

Reaching All Learners in Secondary English Language Arts

Jon Mundorf, Ed.D.

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida, USA
jmundorf@pky.ufl.edu

Jen Cheveallier

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida, USA
jcheveallier@pky.ufl.edu

Cody Miller

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida, USA
cmiller@pky.ufl.edu

Shelby Boehm

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida, USA
sboehm@pky.ufl.edu

In order to effectively implement the principles of UDL in a literacy-based classroom, it is important to recognize the power of student agency in determining methods of engagement with and response to the curriculum. Effective teachers empower students to make intentional choices about how they will interact with and respond to text. Beyond differentiation, designing curriculum for *all* students involves the removal of access barriers as much as it does the provision of multiple opportunities for success. English Language Arts classrooms should prioritize students' interaction with literature--which is axiomatically varied, nuanced, and contextualized--above any one established style or content of analysis. Designing instruction for this purpose positions students as active consumers, interpreters, and authors of text.

To ensure that *all* learners have access to curriculum we must think of curriculum as more than simply methods and materials. Whether we acknowledge it or not, certain cultural assumptions and elements are embedded within our school system and classroom discourse (Eisner, 1985). If teachers are not intentional in confronting their own cultural biases, they risk reproducing institutional biases within their practice, which marginalize some students while privileging others (Gay, 2010). This is without a doubt an increasingly important task for teachers. However, English Language Arts - through the study of narrative - offers avenues for providing a rich panoply of cultural knowledge within the classroom. Drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) concept of "mirrors and windows," which calls for students to see their own (mirrors) and others' (windows) perspectives within literature instruction, we must design instruction that values the experience of students and allows them to learn from perspectives of others. Thus, the selection and implementation of texts and activities must not represent a cultural homogeneity if we are aiming to support all students in their learning processes. Embedding student choice within the text selection is part of designing inclusive curriculum.

UDL framework requires teachers make intentional decisions about curriculum. As English Language Arts teachers, we must continuously wrestle with choices about who

or what is represented or not represented in our curriculum; at the same time we need to truly know our students to understand how these choices will apply to learners. This concept means constantly evaluating who is in our classroom by asking ourselves: how do my curriculum choices impact students learning? State-mandated standards and assessments are the minimal measures of learning in our courses. We view the classroom as a microcosm of the larger democracy. Thus, we see potential within our students to create a more inclusive and kinder society, which means the aims of anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks, 1989) are relevant to our work.

This work is not easy. To have authentic conversations with our students about who they are, we first must establish a classroom culture of respect that leads to a community willing to talk and engage with learning. In practice, this looks like a process of continuous conversation that engages student interests and experiences, discussions throughout the year about major themes and topics, and a commitment to open dialogue and feedback for our classroom community. These conversations reveal student interests and experiences, but also areas for growth and parts of the curriculum that need more "windows." Without a clear relationship between curriculum selection and the community that the curriculum will serve, learning opportunities within our classroom will not serve all students.

Our instructional literacy framework, which seeks to support all students in becoming active consumers and interpreters of texts, draws heavily from the previously cited work of Rudine Sims Bishop. Additionally, the works of Judith Langer, Louise Rosenblatt, Deborah Appleman, and Kylee Beers and Robert Probst guide our teaching philosophies and practices. Langer (2010) and Rosenblatt (1994) help us see the rigor of curriculum is embedded within the exchange between the reader and the text, which moves us away from dichotomous "right" and "wrong" answers in literature instruction and assessment while Appleman (2014) argues that students should approach text from multiple perspectives in order to enhance their ability to understand multiple interpretations of a text or idea. Finally, Beers and Probst (2013) suggest students need to approach

texts with a questioning stance by inquiring into the text, the author, and ultimately themselves. This framework manifests itself in classroom assessment practices through: engagement within the text (annotations), responses to the text (essay, projects, choice in prompts), and creation of text (narratives, poetry). Our literacy framework helps remove barriers such as homogenous text selection, singular text engagement, and teacher-determined response types.

REFERENCES

- Appleman, D. (2014). *Critical encounters in secondary English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents (3rd ed)*. Teachers College Press.
- Beers, G. K., & Probst, R. E. (2013). *Notice & note: Strategies for close reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix-xi.
- Derman-Sparks, L. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Eisner, E. W. (1985). *The educational imagination* (p. 176). New York: Macmillan.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Langer, J. (2010). *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction (2nd ed)*. Teachers College Press.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. SIU Press.