

Using *The Joy Luck Club* to Teach Core Standards and 21st Century Literacies

The authors describe in depth an instructional unit that explores multimodal texts and multiliteracies in a manner consistent with NCTE and Common Core State Standards.

T

oday, class, we'll be starting our new unit with a story called 'Two Kinds' from Amy Tan's book *The Joy Luck Club*."

"Ugh. It sounds boring. Why do we have to read this stuff?"

"Because it's recommended by the state standards, it's part of our curriculum, and it's going to be on your exam. . . ."

Maybe this scene is familiar to you? It is to us in our work with high school English students. From here, the class could go in many directions. In the best cases, students read Tan's story about generational conflict and Chinese immigrants, discuss it at length, and enjoy it more than they thought possible. More likely, they resign themselves. Some grow to like the unit. Others respond apathetically, and a few rebel. As ELA teachers, we have all played out this scene to teach required texts. If you are like us, you've struggled to help students understand how "school" novels and the assignments you made to go with them are relevant today. This article offers one approach to helping students find relevance as we guide them to meet new national standards in English language arts.

Teaching Students, Teaching Core State Standards

Among myriad responsibilities, English teachers must meet students' needs and address state standards for their content area. We get mixed messages about priorities and sometimes feel forced to choose between a seemingly rigid curriculum

and responding to students' needs for motivation and engagement. Responding to students' needs in ways that interest and motivate them has been complicated by a gap between traditional print-based ELA instruction and 21st century literacy practices. Because today's students use a wide range of print and nonprint modes to read and write in daily life, teachers must connect students' new literacies to the academic content required for school success. The International Reading Association has highlighted the fact that "traditional definitions of reading, writing, and communication, and traditional definitions of best practice instruction—derived from a long tradition of book and other print media—are insufficient in the 21st century" ("New Literacies" 2). Furthermore, NCTE's Summary Statement on Multimodal Literacies points out that "The contemporary difference [between 'traditional' and 'multimodal' literacies] is the ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color, animation, video, and styles of print in projects so that they are part of our everyday lives and, at least by our youngest generation, often taken for granted" ("Summary Statement"). The multimodal expansion of what it means to read has contributed to what is widely referred to as the need to address "21st Century Literacies." NCTE's definition of 21st century literacies ("The NCTE Definition") makes it clear that teachers must help students use both print/nonprint and literary/informational texts to collaborate, inquire, solve problems, analyze, and synthesize. They must also help students create, critique, and evaluate texts in both academic and everyday life. Today's students read differently

from those who grew up before the advent of the Internet. We need to present the language arts in ways that are relevant to *their* worlds if we wish to meet high standards and still encourage lifelong learning beyond our own generation (“NCTE/IRA Standards”).

While ELA teachers are now obligated to address new modes of reading, US public school systems are also widely adopting new “Common Core State Standards” intended to support college and career readiness (CCSSI, *Common Core*). These common standards focus on academic work that will be useful in students’ lives and futures, complementing NCTE positions and policies about responding to students’ contemporary identities. Currently, more than 40 states have joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

So what texts should ELA teachers use now to teach the concepts and skills that comprise our field? The Common Core State Standards framework includes “illustrative” or “exemplar” texts that represent quality resources (CCSSI, *Appendix B*). Although illustrative texts can be helpful, their potential connection to high-stakes testing poses the risk that schools could *require* them and make it difficult for teachers to utilize the full array of print and nonprint works students need (“NCTE/IRA Standards”). It is important for ELA teachers to understand that the most successful contemporary curricula will always include more than just canonical texts, even though those texts are still valuable.

In this article we illustrate an instructional unit based on a Common Core grades 9–10 illustrative text—Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds” from *The Joy Luck Club*. We demonstrate how teachers can meet the new standards *and* respond to students’ 21st-century needs by using this modern classic along with other traditional and new media resources. Our unit could be easily adapted to other texts and grade levels.

Our design is informed by research about using students’ experiences and prior knowledge (Moll and Gonzalez), popular cultures (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood), media (Thoman and Jolls), and digital technologies (Lankshear and Knobel) in daily instruction. Teachers must meet the new Common Core State Standards (and maybe use exemplar texts), but we must still meet the profes-

sional standards we’ve established for making ELA relevant today. If we don’t, we will increasingly fail to engage students. Their motivation will decrease, and demotivation correlates with poor scores on the tests that make schools accountable.

Our sample unit combines students’ reading of literary and informational texts based on themes related to culture, identity, and border crossing, writing in multiple genres, and using oral language to demonstrate understanding. We selected a range of texts, both print and nonprint, representing a broad spectrum of student identities and cultures within a single unit. We attempted to select texts that were thematically and topically related in ways that would provide students with multiple perspectives about identity in contemporary society. We wanted texts that were school-friendly, high-quality, and also relevant to youths’ experiences and interests. Finally, we wanted to demonstrate blending of traditional ELA texts and new media resources. We are not suggesting these texts as required; a teacher could select any, all, or substitute as appropriate. Our sample unit provides three to four weeks for reading, researching, discussing, writing, and presenting. Each component interrelates holistically based on NCTE policy and the CCSSI, integrating 21st century literacies as more than mere extras. Such integration makes it easier to attain relevance and motivate students to engage in classroom work.

***The Joy Luck Club* as an Exemplar Text**

According to the CCSSI, *The Joy Luck Club* story “Two Kinds” by Amy Tan is illustrative of the complexity, quality, and breadth of literature appropriate for grades 9–10 (*Appendix B*). Considered a modern classic, it is a high-quality piece of literature that provides insight into Asian American culture. Tan’s novel and the short story we excerpt from it trace the lives of Chinese American women who play mahjong while talking about their relationships and history. Each vignette speaks to choices they make, their relationships, and how their understandings change across time and cultures. In terms of 21st century literacies, Tan’s work provides opportunities for exploring diversity, analyzing multiple viewpoints, and understanding social networks from the perspectives of parents and chil-

dren during times of change. Because it explores the topic of immigration, it encourages students to examine informational texts about current events from various sources and think critically about historical contexts. Tan's work also supports the inquiry, multimodal writing, and speaking/language activities that comprise 21st century literacy practices. Our unit responds to students' interests by linking class work to their everyday lives, and it is sequenced as follows.

Students read "Two Kinds" during class and use a mixture of read-alouds, teacher modeling, and professional audiobook recordings. We ask students two sets of essential questions: (1) How has your family's history affected your life? How will your life affect your family's history? and (2) What does your family dream of for you? What do you want for yourself? What happens when these conflict? Based on these questions, students compare what they know of their families and goals with the families Tan describes in her literary work. To expand students' perspectives, we guide them to compare Tan's story and their own to other literary works related to culture, family, race, and identity, including Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal" from the novel *Invisible Man* (another CCSSI exemplar text) and excerpts from Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, another modern ELA classic. We also review clips from high-quality multimedia texts, including the film *School Ties* about a young Jewish man's attempt to pass as a gentile and Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, a 2006 National Book Award Finalist detailing the challenges of growing up multicultural in the 21st century.

As students discuss these thematically related texts and learn about how they are structured, we complicate the text-to-self connections they make by requiring them to read and respond to informational texts. These include literary criticism of Tan's work (Frank Chin's essay "Come All Ye Asian Writers of the Real and the Fake"), accounts of Chinese American citizens from the PBS documentary *Searching for Asian America*, and a series of news stories related to the topic of illegal immigration in the American Southwest. These nonfiction pieces



include video and online texts such as "Arizona Gears Up for Protracted Immigration Fight" (Thornburgh), "Arizona's Immigration Law Costing Millions," "Drafting Students into the 'War on Immigration'" (Deterline), and "Fox News and the Arizona Immigration Law."

As students read the literary texts, they immediately begin integrating elements of fiction (information about characterizations, themes, symbolism, uses of dialect, etc.) with knowledge about immigration from their own funds of knowledge about

home/family, community, popular culture, and current events. Using secure online blogs, students generate personal narratives based on text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. These reading journals are included in a writing portfolio and are used to formatively assess students' understanding as the unit progresses.

After making connections in their blogs that compare their worlds to characters and events portrayed in the literature, students respond to the journalism that comes next. This sequence enables them to analyze the unit's themes and content in relation to real-world issues. For example, a central theme in these texts is border crossing—individuals navigating boundaries of race, social class, and culture. We ask, "Why might people emigrate from one country to another?" and "What are the issues and arguments involved with immigration in the stories and news we've been reading? How do you think the characters we've read about would respond to today's political debates? How would you respond if you were in their situations?" These questions guide further blog entries in which students take literary characters' perspectives and respond to news articles, compare/contrast their families' experiences to those they read about, and analyze the multiple perspectives and outcomes related to border cross-

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ing that result. To integrate reading and writing, students recast Tan's story by either writing an essay from a character's point of view or placing themselves in one of the stories they have studied. In either option, students relate their own border crossing experiences or dramatize current events based on their studies to make evidence-based thematic statements and arguments.

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They may draw and digitize their own graphic representations of narratives or analyses; create multimedia essays using images, audio, and text; or use text messaging to systematically (and often cleverly) summarize texts and themes. By applying the current literacy practice of tweeting, students can apply the "text-speak" they use every day in an academic manner to produce 140-character summaries and even dramatized scenes reflecting their comprehension of the exemplar text and supporting materials. A great model for this activity is the well-known cartoon by Roz Chast of text messages between Romeo and Juliet. Such systematic summarization has

been deemed via research analyses to be a powerful way to improve students' writing skills among all learning strategies (Graham and Perin).

To conclude the unit, students produce a summative project in which they choose to demonstrate understanding of the essential questions in any of the following ways: (1) organize and implement a formal debate about immigration in the United States today using arguments, evidence, and illustrations generated from studying the unit's texts and your personal knowledge/experiences; or (2) compose a script and use it to create a presentation via PowerPoint, MovieMaker, or a multimedia website that presents your audience with an immi-



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gration narrative, an explication of immigration issues or border crossing in US culture today, or an analysis of a cultural conflict.

By sequencing these texts and engaging in ongoing discussion and writing about their content, students get multiple opportunities to learn and use literary elements in both print and non-print modes using quality literature. They learn to evaluate nonfiction and texts from multiple perspectives and use knowledge from their own lives to address contemporary issues. Finally, they are provided with structured assessments that give choices related to 21st century literacies and require them to work academically at high levels. In the next section, we demonstrate how this integration of "traditional" and "new" modes meets the ELA Common Core State Standards for grades 9–10.

Meeting Core Content Standards and 21st Century Literacies

The Common Core State Standards for ELA are organized into ten standards for reading literature, ten for reading informational text, ten for writing, six for speaking and listening, and six for language. The unit described in this article addresses nearly all of them while responding to students' 21st century needs and funds of knowledge for motivation and engagement.

Using Tan's story and other high-quality frequently taught stories from traditional ELA curricula, we combine them with readings of the award-winning graphic novel and popular film. Students work daily on the core standards for literary reading. They study literary elements the authors employ and use that knowledge to engage in close reading and reader-response (CCS Reading for Literature 1–7). Comparing and contrasting to delve into the authors' methods and results, the students develop increased comprehension overall by citing evidence to analyze both themes and characterizations (CCS Reading for Literature 1–3). By reading sophisticated print and nonprint texts including short stories, graphic novels, and film, the students actively explore how different media may be used to explore common themes with varied results (CCS Reading for Literature 7, 9, and 10).

Similarly, reading informational texts in parallel with literary studies, students regularly cite evidence and analyze both structure and details to identify main ideas and evaluate their development across formats and media outlets (CCS Reading for Informational Texts 1–5). Reading both print-only *and* multimedia texts, students synthesize information into coherent new understandings, evaluate evidence used in arguments, and observe how authors respond to one another (CCS Reading for Informational Texts 7–9).

In relation to writing and language, students compose arguments, informational/explanatory texts, and narratives repeatedly during the unit (CCS Writing 1–3). Because they write daily as a means of response and assessment, they practice for extended periods of time using both print and digital sources (CCS Writing 8–10). Drawing explicitly on their home/family, community, and popular culture funds of knowledge, they frequently engage in research and use technology (CCS Writing 6–7). And because they plan and build their arguments, narratives, and explanations over the course of the unit, there are multiple opportunities for them to practice organization, style, revision, and editing to achieve desired effects on particular audiences by making choices about how to use language conventions (CCS Writing 4–5, CCS Language 1–3).

Finally, students regularly use speaking and listening skills as they share stories about their lives, families, cultures, or other knowledge they

bring to school with them. They plan, deliver, and listen to presentations based on their studies, and they utilize research, writing, technology, and audience analysis to do so (CCS Speaking and Listening 1–6). All of this work not only meets the new Core Standards but also reflects what NCTE knows is essential for helping students refine the multimodal literacies they need for college, career, and real-world success in the 21st century. Both NCTE's and the CCSSI's missions agree in this: that standards and instruction should be rigorous and relevant to these ends. Figure 1 shows one way texts and learning tasks could be used to teach content and standards.

Conclusion

The CCSSI are designed to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in college and work. They “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do but not *how* teachers should teach” (2; italics in original). They are intended to function in a “content rich curriculum” and describe what is “essential” rather than describing “all that can or should be taught” in a particular unit or grade level (2). The NCTE/IRA standards “complement other national, state, and local standards” like the new Common Core and frame how teachers can operate most responsively in their classrooms.

Our *Joy Luck Club* unit demonstrates that teachers can use an illustrative text from the CCSSI and frame it with activities that incorporate media, 21st century literacies, and students' funds of knowledge in meaningful ways without sacrificing rigor or academic focus. In fact, the activities intertwine and feed off one another. No single unit can or should try to cover every component of the Common Core State Standards, and we would not recommend attempting to teach and assess for every single standard we note above in our discussion. But communicating some perfect storm of ELA instruction is not our intention. Our point is that we can meet state standards *and* students' needs in ways that satisfy both our central obligations as English teachers. By thinking about how to connect exemplar texts with adolescents' interests in the 21st century, we can engage our students, design appropriate instruction, and achieve educational success. 

FIGURE 1. Sample Texts and Learning Targets with Corresponding Standards and Rationales

CCSS Strand	Text Resource	Learning Target	Rationale
Literary Reading	"Two Kinds"	Students will analyze family and cultural relationships and use evidence from the text to support their inferences.	Requires students to explore diversity, analyze multiple viewpoints, and understand social networks
Informational Reading	"Arizona Gears Up for Protracted Immigration Fight"	Students will synthesize information presented in different formats to generate a coherent understanding of an issue.	Requires students to reflect on current events and think critically about historical contexts
Writing and Language	"Two Kinds," "Battle Royal," "House on Mango Street"	Students will write an account from another character's point of view and develop narrative elements with well-chosen, revealing details. Students will interpret figures of speech and analyze their role in texts to compare how culture, family, race, and identity are represented.	Requires demonstration of knowledge of narrative, text-to-self connections, composition, and comparison/contrast of authors' language use
Speaking and Listening	Students' lives	Students will exchange information to advance a discussion and to build on the input of others using the questions: What does your family dream of for you? What do you want for yourself?	Requires students to compare their families and goals with the families Tan describes in her literary work
Media and Technology	Twitter	140-character summaries and/or dramatized scenes	Requires knowledge of narrative plus incorporates new technology plus summarization skills

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION	Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
<p>In the essay "Mother Tongue," Amy Tan explains that she "began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with." How these "different Englishes" or even a language other than English contribute to identity is a crucial issue for adolescents. In "Exploring Language and Identity: Amy Tan's 'Mother Tongue' and Beyond," students explore this issue by brainstorming the different languages they use in speaking and writing, and when and where these languages are appropriate. Students write in journals about a time when someone made an assumption about them based on their use of language, and they share their writing with the class. Students then read and discuss Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue." Finally, students write a literacy narrative describing two different languages they use and when and where they use these languages. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-language-identity-mother-910.html</p>	