

# *Kansas English*

2019, Volume 100, Number 1

Kansas Association of Teachers of English



*Sun Seeker* by Jenni Bader

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# Kansas English

A peer-reviewed journal of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English  
2019, Volume 100, Number 1

Member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement

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*\*Special thanks to those who reviewed two manuscripts for this issue.*

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*Sun Seeker* by Jenni Bader, Winfield High School

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## *Kansas English* Author Guide

*Kansas English* is the peer-reviewed journal of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE). It publishes articles and materials on subjects of interest to English teachers, including scholarly articles, reflective/practitioner essays, opinion pieces, interviews, book reviews, and creative works (including photos and artwork). *Kansas English* publishes about 80 percent of the manuscripts it receives each year. Specifically, consider submitting the following types of manuscripts:

1. **Practitioner Pieces** describing how you teach a particular text, skill, or concept in your English language arts classroom.
2. **Scholarly Articles**, including research studies and academic arguments supported by research in English education.
3. **Reflective Essays** about teaching English language arts.
4. **Creative Works** (e.g., poetry, vignettes, photography) related to teaching English.
5. **Interviews** with authors (YA and adult) and experts in the field of English language arts.
6. **Book Reviews** of recently published young adult literature and English pedagogy texts.
7. **Conversation Pieces** in response to previously published work in *Kansas English*.
8. **Kansas-Specific Articles** that would be of interest to Kansas English teachers.

**Deadline for submissions for the 2020 issue of *Kansas English*: January 15, 2020**

### MANUSCRIPT FORMAT

Manuscripts should typically not exceed 15 pages, excluding references. Submissions should be in 12 pt. Times New Roman font, double-spaced throughout (including quotations and bibliographies), and adhere to the latest edition of APA documentation style. The names of submitting authors should not appear anywhere in the manuscript. All practitioner pieces, scholarly articles, reflective essays, interviews, conversation pieces, and Kansas-specific articles should include an abstract (no more than 200 words) and a list of keywords.

### SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically as attachments to [Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu](mailto:Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu). In the subject line, please write Kansas English Manuscript Submission. All manuscripts should be written using a recent version of Microsoft Word. Please also indicate the type of submission (e.g., practitioner piece, scholarly article, reflective essay) based on the categories above, as this will inform the peer review process. Complete submissions include, as two separate attachments:

1. The **manuscript** including title, abstract, and keywords, and *without* references to the author(s) to ensure the piece is blinded.
2. The **title page** with names, affiliations, email addresses, and 100-150 word professional biographies for *each* submitting author, *as well as a statement* that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

### REVIEW PROCESS

Each manuscript receives a blind review by at least two members of the review board, unless the content or length makes it inappropriate for the journal. The review board typically makes a final decision regarding publication within three months of the posted submission deadline. Submitted manuscripts may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style.

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**From the Editor**  
**Summer Inquiry, Reflection, and Dialogue with KATE and NCTE**



2019 KATE Camp participants pose for a photo outside Wichita East High School on June 18, 2019.

*Photo courtesy of Nathan Whitman.*

*Back row:* Stacy Chestnut, Alexis Fisher, Ashli Corbella, Steve Maack, Shayn Guillemette, Rebecca Pflughoeft, Katie Cramer, Candice Michaud, Mary Roseberry

*Front row:* Monica Swift, Shea Cooper, Joy Stahl, Krystal Atkinson, Leann Buethner,

July 2019

Dear Readers,

I hope your summer has been both relaxing and rejuvenating. For me, this is a time to catch up on rest and reading, a time to take care of tasks that fall through the cracks during the academic year, and a time to reflect on my personal and professional goals.

In fact, I have a number of professional goals I'm attempting to tackle while I'm not on contract, and this summer, I was inspired by one of my 2016 graduates (and KATE Executive Board member) Michaela Liebst to enlist the support of accountability partners to help me stay focused on those goals. You can read more about my intentions in [this post](#), and Michaela's intentions on her [Courageous edYOU website](#).

One of my favorite parts of summer is the opportunity to explore new ideas and texts related to teaching English—and spend time reflecting on and further exploring them. Rather than feeling the pressure to get back to grading, lesson planning, and committee work, I can follow a line of inquiry (or several!) for as long as I'd like. I can also designate time to meet up with colleagues to engage in these same lines of inquiry.

On June 18, I had the opportunity to do just that when I attended KATE Camp 2019 (free for KATE members!) at Wichita East High School. Organized by KATE's past president Steve Maack, this was a day of energizing and informed dialogue among new and veteran English teachers—and delicious bagels and cream cheese from Panera. The organically developed breakout session schedule included resource-sharing and focused conversations on 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies and technologies, project-based learning, language and grammar, classroom libraries, ACT prep, classroom behavior and cell phone policies, and sexual/gender diversity and equity. And all attendees received access to all breakout session notes and resources via the KATE Camp 2019 shared folder on Google Drive, so we can return to those resources (and add to them) anytime—even if we weren't able to attend a particular session.

This is exactly the kind of professional rejuvenation I crave, and summertime is the perfect time to soak it up. With that in mind, here are four ideas for your own professional rejuvenation as you begin making plans for the 2019-2020 academic year:

1. **Read this issue of *Kansas English*.** With a range of scholarly, practitioner, and creative pieces, as well as book reviews and an author interview, you'll find ideas for your classroom and your own professional inquiry. If you finish the 2019 issue and you're hungry for more, check out [past issues of \*Kansas English\*](#) online.
2. **Make plans now to attend the [2019 KATE Annual Conference](#) on October 25-26 in Wichita**, and prepare to be inspired by our two keynote speakers: award-winning young adult literature authors [Tiffany D. Jackson](#) and [Alan Gratz](#). While you're registering for the conference, consider [submitting a proposal to present a breakout session](#) by August 31, so you can share your own classroom practice and ideas. I plan to submit my breakout session proposal this month, and I hope you'll join me. If you have questions about the proposal submission process, check out [this helpful page I created](#) for my students and graduates. *And consider this:* Your school administrator may be more inclined to pay for your conference registration and travel expenses if your name is in the conference program!  
If you're not sure about submitting a proposal this year, take the long-range approach: simply attend this year's KATE Conference, get a feel for the types of sessions available, consider what's missing or what you could add to the conversation, and submit a proposal for 2020. Better yet, bring your ideas to KATE Camp 2020 next summer, get feedback on them, submit a proposal to present at the 2020 Annual Conference, and then turn that presentation into an article to submit to the 2021 issue of *Kansas English* to get your ideas out to as wide an audience as possible!
3. **Visit [NCTE's Blog](#)**, which adds new content almost daily from scholars and practitioners in the field and is searchable via a wide variety of categories (e.g., advocacy, assessment, diversity, intellectual freedom, literacy, literature, poetry, social justice, writing). The posts are brief (most are 500-800 words), informative, and resource-rich with links to supporting articles, reports, policies, and organizations. Who knows what line of inquiry you might end up pursuing in your professional practice as a result of the timely and informed posts on this blog!
4. **Finally, look for information about KATE Camp 2020** next spring, and make plans to attend. Bring your colleagues!

So set your professional development goals for summertime (and beyond) using the above suggestions as a starting point. Find some colleagues with whom to share ideas (the [KATE Facebook Group](#) is a great place to start!). Hold one another accountable this summer—and throughout the year—for continuing your inquiry, staying connected to other energizing teachers, and being part of the professional conversation. I look forward to seeing you at future KATE events and reading your published work in *Kansas English*!

Until next time, happy teaching and learning!

*Katherine Mason Cramer*

## Mining our Archives: Reflecting on Artifacts to Improve Writing Instruction

**Jason J. Griffith**  
Penn State University

**Joshua J. Kornexl**  
Andersen Junior High, Chandler, Arizona

**Jannine Amore**  
Arizona State University

**Alex Hoffman**  
Arizona State University

### Abstract

By carefully considering our past, we can better adjust our present to improve our future writing and instruction. This article features the reflections of a former high school English teacher and current undergraduate writing methods instructor along with three pre-service English teachers on writing-related artifacts from their personal archives. The co-authors present teaching principles they have developed after reflecting on which writing-related artifacts they've kept, why they've kept those artifacts, and what those artifacts suggest about how we should teach writing. Finally, the co-authors encourage both students and teachers to engage in a similar reflective process and productively dialogue with our writing pasts.

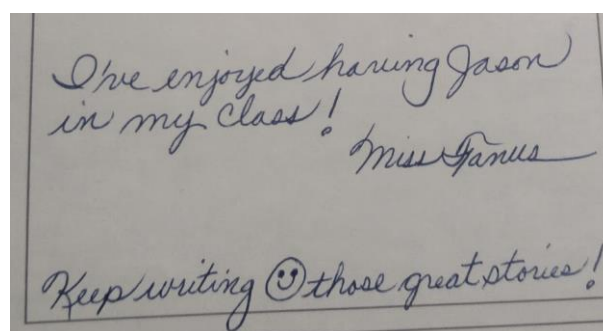
### Keywords

autoethnography, writing instruction, writing artifacts, reflection

### Introduction

Among the personal archives of my (Jason's) filing cabinet, there's an overstuffed folder dripping with various scrawls and scribbles from my past. These writings include things that I've kept from school as well as items holding extracurricular meaning; there are pieces I've saved myself along with those my parents have passed on during purges after I moved out of my childhood home. In addition to the writing products themselves, I've also kept related artifacts including report card comments and teacher feedback.

**Figure 1:** Photos from Jason's 5<sup>th</sup>-grade Report Card and Math Story-Problem Book





At first glance, this folder's contents suggest chaos and disorder, but there are some gems within (see Figure 1) including an encouraging note from my teacher on my 5<sup>th</sup> grade report card, and my hand-drawn illustrations from a math story-problem book starring the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. My mom, an elementary special education teacher, asked me to create this book so she could use it as a mentor text and model for her students in the creation of their own.

Besides nostalgia, reflecting on these artifacts uncovers a deeper reason why I've kept them; each was a hallmark of my writing development. When my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher wrote, "Keep writing those great stories," she planted a seed for me to start to identify as a writer rather than just as a student who wrote well for school. When my mom asked me to create a book for her students, which she bound with contact paper and string, it's one of the first times I can remember my writing going to an authentic audience for an authentic purpose.

Reflecting in this way on my writing-related artifacts helped me to recognize the value in leading students through the same type of work.

### **The Assignment: Autoethnography of a Writer**

Having taught middle and high school English for 12 years, I (Jason) am a firm believer in the importance of reflection for both writers and for teachers. By carefully considering our past, we can better adjust our present to improve our future writing and instruction (Hillocks, 1995; McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 2005; Yancey, 1998).

So, when I transitioned to teaching undergraduate writing methods courses to pre-service teachers as I worked on my Ph.D., I incorporated reflection into our major course assignments by requiring students to curate an autoethnography of past writing experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2016) call autoethnography, "A reflexive approach to understanding the human condition through critical and engaged analysis of one's own experiences" (p. 24), and Hughes and Pennington (2017) add the element of "Critical reflexivity: seeing ourselves as complicit (at least partially) in the problems we perceive" (p. 22). I hoped that by assigning an autoethnography, I could help my students better process, recognize, and discover important insights about writing instruction from their own writing experiences.

To engage students in this reflexive investigation, I instructed them to remember, reflect on, and write about their positive and negative writing experiences, while drawing from writing-related artifacts from their pasts. Requiring students to reflect on their writing-related artifacts set this assignment apart from the sort of literacy narratives common in both secondary and undergraduate English Education classes.

As Pahl and Roswell (2010) note, "eliciting stories about objects from students opens up their home experience and enables teachers to access communities which may not be visible within schools" (p. 1). By considering why they've kept a particular artifact (or why they had few or no writing-related artifacts), students opened the door to a catalytic question: what do these artifacts suggest about how I should teach writing? Identifying and reflecting on writing-related artifacts allowed students to consider some specific ways they'd been shaped as writers by mentors and contexts and, in turn, to transform those reflections into best practice principles informing their own teaching of writing.

Such reflective work takes on even more significance for pre-service teachers, considering that research suggests teachers teach the way they were taught (for better or worse) by their past teachers, rather than teaching how they were taught to teach in undergraduate methods courses (Saidy, 2015; Whitney, Olan, and Fredricksen, 2013; Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore, 2011). Therefore, why not intentionally bring past experiences and artifacts to the forefront of our discussion to encourage reflection and inform our teaching philosophies?

### Featured Artifacts, Reflections, and Teaching Principles

To demonstrate the value of this autoethnography assignment, I've partnered with three of my former pre-service English teachers from my writing methods class, to each share one of our identified artifacts, our accompanying reflection, and our teaching principles in response to what the artifact says about how we should teach writing.

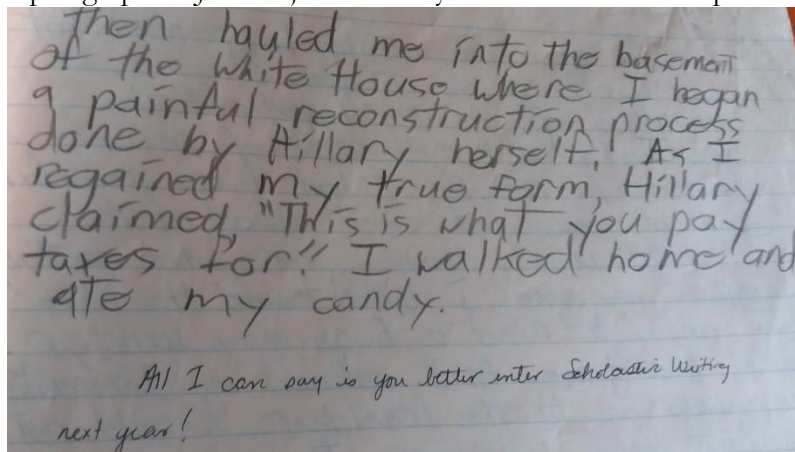
#### Jason's Artifact: 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Journal Entry

Mrs. Mentzer, my 9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, gave us a weekly journal prompt at the beginning of class each Friday, and her instructions were simple. Write for ten minutes. Shoot for at least one full page. If you don't like the prompt or you get stuck, then write about whatever you want for the remaining time. Mrs. Mentzer didn't penalize for lack of quality or correctness. If you wrote for ten minutes, you got the participation points, and you might have earned a bonus point or two for incorporating a term from our vocabulary list. Mrs. Mentzer's weekly journal assignment embraced Penny Kittle's goals for freewriting as "no-fail time to write" with freedom to "experiment with their thinking and ideas, to try on voice, or to rant about life" (2008, p. 29).

I still have a stack of my journal entries from Mrs. Mentzer's class, and despite being a freshman when I wrote them, my work could still best be described as sophomoric. For example, one Thanksgiving-themed entry embellished a meal where my mouth watered as my grandmother served a delicacy on a steaming, silver platter: a single green pea. A Christmas-themed entry took cruel aim at Santa Claus, calling out his unfit physique and penchant for breaking and entering. I frequently poked gentle fun at Mrs. Mentzer or my classmates. Though only a few of my off-key entries, upon re-reading them as an adult, achieved my original goal of being funny, there's one main reason (besides simple nostalgia) I've kept them.

Each journal entry, no matter how ridiculous, includes an encouraging comment from Mrs. Mentzer. For example, I ignored one weekly prompt to instead invent a tale where I was squashed by an asteroid on my walk home from school and then reconstructed in the basement of the White House by a secret government team led by Hillary Clinton (this was during Bill Clinton's presidency). Mrs. Mentzer could have encouraged me to stay on topic, she could have scolded my lack of seriousness, she could have required a re-write or deducted points, but instead, she encouraged me to enter the Scholastic Writing Contest (see Figure 2). The rest of my entries bear similar comments: compliments on my emerging voice, validation of my attempts at humor, encouragement to apply my strengths beyond the journal entries, and even some light sarcasm prompted by my frivolous tone. Mrs. Mentzer only deducted points if I fell short of the single-page requirement.

**Figure 2:** The final paragraph of Jason's journal entry with Mrs. Mentzer's positive comment.



Though I didn't take Mrs. Mentzer up that year on her suggestions for extra-curricular writing opportunities, her positive comments on my journals helped me to self-identify as a writer and bolstered my confidence for future activities such as joining the school newspaper's staff as the sports writer during my senior year. I wonder how my path as a writer might have been different had Mrs. Mentzer been discouraging or punitive with assignments like our weekly journal.

**What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing?** From Mrs. Mentzer's comments on my journal, I learned not to be too quick to dismiss student writing as silly, frivolous, or nonsense. We need to give students time to play in their writing and look for the bright spots within. Some students don't yet have the emotional maturity to write about something serious, but by recognizing their success in other areas like emerging voice or use of pacing, they can build upon this encouragement when they're ready to tackle writing of substance.

### **Joshua's Artifact: Letters to Dorothy**

When I was a boy, my grandmother taught me to write letters. She was an avid letter writer. Up until the days that she could barely move at 93, before the accessibility of the email or text message, she wrote two to three letters a week. The final piece of mail she received in return was, in fact, from me on the day that she passed away.

Most of our letters simply recounted events of our lives taking place so far from each other at times, and others were significant moments that we wanted each other to hear about as if we had been there to witness.

The most significant gift that I could have received after her passing was the bulk of the letters which she had kept from our correspondence (see Figure 3). This history shows the evolution of my writing abilities insofar as I'd learned how to describe the minutia of life, weather, and the seemingly unimportant details that suddenly become important on a Faulknerian scale. One such letter described the sweaty, back-breaking work that my grandfather, along with two of my uncles had completed on a new machine building as large as the house that was technically permitted to be a 10 by 10 shed. All this work was completed in just under thirty days in the late July humid heat of Minnesota. She wrote:

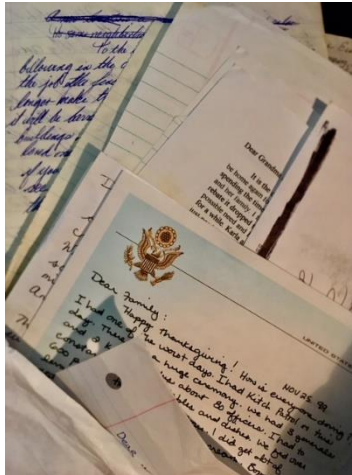
Dad and Davie near broke the new truck hauling the wood trailer but will finish his new shed for the tractors soon. He wants to finish because the sun has been so hot these past few weeks since they began work making him darker than what's good for him, probably not the desert heat you're used to now, Josher, but enough to make dad come in for more breaks when I holler at him. Dad can't finish the kitchen cabinets, put a floor in the basement or get me that gas stove but grandpa can bed down that combine with everything we got back from Uncle Sam. He did get the brown roof to match ours though and almost killed the dog getting it done before the storms start rolling through. You should come home and help a bit because he does too much. (personal correspondence)

**What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing?** The teachable moments from my letters to my grandmother sprout from the lost art of letter writing. Deserving moments may be simple thank you notes to a friend, those between grade-school pen pals on different continents, or they could be letters detailing a concern to a congressperson. Such abilities are taught less and less in composition classes and even less from parents.

As a form of art, I tend to think of letter-writing in three ways. First, letters are a type of persuasion for a family member or friend to visit more often or even come back home after being gone for years on end, such as in my absentee relationship with Minnesota. My grandmother found the ways to write about the weather that would make me miss the scent of rain. A second facet involves writing letters to an elected official about the careless damages to a community, such as when they taxed programs for children's lunch during the summer months when single parents were

working two jobs. Finally, letters are for the historians a hundred years down the road who try to document our quality of life and relationships who will be hard pressed to find truth in a tweet versus a welcome letter between two people, such as the letters between Vincent and Theo Van Gogh or those between President John and his wife, Abigail.

**Figure 3:** Joshua’s stack of letters to and from his grandmother, Dorothy.



### **Jannine’s Artifact: Published Short Story**

On Halloween during tenth grade year, my English teacher gave us a bit of a “break” since Halloween is usually a day that teenager have everything but school on their minds. To keep things low-stress but also relevant to English class, my teacher had us do a creative writing activity; we could write about whatever we wanted, as long as it had a “Halloween edge” to it. I decided to write a story about an abandoned, haunted house, from the perspective of the house itself.

I was fairly impressed by my own idea, and once I began writing, I had a lot of fun with it. However, I did not think much of the finished product even though it was a lot of fun to write. I only wrote it because it was worth a portion of our participation points in the class, and my teacher said she wanted to read them when we were done. So, at the end of class, I handed her my gruesome little story about a house that witnessed one of its tenants murder his family, and I never thought that I would see it again.

To my surprise, the next time she saw me in class, my teacher came up to me with my story in her hands. I automatically thought something was wrong and maybe I had been too gruesome with my content, but it was actually the opposite. She loved my story! She showed it to another teacher in the English Department, and they wanted to get it published in a local magazine that featured student writing samples. With my permission, the story was published! At the time, I didn’t think getting published was a big deal, and I didn’t even get a copy of the magazine, which now I definitely regret because getting something published really is something to be proud of.

Not only do I realize now how wonderful it was to have my writing published, especially at such a young age, but I also have taken away from it something I hope I can accomplish as a teacher. My teacher that year went above and beyond to validate that I was, in fact, a good writer, which empowered me to keep writing outside of the classroom. She also allowed us to branch out of the typical, academic writing assignments and compose something that was completely our own, which is a great exercise for any young writer. I would love to allow opportunities for my students to express their creativity in writing, and I also want to take any possible opportunity to encourage them to keep writing outside of class as well.

**What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing?** My short story experience suggests that I should validate student writers by encouraging them to submit their work to contests or for publications. When students have another incentive other than just an “A” in their English class, they are more likely to be motivated to make great strides in their writing. Students who are fortunate enough to have their work published or win an award will start to identify as writers, and even if students aren’t published, the direct encouragement from a teacher can help to build confidence and independence. My experience also emphasizes the importance of allowing students to branch off once in a while and write creatively. When a student has the opportunity to practice their writing with a topic they enjoy or have created themselves, their academic essays will be strengthened as well.

### **Alex’s Artifact: Senior Journal**

Senior year of high school is not typically characterized by mature decisions or reflective practices. It’s a time plagued with first tattoos (usually regretted), last-minute flings, and milestone celebrations. However, amid such rambunctious activity, my senior English teacher strove to instill one last skill in his students before their foray into college; self-reflection. To do so, Mr. White utilized the practice of journaling. We began our class, every morning, with a 10-minute free-writing warm-up. It didn’t really matter what you wrote, you just had to get your pen moving. All our assigned writings and poems were completed in our journal. We often edited right in our journal as well, which allowed us to reflect on the entirety of our writing practice.

As both my familiarity with the writing process and writing portfolio grew, I began to feel myself develop a new identity: that of a writer. As silly as that may sound, watching my leather-bound journal fill with art that came straight from my melodramatic, teenage soul was both cathartic and empowering. To support my conclusion that I was, in fact, now a *writer*, Mr. White would read through our journals (if we gave him permission to do so) and provide insightful feedback. Throughout most of my schooling, the feedback I had received from my English teachers fell somewhere between “Great work!” and “Keep writing!” There wasn’t much to support my aspirations as a writer or to help me reflect on or improve my skills.

Mr. White, on the other hand, went beyond the standard grammatical corrections and explored how words, *my words*, could have an impact on the audience. He made comments such as; “Strong passage, maybe consider moving the main character’s murder to after her mother’s suicide to elicit more of an emotion from your reader.” Mr. White was clearly taking my writing seriously, and I felt validated. My writing, although morbid, held value to someone other than me.

Flash forward to the future where I have not become a famous writer (yet) but instead have wholeheartedly thrown myself into a career in education. Now that I have begun to curate my own pedagogical practices, I look to the examples that have been set for me in the past. Namely, I look to Mr. White. I still have my journal (see Figure 4) from all those years ago. I kept it, not only as a time capsule containing my emotional treasures from the time but, because it connects me to my passions as a writer. My journal still fulfills its intended purpose: reflection.

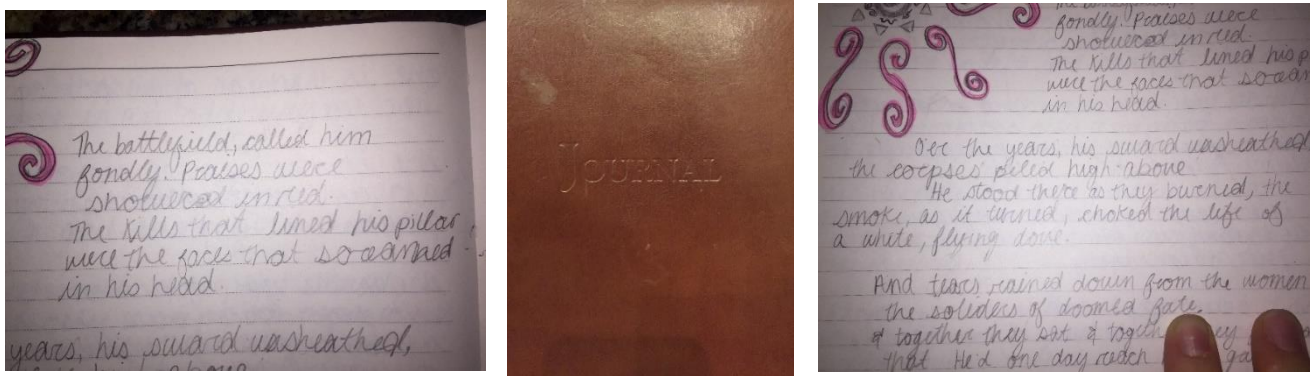
As a future teacher myself, I intend to use journals in my classroom in multiple ways. I, too, will have my students begin the day with a free-writing exercise. I’ve found that starting my English class this way helped to bring me into the present as well as engage me in the creative process. As a portfolio of sorts, my students’ journals will also be used to facilitate both formative and summative assessments. That way, both I and my students can monitor and reflect on their growth. Lastly, I will be mindful of the feedback I provide to my students. Not only do I want my words to validate and enrich their writings, I want my guidance to enhance the reflective and lasting properties journals intrinsically hold.



I recognize that not every student is going to fall head-over-heels in love with writing or even enjoy English as a class. However, it's important for all students to learn how to communicate effectively with themselves and others and to reflect on their intellectual growth. Most importantly, it's crucial for students to feel like their contribution to their own education matters. Journals are a good way to hit multiple targets with one stone, so to speak. Regardless of what career paths my students choose to take, their journals can help them grow personally and professionally. Mine certainly has helped me.

**What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing?** Through my journal writing experiences with Mr. White, I learned I should allow students to use writing for reflection. Using a journal will give them a record of progress and a method for looking back at their growth. I will give personalized feedback respecting students as writers and gives them a chance to improve.

**Figure 4:** Pictures of the cover and entries from Alex's senior journal



### Conclusion

There are evident themes in our collective featured artifacts and lessons: the importance of providing student choice in topic and genre, the lasting nature of tangible writing products in physical form and giving respect to the process and choices of student writers; however, none of the teaching principles shared through these examples are all that revolutionary. By and large, they line up with advice from Kittle (2008), Gallagher (2011), and other student-centered writing pedagogy. What's unique about these principles is that the co-authors developed them through reflection on artifacts they've kept. And, like with many practices, we're more apt to adopt principles we've discovered ourselves rather than those that were taught to us as rules.

For secondary English teachers, there are several takeaways from this work. The first is an encouragement to look through your own archives. What writing-related artifacts have you kept? What do they suggest about how you should teach writing? Are there provocative examples which challenge your current practice, or which would make interesting models for students? Considering these questions while looking through your archives and reflecting on the artifacts you re-discover can be a valuable practice for discovering and clarifying pedagogical principles in the teaching of writing.

In addition to reflecting on our own writing-related artifacts, we can ask students to engage with their writing pasts. Ask students to comb their own personal archives and to check in with their families about any writing-related artifacts they may have kept. Then, ask follow-up questions about why the artifacts were kept and what they reflect. Even discovering a lack of writing-related artifacts can be valuable by considering how the fact that nothing was kept reflects on past writing instruction and experience. We believe that identity and development as a writer, is based on past

experiences, and by bringing conscious reflection and understanding to the physical artifacts of students' pasts, it could foster a generative platform for future, intentional growth.

Perhaps most importantly, English teachers should strive to generate for students the kinds of writing products they'll want to keep as artifacts, to look back on and reflect, celebrate, and maybe even pass on to future generations.

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Jannine Amore is an 8th grade Language Arts teacher in Tempe, Arizona. Throughout her college career, her love for literature and the written word became stronger and stronger, and that is when she knew she wanted to be able to share that love with young adults and aspiring writers. Having the ability to share her passion with middle school students and encourage them to be confident in their writing abilities and appreciate literature extremely rewarding and something she enjoys doing each and every day.

Alex Hoffman is a recent college graduate currently working at LifeTime fitness as an Assistant Manager in the aquatics department. She enjoys using the leadership and educational skills she learned at Arizona State University to lead her team of employees, as well as instruct young swimmers in the water.

## American Anger, 2018

Shannon Carriger

Gardner Edgerton High School, Gardner, Kansas

*The anger that inspired this essay a little over a year ago has sadly increased. It has been hard to watch this escalation and even harder to lead students through civil conversations about a world so full of tumult and pain. But, it's the job, and it may be more important than ever.*

It's morning in America...somewhere. Still morning, technically, on the West Coast where I'm sure there is sun, but here in the gray mid-winter of a Kansas mid-afternoon, there is no sun and no warmth.

My students, Advanced Placement juniors, are writing about Carrie Chapman Catt's 1902 speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association<sup>1</sup>, and, earlier, my Advanced Placement seniors debated the desire for connection and a shared humanity in Colum McCann's exceptional 2009 novel, *Let the Great World Spin*. I am a high school English teacher, and these assignments that ask my student to think, analyze, criticize, and wonder are lately all I have to offer a world that feels, increasingly, to have gone mad.

We are angry in America at the start of 2018. Not even 100 years since women won the right to vote, just over 150 years since the end of the Civil War, still 58 years shy of our 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a nation, and we are angry. More and more with each passing day, we are angry at each other, at ourselves, at our government, at our enemies. At times, we are even angry at our friends. There has to be some reason for this unbridled anger that rides out between us, across the plains, into valleys, through city streets, under bridges, over mountains. There has to be a reason. Otherwise, all this ire is bound to burn beyond our control until we're left with nothing but ash and regret.

When I was in the third grade, I called my teacher a bitch. A bouffant-haired hardass whose only fault was wanting her under-nine charges to grow up to be good people with a strong work ethic, she did not deserve my criticism. As a teacher myself, I know that now. But, at eight-years-old, I was hell bent on being praised for something I did well, often better than my peers, which was spelling. I could spell just about any word put in front of me. What I couldn't do—and that list is long—was legibly write in cursive. So, my teacher made me take home 13 consecutive spelling tests, not because I'd misspelled a single word, but because my handwriting was atrocious. This was 1984, and penmanship was still taught in grade school classrooms.

Calling my teacher a bitch wasn't a surprise; I was an angry kid. I had a fierce sense of injustice and didn't like to see anyone mistreated. Walking the three blocks home from school each day, I yelled at the older boys who heckled my little brother and me, convinced their age and size were no match for my volume and outrage. And, my parents fought sometimes, as most parents do, and I worried, as most kids do, that somehow it was my fault. I was angry at those latchkey bullies, angry I couldn't stop my parents from fighting, and you can bet your ass I was angry about those spelling tests.

My punishment for calling my teacher a bad name was to speak with our elementary school counselor. I remember him as a tall man with a well-kempt beard, glasses, and a bald spot, but all of that could be wrong because he had one distinct characteristic that blurs the rest of him when I turn my mind back to his office. He had a therapy puppet, a dolphin named Duso, that I spoke to each time I went to talk about my anger issues. While I don't recall those conversations in the slightest, I remember Duso perfectly. He was quiet. He asked questions. He gave me somewhere to look besides into the face of an adult I didn't know. He made me feel safe enough to say what was bothering me. Years later, after my divorce from my first husband, I remembered that feeling of

safety. It was like a thing buried deep in the ground that I had forgotten until I walked into my therapist's office in 2012. As I cried, trying to choke out what was wrong, that buried thing began to burrow up, shedding layers of dirt and grime, until there it was in front of me: a small, green thing giving me permission to breathe again.

Though my story is singular, the anger within it is not. That kind of anger, that rage that has nowhere to go, is a part of our American identity. It's in our literature and the foundations of this country, and it is something our students need to learn how to negotiate.

My juniors, reading Carrie Chapman Catt, discovered her argument for women's independence and for the breaking of ties to fathers and governments that would view women as lesser. She wanted to shatter the notion that women had to be obedient because it implied men were to be obeyed, and not all men can lead, just as not all women are born to serve. What Catt knew about anger could power a small city. By the time she delivered her speech to NAWSA in 1902, she had been working for women's suffrage for nearly twenty years; it would be another eighteen before the 19th amendment was passed. Her opposition wasn't solely male; there were plenty of women who wished her silent. Women who were comfortable being relegated to the role of the domestic, and women who didn't want more than what their husbands allowed saw Catt as a nuisance at best or, worse, a threat. Then, as now, women shuttered each other as often as we raised each other up. I can't say I know for certain she ever called someone a bitch, but I'd bet even money she had occasion to want to. She watched her competent, intelligent mother stay home and stay silent while her father exercised his right to vote. She lost her first husband to an untimely death by way of typhoid. And, within six years, she also lost her mother, her dear brother, and her friend and fellow suffragette Susan B. Anthony. She had reason to be angry.

Around the time of the publication of *Let the Great World Spin*, Colum McCann was interviewed about, in part, his inspiration for the novel<sup>2</sup>. The title comes from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall," but a more personal story drives the narrative. On September 11, 2001, McCann's father-in-law was in the north tower of the World Trade Center on the 59<sup>th</sup> floor. He was able to get out, and he walked all the way Uptown, to 71<sup>st</sup> street, into the arms of his granddaughter. On that day, fear and anger held this country hostage in a way we had not felt before. We huddled in doorways in New York City and in apartments in Kansas, terrified of what would happen next. McCann's novel could easily have taken that road, the exploration of tragedy and fear against an ever-changing skyline; instead, his book illuminates the need for empathy and connection in an isolated age and is, I dare say, more relevant now than when first published in 2009. Set in 1974, the book is a tapestry of poverty and wealth, Vietnam and the start of the internet age, prostitution and what it means to be an artist, the deep skepticism at the heart of all true faith, of hope, and, of course, anger. One might assume a book written in response to 9/11 would be filled with reasons for anger, but it isn't. It is, rather, a treatise on how to love each other. We are to do it openly. We are to do it honestly. And, above all, we are to do it completely. We are to love everyone and anyone we can, each and every day.

This is the focus of my classroom and my teaching philosophy. I believe there is no better way to show someone you love them than to teach them. Sometimes, those lessons are about sentence structure and word choice. Often, they are not. In English classrooms we're dealing with text as a gate to the messy stuff of life: what it means to be human and how to survive it. Knowing how to manage anger, then, is central to my teaching.

America has been in an arrested state of grieving since 9/11. We haven't processed trauma the way we should: quietly, personally, in places that makes us feel safe. Those born between 1970 and 1990 hadn't fully experienced our country at war until 9/11, the Gulf War having been so short-lived that for some of us it barely felt real. We were innocent enough to believe the lie of American exceptionalism, and we were fragile enough to be broken by the realization of its falsehood. We



stayed out until the streetlights came on as kids and didn't think about being in constant contact with our parents because cell-phones didn't exist yet. Besides, who really wanted to?

Our anger today is rooted in our choice, collectively, to retreat into the faux-safety of the digital world rather than engage with one another. We hide behind the screens of protection, somehow thinking if we never allow ourselves to get too close to anyone, we can't be hurt, all the while becoming enraged at the people on the other side of the screen, people, often, we don't even know. Our unprocessed trauma, coupled with technological advancements that eliminate the need to ever speak to or physically interact with an actual human being, has driven American emotion underground. The spiraling rage on Twitter isn't real emotion. It's performance parading as catharsis, and it isn't helping anyone. When we take to social media platforms to air our grievances, we aren't attempting to connect to someone who may disagree in any meaningful way. We aren't hoping to find common ground in an increasingly isolationist culture, and we certainly aren't trying to figure out how to love anyone, except for, maybe, ourselves. Because, when we post about how fed up we are, how appalled, how irate, what we really want is affirmation. We want people to agree with us, to validate our statements, to "like" and "favorite" us so we can feel part of something. We want an escape from the void. But, we're constantly entering it. As we sit behind screens, we are increasingly angry and increasingly alone.

Ironically, anger isn't the enemy, and it isn't even, really, the problem. Anger may arise from pain, from sadness, from risking vulnerability only to be rejected. None of those are problems. Pain is proof of living. Sadness is proof of caring. Rejection means you were brave enough to be vulnerable in the first place. While living, caring, and vulnerability may all lead to anger, anger can lead to action, and action can lead to change. If we want change, we have to live boldly enough that we risk pain, to care deeply enough that we risk sadness, and to be vulnerable enough that we risk rejection. All of that starts with engaging not only with other people but with ourselves. Reaching out for a friend or neighbor or stranger—instead of a phone—can foster this engagement. Sitting in silence, or walking in the woods, or breaking down and crying can be ways of engaging. We have to relearn how to engage with all of our emotions, even anger, or we risk forgetting what it was like to ever really feel anything. And, we have to teach our students to do this.

As teachers of English, we can't help but be deeply attached to emotion. It's in how we feel about our students, about our content, and about our careers. We stand up for teacher rights in capital buildings; we stand up to administrations for our students; we stand up in front of classrooms every day and try to lead by example even when—especially when—we are angry.

What I'm trying to teach my students is that there is a time to be enraged, and there is also a time to engage. There is a time to think and to analyze and to criticize, and there is a time to act, to feel, and to change. There is a time to love and a time to breathe. A time for every purpose—or dolphin puppet—under heaven.

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Shannon Carriger has taught English in Kansas for over fifteen years; she currently teaches at Gardner Edgerton High School. She has taught for Kansas State University, Washburn University, Ottawa University, and University of Kansas. Carriger ran a Kansas Volunteer Commission arts

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## **“This is it?”: A Better Conference Response Framework**

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### **Abstract**

Despite collaborative teacher intentions, students often fall silent or acquiesce to the teacher’s agenda during writing conferences. In annotation-driven conferences, students prepare for and lead with annotations on their own writing. Their self-annotations provide a blueprint for teachers to recognize and respond to rhetorical choices. Annotation-driven conferences follow a rich history of writing teachers’ efforts to gain additional insight into students’ intentions that are not immediately obvious on the page.

### **Keywords**

developmental writing, remedial writing, annotation, conferences, feedback, writing, self-annotation, writing response, first-year writing

Back-to-back student-teacher writing conferences usually mean only a few minutes to prep for each writer, and with the pressure of students lined up outside office doors, our best intentions for responding don’t always play out. Especially when a student brings a paper with lots of errors, our responses can fall short of acknowledging all of the student’s careful decision-making.

Even in conferences where teachers prioritize student interaction, nervous writers can retreat to safe responses rather than risk sharing narratives of their thought process. Students who are new to college writing expectations or intimidated by previous harsh responses to their writing can easily shift into a passive role and acquiesce to what seems like a teacher’s revision agenda (Heller, 1989; Gulley, 2012). When teachers are rushed and students are silent, there is an understandable tendency for the teacher to take over. In these moments, one risk is to ignore the very real intention and effort behind a glaring error or incomprehensible sentence.

For students assigned to “remedial” writing courses like the ones we teach, feedback that seems dismissive or hasty can add to the already-prevalent narrative that they aren’t “college material” (Herrington and Curtis, 2000; Sommers, 2006; Hogue Smith, 2010). Comments like “this doesn’t make sense” or “think about your word choice here” are well-intentioned and efficient but can underscore the stereotype that “underprepared students ‘just can’t think’” and are “gate crashers” at the college party (Hogue Smith, 2010, p. 668). Here’s how one of our students at a small central Kansas college described feedback during a freshman-year conference:

“I felt my intentions were overlooked; like my effort was misunderstood. . . I carefully chose one particular word that my professor circled and scribbled ‘word choice’ in the margin. In that moment, I was unsure if the word was used incorrectly, if the professor didn’t think it fit, or if I didn’t understand the content at all. Either way my intentions felt undervalued and the time I spent picking the word felt wasted.”

Especially for students already struggling to feel a sense of belonging in the college classroom, responses to writing make a critical difference in how student writers develop, if they develop, as writers (Sommers, 2016, p. 251). We’ve seen students quickly resist or disengage when

their effort feels dismissed (Herrington and Curtis, 2000). Recently, we sat down with a group of students to discuss how they feel when teacher responses seem to overlook their effort. Below is an excerpt from the focus group.

Student 1: Sometimes when you spend six hours on a rough draft and [the teacher] will look at it or one of your peers will look at it and you can just tell on their face that they are like, “This is it?”

Student 2: Yeah, all that work I put in!

Student 1: And you’re just like, “Really? I just spent six hours on this, on a rough draft and you just give me that look like, “This is it?”

Researcher: What do you do when that happens?

Student 3: That’s six hours of work!

Student 4: There’s this kind of “screw this” reaction that you initially want to have if that happens, I think, right?

Student 1: Yeah, I get frustrated.

Student 4: I think some people just have maybe a harder time with it, and so it’s like when they see that they’ve put in so much work and they’re not getting out of it what they wanted, it’s kind of like, “I put in all this work, like, I know I’m not the best writer.”

Our students are clearly voicing frustration with feedback that seems to overlook their efforts and intentions. Their frustration suggests that teachers like us and like those of the students quoted above, need ways to illuminate what writers tried to do and recognize students as “thinking persons behind and within their prose” (Herrington and Curtis, 2000, p. 361).

For decades, English teachers have worked on responding to intention. Assignments like Dana Heller’s (1989) “paragraph of intention” in which students chronicle their overall plans for a paper (p. 211), allow students to unpack their thought process in ways that may not yet be obvious in their writing. Attached to the first draft of a paper, Heller’s students give a paragraph-length “account of what he or she has tried to do . . . . ostensibly making it possible for a reader to understand the primary aims and disposition of the writer’s task” (p. 211). This strategy directs teacher and student attention to overall intention rather than errors in the early planning stages.

We also need strategies to bolster conference conversations about what students try to do (and how) compared with what the reader experiences (and why) in the nitty gritty details. Without such conversations, students with a “submissive relation to authority” may see teachers as unpredictable, arbitrary rule-driven, writing authorities (Jarrett et al., 2009, p. 52) and dismiss their feedback as “instructor idiosyncrasies” or bias (Sommers, 2006, p. 252).

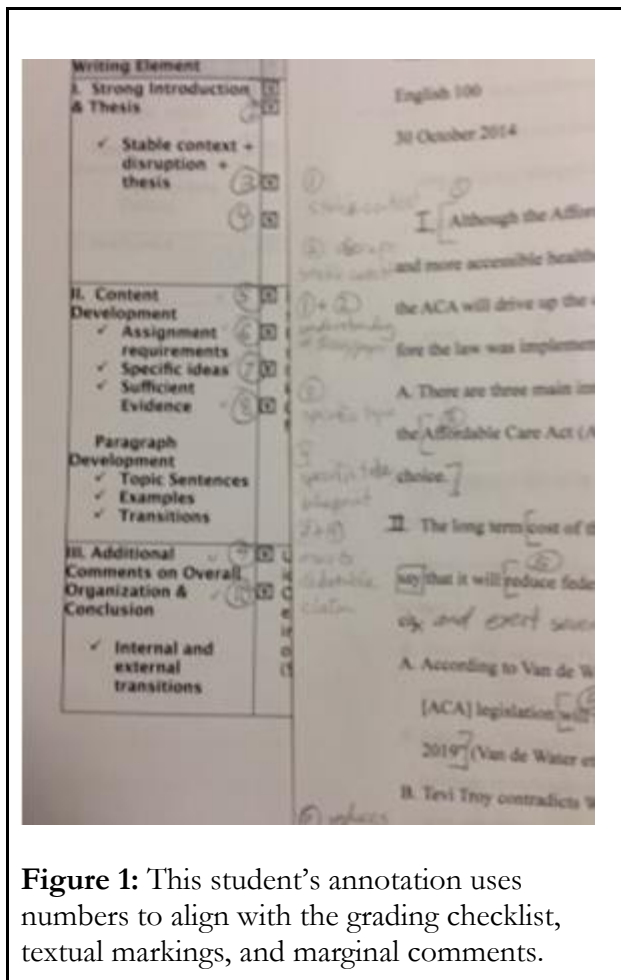
To position students as purposeful writers, regardless of error-ridden prose, correctness alone can’t be the measure of effort nor the sole focus of conversations. Despite a misplaced appositive or a confusing signal verb, a writer likely selected its details and placement with care. We need conference practices that position students as the “thinking person behind and within their prose,” the expert of their own writing (Herrington and Curtis, 2000, p. 361). Like Sommers suggests, we want our students to “imagine their instructors as readers waiting to learn from their

contributions, not waiting to report what they've done wrong on a given paper" (Sommers, 2006, p. 255). Especially in the shadow of heavy workloads and limited time to really look at student writing, we need a conference practice in which students can lead us to places of thoughtful intention and interest (King and Sheriff LeVan, 2018b).

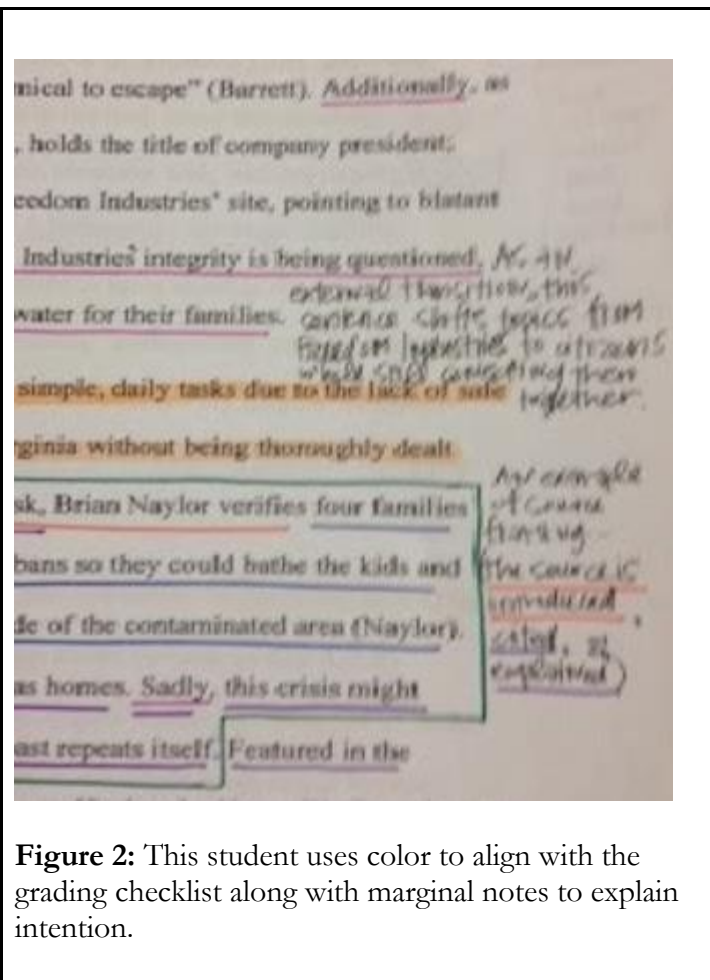
### Self-Annotation as Conference Preparation

To respond to students *and* their papers we ask students to use self-annotation—where students describe how their work matches up to grading criteria prior to conferences—to prioritize the invisible work we often overlook. Students use textual markings to spotlight required content and marginal or endnotes to explain intentions. Their sideline commentary guides teacher attention to the process along with the product.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of what annotation might look like as students enter a conference. In each case, the student finds ways to show where they believe their writing meets the grading expectations and explains their thinking in marginal notes. If a student spent a great deal of time integrating a source, for example, she might annotate some of her thinking to reveal purpose and effort.



**Figure 1:** This student’s annotation uses numbers to align with the grading checklist, textual markings, and marginal comments.



**Figure 2:** This student uses color to align with the grading checklist along with marginal notes to explain intention.

With annotated writing in hand, students can participate in student-teacher conferences as leaders who narrate the thinking behind their writing decisions. Students adopt a self-evaluatory role



in which they mark their own work before getting feedback from others (King and Sheriff LeVan, 2018a). Instead of showing up with a clean writing sample, students come to conferences with their work already annotated, with their own commentary spilling into the margins. Although it's possible to prepare and lead conferences without annotation, the physical representation of student thinking gives students a place to start when they might shrink away from a teacher's question.

### Variations on Annotation

Of course annotation—even on the student's own writing—isn't a new idea. Many scholars use annotation to help students show how they understand their rhetorical choices and improve metacognition (King, 2012; Andrade et al., 2009; Marsh, 2015; Bunn, 2013; Hogue Smith, 2010; Zywica and Gomez, 2008). In their work with middle school students, Heidi Andrade and Beth Boulay used a color coding annotation system to match text with rubric elements—a quick and easy way for students to demonstrate where they think their writing meets the requirements. Other annotation approaches spotlight decision-making and writing rationale. For example, Cheryl Hogue Smith asks students to use track changes between drafts and explain those changes with endnotes. Michael Bunn's submission notes ask students to annotate the places they imitate another writer's moves, and still other teachers, like the ones Bill Marsh describes, use annotation to show where writers intend to connect their own writing content to another text. In each case, annotation provides additional insight into students' intent that isn't immediately obvious on the page.

Annotation, in any mix of the already popular forms, can help set teachers up to respond to both intention and product. How we ask students to annotate depends on what additional information we need to be thoughtful responders. At times, this means our annotation requirements are extremely specific. We might, for example, ask students to annotate where they acknowledge a naysayer or explain how appositives build credibility. Not every annotation receives a conference comment; students have their own reasons for marking their papers. They might want to check their own thinking, compare their work with the rubric, and other times underscore the work they've done. Often student commentary fills the margins with their intention and effort in ways we can't predict.

### Self-Annotation to Guide Conference Preparation and Structure

Using self-annotation to drive the conference process influences what students do before they arrive for a student-teacher writing conference. Even for accomplished writers, knowing how to prepare for a writing conference can be murky. Below are three student reflections, taken from recorded metacognition exercises, where students reflect on how they prepare for and lead conferences with annotations:

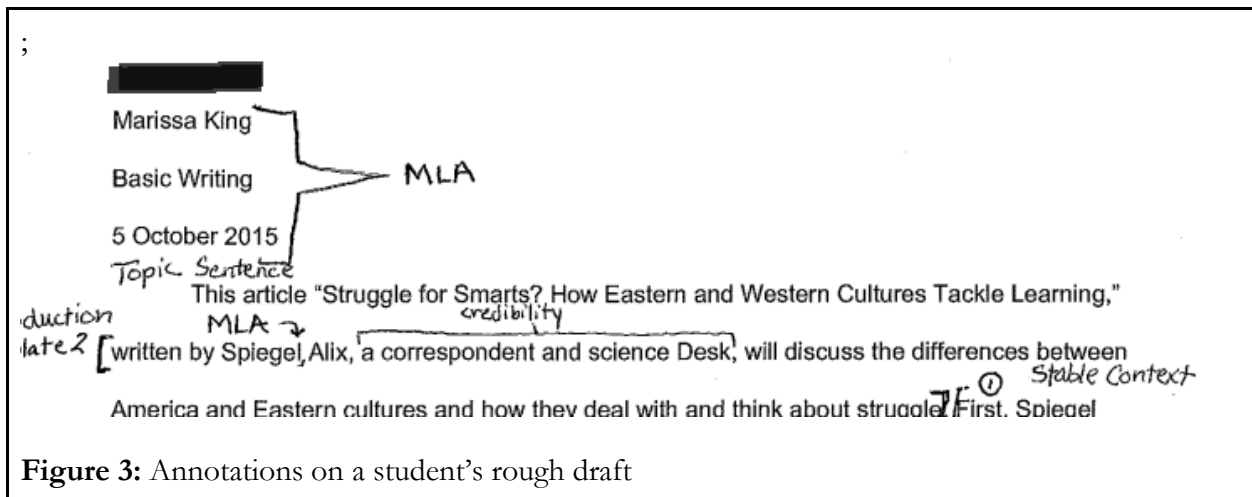
**Student 1:** After I print my final draft, I go through and I annotate it. Then I go look at my rubric. Then I go through and annotate and make sure that I have everything. And if I missed something, or see something that I didn't do, I go back and I fix it. You go in and you have your stuff ready and you tell—show [the teacher]—what you did and why you did it and why you did it that way.

**Student 2:** I followed the step-by-step rubric to make sure that I had what I needed to before conferences. You explain each step and the teacher can truly understand what you're wanting them to understand if you read and explain why did you write—decide—to use that word or phrase. It's very beneficial, I think. It helped me have a better self-confidence in myself.

**Student 3:** The way that I have prepared for conference is annotating my papers and knowing what to explain and how to explain it. So like when I use a transition word why I used it and how it works with the paper or another example of appositive, how that builds credibility for the author. And then what it means to lead a conference is to take control and show how you wrote the paper and then I was never used to like conference. I [was] always used to handing in my papers and being done with it.

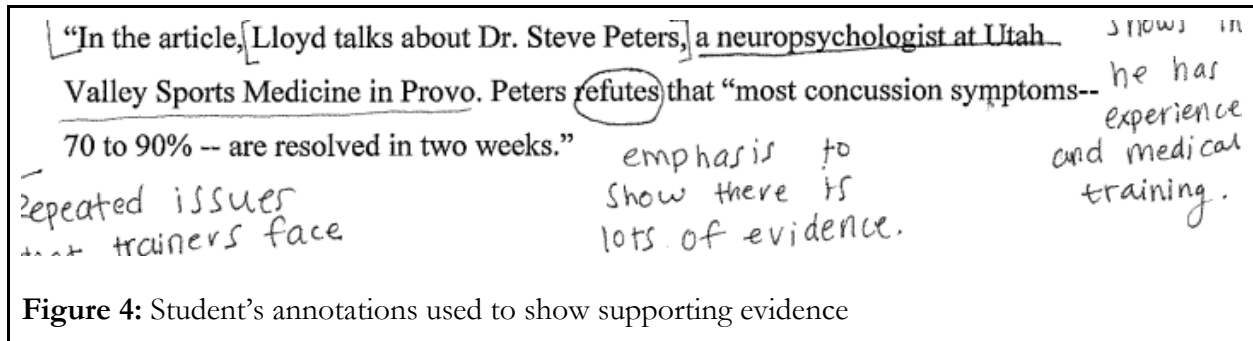
### Annotation to Spotlight Intention

For teachers, student self-annotation offers a chance to see what students intend even when there are errors. Figure 3 shows a rough draft that a student brought to a conference. Citing the annotation of her source introduction, the student explained how her source introduction (“Speigel, Alix . . .”) met MLA expectations. Although the voice marker is incorrect and misspelled, her annotation offered an explanation of why she inverted the author’s name. As responders, we could clarify the easy-to-fix misunderstanding while acknowledging the effort to implement MLA. Although this error is not a pressing concern and could be quickly fixed in any conference, annotation prioritized the student’s explanation of what she *did* know and the careful, although wrong, choice she made. Especially for students with many errors, annotation helps students highlight their intent.



**Figure 3:** Annotations on a student’s rough draft

In another conference a student used the annotations in Figure 4 to begin the discussion of her supporting evidence. Her paper laid out the dangerous, time-sensitive work of athletic trainers assessing concussions and made a case for how quickly trainers have to respond. Then, in a section annotated “repeated issues trainers face,” she wrote, “Peters refutes that ‘most concussion symptoms—70-90%—are resolved in two weeks.’” At first glance, the sentence seemed to contradict her earlier claims. But the student’s annotation for the signal verb “refutes”—that it “shows there is lots of evidence”—pinpoints a misunderstanding of the word’s meaning. Her annotations turned the conference conversation towards her well-informed intention to underscore the evidence with a quote and treated the word choice as the minor issue it was. As physical signposts of the writer’s thought process, annotations take some of the guesswork out of responding to a confusing verb or other misstep.



Perhaps the students in Figures 3 and 4 could have easily articulated the intentions behind the inverted author name and the confusing signal verb but it's also easy to imagine a conference breezing by both issues. As conference preparation, annotation can prime students to consider their own decisions and remind teachers to dig beneath areas of confusion.

Even in polished prose where students use annotations to accurately explain their moves, the teacher can respond more fully to the student's intent. A teacher's comments such as "another reason this works so well . . ." or "this is similar to X author's moves" add to a student's knowledge of rhetorical practices, deepening understanding of writing success.

Most English teachers have a repertoire of strategies to employ during writing conferences and annotation-driven writing conferences is one more tool to position students as experts of their own writing and teachers as responders. Students' annotations provide a blueprint to recognize and respond to rhetorical choices. To borrow one of our student's descriptions, annotation helps us find "treasure underneath the ashes and dust of error-filled writing."

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## Missing the Signs: Imperfect Allyship and the Re-examination of Personal Biases

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Let us begin with some recent popular culture. Consider the excellent film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* released to theaters in late 2018.<sup>1</sup> At a point in the movie, the intrepid heroes Miles Morales and Peter Parker sneak into a lab run by corporate scientists, for plot reasons. During this scene, we discover that the lead scientist, a woman, turns out to be Olivia Octavius, a female version of the famous Spider-Man nemesis, Doctor Octopus/Doc Ock. While watching the film, my friend and I turned to each other and gasped like pre-teen boys; we had not seen it coming. And yet the movie warns us a moment before the reveal that we need to challenge our assumptions, as Parker quips, “I re-examine my personal biases,” after being told that the head scientist, who he thought was a man, was in fact a woman. The writers of the movie left clues throughout the story making it clear that not only would a major antagonist be a woman, but it would also make sense and not be a big deal. However, I think a lot of us long-time Spider-Man fans were genuinely surprised, as we overlooked the tells throughout the film, noticing only after the fact, to our surprise and, perhaps, embarrassment. Peter Parker had to re-examine his personal biases, but so did a lot of moviegoers.

For the sake of the argument I am going to make in this reflection, I will call this story the Doc Ock heuristic, by which I refer to an event that causes me to think about my own biases and find previously overlooked clues to an unexamined but obvious truth. My Doc Ock moment came in the form of a pretty great teacher candidate named Cal. Cal is now a senior in my teacher preparation program, which means I have been teaching, advising, and supervising them for a year now. Cal is funny, smart, sarcastic, loud, and blunt, which are qualities in students and teachers that appeal to me. So I almost immediately took a liking to them. Until embarrassingly recently, I would have used “her” instead of the admittedly grammatically awkward “them.”

To my chagrin, I have learned the hard lesson that I am not as woke as I liked to think I was. Between semesters, after having Cal as a student in two different classes, it dawned on me that perhaps Cal is transgender or non-binary, and I had not even noticed or thought about changing the way I talk with or about them. Now that I understand more about Cal’s identity, I also see the signs over the last year that, in hindsight, make obvious that unexamined (on my part) truth.

My first opportunity to read a sign came upon one of my first interactions with Cal. During the first class period I had with Cal’s cohort I outlined the procedures for teacher candidates pertaining to their field experiences, going into schools, introducing themselves to office staff, that sort of stuff. Cal approached me after class and asked about the name tag provided by the university that all students must wear as identification when they visit a school. Cal’s legal name is uncommon and not something like Callista, where “Cal” would be an obvious shortening, which means that Cal’s name tag did not read “Cal.” They asked me somewhat tentatively about getting a name tag with Cal on it instead of their legal name. I responded, “Yeah, no big deal. Just tell the office what you need and if they give you a hard time, I’ll take care of it.” Easy, because mostly I do not particularly care what the name tag says, as long as it

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, really. *Into the Spider-Verse* is much more of a fantastic, award-winning art film than a comic book movie. I am also going to spoil something minor: beware! Of course, if you read this note after reading the essay, then....sorry?

matches the identity of the person wearing it. Cal looked so relieved, like my “yeah, sure” permission was something special and out of the ordinary.

I wish I had thought more about the underlying reasons it was so important for Cal to have their name tag match their identity. In an insightful paper on name choice as an integral part of transgender identity, Arielle VanderSchans explains, “as names are both an expression and construction of identity and identity is partly a social construct it matters what others think” (2016, p. 18). Giving Cal permission to use their chosen name on a name tag had more significance than I had understood in the moment. As the program chair, professor, and advisor, I signified that I approved of Cal’s identity (which I do), but how nice it would have been to fully realize what I was doing at the time!

Another clue: looking back on the past year, I think many of Cal’s fellow candidates knew about Cal’s identity, even if those peers never told me or used any pronouns at all when talking to or about Cal. There are two Cal’s in the same cohort; the rest of the students call them “Cal T” and “Cal P,” never “boy Cal” and “girl Cal” or some other gendered version. Additionally, relationships and interactions with a teacher mentor earlier in Cal’s field experience seemed strained and weird, but I never caught why, chalking it up to interpersonal oddness that occasionally happens when pairing a student with a teacher. Now, I wonder if some of that discomfort came at least partly from Cal’s non-conforming identity. Finally, Cal occasionally referred to a girlfriend, so my assumption was that Cal is gay. My bias, or my blinder was not considering gender identity in Cal’s case, only sexual orientation.

This is sadly funny, because I teach about racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism in multiple classes at the university. My teaching, my scholarship, and my attention tends to center on marginalized people and their experiences in American institutions, particularly schools. My spouse and I teach our elementary-age children that people have different life-experiences and our responsibility as good neighbors and citizens is to become aware of, befriend, and respect all kinds of people, no matter their race, gender, or identity. And yet, there I was, stuck with the idea that I have only partially been practicing what I preach.

What finally made me understand my own ignorance came from an incident at the end of the semester when I went to observe Cal for a lesson they were teaching at their assigned middle school classroom. Now that Cal is with a teacher mentor who is comfortable with them and allows more opportunities to teach, Cal has blossomed; they interact with their students with the power of wit, charm, and tease, and the students eat it up. Cal is doing great in the classroom, and I told them so, using the titles I save for student teachers in schools: “Ms. T, I very much enjoyed this class. Excellent work, ma’am.” Ma’am. I said, “ma’am,” which is not what I thought was a normal word in my vocabulary. I suppose I use it in place of “sir” when I feel like using an honorific with someone I perceive as a woman. And Cal *cringed*, and I noticed, but it took me a couple of days for it to set in.

Eventually, I got the idea. Oh no! I called Cal “Ms.” and “ma’am,” and I am not sure that Cal *is* a “Ms.” and a “ma’am,” and *I never thought to find out first, because I never ask first!* After I realized my mistake, I started reading about gender identity and engaged in the classic practice of going to Google to get advice on how to ask students about their own gender identity in an appropriate manner.<sup>2</sup> I found some guides from several universities across the country and decided to share a document from another institution with my students for their own edification.<sup>3</sup> On the first day of class of the new semester, I met with my group of student teachers and shared

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<sup>2</sup> Not an endorsement of Google as a company or a suggestion to exclusively use their search engine. Bing, Yahoo, even DuckDuckGo are all viable options for searching on the internet.

<sup>3</sup> Citing the source to the students, of course.



the document. Cal seemed genuinely pleased, until they got to the final page, when they pulled out a pen and started marking.

When class ended, I approached Cal and asked the question that I could not bring myself to send in an email: “Hey, Cal, remember last semester when I visited you and called you ‘Ms.’ and ‘ma’am?’ I think I screwed up, and I am very sorry. What title and pronouns should I use?” Cal cocked their head a bit, flipped back some hair, and nonchalantly replied, “They. I prefer ‘they.’ But call me ‘Ms. T,’ anything else just confuses my students.”<sup>4</sup> I apologized again and told them I would use the correct pronouns, but it seemed Cal had bigger fish to fry. “Actually, we need to talk about the handout—you usually give really thoughtful, good stuff, but this one kinda sucks.” Cal then informed me that at the end, the seemingly helpful chart that gave a list of “alternative pronouns” with handy conjugations (e.g. *ze/zir/zirs*) included multiple pronouns that are largely considered insulting or mocking of non-binary, non-conforming people. I felt stung, again by my own ignorance. I expressed thanks and apologies and told Cal I would correct the error and share with the rest of the class in our next meeting. Cal’s response: “No problem. Look, remember when you said I could change my name tag? I knew then you were an ally.” There it is. My relatively thoughtless act of kindness, in that I did not even consider the underlying reasons for a name change on an ID badge, but it mattered to Cal.

Being a nice and generally considerate person is great, but not enough. I realize that I need to be more thoughtful and active in my allyship. I cannot wait for students to identify themselves, to assume “he” and “she” are the norm for each individual until somebody demonstrates otherwise. So, I am making some changes. For example I added a few unassuming questions on my student profile sheet I ask every new student to fill out, and now I know what pronoun my students prefer I use and what title I should employ when visiting in a field placement. Simple, not a lot of effort on my part, even confidential as the form goes directly from the student to me, no big deal. And yet, it took me five years and mis-identifying one of my own students to think of changing my own practice as pertaining to gender identity.<sup>5</sup>

But this essay is not meant to be another “blunder narrative”—where I explain my mistake, how I solved the problem, then congratulate myself on my newfound enlightenment and ask readers to do the same.<sup>6</sup> Instead of offering shallow, three-step solutions, my intention is to demonstrate my own oversight as an example for others. I would like for you, dear reader, to draw your own conclusions for your own teaching and interactions with your own students. If you see a warning applicable for your own life, great. If you read this and think about how much more aware and less hypocritical you are, fantastic and good for you. Ultimately, what matters is

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<sup>4</sup> This answer about using the title “Ms.” because any other moniker is confusing to students is loaded and very much worthy of further discussion and analysis.

<sup>5</sup> I had received the advice that I include more suggestions on how to intentionally create an inclusive classroom space, which I admit to feeling awkward about because I am not an expert. But there are a growing number of educational professionals who have excellent ideas, so let me share a place to start: Allie George (pseudonym) wrote for a Guardian blog on education and had an excellent piece in 2014 about supporting transgender students (<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/oct/29/transgender-supporting-students-school-lgbt>). George also ran a twitter account called Rainbow Teaching which, while no longer active, contains a treasure trove of information, links, and contacts with teachers and administrators who take the work of inclusion seriously (<https://twitter.com/rainbowteaching?lang=en>). Finally, Monmouth University made a simple two-page flyer with basic advice and links to other sources (<https://www.monmouth.edu/gender-studies/documents/transgender-inclusion.pdf/>).

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “blunder narrative” is a derivation of John Paul Tassoni’s and William H. Thelin’s “Blundering the Hero Narrative” (2000). An excellent explanation of the inherent issue of the blunder narrative comes from Darren Crovitz’s “Bias and the Teachable Moment: Revisiting a Teacher Narrative” (2006).

that we treat our students with respect and care, then correct mistakes when we discover our errors. I would like to reiterate something stated by Jenni Bader two years ago in *Kansas English* in a reflection she wrote about a non-binary student in her class:

The lesson for me is not in learning how to qualify or label students' gender identities or sexual orientations but in learning not to label or make assumptions. Rather, each of our students should be able to expect non-judgmental, unconditional care and support as students and as individuals (2017, p. 12).

The point is that I do not need to worry about how to label Cal, just how to treat them with respect, which in this case means I need to change the way I speak to and about them.

Finally, back to Spider-Man. For me, the Doc Ock heuristic serves as a reminder that I need to be more actively cognizant of my students, but when I am not, that I own the mistake and then do better. I am an ally, just an imperfect one. I have been more attuned to race, ethnicity, and sexuality for a while now, but my own radar was not picking up on gender identity. Allow my story to serve as a warning. As sensitive as you are to the needs of your students and the realities they live in, you can still miss something in the future. Maybe the signs will be clear in retrospect, perhaps not. Regardless, re-examine your personal biases, and I will re-examine mine.

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## Improving Multimodal Assignments through Collaborative Reflection/Revision

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### Abstract

Multimodal assignments, while dismissed by some as “creative,” are becoming more widely accepted in college composition classrooms. In fall 2016, Wichita State University assigned a multimodal assignment in English 101 for the first time. This essay traces the revision and remaking of this multimodal assignment, reviewing the purposes of multimodal assignments and the benefits of a reflective and collaborative pedagogical practice.

### Keywords

multimodal, creative, composition, revision, reflection, collaboration

In fall 2016, all English 101 instructors at Wichita State University (WSU), for the first time in the composition program’s history, assigned a multimodal assignment. In many universities across the nation, composition programs are more frequently assigning multimodal tasks, despite some continued resistance to “creative” assignments.

Instructors at WSU designed this first multimodal to help students navigate rhetorical situations and understand how various modalities work together to form cohesive messages. The assignment instructed students to select between several options: creating a graphic novel, composing a soundtrack to a novel of choice, creating or curating a photo essay, producing an infographic, or revising a previous essay into a new genre. Each option also came with a unique topic for students on which focus their product. The final product, regardless of which option students selected, was to include five pages worth of work. The assignment included a rubric covering the six traits of writing – ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, fluency, and conventions. This rubric aligned with the rubrics given for all other major assignments in the 101 course.

The fact that this was the university’s first semester implementing such an assignment seemed unique. I’d taught multimodal assignments before during my time in the secondary classroom but had seldom come across such an assignment in my post-secondary experience. I was curious to see how this assignment would be received, and then potentially improved. With the approval of the writing director, I decided to collect reflections on the assignment from multiple sources after its completion. My original goal was to understand how the assignment had been received, and then make suggestions to the writing director for possible improvements.

### Student Experiences and Feedback

I received feedback from students in both a class discussion and in an informal reflective survey. In their verbal responses, some of my students expressed a great deal of excitement over the multimodal assignment. These students were the ones who took the assignment as an opportunity to explore one of their passions within the composition classroom. One such student remixed his previously written compare-contrast essay into a YouTube video he published on his own YouTube channel, a channel already replete with his friends’ humorous exploits. This student loved the assignment, and his excitement was evident within the final product he produced and his comments during the discussion.

However, many other students had a different and less-fulfilling experience. Several students felt like they did not leave the multimodal assignment with any identifiable skills. Many students

complained the prompts felt limiting or confusing. They also complained that the wide variety of prompts made the assignment confusing, and since it seemed some prompts were easier than others, it was hard to gauge what qualified as the required “five pages worth of work” listed in the original assignment. The students also expressed great concern over the grading process. They felt the rubric was mismatched to the assignment, and many of them were concerned their grade would not reflect the effort they put in to the assignment, or conversely that someone who put in far less effort would end up just as successful as they hoped to be. The reflective survey I gave students mirrored these negative sentiments.

As an instructor, receiving this feedback was disappointing, but wholly unsurprising. As we progressed through the unit, I’d sensed the disconnect happening between the purpose of the assignment and the actual experience students were having, but I was not quite sure how to address the issue. I decided that in order to better understand the situation surrounding this assignment, it would be appropriate to seek out feedback from my fellow instructors to gauge whether they had similar experiences in their classrooms.

### **Instructor Experiences and Feedback**

To do this, I emailed an open-ended questionnaire to my fellow graduate teaching assistants. I also held a series of informal interviews with my peers to discuss the pedagogical choices they made during the unit. These responses and discussions showed a strong relationship between the student feedback and the instructors’ feelings. One such point of intersection between student and instructor feedback was the prompts. Several of the instructors felt the prompts were either too varied or too limited and therefore made changes to the prompts in their classrooms. Many of the instructors broadened the expectations, allowing students to write about any content they chose. One instructor posed the prompts to students but then said students could have more freedom with content and modalities per teacher permission. He explained: “So, in essence, I went for the vague and open-ended route. I feel strongly that the students who got into the assignment were allowed more room to push their final projects; and that those who were just going to blow it off anyway, did that” (Ethington, personal communication, November 29, 2016). In contrast to this, another instructor, proceeded in the opposite direction and limited the student’s prompts to only two prompt options. I think this varied response to the prompt by instructors indicates again a disconnect between of the assignment and the purpose of the assignment. While the instructors were all able to grasp the purpose of incorporating a multimodal assignment in the composition classroom, it seemed many of them lost sight of that purpose in its implementation. I include myself in this assessment. As I taught this multimodal unit, I frequently lost sight of the goal of multimodal assignments, and instead just tried to teach “graphic novels” or “infographics” rather than lessons targeted to the development of transferrable skills.

Reflecting on the experiences of my peer-instructors and my students, I concluded the multimodal assignment should be revised. My primary goal in my revision was to reconnect the assignment itself to the original purposes that scholars have discussed as reasons to include multimodal and creative assignments in the composition classroom. In Tracy Bowen and Carl Whithous’ (2013) introduction to *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* they discuss what they believe to be a purpose to multimodal assignments: “The contributors [to this volume] consider how understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students’ development as writers able to work across modes and across genres” (p. 3). Simply put, the authors in this volume believe negotiating new genres will improve student writing abilities because they will have a higher level of understanding of genre. Students who understand genre and how genres are selected due to rhetorical situations will likely be able to better express themselves because they understand rhetorical purpose. Any instructor who has struggled to help students transition their

writing style from a narrative to a formal argument essay can appreciate how important it is for students to understand rhetorical situations and genre.

Some scholars support this purpose and extend it. Jody Shipka's (2011) *Towards a Composition Made Whole* argues for a paradigm shift in accepting multiple genres and mediums as a natural part of the composition process. She points out several purposes behind the multimodal approach, such as, developing a "more richly nuanced views of literacy," and these assignments and new framework provide us with opportunities to "remediate our actions by changing our tools and the way we share them with others" (p. 1064). Following Shipka's model, multimodal assignments develop a student's thoughtfulness and reflective nature in order that they might "remediate" their actions. These are some of the skills my students missed in their multimodal experiences—that reflective skills are transferable and extend to all aspects of the composition classroom. Students who are reflective and can make conscious composition choices during a multimodal assignment can make conscious choices while writing an essay. These same students can use these newly acquired skills of reflection to make a better presentation for their history class or write a better proposal in an entrepreneurial business class. Taking these scholarly opinions together, multimodal assignments are given to craft more compositionally conscious students, and the design of these assignment should mirror this.

### **Revising the Multimodal Assignment**

With these purposes in mind and with permission and approval from the writing director who created the original multimodal assignment, I began the revision process in spring 2017. I wanted the assignment I designed to improve student writing, refine their reflective skills, and facilitate a creative exchange. I also kept in mind goals discussed in the New London Group's (1996) landmark article "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," which first discussed how incorporating multiple literacies in the composition classroom can prepare students for a global economy that demands flexibility from its workers, and how these same multiliteracies give voice to those who previously have been denied representation. Finally, I also wanted the revised assignment to result in more positive responses from both students and instructor feedback. I wanted students to feel more engaged throughout the process and to be able to define the skills they gained from the activity.

I first chose to focus on student choice and transitioning the original multimodal assignment from a very strict model, with the mediums and topics already tied together, to a more open model where the students could pair topics and mediums based on their creative intuition. However, I did not want to leave the assignment completely open to student choice. While many scholars develop very open-ended multimodal assignments with almost no guidelines, I was concerned that with such an assignment, students would feel overwhelmed by the idea of having to pick both a topic and medium from the vast sea of options. Additionally, I thought so many options would be particularly daunting for English 101 students, as for many of them, this would be their first encounter with such an assignment on a collegiate level. I also thought assignments with such little guidance place certain groups of students, such as first-generation college students or returning non-traditional students, at a disadvantage. These students who had not operated in collegiate academic spaces before, or not for several years, might not be equipped to meet the unspoken demands of the academic environment. So, I instead decided to provide options for students to choose from. I view these options as a boxing ring, providing a set space for students to enter and wrestle with their rhetorical choices.

To create this balance between maximizing student choice and providing space to explore, I chose to separate the topics and mediums the original multimodal assignment had paired together. I provided students with two lists – one with specific potential topics, and the other with potential mediums. It was important to allow students to select which medium would be best suited to their

topic to fulfill the purposes of the assignment. The pairing of topic to medium helps students to better understand genre, as mentioned by Bowen and Whithous (2013). For example, students who select the recent tobacco-free campaign on Wichita State University's campus, must consider what stance they are taking on the topic, and to whom they are appealing. After these considerations, students would then determine what genre their project best fits, choose an appropriate medium, and perhaps apply a similar process in their creative endeavors in the future.

I included a diverse list of possible mediums. I did not want to fall into the problem of limiting students to only technology-based mediums, because far too many instructors equate multimodal to technological, which defeats the purpose of students authentically analyzing rhetorical situations. The mediums offered varied from heavily technology-dependent options such as film and infographics, to totally non-technology-based options such as a live performance. Such options could potentially be adapted to multiple genres and topics, leaving the space for students to adapt their projects according to their creative aspirations.

Providing student choice by separating topic and medium was an important step in my revision, but there were other elements I felt should be added to the assignment. Shipka (2011) argues "that students who are required to produce 'precisely defined goal statements' for their work become increasingly cognizant of how texts are comprised of a series of rhetorical, technological, and methodological 'moves' that, taken together, simultaneously afford and constrain potentials for engaging with those texts" (p. 2017). She believes students who produce "goal statements" will become more "cognizant" of their creative moves and will hopefully result in more successful final products since students can produce with the end in mind. In my revised assignment, proposals served as these goal statements. I left the instructions of the proposal open to instructor interpretation, but the presence of a proposal was essential. The presence of a proposal was an opportunity for instructors to create authenticity in their work, as instructors could ask students to mirror their proposals from a real-life example such as a business or grant proposal.

In addition to a proposal, a reflection was another essential element in successfully accomplishing the goals of the assignment. In his 2013 article "Back to the Future? The Pedagogical Promise of the (Multimedia) Essay," Erik Ellis discusses reflective essays and decides these essays should be "embodiments of their thinking that enable readers to experience their ideas as they have unfolded over time" (p. 52). The value of this "embodiment" of students' thought processes lies in the connections students will make between their creative compositional process and the goals of the assignment, and of course demonstrate an understanding of those connections to the instructor. The reflection gives the student a valuable time to better understand concepts such as genre, audience, and skills to be derived from the assignment. The reflection gives the instructor something written not only to grade, but also to gauge whether the instructional practices and assignment has met its goal.

The reflection I assigned in the multimodal project was largely left open to instructor interpretation. Ideally, the instructors took the reflection and assigned it as a formal written element to the multimodal assignment. In the assignment instructions, I did communicate some of the purposes behind the reflection by stating, "You could be asked to explain choices of selection and composition. You might also be asked to reflect on skills you developed and how the skills you use translate to other areas of composition or other fields." These statements were designed to encourage both instructors and students to make their reflections meaningful and not just informal afterthoughts to the assignment. However, the reflection is designed to still be secondary to the final multimodal product. In her chapter of *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, Cheryl Ball (2013) discusses an assignment where too much emphasis was placed on the reflection: "This is not an assignment I have chosen to repeat because most students' discussions of their literacy practices were demonstrated better in the written design justification than in the final texts, and that runs



counter to my purpose in teaching multimodal composition practices” (p. 26). Ball shows that sometimes the reflection can usurp the multimodal assignment itself and is problematic. The final multimodal product should reflect the effort described in the students’ reflections. If the reflection discusses a level of comprehension or skill that was obviously not replicated in the final product, then the student has likely not fulfilled the intended goals of the assignment. To prevent this from happening with my assignment, I encouraged instructors to define the percentage of the grade the reflection and proposal would have when first giving the assignment. In further revisions of the assignment, and adaptations in other settings, I created a separate rubric for the reflection that showed its value in comparison to the multimodal final product.

The rubric was the last revised component. The grading process was one of the most complained about components of the multimodal assignment from both instructors and students in the first semester of fall 2016. Both students and instructors struggled to adapt the given rubric to the assignment at hand. Grading multimodal assignments is frequently problematic because the final products are so varied, and by nature some mediums require greater effort than others. For example, a student in my first semester made a film adaptation of an essay he had previously written in class. In his reflection, he discussed the many steps he’d taken to complete the project. He had written a script, cajoled friends to volunteer to help, organized those friends, filmed the scene, played a part in the film himself, and then edited the entire project. His multimodal assignment took him a great deal of time and effort. In contrast, a fellow student in the same class produced an infographic about endangered animals. This student used Piktochart, an infographic generation website, and in her reflection admitted to spending only a few hours on the entire project. Both projects fulfilled the requirements, and both projects received an “A.” But as I was grading, I felt a twinge of conflict as I felt the first student deserved more than just an “A” for his above-average effort. This enters a difficult zone of grading theory in general – should the product outweigh the effort? Or the reverse?

To address this, in my second semester of teaching English 101 – and in the middle of my revision process – I decided to discuss the grading issue directly with my students. Two class periods into the multimodal unit, I held a discussion with my class about the nature of the multimodal assignment and the grading process. While we acknowledged departmental requirements meant I as the instructor had to adhere to the original rubric, we decided to come up with our own alternate rubric that would better help guide both the students in their creation process, and myself in the grading process. As a class we created a rubric with the following categories: Message/Purpose, Organization, Production Value, and Written Mechanics. We also distributed the points according to which categories we found to be the most important. We then took the rubric we created and discussed how it could be adapted to the original rubric. After this exercise, we viewed example projects and graded them as a class using both rubrics so our ideas of success were aligned. This exercise alone resulted in a dramatic improvement in the responses from students about grading. After the assignment, students expressed that because of this activity, they felt like even though the rubric might not have aligned with their ideal grading situation, they were able to understand what to expect and better focus their efforts on what mattered most.

I also benefitted a great deal from this lesson as it guided me in my revisions of the current rubric. While I considered briefly attempting to convince the writing director to abandon a rubric all together, the value of a rubric is still significant in terms of alignment between instructors. Holistic grading is unrealistic in terms of most writing programs who seek for some level of consistency among first-year composition courses. Additionally, the writing director decided he wanted the rubric to remain consistent with the other assignments which were organized by six traits of writing. I therefore created a rubric divided into the same six writing traits, but with each trait separated into two categories: one that defines the categories in terms of the written components (the reflection and proposal), and one that defines the categories in terms of a multimodal assignment. Of the

adaptations I made, the one I felt was most effective was using my students' idea of "Production Value" to add some element that could gauge the efforts of the students who used particularly difficult mediums to communicate their message. This "Production Value" category evaluated students on the quality of the final product and acknowledged the different levels of effort required by different mediums. Overall, the revised rubric would better guide both students in their development process and instructors in the grading process of diverse products.

The revisions made to the multimodal assignment were published and implemented in the fall 2017 semester, one year after Wichita State's first attempt at implementing a multimodal assignment. Individually, as with most graduate students, my teaching circumstances were dramatically different from one semester to the next. In fall 2017, I taught two sections of online English 101. The revised multimodal assignment was implemented online as well, and while I saw some positive shifts in the assignment, I felt gathering information from my peers in face-to-face courses would be important to grasping a non-biased opinion on the effects of the revisions. Most of the instructors for English 101 were first-year graduate students who had as little experience with the multimodal assignment as the previous year's instructors

### **The Revised Multimodal Assignment: Instructor Experiences and Feedback**

I sent the English 101 instructors from fall 2017 the same optional, open-ended email of questions I had sent to my peers the previous year. Overall, the instructor feedback was positive. Where as in the previous year, instructors expressed a level of discomfort and displeasure with the multimodal unit, instructors from fall 2017 expressed satisfaction towards the assignment. Most instructors felt their students were successful in their efforts and the unit had an important purpose in the classroom. One instructor stated:

Perhaps the greatest benefit I could see from teaching the Multimodal Unit was the inclusiveness towards first generation and minority college students. Many of my students chose their own family heritage, culture, or origin for their "thesis" for their final project. I also liked that this format allowed my students who struggled with writing to really soar to great heights of achievement by expressing their thesis in something other than purely alphabetic text. (Yenser, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

This effect of reaching marginalized students is one of the most important effects of a multimodal unit and demonstrates this assignment helped to reach the identified goals of my assignment which aligned with the goals of the New London Group (1996) when they first called for the revolutionizing of the compositional world in their landmark publication.

Another instructor, who had the rare opportunity of teaching English 101 face-to-face two semesters in a row, also discussed her positive experience with the revised multimodal assignment, focusing on the proposal element. She stated:

I think the most helpful addition to the multimodal assignment was adding a proposal. This gave me a chance to show students how to structure a proposal and screen some of their ideas, but it also gave students a chance to really think about the purpose of their project. A lot of the students I had last semester were happy with creating a multimodal project, but many of them fell short because they didn't have a clear purpose. With the proposal, students were required to think about why they were creating an infographic on tobacco use on campus, rather than just throwing one together for the sake of meeting assignment requirements. (Stewart, personal communication, January 10, 2018)

This instructor's feedback indicates not only the significance of the proposal but also of how the revised multimodal assignment enabled students to consider elements such as purpose, which would lead them to be more reflective in their rhetorical choices. Honing this reflective ability was one of my primary goals of the assignment, and this feedback from the instructor demonstrates this was, in some ways, accomplished.

Finally, another instructor reported the positive experience he felt was cultivated in his classroom because of the multimodal unit:

Most of the projects I received were pretty great; I stressed the effort and compositional elements over the written elements of this essay and they seemed to react positively. I allowed them to set their projects up in a World's Fair-style exhibition and they enjoyed having a day to show off their work and to enjoy everyone else's work. (Parker, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

This response indicates a few things about the assignment. First, the instructor notes students reacted positively to his emphasis of compositional efforts rather than written efforts. This positive reaction is hopefully a reflection of the students' enjoyment of the ability to engage in the creative process. Students in this revised assignment took parts of themselves and their surrounding socioculture and engaged with it in a meaningful way without limiting their experiences to the written word. I believe this positive reaction is an indication of students' satisfaction at being able to express themselves in a more honest and creative manner. Additionally, this instructor's feedback hits on another unintended benefit of the multimodal assignment. The instructor stated his students enjoyed sharing their work with their peers in a "World's Fair-style exhibition." The students enjoyed participating and engaging socially within the classroom, and points to multimodal assignments could increase student engagement and activity within the composition classroom.

I am inclined to believe such a link exists because of my own experience with the multimodal assignment. In spring 2017, while in the midst of my revision process, I ended up incorporating some elements my assignment revision, such as opening up the assignment by allowing students to select the topic and pair it with whatever medium they preferred. My class that semester was an eight-week session with only seven students. We met twice a week for two hours and forty-five minutes. The class had been a struggle, as most of the students were quiet and from dramatically different walks of life. However, once the multimodal unit began, my students became vastly more invested in the class. Rather than walking into silence when class began or passing the break period on their phones, my students discussed their multimodal assignments, questioned their rhetorical choices, and critiqued each other's ideas. The unit gave my class an almost "Breakfast Club"-like experience, and by the end of the semester we were all sad for the class to end. This experience, paired with feedback from other instructors such as those listed above, causes me to believe there could be a strong link between a well-designed multimodal assignment, facilitating greater classroom participation and fostering a better classroom environment.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting on this experience of revising this multimodal assignment, I have come to a few overarching conclusions. First, multimodal assignments are not superfluous in a composition classroom. Instead, multimodal assignments develop students' rhetorical dexterity and highlight the transferable nature of composition skills. Additionally, these assignments can dramatically increase student engagement. Therefore, multimodal assignments are essential to a successful composition course.

I have also concluded that multimodal assignments are most successful when they remain connected to their purposes. Teachers can ensure this connectivity by maximizing student choice, including proposals and reflection requirements, and having clear grading guidelines. I have used these guidelines in developing multimodal assignments in future courses since fall 2017 and have seen the beneficial outcomes repeated several times.

In addition to these conclusions, I have also been reminded through this revision process the importance of a reflection and collaboration in any pedagogical practice. The original multimodal assignment produced by the writing director was excellent. It inspired creativity and brought new life to the English 101 courses at WSU. My reflection and revision improved upon the original experience and that process has continued in each subsequent semester. The revisions I made were based upon student and instructor feedback. I collaborated with my peers and students to make my practice better, and it benefitted my future students far more than I originally anticipated. Often, teachers are considered islands. As a first-semester graduate student, I had the unique opportunity to collaborate every week with my peers in my practicum course. After that semester, my collaboration dramatically decreased, and only happened when I forced engagement through surveys and emails. Since then, as an adjunct professor, it has been a struggle to even find my peers, let alone collaborate with them. However, remembering the benefits I received from collaboration during my multimodal revision, and the countless ways my pedagogical practice has improved since, I continue to seek out opportunities to collaborate with peers, as they are, in the end, my best resource.

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## Enhanced Vocabulary Instruction: Using Vocabulary to Teach More than Meaning

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### Abstract

While many students arrive to middle school lacking fundamental reading skills, traditional English language arts curriculum and methods fail to address the needs of struggling readers. In fact, secondary English teachers often focus on helping students understand texts without the students actually reading the texts rather than building students' reading skills. In this article, the author shares a procedure for vocabulary instruction that also promotes phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, and orthographic mapping.

### Keywords

vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, orthographic mapping, spelling, phonics, middle school literacy

According to *The Nation's Report Card*, 37% of 8th graders scored at the proficient level in reading on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2017, para. 1). The Kansas Department of Education reports that 8th graders in Kansas score only slightly higher than the national average (Bush, 2018). Therefore, middle school English language arts teachers often find that over half their students lack the skills needed to read and comprehend grade level texts independently. As a result, many ELA teachers resort to teaching methods that take student reading out the equation, using teacher read-aloud and audiobooks as a replacement for student reading. Although such methods certainly play a role in literacy instruction, we cannot expect students to develop reading skills if they are not, in fact, reading. For this reason, an effective middle school ELA classroom must include instruction in fundamental reading skills in addition to addressing literature and writing standards.

In 1999 the National Reading Panel identified five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Shanahan, 2005). Secondary ELA teachers have typically assumed that the first three components lie in the domain of elementary reading instruction and have directed their attention primarily to vocabulary and comprehension instruction. However, recent research on the reading brain indicates that reading instruction has relied far too much on teaching students to guess at words using context clues and not enough on teaching students use their knowledge of sounds and letters to decode words (Hanford, 2019). Most research attention has been directed at early literacy, for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, as David A. Kilpatrick observes, even older students can show growth following instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics and with the opportunity to read connected text (2015, p. 13). Because intensive intervention requires a significant amount of time with a low teacher to student ratio, such intervention is typically beyond the scope of the regular ELA classroom; however, classroom teachers can still integrate instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics into their existing curriculum. In this article, I will share a vocabulary routine I use in my 6th and 8th grade classes that incorporates phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling with word knowledge to promote orthographic mapping. Since implementing the orthographic mapping component to my vocabulary routine, the percentage of my 6th and 8th grade students testing on grade level has increased 15% (based on fall and winter Aimsweb screeners).

Orthographic mapping may be a new term for secondary teachers. Kilpatrick (2015) argues that our ability to read depends upon a process called "orthographic mapping." Kilpatrick defines

the term as “the process readers use to store written words for immediate, effortless retrieval. It is the means by which readers turn unfamiliar written words into familiar, instantaneously accessible sight words” (p. 81). Orthographic mapping depends on letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate sounds within words). This allows readers to connect the sounds in a word to the spelling of the word so that the word does not have to be decoded each time the reader encounters it (2015, pp. 84-87). It is also important that readers understand the word so that they have a meaning to connect to the sound and spelling (2015, p. 88). Competent readers orthographically map words automatically and unconsciously without instruction; however, struggling readers take longer to map words and as a result, do not map as many words to their sight word vocabularies.

I use the following vocabulary routine to help students not only learn the meanings of new words but also orthographically map new words to enhance their sight word vocabularies. I typically teach the same set of words over a period of one to two school weeks, and vocabulary instruction takes five to ten minutes of our class period. I select vocabulary words that are either in the text we are reading or are important for discussion of the text. (For example, when I teach *Hunger Games*, I teach words such as “dehumanize” and “injustice” even though they don’t occur in the text because they allow us to discuss the text.)

### Vocabulary Introduction

I introduce vocabulary words orally. Students have not seen the words in print yet. I say each word out loud and students repeat it. I ask students first to identify how many syllables are in the word. (In the case of “dehumanize,” there are four syllables.) Then I ask students to identify the sounds (phonemes) in the word. (In the case of “dehumanize,” there are nine sounds: /d/ /E/ /h/ /U/ /m/ /a/ /n/ /I/ /z/, which are represented by 10 letters.) Students then attempt to spell the word by representing each individual phoneme. After students have finished, I ask them to look at the word, see if it looks right, and make any corrections. I then show them the correct spelling of the word. They write the correct spelling of the word, and we discuss their spellings. In some cases, students spell the word in a way that is phonetically acceptable but not standard (for example, “deehumanize,” “dehoomanize,” “dehumanize” or “dehumanise”). We discuss different ways sounds can be spelled in English and how these particular sounds are spelled in this word. This step goes very quickly once students are accustomed to the routine. Sounds and spellings are the focus of this step.

If the words are particularly difficult, I provide a brief, student-friendly definition of the word. If the words can be determined from the context of the text, students create a chart (see the example below). As they read or we read together, they write their own definition of the vocabulary words as they encounter them. If the text is short, I often begin with an interactive read aloud, and then students reread with a partner and write definitions. I recreate the chart on the whiteboard, students add their definitions, and then we work as a class to create student-friendly class definitions.

Word	Student definition	Class definition
dehumanize	Not being nice	To treat someone as less than a person

### Daily Vocabulary Routine

After I have introduced the vocabulary words, I begin each subsequent class by saying each word and having the students repeat it out loud. We review the student-friendly definition. Then I



continue vocabulary development by choosing from the strategies below. I usually use one or two strategies each day, focusing on oral language skills at first and then moving to written. To see vocabulary instruction in action, readers can view Anita Archer's (2019) excellent videos on vocabulary instruction. These videos provide a model for using student-friendly examples, promoting student involvement in vocabulary instruction, and maintaining a brisk pace.

I incorporate the following strategies in my own vocabulary instruction:

1. **Oral sentences:** Each student uses the word in a complete sentence with a partner. I typically provide a sentence stem to help students use complete sentences. (I teach in a district with a significant percentage of English language learners, so this is a high priority goal for us.) I want students to have multiple experiences using the word themselves (not just listening to others use it).
2. **Actions:** If possible, we come up with an action or sound effect to accompany the word. (For example, with the word "plummet," students hold their hand up high, then turn their fingers down and lower the hand quickly.) The goal is to help students remember the word by associating it with an action.
3. **Questioning:** I ask students questions about the word that can be answered "yes" or "no." For example, I might ask, "When the Nazis compared Jews to rats, did they dehumanize the Jews?" and "If I gave you an award for good citizenship, would I dehumanize you?" I try to ask several questions for each word, with a combination of examples and non-examples. I also ask questions with forced choices--for example, "If I dehumanized you, would that make you feel proud or humiliated?" The goal here is deepening student understanding of the word. Then I move to more open-ended questions: "How might it affect a group of people to be dehumanized?"
4. **Examples:** Students share examples (and non-examples) of the word. I might ask this to the whole class or have students ask each other to give examples and then share with the whole group. For example, I might ask, "When is a time that people have been dehumanized in America?" and students can share examples.
5. **Which word:** I ask questions such as, "I'm thinking of a word that means "to treat someone like less than a person. What word am I thinking of?"
6. **Word reading:** Students take turns reading the words to a partner, either from flash cards or a word list. The goal is to have students practice reading the word to connect the sound of the word with its spelling.
7. **Word study:** We discuss word parts. For example, "dehumanize" contains the prefix "de-," the root word "human," and the suffix "-ize." We discuss how these words parts help us understand the meaning and decode the word when we first encounter it. We also discuss related word forms—dehumanization, dehumanized, human, humanize, humanity. This helps students recognize related words instead of having to decode them each time and promotes understanding of prefixes and suffixes.
8. **Sound-spelling:** I ask students how specific sounds are spelled in the word, particularly if the spelling is unusual. For example, in the word "hyperbole," the /E/ sound is spelled with

an “e,” which is an unusual spelling in English (since a final “e” in English is usually a silent e accompanying a long vowel sound) but common in Greek (and hyperbole is a word that came to us from Greek). This promotes orthographic mapping and spelling skills.

9. **Word writing:** Students write the words to practice spelling and promote orthographic mapping. I always have them copy the words first with the correct spellings visible. Then I have them write them “spelling test” style--I dictate the word and they spell the word. We analyze misspellings according to sound.
  
10. **Written extensions:** I might have students draw pictures to illustrate vocabulary words, create or complete graphic organizers such as the Frayer model, complete sketchnotes, answer written questions, or write sentences or paragraphs using the word. The goal is to move from oral knowledge of the word to the ability to use it in writing.

The following chart reflects a sample week of vocabulary instruction:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
I say, students spell words	I say, students repeat words	I say, students repeat words	Students say words to a partner	Students read words from flashcards to a partner
Correct student spellings to standard spellings	Discuss prefixes, suffixes, unusual spellings	Review student friendly definitions with actions	Which word?	Word writing
Student friendly definitions	Review student friendly definitions with actions	Questioning	Examples	Writing extension of one or two words
Add actions to words				

When teaching vocabulary, I try to keep the following the following principles in mind:

- Students need to say the words out loud (not just the teacher). Students don’t learn how to pronounce a word correctly from simply listening. This also promotes engagement and interaction.
- Students need to read the words out loud (not just repeat them). This promotes orthographic mapping.
- Students need repeated exposure to words. Some students learn words quickly, but many students to see, hear, and use word many times before the words become part of their sight word vocabulary and lexicon. Ideally, students will encounter multiple texts using the same vocabulary words. Sometimes, we’re lucky enough to have textbooks that provide this for us. When we’re not, we may need to design our lessons so that students will be exposed to words they’ve learned before.

Vocabulary instruction is a key part of any well-designed ELA program. The above strategies can be incorporated into existing vocabulary instruction to promote students’ phonological awareness, orthographic mapping, and spelling skills in addition to their vocabulary knowledge. Obviously, this is only one component of classroom literacy instruction. However, for a small time investment, it pays off in the development of multiple skills and student achievement. By increasing

students' vocabulary and bank of automatically recognized sight words, we can improve their overall reading skills as they confront increasingly complex texts.

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## A Powerful Confluence: The Transformative Power Inherent in Young Adult Literature and Young Readers

### An Interview with Melanie Crowder

Kevin B. Kienholz

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As someone who appreciates young adult literature (YAL) and who recognizes the importance of encouraging and supporting young readers, I think that the best day of the entire academic year may well be the one that occurs annually at the Literature Festival, held on the campus of Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. Every fall the Literature Festival brings together outstanding YA authors from across the country and hundreds of enthusiastic middle and high school readers from around Kansas and Missouri, resulting in a day that both shines an important spotlight on and celebrates readers, writers, and great books.

For 25 years, the Literature Festival has celebrated the important work done by YA writers and YA readers—and has brought those writers and readers together—just as it did once again this past October 2<sup>nd</sup>, when the Literature Festival welcomed author Melanie Crowder from her home on the Colorado Front Range for a day filled with presentations, discussions, autograph sessions, and book talks. The author of *Audacity*, *Three Pennies*, *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*, and *A Nearer Moon* (among other notable titles), Crowder and her wide-ranging, remarkable books have received a great deal of critical acclaim, including recognition as a National Jewish Book Award Finalist, a Jr. Library Guild Selection, and a YALSA Top Ten Books for Young Readers. Crowder is an accomplished writer, an engaging speaker, and a steadfast advocate for YAL who clearly takes both her craft and her readers seriously. Throughout the day at the Literature Festival, her appreciation for and kindness toward her young readers came through consistently, as she visited with, connected to, and laughed with her many new fans—both young and old—here in Kansas.

My interview with Melanie took place on what would properly be described as an idyllic autumn afternoon, made even more pleasant for the fact that it took place while we were meeting on a beautiful college campus, the best place to spend a fall day, as far as I'm concerned. Taking a break from her busy day with the young readers who were excited to hear her presentation, enthusiastic about asking her questions regarding her writing and her books, and keen to take selfies with her at every turn, Melanie and I stole a few moments to have a conversation outside the Memorial Union, amidst the hustle and bustle of a typical college campus: Students burdened with backpacks were dutifully hiking to and from classes, the sun played its part by shining clear and bright, and the leaves were turning—a sensational day for those who enjoy the atmosphere of a university campus. The only potential fly in this ointment came courtesy of a riding lawnmower that persisted, every few minutes, in roaring past the park bench we were sharing throughout the duration of the entire interview, drowning out the otherwise serene setting for our interview. Taking this noisy turn of events in stride and with good humor, Melanie settled in for a 15-minute conversation that ranged from discussions of YAL, young readers, and her own history as a writer.

Our conversation launched forth on a perfectly natural point—the Literature Festival that brought her to Kansas. The interview, coming as it did right in the midst of a day designed to bring young readers and books and authors together, started off with a focus on the importance of young readers having the opportunity to connect the books they love with the authors who craft those stories. While my first question focused on the importance of placing young readers into close proximity to the authors who create the stories they love, Melanie quickly and correctly noted that

those young readers bring equally important stories with them—and that those personal narratives inform the reading transaction in crucial ways:

**Kienholz:** We are conducting this interview in the midst of an extremely busy day of presentations, Q & A sessions, book signings, and meet-and-greets. What do you hope that these young readers will take with them from a day like this one at the Literature Festival?

**Crowder:** Well, I can remember when I was very young . . . I don't know who the author was who came to speak with us, but it was a similar event, and I remember meeting an author, face to face, and I remember being able to hear, I guess the intent behind their stories and the passion behind their ideas. I found that to be really inspirational and I hope that students would take away from today the idea that their ideas and their stories are just as valuable. And that, yes, it's a lot of work to become a published author but we absolutely want to hear their stories and we absolutely want what's in their hearts on the page in the future, whether they become writers or not. Whatever they have to contribute to society, that we're looking forward to it. We need their active engagement in our world and they have so much to offer and we want to hear it.

Melanie Crowder's writing navigates fluidly between and among an impressive variety of literary forms and genres. Take these examples: In a blend of historical fiction and verse novel, *Audacity* recounts the harrowing labor conditions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that led to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire as well as a glimpse in the heroic efforts of protagonist Clara Lemlich. *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky* tackles the contemporary issue of prison reform in Bolivia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. And *A Nearer Moon* moves into the realm of fantasy, with its inclusion of water sprites, legends, and magic. Crowder operates confidently in all of these different spheres, but it's her strong focus on characters—an ability to develop fully realized individuals on the page—that serves as a consistent link among Crowder's books, imbuing each with a literary quality that renders characters with which her readers connect, identify, and draw inspiration. Quite often, Crowder's characters struggle against antagonists that take the form of massive, overwhelming social and political systems which exert enormous power over her protagonists. Our conversation turned next to the genre of literature she is most comfortable writing as well as to her interest in exploring power dynamics when characters find themselves fighting against systems larger than themselves:

**Kienholz:** Your books cover a great deal of literary territory: historical fiction, fantasy, contemporary fiction, prose, verse, and so on. Where do you find your greatest comfort level as a writer?

**Crowder:** That is such a tough question. You know, it was really interesting, when I started writing in free verse for *Audacity* I was not comfortable *at all*. I was very self-conscious, I was very nervous about stepping outside of the norm and stepping outside of the traditional prose novel. But once I set my concerns aside, once I just gave myself permission to really dive into the form, I actually found that that was where I found my greatest freedom, where I found the most versatility. I found that when I began writing my next young adult book, I wanted to write that one in poetry . . . and I actually pulled myself back because I didn't want to end up writing the same kind of tone, the same voice, the same character in what was really two extremely different books. So I pulled away from poetry even though perhaps, that is my most natural form.

**Kienholz:** In preparation for this interview, I read *Audacity*, *Three Pennies*, and *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*—and enjoyed all three books immensely. All three novels feature a protagonist fighting against a system of some sort that threatens their wellbeing. (In *Audacity*, it's management and an unfair economic system. In *Three Pennies*, it's a foster care system and, thanks to a setting in San Francisco, plate tectonics. And in *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*, it's a legal and educational system.) Can you talk a little about your interest as a writer in exploring how people, especially young people, react when faced with difficult situations and challenged by systems bigger than themselves?

**Crowder:** Well, I think that's the reality of being a kid or being a teen. You're not necessarily in control of your own life. You have adults around you, hopefully caring, responsible adults with your best interests at heart, shaping your path or helping you make good decisions or teaching you how to make good decisions once you achieve independence. But the truth is, is that not all kids have the kind of role models, or not all kids live in a situation where those freedoms are a reality, where it's a nurturing, safe place for them to be in their own homes. And so, I suppose I speak to that future freedom that they're reaching towards, or I speak to the kids who are stuck. I know what that feels like to be stuck when you're young in a place that isn't safe or that isn't in your best interest. And, I just want to reach out through my stories to kids who are stuck like that, who feel like they don't have the freedom yet to put themselves in a positive situation and to give them hope that they will have the ability to move beyond their circumstances if they hold true to themselves, if they believe in themselves, and if they are willing to step out and be bold in some uncertain times.

Though her characters often find themselves pitted against seemingly (though not quite) irresistible systems clothed in enormous power, Melanie Crowder never leaves these characters, or her readers, without hope. Built on a foundation of agency and courage, the optimism that her characters carry into and through the challenges they face is characteristic of YAL in general, insofar as the endings of her books leave her readers understanding that even in the midst of trouble, hope persists and, to one degree or the other, personal courage triumphs. Our conversation veered next into a discussion of the role that she sees for hope and optimism not only in the plotlines of her books, but also in the lives of her readers:

**Kienholz:** In *Three Pennies*, you describe a scene when Marin begins to settle into her new room in her foster mother's home this way: "The room was still bare: white walls, white bedposts, white sheets. But it was no longer waiting. There was an occupant, however slight, however reluctant. And with her, frail as it may have been, came hope." How do you see the role of hope and optimism in literature that is written for a young adult audience?

**Crowder:** Well, you know it really circles back to your last question. This idea that young people, my young readers, may not yet be in a situation where they are able to grab their own destiny and move forward. There may be restrictions around them because of their age where they are not able to step forward and create the life that they want. That's the sense of hope that I feel is appropriate for this age group in that their future is still forward, it is still ahead of them. No matter what your circumstances are, no matter what difficulties you are finding in your life, you can still create a better future for yourself and I think that's something unique to this readership. That's not something you can always say to, you know, someone who's reading a book in their seventies. Perhaps there's not that opportunity for



them to create a whole new life and start at the beginning whereas someone who is looking forward to the rest of their life ahead of them, that sense of hope is a very real thing. No matter how rough your circumstances at any given time, your future is ahead of you, and it may be more difficult for some than others, but you can make something beautiful out of your life.

In addition to Crowder's ability to render believable, complex characters struggling against complex systems that threaten, oppress, and restrain, she also offers her readers another important element common to great books: prose that is far more than utilitarian—prose that borders on the lyrical. Crowder's evident interest in language comes through clearly in all of her books, and her readers are rewarded with language that, on one hand, is quite lovely and, on the other hand, reminds her readers that language has a power of its own. Crowder's facility with language results in books that are a pleasure to read, to be sure, and that are occasions to consider the ways in which words can shape—and reshape—our lives:

**Kienholz:** Your characters often recognize the incredible power that words can have in their lives. The power to change laws. The power to change one's circumstances. The power to deal with trauma. As you see it, what is the connection between agency in a young person's life and the power of language—the power of words?

**Crowder:** Well, I think for so many, language is the way that the world forms their judgement of us. How we present ourselves is the way that the world sees us. I actually spent five years as an ESL teacher, and my purpose as I saw it in that job was to help students who didn't yet have the ability to speak English as a native speaker, or someone who wasn't yet proficient in this new language to them. My job was to help them so that the rest of the world could see their heart, their soul, their intelligence. So that they could communicate to the world and be seen for their intelligence and not for something that they didn't yet possess, which was their ability to speak English fluently. For me, that was such a powerful role to be in, and I feel like that's what really all students, not necessarily only the ones who want to be writers themselves, but all of us - What we put out to the world is usually in spoken or written form, and that's the basis with which we make our introduction to the world. And, learning to choose words carefully is something that, I don't know that our society is valuing highly at the moment, and I think it's something that is incredibly important to think, to be reasoned, to be measured, and then when you say something to have your full heart and soul in the meaning behind it.

With our interview drawing to a close and with the riding lawn mower making one final, noisy pass near the bench we were sharing, I was struck by the fact that even in a relatively brief 15-minute interview, Melanie Crowder managed to shine a clear light on a number of issues related to her writing and about her readers: She takes the art and craft of writing extremely seriously. She views the young readers of her books as worthy of the best writing possible. She appreciates language and the power it can wield in our lives. And she recognizes the potential for agency that exists when serious books make it into the hands of serious young readers—a powerful combination that reminds us all about the alchemy that occurs in the literary experiences of the readers we meet every day in our own classrooms.

**Author Biography**

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with undergraduates preparing to teach middle and high school English. He joined the faculty at ESU in the fall of 2000 after having taught high school English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma.

## Who Were You, Miss Billings?

Sheryl Lain

Cheyenne, Wyoming

Miss Billings was gray. She had gray hair, gray bushy eyebrows, and gray hairs that sprouted from her chin. She even wore gray rayon dresses, the kind with little tiny flowers on a huge gray background. She was my fourth grade teacher.

My heart races a little even now when I remember the day I challenged Miss Billings. A skunk got loose inside Judy Jones' farmhouse one night. I guess it crawled through the screen door left ajar. Maybe it was the dog that scared the skunk, or maybe the cat. Whatever the trigger, the skunk did what skunks do--it cut loose the smell from hell. Judy didn't come to school for three days while her mom aired out the place, took the bedding to the clothesline, washed the kids down in tomato juice.

The day Judy returned to school, Miss Billings shoved all our wooden desks willy-nilly out of their rows and screeched them clear across the oak floor, over in the far corner under the American flag. Only one desk with its fold-up seat sat alone by the open door. It had Judy's name on it. When Judy, the shyest girl in the world, came in and saw where she'd be sitting, she cringed. No way did she want to be the center of attention, cast in the spotlight of her aloneness. Her blue eyes watered, but she was brave. Even as the cancer took her away, little by little, she was brave.

I was spitting mad at Miss Billings. At recess, I banged the door against the wall of the restroom when I slammed inside. "Miss Billings is so mean!" I announced to the room, my rant ricocheting off the green-painted cinder block walls. "Poor, poor Judy. She's all alone, she's so shy. What does Miss Billings think, the smell will kill us?"

Right in the middle of my bathroom tirade, a toilet flushed behind one of the stall doors. The metal latch screeched open. Miss Billings' square frame filled the opening. I ducked my head figuring for sure she'd slap me. But she lumbered on by and left the restroom.

After recess, our chairs were back in their customary rows, all of us neatly alphabetized. Miss Billings sat at the helm of her ship behind her desk up front. Judy Jones' desk was back in its place--Row C, Chair Seven--in front of her cousin Kathy Jones.

On we went with our workbook pages.

Miss Billings never said a word about the bathroom incident, not to me, not to my dad. My father would have sided with the teacher, just like he promised when he warned, "You get in trouble at school, and you will get into twice as much trouble at home."

Decades later at a class reunion, I happened to sit by Judy Jones, now ravaged with cancer. She smiled softly at me and I flashed the memory of Miss Billings' skunk intervention. "Do you remember Miss Billings?" I asked Judy. "Yes," she replied, smiling. I told her my memory of her desk all alone in the middle of miles of blond oak floor. Judy spoke in a voice so soft I had to lean over to hear, "You were always fair, Sheryl. You were always fair." Her unexpected compliment made me blush.

Today, after teaching for decades, I've made plenty of my own mistakes. I've been both understood and misunderstood by the kids in my room, and I wonder about Miss Billings, the woman behind the gray exterior. Who were you, Teacher? Did you ever laugh or cry, love or lose? What colors did you hide behind those gray spectacles?

### Author Biography

Sheryl Lain has taught thousands of students in her English classes over the years. Former director of the Wyoming Writing Project, she facilitated writing projects throughout her state. Her book *A*

*Poem for Every Student* chronicles a teacher's life. She is an international presenter for the Bureau of Education and Research and author of numerous articles, monographs, chapters and poems. She can be reached at [sheryllain@aol.com](mailto:sheryllain@aol.com).

## **Using Padlet and S.M.A.R.T. Goals to Enhance Reciprocal Teaching Strategy: Success for English Learners**

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### **Abstract**

A teacher-researcher spent the year in Slovakia teaching English to high school students. Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS) was implemented to engage the students in discussing their reading. RTS is a research-based, highly effective strategy encouraging students to participate at a higher level of thinking. It is aimed at increasing students' overall comprehension of the text being read but also challenging the reader to construct deeper inferences, arguments and ideas. When the students used the strategy while reading a text, they also had the luxury of working independently to become more metacognitively aware while also leaning on peers to challenge thinking and clarify any confusing parts. To increase engagement for RTS, Padlet, a web-based tool, was used for the students to write about their RTS roles, goals, and quality of responses to peers. Because Padlet lends itself well to shorter responses, the ELL students viewed the writing as less threatening while we, as facilitators and researchers, could respond to their writing with probing questions, praise points and teach points. Students set S.M.A.R.T. goals to improve the quality of work in the RTS groups.

### **Keywords**

Reciprocal Teaching Strategy, English learners, Padlet, S.M.A.R.T. Goals, teacher research

This article originates from a case study, broad in scope, that examined Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS) used with English Learners (EL) in Slovakia. The data sources for this publication were the open-ended responses to student surveys, students' journals, Padlet (2018) responses, S.M.A.R.T. goals set by the Slovakian students, and anecdotal notes kept by the teacher researcher. While the research studied EL students in a European country, the strategy, technology, and goal-setting were critical to increases in learning English—spoken, read, and written—thus having application to all learners, but, specifically, English Learners in classrooms across Kansas.

Readers will take an in-depth look at the value of RTS use in classrooms where students are learning the English language. This is done through the lenses of theorists and experts in the fields of literacy, engagement, and constructivism. To increase engagement in the strategy, students used the web-based tool, Padlet (2018), to write about their RTS roles, reflect on their success at enlightening peers about the text, and evaluate how their participation could improve. Additionally, S.M.A.R.T. goals were set to challenge students to use goal-setting as a means of improving their performance for discussions in RTS. Each of these components were important for students learning English, but can assist all students to improve learning.

Please note: Quotations from students (written and verbal) are as the students wrote them or verbalized them.

## Participants

The Slovakian students attend a business academy, considered an average school, not overly prestigious, but certainly a respected school. Like other schools in Slovakia, about half of the first year high school students apply for the bilingual section. This means their first year in high school is primarily taught in English (although learning a third or fourth language is becoming a priority in Slovakia). Many students grow up listening to some English through music or television. For most students, though, formal English instruction has been limited. There were 15 students in the class with a wide range of skills and abilities.

## Reciprocal Teaching Strategy (RTS)

RTS is a teaching strategy allowing students opportunities to deepen understanding, connections, and love for reading. Students are placed in small groups and assigned one of the four RTS roles: Predictor, Questioner, Clarifier and Summarizer. Within those groups, students independently reflect on their reading from the different role lenses. Then, they bring their analyses to group discussions. This increases overall comprehension through enriched conversation about the text.

RTS is considered to originate from the work of Palinscar and Brown (1986). Implementation requires students to use four important reading discussion strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing (Oczkus, 2010). RTS embodies elements of constructivist theory and the multiple meanings to be discovered and understood in order to construct meaning while engaged in social learning. Cambourne (2002) tells us that using collaborative groups within a constructivist classroom is a powerful way for students to learn. Cambourne (1995) described critical structures for collaboration to occur: transformation, discussion and reflection, application, and evaluation. These are elements inherent in RTS and not considered “add-ons,” but critical parts of the framework when implemented.

This research based strategy encourages students to participate at a higher level of thinking. It is aimed not only at increasing students’ overall comprehension of the text but also challenging the reader to construct deeper inferences, arguments, and ideas. Best, Row, Ozuro, and McNamara (2005) explain that comprehension at deeper levels occurs when students are able to use their inferencing skills to make connections while reading. Deep comprehension involves going beyond reading the lines of the text and requires students to interpret more than the sentences on the page (Best et al., 2005). When the students are using this strategy while reading a text, they have the luxury of working independently to become more metacognitively aware while also leaning on their peers to challenge thinking and clarifying parts that may be confusing to them. Importantly, RTS is “structured for success as students take on the role of the leader and learn to use the strategies on their own,” working toward being successful at what a competent reader does in their head while reading text (Fogarty, 2007, p. 69).

The structure of RTS requires small, heterogeneous groups that consist of at least four members, one for each role. These members are responsible for doing their parts to contribute to the overall discussion and comprehension of the group. This interdependence is important for team building and holds students accountable for performing their role. Fisher, Frey, and Everlove (2009) describe this as an “interactive instructional process” (p. 30) designed to promote interdependence among group members. If the small group is to construct meaning of the assigned text, then each group member must do their part in processing beforehand and discussing with group members during RTS sessions (Fisher, Frey, & Everlove, 2009). Apart from teamwork being a necessary skill students must use in many aspects of everyday life, it is also a desirable skill they need to develop for post-high school, college, and career purposes. Students will surprise and enlighten each other with various perspectives, opinions, and questions and will challenge the team members’ thinking.

During RT discussion, not only are students sparking new ideas and questions within their teams, they are building up a new sense of accountability and confidence. This strategy is designed to give students the driver's seat to their learning; they are in charge of their reading process from top to bottom. They no longer have a teacher standing at the front of the classroom reading a text to them and asking questions to one single student at a time. Instead, students read at their own pace, stopping and analyzing when it is appropriate for them, leading, answering and clarifying questions and ideas and, most of all, being engaged the whole time. When a teacher directs a class and asks the questions, and only one student is called upon to respond, we can only guarantee one student is overtly engaged. In the RTS model, we have engagement from start to finish, as students know the responsibilities for their role and must continue to actively participate. This is particularly important in an EL classroom. In order to make significant improvements in their language skills, EL students need to read, write, speak, and listen in English as much as possible. Because all students are within a group where the expectation is participation in the discussion, RT also improves the quality of the discussions within the classroom (Hashey & Connors, 2003). And, of course, confidence is truly a key for all EL students. The more opportunities they have to communicate with their peers, the more they will learn about these topics, broaden their vocabularies, and feel increasingly comfortable speaking often.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory about "Zone of Proximal Development" tells us students learn best when working in their "zone." This zone is somewhere between being able to work independently (actual development) and needing a teacher to assist (potential development) on a task. When students are within this zone, they develop the mindset to push themselves to the potential level with careful scaffolding from a teacher or another skilled individual until they are able to internalize a strategy independently (Vygotsky, 1978). As students begin to master RTS, their focus will be placed on the ideas and questions they developed from the text and the discussions they are having, led completely by students. The ultimate goal in RTS is to develop learners who can use skills to maneuver texts effectively in order to generate new ideas and arguments. These are communicated to others via speaking and writing to foster conversations that then challenge and develop those ideas further. Independent learners wonder, ask questions, make predictions, and are aware of when their comprehension has fallen and can use many strategies to reconstruct it.

Ostovar-Namaghi and Shahhosseini (2011) conducted a study with 120 freshmen ELL students. The post assessment demonstrated that RTS yielded significantly higher results than traditional teaching:

Reciprocal teaching is more in tune with the heartbeat of language. Rather than being a unidirectional mechanism for receiving information, as it is supposed by the traditional [teaching] model, language is mechanism for constructing meaning in the dialogical process of negotiation and interaction with the text and with the others. (Ostovar-Namaghi & Shahhosseini, 2011, p. 1241)

The potential for increased classroom discussion is another hallmark inherent in RTS. Pressley and Allington (2015) note that current studies highlight how discussions led by the students assist them in understanding texts they are reading. And RTS, by its very nature, promotes in depth discussion thus increasing engagement through the peer-managed roles (Pressley & Allington, 2015). Comfort with the roles and the collaborative nature of the discussions serves students well "resulting in further consolidation of sound reading comprehension and monitoring strategies" (Fisher, Frey, & Everlove, 2009, p. 31).

In all, reading is the foundation of learning and every teacher is a teacher of reading. Therefore, by taking the time to introduce RTS to students, each is getting the opportunity to develop skills that will be used in all subjects and areas of life.

### Classroom Implementation of RTS

The introduction to RTS needed to be detailed and methodical to avoid confusion for the students. They were introduced to RTS through a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the vocabulary used to describe the roles and expectations for each. The roles were then demonstrated using a text and think aloud by the teacher. Modeling included how to make *predictions* based on reading the title and the first few sentences, making sure to stop to *clarify* unfamiliar words and phrases to ensure comprehension was occurring. The teacher asked a couple of *questions*, and at the end of the first paragraph, a *summary* was given about the text. The students were then ready for the next scaffolded phase: Assignment to a team to work with once a week using the RTS strategy. Students assembled into their groups, decided the role that they were going to focus on, discussed RTS, and generated ideas about what it would look and sound like within their team.

In the next class session, students completed an exit ticket asking questions about their understanding of the RTS roles. This gave the teacher opportunity to clarify any misconceptions about the roles and expectations. The following week, the students read the article that the teacher had initially demonstrated RTS with and tried out another role of their choosing. Students met with peers having the *same* role to discuss what went well for them, how the role functioned, and what the role contributed to the team.

The following day, the whole class brainstormed expectations for RTS and co-created an anchor chart. Discussion included what RTS should look and sound like when working in groups based on the previous discussions. The students read a short biography about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and were asked to choose a new role and try RTS again. Role sheets were distributed to record important information for their role to help guide them and the ensuing discussions. The teacher moved around the classroom, helping to guide the groups, answer any questions, and take anecdotal notes on what was observed and heard. As scaffolding for the RTS groups continued, S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals were set, and Padlet (2018) was introduced to the students so they could record their thinking and progress with their roles.

### Setting S.M.A.R.T. Goals

At the beginning of the academic year, there was a visible lack of accountability and intentional learning. This called for a tool to help students become more aware and in control of the growth students claimed they wanted but did not know how to achieve. This demographic of students could not translate how RTS was going to directly support their English skills. Since the S.M.A.R.T. goal model had been previously taught, it was an excellent technique to assist students in writing genuine goals that catapulted their progress utilizing RTS with the aim to carry over into other learning and aspects of life. The S.M.A.R.T. goal model is a sustainable way to not only track students' efforts but reinforce accountability as a learner. S.M.A.R.T. goal setting takes students beyond 'I want to get better at...' to helping "students set meaningful goals, provide support as they diligently work toward those aims, and congratulate them when they eventually achieve their goals" and work toward "positive sense of self" (McGlynn & Kelly, 2017, p. 23). By applying this structure in conjunction with RTS, specifically using Padlet (2018) where goals were posted as a constant reminder, the students became more intentional about how they were personally processing and relaying the information they were grasping from the texts. This newly adopted mentality--of intentionality--created a surge in their metacognitive functions which was evident in their weekly Padlet (2018) posts where they described their thinking about the text but also in how they were contributing to the discussion. They were becoming aware of not only their personal need to comprehend but also what their peers needed and how they could support peers to make that happen. Learning how to write S.M.A.R.T. goals paired nicely with RTS and was later applied to their lives outside English classes.



### Introducing Padlet (2018)

Once RTS roles were understood by students, a way to have students record their thoughts and document progress was needed. As teachers, we know that, often, technology can be motivating to students and increase engagement. However, it was also critical for the technology to have accountability built into it so that it would be easy to collect, analyze, organize, and save responses for assessment. Padlet (2018), a web-based tool, was implemented to infuse technology for further engaging the students and met the requirements for accountability. It is an easy-to-use, free, online application where students can see boards having prompts and allowing responses directly to one another and their teachers. Infusion of this technology into the classroom made the assignments more enjoyable and relatable to students. It had the added benefit of allowing students a way to write about their goals, RTS roles, reactions, and reflections.

Each RTS role had its own Padlet (2018) so while the students were working within their RTS group, each student was only accountable for sharing their role with other people who had the same one. This had the effect of the “experts” role in the jigsaw strategy. The goal was that students could share their best work with the teacher, read other students’ posts having the same role, learn from peers and increase ability to use these skills each week during RTS. This would also have implications and application for other areas of life outside of the classroom and reading assignments. The teacher posed questions within Padlet (2018) for students to respond to helping them deepen thinking about their particular role. Padlet (2018) seemed like social media posts among students because they could like one another’s posts and add comments, as well. They knew that their work was going to be viewed by their classmates, so motivation to do their best grew without making them feel insecure or threatened about their English writing skills.

Careful introduction and scaffolding of RTS, setting S.M.A.R.T. goals, and using Padlet (2018) to reflect and extend resulted in students transitioning to independence in conducting the RTS sessions.

### Results

The open-ended survey responses provided a great deal of insight into student thinking. Their comments spoke to how classroom community developed during RTS and how their peers clarified understanding during discussions. Their responses echo Pressley and Allington’s (2015) assertion that student-led discussions promote engagement through peer-managed groups.

#### *Predictor Role*

The themes that emerged from the students’ Padlet (2018) responses for the predictor role described the skills students were developing and using beyond predicting because of the other RTS roles they performed previously and their peers were modeling. They realized the importance of confirming their predictions and revising them when they fell short of being accurate. The students used text features to inform their predictions (e.g., “I saw a bunch of key words such as woman rights, a right to study, etc.”). The researchers realized how carefully text must be selected for the RTS predictor role after students had difficulty making predictions for a text about *Romeo and Juliet*, a story they were very familiar with; there were numerous Padlet (2018) posts about already knowing the story so that prediction was nearly impossible.

#### *Questioner Role*

The questioner role was the favorite one for most students. They viewed this role as a leadership one, and quickly understood how critical this role was in promoting rich student-led discussions. The classroom researcher saw how discussions about text changed because the

questioner realized they should ask questions right away as groups began meeting, and the researchers noted the students transitioned to deeper levels of questions as they progressed through the semester. Students were candid about needing to improve their questioning skills and believed that the ability to ask questions was key to understanding a text. The ability to ask important questions was also a theme, as one student noted, “To ask questions you have to really understand the text. Especially so you are not just asking yes or no questions. So you have to know a deeper meaning.”

#### *Clarifier Role*

Prior to RTS, learning specific words in English for the Slovakian students was often a matter of looking up words in a translation dictionary and so often a precise translation was either not available or not a concern to the students. The clarifier role proved to sharpen their skills as they recognized the need for careful translation of words. While they still used digital dictionaries and translators to complete their work, they transitioned to having higher standards so that they could find the “best” translation. And, their work grew beyond mere translations to clarifying meaning within sentences and ideas. This work is demonstrated in a student’s response:

While reading the text I wrote down some words that I didn’t quite understand or that I’ve never read before. Later, I opened the Slovak-English dictionary and searched those words and tried to find synonyms. I tried to use them in example sentences and if that didn’t work I just told them the Slovak word for it.

They also realized that not only were they clarifying for themselves, but anticipating the needs of their peers. They initiated mini-goals and challenges for themselves.

#### *Summarizer Role*

Summarizing tends to be a difficult skill for many students, and this proved challenging for the Slovakian students, initially. But, they were methodical and strategic in their approaches to summarizing, often beginning with a condensed summary sentence. They followed this with using other writing forms to summarize such as bulleted lists. They relied heavily on vocabulary to inform their work and mimicked the texts they were reading by bolding or italicizing the vocabulary words within text they wrote in their summaries. To assist their peers, they recognized a need to use “easy” words for “hard” words. By the third round of RTS, the students were comfortable stating their opinions while summarizing. An example that demonstrates this opinion writing followed reading a text about Ferguson, Missouri protests after the shooting of Michael Brown, “Mr. Wilson was racist and people didn’t like it so they started protesting and I think that’s the right thing.”

### **Educational Importance of the Study**

Early in the study, the learners began to connect to schema within their RTS groups, much like Vygotsky’s (1978) deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge. They restructured knowledge together, then elaborated upon it, especially in the Padlet (2018) reflective responses. Being metacognitively aware of how to use schema for building knowledge was a skill that grew throughout the study. Keene (2011) notes that when students “are aware of the way they learn and remember, they will carry those tools with them for a lifetime of learning” (p. 76).

Experiences with RTS and Padlet (2018) can best be described as having a roller coaster effect. Initially, students struggled with the roles and were not very interested, but as they began to master both, they started to feel they could work independently and began enjoying the work with their peers. Interest waned again mid-semester when students thought they had mastered the roles and perhaps did not see the point of continuing them. The purposes of goal-setting were revisited

and their accomplishments and improvements in English and reading skills were pointed out to them. The students finished the semester strong.

As the students were observed using RTS skills throughout each of the sessions, they could be seen assisting one another when comprehension fell or were having difficulty articulating and adding to the group discussion. They talked with their teacher about how they used their RTS skills in other classes, at home while completing reading texts for school, and even for independent reading. When asked if they could use RTS at home, one student said, “Yes, I can! It is getting easier for me to clarify for myself.” Another said, “It is like we are doing all this stuff in our own heads (predicting, summarizing, questioning, clarifying) but now we are practicing it out loud.” The students understood they were articulating what they knew and their newfound skills, but in English!

A final positive note about RTS came, not from this classroom of students written about here, but peers being taught in another classroom using the traditional instruction common in the school setting. Several of these students approached the teacher researcher and asked if they, too, could learn about RTS. It became clear that the students using RTS were discussing their successes outside the classroom and impressing their peers with what they were learning.

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## **A 9-Step Social Emotional Approach to Secondary English Language Arts Curriculum Writing**

**Paul Restivo**

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### **Abstract**

In this practitioner piece, the author defines social emotional learning (SEL) and outlines an approach to integrating SEL activities into secondary English language arts curriculum by identifying priorities; developing thematic questions; designing reading, writing, and speaking and listening experiences; determining a culminating assessment; aligning with standards; designing lessons; and integrating class policies.

### **Keywords**

social emotional learning, curriculum design, secondary English language arts, standards

Now that Social Emotional Learning is a measured outcome in Kansas, improved professional development opportunities around the state show that schools have acknowledged the increased value of integrating SEL into the school culture. Convincing evidence suggests that in order for SEL to truly expand student cognitive and emotional growth, SEL must be embedded into the school curriculum and classroom norms (Jones et al., 2017). Interesting research out of the University of Kansas's Research Collaboration identified the top two factors in determining success in college or in a career: self-regulation and self-efficacy (Noonan & Erickson, 2018). The authors outline the importance of other skills like organization, time management, and content-specific skills, which are included in the College and Career Competency Framework. Where our students continue to need our help is in providing them opportunities to help themselves and to promote experiences where they feel their effort matters. Our schools, and arguably English Language Arts teachers, are on the frontlines of fostering healthy minds. While effective supplemental programs in character education might help, the curriculum must serve as the centerpiece for educating our children in the most responsible way. A curriculum designed to address the whole child will give us the most gains in achievement and social-emotional health.

### **Understanding Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

It is important to understand what social emotional learning (SEL) is and is not. Often referred to as "soft skills," SEL teaches students intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness, problem solving, and team building so that they have the social and emotional skills necessary to succeed in life (Fisher & Frey, 2014). What is it not? High-fives, fist bumps, fake positivity, and any other inauthentic behaviors. This might be controversial, yes. I have sat in on interviews for teacher candidates and have heard those teachers say that those fist bumps and high-fives are the most important elements of school culture. More than likely, their sentiments are rooted in good intentions. We know that having positive relationships with students is important. We know the importance of making sure students feel valued. Where we have gone off the rails is in how to accomplish that.

First and foremost, we must eliminate the mentality that we are here to rescue kids. We are not. Instead of "You are hurt, and I need to save you," we must be of the mind that "You are hurt, and let me get you started on the path to save yourself" (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2013). One of the foundations of trauma-informed care is to avoid rescuing students. If we are concerned about them

the day after their graduation and not just while they are in our system, then we must provide them the tools and conditions to help themselves.

### **Start with Curriculum**

Schools that stop or de-emphasize curriculum in order to incorporate social-emotional learning activities are missing the point. All of these additional SEL activities must be built and based around a content-rich curriculum. In the past, I have been part of discussions with leadership teams where we ask, “What activities can we implement to get kids to care about teamwork?” Or “What product can we purchase that will address these SEL issues?” Instead, leadership teams should ask, “To what extent does our curriculum promote a content-rich learning environment that allows for a thriving SEL experience?” Conversely, we should avoid the trap of focusing more on SEL than academic standards. The two are important together and not mutually exclusive. A thriving SEL experience will emerge from a content-rich curriculum. In fact, it is more important now than ever before to teach our students “to suspend judgment, weigh evidence, consider multiple perspectives and speak up with wisdom and grace on behalf of themselves” (Ehrenworth, 2017).

And what better core content area to tackle this than English Language Arts, a content area immersed in the lessons learned from stories and our own writings? It is important to note that the emphasis should be on the curriculum — not imitating someone’s teaching behaviors or style. Not everyone needs to teach like they had 15 cups of coffee. Teachers are not circus performers. We are practitioners trying to do something life-changing, which is to provide the most important literacy skills necessary for students to navigate this world, seek truth, and communicate that truth. If the curriculum is going to be any good, it cannot be canned, and it cannot be handcuffed by the standards. “Standards-based instruction” and a complete reliance on skill mastery usurps the purpose of an ELA classroom, which should provide authentic literacy activities that produce a generation of “voracious readers” who are able to think critically and respond thoughtfully to the world around them (Gallagher, 2009). Worry not; the standards will show up later in the process. In order for students to reap the benefits of this type of curricular approach, we must operate off the assumption that “large amounts of nonfiction reading will occur in science, social studies, arts, and electives” (Schmoker, 2018). Assuming, this foundational and necessary truth, the following nine-step process is one workable option our ELA teams have used for developing curriculum from the ground up in a way that promotes a rich and SEL-mindful experience for all students.

### **Step One: Identify Your Priorities**

Many of us call these our “power standards.” Looking at the Kansas ELA standards right at the beginning of this process (46 of them at the secondary level), helps to at least offer teachers the perspective necessary to begin the curriculum writing process. But keep in mind we are mapping curriculum—not mapping standards. Identifying the priority or “power” standards helps teams of teachers determine what they believe to be most important for students. These could be narrowed down to 10 or fewer. In fact, I recommend rewriting these as a team to more accurately align with your local philosophy. For example, here are my basic priorities:

- 1) Read texts closely in order to identify author’s strategies and purpose and in order to respond accordingly.
- 2) Articulate your own original ideas clearly and effectively using a variety of methods.
- 3) Understand your role as a citizen and individual among these texts.

If I think of what I want an 18-year-old graduate to be able to do, it boils down to those skills. Looking closely at priority one, this alone encompasses nearly all of the state reading standards. Priorities two and three address many, if not most, of the writing and speaking and listening

standards. If the content is rich and plentiful with these three priorities in mind, the standards will work themselves out.

When we look at these three priority or “power” standards, these address areas that will help students in every aspect of their lives. I do not get caught in the weeds of root words, grammar terms, etc. If students are not reading and writing every day and extensively, it does little good to emphasize the importance of the semicolon (standard W11.a for 9th and 10th grade). This is not to say these standards should be neglected. Instead, they will find their way into lessons organically (during a writing workshop, for example, while conferencing individually with students). Curriculum writing, which is typically done in departments or grade-level teams, can quickly derail if we argue over where “colons” will be taught. This bickering over minutiae paves the way for a curriculum evident of collegial compromises that leave a student’s SEL in the dust. That debate can be waged another day. For now, think bigger and focus on the power standards that will offer students the greatest gains. The importance of identifying basic priorities cannot be overstated. It can take some time for teams to come to a mutual understanding on their guiding philosophies. If the entire team cannot agree on the underlying goals for student learning, then coming to basic understandings on how to meet students’ SEL needs becomes murky. We must understand that we are not building a skills-based, test-prep curriculum but a “comprehensive education” that incorporates those necessary literacy skills in a way that prepares students for their vital role in passionate and active citizenship.

### **Step Two: Develop Thematic Questions to Guide the Year**

I rarely hear students say, “Yes! It’s the poetry unit!” Or insert any word before “unit.” English Language Arts is cyclical in that we ELA teachers do not teach one skill at a time. We teach numerous skills all the time and at gradually increased levels of rigor. Instead of letting the standards dictate units, allow SEL-focused themes to do so. An effective thematic question links all student learning experiences together, whether they are reading poetry, short essays, composing their own writing, or speaking and listening in a Socratic seminar. These questions also should help students understand and grapple with their own understanding of the world and how they might approach life going forward, an SEL hallmark. For freshman English this year, I have one thematic question per quarter (roughly 8 or 9 weeks). They are as follows: What is my responsibility to those around me? How much control do I have over my own life and my own actions? What is the value of a literate society? What is the value of memory and storytelling? Notice these are themes that are grounded in rich SEL experiences. Other practitioners have called this a “literacy-based” approach rather than a standards-based approach (Phillips and Wong, 2010; Schmoker, 2018). This allows for the natural integration of standards into lessons and units that approach the student’s learning with the understanding that this is a humanities course and not simply an ELA skills course. I do not, for example, have a question like “What is the structure of an argument?” That skill is embedded into the curriculum, units, and lessons. My department does indeed teach methods like the Toulmin or Sermon concepts of argumentation but not as the precepts to designing an authentic literacy-based unit. Here are examples of other less effective questions: What role should the government play in preventing man-made climate change? What is Shakespeare’s influence over modern day English? Thematic questions should be designed to lack a definitive answer so as to introduce a variety of viewpoints from authors (and students) throughout the unit. Other themes that would work include: Under what conditions should I rebel or disobey? To what extent should I defend my morals and ethics? What is worth valuing in America? How can I determine what is true? How can goodness overcome humanity’s propensity for evil? These themes have three principles in common:

- 1) **They are not standards-based.** ELA is not math. We do not need to sequence our courses around standards. Most of our standards can and should be taught all year every year. As we are beginning to see and will understand more in a later step, the standards will show up and, arguably, more effectively than if a curriculum were designed around the standards.
- 2) **They are not text-specific.** I am as guilty as any ELA teacher when it comes to teaching certain books. I will do almost anything to teach *The Great Gatsby* every year. So I typically have a thematic question into which Fitzgerald’s novel fits. We want to avoid, however, marrying ourselves to texts simply because we feel they must be taught. Consider this, though. Would our students be less prepared for life (or college) if they did not read *The Great Gatsby*? While it seems sacrilege to even consider, I have had too many conversations with teachers over the years that often contain phrases like this: “But we *have* to teach <insert text here>. Where else are they going to get this?” If the state standards do one thing right, it is that they don’t dictate the vehicles we use to drive instruction. Methods, tools, programs, websites, and all other strategies are left up to local folks to determine — preferably individual teachers. To that end, texts are merely tools to help us teach authentic literacy-based units that ultimately address the standards. By handcuffing our curriculum to certain texts, we eliminate the creative autonomy our teachers deserve to achieve the greatest gains with students.
- 3) **They help students learn something about themselves and their own value or worth.** At the core of English language arts is the story. Whether this is fiction, poetry, drama, or a student creation, the story teaches us one more chapter in the story of humanity. Thomas Foster in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* asserts that all texts, individually, are chapters in one great book that tells the story of what it means to be human. A thematic unit, rich with reading, writing, and speaking experiences invites students to grapple not only with the definition of a sonnet but with what that sonnet teaches them about themselves, which students would communicate through writing and speaking opportunities.

Now consider the unfortunate alternative to these three qualities: 1) the ELA classroom is standards-based, 2) it is built around the same texts, teacher to teacher, and 3) it emphasizes mastery of skill rather than mastery of literacy. How does this address the whole student? A scripted curriculum that is overly standardized produces an impractical and unsustainable model for student growth. Conversely, a focus on thematic literacy units produces the essential SEL competency result: students who are ready to take on the real-world challenges that await them (Noonan & Erickson, 2018).

### **Step Three: Design a Year of Reading Experiences**

With thematic questions in place, fill those units with texts that inform different answers to the question.

#### **Start with an anchor text**

I like the value that a whole-class text brings to the curriculum. It invites extensive study of an issue and a variety of author structures and methods. It also promotes reading stamina, something our students desperately need (Conley 2005). In my freshman English class, *Of Mice and Men* fits nicely with the thematic question of “What is my responsibility to those around me?” A reading of that book alone would offer rich opportunities for students to discuss informed answers to that question. This also begs the question: Is it truly necessary for teachers to teach the same



book? What if one teacher feels *The Book Thief* addresses the theme while another likes *Brown Girl Dreaming*? The answer should always come down to this: How can we provide the biggest gains for our students while ensuring our students are mastering the same skills? If this means that teachers diverge on their text choices so that their students make the biggest gains, then we should embrace that divergence. After all, ELA teachers must understand that these thematic questions ask students to practice a crucial skill: argumentation. Conley (2005) emphasizes that nearly everything students read should be vehicles to sharpen their own arguments. Nearly any text serves this purpose. To squabble over which four books should be taught every year in 10th grade is a futile argument we English teachers must extinguish.

### **Fill in the gaps with supplemental texts**

After determining the whole-class text, insert a variety of texts into the rest of the quarter. I plan for eight pieces of poetry, short stories, short essays, and other forms of media. The guiding question throughout the planning stage should be “How can I give a 360-degree view of this thematic issue from a variety of voices and styles?” It is important to avoid pushing an agenda (particularly a political one) when choosing these pieces. Do not “steer” students toward a particular answer. Provide them the gift of that self-discovery. A unit that truly addresses SEL allows for self-regulation and self-discovery—contributing ultimately to self-efficacy. We ignore all of this if we design the outcome for them.

### **Identify the skills to be assessed**

These can be specific state standards, or they can be branches of the state standards. For example, in an AP Language & Composition class, analyzing for rhetorical appeals might be the primary skill focus. That skill addresses more than half of the state standards for reading informational texts. For my freshman English class, understanding the power of story and narration is a large focus in the first quarter. This, too, addresses a large chunk of the state standards for reading literature. The point here is to allow teachers’ skills as professional practitioners of teaching and learning to dictate the direction of the curriculum. If the judgments teachers make are good ones, the standards will all fit. This is where the collegial discussions that emerge through professional learning communities can help provide the necessary perspectives to foster this type of curriculum design.

### **Determine the reading assessments**

The final step is to determine how to show proof of learning. I personally find this part difficult for reading assignments and find that many assessments are mired in comprehension checks. Because of that, my reading assessments tend to all be formative in nature—dialectical journals, creative writing responses, visuals. I wait for the writing projects and Socratic seminars to assess what students were able to accomplish with a text. The reason is grounded in paying attention to what I want most: students with the ability to self-regulate, communicate effectively, and find value in their work and life, all through the vehicle of reading and writing extensively over long periods of time. If a reading assessment does not lead to this type of experience, I certainly do not grade it as a summative assessment.

## **Step Four: Design a Year of Writing Experiences**

It is not enough for ELA to offer rich and extensive reading opportunities. We must provide plenty of experiences that allow students to write every day. This should include writing essays that go through the entire writing process, perhaps even using the workshop model. An SEL-minded question to keep in mind when designing these: What will the students discover about themselves

through writing this? For example, after reading *Beowulf*, my colleague and I wanted students to understand the archetype of a hero, which included the hero's journey. But was a *Beowulf* literary analysis essay, which would take at least two weeks, the proper way to assess that? We determined it was not. After a variety of short creative writing assignments and class discussions, students had a keen understanding of a hero and hero's journey. To follow this up, students then wrote an essay that incorporated both expository and narrative techniques to define their own archetype. To determine this, they took the 16 Personalities quiz and studied their results. They read psychological profiles written by Jung. They then planned and wrote an essay that incorporated narration and explanation to reveal their own individual archetype. Instead of an essay that analyzed the character Beowulf, they wrote an essay that analyzed themselves. It was not "Who was he" but rather "Who am I?" It is a transformative difference. Did we also analyze Beowulf? Certainly. But not through a summative assessment that would require so much of their time and energy.

Teacher preferences, individual skills, and local norms will determine how much writing you will do. Each semester, my department plans for a minimum of two process essays. Prompts, which usually contain choices for students, fit with the thematic question. This means students will write a minimum of eight essays each year, although in recent years I have opted for a multi-voiced argumentative research project for fourth quarter instead of traditional essays. Writing in a variety of voices goes right to the heart of SEL curriculum design—it helps students to put themselves into someone else's shoes, promoting empathy and sympathy and a more informed and well-rounded argument.

This all may seem like too much writing or an impossible grading load for a teacher. That is understandable. Keep in mind that this type of curriculum design requires a shift in philosophy—the de-emphasis on skill-drill and standards, and the emphasis on a humanities-focused, thematic, literacy-based learning environment. The latter addresses the whole student. On a basic level, ELA teachers should agree on a minimum number of writing experiences and assessments for students so that we do not have more of what we have had throughout the last half century in our schools: few writing assessments and varying degrees of teacher expectations for writing (Conley, 2005; Schmoker, 2018).

### **Step Five: Design a Year of Speaking and Listening Experiences**

Consider this question when mapping a year of speaking and listening (S&L): How can we provide students the opportunities to discover truth through speaking and listening? Many teachers arrange desks in cooperative learning groups of four, which allows for brief collaborative structures on a daily basis. In addition to cooperative learning structures every day, which could be a simple think-pair-share or gallery walk activity, I build in two Socratic seminars each quarter. The first is a formative assessment in which, at the end of our reading, the students discuss the themes and larger implications of our whole class text. The second is a summative assessment the last day of the quarter in which the students synthesize evidence from our readings and their own writings to help them debate the thematic question they have studied for eight weeks. It has proven over the years to be an effective and engaging way to conclude our study, and the students look forward to this discussion. Evidence of critical thinking is on full display this day. I hesitate to prescribe any particular strategies here, as teachers should choose those that have achieved the greatest gains for their students. Regardless of a teacher's method for assessing S&L, the point is this: Are students learning something about themselves and the world so that they might grow into stronger individuals? Teachers presumably would like the answer to be yes. It is a far more powerful discussion that promotes students' own reflection and metacognition than, say, a discussion on the plot structure or literary devices in *Lord of the Flies*. Plot structure and literary devices will come up

and possibly even be assessed formatively throughout the year. But if we are building an SEL-focused curriculum, plot and devices do not serve as foundations for that curriculum.

### **Step Six: Determine the Culminating Assessment**

In a 16-week semester, what are teachers aiming toward? The answer to that should show itself through the final assessment—typically a common assessment in many schools. One such assessment, which I have utilized for years, is the writing portfolio. Students revise their essays from the entire quarter or semester and write a metacognitive letter to me that addresses similar components of Conley’s (2010) four domains of college and career readiness, only 25 percent of which is based on the specific standards-based skills they learned. The other domains address academic behaviors that include self-efficacy and self-regulation. Students complete the portfolio in class through a writer’s workshop model that allows me to teach essential skills and conference with them one-on-one, further fostering those deeper relationships our students need with us. Throughout this revision process, which typically takes four class periods, students experience varying levels of success, ultimately building confidence and the insight that they can, indeed experience achievement in ELA. There are other components to our final, such as a vocabulary test and a final Socratic seminar. Those, however, are weighted less than the writing portfolio, which more accurately measures their growth from beginning to end. It provides students the healthy opportunity to see that they can improve. I allow my students great flexibility in their revisions, although I provide them plenty of concrete strategies. I avoid telling them what to revise but foster an environment that invites them to implement changes they think are best. I coach them, not direct them. What is arguably a daunting task for them becomes an experience in perseverance and grit. Many students feel that if they can conquer the portfolio, they have achieved something great.

### **Step Seven: Plug in the State Standards**

This might seem counterintuitive to do this close to the end, and undoubtedly there are bureaucrats offended by this approach. Even the early advocates of Common Core acknowledged that standards do not dictate curriculum and that “it is important to celebrate that [any] standards acknowledge that teachers need to draw upon the knowledge of our field in order to bring students to these ambitious levels” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Look how much we now know about our field since the latest iteration of standards emerged. Consider, too, what this SEL-minded curriculum has produced up to this point: extensive reading opportunities in nearly every genre; daily and prolonged writing experiences; and daily speaking and listening opportunities. All in one quarter. At the very least, nearly all state standards are addressed through formative assessment and a great number of them are addressed through summative assessment. The secret? A curriculum that is not lazy but is rich and filled with topical, relevant reading and writing experiences on a daily basis that treats the course as a humanities-based, literacy rich learning environment. So teachers should go through the curriculum and attach the standards where those standards organically show up. If any standards are not addressed, teams can then determine how to deal with that, such as through writing workshop, individual conferencing, or other methods.

### **Step Eight: Design Lessons**

Ideally, this is where the “common” curriculum becomes individualized based on teacher creativity and strengths. Steps one through seven are collaborative and should be made available to the community and new teachers. If students are writing, reading, speaking, and listening as much as we outlined in steps one through seven, then we should trust our colleagues to create experiences for their own students in ways those teachers feel would garner the most gains from their students. Standardization kills this and usually is only implemented because a parent demands it or out of fear

that a parent might demand it. Yet, keeping SEL in mind, teachers connect with students in different ways. The lesson planning (and the texts teachers choose) largely determine the experiences students will have with that teacher and with their peers. We should trust ourselves and our colleagues enough to do what they think is most effective in their classrooms.

For the sake of providing a model, I essentially ask myself this each time I plan a lesson: “Are my students reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a meaningful way today?” I also ask “How does today help inform an answer to our thematic question.” This keeps me grounded in providing those meaningful SEL experiences for students. I typically build in journal writing, sharing in small groups, closely reading a text or studying a whole-class novel, participating in a cooperative learning activity that analyzes the text, and allowing for time to work on original, extensive writing. I also build in time for reflection and mindfulness at the end of each class.

### **Step Nine: Insert Your Class Policies**

Often overlooked as part of curriculum implementation, class policies help to shape the classroom climate and sustained culture. My department, for example, most recently developed common ground on late work policies—a feat that could only have been accomplished at the end of our curriculum development process. What good is a late work policy if we do not even know how we weight certain types of assignments or what we value in our curriculum? Other items to consider: If our goal is to help students self-regulate, should class policies include never-ending due dates? If time management is an important college and career competency, according to the College and Career Competency Framework, should teachers give far-reaching extensions to students when they do not turn in work? These are all determinations teachers must make for themselves, or in teams. But we all should ask ourselves, “What do we want for our students, and how will my policies help them achieve that?” Shouldn’t we expect basic expectations (alert, head up, ready to learn, devices put away)? Am I their favorite teacher because I am funny and loose? Or am I their favorite teacher because I helped them become better learners and better equipped for their next steps? Recall that a strong SEL environment is not one that rescues kids and ensures they will always have an adult to rescue them but rather an environment that equips students with the tools to persevere and see success as an option even after failure. An engaging and viable curriculum is nearly wiped out when the class policies fail to protect the integrity of that curriculum.

### **How to Ruin This**

A school or district determined to standardize everything will ruin this. Common assessments based on compromise rather than consensus will ruin this. Teaching texts because *we just have to* will ruin this. Ultimately, as Simon Sinek says, it comes down to understanding our “why.” Why would we structure an ELA curriculum in the way I have prescribed? I have argued that it provides a rich, rigorous, and engaging curriculum that addresses the entire student. I have further argued that it allows ELA to thrive in the way it was intended: as a humanities course, not an ELA skills course. The design and implementation of such a curriculum unavoidably addresses all state standards. The “why,” however, does not include mastery of those state standards. The “why” includes helping students understand the power of literacy to improve their lives and discover truth. And when that happens, proficiency in the standards works itself out.

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Dr. Paul Restivo has taught English at the high school and college level for 15 years. In that time, he has served as department chair and cooperative learning coach in addition to serving on curriculum councils, school leadership teams, and assessment committees. His research focuses include inquiry-based learning, collaborative inquiry, metacognition, self-regulation, social emotional learning, teacher retention, school leadership, and high-quality professional development. In the last decade, he has presented at more than 20 national conferences and local professional development workshops. Dr. Restivo believes strongly in building a strong, viable curriculum filled with a rich variety of reading, writing, speaking, and listening opportunities that reaches students of all ability levels. He can be reached at [restivop@usd416.org](mailto:restivop@usd416.org) or @drpaulrestivo.

## The First Year

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My first year of teaching is a melting cone. My tongue, frantically catching the streams of crème falling to my hand. It's a muscle wrenching, knee throbbing dead sprint, among those who jog effortlessly. It's jokes in the hallway like: "Man my kids were awful today." Or "My first hour is a disaster." A laugh that goes dry in my mouth and turns into a lump I fight like hell to keep down. It's understanding nods and grins with promising advice. It's a computer with emails that I know are important but can't understand. It's nine IEPs in one class. It's guilt. It's guilt. It's the five seconds I count in my head before I speak to a disrespectful student. It's the lunch break I use to prepare for the next class. My first year of teaching is a melting cone. Falling apart in my hands, sticking to my clothes. A promise of pleasure and happiness. A puddle on the ground. Lungs burning, legs wailing, yet so far behind. My first year of teaching, a wave of panic, a sticky mess, a ruined shirt, a tear on my keyboard, a cacophony of CHAMPS, demerit threats, ambiguous e-mails, a thud on the window. Suddenly our eyes dart to the bird who smacked into the glass. The CHAMPS collapse. Students erupt into bellowing howls. Uncontrollable belly shaking laughter. Their smiles seep into my skin, infecting my composure. My tight lips break into a smile. I embrace the moment, the cone, the mess, the crème as I let my class fall apart. We watch as the dazed bird gathers herself, whips her head back and forth and with two flaps, soars smoothly into the purple sky.

### Author Biography

Tabetha Davis is a seventh grade Language Arts teacher that works daily to empower students through different avenues of literature. Tabetha believes that every student has valuable and unique thoughts to share and works to help them learn how to express those thoughts effectively. Tabetha is a graduate of Wichita State University with a degree in Secondary English Education. She recently started her career in a magnet school within the Wichita School District. She is currently the school's student council sponsor where she encourages students to take on leadership roles in their daily lives. In her spare time Tabetha enjoys experimenting with poetry and creative writing. She can be reached at [Tmlevydavis@gmail.com](mailto:Tmlevydavis@gmail.com).

## Insight into Instructional Coaching

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to gain insight into the startup cycle of an instructional coaching responsibilities in a school district. These case studies show both success and setbacks as an honest and transparent look into instructional coaching.

### Keywords

instructional coaching, primary grades, intermediate grades

### Introduction: My Story as a Coach

Instructional coaches help educators set and achieve self-selected goals, empower educators and students, and offer support and resources until the goal is met. They also partner with educators to help them improve teaching and learning so students become more successful. In a mid-sized district, our new instructional coaches have been vital in implementing new core curriculum, facilitating professional learning sessions, and sharing feedback and models of lessons.

My fellow coaches and I seek to make coaching an effective support for our teachers. I work in four elementary schools with a wide range of student and teacher backgrounds and experiences. To showcase the cycles, I selected two teachers as case studies because they were both new to teaching in an elementary setting, but they each had a background in working with children in other contexts. I wanted to look at how my coaching might be different in primary and intermediate grades and to reflect on how my coaching cycles unfold when working with different personalities. Notes taken during or shortly after conversations with teachers or administrators have provided helpful insight as I've analyzed my interactions and coaching approach with the two teachers during the implementation of instructional coaching. Names and identifying information has been changed to protect the identities of individuals.

In this practitioner piece, I will explain the Impact Cycle used for instructional coaching. Each section following will highlight my interactions with a primary and an intermediate teacher I have worked with this school year as well as my reflections.

### The Impact Cycle

The process we use for instructional coaching is called the Impact Cycle, and it is composed of three steps: identify, learn, and improve (Knight, 2018). Developed by Jim Knight, the Impact Cycle is designed to foster collaboration and goal setting between a teacher and an instructional coach to improve instructional practice. In three steps, coaches offer support and resources throughout the process until the goal is met:

- In the **identify** step, the goal is to gain a clear picture of reality and identify student-focused goals with academic achievement, student engagement, and classroom management. Together, coaches and educators decide on a goal and a strategy to meet the goal.
- In the **learn** step, educators and coaches implement a strategy by modeling, co-teaching, trying the strategy, or using a checklist or other tools. This section can be broken up into smaller, more manageable steps to help teachers meet their goal.

- In the **improve** step, ask: Was the goal met? The teacher and coach monitor progress and make changes to the goal or strategy used as needed. Plans and actions continue until the goal is met (Knight, 2018).

### Entry into Coaching

In two selected cases, the teachers entered the coaching cycle in different ways. Ms. Jones reached out to me for help as soon as school started, whereas I asked to observe Ms. Lark. The teachers had very different challenges in their classrooms and required different approaches to accommodate their needs.

Primary Teacher: Since she was new to the district, I approached a first-year primary teacher, Ms. Lark, at the beginning of the school year in August 2018 to observe her class during her ELA block. She was accepting of me coming in to observe, and reported that she felt like things were going well with her students. My first observation occurred in the second week of school. During the lesson, many students were engaged in a conversation with other students, and the teacher had to say the name of a student multiple times to get their attention. Throughout the lesson, I identified only a few students fully engaged in the lesson activities.

Intermediate Teacher: About this same time, I was approached by a second-year intermediate teacher, Ms. Jones, to start a coaching cycle. After a difficult first year, she was determined to have a better year, and she asked if I would observe her teaching. Ms. Jones' biggest concerns were implementing the new core ELA curriculum and classroom management. My initial observations during her ELA block revealed that her students were generally engaged in the lesson, and she had some management strategies in place to prevent student misbehavior.

### Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations

After my first observations of these two teachers during their ELA blocks, I hypothesized what I thought they would select for their goals. Based on my conversations with Ms. Jones and Ms. Lark before observing, I thought Ms. Jones' goal would likely be centered around student engagement and Ms. Lark would choose to focus on classroom management. One prediction was correct and one was not. The teachers' perceptions and expectations of their teaching aligns with the identify step of the Impact Cycle as outlined above.

Primary Teacher: When I met with Ms. Lark to discuss her lessons, her perception was that her teaching and classroom management were fine. She felt that things were going well and rated her performance during the observation at a "seven out of ten." Yet after her formal administrative evaluation, the principal raised concerns about student learning and classroom management and told Ms. Lark she was required to enter into a coaching cycle with me. When we met again, we set a goal for better student engagement. Ms. Lark expressed to me that she wanted to improve her teaching because she cared about her students and loved her job.

Intermediate Teacher: Immediately after my first observation, Ms. Jones set her first goal around student engagement: *Students will be engaged during ELA tier one time, 40%-50% of students raising hands, 60% annotating and answering questions in the book according to expectation.* Ms. Jones knew that true engagement was more than students raising their hands but this seemed like a logical first step for her to increase engagement. She shared her expectations for speaking, listening, annotating, and answering questions (verbally and in writing) with her students verbally and in writing. We discussed ways she could measure progress toward her goal. Her ideas included implementing rubrics for annotations and written responses, collecting student workbooks to check annotation and observing the number of students raising their hands each day. We meet regularly to discuss observations and progress.



**Reflections:** At this point, I recognized that Ms. Lark did not understand what it looked like when she was teaching. Ms. Lark did not voluntarily enter into the coaching cycle with me, and she was required to work with me. When people feel they don't have a choice in whether or not they do something, they may resist or act compliant without sustaining real change (Knight, 2018). In contrast, Ms. Jones is more aware of her strengths and weaknesses. She has more experience teaching and is more knowledgeable about effective practices in reading instruction. I did not have to guide Ms. Jones and we were able to have great dialogue about strategies that would be effective in improving student learning.

### **Launch into Learning**

In the identify step of the impact cycle I asked the identify questions written by Jim Knight in his book *The Impact Cycle* (Knight, 2018). These questions helped teachers set a self-selected goal, provided the teachers a chance to reflect on their own teaching, and allowed them to choose a goal that was compelling. The questions were intentionally written to move the dialogue towards constructive conversation grounded in reality (or the teacher's perception of reality) and focus on how to best help students. In this step, the teachers identified what they needed to improve in their teaching by answering questions such as "What would your students be doing differently if that lesson was a 10 on your rating scale?" and "How would you measure the change you're describing?" Additionally, teachers identified how the changes to instructional practice would increase student achievement. Finally, questions such as "What teaching strategy could you use to hit your goal?" and, "What are your next steps?" identify the work that needs to be done.

This model of instructional coaching focuses on developing a dialogical coaching relationship. In a dialogical coaching relationship, teachers and coaches work together as partners, using their shared knowledge and expertise to set and meet a student-centered goal (Knight, 2018). I was able to have a dialogical coaching relationship with Ms. Jones. She and I shared ideas very often and we both learned a lot in the process. The setback was often Ms. Jones' confidence. She sometimes focused on what did not go well in a lesson rather than celebrating her growth as an educator. During our meetings I tried to balance our conversations with steps toward improvement and celebrations of growth. In contrast, most likely because of the required use of coaching, my approach with Ms. Lark was more directive coaching. The mini-goals for her improvement were based on my observations and our conversation after I observed, and the goals were strongly guided by my observations rather than her perceptions.

**Primary Teacher:** After more reflective conversations, the self-selected goal Ms. Lark chose was: *90% of students will be continually engaged throughout lessons during the ELA block.* I knew she would need to set mini-goals since there were several basic strategies she needed to master before engagement was realized. Ms. Lark tended not notice her students' behaviors until their behaviors were out of control. Noticing undesired behaviors in the classroom was an early mini-goal for Ms. Lark. To support her in having an accurate picture of her students' behavior, I collected data during my observations during her ELA block on the number of students off task at a given time and how many students she praised and corrected during her lessons. We used the data to select something small she could improve. After I started collecting data, she was more cognizant of who she was correcting and who she was not noticing. This was an important step for Ms. Lark.

**Intermediate Teacher:** Ms. Jones and I next discussed methods she could use to reach her goal of increasing student engagement in her class during ELA. The strategies we felt would be most helpful for this goal were: 1) effective feedback/behavior specific praise, 2) opportunities to respond, 3) cooperative learning, and 4) shared learning targets. To encourage students to raise their hands and enter class discussion, Ms. Jones added a clear and visible class goal to her wall: "Respond to a question five or more times each day." Her goal was not correctness, but instead that students

were attempting to answer questions and participate in discussions. After adding this goal to her wall, Ms. Jones then looked at her lesson plans and added more opportunities to respond. She also noted success by praising students more often with feedback when they responded to questions and participated in class discussions.

### **Teachers Taking Action**

After selecting a goal and a strategy to meet the goal, we moved into the second step of the Impact Cycle: learn. Teachers and coaches worked together to create a plan of action to implement the strategy chosen. The pace at which my coaching cycles moved was dependent on the teacher. Ms. Lark and I moved at a slower pace than Ms. Jones and I because the two teachers have different action plans and needs. Ms. Lark wanted to make changes in her instruction and classroom management but seemed nervous when presented with large changes. Ms. Jones was much more willing to take risks and try new things in her classroom.

Primary Teacher: Ms. Lark seemed to do best when given one or two small things to implement at a time, for example, some smaller goals were: 1) expecting perfect transitions every time by holding students accountable to the classroom behavior matrix and 2) adding morning meetings to her morning routine to establish and strengthen classroom community. After a few days of higher expectations for transitions and practicing transitions when not executed according to expectations, her students were doing much better. I predict that we may need to revisit the need for high expectations during transitions within the next few months. Morning meetings were going well, and she was starting to use that time as an opportunity to help students learn how to interact with each other appropriately at school and to build relationships with her students. The next mini-goal Ms. Lark attempted was to teach all students the silent attention signal called a “hushpuppy.” An ongoing goal was to give students positive feedback more often with the goal being four positives for each correction.

An ongoing concern about Ms. Lark was that her management strategy was very different when I was observing in the room versus when I was not in the room. While I was observing, Ms. Lark used many of the best practices we discussed during coaching meetings. However, as I walked past her classroom throughout the day, she tended to fall back to using ineffective management strategies such as raising her voice and using phrases such as, “excuse me,” which didn’t have meaning or consequences for primary students. I think when I was in the room, she felt like she had authoritative backup. We work together weekly and there is now a sense of camaraderie between us.

Intermediate Teacher: Ms. Jones has identified a goal of having her students more engaged and she selected annotating and collaborative learning as the two strategies to implement in ELA. I provided Ms. Jones with resources including videos of teachers using these specific ELA strategies, arranging for her to observe other teachers in the district and anchor chart ideas she could recreate. With both of these practices, Ms. Jones began by explaining her expectations, then modeling, and finally letting students try on their own while she circulated and provided feedback to students as they worked. Ms. Jones has successfully implemented both annotations and collaborative learning with her students, which has greatly enhanced student learning.

The next step for Ms. Jones was to write rubrics for annotating and answering questions in the workbook. We met to discuss how to write a strong rubric for the performance expectations. She wrote rubrics for annotating and answering questions. Her next step was to share the rubrics with her students and begin using them to grade her student’s work.

Reflections: I am currently engaging in dialogical coaching with Ms. Jones. My coaching with Ms. Lark is still directive. I am collaborating with other coaches as well as my own virtual coach to determine next steps to help Ms. Lark. Despite her hesitancy to be filmed, I feel this is a necessary next step and that she will begin noticing what is happening when she is teaching.

### **Coach's Reflections on the Impact Cycle with Teachers:**

For a coaching experience to be most effective, I believe that teachers need to have a few characteristics like: 1) the basic skills needed to effectively manage a classroom; 2) be willing to try new things out of their comfort zones; and 3) have an open mind and a desire for change. For some teachers, these characteristics are inherent and for some teachers, these characteristics need to be developed. The type of coaching relationship I developed with these two teachers hinged on these characteristics.

As I continue to coach these two teachers, I plan to sustain my current practice of observing, providing feedback and encouraging best practices in their classrooms as outlined in the Impact Cycle (Knight, 2018). My goal moving forward is to individualize my coaching. Because Ms. Jones is willing to take risks and already has great teaching instincts, I can take a dialogical approach to coaching. Ms. Lark required a more directive approach to coaching. Individualized coaching based on my observations and the skill level of the teacher is the best utilization of coaching in my opinion. I will continue to make changes to my approach as I collect more field notes and observations. Coaching is an important practice, and one that I certainly hope my district chooses to continue in the future.

I have adjusted my approaches to coaching throughout this process. Before I started coaching, I didn't think personality would have as much weight in my approach to coaching; however, it does. The personalities of these two teachers has definitely impacted my coaching relationship with them. There were times when both teachers didn't understand something I said, and I had to rethink how I was presenting ideas. Taking a step back and viewing the entirety of our relationships has enabled me to understand these teachers more deeply. In the future, similar patterns will emerge; and I hope that my experience with these teachers serves as a guide for how to best meet the individual needs of our teachers.

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### **Author Biography**

As USD 383 Instructional Coach with a Literacy Network of Kansas Striving Readers Grant, Cynthia serves four schools. Though she coaches teachers in all subjects, literacy has been her main focus during year one implementation of both instructional coaching and new ELA curriculum. Cynthia has worked as a primary and intermediate teacher in Utah and Washington and has also worked in ESOL and family empowerment positions. She is married to Travis and mother to Asher. The family has three dogs, Auzzie, Izzy, and Dog. She can be reached at [cynthiac@usd383.org](mailto:cynthiac@usd383.org).

## Teacher Perceptions of Define-Example-Ask Vocabulary Routines for Elementary Students

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### Abstract

Vocabulary is a set of familiar words within a person's language. Typically developed with students' exposure and age, the focused instructional routine of Define, Example, Ask (DEA) is used for Wonders K-5 Curriculum from McGraw Hill. This routine serves as a fundamental tool for acquiring knowledge through vocabulary in real-life methods. This article assesses teacher efficacy and perceptions of the DEA routine in year one of curriculum resource implementation with data collected from grade-level focus groups in fall 2018. The research question focuses on teacher efficacy in implementing the DEA routine.

### Keywords

vocabulary instruction, teacher efficacy, Wonders K-5 Curriculum

### Introduction

Vocabulary is knowledge of the meaning, use, and pronunciation of individual words used in speaking or recognized in listening (oral) and words used or recognized in print (reading and writing). Vocabulary is a key component of many aspects of literacy, including listening, expression, comprehension and writing (Wonders, 2017). As one of the main pillars of literacy instruction recommended by the National Reading Panel through the "Putting Reading First" report, vocabulary knowledge comes from multiple exposures to new words in context (NRP, 2000). Using the Define, Example, Ask (DEA) instructional routine, students gain opportunities to efficiently absorb and 'own' new vocabulary. Direct instruction in vocabulary with the DEA model has a positive impact on students' language development (Wonders, 2017).

Kansas English language arts (ELA) standards emphasize the need for students to expand the breadth of their vocabulary knowledge and acquire a healthy, always-expanding stock of words. Standards emphasize that instruction should guide students to extract word meaning from the context in which it is used. Wonders by McGraw Hill was adopted as the main curriculum resource for the district in fall 2018, and the DEA routine is part of the instructional expectation of this curriculum. Routines like DEA provide support for students unlikely to determine word meaning from text alone (Wonders, 2017). For example, English language learners may require support in mastering high-frequency words that are essential (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998). Teachers' perceptions in their efficacy of the DEA routines support research that direct vocabulary instruction results in an increase of specific word knowledge and future performance on summative assessments (Snow, et al., 1998). This study and research question will report on teacher perceptions of efficacy and highlights specific ways to build confidence with DEA, not student results but rather educator level data. Qualitative data was collected from grade-level focus groups in fall 2018.

### Define, Example, Ask (DEA) Routine

The steps for the routines include *define*, to share the meaning of words in student-friendly terms; *example*, where common experiences are shared; and *ask*, where questions are formed from the word in real-life context. Approximately eight selected focused vocabulary words are linked to the weekly theme, and students talk about and review words many times throughout the week (Wonders, 2017).

Students are given opportunities to learn new words in a variety of ways. Pre-instruction, context-based instruction, and restructuring are all used to teach vocabulary with DEA. Students are also taught to use context clues to figure out the meaning of unknown words with sentence and paragraph clues, definitions and restatements, synonyms and antonyms throughout (Wonders, 2017).

For example, in grade four during one sample week, students are introduced to vocabulary related to money and economics with vocabulary including *entrepreneur* and *currency*. Students begin the week by discussing the concept “Money Matters,” which connects to the main text selection. They use a concept web or graphic organizer to generate words and phrases related to money. With DEA, students discuss and write academic vocabulary throughout the week, with additional scaffolding for the vocabulary words (e.g., *scarcity* and *opportunity*).

On day one, students practice using the new vocabulary definitions provided by video or picture examples. On day two, they are asked to generate new forms of the words by adding, changing, or removing inflectional endings with several examples. Students complete sentence stems using the words on day three. On day three or four, students may write sentences using the words in word study notebooks or personal journals. On day five, they complete a Frayer model or word square for each vocabulary word: in the first square of the model, they write the word; in the second square, they write a definition; in the third square, they draw an illustration that will help them remember the word; and in the fourth square, students write antonyms for the word (Wonders, 2017).

### Review of Literature

DEA routines ask students to use multiple modalities of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The research connected to these areas is strong. Vocabulary development shows that comprehension gains are results of vocabulary learning (NRP, 2000): “More complex aspects of oral language, such as vocabulary, had more substantial predictive relations with later conventional literacy skills” (NIL, 2008, p. 78). Beginning in grade one and up, higher level tier two or three vocabulary words are selected from main text selections. In addition, domain-specific words are also introduced in context through selections. In-text scaffolding helps students with specific vocabulary in selections. Students continue to build on this vocabulary throughout the week.

With direct DEA instruction, even students in primary grades can acquire sophisticated vocabulary (Wonders, 2017). In order for students to understand a word once it has been decoded, it must already be part of their vocabulary (NRP, 2000). Before students can read independently, direct methods for building oral vocabulary contributes to students’ ultimate success in reading. Snow, et al. (1998) argue that “learning new words is essential for comprehension development” (p. 217). Rich oral language-based instruction is a key part of reading. Using self-talk, parallel talk, expansion and praise are all parts of developing oral language, which transfers to understanding written words when decoded. Additional examples include the following:

1. With guidance and support from adults, students explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings (Define)
2. Students use words multiple times acquired through conversations, reading, being read to, and responding to texts with several examples (Example)
3. Students acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate conversational, general academic and domain specific words with questions to plug them back into their existing schemas (Ask)

One highlighted DEA aspect, nonlinguistic representation, comes in many forms with visual photos, videos, graphic organizers, sketches, pictographs, concept maps, flowcharts, or computerized simulations. The type of representation selected is a function of student abilities, type of content addressed, and amount of time available. Nonlinguistic representations must focus on

crucial information or the practice may have no positive effect on student learning (Haystead & Marzano, 2009). Representation helps students deepen their vocabulary understanding because it requires them to think about content in new ways. Asking students to explain their representations promotes even greater understanding. Nonlinguistic representations are a form of note taking in that they represent a student's understanding of crucial content at a specific point in time (Haystead & Marzano, 2009).

Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly with DEA, with both explicit instruction in vocabulary and methods of decoding word meanings and more contextual approaches to exposing students to vocabulary on the other (NRP, 2000). Instruction with DEA includes a combination of different strategies, both direct and indirect, for building vocabulary, rather than relying on only one method or strategy (NRP, 2000). Honoring teacher personalities for strong student relationships and relevant always-updated content, DEA allows for learning new words in a variety of different ways, such as providing sample sentences or examples along with definitions (NRP, 2000).

### Method

The district serves two communities and outlying rural areas in north central Kansas. In grade-level focus groups scheduled on a professional learning day of staff development, teams of teachers shared their perceptions of DEA routines in grade level groups. More than 100 kindergarten to grade five teachers participated in a one-time focus group arranged by grade levels with about 10-15 teachers in each group facilitated by a lead teacher or administrator. A predetermined short list of question stem prompts helped guide the 30-60 minute conversation. This focus group session took place in October 2018. Data was recorded, and notes revealed trends of efficacy in the routine.

### Findings

Teachers commonly shared that vocabulary routines have strong efficacy when taught through active, visual student participation with frequent nonlinguistic representations on the visible vocabulary cards. Educators feel confident when exposure to new words begins with direct oral vocabulary development. Teachers shared that they feel most confident using a blend of both digital and print options to support students' vocabulary growth. Lesson openers, essential questions, and connections to other curriculum areas help develop oral vocabulary and build background knowledge. Teachers shared a favorable perception with flexibility for cooperative learning and choice in each step. Teachers increased their efficacy and confidence with vocabulary with themes in the following areas: nonlinguistic representation methods, print and digital options, active student participation, cross-curricular connections, timing and lesson flow, and clarity.

**Nonlinguistic representation methods.** Thanks to the visible vocabulary cards and videos, DEA provides students with information about the words' definitions and examples of the words' usages in a variety of contexts. Teachers reported stronger confidence in students' learning vocabulary with these visuals. "I love the vocabulary cards. Kids are recognizing and using these words in outside content," said a first-grade teacher. DEA helps usher in the large gains in both vocabulary and reading comprehension, which supports research encouraging limits on drill and practice (Snow et. al., 1998). Teachers felt confident about the student-friendly definitions, examples, and sample questions to connect back to students' lives. "I like the cards with the pictures for vocabulary, and the online projection tool with pictures and video to help them connect," said a third-grade teacher. Words are present in classrooms all week on the focus wall, and DEA is repeated throughout the week to provide multiple exposures and understanding in context. DEA lessons incorporate active student participation throughout, often with students creating their own

graphics of the words in their notebooks. “I love the pictures, word forms, and videos. They help us focus on the key ideas and concepts,” said a second-grade teacher.

**Print and digital options.** Teachers said DEA increased confidence to allow for a wide range of inputs including blended learning with technology. Some teachers preferred the online versions and videos rather than the print cards because students could see the visuals. “I use digital for whole group and [print] cards for small group,” said a second-grade teacher. Another teacher felt more confident with the actual print materials because she posts them for students to use in their writing throughout the week. There are times that teachers noted a need for technology support, such as: “[The] video component on the vocabulary doesn’t always work, causing a black screen. [There is a] lag time with the teacher is clicking around.” Overall, most K-5 teachers shared favorable methods of the DEA technology components: “The online resource is great, and I love having it available. The student version makes it so nice for centers,” said a third-grade teacher. Technology also helps with the DEA model of personalized, independent student work. “Vocab routine gets monotonous doing the same exact thing every week, so I try to pull in other ways to introduce vocab in more engaging and student-led or student-involved ways. Some lessons have a technology-based activity like Kahoot, Quizlet or Quia vocab activity available,” said a fourth-grade teacher.

**Active student participation.** With DEA, teachers shared increased confidence in keeping students active and significantly more engaged when asked to come up with real-life examples of the words in context. “Students love the [vocabulary] questions that are asked each week. They are really engaged with cooperative learning like ‘stand up, hand up, pair up,’ rally robin or shoulder partners used to help them answer the questions,” said a second-grade teacher. A third-grade teacher reported, “I have students in [cooperative learning] groupings to do a variety of activities with vocabulary, like using examples of them in new sentences. I often have a designated student help lead each group.” After several units, one kindergarten teacher noted student growth: “Students are able to share and interact with the vocabulary. Students are thinking about the drawing activities during centers.”

**Cross-curricular connections.** DEA allows for ELA vocabulary to support many other content areas. “I like how the vocabulary ties well to essential questions. It helps with understanding the stories and themes,” said a first-grade teacher. “They are making connections across all areas and pull out examples in other areas of their learning during the week. They get excited when they see their words used in non-ELA places and connect these words in other areas of instruction throughout the week. I use the words as much as I can to get that exposure,” said a second-grade teacher. Teachers noted benefits when knowledge is gained in multiple disciplines, and they expressed their belief that they teach better with these connections. A fourth-grade teacher said, “Students are recognizing vocab words within the [other] text, and many vocab words are found within other curriculum areas like science and social studies.”

**Timing and lesson flow.** Pacing for the DEA routines can create a challenge due to the sheer volume and rigor of the curriculum packages and standards requirements, hindering some teachers’ confidence levels. A kindergarten teacher said, “I’ve found there’s not enough time to incorporate all of the [DEA] activities. I do a few at a time, even though there is way too much offered to get done during the allotted time.” Forcing to choose from competing values, teachers must prioritize their DEA routines. “There is a ton to our curriculum with not enough time to get to it all. I don’t feel pressured to get through it all since the vocab is in every story throughout the week and in their leveled readers,” said a second-grade teacher. Spreading the DEA components throughout the week, rather than a single time, is also a strength teachers found to help their pacing. “It’s hard to spend time on the vocabulary and still introduce everything on Monday. So I infuse it in small bits throughout the week,” said a fourth-grade teacher.

**Starting with clarity.** Instead of guessing at definitions, teachers appreciated that DEA starts with the true meanings as defined by the text in student-friendly and grade-level appropriate terms, resulting in reliable gains in incidental word acquisition. The DEA connections also help with intervention groups. “[Intervention] groups work well when teachers are following the [DEA instructional routine] for the vocab cards because the kids know expectation. These mini-lessons are quick, and I note discussions throughout the day centered on those vocab words,” said one first-grade teacher. Assessments are a key part of ensuring DEA is effective in each setting, and teachers noted a need to gain flexibility in their summative data. “Vocabulary tests were way too similar in an unfair way, and it was hard to find the correct answer. So, I accepted either answer,” said a second-grade teacher. Also, teachers noted the need to turn the work back to students, rather than making DEA an adult centered show. With the student-friendly tools and clear modeling, teachers noted ways to support students in peer-level discussions and work. “Teachers may be doing most of the work, but I try to give it back to students as much as possible [to give them the DEA tasks to complete],” said a third-grade teacher. For example, a teacher brought Fortnite Battle Royale game references into a fifth-grade classroom to help students understand key terms thanks to student interest and timely relevance.

### Conclusion

With new vocabulary introduced using DEA, teachers reported feeling high efficacy and confidence to ensure student understanding with these methods. The DEA routine uses visual vocabulary cards to define each word, give examples and ask students about ways to use the word in their context. These cards are posted each week for reference as visible reminders on the focus wall. After the vocabulary has been introduced, teachers believe in their ability to find specific activities within the routine for students to discuss new words or write using the words. Teachers said they appreciated these types of active student participation that continues throughout the week to lock in a deep understanding.

Students build vocabulary indirectly by listening to, reading and discussing fiction and nonfiction texts. DEA vocabulary instruction is present with key vocabulary words taught to students during reading and in reflection of the text. Students learn vocabulary strategies to help them decode word meanings, including identifying inflectional endings, root words, prefixes and suffixes, as well as Greek and Latin roots. Teachers also help students learn to use print and online reference materials, including dictionaries and glossaries. With DEA, teachers shared that students can learn to recognize word study elements like homophones, homographs, and figurative language with the examples section of DEA.

Educators using DEA found they could support students’ interpretation of the meaning of words in context and use new words appropriately in real-life ways. From these qualitative examples, teachers shared high efficacy and confident perceptions of the DEA routines with nonlinguistic representation methods, print and digital options, active student participation, cross-curricular connections, timing and lesson flow, and clarity.

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### **Author Biography**

As USD 383 director of elementary education, Lucas Shivers channels his life-long passion for positive student and professional development to build the core values of student-centered learning and adaptive leadership to facilitate growth for each student as a champion and advocate for innovative instruction. He can be reached at [lucass@usd383.org](mailto:lucass@usd383.org).

## ***The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime that Changed Their Lives***

**A book review by John Franklin**

Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas

*The 57 Bus*, Dashka Slater’s 2017 journalistic investigation of a horrific event, is a 302-page exposition suitable for high school students as well as middle school readers who—while encountering puberty—experience conflict and curiosity about gender and sexual identity.

Set in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Oakland, California, the book confronts the conflicts among three kinds of justice: legal, restorative and social. It does so by relating a cast of characters including personifications (some identities are veiled to preserve privacy) of students from privileged, progressive, private Maybeck High School as opposed to students from underprivileged, challenging, public Oakland High School. The characters meet by way of public transportation, where the inciting incident occurs.

The plot recounts actual events—some recorded on video—leading to a skirt-wearing Maybeck HS student being set afire by a troubled Oakland HS student.

Afterward, the author objectively questions the value of our justice system when applied to a juvenile.

*The 57 Bus* would appeal to readers curious about cultural identity, including gender and sexual representation as well as economic and family dysfunction. More mature readers will enjoy the revelation of a legal system bent on punishing adults rather than understanding adolescents. All readers can learn from the forgiveness extended from the victim and their family to the perpetrator.

This book could easily meet KSDE Standards for Reading: Information. I envision lesson plans focusing on outward appearance at the level of clothing and fashion; on restorative justice as a system of raising awareness and resolving conflict—here the chapters called “Ass Smacking” (about an early adolescent improperly touching classmates) and “Restorative Justice” are particularly edifying; and, on the importance of sympathetic adults for adolescents in need of guidance.

Parents and other concerned community members might object to the matter-of-fact exposition of gender and sexual identity—here the glossary named “Gender, Sex, Sexuality, Romance: Some Terms” is invaluable for opening enlightening discussion—as well as the profane dialogue. Their challenges may be met by providing an alternate selection: *Touching Spirit Bear*, by Ben Mikaelson, which narrates the positive application of a Native-American construct called circle justice, an alternative form of justice focused on healing victims, perpetrators and the community.

What I like best about the book is its short chapters, organized into four parts: Sasha (about the victim); Richard (about the perpetrator); the fire (about the incident); and Justice (about its aftermath), with each part providing substantial, interesting information. Taken altogether the 2-3 page chapters outweigh the whole.

After finishing *The 57 Bus*, I felt that it was the most important book I read in 2018.

### **Author Biography**

John Franklin (BA Rice; MA Miami of Ohio; PhD Florida; Texas Teacher’s Certificate) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending twelve-week summers in Britain with a backpack or a bicycle visiting the settings of the fiction, drama and poetry he taught: London for Dickens; Scotland for *Macbeth*; Canterbury for Chaucer; and, the Lake District for Wordsworth. John Franklin is an Associate Professor of English, a Supervising Professor of English Education and the Director of the English Education Internship Program at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools. He can be reached at [jfranklin@pittstate.edu](mailto:jfranklin@pittstate.edu).

## A Review and Brief Analysis of Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* and the 2018 Young Adult Adaptation

April Pameticky

Wichita East High School, Wichita, Kansas

Bryan Stevenson's powerful memoir *Just Mercy* combines his acumen as a lawyer and expertise in the field of social justice, with a far more personal narrative style that resonates powerfully. This doesn't read as a diatribe, although there were times that *would* be justifiable. Instead, with little personal fanfare, Stevenson seeks to replay his own journey from young law intern to the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative early in his law career. Focused on representing inmates on death row who couldn't afford legal representation, *Just Mercy* explores issues of race and poverty in capital cases, particularly in the south in both Georgia and Alabama. As a young man, Stevenson came to represent Walter McMillian. McMillian was tried for the death of Ronda Morrison, an 18-year-old white girl, shot dead on the floor of Monroe Cleaners where she worked. Based on spurious evidence, a sheriff driven by racial prejudice, and with a judge motivated by reelection with a reputation for being "tough on crime," summarily convicted of capital murder, McMillian was sentenced to death. Despite numerous witnesses and other pieces of evidence that showed his innocence, the struggle to free McMillian took Stevenson years and became the defining case of his career.

Stevenson's skillful blending of historical and legal precedence are coupled with his own personal triumphs and frustrations. Early in the text, he painfully rehearses his first words to a death row inmate:

"Hello, my name is Bryan. I'm a student with the ..." "No." "I'm a student with ..." "No."  
"My name is Bryan Stevenson ..." Soon I found myself pulling up to the intimidating barbed-wire fence and white guard tower of the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification State Prison. This was a hard place. (2014, p. 7)

He reveals an acute vulnerability. At other times, he writes with the power of an objective witness, recounting in plain terms, his observations. Whether guilty or innocent, Stevenson argues that the very existence of Death Row has been used to perpetuate racial stratification and endemic injustice, that white and wealthy defendants tried for similar crimes received very different sentences, particularly in Alabama and the south.

I first read *Just Mercy* in spring 2018, originally on my own and then later joining a book group led by Wichita State University Professor Dr. Robin Henry, held at St. James Episcopal church in Wichita. I found the group and subsequent discussions on race and social justice beneficial in my own understanding of the text, and I mention them here only in that I truly believe that dialogue was integral in processing the complexity of some of the social injustices catalogued.

The original text was released in 2014 and has subsequently received numerous awards and been the Common Read on college campuses across the country, including at Wichita State University in fall 2018. However, a new young adult adaptation was released in the fall 2018. A comparison of the two texts reveals that structurally, the two are nearly identical, with the same introduction and the same structural organization and chapter titles.

But an analysis shows that certain omissions and editorial changes were made. For example, chapter three begins identically in both texts, with the arrest of Walter McMillian, after public pressure and based on the sketchy testimony of witness Ralph Myers.

**Adult Version (2014, p. 47)**

They hadn't yet done much investigation into McMillian, so they decided to arrest him on a pretextual charge while they built their case. Myers claimed to be terrified of McMillian; one of the officers suggested to Myers that McMillian might have sexually assaulted him; the idea was so provocative and inflammatory that Myers immediately recognized its usefulness and somberly acknowledged that it was true. Alabama law had outlawed nonprocreative sex, so officials planned to arrest McMillian on sodomy charges.

**Young Adult Version (2018, p. 46)**

They hadn't yet investigated Mr. McMillian, so they decided to arrest him on a minor pretextual charge while they built their bigger case. During Myers's strange testimonial, the suggestion that Mr. McMillian might also have sexually assaulted him arose. Alabama law had outlawed nonprocreative sex, so officials planned to arrest Mr. McMillian on those charges.

In another example, when discussing the inconsistencies and illogical practices within the juvenile justice, Stevenson writes about the arguments made in litigation in trying to eliminate the death penalty as a juvenile sentence, from chapter 14 "Cruel and Unusual."

**Adult Version (2014, p. 270)**

We emphasized the incongruity of not allowing children to smoke, drink, vote, drive without restrictions, give blood, buy guns, and a range of other behaviors because of their well-recognized lack of maturity and judgment while simultaneously treating some of the most at-risk, neglected, and impaired children exactly the same as full-grown adults in the criminal justice system.

**Young Adult Version (2018, p. 222)**

We emphasized the hypocrisy of not allowing children to smoke, drink, vote, drive without restrictions, give blood, and buy guns because of their well-recognized lack of maturity and judgment while simultaneously treating some of the most at-risk, neglected, and impaired children exactly the same as full-grown adults in the criminal justice system.

The shifts between the texts are subtle. While certain facts and references have been deleted for brevity, overall the changes do not affect readability. The issues of race, poverty, incarceration, fair representation, wrongful prosecution, and the debilitating legacy that "tough on crime" policies have been vaguely concealed pillars of a systemically racist justice system remain intact.

Were I to choose between the two texts for secondary class use, I would first determine my own objectives. If I were going to spend a great deal of time on language analysis, I would stay with the original narrative, as the nuanced editorial decisions to affect the intensity of tone and the layered feelings that reveal Stevenson's own misgivings at times. But if my primary objective was to introduce these topics into my classroom in way that students could access and discuss, I would use the young adult adaptation.

Either way, I've come to the conclusion that I believe *Just Mercy* to be essential reading. If we are to maintain that literature can be both a window and a mirror (Sims Bishop, 1990), how important is it then to shed light on the systemic injustices that plague our country. Stevenson writes:

I felt the need to explain to people what Walter had taught me. Walter made me understand why we have to reform a system of criminal justice that continues to treat people better if

they are rich and guilty than if they are poor and innocent. A system that denies the poor the legal help they need, that makes wealth and status more important than culpability, must be changed. Walter's case taught me that fear and anger are a threat to justice; they can infect a community, a state, or a nation and make us blind, irrational, and dangerous. (p. 313)

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**Note:** A discussion guide for *Just Mercy* has been created for teachers through the Equal Justice Initiative: <https://eji.org/just-mercy/discussion-guide>

### Author Biography

April Pameticky has taught English Language Arts in the Wichita Public School district since 2006. The mother of two shares time between her classroom and the burgeoning community of artists and writers in Kansas. She facilitated the Wichita Broadside Project 2017 and currently serves as editor of *River City Poetry*, an online poetry journal. She also co-edits *Voices of Kansas*, a regional anthology of work from school-aged children across the state sponsored by the Kansas Association for Teachers of English. Her own work creative work can be seen in journals like *Malpais Review*, *KONZA*, *Chiron Review*, and *Turtle Island Quarterly*. She can be reached at [apameticky@usd259.net](mailto:apameticky@usd259.net).

## A Review of *Black Bottle Man* by Craig Russell

Jessica Rodriguez  
Wichita State University

Russell, Craig. *Black Bottle Man*. Great Plains Teen Fiction: 2010. 174 pages.

Craig Russell's *Black Bottle Man* packs a poetic punch of love, loss, and adventure, sprinkled with those pesky aspects of the human condition we all end up face to face with at one time or another. The story follows Rembrandt, a young man from a small farming community, on his odyssey toward the redemption and reconciliation of his family members after two of his aunts make a deadly deal with the Black Bottle Man. The age-old battle between good and evil, and doing what is right when right isn't what is easy, gets revamped in a setting that moves between depression-era hobo camps, modern big-city streets, and contemporary scenes involving terrorism and even mental illness.

The story is told from the point of view of two characters, Rembrandt and Gail, from two entirely different backgrounds and lifestyles, yet who share the familiar weight of responsibility that comes with serving a higher purpose. We meet Rembrandt as an elderly vagabond making his way from shelter to shelter as he provides insights into the realm of homelessness and loneliness. Gail is a former teacher attempting to carry the burden of surviving a school shooting. They appear to share almost nothing in common and as the story progresses, their connection largely remains a mystery. Both characters provide us with narratives that switch between present and past perspectives, providing readers with insightful opportunities to learn how they grow into the heroes they eventually become.

Allusions to Julius Caesar and Greek mythology throughout the novel provide high school students with opportunities to make connections between the ancient heroes of the classical literature they tend to (begrudgingly) study, and the modern-day, troubled champions our story presents us with. As such, the novel encourages students to question their definitions of heroism, while simultaneously challenging their notions of family, home, and true love. With *Black Bottle Man*, Russell gives teachers the chance to thoughtfully engage their teenage students in considering how our society shapes our idea of what is moral and right, when our ability to make those decisions for ourselves can often thrive in individualism.

If there are any challenges that could arise from teaching this novel, they are likely to deal with the spiritual and religious themes embedded into the storyline. After all, the Black Bottle Man turns out to be Satan himself and there are mentions of biblical passages, characters, and conspicuous Christian beliefs that move the story along to its ending. While teaching the novel might not be seen by most as an attempt to preach the gospel, there is always the possibility of students feeling singled out, left out, or even pressured to accept religious values that are not their own.

In a time when our students are likely to get up from their desks, pull out their mobile devices, and allow themselves to be absorbed in the trivial centrality of the media, a story like this one gives us the chance to emphasize how important it is to remain aware that there are always two sides to every story—and sometimes more than that. Our perceptions should not be deemed judgements, and our decisions always come with consequences.

### Author Biography

Jessica is a senior at Wichita State University (WSU) majoring in Secondary English/Language Arts Education and minoring in Linguistics. She has worked as a paraprofessional for USD 259 and is

excited to begin teaching after graduation. She is fascinated by language and communication, and she hopes to inspire future generations to discover and develop their own voices. In her free time, she enjoys reading lengthy novels, playing word games, and writing. Above all, she loves making memories with her young son and partner, and plans to spend the summer cherishing family and soaking up as much sunlight as she can before student teaching in the fall. She can be reached at [jrrodriguez1@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:jrrodriguez1@shockers.wichita.edu).

**Acknowledgement**

*Kansas English* would like to thank author Craig Russell for providing a copy of his book *Black Bottle Man*.

## They, Them, or Human? Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* Charms Readers and Identifies the Humanity in the Misunderstood

Elizabeth G. Vest  
Wichita State University

Jeff Garvin paints an incredible picture of Riley Cavanaugh in *Symptoms of Being Human*. Riley, of Park Hills, California, is a lot of things: the new kid at school, teenager, (pretty famous) blogger, a flirt, and most importantly, the kid of a congressman running for reelection. Can it get any worse?

With all eyes on Riley, the pressure to blend in has become incredibly important. That is, until people start to notice just what Riley wears. He, she, or worse, “it” are all pronouns thrown around in a setting that would normally just be standard teen gossip. But is it? We’re given an inside look into the life of someone who is gender-nonconforming, and for Riley, it isn’t good. Though the book never really discloses Riley’s gender assigned at birth or their preferred pronouns, the development of the story highlights that this might not be so important. It certainly isn’t when I consider, looking back, just how pure Riley really is. Alongside the reader, discerning whether Riley is a normal anxious teen or if something bigger is at play here are Riley’s parents, and they are relentless. Coming from a place of love, the two require a lot from Riley: their presence, making appropriate “first impressions” (as their dad likes to say) and ensuring that Riley always acts “normal” are all on the table, and Riley feels like it isn’t achievable.

Readers slowly fall in love with Riley as we watch the development of their sass, activism, and figuring out their own identity, and Riley shows us how scary it feels to not feel right (whatever “right” even means). Feeling like a boy one day and a girl the next is Riley’s everyday experience. For a diverse reader base, this might be initially off-putting, but the portrayal of Riley that Garvin paints shows just how universal Riley’s experience really is, connecting even the most conservative reader with the pain and joy this nonconforming character vividly experiences.

Perfect for the classroom, this book takes a fierce anti-bullying approach through the experiences we see in following Riley, especially for transgender/non-binary and LGBT youth. Though some sections might not be age-appropriate for all students (read: the impending and disturbing sexual assault of Riley by the story’s perpetual bully), the message ultimately displayed is one of hope, survival, and self-acceptance. Visibility for trans youth is shockingly sparse, and exposing cisgender (and trans) kids to the experiences shared by them all will be overwhelmingly helpful in fostering an accepting student body, which is what Riley wanted all along.

He, she, or both? Riley Cavanaugh might be one, the other, or neither, but illuminates that it never really matters. After all, it’s all just a symptom of being human.

### Author Biography

Elizabeth Vest is an aspiring English Educator attending Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. She has earned an Associate’s Degree in Visual Art from Butler Community College, and is currently working towards her Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary English Education. Elizabeth works at the Boys and Girls Clubs of South Central Kansas with young people ranging in age from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and works on campus at WSU as a tutor. She is motivated by the human connection and the idea that the world will become a better place. She can be reached at [egvest@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:egvest@shockers.wichita.edu).



## ***Bang* by Barry Lyga: A Story on the Complexity of Humanity**

**Kaylee Walker**

Wichita State University

A question people like to ask one another is: “If you could go back in time and do something different, would you?” There are no perfect humans. We are prone to make mistakes and the desire to change things for the better lies within us. Barry Lyga’s *Bang* (2017) explores this desire of erasing misfortunes through the eyes of 14-year-old Sebastian in Brookdale, Maryland. Sebastian contemplates suicide because of an accident that occurred when he was four years old that negatively affected his life: He shot and killed his four-month-old sister and everyone knows about it.

This character feels trapped in his past and unable to handle his grief of his actions and deal with his estranged family. His journey is packed with lessons on the harsh judgments from society, the absurdity of political identity eclipsing the identity of humanity, the understanding of defining “accident,” and facing issues of suicide and discrimination. Despite the whirlwind of issues encircling him, Sebastian learns to handle his grief and understand the complexity of humankind.

This is an outstanding novel for young adults and speaks to their world (e.g., references to the platform YouTube and well-known YouTuber PewDiePie). Teens should read this book because of the deep issues they might be familiar with: suicide, discrimination, living with unfortunate events, alienated households, and falling in love with someone who does not reciprocate those feelings.

The language speaks to the audience in clear simple terms with beautiful descriptions: “And the next thing I know, the sun is low along the horizon, its light stretched deep pink like pulled tufts of cotton candy” (Lyga, 2017, p. 88). Also the text is written with insightful somber sentences: “The world is filled with invisible, theoretical assassins, armed projections of our deepest ids, bearing guns loaded with wish-bullets” (Lyga, 2017, p. 51). Young adults would love the novel’s use of space and short chapters. Some chapters are a single sentence, some a mere paragraph, while the majority are standard length. The use of space could encourage the reader and eliminate intimidation or worry of long reading sessions.

The fact that this could be a great fit for teens means that this could work well in the classroom setting. *Bang* offers opportunities to discuss hot topics in today’s world. The novel grants an entrance to examine society’s issues with media and politics. Tragic incidents are mocked by one group because of their affliction with the other political party. Media’s portrayal of different ethnicities and clear-cut reporting affects the minds of others. A common subject is the separation of humans crowding into groups that are then pinned against one another. The classroom would be an excellent area to deconstruct our concepts of identity and find at the center is the mutual characteristics of being human. This talk of media and division in politics could spark controversy in the classroom and at home. My goal would be to erase those barriers and let each side see that they are united in the fact that they are human.

*Bang* offers wonderful insight into the mind of a troubled teen searching for a way to erase his guilt and soul-crushing grief. Through his trials he finds friendship, understanding, and solace in his bravery to move forward from his haunting past.

### **Reference**

Lyga, B. (2017). *Bang*. New York, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

**Author Biography**

Kaylee Walker is a senior at Wichita State University (WSU) double majoring in Secondary Language Arts Education and English Literature with minors in creative writing and sociology. She currently works in the 259 Unified School District as an AVID Tutor and at WSU as a Success Coach for the Office of First-Year Programs. She volunteers at the Museum of World Treasures as an Education Facilitator during the summers. Her free time consist of filling her days with stories: reading, writing, and videogames. Most importantly she finds time for her family including her three dogs. Her ultimate career goal is to find work involving her love for literature and education while serving the community.