I Hear America Sing: Promoting Democracy through Literature

Donna Canan

This article discusses how blog use, promoting choices, and presenting students with literature that changed a nation show them how to find their voices in a democratic community.

In 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, Walt Whitman examined democracy’s future and sustainability in his essay “Democratic Vistas.” He had faith that democracy would flourish if balance developed between the newly merged nation and the individual (9). As he reflected on how to achieve this balance, he argued that a “democratic America” needed “national, original archetypes in literature” (31) and a “vision for the future, more than the past” (36). He believed that this literature would produce “its own democratic spirit” and “American aroma” (36). Essentially, Whitman viewed literature as the soul and heart of American democracy (37).

As English teachers, we continually seek ways to offer students quality texts to support the development of individual voices within the context of a dynamic, democratic culture. In our high school, we suggest students read a combination of free choices of literature and selected classics. We encourage students to explore various cultural archetypes and universal themes with less emphasis on establishing a strong common thread in our democracy. Whitman contended that “Democratic literature may well bring forth” a balance between “individuals and society” (“Democratic Vistas” 43). How do we prepare students to become active participants with confident voices in a constantly changing nation?

What kind of literacy experiences can we create? By using blogs as a forum, promoting choice, and presenting literature that changed a nation, teachers can help students develop their individual voices in a democratic community.

In the spirit of Whitman’s essay, I began to think about how I could use American literature to address the concept of individuality in a democratic society. The approach became apparent when I learned about the Library of Congress’ recently published list of Books That Shaped America (http://www.loc.gov/bookfest/books-that-shaped-america/). I saw these 88 books, spanning fiction and nonfiction, as a basis for fostering student choice and individual expression while sharing the common experience of books that influenced our culture.

Creating the Approach

To facilitate the plan with two classes of honors sophomores (any student who wants a challenge can opt into this course), I first shared the process that guided Librarians of Congress in forming their list. The website offers a brief description of each book. We viewed their website together via the Active Board. Librarian of Congress James H. Billington said the list “is not a register of the ‘best American books’” necessarily, but “is intended to spark a national conversation on books written by

Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) [sic] of American democracy.

—Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas”
Americans who have influenced our lives” (Library of Congress). Similarly, in 1869 Whitman quoted the Librarian of Congress: “‘The true question to ask respecting a book, is, has it help’d any human soul?’” (“Democratic Vistas” 41). Ironically, the Library of Congress in 2012 selected Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* for their list. Second, I asked the students to select one book a quarter in addition to other required texts. To encourage expression of individual voices in a group context, I devised a procedure involving students writing blogs in response to a series of questions and tasks I proposed to enrich their analysis. For students without home computers, I provided time to use classroom computers. I extended the size of the community of readers to include parents, teachers, and administrators.

**In a democracy, as Whitman asserts, the literature should “free, arouse, and dilate.”**

**Questions and Tasks to Guide Responses**

Once students made selections, I considered what kind of prompts I could create to develop their voices, enhance critical thinking, and elicit engagement with the texts. In a democracy, as Whitman asserts, the literature should “free, arouse, and dilate” (“Democratic Vistas” 42). Therefore, by primarily creating prompts with a focus on intertextuality to “juxtapose different texts” (Bloome and Egan-Robertson 305), students could experience “empowerment because . . . [they] get to appreciate positions different from theirs” (Kalua 11).

I selected a range of texts, not limited to print, and used various topics:

- Emily Dickinson’s poems: themes
- Concert music from JW Pepper: dominant impression
- The chapter “Now Where Have I Seen Her Before?” from Thomas E. Foster’s book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*: allusion
- Literary theory: structuralism
- The movie *Il Postino*: metaphor
- *New Yorker* magazine covers: satire, humor, and pathos
- Editorial cartoons: satire
- Paul Brooks’s *The People of Concord: One Year in the Flowering of New England*: communication
- Primary documents: historical context
- Charlie Rose interview: past and future
- President Obama’s inauguration speech, “Democratic Vistas,” and Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451*: democracy
- The students’ I-Search topics: proposed legislation

**Blogs and Voice**

If we plan to help students become involved in political decision making, then classroom blogs create authentic forums for students and the public to read and express their individual voices. Blogs create a “democratic experience that can not be offered by any traditional form” (Woodly 114–15). “A blog lets you raise your voice without asking anyone’s
students read Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, both a required text and one on the Library of Congress list. I divided the blog postings into categories to show student engagement and the range of literacy experiences: choice, poetry and music, visual literacy, communication, and politics and history.

**Student Choice**

Student choice can lead to interest and engagement. Whitman asserts, “books are to be call’d for . . . , on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle. . . . Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does” (“Democratic Vistas” 45). Since students have choice, they will more likely interact with the texts. Erika A. Patall’s research supports this correlation: “individual interest for an activity predicted experiencing greater interest and enjoyment during task engagement, as well as heightened task performance” (11). A student’s curiosity can set the framework for motivation and broaden connections. Each quarter, students blogged about their rationale for their selections.

One student, Maggie, chose *Riders of the Purple Sage* because her grandfather loved Zane Gray’s novels, and she wanted to see its “impact on American culture.” Another, Whitney, selected Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “I always had a really strong passion for African American rights. So now that I have started reading this book I can already picture this epic tale of a slave’s journey.” And Seina chose Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* “because it covers the most interesting topic of all, science,” and as he reflected on a PBS program on *NOVA*, he “wanted to find out more about the universe.”

Students had varying reasons and purposes for selecting their books. Maggie chose “impact,” Whitney: “passion,” and Seina: “interesting” to show their eagerness to delve into subjects that inspire them.

Kerry Arens, our Instructional Coach, suggested I use Edublogs, and I titled the blog canan-class (http://cananclass.edublogs.org). Students wrote nine-line weekly entries. Posting onto the blog simply required names and email addresses, which allowed easy access for people outside the classroom to converse. Students used school email addresses, and I held editing privileges. I chose a picture from the Library of Congress for the blog, which featured books, created a QR code for easy availability, and posted flyers at the school and in local libraries. Students had access to each other’s, families’, and teachers’ entries to serve as models, and communicated with each other within a wider audience.

**Literature in the Classroom: Supplementary Required Classroom Reading**

In response to our department addressing the Common Core State Standards, we have begun to shift from seeing specific texts as the curriculum to focus more on building skills. Although we still teach *Lord of the Flies*, 1984, and *Julius Caesar*, among others, we understand that we need to offer students a variety of texts. Therefore, each quarter I required students to read a Library of Congress selection in addition to the required texts. In line with Marlow Ediger, this approach reflects standards for effective reading programs, such as (a) “encourage[ing] reading of diverse kinds of genres”; (b) creating a “purpose in reading”; (c) “assisting [them to] become well-rounded individuals”; and (d) assessing independent reading levels (132). *Books That Shaped America* meets these criteria. The list includes authors such as Thomas Paine, Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, W. E. B. Du Bois, William James, Margaret Sanger, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Dale Carnegie, Zora Neale Hurston, Joseph Heller, Ezra Jack Keats, Betty Friedan, Ralph Nader, and Cesar Chavez, to name a few. Third quarter all the students read Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, both a required text and one on the Library of Congress list. I divided the blog postings into categories to show student engagement and the range of literacy experiences: choice, poetry and music, visual literacy, communication, and politics and history.
Poetry, Music, and Style

When teaching American literature, I frequently use Emily Dickinson’s metaphorical poems as a basis for Socratic discussions and essays. However, instead of explicitly teaching her poetry, I wanted to see how students could independently make the connections with a poem, text, and models when others posted. Students either posted the poems into their entries or added links to the poems. A student, Bradley, delves into Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* world and relates “Much madness is divinest sense” (Dickinson 1):

This . . . poem relates . . . in its focus on the relativity and definition of madness. *Catch-22* commonly uses insanity to characterize the main character . . . who sometimes feels as if he is the only sane character in the book. Yossarian often perceives the flaws and hypocrisies in his life at a bomber air base during the end years of WWII. Because of his vocality on this subject, and his actions in trying to take himself out of the worst parts of the war, others view him as crazy. In Dickinson’s poem, she seems to say that madness truly is relative. What is madness to one may make perfect sense in a different light, and sanity norms are largely decided by an arbitrary majority opinion.

Although several students selected the same poems, because the texts from the Library of Congress selections varied, each response offered a unique viewpoint. Without having been directly taught this poem, Bradley understands metaphor.

Poetry and music have a recursive pattern. I usually tell students to be in the moment and put their phones away; however, this time I wanted their phones out or ears plugged into class computers. Orchestra students recommended JW Pepper, which contains American choral, orchestra, band, and worship music. Whitman mentions not only literature but also “songs, esthetics, . . . of a country . . . furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for women and men of that country and enforce them in a thousand effective ways” (“Democratic Vistas” 21–22). Students had recently selected music for *Lord of the Flies* and wrote about dominant impressions of the musician’s context. Margaret chose a Jeffrey Bishop’s string orchestra recording of *221B Baker Street* for Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* and mentions the “tone . . . is calm” in the beginning of the book. She weaves in examples from the book. As the story progresses, the “sharp notes create the feeling of stress or pain.” As Buck readjusts, he loses the tension, and “the sound goes back to the sultry tone as in the beginning.” Although I explicitly taught this concept of dominant impression, Margaret independently creates descriptions that take her readers through the music and weaves back to the dominant impression with two texts of her choosing. Students can read Margaret’s model of how she made these connections and listen to the music she linked onto her blog, but their challenge lies in their responsibility to choose their own music selections with their book choices.

In *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Foster suggests that “there’s no such thing as a wholly original work of literature. Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking . . . ‘now where have I seen her before?’” (29). Each student read a blog posting linked to Chapter 5, which explains the importance of allusion. The prompt asked them to blog about a work that reminds them of a Book That Shaped America. Michael connected Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* to John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, which he read “during [his] sick days.” Michael wrote:

Hazel has lung cancer that is incurable. . . . She knows . . . the fluid building in her lungs will be the end of her but she goes on anyway. I see a relation to Hazel and then Orr and Yossarian in *Catch-22*. Both Yossarian and Orr are fully aware that humans will inevitably die. Orr takes this too seriously by making life seem as long as possible by making it as boring as possible. He calculates how much time he is adding by the way time feels relative to how it actually is. Yossarian’s main goal of the war is to survive. . . . After Snowden died he thinks that humans in the war are merely tools, meant to die. He soon realizes exactly how easy it is for humans to die which makes him worse. Both novels associate death as an event that will eventually happen . . . because it’s a side effect or simply because it’s frail.

When students read this public response, they observe that Michael views the human condition within the specific contexts of these two works. Whitman speaks of “insight to ourselves, our own present” (“Democratic Vistas” 45).
Not all students concede to seeing the connections, however. Several years ago, Joanne Golden and I used literary theories through the lens of Snow White to examine how tenth graders created meaning with a short story and a novel to develop critical thinking (Golden and Canan). Due to students’ perceptiveness, I adapted the unit by prompting each student to read a brief link posted onto the blog about binary opposites ("Binary Opposites"), a part of structuralism, and explain how either explicitly or implicitly this theory enhanced the book’s meaning. For example, while analyzing Thoreau’s Walden Pond, one student (Jake) questioned the author’s premise:

The essence of Thoreau’s stay at Walden Pond was to explore the differences between life in the city, or society, and in rural area(s), or away from society. In his removal from society, he proves that society and “non-society” are not binary opposites; or mutually exclusive, because of society’s members’ ability to drift between the two like Thoreau did. Though there was not dramatic gray area at the time between city and country, making it seem like Thoreau’s city and Walden were binary opposites, his conclusion prove[s] this is not true.

Although most students found opposites, Jake took another angle; he created an independent perspective to argue against one of the author’s key purposes.

Visual Literacy

As our department examined the Common Core State Standards for literacy, we considered how we could “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices). Students had chosen a poem and responded to a literary theory. How would they blog about a movie? I posted a subtitled clip from the film Il Postino in which Chilean poet and political activist Pablo Neruda tries to explain what metaphor means to the lovesick postman who cannot quite grasp the concept. As they sit by the sea, Neruda wants him to see metaphors surrounding them. The postman reveals that the words make him seasick and he feels “like a boat tossing around on the words.” Neruda excitedly tells him he created a metaphor. Bree read Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged and shares how Eddie recalls “his childhood when he and his friends would come and look at an oak tree on the Taggart estate. The oak tree . . . serves as a metaphor for society’s decay.” Bree builds on the nature concept and uses decayed trees as metaphors to explain societal weaknesses. In a democracy, Whitman states in his “Vistas,” we need “language fanned by the breath of Nature, which leaps overhead, cares mostly for impetus and effects and for what it plants and invigorates to grow” (45).

After students watched a movie, what insight would they have with culturally specific US artwork from New Yorker covers? Leslie wrote about Holden in J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye:

The image . . . fits the perspective of Holden . . . . The man in the cover is flying above a city[;] in this case, I’m presuming it to be the city Holden lives in. The empty lot below him represents the people in his life that he despises, the people that he calls “corny.” They hold no appeal for him, which is why he’s trying all he can to get away . . . . hence the flying. He’s surrounded . . . by really tall buildings, which signify all of the problems that he has to overcome, like finding people who actually understand him, like Jane did when he was younger. That’s . . . one of the goals that he has in asking . . . random questions, like where the ducks go in the winter. He’s trying to find a person who . . . understands his curiosity . . . . The viewer cannot see the place . . . he’s trying to travel to, because even he doesn’t know where he’s going . . . . All he really wants to do is escape from the corniness.

Leslie sees the New York landscape rising up and overwhelming Holden, his place within the context of his culture, and Holden seeking his own “identity—yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me” (Whitman, “Democratic Vistas” 32).

Each student selected an editorial cartoon to examine satire and prepare for the EOC, end of course state exams. Bridget selected Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown and posted a Joel Pett Los Angeles Times editorial cartoon link.

The cartoon . . . shows an [A]merican government official telling other leaders of countries that everyone needs to lend a helping hand to end world crises. For example, the one shown in the drawing: world hunger. However, the American man’s words are empty and do not mean anything. . . . As shown in the drawing, this thinking is
incorrect. Although he talks like a tough guy he is not. This relates to my book . . . because it illustrates exactly how “peace treaties” were handled . . . . As shown in the editorial cartoon I found, the white man’s words of freedom are only another man’s death sentence.

Bree sees the dark side of the political spectrum and comments on the politicians’ empty promises. She understands the concept of the importance of developing a “moral civilization” (“Democratic Vistas” 38) in our country by pointing out the injustices in our past.

Communication and Expanding the Literary Community

Whitman states literature of tomorrow should “soar . . . in highest regions, and should be both erudite and elegant” (“Democratic Vistas” 33). When teaching American literature, I became fascinated with how Brooks’s book The People of Concord shows Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Hawthorne, Melville, and Holmes engaged in a literary community during the same era in which Whitman wrote. I invited readers to join our literary conversation. Although they had read each other’s models in a public forum, to really support an individual within a vital community, others needed to be a part of the conversation. I encouraged students to invite teachers, parents, siblings, friends, and community members into the discussions. Grace’s mother wrote about Richard Wright’s Native Son in response to another mother’s blog.

I also read Native Son . . . one of the most exhilarating and . . . the most disturbing book I had read up to the time. Growing up in a small town with little diversity, the concepts of racism and social injustice rocked my narrow, cozy little world . . . . I have picked the book up many times and re-read, feeling the panic and despair Bigger experienced as if it were the first time. Each time, I read the section where Bigger is trying to help Mary, and hoped that THIS time, the outcome would be different.

After reading Betty Smith’s novel A Tree Grows in Brooklyn with her daughter, Julie’s mom blogged:

“What a wonderful book! It has been so many years since I read it that it was almost like reading it for the first time. But it was very different reading it as an adult at a time in our history when so many people are in danger of losing their jobs and slipping into poverty.” Julie and her mom read together, and their experience shows how students can see the power of extending the literary conversation and the value of returning to books that resonate with them. Seina’s dad also saw this opportunity to communicate with his son: “Seina and I had many interesting conversations debating the topics covered in the Cosmos. The book is great for any child/parent pair with an interest in exploring how the world came to be and whence we are heading.”

At parent-teacher conferences this year, in addition to focusing on student progress, I conversed with parents who felt excited about reading with their children; we examined the list to see what additional books they could select together. Prior to my assigning the class blogs, students had one or two classmates or me as their audience for their writings, but with this new class communication forum, I wondered how they would respond to each other. After reading entries about several prompts, I asked students to make comments to each other. Ben responded to Bree’s Atlas Shrugged metaphor: “Bree’s metaphor . . . goes with . . . The Jungle. . . . Jurgis’ decay is shown through the meatpacking industry not letting him back into his job, the tree shows that everything has to eventually die at some point. A tree starts out big and strong like Jurgis, but as time goes on, the tree will one day die, or man will come by and chop it down before it’s ready to die, just like how the meatpackers are killed before their prime in The Jungle.” He connects a nature metaphor from a book published a half of a century earlier.

A history teacher blogged about Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, which he suggests “should be required reading for all high school students” (Olderman), and Maddie’s dad, who read Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, recommended a companion book: “The book that immediately comes to mind is Philip Howard’s The Death of Common Sense. It is a very quick read (sometimes attractive to high schoolers) and does a great job depicting the unforeseen results of a government and legal system that means to do well.” After a face-to-face inter-
Students read Bradbury’s novel Fahrenheit 451, and since they had not yet had audio for a blog prompt, I linked a Charlie Rose interview about the future of books. Author Jonathan Safran Foer argued: “Books do something . . . nothing else can do. . . . If we lose books . . . , our emotional spectrum will be narrowed. . . . Surfing the web differs from . . . further solidification of yourself . . . ,” which . . . reading books does. Finding something you didn’t know you would like” arrives from reading books (Foer et al.). The posted prompt question: Do Foer and Bradbury overstate the fear of losing books? Katlyn replied:

My family has an e-reader yet I still like to read from [an] actual . . . book, but I do not think e-books have done anything detrimental to reading or to publishing books like Safran implies. In fact . . . the [I]nternet has widened the space for freedom of speech and self expression. Almost anyone can be an author now. . . . What I think is important are written words. . . . [I]n the past newspaper[s] were . . . heavy with text and not many pictures or illustration . . . . Like in Fahrenheit . . . , our society has turned to media visuals rather than written words. In the book, most people aren’t bothered by their lack of freedom of speech because they do not like reading and thinking, but instead they like to be entertained. In our society . . . , Newspapers have to play a game of making the paper exciting . . . to get people drawn in to read. . . . There may be a 600 word amazing story but people are more likely [to] look at the 150 word description with a collage of photos. Photography is a great part of journalism, but they can [not] completely capture the background or emotion. It is important to keep stories and books because they allow for more insight.

She feels empowered to disagree with the author’s premise and sees the importance of reading full texts that can cause the reader to think deeply.

To examine how literature relates to current times, students perused President Obama’s inauguration speech, Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas,” and Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451. I asked students to make connections, and Sóley wrote the following:

Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, and President Obama’s second inaugural address all address the relation between books and literacy and democracy and politics. In
I Hear America Sing: Promoting Democracy through Literature

Whitman’s essay, he stresses how even after societies are long gone, their literature keeps them alive indefinitely. He mentions how “literature penetrates all” (Whitman 3) and that one of the foundations to the American democracy. In Obama’s address, he also stresses how literature holds our country together, from the Oath of Office to the Constitution. Bradbury also displays a similar attitude. He hypothesizes what a society would be like without literature and creates a world in which democracy is nonexistent and curiosity is persecuted. While all three of these authors agree on the importance of literature in human culture, they focus on different time periods. Whitman’s essay speaks more of the past and how while other parts of a culture may die, the literature will sustain the heart of it and remind the people of the present of the memories. Obama’s speech begins with how our country’s literature has penetrated through the ages to today, but he takes that thread and emphasizes the impact of literature today, how the Pledge of Allegiance bonds all American citizens together. Although Whitman and Obama both had a lighter, more analytical tone, Ray Bradbury writes about darker predictions. In his futuristic novel, he explains the importance of literature in society by showing what happens when it doesn’t exist. It smothers curiosity and kills free speech. However, Bradbury, Obama, and Whitman all come to the same conclusion of literature’s great importance and how democracy, freedoms, and curiosity all come from the written word.

Sóley sees the importance of literature and freedom embedded into the foundation of a democracy.

After completing I-Search papers, they imagined themselves sharing their voices on the American political scene and suggesting legislative initiatives. Emily’s research centered on US immigration: “I am personally connected . . . because my mother just went through this process. I had my own biases . . . and wanted to know more to really understand. . . . Had I not had this opportunity, I would still be in the dark. . . . [I]f anything like the government in Fahrenheit 451 were to come up, there would have to be an act or a law prohibiting anyone from taking away the rights [of] young people, and all people have to books and their information.” She does not see herself as a passive member of society, and just as Deva Woolly suggests that “blogs do affect the structure of political communication in the United States” (122), perhaps Emily will develop confidence as she blogs in high school about the Books That Shaped America to let her voice ring on the political scene.

Conclusion

Walt Whitman writes about democracy’s future that will rely on “a class of native authors” (“Democratic Vistas” 3), which not only the Library of Congress reflects in the Books That Shaped America, but that he projects in our future as well. As these high school readers and writers delve into classic literature, engage in discussions, and examine their culture, the blogs and choice serve as vehicles to give them confidence their voices will be heard. Walt Whitman dreams of a democracy in which writers will be the “native” voices of their times. As I reflect on the blog’s future, I see guiding students beyond content to assume awareness of their diction, rhetoric, and syntax (e.g., Jim Burke’s AP Writing Style analysis with Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract paintings and local sculpture Roxy Payne with Text Features). Students participating within a wider community about timely topics with intertextuality prompts serve as the framework to prepare them for an active engagement into current events and to become the writers of the future.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear, Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong

(Whitman, “I Hear America Singing” 1–2)

Works Cited


READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The author uses a piece by Walt Whitman to describe an approach to literature. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Walt Whitman as a Model Poet: ‘I Hear My School Singing’” has students first analyze Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” then use Whitman’s poem as a model as they create their own list poems. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/walt-whitman-model-poet-989.html

Donna Canan

Donna Canan (NBCT) currently teaches English and serves as department chair at Kirkwood High School in Kirkwood, Missouri. She is co-founder of KIWI (Kirkwood Writing Institute) along with Simao Drew and Eric Turley. Email address: donna.canan@kirkwoodschools.org.