

# Workshop 4

## Diversity in Texts

*“For a book to be worthwhile, good enough to use in class, it has to command the kid’s interest, foremost.*

*—Joe Bernhart, Seventh-Grade Teacher, Fondren Middle School, Houston, Texas*

### Description

Maybe good literature can make you think, transport you to a foreign land, or reflect on your own world. Maybe it can help you to understand human nature, yourself, and how to get along in the world. Reading a variety of genres, styles of writing, and literature portraying many ways of life builds literate thought and minds. These diverse text experiences provide opportunities for lively discussions that support envisionment building in the classroom.

The kinds of literary experiences you have each time you pick up a really good book are the same kinds of experiences you hope your students will have. Selecting the right texts is crucial to your students’ literary experiences. Your guidance is critical in helping students explore a variety of literature as they make meaning for themselves.

It is important to find texts that challenge and interest students. At the same time, the texts you choose should not alienate or frustrate students. Literature should be relevant to students’ lives, but it also should push students to expand their personal horizons. In Workshop 4, middle school teachers discuss these concerns and many more as they explore how they select literature for their classrooms and what factors contribute to their decisions.

### Key Points

- Teachers select literary texts for use in their classrooms based on many criteria. The teachers in this workshop video ask themselves the following questions as they consider literature for their classrooms:
  - Is the plot engaging for students? Can the students make sense of the conflicts and characters presented?
  - Are the characters engaging, imaginable, and adequately developed to understand them?
  - Will the text make students think about their own lives, the world in which they live, and their roles in it, or about things they might become interested in?
  - Does the text have literary merit? Will it be gripping, memorable, or connect to something else students will read?
  - Can the students see themselves in the literature?
  - Do the texts represent a variety of cultures and genders in an authentic way?
  - Do the texts expose students to ways of life they may not know from personal experience?
  - Does the body of literature appeal to a range of reading abilities?
  - Does the body of literature introduce both contemporary and classical works?
  - Does the body of literature include a variety of genres?
  - Does the literature present many layers of meaning?

- It is important to give students the opportunity to select texts for themselves and to help them learn how to choose.
- Middle school students enjoy reading literature that features characters their own age, coping with adolescent conflicts. This includes some classics and many contemporary, young adult selections.
- Teachers need to be aware of what their students are reading, both for literary merit and for appropriateness for the classroom and school community.
- Many classical literature selections are appropriate for middle school students and can be paired with contemporary works.
- Teachers should encourage students to select a range of literature, including texts that are easy reads, ones that are just right for them, and ones that challenge them.
- Reading books aloud in the classroom is a powerful tool. Reading aloud helps teachers reach a broad range of reading abilities and turn kids on to books they may not have explored on their own.
- Literature that is appropriate for reading aloud includes texts with compelling stories, interesting language, and adolescent characters.
- Teachers have a responsibility to help students find themselves in literature. Students should be able to find themselves in gender, culture, and in the characters' lives and dilemmas.
- Teachers can learn about great literature that appeals to their students through the National Council of Teachers of English *English Journal* and *Voices From the Middle*, colleagues, professional conferences, and students in their classrooms.

## Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, you will be able to:

- select a well-rounded, diverse body of literature to read with their students, as well as help students make selections of their own.
- identify key concerns to consider when selecting diverse literature for their students.

## Background Reading

In preparation for this workshop, read "Literature for Students the System Has Failed," "Literature Across the Curriculum," and "Closing Thoughts: Literature in School and Life" in Dr. Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press. Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

For additional online resources, go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature). Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, click on Workshop 4, and go to Additional Reading.

# Workshop Session (On-Site)

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## Getting Ready (30 minutes)

### Discuss:

Think about and discuss these questions before viewing the video:

- What are your students' top two or three favorite books? Why do you think your students enjoy these books more than others?
- What do you think students gain from reading literature that represents multiple cultures, life experiences, genders, styles of writing, and genres? Explain.
- How do you think your students select books to read for themselves?
- How do you select books for yourself?
- How is your selection process similar to or different from how you think your students select books to read?

**Site Leader:** Use these questions to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the reflection questions in their journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

If you have Internet access, display the workshop Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), making participants aware of online resources and interactive opportunities.

## Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

### Think About and Discuss:

**Pause** after the narrator states: "Over the next hour, we will explore ways to find, select, and work with the kind of literature that make a classroom come alive."

- How do you go about selecting literature for your students? What criteria do you use?
- When you think about texts that have literary merit, what qualities come to mind?

**Pause** after Linda Rief states: "Well, they need to know too that you trust them as someone who chooses books that you would let them choose. So when you're allowing them that individual choice, then when you say, 'Let's try this book together.' 'Well, she trusted me: maybe I can trust her.'" This concludes the discussion about how to choose texts that engage kids.

- What is the value in students selecting their own texts?
- What qualities in a book do you think really engage middle school students?

**Site Leader:** If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated here to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program, and discuss them later.

You may select any or all of the questions to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants.

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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**Pause** after Linda Rief relays her principal's statement about how to deal with books parents do not want their students to read: "You may provide an alternate curriculum if they choose to keep them in public school, but you don't have to be responsible for designing an entire new curriculum. But that's not the case for a lot of teachers."

- How do you find good books to read and share with your students?
- What is the power in students making their own reading selections?
- How do you guide students in selecting books? What advice do you give them? How do you make them aware of books that they might want to explore?
- What books have you used in your classroom that appeal to reluctant readers?
- What titles and authors are popular with your students?
- How do you decide what is appropriate to read in your classroom and what is not appropriate? What guides you in these judgment calls?

**Pause** after Dorothy Franklin states: "Often in social studies it's dry facts, dry ideas. But if we can pull out these fictional stories, then, wow, this is how the people actually felt during this particular time." This concludes the discussion about the importance of reading texts aloud.

- How do you select texts for students with a range of reading abilities? How do you include all reading abilities in literature activities and discussions?
- What is the value in reading aloud to your students? Share some personal experiences with read alouds from your classroom. If you have never done a read aloud, how might you try one in the future?
- What books have you used in your classroom that make good read alouds? Explain.

**Pause** after Jan Currence states: "...that the author is really authentic in terms of the relationship between the characters, and that's hard to find sometimes." This concludes the discussion about the importance of students finding themselves in the texts they read.

- In your classroom, have you found that certain books attract boys and others attract girls? Explain.
- What is the value in being cognizant of gender when selecting texts for your students?
- What is the value in students finding themselves in the texts they read?
- What is the value in students reading literature that is foreign to their own life experiences and knowledge?
- What texts have you used in your classroom that present a variety of cultures, viewpoints, and life experiences?

**View program until the end.**

- How do you integrate classical literature with contemporary literature in your classroom?
- What are some of your favorite authors?
- If you were to stock a middle school literature classroom library, what three books would you consider "must haves"?

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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## Going Further (30 minutes)

### Brainstorm and Discuss:

Brainstorm a list of criteria that teachers consider important as they select literature for their students. Write ideas on poster paper. After the group generates a list of criteria, take time to discuss the ideas listed. Rank each item for importance with (1) being the most important, (2) being somewhat important, and (3) not always necessary. If time permits, suggest literature titles that meet the criteria for selection. Record the criteria and titles in your workshop journal for future reference.

## Between Sessions (On Your Own)

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### Homework Assignment

#### Journal:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- Take a trip to a public library and peruse the young adult fiction section. Select three books that you have not read and that you think will interest your students. Check them out from the library. Keep in mind all of the criteria raised in the workshop for the selection of diverse texts for students. Write down the titles and authors in your workshop journal. Write a few sentences next to each title, explaining why you think students might enjoy the book. If you have time, consider reading one of the books on your own. Later, you can share your reading experience with your students through a book talk or a read aloud.

You will be asked to share your three selections at Workshop 5. If possible, bring the actual books with you to the next workshop.

#### Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 5, review "Literature for Students the System Has Failed" in Dr. Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

For additional online resources, go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 5.

### Ongoing Activities

#### Channel-Talk:

You are encouraged to participate in an email discussion list called Channel-Talk. Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country. Comments can also be viewed on the Web site. Go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, and click on Channel-Talk.

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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## Extension: Classroom Connection

### Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner:

**Build a Classroom Library:** If you do not already have a library in your classroom, consider making one. Utilize the criteria mentioned in the workshop video as a starting point in selecting appropriate literature. As you stock your library, invite students to offer their favorite reads and authors. At the end of each school year, poll the students for the books they would most recommend to their friends. Evaluate and review the books you keep on the shelves and continue to add to your collection. Utilize the teacher resource Evaluate the Literature in Your Classroom found in the Appendix of this guide for this purpose. Remove books that are rarely checked out from the library and bring them to your students' attention through book talks and read alouds, when appropriate.

Utilize professional journals like the National Council of Teachers of English *Voices From the Middle* and *The English Journal* as resources for new titles and authors. Use the Additional Reading section of this workshop's Web site for more ideas as you continue to build your classroom library. To access these and additional resources, go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 4.

### Student Activities:

Try these activities with your students.

**Contemporary/Classical Pairing:** Read a contemporary work of literature with a companion classical piece. Consider comparing author styles, how themes and conflicts are addressed, character similarities, and how time periods are portrayed. Some possible pairings:

*The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *1984* by George Orwell

*Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain

*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse and excerpts from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

*A Separate Peace* by John Knowles and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

*Freak the Mighty* by W. R. Philbrick or Rodman Philbrick and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

*West Side Story* by Paul Laurents, Paul Werstine, and Norris Houghton, editor  
and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

**Student Book Selection Discussion:** Discuss with your students how they go about selecting literature for pleasure reading. Allow students to volunteer their ideas while you record them on poster paper, a chalkboard, projection screen, or overhead projector. Once students have offered a fair amount of ideas, ask them to narrow down the list to their top five criteria for selecting books. Ask students to keep in mind that these criteria should guide one of their friends in selecting a book that is appropriate for them either for enjoyment or for an assignment for school. Ask students to also consider how you avoid the problem of choosing a book that is much too hard or easy and the advice they would give to someone else. Post the students' criteria in your classroom and the school library or media center for students' future reference.

**Dramatic Read Aloud:** Model a dramatic read aloud for your students. Carefully select an engaging text. You might consider *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, or *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Select a compact passage that draws the students into the story. Be careful to select only a few pages, so that you will not lose your students' interest. Start your presentation by giving the students just enough information about the book and the scene you plan on reading to help them connect to the text. Consider using props, music, dramatic voice, movement, and music during your reading. You may want to refer to the book *The Read Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (Penguin, 2001. ISBN: 0-14-100161-5.), as you prepare for your read aloud. After modeling the dramatic read aloud, challenge your students to prepare and present their own read alouds. Assign this project in advance and schedule class time to hear all of the presentations.

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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## Additional Reading

Beers, K. and Lesesne, T. editors. *Books for You: An Annotated Booklist for Senior High*, 14th Edition. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN: 0-8141-0372-3.

Langer, Judith. *Envisioning Literature*. Columbia University: Teachers College Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

Monseau, V. R. and Salvner, G. M., editors. *Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000. ISBN: 0-8670-9473-7.

Nilsen, A. P. and Donelson, K. L. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, 6th edition. Longman Publishers, 2000. ISBN: 0-3210-3788-X.

Samuels, B. and Beers, K., editors. *Books for You: An Annotated Booklist for Middle School and Junior High*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. ISBN: 0-8141-5943-5.

Scales, Pat R. *Teaching Banned Books: 12 Guides for Young Readers*. American Library Association Editions, 2001. ISBN: 0-8389-0807-1.

Soter, Anna O. *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories: Developing Critical Readers in Middle School*. Teachers College Press, 1999. ISBN: 0807738808.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read Aloud Handbook*, 5th Edition. Penguin, 2001. ISBN: 0-14-100161-5.

Yokota, J., editor. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8*, 3rd Edition. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN: 0-8141-2540-9.

*Professional journals about literature instruction:*

**ALAN Review:** The National Council of Teachers of English's Assembly on Literature for Adolescents produces a review of adolescent literature and literature instruction three times a year (fall, winter, and spring).

**CELA Newsletter:** The National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, State University of New York, Albany, publishes a newsletter in the fall, winter, and spring. The newsletter addresses a wide range of issues concerning literacy. The newsletter can be accessed for free on their Web site at <http://cela.albany.edu>.

**The National Council of Teachers of English Journals:** NCTE publishes many subscription journals, including *The English Journal*, high school level, *Voices From the Middle*, middle school level, and *Language Arts*, elementary and middle school levels.

*Some literature titles referred to by the teachers in this workshop program include:*

### **Contemporary Novels:**

*Year of the Impossible Goodbyes* by Sook Nyul Choi

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis

*Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon M. Draper

*The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake

*Fig Pudding* by Robert Fletcher

*Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George

*Gaucho* by Gloria Gonzalez

*Among the Hidden* by Margaret Peterson Haddix

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse

*The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton

*Zachary Beaver Came to Town* by Kimberly Willis Holt

The Redwall Series by Brian Jacques

*Heaven* by Angela Johnson

*The Giver* by Lois Lowry

*Slam* by Walter D. Myers

*Somewhere in the Darkness* by Walter D. Myers

*Freak the Mighty* by Philbrick Rodman

The Harry Potter Series by J. K. Rowling

*Crash* by Jerry Spinelli

*Dangerous Skies* by Suzanne Fisher Staples

## **Classics:**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

*Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

## **Short Stories:**

*The Day It Snowed Tortillas: Tales From Spanish New Mexico* by Joe Hayes

"Guests in the Promised Land" by Kristin Hunter

*Couple of Kooks and Other Stories* by Cynthia Rylant

## **Poetry:**

"Dreams" by Langston Hughes

"A Fire in My Hands" by Gary Soto

*Authors mentioned in the workshop by teachers and students:*

Maya Angelou

Katherine A. Applegate

Judy Blume

Beverly Cleary

Robert Cormier

Christopher Paul Curtis

Roald Dahl

Emily Dickinson

Sharon Draper

Lois Duncan

Robert Frost

Karen Hesse

S. E. Hinton

Kimberly Willis Holt

Robert Jordan

Walter D. Myers

Gary Paulsen

Edgar Allan Poe

William Shakespeare

Gary Soto

Theodore Taylor

Mark Twain

Laura Ingalls Wilder

For additional resources, go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature). Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 4, and Additional Reading.