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CHAPTER 14

Coding and Connecting Complex Literature

By J. Gregory McVerry and W. Ian O'Byrne

Fallacies spread like wildfire. These misconceptions, such as the role of literature in the Common Core State Standards, roar through popular culture, littering the landscape with charred half-truths. The CCSS, while calling for a greater balance of informational text, in no way bans or limits the role of literature in the English language arts classroom. In fact, by casting a greater role on disciplinary literacies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) the CCSS may actually liberate ELA teachers from the shackles of colleagues claiming all writing and reading instruction belongs in the ELA classroom.

The CCSS call for an increase in the complexity of literary texts read in the classroom. In fact, the anchor standards focus on the ideas of using evidence to validate inferences, analyze themes and characters, compare modalities, and evaluate an author's choice of words and text structure. This approach doesn't require shifts in instruction but rather recognition of better practices. In order to comprehend complex literature, students must focus on text-based talk and text-based analysis (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). They must also extend meaning by transforming or creating their own literary responses (Smagorinsky, 2008). It is through responses during and after reading that students will truly comprehend complex literary texts.

Current trends in education, such as close reading, place meaning within texts rather than in the connections readers make to the text. In fact, David Coleman architect of the CCSS English language arts standards defined *close reading* as paying attention to "what lies within the four corners of the text." This has led to a critical

view of literature responses that emphasize background knowledge, personal experiences, and biases. Instead, the textbook publisher guidelines, designed for Common Core alignment, stress responses that place all meaning within the text (Pearson, 2013).

However, other researchers place meaning outside the text (Beach, 2012). Scholars may define *comprehension* as a transaction with the reader (Rosenblatt, 1985). They may place meaning within society at large (Bakhtin, 1981). In general, these perspectives view meaning-making and literacy as a socially constructed act. Literature responses, it is argued, while grounded in the text, cannot be separated from our lives.

In today's networked world of digital tools, teachers need not choose one specific philosophy (Labbo & Reinking, 1999). Instead they should remix the ideas of others. Yes, interpretations of texts are unlimited, but authors do use text structure and word choices to constrain meaning the reader will make (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Paying attention to text matters. At the same time, texts exist within larger and competing social narratives (Kirkland, 2013). Thus, recognizing context also matters.

Given the influence of digital text and tools, it is hard to argue that meaning, in regard to complex literature, could be found solely in the text or even as a transaction between the reader, the text, and the activity. Instead, meaning-making is distributed across multiple networks and texts. Students, when reading complex literature, may download the book to an ereader, watch *Thug Notes* summaries on YouTube (Wisecrack, n.d.), post fan fiction to writing communities, and read literature response blogs. This multimodal metamorphosis allows teachers to use digital texts and tools to teach students how to code texts through annotation and connect with other readers through discussions.

Purposeful Analysis of Text

Text annotation is as old as text itself, yet too many students highlight or color words without analytical reasoning. We need to encourage readers to engage in purposeful coding of texts, which involves creating an evolving mark-up system to support understanding. The act of annotation through purposeful coding requires active and analytical reading. Thus, there is no text annotation without purpose. Annotating without purpose is highlighting.

Class and small-group discussions also help students recognize key ideas and details, determine craft and structure, and analyze the ideas in a text. Teachers can use digital text and tools to encourage specific talking strategies (Resnick, Salmon, Zeitz, Wathen, & Holowchak, 1993) that support comprehension of complex literature.

Another common misconception surrounding literature is that the CCSS do not call for specific literature and point to appendix B as a recommended list. Yet if teachers read the anchor standards for literature more closely, they will see specific calls to read such texts as Shakespeare and Early American literature. There are several ways that technology can help teachers access such texts. For example, if educators visit Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org), they will find everything from Shakespeare's plays to Mark Twain's American classics. More importantly, these tales are available as pdfs, epub files, and html files. This flexibility allows teachers to build in opportunities for both purposeful coding and discourse involving complex literature.

How Do I Do It?

Many digital texts and tools marry text-based analysis or text-based talk. Teachers can use social annotation sites to support reading of complex literature. There are options that will match the needs of any district. For a web-based platform, educators can use Lit Genius (lit.genius.com). This website allow you to annotate texts in public or privately as a class. Students can add images, videos, and texts to their annotations. They can then discuss the annotations of the texts left by peers. Students are awarded IQ points as they interact.

If your students use iPads, there is an iOS app Subtext. As a reading application, Subtext allows students to annotate and discuss texts while teachers quickly track progress. Teachers can assign books to students or to groups. Teachers can also build in questions and activities. Finally you track progress by being able to quickly sort and search student annotations and discussions.

On Chrome-based computers, or on the Chrome browser, you can use Hypothesis (https://hypothes.is). A Firefox extension is coming soon. This tool allows you to click on an extension and annotate any web-based file. Hypothesis is a non-profit organization committed to open web standards.

Classroom Example

During the winter of 2014, students from across the globe took part in the #Walkmyworld project. The ten-week "class" had students share images to document their world. They then read and responded to the poetry of Robert Hass. Finally they wrote poetry about their worlds. As part of the project, participants (which included students from kindergarten to graduate school) annotated Hass's work on Lit Genius (http://genius.com/2808124/Robert-hass-the-seventh-night). These annotations included the line-by-line analysis called for in the instructional shifts of the Common Core. Yet they also included maps and videos that could help

build background knowledge. The annotations were then commented on as students discussed the text.

Your Turn

While all the options discussed share many affordances I turn now to Subtext to illustrate both the power and ease of social annotation. When you install Subtext, you have to sign in using a Google or Edmodo account. From there add a new book, download the user guide, or create a class of students. Creating a class of students results in a private group and allows a teacher to track progress. While Subtext has the capability to organize their premium content by grade-level bands using the ATOS readability scale, we will focus on complex literature.

The first step is to save an epub file in the open domain and then read the file using Subtext. On your computer or tablet, go to Project Gutenberg. Next, search for a text that would fit the anchor standards, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Then save the file to Google Drive or Dropbox. Once you are on a device that has the Subtext app available, open Google Drive or Dropbox, and choose the file to open in Subtext. Once you open a book in Subtext, it will change the pedagogical practices of reading in your classroom forever. Students can select any text, and the app will give them the option to highlight, discuss, google, or copy the text.

Highlighting allows the reader to tag a text. The reader can make strategic decisions about the key details or author's craft. For example, say a classroom was working on characterization. Students could read parts of the story that allow them to make inferences about Huck. They could then highlight the passages and add a summary of why that selection reveals elements of Huck's character. The highlight will appear in the chosen color, and a paper clip will be next to the text. Students can also choose to share and discuss their highlights. This approach transforms digital texts and tools into an efficient method for tracking growth of understanding. Imagine giving students a piece to annotate at different points in the year. If you examine the tags students assign to highlights and the section of texts they choose to annotate, you will gain insight into the skills the Common Core State Standards require.

Subtext also embeds text-based discussion directly into the books students read. The discussion features are very rich. The discussion is directly connected to an element within the text. As a reader or teacher, you can decide who can see the comment, mark the "spoiler alert" button, and decide who can reply.

Embedding assessments and text-dependent questions is a very powerful tool; disembodied literary analyses are unnecessary. No good reader says, "That was a great book, so now I should sit down and answer some multiple-choice questions." Disconnecting our assessments from the texts has always made little sense. It isn't a

discipline-specific practice readers in the field use. A literary critic would not write a book review without turning the pages of the book. Being able to include our checks for understandings within the text helps model good practice.

Connecting your students is the final element that makes social annotation tools such as Subtext a powerful tool to support the reading of complex literature. Books, articles, and discussions can then be shared within and across groups of students. Teachers can assign texts to the entire class or to literature circle groups. Educators can also create groups for a specific unit. If you are doing a genre study, different groups could be made for different titles. Or perhaps your district has a common reading across grade levels. Imagine the power of a school- or districtwide discussion.

Conclusion

Teachers do not have to tremble at the thought of tackling the increased complexity in literature the Common Core State Standards requires. In fact, using open educational resources and powerful apps such as Subtext, teachers can increase the efficacy and efficiency of their better pedagogical practices. We know that text-based analysis and discussions increase students' abilities to make meaning with complex literature. Utilizing digital texts and tools allows educators to bring these practices together in a way that supports learners in a digital environment.