



# The High School Connection

No More Just Making Do with What We Have Done

**W**elcome to “The High School Connection”! It is very exciting to once again offer a column for those who teach older adolescents. Many of us have occasionally experienced frustration as we design the right lessons for high school students. We often search high and low for tips, helps, and strategies that are not designed for the very young or for those in the middle. With the topics covered in this column, we can say goodbye to making do with strategies and philosophies that only partially fit the needs of older students. This column will be uniquely ours and will put us back in our own spotlight. Most importantly, it will empower us to “meet the challenge” (this issue’s theme) of teaching thoughtful lessons while preparing students for state and national assessments, for college, and for life. With your feedback and suggestions, we can collectively create . . . a high school connection!

Speaking of assessments and challenges, I was recently reminded of the educational needs of older teens while I supervised several student teachers. The student teachers, all in their twenties and

eager to do good jobs, were working well with their cooperating teachers. They had reviewed the classroom teachers’ policies and unit plans. They had also looked through numerous files to find teaching helps and possible lesson designs. In some cases, but never often enough for a diehard supervisor like me, the students had even revisited the state core to determine what objectives needed to be taught.

Although it is now passé and I’m a structuralist at heart, I often yearn to see more explicit lessons in writing, vocabulary development, editing, and critical thinking skills. But despite these preferences, I was very pleased with the students’ teaching. However, as the days passed and I more frequently observed the students in action, I began to see a practice that concerned me. What I observed in each class were well-crafted explorations of literature, and to varying degrees, the high school students were engaged. Thoughtful lessons and quasi-engaged students could be good enough by some standards, but I was saddened by the regrettable practice that had disinterested so many adolescents. Each of the

three student teachers were teaching from a canon of literature that has been around, and often boring adolescents, for forty years.

I was interested in the selected texts, and after asking the usual “who, what, where, when, and why” questions, I received these answers: The class novels were taken from the terrific but tedious titles we all know and love: *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Crucible*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Red Badge of Courage*. Please understand that I mean no disrespect when I call these novels tedious. It’s just that these novels have been around since I was in high school, and if you’ll permit me to exaggerate the tedium, let’s just say my high school reading took place in the decade when students and Mick Jagger were yearning for satisfaction.

As a current devotee and professor of young adult literature, I wondered why a few contemporary and non-tedious titles had not been even a small part of any teacher’s

literature program. My student teachers gave me the answer to that question, too—an answer that I thought we had long ago reasoned against. Classic novels, the student teachers had been told, were timeless, whatever that means. As an added bonus, their literary merit best prepared young students for national assessments, college, and life. Studying the classics, the premise continued, would greatly reinforce reading skills. These skills would build an aptitude that would help create a “proficient” school—even a “No Child Left Behind” proficient school.

After twenty years of watching the wheels of public education go round and round, I thought I had heard everything, but this response stopped me in my tracks. Aligning our practice with national concerns and current student aptitudes is inherent in our job descriptions. High school English teachers know we can only monitor student progress and make adjustments in instruction when we know the educational goal before us. The discussion surrounding the goal, and particularly the pedagogy we use to accomplish it, becomes the crucial discussion.

With national interest in student progress, it smacks of ingratitude that many of us are troubled by the sweeping federal legislation that was signed into law in 2001. After all, dedicated English educators are encouraged by all efforts that help meet the challenge of improving reading and writing. Preparing students to be thinkers, readers, and writers is hard work, and we welcome all help. Importantly, our commitment would never allow us to casually ignore an

ossified educational system that does not promise strong learning outcomes.

But before we become too confident with our professional commitment and the classes we teach today, please consider this sad announcement. On a national level, NAEP recently reported that American children (at least in their representative sample) have not shown any significant improvement in reading skills compared to grade level in the last eleven years of school. If, for example, we currently teach eleventh grade English, this may mean that our students have made no significant gains towards or beyond grade level at comprehension or synthesizing texts since the first grade. Obviously, this critical information must reform our philosophy and practice. If we continue teaching what and how we taught ten, twenty, thirty, and even forty years ago, it is time to illuminate our pedagogy. Because it appears our adolescents have not made great strides in their reading abilities and because we continue to compete with their fast-paced culture, we face the never-ending challenge to entertain. It is plausible that many young adult novels and other contemporary “classics” would provide entertainment and authentic interest to greater numbers of young readers. If the corollary holds true, that interest and literary appeal ensure greater student engagement and that engagement leads to comprehension, then it seems reasonable to assume sound deconstructions of text will occur. Logic, and not instinct, suggests that reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* is not a selection that best guarantees all

adolescents will become “proficient” readers, no matter what tradition might dictate and regardless of what national assessments may seemingly call for.

Creating a new high school literacy must begin simply. It must begin with new teacher behaviors: thinking outside the box, swimming against the current, and coloring outside the lines. Action begins with the initial conviction that selections other than the time-honored classics offer philosophical and rhetorical challenges. Furthermore, a new literacy begins with the recognition that students welcome diverse representations of literature, and that any number of texts can engender authentic and instructive literary conversations. By capitalizing on the interests and skill levels of their students, teachers must trust themselves to choose literature that can bring maximum and “proficient” results. It is a tough challenge, but a challenge that we are cut out for. After all, we’re English teachers; we can do anything!

*After earning an English and music education degree from Utah State University in Logan, Utah, (Dr.) Kay Smith enjoyed seven years of teaching high school English. In 1993 and 2000 respectively, she earned an M.Ed. and Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Brigham Young University. After working ten action-packed years as a secondary principal, she left what she loved and decided to do what she really loved: teach English education on the college level. She currently teaches Young Adult Literature and Methods of Literacy at Utah Valley State College. She is married to Michael D. Smith, and they are the proud parents of seven children and proud grandparents of six. She can be reached at smithky@uvsc.edu.*