



April 20, 2012

Teach the Books, Touch the Heart

By CLAIRE NEEDELL HOLLANDER

FRANZ KAFKA wrote that “a book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.” I once shared this quotation with a class of seventh graders, and it didn’t seem to require any explanation.

We’d just finished John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men.” When we read the end together out loud in class, my toughest boy, a star basketball player, wept a little, and so did I. “Are you crying?” one girl asked, as she crept out of her chair to get a closer look. “I am,” I told her, “and the funny thing is I’ve read it many times.”

But they understood. When George shoots Lennie, the tragedy is that we realize it was always going to happen. In my 14 years of teaching in a New York City public middle school, I’ve taught kids with incarcerated parents, abusive parents, neglectful parents; kids who are parents themselves; kids who are homeless or who live in crowded apartments in violent neighborhoods; kids who grew up in developing countries. They understand, more than I ever will, the novel’s terrible logic — the giving way of dreams to fate.

For the last seven years, I have worked as a reading enrichment teacher, reading classic works of literature with small groups of students from grades six to eight. I originally proposed this idea to my principal after learning that a former stellar student of mine had transferred out of a selective high school — one that often attracts the literary-minded offspring of Manhattan’s elite — into a less competitive setting. The daughter of immigrants, with a father in jail, she perhaps felt uncomfortable with her new classmates. I thought additional “cultural capital” could help students like her fare better in high school, where they would inevitably encounter, perhaps for the first time, peers who came from homes lined with bookshelves, whose parents had earned not G.E.D.’s but Ph.D.’s.

Along with “Of Mice and Men,” my groups read: “Sounder,” “The Red Pony,” “A Raisin in the Sun,” “Lord of the Flies,” “The Catcher in the Rye,” “Romeo and Juliet” and “Macbeth.” The students didn’t always read from the expected perspective. Holden Caulfield was a punk, unfairly dismissive of parents who had given him every advantage. About “The Red Pony,” one student said, “it’s about

being a dude, it's about dudeness." I had never before seen the parallels between Scarface and Macbeth, nor had I heard Lady Macbeth's soliloquies read as raps, but both made sense; the interpretations were playful, but serious. Once introduced to Steinbeck's writing, one boy went on to read "The Grapes of Wrath" and told me repeatedly how amazing it was that "all these people hate each other, and they're all white." His historical perspective was broadening, his sense of his own country deepening. Year after year, ex-students visited and told me how prepared they had felt in their freshman year as a result of the classes.

And yet I do not know how to measure those results. As student test scores have become the dominant means of evaluating schools, I have been asked to calculate my reading enrichment program's impact on those scores. I found that some students made gains of over 100 points on the statewide English Language Arts test, while other students in the same group had flat or negative results. In other words, my students' test scores did not reliably indicate that reading classic literature added value.

Until recently, given the students' enthusiasm for the reading groups, I was able to play down that data. But last year, for the first time since I can remember, our test scores declined in relation to comparable schools in the city. Because I play a leadership role in the English department, I felt increased pressure to bring this year's scores up. All the teachers are increasing their number of test-preparation sessions and practice tests, so I have done the same, cutting two of my three classic book groups and replacing them with a test-preparation tutorial program. Only the highest-performing eighth graders were able to keep taking the reading classes.

Since beginning this new program in September, I have answered over 600 multiple-choice questions. In doing so, I encountered exactly one piece of literature: Frost's "Road Not Taken." The rest of the reading-comprehension materials included passages from watered-down news articles or biographies, bastardized novels, memos or brochures — passages chosen not for emotional punch but for textual complexity.

I MAY not be able to prove that my literature class makes a difference in my students' test results, but there is a positive correlation between how much time students spend reading and higher scores. The problem is that low-income students, who begin school with a less-developed vocabulary and are less able to comprehend complex sentences than their more privileged peers, are also less likely to read at home. Many will read only during class time, with a teacher supporting their effort. But those are the same students who are more likely to lose out on literary reading in class in favor of extra test prep. By "using data to inform instruction," as the Department of Education insists we do, we are sorting lower-achieving students into classes that provide less

cultural capital than their already more successful peers receive in their more literary classes and depriving students who viscerally understand the violence and despair in Steinbeck's novels of the opportunity to read them.

It is ironic, then, that English Language Arts exams are designed for "cultural neutrality." This is supposed to give students a level playing field on the exams, but what it does is bleed our English classes dry. We are trying to teach students to read increasingly complex texts, but they are complex only on the sentence level — not because the ideas they present are complex, not because they are symbolic, allusive or ambiguous. These are literary qualities, and they are more or less absent from testing materials.

Of course no teacher disputes the necessity of being able to read for information. But if literature has no place in these tests, and if preparation for the tests becomes the sole goal of education, then the reading of literature will go out of fashion in our schools. I don't have any illusions that adding literary passages to multiple-choice tests would instill a love of reading among students by itself. But it would keep those books on the syllabus, in the classrooms and in the hands of young readers — which is what really matters.

Better yet, we should abandon altogether the multiple-choice tests, which are in vogue not because they are an effective tool for judging teachers or students but because they are an efficient means of producing data. Instead, we should move toward extensive written exams, in which students could grapple with literary passages and books they have read in class, along with assessments of students' reports and projects from throughout the year. This kind of system would be less objective and probably more time-consuming for administrators, but it would also free teachers from endless test preparation and let students focus on real learning.

We cannot enrich the minds of our students by testing them on texts that purposely ignore their hearts. By doing so, we are withholding from our neediest students any reason to read at all. We are teaching them that words do not dazzle but confound. We may succeed in raising test scores by relying on these methods, but we will fail to teach them that reading can be transformative and that it belongs to them.

An English teacher at a public middle school in Manhattan.

