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THE PARADOX OF THE WHOLE-CLASS NOVEL

Confronting our challenges to become better educators

By **Kate Roberts**

talking with teachers about reading can be a little like talking to parents about feeding their babies. When our first son was born, many of the parents we met were funny, helpful, and realistic. Then there were the others—the parents who scrunched their faces when we answered the question, “Is he sleeping through the night?” with a resounding, “Not in the slightest.” There was a strand of parenting that seemed to believe in the “right” answer and, if only by default, the “wrong” answer.

Over the decades, similar rifts have widened in our professional community around how to teach. The two camps: those who believe in teaching reading through whole-class texts, and those who believe in teaching it through independent reading with skills instruction. Most of us fall into one of these camps by choice or by circumstance, or we straddle them uncomfortably.

We all hold strong beliefs about reading, literacy, and books. For instance, teaching whole-class texts suggests the belief that struggle is productive, that students need to read complex texts, and that focusing on a common book builds strong reading communities. Those of us in the independent reading camp believe that reading ability matters, that students benefit most from reading great books they can read on their own, and that learning skills to read any book will help them build strength and independence whenever they read.

Both of these pedagogies make sound points. And like many of the decisions we make as parents, choosing which course to set for our class might sometimes, well, *depend*: on your goals for your class, on your students, or on the resources that are available. Yet our instructional choices rarely depend on these factors. Instead, too often these choices are made because "this is how we have always done it" or because of rigidly held ideas about the teaching of reading. This is partly because the issues raised when we examine our literacy practices create uncomfortable paradoxes that can feel impossible to reconcile.

The paradox of the whole-class novel for me is this: Over the years, I learned to teach in ways that felt more effective than when I taught novels. I became a reading workshop teacher. And yet if you asked me, or my students, what our favorite unit was, I'm pretty sure we would all say *Romeo and Juliet*.

Your paradox might be different. Maybe the paradox for you is that, although your students read more during independent reading, they seem to work less. Or that, although your kids know the book better during a whole-class novel unit, they start to hate—and stop—reading. The thing about paradoxes is they make us smarter if we deal with them. As Plato said, "I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing."

Tackling the issues and contradictions in our teaching makes us better. These three common issues in whole-class novel units can be transformational—*if* we wrestle toward reconciliation.

1. Time

Whole-class novels take too much time. When we plod through each page of a text over the course of 6, 8, or even 10 weeks, we do little to improve students' understanding of reading of the text and we do much to harm their enthusiasm for and independence with reading these texts powerfully. Think of it as the Law of Diminishing Returns: If I have a wicked headache and take three pain relievers, but then that doesn't work, four isn't going to work any better and may begin to cause harm. The same is true for the time it takes to read books.

What to do: Dramatically shorten the time it takes to read the book. That 6- to 10-week unit? Get it down to two to three weeks.

2. Teaching

Whole-class novels are often not taught very effectively. Round-robin reading with no fluency instruction, constant text-dependent questions with no strategy instruction, and lectures all have limited effects on student achievement. In fact, each of these teaching methods tends to keep students where they are; although some students may make gains, most often the ones who benefit are intrinsically motivated. For students who are not already on board, or who are excited to learn but face certain obstacles, or who need a little support, these techniques often keep them right where they are.

What to do: Develop a skills focus for your unit, and teach using methods of instruction that are explicit, transferable, and engaging. For example, your *Of Mice and Men* (Penguin) unit could focus on analyzing craft.

3. Transfer

If the main reason we teach is to see our students improve over time, then each novel we teach should reveal marked improvement in the ways our students tackle the texts. And to be sure, in classrooms with committed teachers, students get better at doing the work we ask them to do. However, teachers I have talked to over the years reflect dissatisfaction with the transfer they see. When whole-class novels are taught over long periods of time, without teaching that helps students understand how to read any text well, we don't see tons of transfer.

What to do: Take the skills you have asked students to practice in this book and ask them to repeat that work with greater independence on, say a book they read with a club or an independently read text (ideally one that they choose).

It is possible to strike a balance and bring our students the best of the great teaching methodologies. But we will have to face our paradoxes first. ■

Parts of this article will appear in Roberts's upcoming book, to be published by Heinemann in spring 2018.

ILA 2017

Kate Roberts will present a Teaching Edge session on Monday, July 17, on the topic of transforming your work with whole-class novels. For more information, be sure to download the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits app or visit **ilaconference.org/app**, both of which will be available in early March.

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