

# Reading Across the Curriculum: A Report from the 2009 NCTE Region 7 Conference

Teaching Ideas



To provide more opportunities for students to practice writing, many universities instituted Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs starting in the 1980s. These programs are based on the principles that writing promotes learning, that writing is the responsibility of all content teachers, that writing should be integrated in all disciplines throughout a student's educational career, and that only by practicing authentic writing in every discipline will students learn to communicate within that discipline (The WAC Clearinghouse, 2009). These collaborative programs have filtered into K-12 secondary schools, especially in the last decade due to the standards movement (Brewster and Klump, 2004).

Reading across the curriculum has not had such systematic development. Though most pre-service teachers in the United States take a content area reading course as part of their certification program, there is little follow-up support to this practice. The teaching of reading must be grounded in all disciplines in the classroom if we expect all students to become proficient readers. If students are to be prepared to read material in new media, they must learn to read

not only literary texts but to read as scientists, as mathematicians, as computer programmers, as discerning consumers of information doubling in size every four years (Wurman, 2000). In *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher asserts that he is "not sure that teachers across the curriculum are aware of how little reading their students are actually doing." He asks those of us in the Language Arts field to remind

How do you know when students don't know how to read in your discipline? How do you show them how to read primary documents? How do you show them to negotiate a Math textbook? How do you show them to think critically about a lab report? However, students in a class I currently teach, Young Adult Literature (YA), insist on reading in all content areas, especially YA novels. Again and again, they argue

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our peers "that we are not simply content-area teachers. We are all literacy teachers as well" (58).

## Groundwork for NCTE Region 7 Workshop

My workshop at the NCTE Regional in October 2009 in Burnaby, B.C. had several starting points. When I taught Content Area Reading, there was constant resistance from all content area pre-service teachers—including English—about teaching reading at the secondary level. I argued that you cannot expect students to read what is assigned unless they know *how* to read what you are assigning.

that *Sold* by Patricia McCormick would provide background to the study of how international agencies could collaborate to solve complex problems such as child sex slavery and/or how national governments could contribute to solutions. They argue that Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* not only merits close study in the English class but would also enhance a Health class discussing the psychological effects of sexual assault, and that Sherman Alexie's *Flight* would be a vivid text for a history class studying Native American history. Inspired by these students, I recently brought Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* into

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a Health class (Hill, 2009). The Health teacher and I chose this novel in order to open dialogue about teen pregnancy and teen parenting, designing a two week unit in which class discussions would begin to break down gender stereotypes such as males cannot be nurturing parents. If our content area colleagues are reluctant or feel unequipped to teach reading, we can at least find ways to get their students reading in their classes, starting by finding them content appropriate books.

For the NCTE workshop, my main objective was to help participants strategize how to integrate YA into other disciplines to enhance content learning. I expected that participants would leave with a list of book titles selected for specific content areas, along with rationales for spreading these and other books throughout the curriculum. I first asked them in groups to brainstorm ten titles and potential content areas. From each group, we generated a list of ten books, then started to build the rationale for three of them. We discussed how one suggested book in particular, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, would make a solid centerpiece to a cross-disciplinary unit (more on this novel below).

### Small Group Selections

In groups, participants brainstormed titles and targeted content areas. Several picture books were suggested for inclusion into the science curriculum, including *Salmon Creek* by Annette Lebox and Karen Reczuch, which could introduce a unit studying the lifecycle of salmon. Similarly, *A Log's Life* by Wendy Pfeffer and Robin Brickman could inform a unit learning about the lifecycle

of an oak tree, how the fallen tree provides food and shelter to porcupines, ants, mushrooms, salamanders, and many other creatures, until it composts into a mound of rich earth. Because the cognitive demand for comprehension is low for these picture books, students will gain basic understanding of the concepts on which to pin more complex material they encounter in textbooks.

A host of novels were

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discussed that would make historical events more relatable. Karen Cushman's *Catherine Called Birdy* would enrich the study of Medieval English history, particularly classes considering the roles of women. David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* would supplement the study of the long-term effects of Japanese-American internment on the families and the communities from which these citizens were removed. In tandem with *Farewell to Manzanar* by James Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Guterson's novel would make an indelible impression on students of the plight of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Showing students that history is a living process, Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle of the Ninth* lifts Roman history in Britain off the textbook page, giving readers a sense of the lifestyle of both the Roman army and the people of Britain. A line on a map now, Hadrian's Wall will come alive. Kate Seredy's *The White Stag* explodes the one-dimensional view we have of the migration of the Huns in post-

Roman Asia and Europe. Attila, synonymous with the worst monsters of history, is a more complex character than historical surveys depict him. Lastly, *In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer*, a memoir by Irene Opdyke, details how Opdyke as a young woman risked her life in Poland to aid Jews in the ghetto by passing along vital information about resistance movements, by smuggling in food, and by ultimately helping them escape.

Participants suggested that four graphic novels—*Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, *Louis Riel* by Chester Brown, and *Pyongyang* by Guy Delisle—would make historical and cultural events in distant countries concrete for teenage readers. *Maus* retells the experience of Spiegelman's father in Auschwitz and his lifelong struggle with that experience, especially as it affected his relationship with his son. *Persepolis* recounts the author's childhood in Iran at the time of the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s, providing insight into Iran's government today. *Louis Riel* documents Riel's struggle in the mid-1800s with the Canadian government on behalf of the Metis community, a struggle many minority groups continue to experience today throughout the world. *Pyongyang* covers Delisle's two month journey in North Korea, a country we fear but about which we know almost nothing. All four books make these remote places and events intensely present, broadening students' understanding

of these and other cultures.

For expanding knowledge of current events, Ishmael Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, takes readers to Sierra Leone where they will experience the chaos of a civil war, the horror of children killing children, yet re-emerging whole with the aid of compassionate individuals. Elizabeth Laird's *The Garbage King* will give younger readers an inside look at Ethiopia, the story following two boys, poor, uneducated Mamo and wealthy Dani, both struggling at school as they tumble into adolescence and into the streets of Addis Ababa, the capital city. Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* and *Parvanna's Journey* will take readers into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan where a young girl disguises herself as a boy to take care of her siblings and to search for her missing mother in Kabul.

Several books were discussed that would enrich a psychology class. K. L. Denman's *Me Myself and Ike* is about two boys who set off on a psychological and physical journey to sacrifice themselves for future generations, becoming more and more alienated from their families and community. *Hard Love* by Ellen Wittlinger explores the ever-increasing complexity of teenage relationships. In this novel, John, who claims he is "immune to emotion," meets Marisol a vivacious lesbian 'zine' writer. Readers will participate in the characters' growing sense of sexuality, of identity, and what both mean in a relationship, offering insight into the psychology of adolescents. Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle: A Memoir* is a memoir about her childhood, sharing her memories of her father and mother

whom many readers argue are mentally ill. Walls tells how her parents refused to conform to conventional ideas of parental responsibility, forcing their children to meet their most basic needs, such as food and shelter. All three books could serve as case studies for the exploration of a range of psychological issues.

For government, ethics, and law classes, participants proposed several futuristic novels to stimulate discussions about moral behavior. *Feed* by M. T. Anderson portrays a world in which computer chips have been implanted in people's brains, everyone virtually always on-line. This novel would fit into classes exploring social justice, particularly issues of pervasive commercialism. *V for Vendetta* is the story of one man's vengeance against a government that conducted medical experiments on him and others. In an attempt to liberate the populace, V attacks the symbols of authority, the Houses of Parliament, The Old Bailey, and the government-run television station. This graphic novel raises the question of whether violence is ever justified. *The Last Book in the Universe* unfolds in a world still reeling two hundred years after a catastrophic earthquake spewed poisonous gases into the atmosphere. With one exception, Eden, survivors live hand-to-mouth in communities called "latches." Spaz, the main character, finds out that Eden is a utopian community constructed by those previously in power who have sealed themselves off from contact with the rest of the world. With Ryter, an older man writing the last book, a document preserving as much literature and history as possible, Spaz discovers the gaping disparity in their world, wondering if it is ever ethical to

withhold scientific advances from the general population. In *The Giver*, citizens live out their lives in a strictly controlled society that shields them from any emotional and physical discomfort, including painful memories. It is the task of the Receiver to carry these memories so they won't be released into the world—no one knows what would happen—while protecting the citizens from them. One of the

many questions this novel raises is how much individual freedom would one give up for personal safety?

### **Recommended for Cross-Disciplinary Study**

The book we focused on for cross-disciplinary study was Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. The novel portrays the life of Kathy H. from childhood in an experimental boarding school to her adulthood. Set in a futuristic Britain, Kathy and her classmates have been cloned to become organ donors, though as an adult Kathy has another role working as a "carer," someone who supports organ donors as they are processed for transplants, a process that eventually kills them.

Organized in three sections, the novel details the lives of Kathy,

Ruth, and Tommy. The first part takes place at the boarding school, Hailsham, where the children are raised and programmed to fulfill their duty as organ donors. Though Hailsham is not a conventional boarding school, many of students of Hailsham are typical school bullies. For mutual support, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, establish a friendship, Kathy often serving selflessly as the mediator in the group, especially between Tommy, a loner, and Ruth, an outspoken extrovert.

The second part follows the now young adult characters as they move to the residences where they begin contact with the world outside the school. Relatively independent, all three characters explore relationships with the opposite sex. Ruth and Tommy, however, maintain a steady relationship while Kathy avoids any such emotional commitments.

In the last section, Tommy and Ruth become organ donors. As carer, Kathy comforts Ruth through the process. Before her death, Ruth urges Kathy and Tommy to pursue a relationship with one another. Ruth also insists they defer their organ donations, a possibility rumored among clones. Finding this is not possible, Tommy and Kathy learn that Hailsham was an experiment to improve the conditions for clones and an attempt to alter the attitudes of society, which views clones simply as non-human sources of organs. After Tommy dies, Kathy resigns herself to her own fate as a donor and her eventual “completion.”

Workshop participants believed that this dystopian novel could be the rich centerpiece of a cross-disciplinary unit. Among the many classroom applications, in

science students could study cloning and its implications. A psychology class could explore the psychological effects of living life as an organ donor, of being treated as a non-human. In an ethics class, students could debate the moral values of breeding and raising humans to be harvested for organs. In a math class, students could calculate the costs and savings of raising clones for organ transplants. A social studies class could connect this futuristic culture with cultures past and present in which some groups of humans were not afforded the same basic rights as others.

### Call for Action

I challenge you to choose one of these books—or another book that you know would enhance the curriculum of other disciplines—and talk with a colleague about how they could utilize this book to benefit of their students. If money is one reason you and/or your colleagues might balk at this idea, remember that such a project does not have to entail a large outlay of money to buy books for every student. A novel could be included in the curriculum solely as a read-aloud, a book read by the teacher at the beginning of class during a relevant unit of study (Richardson, 2000). The only curriculum materials needed would be the willingness to ask questions and enter into dialogue with students about issues raised in the novels. Or one could find four or five copies of thematically related novels and set-up literature circles to supplement the curriculum. For example, to explore a range of issues that loom on the horizon for our students, *Never Let Me Go*, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult, and

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood could make up a provocative literature circles unit for upper high school grades across many disciplines. At the very least, engage in vigorous discussions with your colleagues at every chance you get about how we all need to be literacy teachers. If our students are engaged in reading in school, perhaps they will be more likely to read outside of school. The challenging world our students will graduate into demands that we all contribute to building their lifelong reading skills. 🌱

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