



LAYERED LITERACIES

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The Beyond Books Project: Preparing Teachers and Students for a World of (In)Equities

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The main force pushing toward reduction in equality has always been the diffusion of knowledge and the diffusion of education.

—Thomas Piketty

Piketty's assertion as an economics scholar aligns well with our belief in the power of education. This issue of *The ALAN Review* focuses on the complexities of economics and the ways in which the economics of the world are reflected in the young adult literature (YAL) we share with our students. While economics and inequities may be directly mentioned or discussed in texts, most of our understanding of the influence of economics and equity in YAL occurs indirectly through our understanding of the setting, the characters' lives, and events that surround those lives. To help our students better understand the complexities of equality and the economic disparities that exist in our world, we often turn to texts as a framework for discussions and inquiry.

On a recent campus visit to Kansas State University, I was drawn to Lotta Larson's work with texts wherein she incorporates the types of knowledge diffusions that we need in order to fight against inequality. The Beyond Books project, developed for use with preservice teachers, highlights the ways in which we

can use traditional and nontraditional texts, coupled with digital and online resources, to enhance learning experiences for students in the classroom. Through this project, students integrate "texts" in all forms to highlight inequities in localized and global dimensions. As a professor at Kansas State University, Lotta teaches in the literacy program as well as the Master of Arts in Teaching program in literacy and technology integrations.

The Beyond Books Project

by **Lotta Larson**

The theme of this issue hones in on socioeconomic issues and inequities around the world. Over the past 20 years, income inequalities have drastically increased throughout the world, and family life has become progressively disparate with respect to socioeconomic status (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2016). Our classrooms brim with students representing diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, along with disparate socioeconomic situations, family structures, rural and urban upbringings, etc. In the United States alone, over 15 million young people (21%) live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold, with the highest poverty rates existing among African American, Latinx, and American Indian youth (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2017). Current trends in YA literature mirror these economic and social inequalities, as marginalized and diverse voices are gaining representation in the field. Furthermore, there is a surge in both fiction

and nonfiction books that tackle issues related to the current political and socioeconomic climate, including the Black Lives Matter movement or migration and refugee experiences (Roback, 2017).

As a teacher educator, I recognize the importance of preparing new teachers who understand content and pedagogy. Even more important, I strive to prepare teachers who are responsive to the unique needs of their students and able to develop strong connections between students' experiences and academic outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Through the Beyond Books project, I encourage my students (preservice teachers) to walk in someone else's shoes and use YA literature as a springboard for conversation about sensitive topics like race, social and economic inequities, and political controversies.

In addition to using YA literature, the Beyond Books project integrates digital tools and multimodal literacies. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2008/2013) recognizes that "literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices As society and technology change, so does literacy" (n.p.). However, since new technologies demand new literacies, traditional literacy instruction is no longer sufficient (International Reading Association, 2009; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013), nor is the idea of limiting the act of reading to experiences where the endpapers truly signify the end. In other words, today's students deserve opportunities to move beyond books to unearth multiple, and multimodal, layers of information while gaining diverse perspectives. While the Beyond Books project can support almost any topic or theme, it is particularly effective in addressing matters of diversity, race, and economic disparity. Simply put, it helps learners place themselves in someone else's shoes.

I started the Beyond Books project over a decade ago to help prepare teachers to orchestrate literacy instruction in which books serve as a portal for diverse, multimodal explorations. Originally, the idea was to pair twin texts—fiction and nonfiction texts about the same topic (Camp, 2000)—with a related website "for the purpose of opening a new gateway to learning" (Hancock, 2004, p. 356). In response to the need for more participatory, diverse literacy experiences, the Beyond Books project has evolved over the years. Rather than passively consuming information from

books and online sources, I now nudge my students to produce, share, and co-create information with authentic audiences through the use of digital tools. While the primary focus remains on the literature, the online resources extend content in diverse, multimodal formats.

Classroom Applications

So, what does this look like in the classroom? In truth, I tweak the project every semester to address current topics and meet the needs and interests of individual students. Obviously, this holds true when working with adolescents, as well. Below, I share two variations of the Beyond Books project, one in which students engage in literature response projects and another in which they participate in global collaborations. No matter the version, the basic components remain the same:

1. **Introduce:** Explain that the Beyond Books project focuses on literature but extends print-text reading to include multimodal experiences. Show and discuss examples of twin texts (books from different genres on the same topic) coupled with websites, digital tools, or apps that further help readers gain information on the topic.
2. **Model:** Share a Beyond Books project to demonstrate how students can explore twin texts and websites. Select a theme that relates to current units of study or a topic in which students have expressed particular interest. Examples of twin texts and related websites can be found at ReadWriteThink.org (search: Beyond Books).
3. **Differentiate:** If teachers or students are new to integrating reading experiences and technology, begin by simply reading fiction and nonfiction books and viewing related websites. Gradually move from consuming information to creating, sharing, and

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collaborating in online environments. Consider the unique needs, interests, and background experiences of your students by adjusting genres and online resources as needed. Create your own rules!

4. **Consider Technology Tools:** Don't let limited technology resources constrain your Beyond Books aspirations. Many collaborative tools are free to educators (e.g., Edmodo, Smore, VoiceThread, Skype, Google Classroom, etc.). Although it helps if every student has access to a laptop or other device, it is not a necessity. Shared Internet experiences only require one computer and one projector. Similarly, groups of students, or an entire class, can engage in a collaborative global partnership. It doesn't have to be an individual experience.
5. **Share:** Regardless of whether students create a traditional book report or engage with others on a global scale, pinpoint opportunities for sharing students' work. Ideally, the audience will contribute feedback and unique perspectives. However, it's always a good idea to start small—perhaps within your own classroom or building—and gradually seek audiences or partnerships far beyond classroom walls.

Example 1: Literature Response Projects

To learn about the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, my students are captivated by Karen Hesse's free-floating verse in *Out of the Dust* (1997) and the compelling photographs in Russell Freedman's *Children of the Great Depression* (2005). These fiction and nonfiction books are paired with the History Channel website (<http://www.history.com/>). Here, students listen to President F. D. Roosevelt's 1935 fireside chat radio broadcast on the New Deal Programs (<http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/speeches/franklin-d-roosevelt-on-new-deal-programs?m=52af5724c3c2e&s=undefined&f=1&free=false>) and view authentic photographs of soup kitchens and bread lines (<http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/pictures/soup-kitchens-and-breadlines>). The students also listen to National Public Radio (NPR) interviews with survivors of the Great Depression (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97468008>). In response to the literature and NPR voice recordings, my students write their own scripts in which fictional characters account for diverse experiences in the 1930s. They

garner historical facts along with fabricated details from the books and websites to create believable characters and settings. Some characters tell tales of desperate situations and living conditions, while others face fewer difficulties. To reach a larger audience, the interviews are recorded and shared as VoiceThreads (<https://voicethread.com/>).

Another example takes a close look at the impact of poverty on children's chances for future success. Here, we read *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (Moore, 2010), which follows the true opposing narratives of two men who happen to have the same name but grow up under very different circumstances. As explained by Wes Moore himself, "The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his" (p. xi). *The Serpent King* (Zentner, 2016), in which three fictional high school seniors struggle to find their way in the face of economic inequities, also depicts how being born into particular circumstances influences an individual's path in life. To gain further background knowledge, students watch the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) "NewsHour" segment *Land of the Free, Home of the Brave* (<https://youtu.be/YnQwTS-K6jI>), study the Pew Research Center's report *America's Shrinking Middle Class* (<http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/05/Middle-Class-Metro-Areas-FINAL.pdf>), and complete the interactive, online PBS quiz *Are you in the American middle class?* (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/05/11/are-you-in-the-american-middle-class/>). In response to the literature and news clips, students write, produce, and share their own news segments in which they conduct interviews with someone who represents a different economic background than their own.

A similar example works to broaden students' understandings and perspectives of the American Civil Rights Movement as students read *The Watson's Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), a cogent work of historical fiction, and the picturebook *The Other Side* (2001), in which Jacqueline Woodson's lyrical words come to life through E. B. Lewis's beautiful illustrations. They also read Ruby Bridges's autobiographical account, *Through My Eyes* (1999). Several websites enhance understanding of the topic, including that of the National Civil Rights Museum (<https://www.civilrights museum.org/>), where visitors can conduct a virtual tour of exhibits and galleries.

To help students make connections between the Civil Rights Movement of the past and current events, I ask them to read and respond to news blogs such as *Huffington Post* (<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/>) or *BuzzFeed* (<https://www.buzzfeed.com>). Keeping past struggles for civil rights in mind while reading about National Football League player demonstrations, recent cases of police brutality, or the proposed changes to immigration policies helps students examine their own beliefs while considering new, or different, perspectives. In addition to sharing opinions and engaging in blog discussions, I encourage students to write to their local newspapers or contact their congressional representatives (<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>). Helping students find an authentic audience elevates their own learning as they broaden perspectives and engage others in conversation about important topics.

Example 2: Global Collaborations

In addition to creating response projects, my preservice teachers engage in global collaborations with ninth graders in Sweden who are studying English as a foreign language. Given that online experiences are already pulling the world closer together, we must focus on learning opportunities across space, time, and diverse cultures. Connected learning occurs when teachers and students use new literacies and common online tools that afford them abilities to collaborate and communicate on a global scale (Lindsay, 2016).

After learning about World War II through nonfiction texts and websites, the Swedish students and the preservice teachers in the United States read *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006) by John Boyne. In this work of historical fiction, two boys, a son of a Nazi officer and a Jewish boy in a concentration camp, form a deep friendship. To extend the reading experience, the two groups discuss the book in Edmodo blogs (<https://www.edmodo.com/>). Here, the preservice teachers post discussion prompts, teach vocabulary words, and guide the Swedish students in online learning activities to build additional background knowledge and language (e.g., Scholastic's interactive online WWII activities at <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/wwii/>). By reading and responding to literature, the Swedish students improve verbal and written communication skills in English. The preservice teachers in the United States learn how to instruct

English language learners while gaining important experience in online teaching.

The blog also serves as a platform for discussion of online texts, including articles from *National Geographic Kids* (<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/>), *Time for Kids* (<https://www.timeforkids.com/>), and *DOGOnews* (<https://www.dogonews.com/>). These articles address current topics of global interest or concern (e.g., politics, environmental issues, migration, sports, etc.) at a language level appropriate for English Language Learners. While the preservice teachers in the United States have much to teach their Swedish students, they also have much to learn. Peeling back preconceived notions about the Vikings, Pippi Longstocking, and Ikea, they learn about a country with little income inequality and where *all* students receive free lunches and college tuition but, on the other hand, pay very high taxes. They learn about a country that has traditionally dealt with few racial contentions but is now debating and reacting to a recent influx in immigration (Swedish Institute, n.d.). The future teachers have described this as an eye-opening experience. Both groups learn how to use digital tools to communicate and socially construct knowledge while gaining global competencies (Larson & Brown, 2017). Of course, configurations of online literature discussions vary, as do the digital tools used to collaborate (Larson, 2009). To form a suitable partnership, teachers may turn to services such as ePals (www.epals.com), a global community where educators can connect with classrooms from around the world.

Moving Forward

To prepare teachers for a diverse and changing world, we need to offer opportunities for walking in someone else's shoes. Considering the complex, multimodal texts students encounter, both in print and digital form, their skills and strategies must expand beyond

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those sufficient for traditional print-text reading (Serafini, 2015). Learners need skills to evaluate real and “fake” news; collaborate and communicate across time and space; and decipher a deluge of economic, societal, and environmental concerns and inequities. Today’s students have a right to “literacy instruction that embeds critical and culturally sensitive thinking into print and digital literacy practices” (International Reading Association), 2009, n.p.). NCTE (2008/2013) agrees that teacher preparation programs must require training in the integration of technology and literacy

instruction. However, technology in and of itself won’t make a difference unless teachers offer students augmented opportunities to engage in authentic learning experiences in which they can learn *with* the world rather than *about* the world (Lindsay, 2016/2017). By engaging my preservice teachers in this project, I hope that they, in turn, will design authentic learning opportunities for their future students. The ideas presented in this article are mere suggestions, limited only by the imaginations of educators. I encourage you to share your ideas!

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