

# ***THE ENGLISH RECORD***



## ***Teaching English Language Arts in New York State Today***

**VOLUME 73    ISSUE 1    FALL 2025**

### **EDITORS**

Michele DeVirgilio, Ed.D  
Henry “Cody” Miller, Ph.D  
Meg Davis Roberts, Ph.D



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## Editors' Introduction: Welcome Back!

It's with great enthusiasm that we welcome back *The English Record* from a publication hiatus. The last issue of the journal was published in 2023. And while 2023 was only two years ago, so much has shifted in teaching, learning, and schools: the emergence and ensuing complications of AI, a brewing culture war that has turned English teachers and their curriculum into targets, ongoing disputes about technology's role in our lives and classrooms, and a seemingly daily shift in federal education policies meant to shrink the ambitions of public K-12 schools. Yet, with these changes also come the perpetual concerns and inquiries of teaching English language arts: What books best speak to our students? How do we balance reading, writing, speaking, and listening? Which assessments prepare students best for deeper learning while still adhering to state requirements? And more!

The questions — both eternal and ephemeral — that make our profession so dynamic, complicated, and thrilling are guiding our renewed approach to *The English Record*. We asked ELA teachers in New York state to consider the issues, innovations, and ideas that define ELA teaching in New York today as they made their submissions. And ELA teachers responded with a wealth of insight. We are excited to offer an issue with two teaching articles, two empirical research articles, and three reviews of recently released books!

Secondary ELA teachers Robert Van Auken and Karissa Sullivan demonstrate how they have crafted and implemented games-based pedagogies in their English classrooms in their article, "Getting On Board: Practical Approaches for Designing and Implementing Games-based Learning Using Analogue Tabletop Games." The authors provide an overview of what games-based learning is and how it can be leveraged in ELA classrooms. Van Auken and Sullivan then illustrate how theory translates to practice through examples from their own teaching

Next, Timothy Diamond's teaching article, "Implementing Literature Circles in the Modern Rural English Classroom," begins this issue. In this article, Diamond, a secondary ELA teacher, documents how he built and taught a literature circle unit in his rural classroom. Drawing on scholarship relating to rural ELA teaching, Diamond provides insights into modern approaches to literature circles that speak to the particulars of rural spaces.

In the first empirical research article of this issue, "A Mosaic of Hope Moments for Preservice English Language Arts Teachers," Nicole Sieben and a cohort of her teacher candidates — Nicholas Connolly, Alexandra Deliso, Sean Lynch, Joseph Mannion Jr., Julia McGarth, Dean Metacarpa, Thomas Steinert, and Philip Tepe — discuss how hope can be envisioned and enacted in secondary ELA classrooms. The team of researchers draw on their own experiences in tumultuous, hope-challenged times to reflect on practices that elicit hope. Sieben and her students argue that the very discipline of ELA is rife with hope-inciting potential that can sustain teachers and students alike.

Next, Diane E. Lang provides lessons learned in engaging in place-based learning in the article, "Oh, Now I Get It... Making Literature More Comprehensible Through Place-based Learning." Lang threads together thematic curricular connections to various places in New York state to demonstrate how place-based learning can enhance students' experiences with literature. The author argues that

place-based learning is one way teachers can address the lingering impacts of COVID lockdowns on students' abilities to build background knowledge.

Finally, we close this issue with three text reviews. ELA teacher educator Meg Davis Roberts and her students, Sara Carder, Jacquelyn Constantine, and Cecilia Dignan, review the latest edition of Deborah Appleman's classic text, *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. They consider how the newest edition grapples with the literary insights of critical race theory, which was ignored in prior installments of the book, and provide supplemental material to deepen ELA teachers' literature pedagogies. Then, high school English teacher Jake Provenzano reviews Percival Everett's award-winning novel *James*. Provenzano argues that *James* can be placed in conversation with its inspirational source, *Huck Finn*, to provide a more honest, more critical understanding of the United States. Michele Denson, a middle school teacher, rounds out our review section with a deep dive into Mary E. Styslinger's *Workshopping the Canon for Democracy and Justice*, which is a sequel to the author's popular *Workshopping the Canon* from 2017. Denson argues that the book can provide insight into teaching literature in today's turbulent socio-political landscape. Taken together, these three reviews offer readers insight into *what* texts could be taught in contemporary classrooms and *how* those titles might be taught in critical ways.

So, what does teaching ELA in New York today look like? There is not a single answer. Rather, as this issue testifies, ELA teaching in our state looks varied across geography, grades, and other socio-political contexts. The authors of this issue show that place matters — whether that place be a rural classroom or a visit to a New York historical monument; ELA is ever-evolving as new ideas of reading emerge — both games-based literacies and newer ideas about what counts as “youth” literature; and older ideas frequently deserve a contemporary inspection — canonical texts are not static and neither are the theoretical frameworks we take up to read such texts.

As you make your way through this issue, we invite you to take note of the issues, innovations, and ideas that cross your mind. Then, consider wrestling with that idea in a submission to *The English Record*, a proposal for NYSEC's annual conference, or a blog post for our website! The answers and insights in this issue are only a snapshot of the important work happening in English classrooms across our state. We encourage you to join the conversation through NSYEC in some manner. After all, we cannot answer this issue's driving inquiry — what is teaching ELA in today's New York? — with you, the English educators of New York.

Sincerely,

Michele DeVirgilio, EdD  
Henry “Cody” Miller, PhD  
Meg Davis Roberts, PhD  
*The English Record* Editorial Board

# Graffiti Your Dreams:

Empowering Students Within the Walls of Your Classroom to Inspire Hope Beyond



**Jasmine Warga**  
Award Winning Author



**Dr. Yolanda Sealy Ruiz**  
Award Winning Educator  
and Author

50+  
WORKSHOPS

*Don't Miss:*

- Poetry Workshop
- Teacher's Lounge
- Lesson Exchange
- Build Your Stack
- HVWP
- CDWP
- ...and much more

**Featured Workshops**

- Practices for Deeper More Critical Discussions About Texts
- Fostering Diverse Perspectives through Student-Led Classroom Discussion
- AI Isn't Cheating—It's Coaching
- Blogging Our Vision: Writing with Purpose, Power, and Possibility
- Speak Up! Empowering 9th Graders through TED Talks
- Reading Sprints: Fuel Dreams and Build Independent Lifelong Readers

For more information and to register: <https://www.nysecteach.org/> ↘

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## THE ENGLISH RECORD

# 2026 CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

## CRITICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING JUSTICE AND JOY

*How do ELA teachers create moments of joy for their students, their communities, and themselves? How do ELA teachers support learning that centers justice in today's classrooms, especially in this current political climate? What other questions, insights, and ideas about joy and justice do you have as an ELA teacher? We enthusiastically invite classroom teachers, department leaders, building and district administrators, teacher educators, preservice teachers, and students to submit manuscripts.*

### ARTICLE TYPES



**EMPIRICAL ARTICLES** are peer-reviewed articles that detail original research. Empirical articles should be no more than 6,000 words inclusive of references, tables and figures. Empirical articles should include a literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, discussion and implications sections.



**TEACHING ARTICLES** are peer-reviewed articles that detail a classroom practice including instructional moves, curriculum outlines, and reflective pieces on practice. Teaching articles should be no more than 4,000 words inclusive of references, tables and figures. Teaching articles should include a summary of the teaching idea, reflections from implementing the idea, and curricular materials when available.



**CONCEPTUAL ESSAYS** are peer-reviewed essays that explain, narrate, think through, and/or advocate for a new approach to teaching English language arts and/or literacy. Conceptual essays should be no more than 2,000 words inclusive of references, tables and figures.



**BOOK, MEDIA, AND TEXT REVIEWS** are short articles that offer critique, praise, and/or other thoughts on a text, which we broadly define to include books, graphic novels, film, television, music, and other media. Book, media, and text reviews are reviewed by the editors and additional reviewers if necessary. Book, media, and text reviews should be no more than 2,000 words inclusive of references, tables and figures. Book, media, and text reviews by secondary students are highly encouraged.

**PLEASE INDICATE WHICH TYPE OF ARTICLE YOU ARE SUBMITTING IN YOUR EMAIL.**



**PLEASE SUBMIT YOUR MANUSCRIPTS TO  
[ENGLISHRECORD@NYSECTEACH.ORG](mailto:ENGLISHRECORD@NYSECTEACH.ORG) BY MARCH 9, 2026**

# Getting On Board: Practical Approaches for Designing and Implementing Games-based Learning Using Analogue Tabletop Games

ROBERT VAN AUKEN & KARISSA SULLIVAN  
GAME BARD GAMES, LLC

In an educational climate increasingly marked by standardized tests, data-driven instruction, and digital fatigue among students and educators, the tabletop game emerges as a refreshing pedagogical tool. In this paper, we explore the use of analogue tabletop games as teaching assets via the implementation of games-based learning<sup>1</sup> (GBL) and “serious games,” sometimes collectively referred to as “learning games.” We distinguish “gamification,” a popular ludic practice often conflated with GBL, from these methodologies. While the two share elements of gaming, they apply those elements in significantly different ways.

In what follows, we define games-based learning and serious games, and offer practical methods for facilitating these methodologies using analogue tabletop games. We also share some of our experiences as six-year journeymen in designing and facilitating instruction using games. While our experience is limited to instruction specific to the secondary ELA curriculum, our discoveries apply broadly across most subjects and grade levels.

## An Introduction and Coming to Terms

Games-based learning (GBL) is defined broadly as an instructional methodology that uses games as instructional tools (Eng, 2020). Micael Sousa, Chief Game Designer at the Center for Advanced Preparedness and Threat Response Simulation (CAPTRS), asserts that [games are] “agency-based and [offer] interactive systems to deliver experiences” (p. 2024). Sousa’s definition underscores the learner-centric nature of GBL, a quality that has transformed our student engagement and reshaped our pedagogies. For

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “games-based” learning and “game-based” learning are interchangeable. Our use of “games-based” is one of preference as that is how we first encountered the term.

this paper, we define games-based learning as the modification of games to achieve academic goals and outcomes by leveraging gameplay to teach concepts and develop skills (Eng, 2025). By contrast, serious games are games designed specifically with the goal of educating (Eng, 2025). The games discussed in this paper are commercial titles that we adapted for classroom use. We have developed serious games entirely in-house, but this paper focuses specifically on our process for modifying and implementing games for GBL. For clarity, we will refer to both types as games we “designed,” while acknowledging the distinction between adaptation and original creation. This paper aims to provide an actionable framework for teachers to adapt and utilize games effectively in their courses.

When we refer to analogue tabletop games, we are specifically referring to games that are played with physical components such as, but not limited to the following: cards, game boards and/or mats, pawns, meeples, dice, pen or pencil, paper, assorted game specific bits and components, and very often other players, in real time, on a designated, non-digital, surface or space.

Despite the research on the benefits of games-based learning (Thorgersen, 2022), educators are understandably reluctant to adopt GBL into their instruction (Chen et al., 2020) for many reasons. Included in these reasons are teacher attempts to satisfy “planning regimes” (Boldt, Lewis, & Leander, 2015), the limited access to game design literacy and training (Chen et al., 2020), and the absence of guided frameworks to guide the game-playing process (Erdogan, Sunay, & Çevirgen, 2022). Without these prerequisite skill sets and supporting professional development, GBL can seem like a daunting endeavor.

Another challenge facing game-based learning and instruction is the perception that GBL supports, rather than drives, traditional instruction (Erdogan et al., 2022). This perception is particularly pronounced at the secondary level when compared with the elementary and middle school levels. This belief may account for the scarcity of relevant literature on GBL at the secondary level. During our research for this topic, we encountered significantly more literature focused on learning games and games-based learning for grades K-8 than literature pertaining to the high school levels. While not definitive, our research suggests the likelihood of this disparity. Games included at the higher levels are often positioned as “add-ons” (Kim & Johnson, 2023) or review tools (i.e., Jeopardy, Bingo, Trivial Pursuit), which can unintentionally narrow their perceived scope and instructional potential (Erdogan et al., 2022). Thorgersen (2024) observes that some teachers integrate games not primarily for curriculum advancements but for non-curricular benefits: social interactions and fostering

an engaging classroom environment. The use of games to foster social-emotional learning (SEL) is a net positive for proponents of GBL, but potentially indicative of the perception that games are not instructional enough in-and-of themselves. That there are ways to fill “downtime” or “ice breaker” activities. While these applications offer meaningful benefits, they also reflect the ongoing challenge of positioning games as primary instructional tools that align with academic goals and outcomes at the secondary level.

To further complicate the adoption of GBL is the frequent conflation with gamification. Dan Norton of Filament Games, an organization that develops games for education, offers a helpful distinction: “Gamification as a practice refers to the integration of content-agnostic game-based tools. These include things like points, badges, quests, feedback... basically things that go into games that make them sticky and compelling, but don’t actually tie to the content itself” (Norton, 2017, para. 3). Websites such as Quizizz, Kahoot, Blooket, ClassDojo, Classcraft, and Quizlet are among the more commonly used gamified platforms. These tools have value in their own right, but they are not examples of games-based learning.

Another challenge in adopting GBL is the common association with digital gameplay. Much of the literature on games centers on video games and is imagined in terms of “glowing screens” and “manipulating buttons and sticks of console controllers” (Thorgersen, 2022). Video games have been shown to have significant value and engagement (Bogost, 2024); however, our work explores the potential of analogue tabletop games as powerful tools for instruction. Non-digital games have been connected to the human experience for millennia (Englestein, 2019). In our experience, tabletop games combat digital fatigue in the classroom, engaging learners through face-to-face collaboration.

Through rule-bound gameplay, games-based learning promotes decision-making, collective storytelling, agency, strategic thinking, social growth, ethical reasoning, metacognitive reflection, and negotiating setbacks (Kapp, Blair, & Mesch, 2014). When applied with purpose, analogue games become sites of epistemic and affective engagement. In what follows, we will define our approach to games-based learning, offer suggestions for classroom implementation, and provide a basic framework for designing games-based experiences that prioritize learners.

## Exigence & Kairos

We have been co-teaching and implementing games-based learning since 2019. When we first started using games in the classroom, we did so without formal training in game design. During our early attempts at GBL, we wanted to design more engaging learning activities. Students were dealing with the social-emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the time, we believed that education as a broader institution continued to cede ground in the war over student attention to the ubiquitous and more powerful tech industry (e.g., social media). To begin our designs, we reflected on games rooted in language that influenced our love of words, and we devised a list: crossword puzzles, word searches, cryptoquotes, Hangman, *Scrabble*, and our favorite of the batch, the *Speak n’ Spell*. Using these games as our base, we endeavored to modify them with more popular commercial games to create more engaging games that emphasized educational goals. We settled on recognizable, classic games with easy-to-follow rules: *Battleship*, *Words with Friends/Scrabble*, and the popular Nintendo series *Mario Kart*. We designed three games: *Battle Words* (inspired by *Battleship*), *Words With Rams* (inspired by *Words with Friends/Scrabble*), and *Vocab Racer* (inspired by *Mario Kart*).

The implementation of these games yielded mixed results in terms of student engagement and student outcomes. Among our successes: students were notably more engaged and participative during our instruction. Our choice to implement classic games helped reduce the learning curve for rules and made our versions easy to set up and play quickly. Among our failures: the games were predominantly teacher-centered, requiring us to facilitate them. Choosing to modify classic games was the right instinct; however, because they were teacher-centered, we naturally gravitated toward familiar ground and ended up creating trivia-style versions. This was a mistake. Trivia-style games seem a natural fit for GBL, but the opposite is true. Trivia is a decontextualized exam, and thus it is more akin to a summative assessment than a tool for instruction. Exams do not teach - they assess (Kapp, Blair, & Mesch, 2014). Trivia-driven mechanisms can slow down game sessions, as students may need time to process the question, or if they are still becoming familiar with the material. We also made the error of making our games turn-based, which created a lot of wait time in between student actions. Despite our many mistakes, we prefer to think of these as productive failures – each one an invaluable lesson in the fine art of how *not* to make a game.

Inspired by our first generation of games, we aspired to make better ones. To do so, we felt we

needed to better educate ourselves about game design. We sought professional development for GBL. We discovered an impressive body of existing science and literature. We attended conferences and engaged with educators and game designers in the field. Since our first generation of games, we have created instructional games that worked, games that failed, and games that were a mix of both.

## A Brief Note On Game Design

Before we proceed, it is prudent to define two key aspects of game design that we will reference often: mechanics and core dynamics.

- *Mechanics* are the rules, systems, and interactions that define how a game functions, what players can do, how they do it, and how the game responds. Often expressed through physical actions (e.g., drawing cards, flipping tiles, moving cubes), mechanics guide players toward problem-solving, inform decisions, validate agency, provide feedback, and support efficient action within complex systems.
- *Core Dynamics* are the motivations and experiences that make play meaningful, such as cooperation, competition, role-playing, exploration, and problem-solving. While mechanics explain how a game works, core dynamics explain why players engage, making them central to games-based learning in the ELA classroom.

## The Intersection of Education and Game Design

Our acquisition of game design literacy was key to our success in implementing games-based learning in the classroom. In developing our literacy, we came to recognize the unexpected alignment between game design and academic design, an overlap that may surprise many educators (Figure 1). Key similarities include the use of backward design, scaffolding, and choice architecture.

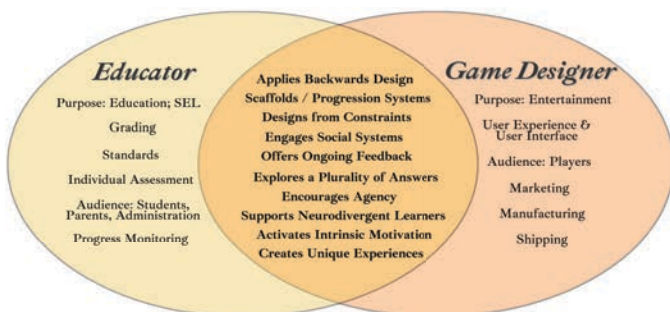


Figure 1. Venn diagram of educator and game designer commonalities

The text *Play to Learn* offers a definition for ‘game’ that makes clear some of the subtle links between education and game design:

A game is an activity that has a goal, a challenge (or challenges), and rules that guide achievement of the goal; interactivity with either other players or the game environment (or both); and feedback mechanisms that give clear cues as to how well or poorly you are performing. It results in a quantifiable outcome (you win or you lose, you hit the target, and so on) that usually generates an emotional reaction in players. (Boller & Kapp, 2017, p. 4)

Boller and Kapp’s definition is comprehensive, and teachers should easily recognize that “goals,” “challenges,” “rules,” “interactivity,” “feedback,” “quantifiable outcome[s],” and “emotional reactions” are the blueprint for effective education.

Educators can gain valuable insight from the practices of game designers. It is worth pointing out that game designers are highly successful at engaging educators’ target audiences. They are skilled at building efficient feedback loops and delivering just-in-time learning – recursive techniques that provide timely information to support problem-solving and educate players as they progress through a game. In traditional academic contexts, learning is often framed as work, as a labor (Schneider & Hutt, 2023). Games shift learning from a labor and transform it into a sense of play and authentic practice (Kapp et al., 2014), rooted in curiosity, discovery, and interactivity.

Games accomplish this by “leveraging two important characteristics: agency and play... the use of agency and decision making in games creates a natural means of experiential learning over rote memorization” (Eng, 2024a, para. 10). Educators can harness GBL to situate learners and curate experiences, positioning students to make meaning of these experiences.

Gameplay is a situated form of knowledge (Gee, 2008). It is important to note, however, that situating works on multiple layers, there is the literal situatedness of the student, their peer group, available learning tools, classroom, and teacher (Apperley & Beavis, 2013). There is also the situatedness of students within the framework of the game itself (i.e., the role or character they will play, the objectives they will pursue). In this second context, situating is not unlike commonly practiced stakeholder exercises in which students have the opportunity to generate knowledge, rather than merely acquire it. Gameplay sessions are student-centered and occur in real time at the game table, creating occasions for instructors to assess students, both formatively and summatively, along a wide spectrum.

## On Your Turn - Action Items

A popular component of many modern board games is the “On Your Turn” card. As its name suggests, it is a player aid, often in the form of a card, that summarizes a player’s possible actions when it is their turn to act (something we include in all of our game designs as well). This section of the paper, along with the sections that follow it, aims to operate the same way, by providing an outline of actionable steps that educators can take to begin implementing effective GBL.

When we began designing games for our English classroom, we considered both digital and analogue games. Much has been written about using digital games to implement GBL, and we agree that it is an intriguing space. However, we recommend using analogue games for a number of reasons:

1. They do not require expensive gaming systems, computers, or the internet. These can be costly to implement, maintain, and secure. By contrast, analogue games generally require only paper game boards or mats, components, and table space.
2. The instructor retains control of the design. By applying even a rudimentary understanding of game design, educators can create and produce games that align with their specific needs and the academic goals for their students. This is often much easier than learning how to code or outsourcing to video game designers, who subsequently inherit design control.
3. It brings a welcomed tactility that concretizes abstract concepts.
4. Analogue games are inherently social—students interact with one another, restoring a sense of play.

### **Action Item 1 - Play as Research (a.k.a Playing Games and Taking Notes)**

Crucial to our evolution as learning game designers was advice offered by Richard Garfield, creator of *Magic the Gathering*, in his essay “Play More Games” featured in the *Kobold Guide to Board Game Design*: “People who wish to design games should play games. Lots of them” (Selinker, 2011, p 7). This advice cannot be understated. Collectively, we have examined and played nearly 300 games. In doing so, we expanded our understanding of game elements like rule

sets, game mechanics, game dynamics, core loops, just-in-time feedback, and purposeful aesthetics.

Educators interested in understanding the power of games should dedicate time to examining modern tabletop games (bonus: you will have some fun). On our short list of games we recommend to educators are the following: *The Grizzled* (2015), *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Pandemic* (2008), *Daybreak* (2023), *Forbidden Island* (2010), *HerStory* (2022), *Holding On: The Troubled Life of Billy Kerr* (2018), *The Cartaventura series* (2021), *Canvas* (2021), *Modern Diplomacy* (2025), and *Lords of Waterdeep* (2012). A familiarity with these titles will offer educators a crash course on the range and versatility of contemporary board games. Subsequently, playing these games (or even watching playthroughs on YouTube) will demonstrate a wide variety of mediums, mechanics, and dynamics that teachers can draw on to inform their own designs.

### **Action Item 2 - Read Literature about Game Design**

Educators looking to initiate games-based learning should start by reading texts from Eric Zimmerman. Zimmerman makes a great ambassador for learning games, having expertise at the intersection of game design and education. He has authored several texts on the subject, including *Rules of Play* (co-authored with Katie Salen, 2003), which is widely recognized as authoritative on the subject of game design. In his most recent text, *The Rules We Break* (2022), Zimmerman offers simple, practical, and thoughtful ways to introduce games while also providing basic game design literacy in easy-to-read, single-page essays.

Another helpful essay is “The Mechanic is the Message” from designer and educator Brenda Romero (2024). In her essay, she highlights her process: “For me, the key design moment in games comes in finding the system I want to represent. Systems are inherent in everything around us...with my games, and particularly games that focus on difficult subjects, I look for the systems that allow the event to happen in the first place” (p. 94). She elaborates on game mechanics as essential design elements that work within complex systems and have the power to function as transformative actions, charged with emotional implications (p. 94). Her essay is a useful place to begin for educators looking to design games around potentially difficult subject matter.

Other titles for recommendation: *GameTek* (2019) by Geoffrey Engelstein, *Board Games as Media* (2021) by Paul Booth, *Your Move* (2019) by Jonathan Kay & Joan Moriarty, and *Game Design Workshop* (2024) by Tracy Fullerton.

### Action Item 3 - Setting Academic Goals and Outcomes

Prior to modifying or designing a game, educators should establish the desired learning goals and outcomes they want their students to achieve. Educators should be mindful of the difference between academic goals and academic outcomes. The teacher establishes academic goals – the material, skills, and information that students learn. Academic outcomes are driven by the student experience, whether playing the game or receiving instruction (Eng, 2024b). If the goal of a game is to strengthen reading comprehension, players must read and make inferences as part of the gameplay. If the goal of the game is to build empathy, the game must situate students in another’s circumstances and require them to articulate that perspective.

### Action Item 4 - Implementation

When we first began using GBL, we lacked a framework for incorporating games in the classroom. Much of what we developed was learned through trial and error. We have since discovered some helpful literature. We would direct anyone interested in a practical framework for using games in their class to “How to Play Board Games: A Framework Proposal for Classroom Settings” by Erdogan, Sunay, & Çevirgen (2022). In their paper, they outline a comprehensive six-step process for implementing the use of board games in an academic setting. Their framework: Encounter with the Game, Understanding Cause-Effect Relationships, Strategy Development, Clarifying the Strategy, Verifying the Strategy, and Evaluating the Game and the Process (Erdogan, Sunay, & Çevirgen, 2022).

The framework we developed through our own trials and experimentation is more streamlined, engineered explicitly for English courses but suitable for other subjects. When we use games in our classroom, we do so over the course of a single week. Each day is reserved for approaching the game with a specific purpose:

**Day 1: Learn the Rules:** Prior to playing the game, students are assigned a reading of the rules for homework the night before and spend time in class clarifying any points raised by students to establish a strong understanding of the game’s dynamics, mechanics, and flow.

**Day 2: Play for Fun:** Having reviewed the rules, we turn students loose to enjoy playing the game. It is crucial for teachers to observe and take notes on student interactions and behaviors during this time. Observations

recorded during this play session will often provide powerful insights for students during the debrief.

**Day 3: Play for Analysis:** Have students examine the game as a text. Have them inspect the pieces, the board, the mechanics, and the dynamics of their session. Encourage inquiry about your game design. Have them evaluate your decisions as the game maker. Why use piece X to represent Y? How is concept X represented in the game?

**Day 4: Debrief and Reflect on Play:** A debrief is essential for successful GBL. It is easy for students to get lost in the joy of the game. Debriefing and reflecting are essential to cementing our students’ discoveries and insights. We will often host a Socratic seminar on day 4 to allow space for students to share their experiences during the game session.

**Day 5: Demonstrate Knowledge and Understanding:** This takes the form of an individually written reflection or group presentation.

### Best Laid Plans – A Model in Summary

A central focus of *Of Mice and Men* is the plight of migrant workers during the Great Depression, namely the struggle to accumulate wealth, maintain employment, and cope with a sense of rootlessness, which are subjects that may be difficult for learners to grasp. Our solution was to create a game, The Best Laid Plans (Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4), that curates the migrant experience against the backdrop of literary naturalism (i.e., laboring for little pay, experiencing frequent job loss, traveling for available work, and being subject to the ebb and flow of economics and politics). It is important to acknowledge that the experience students glean does not have to be an exact simulation; an approximation is sufficient to stimulate insights.



Figure 2. The Best Laid Plans.



Figure 3. Player placing a worker.



Figure 4. Close up of physical components.

We began our creative process by identifying our learning goals:

- Students will be able to define socio-historical factors that influenced “Literary Naturalism.”

- Students will be able to articulate how socio-historical factors affected the plight of the 1930s migrant worker.
- Students will engage critically with an analogue tabletop game in a social, analytical, and reflective manner.

Our next step was to anticipate and plan our desired academic outcomes:

- Students vicariously experience the hardships (job displacement, unstable housing, travelling far distances for work, economic uncertainty) of the 1930s migrant worker and understand the limitations of such a vicarious experience.
- Students connect meaningful gameplay to the themes, events, and characters of *Of Mice and Men* with greater empathy, comprehension, and critical analysis.
- Inspired by gameplay, students engage with one another on the subject of the text with greater inquiry, emotional connection, and personal investment.
- Activate student interest in reading the novel *Of Mice and Men*.

Having settled on our academic goals and outcomes, we began investigating commercial games to modify. We settled on the game *Lords of Waterdeep* (LoW). After playing the game several times, we felt that it was a natural fit for the basis of an *Of Mice and Men* game for several reasons:

1. LoW is designed for five players. We felt that this would be an easy to expand to six players, our preferred player count given our typical roster sizes (on average we have between 24-28 students), physical classroom limitations (i.e., play spaces such as desks or tables), and period duration (games should be playable in 50-75% of class to allow for space to unpack discoveries). Whether considering modifying a game or designing a serious game from scratch, teachers should assess these spatial and temporal factors.
2. We felt that game components would be easy to produce and purchase. We created many of the games in-house using Canva.com, an easy-to-use graphic design program. We purchased game bits (a 1000-count of 8 mm cubes from Amazon.com for less than \$20). We also generated two premium versions of high-quality, crafted components sourced from various game design websites (TheGameCrafter.com, MeepleSource.com). We print game mats at Staples and through Canva.com.
3. One of the two primary mechanics of the game is work placement. Worker placement is a very simple mechanic. Players get one action on their turn – placing a pawn on the board, allowing them to collect a resource. This is easy to learn and almost immediately activates player agency as the limitation of a single action amplifies the importance of a player's decision. Worker placement felt like a natural fit for a game inspired by *Of Mice and Men*, which is, of course, about the story of migrant workers during the Great Depression era. Additionally, the simplicity of this mechanic allowed us to mitigate something known as “analysis paralysis.” This occurs when the number of choices facing a player is so overwhelming that they slow down the game out of fear of making the wrong choice (Eng, 2023).
4. The second chief mechanic in the game is contract fulfillment. We felt that the contract fulfillment mechanic would keep players when it was not their turn. The way this operates is that every player receives a Job Card, which requires specific resources to mark it as complete, earning players money and American Dream (i.e., victory) points. Players must attend to the actions of other players as well as strategize and prioritize their worker placements in advance to be successful. Thus, every player is engaged on every turn. Creating games that maintain constant player engagement cannot be overstated. One of our initial errors was creating games that were turn-based. We have since learned to create games in which players play or participate on everyone's turn.
5. Finding a job was central to the struggles of migrant workers during the Great Depression. LoW has a graphic on its game board that operates as a card market. We felt we could easily modify it to make it appear as a “Job Market” board. Through our research, we tracked down an original job card for Murray and Ready's – a job agency briefly mentioned in *Of Mice and Men* (p. 21) – housed at the History San Jose Research Archives. We wrote the facility and they granted us permission to use the image in our game (Figure 5). The reproduction of a primary source adds a layer to the game as a teaching tool. It makes history tangible and enriches the socio-historical context. Moreover, it sparks discussion about the novel, the experience of the migrant worker,

and opens up connections to their personal experiences related to labor.



Figure 5. "Murray & Ready's Employment Agency Calendar," by Murray & Ready's Employment Agency, 1898, <https://historysanjose.catalogaccess.com/archives/127553>. 2024 by History San Jose. Image Courtesy of History San Jose. Reprinted with permission.

One of our goals for this game was to make student-players aware of the economic, social, and political systems that shaped the prejudice, misogyny, and economic inequality visible in the novel. When we introduce the game to students, we take time at the onset to discuss the historical context of these sensitive issues. In order to introduce literary Naturalism organically, we opted to 'give the game a turn.' After each round of play, the last player to act draws a Literary Naturalism card and applies the effect to the specified location on the board. These effects arbitrarily impact the players in ways that are outside of their control, not unlike the harsh realities that inspired the Naturalism movement.

Teachers should not shy away from making games about difficult subjects, provided they design with awareness. In her essay "The Mechanic is the Message," seasoned game designer and educator Brenda Romero (2024) insists on the importance of examining the foundational systems that enable historical or social events to occur. We drew a lot of inspiration for designing games with careful intention from *The Grizzled*, a game about six soldier-companions in the trenches of World War I. The instruction booklet features a homage: "some of the characters in this game were real people. Some are ancestors of people who worked on this game. "The Grizzled" is a homage to all the men who lived through this tragic period" (p. 2). The game also offers an "Intentional Note" in the instruction booklet:

At the same level as literature and cinema, games are a cultural medium which is undeniably participative. There are no subjects it can't broach, though some are more delicate than others. The life of the Grizzled is one of those. Guided by the deepest respect that the suffering endured by these men has inspired in us, we've designed and tweaked this game with constant concern...Without ever touching on the warlike aspect, "The Grizzled" offers each player the chance to feel some of the difficulties suffered by the soldiers in the trenches. (Riffaud, F., & Rodriguez, J., 2015, p. 2)

We made a host of other major and minor modifications to this game over several iterations before settling on our final version (and even now, we tweak it on occasion). To list them all would exceed the scope of this paper, but the ones listed here are ample to demonstrate to educators how to get started modifying, designing, and implementing games on their own.

## The End Game

Creating learning games is not easy. We have encountered a significant amount of reluctance from teachers who are unwilling to attempt GBL. Teachers we speak with acknowledge that they are intimidated by the process or even flatly deny its value. We often hear, "I can't do that," or "How could you grade such a thing?" or "That won't help my students on the exams." This reticence is echoed in a 2020 study titled, "Games Literacy for Teacher Education: Towards the Implementation of Games-Based Learning," wherein the researchers note, "Teachers often acknowledge the merits of games [while] they complain about the difficulty of completing effective instructional design, which seriously hinders the advantages of GBL" (Chen et al., 2020, p. 77). This response from educators is valid. There are barriers to larger implementation: instructor and administrator familiarity, grade-motivated learning, and the emphasis on standardized assessments. Without a game design literacy, however, the barriers to adopting GBL are likely to remain very high. The authors of this study suggest that game design be introduced to pre-service teachers as part of their professional certification (Chen et al., 2020). Introducing teachers-in-training to game design would familiarize them with the necessary game literacy at the proper time in their professional development. Offering game design during pre-certification and juxtaposed with educational methods would make clear the connections to instructional outcomes and ways to implement games-based learning. For veteran teachers, school districts should invest in professional

development to equip their staff with the necessary skills to attempt more robust GBL practices.

The frameworks we have outlined, rooted in clear goal-setting, purposeful design, and student-centered implementation, illustrate that educators do not have to be experts in game design to attempt games-based learning. They need only a willingness to experiment and embrace play.

Games-based learning situates students in experiences that blend academic rigor with the joy of play. Our journey from early, imperfect adaptations to more intentional designs demonstrates that GBL is neither a novelty nor an add-on, but a legitimate and versatile mode of instruction.

The power of games in the classroom ultimately lies in their ability to transform learning into an active, shared endeavor. When we invite students to play with purpose, we invite them to think, feel, and engage in ways that conventional instruction often cannot. By embracing analogue games as more than diversions, by threatening them as intentional, interactive texts, we expand the possibilities of what our classrooms can be. The next move, as in any great game, is yours.

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# Implementing Literature Circles in the Modern Rural English Classroom

TIMOTHY DIAMOND

Just within my first year teaching, I became frustrated with myself as I recognized how “Not every preservice teacher prepared in a sub/urban TPP [teacher preparation program] will end up teaching in sub/urban school” (Parton, 2021, para. 19). As I started my teaching career in a rural school, I felt ill equipped to teach there. Though I was not prepared in a teacher preparation program set in a sub/urban area, I was only ever taught pedagogy developed for sub/urban schools. While I have developed effective content for my classes, doing so has come with challenges. These challenges specifically arose as I attempted to build a curriculum for my senior English class. In this reflective essay, I discuss practices developed from two years of implementing literature circles into my senior English classroom, as well as a curriculum focused on place. Bringing together the use of literature circles and a study of place, I explore how combining these two pedagogical practices can be used to motivate senior English students in rural school districts to engage more fully with their curriculum.

## Background and Context

Let group A represent my seniors who graduated in 2024, consisting of 15 students. In comparison, group B represents the class of 2025, which consisted of 12 students.

Literature circles were used for groups A and B for the same unit. Students read a memoir and used it as a mentor text to aid them in composing their own memoirs. The memoir students compose must be tied to place, as students studied how writers explore place in their writing. When developing a curriculum for my rural students, I considered using literature circles to motivate them as they prepared for writing assignments. From my experience studying literature circles while working on both my bachelor's and master's degrees, I realized how literature circles are “useful in terms of encouraging positive reading habits” (Avci & Yuksel, 2011, p. 1298). Despite using literature circles in a different context and with a different population of students, Avci & Yuksel's findings nonetheless provide

motivation to attempt this reading modality, as they suggest that students enjoyed the practice when tackling a novel for the first time. Motivation is my primary goal, for if students are not motivated to engage with either the text presented or the writing task, they may not complete either. I must note that modifications have been made to traditional literature circles to maintain student engagement. Literature circles are commonly defined as “student book clubs” (Daniels, 2002, p. 1). As my students are at different levels in terms of maturity regarding their ability to handle agency granted to them for literacy tasks, modifications to this traditional model are necessary. I say this as book clubs often connote a level of individual meaning-making that falls on the student. The ability to work with the agency of a book club, too, falls back on the motivation piece. If students are not motivated to pursue the assigned text, they will struggle to maintain the emotional maturity required in a book club. This lack of motivation could, consequently, result in poor writing, as they may not have been able to gather the engagement needed to see a prime example of the genre, for the reading of the memoir serves as a mentor text. Both groups read the same memoir, *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff (2023).

## Background and Context of Group A

This group of seniors did not commit to reading outside of class. This observation was made by assigning homework and not receiving it back. Therefore, I modified my usage of literature circles so that students had time in class to read the novel. We discussed the novel as we read together, having more structured discussions on Fridays. Memoir writing was presented to this group as a summative assessment after they had finished reading their mentor text to show their knowledge of the genre.

## Background and Context of Group B

While students were given time in class to read, it was only two days, compared to every day for group A. Group B opted to read independently, in contrast to group A, which read together. Reading days were paired with writing days, where students composed their memoirs.

## Review of Scholarship

As students are reading memoirs to prepare them for memoir writing tied to place, I reflected on how “where a school is located matters: the histories and politics of a place, the geography and its weather patterns, local economies, population trends.” (Parton & Azano, p. 172). Rural students, unfortunately, often

undervalue their setting-based experiences. I say this as I found myself pleading for students who come from farm families to write about said experiences. In the case of a rural student, I have noticed how the excuses they make for not writing about their rural settings are tied to stereotypes associated with rural communities, which are “plagued by deficit images of poverty, loss, and despair and is consistently portrayed in conservative and monolithic ways” (Parton & Azano, 2022, p. 173). Seniors have had a full experience living in a rural community by the time they are seventeen or eighteen years old. Furthermore, issues such as those highlighted by the authors become more apparent to young adults as they get into their later years, as they develop an understanding of the world around them. Having reviewed the work of Parton & Azano, I considered this reason to explore place-based reading and writing with students from rural communities. As seniors, students may care more to debunk these stereotypes by showing people from various communities that they may live similar lives, or that rural culture is something to be valued.

Memoir is the most apt genre for exploring place in literature, as students can use it to explore issues tied to stereotypes of rural settings that impact real people. I chose *This Boy’s Life* as a mentor text for this unit, as it is an outstanding model of rural memoir writing, primarily set in the rural Northwest. I aim to help students understand this story as a mentor text, as the author has constructed impactful pieces of literature within the genre. A mentor text is defined as “a piece of literature students can read and reread for specific learning purposes” (Dorr, 2023, Para. 3). I wanted students to read and experience first-hand how people not only construct writing about their lives but also how they connect their real-life experiences to place. Having learned how people construct memoirs in rural settings, students can reflect on their experiences living in a rural community. Further, when young adults “move from writing personal narratives to crafting memoirs,” they can engage with the craft and content of their stories, learning to replicate the specific narrative structure of the genre (p. 198). By having students read a memoir before writing, this skill is further enriched through their reading, as they learn how masters of the genre have constructed their work. Finally, referring back to place-based writing, this could further motivate rural students to write, as their experiences would help break down stereotypes of rural communities.

Harvey Daniels (2002) is seen as a forefather of literature circle reading. Traditionally, in an idealized world, literature circles “are formed around several people’s desire to read the same book or article-not by reading level, ability grouping, teacher assignment, or

curriculum mandate” (Daniels, 2002, p. 19), but what student is going to want to suddenly start a literature circle? While I value the idea that “student choice” is paramount (p. 18), students lacked appropriate exposure to the memoir genre. Teachers using literature circles must consider this possibility and be able to offer suggestions. Despite some challenges, though, I appreciated the modality as I like the discussion-based aspect, especially when working with a memoir as a mentor text. *This Boy’s Life* explores many topics familiar to students, set in a rural environment where the author interacts with the culture associated with rural communities. However, while the writer, Tobias Wolff, shares some experiences students can connect with, he also offers a unique perspective that many students may not have. Students can thus learn more about each other if they discover that they have experiences they may have never known about their peers. These hidden experiences offer points of reflection for students, which can later be tracked into their memoir writing. Therefore, through discussions promoted by the book-club nature of literature circles, students can check in regarding their developing understanding of the genre, while also learning more about the writer and each other, prompting writing opportunities.

## Teaching Methodology

### Group A

Initially, group A was not reading independently, despite being prompted to do so. I came to this conclusion, not only from a weekly wrap-up grade that yielded low scores, but also because the students themselves admitted this to me. I sought to adapt how the class proceeded. The class came to take the form of Socratic circles. I saw the need to modify the Socratic circles so students could “become active discussion participants” (Copeland, 2005, 17). Not only would the discussion be fruitful in Socratic circles, but I also realized how this adaptation would be “helping students understand differing points of view and tolerate the ambiguity those views sometimes create can assist them in suspending judgements until they explore a topic more fully” (Copeland, 2005, p. 41). This group was not altogether warm with one another, so if we held discussions in a Socratic manner, and students were to become open to multiple perspectives, conversation would need to be structured. I decided that, while reading, students would answer questions about the story. As we read, students could ask these comprehension questions aloud for the class to discover answers and guide us into a discussion.

Students read with me every single day, until I felt we achieved the purpose of using the text. I opted

for *This Boy's Life* as an option, for I recognized that as group A was mostly made up of male rural students, so they “might especially want to search for books featuring male protagonists that would appeal to male students, who are sometimes more-reluctant readers” (Kuhel, 2023, para. 3). Despite choosing this option more for male students, female students chose it as well, as I think students were more attuned with reading about shared experiences as a result of setting, rather than shared experiences based on gender identity. The summative assessment required students to construct a three-page memoir. Students developed well-constructed writing pieces after interacting with the memoirs read as mentor texts. This culminated in students experimenting with the genre in their writing. For example, a student wrote about seeing her favorite band play live and the thrill she felt, incorporating photographs to create a written documentary. Others stretched the thematic and structural bounds of the memoir genre, writing a series of poems or how people are “places” to them.

### **Group B**

I changed the schedule slightly compared to how I approached reading and writing with group A. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students were given time in class to read. We talked about craft early in *This Boy's Life* as well as discussed the author's experience in a rural community, which students related to. Despite discussing the selection of novels for rural readers in the Appalachian region, Kuhel (2023) highlights a general idea that students need to read about people who are experiencing similar hardships to themselves. I find that with *This Boy's Life*, students appreciate how open the author is about experiences they would never have opened up about. As we progressed further in the book, we began writing. Students ultimately took their reading further, as they would read the selected text for fun, appreciating not only the author's openness but also the connections they could make to some of the topics discussed. This resulted in students being more honest about their own experiences in their writing.

### **Reflections**

Young people living in rural communities have made shifts to decenter traditional values and culture associated with rural living. Students in my classroom have come to undervalue their rural communities. I made this observation as my seniors are quick to avoid writing about living in a rural place, and engage more in discourse about writing about adolescence. With literature circles, students are given the agency to make

individual meanings of a text and how it relates to them. When reading *This Boy's Life* with students, they often locate various events from Wolff's childhood that they can relate to. Reflecting on the validity of utilizing literature circles in a rural English classroom, I concluded that literature circles can help motivate rural students. I observed in Group B, early in reading *This Boy's Life*, how students took stereotypical rural experiences and challenged them. For example, while reading about the narrator obtaining his first hunting rifle at a certain age, students began a discussion about when they obtained theirs. This student-centered conversation culminated in engagement later on, as I then prompted students to predict how well the writer would handle the responsibility of the rifle. Furthermore, I also noticed that the results of these student-prompted conversations often led to hesitant students participating for once, and even reading ahead in the novel. If rural students are given the agency to create connections to a character's life, they will do so. Additionally, this agency may also prompt students to step out of their comfort zones as they will want to engage in a text. However, I would be remiss if I did not address a population of students who did not engage in the content and never saw an increase in motivation.

It has taken me a while to consider why students may lack engagement during this unit. I question to what extent the lack of motivation is a result of cultural embarrassment or internalized prejudice. Students who have been apprehensive about literature circles within a place-based study are typically rural students who are *hesitant* to discuss their rural communities. Not only have rural communities become less culturally significant, but students are also *making* them less significant, as they only think of the negative stereotypes associated with them, rather than reclaiming them as part of their identity. I question the extent to which students do not want to read this text because it reminds them of a culture and behavior that, as seniors, they wish to leave behind as they transition into adulthood. Perhaps a lack of interest in the unit stems from a reluctance to alter the narrative of rural communities, as a result of being embarrassed by growing up in a rural setting. This embarrassment may be the result of the fact that “Many people have not experienced rurality except for what they have seen in television shows, movies, or the news, and these depictions are limited at best” (Suico, 2024, p. 170). Where does not wanting to change the narrative come from, but a lack of positive rural texts? While there has been a push within the last decade to create collections of rural texts for young readers, “there are certain stereotypes that prove to be barriers in viewing rural experiences as worthy of reading/hearing/learning about. As a result, rural YAL with a critical lens is often

missing from ELA curriculum” (Parton, 2021a, para. 16), culminating in an amalgamation of rural texts not doing much in the way of undoing a decade of self-inflicted biases caused by students internalizing stereotypes about living in a rural environment. As students in rural communities are fed stereotypes about what their values and beliefs should be, they will continue to regurgitate the same narratives that they think they are meant to believe, further fulfilling their self-sustained stereotypes.

There is a substantial number of English education and literacy scholars who dedicate their studies to rural education (Parton & Azano, 2022; Suico, 2024; Thompson & Whitten, 2024a, 2024b). Although still emerging, a growing body of scholarship and interest in rural young adult literature signals a promising shift—yet sustained growth is essential, especially given that “[s]ome of the teachers avoided contemporary rural YA in their own reading lives and classrooms because of the ways they have pushed back against and tried to escape the aspects of their rural upbringings and identities that they found untenable” (Parton, 2021a, para. 7).

## Recommendations and Conclusions

We need more current literature on teaching English to students in rural communities. A combination of more rural pedagogies and the introduction of rural literature into the English classroom may make students happy to be from a rural culture again. Encouraging future writers to reflect on how their rural settings shaped their childhoods may offer a way to counteract the pattern in which “[t]hese unreconciled tensions led them—to some degree—to reject their own rural futures” (Parton and Azano, 2022, 173). We need to find ways to foster a positive rural culture in our education of reading and writing. I have begun to adopt this approach to fostering a positive rural culture through literature circles and place-based studies. Fostering positive dialogue about rural places has the potential to engage readers who otherwise don't see themselves reflected in their school curriculum. Students may develop a greater sense of pride in their rural identities and be more inclined to stay in their communities. Academically, rural students could be more motivated to engage in our content and creatively explore ideas in their writing. Further, it's important to consider the role rural teachers play in advocating for their students, given that “[t]he bulk of educational scholarship has and continues to ignore rural students” (Parton, 2021b, para. 5). Teacher education programs need to better equip teachers to work within all communities. We must continue to create authentic and accessible learning opportunities for students in our English classrooms,

regardless of their background or location.

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# A Mosaic of Hope Moments for Preservice English Language Arts Teachers

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Two years ago, when much of the world was still recovering from the shift to fully remote learning in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, I [Sieben], an English teacher educator and program coordinator, worked with graduate students in my courses to pursue hope-filled goals in the face of challenge and adversity. As a hope researcher, the pursuit of hope is often a theme in the teacher education courses that I teach at the graduate and undergraduate levels, but when confronted with exceptionally difficult times, the presence of hope seemed even more critical. At the time this manuscript was written, I was in my eighth year teaching at a public, liberal arts comprehensive university that offers several undergraduate, graduate, and advanced certificate programs for students pursuing careers in education with passions rooted in social justice.

Our SUNY institution, situated on Long Island in central Nassau County about 40-minutes from New York City, has been recognized as SUNY's most diverse campus (SUNY Old Westbury Vision Statement) and commits to the following mission statement:

The State University of New York at Old Westbury is a dynamic and diverse public liberal arts university that fosters academic excellence through close interaction among students, faculty and staff. Old Westbury weaves the values of integrity, community engagement, and global citizenship into the fabric of its academic programs and campus life. In an environment that cultivates critical thinking, empathy, creativity and intercultural understanding, we endeavor to stimulate a passion for learning and a commitment to building a more just and sustainable world. Our University is a community of students, teachers, staff, and alumni bound together in mutual support, respect, and dedication to the Mission. (SUNY Old Westbury, 2025)

Some of our students commute from across Long Island and the boroughs of New York City while many of our students enjoy living on campus in one of our residential life buildings. Many of our students are first-generation college students, at the both graduate and undergraduate levels, and all of our students have important stories and powerful voices to share. This project was born from the goal of sharing student voices of empowerment and hope during times when both were greatly needed.

## Hope as a Framework for Teaching

I start my teacher education classes each semester by defining the type of action-based hope framework (Sieben, 2021) that I think and work within. Snyder's (2002) theory of hope, grounded in positive psychology, consists of three components: goals, pathways, and agency. The goals are the aims of the actions taken; the pathways are the routes taken towards goal pursuit; and agency is the affective motivation needed to accomplish self-determined goals (Sieben, 2025; Snyder, 1996). All three components work together in a reciprocal feedback loop to inform the other parts. Agency thinking fuels pathways use, and pathways engagement energizes agency development. Both agency and pathways work together to help students accomplish the goals they set inside and outside of the classroom.

With this framework in mind, I attempted to build hope in spaces where it felt like it was lacking, especially during such a challenging time. I shared articles that explained this concept of hope written by Shane Lopez (2012), C.R. Snyder (2002), and even a few I had written (Sieben, 2018a, 2019). As research shows, hope is contagious, and part of passing hope on to others is teaching them about this action-based hope framework and how it can be applied in school and in many aspects of their lives. Therefore, my classrooms are spaces that promise (and teach) hope in a variety of ways. During this time, I set out to magnify hope messages in the curricula using intentional approaches to teaching and learning. One way included focusing the curriculum around action-based hope in one of the methods courses I teach for preservice teachers.

## The Course and Assignments

In my course *Literacy, Research, and Technology, English Language Arts*-- the second of a series of two methods courses that I teach in our graduate English education programs for preservice teachers-- we spent a great deal of time thinking about and developing our role in the national and state professional communities of English language arts

teachers. We read student-selected professional texts in groups of three students and then created a digital book talk for the rest of the class based on “big picture takeaways” for our individual teaching practices. The texts students chose to read in their book groups that year included:

- *The Formative Assessment Action Plan* by Nancy Frey & Douglas Fisher (2011)
- *Teaching Adolescent Writers* by Kelly Gallagher (2006)
- *Urban Literacies: Critical Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Community* by Valerie Kinloch (2011)
- *Write Beside Them* by Penny Kittle (2008)

For other assignments, we wrote lesson plans grounded in action-based hope pedagogy. In one assignment, “One Lesson, Two Ways,” we considered a variety of ways to teach the same lesson objectives to students and practiced re-imagining multiple approaches and entry points into authentic teaching and learning for and with our students. Hope theory teaches that when one pathway presents obstacles, hopeful people know there are other pathways to pursue that may yield more successes. Teachers and students with high hope levels know that no pathway will be without obstacles, but they also know that there are other pathways to pursue towards goal attainment when one path seems obstructed or blocked (Sieben, 2018b, 2025). When engaging hope principles, teachers and students can problem-solve their way through obstacles or muster the energy to find new ways of pursuing their goals when the other ways they have traveled seem impassible (Sieben, 2025). To make this theory tangible in education, I assigned a lesson planning project to the preservice teachers in this *Literacy, Research, and Technology* course in which they needed to plan “one lesson, two ways” and write two creatively different procedures to teach the same lesson objectives. This assignment allowed students to practice teaching through action-based hope: planning for one way, but knowing that when that way does not yield success, there are other effective ways of getting students to mastery of the lesson goals.

Using one of the lesson plan procedures from the “One lesson, Two ways” project, the preservice teachers then delivered demo lessons to one another simulating classroom experiences for secondary school students. Afterwards, students debriefed the planning and delivery of the lessons with peer and teacher feedback. I reminded students that hope-filled feedback balances compliment and critique (with a slightly positive skew) (Sieben, 2017), and guided them to provide critiques in the form of asking questions to invite conversation. Finally, I encouraged students to

respond to peers’ efforts in planning, content, and delivery of the lesson.

Throughout the semester, the students and I participated in multiple writing endeavors aimed at building a hopefulness about our own writers’ voices and teaching abilities. We wrote professional manuscripts and conference presentations, created original writing prompts, engaged in peer-facilitated dialogue, and shared creative freewrites. We drafted, revised, rewrote, edited and published our work throughout the semester in a variety of genres and modalities. We continue(d) to become the very teachers we intentionally set out to be, and evolve(d) in ways we did not necessarily know we needed to or wanted to. In the midst of “unprecedented times” as a cohort, we leaned on each other and learned from each other what it truly means to need other teachers to succeed in our craft, in the art of teaching and hope-building.

### A Hope-Building Writing Assignment

In the last project of the semester, we were each tasked with writing a manuscript proposal based on an inquiry project that would lead to researching and then completing the final manuscript or a professional conference presentation based on our findings. “We” is quite intentional here because, like Penny Kittle (2008) advises, I (Sieben) always “write beside” my students, so the “we” in this work includes all of us, teachers and students, writing alongside one another. The assignment that brought hope into focus for us was the “professional project” assignment. The prompt for this assignment is included below for context:

#### **Professional Paper or Presentation Project (20%):**

In order to participate in the national professional community of English language arts teachers, it is necessary to read and contribute to professional journals (and conferences) in our field. As secondary ELA teachers, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is the national professional community that you will likely most frequently interact with, so this semester we will begin doing so. The organization’s website is [ncte.org](http://ncte.org), and before deciding on a topic for this project you are required to visit and navigate through content on the site. For the **first part of this project**, you will each complete a **paper proposal that answers questions on a form that outlines what an article on a topic of your choosing would cover**. This part is 5% of the project grade. For the **second part of this project**, you may choose to (a) **write the full manuscript of this article** you’ve outlined in the proposal, **or** (b) you can take this proposal and turn it into a **conference presentation**. The choice is yours. Details on both are below.

**Journals:** NCTE publishes a number of English journals that detail methods/approaches for teaching ELA as well as educational ideologies, philosophies, etc. You are encouraged to write and submit manuscripts that detail your work as a graduate student/ELA teacher to journals you feel would be interested in working with you to publish this work. The NCTE journals that you will likely engage with most frequently are *English Journal*, *Voices from the Middle*, *English Leadership Quarterly*, and *Language Arts*. NYSEC's flagship journal is *The English Record*, and you are encouraged to read and submit here too.

**Conferences:** Each year, NCTE hosts an annual conference in November at a rotating city. At the state level, the New York State English Council (NYSEC) also hosts an annual conference, always held in Albany each October. You are encouraged to submit proposals to present at these conferences (usually proposals are due at least 6-8 months before the conference date) while you are a graduate student and also when you are a certified ELA teacher, and it is a valuable professional experience to attend these conferences even when you are not presenting.

**Your Task:** This semester, you will create either a professional conference presentation or write a professional manuscript for publication. You'll first watch some virtual conference sessions and read several articles from these journals, and for this major project this semester you will **either** (a) **create a 20-minute conference presentation** (using formatting and organizational guidelines I will provide to you) OR (b) **write a manuscript of about 2,000 words** for one of these journals based on the proposal you created. This part of the project will be 15% of the project grade.

You will submit **the proposal by October**, and I will provide you with feedback. Then you will create your presentation or write your article based on this feedback and additional research you conduct. This **project will be due in November** and presentations to our class will take place in **December**.

**Details:** I will distribute the assignment sheets for this project, but a few preliminary details can be found here. For both project choices, you must **reference at least 5 secondary sources** (journal articles from professional journals or books written within the last 10 years).

**\*You may choose to collaboratively write an article or create a presentation, with one other co-author, if you wish.** If you choose this collaborative option, both writers will receive the same grade on the project, so please be sure to agree on equitable distribution of the research, drafting, and writing process.

**Connection to Observation Hours:** This project will also serve as your observation project this semester. Based on your observations of ELA strategies used in the classrooms you've been observing in, you should include in your project some degree of synthesis and evaluation from your observation fieldwork (within the context of this course and the current research). In your manuscript or presentation, you can explore some of the strategies that you observed, and in your (informal) presentation of these strategies to the class you can describe and discuss the strengths and/or weaknesses of the strategies you highlighted in your piece, noting any opportunities for improving the use of these strategies based on research that you have found. Any references made to research in the project should also appear at the end of the presentation or the end of the manuscript in APA format. We will discuss this assignment in greater detail in class, and I will provide you with the guidelines for this assignment along with a performance assessment rubric (Sieben, 2022).

During the months we spent working on this project, we requested and received feedback on topics, proposals, and drafts in order to refine our work. Once final copies were submitted in November 2022, we as a class community saw commonalities across our projects that are notable, which brought us to collaborate on this article. We chose the paragraphs that we felt best captured the essence of each of our papers and the sections that reflected hope in our theory and practice. We put these pieces together as a lyric essay, which can be found below in the section, "Hope Aloud Lyrics."

As preservice teachers completing 100 hours of classroom observations and about to start student teaching, we (the preservice teacher authors) saw immediate applications for our teaching approaches in one another's work. Much of the research we engaged with has shown us models we hope to emulate in our own classrooms. We appreciate and are humbled by the professional process we have participated in so that we too can contribute to the conversations happening in the national and state professional communities of English teachers.

## Hope Moments

What we share here from our papers are snapshots of hope—hope moments, in fact—present in the professional writing and research that we have engaged in this [fall 2022] semester. By definition, "hope moments," or "hope happenings" are, "productive event[s]... that lead to the growth of hope in a person or circumstance" (Sieben, 2018b, p. 240). These can happen for a variety of reasons across a multitude of contexts, and they can be due to gains in

agency/motivation, or due to gains in pathways/skills attained in the process of goal fulfillment. Either way, hope happened in our *Literacy, Research, and Technology* course that fall semester. We believe it is worth sharing given that research on hope reveals that hope moments are collectively empowering when shared with others (Sieben, 2018b).

## Collective Hope

Hope also has the capability to inspire across contexts. “Collective hope,” (Sieben, 2018b) in this way, has the power to be a change agent in systems that influence teachers’ professional identities, learning outcomes, and processes. As a class community, it is our intention that the collective hope that we have garnered, across the various projects we worked on and the conversations we shared, will demonstrate the power of having hope moments as preservice teachers. It also shows the importance of facilitating space for that hope to happen in teacher education, especially during a time when unique skills and strengths are needed for resilience and success in the classroom. The snapshots we share below– the hope moments present in our papers from the “professional paper project”– essentially create a lyric essay (which combines poetry and essay forms) that exemplifies the unique ways hope was “manifest aloud” (Sieben, 2018b) in our course during the fall 2022 semester. What follows are a series of unique hope moments in our writing and in our research that make us collectively a community of hope-filled (future) teachers ready to begin our professional teaching journeys as educators of (and alongside) young people, and as writers and researchers in the profession. Today, in times of unrest and uncertainty, we need hope in education to carry us through these times and to bring us peace and power in our practice.

### “Hope Aloud Lyrics”

...a lyric essay written in parts by the preservice teacher authors of this article

### Critical Research Encourages New Hopes for Today

The educational difficulties experienced by adolescents during the international pandemic of COVID-19 between the years 2020 and 2022 created unforeseen obstacles and fluctuating expectations pertaining to their personal and academic development. There are many new texts that have been released over the last few years that indicate lessons that have been learned from teaching during such turbulent times. These issues are of high interest to many concerned individuals in society. We hear opinions in passing social

interactions and read news stories within our communities pertaining to adolescents’ increased anxieties, lack of social engagement from lockdown related restrictions, lack of readiness to enter collegiate courses or the professional setting, and the difficulties they encountered and voiced during unstable years of educational continuity and guidance.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of critical research proposed by Ernest Morrell urged the incorporation of the student and educator within the classroom to develop relevant data with the intention of understanding students’ educational training and development. Morrell (2009) envisions that teachers and students provide insights and observations that inform the perspectives of university-trained researchers. Applying his concept of critical research to the analysis of COVID-19’s effect on adolescent education can help to further understand the all-encompassing effects of lockdowns and restrictions on academic progress and personal development of students. Researchers and educators are still gathering data to understand how these events have changed the field of education and the abilities of adolescents to engage in rigorous academic work. The inclusion of the voices of students and teachers that exist in classrooms across the world will ensure comprehensive considerations to the very tangible components of adolescent education. (Philip Tepe)

*Here, Tepe examines how Morrell's (2009) article, “Critical Research and the Future of Literacy Education” may apply to a new future that we need to now imagine in the face of the aftermath effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, shutdown, and consequences. With the reemergence into schooling practices once again for adolescents and their teachers, how can hope exist anew?*

### Celebrating Diversity is Action-Based Hope

Through the teaching of multicultural literature, students can be taught about diversity and acceptance regardless of background, culture, color, or creed and even become advocates themselves in their own communities. Diverse literature is one way for us as educators to learn more about the world around us alongside our students, especially in relation to learning about our students’ communities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Some questions to think about while reading multicultural literature with adolescence can include, *how can we create a more inclusive and socially just learning environment in and outside the classroom that extends after students leave the classroom or graduate from a school? How can teachers advocate and help students advocate for themselves in*

*multicultural communities?* As educators of any subject, we could miss great opportunities to communicate on a human level with our students if we ignore the outside world and the realities associated with a sometimes inequitable society and what many students encounter on a daily basis. Inclusive and open classrooms that consider diverse perspectives in the literature we choose, will hopefully lead to stronger learning environments that teach hope, resilience, and celebration of differences. (Julia McGrath)

*In her consideration of which works of literature she would select in her teaching of literature to adolescents, McGrath explores the importance of including diverse author voices into the dominant narrative of school curricula. As Sieben (2018a) notes “a vast majority of canonical and young adult novels include themes of hope, grief, loss, and struggle that can be explored using [hope-filled] strategies” that amplify multicultural voices in the curriculum (p. 23).*

### **Building Hope through Activism**

If teaching activism will bring forth challenges, then why is it important to do so? Equipping our students with a breadth of knowledge and experience could help foster a wave of community leaders and activists. We must also acknowledge privileges afforded to some in our society, especially if we belong to that privileged group. We must acknowledge the myth of the American dream, although “the pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy” (McIntosh, 1989). To realize that not all of our students are privileged should call us to teach for change. We must allow the students to teach us about the things in their lives that may be oppressive or hold them back from being their best selves (Freire, 1993). Educators should want all their students to have equal chances at succeeding in their futures and provide them avenues to express themselves and options for their future. (Nicholas Connolly and Sean Lynch)

*In this excerpt, Connolly and Lynch examine the costs and benefits of pursuing a teaching path for activism and empowerment. They acknowledge the struggles and pushback that may result but emphasize that inequities with respect to privilege and oppression may not be permitted to persist. Through Freire’s (1993) work they engage in problem-posing education practices supporting the notion that teachers and students should be both, teachers and students, in community with one another.*

### **Microaggressions Crush Hope, Microaffirmations Build It**

Microaggressions in the classroom must be replaced by microaffirmations by students and teachers. In his article, “Why Overlook Microaffirmations?” Pittinsky (2016) discusses how microaggressions are often unintentional and can make marginalized groups feel put down and left out. Microaffirmations, in turn, make people feel welcome, optimistic, and confident. This type of positive energy facilitates more engagement in the classroom from students (Pittinsky, 2016). As Leila Christenbury and Ken Lindblom (2016) mention in their text, *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts*, teachers can’t police the whole school, but we can provide a safe space in our classroom where any form of bullying is not tolerated (Christenbury & Lindblom, 2016). There should be a particular emphasis on verbal bullying for ELA teachers as well considering language is vital to our teaching. My belief is that a zero-tolerance towards bullying policy should be adopted by everyone and addressed with students by the teacher in the first couple of days into the school year to avoid these types of outcomes. (Thomas Steinert)

*In his explorations of microaggressions and microaffirmations (Pittinsky, 2016) in the secondary school classroom, Steinert recalls a time during his classroom observations that required him to reflect on what he knew about the deleterious effects of bullying and microaggressions in the classroom and how implementing a classroom culture of microaffirmations instead could (and should) inspire hope in a way that encourages learning to occur in a safe and affirming space.*

### **Fighting for Hope by Advocating for the Freedom to Read**

Not only should controversial issues be taught in schools, but the topic of book banning itself should be discussed as well. The intricacies of the book banning issue contain many opportunities to develop students’ English skills. For instance, students can analyze the contents of the controversial texts, formulate their own opinions on what they read, and defend their stance through debate and supporting evidence. All of these aspects are components of an English language arts secondary school classroom and they encourage student agency, voice, and hope. Book banning, in some form, has been seen throughout history. People have always tried to protect the minds of the youth, but censoring content will only keep them in the dark. The use of frequently banned books and the concept of censorship ironically contains many qualities that coincide well with the facets of an English classroom. (Dean Metacarpa)

*Here, Metacarpa illuminates how fighting book bans is an act of collective hope for students and teachers when they work in community with one another as Freire (1993) calls on us to do. In critically analyzing and debating book bans as a class, both teachers and students can both teach and learn why certain banned books are important to maintain in the critical conversations happening in secondary school ELA classrooms today.*

### **Hope-Filled Feedback Fosters Hope in Student Writers**

The use of strategies that are grounded in positive psychology provides students with a sense of hope and optimism within the classroom. The feelings of hope and optimism effectively impact academic success in relation to test scores, writing improvement and overall classroom engagement. As educators, we can alter the way we approach students, provide feedback and positively influence students in the classroom. Throughout the semester, we have all experienced Dr. Sieben's feedback. Her feedback is always positive, informative, and helpful and I feel the opportunities for revision eliminate many feelings of my own anxiety. Even as an adult, the positive feedback has provided me with a sense of hope and has influenced me to write with an open and authentic mind. (Alexandra Deliso)

*In her reflections on experiencing hope-filled feedback as a graduate student, Deliso shares how giving feedback through a positive psychology, hope-centered framework can make a difference in building students' confidence and engagement in the ELA classroom. She notes that at any educational level, even with adult learners, hope can make the difference between perseverance and abandonment of academic goals. With intentional feedback practices that encourage revision and strengths-based critique, students can grow as writers and learners in uplifting ways (Sieben, 2017).*

### **Hope in Writing Can Translate to Hope in Life**

Overall, to generate skillful and rogued writers, students must understand the stages of what makes good writing. Having an individual voice, maintaining honesty, integrity, and open-mindedness; being real and open, having a flow, showing a silly nature, informing the reader and keeping an audience, giving enough detail and analysis, considering word usage, and using proper grammar are the steps to active and successful writing. When most of these steps are mastered, a student carries these abilities outside of high school and

can use these techniques in their everyday life, showing aptitude in anything they create. Students become more confident in their abilities and even respectfully and beautifully form lavish opinions, and then use evidence to back up their beliefs. Systemically, the SO WHAT moment is a transformative strategy that helps with the writing process and natural thought processes of life. (Joseph Mannion, Jr.)

*As Mannion's conclusion to the lyric essay shows, building hope and confidence in students about their writing can translate into building a general hopefulness and confidence in students about other aspects of life. Past research has shown that writing hope is correlated with and related to life hope (Sieben, 2018b, 2025) and is worthy of pursuit in the ELA classroom with secondary school students in order to build life-affirming skills in adolescents. Given Mannion's conclusion, when we focus on writing processes in the classroom, thought processes of life develop as well.*

### **Concluding Hopes**

We need hope, in all its forms, to get us through the days that teaching feels draining and to empower us through the days that teaching feels fulfilling and invigorating and more. Hope sustains us; it energizes us; it empowers us to do the work alongside our students. It reminds us when we cannot remember our "whys" or our "whats" about teaching exactly what this career is all about. When the noise gets louder, hope jumps in to help us tune it out or to turn our own inner voices up. Hope recalls what we have promised for our students, a more just and equitable society than the one we found when we started. It pushes us to create and innovate solutions to new worldly issues, and to ask the hard questions of our students so that they too are driven by inquiry-based learning that can inform social justice practices. Hope can be one action-plan for success in all classrooms across levels if we continue to hope aloud collectively.

As a cohort of preservice ELA teachers preparing to enter our own classrooms, we envisioned this hope as an energizing force for us and our students. Perhaps it will also be a conversation piece for other preservice and inservice teachers, teacher educators, and accompanying teacher mentors. As a class we have seen that collective hope can be made tangible and is evidenced in teacher education in the form of professional writing, conference presentations, teaching demonstrations, creative lesson planning, mentoring or some other form entirely. We have found that the key is in the process. When the *process* of hope-building in teacher education does much of the work of inspiring future teachers to hope, to act, and to hope again, then

the burden is not always placed on inservice mentor teachers (even though this still may happen to some degree at times) when there is already so much work to be done. When hope is the way, hope is also often the outcome.

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# Oh, Now I Get It... Making Literature More Comprehensible Through Place-based Learning

DIANE E. LANG

COVID-19 limited learners' access to everyday and special place-based experiences such as visiting stores, hotels, restaurants, museums/monuments, and attending shows. Marshall and Pressley (2024) report that COVID-19-related school and community resource closures impacted ninety percent of the world's students. COVID-19 limited place-based experiences and hindered many students' ability to read and consider settings in literature. In this article, I will share a pedagogical project focused on place-based learning experiences and literature. This project highlights how students' ability to read and consider settings in literature connects to their experiences, as well as the implications for teaching literature appreciation and understanding going forward.

Our story starts with a question that became increasingly pressing at the Division of Instructional Support Services at the Orange-Ulster Board of Cooperative Educational Services (OU BOCES) serving the lower Hudson Valley region in New York State. The question was "Why, after the COVID-19 pandemic, were so many students struggling academically during literature units of study?" This question was based on an observation by our Instructional Support Services team that our BOCES, which is a regional state-run educational support center, was inundated post-COVID-19 with requests from teachers and schools for field trips, events, and hands-on experiences offered through a cooperative service (CoSer) that supports districts to enrich teaching and learning through field trips and events. As the BOCES Instructional Support Services team responded to the deluge, we started to hear teachers, especially English teachers, express concerns about how students were struggling to read, learn, and achieve during literature-based units of study.

These educator conversations and interactions led to the development of an instructional project addressing our question. As a follow-up question, we wondered: How can we improve pedagogy to address this struggle? Once the Instructional Support Services team collected regional data and instructional observations, we conducted a pedagogical analysis. Then, we identified themes in the instructional data and observations and drew instructional conclusions. We

then developed pedagogical recommendations. Ultimately, we planned and created a list of NYS visits/trips that build place-based knowledge and literature appreciation.

## Place-based Learning Pedagogy, Experiences, and English Language Arts

Place-based learning pedagogy and experiences offer schools an opportunity to expand students' limited background and working knowledge, which was impacted by COVID-19, facilitating insight and comprehension of texts. Using place-based methods in the English classroom is an innovative approach. Eggersen (2024) called attention to this pedagogy, referring to it as "place-based reading" (p. 2). Further, she contends that as a pedagogy, place-based reading and the teaching of literature form a powerful instructional intersection (triumvirate) of place, text, and constructivist educational theories that value teaching both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, place-based learning broadens the instructional environment, allowing for interaction that also builds socio-emotional skills and cultural knowledge (Evans et al., 2024). Ultimately, place-based pedagogy and experiences help students develop a better understanding and appreciation of literature.

The negative impact of COVID-19 on student learning, particularly in the area of reading, has become widely acknowledged. Schwartz (2025) reports that federal COVID-19 learning loss services contributed to post-pandemic learning recovery and academic progress. However, high-level reading comprehension, which is critical to literature engagement and appreciation, continues to be an area of significant learning loss post-COVID-19 (Schwartz, 2025). Educators are faced with a critical question: How can we accelerate learning recovery in the area of literature-based learning? Vaughn and Parsons (2023) report that "Students need multiple strategies to help them continue to navigate learning and to recover the learning loss they have experienced" (p. 4). Furthermore, Vaughn and Parsons (2023) argue that learning environments in literature must be responsive, intellectually engaging, and flexible.

Another research team, Marshall and Pressley (2024), found that considering the social-emotional dimensions of learning and teaching is critical post-COVID-19 as teachers design pedagogical elements and provide literature instruction. Marshall and Pressley's (2024) research confirms that of Vaughn and Parsons (2023), who report that literature instruction must build "academic skills while simultaneously developing SEL needs" to address social emotional learning (SEL) and literature learning recovery needs

(Vaughn and Parsons, 2023, p. 54). Using place-based learning, teachers can expand students' social-emotional and literature learning repertoires.

## Theoretical Framework

As the Instructional Support Services team leader, I developed a theoretical framework for this pedagogical project centered on foundational and contemporary curriculum, learning, and pedagogical theorization, specifically drawing on the work of John Dewey (1938), Piaget (1971), and Vander Ark, Liebttag, and McClennen (2020).

Dewey's (1938) and Piaget's (1971) foundational constructivist theories of learning emphasize the centrality of experience and interaction to skill development and knowledge expansion. In particular, Dewey (1938) emphasizes the importance of place-based learning and field trips in supporting students' development of knowledge and skills. Piaget's (1971) focus on concrete interaction with objects, being foundational to the manipulation of abstractions and ultimately to pondering worldviews and positionalities, is also an essential consideration.

Place-based learning pedagogy and experiences are a powerful way to address the challenge of expanding students' reading skills and ability to comprehend literature. Vander Ark, Liebttag, and McClennen (2020) theorize "learning that leverages place comes in many forms" (p. 3). Place-based education takes place in the community and tactually, visually, and linguistically explores current and historical cultures, landscapes, towns, and cityscapes, as well as opportunities and interactions. This firsthand learning serves as a foundation for study across the curriculum, especially for reading, the study of literature, and writing. Using this pedagogy, community and learning are connected. Six approaches are central to the place-based learning paradigm: community as classroom, learner-centered, inquiry-based, connecting local to global, design thinking, and interdisciplinary (Vander Ark, Liebttag, and McClennen, 2020).

## Regional Approach: Our Story

The massive increase in requests for Enrichment and Outdoor Education CoSer programming was the first sign that something was happening in our BOCES region, something in the educational landscape had shifted, and teachers noticed. When we asked teachers why they were requesting the increased number of trips and shows, the majority of teachers and school administrators responded that it was due to the challenge of explaining contexts and situations that appeared in literature explored at school. Situations and

contexts in books that had been in the curriculum for years, which previously seemed easy, now seemed oddly challenging for students. Teachers noted that, post-COVID, students struggled to visualize familiar and natural settings—like a zoo, a diner, a Rockette show, or scenes set in forests and rivers.

Teachers reported they wanted to make the literature more comprehensible. Drawing on teacher training designed to integrate Dewey's (1938) and Piaget's (1971) theories into daily teaching, they began to provide concrete experiences that would build an experiential foundation for abstract thinking about the literature and themes explored. Teachers remarked that they were trying to offer students enriching field-based experiences to help them consider the context and action of the stories they were reading. As we asked teachers more probing questions, educators shared that, post-COVID-19, many students seemed to struggle with considering how the context shaped the narrative and larger issues presented in literature. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many students across grade levels appeared to be even more literal in their interpretation of literature. For educators and the BOCES, this was a significant instructional challenge begging for a research-based curriculum, instruction, and pedagogical enhancement to support higher-level thinking and consideration of literature by students.

Requests from teachers calling the Instructional Support Services team at OU BOCES to find out what field trips and events could be provided to enhance students' background knowledge escalated dramatically post-COVID-19. This increased drive from teachers to plan instruction to enhance students' hands-on and place-based experiences and background knowledge post-COVID-19 heavily influenced teachers and school districts to request support. Requests are recorded and tracked in annual spreadsheets maintained by the Instructional Support Services team that arranges the events and trips. The data that follows was drawn from those spreadsheets. The number of events such as guest speakers, theatrical and musical productions, and special workshops, as well as field trips, dramatically increased 157% from 2021-22 to 2024-25. During the 2017-18 school year, there were 22 trips and events. During the 2018-19 school year, there were 21. During the 2019-20 school year, we completed 20 trips and events. About 20 events/trips per year had been the historical trend for the CoSer offering trips and events to schools within the BOCES. Schools closed completely for in-person learning and teaching in March of 2020 due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the fall of 2020, schools reopened and students engaged in hybrid models of learning. During the 2020-21 school year, we ran no trips or events due to COVID-19 mitigation regulations.

For the 2021-22 school year, schools returned to in-person learning, and we planned and hosted seven trips and events. Strikingly, in 2022-23, there was a massive increase in requests, and we planned and executed 42 trips and events. The deluge of student need in the area of building experience and background knowledge to understand texts presented teachers with an enormous challenge. Teachers responded by trying to build place-based knowledge and schema that would help students interpret settings and interactions in literature. The use of events and field trips has become an essential pedagogical element when teaching about and through literature. This pedagogical project documented that in the 2023-24 academic year, there were 142 trips and events, and in the 2024-25 academic year, there were 157 trips and events. This is an extraordinary shift in teaching practices driven by teachers' recognition that students' actual experiences with places and settings are a critical dimension to reading and understanding the larger messages in literature.

Once we noticed the increased volume of requests for events and trips, we sent out open-ended surveys to educators who requested support to ask them to share with us how the events and trips provided impacted student learning. Teachers reported that once the students experienced place-based learning, their answers to complex comprehension and interpretative questions about the literature improved dramatically. During and after the place-based learning experiences, when teachers asked comprehension and interpretative questions about the literature of study, students responded, "Oh, now I get it! When we went on the trip, the story fell into place in my mind," and "Now, I understand the context and what this story is about." Teachers reported a remarkable improvement in reading comprehension and an increased appreciation of literature.

### **Pedagogical Methods to Address this Challenge**

Moving forward post-COVID-19, to expand students' understanding of literature and overcome deficits in experience and place-based learning, English educators could adopt a constructivist, place-based learning perspective when designing literature-based curriculum units. Classroom instruction needs to be enhanced with place-based teaching and learning. Field experiences are essential. Further, socio-emotional concepts need to be explicitly taught. Educators can accelerate literature-based learning recovery by providing place-based learning experiences.

In the following sections, I offer an exploration of a poem by Langston Hughes as a window into what is pedagogically possible. Then, I discuss books

commonly used in New York State schools that incorporate New York State place-based experiences as exemplars.

### **Designing, Planning, and Implementing Place-based Literature Learning Enhancements**

To design place-based learning enhancements for literature curriculum units, one should re-read texts with a focus on place-based concepts and action in the text. Critically notice what place-based concepts and terms might make comprehension of the literary texts difficult, given students' COVID-19-impacted experiences. For example, when preparing lesson plans for a unit centered on the work of Langston Hughes, I re-read his poems with an eye for the place-based concepts essential to meaning-making. Consider the poem "Dreams" by Hughes (1932). English educators could ask themselves, what place-based learning and contextual understanding would be required to explore and locate place-based concepts contained in this poem? As an English educator considers this poem with their students with this pedagogical project in mind, they might consider the following instructional approaches:

- Directly and explicitly discuss place concepts and images in the poem.
- Ask students to identify several examples of words or concepts that are place-based. In this poem, "Dreams," by a famous New Yorker, the words "bird," "field," and "snow" illuminate place-based objects and concepts.
- Ask students to highlight any lines that contain place-based concepts or knowledge that impact their understanding of the poem's meaning.

Further, English educators should pose questions to themselves when planning literature curriculum units, such as, *When considering place in this poem, short story, or book, what concepts or visual/sensorial knowledge is required to understand this piece?* or *What place-based experiences could be designed to help develop an inquiry unit centered on this piece of literature?* Specifically addressing place-based and socio-emotional content will enhance student reading and appreciation of literature. Designing literature curriculum units using place-based pedagogy encourages teachers to use questions to drive literature inquiry and help students connect place-based learning with pieces of literature. Furthermore, having an intellectual theme for place-based literature units will help students engage in the inquiry and connect the place-based learning with the literature of study.

## NYS Visits/Trips that Build Place-based Knowledge and Literature Appreciation

There are many great literature field-based and place-based connections. In this section, I highlight several points that connect to New York State (NYS) possibilities.

***The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.*** Washington Irving's home, Sunnyside, in Tarrytown, New York, is a museum that offers students insight into Washington Irving's life and a New York State point of view. Ideas from Irving's book *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are physically represented in the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow area and at Sunnyside. An instructional theme that a teacher might explore with this book and a field trip to Sunnyside is 'Getting to Know a Founding Father of American Literature.' Two questions to drive inquiry and help students connect place-based learning with this piece of literature are: 1) How does local lore and literature impact local culture? and 2) What makes a nation's literature distinctive?

***The Last of the Mohicans.*** The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in New York City, New York, and a walking tour of the village of Cooperstown, New York, both offer excellent place-based learning that can enrich students' knowledge base to enable them to consider James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. A cross-disciplinary instructional theme for considering *The Last of the Mohicans* is 'Early America, Native Peoples, and New York State.' Questions that drive inquiry and help connect place-based learning to the literature are: 1) What makes a nation's literature distinctive? and 2) How do exterior spaces and natural landscapes help tell a story?

***"Dreams."*** This poem by Langston Hughes works well with a theme centered on 'American Literature during the Harlem Renaissance.' The Langston Hughes House in New York City, New York, offers a rich place-based and socio-emotional learning experience. Further, visiting a barren field during the winter may also help students consider Hughes' famous comparison of dreamlessness and snowy, barren landscapes. A pair of questions that can guide this literary inquiry centered on "Dreams" includes: 1) How can landscape express mood and meaning? and 2) What is the role of nature in American literature?

***Moby Dick.*** There are numerous place-based field experiences educators can explore as part of a literature unit on *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Possibilities include the Melville Home and Museum in Lansingburg, New York, the Whaling Museum in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, whale-watching boat tours in the Atlantic, a visit to an aquarium, or a trip to a seaport, such as the South Street Seaport and Museum in New

York City, New York. A theme that teachers can consider is 'Whaling, Whales, and People.' Key questions guiding inquiry and connections within this literature unit could be: 1) "How does a seascape communicate mood and story in literature? and 2) "How do animals move a story forward?"

***My Side of the Mountain.*** Connon Free Library in Delhi, New York, a hike in a rural park or preserve, or a hike in the rural area around Delhi, New York, all offer place-based learning that would contribute to student comprehension of *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George. An engaging literature unit theme for this book and experiences would be 'Rural Adventures.' Questions to support student inquiry and building semantic connections include: 1) What is the role of nature in American literature? and 2) How is adventure communicated in writing?

***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer/Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*** There are multiple opportunities to ground the study of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in place-based learning. The Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, offers a great deal to see and do. It is possible to visit Mark Twain's octagonal writing studio on the campus of Elmira College in Elmira, New York. Further, a visit to a river and its banks also provides meaningful place-based learning in support of a comprehensive literary appreciation of Twain's books. 'Picturing Life on a River' is a theme that ties this literature unit together. Questions that ground the literature inquiry are: 1) "What is the role of nature in American literature?" and 2) "How is adventure communicated in writing?"

***The Catcher in the Rye.*** Supporting the engaged reading and appreciation of *The Catcher in the Rye*, there are general and specific place-based learning opportunities. More generalized trips to large train stations, such as Grand Central Station or Penn Station in New York City, New York, the Albany-Rensselaer Joseph L. Bruno Station in Rensselaer, New York, or local train stations with large waiting rooms, or taking a train ride, help ground the appreciation of this novel. Central Park, New York City, New York, or large regional parks also offer place-based learning settings that connect scenes and ideas from this novel. A specific place-based learning trip might include a visit to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, New York. Teachers and students might consider 'Transition to Adulthood' as a theme. Questions that can guide the literary exploration are: 1) How can readers use psychological stages of development to interpret the motivations of the characters in a novel? and 2) To what extent does time of day impact what happens in a place, and how does this impact storytelling?

**The Great Gatsby.** Exploring a theme of ‘Life, History, and Music’ is possible when studying F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Trips and events such as seeing *The Great Gatsby* show on Broadway, visiting a historic mansion on the North Shore of Long Island (or perhaps even one on the shore of the Hudson River), and attending a jazz music performance, all help students connect with the settings and messages shared through *The Great Gatsby*. Questions to guide the literary inquiry are: 1) How is social class communicated in literature? and 2) How do interior spaces help tell a story?

**Empire Falls.** The theme ‘Life, Lunch, and Conversation’ is well-suited to a literature unit centered on *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo. A simple trip to a diner for lunch and a tour of the kitchen provides excellent place-based learning relative to this piece of literature. Two questions that a teacher might ask to guide the literary inquiry are: 1) How does linguistic register impact dialogue’s ability to carry a story? and 2) What is notable about interior spaces as settings in literature?

### Lessons Learned from Enacting Place-based Learning

Place-based learning pedagogy and experiences offer English teachers and schools an opportunity to expand students’ COVID-limited background and working knowledge and facilitate insight and comprehension of texts and literature. Using place-based methods allows English teachers to provide interactive, dynamic, engaging, and impactful instructional experiences that will enable students to expand their thinking and knowledge. As a pedagogy, place-based reading and teaching of literature brings together a literary intersection between place and text and constructivist educational theories that value inquiry-focused teaching inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, foregrounding socio-emotional concepts will enhance this place-based pedagogy centered on literature. Ultimately, leveraging place-based pedagogy helps students develop a better understanding and appreciation of literature presented in English class and beyond.

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## ***Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents.* Deborah Appleman, 2024.**

MEG DAVIS ROBERTS, SARA CARDER, JACQUELYN CONSTANTINE, & CECILIA DIGNAN

In this review, we share the perspectives of one teacher educator and three preservice teachers on the fourth edition of Deborah Appleman's text, *Critical Encounters* (2023). As part of our Master of Arts in Teaching program in Adolescence English Education, we read and reviewed Appleman's classic to consider how best to leverage contemporary literary theory in the secondary English language arts classroom.

We, the authors, appreciated this text for its encouragement of perspectival multiplicity and for how it helps literature teachers fulfill the charge to help students "make their way meaningfully through the world" (Appleman, 2023, p. xii). Sara, Cecilia, and Jacquelyn are preservice English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. Meg coordinates the English education program and teaches the methods class, wherein we read *Critical Encounters*. Together, we review the fourth edition.

*Critical Encounters* presents contemporary literary theory for the pedagogue: braiding classroom vignettes with a solid gloss of six potential theoretical lenses and a fastidiously tabbed resource section. Though the heft of the text exists in chapters on theoretical "lenses" with which teachers and students can work—reader-response, Marxism (or "social class"), feminism (or "gender lens"), postcolonialism, critical race, and deconstruction—the preceding and succeeding sections make the case for why secondary ELA might bother with literary theory. The fourth edition introduces critical race theory as one such critical lens, replacing the New Historicism section in previous editions.

Across the scope of the chapters, Appleman works in various school contexts and with a handful of critical "lenses" to demonstrate *how* teachers and students uncover the ideological elements of a text and/or the ideological nature of textual interpretation. Appleman's project is not to produce critical theory

works, but instead to encourage English teachers to help make the invisible workings of ideology in text visible to students and to enhance their capacity for seeing texts more flexibly and pluralistically. Classrooms where students adeptly navigate theoretical realities in literary text are those Appleman believes equip students to better live in our current 21st-century moment: an "increasingly ideological world" where we are "poised precariously within ecological, economic, and political crises" (2023, pp. 3-4). This is not unlike the frequently championed Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World framework with which we equip our students to process texts. Yet, Appleman argues, that with the explicit teaching of theory, such connections open up a greater range of possibilities. She does not posit the teaching of theory as a way to "produce discrete interpretations of individual artifacts," but rather as a deeper, more ethical way to "help interpret, understand, and respond to our lived experiences" (p. 83). As each chapter details a different theory and classroom application, the reader gets to learn *with* the featured classroom teachers and students with whom Appleman worked. The reader does not receive a neatly packaged program for teaching theory, but rather perches in the back of a classroom where it's happening—afforded the privilege of hearing teachers and students process and respond to working with theory, hiccups and triumphs included. As such, the text is committed to practicality and lived experience despite "theory" as its titular subject.

### **Responses to the Fourth Edition**

In the following section, we each take space to write a core reflection on *Critical Encounters*. Such reflections serve to provide a fuller picture of possible engagement with the text, honoring its emphasis on multiple perspectives.

#### ***Sara's Read: Illuminating Multiple Perspectives***

I will admit that before I read Appleman's book, I had reservations about the value of placing "theory" on top of all the other demands on my future students' attention. Indeed, as Appleman notes, students and teachers alike have told her they find it hard to believe that something as abstract as literary theory will feel relevant to students' lived experiences. However, after reading the 4th edition of *Critical Encounters*, I agree with Appleman that, perhaps more than ever before, students need critical tools to read the increasingly bewildering world around them.

Throughout her book, Appleman charts how providing students with theoretical entry points through which to view texts can give them valuable perspectives they might otherwise miss. As Joelle, a student quoted in the book, puts it, "critical lenses are about looking

into elements of the world in different ways [...] seeing different sides of stories only benefits everyone” (p. 145). This and other student reactions to the use of Appleman’s lenses assuaged another reservation I had about incorporating theory into my future classroom. As a preservice teacher who hopes to put student-centered learning front and center in my practice, I worried the teaching of theory might land as an attempt to indoctrinate my students to specific ideologies—quite the opposite of allowing them to make discoveries on their own. Appleman addresses this concern head-on in her brilliant chapter “What We Teach and Why.” Quoting Norman Fairclough who wrote in *Language and Power* (1989) “ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible,” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 85 as quoted in Appleman, 2023, p. 5). Appleman makes the case that if we don’t give students the conceptual tools to understand the hidden cultural messaging that underlies so many works of literature, we run the risk that students will simply absorb said ideologies without the potential for critical thinking. After reading this book—and especially after hearing the excitement of students like Joelle—it is now clear to me what a powerful tool Appleman’s theoretical “lenses” can be for any ELA teacher who hopes to encourage their students to consider multiple perspectives on any given text.

### ***Cecilia’s Read: Behind the Curtain***

As I read Appleman’s *Critical Encounters*, I was reminded of my own experiences as a student and how appreciative I was when teachers included me in my learning rather than put up an Oz-like curtain between the students and the teacher’s intent. Appleman’s book acknowledges this barrier of teacher secrecy through literary theory, mentioned explicitly in the section “Pulling back the curtain,” noting that for best results in active engagement, educators must be transparent with their students. When introducing a reader-response technique to their students, one teacher was surprised when the lesson didn’t go as planned, only to realize they had never clearly communicated to the students what was expected of them. She states that, “All the time it would have been more illustrative and perhaps even more magical without the illusion, if only I had trusted them enough to take them backstage” (2023, p. 35). Ellen’s Reader-Response Diagram in Figure 3.4 adds context to understanding the “backstage” effects of reader-response; that somewhere in the middle of the text and a reader’s response to it is the meaning of that piece of writing.

As a future teacher, I hope to incorporate these ideas in my own classrooms. Utilizing theory as a tool, especially, will transform the classroom experience for students by taking down that curtain and inviting them

to participate. If students are required to trust educators with their learning process, teachers need to trust students with the information provided to them. As I progress in my teaching career, I don’t want to lose my student self, as it will give me insight into student thinking. I want my students to feel involved in their learning with no hidden meanings, as full transparency about what and how we are learning is the focus and foundation of teaching.

### ***Jacquelyn’s Read: Theory and Practice***

A key strength of Appleman’s text for pre-service teachers, such as myself, is her use of real classroom experiences to illustrate her teaching practices. This enabled me to see how educators implement her ideas in actual classrooms. Oftentimes, it feels as though pre-service teachers are exposed to new methods without fully grasping their real-world application. Appleman bridges that gap by presenting scenarios that reveal the reasoning, benefits, and challenges behind her approaches. She shows that teaching is an imperfect, evolving process of finding what works best for each class.

Another notable feature is the inclusion of activity/lesson pages at the end of the book. Instruction and application are two essential components of teaching. As a future educator, I aim to teach my students the key concepts of English while also guiding them to apply these ideas to their lives and academic pursuits. In teacher education, methods can feel meaningless if the “why” and “how” aren’t made clear. Appleman addresses this by meaningfully connecting theory to practice.

We implemented these practices in our own methods class, where students modeled one of Appleman’s activities: using Sharon Olds’ “On the Subway” poem to highlight the historical and racial imbalance between Black and white people. A group of student teachers divided their “students” into groups to examine the poem through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Social Class, and Reader Response. Presenting the poem in this way prompted students to consider uncomfortable yet important truths—aligning with Appleman’s insight that “even presenting textual readings as neutral is in itself a political choice” (p. 11). Rather than avoiding the poem’s uncomfortable aspects, students engaged with the poem from multiple perspectives and constructed varied interpretations.

### ***Meg’s Read: Rendering the Invisible Visible***

I’d read the third edition of *Critical Encounters* in my second-to-last year of teaching high school English language arts. Although I never fully implemented the heft of what Appleman posits, I fretted over the

monotheoretical way I'd been teaching texts in my classroom—i.e., relying on undiagnosed reader-response and New Criticism, without articulating these labels. My first read prompted me to more explicitly address issues of race and class in my yearly teaching of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in my junior American literature course. Read: stopping for discussion and analysis of Jordan's "we're all white here" line in the text's climax (p. 130), the cursory line describing a limousine with "modish" Black people inside (p. 69), or the class status of characters who met their life's end and those who didn't. While this was not a full embrace of the lenses as Appleman advocates, I felt better able to align myself with modeling the kind of careful and socially-conscious reading I so earnestly wanted to practice with my students.

Similar to Appleman's own experience, "it was only when I began teaching about teaching that I started making response-based teaching explicit with my own version of 'naming the parts'" (Appleman, 2023, p. 35). Working to articulate pedagogical content knowledge in my preservice teacher classes – to say what, how, and why something was happening – further solidified the vitality of this text. As I worked to encourage savvy and well-equipped future ELA teachers, my understanding of teaching as a *craft* grew. Appleman quotes Scholes (2001)'s notion of a "crafty reader," a goal for the students we work with and for: "As with any craft, reading depends on the use of certain tools, handled with skill. But the tools of reading are not simply there, like a hammer or chisel. They must be acquired through practice" (Scholes, 2001, p. xiv, as quoted in Appleman, 2023, p. 14). This text, and by extension Appleman's critical lenses, for their theoretical complexity and clarity, are tools for the ELA teacher. Further, and perhaps even more so, for the ELA teacher educator. In the work of making "the invisible visible" lies teacher education, deep textual interpretation, and the vitality of this text.

### A Note on the Addition of CRT

While we appreciated the addition of critical race theory to the fourth edition—particularly noting the opportunity it offers to read canonical white texts, which are often required in our curricula, with greater criticality. However, in our current political climate, discussions of race in the classroom require a more expansive and nuanced approach. Appleman anticipates this need and distinguishes CRT from antiracist teaching.<sup>1</sup> We appreciate her distinction and also believe that approaching CRT as a "lens," as Appleman posits it, requires more adept tools from the fields of antiracist and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

To that end, we turned to Carlin Borsheim-Black and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides *Letting Go Of Literary Whiteness* (2019), which articulates and exemplifies an explicitly antiracist stance toward literature instruction. They explore teachers' "ambivalence about teaching race via literary study" (2019, p. 20) and grapple with the emotional and pedagogical weight such discussions carry in today's classrooms. As such, antiracist literature instruction offers a more thoroughly developed pedagogical approach—one that can both reinforce and critically complicate the use of a CRT "lens."

Additionally, Lorena Germán's *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices* (2021) offers a more robust and grounded framework for how to best situate CRT and the conversations it elicits in educational settings. In short, Germán positions CRT as one element within a broader constellation of culturally responsive strategies. While Appleman's suggestion that students take the critical race lens "on and off" in tandem with other lenses (such as gender and social class) may make antiracist teaching more approachable to a wider population of students, we argue that meaningful, sustained engagement with race in literature requires sturdier scaffolding. Borsheim-Black, Sarigianides, and Germán provide us with resources to help us move beyond theory and into practice, ensuring that race is not just a lens, but acknowledged as a lived and responsive reality in classroom dialogue.

### Conclusion and Ideas for Future Use

Reading it from our different stances, we enthusiastically recommend *Critical Encounters* to a wide range of audiences: current and preservice ELA teachers, teacher educators, and any educator curious about making the ideological elements of texts more visible to their students. We all highlight the treasure trove of a resource section affixed to the end of the book, replete with lesson plans and ideas — it is immensely user-friendly and practical, taking the question of application seriously and to full fruition. As future teachers, we plan to frequently utilize Appleman's text and introduce theoretical lenses into our classrooms, inviting students to expand their conceptual toolboxes. We also plan to extend Appleman's approach to lenses not covered in the book, particularly queer theory, ecocriticism, and critical disability. As Meg looks ahead to future semesters working with preservice teachers and Appleman's text, she plans to encourage a critical lens "demo lesson" in methods, closing the circle on bringing theory into practice.

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## End Notes

1. “The primary goal of using CRT for interpreting texts as part of a larger literature curriculum is significantly different from its role in a specifically antiracist curriculum. Using CRT in an antiracist curriculum is a powerful way of reading texts and worlds; using CRT as part of a multiple theoretical approach demonstrates that it is not the only way” (Appleman, 2023, p. 105).



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## Redefining & Advocating for Young Adult Literature in the Classroom through Percival Everett's *James* (2024).

JAKE PROVENZANO

*"[Fiction isn't] so unlike religion or history, for that matter. I pulled the book from the bag... the smell of the pages was glorious. In the country of Westphalia. I was somewhere else. I was not on one side of that damn river or the other. I was not on the Mississippi. I was not in Missouri"* (Everett, 2024, p. 73).

Art and popular culture seldom exist in vacuums; they are direct reflections and byproducts of the cultural conditions in which they were created. In that spirit, the above passage from Percival Everett's 2024 novel, *James*, highlights the power and transformative potential of literature, especially within the context of the marginalized experiences of the titular character as he navigates the pre-Civil War South as a runaway enslaved person.

Notably, the freedom afforded by the ability to read and write, championed by the novel, mirrors the subversive yet impactful history of young adult literature for historically marginalized groups. PBS Voices (2020) shares the history of young adult literature as reflecting the elements of teenage life experienced outside of traditional norms, including angst, drinking, and sexual activity. Therefore, young adult novels can be seen as historically significant in their provision of voice and agency to the experiences of young people who are often unacknowledged by popular culture yet are synonymous with the human experience. Kitchener (2021) argues these texts have resonated with adults and young people alike through their authentic representation of what it means to come of age within a given social reality—despite elements of our experiences and identities our cultural institutions reject and invalidate—a process by which each of us is continuously undergoing. When any reader, particularly students collectively and individually developing a sense of self, can see themselves in a text, their engagement becomes authentic and meaningful. Here, reading can serve as a space for healthy and affirming growth.

The history of book banning within young adult literature suggests the genre speaks to marginalized

experiences. Given that these texts work to validate that which opposes social, political, and economic institutions, those in power have sought to minimize their influence through policy and direct removal. *Storied*, a wing of PBS (2020), shares an overview of the history of book banning in United States culture. The texts targeted by book bans are connected by providing empowering representation to marginalized groups and experiences. Namely, BIPOC & LGBTQA+ experiences, topics of sexual autonomy and/or abuse, and questioning of authority and/or religion have been historical subjects of banning. Uncoincidentally, these are the aforementioned topics that provide opportunities for visibility, representation, voice, and agency for young people during transformative periods of growth. The cultural moment of banning such texts is essential for teachers of language and literature to consider, as it directly impacts how curriculum and instruction can reach and serve our students.

In this space, where the intersection of texts speaks to the heart of personal growth and validates the experiences and voices of historically marginalized identities, Percival Everett's *James* can be introduced as a relevant text for contemporary English students. The novel is a retelling of Mark Twain's canonical text, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The primary distinction between the two texts is that *James* is told entirely from the perspective of Huck's enslaved companion and father figure in the original text, Jim. Immediately, this presents an opportunity for a text-pairing study. There are countless avenues through which this text could be meaningfully explored in ELA Classrooms, especially when placed in conversation with the original text; from *James*' passion for reclaiming voice through reading and writing, the concepts of code-switching and the role of African-American Vernacular English in preserving safety yet upholding stereotypes for the Black community, historical and contemporary relevance in the topics of race, class, American identity, and the comparisons of rhetoric and language toward *James*' character.

Simply put, *Huckleberry Finn* is synonymous with the dominant United States literary canon. Through the embracing of the American Spirit as a means to actualize freedom and unity, the text has transcended time and is hailed as a classic on many lists of "essential" novels a reader will encounter. While the text certainly subverts the social reality of its time through the promotion of interracial familial connections and critique of American schooling and materialism, the novel has become inextricably connected to the American literary canon, which has been utilized to justify the minimizing of voices outside of hegemonic norms (Toliver & Hadley, 2021). Additionally, many of the portrayals of characters of color, particularly Jim, have

been criticized as upholding stereotypes and caricatures.

For example, the manner in which both *Huck Finn* and *James* introduce the former's titular character provides insight into the potential of a comparative analysis in secondary ELA classrooms. In both texts, James—referred to as “Jim” in Twain's original work, and abbreviation that calls into question notions of humanity and ownership of identity in and of itself when compared to Everett's reimagining—is first introduced through a prank at the hands of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, the traditional, white, rebellious, literary heroes who have long served as a stand in for those in the margins for their ostracization and rejection of social standards. In Twain's original work, Jim's first spoken words are in response to Huck and Tom's movements, as follows: “Say, who is you? Whar is you? Dog my cats ef I didn' hear sumf'n. Well, I know what I's gwine to do: I's gwine to set down here and listen tell I hears it agin” (Twain, 1884, p. 6). Tom and Huck proceed to joke at his expense before continuing with their adventure. Most notably, Huck's initial narration of Jim is laden with the N-word, describing Jim and his role in the culture of enslaved people as a quasi-shamanistic truth-holder of African American folklore. Before moving forward, it is important to note Twain's intentions. Huck's language is designed to expose the biases that plagued American culture and youth during this time period, and Jim's speech, cultural connections, and position were intended to provide accurate representations of Black culture. These qualities, coupled with Jim's integral role in the plot, both speak to the role of racism in America's cultural realities and were built upon in Everett's reimagining. Nonetheless, this passage alone provides several meaningful discussion opportunities in the secondary ELA classroom.

Prompts surrounding Huck and Twain's racist narration, stereotyping, and creation of a minstrel-coded caricature of Jim, regardless of authorial intent, can provoke students to consider the impact of representation on readers in the literary canon. Furthermore, comparative exercises with Everett's introduction of James, in which the titular character states, “those little bastards were hiding out in the tall grass... it always pays to give white folks what they want, so I stepped into the yard and called out” (Everett, 2024, p. 1). In Everett's rendition, James is fully aware of his position in the narrative and social reality. He is not the victim of the mischief of an ignorant child, but a man seeking solitude yet prompted to engage in the norms of racial hegemony in order to preserve his image and increase his chances of survival. Evidently, Everett's choice to shift James' agency introduces thematic ideas of code switching and self-protection through performative respectability politics. However, Everett

primarily provides ownership and humanity for James, which are fundamental to the purpose and message of the novel. With that in mind, these passages, and countless other mirrored situations throughout the text, can be utilized to add nuance to student understanding of how we navigate oppressive systems, the impact of representation, and the significance of writing and storytelling in either upholding or rejecting marginalizing social realities.

Consequently, *James* can be viewed as a culturally responsive and affirming text to reignite the spirit of the original text. S.R Toliver and Heidi Lyn Hadley (2021) thoughtfully examine and advocate for counternarratives surrounding the traditional literary canon, arguing that “untying knots of dominance can be uncomfortable, as we grapple with ways we have been complicit in maintaining and often reifying dominance... selecting texts is inherently a political act” (p. 14). By transforming “Jim,” whose existence has been defined as a tangential argument in a White-centric narrative, into “James,” Everett provides power and agency to the character and, by proxy, readers of color. *James* fundamentally exists to untie knots of dominance by centering historically marginalized voices and advocating for inherent value in voice. Across different moments in the text, James reflects, “Then I wrote my first words. I wanted to be certain they were mine... in this notebook I would reconstruct the story I had begun, the story I kept beginning, until I had a story... Still, I had my pencil. I had a habit of periodically touching it through the fabric of my pocket, for comfort” (2024, pp. 55 & 196). The comfort, ownership of identity, and resistance through language expressed by James in these passages embody the potential of language education and the nonconformist ethos of the original text. Therefore, *James* amplifies the original spirit of *Huck Finn* by extending these messages in a manner that acknowledges the gravity of the historical context encountered in both texts and intentionally empowers historically underrepresented voices.

Furthermore, a unit of study that connects *James* to *Huck Finn* represents an opportunity to exercise contemporary practices in text pairings, which are promoted as culturally responsive and relevant ways to engage students in reading canonical texts. Brooke Eisenbach et al. (2018) share that “complementing classic titles with contemporary texts can provide a foundation for teaching strategies that reach beyond academic standards. In pairing diverse texts, teachers are providing safe spaces for middle-level readers to engage in conversation and reflection centered in uncovering the identities, experiences, and perspectives of themselves and others” (p. 34). In the case of *James* and *Huck Finn*, the identities, experiences, and perspectives become self-defined for the

characters—promoting this potential for students. Additionally, the philosophy of text pairings solidifies the untying of dominant, White-centered narratives, as expressed by Toliver and Hadley (2021) and upheld by engaging solely in Huckleberry’s story, as students are given the opportunity to consider and critically reflect on the voices and experiences of marginalized characters. Jason Griffith (2018) shares that “texts talk to each other, and can be purposefully arranged in pairings to provide opportunities for students to develop text-text, text-self, and text-world connections” (p. 39). *Huck Finn* and *James* are designed to be placed in conversation; their mutual admiration for each other through the extension of theme, voice, and the power of writing offers students the opportunity to see themselves in this conversation as the sole owners of their identity and voice. For example, framing a comparison between James’ introduction in each text can promote discussions of agency, perspective, representation, and identity within marginalizing social structures.

Due to the conceptual complexity, historical nuance, and graphic nature of *James*, the text may not initially appear to be a young adult novel. However, the previously discussed text-pairing opportunities establish a foundation for the novel’s place in the contemporary ELA classroom and its status as a relevant young adult text. In discussing the removal of African American representation in young adult literature, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2020) reflects: “beyond notable exceptions, the field of young adult literature and study has largely left Black scholarship behind... we have endured so much, from slavery to colonialism... our struggle continues... the creativity of Black storytellers is infinite” (p. 13). The celebration of the human spirit as expressed through African American creativity and voice in the face of historical marginalization embodies the spirit and message of *James*. The titular character writes:

My name is James. I wish I could tell my story with a sense of history as much as industry. I was sold when I was born and then sold again. My mother’s mother was from someplace on the continent of Africa, I had been told or perhaps simply assumed. I cannot claim to any knowledge of that world or those people, whether my people were kings or beggars [...] I can tell you that I am a man who is cognizant of his world, a man who has a family, who loves a family, who has been torn from his family, a man who can read and write, a man who will not let his story be self-related, but self-written... With my pencil, I wrote myself into being. I wrote myself to here. (p. 93)

James’ recount of his story as a reflection of Black history connects deeply with Thomas’ (2020) recount of African American art—and how it has been notably removed from canonical conversations—in conversation

with this history. As James reclaims his full name from the two-dimensional “Jim,” he represents generations of African Americans who utilized reading, writing, and communicating to provide voice and agency. While this passage is in stark contrast to the original novel’s portrayal of Jim as a caricature, it builds upon *Huck Finn*’s spirit of language as an authentic expression of identity in a way that positions James as in control of his voice, rather than a product of circumstance. Once again, comparing this to the original characterization of Jim becomes a means to discuss the inherent humanity associated with written language, particularly for those pertaining to marginalized groups.

In this passage, James is characterized by unapologetic humanity and power over his circumstances, despite severely oppressive circumstances. Sharing these perspectives and the potential of the human spirit and language with young learners is essential, especially for students of color who have been underrepresented in canonical literature. Similarly, Sybil Durand (2016) advocates for such texts to be taught in schools, as students of color are given opportunities to read “stories that privilege their cultural perspectives. Of course, books with diverse characters help all readers consider multiple perspectives about what it means to be a young person living in the world today” (para 1). Once again, *James* exists to privilege the cultural perspectives of Black experiences in a nuanced, authentic manner that provides voice and agency to readers. Therefore, while the novel may not read as a traditional “young adult” novel, its cultural significance and potential for embracing perspectives and marginalized voices align the text with the spirit of young adult literature. With these concepts in mind, *James* possesses opportunities for healing and growth through literature. In Larsen Walker et al.’s (2020) study of bibliotherapy for students struggling with adverse childhood experiences, they determine that providing students with specific frameworks of resilience can actualize meaningful healing and growth for vulnerable populations. The way *James*’ titular character utilizes language to make meaning of and empower his ownership of experiences embodies resilience—and can be one of many angles explored to make meaning of this text in the classroom as a framework for students.

In connection with the previous discussion surrounding the ethos of young adult literature, *James* represents a thoughtful text that carries such value. Placing *James* in conversation with the history of the banning of its source material provides a powerful reminder of the relationship between censorship, structures of power, and language. The simple act of reimagining *Huck Finn* immediately places *James* in conversations of banned books. *James*’ position as a banned book may be overlooked as a continuation of

legacy and literary tradition, but is meaningfully assessed when considering the purpose of the novel as one of agency, self-actualization, and power through language, storytelling, and control of narrative for marginalized groups. Everett does not view Twain and *Huck Finn* with contempt—quite the opposite, as seen in his acknowledgement of the writer in the back of his novel. It is possible that Everett sees in *Huck Finn*'s portrayal of Jim what those who have historically banned the book do—an opportunity to reclaim humanity, culture, and identity for those who have been historically silenced. In this light, Everett's novel is not a rejection of Twain's writing, but a reimagined passing of the baton that reminds a generation that faces a resurgence of book banning that their voice and identity hold intrinsic power. For these themes alone, *James* holds a home in any secondary ELA classroom, as the novel carries the potential to exemplify writing as growth, ownership of identity, and healing for students.

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## JAKE PROVENZANO

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## ***Workshopping the Canon for Democracy and Justice.* Mary E. Styslinger, 2023.**

MICHELE M. DENSON

*“Teachers who workshop for democracy and justice are working to create a different kind of society – both within the classroom and beyond the classroom doors.”*

In *Workshopping the Canon for Democracy and Justice*, Mary E. Styslinger (2023) offers a compelling and practical guide for English teachers to examine their curriculum through the lens of equity and inclusion. This book serves as a resource for educators seeking to reimagine their practice by pairing traditional, canonical texts with diverse, contemporary and socially-just literature. Grounded in the belief that literary instruction is inherently political, Styslinger delivers concrete strategies to help students engage with the world through reading and writing, fostering critical thinking and civic agency. Her call to action is clear: educators must create opportunities for students to identify and challenge bias, question accepted narratives, and develop their own voices.

The book aligns with a growing body of scholarship that challenges traditional approaches to teaching canonical texts. Scholars Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014) and Dyches (2018) emphasize the importance of teaching literature through a critical lens. They encourage teaching students how to analyze canonical texts and reflect on the dominant ideologies that they convey. Styslinger’s work contributes to the broader conversation about integrating social justice in education by offering an approachable model for teachers to implement this pedagogy into practice. Her work also resonates with the arguments of Toliver and Hadley (2021), who call for a disruption of the canonical hegemony and advocate for more inclusive, justice-driven curricula. In her workshop model, Styslinger elucidates that an inclusive curriculum does not always mean the removal of classic literature, but rather rebalancing texts to explore the canon under the context of power, identity, and critical analysis.

In her introduction, Styslinger outlines the turbulent events that compelled her to revise her earlier book, *Workshopping the Canon* (2017). While she

references the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, her true catalyst lies in the racial justice movements following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Michael Brown. She expresses, “While we now have a coronavirus vaccine, there is no immunization against discrimination” (Styslinger, 2023, p. xi). Her revised book directly responds to this social reckoning, arguing that English classrooms must be sites of resistance, reflection, and reform. The goal is not just to teach books but to empower students to understand how literature influences and is influenced by systems of power and identity.

Each chapter opens with an excerpt from a well-known young adult novel by a historically marginalized author. Curated selections from award-winning works, *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), *The Poet X* (Acevedo, 2018), and several others, foreground themes of democracy and justice, encouraging teachers to make space for new voices in the classroom. As a character from *The 57 Bus* (Slater, 2017) intimates the powerful sentiment, “Never let your obstacles become more important than your goal” (as cited by Styslinger, 2023, p. 12). The author’s careful and effective structure introduces readers to a range of accessible texts that both complement and subvert the traditional canon. As a recurring message, she suggests that student autonomy through the workshopping classroom reinforces the skills necessary to actively participate in a democratic society – one where change is essential.

**Chapter 1: How and Why to Workshop.** In the first chapter, Styslinger critiques the traditional teacher-centered model and emphasizes the conditions for creating a student-centered workshopping environment. Styslinger suggests that an authentic, responsive classroom experience provokes student responsibility and agency. The author continuously reinforces that the workshop is an essential learning structure, as it recreates the conditions of democracy, preparing students for their role in society. This first chapter challenges readers to envision their classroom as a space where difficult questions are examined, authentic learning experiences take shape, and critical thinking becomes a tool for fostering positive societal change.

**Chapter 2: Planning to Teach.** This chapter includes important subsections for teachers. “What We Teach” emphasizes the importance of representation, and “How We Teach” offers thoughtful advice on challenging students through questioning. Throughout this chapter, the message is clear that *what* and *how* teachers teach matter. It offers practical suggestions and encouragement for adopting a culturally responsive curriculum and demonstrates the importance of reinforcing skills through pairing contemporary texts

with older, canonical texts. In one specific example, she examines the theme, “What is the American Dream?” Styslinger proposes that classrooms explore F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (1925) *The Great Gatsby* alongside Ibi Zoboi’s (2021) *American Street*. The chapter provides several other helpful ideas, with lists of supplemental and independent reading texts ready to incorporate into English classrooms.

**Chapter 3: Fostering Critical Response.** The focus of the reader’s background for making meaning is explored. The author repeats encouragement for teachers, “Workshopping teachers help students become more conscious of their identities and experiences as constructed within specific power relations” (Styslinger, 2023, p. 30). Chapter three reminds teachers to choose novels carefully and illuminates the use of diverse supplemental texts. Styslinger gives specific examples and supports teachers with additional resources that reflect a wide range of unique student experiences. Workshopping allows students to practice the skill of critical literacy through analyzing the author’s message, its function, and its purpose. Additionally, the literary experience is employed for personal reflection and to understand the perspectives of others.

**Chapter 4: Reading *With* and *Against*.** The fourth chapter offers several essential resources for teachers to facilitate critical analysis of text and presents practical tools with student handouts and activities. Within this chapter, teachers seeking simple, producible handouts can find suggestions in “Probable Passage Activity,” which guides students in making predictions, and “Somebody Wanted But So,” a summary strategy, as well as “It Says–I Say” for developing inference and reflective skills. The chapter emboldens teachers to provide juxtaposing counter-texts that critically analyze belief systems and biases in literature. The chapter also advocates that students be taught to reflect on canonical texts, to question and expose how ideas presented in texts can influence readers.

**Chapter 5: Seeing Text Critically.** This section reinforces lessons or units to promote critical thinking and scholarly analysis. It reflects on the various lenses and communicates the importance of teaching students to become scholars by teaching literary theory. The chapter gives a brief overview of the uses of literary criticism and is an excellent resource for teachers who need a refresher in literary analysis. It includes brief explanations of reader response and meaning-making, New Criticism, Marxism, feminist criticism, queer theory, critical race theory, critical disability theory, and several others. The chapter explains how workshopping these various forms of criticism can help students to reflect on literature’s messages through unique lenses.

Workshopping in this way empowers students to develop awareness of representation, socio-cultural interpretations, and to engage in impactful discourse.

**Chapter 6: Talking Back and Beyond.** This is another chapter that equips teachers with key resources for fostering a classroom where student voice is recognized and encouraged. It supports teachers with sample questions to advance student participation and guide agency. There is an opportunity for teachers to replicate and provide handouts for their students. In addition, Styslinger lists guiding questions for teachers who may be unfamiliar with Socratic circles and encourages the relevance of active discussion through student questioning.

**Chapter 7: Writing for Change.** Although much of the book focuses on reading and discussion, the seventh chapter specifically lifts the written word as a powerful vehicle for change. Styslinger lists and explains the various methods of writing experiences within the classroom (narrative, description, compare and contrast, classification, cause–and–effect, and others). This chapter explains the structures and strategies for powerful written experiences for students. She reminds the readers that “All writing is a political act, and when we write toward justice, we raise critical consciousness” (Styslinger, 2023, p. 88). Writing allows students to take direct action to address concerns about society and generates a concrete tool by which they may promote change.

**Chapter 8: Supporting Inquiry and Agency.** The concluding chapter repeats emphatically the message of promoting student agency and preparing students with the skills necessary for social change; this chapter further focuses on providing research opportunities and elevating action. It reminds the reader of the overarching theme of promoting transformation. She advances, “When we embrace social justice in our classrooms, we declare that we’re responsible for improving our world” (Styslinger, 2023, p. 101). In reading the final chapter, teachers are challenged to provide their students with literacy experiences through workshopping canonical, contemporary young adult literature as well as supplemental texts for understanding our world and its complexities. In her final thoughts, Styslinger encourages her audience of teachers to be agents of change, along with their students, for a better world.

One of the book’s standout features is its collection of detailed sample units, where Styslinger thoughtfully pairs canonical texts with diverse, contemporary works. Each unit includes thematic connections, essential questions, and a range of multi-genre supplemental texts, making them both rich in content and ready for classroom use. Especially valuable is the appendix, which organizes this material

into a clear, efficient grid that busy educators can easily navigate. While every component is carefully crafted, the inclusion of critical questions is especially powerful, serving as a practical springboard for inquiry-based learning and meaningful classroom discussion.

Styslinger writes from a place of reflection and humility. She acknowledges her own evolving understanding of privilege and pedagogy, stating, “I need to listen more, talk less, think harder, and do better” (p. xiii). This stance invites educators, particularly those who may be newly engaging with anti-racist teaching, to join her in ongoing reflection and growth. At the same time, it’s important to acknowledge that this framing may not resonate equally with all educators, especially teachers of color who have long been engaged in justice-centered work. Nonetheless, the author’s dedication to advancing equity and providing a critical reflection of teaching literature remains clear and intentional. Grounded in her commitment to social justice and reflective practice, the book offers insights, strategies, and practical tools, inviting educators to rethink canonical texts through the lens of democracy and social justice.

*Workshopping the Canon for Democracy and Justice* (2023) is a call to act with courage and purpose, and especially resonates with today’s challenging political climate. Styslinger’s workshop model centers student autonomy and positions learners as critical readers and writers. It reminds educators that literature instruction is never neutral, and that thoughtful, justice-driven teaching can prepare students to succeed academically and participate meaningfully in a democratic society. Styslinger offers encouragement, structure, and illuminates critical challenges to the traditional English language arts curriculum, making this book a valuable companion for teachers ready to examine what they teach, why they teach it, and who gets to be heard in their classrooms.

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As an NCTE affiliate, we are aligned with the vision, mission, and positions of our parent organization and work toward manifesting these ideas to support the educators of New York State. Towards that end, we also consult with and advise the New York State Education Department on matters of mutual concern. In addition, NYSEC maintains communication with national and local affiliates, often collaborating on projects and workshops. Our awards program highlights the contributions of teachers, pre-service candidates, and administrators at the elementary, middle, secondary, and collegiate levels, recognizes exceptional programs and professional collaborations, and celebrates student writing.

For over 70 years, NYSEC has promoted and delivered exceptional professional development to educators in New York State, and we continue to do so both in person and virtually. We advocate for students and teachers and promote collaboration among English Language Arts and literacy educators as well as among content area teachers. By encouraging Pre-K to college articulation, NYSEC supports its membership through conferences, workshops, publications, and digital communication.

Finally, to echo the objectives of NYSEC's founders, NYSEC strives to develop an understanding of the problems that confront English teachers of New York State at all levels, to provide unity of action in the solution of our common problems, to promote discussion and study on a local, regional, and statewide basis, with the intention of increasing the understanding of the best practices in English teaching, and to strengthen the English program in New York State so that the needs of our students may be met most effectively.



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