

Literacy Letters:

Comparative Literature and Formative Assessment

As teachers who appreciate adolescent literature, we have often asked ourselves how we can include the amazing collection of books written for young adults into our classrooms. However, as high school English teachers, we feel pressured to assign classics such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare) or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) to our students. Of course we know that simply assigning a book for students to read at home is ineffective. Many of our students cannot read these texts independently and others are not interested in them. Despite many attempts, we have yet to find a single book that will engage all of our students at the same moment in time. In the past, when we assigned a classic to the entire class, we invariably ended up orally summarizing the assigned reading so that we could have a class conversation about the content. The result was obvious; over time students did less reading because they knew we would do the thinking for them.

We are also university professors, so we see the long-range effects of this kind of disengagement. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, an annual study of college students' learning experiences at 769 campuses, 20% of college freshmen reported that they "often" or "very often" come to class without reading assigned texts (NSSE, 2008). We believe the habit of failing to assume responsibility for their learning by completing reading assignments is first established in high school.

We are not alone in this dilemma. Teachers across the country struggle with motivating adolescents to read books they did not choose. In response, teachers

attempt to differentiate instruction such that all students read the same book at the same time (e.g., DeCourcy, Fairchild, & Follet, 2007). Others assign worksheets and give pop quizzes to enforce compliance. Still others give up completely and assign contemporary adolescent literature exclusively in hope of increasing the amount of reading their students do.

Each of these choices proved limiting in some way for our English classes. For one thing, we wanted to increase the amount of time students spent reading. We understood that increasing choice was an important component of increasing reading volume. We also wanted to be sure that we developed our students' understanding of the state content standards. And finally, we wanted students to experience literature as a force that can help them answer questions about themselves and the world. As such, we decided that we would no longer assess students' understanding of a single text, but, rather, that we would design prompts and other assignments that would encourage them to compare texts. This would allow us to teach from the classics, while actively making connections to a host of titles from which they could select. We theorized that comparative literature tasks would result in better learning outcomes, as opposed to the writing tasks we had assigned over the years that weren't much more than plot summaries. We designed our English classes using several research-based curricular design elements: 1) an essential question to encourage convergent thinking; 2) a common text to use as a platform for instruction; 3) a range of student-selected texts to differentiate and to broaden their



perspectives across cultures and experiences; and 4) a formative assessment task to allow for ongoing measurement of each student's progress.

A Single Focus: The Essential Question

The basis of our class would be essential questions. Consistent with the professional literature on essential questions, we wanted to focus on questions that did not have clear-cut answers (McKenzie, 2005). We wanted these questions to spark interest and wonder, and ultimately, original and meaningful answers. After much discussion, we reached agreement on the four questions that would guide our school year (one per quarter):

- What sustains us?
- If we can, should we?
- Does age matter?
- How do people attend to their health?

We also agreed that these questions would serve us for one year and that each year we would develop new questions that would allow for us to integrate new ideas and new books into our classes. Our plan was to create text pairings that would invite students to contemplate the essential question across time and genres. Therefore, we identified common texts, both classic and contemporary, to be read in class with the teacher. In this way, we would be able to marry the literary canon with adolescent and young adult literature.

Another important consideration was in choosing a range of texts that would allow for differentiation based on interest and skill. By offering a menu of titles, students could exercise their choice. Books were nominated for the list based on two criteria—we had to have read it ourselves and we had to be able to articulate a connection to the question. We prepared a list of titles grouped by relative difficulty (see Figure 1) and shared each title with the students as a brief book talk. Because the adult who read a particular book couldn't always be physically present, we bought copies of *500 Great Books for Teens* (Silvey, 2006) and other respected lists and wrote our names next to each book we had read. Students could consult the lists and find the adult who could discuss his or her recommendations. In addition, we made sure that the selected books represented several genres, including informational texts, graphic novels, and collections of shorter pieces.

With choice, however, comes responsibility. Therefore, we knew we needed to develop assignments that caused students to become aware of their rationale for selecting (and occasionally, for abandoning) a title. In addition, we wanted students to link their books to the literary instruction occurring in the class. Because students would be reading a broad range of titles, we also knew that we would need to confer on a regular basis with each of them. Inspired by Atwell's (2007) letter-essays that her students write once they have finished a book, we developed a weekly literacy letter assignment. In this way, we hoped that students would consider how his or her chosen book converged with other literature, and what this meant to them as readers. The weekly literacy letter assignment became our chief formative assessment tool for gauging the progress of each reader.

Multiple Expressions: The Literacy Letter

We introduced literacy letters to students during the first week of school as a means for journaling directly with the teacher. Each Friday, students wrote a letter about their selected text to the teacher that consisted of three parts. We asked them to include the title and author of the book in the introductory paragraph to help us recall what they were reading, and to update us on the plot developments thus far. For the last section of the letter, we invited students to comment on how they were feeling about the book to this point, and to give it a rating from 1 to 10. Our intention was to elevate their awareness of the rhythms of a reader's response as it ebbs and flows across a book so as to prevent early abandonment of a book. In addition, we reminded them that they needed to tell us why they were assigning a particular rating—not just that “it's a perfect 10” but also to pay attention to the ways in it appealed to their reading sensibilities. At times these took on a confessional tone, as when one student candidly told us, “I did not read [over winter break] because I had chores and I was lazy.” Figure 2 contains a peer-editing checklist used by students for the format of the letters.

The middle section of the letter served as the centerpiece each week and allowed us to tailor each assignment to fit the week's instruction. Sometimes we asked students to think about their own reading habits:



What sustains us? Common Texts for Entire Class		<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> (Trueman) <i>Lord of the Flies</i> (Golding)
High Interest Books You Can Read Easily <i>Al Capone Does My Shirts</i> (Choldenko) <i>Becoming Naomi León</i> (Ryan) <i>Chew on This</i> (Schlosser) <i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Ryan) <i>Fever 1793</i> (Anderson) <i>Lizzy Bright and the Buckminster Boy</i> (Schmidt) <i>Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science</i> (Fleischman) <i>Cruise Control</i> (Trueman) <i>Among the Hidden</i> (Haddox) <i>Gathering Blue</i> (Lowry) <i>A Child Called It</i> (Pelzer) <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> (Bradbury) <i>Habibi</i> (Nye, 1997)	Young Adult Books That Might Challenge Your Thinking and Reading Skills <i>Define “Normal”</i> (Peters) <i>Mountains Beyond Mountains</i> (Farmer) <i>The House on Mango Street</i> (Cisneros) <i>The Life of Pi</i> (Martel) <i>The Outsiders</i> (Hinton) <i>The Pigman</i> (Zindel) <i>The Secret Life of Bees</i> (Kidd) <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (Lee) <i>Twilight</i> (Meyer) <i>Tuesdays With Morrie</i> (Albom) <i>When Plague Strikes: The Black Death, Small Pox, AIDS</i> (Giblin) <i>Silent to the Bone</i> (Konigsberg) <i>Things Fall Apart</i> (Achebe)	Complex but Very Interesting Books that Require Thought and Perhaps Effort <i>Best American Science Writing of 2006</i> (Gawande) <i>Guns, Germs and Steel</i> (Diamond) <i>Into Thin Air</i> (Krakauer) <i>Love in the Time of Cholera</i> (Marquez) <i>The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History</i> (Barry) <i>Siddhartha</i> (Hesse) <i>My Stroke of Insight</i> (Taylor) <i>The Bluest Eye</i> (Morrison) <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare) <i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest</i> (Kesey) <i>The Awakening</i> (Chopin) <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> (Salinger) <i>The God of Small Things</i> (Roy)

If we can, should we? Common Texts for Entire Class		“The Lottery” (Jackson) <i>1984</i> (Orwell)
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High Interest Books You Can Read Easily <i>The Skin I’m In</i> (Flake) <i>Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery</i> (Freedman) <i>The First Part Last</i> (Johnson) <i>A Step from Heaven</i> (Na) <i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i> (Smith) <i>Inkheart</i> (Funke) <i>The Heart of a Chief</i> (Bruchac) <i>Hoot</i> (Hiaasen) <i>Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam</i> (Myers) <i>Mud City</i> (Ellis) <i>Spirited Away</i> (Mizuyaki) <i>Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World</i> (Armstrong) <i>A Children’s Story</i> (Clavell) <i>Touching Spirit Bear</i> (Mikaelsen) <i>Wringer</i> (Spinelli)	Young Adult Books That Might Challenge Your Thinking and Reading Skills <i>Feed</i> (Anderson) <i>Speak</i> (Anderson) <i>Whale Talk</i> (Crutcher) <i>Like Water for Chocolate</i> (Esquivel) <i>A Lesson Before Dying</i> (Gaines) <i>Frida: A Biography of Frida Khalo</i> (Herrera) <i>Blue Diary</i> (Hoffman) <i>Girl with a Pearl Earring</i> (Chevalier) <i>Soldier’s Heart</i> (Paulsen) <i>Maus</i> (Spiegelman) <i>Joy Luck Club</i> (Tan) <i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i> (John) <i>In Code: A Mathematical Journey</i> (Flannery) <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> (Haddon)	Complex but Very Interesting Books that Require Thought and Perhaps Effort <i>Best of the Brain from Scientific American</i> (Bloom) <i>My Antonia</i> (Cather) <i>The Hours</i> (Cunningham) <i>Catch-22</i> (Heller) <i>Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress</i> (Sijie) <i>Native Son</i> (Wright) <i>Persopolis</i> (Sartrapi) <i>Beowulf</i> (trans. Raffel) <i>Opening Skinner’s Box</i> (Slater) <i>Madness: A Brief History</i> (Porter) <i>Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America</i> (Erhenreich) <i>Hamlet</i> (Shakespeare) <i>Beloved</i> (Morrison) <i>Amazing Grace</i> (Metaxas) <i>Savage Inequalities</i> (Kozol) <i>The Prince</i> (Machiavelli) <i>A Personal Matter</i> (Oe) <i>The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down</i> (Fadiman)
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Figure 1. Companion books for “What sustains us?” and “If we can, should we?” essential questions.



Name _____	
Date _____	
Literacy Letter Peer Edit Check List	
1. Literacy Letter Format	/2
• Date	
• Greeting	
• Body – indent 1st line of paragraphs	
• Closing – not indented	
• Signature – name capitalized?	
• Rating	
• Two paragraphs	
2. Paragraph #1	/2
Name of book, author, update on your book (where are you in the book and what is happening?)	
3. Paragraph #2	/2
Answer the prompt for the week using complete sentences.	
4. Mechanics	/2
Typed, double-spaced, 12 Times New Roman font, black ink	
Spelling – spell check?	
Capitalization	
There are no run-on sentences	
There are no incomplete sentences	
Do your sentences make sense?	
5. Letter turned in on time	/2
Total	/10

Figure 2. Peer editing checklist.

What do you like as a reader during school? Be honest with yourself as you reflect on your reading. Do you spend your time during independent reading engaged in a book? Are you focused? Distracted? Do you like talking about your book with a teacher? Do you ever read during lunch, before, or after school?

Knowing that skilled writing requires close reading of the works of other writers, we structured some letters to focus attention on the craft employed by their authors:

This week you will not write a second paragraph. Instead, we would like a bulleted list of 5 sentences in your book where a transitional word is being used. Remember, these are words like consequently, moreover, furthermore, nonetheless, etc. These words can also be found in the middle of sentences with a semi-colon and a comma. Please include the sentence and the page number where this sentence was found.

And of course, many of the literacy letter assignments invited students to make connections between the

common and selected texts. This lies at the heart of comparative literature, and a critical approach to what is read. Consider the following literacy letter assignment that refers to the common text at that time, *Rash* by Pete Hautman (2007), a dystopian novel set about subjugating male aggression in the United Safer States of America:

The setting of a book can be very important to understanding what is happening. There is a reason why the author chooses a particular setting. Choosing an alternative setting could greatly affect what the characters do and say.

Think about *Rash* (Hautman, 2007) for a minute. There is a reason why the author chose to have the penal institution located in the cold climate of Canada. The story would be very different if the prison was located in sunny southern California. The inmates would have an easier time playing football in the sunshine without the threat of polar bears. Clearly, the author wanted to create as harsh conditions as possible.

Now think about your book. What is the book's setting?

- (1) Include where the book takes place AND the time period.
- (2) Explain if the book has multiple settings or just one.
- (3) Finally, write whether you think this was a good choice for the setting or if you think the author should have written about a different place and time. If you think so, be sure to write exactly where and when you think the book should take place.

The letters were designed to build upon one another each week, so that students engaged in a form of dialogic journaling about each book (see Figure 3 for other assignment examples). During weekly individual conferences with students, we invited them to look over previous letters to notice patterns in their thinking and motivation. For instance, Ray, who was reading *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (Krakauer, 1999) read over his literacy letters and said,

At first I was bored by all the technical stuff—like, I didn't really care about learning all that junk about how you climb a mountain. But I kept reading and I started to figure out why he [the author] added all that. I could see that you really had to have these skills to climb, and that some of the people didn't have that knowledge.

Our students surprised and delighted us with the range of responses in their literacy letters. Patrick, for example, among the most struggling readers in the school, said that he “never read a book in middle school.” He selected *A to Z Mysteries: The Bald Bandit*





Literacy Letter 1:

In your letter this week, write about the book’s genre and any connections you may have with the book. Can you connect and identify with the characters? Does this book remind you of any other book you have read? Does this book make you think of anything that is happening in the world? This prompt can be answered no matter what the genre is! Don’t forget to rate your book 1-10!

Literacy Letter 2:

In your letter this week start with “I didn’t agree with . . .” or “I don’t understand . . .” Explain why you feel this way or what you didn’t understand. Don’t forget to share how you rated the book!

Literacy Letter 3:

This week start your letter by writing “If I were the author . . .” As you write you might want to think about what you like or dislike about the characters, the decisions they’ve made, the sequence of events, the setting, and style of writing.

Do not forget to write this in the FORM OF A LETTER! That means with a date, a greeting, a body, and the closing! As always, remember to rate your book!

Literacy Letter 4:

In this week’s literacy letter, please write about the theme of your book. What is the dominant idea the author is trying to convey? Stick to this prompt! Support your answer with specific quotations from the book. Be sure to write the page number. For example, on page 72, the author writes “She wept uncontrollably at the sight of the limp, bloody, dog. The thought of this loss in her life was too much to bear.” This is one example of how the author is writing about death.

Do not forget to write this in the FORM OF A LETTER! That means with a date, a greeting, a body, and the closing! As always, remember to rate your book!

Literacy Letter #5:

In your letter this week please write about the author’s purpose. Why do you think the author wrote this book? Some reasons authors write are to inform or teach, entertain, persuade, or convince. Use direct quotations and page numbers to support your answer. For example, in *Stuck in Neutral*, author Terry Trueman writes to entertain and inform the reader about cerebral palsy. I know this because on page 45, he writes “I love the feeling of escaping from my screwed up, worthless body. I love my seizures!” Of course, you will add many more details. Be sure to write the name of the author and the title of the book (and don’t forget to underline the title). As always, rate your book!

(Roy, 1997). While this is a very easy book to read, it helped Patrick think about the question “if we can, should we?” His response to analyzing the setting surprised us, given his lack of experience with reading. Patrick wrote:

This book takes place like outside in a regular neighborhood, maybe in the front lawn. I haven’t got too far in the book, but I think it is going to have multiple settings because right now they are in the front lawn, but maybe they will end up in a bank, because on the cover of the book there is a bald guy buy a bank and money. I think this is a good place for the setting because where else could you set up a bank robbing, so I think this setting is good. They could rob other things, but not in this book because this is a bank robbing book.

Sean also surprised when he reflected on his own behavior while reading *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes, 2005). Sean wasn’t always the nicest person to have around and some of his peers were giving him feedback about his behavior. In talking about Charlie, from the book, Sean considers his own behavior:

Charlie is starting to speak for himself and be far more independent. He also is becoming a little rude and arrogant towards the people who are trying to help him. I guess I’m like that sometimes. I don’t mean to be rude, but they tell me I am. When I know the answer, sometimes I get mad at people who don’t know. It makes the class go slow.

When I knew the math answer yesterday, I made fun of Martha because she didn’t. Then her friends turned on me. I guess it wasn’t right for me to do that. Charlie also sees the old Charlie and doesn’t want to go back. He feels as though the old Charlie is waiting for the perfect time to take control again and take him back into the darkness. I can see how that can happen.

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Letters As Formative Assessments

Importantly, an analysis of the weekly literacy letters led to teaching points for small groups of students or the whole class. As such, the literacy letters became

Figure 3. Sample literacy letter assignments.



an authentic formative assessment tool, useful in lesson planning. By reading the letters, we were able to identify instructional needs related to grammar and mechanics. When we noticed a pattern, such as the misuse of their, there, and they're, we met with a small group of students who made the error and guided their learning accordingly. The whole class did not need this particular lesson given that only a few students still struggled with this information.

The literacy letters also allowed us to check for understanding of state content standards. For example, while studying the setting, several students identified wildly inappropriate alternative settings for their

books. This told us that our whole class lessons on setting were not effective and that we needed to review this content. When students started noticing literary devices such as personification, symbolism, metaphor, foreshadowing, and flashbacks, we knew that they had developed increased understanding of

If lots of students demonstrated that they were unsure of this content, we could have addressed this as a whole class.

this standard and that our instruction was headed in the right direction.

The literacy letters repeatedly proved an excellent means of formative assessment. Useful information was provided, for example, when Lexie identified the following three sentences for a prompt that requested five sentences in which the author uses transition words:

- And then the man was out the door. [pg. 35]
- And this time Nina was sure the boys were whispering to Alia, telling her not to say anything else. [pg. 42]
- And when they were thirsty, they had to go to the dampest part of the cave and lick the wall. [pg. 55]

Given that Lexie only provided three examples (out of five requested) and that they each started with "and," we knew that she wasn't quite sure what transition words were. If there were other students whose letters indicated the same level of understanding, we would have met with a small group. If lots of students demonstrated that they were unsure of this content, we could have addressed this as a whole

class. But in this case, it was just Lexie who needed additional instructional support to learn this content. And the literacy letter, written based on book she had chose to read (*Among the Betrayed*, Haddix, 2003), provided us insights into a student who might have otherwise been missed.

Future Focus: Expanding Comparative Literature in High School

Our interpretation of comparative literature for ninth grade students was to introduce them to a broader range of western and non-western literature that would reach across time, especially through the use of contemporary titles. In addition, we wanted to expose them to writers from other countries, and to familiarize them with authors who in the past had not been widely represented, especially female and nonwhite authors. A major challenge with this age group is in locating international, and especially non-western literature that is also accessible to high school students. Therefore, many of the titles chosen represent experiences of people from other cultures, but are written by western authors. We hope to continue to expand our repertoire of appropriate international literature over time. As well, because we expected that most of them would not be widely read in titles from the canon, we understood that eliminating those would be to do a disservice to our students. Therefore, we attempted to balance our lists with these considerations in mind.

We have found that the use of essential questions, pairing common texts with student-selected pieces, and ongoing formative assessment in the form of literacy letters has proved invaluable to our students. The volume of reading has increased, as evidenced by the number of titles students are now asking about. In addition, the teacher recommendation logs have expanded to include students as well. We regularly find student names inked into the margins of the class book lists, alongside ours. By inviting a comparative literature approach for high school students, we believe we are preparing them to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. And in a few years, when some of them are students in our university courses, there will be no excuse for showing up to class without having read!





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