WORKSHOPPING the CANON

picture books

vocabulary

mini-lessons

informational text

response engagements

YA novels

craft lessons

read-alouds

expository essays

readers theater

book clubs

plays

mentor texts

music

short stories

critical literacy

close reading

poetry

narrative writing

shared reading

Mary E. Styslinger

Workshopping the Canon

NCTE Editorial Board

Workshopping the Canon

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*For my husband, John Clothiaux, who has always
believed in me; for my daughters,
Sophie and Anabelle, who now know that
anything is possible with hard work; for my
mother and father, who would have loved to
have read this book.*

Contents

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Introduction

*I*t's a Tuesday morning, around 9:45, in a nondescript high school classroom. A teacher sits on a stool, ready to introduce twelfth graders to Macbeth. Joaquin puts his head down. Steve is more direct and asks, "Ms. S., I still don't get why we gotta read this stuff. It don't got nothing to do with me, and it's too hard to understand."

Ready to defend Shakespeare, I respond, "What about the idea of ambition? You're on the basketball team, right? How far would you go if some witches, or recruiters, predicted you could play for the NBA someday? How far would *you* go to make this happen? Even though this play is really old, the ideas in it are relevant to your life today. Give it a chance." I hold up three articles—one about a mother who attempted to hire a hitman to kill her daughter's cheerleading rival, another about an attack on a figure skater instigated by a competitor, and a third about songwriters accused of copying a Marvin Gaye song. "I want each of you to choose one of these short articles to read in class today. Either while reading or after reading—whatever is easiest—write down at least two things you learned from your reading and one question you have about your article. Then we are going to talk about what we read in small groups. At the end of class, I'm going to play you a song called 'I Want It All.'" I gesture to a stack of six different young adult novels, then continue, "And tomorrow, you are going to get to pick out to read one of these other books, not so old, that deal with ambition." Joaquin opens one eye.

Are you a teacher who sometimes feels divided? On the one hand, I love literature, and I mean Literature with a capital *L*. It is one of the reasons I became an English teacher. I want to inspire others to love *Macbeth*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Hamlet*, *1984*, *The Odyssey*, *Romeo*

and Juliet, *Animal Farm*, *The Crucible*, *The Great Gatsby*, and even *The Scarlet Letter* as much as I do.

On the other hand, I am passionate about literacy, too often spelled with a small *l*. I want to inspire a generation of lifelong readers and recognize that not every student is going to be excited by or ready to read about a Scottish thane's obsession for power, a knight's pilgrimage to Canterbury, or a bunch of talking pigs. Many teachers and students struggle with the readability and relatability of classical literary works that school districts and national standards often expect us to teach. We know that each reader's interests, strengths, and challenges are unique, and no single text is appropriate for every student in a middle or high school English classroom.

So, should we teach canonical works or not? There are those of us who keep trying, and there are those of us who jump at the chance to teach other texts, such as young adult novels, nonfiction works, graphic novels, picture books, and other genres and media such as music and art. And there are those of us who bounce back and forth, teaching a classic novel, followed by a young adult novel, with an essay squeezed in between, who end up feeling a bit schizophrenic in our efforts to satisfy the expectations of districts, standards, parents, students, and ourselves.

It has taken me more than twenty-five years of teaching, a whole lot of reading and listening, not to mention a bunch of teacher trial and error, to figure out a way to interweave literature with literacy. This book suggests a process for planning and teaching called "workshopping the canon." In this book, *workshop* is used as a verb (i.e., to workshop) because it involves action on the part of teachers. When we workshop the canon, we actively and purposefully partner classical texts with a variety of high-interest, multiple genres within a reading and writing workshop structure, aligning the teaching of literature with what we have come to recognize as best practices in the teaching of literacy.

No longer do we have to feel divided between a longtime love for literature and a high regard for literacy. When we "workshop the canon," we can still teach *Beowulf*, but within a focused unit that includes other genres such as young adult novels, short stories, informational texts, picture books, music, art, and movies. We can explore heroes, past and present, through a variety of reading workshop structures, including read-alouds, independent reading, shared reading, close reading, readers theater, response engagements, Socratic circles, book clubs, mini-lessons (e.g., how-to, reading, literary, craft, vocabulary, and critical), and writing workshop structures such as mentor texts, writing plans, mini-lessons (e.g., how-to and craft), independent writing, conferences, writing circles, and publishing opportunities. If we workshop the canon, we can be both

a teacher of literacy and a teacher of literature. One does not have to preclude the other.

Workshopping the Canon is a practical text. Aligned with College and Career Readiness anchor standards for reading, writing, language, speaking and listening, and designed to meet other state standards as well, this book introduces foundational reading and writing workshop structures in the context of middle and secondary classrooms and curricula. Along with providing detailed suggestions for implementing workshop structures and strategies, it includes authentic teacher vignettes and examples of student work. Many teachers share resources, engagements, and ideas from their workshopping classrooms across chapters. Whereas much has already been written about reading and writing workshops, it is important to reconsider and reimagine these ideas for middle and high school classrooms, in the context of classical works of literature.

In writing this book, I draw on my experiences as a classroom teacher, as a teaching team member for a statewide reading initiative, as a director of a National Writing Project site, as an educator of new teachers at a state university, and as a colleague of so many inspirational teachers who surround me at the university, secondary, middle, and elementary levels. It is written, I hope, like those professional resources I like to read. It is filled with teacher voices, useful models, and helpful ideas. It is written to enrich and transform practice.

My hope in writing *Workshopping the Canon* is to provide middle and high school English teachers with ideas for "workshopping" their own classrooms and curricula. The teachers who write alongside me detail their classroom experiences to encourage colleagues. While this book does provide specific suggestions for "workshopping" certain canonical texts, the ideas are shared to prompt independent, creative, and critical thinking. The suggestions offered are not meant to be prescriptive but descriptive. This book endeavors to make the often invisible and always messy processes of workshop planning visible. It is written to show teachers a way to teach reading, writing, language, speaking and listening using familiar classical texts. It is a book to help bridge the divide between literature and literacy. It is a book for those teachers wanting to workshop. It is a book to help you through the process.

Why and How to Workshop

"What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?" cried Daisy,
"and the day after that, and the next thirty years?"

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I will never forget the first time I walked into an elementary classroom and saw a workshop taking place. Several students were on the floor reading independently; others were gathered in a circle, with a teacher guiding their reading; pairs were reading to each other; some were writing in notebooks and typing on computers; three students were trying to select new books from a classroom library; one was listening to a book on headphones. All students were engaged in reading or writing, as was the teacher. I was stunned. I was envious. I wanted that sort of literacy experience for my students.

Workshopping is a great idea in theory, but it isn't so simple to put into practice, especially with older students. Translating what I saw into middle and high school classroom contexts and curricula was not easy. So many questions initially overwhelmed me. Could I teach Shakespeare and still have authentic and engaging workshop structures such as read-alouds, book clubs, and independent reading and writing? How could I include other kinds of text such as young adult (YA) novels, short stories, newspaper articles, informational and argumentative essays, and poetry? When could I teach literary elements? What kinds of writing would students create? What about close reading? Where was the place for literary theory? How would it all fit together?

While I had read a wide variety of inspiring professional texts about establishing reading and writing workshops, most were set in elementary classrooms or featured far less complicated and complex texts. I wanted rich descriptions and detailed procedures that could help me establish a reading and writing

workshop with literature most frequently taught at the middle and high school levels.

Workshopping the Canon is a book written to show teachers how to create and conduct a workshop with and around frequently taught texts in middle and secondary classrooms. It offers a straightforward process for "workshopping" those works of literature traditionally accepted as important and influential in shaping Western culture. But, before we can consider *how* to workshop the canon, let's start with *why*. Why is it important to workshop the canon?

Why Workshop the Canon?

We need to workshop the canon in order to better support and motivate readers and writers in middle and high school classrooms. The supporting statistics are startling and scary. According to recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results, more than 60 percent of middle and high school students scored below the *proficient* level in reading achievement. Twenty-three percent of eighth-grade students and 25 percent of twelfth-grade students scored below the *basic* level in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). American fifteen-year-olds rank seventeenth in reading among developed nations, lagging behind countries such as Estonia, Lichtenstein, and Poland (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013, p. 1). As for writing, the National Council of Teachers of English has reported that 40 percent of high school seniors never or rarely write a paper of three or more pages, and the scores of twelfth graders show no significant changes in writing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007). So, what can teachers do about it?

In the past decade, we have come to know more and more about out-of-school literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2001). We have discovered that many of our students possess secret literacy lives, not always evident or valued in schools. They are reading YA novels, contributing to a 21 percent increase in young adult readership (National Endowment for the Arts, 2009). Our challenge is to integrate out-of-school literacies into the school curriculum. We want to bring more authentic reading and writing processes into classrooms. This is one reason why we should workshop the canon.

There are books students are more likely to read in English class, and there are books they are more likely to read out of English class. They read *1984* in class, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* out of class; *Romeo and Juliet* in class, John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* out of class; *Lord of the Flies* in class, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* out of class; *The Scarlet Letter* in, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* out; *Julius Caesar* in, Gail Giles's *Shattering Glass* out; *The Great Gatsby* in, Gordon Kor-

man's *Jake, Reinvented* out. The Drama High, Perfect Chemistry, Runaways, Bone, and Kimani TRU series are devoured by students, but out, out, out, outside of class.

So, what are we reading in class? Same old, same old. Applebee (1993) first shared this fact in his foundational and comprehensive study of the content used in the teaching of literature in American high schools. Included in his still staggeringly relevant 1988 listing of literary works required in 30 percent or more of public schools, grades 7–12, are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Pearl*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. More recently, Beers and Probst (2013) conducted an extensive survey of 2,300 teachers in 2008 and 2010 to determine the most frequently taught books in grades 4–10, and their listing for grades 9–10 includes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Sound familiar? The century has changed, but many of the texts taught in English classrooms have not.

There are valid arguments for and against teaching canonical works. There are those (Bloom, 1994) who support the canon and use these texts as a basis for comparison, and there are those who challenge these texts for their Eurocentric, masculine representations of experience—those who note the absence of female, African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latinx representation in terms of author or understanding (Baker, 1980; Barker, 1989; Bruchac, 1987; Ling, 1990).

No matter your position, if we want students to read more often and subsequently improve their reading performance, we need to provide high-interest and more accessible text. We need to better incorporate what students are more likely to read out of school into the school. We need to surround students with all kinds of relatable genres. At the same time, some teachers or districts may find it hard to let go of a number of great works of literature. Luckily, the workshopping classroom encourages both, broadening our view of classical texts.

Workshopping structures and strategies enable teachers to interweave other genres as a means of providing students with more accessible text and diverse cultural representations, bridging the gap between out-of-school and in-school reading. We partner those texts students are expected to read with those they are more willing and ready to read, and everybody wins. When we create a workshopping classroom, we simultaneously introduce students to literature and relate it to the kinds of reading completed outside of class. We do so through a variety of workshop structures, to be detailed in the following chapters.

Another reason why we want to workshop the canon is to increase student comprehension and motivation. When I first began teaching, I taught differently than I do today. Like many English teachers before me, I taught *Macbeth*, *Frankenstein*, *Of Mice and Men*, and the *Scarlet Letter*; I lectured on King James and

Romanticism, the Great Depression and Puritan values. Students wrote essays, created monsters and scarlet *A*s, and took tests, listing Romantic elements and drawing Freytag's pyramid.

Even though students were busy around these works of mostly British and American literature, generating lots of literary products, I have to ask myself, did they really "read" any of these texts? Or did I read for them? Did I, with the very best of intentions, foster a classroom environment that provided students with all of the information necessary to write essays, create projects, and take tests without ever having to make meaning of or transact with the text? Was literature something I did to students, rather than something they figured out for themselves? Did I enable students not to comprehend? It all depends on how we define *reading*.

"What's in a name?" Juliet asks. Well, a lot, if we are talking about reading. How we choose to define it lays the foundation for all English language arts teaching. In my old classroom described above, reading is defined by products (e.g., essays, projects, tests). Attention is placed on that which follows reading; *reading* is best defined as "after the fact." While we might have called aloud some of the text together, the majority of class time was spent, after the fact, explaining and analyzing the assigned text. Students were then enabled to create the products of reading necessary to succeed in class, perhaps with little to no understanding of the assigned text.

Quite a while ago, Harste (1978) claimed the theoretical orientations teachers hold about reading significantly affect their expectations, goals, behaviors, and outcomes. What we believe reading is (and is not) greatly impacts what we do (with literature) in classrooms. If we associate reading with after-the-fact products, then we structure classrooms that lead to greater productivity; if we consider reading a meaning-making process and emphasize comprehension, then we organize classrooms that emphasize individual processes. Whether we are aware of this or not, our classrooms reveal deeply held beliefs about literacy.

Students' definitions of reading are shaped by teachers' definitions of reading. The definition of reading we employ in class, the instructional approaches we use when teaching literature, mold students as readers (Weaver, 2002). Does reading mean identifying words, listing characteristics, or matching characters? Or is reading constructing meaning, connecting with vocabulary, making inferences about plot, and predicting actions of characters? If we spend time emphasizing parts of literature, students will conclude reading is parts—disassociated vocabulary or stems, grammar or daily oral language, attributes of the author or qualities of characterization.

As teachers, we shape readers—and not always for the better. When I first read Atwell's (1998) foundational text on workshopping, I was struck by her

"Twenty-One Lessons Teachers Demonstrate about Reading" (pp. 28–29). Was I unintentionally teaching students the following?

- Reading is a serious, painful business.
- Literature is even more serious and painful, not to mention boring.
- Reading is a performance for an audience of one: the teacher.
- There is one interpretation of a text: the teacher's (or that of the teacher's manual).
- Reading requires memorization and mastery of information, terms, definitions, and theories.
- Reading is followed by a test.
- You learn about literature by listening to teachers talk about it.
- Teachers talk a lot about literature, but teachers don't read.
- Reading is a waste of English class time.

The ramifications of these lessons are troubling.

Jobe and Dayton-Sakari (1999) described a variety of student stances toward reading that occur in today's classrooms, offering four different labels: the "I can't" readers may choose not to read, or truly don't know how to read; "I don't know how" readers aren't sure what reading is, and may have become dependent on teachers telling them what the text means; "I'd rather" readers prefer to do something other than reading; "I don't care" readers really don't want to be in the classroom. What role do teachers play in supporting these labels? How can we tell if a student cannot make meaning if we explain everything that is read and fail to allow time and support for the actual processes of reading? Do we motivate students to read with texts and practices? Do we create literacy environments students want to be a part of?

Reading and writing workshop structures and strategies increase reading comprehension and motivation (Gaughan, 2003; Keene & Zimmerman, 2013; Lause, 2004; Swift, 1993). To deepen student understanding and counter negative attitudes, we can stop teaching in product-oriented, text-centered, top-down ways. When we provide students with choice and foster responsive classroom environments with connections to real-life experiences, we help students stay engaged. In a workshop, students take responsibility for making sense of texts. Teachers support the processes of individual readers and are concerned with how readers make meaning from their experiences with text, implementing structures, strategies, and technologies that facilitate sharing of these responses.

The processes of reading, writing, and talking about literature are valued as much as the substance of what is read, written, or spoken.

Yet another reason to workshop the canon is to reach diverse learners and foster diverse perspectives. Monocultural approaches to teaching increase the achievement gap and augment adolescents' disengagement with literacy (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007). When we teach one text at a time, we limit perspectives. Only one voice is heard. So much of English language arts education is departmentalized and compartmentalized, resulting in too-limited points of view. Literature is detached from literacy. Reading is separated from writing. Grammar is disconnected from both reading and writing. We break apart genres like crackers and study poetry, memoir, short stories, then plays. Classical literary works are split from YA novels. We have also been known to celebrate, albeit isolate, works by women, African American, Latinx, Native American, and Asian authors. Time periods and literary movements further sever texts into smaller pieces. When we workshop the canon, we increase multicultural perspectives through students' multiple and varied engagements with texts and one another.

The schools in which we teach are increasingly academically, economically, socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. To foster students' interactions with a range of ideas and ways of being, teachers need to provide different representations of peoples, societies, mores, backgrounds, traditions, ethnicities, and customs through texts, and encourage engagement with cultural issues in literature, literacy, and the world. Workshopping classrooms are places in which students think critically and honor different perspectives—necessary qualities for living within a democratic society.

When we workshop the canon, we immerse students in a wide assortment of texts, providing multiple viewpoints and an array of representations gathered around a unit focus. Whereas the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) might encourage the teaching of more expository and less narrative texts, there are important reasons for still teaching fiction. Oately (2011) reminded us that stories help us understand not only characters in books but human character as well. Reading stories prompts better understanding of other human beings as we take on varied points of view within fictional settings, helping us make sense of one another and the wider world. When we workshop the canon, we bring together classic texts and contemporary texts; fiction and nonfiction; and, especially, a wide array of texts representing a range of world literatures, historical traditions, and genres and texts representing the experiences of different genders, ethnicities, and social classes.

The workshopping classroom encourages transaction with multiple texts through a variety of workshop structures and strategies. Sustained experi-

ence with diverse texts across a range of genres that offer multiple perspectives enhances motivation in students (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). We want students to enjoy what they read, respond to it, and leave classrooms thinking about it. We encourage them to discover more about themselves, others, and the world around them. Social and collaborative experiences reaffirm the idea that no single reading of a text is definitive. The student, not the work, remains at the heart of each day's lesson as we foster transactions within each reader through writing, talking, listening, and other workshopping means.

When we workshop the canon, we can better meet the diverse needs of students because workshop structures and strategies are accessible to all learners. We can better differentiate learning and meet individual needs in a reading and writing workshop environment. If there are more texts, there are more choices. Students can make guided selections for independent reading across levels and languages while the reading of a core canonical text is supported and shared.

How to Workshop the Canon

Now that we have a shared understanding of reasons for workshopping the canon, we can begin to discover how to do it. A *workshop* is a metaphor for a particular kind of learning environment that organizes reading and writing experiences in meaningful ways. Richly described and detailed by Atwell (1998), a reading and writing workshop creates authentic and sustained literacy experiences in classrooms. Students spend time engaged in real reading and writing. A workshop is learning and learner centered, social and collaborative. Students have some choices regarding what they read and write. There is access to varied texts and time allocated for reading, writing, talking, and sharing. The schedule is predictable, and blocks of time are allotted for each literacy experience. Teachers teach focused mini-lessons designed to guide students through reading and writing processes. Expectations are high, but there is room for reflection and confusion as long as a safe learning environment is established, which teachers ensure through structured management.

To foster lifelong literacies, reach diverse learners, and increase comprehension and motivation, workshop teachers create genuine reading and writing environments, immersing students in language-rich, high-quality experiences through literature. When designing a workshopping classroom, we provide opportunities for immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, approximation, employment, and feedback (Cambourne, 1984). As we workshop the canon, we immerse students in a wide variety of genres and provide sustained opportunities for reading and writing. The teacher demonstrates how

he or she reads and writes, and utilizes his or her own processes of reading and writing as a model for students. In turn, the teacher expects students to read, write, talk, and listen, and encourages them to take responsibility for many of their own assignments. Students have time during class to read and write with, and talk and listen to, one another; the teacher and other students provide feedback on literacy experiences.

Along with the above, when structuring reading and writing workshops around classical works in middle and high school classrooms, it is important to keep in mind the stages of reading literature suggested by Milner, Milner, and Mitchell (2012). They proposed four stages of reading literature: (1) reader response, (2) interpretive community, (3) formal analysis, and (4) critical synthesis. This four-stage construct moves student readers from responding personally to sharing and deepening these responses within an interpretive community, to illuminating them through formal analysis, and toward synthesizing critical perspectives into their own interpretation. Milner et al. (2012) explained the teacher's role during the initial stage of reading as nurturing unmediated, unencumbered, felt responses to the text. Once students have responded to the text personally, they are ready to move into an interpretive community, as teachers facilitate engagements that bring students together to unravel the text. During formal analysis, we help students explore the craft of the text read, noting such elements as plot, character, setting, point of view, tone, style, themes, or symbols. In the final stage of reading literature, critical synthesis, the text is considered from the perspectives of varied schools of literary criticism, such as historical/biographical, moral/philosophical, archetypal, feminist, Marxist, or Freudian.

These recursive stages of reading literature are already recognizable in most middle and high school English language arts classrooms. On any given day in any given classroom, we might observe students responding to what they have read, talking about what they have read in a group, analyzing formal elements of the text, or delving into schools of literary criticism. What we see may depend on the day of the week, the work of literature, or the objectives for that particular lesson. As teachers, we often have favorite stages; some of us preferring reader response, others eager for more formal analysis. While Milner et al. (2012) indicated movement through these stages is not linear, a workshopping classroom provides initial opportunities for students to engage in reader response that helps to establish the interpretive community. There is certainly formal analysis and critical synthesis in a workshopping classroom, but not until students have had the opportunity to transact with the text and interact with one another. Personal response, formal analysis, and critical synthesis are all facilitated through workshop structures and strategies.

Becoming a workshop teacher requires a move away from traditional toward workshop teaching. In a traditional classroom, students engage more in formal analysis and critical synthesis, with less regard for personal response or the interpretive community. Students may practice skills and memorize facts, content is broken down into discrete sequential units, products are of primary importance, test performance is valued highly, and expectations are the same for all. Characteristics of traditional English language arts teaching are easily recognizable as students read chronologically through the textbook, listing facts about the authors and elements of a tragedy, perhaps memorizing soliloquies along the way. Learning is discrete and separate, as literature is isolated from composition and word study. There is little room for personal responses to literature here.

In a workshop classroom, students actively construct concepts and meanings; content is represented in whole, meaningful contexts; processes are as valued as products; students are assessed through performance on meaningful tasks; and learning is individualized. A workshop classroom environment provides and supports opportunities for students to read, write, talk, and listen in authentic and sustained ways around a wide variety of literature. Students respond personally, interpret collaboratively, analyze formally, and think critically through a variety of workshop structures and strategies.

So, what are the reading and writing workshop structures teachers use to prompt students' personal responses, foster the interpretive community, engage in formal analysis, and embark on critical synthesis? To be detailed in the following chapters, our reading workshop includes time and opportunity for the following: read-alouds, independent reading, shared reading, close reading, readers theater, response engagements, book clubs, Socratic circles, and a variety of mini-lessons (e.g., how-to, reading, literary, craft, vocabulary, and critical). Our writing workshop evolves from and interweaves with the reading workshop, as students write in response to the unit focus, mentor/model texts, or other texts introduced throughout the unit. The writing process is supported through workshop structures including writing plans, mini-lessons (e.g., how-to and craft), independent writing, conferences and/or writing circles, and publishing opportunities. While each of these reading and writing workshop structures is detailed in the following chapters, we begin workshopping the canon by first finding a unit focus.

Find a Unit Focus

Workshopping the canon begins when teachers find a unit focus. So often, we begin and end our planning as middle and high school English teachers with a

classical literary work. *Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Animal Farm*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *1984*, for example, provide the inspiration. We spend so much time and effort exploring the single literary work, pondering its allusions, foreshadowing, foils, imagery, and irony. When we workshop the canon, rather than planning around a single text, we select a unit focus that allows for multiple texts, voices, ideas, and perspectives to be explored within an array of reading and writing workshop structures.

A unit focus originates from the core canonical text. Think about the common novels, plays, or memoirs that you teach. *Beowulf* comes to mind when teaching British literature. How I love those Anglo Saxons, their scops and mead. My mind wanders to the gory details of the fight between Grendel and Beowulf—how the monster twists in pain as the sinews deep in his shoulder snap. And when Grendel's mother returns and carries off her son's claw . . . well, everyone loves a good sequel. I think about the timeless qualities of this epic and the characteristics of an epic hero. I recall the writing style, the kennings, alliteration, allusions, and the poem's rhythm. However, workshopping requires a move from pieces to a whole, from content to process. So, while I may begin with literature as a focus, I move forward and consider literacy. Rather than asking myself what bits and pieces students will learn about *Beowulf*, I consider how I will facilitate students' transactions with *Beowulf* through reading and writing workshop structures and strategies connected to a larger unit focus, such as heroes.

Serafini (2001, p. 40) defined a *focus unit* as a "series of literary experiences that revolves around a central theme or focus." Thus, a unit focus encourages us to think more broadly and intertextually. When we workshop the canon, we interweave the study of a core canonical text with a variety of contemporary genres, helping students make connections more easily between a core text and their lives. We want to create a classroom workshop environment that immerses students in a focused unit of study that includes YA novels, picture books, nonfiction text (e.g., essays, articles, memoir, biographies, websites, reviews), graphic novels, short stories, movies and documentary films, poetry, plays, lyrics, and art. While our unit will include a core canonical text, the development of a unit focus encourages and guides us to include more diverse texts.

Consider *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's historical tragedy: What could be the focus for this unit of study? What idea will bind together a series of literary experiences and literacy engagements? I don't want to choose a genre as a focus, as this will limit the exploration of different kinds of texts. I want to be able to choose from a wide assortment of contemporary works to read alongside this play. My mind wanders to those larger topics always discussed when reading *Julius Caesar*, and I consider the relationship between power and corruption.

Such issues should appeal to students, and certainly a wide array of fiction and nonfiction texts will relate to this focus and enrich students' understanding and broaden their perspectives through hearing multiple voices.

When teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, the unit focus could be ill-fated love—rather a predictable choice, but adolescents relate well to this central idea. Who hasn't been unlucky in love? Who hasn't experienced a doomed or disastrous relationship? So I begin a new unit with students, reflecting and writing about unfortunate relationships. We consider iconic movies with not-so-tragic endings (e.g., *High School Musical*, *Twilight*) as well as those with tragic endings (i.e., *Titanic*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Star Wars: Episode II* and *Episode III*). We discuss star-crossed lovers on television: I show now-classic clips introducing Buffy and Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We listen to songs such as We the Kings' "Check Yes Juliet," Taylor Swift's "Love Story," and Gavin DeGraw's "We Belong Together." Then we consider those factors that might contribute to love being "ill-fated."

Commonly tied to a unit focus are *essential questions*, which are questions that relate to a unit focus and can be used to connect a core classical text to other genres as well. Effective essential questions accommodate many possible answers (Wilhelm, Smith, & Fredricksen, 2012). "What is ill-fated love?" isn't a strong essential question because there is likely agreement on the answer. "Are some relationships more ill-fated than others?" or "What is the relationship between love and fate?" work better because of the range of possible answers. In a unit focused around power, "Does all power lead to corruption?" is a better essential question than "What is power?" The best essential questions develop and deepen a unit focus, prompting higher levels of critical thinking across texts.

There can be many unit foci or essential questions for any given core canonical text. A teacher could create a unit around conspiracy or betrayal when teaching *Julius Caesar*; fate or young love when teaching *Romeo and Juliet*. Teachers should choose a unit focus to generate student interest, interweave diverse texts and genres, and prompt critical thinking. When Kayla teaches *Animal Farm*, for example, she focuses her unit around power and the corruption of government. Her essential questions include "How does power change a person's personality?," "What type of government is an ideal government?," "How much power should the government have?," "What rules should govern society?," and "What would happen to a country without rules?" When Lamar taught *A Raisin in the Sun*, he planned his unit around the untold stories of America and focused on counter-narratives that offered different points of view on the American dream. His essential questions included "How do race, class, and/or gender influence an individual's goals or aspirations?" and "What is the American dream?" To prompt your own thinking around essential questions, a listing of canonical texts with sample unit foci and essential questions is provided in Appendix A.

Collect Diverse Texts

After discovering a unit focus and essential questions, teachers collect *diverse texts*. Before we can workshop the canon, we require a wide variety of texts to include in the workshop structures. We need to select genres that will complement the core canonical text, expand the unit focus, and help us answer essential questions. Multiple texts provide more opportunities to immerse students in authentic literacy experiences, to increase student comprehension and motivation, and to foster diverse perspectives. I gather suggestions for pairing canonical texts with other literature from Herz and Gallo (2005), Richison, Hernandez, and Carter (2006), Kaywell (2000), and Short, Tomlinson, Lynch-Brown, and Johnson (2014). I ask media specialists and scour the Web for ideas and resources.

When teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, I draw from a wide variety of YA novels related to ill-fated love, such as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, Simon Elkeles's *Perfect Chemistry*, Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, Gayle Forman's *Just One Day*, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, Walter Dean Myers's *Street Love*, Mary E. Pearson's *Scribbler of Dreams*, Gordon Korman's *Son of the Mob*, Jasqueline Woodson's *If You Come Softly*, Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*, Jamie Ford's *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, and Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*. I gather a short, informational text about star-crossed lovers from the BBC and an article from *Science News* that informs readers about a pair of star-crossed love bugs. I remember Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee" and Ella Wilcox's "The Winds of Fate." A list of suggested YA novels, short stories, informational texts, picture books, music, art, and movies that supports the teaching of this unit focus can be found in Appendix B. Appendix B provides an extensive listing of canonical texts paired with sample unit foci, essential questions, and diverse texts to prod your own thinking about resources necessary to workshop the canon.

When Angela teaches Elie Wiesel's *Night* or Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, she focuses her unit around resilience. Essential questions include "What hope, if any, can be found in times of hopelessness?" and "How is resilience a ray of hope in dark spaces?" Though centered around texts immediately associated with the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, this unit is supplemented with additional works from other cultures to reinforce the idea of resilience in difficult times. For example, music selections, movies, and documentary films are incorporated from the African American and the Chicano/Chicana Civil Rights Movements, in order to build on and broaden the context for stories of resistance and remembrance that the core texts represent. A complete listing of Angela's supplementary texts for the unit she planned is included in Appendix B.

Once teachers discover a focus and find diverse texts for a unit, they can begin to workshop the canon through a variety of reading and writing workshop structures and strategies, as detailed in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

Workshopping the canon interweaves authentic reading and writing processes into classrooms, increases student comprehension and motivation, reaches diverse learners, and fosters diverse perspectives. Workshop teachers utilize reading and writing workshop structures to prompt students' personal responses, foster the interpretive community, engage in formal analysis, and embark on critical synthesis. Our reading workshop includes time and opportunity for read-alouds, independent reading, shared reading, close reading, readers theater, response engagements, book clubs, Socratic circles, and a variety of mini-lessons (e.g., how-to, reading, literary, craft, vocabulary, and critical). Writing workshops evolve from reading workshops as students write in response to a unit focus, mentor/model texts, or other texts introduced throughout the unit. The writing process is supported through workshop structures such as writing plans, mini-lessons (e.g., how-to and craft), independent writing, conferences and/or writing circles, and publishing opportunities.

This chapter concluded with guidance for getting started with workshopping by finding a unit focus and collecting diverse text. Once teachers discover a focus and find diverse texts for a unit, they can begin to workshop the canon through a variety of reading and writing workshop structures and strategies, which are detailed in the following chapters.

Workshopping the Canon introduces practicing and preservice English language arts teachers to a process for planning and teaching the most frequently taught texts in middle and secondary classrooms using a workshop approach. Demonstrating how to partner classic texts with a variety of high-interest genres within a reading and writing workshop structure, Mary E. Styslinger aligns the teaching of literature with what we have come to recognize as best practices in the teaching of literacy.

Guided by a multitude of teacher voices, student examples, and useful ideas, workshopping teachers explore a unit focus and its essential questions through a variety of reading workshop structures, including read-alouds, independent reading, shared reading, close reading, response engagements, Socratic circles, book clubs, and mini-lessons (e.g., how-to, reading, literary, craft, vocabulary, and critical), as well as writing workshop structures comprising mentor texts, writing plans, mini-lessons, independent writing, conferences, writing circles, and publishing. This book is for every teacher who has struggled to make beloved classic texts relevant to today's young readers.

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