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Educating the Public about Best Practices in English Language Arts

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Boredom.

That's what's driving students out of high schools these days—not high standards, difficult tests, or rigorous curriculum.

Boredom with classes is the reason given by nearly half of the huge numbers of students who do not finish high school, according to a poll sponsored by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2). One third of students in the general population do not finish high school. Even more alarming, about half of Latinos and African American students do not finish (Eckholm 2; Tatum 44; Thornburgh 32). And, although about 35% of students list falling behind academically as the main reason they leave, that falling behind is largely due to absenteeism and missed classes in the year leading up to their leaving. So the number two reason (falling behind) might also be related to the first reason: the failure of classes to engage students enough to bother attending. And for many of those who do manage to graduate, boredom is a big part of their school day.

Some of those classes that failed to engage the students who left school must have been English classes. For those of us involved with English Language Arts (teachers, English educators, pre-service teachers, ELA curriculum supervisors), these dropout rates and young people's reasons for dropping out are disheartening and even puzzling. We are (or were at one time?) fascinated with the subject of English language arts. We wouldn't have gone into teaching if we ourselves were not deeply engaged in all that the study of English can provide: reading or writing fiction, non-fiction,

poetry, and drama; seeing live performances of plays or analyzing films; reading, writing, or presenting persuasive arguments. How did we get here? How do we fix it?

In the wake of Lynne Truss's bestseller, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, dozens of national and local newspaper columnists weighed in on their pet peeves regarding apostrophe use, misspelled plurals, and other trivial issues related to writing. Most of these little essays were harmless and sometimes mildly humorous. But if essays scolding people about surface errors are mostly what's available in the media concerning writing, teachers may feel undo pressure to focus only on copy editing strategies in their classrooms instead of challenging students to analyze higher-level rhetorical issues such as audience expectations, opposing views, word connotation, genre constraints, etc. If newspapers and letters to TIME editors were to contain stories of students writing successfully for a variety of audiences, then

parents and school boards and legislators might be more open to innovative pedagogies that can better counter the boredom so many students feel in school. We need to tell more people about the films our students have created, the graphic novels they're working on, the plays they've acted in, the nursing home residents they've interviewed, the family stories they've recorded.

As busy as we all are, we need to communicate better and more often in publications that are read by parents, other teachers, school board members, or others who have a stake in what goes on in the schools. We need to write and publish in general interest magazines and newspapers. We need to tell the public what we see and what we know about effective teaching of English. We will not change people's attitudes overnight. However, we

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may occasionally reach a legislator, a principal, or a parent who may one day be in a position to help (or hinder) a proposal or program. We want that person to know as much as possible about what works and what doesn't.

As a former English teacher turned English educator, I've been inside many high school classrooms. I am frequently disappointed in the low-level tasks students are asked to do: memorize definitions, keep vocabulary lists, "revise" an essay simply by recopying it, and "discuss" *To Kill a Mockingbird* by recalling simple plot points. As an observer now sitting in the back of the room, I have a better vantage point than the teacher does to see what each student is actually doing when the teacher thinks the class is going fine. I hear students sigh. I see them stare at the clock on the wall, fill in the doodles in their notebooks, write notes to one another, finish their social studies homework, gaze out the window, or doze off. Other students dutifully complete the simplistic tasks they're given, quietly enduring until the end of the period. In the meantime, their teacher, who at one time must have had some passion for the human drama in literature, or the excitement of reading or writing an essay that moves people, or of hearing a well-acted scene from Shakespeare, spends the last ten minutes of class going over a litany of how many points will be taken off students' grades for each day an assignment is late. I think most teachers know better than this.

As English teachers, professors, student teachers, and students in English education courses, many of us have the opportunity to read the latest research on best practices of reading and writing instruction. We also see firsthand, in the classes we teach or observe, that the research is right: students can and do become engaged in high-level, challenging projects in the English language arts. They can work collaboratively in groups, teach each other technological skills, write screenplays and then film the story, design web pages, write to legislators, create short stories, and perform dramas, etc. Yet pressure from some members of the public sector (parents, principals, pundits, newspaper columnists, and legislators) sometimes causes teachers to abandon promising curricula and return to ineffective

or counterproductive classroom activities.

It's possible that the frightening dropout rates cited earlier, coupled with other scary statistics about literacy rates, are causing people to take the exact opposite track they should be taking. Perhaps not knowing what else to do, powerful members of the public sometimes recommend practices which, though well-intentioned, probably do more harm than good: more testing, more drilling on "the basics," and more emphasis on "the classics." Perhaps the logic goes like this: since so many students are leaving school, they should be provided with "the basics" before they leave. And there seems to be an assumption that other readers will know what is meant by "the basics," and that it is a self-evident truth that this is what is needed. This emphasis on "the basics," however, (drilling on parts of speech, plot summaries, vocabulary quizzes) is perhaps what's driving students from school.

I once had a graduate student, a practicing teacher, who told the following story. She had had much success teaching a workshop-based writing class. She had her students working collaboratively in groups, responding intelligently to each other's drafts, helping each other with editing and proofreading, and thus becoming better writers themselves. She had students writing for authentic audiences in real or hypothetical rhetorical situations, so they were learning to adjust their writing for different readers, different genres, different purposes, and different audiences, as per NCTE/IRA standards and best practices. She knew that isolated grammar drills and parts-of-speech worksheets bored her students and were a waste of time. But her principal had told all English teachers that he wanted grammar taught this way, partly because parents expected it. So to get the principal and the parents off her back this teacher added grammar worksheets and parts-of-speech quizzes to her classes. Luckily for her students, she knew not to spend too much time on these activities, and because of her successful workshop model, her students had a positive enough attitude about writing that these activities were not as harmful as they might have been. Also, in the graduate classes she was taking, this teacher was learning how to better argue for the successful

practices she was already using. She had to make her supervisors understand that she *was* “teaching grammar.” Her students *were* paying attention to language use. But her sophisticated, successful methods were so far removed from the principal’s own memory of “grammar,” that he needed better explanations from her in order to understand what she was doing.

This teacher’s story had a reasonably happy ending, at least for her students, because she refused to allow her mandatory grammar drills to interfere too much with the high-level teaching of writing she was already doing. But what about other teachers who don’t have her background in the teaching of writing? It’s frightening to think of how many times this situation is repeated throughout the country, with thousands of students having to endure ineffective, counter-productive, and boring practices because parents or principals insist on a curricula that might be doing more harm than good.

Part of teacher advocacy is speaking up and educating the public. Teachers, college professors, and enlightened parents and principals need to advocate for teachers’ informed, professional judgment. It’s not that teachers are always right and the public is always wrong. If students are complaining about boring, unpleasant classes, then teachers should certainly be questioned about what they’re doing and why. But there needs to be more dialogue and public discussion of what are worthy intellectual tasks for our students and what are not. And part of advocating for ourselves as teachers is spreading the word about success stories.

When we have an exciting insight in our classrooms, we need to tell people beyond our families and faculty room colleagues. When we read, for example, a cover story in *TIME* about the large numbers of students who aren’t finishing school (for example, the “Dropout Nation” cover story, April 17, 2006), we need to write a letter to the editor of *TIME*, commenting on what we think will engage students more and what might keep them in school (projects more related to their lives, connections with community groups, collaboration, authentic audiences for their writing, etc.). If a local newspaper expresses a well-intentioned but unhelpful view on

the state of education, we need to share our students’ success stories.

I once observed a class in which students took turns reading letters they had received from companies to which they had written in prior weeks. Sometimes the student letters simply expressed appreciation for a product. Sometimes the letters complained about project malfunction. The letters students received back from these companies responded to the substance of the students’ letters. In many cases, the student reading the letter also showed classmates an item that accompanied it: a replacement for the broken product, a free sample, or a coupon for another product. There were pamphlets, pens, baseball hats, or T-shirts. Students were experiencing firsthand the power that writing has to help them get something they want, to change the world in some small way. Instead of having their writing returned with comments on what was wrong with it, they were getting positive results of what their writing had accomplished.

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Misguided notions among powerful members of the general public regarding English Language Arts may be impeding meaningful pedagogical changes in the schools. As professionals with more access to research, scholarship, and classroom observation regarding the best ways to teach reading, writing, speaking and listening, we need to reach out more to concerned citizens who want students to learn, but because they do not have access to our sources of knowledge, keep recommending practices we know are doomed to failure.

We know, for example, from both research and from our experience, that when students have more choice in what they write about, they become engaged in the project. They write more, and they

write better. We know that when they write for an authentic audience, for readers who will be looking at their work for what it says (and not just for what's wrong with it), that students' writing can come alive. We know that students who learn to respond to each other's writing—as early-stage responders to content and as late-stage proofreaders—become better writers themselves. We know that it takes time to help students learn how to respond productively and tactfully, but that being a careful, critical reader will help them for the rest of their lives. We know that publishing students' writing, even on a class website or on a wall, lets students know that their writing matters for reasons beyond providing their teacher an opportunity to correct it.

We know that NCTE/IRA standards support students writing in different genres and for different purposes and audiences. And we know that there are many genres to write in, and that not every text is a five paragraph theme. (In fact, it is the rare published piece that follows that format.) The more students write in different genres and rhetorical situations, the more they learn to adjust their word choice, style, voice, and examples for different audiences and purposes—the kind of knowledge they'll need not only in school and college, but throughout life. They can write short stories, instruction manuals, and letters to companies about good or bad products, letters to authorities to try to change something about the school or neighborhood. They can write in useful, everyday genres: recipes, directions to a restaurant, menu descriptions, and application letters. There are numerous genres within one newspaper, some of which might provide authentic publishing opportunities: front page news stories, features, letters-to-editors, guest opinion pieces, interviews, obituaries, classified ads, and reviews of films, books, and games. There are web pages and blogs.

There is so much to read, beyond conventional literature anthologies, that still meets state and national standards for what should be happening in English classes. The more genres students are exposed to in their reading, the more they'll read, the better they'll read, and the more chance there is they'll find something they like and actually read it outside of school. Also, the more

they'll increase their vocabulary and expand their schema, thus helping them tackle increasingly sophisticated texts. There are sports articles and short stories and novels. There are non-fiction articles on robots, safe driving strategies, ancestors, 19th century games, food additives, meat processing plants, and how to win at video games. There is student-written poetry, and published young adult reviews of young adult novels. School librarians tell us that two phenomena have brought students back into the libraries: Harry Potter and graphic novels. And while some parents or educators may object to each one, student interest in these texts tells us that young people do want to read, but they may not want to read the same materials their parents and grandparents had to read in school, from anthologies not much different from what's on classroom shelves today.

There are Supreme Court decisions students could read and analyze on issues such as freedom of speech, prisoner abuse, censorship, and copyright issues related to songs. There are political stump speeches, attack ads, and newspaper editorials across the country that weigh in on important national and international issues on health care, war, and scientific breakthroughs. When there are so many genres to read, write, listen to, and speak about, is it any wonder students are bored when they're asked to take out their list of vocabulary words and get ready for a test on Monday?

So there is much for students to read and write about. There is much for teachers to tell the general public. Where should we publish this information? We know about our own state and national ELA journals, which are excellent choices, but publication in them won't necessarily get the message out to others who need to hear it. There are also forums such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Educational Leadership*, which are read by educators of various backgrounds, many of whom may one day be in a position to influence an important policy regarding English teachers' freedom to teach what they know will help their students. There are national journals read by policy makers and pundits, journals which, because of their very different readerships and ideologies, we should have a voice in or at least know about: *Education*

Week, Re-Thinking Schools, Education Index, and Education Next. There are national, general interest magazines such as *TIME* and *Newsweek*, *The Economist* and *Business Week*, which run education-related stories frequently enough to open conversation in their letters-to-the-editor pages. There are local newspapers, which may be more open to free-lance news stories, feature articles, or guest opinion pieces. There are school web pages and newsletters. These local forums may be the very texts read by neighbors showing up at school board meetings on curriculum or school policy.

Of course, there are many good reasons why we (myself included) do not have the time to do this public writing. (I did fire off a letter to *TIME*, but it was rejected.) We are too busy teaching, responding to student writing, directing plays, editing yearbooks, serving on committees, writing specialized articles for tenure, or pursuing a higher degree. Or we may simply be tired. Ironically though, much of our good work in teaching can be undermined by deeply-held, well-intentioned, and wrong ideas about teaching, held by people who can greatly influence our decisions about how to best use our students' time. Meaningful teacher advocacy requires that we write publicly about best practices for our students. Parents, legislators, and politicians want what's best for students, too. We have to do a better job telling them what that is.

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