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In our editorial from the January 2013 issue of *English Education*, we provided a chart of instructional strategies drawn from a range of literacy researchers (e.g., Hillocks, Raphael, Freebody & Luke). Our purpose in doing so was to reaffirm that the types of demands called for in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reading standards are practices that we are already doing—and doing well. In this issue, particularly in respect to Mary Juzwik’s Extending the Conversation article, “The Ethics of Teaching Disturbing Pasts: Reader Response, Historical Contextualization, and Rhetorical (Con)Textualization of Holocaust Texts in English,” we decided to pay some attention to issues related to text selection. Prompted in part by states’ adoption of the CCSS, most inservice and preservice teachers are moving through a process of curriculum review that requires a close examination of text selection policies and of specific texts. Those of us who are English teacher educators would, similarly, be well advised to consider how we instruct our students to think about the texts they plan to teach in English language arts classrooms.

There are a host of external and internal forces that affect what teachers teach and why. Externally, teachers are guided (or dictated) by designated reading lists and adopted textbooks. And, these lists rarely change. As research shows (e.g., Applebee, 1989, 1996; Scherff, 2004; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006), high school students have been reading the same canonical titles for decades.

Another important—and often unstated—factor that affects text selection is what teachers are familiar with, have knowledge about, and feel comfortable teaching. This set of texts can be traced directly to the kinds of courses that preservice teachers take in either their undergraduate or graduate English/English education programs and to the texts that they
have studied in junior high and high school English classes. To ensure that future teachers’ knowledge of texts is deep and wide, including not only those from the literary canon but also relevant young adult literature, multicultural texts, contemporary fiction and nonfiction, media and film, and other digital texts, English educators must work directly with colleagues in other departments and colleges who engage in English and or literary studies work.

Teachers may also face pressure to select certain texts based on local norms and culture. What can be taught in one city may be faced with challenges in another. Teachers are also guided by internal forces—what they feel most knowledgeable about in terms of genre, time period, and/or authorship and their own preferences, which are influenced by their cultural and religious backgrounds. Marcelle Haddix and Detra Price-Dennis address such issues in their article (this issue), “Urban Fiction and Multicultural Literature as Transformative Tools for Preparing English Teachers for Diverse Classrooms,” finding that preservice teachers resisted young adult urban fiction, stating that “they could not relate to the themes of urban young adult fiction. This challenged their ability to make connections with characters, settings, and conflicts” (pp. 259–260).

In a discussion of the ethical dilemmas swirling around the teaching of Holocaust texts such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank, 1995), *Night* (Wiesel, 1982) or *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1994), Juzwik suggests that those responsible for text selection should consider key historical issues, such as what representations of the past are omitted in selected texts, what perspectives are either foregrounded or effaced, what level of historical detail is presented, and how persuasive the text is likely to be for students. Juzwik also points out the importance of attention to rhetorical complexity in text selection, with its potential for “tapping into collective sensibilities and beliefs” (p. 300) and for persuasion through identification and division. Attention to the connections between literary texts and historical contexts and historical texts, as well as to their potential for instruction for rhetorical complexity, can provide an important foundation or policy upon which text selection decisions can be based.

Another recently published work (Rush, Ash, Saunders, Holschuh, & Ford, 2011) examined the text exemplars provided as appendices to the CCSS. This study reported a predominance of canonical texts present in the exemplars, along with a smattering of multicultural, contemporary, and/or digital texts, while acknowledging that the exemplars are, surely, only exemplars, not meant to dictate choices in text selection. These authors recommended the use of available resources—such as the CCSS, state and local standards, and the *Standards for English/Language Arts* (1996) published by National
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Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association—to develop policies for the selection of texts and for the development of curricula within which those texts will be housed. These policies should also begin with the needs of students, perhaps including data collection at the local level on students’ cultural backgrounds, skills, and interests.

Erinn Bentley’s article (this issue) on the unfamiliar genre project, a method to help English teachers learn new writing genres and teaching strategies, although not about the reading of texts, is connected to texts and text selection. In her research Bentley found that “text complexity . . . emerged as a common theme for both teachers . . . [T]his meant helping students overcome the fear of the ‘hard’ text . . . [and] entailed helping students appreciate the complexity ‘hidden’ in the novels they commonly read for pleasure” (p. 234).

Also in this issue we continue our efforts to involve a range of stakeholders in the conversation. We invited Christine Maddox Martorana, a former high school teacher and current doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University, to collaborate with us. Specifically, we asked her to read and respond to Mary Juzwik’s article, which Mary graciously allowed us to use this past summer in my (Lisa) Children’s Literature course in which Christine was enrolled.

Christine Maddox Martorana: Rhetorical Approaches to Texts: Expanding Our Definition of Rhetoric

In her article “The Ethics of Teaching Disturbing Pasts: Reader Response, Historical Contextualization, and Rhetorical (Con)Textualization of Holocaust Texts in English,” Mary Juzwik advocates a rhetorical approach to the teaching of texts with disturbing histories. According to Juzwik, a text’s controversial history should be accompanied by an instructor’s attention to ethics so as to avoid simplifying, essentializing, and/or trivializing traumatic historical experiences. She draws on her personal teaching experiences and those of fellow instructors to ground the following conclusion: “A rhetorical approach invites teachers to focus on engaging the students in studying how texts—including narratives—work persuasively to take ethical stances on persons and events of the Holocaust years” (p. 296).

As a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition, I appreciate Juzwik’s recognition of a rhetorical approach to teaching literature. However, three years ago, before I started my PhD program, I was a beginning high school English teacher, and a rhetorical approach was not in my pedagogy toolbox. I remember teaching Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”
I was a well-intentioned young teacher, and my activities surrounding this text closely resembled the reader-centered unit Juzwik describes: “I devised student-led discussions . . . and expressive writing . . . as daily activities. A cycle of small group reading and discussion, followed by group-led whole-class discussions, provided momentum for most daily activities in the unit” (p. 287).

However, just as my activities resembled Juzwik’s in form, they also did so in limitations. In attempting to provide a point of connection for my students, I unknowingly created opportunities for my students to equate King’s experiences with their own. While I was pleased my students were relating to the text, I was troubled by the disservice I knew I was doing to the historical context and King’s situation. The unease I felt was further underscored by the fact that there was only one African American student out of the 125 students I taught. This unbalanced demographic alongside the reader-centered activities I offered created a breeding ground for simplifying, essentializing, and trivializing.

Although I recognized the inadequacies of how I approached King’s text with my high school students, I was not equipped with the necessary tools to move my classroom toward more meaningful engagement. Juzwik’s article is an invaluable addition for the English teacher’s toolbox, one I wish I had the benefit of during my early years as a teacher.

With that being said, I hope to use this response to extend Juzwik’s article. She defines a rhetorical approach to teaching as one that studies “how texts—including narratives—work persuasively” (p. 296). While rhetoric does often work toward persuasion, this is not the sole function of rhetoric. As I. A. Richards (1936) explains, rhetoric is the “study of verbal understanding and misunderstanding” (p. 23). While our understanding of rhetoric must include more than the verbal, Richards’s conceptualization of rhetoric is useful because it allows us to see how rhetoric encompasses a great deal more than the act of persuasion. To assume a more thorough ethical stance when teaching texts with disturbing pasts, it is important for instructors to consider additional definitions of rhetoric beyond “how texts . . . work persuasively.”

In expanding our definition of rhetoric, perhaps it will be helpful to consider rhetoric as a noun (as opposed to Juzwik’s use of the adjective rhetorical). Positioning rhetoric as a noun allows us to see Juzwik evoking rhetoric-as-persuasion. Additional conceptions of rhetoric might include rhetoric-as-narrative, rhetoric-as-documentation, and rhetoric-as-protest. If we want to truly employ “a rhetorical approach [that encourages] grappling with some of the tensions involved in transactions with [historically disturbing] texts” (p. 286), we need to begin with a broader conception of rhetoric.
To illustrate how a wider definition of rhetoric might enhance Juzwik’s discussion of rhetorical analysis, I’ll briefly show how rhetoric-as-narrative, rhetoric-as-documentation, and rhetoric-as-protest might be incorporated into a Holocaust unit:

- **Rhetoric-as-narrative** looks at how texts use narrative constructs such as language, perspective, visuals, and dialogue to present a narrative. Students might answer questions such as, What type of reader does this narrative target? From what perspective is the narrative written, and how does this affect the overall theme/message of the narrative? Does the narrative incorporate dialogue, and what is the impact of this? Seeing rhetoric-as-narrative allows for the comparison of narrative perspectives. For example, a class might compare the first-person narrative techniques of Elie Wiesel to Anne Frank, or one or both of these narrators to Annemarie and Ellen, the young narrators in *Number the Stars*. Students can then discuss how the narrators differ in their respective positions and perspectives, using their narratives toward different ends.

- **Rhetoric-as-documentation** analyzes texts for how they document groups, cultures, and/or events. Students might answer questions such as, Who is the person/people doing the documenting? Is this text offering an outside perspective or someone with firsthand experience? Is the documentation objective or are there biases present? Does the text document mainly through words? Images? Both? What are the affordances of each? Seeing rhetoric-as-documentation provides a useful lens for comparing shifts in documentation strategies among genres. For example, a class might compare Anne Frank’s documentation of events in her diary to the documentation of events within *The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography*.

- **Rhetoric-as-protest** considers how texts function as tools of protest in favor of or against a group or action. There is a fine line between rhetoric-as-persuasion and rhetoric-as-protest. Understanding the distinction between the two hinges on a recognition of the intended audience of a text, where the text was published, and how the text was disseminated. Exploring the differences between protest and persuasion can be fruitful for students seeking to understand the purpose and significance of historical texts. In Juzwik’s unit, she might ask students to rhetorically analyze the Dr. Seuss political cartoons as a way of discussing whether the cartoons function within rhetoric-as-protest or rhetoric-as-persuasion.
Regardless of the definition of rhetoric we employ, we cannot ignore that every choice we make as instructors is ideological. As Wysocki (2007) reminds us, “We know that what and how we teach reproduce existing” ideologies (p. 285). Botelho and Rudman (2009) agree: “Discourse is inherently imbued with ideology” and ideology is “the conduit of power” (p. 110). Therefore, as the authorities within a classroom, the language we use to address students, the ways in which we present and guide activities, and the type of analyses we encourage all send messages of power to our students, communicating and reinforcing what is appropriate and valued. While some approaches are more clearly ideological than others, as Juzwik points out, even a rhetorical analysis approach is not ideology-free. Engaging students in a rhetorical comparison of texts is an excellent way of bringing in the historical context and varying voices surrounding an event. Still, we must remember that the texts we choose for this comparison communicate a message, for in choosing certain texts, we are also not choosing others. As ethical, thoughtful instructors, we must recognize the inherent ideology underpinning every pedagogical decision.

One way to account for the ideological stances we take as educators is to acknowledge the presence of ideology in the classroom. Clearly, all educators make decisions about what to include in their lessons; still, we can provide our students with a more complete list of related readings, sharing with them that there is not time to cover all possible perspectives on an issue. Additionally, instructors might consider including other texts from the time period not focused on the Holocaust as a way to present a more complete view of the ideologies surrounding the time period. This is appropriate since “texts written during the same time and place tend to have shared ideologies. Therefore, if readers know something about the cultural and historical context in which the book was written, they can make the connections to its temporal and cultural contexts” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 92).

Juzwik’s article sounds an important call to educators about the importance of teaching texts with disturbing pasts and, more importantly, of doing so ethically. We have a responsibility to consider the full impact of a text upon its intended audience. This includes how a text rhetorically works to persuade, narrate, document, and protest. As Juzwik points out, following this pedagogical approach will help our students not only appreciate the moral stances of others but also more fully understand their own positions.

References

Opening the Conversation


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