

What is English?: Centering Literary Sensemaking and Social Justice in High School English

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In the public high school where I teach, I'm a part of a department of English teacher-researchers who, for the last seven years, have been investigating adolescents' literary sensemaking. By literary sensemaking, I refer here to the processes of making meaning with an attention to both form and content from a wide variety of artifacts across modalities. I see sensemaking as constructing meaning from a wide variety of texts—including books, magazines, graphic novels, websites, images, video, music, and multi-modal works. What makes this sensemaking *literary* is the focus on not only a comprehension and engagement with the content of the text but also with the text's form. Literary sensemaking of a novel, for example, focuses not only on what the text says but also how the text is written. Looking at word choice, figurative language, punctuation, and syntax is a necessary part of this kind of sensemaking. If the text is a still image, then formal visual elements such as color, line, shape, and composition are also important to consider. A video might have linguistic elements that deserve close reading but may also demand a focus on camera angles, framing, lighting, and other effects. Importantly, this kind of analysis is not done at the expense of talking about the content of the text, but rather this focus on form must work to enrich the discussion of content. But why would a group of English teachers find value in studying how students engage with literary sensemaking? Because we have seen that at its best this kind of literary reasoning can be a powerful vehicle for social justice teaching and learning.

Seven years ago, our English department began a discussion of what was essential for our students to know and be able to do. We were and still are a group of English teachers who geek out when someone brings up influential researchers in literacies or English education. The names Carol Lee, Janet Emig, Shirley Brice Heath, Lisa Delpit, and Paulo Freire all make us swoon. As we began talking about the things that we really valued in English teaching, we found ourselves returning to particular times where the field has questioned what it means to *do* English. We looked carefully at writings which came out of the Dartmouth Conference in the 1960's. Together we read Peter Elbow's (1990) *What is English?* and discussed Bob

Fecho's (2004) *Is This English?* As we read, we were spurred on by a persistent trouble that so many high school English departments are organized not around areas of thematic inquiry or particular skills that they value but by the area of the canon that they investigate—often with particular grade levels focusing on “American literature” “British literature” or “world literature.” As we discussed our ideas together, we realized that we did not necessarily need to replicate this traditional way of doing English in high school. Instead of centering the nations from which texts arose, we wanted to center the skills that we found most valuable—intellectual inquiry and literary sensemaking.

Thus, we eschewed the traditional scope and sequence of single-grade English classes that cover a smattering of different topics and genres in each grand band. Instead, we embraced multi-age themed courses that put literary sensemaking center stage. Much like on a college campus, students now select the English course that they would like to take from a list of options. We have one set of options for 9th and 10th grade students and a more advanced set of courses for 11th and 12th grade students.

For example, students in 9th and 10th grade can choose to take “Versus Verses” a poetry course that combines the reading of canonical and contemporary poetry through student-led seminar discussions of form and meaning. Students engage with a range of poetry and song including the lyricism of Frank Ocean and the sonnets of Shakespeare. Our interactions with all of these texts center close literary reading with discussions of larger philosophical and social justice issues. Each week focuses on a different poetic issue—either a literary device like symbolism or a theme like revolution—and every week culminates in a poetry slam where students share and analyze together the poetry that they have been working on. Providing the scansion of a line of poetry in seminar is something many English students have traditionally done, but writing a poem with a meter and form that connotes the kinds of feelings that one is trying to elicit in readers is another level for literary analysis.

In 11th and 12th grade students can take courses entitled “Literary Que(e)ries” or “Black Words Matter”—which focus on texts by LGBTQ+ authors and Black authors respectively. Each of these classes centers both traditional literary works and a wide variety of digital and multi-modal texts. For example, in Black Words Matter students not only engage with

texts by W.E.B. Dubois, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and Ta-Nehisi Coates but also examine Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Lauren Hill's song lyrics, clips from RuPaul's Drag Race, Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talks, scenes from the film *Moonlight*, and the #BlackLivesMatter activism of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi.

Across all our courses, we center literary sensemaking through authentic intellectual work. This focus entails including in every course a series of performance assessments—what some call exhibitions of student work. For example, in Versus Verses students write their own literary analyses of a poem of their choice and then present their analysis in an oral defense to an audience that includes both the entire class and a panel of external examiners—professors, professional writers, teachers, and community members. Also, students in this course create a 50-page chapbook of their poetry and host their own culminating poetry slam in the evening for the whole community. These are the kinds of assessments that are woven throughout all our courses and help us to demonstrate how we value intellectual work through literary sensemaking.

As teacher-researchers we have been continuously conducting our own inquiries of this model of doing English. These inquiries have allowed us to press on when the road gets rocky. For example, when we started a focus on literary sensemaking, we found that many students just went on the hunt for literary devices. In the first year, we looked at student papers where students were identifying similes and personification but fewer papers where students were talking about the literary effect of this figurative language. Further, semi-structured interviews revealed that for some of our students, literary sensemaking seemed to feel more like a doing-school compliance-based task than authentic intellectual work. Together, we started to tackle this thorny problem of practice. We moved toward more dialogically organized classrooms where students and teachers were sharing the facilitation duties. We worked on asking questions that combined issues of close reading of literary devices with high-interest issues around social justice, oppression, and identity. We drew on students' funds of knowledge as routine aspects of classroom pedagogy and highlighted culturally sustaining pedagogies across our classes. And we continued to get better at the craft of teaching: we read Peter Johnston's (2004) *Choice Words* as we critically studied our own classroom discourse; we pored over Deborah Appleman's (2015) *Critical*

Encounters in Secondary English as we engaged students with literary theory; we spent a year learning some of the skills typically implemented by reading specialists so we could conduct one-on-one reading interventions with students in our classrooms.

This might all sound like pie in the sky nonsense that feels realistically unachievable at other schools. However, I want to highlight that in some ways there is nothing special about the school where this work has occurred. The high school where we work is an in-district, New York City public school. It is *not* a charter, a magnet, or a selective admissions high school. Rather, it is a regular unscreened school. Our 476 students in grades 9-12 come from a diversity of neighborhoods in our city. Demographically, approximately 45% of students identify as Latinx, 25% as Black, 20% as white and 10% as Asian. Approximately 70% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and approximately 30% of students receive special education services. Because valuing our diversity is a core commitment of our school, most of our English classes are co-taught by an English teacher and a special education teacher, which allows us to run a fully-inclusive model of education for all students. In the same vein, our courses are untracked and both challenge and support learners at all levels. Our students must pass a high stakes state test, the English Language Arts Regents Exam, in order to graduate, and we find that our way of doing English seems to help to prepare students.

As I write this piece, reflecting on the work that we have done as an English department over the last seven years, I am inspired by the words of George Hillocks (2016) who, in one of his final pieces (published posthumously and edited by Peter Smagorinsky), argued that “high school curricula do not make it clear that, at the core, literature is concerned not only with character, plot, and setting but with moral and philosophical issues” (p. 110). For my department, restructuring the English curricula around not arbitrary grade bands and national literary canons but rather around issues of social justice through a centering of literary sensemaking has allowed us to create learning experiences of which we think Hillocks would be proud. Moreover, we have done this work in one of the largest school bureaucracies in America and have always worked within the public-school system. It has not taken a herculean effort, but rather the continuous, at times plodding, work of teachers wanting to do better by our students. We hope that this piece might inspire others to consider, as

Hillocks says, “the territory of literature” (2016, p. 110) in high school English departments and to conduct their own teacher inquiries and innovate for themselves based on what will be best for their own contexts.

In our own context, we have worked on answering the question of “What is English?,” and we have coalesced around a vision of high school English teaching that values all semiotic forms as texts, that centers literary sensemaking and intellectual thought, and that holds social justice as a core commitment across curriculum, departmental structures, and pedagogy. However, we do not expect others to come to the same conclusions that we have. Instead, we invite everyone to engage in their own teacher research to discover their own answer to the enduring question of “What is English?”

References

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