Beyond the Stacks: Why High School English Teachers Should Be Talking about Books

Greeks and Gospels?" the woman across from me interrupted. "That's what we had to read in high school, Greeks and Gospels." The woman, a guest at a party, found out I was an English teacher and asked what books I taught. She answered before I could, but I was charmed and intrigued by her response, charmed because she assumed (in some cases accurately) that the literature that was taught 40 years ago is still being taught today and intrigued because she was actually interested in discussing literature that I teach. Little did this woman know narratives about teaching high school literature have been at the center of controversy for many years. Inevitably, the problem with such debates over what literature is best for high school classrooms is that high school teachers, despite being the ones actually engaged with students and the texts in question, have little credibility in the larger, public discourse and end up being interrupted, critiqued, or shouldered out of the conversation.

In this article, I look at how recent policies have shaped what and how literature is taught in the secondary classroom and how those policies affect professional and classroom conversations about literature. Then I share focused conversations I've had with high school English teachers from diverse communities about the complex ways in which they engage their students with literature. Finally, I make an argument for why critical conversations about the selection and use of literature, like the ones I had with the interviewees, should be an essential part of professional development for all English teachers, including those new to the profession.

How the Conversation Started

In terms of the national discourse about what literature matters in high school, it's important to acknowledge that although some beliefs about curriculum have changed over the last 200 years, many remain. Oddly enough, the woman I spoke with at the party was likely in her 40s, and yet the "Greeks and Gospels" curriculum she described casts her in the 19th-century American classroom, where literature study was viewed only as part of teaching classical languages. Clearly, this attitude has changed. Rare is the public school that requires Latin over language arts. But as the 20th century turned, debates formed among university professors over whether the study of literature should involve personal, aesthetic readings or should apply far more "scientific" approaches (Graff). Another subject of debate at the time was whether popular literature should be part of classroom study. Such topics sound eerily familiar today where many ELA teachers aren't sure whether to place greater focus on strategies or texts and on which texts in particular. The canon? Multicultural literature? YA? Nonfiction? But the dilemma of how to balance strategies and texts has been exacerbated by the volley of contradictions teachers have been subject to under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Common Core State Standards. Allow me to illustrate the problem. In 2001–05, not long after NCLB legislation, literacy
coaches and specialists were installed in 5,600 public elementary schools across the country because of Reading First Grants provided to major urban districts such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and San Diego (Atteberry and Bryk; Peterson et al.). Not much time passed before eight public high schools received similar grants and NCTE and IRA published standards of practice for literacy coaches (Blamey, Meyer, and Walpole). With the installation of literacy coaches came widespread change in the professional development available to teachers of all subject areas, a change that emphasized reading strategies that could aid student comprehension. The movement took hold, but the trouble was that so much reading strategy instruction was creating for English teachers what Lisa Schade Eckert describes as a “pedagogical gap” between literary and reading instruction. She contends that “literacy literacy instruction can vacillate between two extremes” where students in developmental classes receive only “repetitive, skills-based instruction” while students in literature classes experience “intellectually lofty, highly theorized definitions of literary interpretation” (111).

It seems the National Governors Association agreed with this assessment as now Common Core State Standards (CCSS), unlike NCLB, include “Reading Literature Standards” that require close reading and comparison of different literary sources and eras (RL.8-10.9 and RL.11-12.9) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices). Such standards seem more closely aligned with Eckert’s description of the “intellectually lofty” literary extreme and call for a seismic shift in the way that English teachers are now supposed to teach literature. This shift toward intellectualism is welcomed by some such as Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University, who sees literature standards like RL.11-12.9 as “a weapon against the multicultural imperative that has produced so much historical ignorance and dumbed-down literary exposure among high school graduates” (25). But such a vision of literary study places high school teachers who emphasize a literary approach right back in the center of controversy as their attempts to embrace CCSS might inadvertently encourage them to abandon the multicultural or YA texts they’ve previously integrated into their classrooms.

The point here is not that teachers are thoughtless or “dutiful delivery mechanism[s] for so-called proven literacy education programs and methods” (Brooks). On the contrary, my interviews with high school English teachers of varying levels of classroom experience and diverse communities suggests that they have complex ways of reading and teaching literature that involve many more variables than just doing what they are told.

What Do Teachers Have to Say?

Despite being subject to federal, state, and local directives, I felt that English teachers, like other teachers, relied on “individual attitudes, beliefs, practices, and sustained professional development [that] are crucial for designing and delivering effective literacy instruction and learning opportunities” (Brooks). With this in mind, I wanted to know what specific factors influenced English teachers’ instruction, so I spent a year engaging high school teachers from rural, suburban, and urban communities in conversations about the literature that they teach. I interviewed them about texts they like and dislike and strategies for teaching texts. To ensure fresh perspectives and impromptu thinking, I also asked them to do a cold reading of an excerpt from a text listed under Common Core’s exemplars to see how they might evaluate literature with which they were unfamiliar. The results demonstrated that teachers are not only capable of thinking about how and why they teach certain texts, but that they are eager to engage in such conversations.

The first part of the study involved a survey sent to Midwestern high schools that met the community profiles of rural, suburban, and urban. Four high schools in each profile were contacted for permission to send English teachers a survey. Of the 117 teachers contacted, 13 returned the survey. I followed the survey response with phone and email contact and conducted interviews with nine teachers who represented a variety of community profiles and career stages, from fewer than five years to 25 years or more of experience.

During the interview teachers evaluated a list of texts as teachable or unteachable. The list
included, among others, To Kill a Mockingbird, Romeo and Juliet, and A Raisin in the Sun, titles ranked most commonly taught in the 2003–04 school year (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber). The list also offered more contemporary titles such as I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Way to Rainy Mountain, and The Joy Luck Club that had been included in published studies of multicultural literature (Glazier and Seo; Glazier et al.; Pang et al.). Additionally, contemporary and young adult titles were included based on classroom studies of YA fiction (Freedman and Johnson; Wollman-Bonilla). These three categories of texts, canonical, multicultural, and contemporary/YA, helped determine initial teacher values associated with text selection and indicated if the teacher had particular leanings toward traditional or pluralistic literature curriculums.

From this list teachers identified as teachable a number of texts that remain curricular “warhorses”: Lord of the Flies, To Kill a Mockingbird, Fahrenheit 451, and Raisin in the Sun. But there was disagreement about the value of these perennially taught texts. Multiple teachers, both suburban and urban, suggested that The Odyssey was unteachable or “boring” in its full verse format. Some of those teachers indicated they used excerpts of these texts to supplement a particular thematic unit. There were also both urban and suburban teachers who said Romeo and Juliet was unteachable, and one suburban teacher even explained that teachers in her school no longer sent the play home for assigned reading because it created a “chasm of kids who were really trying and really could grasp it at a much higher level and kids who turned off and didn’t read it at home at all.” In these examples teachers communicated various beliefs that could be used as a means of criticizing their attitudes as flippant or arbitrary, but I think that the previous quote demonstrates the complex task of reading and teaching an Elizabethan text to a diverse group of learners.
The teacher recognizes that a text with such unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax creates a challenge for the students. Furthermore, the teacher’s awareness that she must attend to both the students with higher comprehension and the students who have “given up” implies that she may end up teaching both basic comprehension and advanced interpretation to the same class of students.

Interestingly, canonical texts were only part of what was identified as teachable. Many teachers from all three community profiles talked about contemporary and YA titles. Suburban and rural teachers identified Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as highly teachable. Teachers in both rural and urban settings listed *The Book Thief* and *Hunger Games* as highly teachable. In addition, teachers mentioned beyond those provided on the survey list titles that struck me as unique or at least uncommon. For example, one rural teacher was trying to develop a literature circle unit on the search for identity and selected *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, *Monster*, and *Puddin’head Wilson*. In this example, the teacher is integrating a traditional, YA, and contemporary title into a single unit. She defended the variety by describing features such as student appeal, student challenge, and exposure to multiple time periods and genres.

For the second phase of the interview, I asked the teacher participants to read an excerpt of literature, tell me if they thought it seemed teachable, and then explain their process for determining if it had classroom value. The excerpts came from Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*, both exemplars on the CCSS website (“National Governors Association Center for Best Practices”). Assuming these titles were lesser known, I hoped they might provoke teachers to talk about characteristics beyond familiarity. These texts also share other characteristics: both have male narrators, both narrators are recalling memories, and both narrators make religious references that may be considered controversial and a reason for rejection.

But rejection was rarely an issue. Only one teacher who taught primarily struggling readers rejected Lahiri’s text, claiming that the vocabulary would be too frustrating for her students. All other teachers assessed the passages as teachable, though they varied in reasons as to why. One suburban teacher described the text as vivid, bicultural, and capable of inviting students to take a perspective. He predicted the text would lead to a “good day in the classroom.” Another teacher analyzed it according to writing potential, “It certainly would be a place where you could do a narrative prompt. . . . Certainly making your own personal connections, ‘When was a time you were really scared?’” This particular teacher, from a rural school district, also valued the imagery in the text and saw it as potentially encouraging analysis. What I find fascinating is how both teachers analyzed Lahiri’s text for its literary values (vividness, imagery, point of view) and its pedagogical potential (inviting personal connection, provoking conversation, and inspiring student writing). I think this indicates the many features and variables an English teacher considers when reading a text for the classroom.

Avoiding the Real Issues

The fact that high school English teachers consider a variety of factors such as genre, literary era, student interest, student ability, aesthetic value, and point of view as part of their evaluation indicates that they have a lot to say about how they read and frame learning in their ELA classrooms. But such complexity in the craft of teaching continues to be undervalued as few opportunities exist for English teachers to discuss the content of their instruction. As a result, teachers who should be “at the center of the process of designing powerful classroom learning experiences” end up making choices that are less bold and seem safer (Smith and Girod).

In many cases, teachers self-censor texts they believe have controversial content and thereby “succumb to the pressure to retreat behind the shield of other similar books that are less controversial, but that may not compel the students to see another perspective or think on a deeper level” (Freedman and Johnson 357). This means that teachers, believing that they do not have adequate defense for the literature they teach, choose less dynamic and even less diverse texts to avoid criticism, district reprimand, or worse.
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or worse. And while some may argue that if you can teach the same ideas using a different text then you should teach the alternative, such an argument suggests that all ideas are equal and that the art of the piece doesn’t really matter, a position that ignores specific values teachers expressed in the interviews. There is significant difference between using To Kill a Mockingbird, or The Help, or Invisible Man to teach the tragedies of racism. The classroom experience and outcome would be different in each case, even with the same students and the same teacher. Dewey identified this difference as the classroom teacher’s unique ability to “psychologize” the subject matter they teach for their particular students (in Smith and Girod). Teachers as part of their knowledge and experience can heighten students’ consciousness and interests through the nuances of the text, a skill critical to creating dynamic learning.

To promote such pedagogical and literary consciousness, it’s crucial that English teachers with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and experience levels engage in professional development opportunities that go beyond reading strategies or text exemplars.

Professionals Engaged in Literary Conversation

To encourage better teaching in secondary English classrooms, teachers need more diverse reading experiences and more participation in literary communities, precisely the kinds of experiences that we as English teachers try to provide for our students. And while it’s possible that CCSS with its exemplars and literature standards will change the professional development landscape, I don’t think that we, as teachers of English, should wait for something to come down the pipeline. The idea of literature-based professional development builds on an article written for Educational Leadership a few years ago. In trying to illustrate what makes the most effective professional development, the author featured two summer institutes, one in math and one in science, where teachers were exposed to six weeks of intensive seminars focused on content. Peppered throughout the article are citations insisting that teachers reported growth and change in their practice when they attended sessions focused on content knowledge (Darling-Hammond and Richardson).

By comparison, there have been a few studies reported in which teachers participated in book clubs or discussion groups to introduce new ways of thinking about multicultural texts (Glazier et al.), popular culture (Lewis and Ketter), or discussion methods (Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith). And I think that all of these serve as legitimate reasons for engaging teachers in literary discussions, but I also think that sustained professional development focused on “literary literacy” (to borrow Eckert’s terminology) should be more nuanced and intentional than mere participation in a book club or reading group. The field needs focused literary professional development inviting to new and experienced teachers looking to invigorate their interpretive chops.

Because there are so few studies of professional development specific to literary literacy, I think it’s worth sharing some personal professional experiences that have helped me grow not just as a reader, but as a literature teacher.

1. Read a text that stretches you as a reader.
   One of the most influential opportunities I had as a young teacher was working with a much more knowledgeable colleague who asked me constantly about books I had read and if I would I be willing to read others and discuss them. Because of these conversations, I read and discussed novels such as Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Faulkner’s Light in August, and Robinson’s Housekeeping, all of which I eventually integrated into teaching units.

2. Invite colleagues to read a book with you.
   Another way I’ve been exposed to new texts is through literature classes not intended for teachers, ones that leave me thinking about instructional possibilities on my own. And although I get some recommendations for books at conferences, these events do not provide the sustained and ongoing reflection that enables me to actually incorporate the
text into my classroom, especially if the text is a novel. When I have had colleagues agree to read a new book with me, it’s helped to keep my passion and ambition in check. That is, through discussion we together try to determine if the book’s content and pedagogical value is as great as I first thought when I read it on my own.

3. **Ask to pilot a text.** At the school where I teach, as with many schools, there is a formal process for proposing, piloting, and adopting a new text in course curriculums. I see the merit in such a review process, but I also know that to reach the point of text adoption teachers need more than documentation. They need support from colleagues to think in alternative ways about a text they might find intimidating. Studies on successful professional development show that instructional change occurs only when “collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection, allowing teachers to raise issues, take risks, and address dilemmas in their own practice” (Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2).

4. **Propose a professional development opportunity focused on literature.** In my department, we get conflicting directives on whether we can talk about literature during teacher institute days, and too often those conversations are only in the service of designing common assessments, writing learning targets, or aligning curriculum with standards. There are a handful of experiences I’ve had in my district over the last 15 years that offer as a vision for what professional development in literature might look like. For two department meetings, my former department chair provided time to discuss the novel *The Good Thief* as a way to engage in conversation about the quality of classroom texts and to judge whether this novel was dynamic enough for classroom conversation and written analysis. Another rather simple but enriching experience was one my first department chair created: an end-of-the-year conversation about the quality of classroom novels that offer as a vision for what professional development might look like.

These conversations, whether with a mentor or with all ELA teachers in a district, especially if centered on a challenging text go far in developing our content expertise and remind us what it feels like to struggle to make meaning, a feeling students frequently experience. The bottom line is that new and experienced teachers of literature need to read and interpret literature outside of our personal canons. New stories, new questions, and new conversations bring us out of our pedagogical habits, expand our thinking about our content and our students, and ultimately empower us with ever-evolving insight into the profession of teaching literature.

**Works Cited**


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Tardy

He slips in quietly, late again—
this boy I am trying to hear, to see, to figure.
I move to him, explain the assignment: another slice of summer school to swallow.
One eye is swollen nearly shut, the other bleeding.
Last night? This morning.
I continue, my throat a trap door.
His nose resumes a slow scarlet drip, interrupting our nonchalance.
He’s trying so hard this time . . .
I am heavy with ineptitude; he is spurred by pride.
Our tongues are muddied fish.

Simile, metaphor, irony . . .
He’ll take my concern as pity, and neither of us can afford that.
“What, this? I’ve had worse than this.”
19 and machismo, fronting, he catches my tone, my eye, senses I’ve gotten too familiar, and just like that, I’ve lost.
Symbol, synecdoche, hyperbole, alliteration, assonance, dissonance . . .

—Kelly J. Gomes
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