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New Directions in Literacy Teaching:

Engaging Readers and Writers in 21st Century K–12 Classrooms

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Literacy educators and advocates have similar goals for students. We want to engage them. We want to connect them to the world of ideas. We want ideas to inspire them to engage more powerfully with the world that they inhabit as literate and competent beings. I'll address factors that prevent this engagement with reading and writing, I will share some research convergences in literacy studies, and I will highlight a few promising practices from K-12 contexts.

We often ask ourselves how to move the needle on literacy achievement but a different question is more important to diagnosing the problem and moving toward a solution. That question is, how do we bring real joy to the readerly and writerly lives of our students? We need to think about disengagement, not lack of ability as the crisis we face in our literacy classrooms. We know that because we can see tremendous turn around in a very short amount of time with students, with classrooms, with whole schools or a school system. The students are not necessarily getting a new ability, they're certainly not getting a new socioeconomic status. But what they are doing, when they are succeeding, is becoming more engaged.

We must also be aware that disengagement is often both logical and self destructive. We must then challenge ourselves to become experts on the logic of student disengagement. Our challenge, as literacy educators, literacy leaders, and administrators at the school or district level, is to figure out how to change that logic. This white paper draws its examples from ELA classrooms that are effectively employing high leverage literacy practices to engage all learners.

I will focus on three core practices. The first practice concerns how to nurture powerful readers, how to get students to read more, how to get them to read more critically, and how to ask more engaging questions of the texts that they read as a higher level of questions provokes an advanced level of thinking. The second practice addresses how to teach media, how to help students to become better readers of the media but also smarter and more informed producers and distributors of media. The third practice explores the development of powerful writers and the fourth practice involves generating powerful student voice in the polyvocal classroom.

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Ten Minutes of Reading a Day Will Change a Child's Life

If we can get a student to read 10 minutes a day, it will change their literate life (Adams, 2006; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Beers & Probst, 2017). Students who identify themselves as struggling with reading or not liking reading will read as little as two minutes a day on their own. Those who enjoy it will read upwards of 20 minutes, which is the gold standard. However, 10 minutes is the magic number. **Just ten minutes will change a child's fluency, comprehension, and academic vocabulary**. How do we get students to read more at school and at home? How do we move from 2 minutes to 10 minutes a night? Essentially, if a child or adolescent is reading an additional 10-15 minutes a day, that amounts to approximately a million words a year. We typically have students for thirteen years, from K - 12, and if the student is reading 10 to 15 minutes daily inside of class, that's an additional 12 to 13 million words. If they add ten minutes outside of class, that's an additional 25 million words. Two children may begin school with the same ability, but all of a sudden one's literacy ceiling raises significantly as they increase their reading by 12 million to 25 million words over the duration of their schooling. What keeps children and adolescents from reading that additional ten minutes and how can we open the door to literacy so that they acquire the additional 25 million words while they're in our elementary and secondary school systems?

How Do We Inspire Literate Lives? Three Big Questions

How do we inspire literate lives? I worked with students for several years over a 12-year period in a central city school system where we had 100% graduation rate and 100% college-going rate by implementing some of the strategies that are to follow. One key aspect of this paper is that I am committed to keeping this inspirational. The Latin root of the word, *inspire*, literally means to *breathe life into*. The question is: How do we as educators breathe that literate life into our students daily in our classrooms? We want to think about literacy as powerful student voice. What do our students want to say? What do they have to say? What do they need to say? That's the conversations they have with the texts that they're reading. It's also the conversation they have through writing and through speaking.

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> "Just ten minutes will change a child's fluency, comprehension, and academic vocabulary."

There are three big questions that undergird my work. The first one is how do we get children and adolescents excited about reading? For all the reasons I mentioned, students who are excited about reading, read more. Those who read more simply perform better across all literacy practices. They're better speakers. They're better writers. They're more critical in terms of their engagement with text. I think about this as the tiger crouch (Lave & Wenger, 1991) which is the position of a tiger about to pounce. The tiger is leaned in. That position is really important for learning. It's important for adults. We might get in the tiger crouch when we're binging on our seventh season of Game of Thrones or watching our favorite team in a football game. We get in the tiger crouch in the moments that really matter to us. What is happening is that our brain is activated at a different level when we're in that tiger crouch. The question is: How do we get students to lean in to what they're reading?

The second question is: How do we develop students' literate identities? Their academic identity is really the cornerstone of engagement (Baker, Dreher & Guthrie, 2000; Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). If they do not see themselves as being able to do what we ask, they can not be engaged (Rumberger, 2012). But if they can see themselves as being successful in the activity, and it's valuable to them and they can see success, they are much more likely to be engaged. This identity question is key to developing students' literate identities.

The third question is: How do we make literacy learning socially, culturally, and digitally relevant? Currently, in the K-12 system we do not have any students that are remnants of the twentieth century. Even the graduating seniors in the class of 2019 were born in the year 2001. We know that middle school and high school kids are going to live to see the twenty-second century. What do they need from us now? How can we share the essential characteristics of our disciplines that we learned and loved as pre-service and early career teachers and at the same time acknowledge that the world is changing, our kids are changing, their needs are changing, the demographics are changing but much more importantly, what it means to be a literate person is changing?

Why Do The Students Who Want to Succeed and Can Succeed Still Fail?

I draw on two research based assumptions to complicate simplistic explanations for student disengagement. The first one comes from the aspirational literature, which tells us that all kids want to succeed. Regardless of any identity marker, if success is possible, students will choose it. The overwhelming majority of them want to be successful in school and they know that being successful in school is important for their quality of life socially, intellectually, and materially.

The second assumption comes from the literacy achievement research, which tells us that the majority of schoolchildren are capable of advanced literacy learning. Scholars such as David Pearson and Barbara Taylor (2002) and Nell Duke have long questioned literacy instruction in schools serving children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and found that improving instruction and resources leads to academic success. The most important variable in students' potential for growth and achievement is not their parent's income. Duke has consistently found that the difference in children's achievement is not their ability to learn and succeed; rather it is the ways in which they are taught and the resources available to them (Halverson, Duke, Brugar, Block, Strachan, Berka & Brown, 2012). She has also argued for having access to a broad range of genres in classroom libraries and as environmental text (Duke, 2002). In other words, variables such as a child's socioeconomic background is not the strongest predictor of academic success. So we can assume that all kids want to succeed and all kids are capable of a level of success that they have yet to achieve. Hence, when we talk about failure, the real question should be why do kids who want to succeed and can succeed still fail. The two most common explanations outside of our profession for lack of success is kids don't want to succeed and they can't succeed. We have to completely eliminate those explanations from our conversations inside the profession. We know kids want to and we know that they can. But at the same time we know that kids still fail. When we ask the question, why do kids who want to succeed and can succeed still fail, we begin to arrive at more profound and productive explanations.

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One explanation for why students who want to succeed and can succeed still fail is that they lose confidence, which affects their academic identity. If a student is laughed at when they offer an idea or see themselves as incapable of keeping up with the reading or not being able to jump in to a conversation, they begin to lose confidence. As soon as they begin to lose confidence they begin to engage in self-defeating, self-destructive behaviors that reinforces their underachievement. We need to offer critical feedback to students to push them forward on their learning trajectory, but in a way that maintains their confidence.

A second explanation for why students fail is a lack of perceived relevance. Drawing on 60 years of educational psychology, we have learned that a basic equation for motivation is confidence plus relevance (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). For example, according to Wigfield and Eccles' Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation, motivation is a function of confidence, or an expectation of

success, and relevance which is a value proposition. When either confidence or relevance is lacking, kids are going to lean back from their learning.

A third explanation is that students lack engagement with high quality, relevant literature. Reading engaging texts dealing with issues that are of importance to the children and adolescents in our classrooms raises their interest. The quality of what they read matters. We have to maintain a high bar for the books and other texts that we put in front of them.

> “We have to make sure that the work is relevant, that it matters and that we’re asking students about their passions and concerns and trying to connect our curriculum to those concerns and passions.”

A fourth explanation for student failure is that they lack sustained engagement with a community of learners. We know that when students are working together on a project, they’re much more likely to show up to school, complete that project, and say that they enjoy doing it. This is the same with adults. We’re social creatures and we learn while together so figuring out ways to have children and adolescents learn together can help them to succeed. Unfortunately, if a student begins to struggle early in their K-12 trajectory, they’re much more likely to be isolated, which just exacerbates the problem. Our students on the periphery are the ones that need to be welcomed in and embraced with both arms by the classroom community as they often crave a sense of belonging (Allyn & Morrell, 2016).

A fifth explanation for academic failure is a lack of engagement with the social world. How are our practices and curricula in the classroom today in 2019 relevant to 2019? It’s important to read King Lear. It’s important to understand what happened in the Civil War. But these classic texts are important to the degree that they help us to think more provocatively about our world today and for the students, the world tomorrow and all the tomorrows that will be a part of their lives.

If we take these reasons for failure and flip them, they become a recipe for success. We have to increase student confidence. We have to let students know that they can and will succeed if they put in the work. We have to make sure that the work is relevant, that it matters and that we’re asking students about their passions and concerns and trying to connect our curriculum to those concerns and passions. We need to make sure students are reading thought-provoking literature as a class as well as literature that they choose or that interests them. We have to provide opportunities for collaboration and connect what’s happening in the classroom to the larger social world.

21st Century Learning

It is important to understand that learning is different in the 21st century than it was in the 20th century. For many of us educated in the 20th century our learning modalities are closer to Gutenberg than Zuckerberg! Learning changes as technologies change. We’re moving from what would have been a receptive learning ecology to an interactive and productive one. The 21st century is about producing knowledge. It’s a century where students need to develop unique and powerful voices plurally and consider the following questions: How do I speak to different audiences? How do I understand the rhetorical situation? How do I know what my audience needs to hear from me? How do I meet them where they are? There’s not just one generic academic voice; there are multiple voices. It’s also about learning to consider and engage diverse perspectives.

> “Our classrooms need to be a space of collaboration, presentation, and invention.”

The U.S. holds 4.4% of the world’s population, which means nearly 96% of the people that we could interact with in our lifetime are not even in the United States, let alone our town or state. The world is big and filled with people who have many different viewpoints. We need

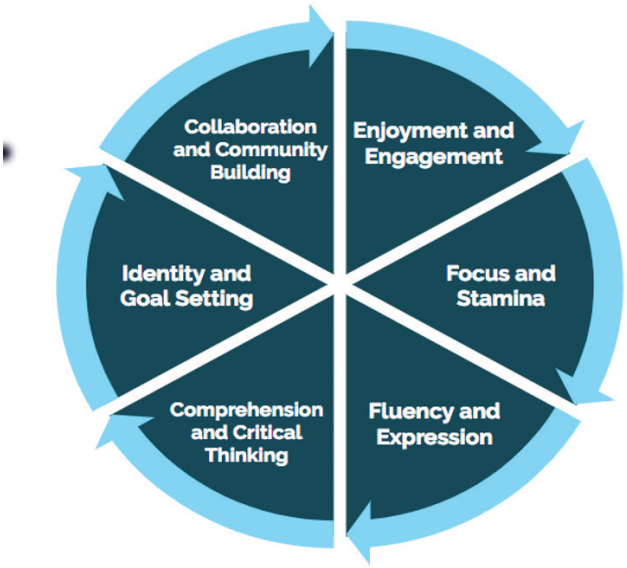
to understand how to engage those perspectives and allow ourselves to be informed by them. Our classrooms need to be a space of collaboration, presentation, and invention. We need to consider all of these factors and variables as we ponder what an engaging literacy curriculum might entail.

Powerful ELA Practices in K-12 Classrooms

There are several powerful practices in the classroom that have risen to the top in the field of literacy research. Often people say there's a lot of noise in the research and question what to listen to. I encourage educators to look for the convergences in research because we have ten practices that continue to be the cream of the crop. These ten practices include:

1. Interactive read alouds
2. Critical engagement with texts
3. Independent reading
4. Classroom libraries
5. Writing for purpose
6. Inquiry and research
7. Digital and media literacy
8. Student voice (polyvocality)
9. Culturally responsive teaching
10. Social and emotional learning

Powerful literacy classrooms are spaces where teachers are reading aloud to students and helping students to critically engage texts. They are spaces where students have a chance to read on their own texts of their own choosing. Where students write for purpose and joy to share with authentic audiences; where students write as a part of genuine inquiry and research. Where students have opportunities to connect to digital technologies and raise their voices in a polyvocal classroom. Powerful literacy classrooms are places where teaching is culturally responsive and honors all the ways that young people bring culture into the classroom. Culture is not only ethnicity and race, language, religion, and age. Children and teens belong to youth cultures and local geographical neighborhoods and communities. Culturally responsive teaching means seeing every child as multicultural. Finally, powerful literacy classrooms are places where teachers consider the social and emotional aspects of student learning.



7 Strengths to Open a World of Possible, by Pam Allyn and Ernest Morrell. Published by Scholastic, 2015.

PRACTICE 1: DEVELOPING POWERFUL READERS

The first practice I'll discuss is developing powerful readers. For this image of the Lit Wheel (Allyn & Morrell, 2016), we think of each of these triangular pieces as a section of the wheel. The first section is joy and engagement. We cannot have a solid foundation for literacy curriculum without joy and engagement. Basically, when kids like what they're reading, we see improvement with all of the other spokes. The second section is focus and stamina, which to me is the most important part of this wheel because focus and stamina are really the barriers to any high level literacy achievement. Focus and stamina are normally metaphors connected to activities like running or sports. A child can have the ability to run or an ability to play the piano but if they don't practice they're not going to maximize that ability. It's the same with reading. Often what we consider an ability is much more of an experience issue. It just is the case that the more we enjoy what we're doing, the more focus and stamina we will have. When my college students are dozing off two minutes into my lecture, I ask them, when is the last time you fell asleep at your favorite hip-hop concert? Whether we are watching our favorite musical stars, favorite TV show or favorite athletic team, we just lose track of time when we're doing something we enjoy. No one ever says in the fourth quarter of a hard-fought football game, boy, I'm really bored with this. I can't wait for them to finish this game. No! We have a focus and stamina for it because we enjoy it. Students may be two

pages into a novel or two pages into a history textbook and they're ready to toss it away. What we really need to do is focus on the joy and engagement. The focus and stamina will come. The more focused students are and the more stamina they have to embrace words, literally to embrace them, the better chance they have to attain fluency and expression.

During my career, one of the big a-ha moments occurred when I began to understand that fluency is a function of experience and not ability. We talk about kids as being fluent or not fluent as though it's innate. It really is a function of how much experience they have, which is

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similar to learning to speak a foreign language. If you went to Germany or Russia and you weren't familiar with German or Russian, it doesn't mean you don't have the ability to speak that language. It means you lack the experience. But say you went on a Fulbright Fellowship and you spent a year or two in Germany or Russia. All of a sudden you would begin to dream in that language. You would be able to order beers for the whole bar in that language. You would begin to tell jokes in that language and all it would mean is that you gained experience. You didn't get a new brain. You just became more fluent because you had more experience. Our real barrier is that the students lack experience because they're not necessarily having the relationship with text that fosters that joint engagement. We now know that fluency is the gateway to comprehension and all high stakes examinations across our disciplines at the elementary and secondary levels are about comprehension - even math and science exams. If students do not understand what they read, they can not demonstrate what they know. We often think about fluency and comprehension but we don't as often think about how joy and engagement, focus and stamina are really what undergird that.

Interactive Read Alouds

One of the high level practices that I'm most passionate about is teachers reading aloud to students and interactively discussing what they read. Are we reading aloud on a regular basis to students? It could be just a few minutes. It could be the first couple paragraphs of a chapter in a book, a primary source, or a play. Reading aloud remains the single biggest game changer in K-12 literacy. The amount of time teachers read to students and engage students about what they're reading orally is the most research proven literacy practice to increase achievement (International Literacy Association, 2018). There are a few reasons and we can look at the definition of a read aloud, which goes back to the 1980's, because the answer is in the definition (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985). A read aloud is, "a strategy in which a teacher sets aside time to read orally to students on a consistent basis from texts above their independent reading level but at their listening level." (p.)

There are four aspects of this definition that are important for read alouds. First, the teacher is sponsoring this activity and sets aside a time to read orally. Well into high school and maybe beyond, the students' listening level is above their reading level so they can listen at a level that they can not yet read. Hearing the text read orally is important because it's a chance for students to ingest texts that they couldn't otherwise on their own. It's also a chance for them to expand their academic vocabulary in a discipline specific way on a consistent basis. Over time, they are developing focus and stamina. The text is above their independent reading level but at their listening level, which means that students wouldn't necessarily be able to access it in the same critical ways without a teacher.

When teachers read aloud, students begin to associate reading with pleasure. It provides them with a reading role model and develops their academic vocabulary and background knowledge in how texts work, which is very important. Students learn more than just a substantive

> "Our classrooms need to be a space of collaboration, presentation, and invention."

background knowledge of what the teacher is reading. They gain a knowledge of how texts are constructed rhetorically that will translate to any text that they read on their own.

Powerful read aloud strategies for ELA classrooms in grades K-12 include the following:

- Extension activities to engage prior knowledge
- Develop academic vocabulary and ask students to derive meaning from context
- Have students role play different characters
- Ask "What do you think" questions
- Have questions to promote deep understanding and share your questions with students prior to the reading
- Encourage students to brainstorm their own questions while listening
- Encourage peer-to-peer interaction to promote engagement
- Have students mark the text to identify passages they would like to discuss
- Encourage controversy, debate, and multiple viewpoints
- Have an extension activity on the back end that motivates the students to be active listeners and that allows them to continue to form their ideas about the text

Through interactive read alouds, students develop academic vocabulary. We can ask students to derive a meaning from a context by reading a sentence or passage and then ask them, what do you think this word means based on the context of the sentence. Students can role play various characters. We can ask "what do you think" questions and have questions that promote a deep understanding. Prior to reading, we can share questions with students so as we are reading, the students can think about these questions that they're going to discuss. Students can brainstorm their own questions and teachers can have them write down a question or two that they might have so that they can offer a question in the overall discussion and engage peer-to-peer. Encouraging controversy, debate, multiple viewpoints, playing the devil's advocate, getting students to argue different viewpoints - even ones that they may not necessarily believe in - are all powerful ways to have a vibrant polyvocal community around a text and to encourage close and critical engagement with that text.

> "The volume of reading students do on their own is the single biggest determinant of their literacy achievement."

Student Choice and Independent Reading

In a meta-analysis of dozens of research studies, Stephen Krashen (2004) found that students' reading achievement correlates with success in school and the amount of independent reading they do. The volume of reading students do on their own is the single biggest determinant of their literacy achievement. As previously mentioned, the magic number is 10 minutes a night. Ten to fifteen minutes a night will yield about a million words a year for students.

We need to encourage independent reading and have important conversations with students about how to connect their interests and their current reading ability level to text. We need to allow students to read and reread during class time. The books that we're asking them to read on their own, without any real discussion in class, are ones they should be able to comfortably read with about 95% accuracy. We can ask current and former students for recommendations, have multiple forms of accountability, and have a protocol for students to set aside a book that they're just not enjoying. We can encourage students to talk about the books they're reading to their peers, whether it's for a research report, English, social studies, a novel, a play, or a graphic novel. The more they're able to talk about and be an expert on a text, the more that's going to cohere their positive identity. We should encourage parents and guardians to ask children about what they're reading and give them questions. Parents should be an audience of their child's ideas for ten minutes a day. Sometimes teachers can send questions home or explain what students are learning in class. For example, teachers can share with parents that their child is participating in an important debate about a particular era of history or we're reading a particular text in ELA, so please ask some provocative questions to your child about the topic.

Critical Engagement With Texts

How we read is just as important as what we read. How do we engage text critically? The level of questions that we ask of texts sets the bar for the kind of thinking and discussion we'll have around that text. If we want a high bar, we have to offer students critically and challenging questions to inspire a different level of thinking. I have been an educator for twenty-six years, and taught some books a dozen times, perhaps up to fifteen times over a period of two decades or more. What I focus on is the questions. What are the questions that I want the students to be thinking about as they read this text and what do I want to talk about with them?

> "Text don't just speak to students. Students have a conversation back with that text, especially when they're reading powerfully."

My approach includes reading behind the text, within the text, and in front of the text. It can also be thought about in terms of a rhetorical triangle where there is author centered, text centered, and reader centered approaches. The first approach is reading behind the text, which is an author centered approach. We want to know who the author is. When did he or she write the text, what was happening at the time they wrote the text that would have influenced the construction of the text? These are important questions with primary sources such as texts from the 20th century or earlier centuries. What was the immediate audience and what were their beliefs or values? How did they see the world? What purpose did the text serve? We want to have 10 or 15 total questions for the students across the behind, within, and in front approaches. We choose three or four from each approach and take all of them up or down depending on the student, their age, and the discipline.

The second reading, within a text, is the most common. Even more important than telling students to read a text closely is giving them questions such as: What happens? What takes place? Who speaks? Who is silenced? If it's a non-fictional text, we can ask what evidence can we find in the text or about the political life of the time. How is it intended to communicate? How is it structured? What's its style? Is it evidentiary? Does it make an evidence based argument? Is it just opinionated? The real question that we have been focusing on in my classrooms and in the work that I'm doing in schools is who speaks and who is silenced? Who's absent from the text? If it's a news story or a short story, who should we be hearing that we do not? Students can read a text for its absences as much as for what's present.

The third area, reading in front of the text, is the real payoff. Students get engaged when they realize they can speak back to the text and that the text is actually the beginning of a conversation. It's not a monologue. Text don't just speak to students. Students have a conversation back with that text, especially when they're reading powerfully. They can ask questions of the text such as: What are the biases? How is the text representative of the mainstream ideas of its time? How is it critical? How does it push the envelope? What are the silences? Who's missing? Who is spoken for? What contradictions or debates has the text generated or is likely to generate? What alternative readings or interpretations are there? How do we have to consider context? How might the text provoke or inspire new thinking and new action? Across the three approaches, there are approximately 20 questions. We can use them all. Teachers can put them on one 8.5 x 11 paper and tell students that these are the core questions. As they are reading, they should think about these questions and know that they will be discussed in class. The questions become a constant which give more precision to how students are reading and talking back to the text. They bring that to their writing and class conversations.

PRACTICE 2: CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

In the early 1990s I became inspired to think about adding media to my teaching repertoire when I began reading research from the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatricians. Both organizations talk about the negative health outcomes that are associated with overexposure and uncritical consumption of mainstream media. Some of those include sleep problems, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Both of these organizations have asked adults, mostly teachers and parents, to step up and have critical conversations with children and teens about how they consume and produce media–everything from reading, film, video games, mobile applications, to responsible citizenship

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and social media participation and cyber bullying. That's our responsibility. The ability to read the media is a 21st century skill that impacts employability and the ability to live as a citizen but it's also a key factor in how children and adolescents construct a social identity. This includes whether a person sees themselves as worthwhile, beautiful or powerful or smart or important or what they think a girl or a boy is supposed to be like. These are really important questions that don't just end with the classroom. They affect every aspect of our students' lives.

Digital Media Consumption

There are four dimensions of reading the media that I consider as being a part of our classrooms of the present and future (Mirra, Morrell & Filipiak, 2018). The first one is digital media consumption, or how we read the media text with which we are confronted. Young people spend more time engaged with the media than they do asleep, in school or with their families. They're reading the media on average seven or eight hours a day which is upwards of 50 hours a week or 2,500 hours a year. We definitely need to think about how to help young people consume media more powerfully and more thoughtfully.

Below are some questions that I give to students (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia & López, 2013):

- What values or ideas are promoted?
  - What does it mean to be normal (or cool)?
  - What does it mean to have power?
  - What does it mean to be desired?
  - Who is marginalized or "Othered"?
- How is the audience/recipient constructed?
  - Who is targeted?
  - What assumptions are made about the audience?
  - How does the ad/image/artifact intend to make the recipient feel about him or herself?
  - What is an audience member compelled to do/believe?

When we talk about what ideas or values are promoted, we discuss how every artifact of the media has a value proposition. And so the question is, what is the value proposition of that media artifact whether we're talking about a song in their itunes library, a movie in their NetFlix library, a mobile application, a social media, their Twitter feed, Instagram, or Snapchat. Each media artifact has a value proposition. Students should question what values are being promoted. What does it mean to have power? What does it mean to be on the outside?

The second set of questions is about how consumers are targeted as an audience and what they are being compelled to think or believe. Asking versions of these two questions helps students to think differently about the media they consume. For one of my projects, I have students complete a one month auto-ethnography of their media consumption. In other words, they become researchers of their own practices for a month and they document everything - every artifact they consume and its value proposition. It's eye-opening for them because at the end of the month we say, are these values your values? They almost always say no but I say they are going to be. In nutrition and health there is a belief that you are what you consume. The same concept applies to the media. We are what we consume. If we are consuming media with these value propositions, they will become ours.

> "Each media artifact has a value proposition. Students should question what values are being promoted."

When teaching students to be critical consumers, we have students ask the key questions above and start with old media images, from the 1950s, up to the early 2010s. The images are not necessarily a part of their life now because they have a blind spot when it comes to looking at their own media images. Therefore, it's easy to use the clay pigeon of 1950s advertising. We can look at these and say that's sexist or racist. But we want to

think about how these images work and why they were so rhetorically powerful at the time. Students will begin to understand that it's not that people were ignorant in the 1950s and 1960s. They had the same intellectual capacity as we do but there were issues they were blind to in their media consumption in the same way we are blind to a lot of these same issues as they present themselves in the media we consume today. We talk about how to read the image, how to read the words, how to understand who's in power and who's not in power, what is the hierarchy, who's speaking, and who's spoken for.

Iconographic Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

We look at images for their attitudes toward consumerism. One of my favorite images of all time, in terms of media in the beginning of the "Mad Men" post World War II generation is one similiar to the above image. The idea is that to be happy, you have to consume. There are three types of cars. Who wants the lower priced car? Everyone wants the custom-built one with all the bells and whistles. It doesn't matter if you have to go in debt to get it. This is the beginning of advertising as trying to create anxiety. This certainly isn't a picture of the low-priced model car. If you want your family to be happy, go in debt and buy a custom built machine, is a common motif in the media today. Media industries continue to encourage people to consume products that they don't need and that they don't have the money to buy without going into debt.

We then move closer to contemporary issues. Think of popular magazines targeting teenage girls (fashion, makeup, etc.) or teenage boys (video games, music, sports, etc.). Students might say they don't listen to a certain rapper like 50 Cent but they know who he is or a celebrity like Hayden Panettiere whose face might grace a glossy magazine cover. Again, these represent people and images close to contemporary time but not today. An interesting thing to note is that when looking at magazines geared towards teenage girls such as *Seventeen*, we usually see two words appear on every cover: one is *pretty* and one is *sexy*. We also see a reoccurring message about being an object of a guy's desire, "get the guys." Targeted toward 12 to 14-year-old girls, these types of magazines use words like *pretty* and *sexy* to sell products but also end up influencing and shaping how girls think of themselves – what it means to be *pretty*, what size you have to be, what you have to wear, and what you should care about if you want to be *pretty* and *sexy*. Unfortunately, in most of these types of magazines, there's not much about being smart, courageous, or standing up for what you believe in. It's all about how you look. Your joy in life, your value in life as a 17-year-old girl goes back to how you look. The products in magazines such as these are all about physical beauty or what someone else has deemed "beautiful." They're not selling Texas Instrument calculators! It's makeup, mascara, earrings, and material things or the physical appearance and this is a real problem when we are talking about identity formation of young girls. That's why the reading of

> "We can talk to students about being digital curators. If there's a story that they think is important, they should understand how to distribute it, how to share it, and how to get the word out."

the media is so critical, not just for academic attainment, but for well-being, health, and wellness.

The image on the cover of a magazine targeted towards teenage boys might not be any better. For example, imagine a cover on video games or even movies that show tough looking men holding weapons, and wearing

certain clothing or having a certain style that denotes toughness. What these images convey is that if you want to survive, you have to look and be tough. In fact, you might even have to be willing to do harm to others. It's saying that you have to be tough in order to survive and that it's ok to be violent. How many of our young boys are destroying themselves over these images? These types of images are deadly whether we're talking about bulimia and anorexia, anxiety or sleeplessness, or if we're talking about fights on campus, bullying, or violence to others or to oneself. We have to help young people to be able to critically consume this kind of media that is everywhere from billboards on street corners to ads online, in magazines, on tv, favorite shows, album covers, etc.

We also want kids to know that there are good ads out there - that there's positivity in the media as well. What are some examples of the good ads? One activity that I like to do around Super Bowl time is have students look at the ads, rate them on different criteria, and decide which ones are promoting or defying these stereotypes. Then they can understand that the media is also a place that pushes back on norms.

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Digital Media Production

The second component of critical literacy media is digital media production, which is how we write or produce media, because the technology exists for kids to be producers not just consumers. We know that many of our students are addicted to video games. In the past, I would have had students just critique a video game, like Resident Evil 5 and talk about its propensity for glorifying violence or miscegenation. This particular game also has some racist undertones for going into Africa and killing zombies. Students can talk about how these problems exist but may wonder what they are supposed to do. With a program like Scratch (scratch.mit.edu), students can make their own video games. It's the most ingenious resource available for helping kids learn how to code to make their own games. I've seen children and teens in classrooms, my own students, and my own children become addicted to the idea of being able to produce and distribute their own video games that share their own values and interests. Plus, if they make it, they are much more interested in playing it. They're learning a lot about their productive capabilities and developing a skill set that's going to be really important for them moving forward.

Digital Media Distribution

The third component of media literacy is distribution which is how we share media artifacts, both those that we create and those that we come across. We can talk to students about being digital curators. If there's a story that they think is important, they should understand how to distribute it, how to share it, and how to get the word out. A lot of media artifacts go viral because they're curated and distributed. Students can be more savvy about that. They can think about what they want to suppress as well as ideas that people need to hear more about. They can learn the art of being a curator and a distributor of digital technology.

> "Students are readers of the past and present so they can become authors of the future."

Digital Media Invention

The fourth is becoming digital inventors which is just understanding that the new threshold for media literacy is what the students can build and what they can create. We can ask what we are doing in our school to help kids learn and develop the skill set they need to be able to invent media.

One way to bring consumption, production, distribution and invention together is through multimodal theme-based units. This can include picture books, chapter books, novels, plays, or primary sources and combining these anchor texts with films and TV shows, poetry, music, magazines, and informational texts. We can have students create traditional and multimodal products. Perhaps they can produce a documentary or public service announcement based on something that they

studied or researched. Furthermore, they may take some social action around their project.

PRACTICE 3: DEVELOPING POWERFUL WRITERS

Students are readers of the past and present so they can become authors of the future. All students have a story they want to share–something they want to say. Writing is not so much about showing that they have a command of grammar and usage. While those are important skills, they're a means to the end. The end is being able to say something you want to say. Students should understand that *writer* is an identity, not a technical act. Writing is a way of transmitting culture in storytelling. We want students to think about writing for purpose and joy and we want them to write in 21st century genres. I'm a huge fan of assigning five to seven paragraph essays, so I'm not saying we should throw them out entirely. I'm merely suggesting that there are many other powerful genres that students can and should be writing in addition to the five to seven paragraph essay. This includes everything from blog posts to research reports to memoirs, funding proposals, and crossing the divide into fiction, drama, and poetry across the disciplines. There's a project at Columbia University where science students are writing hip-hop songs to share their findings and so they're using art and poetry to share science (Emdin, Adjapong & Levy, 2016). It certainly can transcend the humanities disciplines in terms of having students write poems, short stories, plays, documentaries, or cartoons. Each of these other genres outside of the five paragraph essay is naturally about sharing with a real audience, so the more we have students writing in these other genres, the more they're going to be writing for an audience. The more they're writing for an authentic audience, the more they will embrace the idea that it's important to revise, to be thoughtful, and to communicate as succinctly and engagingly as they can. Having these other genres available automatically moves us in the direction of writing for purpose. Writing for purpose normally is writing for joy because there's a joy in being able to share ideas and viewpoints with others.

One of my favorite examples of how this works is having students write essays and digital stories about a day in their life. They write about a typical morning and what happens in school, what they do during school, and after school. Being able to share through essays or digital stories, being able to connect a day in their life to social science research, being able to share in a memoire or essay format or even out of the box genres like spoken word poetry or theatre of the oppressed helps students to develop their writer identity. They can also think about how a story of their life can lead to some larger social movement or social change.

I encourage students and educators to watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). She talks about how writers can make more nuanced and complex arguments and bring more humility and counter evidence to their own argument thereby pushing past simple arguments. We want students to be writers. We want them to be more nuanced, more reflective, and more humble in the voice that they bring when they're sharing with others.

> "Eighty percent of our waking hours are spent in some form of communication and most of that communication is speaking and listening"

Writing and Student Research

A second aspect of writing that I'm really excited about and have been involved in since the late 1990s is student research and social action projects. We started with these two big questions: "If you could change the world, what's one thing you would change?" and "If you could change your community, what's one thing you would change?" We take students through a process from identifying a problem to developing a question, to collecting and analyzing data all the way to creating products. The final products may be traditional or multimodal. Finally, students disseminate those products and take some form of action.

One example of this type of project is the Youth Historians in Harlem. We worked with a group of young people who were historians of their Harlem neighborhood. They collected oral histories, digitized artifacts, shared these with a local library, and made them accessible to the public. They became storytellers and digital curators of the history of Harlem while at

the same time facilitating their academic achievement. After four years, the first cohort had a 100% graduation rate and 100% college going rate in a school that was ranked D on an A - F scale in the city of New York. These students were able to achieve. We then expanded the Youth Historians in Harlem program across elementary, middle, and high schools where students were becoming primary collectors of historical artifacts, not just readers of secondary historical literature.

In another example, one that crosses ELA and social studies, students were reading the novel Bless Me Ultima (Anaya, 1972) and using that novel as a launch into collecting oral histories from elders in their community and learning more of their stories about migration and immigration.

> "Students need to learn how to be in front of their classmates whether it's a short research report or reciting a poem that they wrote or giving a book talk."

In a third example of having students do research that transcends humanities, was reading a novel like Native Son (Wright, 1940), but using that novel to ask larger questions about race and justice in our criminal justice system. In one classroom research project I developed a mock trial unit where we put the main character of Native Son, Bigger Thomas, on trial (Morrell, 2008). The students in that classroom learned about the legal system and at the same time they became involved in a very critical reading of a complex text for high school students.

The last example is using a poem, like Langston Hughes' (1951), "Dream Deferred" as a launching pad to social science research. Students took that poem and used it to look at issues of engagement and inequality in their school system. They conducted interviews, visited local community organizations, made claims, and supported those claims with evidence. Finally, they created an action plan for teachers and community leaders.

PRACTICE 4: IMPROVING CLASSROOM TALK IN THE POLYVOCAL CLASSROOM

Eighty percent of our waking hours are spent in some form of communication and most of that communication is speaking and listening (Wilt, 1950 as cited in Hyslop & Bruce, 1989). It develops community, improves oral language, helps us to be better writers, and improves our confidence. But speaking is often the least taught of the literacy skills. I want us to think about how that becomes more central to the work of literacy classrooms. That's why I call a polyvocal classroom a place where many different people are able to share their voices powerfully.

Improving Whole Class and Small Group Discussions

The whole class discussion is a space where teachers model thinking out loud, similar to read alouds. The teachers model reading in conversations to model thinking out loud. Teachers model academic humility; they provide scripts for how to clarify, how to synthesize, and how to disagree without being rude. With the help of their teachers, students develop critical listening skills. Ninety-five percent of the time they spend listening in the whole class discussion. When we talk about whole class discussions, what we're really doing is helping kids to become active listeners, better questioners, and more thoughtful participants who understand how to take appropriate turns, and how to jump into and out of a conversation. A whole class discussion is a teacher led, student centered space, which often leads very well into a small group discussion, which is a student led, student centered space.

In a small group discussion students need to understand how to get in the formation for a discussion, such as a huddle or knee-to-knee, how to co-facilitate, how to be responsible for each other, how to pull someone into the conversation if they're on the outskirts, how to politely push someone back if they're dominating, how to bring synthesis or how to agree to disagree. These are all important in terms of their mutual learning, but they're also important life skills to learn how to dialogue meaningfully with others.

Improving Multimodal Presentations

The final communication genre, in terms of talking in class, is how to make multimodal presentations. Students need to learn how to be in front of their classmates whether it's a short research report or reciting a poem that they wrote or giving a book talk. How do students understand the rhetorical situation? How do they understand the audience? How do they effectively incorporate technology? How do they learn how to use their voice, how to speak from the diaphragm, and how to have positive body language? We need to teach students these skills to be successful in sharing their ideas through multimodal presentations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Toni Morrison says if there's a book that you want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it. If we told people in 1870, the dawn of public schools, that within one hundred years we were going to place former slaves, immigrants from Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, and women into the same classrooms and teach them all to read, they would have looked at us as if we were saying humans would live on Jupiter or grow wings. But we did it as a profession. Within a hundred years of the beginning of public schools, we have taught every American citizen how to read. Our illiteracy rate is essentially zero and it has been since 1970. So the question for us is, what are the books that we want to write with our generation of literacy educators? My mom and dad recently retired after 50 years each of teaching. My mom taught kindergarten and my dad taught high school social studies and coached football. I think about what they accomplished. For those of us that are in the middle of our career or at the end of our career, or those who are in year one, we should ask ourselves what we want to be able to say that we've done. For me, the number one goal for us is equitable distribution of literate excellence. That means all students, regardless of their zip code, regardless of where their parents come from or the language that is spoken in the home, can live a powerful literate life. We are so close to being able to say that, but the question is, how do we engage those students that are on the periphery of our classrooms? How do we enable them to be more powerful participants in classroom life?

Teaching Makes You Eternal

My mom and dad were both teachers and collectively taught for nearly a century in very high needs schools. In 1993, when I told my dad that I was going to be a teacher, he just uttered a five word sentence to me. He said, "Son, teaching makes you eternal." My dad was a legend as a teacher in our neighborhood. He coached a rival high school in basketball, football, and track and field that I played against. He directed the International Baccalaureate program. He was department chair. He was an award-winning teacher. A few years ago my dad became really sick and that was the reason he retired. On his Facebook page, his students would say, "Mr. Morrell we love you. Mr. Morrell, I tell my grandchildren things that you taught me." Unfortunately in fall 2018, my dad passed away. I went on his Facebook page and it said, "If Mr. Morrell has made a difference in your life, go ahead and post." There were more than 500 posts within 24 hours and literally 300 of his former students, colleagues and coaches came to his funeral and talked for an hour and a half about the impact he made on their lives. I really began to see that teaching does make a teacher eternal. Our impact lives on after we do. I often ask the teachers and educational leaders that I work with if they can remember the name of their kindergarten teacher and the overwhelming majority of them do (mine was Mrs. Cox). There is very little that we can remember from when we were five or six, but our teacher is one of them because of the role that she or he played in our lives.

My mom and I taught in the same district in Northern California and she would always say at the end of summer, " I can't wait for the babies to come!" She taught kindergarteners, and she taught me that it's

> "Children and teens spend 1,000 hours a year with their teachers. It is a privilege to love people's children through literacy. And that is what teachers get to do."

a privilege to teach people's children and to love them through literacy. I have three children that I send to school daily and I expect my children's teachers to love them. Not as I love them, but as I want them to be loved by their teachers. I call my children's teachers their co-parents. Children and teens spend 1,000 hours a year with their teachers. It is a privilege to love people's children through literacy. And that is what teachers get to do. It's one of the amazing human spectacles that every fall parents bring their 5 -17 year olds to the doorstep of strangers and they walk away trusting teachers with their children's lives. There's literally a circle at Notre Dame where we see license plates from Iowa, Nebraska, and New York and the parents take turns. They drop their kids off in the circle and they head off on a freeway or back to the airport and they trust us to do something good for their children in the four years that they're with us. It is a privilege to live and operate in the public trust and that's what teachers do.

Asa Hilliard says, "I've never encountered any children in any generation that are not geniuses. There's no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them." Educators have the privilege of loving people's children through literacy.

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