

## PARALYSIS FROM ANALYSIS

## Arguing for a Break from Traditional High School English

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To start, it is important to acknowledge that the genesis of American schooling springs from the religious instruction provided to the children of New England Puritans and Congregationalists. The reading curriculum of the American colonies was what John Locke called "the ordinary road of the Hornbook, Primer, Psalter, Testament, and Bible," texts that were used for the dual function of teaching both reading and religion (see Monaghan, 1989, p. 53). Early American schooling was synonymous with religious education; learning to read meant learning to read the Psalms, prayers, the Bible. Eventually, the common school evolved, and so did private and religiously affiliated schools. However, it is not a stretch to understand how the heritage of the American high school English classroom accounts for its striking resemblance to classrooms of yore that used canonical religious texts for paying the way to reading as well as to righteousness. It is also easy to understand how current practices are rooted in the fervent, unassailable belief that meaning is imbued in text and that text is indeed sacred.

The high school English class that relies primarily on literary analysis as its teaching and learning strategy is not sinister, but it is myopic. A curriculum defined by single texts and students' reading, writing, and discussions of those texts is a dogmatism-bound, restrictive course of study that requires limited student engagement with curriculum or with each other. Using Amabile's concept of the creativity intersections, Ambrose (2009) suggested that the workplace with its "carrot and stick" motivation can thwart intrinsic motivation, the driver behind creative and technical and motor skills that combine for optimal creative productivity (p. 176). An English class that employs the single methodology of literary analysis is the classroom analogy for Henry Ford's assembly line with its fragmented yet repetitive work processes.

### Operating Under the Influence of Tradition

English teachers in training at the university level attend classes in both English and education. Regardless of the particular undergraduate experience, English majors intending to teach English usually take some kind of requisite "methods" course in addition to their classes in literature. Usually taught through a school or department of education, the methods course surveys various teaching methods for integrating and teaching the English curriculum that includes literature and varied language arts like writing and speaking. Methods courses foster the entry-level English teachers' skills and dispositions in using the English language arts—reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing—to create instructional plans for students' learning that align with national and state curriculum standards. In addition to content knowledge, preservice candidates must become fluent with various pedagogical strategies as well before they begin practice. Little (2009) says that teacher preparation programs should help teachers ingrain various approaches to teaching in order to "... use and encourage higher-level thinking and ... employ metacognitive approaches like concept mapping as strategies for teachers' use throughout their teaching and not just with special populations" (p. 360).

Once teachers leave university to begin careers teaching English in high schools, they often start by replicating practices that they themselves experienced as English students at the high school and university levels. Schools of education, professional associations at state and national levels, and individual state departments of education promulgate the need to address subject-area standards and skills. Therein lies the rub: it is possible to plan lessons that nominally address standards but do little to engage students in actively complex, meaningful ways. The college-level literature course seems to be the prevailing model from which many contemporary high school English courses have been drawn. Said one student teacher, "Even if I had a creative English teacher in high school, it was undone by four years of uncreative college professors who just 'professed' about books" (M. Benson, personal communication, July 18, 2010). Having been English majors, most English teachers come by this mode of teaching honestly—or naively. The long heritage and status quo of many high school departments of English inadvertently or deliberately conspire to restrict possibilities for the beginning English teacher and make creation of new practice formidable.

The default, traditional approach to teaching English is problematic because it enacts a single strategy for teaching and learning: reading an assigned piece of literature and analyzing it through verbal and/or written discussion. Why does such a limited methodology of literary analysis continue to hold sway in so many high school English classrooms? One block to innovative teaching is the English classroom might just be teachers' fear, habit, and familiarity, in that order. Once hired into high school English departments, beginning teacher

likely eschew the newer, integrated methodologies of their teacher education programs in favor of local methods in order to assimilate into the culture of their new workplace and adhere to the expectations of students, parents, and fellow teachers. Beginning teachers generally follow the status quo of their local school; the immediate need to keep a teaching job and earn tenure win out over risking new implementation or different practices (Pierce, 2007). For a beginning teacher, following the practices and advice of experienced English faculty is a highly visible way of ensuring professional survival among students and peers alike. Classroom teaching that begins as imitative or even as homage to other English teachers becomes habit after enough practice. With veteran teachers often assigned as untrained mentor teachers, beginning English teachers are guided into institutional practice by peer mentors who often operate under the direct supervision of the school administration.

Theorists and practitioners question the usefulness of literary analysis as a way to help students learn much of anything—especially about literature and literary criticism (Graff, 2009; Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Byrnum, 2010). Graff suggested that a certain kind of literary analysis might actually be a way to keep students out of meaningful critical conversations about novels and poetry. Graff further argued that the "standard literature essay" is based on a monological model that is not engaged in any meaningful way with the views of others. He sees the literary essay as closely related to the five-paragraph essay that might ask students to include supporting ideas from others—but in reaction to a predetermined theme (pp. 8–9). Denied choice and voice in their writing, students muddle on best as they might and writing or saying what they believe their teacher expects them to say.

Wiggins (2009) noted an irony with regard to writing in school and English class particularly because "... in the real world, Audience and Purpose matter in ways that school often shields writers from ... It just has to be on topic, handed in on time, and be four-five pages" (p. 30). The methodologies employed in too many English Language Arts (ELA) classes require low-level recall of plot and character and analysis of theme—all of which can be easily procured from one of many of today's online versions of CliffNotes, SparkNotes, or myriad assistance websites that help students respond to their teachers' prompts with little, if any, real analysis at all. Given that many texts and activities for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills in English class remain the same throughout time, is it any wonder why gifted students are bored in many ELA classes, why the light of creative intelligence is dimmed, and why the spark of the teacher's energy is dampened in this static environment?

It seems, however unwittingly, English teachers have clung to a dogmatic notion that writing about literature helps students think, reason, appreciate culture, and write more intelligently despite little evidence to suggest that is the case. Nevertheless, many English teachers persist in a teaching practice

that does little to encourage reading, illuminate literature and controversies, or engage students' original thinking.

### Under the Influence of Testing

In varying degrees, high stakes state testing, the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and the SATs all employ the same methodology by requiring students to read and analyze texts and then write about the text or select the best answer among a multiple choice list. Often, the very texts selected for classroom study are those likely to appear on AP exams or those that can be found in basal text and anthologies. In and of itself, there is nothing sinister about the AP test format except that, perhaps because it is externally assessed without contextual knowledge of the writer, it tends to employ the vacuous kind of prompt and predetermined theme that encourages students to engage in writing that lacks originality or meaningfulness. Graff (2009) argued that students are not engaged in controversy or literary criticism at all when they are forced to write pseudoarguments in literature classes and AP tests that "compare and contrast poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, for instance, while 'analyzing' the significance of dark and night in each." Graff faults this sort of traditional writing assignment because:

assignments like those ... actually train students in how to be pointless, that there is nothing at stake in academic writing, that there are no consequences as there are in the rhetorical world outside of school. So don't ask questions, just do whatever the teacher wants and get on with it. (p. 9)

But the AP and SAT tests are a couple among many standardized tests in students' careers. In this age of accountability that has emerged from the 1990s push for teacher accountability and standards-based education, federal legislation has prompted states to imitate testing at nearly all levels of the K-12 spectrum in most subject areas. Federal programs like No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2009) have intensified the importance of testing because incentives and funding are tied to successful test performance considered tantamount to student achievement. For schools facing unprecedented budget cuts every dollar counts, and for administrators, whose faces sometimes grace the local papers when their schools do not meet the national measure for success, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—the stakes are high. While the push toward testing satiates community desires to improve the educational system by making more public the relative success or failure of schools and their teachers, it has compromised flexibility in the curriculum and the time in the year to deliver it.

Teachers are more pressed than ever to prepare students for successful performance on standardized testing and are often asked to repeat the testing if the best results up to three times in a school year for each subject area. Hart and

Teeter (2002) found that 73% of adults surveyed supported testing to determine student achievement and supported holding schools and teachers accountable for those scores. External and internal pressures on teachers and students to perform well on standardized tests can diminish creative intelligence in the classroom.

This is not to suggest that students cannot both learn the skills and content necessary to perform successfully on state testing and master them through creative and inventive means (Feng, VanTassel-Baska, Quek, Bai, & O'Neill, 2004). But school districts are adopting textbooks less frequently (Howard, 2008), are adopting fewer single title texts, have less money to spend on students because more is being spent on employee insurance and retirement, and districts are less likely to provide much needed professional development for the teachers to encourage creative conveyance of curriculum in the classroom.

Hart and Teeter (2002) found that 91% of adults surveyed supported programs to encourage teacher professional development and growth because all groups in the study recognized the vital importance of effective teaching to the overall quality of education. But as budgets tighten, administrators make difficult choices that may include reduction in professional development and elimination of non-contact days for peer collaboration and planning. It is no wonder then that according to U.S. Department of Education statistics, about 269,000 of the nation's 3.2 million public school teachers quit the field in the 2003-2004 school year with over half of those leaving because they felt dissatisfied with teaching (Parker-Pope, 2008). Without the fire of professional development to inspire teachers and keep them current on best practice, without funding to invest in new technology, relevant single-title texts or innovative software, what can teachers, beginning and veteran, do to enliven their practice and to engage creative intelligence in the classroom for themselves and their students? Darling-Hammond (2010) asserted:

To improve education through the use of standards and assessments, it is critically important to invest not only in well-designed assessments, but also in teacher expertise—through professional development, instructional assistance, and improved hiring and retention of teachers—and well-designed and plentiful curriculum resources ... (p. 73)

### Engaging with the English Curriculum

With very little, if any, direct professional development, teachers can loosen the bonds of their own pedagogical dogmatism, reinvigorate their own teaching practice, and light fires beneath learners of all kinds. It begins with a shift in thinking from teacher-centered inquiry to student-centered inquiry. Higgins (2009) reminded us that the "majority of Americans will not write academic papers for a living. The writing tasks that are required of us in the real world

are . . . context-bound precise and focused tasks . . ." (p. 31). Students could use and develop their language arts to forge investigations, create original work responses, explore and explain various disciplines, as well as speak meaningfully for themselves by employing an array of language arts in projects that go beyond mere textual analysis and extend into creating original work. Students enjoy role-playing and problem-based learning, which can develop myriad communication skills. By capitalizing on this generation's desire for collaboration and social exchange (Howe & Strauss, 2000), teachers can use problem-based learning to broaden understanding of texts and, perhaps even more importantly, contexts at little or no additional cost to the teacher, building, or district. These methods are especially powerful for gifted children because of their heightened awareness of their world. As Cohen and Frydenberg (1996) reminded us, gifted children:

are profoundly concerned about their world. They feel that they must DO something to make it better, to preserve it, to alleviate suffering. This energy, commitment and compassion needs to be focused on making a difference—a harnessing of "child power."

(p. 36)

Problem-based learning plays into this desire of gifted children to make and do and solve for the betterment of society.

Considering that professional development is somewhat limited during times of economic hardship, teachers tend to fall back to what they know both pedagogically and textually. Using texts that teachers already have available in their classrooms or available affordably or for free through web-based resources, and without any additional expenditure for new materials, teachers can employ more student-centered strategies like Socratic Seminars to bring texts to life in new ways for their students. In Socratic Seminars, first developed by Mortimer Adler in the early 1980s, teachers typically bring a text to class that may be consumed in one sitting (Adler, 1982, 1998). This may be a selection from a longer work studied by the class like a chapter of a novel or a selection or may be a shorter independent work like a poem or essay. The teacher has the students read the selection, often marking it with notations that will assist in the seminar to come. Then students, usually seated with the teacher in a circle to represent the importance of every voice, are asked to share with each other what they found within the text, sometimes related to a prompt established at the outset of the seminar. At no time does the teacher validate or invalidate student comments, rather, through questions à la Socrates' giddy method, the teacher can help guide the student-centered inquiry. Because the teacher is not in possession of "the right answer" in this type of discussion, students begin to rely on themselves and each other to understand the significance of what they have read rather than waiting out the teacher. Students become more independent learners and thinkers and more creative in their connections to learning

because they are not limited by the typical classroom guessing game of ELA discussions where students know they are simply trying to find the answer they think the teacher wants to hear. Strategies such as the Socratic Seminar create authentic purposes and audience for students.

Students become more independent learners and thinkers and more creative in their connections to learning because they are not limited by the typical classroom guessing game of ELA discussions where students know they are simply trying to find the answer they think the teacher wants to hear. Little (2011) says that a key element of Socratic questioning is the teacher's skill at probing student responses to the questions with further questions, moving among the questioning levels to elicit deeper, more carefully reasoned and complex thoughts from students. Strategies such as the Socratic Seminar create authentic purposes and audience for students and can be especially effective with gifted learners.

Another powerful pedagogical method shown to be effective with students of all intellectual levels is Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PBL allows students and teachers to engage in real-world scenarios in order to master skills and content. Students are given a role in the scenario and empowered to learn what they need in order to successfully answer the questions posed by the scenario. The need for learning arises from the students' needs to right the disequilibrium of the "ill-structured problem" (Gallagher & Stepien, 1996) rather than from the dictates of the teacher, something very appealing to most gifted learners. PBL encourages cross-curricular connections and higher-level thinking while promoting active and hands-on learning. One reason this is especially vital with gifted students is their existential leanings prompt them to ask the relevance of studies and are not satisfied with pat answers.

The real-world problem solving of PBL can answer the question of relevance for the students through the execution of exercise. Problem-based learning is focused, experimental learning "minds-on, hands-on," which centers on real-world issues and problems and their solutions (Torp & Sage, 2002). PBL curriculum encourages vocabulary acquisition by creating disequilibrium and a desire to know in order to complete the role successfully and perform within the scenario. For example, a student in the role of a first-aid provider at a swimming pool might need to know that paramedics glove-up to prevent the spread of bloodborne pathogens—and consequently—what a bloodborne pathogen is (Kash, 2009).

Even in a language arts class, a student participating in PBL might become anything from a doctor, to a nuclear engineer (Gallagher & Stepien, 1996), to a lawyer or an archaeologist. For example, in an exercise designed to teach inductive and deductive reasoning, students may be asked to play the role of a CSI, or crime scene investigator. Here students could be handed actual evidence bags filled with belongings of a victim of a crime whose identity is unknown. Students must organize the evidence into categories, make assumptions, develop



hypotheses, and submit their ideas about the person's identity or cause of death to the "lead investigator," in reality, the teacher, in the form of a crime report. Imagine the authenticity a writing teacher can have teaching the importance of audience and purpose when students are playing the role and writing for an audience other than the teacher and in a rhetorical form other than the five-paragraph essay. Teachers can begin to meet the demand of career-related learning standards being adopted in many states by using writing in real-world contexts. Layer on to that an element of literature being studied in an English class. In a five-minute warm up activity, students might share a weather report from the witches in *Macbeth*, or in a ten-minute free writing exercise, students may provide an excerpt from a letter home by one of the sailors on the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick*, or in an entire class period, students can don a toga and portray Aristotle as they decry violations of his Poetics in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Wolf and Brandt (1998) remind us of the importance of integration of various disciplines, something PBL does with relative ease and with tremendous implications for integration in the ELA classroom.

What is helpful for students in this case is also helpful for teachers. The majority of the work for teachers when using PBL is spent in preparing the question, scenario, and roles as well as securing resource materials for the student researchers. The Internet has greatly improved the teacher preparation and student inquiry processes. Once the students engage in the scenario, the teacher becomes a facilitator and guides student inquiry; classroom management becomes easier as more of the students are more engaged throughout. The pace of the PBL class is lively, and the energy is contagious. Homework can be minimal as PBL can be employed in the classroom setting with little or no preliminary set up by the students. Grading can be conducted through myriad means: observation, self-reflection, peer feedback, and write-up of results of inquiry just to name a few. PBL provides a perfect foil to this age of Internet plagiarism since the more authentic a role and scenario can be, the less likely students will be to borrow whole-cloth from the web. For teachers experiencing the grind of teaching the same prep multiple times in one day, PBL is reinvigorating because the authentic inquiry is always new, different, and dependent upon the interest and prior knowledge of the students in each class.

Though students benefit in many ways from methods like PBL, perhaps the greatest benefit to students is the benefit to teachers. By using creative means of curricular conveyance like PBL, teachers and students are freer to become more creative and engaged in learning in the moment (Kash, 2009). Instead of relying on teacher-initiated inquiry, which is tiring to both the teacher and the students, and consistently puts the teacher in the spotlight, methods like PBL inspire students to initiate the learning and the inquiry. It does not sacrifice the building of foundational skills assessed in most state testing. And learning through PBL is simply more fun. Cohen and Frydenberg (1996) say that gifted students excel in identifying patterns and relationships necessary for complex

activities like PBL and Socratic Seminar. The ability to recognize patterns and relationships is also fostered for gifted learners in English class through varied activities that promote the study of language itself and elements like grammar, poetics, and vocabulary. Little (2011) says that language study "... encourages the habits of mind of the critical reader and the practiced writer ..." deepens understanding of literary texts through aesthetic and linguistic appreciation, and helps gifted learners develop the tools and skills of the discipline (p. 157). Such varied strategies increase the likelihood of creative productivity in classrooms.

So literary texts themselves can indeed provide inspiration and curricular springboards for creating units of study that explore and critique our worlds and perspectives. Posing an essential question to frame a unit of study and "design backward" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) from the intended learning is a useful way to plan instruction while also planning for students to use various language arts skills and tools in meaningful, artful, and relevant ways. For instance, using Rachel Simon's *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, a memoir about the year the author spent with her sister Beth, a woman with intellectual disabilities, the following essential question could frame a unit of study in English class: "How can one relationship affect the trajectory of a life?" Such a question invites analysis of the relationship between Rachel and her sister Beth or between Rachel and her mother or between Beth and one of the bus drivers, and so on. A good essential question transcends place and time, so in this case, the essential question invites students' exploration of a significant relationship within their own lives, someone as intimate as a family member or perhaps a childhood hero; this activity might result in the development of an essay or poetry, small group discussion, or photography exhibit with narrative. Backward design allows the teacher to plan instruction as well as create strategic opportunities for students to create original work inspired by a single text but that helps students to:

- use new skills and knowledge across the English language arts to go well beyond the text itself;
- explore and construct meaning in various modes;
- investigate a variety of diverse content and disciplines, literature, genres, modalities, and media;
- work independently and collaboratively with others;
- use and explore a variety of the language arts and multimodal forms of expression to create responses;
- make personal meaning and knowledge from exploration of literature, self, others, and the world;
- extend and tier the curriculum for gifted learners.

Backward design, promoted since the standards-based movements of the 1990s, has seen a resurgence of popularity as education reformers (Marzano,

2007; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) emphasize the importance of establishing a clear objective and essential question, but encourage student creativity in demonstrating mastery of learning. Such encouragement takes its shape in teacher-designed, strategically structured assignments or curricular scaffold-ing. VanTassel-Baska (2011) insists that 20 years of research provide evidence that higher-level instruction and flexible curriculum delivery challenge gifted learners and all students as well.

### Implications for Gifted Students

Inspiring gifted students to rise to higher cognitive levels by requiring more authentic and complex work can lead to developing students' creative intelligence. More generally, education the world over are familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy from the 1950s. Some 40 years later, educational psychologists led by Lorin Anderson, himself a student of Bloom, revised Bloom's Taxonomy to reflect the movement toward outcomes-based education (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Forhand, 2005). The revision puts greater emphasis on the creation of new knowledge. Marzano (2000) revised Bloom's Taxonomy further to include: knowing, organizing, applying, analyzing, generating, inter-acting, and evaluating. Relative to a taxonomy that encourages higher levels of thinking and complexity in teaching and learning, the "teaching to the test" methodology reduces the hand of creativity and original work since multiple-choice tests cannot assess higher-level thinking and performance in testing formats that include a series of content question stems, each followed by its correct answer and three optional distractors. In theory, expansion of the literary canon and the pedagogical toolkit are necessary to keep students engaged; in practice, budgets are tight, and principals are not buying new texts or professional development for teachers (Howard, 2008). Standardized testing does not inspire teachers or students; but in practice, standardized tests are accountability measures for evaluating schools, teachers, and students considered, for reasons financial, practical, and political, to be an educational priority at this time. Interestingly, Darling-Hammond (2010) observes that when state testing consisted of performance assessments, a hallmark of early and mid-1990s standards-based education, "teachers assigned more writing and more complex mathematical problem solving, and that achievement on these higher-order skills improved" (p. 69). The problem seems to be not with the tyranny of testing and accountability but in what kind of test is administered and what the test asks students to do. Performance assessments and preparation for performance assessments require more complex, authentic work. And so the nettlesome problem of the traditional English class format is not with literature or with writing; it is what teachers ask students to do with literature and writing about literature. Greater reliance on student-centered pedagogical and curriculum approaches like problem-based learning and backward design promote more

ment toward synthesis and creation, highlighting and strengthening creative intelligence and allowing gifted children to shine and inspire while maintaining their need for choice and personal power (Dredger, 2008).

### Recommendations for Practical Application

English teaching that integrates interdisciplinary and conceptual learning with varied modes of curricular engagement can open avenues for higher-order thinking, complexity, creativity, and manipulation of skills and ideas for gifted learners. When the 3 o'clock bell rings, and the planning for tomorrow begins, teachers need more than theory to prepare for their lessons. Little (2011) suggests starting with the literature selected for instructional purposes and being thoughtful regarding the types and levels of questions asked about the literature for discussion and writing (p. 152). This is indeed a start. From provocative, challenging literature, English teachers can scaffold the English curriculum throughout Bloom's taxonomy, and its more recent iterations, and create opportunities for student-centered performance assessments. These strategies use literature to promote greater student achievement and engagement.

What hope is there, then, for English Language Arts teachers seeking to engage their students, especially their gifted students, and breaking with the asure to the heights of creativity? Crossing boundaries and breaking with the dogmatic disciplinary traditions of the high school English classroom seem to be a good place to begin the revision. Borrowing from the fields of curriculum studies and gifted education, English teachers can open their students' learning potential and creativity by unlocking the paralytic constraints of a discipline that privileges literary analysis as a primary method for teaching and learning in English. Pedagogical inventiveness across the secondary English curriculum may well ignite the fire of creative intelligence within all students ... and do no less for their teachers.

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