

The New Adventures of Old Literature: Modern Classics and Inquiry Circles

Wisconsin English Journal's Associate Editor partners with a middle school teacher to investigate the definition of a "classic."

In our last installment of [The New Adventures of Old Literature](#), we left [Italo Calvino](#) (1999), an Italian author and literary critic, dangling on the edge of his own question, [Why read the classics?](#) In that column, we vacillated between [Calvino's reasons to read the classics](#) and [sociocultural theories of new literacies](#) in order to grapple with frequently asked educational questions such as *What makes a classic a classic?*, *What makes new literacies new?*, and *How can I teach great literature in ways that resonate with the students in my classes today?* In that column, we extended Calvino's question of *Why read the classics?* to *Why teach the classics?*, and we looked at issues of power, identity politics, and self-representation.

This time on *The New Adventures of Old Literature*, I bring into question whether a classic needs to be "old" in the first place. In answering this question, I consider what would make a "modern classic" in this age of fast-paced social networks and rapidly changing faux realities. I then turn to the power of inquiry circles as a pedagogical structure for students to connect with literature and answer the "essential questions" (Tatum, 2009, p. 91) of our time.

The column ends with a section written by Caitlin Rosemeyer, who further describes inquiry circles, and provides examples of three inquiry study units around modern classics for adolescents. Caitlin is a 7th grade English teacher at Iowa-Grant Middle School in the [Iowa-Grant School District](#). Previously, Caitlin worked as a 7th and 8th grade English teacher in Daytona Beach, Florida, and a 6th grade Reading, Language Arts, and Social Studies teacher in McFarland, Wisconsin. She is a track and cross country coach, and enjoys playing the piano.

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As always, the goal of this column is to provide us with a space for thinking about "new literacies" in relation to the timeless characteristics that great literature offers. And as always, I invite you, dear reader, to [submit your own ideas and experiences](#) about how you've taught a great piece of literature in new and innovative ways. This could mean a short description of how you incorporate new technologies into your teaching, or it could mean how you use literature to help your students critically engage with the complexities of the world we live in today.

FAQ: Does a Classic need to be Old?
Answer: No

As you might recall from our last episode, Calvino (1999) was speaking in terms of each of us having our own classic, "a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it" (p. 7). It is within this definition of having "your own" classic that Calvino writes:

*I do not believe I need to justify my use of the term 'classic' which makes no distinction in terms of antiquity, style or authority. [...] For the sake of my argument here, what distinguishes a classic is perhaps only a **kind of resonance** we perceive emanating from an ancient or modern work, but one **which has its own place in a cultural continuum**. (p. 7, emphases added)*

Whether a piece of literature is ancient or modern, it can only resonate with our minds and souls in a present moment. We read and resonate with a text using the knowledge and impulses that are with us today, not in the future, not in the past. While past experiences, cultural norms, or ideal futures always are circulating as we interpret meaning, our fields of understanding are situated in very specific social and cultural settings at the moment of interpretation (Gee, 2001, 2008; Smagorinsky, 2001). That's why re-reading a classic can provide a completely different experience from its original impressions, depending on your time of life, your distractions, your ability to play with meaning, your levels of empathy or creativity.

Perversely, those good old classics that are eternal and enduring, live in the moment. When readers perceive a certain kind of resonance emanating from the text, it's largely because of what they are thinking about and dealing with in the here and now. This makes it possible for "old" literature to remain timelessly fashionable in a present moment, because the reader is bringing current issues of concern to words written long ago. Conversely, "new" literature can take on a classic air if it resonates with us enough to engender discourse and questions that can last beyond the here and now. In Calvino's (1999) terms: "A classic is a work which constantly generates a [pulviscular](#) cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off" (p. 6).

So the answer to the question of whether a classic needs to be old is, *no*. However, this is not the end of the story. At least according to Calvino (1999), what distinguishes a *classic* is not simply its resonance to the here and now for a mere individual, but also the sense that the book, old or new, has a place on a "cultural continuum" (p. 7). It is to this idea of "cultural continuum" in a culture that is based on disjointed (and often digital) realities that I now turn.

FAQ:

What Makes a "Modern" Classic?

Answer: When It Stretches Time and Puts Reality in Perspective

The fact remains that reading the classics seems to be at odds with our pace of life, which does not tolerate long stretches of time, or the space for humanist [otium](#) [i.e., peace or leisure]; and

also with the eclecticism of our culture which would never be able to draw up a catalogue of classic works to suit our own times. (Calvino, 1999, p. 8)

We're living in a world that is incredibly fast-paced in terms of how quickly information can travel. Whether the information is true or not is far from the question. In some ways, when we see it, we believe it – or at the very least, the information in question gets around quickly enough for it to create its own kind of reality.

A case in point is the Shirley Sherrod story. Shirley Sherrod was a U.S. Department of Agriculture official who gave a [full speech](#) at an NAACP dinner. A [piece of this speech](#) was taken out of context by a conservative activist Andrew Breitbart, and posted on his website, [biggovernment.com](#). In the decontextualized portion of her speech, Sherrod talked about a time when she was thinking about discriminating against a white farmer. Not shown in this decontextualized and edited snippet was Sherrod's purpose for sharing this story in the first place: that she has used all of the experiences in her life, including the fact that her father was killed by a member of the KKK, to [move beyond prejudice](#).

With lightening speed on the blogosphere and YouTube, Sherrod was chastised by the NAACP, the White House, the press in general, and socially conservative radio and cable news shows. Sherrod resigned at almost the same nanosecond that the NAACP, the White House, the press in general, and other blogospheres backtracked and made corrections and apologies around the original misinformation.

My point in bringing up the Sherrod story in a column about teaching great literature is to highlight the fact that we, as a culture, are not thinking that deeply or carefully anymore. Instead, we're fast-tracking and creating our own realities based on what we catch a glimpse of on TV or download without question. Sometimes I have the sense that, in general, our students' educational *scope* is deteriorating. We may have *sequence* nailed, especially in the elementary years (first you learn this, and then you learn that). But what of our overall range of thinking? What of our scope to reach beyond [Dancing with the Stars](#) or [America's Funniest Home Videos](#)? What of our capacity to closely

follow something beyond the escapades of LadyLindsayGagaLohan? As [Van Jones](#) (2010) puts it:

Anyone with a laptop and a flip camera can engineer a fake info-virus and inject it into the body politic. Those with cable TV shows and axes to grind can concoct their own realities. (p. 10)

We have data, and lots of it, to look at, to listen to, to take at face value, and to manipulate in new ways. We can concoct our own realities, and tweet them to the body politic. But do we have the intelligence to figure out what's what? Do we have the wisdom to slow down our pace and ask questions of our present moments?

Van Jones (2010) suggests that “[t]he only solution is for Americans to adjust our culture over time to our new media technologies” (p. 10). He wants us not only to spot the lies flying around cyberspace, but also to understand that human beings are complex, not all good and not all bad. “[I]n the age of Facebook,” he writes, “the killer app to stop the ‘gotcha’ bullies won’t be a technological one – it will be a wiser, more forgiving culture” (p. 10).

So I have to ask: Is this contemporary fast-booking time a good vantage point from which to create the “killer app” for a wiser and more forgiving culture that Van Jones talks about in his quote above? Will new media technologies automatically self-generate a new plug-in that will help us to understand how human beings are complex, neither all good nor all bad? Can we adjust our American culture over time to not only spot the lies, but to also spot the promises and perils of new media technologies? And most importantly, do you think any of this can happen without education?

Whether or not such killer apps can be grown out of our contemporary fast-booking face-book culture is almost a moot point. Our contemporary contexts are all we have. Calvino (1999) notes that “[t]he contemporary world may be banal and stultifying, but it is always the context in which we have to place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards” (p. 8). It is the only context we have as readers, and it is the only context we have as teachers. It is the place from which we work.

From my perspective, if we’re talking about wiser and more forgiving cultures that can spot lies and understand complexities, then we need a curriculum that inspires students to

“think beyond” the daily bombardment of reality TV. I realize that reality is pretty gloomy right now on many fronts – from economics to cultural politics; from wars of religion to challenges on science. But if true escapism is what we want, then a counterfeit culture constructed through flip cams and YouTube won’t cut it. We have to become escape artists, develop our mental muscles, and learn that our new media technologies require deeply critical questioning of the multiple realities available today.

Enter great literature and a great education. “The classics,” writes Calvino (1999) in his third definition of the term, “are books which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual’s or the collective unconscious” (p. 4). “The classics,” writes Calvino in his seventh definition, “are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed” (p. 5).

In both of these definitions, I see a modern day classic as a piece of literature that can connect individualistic downloadable moments to collectively unforgettable questions. A modern day classic relates imagination to interpretation, and requires a deeper look to see beyond face(book) value. A modern day classic puts reality in perspective, as idiosyncratic presents become tied to the larger “what if”. A modern day classic is worth the time it takes to think about it.

As teachers, we do have a certain power over the questions we ask our students to consider and how we help our students negotiate their own situated meanings in the literature we provide. So, the question now becomes, *how can I help my students hook up to the larger cultural and historical continuum via questions of our time?*

FAQ:

How Can I Teach Modern Classics in Ways that are Collectively Unforgettable?

Answer: Essential Questions and Inquiry Circles

*In order to read the classics, you have to establish where exactly you are reading them 'from', otherwise both the reader and the text tend to drift in a timeless haze. So what we can say is that **the person who derives maximum benefit from a reading of the classics is the one who skillfully alternates classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material.** And this does not necessarily presuppose someone with a harmonious inner calm: it could also be **the result of an impatient, nervy temperament, of someone constantly irritated and dissatisfied.** (Calvino, 1999, p. 8, emphases added)*

Hmmm... Impatient, nervy temperaments? Constantly irritated and dissatisfied? Sound like any classroom you know?

Seriously, though, thinking about what kind of person would get the maximum benefit from reading the classics, I have to say that I think they're sitting in our classrooms. Our students *totally* alternate what they have to read with contemporary material (though perhaps not in calibrated doses). And all types of texts may float in a timeless haze for them, as they're bombarded with words and images 24/7. They are the perfect audience, and they need us.

In Smith & Wilhelm's (2002) book *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, they looked at the intense engagement and enjoyment that adolescent boys get from a variety of literate activities, though not necessarily always school-based activities. However, Wilhelm & Smith's (2007) goal was to find out the "conditions of flow" (p. 231) that caused the boys to embrace literate activities, and they "demonstrate how to create situational interest that will work to promote the engagement of all students, regardless of their multifarious individual interests" (p. 233). For them, the value of inquiry units is paramount in order for teachers to "address students' needs for personal relevance and promote disciplinary understandings that clearly count and have functional value in the world" (p. 233). Wilhelm & Smith (2007) go on to say:

Inquiry is not simply thematic study, but the exploration of a question or issue that drives debate in the disciplines of

the world. Our work shows us that kids need to find both personal connection and social significance in the units and texts we offer them. (p. 233)

Alfred Tatum's (2009) idea of using essential questions to organize literature study groups is similar. For Tatum, there are four characteristics of an essential question:

- *An essential question moves educators and students to engage in dialogue about issues or concepts that matter in school and society.*
- *An essential question may cause internal conflicts.*
- *An essential question cannot be settled by one person.*
- *An essential question can be addressed from multiple perspectives and in relation to multiple identities.*

Likewise, Steph Harvey & Harvey Daniels (2009) write that a major principle of inquiry circles includes a "[c]hoice of topics based on genuine student curiosity, questions, [and] interests" (p. 13). They too see inquiry circles as a chance for kids to dig "deeply into complex, authentic topics" (p. 13).

Going back to the Calvino (1999) quote that opened this section, I see inquiry circles and essential questions as pedagogical tools that would bridge the present (where the students are reading from) to a larger cultural map, something beyond the moment. Calvino notes that:

A classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time the classics cannot exist without. (p. 8)

This thirteenth definition of a classic, about the ability of a classic to notch down the noise of the present and relegate it to the background hum of, say, a refrigerator, helps me to put any spiraling dread I might have about our contemporary contexts into perspective. I suggest that this is what we need in education too: a way to help our students turn down the noise of the present, while all the while knowing that their interpretation of anything can't exist without their present knowledge, their present downloads, their present videos, their present games. I see inquiry circles and essential questions as tools for digging deeper, taking our time, and thinking slowly about issues of great importance.

Using Inquiry Questions to Guide Literature Circle Selections for Adolescents

By Caitlin A. Rosemeyer

All that can be done is for each of us to invent our own ideal library of our classics; and I would say that one half of it should consist of books we have read and that have meant something for us, and the other half of books which we intend to read and which we suppose might mean something to us. We should also leave a section of empty spaces for surprises and chance discoveries. (Calvino, 1999, p. 9)

I am an avid reader, especially of young adult literature and I hope to help all students find something they enjoy to read. In many ways, my passion for adolescent literature stems directly from my family, who are the most important group of people in my life. My grandmother was a middle school teacher and reading specialist for over 30 years (and subbed until she was 80), and my mom has been teaching middle school for over 20 years and is also a reading specialist. We love getting together to discuss the nature of middle school students and reading young adult literature together. My grandma never ceases to forget to leave with these parting words, “Caitlin, just remember. You’re in the best profession there is. It’s the best!”

Over the summer, I attended the [29th Annual University of Wisconsin Reading Research Symposium](#), and took the corresponding graduate class with Dawnene. Of the many speakers, I was particularly inspired by [Michael Smith](#), who is a professor at Temple University’s College of Education in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In his presentation, entitled *Making it Matter in the Here and Now: Harnessing the Power of Inquiry to Support Students’ Reading*, Smith talked about the *Expectancy Value Theory* (Eccles & Wigfield, 1999; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). This is the theory where a student’s engagement with something (e.g., a text) is the product of the student’s expectation for success *times* how much he or she values the activity, and can be represented in the equation below:

$Engagement = (A. \text{expectation for success}) \times (B. \text{how much you value the activity})$

At the symposium, Michael Smith pointed out that *engagement* is a multiplication problem and a *product* of A & B because neither value on the right side of the equation can be a 0 for engagement to occur.

One reason I implement literature circles based on inquiry questions in my classroom is because of the expectancy theory: engagement = expectation for success X how much you value the activity. Like Harvey & Daniels (2009), I have found that students value activities in which they are given choice and activities that allow their voice to be heard and responded to. Although I choose the inquiry questions to be studied, students are able to choose which books they prefer to read.

At least once a week, students who are reading the same book meet to discuss characters, conflicts, “bigger idea” questions, theme, and the larger inquiry question. Students also work across book groups to discuss the inquiry question, using their novel to support their opinions. Michael Smith told us that classroom discussions are often rare, and typically dominated by teachers. Having a classroom centered around inquiry and literature circles makes discussions far more frequent, mostly student facilitated, and highly beneficial.

In my mind, inquiry circles are different from reader’s workshop because of the critical literacy component and because of a shared reading experience. When students read the same book as other students at the same pace and meet frequently, as happens in inquiry circles, they are reading for a stronger purpose. They’re not reading just for enjoyment or to pass a test at the end. Instead, they’re reading closely so they can engage in their small group discussions. They generate questions and discussion points and must participate in discussions around social issues of importance (Noll, 1994). Through their “bigger idea” questions, which is a taught process that develops over the year, students help each other become critical readers of a text. They challenge each other – and they challenge the text. Additionally, knowing that they’ll be meeting with a small group each week is a huge motivator for students.

A final reason I like using inquiry circles is because it leads to differentiation. My

professional development plan for myself includes differentiation, and I work hard to challenge each of my students appropriately based on their individual needs. Offering book choices in my English classroom is one way that helps me to reach this goal.

The books I've chosen vary on reading level and I can incorporate other lower-level texts based on my students' needs. If I have a student who loves to read, that student can choose to read more than one of the novels during the given time. After novels are read, nonfiction reading takes place to further examine the question at hand. In the end, students write a position paper as their assessment. They are required to use the texts to support their opinions. By the end of 7th grade, they are able to quote directly from the text (one of the new core standards!). I am excited about the inquiry questions and adolescent literature that I'm sharing with you today. At my new job in Iowa Grant, I have total flexibility with the curriculum. My plan is to do one inquiry question a quarter and offer the books I've suggested below (maybe a few more) as choices. Eventually, I'm planning to add some nonfiction articles (e.g., websites and newspapers) for the students to read, in the hopes that they will gain real-life perspectives of the inquiry questions.

Below, I have developed three inquiry questions that I see as tools for digging deeper into literature, and I have included titles of books that can be read as a part of the inquiry study unit. My three inquiry questions are: 1) *To what extent does a person's family shape who they are (the choices they make, their values, etc.)?* 2) *How are adolescents influenced to make decisions? What consequences result from their decisions? Who or what should influence a teenager's decisions?* and 3) *What do teachers, parents, and peers do and say to affect the lives of teenagers with disabilities?*

Inquiry Question 1:

To what extent does a person's family shape who they are (the choices they make, their values, etc.)?

Literature Circle Novels:

[Connor, L. \(2008\). *Waiting for Normal*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books.](#)

The heroine of this novel, Addie, struggles to have a "normal" life because of her mother's outrageous, bipolar, irresponsible behaviors. Caught between taking care of her mother, and longing to live with her ex-step-father and half sisters, Addie is challenged to discover what is most important to her and how, at the age of 13, to make decisions that are right for her, and for her loved ones.

[Farmer, N. \(2002\). *House of the Scorpion*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.](#)

Scientifically, parents are defined as the people who contribute to the genetic make-up of an individual. But, who would your parents be if you were a clone? The billionaire drug lord that you were cloned from, or the caring woman who raised you until the dreaded day the drug lord *needed* you? In this futuristic novel, Matt must decide who to be loyal to- his "parents", friends, or to himself.

[Riordan, R. \(2006\). *The Lightning Thief: Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book 1*. New York: Hyperion Books For Children.](#)

In this five part series, Riordan takes readers on countless adventures through the eyes of demi-god, Percy Jackson. When Percy discovers the truth about his parentage, he is catapulted into the glorified, treacherous world of the gods and demigods of Mount Olympus.

[Weeks, S. \(2004\). *So B. It*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher.](#)

Many teens wish for the moment their mother stops nagging them to brush their teeth, hassling them to do their homework, reminding them to be nice to everyone. However, Heidi longs for the moment for her mother to speak coherent sentences. With the help of a caring neighbor, Heidi grows up taking care of her mute mother. Eventually she longs to know the story of her parents and embarks on a solo trip across America to find the answers she thought would change her life.

Inquiry Question 2:

***How are adolescents influenced to make decisions?
What consequences result from their decisions?
Who or what should influence a teenager's decisions?***

Literature Circle Novels:

[Collins, S. \(2008\). *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press.](#)

This recently published trilogy has swept the interest of adults and teenagers all over the world (the third book was released August 24, 2010). In the aftermath of a worldly disaster, the 13 districts that remain are controlled by a brutal central government. In order to remind the citizens of the dangers of war, each district must send two children, selected at random, to compete in a deadly arena. All of the citizens watch as the 24 children compete until there is only one person alive to be crowned the victor of the Hunger Games.

[Sachar, L. \(1998\). *Holes*. London, England: Bloomsbury.](#)

After a misunderstanding between himself and the local police department, Stanley Yelnats is sentenced to a stay at a rural juvenile detention center called Camp Green Lake. Contrary to the camp's name, this place is not like camping and is not surrounded by a wooded lake. Stanley makes friends, and enemies, and decides to take risks in order to save himself and those close to him.

[Stead, R. \(2009\). *When you Reach Me*. New York: Wendy Lamb Books.](#)

Though many of today's most popular young adult books are set in the future, this 2010 Newberry Award winner takes place in New York City in the 1970s. When Miranda begins receiving mysterious, unsigned, notes, she works to figure out the mystery behind the letters and in the process, unravels truths about friendship, race, and time travel.

[Westerfeld, S. \(2005\). *Uglies \(Uglies Trilogy, Book 1\)*. New York: Simon Pulse.](#)

Westerfeld's series, *Uglies*, is centered on a civilization that requires physical beauty of its people. Teenagers must undergo an extensive surgery that transforms them into a "pretty" person. But for one "ugly", this operation is seen as an option, not a requirement. And Shay decides to "opt-out". The first novel of this series takes readers through the brutal aftermath of her forbidden decision.

Inquiry Question 3:

What do teachers, parents, and peers do and say to affect the lives of teenagers with disabilities?

Literature Circle Novels:

[Bloor, E. \(1997\). *Tangerine*. Florida: Harcourt Books.](#)

Paul Fisher cannot see well; he's legally blind, but doesn't really understand why. Sure, his parents explained about the eclipse, but Paul's memory does not correlate with their explanations. When the Fisher family makes their third cross-country move to Tangerine, Florida, Paul begins to see the truth about his brother, his parents, and his disability.

[Choldenko, G. \(2004\). *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. New York: Penguin Young Readers Group.](#)

Moose was dreading moving to Alcatraz—he thought being stuck on an island with a bunch of 1930s crimesters while his dad worked as an electrician in the prison sounded awful. He wanted to stay on the main land where he had friends, a weekly ball game, and familiarity. Because of his parents' busy schedules trying to make ends meet, Moose is also expected to watch over his sister, Natalie, who has severe Autism. Hanging around with Natalie so much helps Moose realize what it must be like to be her and does his best to protect her from the harsh realities of life—on or off a prison island.

Clements, A. (2002). *Things Not Seen*. New York: Penguin Putnam Books.

Sometimes, don't you just wish you could just disappear? Well, that's exactly what happens to Bobby one morning- he wakes up and he's invisible. Bobby soon realizes that being invisible isn't as great as he imagined. In fact, it truly disables him from having a normal life.

Trueman, T. (2000). *Stuck in Neutral*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

This first-person account of a boy with cerebral palsy is grippingly honest and insightful. Although many people in Shawn's life do not believe he is capable of thinking and feeling emotions, he strongly does both. Shawn is trapped inside his own body, unable to express emotions and feelings to others.

Final Thoughts

According to Wilhelm and Smith (2007), "Having students read different texts around a common question actually benefits everyone. Learning becomes more social, expertise is shared, and motivation stays higher" (p. 234). In many ways, the inquiry question operating in the classroom via different texts becomes the cultural thread that extends each piece of literature beyond the here and now. Whether the book chosen is old or new, it begins to resonate with us through the questions we ask, looped through other thoughts, conversations and cultural texts, as the (new or old) classic takes its place on a "cultural continuum" (Calvino, 1999, p. 7), and "constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it" (Calvino, 1999, p. 6). The social sharing and critical discourses make the classics come alive at any age.

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