

# Oklahoma English Journal

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***Submission Guidelines:***

Submissions are not limited to traditional texts. OEJ encourages many forms of communication including poetry, prose, narrative, graphic stories, and photography.

**Research Articles** should be organized to include the following categories, as applicable: Introduction/rationale, Theoretical framing, Methods, Findings, Discussion, and Implications for future research, practice, and policy.

**Practitioner Articles** should be theoretically based yet pedagogically applicable. Articles, including references and appendices, should be kept under 12 pages.

**Reflections, Expert voices, and Geographical Views** should be less than 1,500 words.

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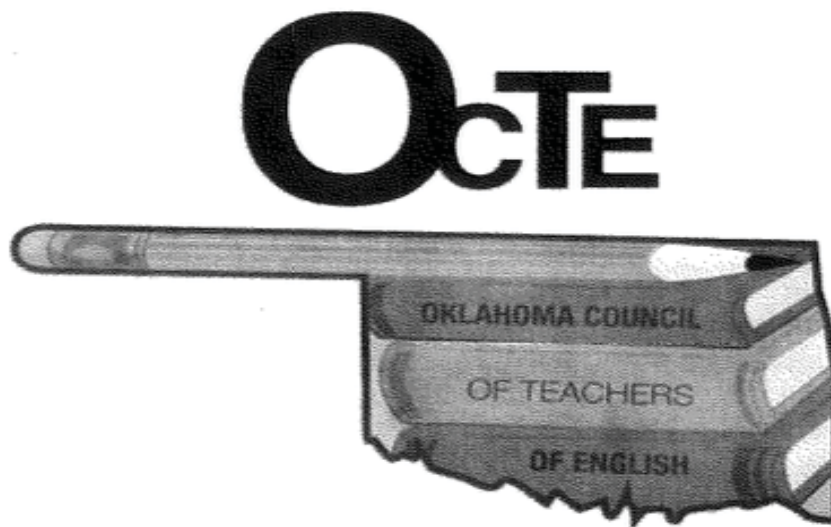
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## *Table of Contents*

Editor's Introduction. Julianna Lopez Kershen & Aimee Myers	p. 4
Thoughts on Past Editorship Deborah Brown	p. 5
Geographical Views of a Tulsa Urban High School Justin Yates	p. 6
Hidden in Plain Sight: The Unseen Culture of the Military Child in Oklahoma Jennie L. Hanna	p. 8
Public Education: Living the (Orwellian) Dream Lawrence Baines	p. 10
Reluctant Writers in the Midst of the New Oklahoma State Standards Kara Stoltenberg	p. 12
Book Review: Salt to the Sea Eril Hughes	p. 13
Pre-Service Voices Kylie Gibbons	p. 16
Pre-Service Voices: A New Education Shaped by Political Activism Adam Van Buren	p. 17
Reflecting on a Unit of Study: Young Adult Literature on the Holocaust Jane Fisher and former students	p. 18
Standards of Advocacy: Using the New Standards to Become a Teacher Advocate Lara Searcy	p. 22
Book Review: Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend Kerry Friesen	p. 23
Integrating the Oklahoma Academic Standards for the English Language Arts Brook Meiller	p. 25
Bridging the Reading-Writing Gap in ELA Curriculum Gage Jeter	p. 26
Book Review: Listen, Slowly Crag Hill	p. 29
Roadblocks to Authentic Learning in Secondary ELA Michelle Boyd Waters	p. 30
Call Submissions, Spring 2017	p. 35

Haley A. Bell



## Editors' Introduction

# Taking the Reins

In this, the 29th volume of the Oklahoma English Journal, we turn towards a new direction. As new editors we have the responsibility to carry on the OEJ traditions of professionalism, scholarship, and instructional leadership directed by Dr. Deborah Brown for the last four years. As we publish this first issue we dedicate this work to the teachers and youth who are committed to exploring how literature and language transform lives. The articles in this issue, ranging from personal essays to research-based instruction and policy recommendations, communicate the overarching message that classrooms can be sites of critical thinking and collaborative, authentic engagement that support youth to find their passions and imagine big dreams. This critical teaching and learning work takes place against the backdrop of newly developed Oklahoma Academic Standards, and regionally, the Common Core State Standards.

To be sure, we commend the teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators who served to create the new academic standards and corresponding learning objectives designed to guide instructional decisions and learning outcomes

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in Oklahoma classrooms. And yet, like many of the authors in this issue, we continue to reflect on our personal beliefs about highly effective, high quality learning and teaching, standards-based reform, and the evolving and diverse population of young people we serve.

The pieces chosen for the New Directions issue of OEJ represent a wide-range of perspectives that focus on the new ELA Oklahoma Academic standards. While many of the perspectives differ, we see a common thread. This common thread is the idea that we must not teach the new standards in isolation. They do not exist in a sterile vacuum. The teacher voices in these articles remind us that Oklahoma's new standards are not isolated threads, but are woven into a complex whole.

When focusing on classroom academics, Gage Jeter reminds us of the need for connections in his piece "Bridging the Reading-Writing Gap in ELA Curriculum." As a middle school teacher, Gage struggled with teaching reading in isolation away from writing. However, as he grew with his colleagues, he began to merge reading and writing together. Through

this process of integrating reading and writing, Gage made English Language Arts both more meaningful and more practical. He articulates a belief that the new ELA standards directly and consciously bridge the gap between reading and writing. Similarly, Kara Stoltenberg, in her article, "Reluctant Writers," addresses the need for teachers of writing to recognize the social-emotional connections students feel when engaging in meaningful writing tasks. She also advocates for integrated writing instruction. Kara makes a strong case for teachers to reimagine their writing instruction to explicitly address how instructional decisions and teacher behaviors affect young writers' confidence and self efficacy.

Michelle Boyd Waters gives us a classroom view in her piece, "Roadblocks to Authentic Learning." She focuses on the decline of youth reading and confronts the roadblocks to reading in our world today. Michelle emphasizes the need for educators to be aware that reading does not happen in isolation, as it is connected to many challenges students face. As a solution to the reading decline, Michelle suggests we focus on making learning experiences more authentic through real-world applicability. Standards come and go, but authentic learning should be a consistent component of our teaching practices. We must connect the world with the classroom and the classroom with the world.

Connected to the theme of the standards as common threads within a complex tapestry, the essays of Jennie L. Hanna and Justin Yates reveal the need to recognize marginalized voices in education and authenticity. These educators, teaching to the same guiding standards, recognize that not everyone's classroom looks the same. Urban, rural, and suburban educators face unique challenges. Justin's essay reveals how ELA standards overlook ELL/ESL students, as Jennie's speaks to how family and community context shapes student learning. These pieces challenge us with questions about equitable practice in our classrooms. Justin ends his essay with valid suggestions that would assist teachers in reaching all students. These essays further remind us that our

I want to thank the new editors of The Oklahoma English Journal for giving me this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the members of OCTE who have given me the privilege to serve as editor of the journal for four years and to serve on the board of our organization in various roles during the last 16 years. Having met and worked with many dedicated educators in our state, I find that I agree with John Wooden who once said “the teaching profession contributes more to the future of our society than any other single profession.”

The Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English is a professional organization whose purpose includes, in part, promoting “improvement in the teaching of all

## ***On Editorship and Leadership***

***Dr. Deborah Brown***

***University of Central Oklahoma***



phases of the English language and the English Language arts at all levels of education,” stimulating professional development, and providing “opportunity for group study and discus-

sion of problems that confront the English teachers of Oklahoma at all levels of instruction” (Article I of the OCTE Constitution). I believe that one of the most important aspects of OCTE is when devoted teachers come together to share their stories and support one another at our conferences and through social media. Certainly I am grateful for the support I have enjoyed from many of you.

OCTE, an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English, provides important opportunities for learning and sharing for Oklahoma’s English teachers, and I am confident the year ahead will be another beneficial and productive one under the leadership of President Anastasia Wickham and the new journal editors, Aimee Myers and Julianna Kersten.

These essays further remind us that our classrooms are not factories where we all use the same ingredients each day and each year in order to produce a universal, common product. Our classrooms are not isolated from the shifting demographics of our country. Our ELA standards can and should reflect this diversity.

Beyond academics in the classroom, the standards also affect us as educators on personal and professional levels. In her piece “Teacher Advocate,” Lara Searcy reflects on the purpose of the new standards for students, and she also discusses how valuable these same standards can be for us as professionals. A valuable question asked in this piece is, “How do teachers become advocates of the profession?” Lara suggests that we should continue to be learners by connecting with the standards ourselves. These new standards encourage the skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Teachers should be modeling these skills by using them to understand our own field better and advocate for our profession. Lara steps out of the isola-

tion of the classroom and steps into the world of professional advocacy. On both a personal and professional level, preservice teachers Kylie Gibbons and Adam Van Buren share with us the experience of new standards from the new teacher perspective. These writers reflect for us both the excitement and fear that develops when entering the teaching profession, and share with us unique perspectives on what the new standards can represent. The new standards can symbolize hope and offer a new narrative based upon cooperation and determination. Despite the shifting standards and expectations for teaching and learning in Oklahoma’s classrooms over the past few years, these two teachers are eager to look for meaningful connections.

And yet, we would be remiss if we failed to recognize how the standards-based reform movement has further bureaucratized American education. Lawrence Baines’s essay highlights the eerie similarities between Orwell’s fictional world in 1984 and the top-down, test-driven culture promulgated by

standards-based reform movements. We believe that a way to challenge this mind-numbing bureaucratization is to strive for authentic and meaningful experiences both as professionals and within the learning experiences developed with students. This issue of OEJ offers an exploration of how the standards provide us a chance to see how we can all connect as teacher voices in our state.

In closing, we firmly believe that teachers serve as opportunity makers, creating spaces for young people to develop the confidence to act on their passions and dreams. Just one look at the beautiful work created by students in Jane Fisher’s middle school ELA class offers a glimpse into the potential for literature and writing to engage young minds. Careful consideration of our instructional goals and learning outcomes, such as through reflection on the OAS, can help us as educators to create opportunities that enable young readers and writers to reimagine themselves, serve their communities, and change the world.

# Geographical Views of a Tulsa Urban High School

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Justin Yates

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*"Necesito un papel, por favor."*

After 3 years of high school Spanish, that, along with a few other catch phrases, was pretty much the extent of my Spanish language skills. I didn't have much use for what I learned 20 years ago and, outside of a beach vacation somewhere, I never thought I would need it. Then I returned to the secondary English classroom and saw how wrong I was.

Last year I taught English I & II at an urban high school in Tulsa. The student population (grades 9 – 12) was mostly Hispanic (50%) and African American (30%) and 100% qualified for free and reduced lunch, which means their household income was below the federal poverty line. The school also had over 200 students who were considered English Language Learners. That designation means English is not their native language, it is usually not spoken in their home, and they have a limited working knowledge of the language.

Many of these students did not choose to move to Oklahoma; instead, their parents uprooted their lives from their homes and friends to give them a better opportunity in the United States. Unfortunately, they are seen by many people, including some educators, as nuisances who only add to their workload and make the job harder because they don't know the language.

But this is the changing face of Tulsa urban schools. I had at least 10 stu-

dents who spoke no English in my on-level English classes, which adds a certain level of fun to the teaching process. Managing 35 hormone-fueled high school students in a class, creating multiple plans for multiple preps, translating those plans for ELL students, making the lessons meet the state and district curriculum standards, and keeping the class fun and educational at the same time, all while keeping your sanity, is why they pay us the big bucks.

Enter in the common core debate. One set of standards is rejected. New standards are passed. District curriculum leaders are consulted. Sweeping changes are made. Such is education, but all the while, teachers who have ELL students in their classrooms are left wondering how these standards will address them. From what I have seen, they don't.

The new standards for English are good, and I agree with the importance of each one. But if a student doesn't know the language, how am I supposed to get them to meet these standards? Many think, "Well, they don't have to meet the same requirements as students who have spoken English their whole lives," and those people are wrong. My English II ELL students took the same End Of Instruction test as every other student. There are some students who can take the Academic Language Development: Literacy Analysis class to complete a project based portfolio to meet the English EOI requirement, but this was only implemented recently, and it is only for a few qualifying students.

I can't help but feel that we are doing a disservice to a growing

population of students in the urban schools. Yes, there is a dedicated network of ELL/ESL teachers and staff that are working tirelessly to meet students' needs. But they can only do so much, especially when students who speak no English are integrated into classrooms and told to learn like the rest of the students. The new standards do not address how teachers should handle ELL students; only giving a broad stroke of what should be taught to English students in general.

Again, let me interject that I like the new standards. And I do not believe that teachers need an overly rigorous checklist to meet when it comes to teaching students. The new standards give teachers enough autonomy to work with their districts and meet the objectives in their own way, but only for the English speaking students. For example, when 10.1.R.2 standard says, "Students will actively listen and evaluate, analyze, and synthesize a speaker's messages (both verbal and nonverbal) and ask questions to clarify the speaker's purpose and perspective," how are English teachers supposed to do this effectively when the student doesn't understand the language? Turn on *Telemundo* and try to synthesize the speaker's message and see how well you do.

Do you want to know the sad truth of what usually happens in classrooms in overcrowded urban schools? ELL students are ignored. Teachers are overloaded with students and assessments, some are too lazy, while others are too intimidated with teaching ELL students to adapt or accommodate them.

And by overlooking these students in the standards, too, teachers have no guidance on how to assist English Language Learners. Yes, there are a couple of hours of training sandwiched in three days of constant meetings at the first of the school year, but honestly those meetings ultimately turn into white noise. Tulsa Public Schools has an amazing

support person who will come out and show teachers how to assist ELL students, but she alone is responsible for

four different high schools. And how many teachers are willing to give up their planning period or have time to stay after school to go through the training? With so much information coming at you, how do you know what to use and when?

That is where I believe the standards should step in, and I don't think it would hard to do. For each of the eight standards, there should be modification suggestions for ELL students (and students with Special Education status, for that matter). Nothing too rigid, but show how teachers can reach students who do not speak the language to achieve the same standards English speakers are expected to meet. I'll reference the same standard above: 10.1.R.2 standard, "Students will actively listen and evaluate, analyze, and synthesize a speaker's messages (both verbal and nonverbal) and ask questions to clarify the speaker's purpose and perspective." Underneath this standard could be an added section for modified ideas for teaching English Language Learners.



Our ELL teaching experts readily have materials that could make this possible and accessible to every teacher across the state that sees each standard. Then there would be no excuse for anyone to overlook these students. At the core of every teacher is a heart of service, to see people learn and grow. Sometimes we just need the materials to bridge the (language) gap.

This past year was my first experience with ELL students in the secondary classroom, and I am nowhere close to an expert in teaching them. But I found that by

modifying the lessons, using Google translate to give them the same material I give my English speakers, and showing them the attention they deserve, these students exhibited a desire to be in the classroom. In fact, my English Language Learners became some of my most well-behaved students with steady attendance, and they consistently turned in their work.

"Maria" was one such student I had in my on-level English II class. She came in a month late in the semester and spoke no English. I gave her translated lessons and allowed her to write in Spanish, and urged her to write in English as the semester and her confidence progressed. I would say "Hola" and "Adios" at the door every day and use Google translate on my phone to explain each assignment. This was not special treatment; it was exactly what I did with my other students. Throughout the semester she slowly opened up and showed her personality in class

and through her writing. On the last day of school, I found a letter in my mailbox from her. Just like in class, she wrote in Spanish and then below translated in English. It read, "Thank you for dedication, for the commitment you have with your students to see learning and good development. Thank you for your such valuable work. God always give you strength and wisdom in everything you do, always do well, you have good health, joy. God bless every one of your days." Maria is one of those students who are being left out.

The urban classroom in Oklahoma is evolving and if we do not change with it, we will be doing a disservice to a growing population. These students are eager to make the most of their new lives in the United States. As educators we have an amazing opportunity to make a difference in a student's life and help them pursue the American Dream. Anyone who dedicates their lives to teaching will agree that every student that walks the halls of our schools deserves a quality education, no matter where they were born or the language they speak. The Oklahoma Academic Standards should reflect that as well.

**Justin Yates** is an Assistant Professor of English at Seminole State College and has taught in secondary and higher ed. for the past 10 years. He has a M.Ed. from Northeastern State University and is a doctoral candidate in English Education at the University of Oklahoma. Justin has presented workshops at OCTE and NCTE conferences and currently serves on the OCTE Executive Council as the Tulsa Regional Coordinator.

# Hidden in Plain Sight: The Unseen Culture of the Military Child in Oklahoma

Jennie L. Hanna

Learning the beliefs and customs of other cultures can increase tolerance and understanding, and the classroom offers an excellent setting for this to occur. College coursework for educators often include diversity in the classroom. However, there is one culture overlooked in Oklahoma: the military culture.

Culture is the way in which a group of people with similar behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols live and share their way of life. While the military is made up of a multitude of different cultures, religions, races, and ethnicities, it is culture in its own right (Hall, 2011). Identification with this culture may not project itself outwardly, making recognizing military students tricky. As such their own specific needs can go ignored or unseen within education spaces.

There are 2 million military children in the country and 44% of all military families have children, so this culture of students is large (Milburn & Lightfoot, 2013). Oklahoma itself is home to five major military installations with more than 130,000 employees (Oklahoma, 2011). Since one in every 16 jobs in Oklahoma is impacted by the armed forces, this makes for a sizable culture in the state.

Where I teach in Lawton, located adjacent Fort Sill, 21% of the total school population consists of military dependents (Lawton Public). Many school districts are not located near a military installation, so it is feasible why this culture might go unnoticed. However, many soldiers serve in a

part time capacity as reservists or members of the National Guard and their children are also part of this culture. As such, educators must try to better understand, serve, and support this culture when it is prevalent.

## ***More Than Meets the Eye***

In classrooms across the country, noises help to create an atmosphere for students. Sometimes it is laughter, sometimes it is lecture, but in Lawton, booming sounds are known to consistently permeate our classroom walls. Despite this, students continue working as the sound of the doors rattling and windows vibrating fade into the background. They know it is just the result of a different kind of learning taking place among the soldiers just down the road. Learning to work amidst these sounds is just one of the things that makes teaching in my community and educating military children different than others.

The biggest thing that separates military children is that a parent may be absent for extended periods of time throughout their childhood. Military deployments are common and the loss is compounded when parents are sent to serve in war-torn regions of the world. This stress can impact the social and psychological development of military children (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Since Lawton is a large military community, the school district supports these students with a traveling military counselor and by sponsoring support groups within

the secondary schools. Teachers can also help by having good communication with the home parent during a deployment since the actions at home and at school don't always match when a student is dealing with an absent parent. Being aware of possible mood swings in military dependent students and remaining supportive works to help these students cope with their loss.

Military children find developing deep relationships problematic. Moving so often in order to meet the needs of the armed forces can prevent them from forming strong bonds with peers (Moore & Baker, 2011). Soldiers generally stay at one duty station for no more than a few years – lifelong military children may move an average of nine times throughout their childhood – so packing up and moving becomes a natural rhythm of life for this culture (Wertsch, 1991). The desire to build strong connections may be repressed for fear of the pain that comes with having to sever those connections. For educators, this results in more guarded students who are reluctant to share and open up to others voluntarily, so keeping an eye on any military students who appear withdrawn is important. This is where good student-teacher rapport is beneficial and teachers can help by helping those students find a strong peers within the classroom.

Since the military is built upon structure and discipline, the student's home can often mirror a similar authoritative style (Wertch, 1991). The values that were instilled into a soldier when they signed up to serve often spill over into the manner in which they parent, which can be both a good and bad thing for teachers. As a whole, I generally have few discipline problems from military children because many have been taught to show respect for those in authority, especially teachers. Some



of my most supportive parents come from a military background because they see the value in being motivated toward bettering themselves and their children through education. On the other hand, because the high level of expectation, any time a military child misses the mark by misbehaving or failing on an assignment, the repercussion at home can be more severe and detrimental, resulting in a more anxious student. In this manner, a call home to a parent can sometimes do more harm than good in building and maintaining a strong student-teacher relationship.

Identity development for a military child can also be more challenging. Once they begin to socialize outside of the military culture, they see the civilian world as different – sometimes even better – because these children don't have to consistently move or deal with a possible extended absence of their parents. These differences can make them feel like outsiders. In fact, most military children state the first time they felt like a foreigner was when they began attending public school (Wertsch, 1991). Moreover, those students who find themselves as both military and minority students get a double dose of feeling like an outcast among their peers. In Lawton, nearly two-thirds of all the military children in the district are also classified under a marginalized race or culture (Lawton Public). Once these students reach the secondary level, this isolation generally causes them to either rebel against the military lifestyle and develop their identity apart from it or immerse themselves more in the culture through JROTC and even enlisting for service themselves when they come of age. Secondary educators can attest that developing an identity can be a messy and tumultuous process for any teenager, but being a military child adds another layer since they must learn to navigate and find their sense of self within both the military and civilian worlds.

It can be difficult to adjust anytime you the new one in the group, but coming into a new classroom as an adolescent is even tougher. Most teachers begin the year with ice-breakers in order for students to learn about each other, however, military students can move into new schools throughout the entire year. One way to help welcome newly-moved military students is to give them a chance to complete the same icebreaker and share it with the class, allowing them to introduce themselves and find those students with similar interests and experiences in the classroom. Our new state standards can also be beneficial, since they closely mirror those in other states, thus making the transition easier since school expectations and curriculum might be on the same track as in their previous school.

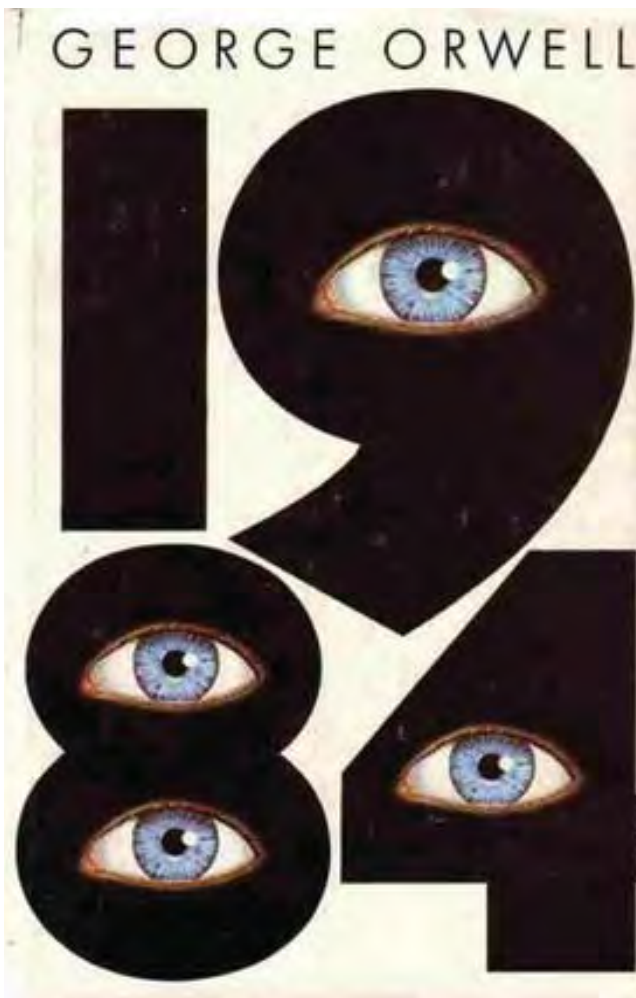
### ***Difference is Not Always a Hindrance***

Teaching in a school with a large military presence does come with several perks educators may be hard pressed to find in other communities. There is a strong sense of pride, patriotism, and service toward others felt throughout the community and seen among the students we teach. With a vast majority of Lawton's population tied to the military as both active and retired soldiers, living amid the presence of so much bravery and selflessness is nothing short of inspiring. Although their time growing up as a military child may make for a more difficult childhood, these students have also been given a unique opportunity to see the world differently because of their access to more diverse cultures, places, and people than their civilian counterparts (Wertsch, 1991). Often these students grow up more open-minded, worldly, and they have more to share with their peers, which can be a true asset in a classroom environment.

Research has shown that military children grow up more resilient and successful in life because of how often they had to adapt to new situations (Hall, 2011). The pattern of being an outsider in a new city, a new school is repeated every time they move to a new post, so the level of resiliency military children develop continues to increase. Even though a military child can feel adrift at times, they learn how to not only survive but flourish. Their tenacity is nothing short of inspirational, and I couldn't imagine living, teaching or raising my family in anything other than a military community.

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- Jennie L. Hanna** is a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma in the Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum Department and has taught English in the Lawton Public School District for eight years. She has also held the titles of military brat, Army veteran, military spouse, and has taught countless military children, including her own, over the years.



*“the profession of teaching has been transmogrified, shifting the focal point of schooling from the welfare of the child to an adherence to legislative mandates, accountability systems, and bureaucratic minutia.”*

## **Public Education: Living the (Orwellian) Dream**

**Lawrence Baines, Ph.D.**

Lately, the parallels between the fictional country of Oceania, depicted in George Orwell’s 1984, and the United States have grown too close for comfort. Oceania’s population was 300 million, about the same size as the U.S. during George W. Bush’s presidency.

In the novel, the richest denizens of Oceania were called the Inner Party, and although they comprised only 2% of the population, they owned most of the wealth and controlled most of the power. Likewise, in the United States today, the richest 2% of the population own most of the wealth and recently, with the case of Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission, the

Supreme Court affirmed the right of the richest among us to influence the political process in any way they see fit. President Obama commented that the Citizens United decision, “gives the special interests and their lobbyists even more power in Washington while undermining the influence of average Americans who make small contributions to support their preferred candidates” (Cable News Network, 2010).

With elections on the horizon, members of America’s Inner Party have proposed tax cuts for themselves, with concomitant reductions in funding for public services of all kinds, including public education. Thus, the fates of the 65 million

students enrolled in public schools and colleges have been pitted against the fiscal predilections of the Inner Party.

With the Inner Party in control of education reform, the needs of the Proletariat, as the common people were called in Orwell’s novel, have been ignored. One of the Inner Party’s favorite propagandistic tricks has been the admonition against “throwing money at education.” Thus, under the auspices of education reform, American children of the middle and lower classes are sent to school in dilapidated, understaffed, overcrowded buildings, where they are probed, evaluated, and indoctrinated according to the strictures of the state-sanctioned curriculum. Meanwhile, the profession of teaching has been transmogrified, shifting the focal point of schooling from the welfare of the child to an adherence to legislative mandates, accountability systems, and bureaucratic minutia.

Despite the Inner Party’s admonition against spending money on education, everyone knows that the most successful public schools are located in the wealthiest parts of the country while the worst public schools are located in the poorest areas. Recently released school ratings reveal that none (as in zero) of Ohio’s high-poverty schools are considered A-quality, while 95% of the schools in Ohio’s richest neighborhoods are considered A- or B-quality (Dicarlo, 2012; Howe & Murray, 2015). Despite the clear connection between poverty and achievement, current policies favor A-rated schools over F-rated schools. Because wealthy parents spend, on average, 10 times more money than poor parents on the education of their children already, the achievement gap between the children of the Inner Party and everyone else will continue to widen (Baines & Goolsby, 2016).

Not resting upon the laurels of reform that has wreaked havoc on public education, a fresh round of initiatives is now before voters. This latest fusillade promises to challenge Americans' capacity for doublethink, the ability to hold two contradictory views simultaneously in the mind.

Indeed, these newest reforms sound as if they have been lifted straight out of the pages of 1984.

The quality of teachers is paramount. Therefore, to improve the quality of teachers, the Inner Party suggests eliminating teacher tenure and dumbing down teacher certification. Florida, North Carolina, Kansas, and Idaho have repealed teacher tenure and sixteen other states have revised teacher tenure laws to make firing teachers easier (Education Commission of the States, 2016a). 47 states allow certification through alternative paths, many of which require no degree in the content area, no courses in pedagogy, and no work with children prior to the first day of full-time work as a teacher (Baines, 2010).

The development of creativity and critical thinking are essential for success in the twenty-first century. Therefore, to develop creativity and critical thinking, the Inner Party suggests mandating a rigid curriculum and requiring frequent tests that require students to fill in bubbles with a number two pencil. According to the recently ratified ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act), states must "annually test at least 95 percent of all public school students and at least 95 percent of all subgroups in math and ELA, and student participation on these tests must be incorporated as a factor in the state's accountability system" (Education Commission of the States, 2016b, p. 5). 100% of these exams are built around multiple-choice questions and involve filling in bubbles on a machine-gradable form.

Improving struggling schools in urban areas would benefit both poor children and the neighborhoods where they attend school. Therefore, to improve urban schools, the Inner Party suggests shutting them down. In 2012-2013, 1493 public schools were shut down, many in poor, urban areas that have few cultural attractions or "safe places" for children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Cohen, 2016).

Obviously, these reforms align well with one of Big Brother's primary maxims, "Ignorance is strength," and will have minimal impact on the children of the Inner Party. However, for everyone else, most especially the children of the Proles, these reforms are a nightmare.

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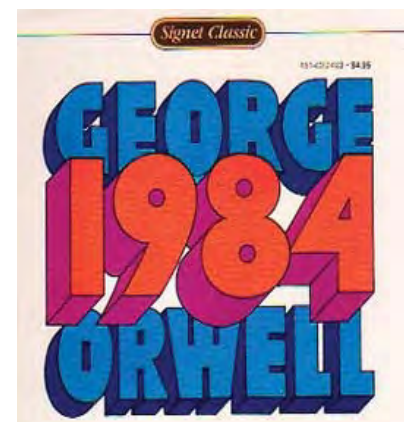
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# Reluctant Writers in the Midst of New Oklahoma State Standards

**Kara Stoltenberg**

While the new Oklahoma ELA standards are centered on the processes of reading and writing, they do not offer guidance for the obstacles teachers must overcome to help students reach these rigorous standards:

- Standard 1: Students will speak and listen effectively in a variety of situations including, but not limited to, responses to reading and writing.
- Standard 2: Students will develop foundational skills for future reading success by working with sounds, letters, and text. Students will use recursive processes when reading and writing.
- Standard 3: Students will apply critical thinking skills to reading and writing.
- Standard 4: Students will expand their working vocabularies to effectively communicate and understand texts.

- Standard 5: Students will apply knowledge of grammar and rhetorical style to reading and writing.
- Standard 6: Students will engage in inquiry to acquire, refine, and share knowledge.
- Standard 7: Students will acquire, refine, and share knowledge through a variety of written, oral, visual, digital, non-verbal, and interactive texts.
- Standard 8: Students will read and write for a variety of purposes including, but not limited to, academic and personal, for extended periods of time.

For students who are resistant to reading and writing, achieving Oklahoma's new standards will be challenging. Many teachers struggle to get students to write a single sentence, let alone ponder intricacies of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical style. While mastering skills in the short term is important, isn't the overarching goal to create

readers and writers who will continue to grow intellectually over the course of their lives? Fostering real achievement begins with developing a positive relationship with students and then helping students develop a positive relationship with language.

## ***Self-Efficacy***

One of the most common obstacles reluctant writers face is their low self-efficacy in relation to writing. Self-efficacy is "defined as individuals' judgments of their competence in writing" and is difficult to overcome (Wachholz & Etheridge 16). Specifically, these judgments stem from a variety of factors, including a student's ability to respond to various writing prompts and the writing skills needed to communicate effectively.

A history of "unaccomplished writing can diminish a writer's confidence," ultimately affecting a student's level of activity choice, effort, and persistence (Street 636-637). Students may spend years feeling inadequate and the inadequacy prevents them from experimenting with language and learning how to improve. Students become apathetic as a defense mechanism, protecting themselves from criticism and failure.

Holmes argues that one of the primary reasons for a reluctance to write is that teachers do not provide students with adequate pre-writing strategies. Teachers assume students have these skills and, when asked to write about a topic of their choice, they struggle. Not only do students lose time in class, "their time [is] consumed by frustration and failure" (Holmes 243). Students who continually fail at written expression, become frustrated, which leads to low self-confidence, a vicious cycle that is hard to escape.

***Salt to the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys. New York: Philomel Books, 2016 (February). 391 pages.**

I would recommend this book for young adults, as well as adults who don't know about the tragic sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff in 1945.

I've just read a special new book that would serve as an "out-of-the-box" way to study World War II for grades 7-12. After I finished reading *Salt to the Sea*, I had a hard time deciding exactly what quality it is that makes this new book by award-winning author Ruta Sepetys so special. Is it just the struggles and dangers that makes this book special—no, maybe it's the well-drawn characters! No, maybe it's the secrets that take over each character! No, maybe it's the plot element of the Amber Room. I finally decided that this wonderful read is special because of the sum total of all these factors.

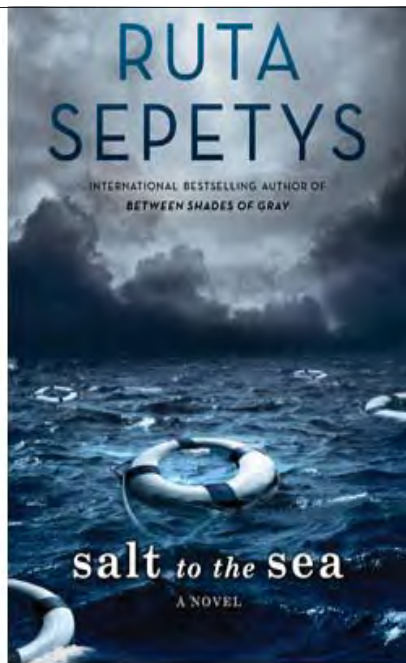
The struggles and dangers are certainly there! After all, the main event of this book is the worst ship disaster ever! The German ship Wilhelm Gustloff sank in 1945, causing the death of more than 9,000 passengers. The passengers were mostly civilians (including an estimated 5,000 children) with some wounded German soldiers. All were fleeing Eastern Europe from the advancing Russian army in a mass evacuation (the historical Operation Hannibal).

To combat these feelings of failure, teachers could model the writing process for their students and point out and celebrate what they do well. Modeling how to write might include "think-alouds," which serve as scaffolds for students who are uncertain what a writing process might actually look and sound like. Think-alouds show students the brainstorming and planning phase where they "tackle the problems of selecting a topic, deciding which information they want to include, and determining how to organize the information"

# Salt to the Sea

Book Review

**Eril Hughes**



The author chooses to focus on four highly interesting main characters. The first is Alfred, a 17-year-old lowly Nazi seaman, who serves Hitler with single-minded focus and creates himself as a hero as he writes daily "letters" in his head to Hannilore back home. The reader quickly begins to suspect that his version of life is a deluded one, and the end of the book confirms not only delusions, but absolute madness. The next character, Florian is a young Prussian art

(Holmes 241). Students can begin to see how writing is a messy, multi-step process and that even teachers sometimes struggle.

In the initial stages, especially, the emphasis should be on student improvement, not on marking each error and drowning the page in the red ink. Only after teachers have established a supportive relationship with a student, can a true discussion about the elements of writing occur. Everything is predicated on the stu-

restorer on a secret mission involving a mysterious valuable object in a small box. Wounded by shrapnel, Florian saves a girl in a pink wool cap from death. This girl, 15-year-old Emilia, had been sent to a "safe" farm in East Prussia by her father, but her sanctuary proved to be far from safe. She is now pregnant, and she and Florian survive a deadly encounter with a Russian soldier. The last main character, a Lithuanian nurse named Joana, carries terrible guilt with her, and she calls herself a "murderer" (42). Her background and her guilty secret are revealed bit by bit as the book progresses and she meets Florian and Emily. All four characters board the Wilhelm Gustloff and think that they have found a way to escape. But which ones will survive the sinking of the ship?

"When the survivors are gone we must not let the truth disappear with them" (183). This superb book of historical fiction certainly keeps the truth alive through the use of memoirs, interviews and testimonies. So read and learn about a little known event. Read and feel what the real refugees must have felt, for author Ruta Septyns captures memories in this novel.

dent/teacher relationship—including discussions centered on vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical techniques. Thus, a positive, supportive relationship with students supplemented with some attention to the teaching of process makes the Oklahoma Academic Standards less daunting. Confident students are more willing to write more, and to experiment with their writing, thus they will improve.

## **Writing Apprehension**

When the problem of low self-efficacy is not addressed within the classroom, it becomes the foundation for other issues, such as apathy and oppositional behavior. When activities are forced on students at which students feel that they cannot succeed, their apprehension and loathing increase. Wachholz and Etheridge describe writing apprehension as an individual's proneness to avoid situations in which writing will be graded or evaluated in some way. Attaching grades to writing assignments that were forced on students may only amplify their hatred of writing.

Some students, like Megan, a student in my sophomore English class, may become overly dependent on their teachers. Overwhelmed by the process of writing, she constantly asked for feedback on organization, diction, syntax, and more. Megan was never confident in her choices and frequently held me responsible for the grades on her writing assignments. In this way, Megan abdicated responsibility for the quality of her writing. A low score was my fault, not hers.

Many nonproductive student behaviors stem from past experiences where teachers have focused solely on surface level corrections, while they perceive their peers as being successful. As a result, perceptions of a "good writer" varies by the apprehension level of the student. Low apprehensive students think of "good writers" as people who have extensive imaginations, who write with purpose, and who can fully develop their ideas. In contrast, high apprehensive writers believe good writers are those who have mastered technical elements such as grammar, spelling, and organization (Wachholz & Etheridge 18).

Students with high apprehension often obsess over minor, surface level mistakes, and are less concerned with the content of their writing. Many

Students with high apprehension often obsess over minor, surface level mistakes, and are less concerned with the content of their writing. Many are hesitant to write as they see people around them writing with ease and accuracy. These students believe that others can simply "hold the pen and a mysterious force dictates stories, poems, and letters" (Holmes 242). They haven't been supported in the writing process and, as they compare themselves to those around them, their self-efficacy takes a hit.

In some cases, students were inadvertently taught to be apprehensive. As children, "90% come to school believing that they can write" (Wachholz & Etheridge 20). Yet as students progress through school, many adopt a defeatist attitude. Classes focusing solely on standards and testing transform writing into an activity that is graded, criticized, and never completed. In order to help students find joy rather than panic when it comes to writing, teachers must consistently show their students, through conversations and classroom interactions, that they are capable of being successful. By showing enthusiasm for writing and creating activities that are relevant to students' lives, teachers can reduce anxiety.

Standards for reading and writing are certainly crucial for a number of reasons, but when a student's literacy is at stake, and he or she no longer feels as though they have a voice when writing, teachers must prioritize the child's self-efficacy and achievement over standards and "coverage."

### **Over-Grading/Negative Teacher Feedback**

A primary trigger for student apprehension is a previous, negative experience with writing. Too often, teachers are guilty of "over-grading" and marking every error on a student's paper without thinking of the effect on a child. Evaluations and feedback speak directly to a student's self-efficacy. Performance

on a task, followed by feedback or evaluation from a teacher, develops the student's perception of his or her abilities (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer 466). Therefore, how a teacher grades and how a teacher provides feedback to their students matters a great deal. When teachers give positive feedback, a student's self-efficacy increases and their apprehension decreases. They evaluate themselves as capable and are more willing to continue writing. Meanwhile, those who receive only negative feedback view themselves as less capable, leading to low self-efficacy and high apprehension. Teachers have a tremendous amount of influence and are one of the main contributing factors to whether a student is scared to write or not. Of course, praise cannot be "faked," so a teacher must work to identify strengths and to work from there.

Unfortunately, negative feedback from teachers seems to be common. Street found that the ratio of criticism to praise in teachers' responses to student writing is 9:1 (637). Too often the emphasis on skills discourages young people from taking risks and creatively interacting with language. While comments made by teachers are usually intended to help the student improve, research has shown that the over-citing of errors does little to strengthen student writing (Wachholz & Etheridge 17).

### **Solutions**

Ultimately, learning is a relationship between students and teachers, and teachers must do their best to not tarnish that relationship. Adhering to the Oklahoma Academic Standards is not enough. Students must feel safe to explore and learn, which requires teachers to ensure they have the poise necessary to try and fail, and then try again. When students gain confidence in their abilities and start to see themselves as writers, those skills and knowledge are part of a developing identity, which

educators are helping to mold (Street 639). Teachers have the challenge of supporting their apprehensive writers by fostering each student's personal growth, while at the same time ensuring students reach the state standards (Auten 923).

While this task seems daunting, there are strategies that can be easily implemented. After reviewing literature focused on writing and self-efficacy, seven ways were revealed for a teacher to authentically build student confidence while enhancing achievement. These strategies include:

1. Identify past improvements in writing, so that students can focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot.
2. Suggest specific strategies for continued writing improvement and set attainable writing goals. This provides repeated success experiences, which build student confidence, self-efficacy, and independence.
3. Allow experimentation without evaluation and provide positive consequences, such as publication of an in-house anthology (Wachholz & Etheridge; Heath & Kreitzer).
4. Allow students to see YOU write. This provides an opportunity for teachers to share their passion and struggles with their students and helps create a community of writers (Holmes).
5. Give students more authority over their learning (writing based on interest inventories) (Street).
6. Use informal conferences and a workshop environment to help students find better ways of expressing themselves.
7. Provide a relationship that is more mentor/apprentice than authority figure/conformist.

It is useful to remember that there can be no progress, no mastery, and no learning if students are unwill-

ing to participate. The Oklahoma Academic Standards will become superfluous if teachers continue to emphasize surface level errors and overwhelm their students with negative feedback. However, if teachers use these strategies and create an environment in their classrooms that is supportive and focused on growth, the possibilities for students are endless.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the number of reluctant writers may seem to be proliferating, teachers can help students overcome their fears. While the new Oklahoma Academic Standards are a step in the right direction, they are written for students who already have high self-efficacy and low apprehension. In order for these goals to be realistic for every student, teachers must engage students who struggle with writing. By building up self-efficacy through honest, positive feedback and not over-grading, teachers can help their students overcome their reluctance to write. Despite recent hardships for education in Oklahoma, we have some of the best teachers in the nation and they still have the power to help students to feel confident, to be successful, and to find their voices.

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**Haley A. Bell**

# Pre-Service Voices

## Kylie Gibbons

As I begin to prepare for my student teaching semester, and my thoughts inevitably turn toward the prospect of searching for a job, I find myself filled with doubts that I thought I had put behind me when I began to work on my degree. Despite all of the negativity that is thrown at students who choose to study education, "Why would you want to do that? Are you ready to be poor the rest of your life? Do you just want the summers off? Why don't you study something that will get you a real job?" I was able to remain positive about my future. I would think of standing in front of my future students, and while I felt the normal amount of apprehension someone would expect when facing a new and unknown chapter of life, there to control the fear of my inadequacy and to combat the negative views of society were my excitement for the future, my passion for learning, my determination to make a difference, and the smidgeon of functional insanity that I think all educators must possess in order to pledge their lives to teaching; especially those who choose to do so in Oklahoma these days. Where education is concerned in Oklahoma the buzz words, or phrases, this last year have been budget cuts and new standards. The former has my insides shriveling and sinking even as I type it and it is the source of many of my re-emerging doubts and fears about entering the profession of teaching. The latter represents an unopened door that could lead either to a bright new future or just

another dead-end road that no one meant to drive down in the first place. I choose to believe in the potential that lies beyond the threshold of that door.

People are growing increasingly upset that more and more future teachers like myself are leaving our state when they are needed the most, but I cannot and do not blame them for their decision to leave. I cannot blame them for being afraid and allowing themselves to be enticed by a situation that seems infinitely more promising for their future when I myself feel their fear and hear the siren calls of more stable opportunities. I like to think that most people who choose to be teachers, or that are trying to become teachers, are altruistic human beings, but I also believe that people can only be pushed so far before life becomes too difficult for even the most charitable of people to handle. The situation in Oklahoma is nearing that breaking point, and for many it has already reached it, but there is one thing that is keeping it from reaching that point for me; the support that I see among teachers and others involved in the field of education in the face of difficult choices and terrifying problems. The creation, and now the implementation, of the new Oklahoma Academic Standards is an example of a situation in which I have seen teachers banding together to make the best of their daunting circumstances.

It was teachers who came together to help create the new Oklahoma standards that will begin to go into effect this school year, teachers who continue to hold each other up when it feels as though the world is conspiring to knock them down, and teachers who continue to push on in order to do what is best for their students even to the detriment of themselves. It is my hope that the same types of teachers that came together to accomplish these things will come together to help people like me that are entering into the profession of teaching. First

year teachers now face implementing new standards that veteran teachers are learning along with them, so there is a feeling that there is nowhere to turn to for help. On top of that, new teachers are entering the profession at a time when you have to justify making more than a class set of copies for an assignment because there is no money in the budget for more paper or toner for the copy machines in some schools.

Learning new standards and learning how to use them in classes without resources, such as not having enough readable copies of a novel for classes that have reached astronomical sizes, is a process of trial and error that will be made easier by cooperation between teachers, both expert and new. Concerns of how I am supposed to implement standards like Standard Eight in the Oklahoma Academic Standards, independent reading, when it may be struggle to even get enough copies of a text to have them read together as a class in some districts or schools come to my mind. How I am going to teach vocabulary, Standard Four, without having to make students write out whole lists of words or questions on their own paper? As I begin to enter the role of educator this semester as a student teacher I question how I am going to achieve implementing many of the new standards without making class tedious or boring because of a lack of resources. Making students copy things down by hand before we can actually do the work in class cuts down on instruction time, and so I feel like students may potentially learn less because of time constrictions and because of the tediousness of the whole process. Having veteran teachers there to help pre-service and new teachers like me figure out how to solve these types of problems is what's needed to help ease the stress we are feeling; it is what is needed to help stop the mass exodus of future teachers from Oklahoma. Teacher mentoring programs should be stressed heavily in the next



few years. I know that some schools and districts have these already in place, but not all of them do, and I think it is more important than ever for teachers to feel connected with each other. On top of that, in light of the new standards, I think it would be beneficial to have teachers meet regularly in small groups or by department to discuss with each other how they are finding ways to implement the new Oklahoma Academic Standards in their classrooms and share strategies for how they are doing these things with their limited resources. This would help teachers who are struggling, like new teachers, while also possibly generating new ideas for everyone to try out with their classes.

Collaboration and comradery among teachers is what will make the future of education here in Oklahoma resilient. The new Oklahoma Academic Standards represent a shift in the course of education and I am not sure yet if the destination will be a positive or a negative one. However, if collaboration and comradery among teachers remain strong suits of our state, and we all work together to make these new standards work, steering education in a positive direction, I have no doubt that we will succeed in finding a bright, new future for education here in Oklahoma.

## ***Pre-Service Voices***

***Adam Van Buren***

### ***A New Education Shaped by Political Activism***

When I announced my intention to become a teacher, my parents fell into abject despair. Why, they wondered, would I consign myself to a life of poverty? In desperation disguised as humor, they suggested I become a priest. Poor I would still be, but at least I'd have lodgings and a set of fabulous robes.

A heathen committed to education, I traded catechisms for grammar lessons, the Good Book for many good books. (I also thought my vows of penury would be somehow nobler if not imposed by a higher power.)

Nevertheless, their objections were not entirely unfounded. Oklahoma's teachers receive pitifully low salaries – among the lowest in the nation, at last count (National Education Association, 2013). The starting pay of \$31,606 seems scarcely enough to live, much less to outfit a classroom. It is an especially paltry sum in light of the financial burden associated with becoming a teacher. University degrees, certification exams, often an entire semester spent as an unpaid intern – the costs mount rapidly. No teacher seeks to become extravagantly wealthy, or at least I have not. They do, however, desire compensation commensurate with their qualifications. Perhaps the salary would be more palatable if teachers had greater control over their classrooms, but they are subjected to numerous evaluations, their students forced to take superfluous tests. To me these measures appear to be roundabout ways of questioning teachers' professional competence. A professional is trusted to do his or her job and corrected only if problems arise. Teachers, ostensibly considered professionals, enjoy neither professional pay nor professional courtesy.

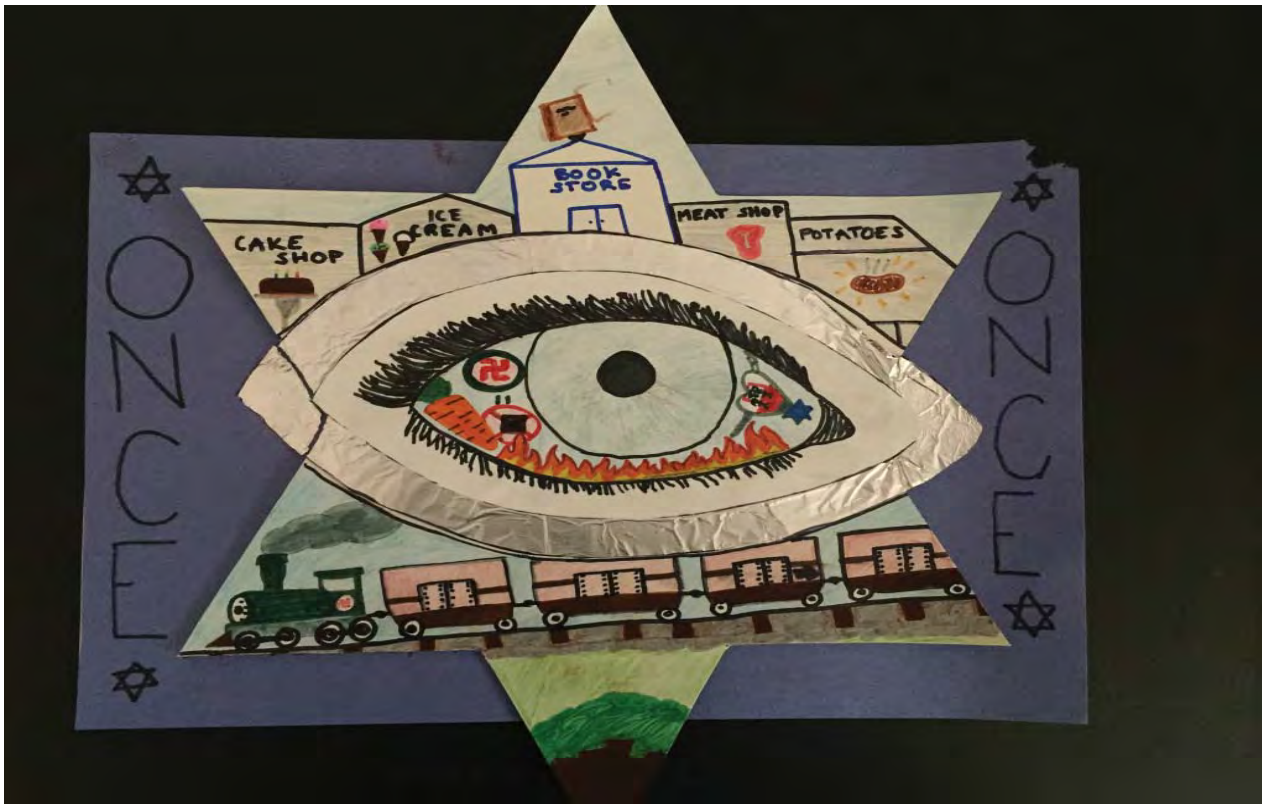
Much of the blame can be laid on legislators and the general public. Lawmakers set teachers' pay scales and determine the budget for education; their action or inaction affects students, schools, and teachers. But of course, legislation derives its legitimacy from public opinion. Among many, teachers are still regarded as overpaid babysitters. We must remember that people judge largely by what they see. Curricula, lesson planning, and differentiation are by definition esoteric topics confined to the educational world. The public do not see, or choose not to see, the toil involved in teaching. They see only an adult managing a roomful of children and dismiss it as easy work. Thus, the cycle of underappreciation, micromanagement, and meager pay is perpetuated.

This year, I saw many teachers resolve to break that cycle. Gone were the days of staunch apoliticism, the belief

that to lobby and demand better conditions is to jeopardize the integrity of the job. No longer were these teachers content simply to "make the best of it." They realized that school is not removed from the political realm but intimately linked with it. Decisions made at the local, state, and federal level have lasting repercussions on students, teachers, and the very core of education. A teacher's focus must be mostly on the classroom, surely, but to ignore politics and to remain silent is to accept tacitly whatever intolerable directives issue from the Capitol.

In 2016, Oklahoma teachers have been anything but silent. Their efforts prevented the passage of HB 2949 and SB 609, which would have instituted a financially disastrous voucher system. New standards, written by Oklahoma educators, were enacted despite political opposition. An extraneous layer of testing has been eliminated. Best of all, scores of educators, intent on helping colleagues and students, ran or will be running for state office. They have recognized – and I hope will continue to recognize – political activism as a means to improve their own lives and the lives of their students.

I now couldn't be prouder to join this profession. Like all aspiring teachers, I envision schools that provide equality of opportunity, regardless of family income or background; respect students' individual talents and differences; and offer challenging yet edifying lessons that prepare students to shape this society. Such schools cannot be created by hope alone. They must be cultivated, nurtured by forces from within and without. Political considerations – school funding, equality of access, restrictions placed on students and teachers – are just as vital as the lessons teachers plan and the attention they give their students. I am glad to see that my future colleagues have learned this lesson, and I look forward to embarking upon my career and upon our collective, enduring crusade.

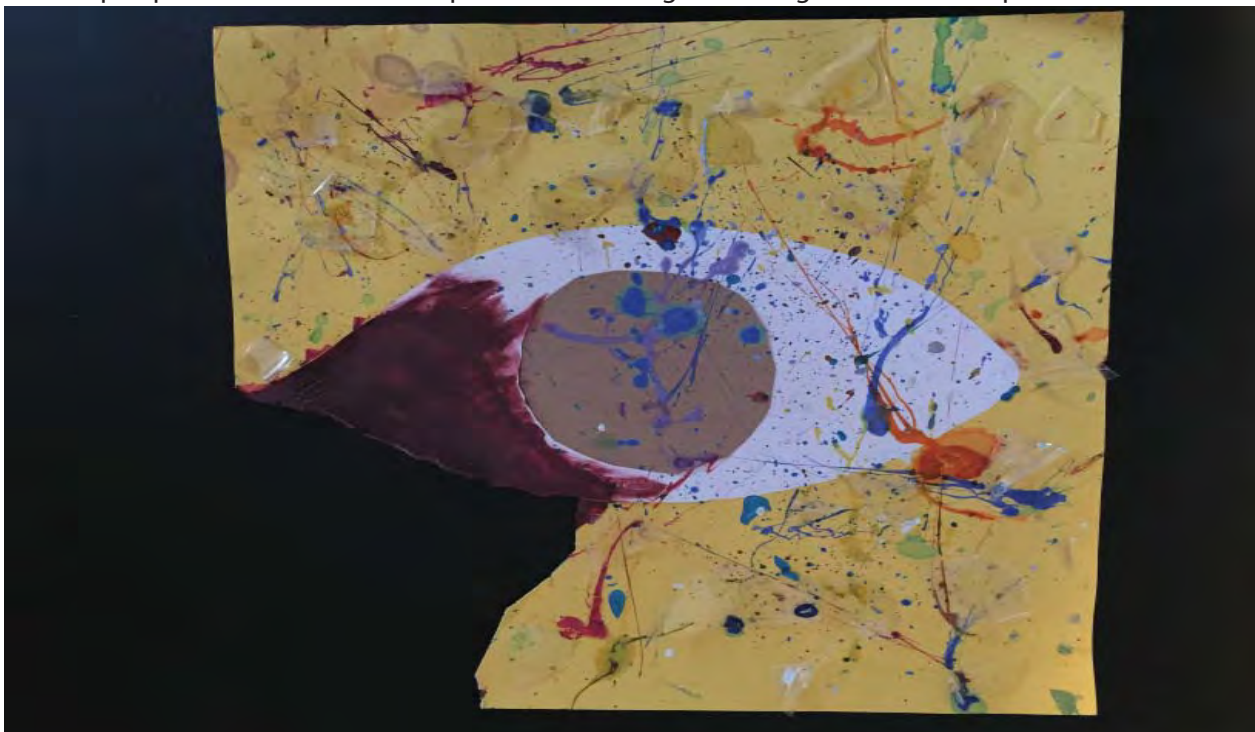


*Student  
art by  
Blake  
Diehl*

## ***Reflecting on a Unit of Study: Young Adult Literature on the Holocaust***

**Jane Fisher**

This unit of study, YA Holocaust Literature Circles for the eighth grade ELA classroom, was one where students were immersed in nonfiction and historical fiction accounts of a character's experience in the Holocaust. The texts read by students varied in genre (from graphic novel to historical fiction to poetry anthology), and offered a diverse range of both male and female protagonists across multiple countries. Through narratives that included a boy sentenced to death by the Nazis, a girl who turns spy, a German boxer, a young girl who calls Hitler her uncle, and the words of the children who lived in the Terezin concentration camp, students were able to examine many historical perspectives and build a deeper understanding of the tragedies and triumphs of the Holocaust.



*Student  
art by  
Jackson  
Blaylock*

## Assignment Sheet.

Choose a protagonist from the book.

### **I. Consider a unique perspective:**

In nearly any piece of literature, there occurs an event that impacts the protagonist some way; usually, this event leaves a lasting impression on the character in the form of an image. Reflect on what your protagonist has “seen” (figuratively or literally) throughout your novel. What is an image or sight that your protagonist will never forget? There will not be a “right” answer to this, because your understanding of your character’s perspective is unique therefore, you may not have the same image as someone else who is reading the same novel as you!  
Procedure:

On a separate sheet of paper, you will create the “eye” of your protagonist as a symbol of their perspective on their experience. Be creative with this! The final product must be at least the size of this paper (8 ½ x 11), use neat and careful illustration to convey what you want to show, and .

# WWII Novel Perspective Project

## *Jane Fisher, 8th grade ELA*

You are welcome and encouraged to use a range of materials, either from my classroom or from home.

### **II. Brainstorm**

An image my character will never forget:  
Supporting text evidence with page number:  
Ways (pictures/symbols) to show this image:  
Materials I could use:

### **III. Reflection/WriteUp**

Answer the following on the back of this paper. You will attach this reflection with the rubric to the BACK of your “character eye”.

1. Provide a relevant piece of evidence (cited with author’s last name and page number) from your text that clearly describes this image seen by your protagonist.

2. Describe in at least 56 sentences an image that your character will never forget. Include the following information in your description: context (setting, situation of character(s), point in plot), significance to character and plot, and thorough description of what was seen. The description of this sight needs to be in your words, not directly lifted from the novel.

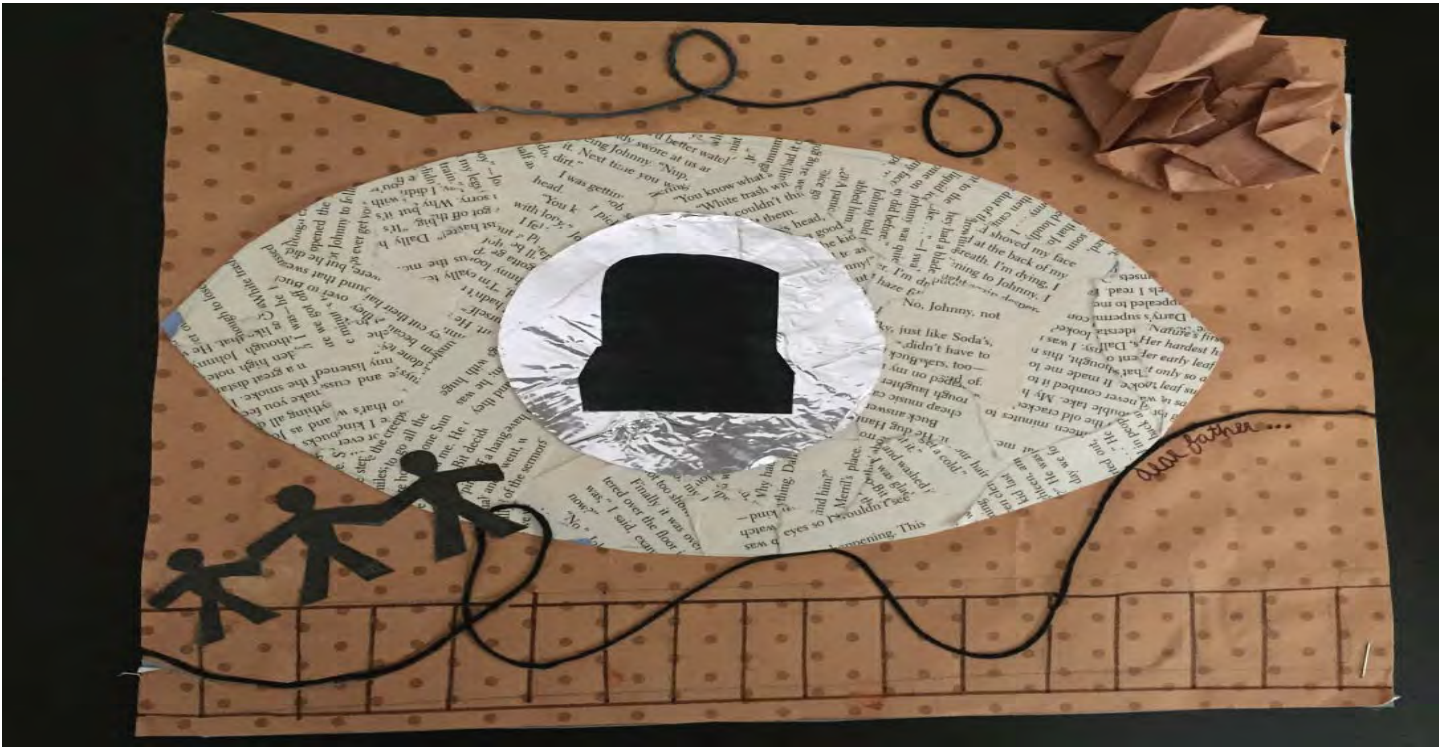
3. Describe in at least 56 sentences what is shown on your character eye. Include the following information, listing (1) materials, images/symbols, placement/formation of images on/within the eye and (2) justification for why you chose them.

As the guide for this unit, I felt that it was among the most successful I had taught because of the interest, inquiry, and independence shown by the students. With over thirteen different texts being read at the same time, this was the first point in the year that students read a novel for class independently rather than together. I planned for this culminating unit before my students headed to high school to be about the process over the product; while students each had reading guides to keep their reading pace on track and enhance group discussions, they had freedom to explore the content of their novels beyond the narratives of their characters.

One of the guiding elements I asked of students during their reading was to sketch along the way—whatever was memorable or significant from the text. Throughout the year I had integrated art into my ELA curriculum, mainly as a summative assessment option but never as a means of recording the experience throughout a unit. For the sketches, I provided templates much like would be seen in a comic. My primary inspiration to heavily integrate art into the literature circles was to offer a reprieve for my heavily standardized-tested students, and my initial reactions to this unit were positive. I was beyond pleased to see so many different stories being read by students and told to their peers—true book talks in action. I was also pleased to see students spending their time in different ways. While some students read independently at their desks, others read with a partner in a corner of the classroom or the hall, while others worked on their sketches or explored a question they had on one of the computers. All students—those in GT, those on IEP’s, enthusiastic readers and students who did not read often, found success during this literature circle process. One student spent much of his time creating an interactive map tracing the path of his novel’s protagonist. Each class period hummed with the creative process of reading and responding to a novel.

The ultimate element of this unit was to create a visual representation of an unforgettable moment. Taking the form of an eye, these projects showed the perspective of the students’ protagonist. We called these “The Eyes,”

student art by Grace Heefner



and they were incredible. Although The Eyes were a final product, they tell the story of a process where students were embodying the role of reader, artist, teacher, and learner. Each eye told me a story, not only of a point in a text, but the story of the student and what their unique perspective on their text was. The perspective projects were authentically them.

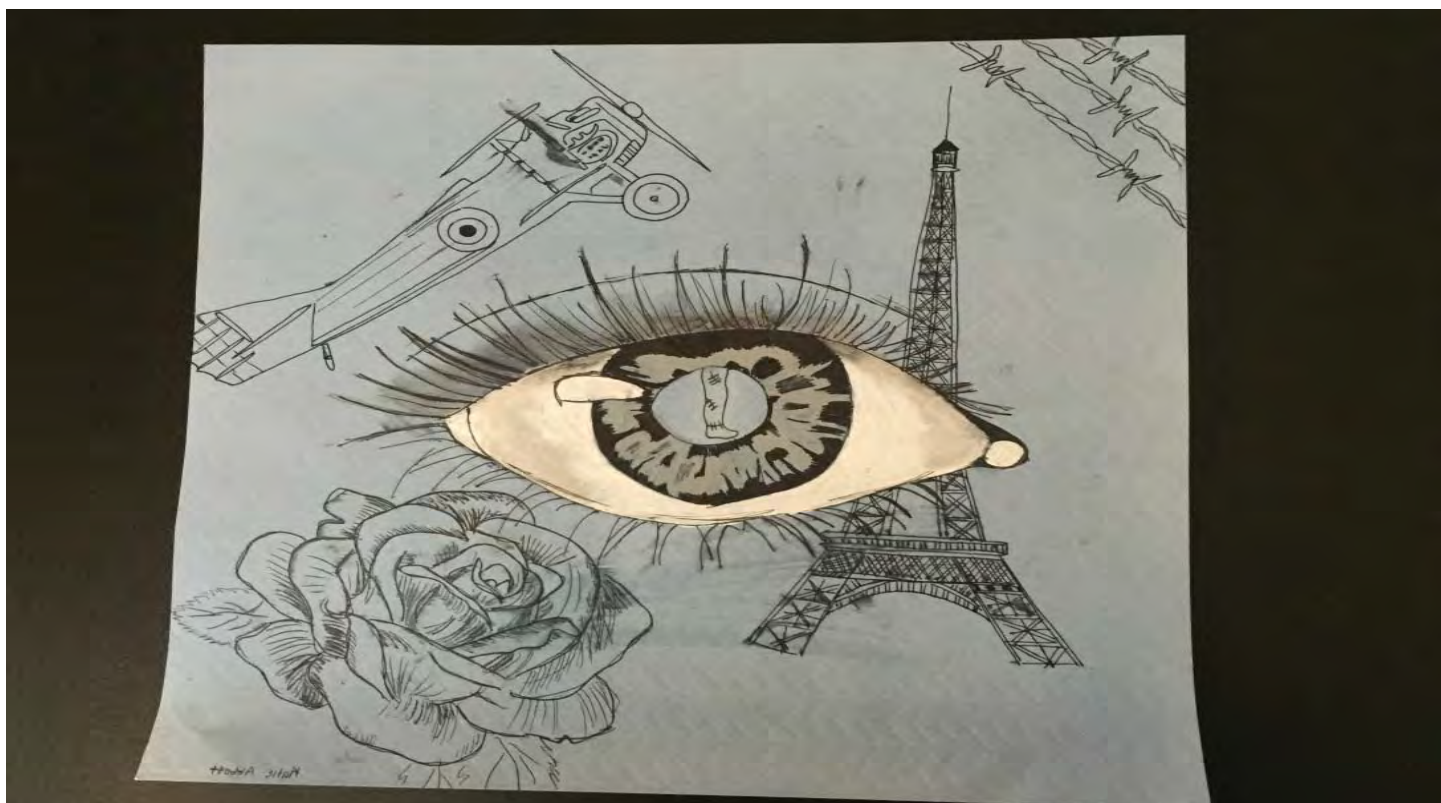


student art by Lindsay Bolino

student art by Laura Meirick



In the future, I would not limit students to creating an eye. Each text, each eye, each student brimmed with such diverse ideas and results, that I would like to see in what other forms students would find inspiration.



student art by Katie Abbott



**ELAOK**  
TEACHERS

## Standards of Advocacy:

### *Using the New Oklahoma Academic Standards in English Language Arts to Become a Teacher Advocate*

**Lara Searcy**

In order to become teacher advocates, or what Michael Fullan calls “change agents,” teachers must be “career-long learners, without which they would not be able to stimulate students to be continuous learners” (Fullan, 1993). This is the process of teacher advocacy: modeling for students the standards and expectations we require of them. With the new Oklahoma Academic Standards in English Language Arts (OAS-ELA), teachers are tasked with creating learning experiences that are engaging, challenging, and sequenced for students (OAS-ELA, 2016, pg. 9). These learning experiences provide opportunities for students to “easily transfer skills to civic engagement and citizen participation,” but first, teachers need to consider how they themselves participate in the community outside of their classroom. Whether one does or does not (yet) engage with the community, teachers need to model how to navigate the “literate world” we ask our students to explore on their way to becoming independent and critical readers and writers (OAS-ELA, 2016,

pg. 5). One way to navigate community outside of one’s classroom is to view the new standards not just as “students will” learning objectives, but also as “teachers should” advocacy statements. “[Teachers should] engage in inquiry to acquire, refine, and share knowledge” (OAS-ELA: Standard 6, 2016, pg. 5). Embarking in the inquiry process alongside our students allows teachers the opportunity to become advocates by sharing our knowledge and experiences about the profession to support the profession.

Starting in Pre-K, students are asked to generate topics of interest (PL.6.W). By twelfth grade, students are asked to create their own research questions in order to find information about specific topics (12.6.W). When teachers embark on the same learning process they ask of even the youngest of students: “to find “a friend, teacher, or expert who can [help us] answer [our] questions with guidance and support” (PK.6.W), they model the inquiry process. Teachers should seek out

the “experts” in the field, their colleagues, and ask critical questions in the field of education. Teachers should ask: “What is a purpose, or rather a cause, that teachers need to invest in?” This question provokes an analysis of pertinent educational issues, such as: high stakes testing, politics, poverty, school leadership, social justice, standards, student learning, teacher preparation, and technology. According to the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), these questions and opportunities for advocacy also occur in our “our everyday instructional decisions, conversations with students and their families, discussions of educational issues with neighbors, op-ed pieces, blog entries, meetings with school administration, and/or connections with lawmakers” (Van Sluys, 2009).

Teachers are an untapped resource for radical and continuous improvement (Fullan, 1993). This means that teachers are the sources of information that will inspire change, yet teachers often fail to use their well-trained “teacher voices” in the role of “change agent.” Teachers must realize that they are the voice in education and represent the voices of their students. The teaching profession becomes politicized when legislators make decisions regarding what occurs in the classroom, not teachers. So, by using “teacher voices” more effectively to inform and educate, teachers are able to advocate for the long-term goals of students and that promotes stewardship of the profession.

Advocacy requires the refinement of one’s knowledge in the field. To do this, teachers must become “Critical Readers” (OAS-ELA: Standard 3, 2016, pg. 33). One of the first places to cultivate knowledge about the field is by reading the professional articles and journals of one’s professional association(s). In acquiring and refining

Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend by Alan Cumyn. New York: Atheneum Books, 2016 (March). 408 pages.

As over-involved high school senior Shiels leaves her English classroom, a speck in the east comes flying toward her school. A short time later, a pterodactyl named Pyke lands on the track. The opening to Alan Cumyn's "Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend" drops us in the middle of a world we should understand with a character we certainly don't.

Shiels does her best to involve Pyke and keep him hidden from the parents in the town. But her grip on her grades, her activities and her relationships begins to slip as she becomes more and more enamored with Pyke and his wild, seductive nature. She soon finds herself in the midst of a world she never intended.

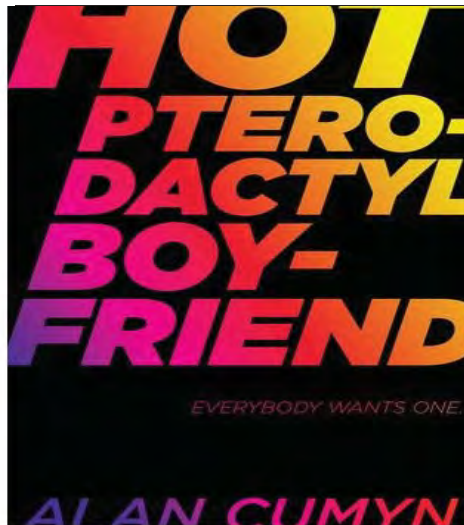
With tongue planted firmly in cheek, Cumyn nails the tropes of young love novels. In addition, by the end of the novel, he twists these tropes and somehow makes the addition of a pterodactyl-human seem natural. The novel's ending is a dream-state frenzy that has readers questioning Shiels' sanity as well as our own.

More than anything else, Cumyn captures the over-involved

# Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend

Book Review

Kerry Freisen



student. The one whose life is a precarious balance of grades, extra curriculars and what passes as a social life. One thing out of place leads to chaos. As a teacher, I've seen these students, and I've seen the balance be upset. However, I'm not sure the students ever see themselves in literature. Shiels is that character.

As Shiels' carefully constructed world begins to crumble, she begins to find what she wants out of life. Perhaps these students might

see themselves in Shiels and work to truly balance their lives and begin to understand what they want out of life.

Shiels didn't understand she wasn't happy with her life until she got a taste of the wild world of Pyke. In many ways, Shiels feels trapped in her world much like Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's novel "The Awakening." Edna's life as a housewife was decent before she got a taste of freedom, and from that point Edna couldn't return. Her awakening led her to leave everything behind and swim out into the ocean. Shiels' awakening leads her to leave everything behind and organize a shoe store. But Shiels has a choice, where Edna's culture didn't allow a choice.

"Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend" is a great – if unorthodox – pairing with "The Awakening." It's hard for students to relate to Edna's predicament and decisions. However, there are many students who can relate to Shiels'. Though none have to deal with integrating a pterodactyl into the population, many do understand the risks of becoming over involved. Students can see themselves in Shiels' stress.

Though the premise of "Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend" seems ridiculous at first glance, the book has far more to say about the pressures of modern high school than any books I've read in recent memory.

knowledge in the profession, teachers again model the inquiry process and application of critical thinking—an important part of citizenship. However, knowledge acquired must be shared. As teachers critically read, comprehend, interpret, and evaluate educational issues, they must also respond, as stated in the standards. This response allows teachers to become "Critical Writers" (OAS-ELA: Standard 3, 2016, pg. 33) where they can model how "to write for varied purposes and audiences in all modes, using fully developed ideas, strong organization, well-chosen words,

fluent sentences, and appropriate voice" (OAS-ELA: Standard 3, 2016, pg. 33). Teachers can also respond through the "application of effective communication skills through speaking and active listening" (OAS-ELA: Standard 1, 2016, pg. 13). When teachers actively listen to the needs of their community and speak out on the behalf of their students, they become advocates outside of the classroom and model the citizenship to their students.

In Oklahoma, especially, teachers need to "practice what they teach."

Teachers need to: 1) ask critical questions in education; 2) read and write critically; and 3) respond (in writing or in speech). Teachers can do this by using the new Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts to guide their advocacy just as they use the standards to guide their curriculum and instruction.

(article continues next page)

Consequently, my advocacy journey began with these three steps and through my own refinement of knowledge and application of the new English Language Arts standards in Oklahoma.

My support of the new standards during their approval process made me realize that advocacy very much looks like a learner who is conducting research, or engaging in the inquiry process (Standard 6). Based on the context of what was happening in Oklahoma during the summer of 2014, I knew the issue of state standards was a cause that needed my “teacher voice” since it was becoming highly politicized by other, outside voices. The approval process provided the purpose for my advocacy because it was through the delayed approval and perceived disregard for the professional expertise of Oklahoma educators that I felt called to support the profession. My stance, or perspective, on the issue of approving the new standards primarily dealt with teacher planning and time. After being in an unwieldy period of transition for several years, I wanted teachers to feel as though their efforts were priorities. To me, the legislative approval process seemed to blatantly disregard the time, energy, creativity, and effort teachers put into their planning and instruction.

Therefore, I had to teach myself, just as we teach our students, how to communicate effectively and respectfully in diverse groups and demonstrate a willingness to accomplish a goal, share responsibility, and value the contributions of others (12.1.W.2). I did this by “engaging in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics [the OAS-ELA]” (12.1.R.3) with an audience outside of my classroom— stakeholders in my community (Standard 1). I then engaged in the reading and writing processes (Standard 2), refined my academic vocabulary in the field (Standard 4), conducted independent (Standard 8) and critical reading

and writing (Standard 3), and applied formal grammar and usage (Standard 5) in my responses about the cause. I wrote letters, made phone calls, and created multimodal presentations with the desire to “clarify [my] purpose and perspective” (12.1.R.2). All of these responses utilized a recursive writing process (12.2.W.1) that was focused, organized, coherent, and incorporated evidence (12.3.W.2) in order to communicate my knowledge with others and defend my argument (12.7.W.1). Using the standards provided me this framework and an opportunity to strengthen my civic engagement and skills, the same learning objectives required of our students.

Overall, I responded to the call of teacher advocacy because I found a cause I was invested in and I wanted to model for my students, pre-service English teachers, what it meant to be a professional. If I expected them to be ready for “leadership, collaboration, ongoing professional development, and community engagement,” (NCTE, 2012, Standard VII.E2), I had to first demonstrate that readiness in my own practice. In order to prepare them to meet their own Standards for Initial Preparation, I needed to provide opportunities for them to interact with the community, engage in leadership, and actively develop as professional educators (NCTE, 2012, Standard VII). My expectations for them became the expectations I had of myself because the process of teacher advocacy requires modeling and inquiry. When we engage in the inquiry process alongside our students we become “change agents” and we become “the friend, teacher, or expert who [helps others] answer [their] questions with guidance and support” (PK.6.W). Teacher advocacy requires teachers to be learners and that learning stimulates students to become more engaged participants in the classroom and citizens outside of it.

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# Integrating the Oklahoma Academic Standards for the English Language Arts

*Brook Meiller, Ph.D.*

The Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts illustrate how we learn. The writing committee felt strongly that the standards should not be a list of things to acquire, but rather a reflection of how we use the English language arts to learn: we speak and listen; we process; we think critically; we learn new words and their function in our language; and, we research, read, and express ourselves in all modes of literacy. The English language arts as a way to learn are reflected in the overarching Great Eight Categories: Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing Processes, Critical Reading and Writing, Vocabulary, Language, Research, Multimodal Literacies, and Independent Reading and Writing. The standards are meant to work together, integrating multiple standards as students learn new literacy skills.

Educators in Oklahoma have been expected to tailor instruction to meet accountability goals measured by multiple-choice tests focusing on one skill at a time. Standardized tests attempt to measure “author’s purpose” without recognizing that students have to attend to tone, theme, structure, point of view, language, and a host of other elements to determine “author’s purpose.” The writing committee discussed how that approach does not reflect how the language arts work, how good teachers teach, or how students learn. With that in mind, the standards were written with the intent for teachers to plan lessons and units integrating multiple standards at once.

How does a teacher plan a lesson or unit that integrates multiple standards? Each day, select texts for students to read, facilitate a way for students to talk about what they have read, and create time for students to write about and share what they have read and discussed. Texts may center around a theme or essential question that students can pursue for one day, multiple days, or even weeks. As an intentional teacher, look for places in the text that allow you to teach grade level skills delineated in the grade level standards.

For example, find a passage that has one well-placed short sentence that provides a shift in the action or tone of the passage, providing the opportunity to teach sentence variety and its impact in text (Standard 5). Read the text aloud so students can hear the length of the sentences (Standard 1). Now ask students to read it to themselves, this time underlining each sentence separately so they can feel the length of sentences and notice the short sentence even more (Standard 2, 5, and 8). Have them distinguish among the long and short sentences and then collaborate with a peer as to why the author might have put that short sentence there and analyze the impact it has on the text (Standard 1,2,3,and 5).

With your guidance, this will lead to discussion of tone and shift in tone, or plot and shift in plot, depending on the passage. Next, have them write a short description of a favorite place or a special person in their lives and challenge them to use one well-placed short sentence, forcing them to focus on their own sentence variety and its impact in their writing (Standard 2,3,5, and 8). Have them share their short sentences around the room, validating their use of short sentences. Put them into groups of two or three to read their entire composition aloud while the other two students analyze the impact of the short sentence (Standard 1,2,3,5,7,8). In this lesson, they are

integrating six of the eight standards.

- thinking critically about text (Standard 3)
- analyzing language (Standard 5)
- speaking and listening to learn new ideas (Standard 1)
- reading and writing independently (Standard 8)
- collaborating with others (Standard 1)
- practicing the process of analyzing text (Standard 2)
- creating their own work (Standard 2 and 8)
- analyzing the work of others, both spoken and written (Standard 1 and 3)
- focusing on the specific skill of recognizing the impact of sentence variety in text (Standard 5)
- incorporating sentence variety into their own writing (Standard 5)

Having new standards does not mean we have to completely recreate our units of study. Take a fresh look at a favorite lesson from last year. Does it have a text for students to read, discuss, and write about? With the grade level standards beside you, identify all the places where your lesson teaches the new standards. Notice which standard seems to be dominant in the lesson and which ones are absent. Can you strengthen the lesson by incorporating another standard? Was this lesson designed to teach vocabulary, but with an added standard, could it also teach a critical thinking skill or an element of language? Did this lesson have an element of student collaboration, and if not, could that be added? With those questions in mind, you and your colleagues will create strong experiences for our students to engage in the study of English language arts.

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# BRIDGING THE READING-WRITING GAP IN ELA CURRICULUM

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## GAGE JETER

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As a middle school English language arts (ELA) teacher, I experienced firsthand both the strengths and challenges of reading and writing being taught as separate subjects. For five years, I taught 6th and then 8th grade ELA at Deer Creek Middle School in Edmond, Oklahoma. As a 6th grade teacher, I taught both composition and literature classes. I saw some students twice a day, so I always found it appropriate, meaningful, and practical to weave the two together. However, it was much more difficult to make those explicit connections with students who I only had for one class or the other.

After a move from 6th grade to 8th grade, I taught composition solely. I was fortunate to have a friend and colleague in my partner teacher, Sidney Barton, who taught literature. We made it a priority to work together to blend reading and writing as much as possible. However, students would look at me quizzically when I would pose a writing prompt related to a novel they were reading in Mrs. Barton's class.

On one occasion, students were reading John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. Sidney and I wanted to integrate writing activities related to the novel, so I posed a literary analysis question one day, and a student questioned, "But this is comp. Why are we writing about something we read in lit?" This question struck me; my students did not recognize English language arts as a blend of reading and writing, as well as language, speaking, and listening. Instead, they often perceived reading and writing as separate subjects without a bridge to connect them.

In consideration of the recently adopted Oklahoma Academic Standards (OAS) for English Language Arts (ELA), a question timely for Oklahoma ELA teacher educators, preservice teachers, and teachers in the field, then, is how can we better weave reading and writing (and language and speaking and listening and all other facets of ELA) together?

### ***Connecting Reading and Writing***

In today's ELA classrooms, it is ideal that reading and writing are taught together, as the NCTE's guidelines for professional knowledge for the teaching and writing explain that reading and writing are related. In accord, Bushman and Haas (2006) note that "children learn to read from writing and learn to write from reading" (p. 89). Blau (2003) argues that ELA teachers should "renovate the culture of instruction in literature to render it more consistent with the process-oriented, collaborative, and learning-centered practices of exemplary writing practices" (p. 5). In essence, reading and writing are similar processes.

Although Miller (2009) contends that "the students who read the most are the best spellers, writers, and thinkers" (p. 55), teaching reading and writing together must be a strategic process from the teacher's theoretical and pedagogical philosophy. There is a "potential for writing assignments to enhance the student's reading experience or to kill it" (Dornan et al., 2003, p. 179). Dornan et al. (2003) maintain that writing instruction and practice should not be sporadic, but instead should occur on a regular basis in conjunction with what students

read. This consistent emphasis will only improve student's reading and writing abilities. In addition, weaving reading and writing together requires thought, planning, and strategy. It is not always as simple as having students write in response to what they read. Establishing goals and purposes for reading and writing can assist students in bridging the gap from the two often discretely taught subjects. Only then might reading and literature be more than story elements or comprehension and writing be more than hypothetical, irrelevant prompts.

Dornan et al. (2003) offer many ideas for writing in response to literature, including personal, imaginative, and informative/persuasive writing; popular forms of writing such as ads and commercials; drama/oral responses; and media composition. Writing in response to an array of texts breaks through barriers of words on a page. By integrating reading and writing in an ELA classroom, students can also begin to redefine reading and writing – that we read and write a variety of texts, including nonprint media. Moreover, writing about literature should extend beyond traditional right/wrong approach to retelling the story or proving a singular point. Instead, there is a "need for the use of extended writing activities that foster constructivist thinking" (Beach et al., 2011, p. 203).

In addition, there are intrinsic benefits for students as they connect what they read to what they write. Students might come to enjoy what they read and write as it can relate to their own lives in and out of the classroom.

For instance, while students read *The Outsiders* in Sidney's class, they wrote about life experiences with friendships and themes of love, loyalty, and isolation. It is important to note that integrating these types of writing assignments in connection to what students are reading involves some risk-taking. ELA teachers should integrate reading and writing assignment strategically so that students might recognize the benefits of reading and writing in and out of the classroom setting.



might be integrated, too, in an attempt to “move away from teaching grammar in isolation and experiment instead with ways of teaching less grammar but teaching it more effectively for writing . . . by drawing on literary and other published texts for examples” (Weaver, 2007, p. 4-5). A holistic approach to the teaching of ELA, instead of isolated pieces, can be at the heart of a successful ELA curriculum.

The Oklahoma Academic Standards (OAS) for English Language Arts (ELA) includes eight overarching standards in reading and writing:

*Standard 1: Speaking and Listening*

*Standard 2: Reading Foundations/ Reading Processes and Writing Processes*

*Standard 3: Critical Reading and Writing*

*Standard 4: Vocabulary*

*Standard 5: Language*

*Standard 6: Research*

*Standard 7: Multimodal Literacies*

*Standard 8: Independent Reading and Writing*

These standards acknowledge that reading improves writing and writing improves reading. Included in framework is the idea that “the eight overarching standards reinforce the recursive nature of the language

language arts, a non-linear process that involves the continuous and thoughtful refinement of concepts and skills” (“Oklahoma Academic Standards | English Language Arts,” 2016, p. 9). The natural interconnectivity of the facets of English language arts assume certain pieces of an ELA curriculum deserve more time and attention than others depending on the specific lesson, activity, and thematic unit.

Especially in consideration of independent reading and writing, it is significant that ELA teachers connect literature and composition to students' lives in and out of school, as “literature that relates in meaningful ways to adolescents in middle and high schools should be a strong part of the English curriculum if we want to increase the numbers of lifelong readers” (Bushman & Haas, 2006, p. 172). Aligning with Freire (1998), texts can aim to “establish an ‘intimate’ connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lives experience of these students as individuals” (p. 36). A variety of compositions can serve as mentor texts for students to engage in reading, writing, language, media/visual literacy, and speaking/oral discourse/listening processes.

### **Potential Constraints**

I argue the number one constraint for integrating reading and writing in the ELA classroom is time; there is simply never enough of it. I would go as far to argue for systematic change. One English class a day is not enough, especially if it only lasts 45 or 50 minutes, as classes usually do in a traditional six or seven period schedule, and “reasons for teaching literature are likely to force us to make choices about time and resources” (Dornan et al., 2003, p. 154).

### **A Reading-Writing Curriculum**

With the knowledge that curriculum is dependent on context and situation, including students, teachers, administrators, school sites, and community members, curriculum should offer outlets for secondary ELA teachers to weave together the many facets of ELA, including, but not limited to, reading and writing components. Walker and Soltis (2009) discuss how the concept of curriculum includes “the purposes, content, activities, and organizations of the educational program actually created in schools by teachers, students, and administrators” (p. 1). Curriculum is certainly contextually dependent.

An effective ELA curriculum should propose reading and writing taught in conjunction, weaving in literature, language, media/visual literacy, and speaking/oral discourse/listening. The teaching and practice of language

During an informal conversation with my former partner teacher, Sidney, she reiterated that the biggest problem with teaching reading and writing together is time. I asked her what area of ELA she viewed as taking the biggest hit in terms of time constraints. She noted that, because classroom teachers are usually limited to a 50-55-minute class period, one of the first lessons/areas to be deleted or 'de-emphasized' is the writing process. She spoke about how ELA is such a broad and non-linear subject area. In reality, with more students and less time in a classroom, something has to give, and, unfortunately, the writing process gets slighted.

Instead of letting go of writing processes, teachers could instead view writing as integral to what and how students read. Even more, secondary ELA teachers can "use reading to teach writing" by "looking at readily available texts differently" (Culham, 2014, p. 31). So, reading and writing can work collaboratively in more ways than one.

In consideration of constraints, ELA teachers can carve out as much space and time as possible for both reading and writing, especially because of the benefits for students: "by nurturing the reading-writing connection, teachers encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning while they become more competent and discriminating readers and writers" (Bushman & Haas, 2006, p. 96). Even in schools in which students take two English classes – reading and writing separately – the work they do can blend between the two. Although many middle schools in Oklahoma teach reading and writing separately, creating a community of practice in consideration of sociocultural theories of literacy, including reading and writing processes and products, can allow this type of

teaching and learning to occur. Within these communities of practice, reading and writing teachers can collaborate to make explicit connections for students.

### **Final Considerations**

Designing a curriculum is a complex process; it requires a meeting of the minds. All too often, curricular decisions are left out of the hands of teachers. It is imperative that teachers play a role in the creation and implementation of a curriculum. It is the teacher who knows his or her students best, and it is the teacher who should decide how to enact curriculum in his or her classroom. I am optimistic that districts, schools, and teachers can use standards-based ELA curriculum as a starting place for creating, through the important reading and writing in which students engage, a sense of hope for the future.

Freire (1998) recognizes that "hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy" (p. 69). I hope learning communities acquire critical thinking skills through reading and writing, teach one another about themselves and those around them, exhibit impatience toward prejudiced histories and realities, produce works connected to thematic texts and their own lived experiences, and resist injustices. Despite potential constraints, I am optimistic that teachers and students will remain persistently hopeful.

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Thanh Hà Lại's *Listen, Slowly: Multiple Windows* (2015). 272 pages. New York: Harper Collins.

For those who grew up with the Vietnam War, Thanh Hà Lại's *Listen, Slowly* will open a window onto Vietnam that should have been opened before we sent hundreds of thousands of troops to fight a group of people we had no means (and probably no will) to understand. *Listen, Slowly* takes you into present day Vietnam, which is surprisingly not unlike Vietnam of the 1960s, especially in the countryside, with the Vietnamese people still fiercely interdependent, the notion of individuality not as important as family and community values. This is how it has been in Vietnam long before the French colonized the country, long before the United States attempted to colonize—and remake—the culture.

For younger readers who may have no idea where Vietnam is or what the Vietnam war was, *Listen, Slowly* will be a window onto a vivid, vital culture in which ritual marks all aspects of life: food (if your mouth doesn't water reading this book, you're not a food lover), family roles, extended family (and I mean extended—into the past; ancestors in many ways are still alive), the way business is transacted, and the way people interact across generations. Younger readers may not want to stay in the Vietnam of the novel, but they will be glad they took the time to visit.

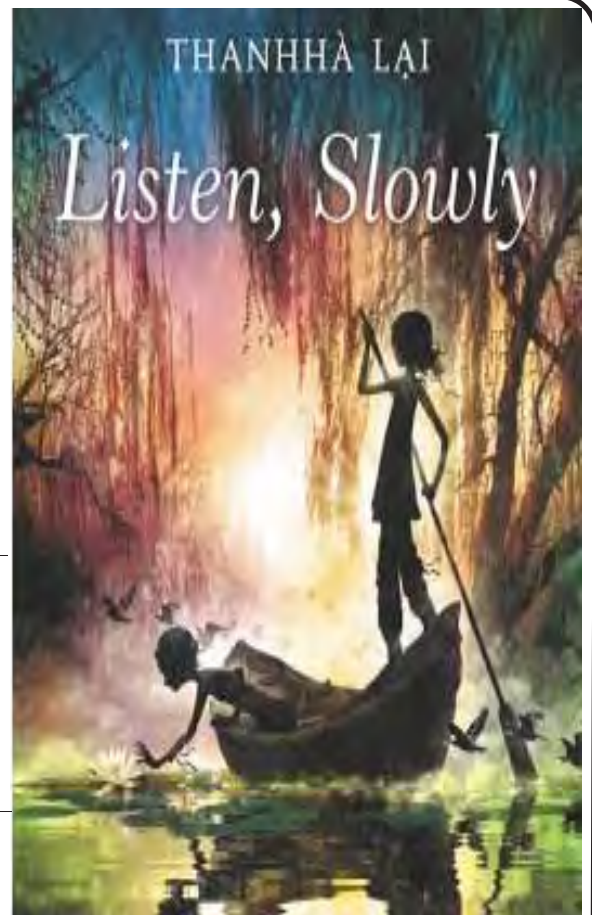
*Listen, Slowly* has been marketed as a middle-grade novel, but Mai, 12 years old, is not your typical pre-teen who may be 8 at one moment and 20 the next. Mai, who

# Listen, Slowly

Book Review  
Crag Hill, Ph.D.

would rather be hanging out at the beach in southern California, is a reluctant traveling companion to her grandmother on a trip to Vietnam. Her grandmother is returning to Vietnam for the first time since her family fled the country when Saigon fell over 35 years ago. She has been given a lead in finding out what happened to her husband who disappeared during the war, a contact with a man who was a guard at the camp where her husband was last known to be.

This will be closure for her grandmother, but for Mai, at first, everything about the trip is pure torture: the lack of internet access, the oppressive heat, the mosquitoes, her ever-present relatives (she has none of that personal space Americans expect). Yet once Mai puts aside her reluctance, this is an opening for her into her background, her present, and her future. Once she begins to see Vietnam through the eyes of her



grandmother and not the eyes of an American pre-teen, once she starts to use the language she has resisted using, she feels more and more at home. In fact, given the choice to move up the day for her return flight to the United States, she decides to stay longer.

Though older readers may not identify with Mai (yet she is as angsty as the angstiest of high school students), I recommend this book for readers of all ages. I would especially recommend it to readers of *The Things They Carried* who are wondering what Vietnam is like today. *Listen, Slowly* will provide a vivid picture of both life in the bustling cities and the quiet, seemingly timeless countryside.

# Roadblocks to Authentic Learning in Secondary English Language Arts and How to Overcome Them with the New Oklahoma Academic Standards

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Michelle Boyd Waters

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***“A literate citizenry possesses the skills required to analyze, evaluate, act upon, and compose a wide range of communications. An ultimate goal of language arts education is the development of citizens who can contribute to the common good” (Oklahoma Academic Standards, 2016).***

During the Oklahoma Writing Project Summer Institute this year, early elementary school teachers told stories during their presentations about how their students love to learn. Those young children were thrilled when they could listen to a story, and learn to write letters and sentences. They rejoiced when they could read books on their own and compose a paragraph with their teachers or by themselves. Unfortunately, this is not the attitude most students exhibit when they enter my middle or high school classroom. Something happens between their early years in school and my English class: That love of reading and writing is lost (Waters, 2014). High school students brag that they have never read a book on their own. Teenagers who will graduate in one year still prefer picture books over novels, and they have no idea what genres or authors they prefer. These young adults still demand teachers bottle feed them academic milk instead of seeking their own solid literary sustenance. When asked to write a paragraph on any topic of their choice, many secondary students will groan, complain that their brains hurt,

and inevitably, someone will ask how long a paragraph is. Students demand to know the bare minimum measurements for success, instead of seeking to convey meaning and purpose. Students still refuse to write more than a couple of unpunctuated, incomplete sentences, perfectly willing to fail the class or settle for a “passing” grade. Virtually none of the students can connect the author’s craft they witness in the literature they do read to their own writing craft. What is causing this shift from reading and writing with joy, to refusal to lose oneself in a novel and dreading putting ideas onto paper at the cusp of students’ graduation to full-fledged citizen? While frustrating home lives due to poverty or family dysfunction, the impact of pervasive anti-intellectualism in American culture (Williams, 2014), a lack of literary role models, an absence of positive early experiences with reading, and innumerable other factors may cause some students to lose interest in learning, the past 15 years of American education policy itself has encouraged students to focus their education solely on seeking non-academic payoffs, scoring good grades, and obtaining high test scores.

## ***Roadblock: Student Motivation***

Students who are not intrinsically motivated to learn wile away their time in classrooms by seeking non-academic payoffs. They are the ones in class who prefer talking or texting to learning, and who will

chase every verbal rabbit they can find in a concerted effort to derail the lesson. This is nothing new. While cellphones didn’t exist in the late 80s and early 90s, my fellow students and I did have neatly folded notes to pass to our friends across the room. In some of our classes, the teacher lectured almost exclusively and allowed napping (at least, as long as your lab partner woke you up often enough to take notes). Though I rarely participated in these classroom shenanigans, I observed them even in classes where a beloved teacher had years of experience -- especially if that teacher held students to high, rigorous expectations. Now that I’m a teacher in my own classroom, I see these diversions more clearly. In a classroom where students are expected to read and write daily, and to use the writing process (particularly revision), some students respond by creating diversions, actively distracting other students, frequently requesting bathroom passes, and engaging in activities that eventually resulted in a trip to the principal’s office. Some parents exacerbate this problem by blaming teachers when their children are trying to avoid challenging reading and writing assignments by citing “personality conflicts” between the student and teacher. Teachers who have raised their expectations often experience pushback from administrators who see student disruption as a classroom management problem (which results in high disciplinary report numbers) and parents who just want their children to be

happy and get a good grade. In spite of all this, some unmotivated students occasionally choose to learn because they like the teacher, their friends are interested in the class, or someone has bribed them. However, their goals are generally not to seek greater understanding, but to obtain the lowest grade they can get away with, particularly in the classes they hate.

### **Roadblock: Chasing the Grades**

Students often identify as an "English" person

or a "math" person, leading them to excel in one class while scraping by in the other. I was no exception as a student. I loved English and journalism because I could gain an understanding of the world through others' stories and use my own sense of language to tell my own stories. I struggled in the skills-based math classes because they were boring -- there were no stories to connect the content to the real world, so I often didn't pay enough attention or muster enough motivation to be highly successful. I preferred to daydream or write poetry. My 10th grade Algebra I teacher changed that for me in her class. During the first week of school, she announced that she would assign every other or every third problem in each unit of the textbook. We would then grade those problems. If we completed additional problems in the unit, she'd count them and add one point for each to our homework grade. I had an epiphany at the moment she explained this system; I knew I could be successful in this class. During that semester, I



completed every single problem in every unit the teacher assigned. Each week, I breezed through the tests, making sure to complete every problem and giving a quick glance for obvious oversights. At the end of the semester, my teacher called me to her desk and informed me that I had the lowest test score of anyone she'd ever had. Incidentally, I also

had the highest homework score of anyone she ever had, with the highest overall average of any student. Yes, I had learned how to game her system.

Students today are still gaming the system. They think that if they can just get a good grade on a worksheet, their report cards, and ultimately on the standardized test, then they have learned. "Often, in school, students write only to prove that they did something they were asked to do, in order to get credit for it" ("Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing," 2016). Students are not envisioning reading and writing as something they need to be able to do when they leave school and enter the real world as citizens, consumers, producers, and advocates. Conversely, students who lack skill or motivation often completely give up. These unmotivated students falsely believe that learning is about the grade they receive at the end of an assignment, not about what they can create or evaluate based on their new understanding. Worse, these students -- of average or better intelligence -- often believe they are stupid and incapable of learning, frequently leading them to drop out of school (Sherry, 1991). "At best,

summative school grades may yield information about basic content knowledge and skills, but they fail to capture mastery of concepts and ideas, creativity and imagination, critical thinking and problem solving, interpersonal abilities and effective communication, and learning mindsets" ("Next Generation School Accountability Report," 2015).

Ultimately, all these "soft," untestable skills are exactly the ones that students need in order to succeed in a world where the ability to organize, evaluate, and create information and understanding are the keys to making civic decisions, making wise purchases, producing a living for one's family, and advocating for positive changes for themselves and their communities. None of that matters if students cannot disseminate their ideas and understandings in ways that other people can recover and interpret accurately without the communicator's intervention. This requires writing. "...in today's increasingly diverse society, writing is a gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy, as well as for our collective success as a participatory democracy" (Nagin, 2003). However, writing frequently has been abandoned in classrooms because it takes too much time away from test prep, and because it cannot be assessed by the state easily (and cheaply).

### **Roadblock: Emphasis on Standardized Test Scores**

Schools and our governments have done an excellent job of discouraging development of intrinsic motivations for learning and encouraging acceptance of standardized test scores as an adequate goal and measure of learning. Over time, we have made these scores a requirement for graduation, used them to judge school systems and entire communities, and used scores to

label students successful or failures. Because of the inflated importance of these scores, schools have increasingly focused on raising test scores year after year, and as a result, administrators tend to encourage teachers to start preparing for testing as early as January, if not from the very beginning of school. Middle schools give quarterly benchmarks in reading and high school teachers are encouraged to use school-purchased assessments to identify student weaknesses. Projects that require higher order thinking skills, application of valid processes, and development of authentic products, are abandoned in the classroom as teachers are pressured to create or resort to using quick, easy-to-grade worksheet packets and computer skill-builder programs in hopes of raising the test scores by which the school will be publicly judged. Instead of learning how reading and writing can be effectively and ethically used to shape their world, students learn that being able read well enough to pass a comprehension test, to listen to a teacher present information and remember it for the test, and to answer questions correctly on a standardized test is what it means to learn (Waters, 2016). Writing instruction itself is abandoned in some cases, which negatively impacts student reading development. "Reading development does not take place in isolation; instead, a child develops simultaneously as reader, listener, speaker, and writer. The research has led many educators to agree that integrating reading and writing has multiple benefits for developing literacy" (Nagin, 2003). Administrators will often state in August that they aren't worried about test scores, but when April arrives, spreadsheets are created, numbers are crunched, and teachers are judged by their ability to raise those scores. Some administrators, who are more upfront about their reliance on scores, advise ed-

ucators to base their curriculum on the testing blueprint and focus more on reading skills because students can earn significantly more points on the reading multiple choice portion of the state test than on the writing. However, this directive is ineffective and goes against research-based English Language Arts best practices.

One would think that students across the state would soon raise their scores to stratospheric heights considering this focus on test preparation. However, this is not the case, according to the Oklahoma State Department of Education. "Flat or declining test scores are remarkable findings given the time, money, and emphasis devoted to preparing students to pass State tests. With considerable attention to the goal of improving test scores, we would expect to find modest gains following the implementation of the A-F accountability system (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006). Practices such as coaching, use of practice tests, curriculum realignment, and focusing attention on borderline test-takers are common responses to the demands of high stakes testing and tend to artificially inflate test scores without producing real gains in learning (Koretz & Hamilton, 2006). The lack of improvement in test scores suggests actual achievement decline may be greater than that measured by the tests and calls into question the validity of the motivational premise of the A-F accountability system" ("Next Generation School Accountability Report," 2015). It is time we abandoned the obsolete standardized testing and empowered educators to assess students using meaningful, authentic methods.

### ***Authentic Learning for the Real World***

The solution to overcoming these educational roadblocks is to make school relevant to students through

authentic -- significant and meaningful -- learning (Newmann, 1993). The narrowing of our curriculum, and the focus on testing as a measure and goal of learning has shortchanged students and narrowed their definitions of learning, which falls seriously short of what they'll need to succeed in the real world. The new Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts and the revocation of state testing requirements for graduation should result in teachers being given more time and latitude to implement authentic learning projects. "Most educators enter the profession because they want to help students. They want to be a part of watching their students grow and develop. They love to see that look in their students' eyes when they get it, when true learning occurs. However, each year teachers' duties increase. Teachers are having increasing difficulty finding the time to simply teach and engage students in authentic learning due to the following factors: the addition of state testing, the necessity to benchmark test, the implementation of formative assessments and analyzing data. As a building administrator, it is our duty to buffer as much as we can for our teachers and help them build their competence, relatedness and autonomy" (Baker, 2015). Teachers need to have the time to develop rapport with their students and the freedom from grades and tests to provide those students with college and career applicable activities.

My own education included real-world reading and writing projects beginning in junior high. I participated in these projects as a member of my 8th grade yearbook staff, and on newspaper staffs for the rest of my scholastic and collegiate career. The staffs and I worked with an advisor to develop, create, and publish our own writing for authentic audiences -- namely our friends, teachers, and administrators. During regularly



*For the Spring 2017 issue the submission deadline is February 1, 2017.*

The Spring 2017 issue of *Oklahoma English Journal* will focus on the theory and practice of teaching writing within the English Language Arts. We invite you to share your teaching experiences and academic research with our readers.

What does it mean to teach the writing process across the spectrum of children's reading and writing lives? How do you invite young writers to re-see themselves as authors of authentic texts? Where do you provide children and youth with opportunities for choice and voice in the writing process?

We would like to highlight the work of the National Writing Project, and we look forward to manuscripts that detail how your experiences with OWP and OSWP have changed your teaching and research. What professional development moments have positively shaped your teaching of writing? What other professional supports have informed your instruction of writing?

Finally, we welcome manuscripts that focus on how teachers of ELA nurture their own lives as writers. How do you feed yourself as a writer? What kinds of writing do you enjoy? How does literature and reading shape your writing? What does it mean to you to "live the writing life"?

# Call for Submissions

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Spring 2017  
*Oklahoma English Journal*



## *Submission guidelines:*

- Articles should be theoretically based yet pedagogically applicable. Articles, including references and appendices, should be kept under 12 pages, although longer articles may be published when justified by substance and likely reader interest.
- Book reviews include reviews of professional texts of interest to ELA and humanities teachers and reviews of literature for children and young adults. We welcome reviews that suggest classroom applications.
- Brief counter statements and letters to the editors which respond directly to published articles will be considered for publication. Such statements should be kept under 500 words.
- Poetry, prose, Teacher Narratives, Graphic stories, and student work welcomed. We print student writing and artwork associated with ELA studies with parent consent.
- Brief teaching tips may be considered, up to 500 words.

Submissions of original work should be double-spaced with ample margins and should follow current MLA or APA style guidelines. Submissions must also adhere to the NCTE Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language. Include a brief biographical sketch of the author(s) upon submission.

Submissions should be sent electronically to [jekershen@ou.edu](mailto:jekershen@ou.edu)

cycles, the staff would plan stories and photographs, interview sources, write news/feature/opinion stories, revise, edit and peer edit our work, and bravely distribute these pieces of our souls for consumption by our school community. We wrote and created reading material for our peers. This system included its own accountability and resulted in an attention to detail and accuracy that has served me well over the years. The rush of seeing my byline in publication and hearing people talk about my work served as a powerful motivator to communicate with my peers as a whole, to provide information, to shift opinions, to entertain. In our roles on the publications staffs, we also served as literacy leaders. Students who refused to even crack open *All Quiet on the Western Front* were motivated to read a school newspaper article we had written about them or their friends. While I don't pretend to be the best writer in the world, I know I was most likely a more skilled writer than those students who didn't read. Even that small difference in training was enough to provide an educational opportunity.

"While enjoying a story, students hear the language of good writers, are exposed to rich vocabulary, and develop literary awareness, or a "sense of story." They learn the structure and language of books. And they acquire literacy skills that can be transferred to their own writing" (Olness, 2005). Teachers can use the stories their students write, along with classic literature, to serve as mentor texts that students can emulate.

This is important because when educators try to teach English as a skills-based class, they drain the life out of it. Students need to experience the writing of other authors and the process of learning how to share their own voices. This can't be done if the

teacher is only requiring students to identify nouns, metaphors, character development, etc. This can't be done if all students are doing is filling in the blanks on worksheets, answering questions at the end of the textbook unit, and turning their brains off the rest of the hour. Students must be able to evaluate other author's writings and then create their own works using the same tools as the authors they are studying (Gallagher, 2011). The new standards support this level of instruction. "In each of the eight overarching English language arts standards, concepts and skills are expressed in terms of both reading and writing, intended to support integrated, rather than isolated, reading/writing instruction. Research supports this integrated model of English language arts, where students read to understand the meaning and composition of a text and write with readers' expectations and assumptions in mind" (Oklahoma Academic Standards, 2016).

Under the new OAS-ELA, the goal of an English teacher is to help students communicate effectively in the real world. It is true that, to accomplish this, students must read. However, students must also be able to speak and listen, and most importantly in today's multimedia driven society, communicate effectively in writing. "Our responsibility as writing teachers is to help students learn personal processes for creating writing that enable them to create their best writing" (Romano, 1987). Students cannot develop personal processes for writing using fill-in-the-blank worksheets. In order to guide students to becoming independent readers, teachers must insist they practice reading by themselves daily. Students must be willing to use the reading skills they've learned in earlier grades to engage with novels and critically comprehend nonfiction works. Students must be willing to analyze an author's

writing to unlock how the author created meaning. To guide students to becoming independent writers, teachers must insist student practice copious, daily writing during which students seek to improve their ability to convey their intended meaning to an audience (Nagin, 2003). Teachers must also spend class time providing one-on-one or small group feedback to enable students to see their own weaknesses and work to overcome them. Encouraging students to dive into the deeper learning encouraged by the OAS-ELA will require educators to consistently and lovingly insist that students stretch their independent reading and writing abilities, principals to understand what teachers are trying to do and who will support them in helping students struggle through the new learning process. Changing the current paradigm will require parents who support teachers by shaping student attitudes, building student confidence, and providing additional external student motivation, as needed. Obviously cognizant of the soft skills students need to develop their full potential, the developers of OAS-ELA required students to be able and motivated to read and write on their own as its overarching goal, as evidenced by Independent Reading and Writing being written as its own standard, and its placement as the final standard. "Teachers should be teaching ourselves out of a job so that students can read and write on their own with increasing confidence, with increasing complexity with what they write and what they read. That's why we placed (the Independent Reading and Writing standard) there" (Stephenson, 2016).

Ultimately, the goal of the new OAS-ELA is to build a "literate citizenry" capable of not only successfully carrying our state into the future, but also willing to serve as educational and economic leaders among the nations as they seek they contribute



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to the common good of our global society. Regardless of the career aspirations of our students, each will need to develop the communication skills advocated by the authors of our standards. To this end, we must overcome any roadblocks to implementation of the new standards and keep our eye on the goal of our students' independence.

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