

Launching the Socially Active Reader and Writer

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INTRODUCTION

The future is now. Students today are immersed in a world that is completely different from the world we knew as teens. We live in a culture that can easily take and take of the individual while at the same time provide little impetus for the individual to give back: to the classroom, to the school environment, to the community, to the city, to the world. What, if anything, does each generation owe the next? We live in a world where altruism struggles to claw its way up to the surface of a pond teeming with selfishness, paranoia, greed, and an us-versus-them mentality.

How can the students we teach improve their reading and writing skills, throw themselves into the language of texts, and appreciate works of literary merit while still living their day to day lives and dealing with the social issues that affect them? Students in public schools tend to be marginalized, ignored, and kept out of the mainstream of public opinion. Events occurring in the world today seem to be so far removed from their lives that their voices and opinions tend to be overlooked, disregarded, or not taken into account. However, the school environment is the ideal place for young people to become mobilized for the future. For the future is now. We expect our youth to build a better future, and the only way for them to do this is to understand the past. All our actions are determined on the past, from which we build upon, from which our actions determine our personal and public future.

In order for students to become effective members of our world, we as educators must guide them to become rooted in the past; to understand events of the past and acquire and hone strategies for the present in order to shape a clear and meaningful vision for the future.

Exploring the literary landscape can be a launching pad for creating socially active young adults. Students can explore social and political issues as thematic elements in autobiographies, fiction, and non-fiction texts. Issues such as poverty, class and socioeconomic status, racism, gender roles, abuse in all its forms, family dysfunction, justice, freedom, conflict, war, violence, environmental concerns, health, and personal identity can be investigated through a wide variety of texts and literature. This curriculum unit will explore the social, cultural and political issues present in selected autobiographies, works of fiction and nonfiction, in order to mobilize students to become socially active readers and writers. The use of literacy as a tool for change will be the focus of this curriculum unit. Through the close reading and in-depth study of a wide range of literature, students' lives will be impacted by social critique and social action.

We often invite students to bring their lives into the classroom and to their schoolwork, but it is time that we work to affect students' lives, literally and figuratively, outside of school. Even though my students may not be able to change the world in the 180 days they are with me, they will at least have the opportunity to think about the political and social realities we face by delving into autobiographies, fiction, and nonfiction.

Do we not want our students, our children, to believe that they can change the world into a better place? Via immersion in literature, novels, and nonfiction texts I will attempt to help my students believe that the world will respond to their action, to their striving to make a

difference, and to their developing identities as citizens of the world. It is my belief that all classrooms should be stocked with a rich supply of a wide variety of literature. Students need to come to school daily and be exposed to print rich environments as they are guided through literature and the discussion that should naturally occur after reading.

One priority for teachers should be to help students learn to read with a critical eye; guide students to understand that all texts are always social and political and that all stories are told from a particular perspective, although many perspectives are possible in the same text.

ACADEMIC SETTING

The students I work with attend a school that is on the cusp of an education reform initiative. Challenge Early College High School is the first early college high school in the state of Texas. Early College High Schools are small schools from which all students graduate with an Associate of Arts degree or enough college credits to enter a four-year, baccalaureate program as a college junior. Early College High Schools share the characteristics of effective small schools (e.g., personalized learning environments, a common and coherent focus, a maximum of 400 students per school, an emphasis on adult-student relationships).

Opened in the fall of 2003, Challenge Early College High School started with 85 students, in grades 9 and 10. A grade level would be added each subsequent year, with students being able to earn college credit, free of charge, in their 10th grade year. An optional fifth year is offered as extra time and support for completion of the requirements for the Associate of Arts degree.

This unit of curriculum is designed for a 9th grade Pre-AP English course. The range of literature covered in the freshman year of high school spans novels assigned for the summer before entering high school (*The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn) as well as Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, just to name a few of the works of literary merit. Additional supplemental readings and short texts are assigned as well in order to provide a rich array of literature and works of writing.

Via these works of literary merit, as well as the introduction of various works of fiction, nonfiction, and autobiographical texts, students will be able to explore relevant issues that affect their lives and the world around them. Literacy is an important component of the curriculum at Challenge Early College High School, with an emphasis on students partaking in a writing enriched environment.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

The unit of study for guiding students to become socially active readers and writers will be centered on three primary objectives. Students will read for deeper understanding through strategies that accomplish in-depth study of a text and lead to meaningful discussion. Secondly, students will work collaboratively in a book club that will serve as the vehicle for their study of a chosen text. And lastly, students will work to improve their skills as writers in response to identified issues, concerns, and thematic elements of study in their texts. Writing through the lens of social activism and being responsive to school, community, and world events will help students develop their identities toward being active global-minded citizens. Students will connect their own individual experiences, ideas, values, and social mores with those of others.

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Objectives

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, are the statewide guidelines in Texas for student success on standardized tests. Using the framework of the TEKS, along with the Houston Independent School District's Project Clear curriculum, I will design the curriculum around objectives to guide students to become effective readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.

Time Frame

The lessons included in this curriculum will accompany lessons that will initially span a nine-week grading period. However, information and concepts related to reading and writing for social action will build upon previous lessons and objectives that students will work to master in their year-long work. Demonstrations on in-depth annotation, maintaining a writer's notebook, and making a variety of connections to a text will be employed before and after the lessons included in this unit. Concepts covered in relation to annotation and close reading will be addressed and covered throughout the academic school year. Annotation and close reading strategies, aimed primarily to aid in understanding, are introduced in the freshman year and skills built upon and scaffolded in each subsequent year of the students' high school career. Instead of reading passively and relying on memory, students will be able to analyze the text with support and evidence.

Annotation

Students will make use of close reading, annotation, and note-taking strategies at the top of the page of their texts or on sticky notes to mark important plot events.

Students will circle or highlight words that are unfamiliar or unusual. Vocabulary exploration in context will be employed, supplementing guesses by discussing the words with a teacher, fellow students, or by consulting a dictionary.

In fiction texts, character study and analysis will be performed, via the highlighting and notation of key descriptions and/or dialog.

Key images, metaphors, symbols, and details that seem to form a pattern in identifying a thematic element(s) throughout the text will be noted. Symbolic passages and figurative language will be explored.

In all texts, students will annotate an idea when reading the text, in a brief form in the margin. These ideas could be discussion starters in the context of a literature circle or whole class discussion.

Questions about something in the text will be noted in the margin or on a sticky note. Ideally, students will have their own copies of paperback novels and nonfiction texts but in the event of students using school-owned books then the use of sticky notes and a notebook is the best way for collaborative and independent study.

Students will be cautioned not to mark too much in the text. If *everything* is marked or noted, *nothing* will stand out. Use of brackets, checks, stars, bullets, or asterisks to mark very important items or details will be employed for later reference.

The use of a composition notebook as a receptacle for exploring the texts will be employed. This notebook, unlike a journal, diary, or writer's notebook, will serve as a reference for exploring a variety of texts in terms of figurative language, elements of writing style, unfamiliar words/phrases, notation of resonant quotes, and inferences and interpretations.

Connections to Texts

Students will be guided to make connections to texts based on prior knowledge and the scaffolding of ideas throughout the course of study. Students will make *personal connections* to texts, in which a relevant concept or memory is triggered based on their reading of a novel or text. The more a student can make a personal connection to a text, the more investment in delving into its underlying motifs, issues, and meanings. Students who have experienced academic failure of more than one course might easily identify with Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Students will make *text-to-text connections*, in which they will identify similarities and related themes, symbols, plot devices, or common issues between unrelated and various texts. For example, students may find similarities between the setting of John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* and the opening scenes of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both novels open on the campuses of boys' boarding schools.

Students will make *text to world* connections, in which relevant ideas, issues or concerns present in texts are the same issues facing the world today in varying degrees. For example, the characters in Knowles' *A Separate Peace* are attending a summer session in order to graduate with a high school diploma before they are drafted into the war. One way for students to address text to world connections would be to identify ways in which the presence of war impacts youth of today. Or later in the text, the issues of jealousy and peer pressure among high school students may be explored through the annotation and recording of specific events and issues hidden in the text.

In a nonfiction text, students might apply their understanding and awareness of one woman's journey to document her experiences working in some of the lowliest paid areas of the service industry, as Barbara Ehrenreich did in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*.

Writer's Notebook

By the 9th grade, students will have been exposed to a great variety of means of keeping and maintaining a writer's notebook. The collection of memories, indelible moments, creative writing, and personal thoughts and anecdotes goes a long way for students to explore personal growth via the honing and improvement of their writing skills. However, writer's notebooks can be used to focus on social issues and questions, to expound the means to do the sort of thinking and writing that allows students to become more socially aware.

Writing for social action will take two very important forms for students: the writing they do in their notebooks will take that of a reflective tool for thinking about their socio-political environment; secondly, the writing they do will be intended for an audience whose mind the writer intends to change. The students' writers notebooks will serve as receptacles for change, to gather and nurture ideas, seeds for taking a stance in the world, to recycle material and revisit previous thoughts and dreams, as well as to build upon thinking, layer upon layer.

The writer's notebooks will serve as a means to write about thinking. Very similar to a journal or a diary, the notebooks will serve as a resource from which to pull projects for writing about a variety of topics in different genres.

At the beginning of the school year, students will discuss ways in which they have published various pieces of writing. Their exposure to starting and maintaining a writer's notebook in previous grade levels will provide telling evidence of their skills and abilities in terms of formal and informal writing.

Students who have previously kept writer's notebooks will have had the opportunity to explore ways of thinking about stories, memories and indelible moments in their lives—from an exploration of characterization, use of dialogue, the nurturing of indelible moments in time, interpretation of the world around them, reflection, critique, and responding to literature. Students will be guided to explore the concepts of social action and social justice through the vehicles of literature circles, use of annotative notebooks, and class discussions.

However, the most important facet of guiding students to become socially active readers and writers via the writer's notebooks is for the teacher to demonstrate thinking about a better world in their own notebooks. The opportunity to model and demonstrate the daily thinking about our reactions, outrages, and experiences via our writer's notebooks will provide a richer experience

for students to do the work themselves. If we demonstrate the writing of our thoughts then students will begin to strengthen and focus on their own thinking about the world of conflict and struggles and wider issues facing us today. Writing in a notebook allows students to think about their lives and their roles, to question, to defend, and reflect on the events that occur within their community and the members in it. The writing they perform, and the sharing of their work with others will produce subsequent group discussions and exploration of continued writing to address their concerns.

Literature Circles

Students will be previously placed in partnerships of four to six members in a literature circle/book club. The groups will be able to read a common text in an agreed upon time frame in order to discuss text evidence about the following:

Characters	Themes
Setting	Symbolism
Plot	Social issues and concerns
Resonant quotes	Social justice

In the context of a literature circle/book club, students will explore the issues and concerns that we all face today. Social, political and cultural issues can be addressed, explored, discussed, and eventually written about as each student in each group finds the means to become more socially active through the power of the written word.

Students will delve into a variety of texts: fiction, nonfiction, and autobiography through the vehicle of a literature circle. Each group will explore an issue, or series of related issues, of their own interest, and at their own pace.

Through literature circles/book clubs, students can explore the following questions in texts: Who makes decisions and who is left out? Who benefits and who doesn't? Why is a certain practice fair or unfair? What alternatives can we imagine to change the situation for the better? What is my role in relation to this issue?

Engaging students in collaborative book discussion groups, along with the daily practice of reflective writing in their writer's notebooks, will offer greater opportunities for students to do important thinking and exploration without the teacher's direct assistance. Through the collaborative group work students will work to draw attention to critical incidents and social issues—being treated unfairly, the abuse of power, gender issues, anger, violence, and conflict.

EXPLORING THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Once students enter high school, their reading lives take a dramatic shift. The types of texts students read change from the personal interest to the assigned works of literary merit. Unfortunately, the works of literary merit those classics assigned are not adequately or rigorously approached by students. For students, with the advent of summarized resources and online study guides, many times, in the words of Mark Twain, a classic text/novel becomes “something that everybody wants to have read and nobody has read.”

In a classroom immersed in rich print, students can explore the endless possibilities of concepts for critical reading. Through their literature circles and book clubs, students can explore issues of power, groups, fairness and justice, voice and silence, multiple perspectives, gender, race, class, money and labor, language, relationships and families, nature, violence and peace, as well as individualism and collectivism.

Immersion in autobiographies can lead students to explore not only elements of literature and history, but psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, and economics. Looking at an individual's life story, or parts of his/her life story, will help students to delve into their own

identities; help students understand how the past shapes our present; how our environment molds us and makes us unique individuals.

Besides being exposed to fiction through the assigned works of literary merit, students will read a wide array of nonfiction texts for becoming more socially aware readers and writers. Students who are immersed in feature articles, newsprint, and informational texts will strengthen their abilities to critique everyday concepts. For example, if students are immersed in discussion around Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, their inquiry into an area of social concern may revolve around fast food restaurants targeting children as consumers. Their concern might center on the fast food industry's links with the nation's leading toy manufacturers and the correlation to children's eating habits. Students will be on their way to developing critical literacy skills that will be important to their lives as writers. Students who are exposed to a wide range of texts in the classroom that deal with political, cultural, and social themes will be better prepared for dealing with the types of texts that are politically, culturally or socially *incorrect* that students experience and encounter outside of the classroom environment.

Students who participate in a literature circle have the opportunity to engage in critical conversations that will allow them to develop meaningful questions and stances related to social justice, either now or in their future. What students talk about when they talk about reading and writing is important.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson 1: The Literature Circle Picks a Concept for Study in their Summer Novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

Objectives

- Students will draw inferences, conclusions, generalizations, predictions and support from a common text.
- Use strategies of note-taking, outlining and study guide questions to better understand texts.

Materials

- Annotative notebooks: composition or spiral.
- Individual copies of text/novel.
- Study guide questions assigned and completed
- Markers and chart paper

Prior Knowledge

Effective use of annotation strategies; effective use of brainstorming topics and ideas in a writer's notebook.

Lesson

Students will have already been partnered in their literature circles and will already have their summer reading assignment completed. The first reading assignment of their agreed upon text/novel will have been the entire novel and study guide questions assigned at the end of the previous school year.

(In the case where the literature circle members are meeting for the first time after being partnered, in the context of a new novel that is not a summer reading assignment, students will have agreed upon a manageable and realistic stopping point for their first discussion; usually, the end of the first chapter as opposed to the middle of a chapter.)

Students will brainstorm concepts for discussion related to the novel. Because of the chance that students will have varying ideas of what is important in the novel, encourage the creation of broad topics for discussion and then the narrowing of ideas under each concept.

As an example, the concept of **class** in *The Catcher in the Rye* is one that usually tends to alienate students from being completely engaged in the text. Holden Caulfield is obviously part of a wealthy family since he attends boarding school and has been kicked out of more than one at the outset of the novel. His family lives in a posh apartment house in New York City. Encourage students to consider the idea of *significance*, and whether Holden's life is worth reading about because of his class status and family's wealth. Students may pull resonant quotes from the novel as evidence to support their ideas. Post the lists on chart paper for further inquiry and development of the novel study.

Assessment: One on one conference with instructor regarding the perceived relationships and recognized outcomes in a variety of written texts. Evidence of effective annotation in a notebook will be evaluated based on a previously designed rubric.

Lesson 2: The Literature Circle Delves into Issues in a Text

Objectives

- Students will use and expand ideas and information from sources other than personal experiences.
- Students will compare text events with his/her own and other readers' experiences.
- Students will generate and refine questions for inquiry.

Materials

- Annotative notebooks: composition or spiral
- Individual copies of text/novel
- Access to the Internet
- Novels/texts with similar concepts for inquiry (if possible)
- Prior Knowledge: Knowledge/familiarity with concepts for inquiry, if possible.

Lesson

Based on a completed reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*, students will discuss personal experiences related to the characters; students will compare events of the novel to each others' lives; students will each generate questions for inquiry around a social issue.

Students will identify issues and social concerns within the text in order to engage in in-depth conversations and discussions regarding the novel's significance as a work of literary merit.

If access to the Internet is available, students may perform research related to themes and symbols present in the novel.

Examples of social concerns present in *The Catcher in the Rye* are: the main character's drinking and smoking; the concept of bullying in school; academic failure; and the emotional results of the early death of a relative, just to name a few.

Students will then draw conclusions based on the information they gather for further inquiry into a social concern.

Lesson 3: Students Write for Social Action

Objective

Students will write in a variety of forms, including business, personal, literary, and persuasive texts, for various audiences and purposes.

Materials

Multiple copies of *Letters from Young Activists: Today's Rebels Speak Out*, edited by Dan Berger, Chesa Boudin, and Kenyon Farrow

Copies of the various forms of writing that students may use to write their persuasive texts.

Prior Knowledge

Some awareness of social concerns facing today's youth.

Lesson

Students will read letters from the text and brainstorm ways in which they can pull social concerns from their literature circle discussions.

Students will pre-write and brainstorm in various forms of writing in their writer's notebooks to an audience that they want to have an impact upon regarding a specific social concern/issue that they identify in their literature circle.

Students will then go through the writing process to create legible work that addresses their awareness for social concerns.

Assessment: Students will produce legible work that shows accurate conventions of spelling, punctuation and capitalization. Students will produce legible work that is persuasive in scope related to their topic of social action.

CONCLUSION

The opportunities we educators have for instilling social critique are limitless. Today's youth are inundated by a great variety of media outlets that fight for their attention in the consumer market. The best way to guide youth to becoming aware of social concerns is through the processes of reading and writing. We have to pay attention to what is important to our students today, as well as build upon and implement a rigorous academic program that will ensure their success in any environment, academic or not. Students want to be connected not only to home and family life, naturally, but to the school environment, and to their world. If we marginalize and limit opportunities for students to become engaged and an organic part of the world around them, then we are doing a disservice not only to them, but to our future. The future is now. And we must provide every opportunity for students to become even more socially aware and socially active.

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