Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Community: Relationships and Renewal

The steady stream of high schoolers, their parents, siblings, and grandparents continued all evening. For the duration of the two-hour event, people filed into the museum to walk past and admire the six large oil paintings displayed on easels throughout the main floor of the museum lobby. Each of the brightly colored panels, created in collaboration between a professional artist and English classes from high schools in the area, illustrated a scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Throughout the evening, students excitedly walked to the panel that they had helped to create. “See that chair?” one boy asked his mom, pointing to a panel that had, as its chosen scene, a classroom full of students (see Figure 1). “I did that,” he said proudly. He went on to describe the scene and when in the novel it took place. It was obvious his mom was not familiar with the novel, but it was also obvious that she was proud of her son and his work.

“I love seeing all these young people here on a Friday night,” an elderly woman commented to us as we stood by the front door of the museum, passing out brochures. “It really is impressive.” Impressive it was. Students and teachers from different schools, so often rivals at sports games and other competitions, shared in a common experience. Community members initiated conversations with “young people” about their interpretations of a piece of literature.

Like in most high schools in the United States, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was already part of the regular English curriculum for the schools in our community. For years, students and teachers in our community have read the novel together, learned about life in the South during the 1930s, discussed its many themes, and completed book-related activities. However, this year was different. Teachers and students from seven area schools along with hundreds of community members participated in a month-long communitywide reading program. These 3,000 intergenerational and cross-cultural participants came together for a common purpose: to read, learn about, and discuss a classic piece of American literature. In the process, they ended up learning more about each other and themselves.

In this article, we share our experiences of being involved in this communitywide reading program. Though we experienced it from different vantage points—Deborah as a teacher educator and the program director and Audra as one of the participating English teachers—we were both invigorated by the new relationships that formed because of our involvements with the program. We explore the implications of these involvements on teaching and learning and offer suggestions to other teachers and teacher educators for establishing community partnerships in their own contexts.

To do so, we draw on sociocultural perspectives of literacy and the idea that literacy experiences are embedded in particular contexts. James Paul Gee, the New London Group, and David Barston and Mary Hamilton, among others, have suggested that reading is not an isolated set of skills but rather a social practice that is deeply embedded in particular contexts and communities. What
readers bring to texts, wherever they might encounter them, is shaped by their background knowledge, identities, and experiences. As Edward H. Behrman writes, “Literate action requires the transposition of thought into symbolic form that can be conveyed to others or to self. Therefore, literacy is particularly affected by our involvement in a community” (26). Reading and discussing literature in a community-wide reading program foregrounds its contextual aspect, taking literature out of a traditional school or academic context and placing it within a particular geographic community of people. Our involvements, and the involvements of our participants, encouraged us to experience literature in new ways and to embrace new identities in our community.

Admittedly, most teachers do not have the time, contacts, or funds to organize or be involved with a program of our magnitude. Community involvement and the concepts of place-based pedagogy, inquiry-based teaching, and visual literacy, however, can extend beyond the particulars of our experience. Smaller-scale community partnerships and activities are possible even with the realities of limited resources. In sharing some of the details and reflections of our experiences, we hope to encourage other educators to facilitate similar programs and community interactions.

Resources Are Important—Relationships Even More

Significant resources were required for the organization and implementation of our communitywide reading program. With a committee consisting of public librarians, college faculty, and community members, Deborah began planning for our program a year in advance. In total, there were more than 30 communitywide events that were free and open to the public, including a keynote address given by Dr. Wayne Flynt, a renowned Alabamian historian and personal friend of Harper Lee; a talk by Mary Marshall Tucker, a lifelong resident of Monroeville; screenings of two films—the 1962 film version of the novel and Our Mockingbird, a recent documentary.

FIGURE 1

A mother throws a chair at people who murdered her baby, but it did not work, and she was still a mother.
about two Southern high schools coming together to put on a *To Kill a Mockingbird* play; a musical event; and more than 20 book discussions held in various locations and sponsored by local groups and organizations. In addition to these communitywide events, the committee hired a local professional artist to go into five area schools and collaborate with students in the making of large canvas art pieces in response to the themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The culminating art reception described at the beginning of this article served as the closing event for our program.

Funding for our program came from a variety of sources, including $16,000 from The Big Read, a program of the National Endowment for the Arts and managed by Arts Midwest that offers grants to support communitywide reading programs designed around a single book (http://www.neabigread.org/). Last year, we were one of 77 communities nationwide who received the grant. Per the grant’s requirements, we matched the Big Read grant amount with financial and in-kind contributions from local institutions and organizations.

While the financial resources for our program helped to make many of the events possible, collaborations within the community soon became valuable resources as well. Often the logistics of the school day, school culture itself, and the ever-present need for resources limit the possibilities for such collaborations, and yet, for Deborah and Audra, it was these collaborations and the fostering of new relationships outside of one’s own institution that proved to be the most generative.

To facilitate the artist involvement with each of the area schools, Deborah met several times with the area teachers involved in the art project both before and during the program. It was attending these meetings—after the school day, in the youth room at our public library—that teachers later said was one of the things they most enjoyed and benefitted from. These meetings served important logistical purposes—providing teachers with the information and publicity materials on the upcoming events, activities, and art project, but they also helped to foster relationships between teachers, public librarians, college faculty, and community members. In these meetings, teachers shared teaching activities and assessments and offered suggestions for supplementary texts.

They were also introduced to different community members such as public librarians. For some of the teachers, the public library represented an untapped resource, something they had not previously considered using or partnering with. While they encouraged their students to go to the public library for research purposes and resources, many of them had not used it as a resource for themselves, for their own teaching or learning. The teachers involved in our project said they enjoyed having our meetings at the public library because of the opportunity to meet and interact with the librarians there. Because of this, they were able to get to know these librarians personally and hear about resources available at the library, resources that our librarians were eager to tell them about. Since our communitywide reading program, a number of the teachers, Audra included, have had these librarians come into their classrooms to give book talks.

Getting to know available resources in a community is something that is often easier said than done. The teachers participating in our program tended to be generally aware of the resources in our community but did not often have personal connections to the people associated with these resources. In addition, many of them were not aware of what kinds of collaborations might be possible with these resources. As a teacher educator, Deborah wonders about the role that college education departments or intermediate school districts might play in helping to facilitate networking among teachers, organizations, and institutions.

From the Classroom to the Community—Trying Out New Identities

When teachers are able to establish new relationships or draw on existing relationships within their communities, it can lead to greater community involvement on the part of their students. When
Audra first heard about our upcoming communitywide reading program, immediately she was excited about the opportunity to take her students’ learning outside of the traditional classroom environment. Although she understood it would take more time and effort than a traditional unit, she wanted to provide this unique opportunity to her students. Sadly, secondary classrooms can often be experienced as “context-less, textbook focused instruction that deals in excess abstractions, blandness based on a fear of controversy, and removal from lived experience or local issues and concerns” (Lesley and Matthews 525). It was appealing to her to have students attend literature-based communitywide events alongside other community members, from senior citizens to school-aged children. In addition, she was drawn to the idea of discussing the novel within the particular context of her local community. Place-based pedagogy, an emphasis on the physical setting of a learning environment, endeavors to help students learn more about the local place where they live (Bartholomaeus; Smith). Reading and responding to *To Kill a Mockingbird* in light of current issues in our community and alongside different community members represented a learning opportunity that Audra did not want to pass up. She was eager for how these experiences might allow her students to draw on new knowledge and have deeper classroom discussions about the novel.

Each of the five English teachers involved in our program structured their teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird* around timing of our program, but all chose different ways to participate with their students. Some encouraged students to attend events, whereas others required attendance at particular events. Audra required her students to pick, based on their interests and availability, at least one of the communitywide events to attend. Her students responded well to this and many of them attended several events. One student even attended all of the seven main events! Students who were interested in music attended the musical event, and others attended book discussions at local stores or organizations. Students interested in films chose to attend one or both of the film screenings; some of the bilingual students attended the book discussions led in Spanish. In attending these events, students were able to see how other people, aside from their English teacher and classmates, enjoyed reading and responding to literature.

These experiences seemed to encourage Audra’s students to enact particular literacy identities or, at the least, see them embodied in others. Peter H. Johnston writes, “Building an identity means coming to see in ourselves the characteristics of particular categories (and roles) of people and developing a sense of what it feels like to be that sort of person and belong in certain social spaces” (23). Students’ participation in the events allowed them to try on identities that are not always possible, for a variety of reasons, in traditional school settings. Whereas getting excited about a piece of literature might not be part of one’s school identity, it was possible for Audra’s students to try out this identity in a room full of community members who were delighted to have high schoolers join them in a book discussion.

Experiencing literature outside of the class also benefited the students in the classroom. During the class period after each event, Audra encouraged students who had attended the event to share their experiences with the class. This helped to foster a stronger sense of community in her classroom and allowed her to get to know her students in new ways. It also helped to enrich classroom discussions about the novel. For example, after the viewing the 1962 film, students were eager to talk about the differences between the film and the novel. They debated whether or not they would have made the same choices and, without realizing it, started to analyze the novel’s themes in deeper ways.

While there were many positive outcomes to students’ participation in the events, there were also some roadblocks. We learned that students most often attended events in places they felt most comfortable or when they were invested in the event or activity. Some did not feel comfortable attending main events held on the college campus or in a church. For some of these students, a college campus was an intimidating place and not one in which they felt welcome. Attending events at the public library was often easier for them because it represented a place that was familiar. Similarly, coming to see a film in a downtown movie theater was an easier sell than attending a lecture by someone they did not know. Volunteering to help with an art activity for young children at the local arts council was more appealing...
because they were vested in the experience; they felt needed in the task of helping younger kids.

These observations about place make us wonder about the differences between literacy opportunities being accessible and being hospitable. One of the priorities of our communitywide reading program was to try to make our events and activities accessible to a diverse audience. We wanted to make sure that people in our community knew about our reading program and were able to participate in our events and activities. Looking back, we realize that we need to be more mindful of creating hospitable spaces in which to read and discuss literature or, at the least, help participants feel more at home in new spaces. Getting students to attend communitywide events is important, but scaffolding them into these unfamiliar spaces and identities is also important.

Art Education with a “Real” Artist

Attending communitywide events was only one aspect of teachers’ and students’ experiences with our communitywide reading program. We also hired an artist (Joel Schoon Tanis, joelschoontanisart.com) to collaborate with students on the art project described at the beginning of the article. Responding to literature with art does not happen often in schools or, for that matter, in many communities. And yet, attention to and experiences with art in English classrooms hold much potential “to build up the skills needed to read and write, increasing students’ literacy levels in all areas” (Seglem and Witte 224). Viewing and creating art in response to literature can encourage teachers and students to “open new possibilities of seeing, hearing [and] feeling” (Greene 57). When students authentically encounter art, as consumers or producers, they can envision and express themselves in new ways and with different mediums. As program director, it was Deborah’s hope that collaborating with a professional artist would give students (and teachers) a new way to respond to literature, a glimpse into an artist’s creative process, an opportunity to create art for an authentic audience, and the chance to make school literacy “public” and thus “tap into its potential for culture making” (Robbins 8).

Each of the participating teachers in our program worked out the logistics of working with the artist based on their particular schedules and contexts. For the most part, he met with each class at least five different times. In his first meeting with students from each school, he described and gave examples of the kinds of decisions that artists make throughout the creative process and shared with them the steps involved in creating an art panel. He then helped students choose and research a theme from the novel and decide on a scene that embodied that theme. The next step for each class was researching the historical time period to know how best to visualize particular characters, places, emotions, and meanings within their chosen scene. His final step with each class was to build off his initial sketches and paint the canvas.

Audra was excited about the opportunity to work with a professional artist but initially apprehensive because she was hesitant to give up class time to a process and person that were entirely new to her. Things felt better after the first meeting with the artist and after her students started brainstorming ideas and researching information based on one of the novel’s themes. On the encouragement of the artist, her students used the Internet to research time period pieces that could be included in the art panel. They also did research by taking pictures of what the human figures might look like drawn out on the canvas.

This approach to research was different than what Audra had previously done with her students but the authentic aspect of the activity helped to motivate her students. Students had to articulate their research ideas and findings to each other and to the artist, knowing that he was relying on them to do high-quality work. In developing a personal relationship with him, students became more invested in the process and product—they cared about what he thought of their work. Furthermore, they were also motivated because they knew that their work would be showcased to the community at the end of the month.

One of the memorable moments of the experience for Audra was when the artist came to their
classroom with the art canvas containing his initial sketches. Though students helped him throughout the process with their brainstorming, researching, and choosing important moments from the novel, it was not until they saw his initial sketches that many of them were finally able to see it all come together. It was an exciting moment in the class when students got to see the research they did on 1930s Southern houses, fire trucks, and other objects come to life in the sketches. This excitement continued when the artist asked groups of them to paint alongside him. As they painted together, he talked with them about what to paint, how to paint it, and which colors to choose. In turn, students started dialoguing with each other about their artistic choices, making suggestions about how best to illustrate the scene. In doing so, they learned more about the creative art process but also gained a deeper understanding of the novel’s themes. The collaborative process encouraged them to analyze, justify, and debate decisions as a class.

When the art panels were revealed at the art reception, students stood by the art panel they helped create (see Figure 2). As community members and students’ family members walked by, many of them asked the students about the process and content of the finished paintings. Positioned as experts, students proudly responded to these questions and shared their thoughts about the novel. The collaborative process, from start to finish, allowed these students to do far more than just respond artistically to literature—they became creators of a visually stunning piece of art that was displayed in our community.

In looking back, we realize that there could have been more time devoted to scaffolding students into the principles of visual literacy, “the ability to understand and use images, including the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images” (Braden and Hortin 38). Though we are surrounded by images in all aspects of our daily lives, there remains much for all of us to learn about interpreting, analyzing, and creating images. If we were to do this again, we would consider using concepts such as Jon Callow’s three assessment dimensions of visual literacy to do a better...
job of teaching students how to create effective and powerful images.

**More Than Literature That Flourishes**

Our communitywide reading program allowed literature and the discussions around it to flourish in our local community. A classic piece of literature read and reread by many of the older people in our community and encountered for the first time by many high schoolers provided the catalyst for conversations and relationships between people in our community who did not often interact. While these conversations and relationships were part of a broad community-based project that required significant resources, not all need to be. Finding new ways and places to encounter and experience literature can happen in myriad ways. Collaboration can occur within a school between English classrooms and a writing center or the art department. Conversations around literature can also happen with other school districts, public libraries, and senior centers. Whatever the case, when we are able to listen and learn from each other, it is always much more than literature that flourishes.

**Works Cited**


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