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GVSU Alumni: Alumni Looking Back; Looking Forward: A Chat with COE Alumn

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Photography by Clayton Pelon



Alumni Looking Back; Looking Forward: A Chat with COE Alumn

By: Austin Keith, GVSU Alumnus

It's 2002. A young fourth grader sits in his blue plastic chair with his elbows up on the desk with the cheap wood finish. Hardened gum sticks to the underside as *Charlotte's Web* rests on top between his arms. The ceiling fan turns at its usual pace while the clock hands inch slowly towards recess. His classmate, Rachel B., the curly-haired girl who laughs at his antics, reads aloud as the rest of the class listens. He taps his knuckles on the desk in waves, trying to keep his eyes on the book, while hearing her voice but not listening to a word she's saying.

Their fourth grade classroom is playing the reading game of Popcorn: a game where a student reads one paragraph and then "popcorns" (chooses) someone else to read after them.

Do I look cool? Will she pick me? He notices she has one more sentence left before her paragraph is over. His leg bounces. His heart beats faster. She stumbles over the word "certainly" and this last sentence drags on, but eventually ends. *This is it.* Rachel B. closes out the last few words and clears her throat as she raises her head to look at the class. *This is it.* Make eye contact. She taps on the desk with her pen and eventually spits out, "Popcorn, John."

Popcorn, John? John R.? Really?

Youthfully heart-broken, he slumps back in his chair while watching the pages of *Charlotte's Web* slowly close on the desk in front of him. John R. sits with his back straight, high and mighty, and begins his paragraph with an accomplished charm. Luckily it's a short paragraph to end the chapter.

Ms. Shelton gets up from her desk with a stack of papers in hand. “Here’s the comprehension questions for chapter fourteen. Due at the end of class.” The papers are passed, shoulder over shoulder, down the row of desks.

The young fourth grader grabs the paper with the reflection questions.

Wait. Who’s Dr. Dorian?

Reading games such as Popcorn seem appropriate in theory; it’s meant to engage the students, involve everyone in reading, and allow the class to self-automate. Yet in reality it is *only effective in theory*. The game potentially does more harm when it comes to literacy and reading comprehension. A student becomes preoccupied with the game itself, how they’re sounding rather than comprehending the reading, and more concerned with being picked or not being picked. In honesty, those who weren’t chosen might’ve benefitted the most—not being absorbed into the fruitless game.

As we know, education is constantly evolving, adapting to new technologies, practices, and generations. Grand Valley State University graduates, who are now educators, had the opportunity to reflect on their own educational history with literacy and share their own ideas about the current literacy atmosphere. Annemarie Sikora, a 3rd grade teacher at Campbell Elementary, recalled her own reading experience when she was in 3rd grade. “There was no library in the classroom, we only read what we were told to read, and there was rarely class discussion.” Looking back, if only a few decades, literacy standards have changed remarkably, and we can sometimes see a borderline-comical element in the faults of our own education in literacy. Thinking back on your own reading classroom in elementary school, the defective nature of certain reading strategies might be much more apparent when compared to the standards of a reading classroom in 2015. You might reflect on games such as popcorn: the educational equivalent of a mullet—a

trend that we should’ve realized was a mistake before full-blown implementation.

So what makes a high quality literacy program today? Erica Beaton, a history and english teacher at Cedar Springs High School, put an emphasis on choice. “Not only choos-

ing your text, but learning *how* to choose your own text,” she added. For students to be interested in reading, they need to have the opportunity to indulge in readings that they thoroughly enjoy. Amanda Roper, a 2nd Grade teacher at Pinewood Elementary with ten years of teaching under her belt, explained that “quality literature with a diverse range of genres” is the catalyst for successful readers and writers in and out of the classroom. The library

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must reflect the student’s diversity in today’s classroom. Autumn Hart, a reading specialist at Detroit Merit Charter Academy, reminds us of the adage that literature is a series of windows and mirrors, where a student can experience the unfamiliar as well as the familiar. This holds true even stronger today, yet we can still push diversity in literature even further. Students need access to a variety of texts to cater to individual interests and cultures while simultaneously building habits on how to choose adequate texts.

Ms. Beaton said she takes the studies of Dr. Jeff McQuillan to heart in her classrooms. Dr. McQuillan is mostly known for his *English as a Second Language Podcast* which has over 1,000 episodes since its launch in 2005. He enforces the importance of students having access to a multitude of texts within each classroom and teachers having at least 1,000 books on the top of their head to recommend to students at any given time. While 1,000 books may seem excessive, it’s more likely a goal than a standard. Yet, the point is clear: reading can’t simply be confined to the Library of America and the standard canonical athenaeum (yet of course they have their advantages). With the vast range of diversity (cultural, economical, and social) of students in any given classroom, a teacher must be prepared

to administer the necessary literature in order to invigorate prosperous literacy. Students might struggle, even fail, if only given a few paths, but give them 1,000 paths and they'll surely find one where they can succeed.

Yet, despite the advantages of choice, there is a continuous need for a cooperative balance between assigned readings and chosen readings. If classroom reading strategies were solely based on student choice, they might never escape easy, fun reading. Assigned readings will always serve their purpose. As Ms. Beaton put it, "Students don't always know how to push themselves, so assigned readings give them that push. And if they're struggling with the text, they have their teacher and classmates to help guide them through it." It's understood that the intricacies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* might be beyond the average capacity of a twelve year old, yet with discussion and a guiding hand, it can open a student to new concepts thorough analysis and critical thinking. Assigned readings create a shared experience—an experience beyond the page. Reading isn't and shouldn't necessarily be a secluded practice, but something to be shared with others, especially when it's a literary challenge. Yet, in education, finding this balance and executing these strategies are often much easier said than done.

This challenge when it comes to reading, where students can push themselves, is also a strong component in a quality literacy program. Amanda Roper suggests that books in a classroom library should not be categorized by reading level, rather they should be categorized by genre. This way, if a student is more inclined to read science fiction, they'd be willing to challenge themselves more within that genre as compared to a genre they don't enjoy as much. It's a way for students to access their reading potential. Yet, this is assuming that these students have access to a classroom library in the first place. For we know that economic disparity, a lack of focus

on quality literacy, and a multitude of other factors render inadequate reading experiences among students.

Aside from the obstacles of reading games such as Popcorn, there are other serious challenges, (sometimes unintentionally) attempting to sink the vessel of literacy in the classroom. In the age of technology comes different approaches of literacy. With new generations of students being exponentially more tech-comprehensive than the last, educators are constantly having to re-evaluate what literacy actually means. "We need to be technologically proficient," Autumn Hart stated with a quick, bold tone, "Teachers need to get with the times." Texts no longer come in dense walls of words on paper; they come in a legion of assorted modes. Visual, Aural, Gestural, Spatial, and Linguistic modes are all used in various combinations on numerous technological platforms. Students are becoming familiar with these modes and technologies at an early age as "native speakers," if you will; where educators are often "second language speakers," resulting in a disconnect with how students see and partake in literacy; this is simply

"With new generations of students being exponentially more tech-comprehensive than the last, educators are constantly having to re-evaluate what literacy actually means."

the nature of how technology progresses. Therefore, educators constantly need to make an effort in becoming familiar with new technologies and text-consumption in order to bridge the gap.

Another difficulty on the list of literacy challenges is the unavoidable testing. Common Core State Standards, which set the bar for mathematics and English language arts/literacy across 42 states, are constantly

under heavy hawk-eyed inspection. Autumn Hart stated that "Common Core is effective in theory, yet there's still too much focus on testing. It's difficult to see literacy depth in a test." The focus on the technical aspects pull down one side of the scale of literacy, where critical thinking, comprehension, and the less tangible yet equally important, aspects of literacy are lost between the bubbles of a multiple choice test. "It's about building a community of

readers,” Ms. Beaton captured the bigger image. Literacy is much more than understanding phonics, syntax, or things that can be measured on a multiple choice quiz; it’s about self-reflection, application, and absorption of cultural and social experiences. “Even if the standards are on the right track, people freak out because control is being taken out of the hands of the teachers. Teachers know what’s best,” Ms. Beaton commented. “But as long as you can get your students to read, write, speak, and think everyday, you’re on the right track.”

Every educator has their own ideas of what a successful literacy program consists of, and this simple idea of being able to read and write becomes complicated through politics, econom-

ics, culture, class, social status, and community. Even with the purest intentions, due to these complications, our education system can fumble the foundations of a student’s

literacy. Yet understanding this fallibility, teachers such as our Grand Valley Alumni can consistently work on improving reading and writing within the classroom. There seems to be common connections among the alumnus ideas on what educators should work towards in order to create effective literacy practices. Literacy is a dynamic concept, constantly changing with every school semester, and the teachers and curriculum alike will

change along with it. And some day, we’ll look back at 2015 and ask ourselves, “what were we thinking?”

“Common Core is effective in theory, yet there’s still too much focus on testing. It’s difficult to see literacy depth in a test.”



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The Next Chapter

The COE has had a year of success and transition. For *Colleagues*, this has meant new ideas from leadership and a move to a longer length format. This issue reflects the combined efforts of faculty, staff, and students that came together to examine literacy education.

After working with our dedicated faculty, I can tell you that their energy and commitment to children and teachers has not wavered. With all that is swirling about in the education realm, I hope you see reflected in these pages the efforts and thoughts that have gone into the COE’s work in literacy education.

By now, a lot of you have seen the report from The Education Trust—Midwest and the bleak prediction, without change, it has for Michigan (<https://midwest.edtrust.org/michiganachieves/>). In particular, the news of the reading skills of Michigan youth is very troubling. This information reinforces the need for research-based approaches to

solve the problem. The COE’s faculty, staff, students, and alumni are creating and implementing dynamic and sound strategies to turn the tide.

The past couple of years has seen the college adopt innovative approaches that directly assist in the field. We have a vibrant team that is committed to responding to needs in the field. While this *Colleagues* is a snapshot of the efforts and thoughts of the COE, I encourage readers to communicate directly with the authors and consider partnering with the COE. As always, you can call the COE’s Center for Educational Partnerships as a first contact at 616-331-6240 for any inquiry into possible collaborations.

The College of Education and the *Colleagues* magazine will continue to provide thought provoking information and direct assistance to the profession. This coming year we will introduce you to our new dean, Dr. Barry Kanpol, and present another informative issue.

If you are interested in writing a piece, please email me at pelonc@gvsu.edu with your proposal.

Clayton Pelon
Editor-in-Chief