

Make your Classes “Lit” with Literacy

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In this media-driven world of fast messages and even faster decisions, we educators must create optimal learning environments that encourage mindfulness, playfulness, exploration, careful thought, and a sense of wonder and joy. These traits constitute the artistic nature of teaching. This comprehensive approach actually takes advantage of our students' natural curiosity to explore and their excitement to be engaged learners rather than passive compilers of distributed fact. As my seventh-grade integrated language arts students would say, “You’re making sure that your lessons are ‘lit’ (by placing the emphasis on literacy).”

Dr. Joseph F. Byrnes, my mentor for many years, always reminds me that parents/guardians send only their best children to our classrooms. These children are placed in our care to have us light the fires of metaphor and alliteration while listening to poetry read aloud, pique interest in meteorology made relevant through on-site forecasting, gain an understanding of the impact of prejudice by discussing the impact of school bullying upon both the victim and the school family itself, and so much more. Subject-area curricula establish the foundations for learning. Moreover, the practice of connecting the foundational concepts within each curriculum to the relevant issues covered beyond each subject area creates lessons that establish the fundamentals while also creating opportunities for experiencing and developing literacy through experiences incorporating the joy of exploring, creating, and learning.

At the core of these learning experiences is a very basic concept: literacy exists in many forms and can be developed in many skill areas. Traditional print literacy can be foundational for our students as we explore with them the basics contained within our subject curricula. The November 7, 2019 position statement from the National Council of Teachers of English states that:

NCTE’s Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age makes it clear that the continued evolution of curriculum, assessment, and teaching practice itself is necessary.

Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and socio-cultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups.

In *The Advocate*, Matthew Lynch states in his January 28, 2019 article entitled “What Are the 13 Types of Literacy?”:

When we think of literacy, we usually think of the ability to read and write. However, the understanding of literacy that we possess is often curtailed by our educational experiences. Those of us in the field of education know that there are numerous types of literacy, all of which help us navigate life and fully engage in our democratic society.

As stated in the title of the article, Lynch identifies “13 Types of Literacy.” Even so, we shall concentrate on the following: Digital and Media Literacy (combined as one), Civic and Multicultural Literacy (also combined as one), and Critical Literacy.

There is a frightening statistic impacting our librarians, who are critical participants in every school’s commitment to literacy. Effective classroom teachers realize they must design a program based on their students’ needs while encouraging literacy, exploration, and self-actualization. This must happen in all classrooms across all curricula. Yet, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 18% of US public school libraries and 54% of private school libraries and media centers have no full-time librarian. Moreover, book banning seems to have increased in its intensity. Add the stress and struggles of the pandemic and the resultant virtual and hybrid structures, and the challenges to literacy have been impactful in the most negative manner. In a typically well-staffed and amply-supplied library, the aforementioned literacies are fostered through print and audiobooks. We dynamic educators form success teams with our librarians who bolster our efforts to create learning engagements in which the various types of literacy flourish.

Let me share with you some of the ways I address literacy in my classroom while continuing to combine the “fundamentals” with “fun.” I plan my lessons and often share my ideas with the librarian to ensure that I am receiving additional input on my ability to address properly the issues of literacy. We write poetry to begin our year. My students examine minimalist poets including William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandberg, and Janet Wong while finding similar styles and purpose within the writings of Ernest Hemingway, Gary Soto, and Jerry Kraft. Poems about returning to in-person learning explore what was, what is, and what is hoped for in the future. This addresses Critical Literacy. We watch an issue-based video entitled “The Present” to gain empathy through Digital and Media Literacy while practicing empathic writing that addresses the issue of coping with a physical challenge. We research heroes during Black History Month. My students create an award for their selected heroes, establish criteria for the award, and then “present” the award to the recipient to emphasize Civic and Multicultural Literacy. Moreover, we enjoy book tastings in which we make free-choice selections and encourage others to read the selected books. The choice of genre is the students', not mine. We also choose any reasonable

pro-social topic and create a public service announcement (PSA) featuring issues that are in the general interest of the general public. These activities address all of the literacies mentioned so far.

We educators must include the concepts of literacy in all of its forms no matter what our curricular foundations happen to be. It is literacy that provides our students with the proper skills to explore, gather, evaluate, apply, and even repurpose the knowledge being collected. As we address the various forms of literacy in our instruction, the learning engagements that we design are energized and serve to create meaningful experiences that are hands-on, relevant, and insightful. When our students have achieved this level of scholarship, we are successful as teachers of literacy in the immediate and related subject areas we are teaching. Without literacy, our students are scribes and compilers. With literacy, our students are inspired and insightful. Our lessons can then be deemed as being “lit.”

Resources

- Lynch, Matthew. "What Are the 13 Types of Literacy?" 29 Jan. 2019, www.theedadvocate.org/what-are-the-13-types-of-literacy/. Accessed 11 Feb. 2022.
- National Council of Teachers of English. "Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age." Position Statement. 2019. <https://ncte.org/statement/nctes-definition-literacy-digital-age/>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2022.
- U.S Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics. 2019* (NCES 2021-009), Chapter 7. 2021. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=42>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2022.

Joe Pizzo - Brief Bio

Joe Pizzo is a middle-school English teacher of 48 years in Chester, NJ, Joseph Pizzo has been the Educator of the Year for AMLE, NJCTE, NJAMLE, and NJ S.H.I.N.E. This NCTE Historian and former president and current Executive Board member of NJCTE and NJAMLE has taught at Union County College, Centenary University, and College of St. Elizabeth. He is presently a member of NCTE's Award for Excellence in Children's Poetry Committee. An NJ Schools to Watch Core Leadership Team member, Pizzo's podcasts include *A Writer's Journey* and *A Spot of Poetry*. Elected to WWOR-TV Ch. 9's A+ for Teachers Hall of Fame, this Barron's author and poet also provides scripting and narration for HTV Media Productions, serves as a Boy Scout merit badge counselor, and serves as a lector/usher at St. Mary's of Czestochowa Church.

Ways to Connect

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