This is a chapter excerpt from Guilford Publications.
Teaching on Solid Ground: Knowledge Foundations for the Teacher of English.
Thomas M. McCann and John V. Knapp. Copyright © 2019.
Purchase this book now: www.guilford.com/p/mccann

2

Teaching in the Territory of Literature

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

After modeling for our students how to construct literature-based lesson plans and units of instruction, we have asked these preservice teachers to produce their own lesson plans. We are always pleased to see our students follow the examples that we have set, and we expect that the preservice teachers will consult with their mentor teachers to devise lessons that make sense in the specific instructional context and fit in cohesively into the sequence of instruction that the experienced teacher had in mind. Sometimes, however, these novice lesson planners devise lessons that imitate what the beginners had experienced themselves as middle school and high school students, or they troll the Internet to find a convenient plan after which to model their own effort or to use as found. The result of their labors is sometimes an assortment of hits and misses. Occasionally, Freytag's pyramid raises its ugly head; or simplistic character charts; or worksheets that prompt learners to categorize characters as round or flat and conflicts as man versus man, man versus nature, or man versus self. We also occasionally see worksheets that prompt learners to record text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, as if these were free standing connections and the exhaustive representations of transactions with literature.

The more dubious lesson plans make us self-conscious about the apparent lack of impact of our methods instruction and worry us about a broad effort to discourage students from enjoying literature and developing a lifelong enthusiasm for reading (cf. Gallagher, 2009). Our skepticism is that these Thomas Gradgrind–style lessons reduce transactions

with, and interpretations of, literature to monologic recitations of the "facts" of a text, as if the *conflict* can be pinpointed in a literary text, and an objective reader can decide if that conflict falls under one of only three categories. We sometimes stagger under the burden of teaching others to instruct adolescents in the complexities involved in simply following the plot of a narrative, making complex inferences that draw from a wealth of knowledge outside of the text, and critically judging the quality of the literature or the ideas that the author seems to promote. This type of reading is often called "close analysis" and in practice can range from a 12-year-old's memory of connecting repeated images to an 18-year-old's comprehension of an author's intentions spoken through the mouths of characters debating a conflict between themselves. Unfortunately, the experiential reduction of literary knowledge to a recitation of facts and teacher-endorsed choices seems to us to be a misunderstanding of what reading literature and its goals are all about, a collapse under the immense burden of imaginative story telling that is rich in complexity. We fear that in the worst circumstances, the teachers' pedagogical goal in this context seems to entail a mere simplification for all concerned. Examining such pedagogies, one could be forgiven for assuming at times the startling idea that literature in English is a discipline too forbidding to allow unprotected students to work out its problems on their own.

Of course, how a teacher teaches literature and what that teacher needs to know about the teaching of literature will be dependent on one's conception of what the teaching of literature, especially in middle school and high school, is all about (Scholes, 1999). When Tom was preparing to become a teacher, he was required by his university program to complete, among other things, several survey courses in American and English literature. The implication was that the study of literature involved telling the "story" of literature—which writer preceded another writer, how one writer and movement influenced the next, and how a historical and cultural milieu shaped authors' interests and shaped particular texts. Another implication was that certain works of literature were just not to be missed. Too often, some curriculum committees or an individual professor assumed that if the Norton anthology included an author, he or she must be important, suggesting that the study of literature amounted to student consumption of selected great works, works not always chosen for their reputed quality (Shesgreen, 2009). A third perspective suggests that the study of literature emphasizes the procedures involved in reading any text closely and critically and being aware of the processes that one follows in constructing meaning and forming judgments. We lean toward this third perspective, which requires the teacher to know a lot about the features of literary texts and the "rules" for reading them

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

(Rabinowitz, 1987/1998; Rabinowitz and Smith, 1997). In tracing the shifts in approaches to the teaching of reading literary texts, Downing, Harkin, and Sosnoski (1994) offer this loose summary: "The profession has moved from raising questions about texts, to raising questions about readers, to raising questions about the conditions of possibility for any reading, to raising questions about how we teach students to read" (p. 6). In this context, teaching students to *read* means more than focusing on word recognition, fluency, and basic comprehension; the endeavor requires instructors to teach the *discipline* of reading literary texts closely and critically, and, John insists, not try to substitute comic books, TV, and/or film viewing for the story as a convenient way to allow students to consume texts. Each of those visual domains is worthwhile studying in its own right and for its own values and goals, and we can partly assent to Robert Scholes's (2001) arguments about "how texts in various media, and their authors, moving from one world to another, one medium to another, [can make] a culture that is interesting—and teachable—on many levels" (p. 235). One should note that Scholes's claims are made by someone who already knows "how to read" and can readily branch out to media other than print with relative ease. Literary instruction in schools demands, however, that teachers know much about how highly literate people read complex texts and know how to organize and structure experiences so that learners can command procedures and be aware of how they made sense and judgments from the texts they have read. The goal of knowing *procedures* for reading, including analysis and critical judgment, emphasizes the generative knowledge that students carry with them from text to text, offering students more than a consumption of selected great works.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

GETTING LOST IN OUR CLOSE READINGS

John has been teaching the study of literature for a long time, and he now hears common complaints from experienced English teachers: Most high school and college students don't want to read literature the way students used to back in the 1960s, 1970s, or even into the 1990s, as far as people are in a position to make such a judgment. We have both observed teachers who seem to have succumbed to students' resistance in reading any literature they judge too complex, too long, or too far removed from their adolescent experiences. One form of response is for the teacher to find texts that match students' comfort level in reading, that is, comfort both with vocabulary and syntax, while paying less attention to the literary quality of the work. We understand that complexity resides both in the features of the text and the critical and creative work involved in

the readers' transactions with the text (Bailin & Grafstein, 2016), but we both cling to the idea that some literature is distinctive in its quality, including the insightful representation of human experience, the provocation of judgment and reflection, the inventiveness of its characters and pattern of narrative, and the precision and lyricism of language.

We have also witnessed some teachers get around the problem of students' reluctance to read complex literary texts by reading every word of a text aloud to students in class, as if pouring language into receptacles and hoping at least to give students a taste of the plot and maybe even motivating some to read on their own, as such nudges occasionally do. Another response is for teachers to assume a Rousseau-like stance by offering the garden of literature before a group of eager learners, allowing them to find their own way in the pleasures of the text. It is good to recall that Stephen Krashen, long an advocate of "free voluntary reading" (2011), also couples such freedom with what he calls "narrow reading," "focusing on one topic, author, or genre, according to the reader's interests, and gradually expanding the range of what is read over time . . . the opposite of the 'survey' approach" (p. 71). Krashen does not mention specifically how the novice reader is to learn about "topics, authors, and genres" without at least some modeling, even though Krashen would no doubt agree that most adolescent Emiles and Emilys could profit from some literary tutelage; the question remains: how, when, and why?

Perhaps the saddest and least productive set of coping mechanisms some teachers have adapted to some students' resistance to reading complex literary texts is to laden the learners with reading guides, graphic organizers, recitations, and objective quizzes, as if these conventional attempts at "accountability" should encourage students to read assigned texts. Gallagher (2009) and Kohn (2011) both warn against the dispiriting effects of such practices. Indeed, at our university, John has famously and frequently referred to such "worksheets" as "tools of the devil." Nonetheless, getting students to do the solitary task of reading is increasingly more difficult even in graduate literature courses, as witnessed by notable teacher-scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles (2013), who confesses that she "can't get [her] students to read whole books anymore" (p. 9). In John's classes, where a decade and a half ago, he could expect students to read seven or eight Shakespearean plays and two dozen sonnets in an average semester, now his default list includes merely four or five plays and a handful of 14-line sonnets—and students still complain that he is pushing them very hard.

What is needed for most English and humanities teachers is not a recitation of the problems they already know all too well, but instead a number of suggestions for useful solutions. What do English teachers need to know about how middle school and high school students learn

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

to read literary texts closely? What must English teachers master in preparing adolescent readers to care about literature enough to read in ways that mature and highly literate adults read? As Nicholas Carr (2010) has discussed so persuasively, the texts we read and how we read them matters a great deal: "The use of intellectual technologies has shaped and reshaped the circuitry in our heads . . . [Any] repeated experience influences our [synapses]" (p. 49). The study of literature and the conversations about meanings found therein (referred to back in John's day as *literary criticism*) are activities explicitly connected to what Carr calls "deep reading skills": critical analyses of verbal statements, and a skeptical mind looking for and expecting evidence for assertions and demanding cognitive subtlety in critical thinking. Brottman (2011) has framed the challenge in this way: reading serious literature with "a full understanding demands individual reflection and private judgment, qualities that can be cultivated only through the practice of careful reading, a practice that demands solitude."

Many literature teachers, if honest with themselves, continue to ask questions about the future of our discipline: Will the skills we usually associate with the study of literature and of the humanities generally—deep reading—get relegated to a tiny minority of aficionados? Must the discipline of literary criticism and literary analysis go the way of the ancient classics in educational history (Court, 1992; Graff 1989, p. 31)? If preservice teachers are not setting out to shape all of their students into future English majors, why are they trying to get students to read and appreciate literary texts the way that they do? What are the procedures that these English teachers must know how to teach, not to produce English majors necessarily, but to promote a highly literate citizenry? To help answer such questions, we intend to discuss not only the problems that seem obvious to many but also some possible strategies to help our students and ourselves cope with this changing world and stay true to some enduring practices.

In preparing future English teachers, we hope to position these literature instructors to help their students work on at least two planes: First, we judge that all English teachers need to show their students how to immerse themselves in a text independently—to make their own judgments, to ponder their own questions, and to reflect on their own experiences with the text. On a different level, we want to prepare teachers to position their own students in engaging confidently and enthusiastically with others in deeper explorations of literature. In this later regard, Elaine Showalter (2003) mentions a technique not often admitted to students but well-known nonetheless by veteran teachers:

> All of us have had the experience of reading a book the night before class, just one breathless step ahead of the students, and

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

> discovering that our teaching suddenly seems electric and the students are lit up with excitement. Teaching new material works, because we are teaching a way of reading, and modeling the way a trained professional thinks about understanding and analyzing literary texts. (p. 45)

Another way of considering Showalter's "discovery" is to state what most of us have believed for a long time: reading and then teaching literature is *both* a solitary act *and* a social engagement, activities that interpenetrate one another in dynamic and often unpredictable ways. We discuss each of these goals below.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

PREPARING FOR READING LITERATURE

When Tom was preparing to be a teacher, and John was instructing his like in literature and methods classes at the university, the common instructional approach was to assign students to read a complex text and then explore the text together, assuming that students had read it. If students seemed negligent in their reading duties, the teacher relied on scheduled or pop quizzes to set a pace and prod learners to keep up. As of this writing, Tom still visits dozens of schools and sees the same model persist. However, by the 1970s and 1980s, advances in cognitive psychology and in reading research demonstrated that students understood their reading better and were to some extent motivated to read when teachers frontloaded reading with discussions and demonstrations that helped students to tap prior knowledge or construct relevant background knowledge before they read (Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Smith & Swinney, 1992).

Tom quickly became a devotee of prereading activities. As he has written elsewhere (McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, & Flanagan, 2006; Smagorinsky, McCann, & Kern, 1987), Tom has found that well-designed prereading activities, especially those that are discussion-based, help students to follow the pattern of a narrative, respond empathically to characters, and assess critically the implications of a literary work. For example, a discussion about our obligations to fellow human beings (McCann, D'Angelo, Galas, & Greska, 2015), an exploration of concepts of *friendship,* or our feelings about putting to sleep a beloved pet (Smagorinsky, McCann, et al., 1987) are likely to position learners to follow the narrative about George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* and to think critically and empathically about their behavior and decisions, and with a little help, reflect on how they have arrived at their decisions and have inferred the author's sentiments about the core problems.

Of course, not all prereading activities are equal. First of all, we

have to acknowledge with Shanahan (2013) that some prereading efforts hijack the reading experience from the learners. We can imagine this danger, mostly with readers in early grades, when a teacher previews the substance of a book, walks students through a text, and highlights a succinct expression of theme. We have both witnessed occasions when students were able to perform well on quizzes and tests without actually having read the target text because, as we witnessed in many prereading activities and many in-class discussions, the students knew generally what the book was about—at least as far as the main outline of the plot, the principal characters, and the teacher's sense of the themes explored. At the same time, as Beers and Probst (2013) point out, there is the danger that students will be unable to read a text or will read only superficially if the teacher does nothing to prepare the readers. We can imagine, for example, that without any preparation, students might find Orwell's *Animal Farm* an absurd fantasy about an improbable rebellion by talking farm animals. But if a teacher appropriately prepares students for their encounters with the text, there is a greater likelihood that they will consider the text a political allegory and be in a position to experience its pathos, judge its gravity, and ponder its current relevance.

So, a teacher who plans to introduce middle school or high school students to *Animal Farm* will, of course, need to know the text well, but will also need to know much about Stalin-era Soviet Union and the rest of Europe between two world wars. If teaching *Animal Farm* is an important undertaking in a middle school or high school, what must aspiring English teachers know in order to help learners make sense of a popular allegory when the target of those allegorical techniques has now passed into what is for students ancient history? Orwell could assume that his authorial audience would understand his novella in 1946 just by listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, or simply by listening to parents' dinnertime conversation. For the average teenager in the early 21st century, however, reading *Animal Farm*—or the *Beowulf* poet, or Shakespeare, or *Pride and Prejudice* or even *To Kill a Mockingbird*—requires a substantial exercise in the historical imagination before and during reading.

Still, we would regret seeing a teacher lecture high school students at length about Stalin, communism, and the Cold War; instead, many teachers devise some alternatives to helping students internalize appropriate information about the Russian Revolution, Trotsky's 5-year plans, the Stalinist purge trials, and so on (cf. Knapp, 1996). Similarly, we have to question the wisdom of introducing *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* by lecturing students about the life of Shakespeare and asking learners to make a papier-mâché model of the Globe Theater to help them learn how to read Shakespeare's early modern English. So, the question remains: How do we prepare students to learn necessary information about issues

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

over which they have little or no direct experience while at the same time encourage them to remain awake and even excited? We both recognize limitations in trying merely to *transmit* relevant background information, bucket-style, that will support students' work with complex texts, and we realize the challenge in finding inductive means to help students to construct such knowledge themselves and together with peers.

Hence, Tom and John agree that the design of any good prereading activity should align with the needs of the students and help them to negotiate the challenges of a complex text. This means that a gateway into a rich literary text is likely to be the questions and interpretive problems that engage highly literate adults in exploring texts and sometimes losing themselves in them. Clearly, in preparing younger readers for their encounters with some difficult texts, an English teacher would need to know how to design prereading activities that introduce critical questions and prepare learners with the interpretive tools to be able to recognize and trace patterns, deconstruct symbols, and reflect on the questions that an author raises.

We know several helpful books that offer examples of the kinds of prereading or *gateway activities* (Hillocks, 1995, p. 149) that offer students a point of entry into an unfamiliar text, raise significant critical questions, and allow learners to anticipate the narrative arc of fiction or drama. We recommend Beers (2002); Beers and Probst (2013); Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (2009); Smagorinsky, McCann, et al. (1987); and Smith and Wilhelm (2010) to see a variety of prereading activities. While these texts offer a wealth of examples for introducing students to significant works of literature, an English teacher will want to use the activities strategically and learn how to design such activities on his or her own. Gateway activities can be as simple as an anticipation guide, or as complicated as an extended simulation game. We offer two types below and explain their distinctions.

First, an English teacher might anticipate that adolescent readers might be puzzled by the behavior of a character in a work of literature from long ago and far away. The example below comes from a prereading sequence that prepares learners to look critically at characters introduced early in *King Lear* (McCann, 1991). By putting students in a contemporary position that asks them to judge characters and express advice, especially through exchanges with classmates, the prereading activity positions students to understand Cordelia's affection for Lear and her reluctance to participate in the flattery that offers her material gain.

The simple activity puts students in the position of an advice columnist responding to writers who seek help with family conflicts. A teacher could distribute three or four different letters across a class, so that a third or a fourth of the class each focuses on one problem that,

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

according to a long critical tradition, has been associated with interpretations of the play. In sharing their responses to each letter, students invite critical judgments about their advice, stimulating some processes of judging the behavior of characters and evaluating alternative critical receptions. Here is an example of one letter:

> Dear Ms. Mannerly,
>
> My aging mother is very wealthy. Although she is in relatively good health, at eighty-two she is not likely to live very much longer. The thing that distresses me is that my two brothers-in-law are always flattering her and trying to win her favor in hopes of getting some of her fortune after she dies. Whenever Ben, my sister Ruby's husband (not their real names), sees Mother, he tells her how attractive her hairstyle is and how fashionably she is dressed. To tell the truth, Mother has changed neither her hair nor her style of clothes in the last thirty-five years. Warren, my sister Grace's husband (not their real names), tells Mother how "cute" her figure is and how young she looks. I love my mother, but she is at least thirty pounds overweight and she looks every bit her age. These two guys would make you sick if you could see them "buttering up" Mother. I've always been a very honest person, and I find it difficult to join in their game in order to gain my rightful inheritance. Should I try to level with my mother and reveal these two guys for the gold-diggers they are, or do you think I should follow their example?
>
> —Dyspeptic in DeSoto

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

It is fairly easy to construct such letters to the advice columnist to generate discussion and activate prior knowledge about sibling rivalry, inheritance, in-laws, and rectitude. With the example above, we have witnessed extensive discussions that allowed students to recognize conflicts, judge the behavior of characters, and evaluate the judgments of their classmates. When students begin their work with *King Lear,* they still face the challenge of working with Shakespeare's language, but they have both the activated knowledge to allow them to anticipate actions and a critical position from which to judge the implications of the play.

A more complicated example of a prereading activity asks students to collaborate in writing their own narrative (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2012). The format here offers students the beginning and ending sentence for each in a series of episodes. For each episode, the two sentences present the challenge of connecting them by constructing the body of the episode that logically connects the beginning and the end. Again, it is fairly easy to construct a set of beginning

and ending sentences for a sequence of episodes that make up a romance, comedy, or tragedy. The key is to offer the few details that will suggest what must happen in the body of the episode while allowing for variation and invention. The following set invites students to write a story that anticipates Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. For many middle school and high school students, their participation in constructing a narrative together offers insight into the craft of fiction and positions them to judge critically the behavior of characters.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

Collaborative Story: What Do You Value Most?

Episode 1

- *Beginning sentence:* When Simón Garcia arrived home from work and learned that the hot water heater was broken and his son Rudolfo had a severe ear infection, he felt overwhelmed and desperate.

- *Ending sentence:* When Simón and his wife Esmeralda left the doctor's office, they felt angry and disappointed; they also worried about their son's health.

Episode 2

- *Beginning sentence:* On their way home from the doctor's office, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia stopped at the supermarket, where they bought some essentials and then spent their last dollar on a Lotto ticket.

- *Ending sentence:* As they looked at the Lotto ticket and waited for the winner to be announced, Simón and Esmeralda marveled at all the things they dreamed of doing with the money.

Episode 3

- *Beginning sentence:* Esmeralda and Simón slowly recovered from their astonishment and called their friends to tell them the good news.

- *Ending sentence:* Not only were they surprised by the doctor's visit to their home, but they also doubted whether the medicine that she left would be necessary.

Episode 4

- *Beginning sentence:* On the night of the day that Simón learned that he was the winner of 20 million dollars, he awoke from his slumber, sat up in bed, and listened again for the noise that disturbed his sleep.

- *Ending sentence:* Simón lifted himself from the kitchen floor and looked out the window to see if he could identify the intruder.

Episode 5

- *Beginning sentence:* It was clear to Simón and Esmeralda that someone had broken into their house in search of their winning lottery ticket, and they had to decide how they would protect it.

- *Ending sentence:* After this attack on the street, Simón realized that no place was safe for him; he looked at his bloody hands and saw that he was driven to do things he thought he was incapable of doing.

Episode 6

- *Beginning sentence:* When Simón returned home and told Esmeralda what had happened, she took the Lotto ticket from his hand and quickly walked to the fireplace.

- *Ending sentence:* As they recounted all their recent troubles, the young couple realized that what they had just done, as difficult as it was, would be the only solution to their problems.

These examples represent simple possibilities for *introducing* a work of literature. The form the prereading takes and its particular focus will depend on the needs of a particular group of learners and the demands a work of literature makes on those students. The planning for strategic prereading that offers students a point of entry into a text and does not supplant the learners' experience with the text requires teachers to know the literature well and know a good deal about how readers read texts—how they recall, how they infer, and how they construct critical judgments. See also Appendix B (pp. 163–168) for a sample learning activity to help students to define the concept of literary *tragedy,* when the definition will allow students to anticipate the configuration of the action of a play or narrative and to judge critically the behavior and fate of a central character.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

KNOWING SOME "RULES" FOR READING LITERARY TEXTS

When Tom works with preservice teachers who have successfully completed several upper-level literature courses at the university, he reminds them that their students are going to see them as readers who are

particularly adept at finding "hidden meaning," as Graff (1989, p. 83) suggests. A key for these future teachers of literature is to be aware of the processes they follow in deriving meaning from texts and judging them critically and to share these processes with their students. The process of constructing meaning should not seem a dark mystery to the adolescent reader, although much of the process may be obscure, even to the most reflective reader. One of the real challenges for secondary teachers is finding a process by which students can learn to comprehend works of literature more or less on their own. Reading and teaching literature are more heuristic processes than algorithmic procedures. Cognitive psychologists refer to the challenges of inferring meaning and instruction in literature analysis as ill formed. That is, there are multiple paths to any answers a student might give, there is rarely a fixed end point or final answer to complex literary works, and the conclusion cannot be learned by mastering a given formula.

Tom recalls high school students who insisted that a poem can "mean anything you want it to mean," which is a literary novice's broad way of saying that a text might be open to a wide variety of interpretations. But the students' claim overstates matters. At the same time, we do not want the experience with literature in an English classroom to be students' recitations of a teacher's representation of a text and judgment of its interpretation, even if the teacher claims to be able to conjure what the author *intended.* The narrative theorist Peter Rabinowitz (1987/1998) and his coauthors (Rabinowitz & Bancroft, 2014; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1997) offer another approach, and we think it appropriate here to discuss this work in some detail, because we judge Rabinowitz addresses the problem of revealing to others how highly literate readers read literary texts. If we agree that a text cannot mean simply anything we want it to mean, then we have to acknowledge that some intelligent and intentional human being designed the text in a way to guide us toward certain ideas and emotions and away from others. Experienced readers of literary texts recognize that the features of a literary work typically exhibit regularities and discontinuities that require us to understand and then apply "rules" for reading these features and making some sense of them. English teachers need to be aware of such rules in order to demonstrate how they apply to complex texts. We are suggesting here an approach that is neither *reader response* (although we recognize that personal connections will influence processing and recall) nor *new critical* (although we ask learners to pay close attention to features of the text). An alternative option begins with an *authorial reading* (Rabinowitz, 1987/1998; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998) that invites learners to notice the features of the text (e.g., the title, the names of characters, repeated images, narrative arc) that the author consciously

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

constructed with the expectation that an intended audience would recognize that these features carry significance. But pointing to features of a text is just a starting point since a reader will also need to be aware of how narratives (i.e., fiction, verse narrative, drama, and nonfiction narrative) work in order to say why the features are noteworthy and how they can construct meaning from them.

Unfortunately, there are few critical tools offering both reasoning processes and ways of noticing genre patterns available to most literature teachers who ply their craft at the secondary level. We recommend the work in narrative study of Peter Rabinowitz, whose ideas have helped our students with useful guides to reading fiction and some drama. Immediately below, we offer a highly simplified thumbnail sketch of Rabinowitz's "rules" for reading fiction, which is probably the most common literary form studied in middle school and high school. These are not cookbook recipes, but guideposts and helpful roadmaps in thinking about imaginative writings in fiction.

Rabinowitz begins his schema by including rules of (1) *notice*—what the author meant for us to see; (2) *signification*—what is important about those items or ideas we are meant to see; (3) *configuration*—how what is important begins to form patterns; and (4) *coherence* or *unity* of the whole work. In one sense, literary reading is, loosely speaking, rule-bound, because in the transactional exchange between author and reader, the author can assume certain ways that the reader will experience the text. Rabinowitz (1987/1998) offers a "system" for beginning a careful reading as a member of what he calls the authorial audience:

> Specifically, the system sets out *four types of rules* . . . [governing] operations or activities that, from the author's perspective, [are] appropriate for the reader to perform when transforming texts—and indeed, that it is even necessary for the reader to perform if he or she is to end up with the expected meaning. And they are [. . .] what readers implicitly call upon when they argue for or against a particular paraphrase of the text [. . . and] serve as a kind of *assumed contract between author and reader*—[specifying] the grounds on which the intended reading should take place. They are, of course, socially constructed—and they can vary with genre, culture, history, and text. (p. 43)

Rabinowitz then offers a major caveat: "But even when readers do not apply the specific rules the author had in mind, in our culture virtually all readers apply some rules in each of the four categories whenever they approach a text" (p. 43). Since these are "rules" most mature readers apply to texts, then English teachers should be familiar with them and develop ways to help novice literary learners to discover them, name

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

them, and apply them. Rabinowitz goes so far as to judge that "the rules have to be learned before the reading begins" (p. 112). We agree: English teachers should engage learners in inductive processes of discovering rules for reading literary texts and exhibit a repertoire of approaches for learners to apply their discoveries.

Rabinowitz (1987/1998) reminds us that "anything in a text can be made to 'mean' by an ingenious reader" but "giving meaning is not the same as finding it or construing it, and to the degree that a novel is an attempt by a novelist to convey some more or less precise meaning, it is impossible for all features to bear weight" (p. 49). Most readers *notice,* for example, both the red rosebush and the pointed hats in the opening two pages of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* but soon discover that one detail is both imagistically and thematically very important, while the other is simply a visual detail.

It becomes crucial, therefore, that an English teacher knows how to plan learning experiences that help students to distinguish among (1) *authorial intentions* (where the reader can be sensitive to the assumptions that an author was likely making about an imagined audience); (2) *ingenious readings* (where the reader develops a coherent system of some sort and where we can argue as much with the system itself or its elements as with the author's exemplification of it or them); and (3) some relatively *randomized set(s) of associations* that make up an interpretive move. See Appendices C and D (pp. 169–181) for sample learning activities to help students discover and apply rules of notice and significance.

Once we know, through the rules of *notice,* what to attend to (e.g., what the author has engineered our attention toward seeing/hearing/feeling), we still have to face the problem of *how* to attend to it. To think of some part of the work (image, word[s], character, etc.) as *significant,* the reader "moves from what appears to be said to what is really said, or at least from one level (which, if not literal, is more immediate or closer at hand) to another which is more distant, more mediated," an activity Rabinowitz (1987/1998) calls *signification* (p. 77). He explains, "Rules of signification are vast in number, and teachers probably have more trouble teaching their students to understand them than other kinds of rules" (p. 79). For example, when King Lear has a map spread before him and designates how portions of the earth are to be distributed, the image reveals much about Lear—the political vulnerability of his actions, and the scale of his ultimate descent. Since Lear is not looking at a road map to plan a family vacation, students can note the image and conjecture about its significance. The idea here is to model how a reader notes certain details and ponders their significance, positioning students to practice the same efforts as they work through the play and other texts.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

Once a text is finished, all rereaders contrast making sense of the work while in "the process of reading" versus the "retrospective interpretation of that process once it has been completed" (Rabinowitz, 1987/1998, p. 110). In *Authorizing Readers,* Rabinowitz and Smith (1997) call this distinction simply the difference between "reading and re-reading," and sometimes Rabinowitz speaks of "reading from memory" (p. 90). In Rabinowitz's model, "rules of *configuration* govern the activities by which readers determine probability," and "can be just as important to the reading experience when the outcomes it predicts turn out not to take place as when they do" (pp. 111–112).

The way in which a work of literature is *configured* prepares readers for what is to come and implies a certain worldview. Ruptures to the conventional structures also prompt reflection and imply challenges to artistic assumptions and other worldviews. Authors provide much guidance. In *Pride and Prejudice,* we can assume that Elizabeth is likely to change her mind, ultimately, about loving and marrying Darcy—not because of some *kismet* in represented reality but because the genre of the marriage plot suggests it. Our familiarity with specific modes and genres of literature allows us to anticipate two meta-rules: (1) "something will happen" (openness) or (2) "not anything can happen" (limits of possibility) (Rabinowtiz, pp. 117, 126). Rabinowitz notes: "Events have a predictive value in fiction that they do not have in life" (p. 118). See Appendix E (pp. 183–188) for a sample learning activity to help students discover some rules of configuration.

Finally, Rabinowitz speaks of the rules of *coherence* or *unity,* and we know from long experience that articulating this end point seems to be important to many teachers. We agree with its importance but suggest that students learning how to define this end point often lose sight of the journey and how they got there. The theme of a given work only makes sense—beyond articulating simple one-liners—when one knows the details of how that thematic end was achieved. Rabinowitz notes: "The majority of critical work done today still aims at setting out the basic coherence of literary works, their 'unity,' or 'basic pattern,' or 'overarching meaning' " (p. 141), what high school English teachers have always called the "theme" of a work. "For many writers, from Aristotle on, the coherence of art is what separates it from life" (Rabinowitz, 1987/1998, p. 144). This sentiment is best expressed by the detective character Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep,* who refers to a fictional problem thus: "It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact" (Chandler, 1950, p. 157). "Coherence, then, often serves as a vehicle by which ideological biases are smuggled into literary discussions disguised as objective aesthetic qualities" (Rabinowitz, 1987/1998, p. 144).

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

The varieties of coherence in many texts range from those essentially pre-assembled, or formulaic, "readerly texts" (e.g., Harlequin romances, vampire tales, or Horatio Alger novels) to their opposite, a few texts that are completely incoherent, to works that baffle or confuse us until we apply "the rules of coherence" to them. They may seem not unified but can be made so "through critical manipulation" (Rabinowitz, 1987/1998, p. 146). This activity puts the locus of coherence not in the text(s) so much as in the reader by assuming that "the work is coherent and that apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning bearing" (p. 147).

It would seem obvious that digesting these rules cannot be done easily via a simple character or plot chart, or through a long lecture, but requires some sort of patterned experience and repetition to make them useful to teachers, much less secondary students. Just as teachers of science or math require mastering some of the tools of their trade, so too should English and literature teachers learn the techniques and processes associated with the close reading of literary texts as part of their training. John and Tom may differ on choices of texts that are the most useful for contemporary secondary students, but both still agree that the English teacher, no less than any practitioner of a complex set of tasks, must find or invent ways of taking the tools of the trade in adult text analysis, and by adjusting and modifying them, make them useful for their middle school or high school students as they read complex literary texts. Novice teachers soon learn that merely rereading a novel they are teaching certainly helps plot recall but does not by itself help the beginning teacher answer students' questions about character motivation or cultural puzzles that "feel" important but remain opaque to the first-time reader.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

CONNECTING TEXTS

So far in this chapter, we have focused on what teachers need to know and can do to prepare students for reading individual works of literature. Tom's preference is to move beyond the examination of any given text as an isolated experience and plan a course of shared inquiry that would allow students to connect a series of texts. From this approach, it is less important to select individual works of literature as optimal esthetic experiences than it is to select literature that will extend and expand inquiry, whether that be into critical questions, particular genres or movements of literature, or individual authors. For teachers of literature in middle school or high school, there is an advantage to teaching coherent units of study rather than jumping from one text to another as

Getting "Lost" without Losing Our Way

As enthusiastic readers and teachers of literature, we want to help students discover an enthusiasm for reading and support their effort to become "lost" (in the sense of total immersion, not total confusion) in a compelling text. We have found it helpful to reflect on the conditions that allow us to immerse ourselves in reading and to note the efforts we make as readers to construct meaning as we enjoy our reading experience and as we share our experience with others.

- *Fostering enthusiasm.* English teachers typically can recall many experiences when they were "lost" in their reading of a text—by being swept away by the power of a narrative or drama, by the beauty of the language of a text, or by reflections about the implications suggested by a text. If you reflect on yourself as a reader, including your history of reading, perhaps you can identify the conditions that allowed you to become immersed in your reading in a kind of "flow" experience that removed you mentally from your immediate surroundings. It would be good to know the factors that fostered your immersion in a text, especially so that you can help students to find similar conditions, especially those that support students in their individual circumstances (Nell, 1988).

- *Recognizing "rules" for reading.* We have cited some "rules" for reading and interpreting literature, especially narratives, referring particularly to the work of Peter Rabinowitz. Don't let the idea of "rules" worry you. Rabinowitz and Corinne Bancroft (2014) specify that following such rules typically means "working with what our students already know—providing a framework and a vocabulary that allows them to express and build on that knowledge" (p. 2). So, as a mature reader, you have probably employed some "rules" yourself, such as paying special attention to the title of a work or to the names of characters. Mere ability to answer text-specific questions or to cite details from a text while formulating arguments about an interpretation isn't enough; you should also be able to cite some reasons, what Rabinowitz calls "rules," allowing you to explain the significance of the textual details. From your reading the reflections of other teachers of literature and from your reflections on your own reading processes, what rules can you identify? More importantly, how can you design experiences so that students can also discover rules for interpreting literature?

- *Noticing and interpreting.* Students sometimes express frustration that their English teachers can "find hidden meaning" in literary texts through a process that seems mysterious and baffling. While trying to describe an algorithm for interpretation is unproductive, teachers can do much to model the procedures that they follow in interpreting and evaluating a text. Certainly mature readers note the details that seem likely to be important, but they also apply rules and evaluate genre options. The image of a white rose in a poem, play, or story might serve as a symbol for love; but in historical genres the white rose might be an emblem of a political faction, and in another context, a symbol of death. A mature reader not only is sensitive to possible important images but also knows *how* to analyze those images to construct likely interpretations. Of course, reading such symbols

(*continued*)

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

in the work's context requires a reader to know something about their history and their significance in particular social and cultural milieus. We think it important for literature teachers to remain aware of their own processes for constructing meaning, while thus removing the veil of mystery by modeling for students the rational processes that allow readers to construct meaning.

• *Connecting texts.* As teachers and learners closely examine an individual work of literature, students also benefit from connecting a single work of literature to several other works. Judith Langer (2001) argues that students thrive when the curriculum is coherent and when teachers can make explicit connections across elements in the curriculum. This is basic to learning theory—connecting new information, concepts, and procedures to what we already know. Earlier, we noted that Northrop Frye (1957/2000) insisted that the discipline of literary study needed to be reformed, and claimed that students of literature can see a body of literature as a unified whole. He began by exploring particular genres, tracing a recurring theme, or interpreting a common archetype as elements in the universe of literature. One need not be a devotee of Frye to agree that one of the demands on a teacher, then, is to know a body of related literature and to know how to organize its study in a way that expands and complicates learners' experiences.

• *Introducing conflicts.* As teachers who have written about the literature we have enjoyed and have taught, we have also read what others have said about the same works. Inevitably, scholars typically disagree in their interpretations and assessments of literary works, in part because if every reader did agree, there would be little further to say other than the obvious. Interestingly, if we rely on teachers' guides and online supports for teaching such common high school choices as *Romeo and Juliet* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we may note that there is wide agreement about how to judge the central characters and evaluate themes. Yet even with such aids, there exists an extensive critical tradition revealing points of contention. While we are not at all advocating that teachers assign literary criticism to their students, we recommend that teachers be familiar with the surrounding debates so that they can frame authentic interpretive problems. The problems can set the context for discussions and written responses and, as Gerald Graff (1992) suggests, can even motivate students to grapple with a complex text.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

if moving from one isolated experience to another. Teachers and learners are in a far better position if they can view a set of readings as a unified whole, with each text and its related discussions contributing to the investigation into some compelling questions or problems. For example, it will be a far different experience for students to read *Beowulf,* followed by an eclectic mix of poetry and then a contemporary American novel, than for learners to collaborate in probing what distinguishes a hero in a warrior culture as opposed to contemporary culture, why such a narrative endures across time and cultures, and how the archetype itself can function symbolically (Tsur, 2010). In the second instance, the teacher would need to know a great deal about the *romance* of the hero as a mode of literature and would need to follow some principles of

curriculum development in order to support the purposeful investigation into several connected works of literature.

Burke (2010), Smagorinsky (2007), and Wiggins and McTighe (2005) lay out principles for designing coherent units of instruction. For the beginning English teacher especially, knowing how to develop an instructional plan that the teacher can convey to learners as purposeful, significant, and coherent would be an advantage for engaging learners and advancing their literacy learning. Smagorinsky is particularly useful, both with his *Teaching English by Design* (2007) and the sample units that he shares on his related website, Virtual Library of Conceptual Units. We recognize that some schools adopt a curriculum, and the teacher serves as the technician to execute someone else's plans. If, however, a teacher has a hand in constructing a curriculum that integrates various elements of literary and language instruction and is responsive to the needs and interests of a particular group of students, the teacher would do well to be familiar with the principles that guide the development of the curriculum. Although one could profitably read Smagorinsky (2007) for detailed guidance, we can specify here that the English teacher who has an opportunity to develop curriculum, either alone or in collaboration with colleagues, would need to know how to do the following:

- Identify a rich concept that can engage learners through sustained inquiry into literary experience, whether that inquiry concerns themes, genres, modes, movements, or authors.
- Represent the concept as a critical problem that can drive inquiry over a period of weeks.
- Explain the significance of the overarching concept, discuss its many aspects and complications, and justify the inquiry and the use of selected texts as appropriate for a given group of learners.
- Express specific learning targets in ways that learners can understand and in sufficient detail to be able to assess evidence of student learning.
- Design authentic assessments to monitor development and measure growth in students' various proficiencies in their work with literary texts.
- Identify, assemble, and connect instructional materials, especially the literary texts that support the inquiry into the central concepts.
- Integrate various language experiences and critical thinking activities to support learning and promote engagement.

A rich literature curriculum will take time to develop, but these basic components suggest what a teacher should know in order to design

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

a coherent course of study that students can enjoy and learn from. Familiarity with a rich store of literature from many genres will allow a teacher to select appropriately the texts that will support inquiry. This conception perhaps turns conventional approaches to curriculum development upside down: Instead of thinking of the curriculum as the literary texts that a class "covers" (as in "I'm teaching *Romeo and Juliet* this year."), we recommend that the teacher's focus emphasize students' learning the *procedures* for reading complex texts closely and connecting them as part of a rich investigation into some significant concept or compelling problem. Inquiry into matters that resonate with learners establishes purpose and drives the close reading and the effort to persevere and remain flexible.

COLLISIONS OF ADVERSE VIEWS

Tom would like to add one more matter for teachers to consider for their secondary classes by reiterating Gerald Graff's (1992, 2003) assertions that secondary students could be helped enormously by the teacher finding some way to introduce into classroom discourse a similar sort of thinking and arguing that adults do in literary criticism (2003, pp. 173–189).

Although experienced middle school and high school teachers might judge that introducing adolescent readers to literary criticism and literary theory is preposterous, Graff notes simply that "we need to recognize that criticism is what we inevitably do when we talk about a work of art" (2003, p. 175). He, too, rejects assigning adult-level literary criticism in the secondary classroom, granting that assigning such "criticism will probably backfire if a way is not found to bridge the gap between critical discourse and student discourse" (2003, p. 174). To that end, Graff recalls how his own adolescent attention elevated to a complex literary text when he recognized that adult readers disagreed about how to read and value a text. Graff (2008) warns that a student who writes about a literary text as if the learner was the first to have read the text, will ultimately offer something insignificant. In thinking about the university student in particular, Graff (2008) suggests that a teacher needs to introduce the surrounding critical responses as well as the literary text itself: "Students need that conversation not only as a prompt for generating their own critical response but also as a model of what critical response to literature looks like" (p. 4). Tom suggests that middle school and high school students in their own way need to engage in similar kinds of conversations that have them sort through various responses to literature and, in a way, negotiate the meaning that they construct.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

Resources for Teacher Development

The Company You Keep: People You Should Know

In preparing candidates to become teachers of English language arts, the faculty at colleges and universities design programs that have students taking many literature courses. That's what English majors typically do. But the special knowledge that teachers have includes attention to how to help learners become skillful and critical readers of literature. While it is common for teachers to learn how to teach through trial and error, we can also draw from the trials and errors of others to see several options for approaching the task of helping adolescents to read literature with care and reflection. Again, as we suggest in Chapter 1, it is likely that ten different English professors will identify ten different lists of authorities in the field, but we have found the scholars and the works listed below to be both helpful and provocative. In looking for help and in attempting to expand conceptions of reading and teaching literary texts, we judge that the following list is a good place to start:

Appleman, D. (2014). *Critical encounters in secondary English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
Beers, K., & Probst, R. E. (2013). *Notice and note: Strategies for close reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Gallagher, K. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Graff, G. (1992). *Beyond the culture wars: How teaching the conflicts can revitalize American education*. New York: Norton.
Rabinowitz, P. (1988). *Before reading: Narrative conventions and the politics of interpretation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Smagorinsky, P. (2007). *Teaching English by design: How to create and carry out instructional units*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Smith, M. W., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2013). *Fresh takes on teaching literary elements: How to teach what really matters about character, setting, point of view, and theme*. New York: Scholastic.
Tatum, A. (2009). *Reading for their life: (Re)building the textual lineages of African American adolescent males*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

John and Tom agree that for students in middle school and high school, it would be impractical to introduce articles of literary criticism that in many instances would baffle the learners and discourage the reading of the text under examination. But in another way, it is crucial that a teacher frame interpretive and evaluative problems as ways to examine a text and discuss it in a meaningful way. This is not to say that the teacher needs to scan the breadth of literary criticism before introducing middle school learners to *The Outsiders*. The idea is not to scour the literary criticism to have the last word about how to read and value the novel. Instead, familiarity with the literary criticism, sometimes in

the form of book reviews and popular commentary, alerts the teacher about the remaining areas of doubt, even with chestnuts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Lord of the Flies*.

Consider a ninth grader assigned to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by a teacher who proclaims that the novel has long been his favorite and he has hoped to model himself after Atticus Finch. Before cracking the book open, the shrewd ninth grader would know that she should share the teacher's endorsement of the novel as a great book and should speak admiringly about Atticus Finch. In contrast, another teacher might introduce the reading of the novel by saying something like this: "You know, I used to admire the character of Atticus Finch in this story, but I am not sure what to make of him now that Lee's new second novel shows a different side of him. Some recent critics have characterized him as complacent about injustice and slow to press for reforms in 1930s Alabama. Perhaps it's unfair to judge him by today's standards, but even Harper Lee might be critical of him. I am interested in knowing what you think of him." This approach is what Nystrand (1997) calls making a "dialogic bid," in that the teacher is announcing that judgments about Atticus and the novel as a whole are a genuine invitation to discuss assessments with others, instead of reciting the teacher's endorsement.

If it is not practical to direct students to the literary criticism surrounding a work of literature, an alternative is to orchestrate experiences that put students in positions to look at texts through a variety of lenses. Tom suggests Appleman's work (2014), which offers an approach that teaches students about critical theory. John worries that in her effort to make ideas of critical theory accessible to secondary students, she has watered them down to near-unrecognizability. In a less formal way, McCann and Flanagan (2002) suggest ways to position students to experience the conflicts that surround a significant text like *The Tempest*. Perhaps it is a stretch to ask students to delve into deconstruction, family systems, and poststructural views of literature; but experience tells us that students enjoy considering a single text from gendered, political, psychological, historical, and biographical views when the consideration of those views awakens the learners to new possibilities and puts them in a position to explain their interpretations in the face of contrasting assessments and mistaken assumptions (Knapp, 1996, p. 195).

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

Tom and John agree that certain older techniques such as memorizing literary terminology and applying them to simplified texts are counterproductive in inspiring joyful and independent readers. We hope teachers

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

have some basic understanding about the processes involved in reading and making meaning from complex texts. As we have pointed out, sometimes this effort to foster the construction of meaning requires the teacher to work strategically to activate relevant prior knowledge or to help learners to construct the background knowledge necessary to infer meaning. We also advocate for teachers to move away from presentation and recitation as the dominant mode of discourse and move instead toward richer strategies that help adolescents continue reading through increasingly complicated literary works. Doing so requires mastering literary analysis techniques like Rabinowitz's, and considering other readers' ways of experiencing a text, as Graff suggests, so that students learn more about other minds, the world in general, and about literature. Our ultimate goal is for adolescent readers to learn how, ultimately, adult readers use their experiences both in life and in reading to make sense of texts requiring both intellectual engagement and emotional sensitivity. While the chicken-and-egg problem always exists for those adolescent readers—develop maturity first and then learn to read well versus learning to read to become more mature via the expansiveness of a literary education—our hope is to alert the teachers about the body of knowledge that will serve them well in planning rich literary experiences for their students.

YOUR THOUGHTS

Too often we have seen teachers simply assign reading and then, through recitation or quizzes, assess whether or not students have read and understood a text to the extent that the teacher deems sufficient. In this chapter we have offered alternatives, but we trust that the reader has participated in learning activities that have helped students to become more mature readers of literary texts. What is your assessment of our proposed practices, and what other options seem reasonable? Here are some questions that you might reflect on, or discuss, with peers:

- To what extent is it necessary to prepare students for their encounters with literary texts?
- How, if at all, might an insistence on recognizing "signposts" or learning "rules" of reading undermine a learner's creative reading of a text?
- How might a learner's struggle with a text ultimately equip him or her to become aware of the procedures to follow in constructing meaning?

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

- To what extent is it possible for a teacher to *show* less expert readers how to construct meaning and interrogate a text?
- How is it possible for a teacher to model reading and interpreting processes and then transfer responsibility for these processes to the learners in a scaffolded, strategic way?

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press

Copyright © 2019 The Guilford Press.
No part of this text may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher.
Purchase this book now: www.guilford.com/p/mccann

Guilford Publications
370 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
212-431-9800
800-365-7006
www.guilford.com