teacher facilitates and adds ideas to the discussion as a participant



Whole Class

Benefits of Seminar

Experience has shown that students:

- ▶ Learn better when they are invested in their learning
- ▶ Discover the common themes across texts
- ▶ Analyze common and similar textual structures such as symbols and motifs that create meaning
- ▶ Discover varied narrative forms and structures that affect meaning and the manner in which it is conveyed
- ▶ Discover a common human experience across texts and across time



Take Away

Teachers are able to teach classic *and* contemporary texts

Students take charge of their own learning

Student choice--

- ▶ improves student learning outcomes
- ▶ exposes students to higher level critical and analytical thinking by making connections across texts
- ▶ empowers students with instructional and learning choices
- ▶ renews the students' love for reading
- ▶ exposes all students to additional texts

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