Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports: A Guide for the English Classroom
Jason Griffith
Arizona State University
Jason.J.Griffith@asu.edu

The Chicago Cubs’ first World Series win in 108 years; Katie Ledecky’s dominance, Michael Phelps’s (supposed) swan song, and a double-dose of Simone (Biles and Manuel) at the Summer Olympics in Rio; Lebron and the Cavs finally delivering a championship to Cleveland; and saying good-bye to boxing icon Muhammed Ali were just a few of 2016’s incredible sports headlines.

Unfortunately, the past year in sports was also marred by dark moments such as Brock Turner’s sexual assault conviction, Curt Schilling’s transphobic social media posts and subsequent firing from ESPN, and Ryan Lochte’s lies about being mugged at a Rio gas station.

As Robert Lipsyte notes in his forward to Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports: A Guide for the English Classroom, “We know that sports—besides being the greatest fun you can have with your body in public, legally—is the most pervasive currency of communication in the world” (xv). Whether teachers are interested in the sports attached to these events or not, no doubt they heard updates, commentary, and reactions from students.

We can’t escape sports culture, which is why the “critical sports literacy” lens that editors Alan Brown and Luke Rodesiler use to frame the book is so helpful. The editors write:

[We] seek to connect sports and critical literacy in a way that allows students—sports-minded or otherwise—to examine the pros and cons of an emphasis on sports in the world around them and that allows for shared conversations in which students can deconstruct—and redesign (Janks 2014)—the meanings, values, and purposes of sports and sports culture. (xxiii)

Such a framework leaves room for both sports fans and sports critics (among teachers and students) to celebrate and critically examine sports culture.

Highlights: Diverse Voices and Great Lesson Plans

The book is organized around seven major sections: “Facilitating Literature Study,” “Providing Alternatives to Traditional Novels,” “Teaching Writing,” “Engaging Students in Inquiry and Research,” “Fostering Media and Digital Literacies,” “Promoting Social Justice,” and “Developing Out-of-School Literacies.” Each section is comprised of three parts: a brief bit of academic context from an English education scholar, four associated lesson plans, and a narrative wrap-up from a YA author. This structure brings together a diverse collection of educators, academics, and authors.

Sports are just a vessel for contributors to demonstrate how they’re doing the work of contemporary English education: applying critical theories, encouraging exploration of identity, engaging in media literacy. There are lots of separate citations of Ernest Morrell’s scholarship on a critical English education. Social justice is a huge thematic tie-in, as are New Literacies (podcasting, film and documentary, Web tools, etc.).
The whole literary spectrum is represented, too, through lessons using sports-related YA literature, graphic novels, informational nonfiction, and visual literacy.

Two of my favorite lessons include Ryan Skardal’s “Power, Authorship, and Identity in Texts by and about High-Profile Athletes,” which features an interesting text set built around basketballer Brittney Griner, and Lisa Beckelhimer’s “Searching and Synthesizing: Researching Cultural Context in Sports,” which provides a useful framework for students to develop research questions.

The fact that the book is so rich with content leads to one of its only drawbacks, which is that the companion website is not very convenient. Some chapters would have benefitted from the reader being able to see the supplementary materials (without an extra step) to fully envision the lesson. However, this criticism only applies for someone who’d read the book cover-to-cover in just a few sittings. A reader who dabbles and finds a useful chapter or idea one at a time will have little trouble plugging in the website and navigating to the additional resources. Plus, the inside cover includes a helpful list of texts discussed, and the “Appendices of Supplemental Material” that follows the forwards provides a tactile, single-destination table of contents for the extra stuff.

Whether you are a teacher who coaches (as many of the contributors do), or an educator with a less friendly relationship with sports (as many of the contributors also list in their bios), there’s much to value in this book.

**Argument in the Real World: Teaching Adolescents to Read and Write Digital Texts**

Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks.

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Brian Conant
Joliet Township High School
bconant@jths.org

“Do you tweet?” Ask a room full of English teachers this question and their responses will range from willful ignorance of social media to #triumphant bragging about the number of followers they have.

“Do you teach your students to tweet?” This second question sucks the air out of the room. Even teachers who espouse the microblogging site’s potential as networking tool and professional development resource will tug at their collars when it comes to playing on their students’ home turf. Others may respond with indignation, anger, or fear.

There are also, thankfully, pockets of curious teachers who are energized and enthusiastic when they think about the open water of digital reading and writing. For the better part of the last decade, Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks’s scholarship has been crucial in addressing the challenges of teaching English language arts in the murky waters of Web-based text, digital literacy, and online writing. Their new book *Argument in the Real World* is a clarion call for all teachers to help students wherever they choose to read and write. It’s also a life-preserver for those who take the plunge.

Turner and Hicks make a convincing argument for teaching students to read and write digital texts. They have presented this evidence before, and they refer often to their quintessential 2015 book *Connected Reading* and to Hicks’s groundbreaking 2013 book *Crafting Digital Writing*. Here they begin by describing the reading and writing life of a ninth grader, Natalie, who has more than 700 Facebook friends and often finds herself heading down rabbit holes in her online reading by chasing link after link beginning from a friend’s post—though she does not really consider what she is doing as reading. She is encountering and engaging text without any evaluation, which, Turner and Hicks note, is cause for concern:

If we want our students, like Natalie, to be writing and analyzing real-world arguments—the kinds of digital texts that influence what they buy, whom they vote for, and what they believe about themselves and their world—we must teach them to understand the logic of argument as well as how those arguments work when they are streaming through a Twitter feed, a Facebook wall, viral videos, Internet memes, and links to other blogs and websites. (7)

With the “why” well in hand, Turner and Hicks spend the bulk of their book addressing the issue...
A Deep Dive into Argument in Infographics

Turner and Hicks ground their examination of digital media in the practical approaches of real teachers (who are helpfully identified with their Twitter handles to encourage real-world interaction). For example, the chapter exploring infographics begins with a description of Allison Marchetti’s approach to teaching students how to create their own infographics—a process that requires students to find and share their own mentor texts before engaging in a rhetorical analysis of those texts. As they describe the process by which Marchetti’s students move from identifying critical elements of infographics into constructing their own, Turner and Hicks include insightful theory and context from historians, bloggers, and scholars. It’s helpful that the book is rendered gorgeously in full color, so that the many infographics discussed (including a compelling student-generated example) are presented in print as they would be found on the Web.

Exploring the infographic that one of Marchetti’s students created, Turner and Hicks identify where she has demonstrated declarative and procedural knowledge. They also note places where procedural knowledge seems limited, and they identify goals for the student’s next project. Broadening their scope, they explore how components of story, data, imagery, citation, and design contribute to the substance and form of infographics by presenting practical questions about each element. They even share a helpful design heuristic—CRAP (Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity)—that attends to issues of design in a memorable way, to say the least. In fact, CRAP is one of several heuristics presented that could usefully adorn the walls of ELA classrooms.

The infographic chapter ends, as all the chapters do, with a consideration of how the media in question present new challenges to issues of citation, plagiarism, and fair use. Turner and Hicks also offer suggestions for practical classroom activities. While the authors remind teachers that the stakes can be high (because students use video and images they do not own), they also provide reassuring resources.

Argument in the Real World is brimming with exciting tools, resources, and practical application of emergent theory (the authors have also developed a companion wiki to the book where links and resources from the text and other teachers abound).

Embracing Argument

My biggest takeaway from the text isn’t a specific tool or a classroom application. Rather, it is the persistent optimism of the authors who embrace student writing even as it happens quickly and publicly in the new digital marketplace. As the Orwellian nightmare of “fake news” has lurched to life in recent months, I have found myself worrying about the state of argumentation. Turner and Hicks’s prescient text, published well before the 2016 presidential election, addresses concerns about misinformation and confirmation bias head-on. In reading Argumentation in the Real World, I am encouraged to help students monitor their reading and writing and to be critical and mindful before they post, “like,” or share. Or, as Turner and Hicks write, “To build on the mantra: read like a writer, write for a reader, and be mindful of both roles as you produce arguments that can be shared on the web” (108). This book reminds me, once again, that argument isn’t the problem; it is the solution.

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Jason Griffith taught middle school and high school English (along with coaching middle school cross-country and high school swimming) for twelve years in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and is currently a TA and PhD student (English education) at Arizona State University. Griffith has been a member of NCTE since 2003 and serves on NCTE’s Middle Level Section Steering Committee. Brian Conant is curriculum director for English and Fine Arts at Joliet Township High School District 204 in Illinois. Brian has been a member of NCTE since 2000. Follow him @JTHS_English.