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12. CREATIVE APPROACHES TO LITERACY LEARNING

A Transformative Vision for Education in the 21st Century

Our idea of what constitutes literacy has moved beyond developing fundamental skills in content areas as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and English and into essential skills of lifelong learning and living more meaningfully. We are compelled to advocate literacy strategies that do so much more than practice skill sets like reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing. This chapter explores some critical literacy strategies that expand the notion of merely teaching English as a subject into literacy experiences that encourage motivation and creativity among adolescents and the teachers who prepare them for 21st-century learning and living. A creative, transformative critical literacy helps students rehearse and learn to question, argue, understand, and create informed, aesthetic, ethical action on matters of individual and social significance.

The 21st century demands that educators pay a different kind of attention and care to their pedagogical practices. With increasingly large portions of the world's wealth controlled by an ever narrowing few, the world and its inhabitants are experiencing macroproblems like diminished natural resources, economic disparity, and global warming. The ethical and practical confusions created by the escalation of conflict and socioeconomic imbalance worldwide have generated macroproblems for individuals and families leading some to leave their homelands in search of better lives. Consequently, one of the defining global issues of the 21st century is migration with immigration and diversity changing the faces of urban and rural centres across North America. In this volume and elsewhere, Ambrose (2012 and chapter 2, this volume) suggested that education could help shift perspectives and solve problems if, for instance, educators engaged "students in critical analyses of the socioeconomic and cultural contexts that surround them" to make them aware of factors affecting their own aspirational development—whatever those factors might be and whether or not they be advantages or obstacles (2012, p. 108). Educational institutions, at all levels, can play major and constructive roles in promoting cultural and social cohesion. As classrooms become more multiethnic and multicultural, the roles and responsibilities of teachers must become more complex and creative to equip both teachers and students with skills to navigate the micro and macro challenges of the

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21st century. Curricula in all content areas can offer the possibility for learners to make *networks* to understand the human condition.

Creative approaches to teaching literacy include: creating opportunities for students to develop emotional intelligence in literacy learning, fostering social and intercultural intelligence by using multicultural texts to expand students' awareness of other cultures, and teaching from social justice and interdisciplinary perspectives. These literacy learning stances and examples require teachers to select diverse and multimodal texts in the first place then use texts as curriculum springboards for students' creative, thoughtful, engaged learning and action.

CREATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHING LITERACY

Acknowledging that the term *reading* is too limiting a concept for 21st century educators, the former International Reading Association recently changed its very name to the *International Literacy Association* because they "... believe in the transformative power of literacy, ... and will work toward ensuring that literacy is a fundamental, inalienable human right worldwide" (International Literacy Association, n.d.). As educators, how can we authentically and creatively engage students with literacy to explore the world of ideas? Take inspiration from literary texts and expand our very notion of literacy. Juxtapose various texts of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, music, art, drama, film, or photography to create curriculum units of study that invite students to learn and explore. Such curriculum experiences require using myriad literacy skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing—in meaningful, artful, and socially-relevant ways. Rosenblatt (1938/1983) extolled the benefits of literary experience for its ability to foster imagination and empathy, but she warned that teachers should not co-opt that experience for their students by privileging their own interpretations of literature:

A preeminent condition for success is that teachers themselves possess a lively sense of all that literature offers. They should avoid inculcating their own assumptions about human beings and social values and should support the student in his efforts to understand himself and forces that pattern society. (p. 275)

Offering curriculum experiences with broader literacy bases can shift students from states of passivity to active engagement. Issues such as racism, joblessness, addiction, and alienation can be explored in meaningful ways leading to personal and social awareness and change. In *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, Greene (1995) stressed the vital importance of literacy as a way of helping individuals from diverse backgrounds understand, appreciate, and empathize with those perceived as different and posed three questions to teachers: How can teachers intervene and say how they believe things ought to

be? What can they do to affect restructuring? What can they do to transform their classrooms? (p. 9). First, teachers need to view their students as active learners who can be motivated through experiential learning and authentic tasks that engage them to think deeply about their own lives and the larger world.

Teachers must adapt and develop their own traditional literary practices and instructional strategies that draw upon multiple literacies and modalities. For instance, Bucolo (2011) suggested that classical texts like Dickens' *Great Expectations* could be taught in the form of "installments" similar to a television series. Comparisons between the novel and popular television programs can emerge. Interestingly, the novels of writers like Dickens and Twain were originally presented as weekly or monthly chapter installments in newspapers during the late 19th century when new technologies of the era made paper, lighting, and even eyeglasses affordable to an emerging global middle class. Rather than "fighting against" new literacies and technologies that include social media, literacy educators are finding innovative ways to integrate multiple modalities of literacy with classical as well as contemporary texts. According to Greene (1995): "Literacy in more than one medium will be required if people are to deal critically and intelligently with demagogues, call-in shows, mystifying ads, and news programs blended with varying degrees of entertainment" (p. 13). Frye (1978) linked literacy learning to personal empowerment and active participation in democracy and accused the media of attempting to "privatize human consciousness" through slanted news, entertainment programs, and advertisements:

We cannot take any part in a society as verbal as ours without knowing how to read and write: but unless we also learn to read continuously, selectively, and critically, and to write articulately, we can never take a free or independent part in that society. (Frye, 1978, p. 19)

Reinforcing the view that advertisements are a way to encourage group conformity and reverence for consumerism, Guy (2006) suggested that media and technology have become a "powerful global communications network" that influences our thoughts, actions, relationships, and perspectives about the world in which we live in unprecedented ways. The mass media is not simply a passive tool that can access new information (p. 74). Conceptions about social class, gender, ethnicity, and lifestyle are all influenced by various media forms. The concentration of the media has the potential to divert learners away from "critical, social conscious forms of learning and social action" (p. 64) and that "critical media literacy is a necessary step toward addressing the underlying issues of control, homogenization, and conformity" (p. 74). Teachers can play a pivotal role in helping learners critically analyze the role and influence of media in their own lives. Texts such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Matrix* films revolve around totalitarian societies that prevent literacy learning and critical thinking. Computer-generated dream worlds, manipulating consumer consciousness, predetermined work roles and

duties, using drugs to blunt the personality and escape life's hardships, and passive entertainments that rob individuals of their ability to think independently and critically frame the cultural context of these dystopian worlds. The ideas and themes that surface in these works can provide a rich source of discussion and debate.

Today's social and pedagogic challenges can be met when teachers encourage literacy from diverse sources and encourage students to create bridges between popular novels like Lowry's *The Giver* or Collins' *The Hunger Games* and contemporary classics like Orwell's *1984*. Being able to read, reflect, write, and speak about similarities between fantasy and dystopian worlds and our own society provides students opportunities to explore ideas, thoughts, and feelings about anonymity, surveillance, responsibility, social control, and privacy.

The setting itself of a literary work can be explored through various contextual lenses to develop complex understanding and knowledge. These lenses could be psychological and social, physical or geographical location, or the actual historical time period. These dimensions of setting interact with one another to influence the trajectory of characters' motives and actions. Smith and Wilhelm (2010) drew upon the psychological theories of Jung, Bronfenbrenner, and Vygotsky to suggest the value of using a novel's setting and said:

... the social/psychological dimensions of setting are a function of the systems of relationships among the characters ... the story's geographical dimension addresses the country, city, neighborhood, and street; its features as far as natural artifacts, style, architecture, floor plan, rooms, and furniture. The physical setting is how a story is located in a specific space or spaces. (pp. 70-71)

Emerging areas in critical literacy include ecoliteracies and inter-textual studies (Bruce, 2011; Glasgow & Baer, 2010). These approaches use texts as powerful vehicles for students to explore contemporary issues that impact their lives. Interdisciplinary approaches, experiential, and place-based learning are ways to promote critical literacy and transformative or deeper level learning. Through self-directed and collaborative learning projects, students make connections between the perspectives they read about and planetary or neighborhood sustainability. Bruce (2011) emphasized that English teachers need to reimagine and redirect the focus of teaching classic and contemporary texts in a way that promotes:

...empathy for both human and nonhuman species, for the soil, water, and air in which all of life depends ... English teachers specialize in questions of vision, values, ethical understanding ... Our expertise in addressing the aesthetic, ethical, and sociopolitical implications of the most pressing human concerns of our time enable us to reach toward and embrace environmental problems. (pp. 13-14)

From a transformative learning perspective, literacy is interlinked with life experiences and the importance of self-expression (Freire, 1997; Green, 1995).

Becoming literate gives individuals opportunities to break the socially constructed boundaries of socioeconomic class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The common themes in transformative learning involve: critical reflection, creativity, self-knowledge, reverence for life, democratic discourse, and the balance of attaining collective and personal goals. When transformative learning occurs, it creates fundamental shifts in the way people see themselves and the world (Magro, 2001; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning is a process of examining, questioning, and revising assumptions about ourselves and the world through dialogue, reflection, and action.

Hall (2002) emphasized that a transformative education can encourage the "release of our creativity and imagination" and help us become, Freire (1997) noted, "agents in our own history" (p. 44). Reinforcing this perspective within classroom contexts, Miller (2002) suggested that a "meaning-centered curriculum" would not only address the needs and aspirations of students, but it also would examine ways to reduce problems like poverty, conflict, mental illness, homelessness, racism, and social injustice. Learning cannot be compartmentalized and viewed solely as a cognitive process. Transformative learning theory is also deeply rooted in constructivist assumptions. Mezirow (1991) wrote that "meaning exists within ourselves and that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and experience" (p. 19). Educators can create climates where questioning and reflective dialogues about self and society can occur. In this context, transformative learning can be defined as:

... a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and action
... such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations;
our relationships with other humans and the natural world; our understanding
of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender ... and our
visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for
social justice and peace, and personal joy. (O'Sullivan, O'Connor, & Morrell,
2002, p. 11)

While the capacity for transformative change exists, it is not always inevitable. Taylor (2008) stressed that transformative learning is much more than a series of activities like reflective journals or experiential learning; it involves "educating from a particular worldview, a particular educational philosophy" that may or may not be shared by other colleagues (p. 55). He further observed:

One area in particular is the student's role in fostering transformative learning. What are the student's responsibilities in relationship to the transformative educator? Second, there is a need to understand the peripheral consequences of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. For example, how does a student's transformation affect peers in the class, the teacher, the educational institution, and other individuals who play a significant role in the life of

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the student? Furthermore, there is little known about the impact of fostering transformative learning on learning outcomes (e.g. grades, test scores). Definitive support is needed if educators are going to recognize fostering transformative learning as a worthwhile teaching approach... (p. 13)

Psychological, situational, and institutional barriers can impact the trajectory of any learning experience. However, in addressing the complex dynamics of learning and motivation, creative educational approaches can emerge to foster transformative learning.

Emotional Intelligence and Literacy Learning

Qualities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, resilience, empathy, intercultural understanding, and other emotional intelligence skills can be woven into literary as well as non-fiction texts. Mezirow (2012) asserted that individuals who possess personality qualities associated with emotional intelligence are more open to *deeper level* transformative learning experiences, and he explained:

Effective participation in discourse and in transformative learning requires emotional maturity—awareness, empathy, and control—what Goleman (1998) called ‘emotional intelligence’—knowing and managing one’s emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships as well as clear thinking. (p. 79)

Emotions impact learning in all its dimensions (Magro, 2001). Salovey and Mayer (1990) have written extensively on the concept of emotional intelligence as being more important than traditional measures of “IQ” in contributing to overall success in life. Goleman (1995) noted that deficiencies in emotional competencies could lead to increased aggression, depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and cognitive problems. Goleman further maintained that the core skills of self-awareness, impulse control, and delaying gratification as well as the ability to manage stress and solve problems in positive and constructive ways can be integrated into the school system at all levels.

Emotional and social intelligence can guide thinking and actions. Vygotsky (1987) recognized the importance of teachers’ understanding the complex interplay of emotion and logic, and he highlighted the way perceptions, memories, thoughts, emotions, and imagination can impact action. In *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky analyzed how plays like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can be used to help readers and viewers connect emotion to the artist and the larger culture. Mack (2012) said: “Art becomes our emotional rehearsal for the larger social experiences of our lives, culture, and epoch” (p. 21). In developing empathy, self-awareness, and imaginative thinking through rehearsal with various texts and interpretive lenses and curricular experiences, youth will be better able to puzzle through challenges that are part of the life trajectory.

Intercultural Intelligence and Literacy Learning

Intercultural competence is a vital personal and social skill that teachers need in today's culturally diverse classrooms. Self-awareness, empathy, openness to and an appreciation of diverse cultures, effective listening skills, and a tolerance for ambiguity are just some of the characteristics scholars have associated with intercultural competence (Magro, 2012). Taylor (2006) described intercultural competence as "a transformative process whereby the [individual] develops an adaptive capacity, altering his or her perspective to effectively understand and accommodate the demands of the new culture; he or she is able to actively negotiate purpose and meaning" (pp. 156–157). Consistent with this, Bennett (2007) described the multicultural person as someone who is "open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of any given culture" and who cherishes and affirms the "difference" between people (p. 9).

The intersection of race, ethnicity, nation, class, religion, and gender can be explored through an examination of world literature (Carey-Web, 2001; Arias, 2007). Too often, world literature courses are offered to students at the high school level, and then the courses are merely electives. Finkle and Lilly (2008) emphasized that students' exploration of multiethnic identity and their need for self-examination in terms of *other* should start earlier on in their educational experience. Finkle and Lilly's (2008) *Middle Ground* provides teachers with sample lessons or teaching literature, such as Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, from a multicultural perspective. Given the growing number of North American students from Middle Eastern, Asian, and African backgrounds, more and more diverse curriculum choices representing different cultures, experiences, and people should be provided.

Diverse texts provide exploration of various societies in the world that are also multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, and multilingual, yet generalizations are often made about individuals and cultures. Bennett (2007) said that in developing pedagogy for multi-cultural education, there should be:

'... the movement toward equity or equity pedagogy, curriculum reform, or a rethinking of the curriculum so that it represents multiple narratives and perspectives; helping students gain multi-cultural competence.' This would provide a foundation for teaching social justice issues and about discrimination of all kinds such as racism, sexism, and classism. (p. 4)

A MULTICULTURAL LITERACY CURRICULUM

A multicultural curriculum including texts representing different voices from international perspectives can help build intercultural intelligence. Sefa-Dei (2002) explained that education can provide new ways to help students integrate history, place, and culture, and he asserted:

The individual as a learner has psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions not often taken up in traditional processes of schooling.

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Holistic education that upholds the importance of spirituality recognizes this complexity by speaking to the idea of wholeness. Context and situation are important to understanding the complex wholeness of individual self or being. The individual has responsibilities to the community and it is through [holistic] education that the connection between the person and the community is made. (pp. 124–125)

Teachers can assist their students in developing the creative, analytical, and intellectual skills to clarify, justify, and realize a more positive vision of the future (Sternberg, 2003). Sefa-Dei (2010) further observed that a school system that fails “to tap into youth myriad identities” is shortchanging learners:

Identity is an important site of knowing. Identity has in effect become a lens of reading one’s world ... the role and importance of diversity in knowledge production is to challenge and subvert the dominance of particular ways of knowing. (pp. 119–120)

Connecting with others and exploring personal identity through stories creates greater awareness of heritage, history, and culture. All of our students have powerful narratives to share. In reading biographical accounts and in encouraging students to write autobiographies and personal reflections, literacy teachers can honor and validate their students’ prior experiences. Narratives reinforce the value of teachers being able to understand the social and cultural background of their students more deeply. Weber (2006) emphasized:

... the very act of writing invites reflection by both students and teachers, which can take place in journals, letters, poems, speeches, formal essays, or more informal personal essays. Whatever the form used, students should see writing as a means of thinking through changes and dilemmas that they and others face. (p. 26)

Weber (2006) further noted that the larger question concerning the relevance of such personal writing lies in an understanding and appreciation of the way they may have changed or improved, and “an understanding of the larger implications of certain events or actions” (p. 27).

Qureshi (2006) asserted the importance of students’ reading diverse literature to challenge their assumptions, values, and lifestyles; she maintained that in a post 9/11 world, students must actively engage in looking through many and varied windows so they can make informed choices as global citizens (p. 35). She developed an English course called “Global Voices” aimed at breaking down cultural stereotypes and improving cultural understanding and critical insight. By fostering empathy and perspective taking throughout the course, Qureshi explained:

... by the end of the year, students have explored the spiritual, physical, and emotional implications of humane and inhumane acts across cultures. Only

then can they successfully turn the mirror on themselves to evaluate humanity and arrive at a set of universally valued human rights. (p. 37)

Some multicultural texts by writers native to African cultures and that explore contemporary issues revolving around politics, landscape, family/relationships, economics, traditions, religion, and social constraints include Larson's edited collection *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories*, Okri's *The Famished Road*, Beah's *A Long Way Gone*. Themes such as crisis and awakening, betrayal, human dignity, and justice are addressed in texts like these. Universal themes in literature can cross cultural boundaries and suggest a broad range of social justice themes for consideration and discussion.

Social Justice and Critical Literacy

Social justice advocates for the full participation of all people, as well as for their basic legal, civil, and human rights. There are numerous parallels between transformative learning and teaching for social justice. In their analysis of global and planetary perspectives of transformative learning theory, O'Sullivan and Hall (2002) asserted that educators today re-examine the systemic and structural barriers that reinforce poverty, racism, sexism, war, and ecological devastation.

Mitchell (2006) suggested that rather than deny the reality that the present world "is rife with examples of intolerance, lies, corruption, crimes against humanity, conflict, genocide," teachers should be compelled to address these issues while encouraging students to find a way to live in harmony. Freire and Macedo (1987) said:

... critical literacy involves a pedagogy and curriculum that support students' learning to read and write the word, as well as support students' learning to read and write their worlds. Teaching students to read and write their worlds prepares them to be keen observers of the many texts they will encounter: literature across disciplines, visual media, music videos, commercials, social media, speeches, conversations among friends, and magazine articles and advertisements. Teaching students for critical literacy prepares them to act with greater awareness and understanding in all the contexts in which they choose to participate, including academic, professional, and daily life. (p. 42)

Texts such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Chinua Achebe's *When Things Fall Apart* can be used to explore essential questions such as: What is truth? How can individual goals be balanced with societal goals? What is the role of materialism in our lives? To what extent can advertising be harmful to our health? What is power? What is freedom and responsibility? Does war challenge us to be fully human? Teachers of critical literacy seek to create "learning environments that support personal transformation—the development of social consciousness—and they prepare students to be both disposed to and prepared for transforming the world

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into a better place to exist for all people" (Mitchell, p. 42). Learning to read and write critically can also help adolescent learners develop empathy. Using multiple texts of different genres gives both teachers and students greater voice and choice. Critical questions that can be explored include:

- Who is in the story?
- Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?
- What does the author want readers to believe?
- Whose viewpoint is expressed?
- How might alternative perspectives be represented?
- What view of the world is the text presenting?
- How else could the text have been written?

Juxtapositioning Literacies

Juxtapositioning various literacies is a useful strategy to encourage critical thinking and transformative learning. Juxtapositioning draws on multiple texts and perspectives. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) explained the value of juxtapositioning is that it entails "expressing ideas from a variety of perspectives and challenges students to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings" (p. 55). Juxtapositioning accommodates multiple modes of literacy, fiction, as well as nonfiction, uniquely suiting literacy learning through a "cultural studies" framework. Cultural studies can integrate interviews, ethnography, testimonials, surveys, films, and media analysis. Different literary genres are explored and rigid boundaries between disciplines merge into a more creative way of teaching and learning (Carey-Webb, 2001). Cultural studies and the concept of juxtapositioning texts have emerged in recent years out of popular culture, multicultural studies, gender studies, and post-colonial studies. Carey-Webb (2001) wrote: "... the perspectives of 'marginal' groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and working-class people are important in cultural studies. Valuable in themselves, they also help us better understand dominant ways of seeing" (p. 15).

In juxtapositioning texts, non-fiction and literary works are integrated, classical and canonical works are analyzed, multiple viewpoints are explored, and theme-related units are developed so that students can gain a deeper level insight into topics such as war and violence; peace building; relationships and family; and challenges and journeys in life. The social sciences, history, humanities and arts, and contemporary issues are among the disciplines that can be studied through literature and non-fiction. For instance, in reading a graphic novel such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, students can gain an insight into Nazi Germany, the abuse of power, family relationships and many other topics through two powerful narratives depicted in drawing and captions. Spiegelman's first narrative is his father's account of how he and his wife survived Hitler's Europe, and the second is the author's own conflicted relationship with his father as they try to lead a normal life while reconciling

tragic events from past. Spiegelman's story could be used as a comparative text with Wiesel's *Night* and/or with German Expressionist paintings of the 1920s and 1930s to gain insights into the cultural atmosphere of tension, fear, and doom that ultimately gave rise to Hitler. Analyzing posters, propaganda, art, letters, and radio/television news from different epochs and countries at war would present additional perspectives of politics, loyalty, and sacrifice. Assessment might include collaborative and multimodal presentations on research findings. Such presentations would juxtaposition texts and might include the creation and performance of original songs, soundtracks, essays, or poetry accompanied by photographs, collages, or art to demonstrate students' understanding, knowledge, and perspectives.

Empathy and an appreciation of diverse experiences are more likely to occur when learners are given opportunities to identify with struggles that a character endures regardless of ethnic and racial background, culture, and geographic distance. For instance, Irvin (2012) used Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* to teach emotional intelligence skills that her students can apply to their own lives. Irvin teaches in a high-poverty area where many of her students face adversity in the form of chronic self-doubt, depression, poverty, exposure to violence, and parental alcoholism. As a teacher of young adults, she integrated emotional and social intelligence into the curriculum by challenging her students to analyze the characters' motives, actions, and consequences. Despite the hardship she experiences, "Walls continually strives for improvement and she eventually leaves home at the age of 16 to begin her own, more normal life" (Irvin, 2012, p. 58). Teachers have the potential to develop a literature and non-fiction course based on psychological and social topics that involve challenges in young adulthood, the world of work, travel, developing a strong identity and building positive relationships, career choice, family systems, relationships, parenthood, coping with stress, and decision making (Magro, 2009). Johnson, Augustus, and Agiro (2012) explore the way a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* could be used to study bullying, group conformity, racism, class structures, and the abuse of power. Socratic seminars, surveys, read-alouds, and developing new media are ways that their students responded to questions such as: How do we protect ourselves and others from violent and harmful actions? How do we control our anger or feelings of jealousy? Mack (2012) asserted:

Emotional literacy has an important place in the English curriculum because emotions cannot be separated from reading, writing, and thinking critically with language. Language gives us the means to make conscious decisions about how we act, speak, think, and feel. If at first we feel hurt or humiliated, thinking through the experience can actually change how we feel about it... Personal tragedy can be rewritten into a lesson in courage that we credit with strengthening our will to survive... (p. 18)

Students' sense of self-direction and motivation is increased when they possess the skills necessary to meet the challenges in life. Motivating teachers create lessons

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that encourage students to make meaningful connections between the texts and their own lives.

CREATING CRITICAL LITERACY CURRICULA

The potential to explore external and internal worlds radiates in literacy; but without scaffolded experiences to usher students into the exploration, the potential remains unexpressed. Thinking of students as “designers” and “advocates” for their own rights and the rights of others reframes the educational process. Effective learning occurs when teachers are able to create a psychological climate that encourages self-expression, exploration of diverse viewpoints, reflective dialogue, and creativity. Greene (1995) said: “All depends upon a breaking free, a leap, and then a question. ... the educative task is to create situations in which the young are moved to begin to ask, in all the tones of voice there are, ‘Why?’” (p. 6). So we trust all the tones of voice among our students and pose provocative questions to help students step into the worlds awaiting their interpretation and action. With literacy curriculum as a springboard, our most creative and socially relevant work as educators is to help students ask “Why?” and support their subsequent inquiries using various literacy skills and content throughout the learning.

Preservice teachers (PSTs) in English language arts present a unique training and mentoring challenge. As undergraduates, they are often English majors whose academic experiences steep them in the literature of various literary and aesthetic traditions. However, teacher preparation programs intend to help PSTs negotiate their own academic and professional transformations from English majors to English language arts teachers of adolescents in secondary schools. Teacher preparation in English language arts must itself create transformative experiences for PSTs so that they will—in turn—employ creative approaches to their own students’ literacy experiences. We cannot settle for the status quo for our students in the complex, multicultural world of the 21st century. We must be deliberate about preparing teachers with hearts, minds, as well as strategies for purposeful curriculum design and assessment work. We must also use the 21st century tools and modalities and encourage our students to do the same in their explorations and representations of learning. Albers and Sanders (2010) said:

Whatever the challenges, we suggest that the arts, multimodality, and 21st century literacies are here, are important to literacy and language arts learning, and must be a part of curriculum. Not only must we embrace these aspects of language learning, but we must begin to play with them as students do daily.
(p. 21)

Designing an English language-arts course that could be transforming starts with varied texts that launch inquiry and learning. Varied texts create the prompts for students to ask their own questions and conduct their own inquiries, to experience

creative literacy as agency. Framing curriculum units with essential questions sets the classroom stage for literacy learning, authentic student inquiry, and expression.

Designing Literacy Curriculum with Essential Questions

Framing curriculum units of study with so-called essential questions and complementary culminating projects intended to showcase and further explore what has been learned in answer to the essential question generates multiple paths for students' own inquiry, learning, and empathy. As opposed to leading questions that might inculcate students to a teacher's bias or narrow interpretation, essential questions and culminating project work prompt students to uncover and discover their own answers, problems, understanding, and empathies. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) defined an essential question in this way:

A question that lies at the heart of a subject or a curriculum (as opposed to being either trivial or leading), and promotes inquiry and *uncover*age of a subject. Essential questions thus do not yield a single straightforward answer (as a leading question does) but produce different plausible responses, about which thoughtful and knowledgeable people may disagree. (p. 342)

Essential questions invite students' original investigations, collaborations, and empathies. Essential questions do not tell students what to think about a topic; they are not leading questions. Essential questions also differ from hooks or guiding questions that educators ask and are necessary at times. McTighe and Wiggins (2013) said: "... by exploring questions, learners are engaged in constructing meaning for themselves" (p. 19). Essential questions raise more questions, recur, spark continual discussion and debate, and demand evidence.

Here is an example of how an essential question prompted student reading, response, and representation regarding Anderson's novel *Speak*. The novel is a fictional story of a high school freshman traumatized by an attack and who stops talking as she journeys through her first year of high school. The assignment question was: "What concept captures your interpretation of *Speak*?" Students selected concepts that individually resonated for them and created individual graphic representations of those concepts for sharing and discussion with the others in the class. Once composed, students displayed their graphic renderings around the classroom gallery as a basis for class discussion around the shared text.

As English language arts teachers, we need to select provocative literature in the first place then provide the curriculum prompts that help students look inside themselves to interpret a story and articulate metacognitive awareness about the many concepts at work within a novel and within our students themselves. A novel like *Speak* helps young adults process their own high school social systems, family relationships, trauma, gender bias, institutional bias, using art to learn, heal, and find voice. The assignment itself requires students to reflect more deeply into themes

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in their own lives. It asks them to re-title their own representations with a verb or action word that captures a concept inspired by *Speak* with titles like *Hide*, *Bloom*, *Hibernate*, and *Create*. Each graphic representation elaborates on the concepts inspired by Anderson's novel with photographs, drawings, twigs, leaves, fabric, painting, and 3-dimensional forms—unique graphic renderings that allowed students to move beyond language and words to articulate much in the way of diversity, individuality, and universal commonalities. This kind of assignment in response to text requires students to step into the world of the text as well as their own lives and make connections and develop empathy toward others. Dolby (2014) reminded us that while mounting scientific evidence suggests empathy might be natural to humans, it still must be nurtured and developed (p. 109).

Readers theatre-style presentations are another way for students to work together to process literature and create multimodal representations in response. In this classroom literacy example, students created their own essential questions to capture significant themes in Myers' *Monster*, a story told from various points of view about a fictional teenage boy being held in juvenile detention as an accomplice to murder. The design of the *Monster* assignment required students to engage with ideas in the text and with each other to create a dramatic, readers theatre-style response. With many variations possible, a readers theatre assignment requires students to create their own brief scenes cut from a novel's actual text. Constructing the assignment became an educative experience for students as they questioned issues of race, ageism, justice, and personal relationships. While reading from their scripts, students used props, costumes, setting, sound, and music to create desired dramatic effect. Some of the essential questions developed in response to Myers' *Monster* included the following titles.

- Do others affect our identity?
- How do labels imprison us?
- How does appearance create prejudice?
- If something is legal, does that make it moral?
- How do we express identity?

For educators designing curriculum, essential questions create practical and philosophical utility. For students, working with essential questions helps rehearse and learn how to ask their own questions. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) explained the usefulness of essential questions in curriculum design this way:

The best questions point to and highlight the big ideas. They serve as doorways through which learners explore the key concepts, themes, theories, issues, and problems that reside within the content, perhaps unseen: it is through the process of actively 'interrogating' the content through provocative questions that students deepen their understanding. (p. 106)

Exposure to diverse texts does not encourage empathy or even aesthetic appreciation, but robust inquiry and presentations can lead individual students

and groups of young adults through powerful experiences. The list of diverse texts below—fiction, nonfiction, traditional, contemporary, young adult—prompted the accompanying essential questions that in turn framed a variety of student experiential learning and representations.

- Jhumpa Lahira's *The Namesake*: Must we let go of our past to define ourselves?
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: What is a hero?
- Lois Lowry's *The Giver*: How does the notion of perfection inhibit us?
- Mark Salzman's *True Notebooks*: How do we create our own prisons?
- Rachel Simon's *Riding the Bus with my Sister*: How can one relationship affect the trajectory of a life?

As suggested in these student examples of themes and essential questions related to literary texts, critical literacy approaches encourage student learning and work that necessarily becomes interdisciplinary as well.

Critical Literacy's Interdisciplinary Nature

Scholars (Ambrose, 2009, and chapter 2, this volume; Folsom, 2009) suggested that interdisciplinary contributions to cognitive diversity just might help save the world from its most challenging problems. At the classroom level, opportunities for divergent thinking required by creative, critical literacy learning are imperative opportunities as students grapple with ever-changing complexities of the 21st century. Students enact a critical literacy stance themselves as they work through their project work, research, presentations, and discussions. Folsom (2009) said:

... Divergent production includes creative thinking and risk-taking. It is the kind of fluent, flexible, imaginative thinking that students need to succeed in our complex world and to change it.

Divergent thinking and production are necessary for complex learning to take place. Creative project work provides opportunities to develop both intellectual skills and social-emotional processes. ... Creative projects encourage the use of imagination to see alternatives in solving problems. Students learn in a real situation what it means to be flexible and make fair and ethical decisions. (p. 297)

Using literacy and essential questions can prompt deliberately powerful interdisciplinary learning and social action as well. Helping students to develop empathy was a strong pedagogic intention of a unit inspired by an initial reading of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The unit used Steinbeck's novella as a way to step into another's situation and understand root causes of homelessness and hunger in our contemporary culture. Specifically, the unit primed the pump of student understanding so that they could thoughtfully promote participation in their school's annual food drive for a local rescue mission. The unit, entitled *Campaign to Support the Homeless and*

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Hungry, asked the following question: "How can facts and data be used to persuade others to take positive action?" The learning goals and objectives were to:

1. Investigate causes of hunger, food insecurity, and homelessness.
2. Read a variety of informational text and data.
3. Listen to and view a variety of sources of information and data.
4. Use research and data to create a visual poster that appeals to high school students and encourages them to participate in school's annual food drive for the rescue mission.
5. Use research and data to create 30-second television appeal to high school students for participation in the school's annual food drive for the rescue mission.
6. Calculate and graphically represent total contributions in a final report.

One discussion prompt in English class said: Many of John Steinbeck's fictional works, like *Of Mice and Men*, show the real hardships faced by people across the United States in an era known as the Dust Bowl. In your small groups, select 4 characters (any characters) from *Of Mice and Men*.

- Think about and discuss Steinbeck's characterization of each.
- What emotion(s) do you feel for each of these fictional characters?
- Using evidence from novella, explain why you feel that way about each character.
- The whole class will discuss the novella and Steinbeck's depiction of real life circumstances and realistic characterizations in his fiction.

In a move to the non-fiction literacies, students conducted interviews with school officials and rescue mission personnel associated with the food drive and were encouraged to generate, ask, and record questions. The answers informed the campaign advertising with facts, evidence, and personal appeals.

- Why does our high school hold a food drive every year for the rescue mission?
- What does our school collect besides food?
- The food drive helps whom? Where does the food go?
- Who are the rescue mission clients?
- What is the mission statement (or purpose) of the rescue mission?
- Does the rescue mission receive any government help/funding?
- If not, where do the funds come from in order for them to continue operating?
- Does the rescue mission need our school to collect anything besides food? If so, what specifically?

It is also important that students understand the many uses of literacy to inquire and research all kinds of information. The following discipline-based prompts required students to go beyond the literary text to develop knowledge and create appeals to their peers to support the hungry and homeless in their midst.

- From Mathematics: One major factor causing people to turn to rescue missions is their inability to afford meals for themselves and their families. Research the

following items to help you come up with powerful and convincing statistics that can encourage your classmates to donate food for the food drive:

- What is the current minimum wage rate in New Jersey vs. cost of basic necessities (vegetables, diapers, formula, milk, eggs, what else)?
- What is the current percentage of individuals unemployed in the City? In the County?
- What is the percentage of individuals living on public assistance in the City? In the County?
- From Social Studies: Most of the homeless in New Jersey do not live on the street or under bridges.
 - Using the Corporation for Supportive Housing's *2013 New Jersey Point in Time Count of the Homeless*, describe the various living situations for New Jersey's homeless.
 - The U.S. Census Bureau releases the poverty threshold data for the previous year every fall. What was the poverty threshold for a four-person family in the U.S. in 2013? What does this income equate to in dollars per day per person? What factors does the Bureau consider in determining the poverty line?
- From World Language: Investigate how other western countries deal with the problems of homelessness and hunger. What lessons can we learn from them for our campaign?

Students used their research uncovered from multimodal sources, disciplines, and varied literacies to create posters and televised appeals to their peers in order to promote participation in a drive to support homeless and hungry people in their region. Based on a literary springboard, the curriculum posed an essential question that required students to use and adapt various literacies to inquire and learn about their world. Then students employed their imaginations, empathy, and varied literacies to promote positive social action.

WORKING TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF EDUCATION AND LITERACY

As educators, and literacy educators in particular, it is not sufficient to intend that literacy transform students' lives. For an educative experience to be transformative, it must be just that—an experience. The most creative approach that educators can take to literacy learning is designing curriculum that invites students to uncover and create their own inquiries and engaged responses and action.

Working toward transformative or deeper level learning requires teachers to develop a curriculum rooted in the aspirations, needs, and goals of their students. Literacy education should come from a need within our communities that are becoming more multiethnic and multicultural. A creative classroom context can be a dynamic and innovative site for exploration of the emotional, social, and cultural landscapes of the past, present, and future.

Worlds past and present are full of violence, beauty, inequity, and generosity—yet our school bookrooms are stacked with texts to which we perennially ascribe traditional significance and stereotypes. When we use literature and literary analysis as the only arbiters of work and reading in our English classrooms, we limit opportunities for relevant exploration, meaningful inquiry, new learning, and empathy. The 21st century demands our creative, critical pedagogy in order to foster the development of all our diverse students facing a complex, multicultural world. If we intend that our students engage in literacy learning that is personally meaningful, socially just, relevant, and transformative, then our literacy teaching strategies must be transformative as well.

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