Complex Conversations and Simple Rules: (Re)Visioning the Ninth-Grade English Experience

Data and (at Least Mild) Depression

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on
—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

In most English classrooms, we usually hear the sweet melodies—there are always teachers and students who love to engage with “the word and the world” (Freire and Macedo). As literacy leaders, we must listen more carefully for students’ unheard melodies. Sometimes we learn that these melodies are bitter. Students’ sour sounds require leaders to actualize our most creative selves. We must search for new notes, chords, and instruments that resonate with our students and with the teachers we lead.

A review of three years of student performance data was where our English departments began hearing strange sounds. We discovered that—on average—a quarter of ninth-grade English students across the district were earning Ds and Fs. We also noticed that a disproportionate percentage of struggling pupils were students of color. This began our collective journey to sweeten our introductory English language arts classes for all learners. What follows is our story—a work in progress.

We are all educators in Chicago’s western suburbs. Our school district had four high schools that serve more than 8,000 students. For the Midwest, we have a diverse population (50 percent white and 50 percent nonwhite) and approximately a quarter of our students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. To make sure all students are on track for academic success, our district’s leadership team has created many spaces for leaders in each of our four buildings (Glenbard North, South, East, and West) to collaborate with the district office. While our collaborative time has been used for a variety of projects over the years, our student performance data made it clear that we had to look at the ninth-grade curriculum as a logical starting point.

Our curricular (re)vision project truly “took a village.” The first stages of the process were led by the four English department chairs (Ben, Laura, Linette, and Sara), the teaching and learning coordinator from central office (Ryan), a building assistant principal (Joan) who acts as point person for English across the district, and three literacy coaches (James, Mike, and Nessa). As the work expanded we developed a team of eight teacher leaders (two from each building), each of whom teaches ninth-grade English.

Before bringing the ninth-grade teachers into the mix, our leadership team had many formal and informal meetings. We met in pairs, small groups, and as a collective to ask why so many of our ninth graders were struggling to earn average grades. In our district (like many others) we were able to identify multiple causes for the disconnect between some students and the curriculum. These included curricular changes at the state and national level—especially as it relates to the incorporation of nonfiction; teacher training that often focuses on literature, not literacy instruction; instruction that emphasizes teaching novels instead of exploring...
ideas; and curriculum that tends to be more traditional and less flexible. Stand-alone novels often determine units, allowing less space for choice or exploration should a student not be willing or able to engage with an anchor text.

These variables helped us explore ways to collaborate with our respective departments as we (re)visioned our ninth-grade English curricula.

While our primary responsibility is to help students perform better in our classes and on national assessments, affective neuroscience suggests that starting with a performance focus may not allow students to make the essential emotional connections they need to navigate skills and content. University of Southern California neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang states, “It is literally neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion . . . put succinctly, we only think about things we care about” (18).

This research suggests that students who are not able to engage with (and care about) school will face barriers to learning. Immordino-Yang’s findings align with Jihyun Lee’s studies of traditional measures of student achievement. Lee examined PISA reading test scores and surveys of almost 70,000 students from 13 countries. Her study found striking similarities across all 13 countries in their “best” predictor of reading achievement—either enjoyment of reading or utilization of reading strategies to efficiently summarize the text. Enjoyment of reading in particular was a strong predictor (for success at reading) at both individual and country levels. This study concludes that what motivates human learning is invariant across countries with vastly different educational, cultural, and language systems. (365)

Given this perspective, we need to help students learn how to read texts and to help them perform well, but our first concern was developing a fun, engaging, and relevant curriculum.

English departments are roundly praised for their emphasis on skills rather than content. In our classes, students read (skill), write (skill), think (skill), speak (skill), and listen (skill). Theoretically, the books we teach are interchangeable and simply a means to skill acquisition. But that’s not always what happens in the English classroom. Often skill instruction is overshadowed by the content of the books we read. Teachers find themselves spending weeks of class time “getting through” the plot of the book, followed by short bursts of skill instruction and performance-based assessments en route to another book. This experience does not always meet the criteria for a “fun, engaging, and relevant” curriculum for our students.

Most of our English teachers work tirelessly to get students to love and value literature. Unfortunately, it is not enough to work through a text and hope students catch on to its importance because you, the teacher, think they should. As literacy leaders, we can’t assume because we think a text is engaging and important that our students will, too.

We realized that, as a district, we had to think more carefully about the students’ points of view while engaging more deeply with insights from the field of English education.

Journals and Joy

Our process began by making time to listen to voices from the field. Everyone on our team participates in a variety of local and national literacy organizations such as National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Council for English Leadership (CEL), and the International Reading Association (IRA). Even with our level of professional engagement, the time-intensive nature of our profession requires extra effort to engage with the latest research.

Every person on our team has strong personal preferences about the types of English language arts instruction that have value. With that in mind we wanted to move away from our personal understandings toward a more objective discussion about the ways we might engage students. We did this by considering voices from other experts in the field.

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To do this, our teaching and learning coordinator (Ryan) designed a learning experience to help us see the work with a wide-angle lens.
We began by reading a series of articles that included Kelly Gallagher's famous blog "Moving Beyond the 4X4 Classroom," “Making the Classics Matter to Students through Essential Questions and Digital Literacy” from Jonathan Ostenson and Elizabeth Gleason-Sutton, and an NCTE policy brief on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. After this shared reading experience, Ryan brought to the team back issues of English Journal and the Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy. He asked everyone to select an issue that we found interesting, and he gave us time to read selected articles. On sticky notes, teachers went "whale watching" (skipper hats included) to capture some of the "big ideas" in the field. These notes were then sorted into themes that helped the group develop a more expansive view of what ninth-grade English might become. Using this larger frame, we began our inquiry into our shared values in relation to the field of English education and how they might be actualized in our classrooms. Specifically, we were wondering what the key principles were that would guide the redesign of the units.

After many great (or at least interesting) debates, our thinking began to coalesce around what researchers Donald Sull and Kathleen M. Eisenhardt call "simple rules." These are foundational rules that help focus our attention to the most important things in complex situations. Sull and Eisenhardt maintain that these rules have four key traits: they are "limited to a handful, . . . tailored to the person and organization using them, . . . apply to a well-defined activity or decision [and] . . . provide clear guidance while conferring the latitude to exercise discretion" (7).

To give individuals and buildings a shared mission while allowing for flexibility, the following five design principles (which we refer to as "simple rules") emerged to guide the redesign of our ninth-grade units. We wanted to see instructional design that focused on the following:

1. **Student Engagement and Relevance:** The learning experiences engage students and relate to their lives. Questions posed included: Are essential questions engaging, open-ended, and leading students to more questions than answers? Are students making meaning through inquiry and discovery? Does the unit reflect the cultures, experiences, and interests of the students in our classroom? And do students engage with audiences beyond the classroom?

2. **Standards and Skills:** Learning experiences align with students’ current skill level and encourage appropriate growth. Questions posed included: Do one unit’s expectations build off the preceding unit’s outcomes? Are standards common among all grade-level teachers? Are standards appropriate to students’ immediate needs and aligned to the summative assessment? Do skills and standards represent a balance of all areas of the English language arts, that is, reading, writing, speaking, and listening? Are materials provided for differentiation? And, does the unit target skills (literary, informational, and rhetorical analysis) that prepare students for the SAT?

3. **Diversity of Texts:** There is a creative pairing of texts of different length, mode, genre, and authorship. We addressed these questions: Do texts represent race, class, gender, geography, etc. where applicable? Do texts expose students to a central topic from varied perspectives and lenses? Does the unit include both anchor and supplemental texts (short stories, podcasts, nonfiction, poetry, images, etc.)? Do the texts selected intentionally support the unit’s featured skill set?

4. **Student Choice:** Students are given room to choose texts and tasks. We asked ourselves, are students given limited and/or free-range choice when it comes to reading experiences? Do students have a choice in demonstrating their learning? Are all students reading common texts?

5. **Authentic Assessment and Creating Meaning:** Students have many opportunities to compose, to write to learn, receive peer feedback, and develop long and short composition tasks. Questions addressed included: Are students exposed to a high volume of writing opportunities both in and outside of the classroom, that is, informal, formal, varied purpose, forms, and audiences? Does the unit allow students to demonstrate knowledge in authentic and varied ways, for example, through essays, blogs, screencasts,
performances, and discussions? Do assessments extend beyond literary analysis? Does the unit have a deliberate and coordinated assessment plan, including common assessments, that all students are required to complete? Does the unit provide opportunities for students to transfer their skills across genres and disciplines?

These rules were crafted in a two-hour session, but they emerged from countless hours of collaboration and conversation. They also focused the trajectory of our work. If a group of nine different minds could build consensus around the ideal ninth-grade English classroom, we were confident that we could do this with a larger group of teachers.

We recognized our role as leaders was to guide the work, not bind it. We were also aware of the fact that all teachers might not know how to apply these priorities to their teaching. Our first iteration of the “simple rules” included three essential words that appear at the top of our document. We asked teachers “to what extent” their existing unit embraces these rules (see Figure 1). Those words rely on a future vision that intentionally guides our work and provides breathing room and reassurance along the way. It pushes the most creative and reluctant educators to improve the work of their PLCs, without creating floors or ceilings at the beginning of the journey.

Headway and (Initial) Hesitation

Our initial use of academic journals removed the ego from many of our conversations and made our process replicable. Before we shared our design principles with the teachers, we wanted them to experience the same process we did. As part of a half-day professional development session, our eight teacher-leaders, with the guidance of the instructional coaches, mimicked our exploration of the field. They explored journals and brainstormed the ideal English experience for ninth graders. While the teachers may not have felt the same sense of urgency to make changes as we did, their rules aligned closely with the leadership team’s first draft. In short, what was meaningful to us was also meaningful to them. Repeating this process allowed our leadership team to refine the design priorities to include more voices and ideas.

Having our teacher-leaders replicate the process had a secondary benefit. If we had jumped right into the unveiling of our design priorities, teachers would have felt as if these changes were being done to them. Instead, they had already developed priorities of their own. In other words, before they were asked to do, they were given space to contemplate. In Larry Lashway’s 1997 essay “Visionary Leadership” he explains:

> Creating readiness is crucial. [Administrators] who have already adjusted to new ways of thinking underestimate the time needed for others to do the same . . . all participants must have the opportunity to examine their current thinking, develop a rationale for change, and entertain new models.

By the time we met again to introduce the design priorities and begin work on revising the curriculum, our entire team was up to speed on some key ingredients for 21st-century literacy instruction. The teacher leaders identified five key characteristics from their field work: multimodal texts and pop culture, technology, authentic audiences,
student choice, and essential questions. Figure 2 shows the teachers’ values (left) alongside our design priorities (right).

Some of the initial conversations among teachers revolved around how to take what was already being done and “fit” it into the new model. This type of thinking was problematic as (we feared) it might limit authentic shifts. This is akin to teachers deciding to rename their 1994 Honda Civic a 2018 Honda Civic. Furthermore, when the Common Core State Standards were initially released, our teachers participated in a more superficial (but typical) curriculum revision. Many documents were created in the last round of curriculum revision, but the process was done quickly and, for a majority of teachers, the curriculum maps never became documents that were used on a regular basis. For this reason, there was some apprehension that they were going to become Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*—doing the same thing again and again, only to be caught in a superficial curriculum revision loop.

Where the district’s past collaborations around unit design had given way to preference and tradition, the department chairs had led a highly successful revamp of the district’s writing assessments. All four buildings collaborated toward common writing assessments and rubrics for argumentative writing. The success of this latter effort in writing was work we wanted to use as a springboard for thinking more carefully about reading instruction.

Some teachers were understandably concerned about the monumental effort it would take to shift practices, alter assessments, and (ultimately) change the culture around what students were reading. Could leadership from the department chairs be sufficient to sustain these changes over time? Leadership feared that they would squander trust and political capital with their teachers should we not find ways to make the work sustainable. The stakes were high. The department chairs and instructional coaches had to establish distinctions between the district-based revisions of the early 2010s, the department-led writing revisions of 2014, and this broader reexamination of curriculum evolution we began in 2017.

Fortunately, everyone dug in. The team—now a group of 17—engaged in a second day of professional development around writing essential questions, using multimodal texts, and exploring better practices related to unit design. During this meeting one teacher commented, “I know what we are doing is the right thing for students, but it is hard to find the time to make the changes.” We embraced this perspective because acknowledgment of new realities is surely a sign of progress.

Some teachers were unfamiliar with studying literacies beyond novels (see Goble and Goble’s *Making Curriculum Pop* as a primer). One teacher commented, “Thinking about multimodal sources as texts with equal value to the main text was new for me. Those were typically thought of as extra things to fit in for engagement if possible. However, it makes perfect sense that these have so much potential for powerful impact on today’s students who interact with these texts constantly.” Our students needed to read the word and the world. This day was about reinforcing that idea.

Expanding reading options to include new types of texts allowed us to build on our strong writing articulation. We had not attended carefully to our vertical reading progression. This was an opportunity to articulate how we wanted to support our students as they climb the ladder from ninth grade to graduation. This project gave us a chance to think about ninth-grade writing as the ground-floor elevator that could lift students to meet the requirements of Advanced Placement Language and Composition.

These two design days with the leadership team and the teachers were not always easy, but they did allow us to develop a wide range of curricular articulations and ideas for each building to work on over the summer.

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**FIGURE 2. Teachers’ Values and Design Priorities**

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<th>Comparing Design Priorities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Department Chairs vs. Teacher Leaders</td>
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<td>Multimodal Texts + Pop Culture</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
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<td>Essential Questions</td>
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<td>Authentic Choice</td>
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<td>Authentic Assessment and Creating Meaning</td>
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Findings and Futures

Brené Brown, a professor of social work at the University of Houston, reminds us that “we don’t have to be perfect, just engaged and committed to aligning values with action” (173). We have just started the journey of “aligning values with action” and have a complex task ahead of us. This school year (2017–18), we planned a series of follow-up design days for our teams to share the units developed and to reflect as a collective on what’s working and what’s not. We always have an eye on traditional metrics (such as student performance) and our leadership team is presently considering how we might start measuring our “simple rules.” We may look at quantitative indicators to measure things such as the diversity of texts; or we may take a more qualitative approach by recasting our rules into a rubric to assess the quality of our unit (re)visions. As we continually clarify the instructional values that matter, we’ve come to realize there are an abundance of ways we might measure the work we are doing.

In the meantime, we’re excited to continue learning and growing together. As Keats reflected on his Grecian urn, we have started listening more carefully to sweeten the learning experience for our ninth-grade English students. While challenges and opportunities lie ahead, we take some solace on his Grecian urn, we have started listening more carefully to sweeten the learning experience for our ninth-grade English students. While challenges and opportunities lie ahead, we take some solace in the process of reflection.

Vygotsky calls their “zone of proximal development” where literacy opportunities are not too hard as to frustrate or too easy to bore but just challenging enough to promote student learning. With a keen eye, we can observe the interests and strengths of students and, when possible, we can consider these to plan learning opportunities. By providing choice and respectful tasks, we can provide meaningful literacy experiences. But, how can we identify student interests and strengths? While no tool is foolproof, several transferable strategies can provide the continual feedback we need to plan for and guide the learning of all students. http://bit.ly/1x5X88d

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READWritethink Connection

When we intentionally respond to the diverse needs of our students, we are differentiating the product, process, or content of learning according to the learning style, interest, or readiness of students. A wealth of research suggests that by framing learning with student interests in mind, teachers can increase student motivation and learning. Additionally, by understanding the varying literacy strengths and habits of our students we can identify what Vygotsky calls their “zone of proximal development” where literacy opportunities are not too hard as to frustrate or too easy to bore but just challenging enough to promote student learning. With a keen eye, we can observe the interests and strengths of students and, when possible, we can consider these to plan learning opportunities. By providing choice and respectful tasks, we can provide meaningful literacy experiences. But, how can we identify student interests and strengths? While no tool is foolproof, several transferable strategies can provide the continual feedback we need to plan for and guide the learning of all students. http://bit.ly/1x5X88d

Works Cited


Remembering an English Teacher’s Entomology Lesson

The poetry is here, she’d say
bidding us drop to all fours
in the dirt with her to see
connotative subtleties in greens
among caterpillar, mantis, and dragonfly wing;
she would show how to deftly dissect
subtexted hums known to sting
and allusions in what June bugs sing,
then tell us to take off shoes and socks
and give barefoot chase
to Mason jar capture a collection
of iridescent curiosities
and buzzing minor lovely things
to forever have and someday open
that nailed punched lid
to know the secret joy
in letting that firefly
piece of wonder
fly out into the world.

for Diana Maylett

—Rich Glowacki
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