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Teaching Novels in the Secondary ELA Classroom:

Three Sides to the Story

What happens in the public high school English Language Arts classroom doesn't stay in the ELA classroom. It follows students right on out into college and the real world. What happens in those classrooms isn't just an English teacher problem. It's society's problem. When studying a nation-wide decline in voluntary reading—a life-long habit that ELA classrooms should ideally instill in students—the National Endowment for the Arts concluded that “the decline in reading... parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life” (vii). Teaching reading doesn't just produce a literate population, but an engaged citizenry as well. However, instead of focusing on reversing that decline by fostering reading as a habit, some English teachers in Texas are currently trapped in a debate over whether or not they should, or even can, teach novels in the secondary English classroom.

Since Texas' 2007 adoption of new standards (the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), high school English teachers now face fitting an average of ten different genre studies into the curriculum each year (Buck). This paper will explore how this specific change in the state standards has called the novel's traditional place in the ELA classroom into question and the three main positions surrounding the issue: the one-or-none position that wants to limit or

ban novels in favor of excerpts, the more-harm-than-good position that wants to ban required novels unless we're willing to let students choose what they read, and the novels-are-necessary position that claims novels fill a need in the ELA classroom that excerpts can't.

At an inservice training this summer, the English Department Head at a local Texas High School instructed his English teachers to only teach one novel this year and to use novel excerpts if they wanted to teach more. When they expressed their concerns, he, and the Academic Associate Principal in the meeting, remained firm, explaining that the new curriculum doesn't allow time for novel units. According to this district's administration, whole-novel study will eventually be replaced with excerpts. Unhappy with the thought of not teaching novels, a traditional part of the ELA classroom, the school's English teachers complained to their counterparts at other campuses and concluded that they would not give up their novels.

This specific argument is just one in a larger conversation: what is the goal of the modern secondary English classroom? According to the same Department Head (hereafter referred to as DH), Texas' fairly recent adoption of the new TEKS calls for a skills-based classroom focused on close-reading that discourages students from bringing prior knowledge to analysis (Downing). News of this change is slowly trickling down from those in the know about the state's new expectations to those teachers still teaching under the assumption that tapping into student knowledge and providing a literature-centered classroom where texts are not autonomous is the secondary English teacher's goal. This change is stirring the pot, bringing once-simmering debate to a boil.

Watching the pot boil are several different parties: administration, teachers, tax-payers, parents, and students. Administration must ensure teachers follow the TEKS (ratings and jobs depend on test scores, proof these standards are being met). Teachers want what's best for the

student and have a responsibility to the state to meet the job description set out for them; some teachers see those two ideas as mutually exclusive. Parents want their children to get the best education they can, students deserve a classroom that sets them up for success in life, and taxpayers want to know that their money goes to produce a work-force and citizenry that will ensure their nation's future stability. All of these parties have a stake in what goes on in an ELA classroom. But at the moment, the novel debate is most heated among the teachers, the ones developing and teaching the lessons students will receive. The ones judged on those same students' test scores.

Position #1: one-or-none. Essentially, this position claims that, since the TEKS require the average English classroom to cover ten genres in a year, teachers can only teach one whole novel (an preferably none) in a year and excerpts for the rest (Buck). A Texas secondary English teacher's goal is to meet the responsibilities the state sets out for him/her, and the secondary English classroom should be skills-based and expose students to a wide variety of genres and reading situations. The TEKS document and our roles as professionals—teaching what is required by these documents—are evidence and reason enough to cut the novel from the classroom if that helps us meet the state's goals. They assume that this goal for the English classroom is right and that the TEKS are the standards we should and want to base our English curriculums around.

In an interview with me, DH explained that we have a duty and responsibility as professionals to meet the objectives that the state sets out for us. He believes that once you've walked a student through one novel, repeating the process with another is redundant and takes time away from other skills that have to be covered with non-fiction, procedural, visual media, etc. He studies the TEKS intensely, re-worked our district's freshmen curriculum into a scope

and sequence that prepares students for the End of Course Exam instead of the TAKS, and has attended Margaret Kilgo's seminars multiple times before, during, and after the TEKS changes. From this study and work, he's concluded that the state has moved from a personal schema teaching model to an author purpose/author intent model, emphasizing close reading and open ended answers that can be judged as right or wrong (Downing).

Position #2: more-harm-than-good. This position agrees with position #1 (and #3) that too many teachers spend weeks or months on the same novel and focus on comprehension skills (memorizing plot) instead of critical thinking or writing activities. However, they aren't concerned with making more time for other TEKS, but with students tuning out and disengaging (wasting time) when forced to study novels they don't want to read. Not allowing the students to choose their books hinders the students' desire to read (in the present and for the future) because it strips them of choice and teaches them that reading is a chore to get through, not an activity to voluntarily participate in and enjoy. Relying on anecdotes from the classroom, this position assumes that banning the novel does less harm than novels being taught incorrectly.

Because of his own obvious love of reading, I went into my interview with K.N., a teacher and member of the National Writing Project, assuming he would be staunchly against the no-novel edict. However, he would rather see administrators ban novels than risk teachers turning students off of books altogether. Though he agrees that some texts should be read together, he claims that short stories or excerpts can work just as well for those skill-learning activities as novels. He advocates student choice, especially when he's seen students who were forced to read novels in class stare blankly at pages, disengage without learning anyway, and then complain that they hate reading. His goal (this position's goal) for the ELA classroom is to help students learn to love reading and writing and to find their voices in both (Nettles).

Position #3: novels-are-necessary. These teachers understand and agree with position #1 that they have a professional responsibility to meet the standards set out by the state, but they either disagree with those standard's priorities or believe that novels can be used to teach most TEKS. This position also agrees with position #2 that the way some teachers teach novels is doing real and measurable damage to students' current reading ability and not creating life-long readers. But they also believe that the poor teaching by a few isn't worth banning novels for all. Position #3 claims that the skills a novel teaches—including sticking with an author through a complicated, longer work—can't be replaced with excerpts. Especially if the goal of an ELA classroom is, as they believe, to engage in critical thinking, immerse students in the whole reading and writing process, foster habits that encourage life-long reading, and produce well-rounded, complete students. They assume, as the other positions do, that their goal is the right goal and, therefore, worthy of being prioritized over the TEKS.

However, much like with the “one” advocates of the one-or-none position, not all of the novels-are-necessary advocates agree on how novels should be chosen for the classroom. Some agree with the more-harm-than-good position that student choice is paramount, and they will strive to provide students with the opportunity to choose whenever possible. Others believe students (and/or teachers) should have a choice, but from a certain list or group of approved or canonical novels. Still others believe that all students should read the same novels at specific grade levels. Of course, such dissention among the novels-are-necessary crowd still presupposes the one claim all of its members share: the ELA classroom should continue to teach whole novels (emphasis on the plural).

In his book, *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*, Kelly Gallagher states that by offering only excerpts “we are starving a part of [students’]

brains, we are producing kids like the students in my class who can read but who cannot get below the surface of what they read” (40). He claims that technologies available to this generation cause attention disorders and that (because information comes in short bursts—a practice reinforced by excerpts and test-practice) certain parts of the brain actually can’t develop as they should and can when students must process longer works. Gallagher believes that studying and reading novels in schools can help students exercise those starved parts of the brain and that “administrators who remove novels from the curriculum do not understand the harm they are inflicting on adolescents. Novels are not part of the problem; the problem lies in how the novels are taught” (40).

No matter which side of this debate teachers identify with, it is critical that they join the conversation. The state has revised the ELA standards; technology continues to revise how our students learn and understand the world. All three of these positions can agree that we aren’t teaching in the same world that most of us not only went through school in, but also were trained to teach in. All three can agree that we want what’s best for the students we teach. With that common ground, we can all work toward getting back on the same page and back to creating classrooms that foster the literacy skills a productive, thriving, engaged nation needs.

Works Cited

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