



Reversing Readicide

Kelly Gallagher

Schools have become unwitting coconspirators in the decline of reading.

On a recent cross-country flight, I found myself sitting next to the president of a multimillion dollar computer software company. To keep his business competitive, he told me, his organization regularly recruits employees from top universities. When I asked him how his current recruitment efforts were going, he said that over the past few years it had become increasingly challenging to find qualified workers. It isn't difficult finding smart candidates; the problem is finding smart people who can think.

This conversation often comes to mind as I teach my students at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. My current freshmen entered 2nd grade as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law. Almost their entire school experience has been shaped by test preparation. These students have already spent years in schools where teachers and administrators have confused covering massive amounts of material with teaching students how to think and read critically.

One major drawback of having students spend their formative years memorizing facts is that facts change. Robert J. Sternberg, former president of the American Psychological Association, notes that the "facts" he learned years ago in his introductory psychology course matter little today. Instead of pounding facts into students' heads, Sternberg (2007/2008) suggests, schools should nurture attributes and skills that are foundational to becoming expert citizens, such as solving problems creatively, working well in teams, and knowing how to lose as well as win.

I fear that in the rush to prepare students for the next round of exams, schools are neglecting attributes like these. And if we are to guide students to become thoughtful adults who possess such qualities, we must face the elephant in the room: U.S. students' lack of reading proficiency and their general disinclination to read.

The signs are not encouraging. Consider the following points taken from a 2006 report on adolescent literacy by the National Council of Teachers of English:

- The 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that U.S. secondary school students are reading at a rate significantly below expected levels.
- The Alliance for Excellent Education points out that 8.7 million secondary students—one in four—are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks.
- The 2005 ACT College Readiness Benchmark for Reading found that only one-half of the students tested were ready for college-level reading. Reading scores were the lowest in a decade.

Young people in the United States are not just substandard readers, they are increasingly reluctant readers—even in their free time. In the National Endowment for the Arts' comprehensive 2007 survey of American reading, *To Read or Not to Read*, researchers found that a "calamitous, universal falling off of reading" occurs for many students at around age 13 and often continues through the rest of these students' lives.

Educators know the commonly cited culprits behind the decline of reading: poverty, lack of parent education, print-poor environments at home, second-language issues, the overscheduling of children, and competition from electronic media. To this list, I would like to add a factor I call *readicide*, meaning practices educators employ to raise reading scores that actually kill students' love of reading. Readicide is occurring, ironically, in the one place where a love of reading should be fostered—schools.

How have schools become coconspirators in the decline of reading? I suggest four contributing factors: (1) Schools act as though they value the development of test takers more than the development of readers, (2) Schools are limiting authentic reading experiences, (3) Teachers are overteaching books, and (4) Teachers are underteaching books. Let's look at how each of these practices leads to readicide, and examine steps teachers can take to counteract them.

Factor 1: Schools develop test takers instead of readers.

A curriculum steeped in test preparation drives shallow teaching and learning. Consider, for example, the monumental task confronting social science teachers in California, who must teach the following standard from the 10th grade curriculum:

Compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty.

How long would it take to teach this standard so that students acquire in-depth understanding? A teacher could easily spend an entire year on this single standard—but this is only one of 49 similar standards 10th grade teachers must cover.

I purposefully use the word *cover* because that is what teachers must do to get students through the amount of material required to generate test scores that will appease administrators, school board members, and parents. Breadth is now winning out over depth in most subjects. Science curriculum frameworks in the United States, for example, are loaded with more topics than frameworks of other countries (Cavanagh, 2009).

It's good to have standards for what students should know, of course. But when there are too many standards, in-depth teaching gets thrown out the window, and schools start producing memorizers instead of thinkers. And when coverage trumps depth, close reading—the kind students need to develop their ability to read critically—gives way to surface-level, "one and done" reading.

Reversing the Trend

We must ask whether teaching in a coverage mode serves the long-term interests of our students as readers. If we look at students' critical reading scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) from 2002 to 2009, during the time NCLB has been in effect, we see a slight increase in points for several years, followed by a decline to below the average score for 2002 (Gewertz, 2009). Isn't it interesting that although many districts tout rising test scores at the local level, reading scores on a key national assessment are in decline?

One recent study, in fact, found that nearly one-third of states have lowered their academic proficiency standards in reading and mathematics to make it easier for schools to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB (Dillon, 2009). Reading scores may be "rising" in districts across the country, but when one looks at a national assessment like the SAT, it seems our brightest students are actually regressing.

Clearly, the "coverage" approach is not working. It's time to bring depth back into the curriculum. Our students would be much better served if we taught them fewer concepts, slowed down, and taught them to think.

Factor 2: Schools limit authentic reading experiences.

I currently teach five periods of 9th grade English at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. More than one-half of my students are socio-economically disadvantaged. The student body is 68 percent Hispanic; more than one-third are English language learners, and nearly 40 languages are spoken on campus.

Although my students have passed innumerable tests in their journey to high school, they are shockingly unaware of what is happening in the world. For example, only a small percentage can tell me the name of the vice president of the United States. Not a single student can name the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and only a handful can define the rights protected by the 4th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, almost every student can name the four judges on *American Idol*. More than half of my seniors last year did not understand that newspapers have editorial sections. These students have since passed all their tests and graduated; they are the next generation in charge.

I point this out not to bash my students, many of whom are exceptionally bright. My concern is simpler: Schools are not doing the job they once did of engaging students in the kinds of reading that enable them to become literate, well-informed adults. Instead, as students progress through our schools, they are forced to read more and more worksheets focused on isolated facts.

Reversing the Trend

Teachers should be guiding students in real-world reading, assigning critical reading of magazines, newspapers, Web sites, and blogs that provide background knowledge about U.S. society, key political players and issues, and students' own role as informed participants. At Magnolia High, for example, all students are given an article of the week to read every Monday. These articles are selected to shore up students' lack of prior knowledge about life outside high school.

Factor 3: Teachers overteach books.

On my desk is a copy of the Los Angeles Unified School District's guide to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This guide contains overarching questions, chapter study questions, essay questions, vocabulary lessons, activities for specific chapters, guided reading lessons, directions for setting up a writer's notebook, literary analysis questions, collaborative activities, handouts, transparencies, 20 detailed lessons, quizzes, and projects. The guide is 122 pages long and includes numerous pages listing goals and "habits of thinking" that teachers should foster in students.

Why is this guide so exhaustive? Because it's aligned to the massive number of standards found on California's standardized exams each spring. As a result, teachers are driven into a "teach all things in all books" approach.

I am not suggesting that the goals in this unit of study are not worthy; they are. But using *all* these lessons to teach one novel, which teachers must do if they are to prepare their students for standardized exams, is a recipe for readicide. If I were to follow this curriculum guide step-by-step in my own classroom, there is little doubt my students would exit my class hating *To Kill a Mockingbird*—and possibly all reading—forever.

In the quest to prepare students for every standard that might be covered on this year's exams, teachers now chop great books into so many pieces that the books cease to be great. One teacher I observed, for example, required students to share their thinking on a sticky note on every page of *Romeo and Juliet*. As a result, this timeless work became an extended worksheet. Its beauty—its value—got lost in a sea of sticky notes. Imagine going to see a great movie, only to have the projectionist stop the film every four minutes to see if you are taking notes. Now imagine being forced to read a novel this way, and you'll see how overteaching destroys students' desire to read.

The antidote to this practice is not to simply assign great books and turn students loose—this practice leads to its own dangers—but to find what I call the *sweet spot* of instruction that gives students just the right amount of support for complex texts. Let's look at the flip side of how many schools introduce students to literature.

Factor 4: Teachers underteach books.

This may seem strange coming on the heels of my argument that too much teaching can kill a book, but underteaching a book can have equally devastating consequences.

At the end of her 10th grade year, my daughter was handed *The Grapes of Wrath* and told to read it over the summer. Her teacher did not "frame" the novel for her in any way; she provided little, if any, background information or support, and she communicated no purpose for reading the book other than to prepare for an exam on the first day of school. The assumption was that, as an honor student, my daughter could handle the task. You might guess what happened. My daughter started to read the novel, became frustrated, turned to a summary on Spark Notes, passed the test, and grew into an adult who still thinks *The Grapes of Wrath* is a lousy book.

If students could read academic texts or challenging literary works by themselves, they would not need teachers. But, of course, most cannot gain the full benefit from—and enjoy—difficult books when they read such books on their own. Assigning a book is not the same as teaching a book. When too much assigning and not enough teaching occurs, students are on the road to readicide.

Reversing the Trend

Realizing that neither chopping up books nor handing students a classic and wishing them good luck are the way to get students to read deeply, teachers must constantly search for the sweet spot of just enough reading instruction. To help find this balance, I ask myself as I assign texts, How much do my kids need me at this juncture of reading? How much support would be too much right now—or not enough?

One thing I have learned is that students need most of my help up-front, often before they even begin reading the text. To understand why, read the following passage:

The pitcher's stuff was filthy. He was bringing cheese. He mixed in some chin music. Along with the heat, Uncle Charlie would occasionally show his face, producing a number of bowel-lockers. Only two batters got a knock. No one came close to dialing 8. (Gallagher, 2009, p. 95)

You probably understood every word in the above passage, but I am guessing that unless you know baseball well, you had a tough time comprehending it. Your inability to understand the passage is not a phonemic awareness problem, a fluency problem, or a vocabulary problem. You can read the words; you just lack the proper prior knowledge to make meaning.

Many students have this problem when approaching a difficult text, be it a primary source document or a

Shakespeare play. This is where teaching (as opposed to assigning) becomes crucial; students need a teacher to supply the context. Before reading Chapter 1 of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, students should have an understanding of Herbert Hoover, the Great Depression, the Scottsboro Case (which inspired Harper Lee to write the novel), and the kind of racism that existed in the U.S. South at the time. On a more concrete level, many of my students do not know what a veranda is. They need vocabulary support before reading Lee's classic.

This kind of framing, however, is not in itself enough to generate the level of motivation required for my students to tackle a classic. Students today need more than history recaps and vocabulary lessons; they need to have some idea from the start of what they will gain from reading a text. I don't teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it's a great book. I teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it's a great book that puts my students in a place where they can examine racism today.

In a similar vein, when I teach *1984*, it doesn't overly concern me that some of my students are not going to like the novel. What concerns me is that all my students understand the value of the reading experience. As they read George Orwell's classic, I want my students to gain awareness of government surveillance today. I want them to understand that the torture site "Room 101" is not simply limited to Orwell's world—that many believe it has been recreated in Abu Ghraib and the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I want them to recognize the degree of language manipulation and propaganda they will confront for the rest of their lives. But I must make this value visible *before* my students commence reading. In introducing novels like these, I always address the central question my students bring to the book: Why should I care?

Before reading *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, I begin by having my students explore the question of whether long-term feuds can ever be buried. This question resonates with these learners, many of whom live in neighborhoods where gangs are a way of life. Although Shakespeare asked this question more than 400 years ago, it still holds value for the modern teenager. As the reading progresses and my students begin to connect with the play, I gradually release more of the meaning-making responsibility to them.

Promote Close Reading

A key element to finding this instructional sweet spot is teaching students to read closely. Teaching close reading is not the same as chopping up a book into so many pieces that it becomes unrecognizable. It is accomplished better by having students read large, uninterrupted chunks of text and then strategically having them return to key passages for second- or third-draft reading and thinking.

If the only reading our students do is "one-and-done" reading, they will never develop a critical reading lens. One cannot read James Madison's Federalist papers or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* once and reach a deep level of understanding. If we are to sharpen students' critical thinking, we need to require them to read longer chunks of text and commit to giving them more close reading practice.

Another important way to promote close reading is to bring reading for pleasure back into students' lives. Our intense focus on testing has brought an intense focus on academic reading, so that students have little exposure to reading for enjoyment in school. Many teachers have pushed aside recreational reading, which may be one reason that so few youth read for enjoyment on their own.

The lack of recreational reading has dire consequences. Brain researcher Maryanne Wolf (2007) has discussed "word poverty," noting that "by kindergarten a gap of 32 million words already separates some children in linguistically-impoverished homes from their more stimulated peers" (p. 20). If students are to have any chance to develop their vocabulary or build the background knowledge needed to become effective readers, they must develop recreational reading habits early in life. And reading habits are not built by handing students reading passages buried in test booklets.

Teachers and administrators who are squeezing recreational reading out of the day have forgotten an important finding: Students who read for fun have higher reading scores than students who rarely read for enjoyment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). I have never had a student receive a high SAT verbal score who was not a voracious reader. And I doubt that any student I run into on the street 20 years from now will thank me for helping him or her recognize symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. In fact, I'd be happier if that student wanted to discuss the contemporary book he or she was carrying.

Pulling Out of the "Reading Recession"

Thomas Friedman (2009) claims that recessions have historically been great times for opportunities to arise. With apologies to Friedman, may I suggest that the United States is in a reading recession. I believe that the critical thinkers we so desperately need will emerge from classrooms where teachers have eschewed the coverage approach in favor of fostering deeper thinking—and where the development of lifelong reading habits has remained as important as next month's test.

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