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Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?

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Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?

The authors report outcomes of a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort through a study group developed to make connections across content areas (English and history/social studies) and grade levels (middle school, high school, and college).

A few years ago, in preparation to teach a content-area literacy course, KaaVonia, an English teacher educator, read “Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Call for Change” (Moje), an article that defines the goals of disciplinary literacy. Interested, KaaVonia began following the discussion around disciplinary literacy. Reading widely about the subject, including the recently published NCTE’s Policy Research Brief, “Literacies of Disciplines,” the following questions occurred to her: What does collaboration mean in the developing national conversation around disciplinary literacy? Is there a place for collaboration in a field that seems to suggest that reading and writing in one domain has little or no bearing in another? Would English language arts (ELA) teachers be expected to collaborate with other content areas? And if so, how would they do this since disciplinary literacy argues for a focus on “specialized knowledge” and “habits of mind” unique to a specific discipline (Moje)?

Last year, with the questions mentioned above in mind, KaaVonia invited three colleagues, Lourdes, a middle school ELA teacher; Maria, a high school social studies teacher; and Yonghee, a social studies teacher educator, to join her in a study group. The group members collected data on their developing understandings of disciplinary literacy and ways this new knowledge might affect each member’s practice. This article reports outcomes of a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort through this study group (Birchak et al.).

The study group met via Adobe Connect. Each meeting was video/audio recorded and transcribed by one of the researchers. To establish a common language and understanding of disciplinary literacy, the study group began by reading and discussing Moje’s “Foregrounding the Disciplines” and “Where We Read from Matters: Disciplinary Literacy in a Ninth-Grade Social Studies Classroom” (Damico et al.). We then read two award-winning young adult texts, *The Book Thief* (Zusak) and *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler’s Shadow* (Bartoletti), and discussed how we might use a disciplinary lens to discuss the texts with each other and, eventually, with our students. In *The Book Thief*, Liesel Meminger holds on to the power of words in the books she creates and the ones she steals, all while being shaped by her experiences in Hitler Youth and her relationship with foster parents who challenge the Nazis by harboring a Jewish man. *Hitler Youth* is an informational text that presents profiles of twelve young people affiliated with *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth). What follows are insights gleaned from the literature on disciplinary literacy and our collaboration in the study group.

Lessons Learned

In analyzing the data, several themes surfaced. We came to realize that the ELA and social studies teachers in our study group believe there are three habits of mind around teaching historical fiction that both disciplines share: (1) It is imperative that both ELA and social studies teachers build students’

historical background knowledge before asking them to engage with historical fiction. (2) One of the goals of teaching historical fiction in both disciplines involves nurturing historical empathy. (3) Pairing historical fiction with nonfiction has value related to promoting historical understanding and thinking in both ELA and social studies classrooms.

Contextualization

Early during our study group meetings it became clear that both ELA and social studies teachers believe teachers of historical fiction must provide students with details about the historical context of a particular work. However, given the study group members’ conversations, disciplines appear to use slightly different terms to describe this similar approach to teaching historical fiction. English teachers might call this practice *building context* as Kimberly C. Price does when she describes how collaborating with her colleagues in Alaska is a “crucial aspect of building context in literature” (43). Throughout our discussions, Lourdes, a grade-level English chair at her school, offered several examples of how English teachers build context to prepare students to read texts set in the past. During our first meeting, for instance, Lourdes said, “I can tell you that just last week I saw the eighth-grade teachers, English teachers, in the library with their classes, and they were researching WWII because they were getting ready to read *Night* (Wiesel). They were reading some of the things that happened during that time before they started reading the [book], and that’s common.” Building historical context in an English class before reading historical fiction helps students make sense of texts set in the past.

Social studies teachers call a similar practice *contextualizing*. According to Avishag Reisman and Sam Wineburg, contextualizing is “the act of placing an event in its proper context—within the web of personalities, circumstances” (202). Maria, a social studies teacher, emphasized the importance of contextualizing when asked how teachers could use *The Book Thief* in social studies:

[Understanding Liesel’s life] is shaped by a deeper [knowledge] of the circumstances surrounding her life. How and why these individuals acted as they did is tied to what was going on in the world

around them—that cannot be separated. Knowing and understanding that context and the chronology of that context allows the reader to have a true understanding of the characters in the novel.

When the ELA and social studies teachers in our group reported on their collaborative efforts, they typically pointed out that one of the strengths of collaborating rests with the social studies teacher’s ability to help contextualize the historical event and/or period in the literary work while the ELA teacher focuses on elements of literature and/or writing tasks. Yet, when such collaboration is not possible, our study group contemplated that an ELA teacher *still* believes it is important to build historical context and actively takes steps to either fill historical gaps in students’ knowledge and/or help students access prior knowledge.

Study group members with a social studies focus learned what building historical context means to the ELA teachers in the group while the ELA teachers grasped what counts as contextualizing in social studies classrooms. Further, we realized that a disciplinary literacy approach to collaboration between ELA and social studies teachers does not have to consist of the social studies teacher providing historical context while the ELA teacher offers lessons around literacy. Instead, teaching together could mean a combined effort where both the ELA and social studies teacher actually work simultaneously in their own courses to contextualize historical fiction and promote reading and writing in response to historical texts.

Historical Empathy

We also found that when using historical fiction in their classrooms, teachers of both subject matters wish to promote another key habit of mind: historical empathy, which needs to be built upon contextualizing the historical period. In English, it has been suggested that young adult fiction “can offer a connection to alienated students, mirror the lives of young adults and provide a forum for adolescents to discuss what it means to come of age, including navigating difficult problems, accessing tools needed to become problem solvers, and fostering empathy” (Bucher and Hinton 10; Stallworth). More specifically, historical details build empathy and help students understand why characters in

historical novels make certain decisions, thus humanizing historical periods and events (Bucher and Hinton; Nawrot). In her reflection after the discussion about *The Book Thief*, Lourdes wrote:

The historical research into the German government and social institutions during the 1930s–1940s guides students as they delve into the emotional, cognitive, and social forces that drive the dynamic characters of *The Book Thief*. These motives are reflected when Hans and Rosa are willing to brave a vindictive regime by hiding Max; Hans and Liesel endure beatings when they reject the dehumanizing march of Jewish prisoners en route to a concentration camp; and Hans’ “gentle soul” demands decency in an indecent world.

Lourdes’s emphasis on carefully researching the period and understanding characters’ motivations within the historical context resonates with history educators’ argument that historical empathy is “a powerful tool for understanding history” (Foster

Historical details build empathy and help students understand why characters in historical novels make certain decisions, thus humanizing historical periods and events.

and Yeager, qtd. in Brooks). In teaching history, historical empathy is characterized in two ways: as “perspective taking” (Barton and Levstik) of people whose beliefs, values, and goals are not necessarily similar to the historical investigator (Riley) and “caring” (Barton and Levstik) *about* and *for* his-

torical events and people of the past, particularly those of contemporary interest. For instance, while discussing the scene in *The Book Thief* where Liesel and her friend Rudy steal food, Maria pointed out the moral dilemma surrounding these characters and explained that the act of stealing needed to be understood within the context of Germany during World War II:

If you’re going to be in a situation where you have students discussing that, then they’re going to need prior knowledge about the war and the circumstances of the war and their own sensibility about morality: What do you do morally in a situation where you see something? Obviously, everybody’s been in that situation, whether you are a child on the playground or you’re an adult,

and you think to yourself, *what could I have done differently.*

Maria believes it is important to encourage students to take the characters’ perspectives into consideration when thinking about their decision to steal.

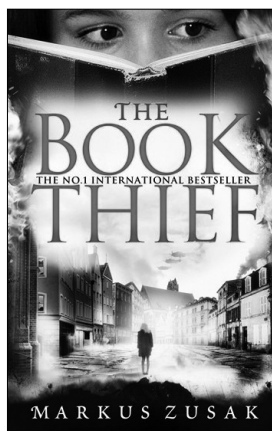
Both Lourdes and Maria also related the novel to two themes, the power of reading and social justice. During the discussions, we valued the fact that the novel portrayed ordinary Germans who may not have known what was going on in and outside of Germany due to limited access to information. Maria shared her experience of asking students to imagine what they would do if they were in similar circumstances. Lourdes also agreed that there are many opportunities for discussing critical contemporary issues by “questioning the privileges and rewards afforded the German society from the 1930s through the 1940s, more specifically, what was the role of schools? How were children empowered, and how did poverty persuade the ethics of the citizenry?” Similar to contextualization, we learned that both subjects, ELA and history/social studies, recognize the significance of historical empathy as a habit of mind.

Fiction vs. Nonfiction

Finally, we discovered that when English and history/social studies teachers use historical fiction paired with nonfiction, it enhances students’ understanding of historical fiction as a piece of literature (Baer) and as historical arguments about the past (Schwebel). Reading nonfiction clearly allowed us to better understand the historical context of the novel, which helped us make sense of characters’ behaviors and the feelings behind those behaviors. Lourdes noted:

I learned a lot. I thought I knew a little bit about Hitler and WWII until I read this book [*Hitler Youth*], and then I realized I didn’t know anything really. Because I’d normally teach the historical background prior to reading the novel, I wonder if anybody thinks that reading *Hitler Youth* before *The Book Thief* would give you a different perspective on the novel.

Similarly, KaaVonia believed she might have read the scenes in *The Book Thief* concerning Rudy’s resistance to the leaders of Hitler Youth with more

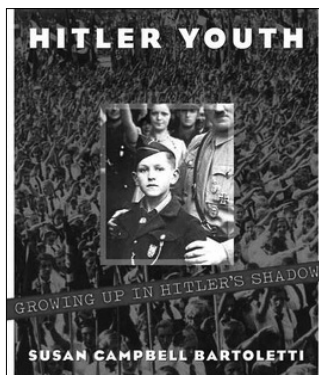


trepidation had she read *Hitler Youth* first: “what [Rudy] was doing was courageous, and I see [that] clearly now having read *Hitler Youth*.”

Maria and Yonghee agreed with Lourdes. Referring to the scenes in *Hitler Youth* that depicted the book burning and the dilemma that German adolescents faced when joining Hitler Youth, Maria observed that *Hitler Youth* made similar scenes that appear in *The Book Thief* seem plausible. Yonghee noticed that as a nonfiction author, Bartoletti was explicit about her craft in terms of conducting research and interviews that informed the stories she tells, which adds credibility to the work, while a fictional text like *The Book Thief* rarely provides space for discussion about an author's research process.

However, as a group, we disagreed with the common practice of pairing fiction and nonfiction to highlight the differences between fiction and informational text. While discussing the benefits of pairing informational and fictional texts when teaching history, Allison L. Baer argues that “the two text types need to be approached differently” since the structure and format of the texts are quite different (285). She goes on to say those differences need to be highlighted when informational and fictional texts are taught together. She also notes that fictional texts read better than informational texts. Contrarily, we found some commonalities between *The Book Thief* and *Hitler Youth*. We were pleasantly surprised that an informational text such as *Hitler Youth* is as engaging as a novel like *The Book Thief*. *Hitler Youth* presented multiple stories of German adolescents who actively participated in Hitler Youth as well as those who resisted the Nazi Party during World War II. With vivid interviews, photos, and details, each biographical sketch in the book reads like a narrative worthy of its own book-length account.

We also learned that whether the text is historical fiction or nonfiction, it should be treated as a historical argument about the past. In her book *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*, Sara L. Schwebel wrote that historical fiction provides incomparable opportunities for teachers to nurture children's sensitivity toward the way the past is used for moral and ideological ends in the present. Study group members agreed that



if a novel represents the author's beliefs about how the past should be taught to students, they should be taught how to examine historical fiction critically. We also speculated that this process can be challenging because fiction can give students the impression that all of the events in a novel are factual since the narrative structure makes the depiction of the events so believable to readers (Barton and Levstik).

Challenges

Maria: It makes a lot more sense to have a partnership with English and social studies. I mean they just naturally lend themselves to each other . . .

Lourdes: Social studies and English need to get married. [Study group members laugh.]

Maria: Love it!

Though the comments from two different meetings in the exchange above are playful, we genuinely expressed interest in both collaboration and disciplinary literacy, while remaining realistic in our assessment of the practicalities of both. We questioned whether middle schools and high schools as they exist today are welcoming spaces for collaboration or disciplinary studies. Reflections on our conversations reveal that challenges could fall into at least three categories: (1) challenges related to collaboration in general, (2) challenges to disciplinary literacy as a pedagogical approach, and (3) challenges to collaborating in the midst of “doing” disciplinary literacy.

Despite ELA and history teachers' willingness to collaborate, well-known challenges such as time constraints put on high school history teachers who are asked to cover a vast amount of curricular objectives continue to hamper collaborative efforts. Study group members also argued that logistical characteristics of high school such as scheduling make collaboration challenging. For example, while high schools take pride in offering students an array of courses, this variety makes it difficult to find any two groups of students that have the same English and social studies teachers. Since it is unusual to find overlap among students taking the same ELA and history/social studies classes, teachers are reluctant to develop interdisciplinary units out of

concern that some of the students would not be able to fully participate.

During our first meeting Yonghee asked, “Have you guys ever heard of the concept ‘grammar of school’? We have had these content areas in schools and this curriculum for a very long time, so we have a grammar of schooling.” She went on to suggest that everyone involved in schools has expectations about what goes on there, expectations that have existed for centuries and are not easily transformed (Tyack and Cuban). A stakeholder’s expectations about schooling can sometimes make collaboration feel foreign and out of place. However, as it might be expected, study group members did note that some school structures, such as middle school core teams, do serve as naturally inviting spaces for collaborating on projects.

We also realized that literacy needs to be defined in a broader sense to incorporate disciplinary literacy as a pedagogical approach in our practices. We concluded our first study group meeting with a simple question: What is disciplinary literacy? Maria offered that it is the skills unique to a discipline. For example, she explained, “You are going to have a different kind of skill if you’re doing a science experiment and you’re looking at scientific data than you are if you’re working on a math problem.” Lourdes talked about background knowledge and practices within a discipline, but then the following exchange took place:

Lourdes: I feel like it’s [disciplinary literacy] something that we [English teachers] have to come across the other areas, and not just English. I feel it’s almost like we [English teachers] own it . . .

Maria: So, who owns it? Language arts?

Lourdes: I’m thinking that it should not be owned; however, that’s the way it’s always come across when working with other teachers. For instance, I’ve worked with a few other social studies teachers, and even in a joint assignment, I have looked at the grammar, the writing aspect, and they have just looked totally at the historical facts that were put into that assignment. Maybe we should have looked at it differently.


Maria: You’re right because if you’re going to express yourself in history, you need to be a literate person.

This suggests that content-area teachers might need opportunities to see how literacy learning operates at the center of what they do, and it is not the sole domain of ELA teachers. Similarly, as this conversation continued, it became apparent that in fields such as history/social studies there is often a tendency to focus on teaching facts rather than historical inquiry (Bain; VanSledright; Wineburg), which the study group members speculated may deter teaching disciplinary literacy in the content areas.

Study group members were also left wondering if “doing” disciplinary literacy hinders or promotes the potential for collaborative opportunities to teach literacy in English and social studies. “Doing” disciplinary literacy in a collaborative way might prove challenging even when collaborating while using similar types of texts. Working together might be difficult if the purposes for using the texts are dissimilar. For example, while ELA and history/social studies teachers both use newspaper articles, they serve multiple purposes within each discipline. In an ELA class, a newspaper article might be used as a model for writing, as a tool for reading to learn, or as a synergistic text related to a literary work. In history/social studies, the same newspaper article might be used to serve as a primary source that students learn how to analyze and interpret or the article might offer information about the event or figures studied. While challenges exist, we remain optimistic and encouraged by what we found during study group meetings.

Conclusion

The lessons we learned point to our growing understanding of the habits of mind of two disciplines, English and history/social studies; how literacy instruction is crucial in both domains; and how there seems to be a natural benefit involved in collaborating across these disciplines. At times, the boundaries of the two disciplines blur. What remains clear is as recent as this year well-established efforts such as the National Center for Literacy Education, supported by the National Council of Teachers of English and other organizations, continue to show that collaboration is an important tool for literacy learning. We are, however, left with unanswered questions: Will disciplinary literacy leave us in our silos or encourage collaboration? When we high-

light disciplinary specific literacy, what are the roles and responsibilities for ELA teachers? Will ELA teachers be called on to collaborate across content areas under the assumption that they have an understanding of what counts as literacy in a particular discipline? Though we cannot speak for all ELA and history/social studies teachers, we believe sharing the “aha” moments made during our study group opens the national conversation around disciplinary literacy to the insights of classroom teachers who value collaboration across disciplines. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

To prepare for reading a historical novel, such as *A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck, *Countdown* by Deborah Wiles, *Dead End in Norvelt* by Jack Gantos, or *The Rock and the River* by Kekla Magoon, students research various aspects of a setting's decade in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Blending the Past with Today's Technology: Using Prezi to Prepare for Historical Fiction.” Then using the information they have gathered, students communicate their findings via Prezi, a Web-based presentation tool that uses one canvas instead of traditional slides. Through the sharing of their Prezis, all students gain an understanding of the historical decades of their selected novels. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blending-past-with-today-30887.html>