

EVERYTHING IS UNCOMFORTABLE NOW: WRITING AND TEACHING IN TODAY'S TEXAS CLASSROOM



By Lupe Mendez

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Abstract: This issue’s Featured Article is bold! Readers are challenged to be advocates with loud voices, ready to push back on current legislation intended to silence voices in our classrooms and on our bookshelves. The author provides readers with an overview of laws and legislation currently impacting teachers and provides ideas for what you, as an educator, can do as a response. This includes innovative ideas for what reading and thinking can look like, proposing some new “literary laws” that you might apply in the face of censorship efforts that affect your teaching life.

Keywords: censorship, advocacy, civic engagement, literacy legislation

I cannot express to you enough the wish I have for all of us educators to be well taken care of, in our classrooms, in our field, and in our homes. I know these days are filled with media cycles where our profession is being pulled apart from every direction: school shootings, the rightful exodus from the teaching profession, book bans, the falsehoods of “parent choice,” voucher programs, etc. I am here to say one major thing:

I see you, and I am grateful you are around. Thank you for moving every day toward our students, toward learning, toward the future.

That said, I want to write about what it means to teach in the state of Texas today and, just as I state clearly in the title of this article, how it is sometimes uncomfortable. What follows is a transcribed version of what I presented at the 2023 TCTELA Conference, “Embracing Boldness—An Exploration of the Power of Language,” held in February in Denton, Texas.

Okay, are you ready for the article? Good. Here we go. The purpose of this article is to have you:

- **Think** about what writing and reading looks like in the face of laws that limit teachers and build up the amount of “red tape” in ELA instruction.
- **Imagine** ways to build a student’s ability to connect with history and literary works.
- **Examine** the ways teachers can guide students through the use of sample texts and writing strategies that empower learners to explore generative writing as a tool for liberation.

We know what the law (Relating to the Social Studies Curriculum in Public Schools Act, 2021) says, and every day it feels like there are new legislative moves being made that center “public” schools, but we must always keep the focus real tight. We are here for students. We know what it is like to witness their minds open up when they finally understand the world of books, and we are the access point for their love of reading, the need for curiosity + imagination, and the building of world concepts: self-respect, confidence, and empathy. Now, more than ever, you are a necessary mentor. You are an architect. You are a world builder. Don’t let anyone take that away from you.

In order to continue to do the job, there are facts we have to keep in mind in regard to the laws about books and education that have already been passed or are in current legislative hands:

- **THE LAW HAS NO TEETH ON ITS OWN. THERE ARE NO PUNITIVE ELEMENTS IF YOU “BREAK” THE LAW.** If you read any of the new laws in place, there is nothing that calls for some reprimand or a call for your certificate if the law is “broken.” The writers of the law run right up to something that punishes, but they are aware that to do so would cross the line on our first amendment rights.

- **THE LAW TAKES OUT ELEMENTS AS REQUIREMENTS, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN TEACHERS CAN'T TEACH WHAT IS TRUE.** The State Board of Ed. might follow what the law says in regard to who and what historical elements are covered as mandatory, but there is nothing in any law that says we still cannot teach what we know to be true. Just because they took it out does not mean you cannot teach it anymore.
- **PRESENTING “THE OTHER PERSPECTIVE” CAN BE A SUMMATION . . . ON A SLIDE. THEN, MOVE ON TO THE REAL TEACHING.** State law says you have to teach about both sides, cool. I said what I said on this because it does not masterfully say to what degree—it just says present the other perspective.
- **THERE ARE MORE BOOKS + TEACHERS THAN LEGISLATORS.** They will not possibly be able to know every book that is out in the world. You know what books you want to use. The state nor any school district has the resources to mandate which texts. They will go after some of them, but they do not know all of them. Just teach.
- **NOTHING IN THE LAW CHANGES WHAT/HOW YOU ARE TEACHING. IT IS A DISTRICT'S CHOICE TO ENACT THE DIRTY WORK OF THE LAW.** This is the uncomfortable truth. You are on the ground floor of the major fights over books. Some of you are right at the center of it. Some of you are on the periphery. Now is the moment. If you can afford to push back at your admin. and your school district, then you better do it. You have fought battles for our kids in a number of other ways. This is no different.
- **MOST PEOPLE HAVEN'T READ THE LAW WELL ENOUGH TO APPLY IT TO THE CLASSROOM. EXCEPT TEACHERS. THEY PROBABLY READ IT AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED TIMES.** Exactly.
- **TEACHERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THE FIRST LINE + THE LAST LINE OF DEFENSE FOR OUR FAMILIES. NOTHING CHANGES.** At the end of the day, in Texas, we have a multitude of issues swirling around our districts. Nothing changes. Keep teaching. Do what is best for kids.
- **WE HAVE TO TAKE TURNS AT THE HELM (ME TODAY, YOU TOMORROW).** We have to work as a community of educators, work past the union, work past what we feel is the work on the campus. Some days the fight is in Central Texas, some days it is in the Rio Grande Valley, some days it is in Amarillo, other days it is in Galveston, but support one another through all the networks you can.

The Landscape of the Work

All across Texas, due in part to how the law works, how we are able to function as educators in the classroom might look different. In truth, it already looks different from school to school because of where and what we teach. But the new factors that contribute to how we move in our teaching and in our curriculum shift from county to county, region to region, and district to district. Added to this is the understanding that major shifts can occur from year to year. Having had the chance to talk to teachers across Texas, I have been able to figure out that we are all teaching in basically three different environments:

- **“Everything Is Fine.”** Here, some of us are in damn-near blessed safe zones where a competent, fully functioning school board and president are working for the betterment of an ever-evolving district. At the time I gave this presentation, I was in

this environment, but as of March, news of TEA taking over Houston ISD has and continues to morph the landscape. When everything is fine, you can teach and work with a curriculum that supports your students.

- **“Work Quietly.”** Here, you are able to work your teaching magic with little to no obstacles, so long as you keep a low buzz about your work. No one is looking too deeply into what is happening because there is either no need to “evaluate” the trust given to teachers or a school district is in the middle of its own management, and the focus is anywhere else but your classroom. I think my teaching environment is this, hopefully.
- **“Ground Zero.”** Here, you are working in a school district that has chosen to ban books, put pressure on librarians and classroom teachers to “get with the program,” and has embraced the letter of the law. There is very little wiggle room for what books can be taught, and the very nature of communication between district, building, and parents may be highly antagonistic.



The truth of the matter is, in whatever shape or form is available, teachers, I implore you, reach out and support one another—from campus to campus, from district to district, from city to city. Big or small, the effect is major. No one teacher can move alone. We work in a system and a network, and it is high time we use it. From TCTELA, to TABE, to NCTE, we are ALL in this together. Use your networks to help one another brainstorm options, get leads on adjusted practices, and gain support at school board meetings (yes, if you didn't know it, you are going to have to change shoes and go to the school board meetings now). Figure out when new bills are being read, when open comment periods happen, and when to visit the Texas State Board of Education (TXSBOE) and let them know what's what.

What Reading and Thinking Can Look Like

Here is where I need you to engage these questions with an open mind and trust your imagination.

1. What happens if we teach the classics and twist them on their heads?

Example: Teach the classics under new lenses and new rules. Lead conversations with students asking what is gained in the exchanges. Once we can morph what we consider on the page under contemporary understandings, it allows kids to engage with books in ways they didn't think of—dialogue, setting, plot, problem and



solution now take on new meaning. Here are some books you can reimagine with new understandings for your students:

- Imagine the book *Of Mice and Men* where all the characters are Mexican Americans living in 1920's South Texas.
- Imagine *The Great Gatsby* is the same story, but this Gatsby is Black.
- Imagine the book *The Outsiders* where Ponyboy and his crew are all recent immigrants or first-generation immigrant youth.

The secret to these new conditions is ONCE YOU DO THIS, THE KIDS CANNOT UNSEE IT. Think of all the possibilities in the way the books are processed. Yes, use the canon, and push against the grain and reimagine them so that kids can see themselves in the texts. They do it in remakes of films and shows and cartoons, and it works. You want to know why? It scares people when you mess with how they think an old story should go (think of all the current uproar of Ariel as a young Black youth).

2. What happens if we replace a classic with a different book that works in the same theme?

Example: Take out the classic book, but replace it with a book written by a marginalized writer:

- Trade out *The Great Gatsby* for *Bodega Dreams* by Ernesto Quiñones.
- Trade out *Canterbury Tales* for *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury.
- Trade out *Animal Farm* for *If I Ever Get Out of Here* by Eric Gansworth.
- Trade out *The Diary of Anne Frank* for *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

- Trade out *Bridge to Terabithia* for *When Stars Are Scattered* by Victoria Jamison.

You are not sacrificing a thing. You are enhancing the way you teach. Thematically, you are looking at books that fit the same ideas, questions, and characteristics of what you are already working with in the curriculum. The TEKS say you need to work with the epistolary form? Cool, *The Color Purple* is just as compelling a read as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. If you need to engage students in the short story, Ray Bradbury does the trick, and he tosses in genre work with sci-fi, so it is like two for the price of one. Let us say somebody asks you to look at the rigor of the selections you make—no problem. Use the book and chop it up and do a comparative read to have students analyze characteristics of the narrative or other literary elements. This tactic, this imaginative work, is additive. Think of the possibilities. If you are tired of teaching *Death of a Salesman*, replace it with *Fences*. What are other books you can do this with?

3. What happens if your school district has already begun the problematic work of banning books? What do you do if you do not have access to all the books you need? How do you compensate?

Hint: HB 3979 (Relating to the Social Studies Curriculum in Public Schools Act, 2021), and most of these laws across the United States that are working against us, says books not texts. So, go to work. I know you do this because I know I have done it—use the shorter materials. Use short story collections (excerpts), use *Flash Fiction*, use short film, use podcasts. Use your neighborhood library. Some school districts are trying to create systems so kids cannot check out books, but that does not stop you from doing what you have always done. If the book was not available in your building, then you went to the public library to get it, right?

4. What happens if you have the books and you are teaching as you do and someone (district, school, or outside “advocate”) yells

out that you are being biased? How do you ensure engagement is open to “all sides?”

Hint: Do what you have always done. The TEKS ensure that we are learning from multiple perspectives. In fact, begin to inject your coursework with the substantive questions about the origins of a book. Lead with these two questions:

- Why is this narrative work necessary? As in, why did the author feel the need to write this work?
- What makes this work timeless or universal?

We can build the purpose for reading with logistical pathfinding. Authors are always responding to either something global or something personal (which, in reality, leads the reader to understand a global theme). We need to be ready to find texts that give us the context for a book. If I were to teach a graphic novel, like *Incognegro* by Mat Johnson, I would be remiss if I did not teach about the history behind the Great Migration, the Jim Crow era, or Emmett Till. This provides a reader with the depth to understand why a book can be so important.

Part of our work in classrooms where our books are being snatched/manhandled/disappeared is that we have to adapt/acclimate/compensate in very spectacular ways. It is a rough response, but as educators we have learned to be resourceful. This last part focuses on what we can do to always remember/rekindle/reframe the generative work of education.

We have always worked in a three-part model. First, we consume books. Second, we analyze the examples we are reading to see how dialogue or setting or characterization is happening; we look at how arguments are presented, how transitions are framed, and how data is presented in nonfiction works—and this is important. Third, after we consume, after we analyze, we generate our own works.

As educators, we have to be willing to face the truth about the end product of our classes. It is not up to the reading teacher or the writing teacher (which, by the way, if your school is still doing this, I need you to tell them to stop; it is a bad practice) to shift to a new topic without a fully functional, generative element at the end.

I think on this idea, and now, more than ever, if these laws happen, then we move in tighter circles. We are leaders in the storytelling game. And that game is generative. That game has rules ... dare I say ... laws to live by.

Literary Laws

1. World-building writing is nonfiction writing.

What happens if you ask your students to build out their rules and the world in which their story takes place before they write the story? Is this not a form of nonfiction writing? They have to logically construct with reasoning and analysis. Look at all the book series + games + shows that live in fantasy, horror, or sci-fi. Here are some of those worlds: *The Last of Us*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Hobbit*, *The MCU*, *The DCU*, *Game of Thrones*, *Avatar*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Hunger Games*, *Ready Player One*, *City of Ember*, and on and on. People have built out full worlds and spinoffs and prequels because the world is built with conditions that are not just make-believe. They reflect images of what the world was or is or what could be.

2. Fan fiction can be disciplined.

What happens if we ask students to add their own ideas/plots/imaginings to the works that already exist? Is this not steeped in research? In plot development? Here is an example prompt that is generative: Write the prequel to *Coraline*. Tell the story of Wybie’s

Grandma, Mrs. Lovat, and her twin sister. We have created a new entry point in the writing. We have stated that it is ok to imagine new beginnings. We encourage students to use the source text as research material to see what can happen. They are extrapolating. They are envisioning. They are laying out new understandings. When we let students generate fan fiction work, we are also setting them up to mimic author moves they can take up as their own. And when we conference with them later, we are not talking to kids anymore. We are talking to craft experts telling us about author moves and why they wrote what they wrote.

3. Poetry is the answer for everything.

What happens if we have kids read poetry every day? What happens if we let kids pick a poem that they want to read out loud? Our jobs change a bit. Our goal is no longer just about exposure to books but exposure to experiences. The body experiences poems. The body produces poems. So our job is now to find collections that are kid-friendly and read from them. When we can read poems, we become better readers and better dreamers. If we can engage students in the writing and reading of poetry, they can master larger writing tasks. When they can analyze a poem, they can analyze any kind of story or text. We can begin by having them analyze a poem the way writers do:

- What are images or moments in the poem that stand out?
- What is being said in the poem?
- What is not being said in the poem?
- What questions do you have about the poem?
- What language moves did the poet employ?

4. We have always owned a narrative.

Here is the darker question. What happens if all the books are gone or in some process (limbo)? The answer: we MAKE UP OUR OWN STORIES. We build stories based on our own knowledge. We tell kids to use their roots, their community, their homes. The truth is that we can show kids that their own family origins are great ways to tap into the writing well. Storytelling was an oral skill first. If they take books, then we, the kids, and you in your classroom make more. We have to be experts in oral history. We have to become savvy with book binding. Oh, yes. When we teach kids about the reflective writing practice (oral history collection and/or memoir writing), several things happen:

- It allows the learner to own their narrative creation.
- It leads to the idea that we are all worthy of a story.
- It embeds the idea that our histories are worthy of being archived.
- It ignites a connection between history and storytelling.

Final Thought

I don’t know what will happen to our Texas classrooms in the near future. But I know that if we can work together and focus on the skill sets that encourage our kids to explore the past to build a future that looks to writing and recording as major tools, I think maybe, just maybe, we win. In the end, we always win.

References

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