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Imagine a dinner table filled with invited guests. Sitting and talking with one another, the visitors and host—familiar with one another’s friends, children, and social circles—chat about their lives. The evening continues, and the group of people at the table begin to discuss the literature they love, adore, admire. They speak about the attention to plot, the descriptive details that make the reader sit at the edge of his or her seat, the real characters that could be next door neighbors or friends.

The dinner guests, influential writers themselves, revel in the writers’ talents, and so they leave the table to talk to other influential friends about the timeless novels they have read. Thus, a new version of the canon is in its gestation period.

According to Bloom (as cited in Allen, 2011), the canon traditionally consists of literature that has stood the test of time and has been selected by influential writers in the field—books heralded as models in literature. Historically, those who have a position at the decision-making table have chosen the works in the canon. These decision makers influence the reading curriculum because they determine who the canonical writers are. Those “strong writers who come later” (Allen, 2011, p. 7) perpetuate membership in the canon, not the current generation for which the writer writes. For this reason, the canon is always at least one generation behind.

Canonical literature reaches that honored status because of its ability to meet “our needs at the deepest level—spiritual, intellectual, human—in the full sense” (Allen, 2011, p. 7). Bloom states in Allen (2011) that the selection of the canon is an open practice, not a “closed shop” or an invitation-only dinner gathering. But we think it is just that—a small circle of works chosen by a close-knit group of people who seek to define and preserve their definition of cultural thinking.

Imagine a second dinner table, one that is open to many different writers, an open space of ideas and multiple perspectives. Writers of all ages attend the gathering, and because the guest list only requires an RSVP and no closed credentials based on societal circles or level of influence, a diverse array of people attend. The conversation at the table is richly varied; it spawns discussions about diverse cultures, technologies and their influence on society, writing in myriad forms, detailed plots about current topics of interest to the old and young, modern society, change in norms, and complicated character development. The conversation is rich, filled with guests asking questions about language, meaning, cultural similarities and differences, word choices and dialect, and plots set in different geographical locations. The guests end the dinner with many different notions of high-quality works that also seem “timeless” and speak to who they are from spiritual, intellectual, and human perspectives. They leave pondering those multiple perspectives about life past and present.

The point here is that those who sit at the dinner table influence how “good literature” is defined through multiple lenses, perspectives, and visions. The canon, or a group of staples in literature, should extend beyond the limited historical
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America’s 21st-century middle level student thinks from multiple perspectives, partially because of the advancements in technologies, but also because of the diverse society America itself has become. Reading literature that simply reflects a mono-ethnic view of history with sprinklings of works from other groups does not allow students the opportunity to think about other cultures and critically engage in discourse about history, current events, and future events. Additionally, students who are exposed to diverse literature are more adept at self-reflection, and as McGinnis (2006) suggests, “[M]ulticultural literature can play an important role in creating transformative practice” (p. 26). Students who regularly read diverse literature are also much more engaged in questioning such literary influences as authors’

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK**

**Cultural Relevance, Student by Student**

In this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org, students, as a class, evaluate a nonfiction or realistic fiction text for its cultural relevance to themselves personally and as a group. They first write about a story that they identify with and share their responses as a group. As a class, they then analyze the cultural relevance of a selected text using an online tool. After completing this full-class activity, students search for additional, relevant texts; each chooses one and writes a review of the chosen text. Selected texts can be any nonfiction or realistic fiction piece—books, documentaries, television programs, or films; students are encouraged to choose texts that are personally relevant to themselves and their peers.


Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

*Voices from the Middle*, Volume 21 Number 1, September 2013
motives and the social, cultural, and historical contexts that frame texts. Such literature promotes “. . . possibilities that will stimulate students to become change agents and to recognize that they have the abilities to effect positive social change” (McGinnis, 2006, p. 26). Conversely, when students read only canonical literature that represents a limited cultural view, they are missing opportunities to develop broader perspectives that promote possibilities for learning about others who live next door or who live differently than they do. We are now part of a global society, which demands that our students read not only *King Lear* but also, for example, *Persepolis* and so much more.

Twenty-first-century middle level students have to be able to see themselves and the myriad possibilities in the world. Integrating quality young adult literature into the canon will provide students with opportunities to see their potential through characters that speak to them as teenagers. Quality young adult literature does not dilute the canon, but rather expands the levels of complexity available to all readers. According to Stallworth (2006), “the genre merits a prominent place in the curriculum in its own right. Today’s young adult literature is sophisticated, complex, and powerful. It deserves to be part of the literary tradition in middle and high schools” (p. 59). By balancing what we include in the canon, we can give students and teachers options to meet learning goals. Texts that deepen students’ thinking and provide them with a rich reading and writing experience are not limited to the prescribed list of books most frequently used in American classrooms. For example, using Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* can lead to students’ thinking about the genre of historical fiction through essential questions about societal roles/responsibilities as well as to higher-level literary discussions about escapism in literature.

We posit—provided that the texts match standards, align to learning objectives, and contain necessary literary elements—that how we teach students to read text is more the issue than just what they are reading. Students who are taught how to close-read quality canonical and noncanonical texts and how to provide textual support for their claims are much more critical of the author’s purpose, the point of view of the narrator, gaps in reasoning, and the development of language and word choice. In addition, students must learn to construct comparisons among texts and to find links to their own world and the larger world, taking a reader-response approach to literature (Burke, 2008).

We believe more research must be conducted to determine how the 21st-century student is asked to think about texts in meaningful ways. In our view, this is the root of our challenge as teachers and teacher educators—not the selection of quality canonical or noncanonical literature to teach students, but how we ask students to examine different types of texts as independent thinkers.

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on “the power of memory” and adds a wholeness and richness to the reading experience. Expanding the canon in such a manner can help us to meet the needs of students in the 21st century rather than reduce the quality of thinking and comprehension. Such clustered readings broaden students’ understanding and encourage them to use their close-reading skills across texts. These are the 21st-century skills that students must possess.

When students can think about and respond to multiple types of texts as independent readers and writers, it should not matter who attends the dinner party. As long as the conversation is one of quality—providing stimulating thought; inspiring humankind to consider its pathway; fostering debate and more questions about past, current, and future society; moving a person beyond self, pushing the reader to think deeply—then limiting the guest list will only hinder our 21st-century middle level students’ critical thinking skills and will fail to address their needs and demands. Conversely, expanding the canon increases the likelihood that young adolescents and middle level students will develop into lifelong readers. Let’s widen the circle of dinner guests. We believe that expanding the guest list will enrich the discussion in ways that engage students in higher levels of thinking and talking about texts.

References

Tonya B. Perry is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in Birmingham, Alabama. B. Joyce Stallworth is the associate provost for special projects and professor of English Education at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

2013 Promising Researcher Winner Named
Dr. Amy Stornaiuolo, Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania, has won the 2013 Promising Researcher Award for “‘Like Two Different Worlds’: Teachers’ Perspectives on Social Networking and Schooling.” This award, given in commemoration of Bernard O’Donnell, is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. The 2013 Promising Researcher Award will be presented at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Opening Session of the Day of Research, Saturday, November 23, 2013.