

## In Defense of Messing About in Literature

**“W**hy are we doing this?” The voice—male, indignant, defiant—came sneering from the rear rows of the classroom with all the pinpoint precision of a well-aimed spitball. We were several days into *Romeo & Juliet*, and I was only a few months into my second year of teaching high school English. The role of soliloquies was on that day’s agenda. Even though this was 1996, still two years before the advent of content standards in the state of California, I had been given a slim binder of 9th-grade literary terms at my new teacher orientation. From this, I knew I was required to teach soliloquy in the context of Shakespeare’s play.

And so, after reading the speeches that open Act II, Scene 2 and explaining these lines in modern day English, I gave my students a worksheet on which they were asked to rephrase key terms from the soliloquies in their own language—essentially asking them to replicate the lecture I’d just given.

“Why are we doing this?”

I suddenly found myself fumbling with the worksheets as I tried to pass them out, and I felt the tips of my ears supernova with embarrassment.

“Um . . . it’s important to be able to, um, put Shakespeare’s language in a modern context because it’s . . . a . . . skill . . . you’ll use, um, later in life?”

I wasn’t fooling anybody. If the purpose of the lesson wasn’t clear to me, why did I think it would be clear to my students? This wasn’t the first time I’d heard this question, and even worse, it had to be asked of me several more times before I was able to ask an even more important question of myself:

why was *my* purpose for doing something (reading this book, writing that paper) always at the center of instruction? Surely there were instances when I could (and probably should) turn over the reins to my students. In my own experience as a student, reading and writing were intensely personal pursuits. In fact, even though I was a confident reader and writer, I often balked at assignments that seemed to hold no personal relevance to me. Yet this was the very kind of teaching in which I often found myself engaging: teacher-directed, with little or no personal input from the students. As teachers, why should we expect students to naturally engage with our lessons when we seldom take into account what the students themselves might want to get out of a text or a piece of writing?

Yet this is where many teachers currently find themselves, locked in both by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and the restrictive, reductive ways in which they’ve been implemented at the site and/or district level. But allowing students to read and/or write for their own purposes—“Messing About,” as science writer David Hawkins (2002) calls it—should not be anathema to the English language arts classroom, even in an era where standards and testing are encouraging (and in some cases even mandating) teachers to march through curricula in a lock-step fashion. Just because these standards and tests appear to have been concocted in a studentless vacuum does not mean we have to follow their lead and banish the students’ own interests and passions from the classroom.

## Theoretical Foundations for Messing About in Literature

It is not exactly a revolutionary idea to leverage our students' interests, but current conditions often make it difficult. As a standards document, the CCSS is like many of its predecessors in that it focuses on the "things" students will find in a text, such as theme, elements of characterization, stylistic devices, etc. This approach asks students to adopt an efferent (as opposed to aesthetic) stance toward the books they read, focusing on, as Louise Rosenblatt (1978) put it, "what will remain as the residue after the reading" (p. 24). In the CCSS (and especially in its emphasis on close reading), students read for information, not for enjoyment, which, for most of us, runs counter to why we read literature in the first place. We certainly may learn things as we read, but we do not read a novel with the same purpose as we read a history textbook or a recipe or a set of assembly instructions. We read literature aesthetically, "to live the adventure that unfolds in the book" (Beers, 1998, p. 46).

When we overemphasize the importance of unearthing information in literary texts, turning the act of reading into a scavenger hunt, we ask our students to remove themselves from the very personal nature of reading, which is one reason why some students eventually "turn off" from reading assigned texts in school. Gallagher (2009) tells us as much when he details the "tsunami" of "overarching questions, chapter study questions, essay questions, vocabulary lessons, activities for specific chapters, guided reading lessons, directions for setting up a writer's notebook, literary analysis questions, collaborative activities, oral presentations, handouts, transparencies, displays, quizzes, and projects" (p. 61) in his school district's 122-page unit plan for teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/1988). Is it any wonder students have difficulty finding personal value in a book when its instruction is dictated so extensively from above?

And reading is, make no mistake, a selfish venture. As Probst (2004) reminds us, the value of reading—for mature adults as well as small children—stems from self-indulgence. We, as independent adults, read because we enjoy it; we do it for ourselves, for our own purposes, and we are primarily concerned with how a work affects us, or when an efferent focus is needed, what we can learn from

it. Even if we read to learn or to discover how other people think and feel, the act of reading benefits, first and foremost, the reader. If we want our students to understand the aesthetic pleasure of reading, we need to create conditions where they can explore literature and other texts for their own purposes.

Smagorinsky (2008) illustrates the fundamental dichotomy between reading for selfish, aesthetic purposes and enforced, efferent purposes (which is often how schools position the act of reading: as an either/or proposition) by reminding us of the difference between transmission

and constructivism. In my ten years of experience as a high school teacher and, for the last five years, as a teacher educator, it seems as though the transmission model is what is most valued by standards and standardized assessments. As Smagorinsky puts it, it is the assumption "that knowledge is objective and static and capable of being handed down intact from one person to another, from text to student, from lecture to notebook and back again" (p. 7). This is the kind of knowledge valued by standardized tests—and those who teach to them; for example, such advocates teach literature by enforcing the perception that a "right" theme can be found in a text if one only looks hard enough for it.

Constructivism, on the other hand, gets at what Rosenblatt and her philosophical kin are advocating—namely that personal experiences, tentative understandings, cultural backgrounds, and the like influence how meaning is constructed by the reader. In rich texts, for example, there may be a range of plausible interpretations, which is an idea not exactly championed by the CCSS or easy to test through standardized, multiple-choice assessments. Blau (2003) demonstrates this with Theodore Roethke's poem, "My Papa's Waltz" (p. 61), where some of his students read it as a fond childhood memory and others read it as a poem about abuse or neglect. Blau reminds us that poems can't simply "mean anything a reader might claim it means," but that "every read-

---

**If we want our students to understand the aesthetic pleasure of reading, we need to create conditions where they can explore literature and other texts for their own purposes.**

---

ing [of Roethke's poem] offered and counted as a viable reading was supported by evidence to warrant it" (p. 75). This is good news for us as teachers when it comes to writing and discussion, but it's more problematic when we consider how our students (and, increasingly, ourselves) will be evaluated by standardized tests.

Just as important, though, for the discussion of constructivism, is the notion that these competing interpretations of Roethke's poem came about after a process of mediated discussion, underscoring Blau's contention that "reading is . . . a social process, completed in conversation. Students will learn literature best and find many of their best opportunities for learning to become more competent, more intellectually productive, and more autonomous readers of literature through frequent work in groups with peers" (p. 54). What Smagorinsky and Blau both posit is the im-

portance of giving our students a chance to *work with* the text for their own purposes, as opposed to having it dictated to them.

When it comes to making a practical argument for a classroom that values the kinds of things advocated by the authors mentioned above, it is worth considering how these ideas are not strictly confined to the English language arts classroom. In fact, I believe one of the best places to turn is, strangely enough, to a science teacher. Hawkins (2002) wrote about this very issue long before public education was gripped by the current mania for standards and accountability. In short, Hawkins advocates for students' freedom to "mess about" in a given subject, exploring it in a way and at a pace that is useful to them and that meets their own educational purposes, but that still results in real learning and is not at odds with whatever goals the teacher has to accomplish, whether those goals be personal or bureaucratic in nature.

Before explaining exactly how "messing about" worked for me with a young adult text, I first need to describe two foundational ideas that are key to Hawkins's argument.

## Tree Learning and the Instructional Triangle

What is meaningful learning, and what does it look like? In his 1965 essay, "On Living in Trees" (2002, pp. 171–191), Hawkins speaks metaphorically, using *trees* to represent the kind of authentic learning we do naturally. The tree, as Hawkins sees it, is the desired mode of teaching and learning. In his experience as a science teacher, students were engaged as active learners when they were free to explore the subject matter based on their own interests and questions. In tree terms, the students were free to move vertically to a new branch, and once there, could move left or right depending on their interest, or perhaps continue to move vertically (or even diagonally) before finding a branch that looked promising to them and on which they could rest a while. Hawkins explains it this way:

The understanding of a subject, the grasp of its structure, comes—in short, *learning* comes—through a self-directed activity of the child, an activity of inventing and discovering. To teach means to *facilitate* learning by surrounding the child with and helping him into, situations where learning can take place. (p. 186)

This emphasis on autonomy and individuality requires that students dig deeply into the subject matter of a class. Whether the class is science or English, students should be free (or encouraged, at the very least) to follow their own interests and to explore the subject matter for their own purposes.

Tree-learning exists in contrast to what Hawkins refers to as ladder-learning: highly programmed (recall Gallagher's 122-page unit plan), where positive movement can only occur in one direction and is strictly sequenced. The rungs on this ladder are evenly spaced, with no diverting horizontal paths to distract from vertical advancement, putting the students' learning in "a strait-jacket and rob[bing] the learner of that autonomy which is his chief means of self-education" (p. 181). In my own experience, "ladder-learning" is all too real as many teachers are made to spend an inordinate amount of time meeting the demands of pacing guides and benchmark tests at the expense of

---

**This emphasis on autonomy and individuality requires that students dig deeply into the subject matter of a class. Whether the class is science or English, students should be free to follow their own interests.**

---

addressing the curriculum through meaningful subject matter that allows students to explore their own passions and purposes. It is worth mentioning, however, that Hawkins's use of ladder-learning as a pejorative stands in contrast to the way Lesesne (2010) employs the ladder as a positive metaphor for building students' reading competence and confidence. In fact, Lesesne's use of "reading ladders" has much in common with Hawkins's version of tree-learning, and the difference in terminology shouldn't be seen as a difference in philosophy.

A necessary offshoot of tree-learning is the importance of devising meaningful subject matter to teach within a stringently standards-based environment. Hawkins explored this issue in his 1967 essay, "I, Thou, and It" (2002, pp. 51–64). Here, Hawkins envisions a triangle. The first two corners, "I" and "Thou," represent the student and the teacher. The third corner of his instructional triangle (the "It") is the rich and engaging instructional material provided by the teacher and the students' freedom to explore their own questions, curiosities, and purposes. The role of this instructional material is to create the common ground upon which teacher and student will stand. The richer the subject matter, the firmer the ground, and the more confidently the teacher can assist the student in his or her journey toward becoming an autonomous learner. Hawkins believes it is crucial for teachers not to neglect this third corner, for there must be "some third thing which is *of interest to the child and to the adult*, in which they can join in outward projection" (p. 60; italics mine). In short, it is through interesting and engaging subject matter provided by the teacher—such as YAL and what we choose to do with it—that students begin to take their first steps toward independence.

Hawkins's version of the instructional triangle comes into play, then, in the way in which we engage our students in their tree-learning. Remembering that the first two corners of the triangle are teacher and student, it is incumbent upon us—as teachers and, presumably, as avid, confident readers—to provide them with instructional material that enriches their journey through the trees. If we only give our students the kind of standardized, top-down material described earlier by Gallagher, it makes sense that students would see reading as a limiting, onerous chore. But if we can help them see that reading is not just pleasurable,

but can be a vehicle by which they can explore their own interests and questions, it is more likely that they will participate in the process.

## Messing About

How do we get to that point? Hawkins believes it comes by letting the students "mess about" in the subject matter of the classroom. In his seminal 1965 essay, "Messing About in Science" (2002, pp. 65–76), Hawkins makes a compelling argument for increased autonomy in student learning—not an outright abolition of curricular guidelines, but at least, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, a loosening of the reins. He makes this argument as a result of his experience with an elementary science class; in it, he proposes three phases to student learning, all of which resist curricular stringency and instead allow for student freedom in exploring the subject matter of science.

In the first phase, which he calls "Messing About," "children are given materials and equipment, or *things*, and are allowed to construct, test, probe, and experiment without superimposed questions or instructions" (p. 68). In the science class, Hawkins found that when students were given this unrestricted time for individual exploration, they were engaged and excited, and they were making discoveries—noting them, losing them, making them again, and sharing them with their peers.

The second phase, "Multiply Programmed," is born out of the problem caused by Messing About. Hawkins notes:

If you once let children evolve their own learning along paths of their choosing, you then must see it through and *maintain* the individuality of their work. You cannot begin that way and then say, in effect, "That was only a teaser," thus using your adult authority to devalue what the children themselves, in the meantime, have found most valuable. (p. 72)

---

**If we can help them see that reading is not just pleasurable, but can be a vehicle by which they can explore their own interests and questions, it is more likely that they will participate in the process.**

---

The problem to which I alluded should be obvious: How does a teacher guide a class in one direction without sacrificing the autonomy created in the Messing About phase? In order to preserve the spirit of Messing About, Hawkins came to advocate the use of “multiply programmed” materials, which are learning materials “designed for the greatest possible variety of topics . . . so that for almost any given way into a subject that a child may evolve on his own, there is

material available which he will recognize as helping him farther along that very way” (p. 72).

How, then, does this add up to anything? In encouraging students to take control of their own learning, how is any common purpose accomplished? Hawkins addresses this concern in the third, unnamed, phase, which is designed to move students into a deeper understanding of the principles they have been studying individually. This untitled phase, arguably the most

conventional of the three, consists of lecture, storytelling, question and answer, and discussion; it grows out of student questions and misunderstandings and “come[s] primarily with discussion, argument, the full colloquium of children and teacher” (p. 75). This phase deepens and extends student understanding of a topic and attempts to tie up some of the loose ends that have unraveled during the other two phases.

### **Messing About in Young Adult Literature**

So how does Hawkins’s work in an elementary science classroom connect to the work of an English language arts classroom? I was introduced to Hawkins’s work by Richard, a science teacher friend with whom I shared the encounter described at the beginning of this article, as well as my nagging suspicion that I had, as a novice teacher, a lot of room to improve. He steered me to Hawkins’s work, which resonated with me immediately, and I began thinking about

how I could apply it to an ELA classroom. One thing I knew: it made sense to make my first tentative steps in this direction with YAL, which I knew, from my own experience as a reader, had a higher likelihood of personal engagement than the more commonly taught classical texts. I didn’t have a wide range of YAL at my disposal, but I did have Chris Crutcher’s (1993) *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* as a 9th-grade text. Crutcher’s book tells the story of the friendship between the title character and Eric “Moby” Calhoun, a high school swimmer who has struggled with weight issues throughout his life. Sarah, who has significant facial scarring, becomes catatonic in class one day, necessitating psychiatric care and spurring Eric, along with his best friend Ellerby, to unravel the mystery of her scars and why she has fallen mute. This rich, provocative text became the vehicle by which I refined the three phases—with much trial and error—over the next few years.

Rather than describing my halting, stumbling progress, I’ll describe what the three phases eventually looked like after some experience incorporating them with my teaching of Crutcher’s book. One thing that bears mentioning at the start of this description is that I think this can work when teachers have to teach from a core text (such as I did, so slim was our selection of YAL), but it would certainly bear even more fruit if students could choose from a range of thematically related texts for independent or small-group reading. While you read, I encourage you to consider how you might use these phases in your classroom if you have such resources.

#### **Phase 1: Messing About**

Because *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* deals with a wide range of hot-button issues (personal identity, body image, child abuse, abortion, psychology, religious fundamentalism, and institutional hypocrisy, to name seven), I wanted to give my students as much of a chance as possible to engage with whatever issues were most interesting to them as they read, recognizing that their interests may change over time and with the understanding that they would eventually choose one issue to work with in greater detail at the completion of their reading.

The “Messing About” phase, then, involved a great deal of individual writing and small-group discussion. To facilitate this and give it some structure,

---

**It made sense to make my first tentative steps in this direction with YAL, which I knew, from my own experience as a reader, had a higher likelihood of personal engagement than the more commonly taught classical texts.**

---

my students came to class each day with a written response to the assigned reading, which was usually one or two chapters each night. There were no particular requirements for this writing, except that it should be a personal response to the literature (an approach favored by authors such as Bushman & Haas, 2005; Miller, 2009; and Probst, 2004). My thinking here was that my students would be able to dig into the issues (of plot, of character, of theme) that mattered to them without me dictating what I thought they should find important.

Also worth noting is that unconventional responses to the text (such as drawings, graphic organizers, or other primarily visual products) were also acceptable, and in allowing them, I tried to honor the work of Purves, Rogers, & Soter (1995): “If we want students to respond genuinely to what they read, we must be careful not to cut off that response or to limit it simply because we lean more toward traditional forms of responding” (p. 130). In other words, if I really wanted my students to “Mess About,” I needed to put as few limits as possible on what that looked like. I also hoped this flexibility prevented my students from seeing the “Messing About” phase as just another reading log or journal entry, both of which can serve a purpose, but with which many students are familiar enough that they can resort to boilerplate “reflection” instead of genuine engagement with the text.

As it turned out, 9th graders needed much more guidance on what a personal response to literature could look like than I thought. Like most things in the English classroom worth doing, from writing groups to literature circles to Socratic seminars, it takes time for students to adjust to this kind of teaching. Student responses (particularly those at the beginning of the book) would often take the form of summary, simply relating the events of the chapter as though they were looking for me to check their comprehension (which was probably not an unreasonable assumption on their part). To open up the range of response types available to them, I shared high-quality examples from their peers (the nontraditional responses mentioned above proved to be particularly eye-opening to students who were locked into the idea of a one- or two-paragraph writing as the only possible way of responding to texts), but I also shared writing of my own where I wrestled with issues from the novel, demonstrating that I didn’t hold the keys to a “per-

fect” understanding any more than they did and that asking questions puts readers in a better position to find the answers they need.

Over time, I saw the students come to engage in highly personal responses to the text: from the superficial (who is Raymond Burr, and why is he referenced at the beginning of the novel?) to the complex (a very religious student arguing with Crutcher about the perceived blasphemy she saw in one character’s car), and they wrestled with passages that confounded or amused them. Some students would retell a portion of a chapter from the perspective of a different character, and in one or two instances, I had students write a short version of something they wished had happened instead. In the process, they were writing about all of the kinds of things I would want them to write and talk about anyway, but they were coming to those ideas authentically, on their own terms, just as we do when we read something for pleasure.

One additional aspect of my “Messing About” phase is that my students would also come to class with at least one question about the assigned reading: some aspect of the text about which they were genuinely curious. Sometimes this would reflect needed background information (in the late 1990s, Crutcher’s reference to Nixon and Watergate was already lost on many students), but it would just as often be a passage they just didn’t *get*. At the beginning of the book, for instance, it was common to get numerous questions about why Sarah Byrnes is in the hospital or what has made her catatonic. My students would share their personal responses and questions in small groups, the purpose of which was to initiate discussion based on those issues they found personally relevant, as well as to help one another explore each other’s questions. As they discussed in their groups, I would circulate—listening, contributing when I had something to say, and making notes about the content of their conversations.

These small-group discussions would then often form the basis for the day’s whole-class discussion, as

---

**As it turned out, 9th graders needed much more guidance on what a personal response to literature could look like than I thought.**

---

I would introduce common threads I had heard from the individual groups. In the course of this larger conversation, I could push students to greater interpretive

---

**You don't have to prepare materials for each of the 30 students in your class. Because their interests will be constrained by the text, so too will those interests run in trends.**

---

and analytical sophistication and help them refine their responses. I would also ask them, when appropriate, to consider and work with those elements of the text (such as character, point of view, elements of style, etc.) that make up its skeleton, and which are, of course, currently required by the standards. But those elements were part of a much larger, more important discussion that was initiated by

giving students the chance to “Mess About” in the text based on their own interests and purposes for reading. Finally, I would collect their responses and questions in order to take a longer look at the individual issues and challenges about which the students were writing. Often, I would use them to initiate Hawkins’s “Multiply Programmed” phase.

### **Phase 2: Multiply Programmed**

Before I go any further, one fact I quickly learned about the three phases is that implementing them is a messy, imperfect science. They don’t follow a neat, linear order, and they will often be recursive in nature. As I refined this process for an English class, I never found a time when I could comfortably say, “Okay, gang! We’re done Messing About! Now it’s on to the Multiply Programmed phase!” The three phases complement one another, and it is up to the teacher to be sensitive to what the students need. In this way, Hawkins’s three phases have common ground with the concept of differentiation, where “teachers focus on processes and procedures that ensure effective learning for varied individuals” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 3). Because the purpose of Hawkins’s phases is to help make learning personally relevant for students, it makes sense that there will be a degree of differentiation involved in accomplishing that.

When one remembers that the main idea behind the “Multiply Programmed” phase is to provide stu-

dents with rich instructional materials (the third point of the instructional triangle) that will help them further explore the concepts in which they are interested (the tree-learning explored in Phase 1), two logical questions follow: 1) How can I possibly anticipate what my students will be interested in? and 2) Do I really have to create individual materials for each of my students?

To take each of those questions in turn, you *don't* have to possess a comprehensive inventory of students’ personal textual interests to be prepared for this phase. The good news is this: rich texts resonate with our students for many of the same reasons they resonate with us, so the materials I gave my students to enrich their reading of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* were necessarily constrained by the text. After teaching the novel in this way just once, I knew I was going to have some students who wanted to explore Crutcher’s use of religion, some students who were compelled by Mark Brittain’s hypocrisy or Jody Muel-ler’s strength, and some students who latched onto and wanted to talk about the book’s First Amendment issues. That isn’t to say I didn’t have interests for which I was unprepared—one year a student was fixated on creating a *Sarah Byrnes* graphic novel, which I tried my best to accommodate—but the texts we use provide us with some boundaries for possible interests, in much the same way that Hawkins wouldn’t provide his students with a Geiger counter for a lesson on soap bubbles.

Similarly, you don’t have to prepare materials for each of the 30 students in your class. Because their interests will be constrained by the text, so too will those interests run in trends. In addition to the issues I mentioned above, I always had several students who wanted to talk about whether Mark Brittain’s suicide attempt made sense in the context of his character. I couldn’t anticipate everything in the novel with which my students might connect, but I had a relative degree of certainty that there would be five or six key issues that caught most of their attention, and I could make small adjustments to my instructional materials as the circumstances warranted.

So what did these materials look like? My go-to (as someone who had early exposure in his undergraduate program with the Ohio Writing Project) has always been writing. The prompts would be broad enough so as not to minimize a student’s personal

engagement with the text but specific enough that I was teaching and assessing the kinds of things I needed to know. This usually involved the student making a personal connection to the text and then engaging in some interpretive or analytical discussion of an issue with which he or she seemed particularly interested. In the suicide example mentioned above, I asked those students to recount a time when they had done something out of character and then argue for or against the believability of Mark Brittain's actions, using textual evidence to support their reasoning. These writing assignments weren't high stakes—I grouped the students by issue and gave them an opportunity to discuss the question before writing—nor were they expected to have the formality of an essay. I viewed them as a variation on what Elbow (1994) called a “think piece”: “writing that is a bit more thought out and worked over—but not yet an essay; exploratory but not merely freewriting” (p. 2). My main purpose for these writings was to provide the students with opportunities to explore issues that mattered to them while giving me some insight into their abilities to read and write with competence and sophistication.

As for the placement and timing of these writings in the context of the unit, I was mainly guided by the written responses in Phase 1. As my students' interests came to light, I would usually give them a first discussion and writing prompt and then introduce a second one once we were further into the book when I could see how (or if) their interests were evolving. If their interests had changed, so too would the topic about which they would write. If their interests hadn't, I would provide them with a topic I hoped would extend and continue to develop the understanding they had demonstrated in the first. (For example, I might ask another question about plausible characterization for students who had answered my initial question about Mark Brittain's suicide attempt.)

### **Phase 3: Traditional, but Student-Centered**

This phase is probably the least interesting in that it looks the most conventional. In my discussion of Phase 1, I mentioned that I would often have whole-class discussions immediately following the students' small-group conversations about their personal response writings and questions. Each group's members would report briefly on what they had discussed, what they were wrestling with, what they enjoyed,

etc., and I would attempt to tie up loose ends, clarify misunderstandings, and help answer their questions. It was also the place where I would introduce key issues I hadn't heard any group discuss. For instance, in any book told by a first-person narrator (as *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* is), I think it's crucial to discuss that character's reliability as a reporter, and this isn't usually something my students would notice until I brought it up. It became my job, then, to introduce the concept of the unreliable narrator, which students could then add to their developing lexicon for possible discussion later in personal responses. In this way, Phase 3 is the most traditionally “teacher-like” of all the phases, involving the kind of lecture and discussion that we usually think of when it comes to schooling.

It is important to note, however, that even though this takes a conventional form, the content of this phase is delivered in reaction to what the students discuss in their groups. My goal here was to create a real conversation about the literature, what Nystrand (1997) refers to as dialogic instruction, where there is conflict, tension, and negotiation in the discussion, and where the teacher incorporates student responses into subsequent questions. This stands in contrast to the traditional model, where teachers come to class with a scripted list of questions about which the students have no input and for which they will either have the answers or they won't. Rather than delivering a top-down lecture scripted in advance (where I would step in at the end of the class period and tell them what the previous night's chapter was *really* about), I would add my notes to the existing conversation, with any luck as a complement to what my students had already been discussing. I always hoped it would be more a matter of, “Hey, do you know what we call it when Eric said that?” as opposed to, “And today we're going to take notes on indirect characterization.”

---

**My main purpose for these writings was to provide the students with opportunities to explore issues that mattered to them while giving me some insight into their abilities to read and write with competence and sophistication.**

---



What I want to emphasize is the imperfect nature of this. In some ways, the three phases exist simultaneously (Phases 1 and 3 frequently happened in the same class period), and I never found one “right” way to incorporate all three with any text. But I *did* find that when my students were encouraged to engage with the text on the basis of personal relevance, talk about those interests, explore what they found personally challenging, and write about their understanding and interpretation in an exploratory way, their interest in reading increased, as did the quality of the writing and discussion in which they were involved.

## Standing Our Ground in the Era of Accountability

As I mentioned at the start, education initiatives like the Common Core State Standards and intensified standardized testing are making it increasingly difficult for teachers to allow for student-directed learning. However, all of the preceding (and especially the discussion of figures like Hawkins and Rosenblatt) is written as a reminder that we teach students first and everything else second, and we shouldn't, as Dewey (1956) tells us, pit child against curriculum. We have a long tradition in education of keeping the student at the center of what we do, but the current push from those not in education seems to remove students from the conversation, reducing them to data points that can be used to evaluate teachers, schools, and colleges of education.

Such efforts regrettably ignore the rich day-to-day lives of teachers and students, and misguided initiatives created in the name of accountability reduce what is possible in the classroom. That is a shame. Now that YAL is even richer and more accessible, the opportunities to “Mess About” seem even more promising, especially considering what we now know about using YAL as a bridge to teach canonical texts (Herz & Gallo, 2005). Herz & Gallo even specifically endorse “helping students to become more responsible for their own learning—through self-selected goals, small-group assignments, cooperative learning activities, and the like” (p. 29), all of which is very much in line with what Hawkins was writing about in the 1960s. Also, with the canon seeming to take on even greater prominence in the Common Core, we have an increased responsibility to ensure our students are

prepared to read complex texts. CCSS architect David Coleman seems to view reading challenging texts as a “sink or swim” proposition, but we have a rich tradition of effective strategies (many of which I discussed earlier) designed to help students become stronger and more sophisticated readers, and it is incumbent on us as a profession to stand up for what we know works while still looking for new ways to improve our own practice.

In this time of increased standardization, Hawkins's writing seems more essential than ever. Rather than push our students to ever-greater degrees of uniformity, Hawkins encourages us to remember that we often learn best when the subject matter is personally relevant. The need for relevance is often at the heart of the question, “Why are we doing this?” It is a student saying, “Make this useful. Make this something *I* find value in.” It is a natural and reasonable question for them to ask, and when they do, it might be the very first clue that we as teachers need to cede some degree of control and allow our students to begin Messing About.

**Rob Montgomery** taught high school English for ten years and is currently an assistant professor of English Education at Kennesaw State University. He works with preservice teachers and teaches courses in methods of teaching writing and literature. For the last five years, he has been the co-director of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project Summer Institute. His current research focuses on the effect of education mandates on teacher identity and practice. Rob can be reached at [rmontgo7@kennesaw.edu](mailto:rmontgo7@kennesaw.edu).

## References

- Beers, K. (1998). Choosing not to read: Understanding why some middle schoolers just say no. In K. Beers, & B. Samuels (Eds.), *Into focus: Understanding and creating middle school readers* (pp. 37–63). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Blau, S. D. (2003). *The literature workshop: Teaching texts and their readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bushman, J. H., & Haas, K. P. (2005). *Using young adult literature in the English classroom* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Crutcher, C. (1993). *Staying fat for Sarah Byrnes*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Dewey, J. (1956). *The child and the curriculum* and *The school and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Elbow, P. (1994). Writing for learning—not just for demonstrative learning. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, National Teaching and Learning Forum (pp. 1–4). Retrieved from

- www.oberlin.edu/ctie/Elbow-Learning.pdf.
- Gallagher, K. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Hawkins, D. (2002). *The informed vision: Essays on learning and human nature*. New York, NY: Algora.
- Herz, S. K., & Gallo, D. R. (2005). *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building bridges between young adult literature and the classics* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Lee, H. (1960/1988). *To kill a mockingbird*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Lesesne, T. (2010). *Reading ladders: Leading students from where they are to where we'd like them to be*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Miller, D. (2009). *The book whisperer: Awakening the inner reader in every child*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common core state standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ela-literacy>.
- Nystrand, M. (1997). *Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Probst, R. (2004). *Response & analysis: Teaching literature in secondary school* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Purves, A., Rogers, T., & Soter, A. (1995). *How porcupines make love III: Teaching a response-centered curriculum*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Smagorinsky, P. (2008). *Teaching English by design: How to create and carry out instructional units*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Tomlinson, C.A., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating differentiated instruction + understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

## Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2015 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or [cee@ncte.org](mailto:cee@ncte.org). Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2015**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.