

# LitTunes Readers Examine Issues Raised by Our Challenge To Traditional Methodology.

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**Two months ago I contributed an essay** to LitTunes which examined the teaching of the whole-class novel. I originally hesitated to post it, afraid some of the opinions asserted in the text would turn away readers, perhaps prompting “unsubscribe” demands or letters of objection.

## ***We Ask a Fundamental Question: How Do We Teach Literature?***

Instead, the essay, "**Reset the Class Set,**" struck a chord in the hearts and minds of the LitTunes readership and garnered many interesting responses. Those responses, along with new commentary, are collected here as an addendum to the first essay. We shall see if the conversation within our online community continues.

**My original essay summarized the argument** of an article written by Fisher and Ivey, "Farewell to A Farewell to Arms: Deemphasizing the Whole-Class Novel" (*Phi Delta Kappan*, 1 March 2007). In the article, the two teacher educators lambasted the dominant force exerted by the whole class novel on the English Language Arts curriculum.

As I grappled with the concepts raised by their argument, I turned to experiences from my past as a student and teacher — experiences that showed the futility of the traditional approach to introducing longer works of fiction to junior and senior high school kids. I realized that I needed to add my challenge to the whole-class novel and its continued dominance in the English Language Arts classroom. At the same time I was careful to search for ways to better understand the issues without demeaning the perspectives of others on a question of real importance to the teaching of literacy.

## ***Passion, Professionalism***

I find the responses stimulating and intellectually provocative, first of all because they present diverse viewpoints based on classroom experience. They also remind us of the passion and professionalism of the American teacher.

**Elizabeth M. discusses** the fact that some recent movements in education have led to demands that English teachers teach the same book at the same time — at an enormous cost to the district and its patrons.

**Copeland brings up** E.D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*, which exploded on the scene in the 1980s to bolster the argument for teaching canonical whole-class novels.

**Lisa H. offers** insight from her life as a parent, teacher, and district-level administrator. She arrives at the conclusion that there are too many great books out there to just be teaching the same book year after year.

**Joyce Sward is** actually teaching a whole class novel, but her approach to the task demonstrates how effectively a master teacher can adapt lessons to meet the needs of a diverse group of students.

**Loraine McCurdy-Little provides** a brief look into the intellectual challenges of decision making, seeking to strike a balance between what is theoretically sound, what is acceptable, and what actually works.

## ***The Need for Anonymity Exposes Another Issue.***

Of these five outstanding educators, two asked that we identify them by first name only. Only one of our contributors agreed to disclose the place of their employment. I am not surprised by the reluctance of professional educators to associate their informed and sensible opinions on a controversial issue with their place of employment. Given the often reproachful and subtly censorious attitude of educational management in our society, their caution is understandable.

**How very disappointing,** this underlying atmosphere of fear that stifles discourse. What is the next step in the erosion of a democracy supposedly devoted to free speech? Will we have to erase all identifying information when discussing issues? "We've had to watch out for people who rule," Scott Miller warns in his 2008 song, "People Who Rule."

## ***Matt Copeland***

LitTunes contributor Matt Copeland, whose wise counsel I have valued and trusted for many years, offers a detailed response to the question I posed in sharing a draft of my essay: "Do you think this is too far out there?" Matt writes:

**I don't think it is too far out there at all.**

In fact, I think it will be one prong of the next great debate in public education — that battle between the traditional, content-area "purists" and those of us who embrace a more interdisciplinary, skills-based, differentiated approach.

I do think there are times when teaching a whole-class novel is appropriate and even necessary. It's tough to model for students the kinds of close, critical reading that is sometimes necessary without

having a common text that everyone in class is reading. And applying those skills to something of substantive length almost requires that "class set."

**But you are right in that the "class set"**

is often abused by individual teachers and often used by schools and administrators as a backdoor way of establishing a *de facto* curriculum, limiting what is "allowable" by limiting what is "available." In reality, we see the same process happening in other content areas as well. It just happens to often be centered around which single textbook is adopted because all too often the textbook becomes the curriculum.

I might emphasize in a stronger manner here that although educators have largely exhausted the great teacher-centered vs. student-centered approaches debate, what we have here is really a content-centered vs. skills-centered approaches debate, i.e. which is more important: that students have all read and comprehended *Huck Finn* or that students are able to analyze and apply what they have read to their sense of self, community, and future?

**That, too, is an old argument** — E.D. Hirsch and his whole cultural literacy movement — but this debate is one that educators haven't been as quick to pick up. You state this in the piece but I don't think it comes through as loudly or clearly as it should.

Educators seem comfortable and quick to argue for and against the appropriateness of differing styles and methods of pedagogy — the how — but we seem far less comfortable and willing to argue for and against the appropriateness of the content itself — the what.

**We argue all the time about how to best** teach *Huck Finn*. But how often do we discuss whether knowledge of *Huck Finn* is the ultimate goal, or if knowledge of *Huck Finn* is merely an intermediary, a context, that allows us to expand and enhance the deeper, more meaningful (and more powerful) skills that students will need in their futures.

How do we define what should be learned?

How do we define the curriculum?

Is that best done by the classroom teacher, the person who works with these students on a day-to day basis?

Or is it best done by the "expert" outside of the classroom — the district administrator, the college professor, the state dept. of ed.?

What agendas are those outside experts peddling?

And what influence do those agendas ultimately have on *what* is taught in the classroom?

**It could be argued that most classroom** teachers — early in their career when they are "low man" on the totem pole and have no real curricular authority or power in their own classrooms — fall into one of two camps: (1) those who have the curriculum shoved down their throats from above (i.e. curriculum mapping, reading lists, common assessments, etc.), and (2) those who are left to flounder on their own, who all too often fall back on that idea of "do what was done to us."

What is truly unfortunate is that "class sets" — much like the textbook — become great obstacles to breaking free from either of those two camps. They become forms of bondage that keep us from creating and exerting our own curricular authority and power in our classrooms. Hell, the "classics" have done this for centuries now.

**NCTE/IRA Standard 1 states:**

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

*National Council of Teachers of English /  
International Reading Association*

## ***Can We Find a New Balance?***

The experience of reading a whole-class novel is a valuable classroom activity when, as Matt describes, it is done with support and isn't the demigod lording over the room from August through May. Total eradication of the whole-class novel concept would be a loss. But there are too many books out there. Whet the appetite of students. Don't force-feed them.

### ***Lisa H.***

Lisa H. provides the next perspective. As a district-level administrator, former teacher, and parent of an adolescent, she offers a viewpoint of depth and breadth based on extensive experience. She writes:

Okay, I'm in.

**I have struggled with this philosophically** for a couple of years now. As a former HS English teacher-turned-administrator, I have tried to approach this curriculum alignment issue with a whole brain-and-heart mentality. State-mandated high school reform initiatives caused us to make some quick decisions regarding "what" is "taught," but now it's time to go back and do the right thing.

Should all kids read *The Odyssey* from front to back? Probably not — but can all ninth graders study the hero's journey, and perhaps be "exposed" to Homer? My own ninth grade daughter recently came home distraught over the dark cloud of boredom in her English class after chewing on tough portions of *The Odyssey* until I said, "You know, 'Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?' is *The Odyssey*." She frowned skeptically, but then her eyes lit up as she began to make the connections to characters and situations — which then led to a discussion about the movies she's seen over time. I love the light bulb moments, don't you?

**There are too many good pieces** of literature out there to narrow our focus on the textbook "classics." I had a senior English teacher tell me that her students were surprised to discover there were actually other dramas they could read beyond Shakespeare! I would much rather motivate them to find the books and genre that inspire them, that make them think.

If we can shake off our dependence on textbook companies that develop these packaged programs with all the bells and whistles, perhaps teachers can sit down and talk about what they really want kids to know and be able to do with reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing — how about thinking? Sometimes, it's about professional laziness; most times, I believe it is lack of self-efficacy on the teacher's part ("Surely I couldn't create such amazing materials / questions / assessments!").

**So, our work is cut out for us**, but I'm going to figure out a way to do the right thing for students within a framework of expectations. I really appreciate your essay.

**NCTE/IRA Standard 2 states:**

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

## ***Textbooks Are a Step Behind The Changing Face of Literature.***

Lisa's sharp analysis of the power of the textbook industry strikes close to my teacher's heart. Textbooks are socio-political documents which represent the status quo from which they were created. As the NCTE/IRA recommends, students need to understand the human experience. The last national study of the teaching of literature (Applebee) was completed in 1988, but the differences between the literature being taught in 1988 and the literature being taught 25 years prior in Anderson's study were miniscule at best.

**Let's face it, the literature** taught in our schools was written by people who were nothing like the students in our schools.

### ***Elizabeth M.***

The third response comes from a classroom teacher employed by a Midwestern school district implementing aligned curriculum and professional learning communities. While some alignment certainly doesn't hurt, the idea that all eleventh grade students should be reading the same novel at the same time is ludicrous. But that is exactly what Elizabeth M. is experiencing as her school implements across-the-board curricular changes in all content areas, changes that are not necessarily tenable for English Language Arts.

**It's true that many academic disciplines** build upon previous learning to help students take the next step. Yes, most students take pre-Algebra before Algebra One. But the teaching of English is recursive and non-linear. The very idea that ninth graders in one teacher's class are learning at the same pace as their peers in another classroom down the hall is ridiculous, too.

Education, especially English education, is not ever going to be something we can fit into neatly aligned, preformatted boxes. Our students deserve better. Elizabeth's spirited response takes a step in the right direction. She writes:

I just finished reading your essay. I think I'm going to send it to some people here. I liked it, and especially liked the first half or so that challenged the teaching of the whole class novel.

**One of the pressures you didn't mention** that I feel here is the pressure of fiscal responsibility. My school has taken "whole class novel" to the extreme and defined it as not only a section of students reading the same thing, but an entire sophomore or junior class reading the same thing at the same time.

This past year we spent thousands of dollars making sure that we are able to have every freshman, sophomore, junior and senior reading these required texts at the same time. It's likely that we will be fighting the perception that if we don't do this well, we will be

wasting our patron's money. Try to wrap your mind around that scenario.

**So, we teachers are trying** to meet the needs of 400 students with one novel, one set of common strategies and methods, and one assessment. I wish someone would show me how this approach can be considered differentiated.

We need to lead a charge against this stuff, for the very reasons you cited in your essay. This one-size-fits-all approach is not good for kids.

**The answer lies in creating** teacher-friendly strategies for NOT using the whole class novel. Otherwise, we are lost in rhetoric.

**The NCTE/NCATE Standards for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts Grades 7-12 state:**

3.5 Candidates demonstrate knowledge of, and uses for, an extensive range of literature. As a result, candidates demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of, and an ability to use, varied teaching applications for:

3.5.2 Works from a wide variety of genres and cultures, works by female authors, and works by authors of color;

3.5.3 Numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults;

3.5.4 A range of works of literary theory and criticism and an understanding of their effect on reading and interpretive approaches.

## ***The Cost of Justification***

In Elizabeth's case, her district seems to be practicing an unfortunate act of justification, which a friend of mine once described as "being right for all the wrong reasons." It has purchased thousands of dollars of new books based on a faulty theory, and now must use them all to justify the expense. What a recalcitrant, wrong-headed decision — one that was adopted and perpetrated by administrators without a clue about how to teach a novel, without a clue about the meaning of effective teaching of the literary arts.

## ***Joyce Sward***

From this rather bleak outlook on the subject of the whole class novel, we shift to Canadian teacher Joyce Sward, who long ago abandoned teaching the whole class

novel, only to bring it back in small doses but with a fresh perspective based on the actual needs of her students. Joyce writes:

**Thanks for all the great stuff you** produce. I am a long-time English teacher (AKA OLD) and I moved away from teaching one novel a long time ago; however, this semester I am using a backwards design model, looking at what we do with a difference or variation.

The class is big — 28 students, grade 11. After looking at Victorian poetry (dramatic monologue), modern poetry, short story by a First Nations writer Thomas King, essays on the topic, and a movie, now the whole class is reading *The Kite Runner*, keeping in mind that big question: What do we do with a variation or difference?

**We are not all examining the novel** in the same way, but it has given me a chance to do big-question discussion. Students who don't read English well have been able to listen to me reading, join circle discussions on Afghani history, and play with vocabulary with their fellow students — and I am liking the results, at least so far.

Some students have brought in stories of tribal differences from their own culture. The entire class will be challenged to put together some kind of oral presentation using music — the class has loads of musicians from heavy metal bass players to classical guitar to jazz, so it should be interesting to see how they put together some kind of musical composition — with the rest of us somehow becoming part of the presentation.

**So though I would say I no longer** teach one novel to a group, perhaps I will now say: I usually don't teach one novel to a group. And the techniques like word walls and responses work, whether I teach one novel or we do lit circles.

Thanks for all your work. I did the Soundtrack exercise with modifications last year. The students loved it and did a great job on CD covers and recordings, both of music of others and of their own.

3.5 Candidates demonstrate knowledge of, and uses for, an extensive range of literature. AS A RESULT, CANDIDATES demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of, and an ability to use, varied teaching applications for:

3.5.1 Works representing a broad historical and contemporary spectrum of United States, British, and world, including non-Western, literature;



**While Fisher and Ivey did advocate** a complete departure from teaching the whole class novel, Ms. Sward's innovative approach illustrates that there are effective ways to overcome the difficulties inherent in the process.

## ***Loraine McCurdy-Little***

Loraine McCurdy-Little, one of our earliest newsletter subscribers, reminds us of the importance of discussion, no matter how long the text might be. She writes:

**This is exactly what I have been thinking** — and I teach in a district that supports the idea. The literature circle strategy, however, didn't work too well at first, but I still need to work on it and can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I would love to read a lesson plan you've done for the music connection.

By the way, I am doing a version of the **'Soundtrack of your Life'** assignment with my eighth graders starting next week! Wish me luck!

4.5 Help students to participate in dialogue within a community of learners by making explicit for all students the speech and related behaviors appropriate for conversing about ideas presented through oral, written, and/or visual forms

## ***Shall We Continue?***

I admire these writers for joining the fray and allowing me to share their unabashed thoughts with the LitTunes community. Each contributor sheds their special ray of light on the debate regarding the teaching the whole-class novel.

**Dear readers, please consider participating** in our conversation. Send LitTunes your thoughts, comments, and responses to the issues raised by our exploration of the whole-class novel and the broader challenges of deciding how to best teach literacy. We have not answered all of the questions yet — and there are, I'm sure, many stones left to upend before our conversation could be called comprehensive. Your response is most welcome and will be shared only with your permission. Send your comments to me at ***cgoering@uark.edu***.

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