## Courageous Conversations: Inviting Valued Texts into the Classroom

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*Zhao (2009) notes that when people are intrinsically motivated, they will become courageous. By inviting texts that students value into literature classrooms, educators can reconcile the sometimes seemingly disparate goals of engagement and accountability. Our work with preservice teachers revealed an intersection between motivation and new literacies that, when realized, created a dialogic space for courageous conversations. Such an intersection occurred when text was broadly defined to include young adult literature, film, new media, digital technology, and images, and when the text is invited rather than imposed.  This article describes action research conducted with preservice teachers designed to model autonomy with the hope that they will carry the power of motivational reciprocity forward.*

*Keywords: motivation, literacy, preservice teachers, adolescence, young adult literature*

*Is it more important for teachers to find texts that students will like or is it more important for teachers to select literature that will broaden students' ways of thinking and challenge them to make connections?*--a preservice teacher

In his book, *Catching up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*, Yong Zhao (2009) discusses the importance of intrinsic motivation in school and in life. He notes that when people (leaders, teachers, learners, etc.) are intrinsically motivated, they will become courageous. We suggest that a goal of literature instruction should be to arrange venues whereby courageous conversations can take place. For it is only by nurturing intrinsic reading motivation that educators can reconcile the sometimes seemingly disparate goals of engagement and accountability. Our work revealed that there is an important intersection between motivation and new literacies that, when realized, creates a dialogic space for the texts valued by - students. This intersection occurs when text is broadly defined to include young adult literature, film, new media, digital technology, and images, and when the text is invited rather than imposed.

This article describes action research carried out with preservice teachers in an adolescent developmental reading class. We agree with Grossman, Schoenfeld, and Lee (2005) and the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2006) that teacher education programs must facilitate preservice teachers' ability to answer important questions of practice based upon in-depth foundational knowledge, a collection of research-recommended instructional strategies, and a well-practiced habit of using intellectual skills to reflect. Thusly, we will share what we have learned about our students and the potential impact on their future classes. Most importantly, this article seeks to serve as an incentive for teachers to invite students to make visible what they value through both texts and topics.

The juxtaposition of life both in the word (or in still and moving images, performance, and digital media) and in the world is quite powerful. It makes present the topics and texts that these preservice teachers valued, allowing courageous conversations within our literacy community. The sections that follow describe the journey. First, we discuss the principles of intrinsic motivation that informed our planning. Next, we transition into our purposefully expanded (re)vision of text and the role it played in the culminating project. Finally, we move into the project and explore lessons learned by and with our preservice secondary English teachers.

**Considering the Principles of Intrinsic Motivation**

According to expectancy value theory (Fishbien & Ajzen, 1975), teachers can influence students' attitudes and behaviors related to their performance. Specifically, subjective task value is an important variable correlated to student achievement. Students who value books and perceive themselves as competent readers are more likely to read for purpose and pleasure. Therefore, in order to nurture literacy competence and motivation, adolescents should be invited to read and respond to valued text. The challenge, however, for educators is to discern what adolescents value. How do we, as educators, peek into the issues and topics about which our students are passionate? How can we arrange reading experiences using valued text?

We, the authors, learned about valued text by arranging instruction informed by the principles of intrinsic motivation. Thus, we provided preservice teachers with autonomy over what Daniel Pink (2009) calls the Four Ts: team, task, time, and technique. Inherent in this process of

granting as much autonomy as possible is the motivating power of social negotiation: presenting suggestions, listening to others, and arriving at a consensus. We agree with Tom Kelly, general manager of IDEO (an innovative consulting firm), that the ultimate freedom for creative groups is the freedom to experiment with new ideas (Pink, 2009). Allowing our preservice teachers the autonomy to explore in collaborative groups illuminated both the texts and topics they valued.

It is important to note that autonomy is achieved through choice. This project afforded the preservice teachers as much choice as possible in each of the Four Ts. For example, they were permitted to arrange their own teams. Then, given a liberal framework of oral and written expectations, teams were able to choose their topics and texts. They were required to manage time for both work and presentation. And, in order to share with peers, each team selected a presentation technique. The following section describes the culminating project arranged around the preservice teachers' revised view of what constitutes adolescent texts and the Four Ts of autonomy.

## The Four Ts of the Culminating Project

The National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) Commission on Reading (2004) and the International Reading Association's (IRA) Commission of Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999), as well as the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1938) informed the theoretical foundation for this culminating project. Rosenblatt posited that it is important

> for the teacher to acquire some general understanding of the possible experiences and preoccupations typical of the particular group of students with which he is dealing. This will aid him in his choice of appropriate literary works and in his handling of the students' spontaneous responses to literature. (p. 78)

Therefore, the preservice teachers presented a collection of six to eight texts, ones that they thought adolescents would read. These texts were connected explicitly or implicitly to a core theme or idea. Next, the preservice teachers created a scope-and-sequence with objectives and activities that were aligned to the NCTE/IRA standards (1996). Because this is the first course within the secondary English teacher education program, the preservice teachers were not required to write lesson plans. Here, the thinking of *why* they chose the texts, *how* they sequenced the texts, and *what* reading strategies and activities was paramount. The most important aspect of the culminating project was the transparent reflection detailing the relationships and contributions within the groups, including but not limited to how the core theme was negotiated and how and why these texts were chosen. A written reflection was instrumental, for it made public their thinking and challenged them to be reflective regarding their future pedagogy.

### Team

Fostering positive collaborations is a key component to classroom success. Teachers are encouraged to plan instruction with colleagues. No longer is the teacher "alone" in the classroom because support is possible both within and beyond the classroom walls. Therefore, our preservice teachers formed their teams in a similar fashion.

Forming teams was standard practice in our classroom. Building a literacy community came as a result of social interaction and collaboration, and for our culminating project, the standard

continued. The preservice teachers, assuming control, formed their own teams; consequently, there was no uniform way for how the groups were made. Some were arranged according to home location others were made around their schedules as to when members would be on campus. Others were formed with those who had similar interests. The way in which the groups arranged themselves was purposeful, for they would need to meet outside of class. Moreover, this proved to be the first step toward autonomy—creating a viable team.

**Task**

Both NCTE (2004) and IRA (1999) affirm that the inclusion of young adult literature and other types of texts as well as deliberate instructional support have a crucial place in the secondary classroom. The preservice teachers had freedom in determining the tasks for the culminating project. First, they needed to agree upon a collection of adolescent texts. The guidelines we provided stated that the texts must be those that adolescents would read or view. By not limiting texts to solely books and stories found in literature anthologies, the preservice teachers were encouraged to think more broadly.

Tom Newkirk (2006) challenged us to resist nostalgia which narrows adolescent literacy experiences to those which take place in school. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that adolescents, particularly males, crave a sense of control and competence and a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill (p. 28); further, they implore that these students demand clear goals and feedback while focusing on the immediate experience (p. 30). These had been missing in the young males' schooling. All literacy experiences were valuable. Reading the sports page in newspapers, reviews of movies in magazines, and manuals for working on cars were all legitimate forms of reading. Graphic novels, images, performance, and drama were not to be perceived as "stepping stones to real reading" (Kennedy[1], personal communication, February 10, 2009). The definition of text needed to be expanded to include other forms of media, such as film, performance, and the visual arts. Therefore, with awareness that most of our preservice teachers envisioned text as solely print based, this project required them to begin (re)visioning text. If our preservice teachers were to honor the media and mediums being read or viewed by their future students, we had to encourage the exploration of young adult literature, film, new media, and digital technologies, as well as the interplay within and among them.

Throughout the semester, the preservice secondary English teachers posed questions and ideas based on each week's readings. Retreating to what they had experienced in the past, some expressed doubt that they could or should include various forms of text in their future classrooms. Adolescent texts, which they read in school, were limited to the canon and selections in the literature book. When challenged to reach beyond this thinking and to advocate for a broader selection of texts, one student wondered, "Is it more important for teachers to find texts that students will like or is it more important for teachers to select literature that will broaden students' ways of thinking and challenge them to make connections?" (Edwards[2], personal communication, January 22, 2007). This question was eventually answered by the culminating project.

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[1] To protect this preservice teacher's identity, a pseudonym has been assigned.
[2] Likewise, to protect this preservice teacher's identity, a pseudonym has been assigned.

**Time**

As all teachers and teacher educators know, time is precious.  Many class sessions were devoted to supporting these future educators as they made meaning with and through texts.  While there is value in the standard questions at the end of a selection or text, there are additional ways to assess students' deep comprehension.  Booth (2006) noted, "The readers' encounter with the printed work is complex, determined by the life experiences of the reader as he or she negotiates the relationships between the ideas of the writer and the reader's experiences" (p. 15).This negotiation is where literacy develops as well as personal growth occurs; yet, these questions are limited to reading literature (i.e., print based texts).  Therefore, much time was dedicated to exorcising the ghosts of their middle and high school (even university) teachers' hard line of having the solely "right" interpretation of a text. Resistance and not knowing how to respond honestly and openly plagued the beginning of the course.  As the semester progressed, they appreciated the complexity of others' readings and viewings; we provided these preservice teachers the time and freedom to unpack the various types of texts in their own way.  They learned how to develop and unpack their own methods to make meaning

Significant time in the course was devoted to pushing the students to own the way they read a print-based text or viewed a non-print based text.  Even if we did not read or view a text the "same way," the discord was exciting.  Rich debates, for instance, about whether or not *Th1rteen R3asons Why* (Asher, 2009) celebrated teenage suicide arose.  Some felt that the author wanted the readers to "like" Hannah, a main character, despite the fact that she committed suicide.  "I thought she was funny.  I wanted there to be something big to explain why she killed herself," commented one preservice teacher.  Another retorted, "Little things add up!"  One preservice teacher confessed that while she was in high school, she was "almost Hannah." These deep explorations with the texts enabled our classroom community to move past the emotional and integrate intellectual response.  Reading and viewing texts holistically, in terms of structure and the purposeful choices the author made, served as the foundation for the course.

**Technique**

The underlying question of the culminating project was how the deliberate attention to multiple forms of text can widen the lens from which preservice teachers observe and interact with their students and their communities. One preservice teacher commented that this project "presents an opportunity for looking at material from a *perspective of possibility* rather than just what is included directly in the texts" (emphasis added, Henry[3], personal communication, March 22, 2008).  It addressed integrating multiple literacies not only as a vehicle for further student participation, but also as an opportunity for preservice teachers to read, write and view texts to which they would not usually gravitate. In doing so, they (re)considered the impact and purpose of a wider variety of texts.

The preservice teachers presented their collection and scope-and-sequence in ways they saw fit.  The only requirement was that technology be used.  Again, freedom was given in the types of technology utilized.  By not restricting them to use the computer, other technologies were welcomed.  Some showed video clips; others played songs on a cd/cassette boombox. Each

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[3] To protect this preservice teacher's identity, a pseudonym has been assigned.

group had thirty minutes to present their collection, the scope-and-sequence, and the demonstration of one of the unit activities. (See Figure 1 for the scope-and-sequence template). During the sharing, each team made public the techniques used to consume and create texts.

| Figure 1: Adolescent Texts Theme (Culminating) Project Scope and Sequence Template | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Overall Unit Objectives** | **Theme:** _____ <br>1. <br>2. <br>3. <br>4. | | | |
| **Adolescent Text** | **Topic/lesson title** | **NCTE Standards** | **Objectives** | **Planned R/V/W Activities (Reading, Viewing, Writing)** |
| | | | 1. <br>2. <br>3. <br>4. | |
| | | | 1. <br>2. <br>3. <br>4. | |
| | | | 1. <br>2. <br>3. <br>4. | |

## Consuming and Creating Valued Text

The culminating project was fascinating to us because our preservice teachers both consumed and created new texts. And as autonomy was embraced, these future educators made public the topics and texts they valued. The following sections revisit several culminating projects. For example, three teams questioned one's role and place in society; another asked about the intricate layers of guilt; and finally, one pondered the vehicles and manifestations of coping with death and grief.

### Outsiders: Identity, Inclusion, and the Isms

Three of the culminating projects were crafted around the theme of identity. A project entitled *Who Am I?* explored the impact of outside influences, such as peer groups and media, on personal identity development. The team consumed a wide variety of texts and created multiple representations. For example, they valued photographs, picture books, novels, song lyrics from music videos, short stories, and expository text. In response to words and images, they encouraged their audience to free write, create a commercial, produce an illustration, and conduct an interview whereby respondents took on the persona of two characters. Figures 2 and 3 contain specific examples from this powerful project. Figure 2 is the photograph that was the subject of the free write. Figure 3 contains an excerpt from the scope and sequence.

**Figure 2: Got Guilt? Free Write**
Class will take 1 minute to complete a free write describing how this picture relates to the theme of finding personal identity through peer groups and how belonging influences personal identity. Explain that this activity will be used as an introduction to the unit with a five minute free write.



Source:http://www.blognetnews.com/new_jersey/feed.php?channel=100

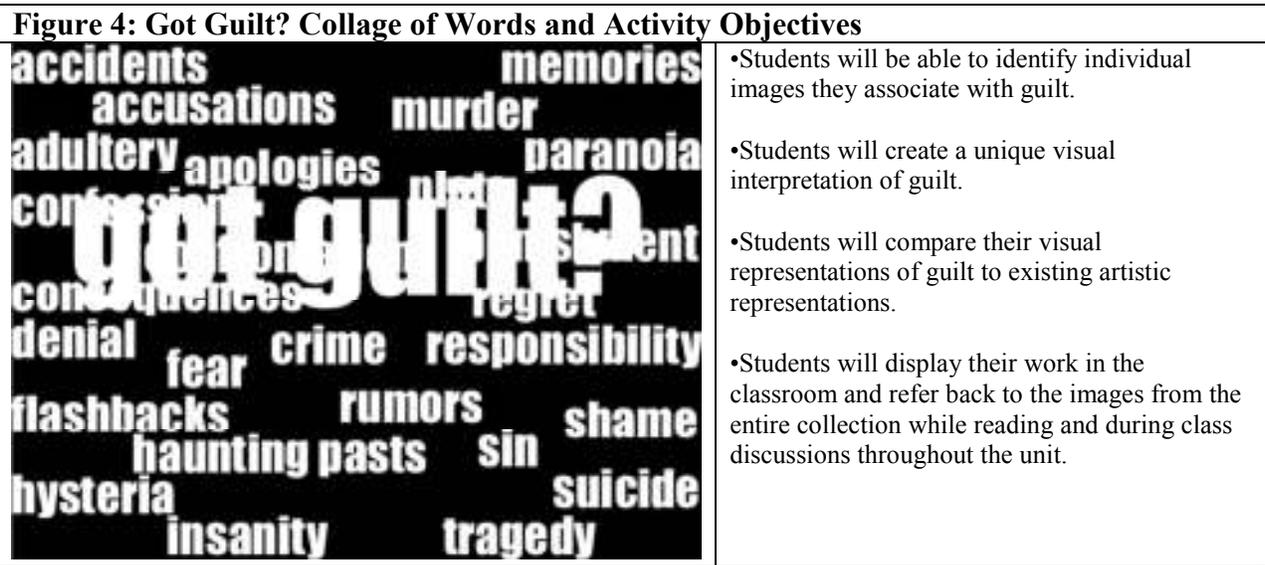**Figure 3: *Who am I?* Culminating Project Overall Objectives**

Two other teams also selected identity as themes for their culminating projects. *Outsiders* explored life from an outsider's perspective, specifically societal "isms" (racism, sexism, etc.) across literature, art, plays, film, and poetry. This team was moved by books and film that included High *Fidelity* (Hornby, 1996), *This Property is Condemned* (Williams, 2000), and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail' 72* (Thompson, 2006).  In addition, participants conversed about inclusion (or lack thereof) through the art of Jackson Pollack, the poetry of Charles Bukowski and Radiohead, and film clips from *Saved* (Ohoven & Cannelly, 2004). They concluded their project by inviting students to select and share a text that best represented the "ism" of their choice. The final identity team titled their project *Outsiders and Outcasts: Multicultural Perspectives for Grade 9*. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (Garcia Marquez, 1972), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Goodrich & Hackett, 1956) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1976) were read. In addition, the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), the expository saga *Warriors Don't Cry* (Beals, 2007), the play *Parade* (Uhry & Brown, 1998), and the poem "See No Indian, Hear No Indian" (Manyarrows, 1994) advanced a critical reading (Friere, 1970/2000). By reading texts that told the stories of those who had been excluded, the team guided their classmates into a difficult space of recalling situations when they had been excluded because of gender, race, ethnicity, and/or religious differences. The texts provided a "veil of anonymity" (Clark & Marinak, 2010) from which the class could speak through the characters about real-life situations.

**Got Guilt?**
 *"Got Guilt?"* was the question considered by another team of preservice teachers. Commencing with a collage of the words seen in Figure 4, this team presented the manifestation of guilt in a wide variety of (re)visioned texts. The group encouraged their peers to create a visual interpretation of guilt. One person drew the word "Promises" which had been split in half to represent promises that had been broken.  Powerful conversations of why each person drew his or her representation ensued.  The deliberate reflection regarding the relationship between the structure and the meaning of their drawings immediately invited everyone into the scope-and-sequence.

**Figure 4: Got Guilt? Collage of Words and Activity Objectives**



• Students will be able to identify individual images they associate with guilt.

• Students will create a unique visual interpretation of guilt.

• Students will compare their visual representations of guilt to existing artistic representations.

• Students will display their work in the classroom and refer back to the images from the entire collection while reading and during class discussions throughout the unit.

Traditional works such as *The Scarlet Letter*, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (Poe, 1998), *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie (2004), and Miller's *The Crucible* (1976) were beautifully woven with Christina Aguilera's song "Hurt" (Perry, 2006) and excerpts from Disney's *The Lion King* (1994). But the creators of this culminating project prompted unforgettable discussion of two poems, "Ground Zero" by Jack Hardy (2002) and "Unexpected" by Racquel Baker (2007). These poems were from the perspectives of a 9/11 survivor and victim who regrets her final moments with her family respectively. Guilt is a universal emotion, and providing a lens, such as these two poems, through which it could be illuminated, opened spaces for healing.

**Who and What Remains?**
Exploring loss in print and media was the theme selected by another team. This group's project, *Coping with Death and Grief,* began this difficult conversation with five songs that ranged from the more contemporary "42" by Coldplay (Barryman, 2008) and Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" (1992) to the haunting "Closing-String Quartet No. 3 (Mishima)" by Phillip Glass (2005). This project invited students to consider representations of death and grief by differentiating amongst their senses. In other words, what was felt, seen, and heard in the selected texts? This "sensagoria" (Bouchard, 1999) continued with poetry by Dickinson, Poe, and Emerson. Death was then examined from the provocative perspectives of murder and suicide in *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002) and *Th1rteen R3asons Why* (Asher, 2009). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Bevington, 2004) and the movie *Chicago* (Richards & Marshall, 2003) concluded the unit. Figure 5 shows an additional portion of the group's scope-and-sequence. As a result of exploring death through the interplay of music, short stories, poetry, novels, drama, and film, students created their own text using discussion, interviews, critiques, poetry, drama, and journal entries.

| Figure 5: Excerpt from Coping with Death and Grief Scope-and-Sequence | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Topic/ lesson title | Adolescent Text | NCTE Standards | Objectives | Planned R/V/W Activities (Reading, Viewing, Writing) |
| Death and Grief and The Short Story | 1. "Grief" —Anton Chekov<br><br>2. "The Monkey's Paw" —W.W. Jacobs | 1,3,4,5,6,8, 11,12 | 1. Students will compare and contrast the thought process of the regret of the characters experiencing death and grief.<br><br>2. Students will write a dialogue for Mrs. White and Petrov with the two characters discussing the death of their child and wife.<br><br>3. Students will create a multi-media montage of photographs, pictures, sounds, or paintings of images of death, and grief, using computer technology. | 1. Imagine the internal conflict Petrov and Mrs. White are experiencing because of the choices they have made for selfish reasons. Write a two-person skit for Petrov and Mrs. White in which both characters give monologues about their choices and regrets as a result of those choices. Student authors will direct a different pair of students to perform the skit to their particular interpretation of the characters' grief expression.<br><br>2. Students present multi-media display during class citing specific correlations or references to the text.<br>Adjustments:<br>Below Average: Students may write a monologue for one character to display that character's regret and reactions to death and grief.<br><br>Above Average: Students will complete a Director's notebook, logging the choices they made when writing/directing their script. |

**Valued Text and the Power of Reciprocity**

It is clear that traditional teaching strategies in higher education (e.g., large group lecture) do not model the behaviors we hope to instill in our preservice teachers.  Like the schools they will enter, today's college classrooms have diverse learners with varied characteristics, interests, and foundational knowledge.  It is inconceivable to believe that preservice teachers will learn important instructional strategies and be comfortable in their use without daily scaffolding by university professors and opportunities for hands on practice. Hence, if our preservice teachers are to recognize the interplay of new literacies and plan motivating instruction utilizing all the texts of our millennium, we must be purposeful in providing such experiences. And though our action research took place with preservice teachers, this framework can invite valued text into any classroom.  In doing so, educators can nurture the skills necessary and the innate desire for students to consume and create texts which embrace a multimodal world.


As students perceive that teachers respect them enough to provide genuine choices, they increase their effort and commitment to learning. Consequently, when teachers see students initiating learning, they provide increased autonomy (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Evidence from our culminating project suggests that this critical reciprocity was realized. By carefully considering the intersection of motivation and new literacies, a dialogic space was created. After modeling the many forms of (re)visioned text and honoring the Four Ts, our preservice teachers were clearly willing to explore important adolescent realities: identity, guilt, and societal "isms."  One participant observed that the multitude of texts helped him realize that "each student's story is valuable to tell" (Kale, personal communication, February 22, 2009).  Another remarked, "Even something like an allusion, which can be found in nearly every television show (*South Park* comes to mind, i.e., Titus Andronicus…) can be brought into the classroom to give a firmer grounding in a work's intention" (Bradley, personal communication, February 22, 2009). Reading, viewing, and creating texts from inside and outside the classroom increased engagement in all literacy communities.  We are confident that our future teachers will carry the power of motivational reciprocity forward. More importantly courageous conversations are possible in any classroom that honors valued text.

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