

NOTES ON AMERICAN LETTERS



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“Literature ranges from simple songs and sayings to elaborate and extended tales of human deeds. The most compelling literature concerns persons whose feelings, thoughts, and actions engage us in the lived time of mortality. Ideas and abstractions, which systematically separate themselves from persons and from time, do not form the essence of literature and do not surpass it.”

-Roger Shattuck, *Candor and Perversion*

EDITOR'S CORNER

Notes on American Letters is slowly evolving, growing as an inclusive and engaging journal as both its Fall and Winter Issues clearly attest. The Fall Issue included two of the fourteen American Poets we plan to present in the next two years by exploring four poems of these highly regarded and often anthologized poets. Emily Dickinson and A.R. Ammons were included this year and twelve other Poets will follow, two each Issue, authored by insightful authors such as Eric Wilson and Bill Wells.

Added to this new look in Notes is a pair of Interviews of outstanding school leaders from elementary, middle and high schools. Seven essential questions that attempt to capture principals' leadership of schools located in a variety of states as well as a few schools in Africa and other international locales will offer brief portraits of varied school leadership approaches as a way to more clearly understand the nature of schools in our culture and others.

Newly named Director of Posts Caitlin Murphy and two of her doctoral and professorial colleagues at Ohio State University were honored as ALAN Review's Outstanding Researchers of the year for their thoughtful and highly useful research on the economic exigencies of working class young girls as found in YA literature and in real life. Our research Column may call attention to this award and its important understanding of the lives of female students living in very hard times.

Joe Milner
Editor

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READING, WRITING, AND VISUAL LITERACY

Alan Brown

For the past two years, I have organized an after-school literacy program for select eighth-grade boys with an interest in sports that provides them with additional support through academic, social, and community engagement. The program meets for an hour and a half each week during the school year at Paisley IB Magnet School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In my first year leading the Paisley Sports Literacy Program, my students and I read *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte (1967), a book about the experiences of a young high school dropout from Harlem named Alfred who uses the sport of boxing to regain his sense of purpose and control over his life.

Years ago, I wrote the following about the modern-day impact of *The Contender*:

The lessons taught in *The Contender* reach far beyond the world of sports. As with most great sports-related YA novels, the story begins and ends outside the athletic arena. And what students will likely remember most about the novel is exactly what Mr. Donatelli [Alfred's boxing trainer] remembers most about Alfred: "I'll never forget how you came up those dark steps. Alone. At night. Scared. You conquered your fear. You worked hard. You almost quit once, and then you came back and worked harder" (Lipsyte, 1967, p. 202).....All students face a similar path to contending—in school, in sports, and in life—before they ever become a champion. So many years later, Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* is still showing students the way. (Brown, 2014, p. 34; see also Crowe, 2014)

As my students read the book, they constantly returned to a single message from *The Contender* that resonated with their own lived experiences, a passage that shows up early in the novel in the first meeting between Alfred and Mr. Donatelli:

"I want to be somebody....Somebody special. A champion" said Alfred.

"Donatelli's thin lips tightened. 'Everybody wants to be a champion. That's not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender.'" (Lipsyte, 1967, p. 35)

My students suggested there were kids in their own neighborhoods, many of them much younger than them, who would benefit from hearing this message, perhaps in the form of a children's book. It was then I began to wonder what it would require to create an assignment for turning a fictional novel into a children's book. I asked a few Wake Forest students and colleagues, as well as Robert Lipsyte himself, to help me envision a writing activity for a children's book based on *The Contender*. What follows are some lessons learned about transforming a novel to a children's book for teachers who might want to replicate this activity with their own middle or high school students.

Establishing a Purpose

Kelly Gallagher (2011) refers to this type of creative writing process as real-world writing using mentor texts, and *The Contender* was a perfect choice for transforming a mentor text into a children's book because Lipsyte did such a masterful job providing vivid imagery throughout his writing. I approached this project by wondering what we could learn by borrowing from the plot of a fictional novel with the purpose of shortening the story around its central message all while elevating its

historical significance. In this case, the central message was “Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender” (Lipsyte, 1967, p. 35). With this central message intact, we began to consider accompanying images to reflect the settings and characters of the time period as well as updating the language to make it more current with a broader appeal to a younger audience.

Close Reading

As Beers and Probst (2012) suggest, close reading contains a number of essential instructional characteristics: (1) it works with a short passage, (2) the focus is intense, (3) it will extend from the passage itself to other parts of the text, (4) it should involve a great deal of exploratory discussion, and (5) it involves rereading (pp. 37-38). Asking students to focus on a portion of the text, or to follow the thread of the central message throughout a text, requires close reading and substantial knowledge of both the text and its context. This particular children’s book project necessitated inquiry into the visual history of boxing in the 1960s (e.g., boxing equipment, attire, gymnasiums, referees), New York settings (e.g., Harlem, Madison Square Garden, Central Park), and boxers from that time period (e.g., Joe Louis, Max Schmeling, Sugar Ray Robinson).

Storyboarding

Encouraging students to storyboard textual scenes (see Bruce, 2011) from a fictional text is a great literacy learning tool because it connects visual literacy (Gilbert, 2013) with close reading. Even more stimulating are the collaborative conversations that emerge when students work together as part of the storyboarding process.

For example, among the most significant decision we made as a group was not to allow the reader to see Alfred’s physical body throughout most of the children’s book. We felt it was important for the reader to view Alfred’s environment as Alfred observed it himself. As a result, discussions about first- and third-person point of view became crucial as we sought to re-frame the story for a younger audience by using more visual cues from the protagonist’s perspective.

Another consequential decision had to do with the villain in the story, a bully named Major, who represented the evil pressures Alfred was trying to escape through boxing. Although Major is an important character, we decided early in our planning that what he represented—a shadowy underbelly of urban life that was constantly trying to coerce Alfred—was more crucial to the story than the character himself. As a result, we decided never to show Major’s face, instead drawing him as a shadowy figure who troubles Alfred throughout the story and only comes to light late in the book in the form of a boxer named Elston Hubbard, the literary foil whom Alfred must finally confront on his path to becoming a contender.

Writing Instructions for the Artist

Whether or not students actually create the children’s book, the activity of re-framing a fictional text for a different audience is a great exercise that allows students to write toward real or imagined artists who would be tasked with recreating the scenes based on students’ instructions. For example, Lipsyte (1967) writes the following early in his novel:

A faint light leaked through a crack, and he hurled himself up at it, paused, took another breath, and plunged into a large, murky room.

"Yeah?" A short, stocky man with crew-cut white hair looked up. His pale face was smooth and hard. Alfred thought he must be Mr. Donatelli.

"I...I'm....I'm Alfred Brooks," he said, gasping. "I come...to be....a boxer." (p. 28)

In our instructions to the artist, we asked that this visual scene show a silhouette of Mr. Donatelli, a character visually-based on a Google image search for legendary boxing trainer "Cus D'Amato," standing in a dark room with a single light bulb hanging over his head. Drawn from Alfred's perspective, this scene would be his first view of Mr. Donatelli as he entered the boxing gym scared and alone.

Conclusion

The process of turning a fictional novel into a children's book has been a wonderful adventure, and one I hope other teachers will consider replicating in their own middle and high school classrooms as they connect reading and writing with visual literacy. Students will begin to read, and view, the novel in fresh and innovative ways while engaging the mind of the author, crafting language for younger peers, and writing specific instructions to be applied by a visual artist.

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BEING IN HERE

William Pass

Journal Entry: July 30, 2018 Being Published While Incarcerated

My friend, Mr. Joseph Milner Ph.D, has asked me to write an article about being incarcerated. He is editor of a journal, *Notes on American Letters*. His journal is published both online and in print editions. This will be my first attempt to be published while incarcerated.

I have mixed feelings about becoming an author. However I am beginning to feel anticipation about being published in this journal. Mr. Milner has given me the opportunity to write about my ups and downs, about the ways I have changed or possibly become stronger. He is interested in my hopes for a life beyond incarceration. He wants me to document how I have used my individual skills to memorize biblical text and any other skills I have gained while not being free.

Journal Entry: August 1, 2018 My Ups and Downs

It's the simple things that define the character of a day in here. Something like an overcast or rainy day can affect your mood all day long. While we are able to matriculate throughout the facility on a usual day, being stuck without yard privileges makes a day seem even longer. Other factors include whether we are able to obtain coffee from the canteen on any given day. Most of us have a favorite television program. However without satellite television we are limited in our ability to stay current on contemporary programming. Taking a class that is centered on computer keyboard usage is something I enjoy. Learning about popular software gives an inmate satisfaction that his digital savvy is still on point. Making an enjoyable phone call is something that will add to the quality of a day's satisfaction.

Visits from friends and family can make a so-so day into an extraordinary day. My family usually visits twice a year. When he can find the time during the year a fraternity brother will come to bring the spirit of respect. My most frequent visitor is my friend Coco. A long warm hug from Coco can bring satisfaction to both days and nights. My cousin who is also my power of attorney talks with me each Sunday morning. I find myself worrying when he is hospitalized and answers the phone from his hospital room. His brother works for the local mortician. I get weekly news about who has passed away. When you reach the sixties, local obituaries are quite important. —The funeral home has stopped publishing news of funerals in the newspaper I receive.

On days when I can go outside and get the exhilaration that comes from an exercise regimen, it's almost always easier to cope with the challenges that you face in here. Since this is a minimum custody institution, we aren't lined up and searched each time we enter and exit the yard, as is the custom in close custody and sometimes in medium custody. A good exercise routine gives an inmate the confidence of knowing his body will answer with vigor when called upon.

Journal Entry: Thursday, August 2, 2018 Ways I Have Changed

From my point of view the greatest change I have undergone since being in here is in any attitude towards life in general. Being a veteran with a disability I am used to some type of action being taken when I write letters to the government or to my congressmen. As an inmate I have written

hundreds of letters to officials within the correctional facilities with most of the letters falling on deaf ears. I have even been refused a DNA test within a rape case because the evidence has been destroyed by the court system.

This change in attitude is part of the result of being housed in a residential mental health unit of the system. Having served in the military with an honorable discharge and having a university Bachelor's degree had given me the mentality that I deserved respect for my efforts and hard intellectual work. With a work history that included several governmental jobs and volunteer work with transporting veterans to medical care, I previously believed that friends with political influence would look out for me. I could not have been more wrong.

I don't expect to be treated fairly anymore. Before being in here, I would possibly have blamed this mistreatment on racism. After being in here, I simply understand that an inmate without financial means is treated as if he has no rights that are due to be respected by correctional officers or courtroom officials. One can observe the prison mentality on inmates depending on the length of time a person has been incarcerated. After being in here for over ten years on a charge I am not guilty of, the bulk of my sentence is behind me. At this point I have my eyes focused on the prize. With less than five years left to complete, my interest is to stay out of trouble.

What is becoming more and more clear to me is that my attitude toward other inmates is changing. It is now clear to me that someone with whom I live in close quarters has to be granted a degree of trust. Here in minimum custody we in effect have no privacy. Over the past twelve years, I have spent at least eleven years being assigned to a single cell. It is apparent to me that for the next four years and four months, this will not be the case.

Journal Entry: Monday, August 6, 2018 **Ways I Have Become Stronger**

My greatest strength is in my resolve to endure this test of faith to the end. What has enabled me to get this far is my ability to memorize biblical scripture. On a holiday visit to my family when I was living at home, the minister of the church I joined some fifty years ago made a suggestion to me. He didn't want to overly tax me, however he suggested a short list of scripture that I should be able to recall at any time. On one Easter Sunday some twenty years later when I visited his church, he called me the 'prodigal son' come home. Currently I know the parable of the prodigal son as well as I can recall any biblical scripture.

Being able to recite scripture during meditation on a daily basis is like finding a rock in a weary land. I enjoy meditating on the Word. It strengthens me as well as sharpens my intellectual faculties. One talent I have noticed is when I read and reread a passage, it's almost like second nature to memorize the verse. I have participated in talent shows reciting biblical scripture at two correctional institutions.

An understanding of karma has enabled me to accept this unfortunately difficult situation. For years I could not come to terms with being in here. I searched my past for some reason, any past behavior, that would have resulted in my ending up being in here. Now I understand how my karma is intertwined with the karma of others. Suffering happens. Sometimes the most we can do is to enable other people to endure what is happening to them without making things worse.

Knowing I have the support of family members is one way I have gained strength. One other means of support is my fraternity brothers from across the nation. Social acceptability is something new to

me. What I have learned is to trust a friend more and to not be as quick to dismiss people as unimportant. A good quality is not to be as judgmental of other people.

I have learned to view life as a waking dream that you sometimes cannot wake up from. I think dreaming awake is the hardest lesson to learn in an acceptable or even seemingly unacceptable lifetime.

Journal Entry Hopes for a Life Beyond Incarceration

My ambitions for a fulfilling career suffered a major blow when the Department of Veterans Affairs informed me in 1990 that my service-connected disability had been assigned a rating of one hundred percent of a permanent and total nature. Some years later, I reentered college and later found my skills as a driver to deliver veterans to medical appointments to be in demand. In the early year of my college career, I had received training as a short story writer. Here I am some forty years later attempting to reignite those skills.

Upon my release from being in here, I have to reconcile my life to being a Senior citizen as well as finding a meaningful way to function day to day. Literature has always been a strong interest for me. What I have to do now is to turn the tables and make a contribution to this wealth of available wisdom.

It's still possible to find satisfaction in being of service to my family. Presently there are cousins who are becoming widows. They need a handy man to help with simple household repairs. In rural North Carolina, there is a need for wood from the abundant forests on our property to use as firewood. Clearing timber can be a vocation as well as a hobby. Recently I have learned that firewood has become expensive. Why not give the wood business a try? Our county has an abundance of young men looking for work.

Journal Entry: Tuesday, August 7, 2018 What Other Skills I Have Gained While Not Free

The most important thing I have learned while being in here is to keep my opinions to myself. I live in an area half the size of a gym with sixty one other men. Learning to not be judgmental is not an innate characteristic for me. I have learned for myself that I am not a very good judge of character. At first, I was judgmental of others because I am in here for a crime I didn't commit. What I have learned is there is honor among criminals. There are also many who will never change their ways. I would wish to learn to become a good judge of character.

One can learn to be tolerant of others' points of view through years of exchanging letters with others. I am a recipient of religious educational literature from a Buddhist nun. We have made friends through our letters. My friend at the monastery is tutoring me on the fine points of mindful meditation. She feels it is important to also learn about loving kindness and forgiveness while incarcerated. She sends me guided meditations on these subjects.

The facilities where I have been assigned as an inmate have offered classes in commercial cleaning where I have learned to wax eloquently, and also electrical wiring, keyboarding, Photoshop, InDesign, and human relations development.

Through a handout on what to do the first thirty hours after release, I have learned the initial steps

of starting your own business. The HRD class enables you to compile a budget for the projected costs of starting up a business. Since I previously had a degree in business management, I have the core skills for business start-up.

Most importantly I have learned patience and tolerance. Upon first being in here I was in a panic when I was on the uphill side of a sixteen- to twenty-one-year sentence. However, I had previous to being in here developed a sharp sense of humor. It was humor that defined the roughest of the first few years. Five years in residential mental health served to put a blunt edge on my skills to get a smile from the meanest of the correctional officers. However, now that I have reached the final few years, I am making it a priority to regain my sense of humor. And I feel that it's coming along. Who will join me in laughter where I'm the victim?

TEACHER INTERVIEW

Joan Mitchell

Interview with Lindsay Schneider, West Forsyth High School, Winston-Salem, NC

1. How would you describe your instructional philosophy? What are the theories or central ideas that undergird the decisions that you make each day in the classroom? Explain the why behind what you do. Consider details such as your classroom arrangement and practices that encourage student engagement. (You do not need to answer all of these questions. The central question is the first one, and the rest are to help you think through what that question means.)

Teacher extraordinaire Carol Jago once said, “We want to build students who both can read and write but also who *choose* to read and write.” At the end of the day, this quote encapsulates my goal in the English classroom. Every day, every single day, we read and write. We read independently; I read aloud; we read poems, novels, advertisements, art, and video clips. We write to learn and learn to write; we write quickly and revise; we write poems, reflections, and analysis pieces. In order to build students who want to read and write, my classroom centers heavily around independent reading, rigorous, high interest whole-class novels, arts integration, and creative writing.

Particularly as a senior teacher, however, my instructional philosophy goes much deeper. At my core as a teacher, I believe in teaching students. I challenge students to become better versions of themselves as I build relationships with them as individuals. I design my curriculum around empathy, self-discovery and growth, and relevant topics. I create lesson plans that encourage students to look beyond the pages of a text and to use books as mirrors reflecting themselves and windows into a world that they have not experienced. Ultimately, my teaching philosophy centers around the simple and challenging idea that “people matter most” and that the heart of the English classroom is empathy.

2. What is your favorite text to teach and how do you teach it?

Whatever text I am teaching at the time!

In all honesty, I am incredibly fortunate to work at a school where I can choose the texts I teach based on the students in my classroom at that time. Due to this atypical freedom, I have been able to build a curriculum centered around texts I love and one that is ever-changing as I grow as a reader, writer, and teacher and as new students enter my classroom. Every year, I am impressed with how students engage with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Things They Carried*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *The House on Mango Street*.

Regardless of the text at hand, I prioritize creating meaningful ways for students to interact with the text. Integrating the arts has always proved poignant and thought-provoking across grade level and ability level. My classes often perform the texts we read through reader’s theater or creating a tableau to exemplify a theme from the text. After studying ways to analyze visual art (such as archetypal meaning of colors and the meaning behind various lines and shapes), students use this knowledge to display their understanding of character development throughout a text. By incorporating the arts - visually, kinesthetically, and auditorily - students gain low-stakes, engaging, and meaningful entry points into any texts allowing them to forge deeper analysis and their own personal connections to the text.

3. What forms of media and technology enhance or facilitate instruction in your classroom?

I love using podcasts and digital media in my classroom! Each semester, my seniors study the first season of *This American Life's* podcast "Serial" and other spin-off podcasts such as "Truth & Justice." Students are captivated by Adnan Syed's case and often dive into their own independent research study of the details surrounding the case and other similar cases. Students are shocked when they realize how much analysis they have completed by the end of the unit and that this "counts" as school work. From here, we get to have powerful conversations about how learning works outside of high school and various ways we can use media in advantageous ways throughout our lives. Rather than simply show a movie adaptation after completing a novel study, I enjoy using various forms of digital media connected to a novel throughout the study. Sometimes this means showing a film with similar themes to compare with a text (such as pairing *Fried Green Tomatoes* with *To Kill a Mockingbird*); other times this means viewing short films from popular films like *Up* to explore how music can impact the mood and tone of piece and having students pair music with the text we are studying for a similar effect. The use of digital images has also repeatedly proved itself in my classroom. *NYT's* Learning Network publishes weekly digital images and graphs which hone students' ability to draw inferences and to write to create a deeper understanding and meaning from a digital text.

4. Describe your approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners in your classroom. Consider student differences in culture, race, gender, learning styles, and academic ability.

Ultimately, my approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners boils down to building relationships with each student. Each student that walks through my door has a unique experience with school and education as well as their own ideas of what it means to be successful and how to accomplish that goal. By attempting to meet students where they are, I have found more opportunities to meet their needs as learners.

More broadly, independent reading as well as reading and writing conferences has had a huge impact on my ability to meet the needs of individual students. By providing students the opportunity to talk about a text they have chosen, I am able to better understand their needs and work with them in a way that doesn't single them out (since everyone is working with a different text).

5. Where do you find your best new teaching ideas? Do you rely on web content generated from other teachers, conversations with teachers you know, journals, professional conferences, or other resources?

My best teaching ideas often come from talking with others who are passionate about teaching. I am fortunate to have surrounded myself with an awesome teacher tribe with whom I brainstorm new ideas and lessons plans. By listening to their successes in the classroom and discussing my own challenging or half-baked ideas, I have become a significantly better teacher with an abundance of new ideas and strategies. Likewise, conferences - particularly NCTE and ALAN - refresh me each year and inspire me to create and mimic countless new engaging, rigorous strategies and meaningful activities. I have also become active on education-focused Twitter chats and a few teaching blogs - particularly #aplitchat, #TeachLivingPoets, aplithelp.com, and talkswithteachers.com - all of which provide fodder for new activities in my classroom. Finally, I have found myself (far more times than I care to admit!) scribbling down new teaching ideas while watching the Food Network. Truly! The competition and games and creativity on cooking shows has led to numerous engaging lessons in my classroom.

WRITERS' WORDS

Lucy Milner

The Writers' Words feature offers snippets from the writing of miscellaneous observers who have something evocative to suggest to educators (particularly those of English language and letters) and their students. We have heard from teachers who have used these fragments as prompts for essays and as inspiration for aspiring and reluctant readers and writers. In this issue again, we add descriptors to writers who might be less familiar than the better-known writers we include. Francis Bacon and Charles Dickens are English. Senesh was a young Hungarian poet who immigrated to Palestine to work on a kibbutz and volunteered to parachute into Nazi-occupied Hungary to rescue other Jews. She was captured, tortured, and executed by firing squad. (She refused a blindfold, preferring to look her executioners in the eyes.) Her poetry has stood as a symbol of courage and hope in the darkest of times.

"Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man."

Francis Bacon, essayist and philosopher (1561 – 1626)

"It is a matter of grave importance that fairy tales should be respected. A nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun."

Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870)

"There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry – "

Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886)

"There are stars whose radiance is visible on Earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for humankind."

Hannah Senesh, poet and playwright (1921 - 1944)

"Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends."

Maya Angelou (1928 - 2014)

"The value of great fiction, we begin to suspect, is not that it entertains us or distracts us from our troubles, not just that it broadens our knowledge of people and places, but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces the qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our failures and limitations.

John Gardner, novelist, essayist, and literary critic (1933 – 1982)

"The books we love, love us back. In gratitude, we should promise not to cheat on them - not to pretend we're better than they are; not to use them as target practice... We are reading for our lives, not performing like seals for some fresh fish."

John Leonard, critic (1939 - 2008)

"Books are like Swiss Army knives. They offer endless creative and revealing possibilities for those who like to interact with them."

John Maxwell Hamilton, journalist and educator (1942 -)

PRINCIPAL PROJECT: INTERVIEW WITH ROB SOUTTER

Lisa Kelly

Rob Soutter is principal of North Ridge Elementary, a suburban public K-5 school with a mix of 650 students who are multilingual, multiracial, require free and reduced lunch, and have a variety of special needs.

1. When hiring a new teacher or staff member what particular qualities do you look for?

I am looking for a couple of things. First, I am looking for personality. That's the one thing I cannot teach. I can teach classroom management or instructional strategies, but I don't know how to teach personality. I am looking for someone who is warm, enthusiastic, relational, charismatic, and someone who can connect with kids and families. Secondly, I am looking for people who are very strong communicators. The job of teaching is a job of communication. If you can communicate well and kids and parents understand what you are talking about, and if you can boil the material down to the main points and be clear and kids understand your directions for assignments, then kids are going to do well. The third thing that I am looking for is a disposition—an attitude of growth. I am not looking for people who just want a job. I am looking for people who believe that they have a vocation—people who believe that they are called for something bigger than themselves. I want to see a hunger in a person—a fire in the belly—a disposition of wanting to grow and improve.

2. How do you engage all stakeholders in articulating the school's mission and how do you resolve conflicts that occur between your vision and that of others?

I try to repeat myself a lot. Stephen Covey said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." All organizations and all people fall subject to this—we get lost in the weeds and we forget what's important and why we are here. So, you have to tell your people again and again, "This is the mission." I communicate our mission frequently.

When hiring, we ask people to buy into our mission and vision. We have a staff handbook that is about 40 pages long that covers the nuts and bolts and things such as what to do when you are sick, dress code, and other details. We also have a staff manual; it is a booklet that is 6 pages long. It has in it our mission, the vision, the values, and the priorities of our school. Candidates who are considered for employment—before they are offered the job—are asked to look over our staff manual and come back in for a conversation about our manual. This way, we can determine if they are committed and buy into our vision before they are hired.

We do some activities with staff where they envision the ideal school. Teachers list qualities of their ideal school and then are asked what they are going to do to create this school. Leading staff through activities like this helps them to re-center and to focus on why they are here.

Because of the nature of public education, many solutions end up being technical solutions. Technical solutions can be helpful, but in this kind of work, we need adaptive solutions. People need to be engaged in the right work with the right mind set. I try to protect my teachers so that they have the emotional energy to engage in real work. I help them by picking and choosing what is most important, so I don't overload them with things such as too many surveys or excessive amounts of professional development.

I don't see any direct conflicts with our mission. Our mission is to build world changers. I don't

know what parent or teacher wouldn't want to do that. What happens is much more subtle. I just deal with those issues one at a time. For example, if a teacher is talking shop outside of school, I would call her in and speak with her about how her behavior is negatively affecting the school and sabotaging her own success. I address the issues individually. I cannot think of an example of when someone was not on board with our mission.

3. What are the most significant challenges you face in leading your school?

The most significant challenge to leading a school is time. You have 10 or 11 hours a day and 30 hours worth of stuff to do. Parents want to see you in the carpool line, teacher assistants want to see you in the cafeteria, and teachers want you to be in the classroom. Everybody wants you to be visible, but they also want you to answer their email right now. You are constantly juggling 100 balls and you are trying to remind yourself which one is the most important. Typically, the urgent crowds out the important. If I could eliminate the minutia, I might be a rock star, but daily I am drowning in the weeds. The consequence of that is I typically leave very emotionally exhausted with decision fatigue. That is the absolute biggest challenge.

I know that teachers face the same thing. The job of teacher has gotten bigger and bigger, and the demands are larger than ever. Teachers cannot do all the things that they need to do professionally because they are just trying to get through today. As a leader, it is really tough to create solutions for that.

4. Where do you draw support for meeting the challenges you face in leading the school?

I draw my strength from a number of places. First of all, I try to rely on God. I have a strong faith that is bigger than me and I try to tap into that on a daily basis. I have a very supportive family. My wife and my kids are very supportive of the work that I do. I try to remember what is healthy for me and find support there--getting exercise, reading, getting in bed at a decent hour, and eating something other than junk food--whenever I can.

I have a team around me that is incredibly strong. I have hired a fantastic assistant principal and 2 instructional facilitators. That's my team. We meet every Monday for a standing meeting to check-in and update. On Wednesdays, we meet from noon until 1 or 2 to do strategic planning. That is where the bulk of my strength comes from. I do have other administrators that I enjoy and can call upon for answers, but—for the day-to-day strength—I find that right within the building.

5. How do you make a positive difference in the lives of students who struggle in school?

That's the million-dollar question. One answer is that I don't have a clue in the world. Struggling kids have always been here and probably always will be.

There are some answers out there. We do know what makes a difference in the lives of kids. At the top of that list is the mindset of the kid himself. If a kid feels that he doesn't belong, that the teachers don't like him, or that he isn't smart, that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The trick becomes, how do you change the mind of a kid? This is done through relationships, through messaging, and by teaching really well. If a kid performs well, then he starts to believe in himself.

We encourage teachers to help kids track data and set reasonable goals. Make the goals visual; make a graph. Growth needs to be visible to people. All these things help to build a positive mindset so that students feel that they belong and can be successful.

6. How do you lead an ambitious reform effort and sustain it over time?

I think you must be okay with slow and steady. Moving a ship this large is difficult, particularly when teachers are so exhausted. Research shows that teachers—by nature—don't like change, partly because they have seen it come and go every year with new initiatives. Artists, for example, love change. People in professions like teaching and accounting hate change.

I would not define the word ambitious as changing lots of things right now. Ambitious—to me—would mean that we are going to do something amazing. The way to create sustainable change is to capture the hearts of your people. Get them excited about what they are doing. Show them that you trust them and believe in them, that you hired them for a reason, and that they are smart and capable. If you can do that, they will work with you with blood, sweat, and tears. If you fail to do that, they may just show up because you are the boss.

7. How do you define leadership and in what way do you see yourself as a leader?

Quite simply, you are leading when people are following you. Leaders are people who have followers who are following by choice. They want to line up behind that person and go on mission with that person.

I feel like the one thing that I do well is that I try very hard not to forget what it was like to be a teacher and what it was like to be a student. I've been out of the classroom for 15 years and it becomes more and more difficult to remember what it was like to be a teacher, but my goal is to remember that and to constantly communicate that to my people and let them know that I am not the smartest guy in the organization and I don't have all the answers. I just hold the title of leader. I want to be a servant leader. If you need someone to cover your class and cannot find someone, I will come and cover your class. I am having lunch this year with every team leader, every teacher within his/her first three years of teaching, and every staff member new to our school. During these lunches, I am asking questions, specifically about their personal world, their professional goals, and how I can support them.

In January, I will start covering teachers' classrooms for 30 minutes so that they can have a break to do tasks that need to be done, or they can sit and watch me teach. I am doing this for two reasons. One is to remind myself of what they go through daily. The second is to give the teachers the message that I am not above them. I am in the trenches with them and I identify with their plight. I want them to know that they are not alone.

I would say the last one because it is an umbrella over everything. Leading is a very difficult job. I have done a lot of leadership training and one of the first things that I have people do is list past leaders and place them into categories of effective or ineffective. More people see leaders as ineffective than effective.

There are a lot of pieces of leadership that are elusive and counterintuitive. Nobody wants to train wreck his organization, but it happens all the time. This is usually someone working very hard and being thoughtful and strategic.

You must do a lot of things really well and wear a lot of hats—manage your time, your resources, and your people. You must be good enough that they want to be with you. Your "A" people, the great teachers, can work anywhere they want. What will make them want to work for me? I must be better than the competition. That's tough.

Lisa Kelly, who interviewed Rob Soutter, agreed that question #7 about leadership was the most important question because Soutter's definition and understanding of leadership guide his thinking and the way he leads his school. His leadership style is evident in all of his answers.

PRINCIPAL PROJECT: INTERVIEW WITH ADAM DOVICO

Katy Shick

Adam Dovico is Principal of Moore Magnet Elementary School. He is an accomplished teacher, principal, college professor, author, and speaker who has spent his career working with schools and educators across the country on building school culture, engaging students, and figuring out what you can do for kids!

1. Urban, Pre-K-5
2. Prominent attribute: 65% of students receive free and reduced lunch
3. Population: 301-850 students
4. Special nature of school: magnet for instruction based on multiple intelligences

1. When hiring a new teacher or staff member what particular qualities do you look for?

"I look for teachers with big dreams. I want dream makers, but I also want practitioners who can make their dreams come true. I look for competitive people who want to be the best at what they do, but I also want collaborators who want to work with their peers to make it happen. Basically, I look for antonyms—dreamers and practical people, competitors and collaborators. But, most importantly, I want teachers who want the best for their students and schools because I'm not satisfied with status quo. I like to make change and break the status quo."

2. How do you engage all stakeholders in articulating the school's mission and how do you resolve conflicts that occur between your vision and that of others?

"Foremost I believe in transparency. I must be transparent in my expectations if I want to get everyone onboard with my vision. At Moore Magnet I ask that everyone on the staff subscribe to three pillars of our mission. We believe in engaging every student, creating an inclusive culture that values our students, and providing a rigorous education for all students. I don't believe that conflict should be always avoided because sometimes conflict can produce positive change. When I do encounter a conflict between two staff members, I guide them through by keeping the discussion focused on what would be the best for our students. Most often, this resolves the conflict because it asks staff to evaluate their own motivations to ensure that they aren't inadvertently approaching the situation with a solution that is focused on their own desires over the needs of their students."

3. What are the most significant challenges you face in leading your school?

"I just completed my first year as principal, and it has certainly been a year of change. I went against the advice of most of my mentors to take the first year with caution and decided instead to bring significant change to our school, not only "rocking the boat," but flipping it over at times. It was difficult at times to bring so many changes so quickly, but we made it through and brought several improvements to our school. For example, I changed how Moore Magnet conducts its morning routine. Instead of asking students to complete "morning work," we ask students to participate in "morning choice," a time in which they can complete art projects, play board games, build with LEGOs, and collaborate with their class mates on projects. Additionally, I banned the use of "busy sheets" as seat work. I want our students to be excited to come to school, not dread it. How the day begins dictates how the remainder of the day will go. As a result, we reduced our tardiness problem by 36%. After all, we can't teach students who aren't there."

4. Where do you draw support for meeting the challenges you face in leading your school?

"I draw most of my support from my Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Support. They have both been very supportive of all the changes I've brought to Moore Magnet. I have also enjoyed the support of our parents and community. Moore Magnet parents have been very engaged and supportive of our new initiatives and let us know via social media as well as in the drop off line in the mornings."

5. How do you make a positive difference in the lives of students who struggle in school?

"Firstly, we focus on getting them to come to school. We want them to want to be here, and once they are here, we can get to work to offering them an engaging education. Most of the time, absenteeism and low academic performance go hand in hand."

6. How do you lead an ambitious reform effort and sustain it overtime?

"That is tricky. I've brought many changes to Moore Magnet this year, but I've also tried very hard to get teachers and staff to "buy" into these changes. Change can happen with a principal, but these improvements cannot sustain themselves unless all staff believe in them and have a vested interest in maintaining a vision. To keep staff onboard, I have handed many of the leadership roles over to teachers. For example, our Harry Potter-style "House System" is a teacher led program with little input from me."

7. How do you define leadership and in what ways do you see yourself as a leader?

"I define leadership as the empowering of others to bring positive change to their school. I can't do my job unless everyone else is doing their jobs. I can't be great, and our school can't be great if everyone who works there isn't also great. Teachers around the county have sent me their resumes this summer hoping to bring their particular strengths to us."

Commentary from interviewer Katy Shick:

I thought Adam's response to question 2 (about resolving conflict) was most interesting. I liked that he feels that conflict isn't necessarily negative. I liked that he said that sometimes conflict brings about new ideas and fresh perspectives. I agree wholeheartedly. Too many times we are focused on "getting everyone onboard" to our vision. Sometimes meeting a little resistance or witnessing friction among a group can offer us a chance to step outside of our subjective view. Perhaps this conflict reveals a flaw that we didn't see before.

FILM REVIEW

Brianna Brown

RBG (2018) AND WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR? (2018)

It's the time of year when students (and educators, let's be honest) can really use some motivation--something to keep us pushing through the dreary winter months. To that end, 2018 has given us the gift of two wildly popular, inspirational documentaries: *RBG* and *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, portraying the life and influence of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Fred Rogers, respectively.

Despite what may seem the obvious difference between these two stories (one of a pioneering feminist liberal judge and one of a conservative Republican minister), it is refreshing in this polarizing political climate to find so many similarities not only in the adversities faced by these two individuals, but in the heart of their beliefs about humanity. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of course, was one of the first women to graduate from Harvard Law and faced extraordinary challenges in her path to the Supreme Court--spoiler alert: her challenges didn't end there. Fred Rogers, meanwhile, chased an unpopular (and nearly unfunded) vision of bringing quality television to children--with no acting experience whatsoever. Both have faced extreme personal and political criticism for the stand they have taken in support of equality and human dignity.

It is unfortunate that even the stories of their past are all too relevant today. In one particularly telling scene of *RBG*, she recounts how the Dean of Harvard Law School asked her why she was "occupying a seat that could have been taken by a man." In fact, this past year (2017) was the first year to see an equal number of female and male students admitted to Harvard Law School. One featured segment of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* (filmed in the show's first week in 1968) shows the character "King Friday" deciding to "build a wall" in order to stop his world from changing. ...I guessing I don't need to spell out the relevance.

While both documentaries clearly intend to leave us with positive impressions, they don't shy away from the more controversial aspects of their subjects. In our #metoo movement society, many viewers may be disappointed to hear that one of Justice Ginsburg's guiding philosophies is to "be a lady." Meanwhile, those who think of Fred Rogers as the eternal optimist may be disheartened by his response to the 9-11 tragedy. Overall, the films deal with their subjects fairly, without being afraid of exposing their faults--or, more accurately, their humanity.

In the introductory scene to *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Fred Rogers says, "One of my main jobs... is to help children through the difficult modulations of life." As educators, this is the very heart and soul of our work: helping children understand and navigate the world around them. What you do every day matters--you are making a difference. Go enjoy some well-earned optimism.

Recommended Text Pairings for RBG

Won't You Be My Neighbor? (2018)

My Own Words by Ruth Bader Ginsburg

We Should All Be Feminists by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo
Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg by Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik
I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark by Debbie Levy
On the Basis of Sex (Coming December 25, 2018!)

Texts I Think Fred Rogers Would Recommend

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
Wonder by R.J. Palacio
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck
Pay it Forward (2000)
"The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry
The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams

PERPETUATING STEREOTYPES THROUGH MEDIA

Kaitlen Grigsby

Journal/Book Title: Immigrant Stereotypes Are Everywhere on TV

Source: *The Atlantic*

Publication Date: October 21, 2018

Basic Concept:

This article explores the findings of a recent study of 47 TV shows that aired in the past year. The findings indicate that immigrant characters are not only underrepresented, but they are more often than not, portrayed one-dimensionally. Statistics about the roles of immigrant characters are compared with statistics of immigrants in the United States, illustrating that the view we see of immigrants on TV is not supported by facts. When combined with false and misleading stories of immigrants in the media, this false representation could be damaging and dangerous. Ultimately, the article explores the need for increased representation, which can be achieved by hiring and casting immigrant directors, writers, and actors whose voices can help create realistic, more humanized pictures of the lives of immigrants.

Comment:

This article sheds light on topics that many teenagers can relate to: being stereotyped and having the desire to voice their own story. It also brings in something that teenagers are very familiar with: TV and media. By reading and discussing this article, students can consider not only important themes of representation and voice, but they can challenge themselves to be more critical readers, viewers, and participants. When we can ask questions about representation, voice, and truth, we allow ourselves to consider power dynamics and how we can gain power or use our power to advocate for the humanization of others.

Key Quotations:

“Immigrant characters on television are still underrepresented and largely one-dimensional, researchers found.” “Something that we talk about a lot with our work within the entertainment industry is that narrative [...]and how we push past that ... to more humanized representations of characters that don’t just have to be single-sided—either a good or a bad immigrant—but can actually just be fully realized.” “We have to empower the next generation of storytellers ... so that they have room at the table and it’s no longer Hollywood telling the world, This is what it’s like. It’s they themselves telling the world, This is what it’s like. This is what my story’s like,”

Driving Questions:

Whose responsibility is it to ensure just and fair representation? Who, if anyone, benefits from single-sided narratives? How can storytelling shape the way we view each other?

Allied Texts:

The House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros; *The Poet X*, Elizabeth Acevedo; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie. *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, Lilliam Rivera.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION

Eileen Ryan

Journal/Book Title: "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"

Journal/Book Author: Jean Twenge

Source: *The Atlantic*

Publication Date: September 2017

Basic Concept:

Writer Jean Twenge has a 25-year career researching generational differences, and her current work studying teens suggests an alarming correlation between smartphone and social media use and mental health issues. Twenge has dubbed this post-Millennial generation "iGen." Born between 1995 and 2012, this generation is notable for the ever presence of technological connection in their lives via smartphone, tablet, and social media, as well as for the decrease in both face-to-face social interactions and emotional well-being. Twenge uses both survey data, which she presents with charts and text, and qualitative interviews with teens to explain social trends within this group. She discusses the fact that this group is dating, driving, drinking, and engaging in sexual activity later than teens in previous generations, which indicates a delay in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Since iGen teens are not out driving around to parties or working to pay for gas as much as their predecessors, they are home more often, "on their phone, in their room, alone and often distressed." Twenge explores the roots of some of that distress – the loneliness teens experience when social media reveals their peers in a well-documented hangout without them, the need for social approval via likes and other forms of digital feedback, and the isolation brought on by aggressive cyberbullying. Twenge ends with the hopeful suggestion that teens seem to be more and more aware of the detrimental effect of devices and social media, but does not offer a tidy solution.

Comment:

This article would be compelling for teens because it addresses two issues they pay close attention to already: their phones and their mental health. Twenge's piece pits iGen teens' self-esteem and happiness against their use of screens and social media, which some students would disagree with. The article also invites students to consider the nature of community, isolation, and why it is easier to be cruel to people when you don't have to look them in the eye. Twenge's suggestion that parents of iGen teens should be more proactive in limiting their children's screen time allows students to consider and discuss whether teens should have the rights to make these decisions on their own. This is an especially interesting question considering Twenge's observations about this generation remaining in their childhoods farther into high school.

Quotations:

"It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones."

"Social media give middle- and high-school girls a platform on which to carry out the style of aggression they favor, ostracizing and excluding other girls around the clock."

"The correlations between depression and smartphone use are strong enough to suggest that more parents should be telling their kids to put down their phone."

"But the portrait of iGen teens emerging from the data is one of a lonely, dislocated generation."

Questions:

1. What is it about social media that can make it more compelling than actually spending time with other people?
2. What is it that makes us resist or shy away from genuine human connection?
3. Given the implications of this research, do you think parents should limit their children's access to smart phone and social media?

Allied Texts:

"Fellowship" by Franz Kafka, "The Social Me" by William James, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

FEATURED AUTHORS

Alan Brown

An Associate Professor of English Education at Wake Forest University. He is a former high school English teacher who now serves as the English education coordinator and secondary education program director. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on topics including action research, adolescent literacy, educational leadership, English methods, and young adult literature.

William S. Pass

A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is a former Governor's School student, a former United States Marine, and a Life Member of Disabled American Veterans. He finds strength in Contemplative Prayer and a Daily Meditation Practice. He is an inmate at Greene Correctional Institution in Maury, North Carolina.

Joan Mitchell

A part-time assistant professor in the Department of Education at Wake Forest University. She is co-author of the English education textbook *Bridging English* (now in its 6th edition), and her current research focuses on writing pedagogy in the secondary classroom. She is a regular presenter at both NCTE and the North Carolina English Teachers Association annual conferences.

Lucy Milner

Began her teaching career in urban high schools in Georgia and North Carolina, continued teaching English methods classes at Salem College, and simultaneously, was passionately engaged in North Carolina's innovative summer program, the N. C. Governor's School, first as an English teacher and then as its Director. She has written book reviews and features for newspapers and educational journals, two books on children's literature and English pedagogy (as co-editor), and six editions of *Bridging English* (as co-author).

Katy Shick

An English teacher at East Forsyth High School with Winston-Salem / Forsyth County Schools. She has been a high school teacher for eighteen years. She graduated from Duke University with a BA in English and Wake Forest University with a MA in English. She lives in Winston-Salem with her husband and two children.

Brianna Brown

A graduate of the NC Teaching Fellows program at UNC-Chapel Hill and the WFU MA-Ed. program, Brianna Brown is in her eighth year of teaching. Brianna taught 10th grade English (World Literature) in Davie County and Wake County public schools for 7 years before making the radical shift to teach at a private middle school. She currently teaches 7th grade (Medieval) and 8th grade (American) Literature courses and coaches Middle and High School Cross-Country at Thales Academy in Rolesville, NC.

SUBMISSIONS

Call for Articles and Posts

Notes on American Letters is an online quarterly journal that is inclusive of multiple disciplines. NAL seeks articles that explore engaging literary texts or basic ideas from diverse fields such as art, religion, politics, natural sciences that engage students in the classrooms of grades 6–12.

In addition to the Articles published in each of the four issues, readers are encouraged to submit wide-ranging, shorter Posts that follow a simple template.

Template for Posts

1. Title of Post
2. Post writer
3. Basic bibliographic information: Text's Title, Author, Source, Publication Date, Internet Link
4. Brief concept of the Post
5. Comment
6. Two or three crucial quotes from the text
7. Two or more probing questions about the text
8. Two or more allied texts that support or counter the same topic

Submission Process for Articles and Posts

- Manuscripts should be sent electronically to Rachel Adjami, Assistant to the Editor (adjara15@wfu.edu).
- Submissions should range from 600 to 1000 words. Authors should use the most important word from their title on the bottom right side of each page alongside the page number of each page. Pages should be double spaced throughout (including quotations, notes, and works cited) with standard margins.
- A brief statement should be provided that states that the manuscript has not been published or is not submitted elsewhere.
- Copies of everything you send us should be saved. We cannot return any materials to authors.
- Authors' names should not appear in the text or the reference list. Substitute 'Author' for citations in the text and in the reference list.
- Two Submissions Editors review submitted manuscripts within 20 days of their receipt. If the manuscript is accepted, the editors will provide suggestions for revision and return the revised text within 20 days to the author.

Publication and Submission Deadlines

Fall, September 15: Submit by July 15
Winter, December 15: Submit by October 15
Spring, March 15: Submit by January 15
Summer, June 15: Submit by April 15

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