Reimagining Literary Studies: Thematic Approaches to Course Design

SARAH MILLER (SHE/HER)

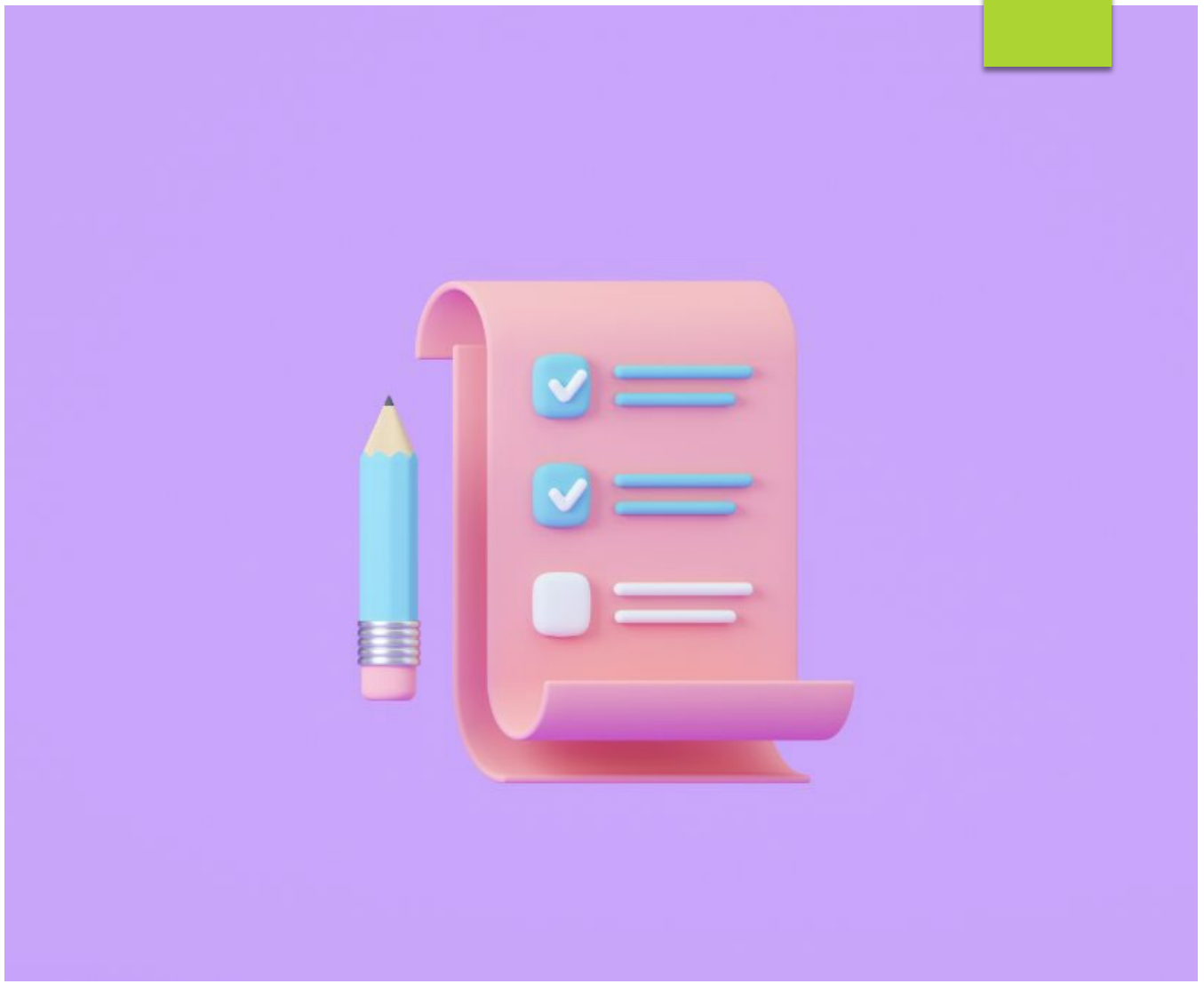
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Territory Acknowledgement

- Burnaby is located on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Kwikwetlem Peoples
- Surrey is situated on the unceded traditional and ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically including the Katzie, Kwantlen, and Semiahmoo First Nations, alongside other Coast Salish peoples, like the Kwikwetlem, Tsawwassen, and Qayqayt

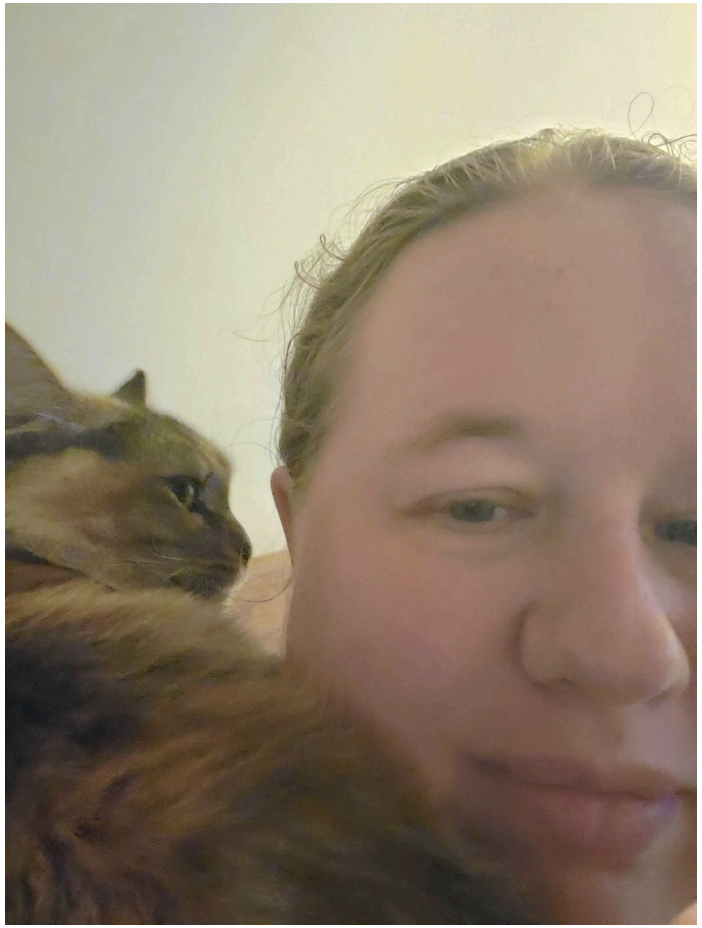
Shape of the Morning

- About Me
- My Story with "Theme-Based English Course Design" (Case Studies)
- Break-Out Groups



About Me

- Teacher (ELA, Social Studies, Careers) for 11 years.
  - Lach Klan School (Kitkatla, BC), 2016-2019
  - Khalsa Secondary (Surrey, BC), 2019-2023
  - Johnston Heights Secondary (Surrey, BC), 2023-2026
  - Guildford Park Secondary (Surrey, BC), Sept 2026-present
- BA: English, University of Victoria
- BEd: Secondary English Education, UBC
- MEd: Social Studies Education (CHiP: Curriculum, Historical Inquiry, and Pedagogy), UBC



My Story with "Theme-Based English" Course Design

- **English Studies 12/Social Justice 12**
  - An interdisciplinary theme that connects literary study with social issues and critical inquiry.
- **English First Peoples**
  - A curriculum-defined course in which First Peoples texts and perspectives are central, with thematic connections developed without flattening cultural distinctions.
- **Sports Lit 11**
  - A student-interest-based theme that provides a framework for studying literature across genres, forms, and contexts.



LITERARY STUDIES 11 (4 credits)

Description

Literary Studies 11 allows students to delve deeply into literature. Students can explore specific themes, periods, authors, or areas of the world through literary works (fiction and non-fiction) in a variety of media. Giving students the choice of a range of literary topics allows them to follow their passion and at the same time:

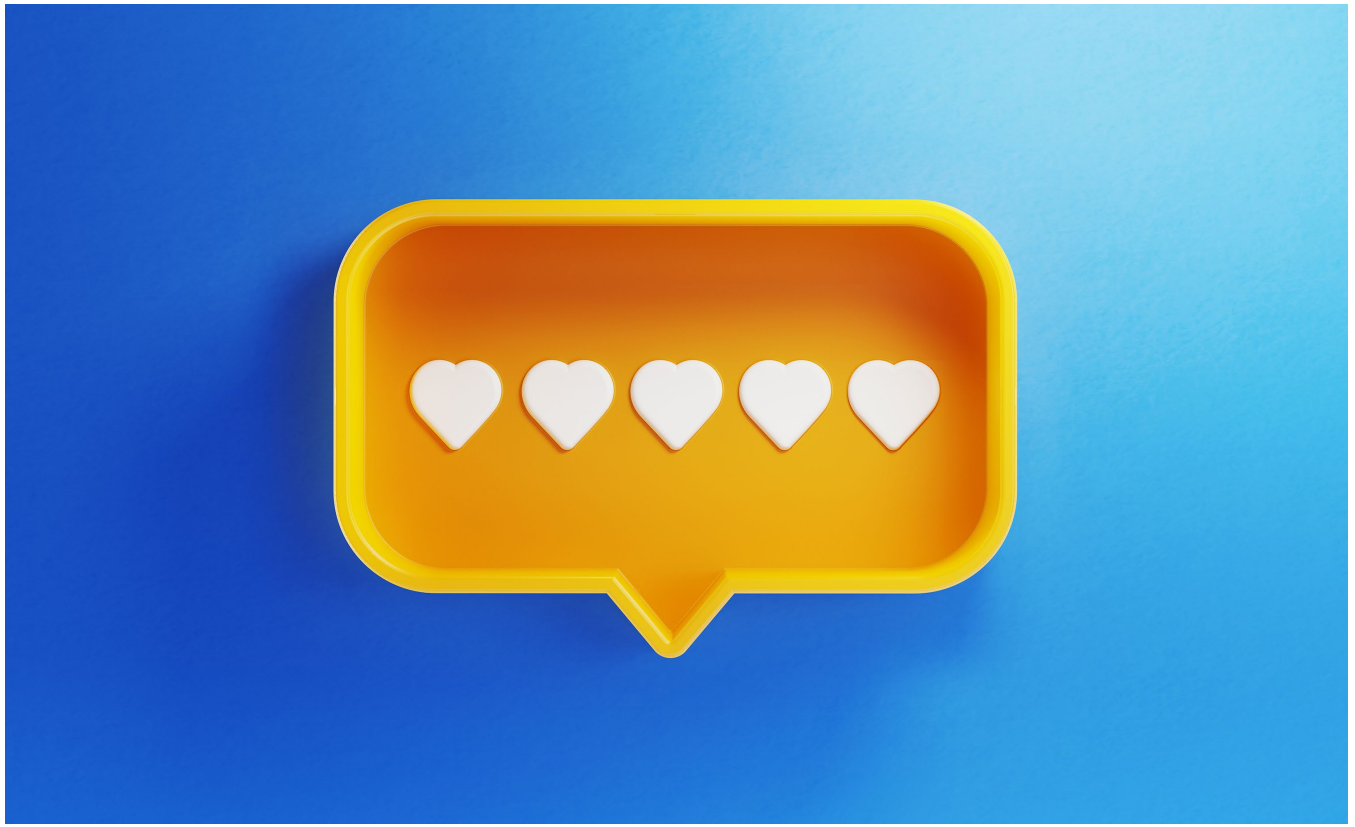
- increase their literacy skills through close reading of appropriately challenging texts
- enhance their development of the English Language Arts curricular competencies, both expressive and receptive
- expand their development as educated global citizens
- develop balance and broaden their understanding of themselves and the world
- further develop higher-level thinking and learning skills

The following are possible areas of focus in Literary Studies 11:

- canonical literature by era (Middle Ages, Renaissance, Restoration, Romantic, Victorian, 20th century)
- genre-specific studies (poetry, short stories, novels, drama, graphic novels, children's literature)
- world literature
- diasporic literature
- feminist literature
- Canadian literature
- First Peoples texts
- specific author studies
- specific topic, theme, or inquiry
- literature by era (Middle Ages, Renaissance, Restoration, Romantic, Victorian, 20th century)

Turn and Talk: How Does Your School Do "Lit Studies"?

- How does your school approach "Literary Studies 11"?
- Are thematic choices primarily a matter of "individual teacher choice," or do students have opportunities to select from distinct, them-based course offerings?
- What might be gained—and what challenges may arise—if thematic course design became a department-wide approach?



Guiding Principles/Questions for Theme-Based ELA Courses

Component	Guiding Question
Course Concept	What is the central theme or inquiry?
Text Selection	How does the theme help determine which texts belong in the course?
Reading List	What range of genres, voices, perspectives, and formats can be included?
Assessment	How does the theme shape assessment?
Student Experience	What makes this course distinct from other ELA 11/12 options?

English Studies 12/Social Justice 12

- Designed/Implemented at Lach Klan School in Kitkatla, BC.
- Addressed a need that many of our Grade 12s were "below level" and would benefit from a "linear/humanities based" approach to English/Social Studies
- Limited/Non-Existent "Book Budget" (had to use what we had).

- Sample Units of Study/Concepts:
  - *Merchant of Venice*
  - *To Kill a Mockingbird*
  - Intersectionality Novel Study*
  - Social Justice in Poetry
  - Critical Theories/Lenses in Literature
    - Race Theory
    - Feminist Theory
    - Queer Theory
    - Disability Theory

English Studies 12 "Lit Circle/Thematic Reading List"

List 1	List 2	List 3	List 4	List 5
The Outside Circle, by Patti LaBoucane-Benson *Long Way Down*, by Jason Reynolds *In Real Life*, by Cory Doctorow and Jen Wang* *The Crossover*, by Kwame Alexander	*Friday Night Lights*, by H.G. Bissinger* *Brother*, by David Chariandy *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa *The Jade Peony*, by Wayson Choy	*Medicine Walk*, by Richard Wagamese *Empire of Wild*, by Charie Dimaline* *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, by Waubeshig Rice *Chasing Painted Horses*, by Drew Hayden Taylor*	*Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson *If I Was Your Girl*, by Meredith Russo *Thirteen Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, by Benjamin Alire Sáenz	*The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger *1984*, by George Orwell *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens* *Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde

* = not available on Surrey Schools LRS (Talk to Teacher Librarian)

- Read **three-four different novels** from **three different "lists"** by the end of the semester.
- Engage in two "book talks" and complete a "comprehension assignment" (in-class) for each book.
- At the end of the semester, stage a scene between two-three different characters from two-three different novels that you have read (including your "Lit Circle Novels" and the "Class Novel").



English First Peoples

- **Themes as connections**
- Recurring ideas that invite comparison, interpretation, and inquiry across texts.
- Possible thematic threads
- • Land, place, and belonging
- • Identity, language, and cultural continuity
- • Colonialism, resistance, and resurgence
- • Kinship, community, and responsibility
- • Storytelling, memory, and knowledge

- **Texts as distinct voices**
- Each text is grounded in particular people, Nations, territories, relationships, and contexts.
- Questions that complicate comparison
- • Whose voice and knowledge are centred?
- • How does Nation-specific context shape meaning?
- • Where do perspectives differ or challenge one another?
- • What must we understand about context before comparing?



Sports Lit 11

- Khalsa Secondary
- Gave Grade 10 students a survey of "Literary Studies 11 Themes" to choose from.
  - Top 3 were given to students as "Literary Studies 11" course selection options (along with other ELA 11 options)
  - 1. Sports Lit 11
  - 2. Heroes and Villains in Literature 11
  - 3. War Lit 11
  - 4. Women's Lit 11

- Sample Units of Study:
  - Sports Poetry ("March Madness")
  - Sports Novels "Lit Circles."
  - Sports Journalism
  - Class Novel Study/Indigenous Text: *Firekeeper's Daughter*

Sports Lit 11 Reading List

The Final Four, by Paul Volponi *

The Crossover, by Kwame Alexander

Booked, by Kwame Alexander

Rebound, by Kwame Alexander

Firekeeper's Daughter, by Angeline Boulley

A Quality of Light, by Richard Wagamese *

Indian Horse, by Richard Wagamese

The Knockout, by Sajni Patel*

Furia, by Yamile Saied Méndez*

Into Thin Air, by John Krakauer

Friday Night Lights, by Buzz Bissinger*

* = not on Surrey Schools LRS (talk to Teacher Librarian)



Breakout Groups:

- **The challenge**
- In small groups, develop a preliminary concept for a theme-based Literary Studies 11/12 course using texts already available in your school bookroom, library, or departmental resources.
- The goal isn't to design an entire course. It's to test whether a compelling theme could support a coherent, rigorous, and feasible English course.

Step 1: Find the Theme (5 min)

- Start with a theme, question, interest, or area of inquiry that could sustain a course.

- Possible Ideas
  - Identity, belonging, and community
  - Sports, competition, and achievement
  - Gender, power, and representation
  - Dystopias, technology, and the future
  - Migration, displacement, and home
  - Justice, resistance, and social change
  - Horror, fear, and the monstrous
  - Place, environment, and human relationships

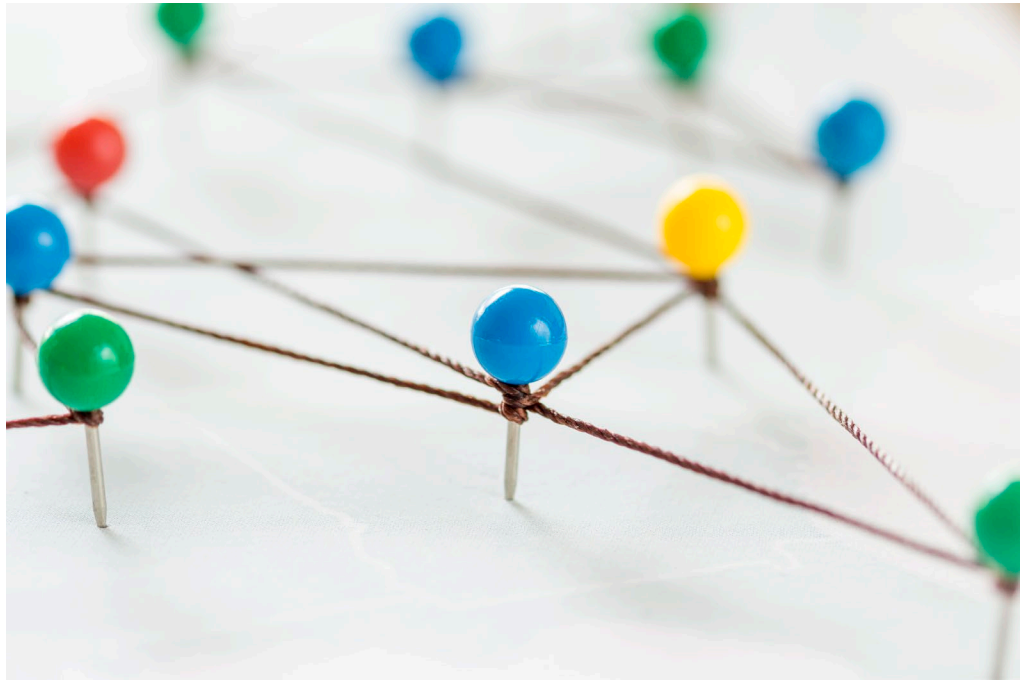
Step 2: Go "Shopping" in your Bookroom/Library (8 min)

- Identify 3–5 texts that could anchor the course. Think beyond novels: short stories, poetry, graphic novels, plays/films, memoirs, essays, spoken word, and other literary or multimodal texts can all contribute.
  - Include at least one Indigenous-Focused text
- For each text, consider what it adds to the course and how it connects to the theme.



Step 3: Test the Concept (5 min)

- Discuss whether the texts form a coherent course rather than just a themed reading list.
  - What big question could connect these texts?
  - What could students investigate, compare, or debate?
  - Whose perspectives are represented, and whose might be missing?
  - How could the course support the curricular demands of Literary Studies 11 or 12?



Step 4: Pitch Your Course (2-5 min)

- Prepare a one-minute/one-"PowerPoint Slide" pitch that includes the course title, its central inquiry, a few anchor texts, and why students might choose it.



Food for Thought

- **Curriculum and Rigor**
  - How do we ensure that a compelling theme still supports the reading, writing, literary analysis, and critical thinking expected in Literary Studies 11/12?
- **Student Choice and Access**
  - Which students might be drawn to this course?
  - How could we make it accessible and intellectually challenging for students with different reading abilities, interests, and backgrounds?
- **Existing Resources**
  - What could we build using texts we already have in our "book rooms"?
  - What gaps could be addressed through interdepartmental sharing, public libraries, digital texts, or a small investment in new resources?
- **Departmental Implementation**
  - Could this work as an individual teacher's course, a shared departmental offering, or one of several distinct course-selection options?
  - What scheduling, enrolment, staffing, and collaboration challenges would need to be addressed?

Closing Question

- What would it take to move from individual teachers designing thematic units to departments intentionally offering students different thematic pathways through Literary Studies?

