
Farewell to *A Farewell to Arms*:

DEEMPHASIZING THE WHOLE-CLASS NOVEL

The common practice in English language arts classes of assigning all students to read the same book at the same time is a tradition, the authors believe, that would be more honored in the breach than the observance.

BY DOUGLAS FISHER AND GAY IVEY

ASK ANY group of adults ranging in age from their early twenties to late fifties what they remember about middle or high school reading, and you will no doubt hear an unenthusiastic and often bitter chorus of such titles as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, and other classic novels long considered standard and acceptable fare in English classrooms. The younger set may chime in with *Parrot in the Oven*, *Looking for Alaska*, or some other young-adult novels that have become contemporary classics.

Not many adults have great memories of assigned reading from English class, yet the one-size-fits-all class novel persists as the centerpiece of instruction in many middle and high school classrooms. As teacher educators and former English and reading teachers, we also know that getting students to read these selections continues to be difficult, even in the best of circumstances. A high school memory sums up this situation for us. Gay recalls a nighttime bus ride back from a National Honor Society field trip to an amusement park near the end of her junior year. Nearly a third of the students clustered at the back of the bus with the CliffsNotes for *The Scarlet Letter*, not because they needed to read it by the following morning but because they had to read it *and* write a critical analysis of it by the following morning! Even for these high-achieving high-schoolers, the goal was just to get the assignment finished.

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For struggling students, the choice is apt to be noncompliance. Often, the teacher notices that the students have not read the text and so reads it to them. We know that teacher read-alouds are a powerful tool for building vocabulary and background knowledge, but we worry that they are being used to supplant assigned readings. Read-alouds should extend students' thinking, not replace it.

We know that classics — and even award-winning contemporary classics — do not make the list of what adolescents prefer to read.

As an alternative, in the hope that students can be coerced into reading a novel that they have been assigned, teachers often resort to testing their knowledge about it. Some teachers give oral summaries of the contents so that students who have not completed their assigned readings can "keep up." Others show the film version so that students have a sense of the content. Regardless of which alternative is selected, students are not reading more or reading better as a result of the whole-class novel. Instead, students are reading less and are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future. Meanwhile, teachers continue their endless — and often fruitless — search for better ways to persuade students to read their assigned novel.¹

Given this frustration and resistance, what is it about a "class set" of novels that captivates teachers so much that its use dominates English language arts instruction? We often hear that curriculum standards dictate the decision and require, for example, that all sixth-graders read *The Giver* or that all ninth-graders read *Romeo and Juliet*. (Of course, the latter is a play, not a novel, but it is typically assigned and taught in the same way.) But even a cursory review of content standards from several state departments of education reveals that specific texts and authors are not actually named. Rather, students are expected to learn how to read, write, and speak about a variety of texts, and the standards typically emphasize literary devices, reading comprehension skills, and writing strategies.

We also hear quite frequently that class novels are selected because they are "good for students." But we know that classics — and even award-winning contemporary classics — do not make the list of what adolescents prefer to read.² In addition, we know that students still struggling to read do not get better at reading from tackling difficult books.³ It would be hard to locate one book that addresses the needs of all students in any given classroom. Life experiences that enable a reader to make sense of a book

vary too greatly, and every class has students who read above or below their grade level.

The bottom line is that, when teachers require all students to read the same book at the same time, English classes are neither standard-centered nor student-centered. As a result, these classes can respond neither to the academic agenda (i.e., the sanctioned curriculum as defined by stan-

dards) nor to the student agenda (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening that satisfy students' own reasons to know, experience, and relate). Radical as it may seem to some readers, to us it's only common sense to reconsider the use of the whole-class novel.

WIDE, FOCUSED READING AS AN ALTERNATIVE

Class novels may actually limit or restrict the variety, depth, and quantity of students' reading. We would argue that we can expand students' reading by significantly increasing the number and variety of texts in English classrooms and by offering a greater number of creative opportunities to read in school. We have identified a number of factors necessary to balance students' preferences for reading with the demands of a standards-driven curriculum.⁴ As an alternative to using the whole-class novel, we offer teachers five guidelines for practice.

1. *Identify universal themes rather than individual books as a way of guiding instruction.* In our professional development work with teachers in middle and high schools, we are consistently asked how to get students motivated to read. We suspect that the real question, the question behind the question, is "How do we get students to read *The Iliad*?" (Choose any other institutionalized assignment if Homer didn't make your school's list this year.)

Research offers excellent advice on getting students to read: choose texts that matter to students,⁵ create contexts in which students find intrinsic reasons to read rather than reasons related to external rewards or consequences,⁶ and provide time to read in school.⁷ But motivation is also multi-dimensional and may be heavily influenced by such factors as the student's own "perceived competence."⁸ The class-novel experience rarely meets these criteria. Instead, you have students with a text they do not like, which they

are directed to read for purposes other than their own, with little time in school to do so. To top it off, the books are typically so difficult that students feel overmatched by the challenges they present. And that feeling is not unreasonable, since these are the same kinds of texts that intimidate even competent adult readers.

to discuss the books with their peers and to write complex analyses of the themes and ideas. What's more, they are motivated to read more.

3. *Select texts that address contemporary issues and that are engaging.* Students want to read about things that matter to them. They want to think, form opinions, challenge

When students read widely from books they have selected, they are more prepared to discuss the books with their peers and to write complex analyses of the themes and ideas. What's more, they are motivated to read more.

Instead of defining instruction in English language arts by the books ("I teach *The Odyssey*." "I teach *Old Yeller*."), teachers should focus instruction on big ideas or universal themes, such as "The Hero's Journey," "Matters of Life and Death," or "Are the Greeks and Romans still with us today?" These ideas and concepts are surely within the grasp of most students, but it is difficult to find out what students know and can do within the context of one very hard book. Big ideas pique students' interest and allow every student in the class to engage with the topic using his or her own background, interests, and skills.

2. *Select texts that span a wide range of difficulty levels.* If our goal is to encourage students to read more and better, then we have to ensure that they are reading books they can read. Simply requiring students to read "grade-level" texts will not improve their skills. However, inviting students to read widely in response to a big idea, question, or theme requires that they have access to a significant number of books at a variety of levels of difficulty that provide diverse perspectives on the topic.

By the way, we don't want readers to think we're opposed to the specific books we've named in this article. In fact, they and myriad other "classics" are excellent examples of literature. *Charlotte's Web* might be a highly suitable addition to a collection of cutting-edge young adult and children's books that explore the theme of friendships with responsibility. Similarly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* might be an appropriate option in a study of discrimination, racism, and prejudice, but it need not be given higher status than more student-friendly, high-interest books on the topic, such as Chris Crowe's *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* or Toni Morrison's *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*.

Our experience suggests that, when students read widely from books they have selected, they are more prepared

and be challenged, and learn. Students want to read widely in multiple genres and media — graphic novels, manga, Internet sites, informational texts, and so on. All of these text sources can be used as students consider the big idea or theme that the class is exploring together. Themes we select should allow students to engage with contemporary issues — issues that they and we are struggling with — while reading both current and classic works. We agree with literary scholars who suggest that literature provides the reader with a mirror to examine oneself, a window to consider alternative experiences and beliefs, and a door to walk through forever changed. We just haven't found the book that does this for every member of every class at the same time.

4. *Orchestrate instruction that builds students' competence.* Another drawback of the whole-class novel is the type of instruction it engenders. Teachers using a single book with a group of students often revert to lecturing and assigning independent reading. From the perspective of the students, the teacher knows everything (from the "correct" symbolism to the appropriate predictions), and students have permission to remain passive.

Turning this situation around so that the teacher provides modeling, coaching, scaffolding, and guiding requires that the teacher use time differently. For example, the expert teachers we love to watch start with a read-aloud or shared reading. This time is not used to read something that the students should have already read but is an opportunity for the teacher to share his or her thinking about a text with the class. Then students move into groups — some are reading, others are discussing books, others are writing or getting peer feedback on their writing — while the teacher meets with specific students to provide guided instruction.

This organizational system allows teachers to move from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the

responsibility."⁹ In other words, the teacher guides students through texts and models comprehension along the way. As students develop their understanding of the theme or response to the big idea or question, they are developing skills, building competence and confidence, and learning with and through texts. And as the students' skills develop, teachers gradually cede to them the responsibility for learning.

5. *Teach literary devices and reading comprehension strategies using texts that are readable and meaningful.* As we have noted, the content standards in English language arts do not name or test students' knowledge of specific texts or authors. Instead, students are expected to learn how to draw inferences from a text as a way of making sense of it. But students are not likely to have vast experience with inferring or with appreciating and understanding how an author uses particular literary devices to enrich a text or to contribute to a theme. Their lack of experience is compounded when most instructional time is consumed by efforts to get them to "get the story" of a few specific texts that they may not find interesting or that may be too difficult for them. Far too often, we try to teach to content standards by requiring that students read books with difficult vocabulary and concepts. The problem is that comprehension tools and literary devices don't jump out at the reader in difficult texts; students simply don't get good at reading comprehension, understanding literary devices, literary response, or writing by reading hard books. Students don't learn how to write a persuasive text or how an omniscient point of view works from reading one difficult short story.

Students do develop an understanding of and appreciation for persuasive arguments by reading a number of texts, across genres and topics that they are accessible to them. And students do develop the ability to make inferences through repeated practice, first with very obvious examples modeled by the teacher and then with increasingly complex examples to which they apply what they have learned independently.

While we don't know of students who got better at reading or learned to understand the classics through a focus on whole-class reading, we do know a significant number of students who got better at reading and who started reading more widely and frequently because their teachers used a range of texts, organized the course around a theme or big idea, and then provided instruction as outlined in their state's content standards. We are on the same page as children's author Walter Dean Myers, who writes, "It is only when readers have the ability to fully absorb the material being read that the process becomes pleasurable and a lifelong reader is created."¹⁰ The whole-class novel

assigned as independent reading won't help students "fully absorb the material." Helping that to happen takes a skilled teacher who guides his or her students through multiple texts, genres, and standards.

A common statement made by some English language arts teachers is that students need to know Shakespeare or Walt Whitman before they graduate. Should this "knowledge" be acquired at the expense of students' knowing how to read and write independently and purposefully for a wide range of reasons? Traditional instruction in English language arts actually *limits* the reading and writing students can produce. Let's work instead on expanding students' understanding, interests, and thinking.

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4. Gay Ivey and Douglas Fisher, *Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006).

5. Ivey and Broaddus, op. cit.; and Worthy, Moorman, and Turner, op. cit.

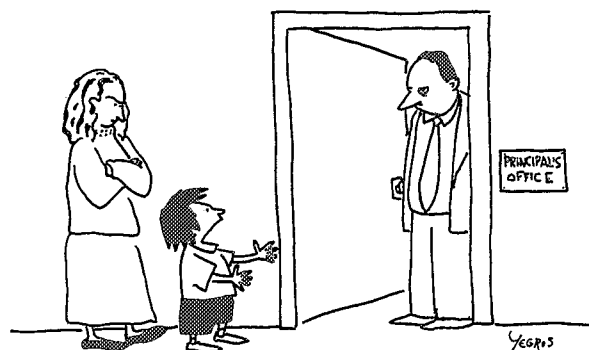
6. Allan Wigfield and John T. Guthrie, "Relations of Children's Motivation for Reading to the Amount and Breadth of Their Reading," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 89, 1997, pp. 420-32.

7. Ivey and Broaddus, op. cit.

8. Linda Baker and Allan Wigfield, "Dimensions of Children's Motivation for Reading and Their Relations to Reading Activity and Reading Achievement," *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 34, 1999, pp. 452-77.

9. Nell K. Duke and P. David Pearson, "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension," in Alan Farstrup and Jay Samuels, eds., *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 3rd ed. (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 2002), p. 211.

10. Walter Dean Myers, "Writing for the Uninspired Reader," *English Journal*, January 2005, p. 36. ■



"Yes, I did write, 'Do not deface school property' on my desk. But she asked me to use 'oxymoron' in context!"



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