

Using Text Sets to Engage Students while Reading Canonical Literature in a Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract: Presenting canonical literature in the classroom can result in little engagement with students. However, these texts can still be useful in classrooms today because of the themes often presented. For example the topics of greed, jealousy, love, death, and betrayal are still relevant today. Students are often bored or uninterested in canonical literature for three main reasons; they are unable to make connections with the material, the language can be difficult for students to understand, and because the same text are often used students don't see reading the texts as necessary. Text sets provide one solution to this issue by presenting students with multiple texts all centered around one theme or essential question which will be the focus of the unit. A text set includes both canonical literature as well as modern texts which are presented to the students in different medium to increase student engagement.

Introduction

In many classrooms across the country students are often told what to read, how to read and what is important in the text. Students often have little to no input. The texts teachers require students to read are commonly from the literary canon. Literary canon can be defined as "...a collection of classic literary texts that are distinguished by overall literary quality, lasting significance, and a distinctive style that is worthy of study" (Cole, 2008, as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016 p. 32). The collection of these texts was established in the 1930's by important literary critics and almost 100 years later students are still reading these texts (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016). Despite the age of the texts teachers continue to teach literary cannon in today's Language Arts classrooms. "Teachers typically expect their secondary students to read texts from the English canon because these texts offer opportunities for meaningful reflections on essential questions" (Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009, p.88). However, students often look at these texts and see an old book written by someone who has no idea what their lives are like. The struggle many teachers are faced with is helping their students make connections between the text and their own lives.

While one could argue against teaching these texts all together, in Ohio and many other states these texts are part of the State Standards which teachers must cover in their classrooms. RL.11-12.9 states that students will "Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more diverse texts from the same period treat similar themes and/or topics." and RL. 11-12.7 states that while reading drama students will read at least one play by Shakespeare (ODE, 2017). Also, RL.8.9 states that students will "Analyze how a modern work of fiction alludes to themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, and religious literary texts...including describing how the material is rendered new"

(ODE, 2017). While these standards can provide a reason for including traditional texts in the classroom it does not specify how these texts should be taught. This allows teachers some flexibility in how they are presented to students. Explaining to students that we have to teach them canonical literature because it says so in the standards will only bore them and guarantee they will not want to read. They don't care about what the standards say. There are many ways to engage students during interaction with canonical literature one research supported method is the use of text sets.

Why do students typically dislike canonical literature?

Students often fail to make connections with literary canon for several reasons. The three most often discussed reasons include the age of the text, the language style that the text was written in and the repeated use of the same texts and lessons year after year.

Students believe that because a text is old, the stories are not relatable

According to Lupo et al. (2018) “Motivation theory suggests that connections between content and interests can secure the buy-in needed for adolescents to do challenging comprehension work (e.g. Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997)” (p. 435). Students fail to see these connections because texts taken from the canon were often written many years ago and include events, places, situations, ways of dressing, behaviors and mannerisms of characters which most students are unfamiliar with. An example from literary canon students may have difficulty connecting with is *The Great Gatsby*. A common theme examined in this text is the pursuit of the great American dream. This dream includes money and love between a man and a woman. However, the American dream today could look very different to many students. It becomes the difficult job of the teacher to help the students make connections between the American dream presented in canonical texts and what students envision the American dream to be.

Students believe that the language is difficult to understand

If students have a difficult time understanding the language of a text they become easily lost and confused. As a result they spend so much time trying to figure out the words themselves rather than focusing on what the words are actually saying. Stover (2003) discusses this using *Romeo and Juliet* as an example. The author states that “One obvious reason why even good readers struggle with any Shakespearean text is because, as speakers of modern English, it is hard for us to make sense of the Bard's vocabulary and syntax” (Stover, 2003, p.78). The language used in Shakespearean times is very different from the language our students understand and use to communicate today.

Students often do not feel that they have to read the texts to complete assignments in class

The texts included in the Language Arts classroom literary canon are often taught year after year and students can easily find summaries, “cliff notes”, quiz answers and other information online which make it unnecessary for them to read the text. Students believe that all they need to know about the text they can discover on the internet. “...no matter how many lectures you deliver, vocabulary words students ‘learn’, elements of fiction students define, quizzes students take, essay answers students write, or films you show. Nothing important is happening because student development of reading and interpretive abilities requires engaged reading” (Broz, 2011, p. 15). Without engaging activities that encourage the students to read and discuss the material they become bored because they feel there is no need to read the material to learn from it when all they need to know they can learn from the internet.

Text Sets

What are text sets?

Text sets are groups of texts presented through different media which are all connected by a central theme or an essential question. As a way to engage students and prepare them to read literary canon modern texts are often used in these sets. Texts sets can include as few as four or as many as ten to fifteen different texts. Text sets can include print media, visual representations, songs or digital media. By using text sets we are encouraging students to make and examine connections between the texts and their own experiences. Helping them see connections between a text and their lives is important for engaging students. If students are able to relate the literary themes presented in class to their lives they are more likely to be interested in reading.

The idea of using text sets in the classroom has become more prevalent because of Common Core and State Standards. Text sets may be used in any classroom and can be used across different curriculum. Text sets include many different genres of literature and as well as other texts. When using text sets the focus of the unit is less on one specific text and more on the theme or essential question being examined which is evident across all of the texts. The reason for using text sets is not only to expose our students to the different genres they are required to read but also to engage all students in reading, even reluctant and struggling readers. Kamm Solutions (2015), a teaching resource, points out that for text sets to be effective teachers need to “Select texts that are authentic, rich and worthy of study and that connect to students’ lives and experience” (p. 2). It is not enough to merely provide the text sets but we need to make sure that they will serve to engage students and aid in their understanding of the theme or essential question which is the focus of the unit. For example, when focusing on the theme of discrimination in *To Kill a Mockingbird* a teacher could include the poems *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou and *Freedom* by Langston Hughes, an interview with Harper Lee, the song *Emmett Till*

by Bob Dylan, and photographs by Gordon Parks as part of the text set. This is just a short list as there are many texts which could be used in a unit on discrimination. In addition to the general guidelines, Kamm Solutions (2015) also provides detailed guidelines for text sets which include many links to websites and other resources teachers may find helpful when creating text sets.

Examples of Text Sets

Linked Text Sets

Wold & Elish-Piper (2009) propose using linked text sets. They state “Foremost, LTS engage students with a wide range of texts to help them understand themselves, those around them, and the universal issues facing humans” (p. 88). Linked text sets are simply a group of texts presented in different medium connected through a central theme or essential question. In the article, Wold & Elish-Piper (2009) provide three criteria they feel are important for choosing linked text sets: including texts with varied and diversified characters or events, different text types, and student choice when selecting texts. In this article the authors present a “classroom snapshot” where a linked text set is being used to emphasize identity development in *The Scarlet Letter* (Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009). All students examined some of the texts in the set, however, the teacher allowed freedom of choice for other texts in the unit (Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009). The teacher used whole group as well as literature circle activities to analyze the texts (Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009). When interacting with the teacher in the study, Wold & Elish-Piper (2009) stated that “Ruiz finds that by using LTS to support and engage her students they are able to read, comprehend, and connect with core texts from the literary canon” (p. 91).

When using text sets in the classroom teachers are often scaffolding these texts in order to provide students the correct support for understanding complex texts. Elish-Piper presented the findings of another study in which linked text sets were discussed. In this study Elish-Piper et al. (2014) presented a method for scaffolding texts. This method of scaffolding linked text sets included three stages; engagement, exploration and expansion (Elish-Piper et al., 2014). In the engagement stage the teacher proposed an essential question to the students and had them participate in activities in which they will connect personal experiences to the essential question and theme of the unit (Elish-Piper et al., 2014). In the exploration stage, the authors suggested the introduction of another text which the students would be using to investigate the essential question and the theme of the unit (Elish-Piper et al., 2014). The expansion phase of this model stated that the teacher use the closure of the investigation of one text as a way to connect this text to the next one the students will be exploring (Elish-Piper et al., 2014). The teacher then began the process again reintroducing the essential question or theme of the unit evident in another text. The teacher then had the students explore this text while keeping the essential question or theme the center of the exploration. Then the teacher once again concluded the investigation of that text. This process continued throughout the unit for each new text. While moving through the phases the canonical text remained at the center of the unit and the teacher helped guide the students in connecting the texts together.

A student in the study by Elish-Piper et al. (2014) claimed that his experiences with linked text sets in the classroom were “probably the most interesting and meaningful thing I’ve ever done in English class.” when asked to further explain he added “I was really interested in the themes and questions about growing up because I could relate to them...” (p. 573).

Quad text set framework

Some models propose beginning with texts that will provide background information which will be essential for the unit. Lupo et al. (2017) propose a “Quad Text Set Framework”, in which there is one target text and other texts which are used prior to and during the reading of the target text. The authors propose using “Visual or video text to activate background knowledge”, “Informational texts to build additional knowledge” and “Accessible texts to ensure connections” (Lupo et al., 2017, p. 436). The initial visual image will serve to engage the students with the topic, the informational and accessible texts can be used during the reading or prior to reading the canonical text (Lupo et al., 2017). This method is supported by the schema theory which explains that teachers provide students with the knowledge that will be necessary for the student to build off of in order to make sense of the new information they will be presented with (Lupo et al., 2017). When students have more content knowledge, their understanding of the text is better and they are able to comprehend more difficult texts (Lupo et al., 2017).

Conclusion

There are many options to help make difficult texts easier for students to understand while still examining the important themes present in these texts. For example, there are texts that provide side by side translations of classic works in which the students are able to read and see the classic text on one page and on the next page is a translation in modern English designed to be easier for students to understand. No Fear Shakespeare is a commonly known source for both print texts and online resources to assist students in their understanding of these often difficult texts. Also, graphic novels can be useful in helping students understand traditional texts. Graphic novels rely heavily on visual images and require students to examine what the images represent (Wolfe and Kleijwegt, 2012). While there are words in these texts they act as a compliment to the images presented which really tell the story.

By making literary canon easier to understand we are giving students the ability to make connections to their lives and the world around them. Many of these classic texts contain themes such as betrayal, greed, power, loyalty, and honesty. All of these themes are relevant to our students’ lives and the world around them either on the small scale with direct connections to their lives or the larger scale of the world and what students see going on outside their daily lives. By examining the themes evident in these texts students can look at the problems and solutions presented and apply them to their own experiences.

Though some students may not see the value in the traditional cannon, there is value and importance in these texts. It is our job as educators to help our students see the importance of these texts and make connections to their lives. By providing

students with the tools to make these connections we can foster their engagement with difficult texts. There are many different methods which are available for teachers to use in their classrooms. It is up to the teacher to decide what works best for their students; these may include a combination of many different methods. Most important is finding and applying these methods to engage our students with what they are assigned to read.

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About the Author

Abigail Barshel received her B.A. in psychology and her master's degree in Adolescent and Adult Education from the University of Toledo. She has licensure in Language Arts grades 7-12. Abigail is excited to have her own classroom in the fall where she can focus on student engagement in Language Arts.