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# Teaching Literature

IN THE CONTEXT OF

# Literacy Instruction



JOCELYN A. CHADWICK

JOHN E. GRASSIE

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*Credits continue on page iv.*

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This book is **dedicated** to the legions of English teachers, past and present, whose efforts have helped students explore the adventures of literature, search the depth of the thoughts and new ideas expressed in books, and, finally, draw from the experience of reading, the foundation of literacy—a gift that shapes students’ lives and their ability to express themselves forever.

Among the many dedicated teachers, I, Jocelyn, have known as a student and then in my career as an English teacher, two very special people stand out: Judith Ann Purvis and Patricia Taggart Munro. They were my mentors and patient counselors when I was a young teacher and have remained true friends, colleagues, and valuable collaborators ever since. In so many ways, this book would not have been possible without their thoughts, insights, and always well-reasoned contributions.

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**Credits continued from page ii:**

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# foreword

We hope this book will help all of us who love literature to share it with students in a way that is meaningful, powerful, and useful to them, so that they can embrace it as their own. We consider literature a bridge to the kinds of skills that standards require, yes, but, more importantly, a bridge to a deeper understanding of the world. To begin this book, we asked our dear friend Hal Holbrook—a man whose love of reading has helped to shape the world's understanding of some of the central works of American literature—to share his journey as a reader and as a human being.

Books can open the world up. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* taught me about hope lost in the dust storms of the '30s and people looking for it in the fruit-picking farms of central California while starvation stared them in the face, and their fellow Americans went for them with clubs and guns because they didn't want them around. Never heard about that. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* taught me about the loneliness of a young man like myself and his yearning for love. And *Huckleberry Finn* showed me how cruel people can be to each other and the spirit of kindness in a man whose color was black. I would never have found all those stories of true life without books.

Why did nobody ever read a book in my house? Was their mind made up? Actually I was raised by my grandfather in New England, me and my sisters, and Grandpa had firm notions about everything. He was our champ, we loved him, but his were the only opinions available. The first book I read was *The Will to Win*, one of the Rover Boy books. *Do or Dare* was next. Grandpa must have picked them out for me because there was nobody else around except our nurse. Mom and Dad had hit the open road when we were babies and they never came back, so it must have been Grandpa. That book, *The Will to Win*, may have defined my life.

But not quite. Somebody cast me as Hamlet in a class project, so I had to find out who he was and why he was so screwed up about his Mom. That tapped into my Mom who wasn't there and made me think dark thoughts about her. So Will Shakespeare opened up that door. When I left Boston on a World War II troop ship, I carried two books: the Bible for some closeness to God before I got shot at and *The Grapes of Wrath*. I bogged down in the "begat" section of Genesis, but John Steinbeck's book about the Dust Bowl Okies looking for a new life in the

mythical heaven of California kept me from getting seasick below decks, down near the propeller and the stinking diesel fuel.

When President Truman dropped the bomb on Japan, that saved me from being massacred in an American invasion and maybe told me to do or dare harder when I got back to college. My grades improved; and then I stumbled across Mark Twain just when folks down South were lynching black people Saturday night and singing hymns on Sunday. *Huckleberry Finn* took note of that and it wasn't very funny. Neither was the country I was born and brought up in and neither was the world around me that *The Rover Boys* may have been lying about, along with an awful lot of people. Mark Twain used them for target practice.

Now I was the first one in the family to read books. Maybe my sisters did, in the middle of their pretty desperate lives, but I was going to make a living out of them. Mark Twain's. Because the truth I couldn't find in life or the Bible as it is reasoned out in churches, I could find in books by him and by people who wrote about Abe Lincoln and John Adams. They carved out the meaning of *Democracy*. I began to study them as I took on the character of Mark Twain and started making a living at it on the stage. Been at it now for sixty years. All started with reading *The Will to Win*.

In a world loaded with information at your fingertips on smart phones, "Why not go to Google?" a young person might ask. "Why waste time reading books?" There's the rub. Information by satellite is not knowledge. Being there is in the book. The deep immersion you get in a story, the feelings that surround you watching Teddy Roosevelt fighting the country's takeover by hugely powerful people in the world of the 1890s in *The Bully Pulpit*, that can give you the emotional experience of time travel to an earlier world. Then you get it. You are there. You get what Pink Floyd is saying in *The Wall*. You can compare it to *Now* and say "Have we learned anything?"

This book by Chadwick and Grassie is a kind of diving platform into the wider pool of knowledge our imagination can open up to us, and shows us the unknown mysteries we face every day: how other people think.

—Hal Holbrook

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# *introduction*

## Literature as a Bridge to Literacy

For many students, learning to explore literature serves as a launch into practicing the literacy skills they will use for a lifetime. Powerful stories insinuate themselves in students' imaginations, making it impossible not to read on, to ask questions, to want more. It's the drive for meaning that really lights the spark for literacy learners. Once ignited, the inquiry and passion that literature evokes can light students' way into the sciences, humanities, social sciences—any and every field of disciplinary knowledge.

—Kent D. Williamson (1957–2015), Executive Director, NCTE; Director, National Center for Literacy Education (personal communication, July 21, 2014)

***Literacy.*** The word has been found in print and used in education in the United States since 1880, when it was used to mean one's ability to demonstrate “the quality, condition, or state of being literate; the ability to read and write. Also: the extent of this in a given community, region, period, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary). Since that time, iterations include *cultural literacy*, *digital literacy*, and *financial literacy*. Even before the Common Core State Standards, the term was growing in depth, breadth, and scope.

In today's global culture, the term no longer focuses solely on reading and writing and teaching those skills, nor is it solely the purview of elementary school. Twenty-first-century literacy now reflects what the National Center for Literacy Education describes as *literacy learning*, a concept ranging from analyzing the vast array of digital content to participating in online exchanges of information and opinion to creating virtual classrooms. This book explores how we have taught, are teaching, and will teach literature in the context of the definition of literacy provided

## in the National Council of Teachers of English's Position Statement "The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies":

*Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in this 21st century global society must be able to:*

- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

(NCTE, 2013)

***Complex literature stimulates creative thinking. It educates a reader's imagination. In a world that increasingly values speed over all else, literature demands that students slow down, stop to think, pause to ponder and reflect on important questions that have puzzled mankind for a very long time.***

—Carol Jago, associate director of the California Reading and Literature Project, UCLA and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (January 22, 2015)

The world in which our students grow is global, technological, and demanding of critical skills that require reading abilities to decipher meaning and message. Literacy and literacy learning within many disciplines is now a fundamental necessity. This focus and redefinition requires us as English language arts teachers to reflect and consider how we can use literature as a bridge to help our twenty-first-century students connect with complex topics, texts, and decisions. While this perspective may at first seem unreasonable, daunting, unnecessary, and without precedent at the secondary level, it moves us into a more relevant position than ever before. Although English language arts has

always had a presence in K–12 education—consistent, substantive, and relevant—the twenty-first-century focus on and redefinition of literacy has also redefined and solidified the import of English language arts, elementary through secondary.

Like the engineers who built the steel-arteried bridges that connect us in the physical world, we are now using our knowledge of and skills with literature to provide connections no other content area can. We use literature to move, prepare, and sustain our students far beyond our immediate classrooms—beyond the seemingly isolated text. In the world of today, young people must launch themselves into adulthood with a sense of agency, able to communicate clearly with a wide variety of audiences and learn from media and communications of all forms, while embracing complexities and challenges. Whereas some may say that there is no place for literature in these circumstances, those of us who are aware of its timeless power know better. Using literature, we teach and explore and model how to read documents in everyday life: Marc Antony’s funeral oration rhetorically models for our students how to craft a message that not only persuades the audience but also moves it to act physically and emotionally. Using literature, we enable our students’ exploration of how an author targets audience, occasion, and purpose, the same skills students need to write a statement of purpose or fill out an application: Little Geoffrey’s Prelude to *The Canterbury Tales* explaining the real motives of the pilgrims, including his own. Using literature, we enable our students’ exploration of theme, style, message, giving students the tools they need to decode a candidate’s position statement or an opinion piece: Scout’s finding her voice, asking her father the hard questions, sending a verbal op-ed piece to his soul. Combining all these elements, literature gives us rich material to teach reading skills: decoding, critical thinking, evaluation, analysis, and inquiry.

Our students *must* possess and hone these skills as they progress from high school into college and career. The English language arts classroom is where this essential and critical literacy bridge is fomented, protected, encouraged, pushed, tempered, and forged. Using the literature we love and we understand so well, we can and must empower our students to think and reflect and evaluate independently in a very complex and multimessaged world requiring reading and comprehension at work, play, and home. As you read the chapters in this book, you will also read—*hear*—the words of educators, students, scholars, writers, journalists, civil rights activists, documentarians, artists expressing their professional and personal perspectives while responding to a query we posed: “How would you describe literature as a literacy bridge?” We want this book to be the beginning of conversation and reflection, the beginning of new ways of thinking about how we teach literature that lives outside our classrooms. In addition, students’ voices and perspectives are represented here, based on an anonymous reading survey we conducted (2014–15). More than 600 students responded. These responses “peppered” throughout the book—within the text itself, as well as in sidebars—provide additional perspectives from varied and diverse walks of life, crossing race, class, gender, and age.

*In my own adolescence, later in my life as a high school teacher, and now as a teacher educator, literature and the communal exploration of peoples' stories have stood as a bridge to embracing the richness and complexity of my own humanity and those around me. Reading literature affords us opportunities to see ourselves through and in others, to explore new perspectives, to connect, and to question what it means to be free. (Logan Manning, assistant professor of literacy education, University of Texas, San Antonio, personal communication, January 15, 2015)*

# 4

## Making Literature Relevant

We are finally moving to a point where we can state the values of a literary education more clearly and forcefully, in terms that will justify just as much attention to literary study as our nation periodically invests in math, science, and “basic” literacy skills.

—Arthur N. Applebee, *Literature in the Secondary Schools: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*



What gets left out of literacy, too often, is literature.

—Louann Reid, Colorado State University (personal communication, July 27, 2014)

**T**HOSE OF US WHO LOVE LITERATURE may wonder why anyone would set aside Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* or Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and, instead, read seventy pages (or a myriad of websites) full of numbing prose that summarizes the plots in a disjointed way, without any hint of voice or even humanity. Yet, secondary English students do this regularly. As student-reporter Laila Abtahi (2010) explains in “Should Students Study with Sparknotes? Con” for *The Mirador Online*, the Orinda, California, Miramonte High School newspaper, “SparkNotes temporarily assures a student that his or her grade is safe.” In contrast, student-reporter, Caroline Cook (2010), in “Should Students Study with Spark Notes? Pro” asserts that SparkNotes are equal to the best secondary sources in “guiding” students and teachers through the mire of “confusing schoolwork . . . SparkNotes is an effective secondary source because it provides supplemental study guides, and helps students understand these assignments.” Students not only choose to read summaries instead of literature, they also trust those summaries to be guides and mentors.

Have we somehow unwittingly contributed to this trend? If our students are not embracing literature, perhaps we have not transmitted to them our innate passion for literature. Perhaps instead of trusting this love to be transmitted through some form of natural absorption, we might consciously construct collaborative, discoverable teaching moments that will pique students’ interest and curiosity, prompting them to read instead of relying on—and trusting—shortcuts. As

we reassert our voices and reaffirm our passion for literature, we must also listen to and observe how our students relate to and interact with the literature we teach:

- How do we engage a literary text not for ourselves but for our students?
- How can we enable students to engage that same literary text?

If we can make literature relevant not only for us, but for our twenty-first-century students, they will read, will not disconnect what they read in our classes from what they read outside, and will not view reading literature as a chore.

In 1987, seven organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Modern Language Association (MLA), created and convened a coalition of sixty educators to discuss, explore, and examine common issues and concerns in the teaching of English language arts—including the issue of students’ not reading. Their guiding questions, centered on the students’ perspective on learning and engagement and their perception of the relevance of literature, underscore the attention given to student engagement and identify concerns we still face today:

- What are the conditions under which literature is being taught?
- What are the traditions represented in the selections for study?
- What are teachers’ goals for student learning?
- How do these goals work themselves out in classroom practice?

Arthur Applebee’s *Literature in the Secondary Schools: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States* (1993) is based on the resulting studies.

## HOW DO WE ENGAGE A LITERARY TEXT?

We approach a piece of literature as a bifurcated audience: English majors and teachers. As English majors, we joyfully enter a piece of literature with an attitude of discovery, curiosity, exploration, diversity, and wonderment. We lose ourselves in the words, characters, scenes, conflicts; the stylistic nuances thrill us. One visual I love when attending NCTE’s annual convention is the tremendous suitcases filled with the books teachers are eagerly bringing home—so many that few even try to lift them. On every face are the most wonderful, satisfying smiles, for each suitcase contains amazing adventures, overwhelming tragedies, seeming and actual insurmountable challenges, real people just like us, and bigger-than-life people who keep us in absolute awe. We cheer protagonists and loathe antagonists. Gordian knot–like plots—Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Lear*, William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” or *The Sound and Fury*, William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, and Isabel Allende’s *House of the Spirits*—keep us welded to our seats, whether in a room, on a subway, under a tree, on a beach.

As English language arts teachers, our first wish is for our students to love literature as much as we do. Graduate students with a passion to teach English always have the same response when I ask, “Why do you want to teach English?” Without exception, it’s “Because I love to read, and I want to help students love to read, too.” My follow-up question, “What do you want for your students after

they leave your class and graduate; what do you want them to GET?” is something of a conundrum, but most agree they want their students to love literature. This is a serious sort of “no response,” because it precludes not only the literal purpose of English language arts but also its import and place on our students’ lives. The response I want to hear focuses on how English language arts prepares students, speaks to our and our students’ here and now—their realities both in and outside class. We know the power of literature and the ways in which it can touch the lives of those who love it, and sharing that love is powerful. However, we must also consider that each of us is one of only a handful of teachers who will try to help a particular student hone the literacy skills he or she will need as an adult. Ernest Morrell and colleagues (2013) remind us that what we teach lives and functions long after students have graduated and that we “have to think differently about how we teach, the tools we use, and the products that we demand from our students” (19).

Also meriting reflection and concern is our desire for students to understand the texts as we understand them. We have all had students who make an abrupt right (or left) turn when we and the other students continue straight ahead without considering or even being curious about an alternative path. More often these students aren’t deliberate contrarians, but engage with the material differently and have a divergent point of view. Sometimes, we dismiss their comments because they did not address the assignment as we have envisioned it. But students may not always resonate with or comprehend a character, event, or theme as we or literary critics have interpreted it. (See Figures 4.1 and 4.2.)

Taylor  
Mr. Mulreany  
AP Language and Composition  
14 January

### **The Effects and Defects of Parental Figures in *Huck Finn***

Typically families provide a sense of structure and belonging to the various members included. Parental figures within those family units help stimulate the feeling of acceptance by taking on the roles of caretaker, educator, and protector. Whichever way these roles are upheld or neglected by the parents or guardians shapes the child’s mentality and behaviors. Families, biological or symbolic, are recurring themes in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In Twain’s novel, the connections between the parental figure and the child mimics family-type relationships: the Widow and Huck, Pap and Huck, and Jim and Huck. even though these couples may not all be connected biologically, their time together creates unique ties. These connections define and drive Huck’s lifestyle choices, ultimately constructing the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

**Figure 4.1**

Taylor’s paper, “The Effects and Defects of Parental Figures in *Huck Finn*” takes a fresh perspective on Twain’s work, making an eye-opening comparison between the families depicted in *Huck Finn* and modern-day understandings of family.

Micayla  
Ms. Christopherson  
AP Lang and Comp  
25 Jan

### Twain's Childhood Influence on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Science explains that memories are just neurons firing synapses back and forth across the brain as chemicals that allow images and events to be permanently recorded in the mind. Science does not explain how these singular events combined provide a foundation for thought and individual personality that transposes time and later has a significant influence on future situations. Memories from childhood are but one of the events that affect later decisions. The novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, written by Mark Twain, was greatly influenced by the childhood experiences he had in his hometown Hannibal, Missouri. The events and people in Twain's life inspired the relationships between Huckleberry Finn and the following characters: Jim, Tom, his family, and the Mississippi River.

The novel is a chronological timeline that describes the circumstances that the main character, Huckleberry Finn, endured when he sailed down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave. The entire novel is set in Hannibal, Missouri, and along the Mississippi River. The childhood persona of Mark Twain shaped the tone of the book. Small details, such as when Huck is jealous or disappointed, aid the reader in developing a personal relationship with Huck, and allow themselves to relate on a basic human understanding. Huck also is subject to physical needs. He requires water, shelter, food, and once says, "I didn't want to go to sleep, of course; but I was so sleepy I couldn't help it; so I thought I would take just one little cat-nap" (Twain). His essential and unwilling need to sleep adds vulnerability to Huck's character, which creates a kinship with the readers, and Twain himself. His childhood was not easy, because he was forced to work, and all a child needs at times is to have the ability to become vulnerable and submit to the most basic instincts.

The relationship that Mark Twain developed between Huck Finn and the slave Jim was a reflection of the friendship Twain had with slaves as a child. Jim was the slave on the farm where Huck was given shelter and learned how to read. He had always been a prevalent presence because he was large in stature and performed most of the work. Huck treated him rudely in the beginning of the novel, reflecting how society saw the slaves. As the plot develops, and more time is spent between the two, Huck's personal feelings and ideas shift. This occurrence is especially prevalent when Huck, motivated by personal guilt and morals, apologizes to Jim, "... before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (Twain). Huck displays his realization that blacks have humanity, and all humans deserve a fair treatment and respect, as apologizing is one of the most significant ways to demonstrate respect, because it shows humility and a genuine concern

(continues)

#### Figure 4.2

Micayla's paper uses Twain's own childhood and upbringing and that of slaves he observed as a child—images of family, familiar and different—as lenses in her analysis of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.



for the opposing party's feelings. Twain is attempting to weave and thread basic morals in scenes such as this one, because it adds to the development and characterization of each individual. Twain personally relates to this moral journey, because it was inspired by his own childhood of attempting to learn the morals that were acceptable in society. The act of apologizing is also significant due to Huck's age, and for him to have the initiative and integrity to apologize without any prompting reflects how his character has matured as the friendship between himself and the slave. The friendship with Jim also showed Huckleberry Finn where the line in society lies. He could be friends with Jim, but not all would approve of the choice. Negroes still were considered property at this point in history. Huck would have to accept that legally he was above Jim on the social standing, and not let that affect his personal opinion of him. This parallels what Twain learned early in his childhood, when he stated: "All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades, and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of, and which rendered complete fusion impossible" (Smith). The innocence of children has allowed the boundary to be pushed enough to develop true friendship. Twain demonstrates this in his own childhood friendship with a black boy. He believed that they are not mere animals, with no thoughts or feelings, but people who could experience emotions and have opinions, and expressed this belief by emphasizing the symbolic relationship between Huckleberry Finn and Jim the slave.

**Figure 4.2** (*continued*)

In December 2014 while a group of students and I were discussing some of Mark Twain's books, one student, Taylor (referenced in Figure 4.1), wondered whether Twain was aware he was foreshadowing things to come with regard to parenting and family paradigms. From this Generation Z student's perspective, which was well thought out, Twain had tapped into familial constructs not common until the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: blended families; single-parent families; extended families; abusive, caring, ambivalent, broken families. Amazing, absolutely amazing. In many years of reading and teaching Twain, I had never thought of this critical interpretation from such a perspective, nor of exploring such a potentially sensitive issue with high school students, nor had I or anyone I knew pursued this line of investigation. Other students found equally fascinating questions in the work, such as, "How inspired was Twain by the women in his life? Was the feminism, or sometimes the apparent lack of it, in the story representative of what Twain experienced in his life, with the women he surrounded himself with?" and "Are there any repeating language (literary and rhetorical) devices that you have noticed Twain used to characterize women and the events that pertain to them?"

Unless students feel comfortable and safe, exploring and stretching their intellect and curiosity, we will miss out on new perspectives and ideas about a well known and loved text. Judith Langer (2000) describes the issue this way:

*Applebee (1984) found that students are often asked simply to display their knowledge rather than to explain, defend, or elaborate on what they are learning. Langer and Applebee (1987) and Langer (1992) report that teachers tend to focus on particular content to be learned to the neglect of ways in which their students think about that content. (3)*

Applebee describes this instructional tendency as “the teacher-centered classroom,” in which students are not encouraged—intentionally or unintentionally—to explore and develop their own unique ideas and thoughts when reading literature (201). I describe this situation, much like Freire does, as one in which students are on a static, “listening-object,” pathway of either right or wrong answers resulting in a dearth of cumulative learning (Chadwick 2015):

[Material suppressed due to rights restrictions.]

[Material suppressed due to rights restrictions.]

What I find wonderful about collaborating with teachers around the country now is their growing curiosity about and eager embrace of new learning pathways. One has only to attend local and national meetings of educators, be part of a Professional Learning Community, or read conversations and collaborations taking place in organizations' and connected communities' blogs and Twitter exchanges to witness this willingness to practice and create active learning experiences.

**Tool 6:**  
Rereading Template,  
Appendix D

### Rereading Literature to Help Us See Our Students' Needs

To make literature relevant to our students, we must consider their viewpoints as well as our own. Of course, we all undoubtedly do this to one degree or another each day, considering the details of a text from our students' perspectives can yield valuable insights. As Paulo Freire (1998, 2005) writes:

*[T]hose who teach learn, on the one hand, because they recognize previously learned knowledge and, on the other, because by observing how the novice student's curiosity works to apprehend what is taught (without which one cannot learn), they help themselves to uncover uncertainties, rights, and wrongs. ... [Teachers'] learning in their teaching is observed to the extent that, humble and open, teachers find themselves continually ready to rethink what has been thought and to revise their positions. Their learning lies in their seeking to become involved in their students' curiosity and in the paths and streams it takes them through. (51–52)*

The Rereading Template (Appendix D) lets us see our reading styles and predilections on three levels—as an avid reader/English major, as a teacher, and from the perspective of our students. I apply this strategy each time I work with high school students.

The rubric includes questions about preferences as well as the construction of the text—total length, plot complexity, and so on. When we consider relevance to students, we must also consider how well the students can access the text. If they are likely to be daunted by a long book or ornate language, we need to consider how we can help them meet these demands.

I recommend using this template before you begin to teach a particular work so you can use your findings as you plan your unit. If you find yourself wondering how a particular student

might react to a given element, listen even more closely to that student in the days or weeks leading up to the unit so as to better understand his or her point of view.

Rereading a text from another's perspective has also been valuable for my graduate students, who have learned to combat censorship by first scrutinizing the challenged texts from the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents. I'll admit to some grumbling about this painstaking approach when I assigned it, but I still hear from and collaborate with some of the students, and when they tell me how they have incorporated our rereading method into their own teaching, I know we did the right thing.

When teachers and I discuss Frost's "The Road Not Taken," for example, we first distinguish between our innate love for the poem and its potential meaning and complexity for our students. Unlike writers whom students initially perceive as impenetrable, such as Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Nikki Giovanni, Pound, and Whitman, they often see a poet like Frost as easier to explore. However, as we know, what appears easy is often subtly complex, requiring even closer attention. Such is the case with most of Frost's poems (and prose texts by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Hurston, for that matter).

As we literally slow down and reread the Frost piece from several points of view, we see that the narrator has chosen a path that appears less traveled but in reality is just as worn as the other. But having chosen the "less" traveled one has made a difference for the narrator. What that difference is—positive or negative—she or he does not reveal. This allows us to teach inference; subliminal messages based on cultural archetypes and mind-sets; symbolic images (a wood, two paths, the journey metaphor); and the poet's style and use of language. It also allows us to privilege and hear our students' voices and ideas and queries.

Reflecting on my teaching approaches, my goals for my students, and the conditions under which students experience the literature (Applebee 1993, 201), I realized that I needed to hone my listening skills; "park" my English-major relationship with the text; privilege students' voices, questions, and perspectives; and say to students, especially high school students, "I do not have all the answers. If you ask a question, and I don't know, I will tell you I don't know. But, I promise we will find it together." Ernest Morrell (2008) further reiterates this needed and focused learning pathway with our twenty-first-century students as audience:

*As a secondary English teacher, I was initially appalled by the disconnect that existed between the students' out of school literacies and the world of the literacy classroom. . . . I merely had a strong belief*

***I know how to write forever. . . . It's mine. It's free. . . . It's pure knowledge. . . . Let the reader enter with her or his own imagination, and that makes us co-conspirators, as it were, together—the reader and me.***

—Toni Morrison (2015)

*that students possessed brilliance and passion that were being neither acknowledged nor accessed inside of literacy classrooms. . . . I had to find a way to achieve success with my English students or something inside of me was going to die. . . .*

*Although I never lost sight of the importance of academic literacy development, I became increasingly interested in the connections between a critical pedagogy of popular culture and the development of critical literacies. (91–93)*

## HOW DO WE ENABLE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE THAT SAME LITERARY TEXT?

We are teaching students the literary texts we read and love. The difference lies in the purpose for reading and—something not often considered—choice. We choose to read these texts; our students most often are told what they will read. How do we encourage and enable students’ wanting to read—how do we tickle their curiosity? I have seen the following strategies work time and again:

- Present the text not only as an assignment but as an adventure. Assure students that as they read the book, they will learn not only about the characters, their fictional world, and the obstacles they encounter, but also about themselves and how these same challenges are often an important part of their world.
- Discuss with students the types of books they read on their own outside class. What interests them about their selected books and what have they learned from reading them?
- Review the setting and background of the assigned text. Supply images and documents, even sounds, especially when students are unfamiliar with a location or event or time. When and where does the story take place? Why is this important? How would students live if they were in the same setting and what would their lives be like?
- What challenges are students likely to encounter while reading the book—difficulties with names, customs, cultural issues, provocative situations, profanity, violence, lifestyle issues? Help students understand the relevance of these issues and why they are included. Address their possible discomfort with the issues and the possibility of their initial rejection of the novel because of them.
- Introduce the characters. Who are they? Where is the novel set (time, location)? What is going on in the characters’ lives and in the world around them?
- Encourage students to cite specific moments in the text that trouble them and explain what they do not like about the author’s decision to include such language, situations, and actions.
- Discuss how literature is sometimes “messy,” why that is important, and how the book fits into the general purpose and goals of literature even if reading it is sometimes uncomfortable.

These strategies help me every time I walk into a classroom. They have changed over time and will continue to do so, but the essential goals remain the same. I find it fascinating how closely this process parallels what Toni Morrison recommended in her responses to queries my Twain, Faulkner, and Morrison course students, all future educators, posed in writing. The questions my students asked focused on memory and sensitive topics, often found in literature—how teachers prepare both text and instruction and how teachers might approach students so that their curiosity, their own sense of relevance, and their predilection towards argumentation and analysis would emerge. My students were echoing concerns that challenge many ELA teachers across the country. Morrison advised them to “put the subject [of racism] on an intellectual plane first, to avoid as much subjectivity as possible in a topic that is rife with emotion.” Rather than focusing on blame, she suggests analysis—of the facts of specific situations and of the language used to frame actions and motives.

A crucial issue with my graduate students has been developing their rapport and collaboration with their students. Reflecting, listening, journaling, collaborating—these are our guideposts for instigating engaging and immersive experiences. I encourage them to share concerns, ideas, issues—anything they want to question or explore. I encourage them to be proactive in their instructional approaches and to be advocates for their students even if it means taking a risk.

Logan Manning (2001) approached me about this issue: “Professor Chadwick, my students won’t read anything. I don’t quite know what I need to do to encourage them to read. Any suggestions?” What made her dilemma not only fascinating but also prescient was her desire and decision to entertain different learning pathways and approaches. What happened follows, with brief but pointed explications of the actual instructional process practiced in both my Methods of Teaching English and Twain, Faulkner, Morrison courses. She remembers the situation this way:

*In my first year teaching, I taught students who were repeating the ninth grade. Most of them had been involved in the juvenile justice system. Most of them had never imagined themselves or been validated as successful students. Most of them had never had the experience of loving a book. Carrying the stigma of school failure, these youth were not generally invited to imagine with unfettered possibilities. Having struggled to engage these students whose persistently negative histories with school created justifiable barriers to classroom learning, I learned with them the power of narrative to help students imagine different endings to their own stories. That first year it was our reading of Always Running (Rodriguez 1993), the memoir of a former gang member that helped students embrace possibilities for change in their own lives.*

*The students in my classroom that year came to school despite tremendous challenges. Because of the bussing system in the city of Boston, many of them took several trains and busses to get to school. Yet when these youths arrived in the schoolhouse, many were labeled students who “did not want to*

*learn” by teachers who struggled to engage them in classroom learning. I too struggled to engage them and to justify how our learning in ELA would serve them in their lives. This seemed an especially difficult task when using unwieldy literature textbooks that weren’t exactly inviting.*

So began our challenge. My mind flashed back to my own first years of teaching and my remedial students—mostly of color, mostly poor, mostly invisible. Logan earnestly believed in literacy for all students, and her determination and passion to help these students was clear to me—and close to me. Our first concern was to understand Logan’s audience and to acknowledge they had never read a book before. I recommended that she not simply assign a text but give them a proposition for reading—to put some control into their hands by empowering their voices. Again, Logan remembers:

*After surveying the youths and discovering that the overwhelming majority of them claimed they disliked reading or hadn’t read anything that they enjoyed, I felt my job that year had to be to engage them in a reading experience that they would enjoy and find relevant to their lives. Many of the students in the program had experiences with gangs and gang violence either because of personal association or because of the neighborhoods where they lived. Students commonly wore RIP hoodies commemorating young people who had died as a result of urban violence. The issue was present in the hallways and in class, but it was not being addressed through the curriculum. I decided to teach Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A. that spring because it was of high interest and would nurture a space for talking about some of the critical issues the students faced outside of school. My graduate school professor knew the author, Luis Rodriguez, and she reached out to him to see if he would talk with the class. We created an incentive: if the class could read the book and complete the assignments, they would be rewarded with a field trip to Harvard University and a conference call with Luis Rodriguez.*

Enabling students to engage the same literary text demands that we find identification pathways to relevance even if we initially feel there are no points for identification. At this juncture, I acknowledge Kenneth Burke (1969), who long ago understood this seemingly disparate juxtaposition:

*To begin with “identification” is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division. . . . Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, partly embodied in*

material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions; rather, it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian's angels, or "messengers." (22)

The difference in and concomitant necessity for identification creates relevance for our students. From this perspective, no piece of literature—not one by Shakespeare, Baldwin, Alexie, Brontë, Tolstoy, Tennyson, Lorde, or even Henry James—can be unassailable.

We chose Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* for these students because we believed his personal narrative, beautifully and viscerally written, with vivid metaphors and similes about young people, challenges, peer pressure, fears, and aspirations, would achieve identification and, ultimately, relevance.

For their first book, Logan's students required relevance—not because they were mostly of color, not because they were mostly poor, but because they felt invisible and lacked voice and identity. Like the women featured in Belzer's "I Don't Crave to Read" (2002), they had never connected with assigned texts. Time and time again in studies and reports and in classrooms, students state lack of relevance, lack of clear connection, as a deterrent to their reading (111–12). To provide incentive and motivation for the students, I contacted Rodriguez to ask whether he would help.

Logan delivered the proposition to her students: "Would you consider reading Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* if you would have an opportunity to speak with Mr. Rodriguez and ask him questions? But you would have to agree to read

*I believe that a "literacy bridge," however one defines it, must be built from both banks and meet somewhere near the middle. This is a way of saying that any communication—typographic, online, aural—fails if it involves nothing more than a sender transporting "content" to a recipient. I have tried to make my narratives collaborative, by writing in a way that invites the reader to come along with me on a journey of alert discovery. I want the reader to "see" the people and their movements, and the physical places they inhabit, that I have tried to capture in words. I want the reader to "hear" the human voices as they speak in their distinctive cadences and vernacular, and to hear the truths and deceptions, conscious and unconscious, that the speech reveals. I want the reader to "smell" the damp leaves on the curving road that made the car skid and the fresh blood afterward. I want my work to offer the essential raw materials that will awaken the reader's active critical and moral consciousness regarding the heart of the story—even if, and perhaps especially if the reader's view departs from my own. If all goes well, we will meet, at story's end, atop the finished bridge's girders, protected, by words and thought that we've built, from falling.*

—Ron Powers, author and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist (November 29, 2014)



the book.” Knowing that literacy, education, and urban children of color were key issues of his writing and social outreach, I called Rodriguez, explained the situation, and asked whether he would help. I told him I would ask my department chair at Harvard whether we could have a date and time for the high school students to take a field trip and share a conference call with him. Logan remembers:

*When I first proposed the idea to the class, there were many eyes rolling. Students were not going to be sold on the idea so easily and they insisted that they wouldn't make it through a whole book. They were amused at the idea of traveling to Harvard because, while it was just a train ride away, it may as well have been in another universe. Because these students had all experienced school failure, they did not imagine themselves in that space.*

But she did persuade her students:

*Not taking no for an answer, I placed *Always Running* at the center of our work as a class. In the beginning we read aloud and I invited students to discuss the book together.*

Logan experienced other, unexpected hurdles: no books, no budget to purchase them, and reticence by the school administration to sanction a field trip. These were overcome. Thanks to a donor, Logan was able to give each of her students a copy of the book that was theirs to keep (most of them had never had a book of their own). The school did sanction the field trip. We scheduled a visit to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where the class would use a conference room to have a group call with the Rodriguez.

The students did read the book, and they used a revised version of my Students' Literary Analysis Rubric (Appendix E) as they dove deeply and wholeheartedly into the text. Logan remembers:

*In the beginning we read aloud, and I invited students to discuss the book together. Slowly they became engaged in the story, and they identified with the imagery and the dilemmas described by the author. They began to ask questions and make connections to their lived experiences. They wrote in journals and they reflected on what they were taking away from the narrative. They got hooked. The students who insisted they would not make it through the book found themselves flipping through the pages and wanting to know what would happen next. We finished the book together, and many of the students said it was the first time they had enjoyed reading something. They were eager to celebrate their accomplishment with my professor and the author.*

### Tool 7:

Students' Literary Analysis  
Rubric, Appendix E

## Reading Deeply

Langer (2000) asserts that as students read, their envisionments (“what the reader understands, the questions that develop, and the hunches that arise about how the piece might unfold” [7]) change:

*The envisionments change as the reading progresses because as reading continues, some information is no longer important, some is added, and some is reinterpreted. What readers come away with at the end of a reading includes what they understand, what they don't, and the questions and hunches they still have. (7–8)*

As students connect with a text, they are not only more willing to examine it closely, they are eager to do so. The Students' Literary Analysis Rubric (Appendix E) is “something in hand” to guide and facilitate independent and collaborative reading, discussion, and analysis.

As Burke (1969) and Langer (2000, 8–11) explain, students' processing of reading emerges in stages: literal reading, relational reading, consubstantiality/identification, and comprehension. Literal reading involves the basics: character(s), plot, setting, conflict; it's important but only the first step, not be an end in itself. Relational reading, as Langer describes, is “being inside and moving through” a text; readers begin comparing and contrasting our own experiences to characters or events in the text. Langer continues, “This is the time when meaning begets meaning; we are caught up in the narrative of a story, the sense or feel of a poem the imagery of description, or the mellifluousness of a beautiful oratory” (18). Consubstantiality/identification, for Burke, represents a critical aim of a writer, seeking the reader's identification with the acts and actors in the text, thereby developing a relationship:

*A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial. (Burke 1969, 21)*

Finally, with comprehension, readers experience and understand the text to the extent we can use it to make meaning for ourselves beyond the text, “when we have the knowledge or insight available to use in new and sometimes unrelated situations. It is generative in that we apply critical aspects of one richly developed envisionment toward the creation of a new envisionment-building experience” (Langer 2000, 21). An illustration of this concept is presented in Chapter 5,

“Blending the Canon with the New,” using Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” in connection with an event occurring in New England during 2014 that was reported nationally. Overall, ELA teachers hope that reading literature will result in students’ using the literature in life and career.

The Students’ Literary Analysis Rubric (Appendix E) reflects these types of reading, as well as my and others’ research and observations. All the templates and rubrics in this book are organic and intentionally mobile. Students profoundly impact my revisions and adjustments because they are never the same from class to class, region to region, and especially year to year. And because students today are highly mobile and socially networked, I design rubrics and charts students can use inside and outside class, independently and collaboratively. They can use hard copies or digital versions. They can respond in the spaces provided or in a notebook or digital journal. Most importantly, this tool belongs to the students: it is not an assignment to be returned and graded for correctness and completeness. It is a framework to challenge students’ thinking, to give shape to their thoughts, and to push them toward critical thought.

## Going Where They’d Never Gone Before: The Harvard Field Trip

Logan’s students had read the book. The day for the field trip and conference call arrived. The adult educators accompanying Logan and her students knew they were not allowed to contribute or intervene while the students were talking with Rodriguez; this conversation was theirs alone. Logan and I were excited and eager and anticipatory, trying to prepare for everything, anything. The students walked gingerly and quietly onto Appian Way where the School of Education is located and into Longfellow Hall. Their reticence did not surprise me. I remembered my experiences with my students during the first few days in my remedial English classes: they sized me up and felt out of place, particularly when I explained that we really were going to “have school,” as they termed it.

Logan’s students walked into a very quiet conference room containing a large circular table, a conference phone in the center, surrounded by comfortable chairs. Logan introduced me to each of her students; each uttered a barely audible but polite hello. I thanked the students for coming and reiterated to the adults that they were welcome but could not participate in the conference call. I called Rodriguez, and the wonderment of the day began—not so quiet, not so traditional, and definitely not so expected. I introduced Rodriguez and asked students to provide their names when they spoke to him. Then I listened and observed and learned.

Student 1: *So, did you really write this book? I mean, is it really about you?*

Rodriguez: *Yes, I wrote the book and the book is about my life and me. But this book is also about the lives of my friends, so many who are now dead. This book is also about my son.*

Student 2: *Why did you want to write about gangs?*

Rodriguez: *I write about my life. My life was in L.A. with gangs. I lived the gang life and thought it was what I wanted. You guys tell me, why did you read the whole book?*

Various Students: *Because we were told to. Yeah, we were told to, but then we liked it. Yeah, it was reading, but not like reading you know? Yeah, not boring.*

I'd promised Rodriguez we would not take more than an hour of his time, but the session lasted two hours. The students referenced pages and scenes in the narrative, and Rodriguez asked them about specific moments in the text. They drilled into choices he made, challenges he confronted. As the students felt more at ease not only with the environment but also with Rodriguez, the adults melted away; *we* became invisible. The students were alone in this safe room with this writer whose book they had just read. I learned much that day about engagement, identification, and relevance and the power literature has for our students. Of the many exchanges I recorded in my journal, this one remains ever with me, especially when I am with high school students:

Student 3 (a young lady): *I want to ask you a question, but I'm not sure how to say it, exactly.*

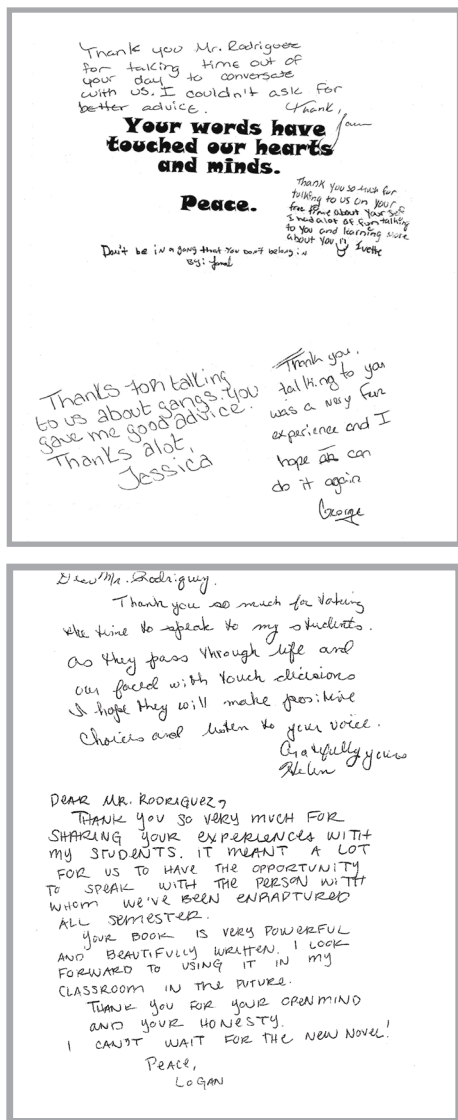
Rodriguez: *Just say it; you are safe here and can say anything to me you want.*

Student 3: *I'm in a gang. I don't want to die. How do I stay out of the grave like you did?*

Rodriguez: *You don't have to die. Get out of the gang and stay in school. But this takes courage, and I know each of you in this room has that courage from listening to you today. Your homies may not want you to leave them, but you have to, to survive. The streets have nothing; remember that. Stay in school. Learn. You know what I'm saying?*

You could have heard the proverbial pin drop. Never before had I witnessed students so intensely connected into a piece of literature. When offered the learning opportunity, these students accepted the challenge, read a book for the first time, left their school and traveled to a university, talked to and listened to the author of the book.

The students began that afternoon quiet and reticent. They left the room animated, talking about parts of the book they now wanted to reread, talking about their impression of Luis Rodriguez. They also talked about themselves, no longer invisible. They held on to their books, books they now owned. I was convinced they had read every word—the covers of these once new books now showed wear—and they had shown us all the power of literature under the guidance of a passionate and determined teacher, Logan Manning. I have quoted to students more often than I can remember Aristotle's conviction in *The Poetics* that great literature moves people to act. I have always believed this to be true. On that day, with those students, Logan, and Rodriguez, I absolutely knew it to be true. (See Figure 4.3 for thank-you notes that students wrote to Luis Rodriguez.)



**Figure 4.3**

Logan's students' notes of thanks to Luis Rodriguez

### Logan's work with her students paid off:

For many the impact of that day was long lasting. Students asked for other books like *Always Running*. They interacted differently with me as a teacher because they had had a chance to interact with me outside the school building that for so many carried stigmas. Some students began to ask more questions and to grapple with the idea that their own lives were not foretold even if that was the message many of them had received year after year in their schooling. Students shared a positive experience with reading that countered the constraining experiences they previously held.

I can't claim that all the students were dramatically transformed or experienced widespread academic success as a result. These were students who had complicated lives and difficult experiences in school. I can say that they left that year having enjoyed and connected with a book and having experienced respect for their opinions about a book. While this might not sound revolutionary, for youths who face stigma and have difficulty engaging in classrooms, a positive experience with reading can open their eyes to more human ways of interacting with peers and teachers and begin to take hold of more positive scripts.

A group of adjudicated young people, students who had never read a book before, reading *Always Running* and embracing it as personally meaningful might seem an unrealistic goal. Yet Logan's careful planning and deep commitment to both her students and to the power of literature made this connection possible. We can help our students—all of our students—love literature as we do.

Grouping, privileging voice, encouraging exploration, discovery, curiosity, and taking risks—Logan combined all

these elements to engage her students. But this experience also addresses another issue close to my heart—expectations. These invisible, urban students, when provided the opportunity, were not passive and decidedly engaged.

Although I have arranged many author conversations and interactions for my students—high school and college—no experience has surpassed what I observed and experienced that day. I was privileged to witness the power of literature as an observer, not a teacher. I was privileged to observe Logan’s creativity, her ability to think outside the box to address educational equity for her students. I witnessed high school students totally immersed and engaged with a literary text and then with the author. I have had many unique and life-changing experiences in my teaching career; on that day, many seemingly divergent pathways melded into a unified and determined one—one anchored in the power of literature to move, to inspire, but also to teach, to be relevant, and to be monumental in the lives of our students—inside and outside the classroom. I carry these students, Logan Manning, and Luis Rodriguez with me every day.

As English majors, Logan and I read *Always Running* and were engaged and intensely curious; we appreciated the style in which Rodriguez conveys his message. We achieved identification, as Burke (1969) defines it. As English teachers, however, we consciously engaged with the novel in a different way, rereading it as our students might, creating learning and discussion environments conducive to encouraging students to read and experience it firsthand. Finally, we approached the novel as our students might. In our work, we must allow for our students’ “So what?” “So, what do I get from reading these books, most of ’em by dead people?” Langer (2000) calls this “what counts as knowing”:

*learning as being socially based, and cognition (in particular, ways of thinking) as growing out of those socially based experiences. Within social settings, children learn how different forms of knowledge “look like.” As children learn to manipulate the tools of language to serve the functions and reach the ends they see around them, their ability to think and reason develops in a culturally appropriate way. . . . Learners’ cognitive uses are selective, based upon the uses to which literacy is put within a community, and the learners’ beliefs about “what counts” within that community. (1)*

If we begin to think of the literature we teach from varied perspectives—as a passionate English major, an English teacher, and even, as Dewey and Freire describe, a co-learner, then, the way we create engagement pathways for reading literature changes. We see our students as an audience—distinctive yet multifaceted, filled with interests not necessarily ours—but just as curious, as adventuresome, always willing to take a risk. I have learned much and continue to learn much from them, particularly, when we explore the “so what” together.

***Children learn the literacies of survival and education, regardless of class and race.***

—R. Joseph Rodríguez, University of Texas-El Paso (July 27, 2014)

*To have a full competency in expression, images, stories, and words is power. This helps establish a personal authority that any member of a free society needs to contribute and positively impact that society. Imposed ignorance, bad schooling, or illiteracy gives that power to others. Poverty—which hampers the participation of persons as full, autonomous, creative, and adequately resourced beings—is also how one relinquishes power. Literature, rooted in books, although accessed by many means, is how stories and/or poems carry us toward such a world. It is therefore a revolutionary and healing necessity. Literature is one vital way dreams are realized. (Luis Rodriguez, author and activist, personal communication, January 21, 2015)*