

Classics, or...?

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers of literature the world over grapple often with that most difficult of curriculum questions: *What knowledge is of most worth?* On a national scale, authors of the Common Core Curriculum, state tests, and others who influence educational standards attempt to provide answers to that question through their designs of mandated instructional plans. In this era of “teaching to the test” and “narrowing curricula,” this question of what knowledge is of most worth is less frequently left to teachers and more often attempted to be answered by bureaucrats and lawmakers.

Unfortunately, this transfer of who answers instructional questions leaves little room for teachers to practice much interpretation of the curriculum. For those who still can, though, a debate rages. Central to that discussion is the question of classic vs. contemporary literature. As we design our curricula and select novels for our students to read, we struggle to balance a consideration of what lessons these texts can teach, and what cultural values those lessons signify.

Curricular scripts and model reading lists, especially the Common Core Model Curricula, focus on classic texts and leave the realms of contemporary and young adult fiction completely out of schools. This mistake is particularly damaging, in my opinion, not only because it ascribes implicit value onto the literary canon and also implicitly removes value from anything outside of it, but also because it represents a curriculum that is not multicultural, alienating many students who cannot find themselves within the pages of the classics. An alternative solution, one I believe in and practice, is to use Gerald Posner’s notion of reflective eclecticism (2004) to select the best of both contemporary and classic genres to reflect the world’s diversity and literary merit.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF BOOKS

What we teach in English class doesn’t just affect readers on a superficial level, boring them or exciting them as they do their homework each evening. Instead, what we teach sends very explicit and

implicit messages about the value of certain kinds of texts. For many of us, I am sure, our high school and college years were spent immersed in novels, plays, and stories from the literary canon—the occasional Shakespeare, some Jane Austen, some Kurt Vonnegut...perhaps even some Sandra Cisneros, Toni Morrison, Sherman Alexie, or Richard Wright, if our educational experiences are more recent. No matter what we read, we received the implicit message that those texts were of value, while anything not taught was not of value. This idea of what is not taught, the null curriculum (Eisner, 1994), is central to the debate over the classics' place in school—because so many cannot “relate” to the classics, they immediately identify their personal beliefs as devalued by society, perpetuated by the school. The danger of selecting texts from only the canon lies therein—no diversity can exist, as all texts in the canon inherently belong to the same group—a group which perpetuates its own values and beliefs with no room for anyone else's—and anything not in the canon therefore lacks value; thus, those who see themselves in non-canonical texts are not of value either.

I saw this very clearly between my first and second years of teaching. I recall looking over the booklist I'd been given to teach, featuring *The Odyssey*, *A Separate Peace*, *Macbeth*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, and then over the diverse faces in my classroom. Every one of those novels featured a white male protagonist and a white male author, and only about 20% of my classes featured white male students. How could I expect my students to engage with what I taught, when it so clearly privileged such a small group of them? As I entered my second and third years of teaching at that same school, I added texts like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to our readings. Students were more engaged, more talkative, more respectful, and, lo and behold—their test scores went way up. When one group was no longer privileged, all students benefited.

Choosing to teach *only* the classics can perpetuate a narrow group ideology. An examination of this ideology reveals the foolishness of this practice. Curriculum author William Pinar suggests that, “school curriculum is what older generations choose to tell younger generations. Whatever the school

subject, the curriculum is historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international. It is the symbolic of curriculum that renders debates over the canon struggles over the American identity itself” (2012, p. 188). The older generations who have selected the texts used to pass on their stories are perpetuating *their* culture, which by the very idea of culture cannot be anybody else’s culture, therefore excluding a great deal of current readers by rote. Indeed, multicultural education scholars Sleeter and Grant explain that, “to solidify, extend, and legitimate its control, a dominant group structures social institutions to operate in ways that will maintain or increase the group’s own advantage” (1999, p. 193). It would seem that the dominant social group here, upper-class whites, is indeed attempting to perpetuate its own culture through schools—social institutions now reputed in society to be little factories of citizen production, using an assembly line method, and too bad for the kid that can’t fit the mold.

In an attempt to salvage those square pegs who can’t fit into round holes, various scholars of education have sought alternatives through which the curriculum can reflect the values of all those exposed to it. Advocating for a “transformation of the mainstream curriculum,” Banks argues that equal representation in texts for all students, which he calls “content integration...deals with the extent to which teachers illuminate key points of instruction with content reflecting diversity” (1994, p. 4). In this way, the text becomes a participant in a discussion (Bernhardt, 1987) of an important topic, rather than the object of study for its own sake, which holds very little appeal at all. Rather than just teaching a text, those authors argue for teaching a concept or skill using more culturally relevant texts to do so.

In a study following what happened when schools did just that, Jewett, Wilson, and Vanderburg explained the success of teaching Paul Fleischmann’s *Seedfolks*, wherein “[t]eachers...valued a text that could connect to students’ lives” (2011, p. 418). Further, they reported that, “[s]electing and valuing contextually and culturally appropriate texts was vital in bringing together and engaging students with their reading” (p. 419). The key word for me there is “valuing,” in which the school implied that by selecting *Seedfolks*, in which a diverse cast of characters unites to accomplish a common goal, it was

valuable literature. Students could now see themselves present in what they read in school. Rather than separating pleasure reading—a genre of “self”—from school texts—a genre of “difference”—(Kirkland, 2011), the two become one, and the school became a place for students to be recognized and valued rather than Othered. Sleeter and Grant would have been proud, as they argue that “people should not have to adhere to one model of what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘right’ to enjoy their fair share of wealth, power, happiness, or respect” (1999, p. 190).

A combination of my personal experience and the research mentioned previously serves to show that the question “what knowledge is of most worth?” is not one to be taken lightly when designing the curriculum. Deciding which texts to teach will answer that question for students, and we must be careful to give them all spaces to see themselves in the curriculum. Despite the obvious dangers of disregarding this research and continuing along in the tradition of the classics, many teachers still do so—why?

THE CASE FOR THE CLASSICS

So many people love to hate the classics, but what about all of us English Literature majors? What about we language arts teachers? What about those of us who actually loved reading *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, and then again in college, and then again after that just for fun? Although we intrinsic lovers of classic literature are few and far between, we *do* exist, and someone or something did make us love those books. For me, it was my teachers, who displayed a passion and zeal for the classics as they taught, discussed, and questioned them. While many find the classics archaic, not relevant, or dull, somehow, many of the texts are still taught in schools by critically aware pedagogues who realize the universality of their themes. However, the *how* of these books supersedes the *what*—it matters how we teach them, not what they have to say on their own.

One impassioned writer, inspired to argue for the removal of classics from schools, ranted: “The classics are not about teenage concerns! They are about adult issues. Moreover, they were written for

educated adults who had the leisure time to read them. They were also, not incidentally, written to be enjoyed—not dissected, not analyzed, and certainly not tested” (Gallo, 2001, p. 34). While Mr. Gallo is certainly correct that classics were not written to be “tested” (nor was any other book, ever, I can promise you), he seems to be making the assumption that classics cannot be enjoyed within the framework of school. I humbly beg to differ, as would Carol Jago, a great proponent of teaching the classics in schools and former president of the National Council of Teachers of English. Jago agrees that objective tests kill lifelong lovers of literature (2000), and asserts that how we engage with and assess our students’ interaction with the text is what’s important. What matters here is not the text, but the teacher—a discussion leader, a thoughtful questioner, a community shaper—not the text itself. Even the most engaging, exciting, and interesting of novels could be screwed up by an awful teacher (names will be withheld to protect the innocent) who insists of giving a test the likes of those offered by programs like Accelerated Reader or Read 180.

More seriously, William Pinar points out, in his discussion of the unfortunate parallels between present American culture and the pre-Nazi Weimar Republic, that “Bertolt Brecht traced the ‘death’ of the classics in German cultural life to the trauma of World War I” (2012, p. 66). Should arguments like those of Mr. Gallo persist, a culture devoid of classics would certainly ring hollow. Old books have value; old ways of teaching them do not.

THE CASE FOR THE “OTHER” LITERATURE

While the classics are wonderful in and of themselves, the fact remains true that most of their protagonists are white males, although a great deal are white females. There is a broad representation of social classes amongst the literary canon, but despite this cursory study of diversity, very many groups are excluded from having a positive presence in the classics. The title of this section is ‘other’ not just because I am discussing something other than classics, but because this literature represents what is commonly known as the Other, the group of individuals in society who are not of the dominant group

which attempts to perpetuate its culture through canonical schooling. It is essential, then, to practice Pinar's reflective eclecticism in choosing novels to accompany the classics in school that will represent a more diverse body of experiences.

Mr. Gallo, the impassioned hater of the canon quoted above, has something to say about the young adult and contemporary literature I would consider using to bolster my curriculum:

What teens want more than anything else from novels is entertainment. And that's exactly what I want—and what I suspect most readers want—from a novel. . . . But once the lesson becomes the primary reason for using a book, the act of reading becomes a chore. So it makes good sense to find teachable novels whose stories are lively, interesting, enjoyable, hopefully humorous, too, from which we can also learn something. (Gallo, 2001, p. 35-36)

While I agree with the second portion of his argument, I do not believe that entertainment has a place in the classroom. While the purpose of reading in schools is not testing, it is not purposeless—its purpose is for learning. In my spare time, I do enjoy reading young adult fiction, romance novels, and murder mysteries, but I do not equate that with intellectual engagement or any deepening of my intelligence—it is merely an act of entertainment, as mentally passive as disinterestedly watching TV or listening to music.

In lieu of reading in schools for “entertainment,” Banks advocates for the “transformation approach” to selecting texts, which “changes the structure, assumptions, and perspectives of the curriculum so that subject matter is viewed from the perspectives and experiences of a range of groups” (Banks, 1994, p. 6). This must be done, Sleeter and Grant caution, because “[i]f the society [children] encounter is predominantly of one ethnic or racial group, children's comprehension of racism or knowledge of other groups is limited” (1999, p. 196). We must not incorporate a diversity of texts into our curricula to entertain students, but rather must transform it in order to provide them with a broader worldview gained through reading experience. “Therefore, the teacher needs to maintain a balance between drawing on the student's world and inviting student decision making on the one hand and, on the other, helping students gain knowledge and ideas that will illuminate not only their own experience, but society in general” (Sleeter & Grant, 1999, p. 197)—and there's the rub, as Shakespeare would say.

Maintaining that balance is the essence of Pinar's *carrere* (1975, 2012) and Posner's reflective eclecticism (2004)—teachers cannot easily choose one or the other; we must be mindful to create a balance that represents equally the Othered individuals of society (as represented in contemporary and young adult literature) and those commonly portrayed as dominant (as represented by classics in the literary canon).

CONCLUSION

The end goal of all language arts teachers is to foster a love of reading and writing in our students. We do not want the children we teach to leave our classrooms merely being able to answer objective questions about texts that were written to be interpreted, discussed, and passionately read—we want them to read critically to enhance their life experience, not just to become savvier citizens, but to broaden their worldviews by encountering diverse cultural values through books. For this reason, then, we cannot settle for teaching an outdated, classics-only curriculum, nor can we give in to Mr. Gallo's implorations that we allow students to read for entertainment in school. Instead, we must practice the infinitive *carrere* William Pinar so articulately advocates for, reflectively selecting texts that will represent a diversity our students must be exposed to, both to see themselves in and to see their differences in as well.

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