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The New Adventures of English Language Arts: The Revolutions ARE Being Televised...and Blogged and Tweeted

Wisconsin English Journal's Associate Editor shares resources for exploring current issues through technology in English language arts.

This column, which was previously known as *The New Adventures of Old Literature*, is being re-titled *The New Adventures of English Language Arts*. Our reason for changing the overall column's name is due to a specific theme of last issue's column where we questioned whether a classic needs to be "old" in the first place. We answered that question: *No, a classic does not need to be old*, because whether a piece of literature is ancient or modern, it can only resonate with our minds and our souls in a present moment. Contemporary adolescent and young adult literature achieves greatness when it helps students grapple with timeless and essential literary questions. Additionally, 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). Old or new, a classic has a way of reverberating through the echoes of the past while ringing true in the present context.

While the name of this column has been updated, the scope remains the same: to provide a space within WEJ for thinking about "new literacies" in relation to the timeless characteristics that great literature and the English language arts offer. As always, we invite you to submit your own ideas and experiences about how you teach English language arts in ways that resonate with your students and ring true in the present. Perhaps you've taught a great piece of literature in new and innovative ways, or maybe you meet the Wisconsin English Language Arts Standards through the use of new technologies in your classroom. Please send a short description of how you use the English language arts to help your students understand and critically engage with the complexities of the world in which we live today.

The Revolutions ARE Being Televised... and Blogged and Tweeted: Democracy and English Language Arts

This issue's column is dedicated to our roles as English language arts teachers who live and breathe (as our students do) during times of great upheaval. Confusion, turmoil, and protests are happening across the world, as well as in our own State. Revolutions are occurring in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and catching fire elsewhere in that region. On a much smaller level, protests are occurring in Madison, Milwaukee, Green Bay, and perhaps your own home town. While the Middle East and the Middle West are engaged in completely different fights at completely different registers, a commonality is that each of our revolutions *are* being televised... and blogged and tweeted.

News and networking join up as one, until the news itself is *about* the networking (Siegel, 2011), and tweets can move whole crowds of people, through up-to-the-second news wires (Stelter, 2011). Even when individuals choose to stay uninvolved, which is

entirely an individual's right, the revolutions are still being broadcast, and this time through multiple media. It's hard to turn a deaf ear because we see feel, hear, speak, text, and read it every day. So whatever democracy looks like, it's occurring within a sociopolitical network of interconnected tools and interconnected people.

So much has been going on in our own State right now that sometimes the historic crises of Egypt and Tunisia only feel like a distant din. Even Social Studies and History teachers wonder whether they should stick with their unit on Australia because, crises or not, they know they'll get to Africa next month. My question in all of this is whether (and to what extent) schooling should go on as normal, as if the sociopolitical network and interconnected stories have no place in our day to day curriculum. In one of Harvey Alvy's blogs on *ASCD's Edge*, he asks the same thing in a more succinct way: "When should a teacher take time to engage a class in a teachable moment that is outside of the 'official' curriculum?" (Alvy, 2011, para. 1).

As you pause to think about the question of when a teacher should take time to teach something outside of the "official curriculum," think also about whether the term "teachable moment" aptly describes the fight for democracy throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Is it really just a teachable moment, or is it something larger than that? Consider also whether the term "teachable moment" encompasses what we do, as professional teachers and scholars, to encourage our students to engage in conversational debate, bi-partisan inquiry, and informed decision-making. It seems to me that there are some times when the term "teachable moment" doesn't quite capture our larger educational mission of providing our students with a clued-up sense of themselves, as acting, thinking beings, living within the world.

Beyond the Teachable Moment: English Language Arts in the World

A basic underlying principle of the English language arts as a school subject involves the idea of democracy itself. For a democracy to work, the country's constituents need to be able to read, write, and make informed choices. Patrick Shannon (2007) notes that since at least the 1840s in the U.S., "[l]earning to read at school…promised to make the public both strong and wise – strong enough to defend itself against moral, political, and economic temptations likely to lead it astray and wise enough so that all members could participate in the governance of their own lives individually and collectively" (pp. ix-x). Over time, however, policies about teaching the English language arts have become more controlling and insidious in terms of mandatory testing, normative content standards, and limited possibilities for students to:

> *…read texts critically at school in order to understand the word and the world in ways that allow them to see through the mysteries, ambiguities, and complexities of modern living in order to make sense of their lives, to understand the connections among their lives and those of others, and to act on that new knowledge to construct a better, more just democracy*. (Shannon, 2007, p. xi)

It is ever more important, then, to help students grapple with the interconnections and politics at play in our world. Yet does this fall under the purview of English language arts?

As I provide some resources and links for you to look at below, you can be the judge. The remainder of this column provides lessons and links for teachers who wish to engage their students with questions of democracy and human rights in the context of world politics now.

There are many resources on the web and elsewhere, but I chose links, lessons, and activities that I feel are directly related to English language arts instruction. As a guiding framework, I turned to the English language arts standards in Wisconsin. Wisconsin is one of the

few states where I feel the standards are open enough to allow for flexibility as teachers go about the work of making professional judgments in the best interests of their students. Our Wisconsin English language arts standards also address 21st Century skills in terms of critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and global awareness (Alvy, 2011). Additionally, if you are teaching "outside" of the official curriculum, you can always cite the standards, and then you have the power of the policy working for you instead of against you. The full body of the Wisconsin English language arts standards can be found by clicking the link above, but here are just a few from 12th grade to get us going (not all bullet points are represented here):

From Standard A: Reading/Literature, 12th Grade

A.12.3 Read and discuss literary and nonliterary texts in order to understand human experience.

- Examine, explain, and evaluate, orally and in writing, various perspectives concerning individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts
- Develop and articulate, orally and in writing, defensible points of view on individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts
- Identify the devices an author uses to influence readers and critique the effectiveness of their use
- Identify philosophical assumptions and basic beliefs underlying selected texts

A.12.4 Students will read to acquire information.

- Apply tests of logic and reasoning to informational and persuasive texts
- Draw on and integrate information from multiple sources when acquiring knowledge and developing a position on a topic of interest
- Evaluate the reliability and authenticity of information conveyed in a text, using criteria based on knowledge of the author, topic, and context and analysis of logic, evidence, propaganda, and language

From Standard B: Writing, 12th Grade

B.12.1 Create or produce writing to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

- Write a coherent argument that takes a position, accurately summarizes an opposing position, refutes that position, and cites persuasive evidence

From Standard C: Oral Language, 12th Grade

C.12.1 Prepare and deliver formal oral presentations appropriate to specific purposes and audiences.

- Demonstrate the ability to debate an issue from either side

C.12.2 Listen to, discuss, and comprehend oral communications.

- Distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information
- Distinguish fact from opinion, evaluate logic, and identify manipulative techniques
- Analyze messages for their accuracy and usefulness

C.12.3 Participate effectively in discussion.

- Detect and evaluate a speaker's bias
- Consider the ideas and opinions of other speakers thoughtfully before responding
- Evaluate the validity and adequacy of ideas, arguments, hypotheses, and evidence
- Be aware of and try to control counterproductive emotional responses to a speaker or ideas conveyed in a discussion
- Convey criticism in a respectful and supportive way

From Standard D: Language, 12th Grade

D.12.2 Recognize and interpret various uses and adaptations of language in social, cultural, regional, and professional

situations, and learn to be flexible and responsive in their use of English.

- Analyze and explain how immediate context and broader social, cultural, regional, and professional variables influence the use of language, citing characteristics such as level of formality, slang, jargon, and emotional impact
- Compare form, meaning, and value of different symbol systems--such as alphabets, signs, symbols--and of expressions commonly used in another language

From Standard E: Media and Technology, 12th Grade

E.12.1 Use computers to acquire, organize, analyze, and communicate information.

- Use on-line sources to exchange information

E.12.2 Make informed judgments about media and products.

- Develop and apply evaluative criteria of accuracy and point of view to broadcast news programs
- Analyze the content and effect of subtle persuasive techniques used on-line and in broadcast and print media
- Develop and apply criteria for evaluating broadcast programming

From Standard F: Research and Inquiry, 12th Grade

F.12.1 Conduct research and inquiry on self-selected or assigned topics, issues, or problems and use an appropriate form to communicate their findings.

- Formulate questions addressing issues or problems that can be answered through a well defined and focused investigation
- Use research tools found in school and college libraries, take notes, collect and classify sources, and develop strategies for finding and recording information
- Organize research materials and data, maintaining a note-taking system that includes summary, paraphrase, and quoted material
- Evaluate the usefulness and credibility of data and sources by applying tests of evidence, including bias, position, expertise, adequacy, validity, reliability, and date

Keep in mind that I have only cherry-picked a few standards above from grade twelve. The eighth grade standards are equally useful when thinking about how each resource I've listed below fits into the English language arts curriculum. Each heading of the sections below is a clickable link to a resource that addresses contemporary topics and 21st Century skills. There is always more on the web than I can describe under each heading, so my explanations of each site are more like annotations. I encourage you to look around and see what would work for you as we go about the business of educating young citizens for the world they face today and the worlds they will face tomorrow.

Inquiry Lessons on Issues of the Day: Teachable Moment

Based in New York, www.teachablemoment.org is a website of teaching resources put out by the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility. Founded in 1982, the Morningside Center concentrates on conflict resolution, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking for youngsters. Funded by members and donors, the Morningside Center expanded its goals of social and emotional growth by adding Teachablemoment.org to its repertoire in 2003.

Alan Shapiro, the *Teachable Moment* curriculum writer, recently passed away in January of 2011, but his lessons and ideas live on for us all to benefit from and enjoy. On this website, you will find free classroom lessons for elementary, middle, and high school students that foster critical thinking and questioning about issues of the day.

For example, if you click on "High School," you will come to a menu of activities for high school students around the following

categories: 1) Current Domestic Issues; 2) War, Peace, Terrorism & Other Global Issues; 3) The Middle East; 4) Nuclear Weapons & Other Related Issues; and 5) Teaching Strategies. Within each category for students, there are further choices for lessons, with full readings, discussion questions and activities.

A personal favorite of mine, though there are many others, is a lesson called, "Interpreting & Verifying the News in an Era of Info Overload." This lesson emphasizes the importance of navigating huge amounts of information and provides the skills for how to do so. As you look at this particular lesson's readings and activities, start checking off how many English language arts standards we're meeting as we step outside the official curriculum. Then stop checking off standards, and start teaching this unit!

At the middle school level, students can consider freedom and democracy through songs, video interviews, and readings. Other middle school lessons help students to think about how change can occur non-violently by relating Martin Luther King's work to current events in Egypt.

The Learning Network: Teaching and Learning with the *New York Times*

The Learning Network is a blog that provides teaching and learning materials and ideas based on *New York Times* content. The blog also contains links for students to respond to opinion questions, take news quizzes, learn the word of the day, or think about the news in relation to poetry pairings.

The lessons based around *New York Times* articles typically include "essential questions" (Tatum, 2005, 2009) for your students to discuss after they read various resources and think collaboratively with each other. The lessons change daily, and are directly related to an article published that day. For example, an article published on March 4, 2011 (the day it happens to be for me right now) is entitled, "One Size Fits All? Reflecting on the Role of Government" (Doyne & Ojalvo, 2011b). A sampling of essential questions to consider along with this article include: *What is, and what should be, the role of government in American life? How do Republicans and Democrats want to define the role of government? What ideologies drive the political parties' views on the role of government?*

Past articles and lessons are included on the Learning Network as well, so that teachers can select from among a wide array of choices that best fit their classroom needs. From ways to teach the unrest in Egypt to our own local State politics, the Learning Network offers ways to put protests and resistance into context. For example, after reading an article by Doyne & Ojalvo (2011a) about the protests, budgeting and bargaining occurring in Wisconsin and elsewhere, the key questions students are asked to debate and consider include: *Why are people staging protests in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana? What do they want? Who is staging counterprotests? Who and what do they support? Why? What are the commonalities in the situations in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana? What factors are unique to each state? Who are the governors of these states? What are their goals? What are labor unions? How do they work?* The Learning Network provides the background knowledge and the information we need to consider these kinds of complex issues, and the lessons help us contextualize what we have learned.

Wisconsin Labor History Society

For more information on the history of labor unions in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Labor History Society website is one of the best resources out there. Wisconsin led the way in protecting worker's rights, and the website provides a brief history including an excerpt

from the Rachel Maddow Show where she pumps up Wisconsin and provides a an overview of what Wisconsin has added to the national protections and compensations that many of us take for granted… like weekends. It is a fun show to watch, and really makes you be proud to be a Wisconsinite!

Present history is recorded too, in photos, facebook entries, oral histories, user comments and ongoing blogs. If specific students in your class take interest in this site, they may consider entering a high school essay contest conducted annually by the Wisconsin Labor History Society. Students write to the prompt: "Unions have been important to my family and my community because …" and up to eight cash prizes are awarded, with a celebration for the winners held in April.

The Choices Program: History and Current Issues for the Classroom

Based at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, the *Choices for the 21st Century Education Program* offers teaching resources and professional development about international issues, both past and present. In general, the Choices Program teaches global awareness, thoughtful public discourse, and critical inquiry. On their home page, their mission and objectives parallel the missions and objectives of our own Wisconsin English Language Arts Standards in many ways:

Choices materials challenge students to:

- *Consider multiple perspectives on international issues*
- *Interpret and analyze primary sources*
- *Compile, categorize and analyze data*
- *Differentiate between fact and opinion*
- *Draw conclusions from evidence*
- *Identify and weigh the conflicting values represented by different points of view*
- *Clarify differences between competing ideas*
- *Work cooperatively within groups to organize effective presentations*
- *Support arguments with evidence*
- *Deliver cogent and persuasive presentations*
- *Evaluate the merits and shortcomings of competing policy options*
- *Develop a deeper understanding of issues through informed discussion*
- *Make connections across time and place*
- *Make the study of history relevant in their lives today.*
- *Develop and articulate original viewpoints on an issue*

(Choices Program homepage, under "About Our Curricular Units, n.p.)

A place to begin on this website might be with its *Teaching with the News* component, where a teacher can choose among a number of current issues such as:

Protests, Revolutions, and Democratic Change

This free lesson helps students analyze the potential effects of the protests on democracy and stability in the Middle East and North Africa.

Egypt's Uprising

This free lesson introduces students to the protests in Egypt, helps them consider the role of the media, and asks them to analyze the role of the United States in Egyptian politics.

The Global Security Matrix

The Global Security Matrix uses text, images, and video to help students explore a broad range of threats as they play out across the layers of the international system.

The teaching tools component of the Choices Program include graphic organizers, teaching activities, guidelines for deliberation, tips for role playing, and assessment tools. Additionally, the Choices Program has a *Scholars Online* component, in which top scholars in their own field answer specific questions related to the content of the lesson.

C-Span in the Classroom

C-Span in the Classroom provides timely teaching videos and links to other materials from a wide array of newspaper and magazine publications. For example, if you are interested in having your students write about (or facebook about) whether facebook itself boosts civic engagement among youth, *C-Span in the Classroom* links us to a *Christian Science Monitor* article (Khadaroo, 2011) on the topic. Lesson plans are available on a wide variety of topics (registration is free), such as getting students involved in following a bill. The videos provided from C-Span include an example of President Obama speaking about Egyptian President Mubarak's resignation, and provide students with a chance to critically listen, ask essential questions, and research various topics further.

Alan Singer's Teaching and Learning Blog on Huffington Post

Alan Singer is a social studies educator at Hofstra University in Long Island, New York. He has a blog on Huffington Post where he provides lesson plans for teachers based on news items of the day. An example from Teaching about Events in the Middle East Lesson Plans includes viewing news programming, reading materials on the topic, and considering questions such as *What makes a revolution?*

From an English language arts perspective, I can't help but enjoy many of Singer's activities. For example, in his second activity in the unit about the Middle East, he attaches our thinking and questioning to poetry:

> *You can't have a revolution without good poetry. Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, who died in 1934, is being called the poet of today's Tunisian Revolution. Below are English translations of two of his poems* [I have just shared one here]. *Read the poems and answer the questions following each poem.*
>
> ***The Will of Life***
> *If the people will to live*
> *Providence is destined to favorably respond*
> *And night is destined to fold*
> *And the chains are certain to be broken*
> *And he who has not embraced the love of life*
> *Will evaporate in its atmosphere and disappear.*
>
> *Questions:*
> *1. According to the poet, what is necessary for change to take place?*
> *2. What will happen to the enemies of the people and of the revolution?*
> *3. In your opinion, why did Shadi title this poem "The Will of Life"?* (Singer, 2011, para. 7-9)

Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies

One last resource that I'd like to mention is Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, which provided a Webinar for Educators: Egypt as a Teachable Moment. Originally broadcast live online for K-12 teachers on February 7, 2011, the webinar is still online for you to view here and is well worth watching. It helps to contextualize Egypt and the Middle East in relation to our own country's goals. Several questions for teachers to consider with their students are listed on the agenda for this webinar as follows:

> *How can the events in Egypt be understood in the context of other movements of protest and social*

change?

How can diverse perspectives and sources of information about Egypt and Tunisia enhance student knowledge of key themes of citizenship?

How can the themes of freedom from government oppression and tyranny resonate with similar themes from American history?

Concluding Remarks

(Sung to the tune of *Pop Goes the Weasel*)

All around the testing push
The curriculum chases the policy
The curriculum catches a wind from the world
Pop goes the policy!

So how does a teacher know when to step outside of the "official" curriculum to teach what's going on in the world, a nation, a state, a city, or a neighborhood? When should we follow the basic underlying standards of a traditional English language arts curriculum, and when should we bust a move away from a unifying policy discourse to discuss the issues of our time? These are not just questions for this particular historical moment; these are questions to keep in our heads for all times. When ought we pop the policy?

I am not the one to answer these questions. You are. You are the only one with enough expertise, not only in your content area or profession, but also with your students and your community (Hassett, 2008). As a professional, you can decide how to approach controversial issues in the classroom (Hess, 2009) and which essential questions (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Noll, 1994; Tatum, 2005) will help your students with problem solving, critical thinking and global awareness the most. Poke around these websites and see what you think. If you try out any of these lessons or activities, please drop me an email. I would love to hear about how it went.

Contrary to what the great American poet, singer, and author Gil Scott-Heron expressed in his spoken word song, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, the revolutions of today *are* being televised. In 1970, Scott-Heron was advocating for us to go live, to not just sit and watch the tube, silently doing nothing. As critical teachers and scholars, I think we have that same responsibility ourselves, to not just sit and watch, because the act of doing nothing is still an action. The difference is that today, we have many tools with which to "go live," and many forms of media to help us become critical consumers and intelligent decision-makers. So as the revolutions *are* being televised, tweeted and blogged, our professional roles change a bit. We become facilitators of the media and students of the world ourselves.

At the same time, though, our professional roles as educators stand true. We are there for our students, to help guide them through issues of change and questions of humanity. No matter what happens in Middle East or the Middle West, we've been doing an excellent job in Wisconsin, and there is no reason to stop now. I commend your work, and I offer my support.

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