

Linking Literature to the Classroom

By Naomi Bates

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As school librarians, we know the impact the library can have on classrooms. The difficult part is that other decisionmakers on campus may not see how important this classroom connection can be. In our educational age of standardized testing and curriculum alignment to state and federal guidelines, the library and librarian can be pushed to the side. Instead of being bullied out of the classrooms however, we need to fight to stay in them. How we do it is an age-old adage: actions speak louder than words. One very important and creative way to show our importance to classrooms and academic achievement is through linking literature to the classroom. While state standards are the ruler by which lessons and academics are measured, creating personal connections between students and the subject matter enriches learning and achievement. We can do this by using literature to link students to subjects they study. Here are a few ideas to ponder for increased linking.

Linking Literature with Research

There is one thing most students can expect to do before graduation: write a research paper. The process of writing is only one aspect of the paper, but the subject matter of student research is the link to literature that creates a culture of sharing and learning. On our campus, sophomores are required to read *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell and then create a research project based on an outlier of their choice. Relying on databases as the foundation, I help build their knowledge of how to find information about their outlier as well as show them how to incorporate copyright friendly images and videos to create a more appealing research paper. Pulling books of famous outliers from the shelves and placing them on desks also helps students quickly find information they need that isn't web-based. Creating a mix of digital and print formats gives them options about where to find information without relying heavily on just one type, thus allowing students to see beyond a computer screen when searching for relevant information.

Library link to classroom: Information literacy, searching techniques, information sources and evaluation, metacognitive modeling--thinking, brainstorming, and guide-by-the-side

Linking Research to Popular Literature

Problem-based learning is another way I link to teachers and students, creating a richer literary experience while helping to deepen a level of understanding in a particular novel. *Animal Farm*, an allegory of Stalin and Russia, is read in class, where students understand and interpret its various literary aspects, including theme, allegory, and symbolism. They also learn about the importance of governmental institutions and their impact on society. Working with an English teacher, we created a lesson in which students work in groups to research different types of governments and then create a unique government based on what information they find. Resources they use include a variety of databases and online articles. To bring current literature into the lesson, I ask them about popular dystopian novels they've read. We have a conversation about what kind of government was used and why it didn't work. Students have time to come to the library, research, and then build a new government. They must justify why their new government is beneficial to society.

Library link to classroom: Inspire reading; metacognitive modeling; information literacy instruction; finding evidence to build an argument, research for college and career readiness.

Linking to Required Reading

As librarians, we need to build reputations that teachers and administrators recognize as relevant and valuable. Having input into required reading in classrooms is one way to show how we can be a part of the curriculum. I recently sent out a survey asking school librarians how involved they are in the process of vetting novels and literature on a required reading list. Here are the results:

- 23.6% of the respondents said their English classes have required reading that is based only on “classic” titles.
- 64.3% of the respondents said they had input on those lists.

This is a welcome change that includes library participation.

I am one member of a team who is asked for input into what titles should be on our high school’s required reading lists. One of my recommendations, Todd Strasser’s *No Place*, was chosen last year because the content reflected social issues in the United States. Students created digital projects ranging from book trailers to newscasts to informational infographics about the issue of homelessness in the United States. This year, I proposed literature formats other than traditional novels by suggesting graphic novels and a book based on a compendium of “documents” (*Illuminae* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff). It is important to expose students to a variety of texts that are challenging by allowing them to interpret what they read visually as well as textually.

To build a great reputation as a connector between students, curriculum, and literature, the most powerful thing I do is booktalk. Students look forward to the semi-annual booktalks I deliver. By signing up on a website such as Doodle, teachers are able to schedule a booktalk for me to work with their classes. I usually present twenty to twenty-five books and make sure all genres are represented. I also ensure at least 10% (if not more) of the booktalk centers around nonfiction for young adults. Because of the wide variety of genres, I’m able to have a dialogue with students about how classics tie into certain books. *Alive* by Scott Sigler is an excellent example of bringing in previously required reading in the classroom by comparing it to *The Lord of the Flies*, and students take more interest in it because of the connection.

Using book trailers and telling the story without revealing too much hooks students from the moment they make the connection. It’s rare for students to read nonfiction for pleasure, so I create awareness for students through paired fiction and nonfiction titles on display, creating a booktalk title list for students to use personally. Booktalking also impacts more than students. Exposing teachers to current young adult literature allows them to expand their view beyond the curriculum by embedding these titles into it.

Our campus has a reading program that a team of teachers, administrators, and I created to strengthen our campus’ focus on reading: #N2RDG, which is both the title and Twitter hashtag. This program also makes students aware of how reading can challenge and help them academically. By weaving this program into social media, our reading program casts a wider net for all readers. This is the third year of implementation and it continues to be successful. Because high school students are busy with a variety of extra-curricular activities, we allowed them to use a variety of reading materials from books to anime and, most importantly, required reading and textbook reading. The reason we did this is to ensure ALL readers are rewarded, not just pleasure readers. It also emphasizes that both pleasure and academic reading can exist on the same level. This decision was talked about in-depth during the planning phase of the #N2RDG program on campus, and everyone on the committee understood how important it is to leave literature choices, and what students read, open so it wouldn’t be exclusionary. On the logs students turned in, I saw all reading types recorded, which showed both reading for pleasure and academic purposes.

Library link to classroom: Enlarging options, introducing reading mediums; embedding more student choice; increasing student choice and voice; and providing covert professional development in the area of literature, connecting to the students' social network.

Linking through Creative Partnerships

Savvy librarians also know they can connect literature in the classroom through ingenious partnerships. Be aware of what is happening in the classrooms as well as celebrating events during certain months. April is National Poetry Month and the English department is using this month to teach their poetry units. Being creative, a teacher on my campus set up her room like a French coffee shop, which I attended. What I did to further the student experience is have a table set up in the library where pages from weeded books are pulled out that students can use to create blackout poetry and share them individually, in the classroom, and even online using the library's Twitter or Instagram. Other events I keep in mind are National Readathon Day in May, Banned Books Week in September, and Picture Book Month in November. You can find more events on the ALA Celebration Weeks and Promotional Events 2016-2017 website (<http://www.ala.org/conferenceevents/celebrationweeks>).

Think of the library as the largest classroom on campus and allow your library to reflect curriculum being studied in the classroom. With just a few tweaks, such as adding social media or showcasing students' work, you can show how you are actively connecting to the classroom. Some ideas would be to take a standard display and showcase an added dimension of current concepts students are reading and learning in their classroom; pair classic novels with YA literature retellings; display student book trailers created using classroom literature on large presentation screens on smaller digital picture frames; and keep resource lists, both digital and hard copy, of research materials and books that will help students with their current research projects.

There are so many ways that show how collaboration impacts learning. Linking literature to students' current lives creates curiosity and furthers learning. When we collaborate with teachers to link literature with students in a more personal way, we are helping to create a new learning experience that allows students to read deeper, see alternatives, and make correlations with ideas and perspectives beyond standard expectations.

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