

New Jersey English Journal

Volume 3 *New Jersey English Journal*

Article 2

2014

Reading Communities in the Classroom and Beyond: Repurposing Reading and Nurturing Lifelong Readers

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Recommended Citation

Felt, Jennifer I.; Guerrette, Melissa L.; and Stygles, Justin M. (2014) "Reading Communities in the Classroom and Beyond: Repurposing Reading and Nurturing Lifelong Readers," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol3/iss1/2>

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Reading Communities in the Classroom and Beyond: Repurposing Reading and Nurturing Lifelong Readers

The classroom might strike an observer as busy and unsettled. Alison stands at the bookshelf by the window, paging through books Nicole is recommending to her. “If you liked *Wonder* you should try this one,” eavesdroppers hear. Max is also out of his seat, chewing his marker cap as he adds his thinking to a web of book talk sprawled on chart paper labelled, “*The One and Only Ivan*.” Three boys are gathered at a table nearby, listening intently as Jordan reads aloud from *Prisoner B-3087*. One pleads, “I want it after you, ok?” Across the room, Danielle conferences a book review with Ms. Guerrette, preparing to write classroom blog post. The conference is interrupted by Katrina, who asks, “Hey, did we get that new graphic novel from Raina Telgemeier yet? Can I read it first?”

These are the sights and sounds of a thriving reading community.

Reading Community, Defined

Reading can no longer be a stand-alone period of the day in which texts are assigned, quizzes administered, and fluency rates measured. The love of reading and the nurturing of a reading life depends on natural, personal, and social interactions.

A reading community is built on a foundation of shared reading experiences and authentic opportunities to interact with other readers. Through these experiences and relationships, students take ownership for their learning. The reading community is strengthened as students feel empowered to engage and influence the reading lives of others. The stronger the reading community grows, the more connected the community can become—to families, geographic communities, and the global society.

Today’s global marketplace requires employees to collaborate and to comprehend and respond to text, whether for daily interactions, such as emails or statutes, or for ongoing job

trainings, like workshops and courses. Historically, in industrial-based communities reading served as a channel for moving up in social class, finding better jobs, or passing school. Students learned to read in school, but chose not to read outside of school, the definition of aliteracy. Few students discovered a love for reading or view reading as a communal activity. Boys, in particular, perceived school as a means to follow the path into well-paid factory jobs, refraining from reading by choice. This recurring mindset has led to “generational aliteracy,” meaning for generations, people within our community have learned to read, but refrain from doing so of their own volition. Therefore, developing the reading community is an important means to reframing every student’s purpose for reading, mentoring students into a world of collaboration, encouraging lifelong reading, and reversing the trend of generational aliteracy.

Getting to Know Readers through Reading Surveys

Informal reading surveys give us a window into students’ perceptions, and that can be particularly valuable as we seek to develop rapport, build relationships, and create a culture of reading within the walls of our classrooms and beyond. Unlike standardized tests, reading surveys can impact instruction right away and do not require waiting weeks or months to review. Surveys are extremely helpful towards assisting students in finding books that match their interests. In their 2006 study of 831 Pre-K through fifth graders, Edmunds and Brauserman cite identifying students’ personal interests as a leading factor that motivates them to read (416). By examining student responses to the prompt, “*The best book I ever read was...*,” we are immediately informed about students’ tastes and preferences when we see such titles appear as *Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute* and *Babymouse: Queen of the World!* or *Marty McGuire* and *Gooney Bird Greene*. We

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can gain insight into students' beliefs and misconceptions about reading through the use of surveys. For example, this sentence starter, "I learn best when...", might elicit such responses as: *I learn best when it is quiet*, or *I learn best when I'm sitting at a table*. In Madelyn's fall survey (Figure 1), she indicated that she learns best when she reads hard books. This reveals a preconception Madelyn held about reading: she needs to read challenging texts in order to be a successful reader. While on the surface this is a logical supposition, the information suggests Madelyn was resistant to engage in reading familiar texts at her independent level both at school and at home because she felt they were too easy. To Madelyn, struggle equated to learning.

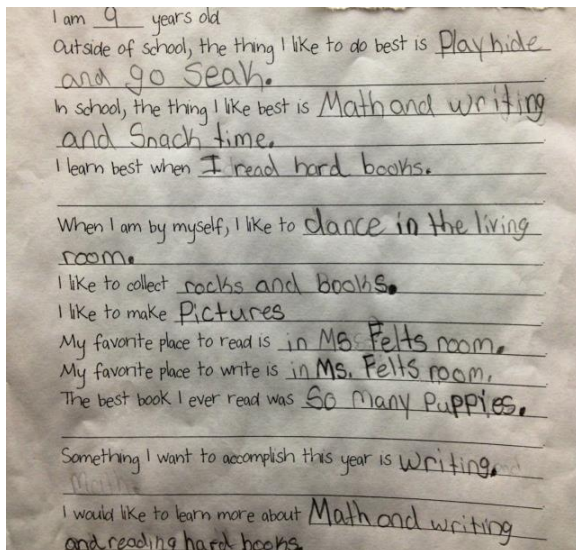


Figure 1:

Madelyn's beginning-of-the-year survey indicates that she feels she learns best by reading hard books.

Students within the reading community complete another survey after the first half of the school year. This gauges students' growth as readers and how their preferences and tastes may have changed. Madelyn's responses to a second survey (Figure 2) demonstrate the confidence she has gained as a reader. She not only mentions the text she is reading in a guided setting, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, but also indicates a series that she enjoys, *Lotus Lane*, and has a plan for what she wants to read next, *Alone in the Night*. Her excitement about moving into more complex texts and expanding her reading vocabulary is clearly evident in her mid-year survey.

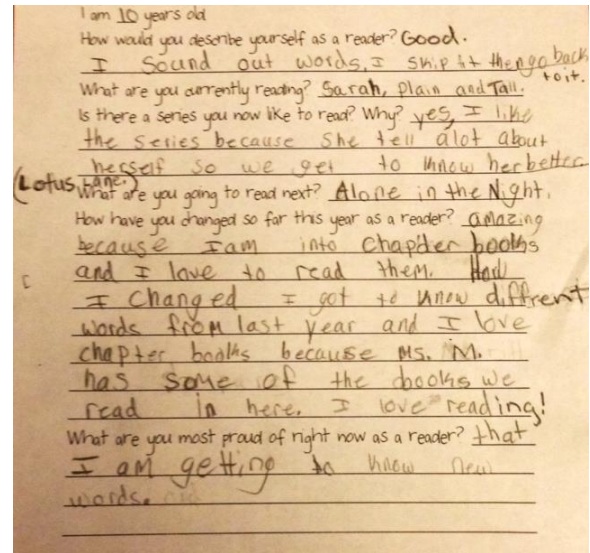


Figure 2:

Madelyn's mid-year survey indicates that her reading confidence has grown, and she is proud of her accomplishments.

Administered early in the year, a reading survey aids in collecting information about students' reading habits and preferences about series, authors, topics, and genres. When administered later on and again at the conclusion of the year, surveys can illustrate how students' reading has shifted and evolved. This type of data proves to be very useful for teachers and can be an extremely effective tool for students, as they reflect upon their reading lives.

Building the Nucleus of the Reading Community

Promoting Volume Reading

Promoting volume reading is a complex challenge in our aliterate culture and test-based learning environments. In addition to former and current students deliberately choosing not to read, as Gallagher states, "All-consuming teaching to these standardized tests has become the problem" (12). We realize the demand of high stakes testing has supplanted the physical act of reading and developing reading as a lifelong habit. Sadly, as a result, this demand has eroded the congregating power of classroom cultures. We need to alter the course this trend if we intend to stunt generational aliteracy.

Voluminous reading can provide a means by which students rely on each other's expertise,

engage in meaningful discussion, and take interest in one another's reading lives. Voluminous reading is encouraged through several means including book talks and classroom expectations, including genre requirements and the 40 book challenge (Miller 2009), and twenty-plus minutes of reading daily, which contributes to the forty-five plus minutes read per day (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 2012). These factors contribute towards developing positive reading attitudes and respectful collaboration.

Reexamining the Role of Talk

For reading communities to grow, classroom cultures must shift from teacher-centered to student-centered. One of the most observable characteristics of a classroom culture is the consideration of who is talking. Traditionally, teachers assumed the role of imparter of knowledge. The format of classroom instruction has been stand and deliver, with teachers guiding students through excerpts of text with a prepared list of comprehension questions to pose. In this pattern of instruction, students learn there is a correct response and the important part of reading is riddling through what the teacher finds important. Students are not processing and synthesizing to make meaning when their attention is devoted to literal recall or guessing what the teacher wants them to say (Doyle and Bramwell 59: 556). The modality of instruction has not changed enough if teachers are posing questions to students with expected outcomes or "right" answers. This monologic discourse reinforces the teacher as the authority in the classroom. Rather, our students' needs necessitate shifting our culture to dialogic discourse in which student voices- all student voices- are valued as contributors. In dialogic discourse, speakers and listeners alternate roles and neither party is considered authoritarian (Beers and Probst 28). In the classroom, this manifests itself through open-ended questions that invite interpretation and multiple "possible" answers. Students assume responsibility for posing questions and initiating conversations. It can sound noisy and unrestricted as more learners can be engaged simultaneously. The students' ability to participate in a community of discourse is a necessary measure of students' preparedness to engage in a global, literate community beyond the classroom walls.

Read Aloud: Bricks and Mortar

Read alouds are foundational in the reading community. If read alouds are considered to be the bricks of the reading community's foundation, discourse is the mortar. A well-selected read aloud provides students with a common reading experience that gives context to the community's discourse. "As we share the words and pictures, the ideas and viewpoints... The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading it" (Fox 10). A common reading experience equips all students with a shared encounter with the same text, allowing point of entry into the work of the reading community for all students. Interaction of the community based upon read aloud experiences creates an environment where participation is not dependent on individuals' ability to access the text (Miller 50). Read aloud is a natural, fitting place for dialogic discourse (Allington 2002; Sibberson and Szymusiak 81).

When accompanied by text-based discourse, read aloud provides students with important rehearsals for real life. In the safety of the reading community, students dialogue about character, conflict, emotion, and more. They formulate ideas, elicit responses from peers, and revise their thinking as active participants in a community of readers (Beers and Probst 25-26). Student interviews about the importance of talking about read aloud books support the value of discussion as an element of community building (Figure 3). As shared experiences deepen, students learn about others and the world we live in and gradually develop their own values and their sense of character-who they want to become. In one classroom discussion while reading *Beyond Lucky*, Max shared his concern about the main character's best friend, Mac, with his peers, "He wasn't supposed to tell about the card. When he did, he was, like, backstabbing. When you choose friends, you want someone who can keep...a secret." The face-to-face, personal nature of a shared read aloud and subsequent interactions contribute to the students' sense of self and purpose amidst the larger backdrop of society. Relationships are built from discourse and read aloud experiences (Miller 49). The more students experience the satisfaction and pleasure that come from identifying with others in a genuine way over

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text, the more they hunger for that connectedness, and the deeper intrinsic motivation to read grows.

Students Speak:

How does talking about books build a reading community?

“What helps me about read aloud is that it’s not always the teacher talking, but we get to talk, too...we do turn and talks.” –Sarah

“We could get a different perspective and share our thinking and get deeper into the book.” –Michael

“If you thought you had something really good, but you heard someone else’s [idea], you’d think on their idea, too, and it would help you think more about the book.” – Angel

“How we got a reading community was that we trusted each other, and if someone said something that was way off, we talked about it and worked together to figure it out.” –Jess

“When we would talk about the book we were reading altogether it would help me to explain and figure out problems in my own independent book.” -Erica

Figure 3: Student interviews document the impact of talking about shared books in the classroom.

Conferring: Learning Personal Management

The investment in conferring is substantial and sustainable in the workshop model we created. The instructional workshop and the reading community are both anchored in independent reading. There are related and connected. What students learn in the workshop is transferred to independent practice, collaborative discussion, and development of self-regulation in the reading community. Fisher and Frey state, “When students have daily opportunities to engage... they develop the ability to regulate and monitor their pace of work and hone their problem-solving skills. (101)

Many students need a boost in reading motivation or deserve a challenge when thinking

about their reading. However, we find most readers have not learned to self-regulate their reading lives. This makes conferring a most essential element of the reading community. Most importantly, conferring is an important scaffold in helping students learn to manage their reading lives. After all reading is the only real requirement to be a part of a reading community.

For example, after evaluating a student’s previous reading experiences, Justin finds the reader to have read ten books the previous year, including the entire *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. In our first conference, he described the reasons he couldn’t read, which included, football practice, his sister’s dance practice, and after school care. He confirmed his reading log data. Indeed, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* took two weeks to read. When asked about his nightly reading, from 7:30-8:00, he revealed that he filled that out to avoid missing recess or that his mom covered for him. He mentioned that reading was something the teacher made him do, but thanked his previous teacher for allowing him to count one of the class read alouds on his reading log since he had read two chapters for homework. In such a case, the reader had to find purpose and value in his reading life. He had already started rereading the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series because he read and enjoyed the books previously. For many students, this is synonymous with “I don’t know what else is out there to read.” Conferences with students help spark and redirect their reading lives. Asking students “What are you reading, and why are you reading?” shifts the locus of control onto the maturing reader, which is necessary to help students explore potential interests, develop ownership of reading, and develop a reading heart. Such interactions reaffirm to the students our commitment towards scaffolding and supporting their reading lives. Such conferences, and proceeding conversations, help the reader develop a sense of reading awareness-including a sense of self as a reader-that they have not experienced before. We find this anecdote similar to Allen’s vignette, “Each day... we’ll discuss the ‘signs’ we uncover... When we’re finished, we’ll pull our thinking together (55). Some further examples of focal points in conferences within the reading community may focus on finding the right time and place to read, on selecting a book that the students could appropriately manage in a week, (or other manageable period), and discussing what

makes a book interesting. An exchange between the student and teacher often occurs in this fashion:

Teacher: “What are you reading and who are you reading for?”

Student: I’m reading *Hunger Games* because my mom read it and I want to talk with her about it.

Teacher: Great! Interesting choice! How long will it take you to read this book?

Student: Umm, maybe a week? I can read a page in a minute.

Teacher: How many pages is it?

Student: 324?

Teacher: So, how much are you reading at night?

Student: Well, I didn’t read over the weekend. I’m only on page 23.

Teacher: You started this on Thursday, right?

Student: Yeah, but I read for an hour last night and this morning.

Teacher: OK. So, the *Hunger Games*. This book is a commitment, isn’t it? If you’re reading a minute a night and you have 300 pages left to go, how much time will you need to read it?

Student: Well, I might need a few more days than a week, but I know I can read this.

Such conferences intended to orient the reader, yet not discourage them. Not every book can be read in a week. This example helps the reader understand the ebb and flow of a reading life.

Book Access & Classroom Library

An essential motivator behind volume reading is access to books. Not just any books - fresh, new, inviting books of all varieties. We gather data from informal reading surveys, like the *Motivation to Read Profile* (Malloy, Marinak, Gambrell & Mazzoni 2013). On the survey, students commonly complain of old, tattered, “boring” books found in the school library and unpurged staples of the classroom library. This is analogous to students buying CDs. They much prefer the CDs visual appeal and sound, rather than Dad’s classic hair band CD or someone’s used relic. Having a constant flow of new books, from the book store, book orders, or giveaways, is important. An influx of new books propels book talks, book sharing, and eagerness, as most every

reader wants to be the first to crack open a book, know how good a book is, or be the first to make a recommendation to a friend. New books also invite students to different read genres because new books do not carry stereotypical judgments students have developed towards commonly seen books across grade levels. Moss & Young state, “By maintaining a flexible approach to book selection...students have opportunities for meaningful encounters with print” (48).

In a low socioeconomic community, obtaining books-especially new books-for a classroom library is not easy. Students simply cannot afford books, and teachers are on limited budgets. Book orders, for instance, seldom surpass \$50, between two classes. Unless the teacher makes an order, new books rarely infuse the classroom library. To alleviate this issue, we utilize book order bonus points for free books, and we keep an alert eye out for bargains at book stores and warehouses.

“What Are You Reading” Posters

Expanding the reading community outside the class starts with influencing other classes. Promotional ideas, such as locker posters and book reviews reflect activities and thinking that occurs in the classroom. We utilize locker space for reading promotion. The idea is to attract readers from neighboring classrooms to take interest in reading. The posters (adapted from ideas by Penny Kittle, 2012 and Donalyn Miller, 2014) are formatted to included four sections. The predominant section includes the book a reader is currently reading. Another section includes the book the student wants to read next. Most students, on the bottom of the posters, add all the books they read in a trimester. We update the posters weekly, when images are harvested during computer lab time. Students print, cut, and paste the pictures to the posters.

In terms of promoting volume reading, the posters are constantly visible across the school building, raising students’ awareness. The posters make students’ reading suggestions readily available to their peers. Thus, time spent searching for a book is reduced for other readers. We hope our posters make the difference and have a positive impact when other teachers ask their readers, “Where did you get the idea to try that book?”

Extending Reading Communities Beyond the Classroom

Community Means Family, Too

The OES READS movement at Melissa's school originated to address concerns about connecting students and families with reading experiences. Family literacy is a culture that must be built to support students' reading lives. Miller notes, "Building reading communities that support children begins by addressing the experiences and perspectives of community stakeholders. Many parents lack strong, positive reading experiences in their own lives and don't see the urgency or understand how to support their children's literacy in meaningful ways" (92). OES READS was modeled after the *One School, One Book* movement (<http://readtothem.org/our-programs/one-school-one-book>). OES READS was implemented as an effort to put books into students' hands and families' homes and to facilitate a wide reading experience for the greater school community. A text is selected based on accessibility and wide appeal, and every student is gifted a copy. Additionally, all staff and school personnel—including food service personnel, bus drivers, and custodians—are provided a copy of the selected book. Families are invited to special assemblies to launch and conclude the program (Figure 4). The assemblies include a whole-school read aloud, and the weeks between the start and conclusion are peppered with trivia, prompts for family literacy activities, and a suggested reading guide. Whole-school initiatives illustrate the potential for books to connect us all—students, teachers, and family members—through the enjoyment of reading.

Blogging: A Portal to Other Reading Communities

Blogging is redefining the classroom and broadening the geographic range of student interactions. Our students have come to recognize their blogs (hosted on www.kidblog.org) as a means of expression and interaction with other readers. Not only do blogs offer an authentic purpose for writing, but students engage with peers from classrooms across the country. Sometimes, blog posts and comments are reactions to the books they are reading. Other times students use their blog as a platform for reviewing and promoting books. Students develop



Figure 4: Whole-school reading events are a way to open the doors of our reading communities to families.

preferences about the blogs they visit and the literary opinions they seek. Suddenly, students have a new source of book recommendations and add titles to their to-be-read lists that they have seen mentioned on peer blogs. These transactions typically occur within the confines of an intermediate literacy classroom. The use of student blogs on the internet enables students to extend their reading communities beyond their geographic community.

Book Reviews

Writing book reviews has become a popular idea with our reading community. Students enjoy sharing what they read in alternative means than "after-reading homework assignments," including summaries or strategy explanations. Reading inventories portray students' displeasure as they claim such assignments make reading *hard*, otherwise known as "boring." Teachers desire some measurable form of reading accountability and comprehension while maintaining the fun and value of reading comprehension assignments. Book reviews fit these specifications.

This idea came from a bookstore in Saratoga, NY that had 3 x 5 index cards, with core information (title, author) and a space for a very brief review, no more than three sentences long.

The store displayed the book review cards on bookshelves beneath corresponding books. Used in this way, book reviews add something missing to our libraries – student voice. Writing book reviews encourages student ownership of their book choice. Further, because each student wants their classmates to read their review they are eager to read books and “sell” their influence.

Reviewing ARCs create a “read-it-before-you-can-buy-it” feeling, which generates a sense of authority around books. We are fortunate to have the school library and the public library as places to post our book reviews for authentic audiences expanding our reading community. Students who read the “hottest” books write their brief review on an index card and place the review on the book’s shelf. ARC reviews are used by our bookstore on a book’s release date. For example, a few students have read *The Thicket: A Path Begins* by J. A. White (2014). Each student wrote a review complete with a star rating. The card will be kept until the release date, April 29, 2014. When the book store releases the book, the book display will be complete with the students book review.

Literacy Pen Pal Project

One way we expand our reading community beyond the classroom walls is through a pen pal project (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo 2011). The premise behind this project is two-fold: to create an authentic purpose for aliterate readers and show students how adults approach their reading lives. Some intermediate readers question the authenticity of teacher modeling and view lessons as contrived. Observing how their adult pen pals, mentor readers apply strategic reading or consider ideas in their everyday reading (an authentic context), reiterates to the maturing readers the real life importance of mini-lessons.

The pen pals and students read the same book (*Mr. Tucket*, by Gary Paulsen and *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg*, by Rodman Philbrick) which provided an avenue for discussion points in the letters. The pen pal cycle starts with each adult pen pal sending students a letter via e-mail expressing opinions and reactions to the plot. (All e-mails are sent through the teacher’s school account.) The adult pen pals also wrote about instances they clarified predicted, and wondered; they solicited student opinions through

questions before exchanging letters. Students returned letters to pen pals using the same written-response structure. Additionally, the students weave content from class into their letters, i.e. linking segments of *Mr. Tucket* to (teacher-selected) segments of westward expansion movies to reveal their understanding to their pen pal. Students confer with the teacher before finalizing the letter for content, clarity, and appropriate use of text citations. Like the sender, students write their opinions of the reading, respond to questions, and pose questions back. The richer exchanges include vignettes from the adults that explained a personal connection or when students revealed the way an event turned out. The process spans four letters (two from adults, two from students), over a period of one month.

Engaging with Authors, Across the Miles

The availability and wonder of modern technology allows our aspirations about connectivity to be virtually limitless, helping teachers to level the classroom walls and extend learning. Connecting with others from around the globe is more feasible now than ever, with applications such as Skype, FaceTime, and Google Hangout. Teachers can facilitate the connections of students to experts with ease—visits are no longer limited by funding and the logistics of travel. Skype has been instrumental in broadening the reading community as a tool for connecting students to authors. Numerous published authors are interested in and willing to conduct brief virtual visits with students who have experienced their books. Students delight at the opportunity to talk to and with the writers behind books to which they become connected. Students’ reactions to Sarah Aronson’s own superstitions that shaped her writing about lucky were similar to when they have been let in on a secret. Students are not only invested but intrigued by tales authors tell of inspiration, writing struggles, and choices made in the process of writing their books. Many itch for their turn to pose a question, often inquiring about works in progress and other writers or books that have influenced the author. Melissa’s students’ Skype with Linda Urban after reading *The Center of Everything* was truly so comfortable an exchange between readers that book recommendations began to fly as easily as they do among longtime friends.

Reading Communities in the Classroom and Beyond

There is an inestimable power in developing students as readers and writers by facilitating contact with their writing heroes—authors they love. Melissa’s students indicated “Skyping with authors” to be one of the most significant influences on their reading progress on the end-of-year reading evaluations in both of the last two years.

Open Mic Friday

Within and beyond the classroom, Jennifer links the two schools she coaches expand the reading community and improve students’ fluency skills through video conferencing. Students sign up for “Open Mic Friday,” performing poetry, reading aloud book excerpts, or sharing original writing every two weeks. Students set aside time during their regular independent reading time to practice. Two days before “Open Mic Friday,” Jennifer confers with third and fourth grade readers, listening and providing feedback on their fluency. As Rasinski states, “If I were to give an oral reading performance of a passage, I would most certainly have an incentive to practice, rehearse, or engage in repeated readings.” (705). As a result, students’ fluency, confidence improves; speaking and listening skills are strengthened. “Open Mic Friday” becomes a popular event as the year progresses.

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Conclusion: Reading, Repurposed

Our reading expectations and classroom practices must forge the charge to repurpose reading and nurture lifelong readers as our communities and the world face continuous change. Providing authentic purpose and value to students through collaborative reading experiences empowers students and lays the foundation for stronger community outside the classroom. Generational aliteracy can be averted and discontinued through proactive measures. Aliterate attitudes towards reading can be converted by experiencing and sharing the value and power of reading – a necessity when collaborating in the age of college and career readiness.

We have discovered that nurturing readers through participation in reading communities is an essential underpinning to classroom culture and learning expectations. Reading drives all instruction. Owning the ability to read is paramount: as a subject, across disciplines, and as a lifelong habit. Collaboration--from text-based discussions to social media, face-to-face conferring to letter writing with reading mentors--affords students experiences with the connectivity of reading and the intrinsic rewards of belonging to a community, a reading community. The rationale for reading becomes repurposed, and students claim their roles as lifelong readers.

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The article is based on a presentation the authors delivered at the NCTE convention in Boston, November 2013.



Read, by Erika Banoun

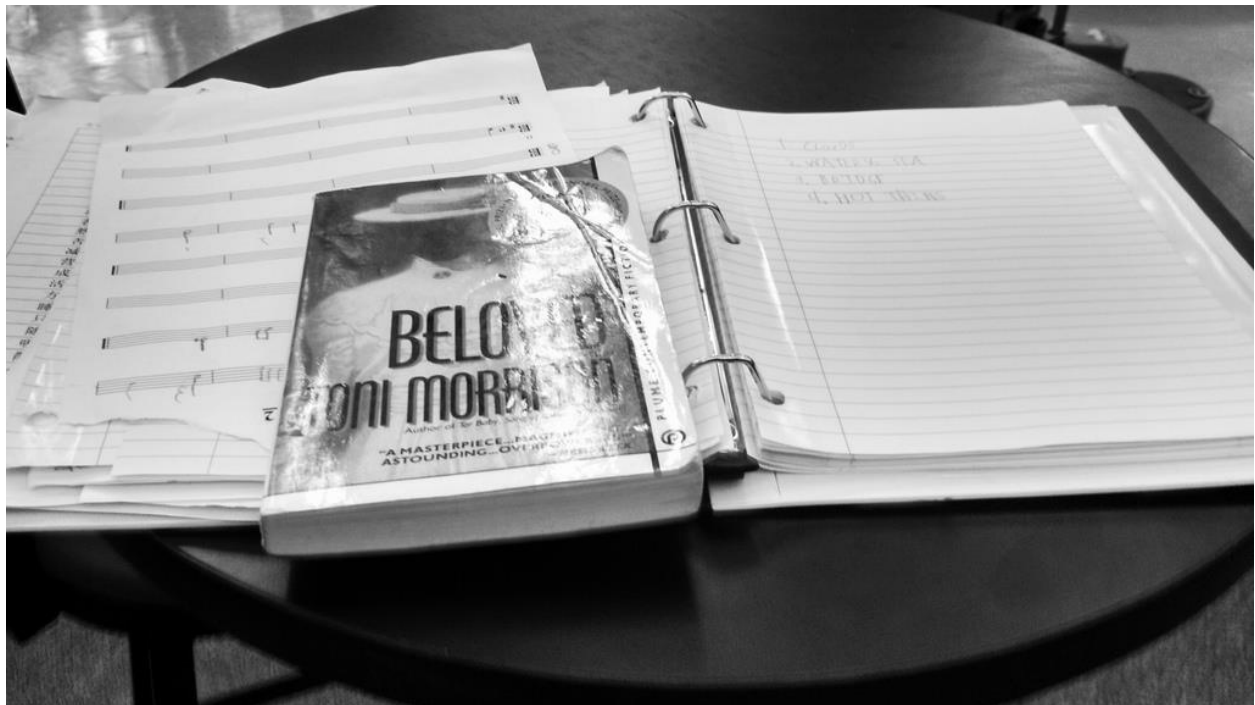


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