The Top Five Reasons We Love Giving Students Choice in Reading

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Kate DiCamillo says, "Reading should not be presented to a child as a chore, a duty. It should be offered as a gift"(qtd. in Kittle, 2013, p. ix).

Yet, obligatory reading was happening in our high school English classrooms. When we assigned the same book to every student to read, we turned reading (something most English teachers cherish) into a chore—and that's if the students were actually *doing* the reading!

This school year, some of our high school ELA teachers decided they wanted to do things differently for their students. After reading Penny Kittle's *Book Love,* these teachers began to believe that "Teenagers want to read—if we let them" (2013, p. 1). They decided to offer students choice in the books they read and, more importantly, time in their classes to engage in the reading.

What a transformation these teachers and students are experiencing! As our teachers reflect on the changes they are making and experiencing with their students, they have come to realize that they *love* giving students choice! Here are their top five reasons:

Choice Empowers Students

School is sometimes a frustrating place for students. Their technology-rich world is robust with opportunities for decision-making and choice, but when they enter the classroom, the opportunities for choice are much more limited. When students are routinely assigned books to read without any opportunity to act on their own judgment, many end up dreading the reading and often fail or refuse to complete it. But when we provide students with choices (even within parameters), they make their own decisions and they feel empowered and important. Empowering students to choose in these early experiences sets them up for success as lifelong readers.

Valuing Student Choices Values the Student

Book choices tell us a lot about our students. We learn about their dreams for the future, interests we have in common, and why they act the way they do in class. As we provide more opportunities for choice, we discover realities, such as high school boys enjoy reading nonfiction. They really love nonfiction because they want truthfulness and honesty; they want something real. Knowing this changes the way we see them and react to their participation in class.

Choice Leads to Real and Meaningful Conversations

When we assign reading, rarely do we have meaningful conversations about these texts with all students. Now that we offer choice, our conversations are about books students enjoy reading, and the discussions are exciting and passionate. Allowing students to choose their books also provides opportunities for them to explore conflicts and issues applicable to their lives. Often, YA novels address many topics more relatable to students than those of many canonical classics.

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Choice Helps Establish and Deepen Relationships

When students have the opportunity to talk with each other about their books, they have the opportunity to form new relationships and build a true learning community. Often students are hesitant to talk to classmates they do not know. When conversations are about books they have read and enjoyed, suddenly students are more willing to talk to others—even if they have never spoken before. Students will also recommend books to other students and share reading excitement. Take Ben and Cameron as an example. Ben is a student who just doesn't seem to get into anything the teacher recommends. He's speed-dated several titles, but nothing grabs his interest. When his teacher places the first book of the Michael Vey series in front of him, he is skeptical. Cameron, who sits directly behind Ben, chimes in: "Now THAT'S an awesome book!" Cameron tells Ben that he read it in about three days, it was so good. This happens more and more as the year continues. Reading for fun can be contagious, and it's the most enthralling thing for a reading teacher to watch spread.

Choice Leads to Independence

The teachers who have committed to changing their instruction to allow choice also provide students with time to read during class. And the students do. Teachers know that students are reading, because they watch them

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and they confer with them about their reading. Students can't fake this kind of reading—they have no idea what the teacher will want to discuss, and online analyses for their titles, when available, will not help. While this is a huge win for teachers, it's not quite enough. We want to see that our students are choosing reading independently—outside of our ELA classrooms. This is happening. Teachers in other content areas are beginning to report seeing students reading in their classes more often than before. They also have observed that students are not all reading the same text as they have seen in previous school years. Instead, students are reading all different titles more often. While we can't follow our students around to monitor their reading habits, we know, anecdotally, that many of their reading lives have been positively impacted by this shift in our instructional approach.

Bonus: Choice Changes the Reading Life of the Teacher

The high school teachers who have committed to providing students choice in their selection of books already understood both the joy that comes from reading and the importance of reading routinely. But this instructional shift has made their own reading a necessity. While it is not necessary to have read every title that our students are reading (conferring often goes better when the teacher has not read the book the student is reading), it is necessary for teachers to read as much as they can in order to help reach the diverse readers they encounter in their classrooms every day. "Reading teachers read . . . we can't teach something we don't practice" (Kittle, 158). Choice has many positive impacts on our students, and the bonus for our teachers is that they "get" to read more, too!

We are far from being experts in offering choice, in providing time for reading, and in conferring. Our experiences so far indicate that our students enjoy engaging in reading and learning this way, and we believe they deserve it, so we will continue. We will continue to provide these opportunities for our students, and we will continue to read and learn as much as we can.

References

Kittle, P. (2013). *Book love.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. ●

Join the conversation:
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ANNOUNCEMENTS

2016 CEL Convention Call for Proposals

If you'd like to be on the program for the 2016 CEL Convention in Atlanta, answer Program Chair Tracy Recine's call! The 2016 CEL Convention will be held in Atlanta, Georgia, November 20–22, with the theme of *Innovative Leadership: Navigating Changes in Literacy Education*. The Conference on English Leadership encourages interactive, participatory presentations.

Call for Emerging Leaders Fellowship Applications

The NCTE Conference on English Leadership invites participation in the **Emerging Leaders Fellowship (ELF) program for a possible sixth cohort.** The ELF program invites individuals in the initial few years of a new or revised leadership assignment at K–university levels to collaborate for leadership support and networking opportunities with a mentor from a community of highly experienced English leaders and scholars. Mentors' own work can be enriched through engagement with new ideas and school contexts.

Fellows and mentors meet during the annual CEL Convention in November and continue their work throughout the following year. Selected fellows and mentors receive complimentary registration for both the 2016 (Atlanta) and 2017 (St. Louis) CEL Conventions. Please check the NCTE/CEL website for further information, application requirements, and procedures. **Application Deadline: February 29, 2016.** Fellowships will be announced by the end of May.

NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2016

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on **Thursday, February 25, 2016.** NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues.