

# What *The Hunger Games* Can Teach Us about Disciplinary Literacy

*This piece discusses how to use the young adult novel *The Hunger Games* to plan literacy-based lessons that draw on a variety of core content (English, history, math, and science) and deepen students' understandings of curricular content across the school day.*

**M**y first exposure to disciplinary literacy occurred when I was a middle school teacher in North Texas. Our principal at the time was interested in interdisciplinary, cross-curricular units to help students connect their learning across subjects, and we worked in teams with a science, math, social studies, and language arts teacher to develop meaningful learning experiences for that purpose. This was a complex endeavor with few exemplars to light the way; some of our staff resisted leaving the safe cocoon of their content and working with others. Efforts were exacerbated by curricular standards that did not always blend so seamlessly together. We initially tried to combine social studies and English for our unit drawn from a core text or novel, but we were limited by resources. For example, while the eighth-grade social studies standards (TEA) included American history from the early colonial period through Reconstruction, we had no available young adult books in class sets for students on our teams to use. Those novels we did have were difficult to synthesize with the other main content areas because they were either rooted in a historical period our students were not required to study, or they were so contemporary it was difficult to conceive of opportunities for math and science to get taught.

In the end, rather than having students read a novel unrelated to what they were learning in their history class, we instead created an end-of-the-year

exploration of cola companies, their products, and how they targeted young people as consumers. We received a small grant to support the “Soda Papparazzi” project, which offset materials, and the team teachers and I set about connecting our content to a larger idea. In their history class, students explored the development of the Coca-Cola and Dr Pepper companies; in science, students measured and blended a variety of flavors to produce a signature drink that could be mass-produced for taste tests. The math teacher coordinated market research questions and oversaw a schoolwide taste test; students later crunched the numbers to determine which of the drinks were enjoyed most. In my English classroom, students viewed and critiqued advertisements and considered which they liked best, based on the rhetorical devices employed to sway consumers’ opinions. They then wrote and produced advertisements that we asked taste-testers to watch and evaluate as a part of the market research data students were collecting. Points were tallied for audience favorites both in the taste and advertising appeal realm, and we awarded prizes to the winners, ending the school year exhausted but excited about our completed project.

## Where We Are Today: Enlarging Literacy in the Age of Testing and Standards

It is important to note that such a project requires a certain level of flexibility—on the part of teachers, students, and administrators not to mention a malleable curriculum—to develop and execute such

a complex interdisciplinary unit of study. In the years since I took part in the Soda Paparazzi project, we have witnessed *less* flexibility in schools in my local community. State standards and high-stakes tests have pushed creativity out of many schools altogether. Funding has tightened to the point that most districts in our state have set aside teaming, which has decreased the opportunity for teachers to even consider cross-disciplinary studies regardless of its chance to help students see that learning in one class overlaps with others. School leaders and teachers alike voice concerns about “covering the curriculum” rather than discussing ways to deepen students’ understandings of the various contents and helping match learning in schools to the interests students carry with them as they move from one departmentalized classroom to another.

Disciplinary literacy research (Moje) suggests that our efforts to reinforce literacy across the school day or encourage content-area teachers to use reading strategies as a regular part of their teaching practice has “neither been widely accepted by teachers in the disciplines nor particularly effective in raising reading achievement on a broad scale” (Shanahan and Shanahan 57). In fact, it is evident to many of us working in the field of literacy education that “Generic literacy approaches across the content areas have not produced the results we have been looking for in our students’ literacy or content knowledge, skills, and performance” (Zygouris-Coe). According to Carol Lee and Anika Spratley, supporters of strategy usage disregard the importance of developing students’ identities as readers in meeting each discipline’s unique reading and writing tasks.

Efforts to reconceptualize and deepen our understanding of the myriad literacy discourses present in a student’s school day have surfaced some interesting discussions and pushed us to think differently about the ways in which students master thinking and working like a scientist, or reasoning like a mathematician. But how might these different discourses reinforce the

disciplinary and literacy learning necessary for secondary students to truly grasp what they are learning and contextualize it into a broader schema that will stay with them after they take a test over the material? And, how might teachers draw on the interests and engagement students have for other kinds of literate activities as they teach their assigned content?

Having transitioned from a classroom teacher to a teacher educator, I have a vested interest in these queries; I also have an opportunity to reconceptualize the manner in which I approach disciplinary literacy with the preservice teachers and to learn from their efforts. What follows is a description of my attempt to guide preservice teachers in how to weave literacy practices and disciplinary content (math, science, social studies, language arts) standards into challenging and engaging lessons using a familiar and accessible text.

### ***The Hunger Games Project***

In the fall of 2009, I began teaching content-area reading courses in an undergraduate program at a large state university in Texas. Many of our students are the first in their family to go to college. Because our college is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (a federal designation and support mechanism for universities with at least a 25 percent full-time Hispanic student population) many of my students are bilingual (Spanish and English). They understand the importance of maintaining both languages in their own lives and in the lives of the students served by our local schools. Students in the College of Education take classes that are paired with fieldwork and test pedagogical ideas introduced in courses in cooperating teachers’ classrooms. I typically teach 20–25 preservice teachers in a literacy “block,” where they read and discuss research, work collaboratively to create literacy-based lessons across the content spectrum, develop games to target content-area vocabulary or support skills necessary for specific content classes, and practice teaching. Although many of my preservice teachers are white, middle-class young women, I have seen increasing numbers of Latino/Latina students and a growing number

**How might teachers draw on the interests and engagement students have for other kinds of literate activities as they teach their assigned content?**





Purestock/Thinkstock

of young men pursuing teaching certificates. Most striking in these changes are the burgeoning numbers of those seeking math and science certification. As the job market has tightened in our state, many are gravitating toward the fields where they will more likely find work after graduation.

As a result, like many professors working with students who do not plan to become English teachers, I often discovered resistance when I asked my preservice middle school (fourth through eighth grade) teachers to consider how literacy might relate to math or science. Their initial attempts to make sense of these two disparate notions led to suggestions that they could ask students to do research projects about Einstein or a particular mathematical principle. While those are perhaps valuable ways to connect math and literacy, I could tell I was not helping students really think about what literacy might look like in a content area existing outside of the English classroom. At least one preservice teacher a semester would say, “I’m not a reader. This is why I decided to teach [math, science, music, etc.] instead.”

Initially I had only limited success in helping preservice teachers incorporate research-based literacy ideas into their lesson plans. That is when I noticed that many of the middle grades students at the schools where I was supervising interns were reading a book—one that they were so involved in that they would hide it from their teachers in their laps, and continue reading while the teacher was explaining the day’s lesson. That book was *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins—a book I had just received as a gift and had put off reading. Since that initial discovery, *The Hunger Games* has become both a bestseller and a movie and has found its way into classrooms to teach about dystopia, tyranny, social justice, and hegemony. Teaching ideas linked to the *Hunger Games* trilogy are readily available on the Internet, there is a *Hunger Games* Facebook page directed at fans, and there are an array of critiques of the text and the movie as well as the choices the filmmakers have made in terms of casting decisions (see, for example, <http://jezebel.com/5896408/racist-hunger-games-fans-dont-care-how-much-money-the-movie-made>).

I finished the book over a weekend and spent the summer thinking about how I could incorporate it into my content-area reading courses as an entry point for preservice teachers to consider both literacy and their discipline. While using young adult novels or picture books to teach curricular content is a common practice, I set out to explicitly demonstrate how to draw on events from the text to reinforce a specific curricular goal. Along with another professor, I developed a list of “Hunger Game Achievements” that matched teacher proficiencies (like tenacity, problem-solving, applying and sharing knowledge, harnessing tools) with the journey Katniss and her fellow tributes experienced and extended this into a larger semester-long project that is described in greater detail in another venue (Saunders and Ash).

First, I asked preservice teachers to read *The Hunger Games* during the first week of the semester, so that we could revisit it throughout the semester. We then used the novel as a touchstone text for literature circles, which served two purposes: ensuring that preservice teachers have read the book and giving me the opportunity to model how to use reading strategies with a high interest text. I employed ideas that were well documented in the research or were available from our class text. Testing out the visualizing strategy (Robb), students took a scene from the book and drew comic strips that exhibited plot. Using discussion webs (Alvermann and Moore), students considered whether it was beneficial that Katniss joined forces with Peeta in the arena. Students discussed connections they were able to make—to the world, themselves, and other texts (Rosenblatt)—after reading *The Hunger Games*. I wanted them to see strategies we were reading about modeled early on, so they could grasp that I was not asking them to use any tools I was unwilling to try myself.

Next, I asked preservice teachers to read the curricular guidelines (TEKS) for their content to surface intersections between the curriculum and *The Hunger Games*. Content-specific expert groups engaged in deepening conversations about their subject’s standards and brainstormed events from the novel that could support the teaching of a standard. In the early stages of this process, preservice teachers considered concepts that were most evident after finishing the book. Among these were prob-

ability, ratios, and drawings of the arena (math); comparisons between Panem and the United States; attributes of the civilization like laws, tools, and society (social studies); character analyses, writing alternate endings, comparing the book to other dystopic novels (language arts); and ecology and the environment, adaptations, categorizing species (science).

Finally, preservice teachers broke into disciplinary lesson-planning teams of three to four members. Each created a lesson or extended activity that:

- Was rooted in state content standards.
- Drew on a chapter, passage, or section of *The Hunger Games* that related to the curricular concept they were attempting to teach. These were retyped or photocopied and included with completed lesson plans.
- Employed one of the many research-based literacy ideas we were learning in class. Preservice teachers were required to justify their use of selected reading strategies and cite their sources in lesson plans.
- Included handouts, models, or materials necessary to teach the lessons. I wanted to see every aspect of their lesson, even if it was a simple T-chart used for brainstorming.

I have used this project for several years and have noticed richer and more complex lesson plans in recent semesters that are likely a reflection of improvements in my practice. The project is no doubt equally supported by model lesson plans from earlier semesters that I upload to an online space we use for class, examples that preservice teachers read and critique prior to creating their own. Thus, while math folks in my first semester chose probability as their topic—related to the probability that Katniss’s or Prim’s name will be drawn during the reaping in *The Hunger Games*—more recent contributions involve less obvious topics related to the novel, such as graphing and slope evident in the Games’ arena.

As I consider strategy use and its efficacy for preservice and practicing teachers in the content courses, I find myself thinking that some strategy use is, well, *useful*. But I also have to acknowledge that effective teachers can create more meaningful activities if they are unencumbered with learning the names and labels of the various content-area

literacy strategies we have historically taught them in these courses. Sure, it might be helpful to teach preservice teachers about strategies such as concept maps and visual graphics, but many have moved way beyond these ideas as they view and respond to info graphics through online sources and social media. They have found websites to help them develop these for classroom use and often prefer looking at Pinterest or the Internet rather than their books for ways to teach their content more creatively. These tensions are something we will no doubt continue to explore; for now, I prefer a more balanced approach of teaching some strategy usage to help students unpack text in specific content courses and putting an equal amount of energy into unearthing texts (both fiction and nonfiction) that captivate student interest, like *The Hunger Games*. In this way we can focus our attention on helping students see the intersections between what they are already enjoying reading and the content we are expected to teach, in English class and beyond.

Figure 1 represents a sampling of preservice teachers' efforts to blend content-area reading strategies, *The Hunger Games*, and their required curricular content for middle grade students.

### Where to Next?

Using a novel as a springboard for disciplinary studies is nothing new. As a teacher I often saw really interesting novels used in content-area teachers' classrooms, from Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone* for teaching about a biological outbreak to *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck for teaching about the Depression. Now a professor, I have relied on Wendy Lichtman's *Do the Math: Secrets, Lies, and Algebra* to remind preservice teachers that girls are just as accomplished in math as boys. Finding a book that offers opportunities for students across the school day (and offers disciplinary literacy to emerge through its study) is more challenging than it might seem. Watching preservice teachers go from reluctantly reading about a literacy strategy and wondering why it's relevant to their discipline to really taking ownership over a text and seeing the strategy as a tool for learning has taught me a few things. This can be done using a vast array of novels, but I continue to use *The Hunger Games*

because of the feedback I consistently receive from preservice teachers. Morgan captures the essence of what many have told me repeatedly in end-of-the-semester reflections:

When we were first assigned a lesson plan for this book, I really didn't understand why . . . I read it without even thinking about how it could be used in that way [but found it] useful in planning a lesson plan. The book seemed to have mathematical topics throughout. I could have used any chapter from any book in the series to formulate a lesson plan. In the future I hope I get a [*sic*] English teacher that is willing to cooperate with me in incorporating a book like *The Hunger Games* into both subjects.

**We can focus our attention on helping students see the intersections between what they are already enjoying reading and the content we are expected to teach, in English class and beyond.**

Natalia was equally enthusiastic about the assignment. She writes,

This novel was an amazing choice for lesson planning. It was easy to take an idea and pull from *The Hunger Games* to make a complete lesson. I also liked hearing different content area's lesson plans and ideas. I was able to see how to connect *The Hunger Games* to different areas very well. This novel has changed my thinking on reading and different content areas. I did not realize you could connect a novel with math or science. Hearing my classmates' ideas was helpful. I know now that I can take a novel or book and connect it to specific content areas, which will be helpful when I become a teacher.

Not all of my students are pleased with the novel, the lesson-planning project, or the semester-long *Hunger Games* Achievement project I required, reporting out as Caleb did, "It's just. Too. Much. Work." I have found those critiques infrequent and less a personal complaint and more a lack of understanding about the complexity of our work as educators. The best among us are alchemists capable of blending learning events that bridge what students already understand with what they have yet to learn.


Large-scale data from tests such as the NAEP, the SAT, and state-mandated assessments suggest that secondary students are struggling to make

**FIGURE 1. Using *The Hunger Games* to Blend Content and Reading Strategies**

<b>Subject and Grade Level</b>	<b>Curricular Connections and Standards</b>	<b><i>Hunger Games</i> Connections</b>	<b>General Description of the Activity</b>	<b>Literacy Strategy or Idea Employed</b>
Math seventh grade	Coordinate planes; ordered pairs; communicating about math through informal and mathematical language, representations, and models	The layout and environment of <i>The Hunger Games</i> arena, based on details from the book	Students draw a pictorial rendering of the arena from <i>The Hunger Games</i> , including the cornucopia, the lake, the piney woods, and the podiums tributes stand on as they enter. They add three additional objects and then create a coordinate grid overlay of the drawing. Students pair with another group and take part in a modified form of Battleship using the opposing group's coordinates.	Visualizing and using mentor text to infer an actual space. Listening, speaking, reasoning.
Science seventh grade	The relationship between organisms and environments; biodiversity; classifying and categorizing	Katniss and Gale hunting in the District 12 ecosystem; Katniss and the other tributes have to adapt to an unknown environment	Students bring in artifacts (plants, materials, trash, bugs, or animals) they find in their yard. They classify the artifacts and draw conclusions about the local environment. They use the same approach to discuss District 12 and the ecosystem of the Arena.	Using the Frayer Model to deepen students' use of unfamiliar scientific vocabulary. Writing notes and creating tables to use for classification. Writing about similarities and differences.
English/Language Arts fourth through eighth grade	Writing for a variety of purposes; represent text information in different ways such as in outline, timeline, or graphic organizer; produce visuals to complement and extend meanings	Characters are described throughout the novel, and readers can gain information both from what the characters say and think and by what other characters say or think about them.	Students work in expert groups for each character, completing charts of that character's progress in the book, keeping track of each character's special talents and skills, based on the book. Students create a designated section of a "field guide" or manual that depicts both images and gives descriptions of the characters in their field of expertise.	Drawing inferences about the characters, based on details from the text. Writing field guides that include artwork.
Social Studies	The Bill of Rights; unalienable rights; personal responsibility; citizenship	Evidence from the book suggests that no such document exists in Panem as a whole or in the individual districts. Students can infer what this means in terms of government structures and compare that to the important documents that govern the United States or their country of origin.	Students complete a quickwrite about the Bill of Rights in the United States. They then consider the absence of rights in <i>The Hunger Games</i> and develop a Bill of Rights that better protects Panem's citizens and/or frees them from subjugation by the Capitol.	Connecting reading and writing. Using the Bill of Rights as a mentor text.

gains in reading as the curriculum becomes more complex after elementary school (Biancarosa and Snow; Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy; Shanahan and Shanahan). Given this reality, we have a moral imperative to pursue different avenues for making some of these complex concepts more accessible to students, so that they can realize their potential in an era of standardized learning.

As English teachers, we can help ameliorate this reality by seeking out novels and other texts that make opportunities for disciplinary literacy more visible to our colleagues who teach in other content areas. It would not hurt (and might help) if we offered to co-teach a novel with teachers unaccustomed to using them as classroom tools and ask students working in literature circles to consider a book's relevance in terms of scientific, mathematical, or historical coursework. While the information included in this piece draws on the state standards of Texas, teachers (and teacher educators) could just as easily rely on their own state standards or on the Common Core to make these connections. Finally, we need to engage in a collective conversation about the standards that transcend our area of expertise, and build bridges across the contents if we expect students to excel throughout the school day. Recent research suggests if we hope to engage with students about the complex work required for each of the disciplines, we need to nestle that content "in relevant context and its connection to larger constructs within the course, the field, others fields, and the world" (Langer 11). This work is an attempt to help students and teachers see the connections to content all around them and fortifies my belief that if we can let go of the desire to stay cocooned in our divided-by-content hallways,

wings, and departments, we might see some unexpected results. 

### Works Cited

- Alvermann, Donna, and David W. Moore. "Secondary School Reading." *Handbook of Reading Research*. Ed. Rebecca Barr, et al. Vol. 2. White Plains: Longman, 1991. 951–83. Print.
- Biancarosa, Gina, and Catherine E. Snow. *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006. Print.
- Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2009. Print.
- Langer, Judith. *Envisioning Knowledge: Building Literacy in the Academic Disciplines*. Language and Literacy Series. Ed. Celia Genishi and Donna Alvermann. New York: Teachers College, 2011. Print.
- Lee, Carol, and Anika Spratley. *Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2010. Print.
- Moje, Elizabeth. "Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Call for Change." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.2 (2008): 96–107. Print.
- Robb, Laura. *Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking*. New York: Scholastic, 2010. Print.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995. Print.
- Saunders, Jane M., and Gwynne E. Ash. "Entering the Arena: The Figured Worlds Transition of Preservice Teachers." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56.6 (2013): 490–99. Print.
- Shanahan, Timothy, and Cynthia Shanahan. "Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy." *Harvard Educational Review* 78.1 (2008): 40–59. Print.
- TEA. "Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, Social Studies." Austin, 2013. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.
- Zygouris-Coe, Vicky. "Eyes on Disciplinary Literacy." *Reading Today Online* (2013). Web. 28 June 2013.

**Jane M. Saunders** is an assistant professor in literacy in the College of Education at Texas State University–San Marcos. She has a keen interest in how teachers employ pedagogical innovations to strengthen the literacy learning of students. Email: [janesaunders@txstate.edu](mailto:janesaunders@txstate.edu).

### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode "A Second Look at *The Hunger Games*" shares the seeds for *The Hunger Games* story, themes that distinguish the series as an important work of literature, and what the books have to offer teen readers. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/second-look-hunger-games-30858.html>