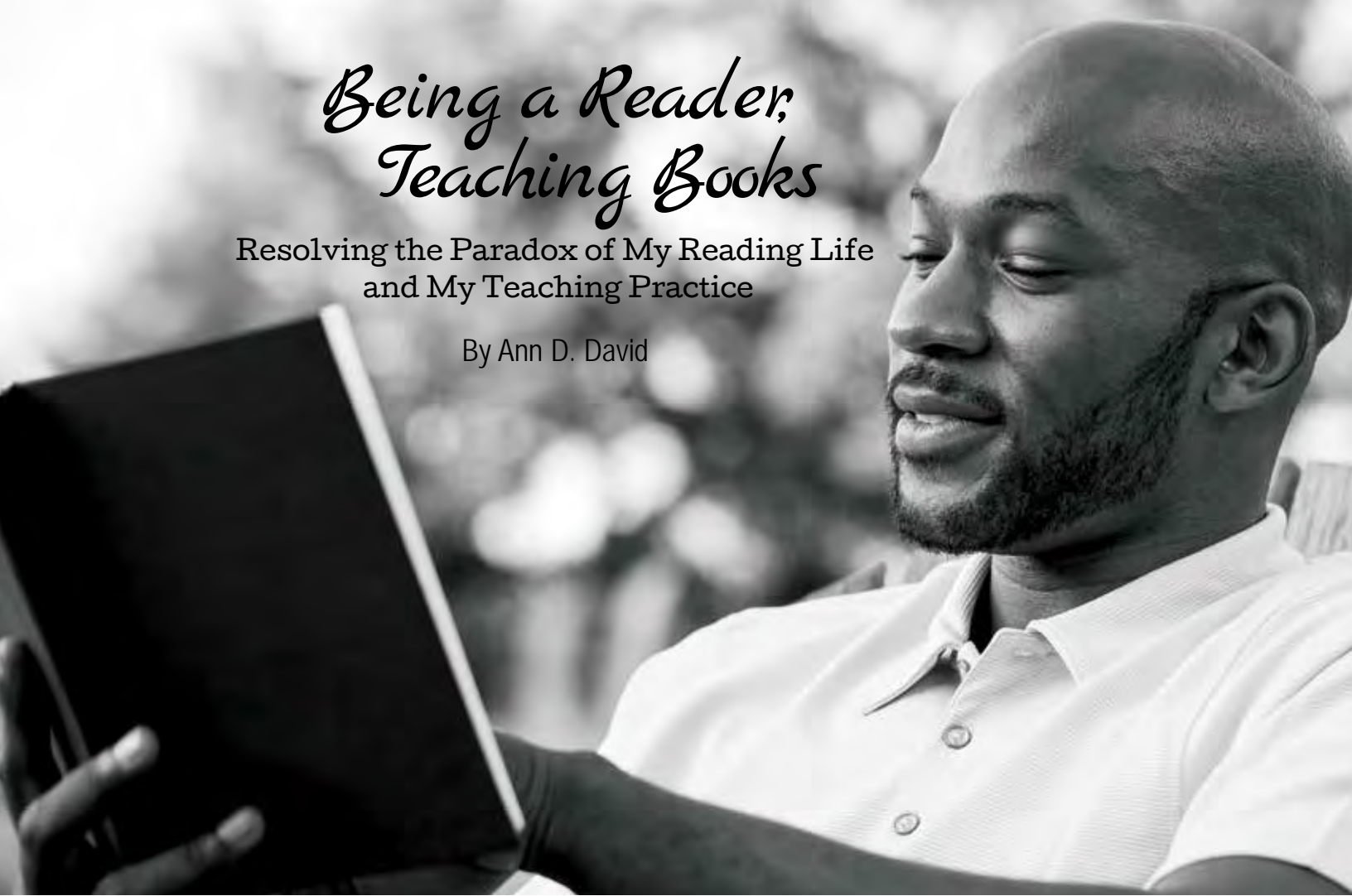


Being a Reader, Teaching Books

Resolving the Paradox of My Reading Life
and My Teaching Practice

By Ann D. David



Ann D. David is an Associate Professor in the Dreeben School of Education at the University of the Incarnate Word. She prepares future teachers, researches the teaching of writing, and works with inservice teachers on the teaching of writing. She's been an NCTE member since 2000 and an NWP teacher-consultant since 2001.

Abstract: The author reflects on the development of her own reading life and how that rich reading life failed to influence how she taught reading early in her career. During graduate studies, while researching in classrooms where reading workshop was the instructional model and through talking to those exemplary teachers, the author came to understand both the how and why of teaching readers, not books. Drawing on experience and research literature, the author offers ways to develop students' reading lives within the context of English language arts classrooms.

Keywords: reading, reading workshop, teaching of reading, adolescent literacy

Looking at my nightstand, it is clear I'm a reader. At least eight books, and assorted magazines, a few clearly being read, others pretty dusty. Highlights include *Anna Karenina*, Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, *God Land* by Lyz Lenz, the requisite academic tome *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, two magazines—*Real Simple* and *Cooks Illustrated*—alongside *Elements*, an essay collection about Northern Michigan.

Anna Karenina is an old friend I have read at least three times and intend to read again soon. My mother gave me *Becoming* because she wants me to read it. The magazines are both practical and mind candy. *Our Lady* is for work, which is probably why it's dusty because I do not like to read for work before falling asleep, and my optimism that I might someday read it keeps it there.

God Land is the book I have actually been reading from this hodgepodge. It ended up on my nightstand, as books sometimes do, through a series of unexpected recommendations and the power of Amazon. It is a book-length essay that weaves together the recounting of a personal faith journey with a journalistic examination of Christianity in the Midwest—where I am from. It is tugging at some half-formed understandings of what it means to grow up in the Midwest, in a rural place, and how I carry that with me, even to San Antonio, the sprawling metropolis whose bones are all small town.

My Reading History

I have always been a reader. I don't remember actually learning to read because I was so young. As many have said before, reading

was an escape for me. Frankly, it was also one of the only things to do in the small, sleepy Midwestern town where I grew up. I am sure I visited the library often, though I do not have the same kinds of memories of such visits that others write of. And I do not really remember reading during elementary school, though I am sure we must have.

Getting a new Nancy Drew novel when my mom took me to the big bookstore an hour away is my *madeleine*. (*Remembrance of Things Past*, by Proust, is perhaps best known for his reflection on an involuntary memory sparked by dipping *madeleine* cookies into tea.) Though, they were a treat I failed to savor as I tore through those books in a matter of hours and almost never reread them. God bless my mother for continuing to buy them. I moved through Nancy Drew and onto Ed McBain and Patricia Cornwell, probably way too early, but they were around because that is what my mother read. I would often get desperate for something new to read and would just scrounge around the house. This tendency led to reading *The Sun Also Rises* the summer after fifth grade, which ruined Hemingway for me for life.

The middle school library moved me away from mystery and toward interesting, challenging nonfiction. I spent a lot of middle school lost in space, reading every book the library had on astronomy, astrophysics, planets, stars, and the like. Some summer in high school, I put this knowledge to work and decided to read the entire science fiction/fantasy section in the library. I remember getting through Asimov and Clarke, but don't know that I got much further.

Honestly, I did not feel particularly compelled by the reading assigned for school, until an elective during senior year that was what I now know to be a reading workshop. I took the class because I did not want to take calculus and because I liked the teacher. We got to choose whatever we wanted to read, as long as we kept reading. I tried to work my way through all of Shakespeare's plays in chronological order—and while I did not make it all the way through, I still consider that a kind of triumph. I revisited science fiction and dabbled in classics. I just kept reading.

Mr. Raymond, though, also taught the class how to have academic conversations without “tortur[ing] a confession” (Collins, 1996, n.p.) out of the text. We engaged in conversations across texts—remember, we were all reading different things—and found those commonalities as well as found books we might like to read next. We also had to write about these books we were reading. I do not remember the specific assignments, but I do remember Mr. Raymond handing back one of my essays and telling me to redo it. My 17-year-old-self bristled at the suggestion and Mr. Raymond responded: “Well, this is not very good for you.” So, I rewrote it, and in doing so, I learned a lesson about holding myself to a high standard.

This year of books deepened my identity as a reader in ways that are still weaving themselves into my life. I became an English major and then an English teacher. I read classics I had not read in high school. I fell in love with Austen, and then with Hurston. I moved onto graduate school in education but with a focus on English language arts curriculum and instruction. There, I learned to break up with a book, and I learned how good young adult literature is. I learned to read post-modern theory, statistics, and research articles—and even to enjoy most of it.

So, this is the kind of reader I was, and am: voracious, constant, and ecumenical.

Moving From Teaching Books to Teaching Readers

The part of my story that might matter most for readers of this essay, though, is something of a confession. My own meandering reading life never informed my teaching of reading. It never occurred to me that my students would want to dive into science fiction or pour over classics or break up with a book. I taught whole class novels over and over again. I did it well by all accounts, and some students discovered some books they enjoyed. But if anyone became a reader in my class, or got turned onto books, it was a happy accident and not because of any teaching on my part. I was too focused on teaching books, not readers.

It was not until graduate school that I was able to see my own mismatch between personal experience and teaching practice. Through a combination of assigned readings (Ironic? Maybe.), research in classrooms, class conversations, and guidance from my professors, I came to understand why my own reading life was so rich—choice, engagement, identity, and community (David, Consalvo, & Vetter, 2019; David & Jansky, 2017)—and how I had failed to offer my own students those same opportunities.

The experience that had the most impact, though, are the three years I spent engaging in research at a middle school with six brilliant English Language Arts and Reading teachers. I had the great privilege of watching them teach, talking to their students, and debriefing their work with them. Throughout this research, their reflection turned into action around reading workshop instruction put into practice all I had read about in graduate school. Their students collectively read thousands of books each year and lined up to visit the library during lunch, which convinced the principal that workshop worked. They were focused on teaching readers and writers, and that is what they did, in a school whose demographics would often lead to deficit assumptions about the students' abilities. And they did it—*first*—with choice. With huge classroom libraries and the school library (staffed by a supportive librarian), they offered the students choices. And those kids read.

These teachers pushed through fake reading, shared their own ups and downs with reading, celebrated when a student found the just-right book, gushed over the newest book by their favorite author, and offered book after book for that discerning student.

What I Know, and So, Now

Almost a decade after spending time in these classrooms, I return to my memories (and extensive field notes) as I talk to my preservice teachers about how to grow readers. In this case, I frame the work of teaching readers in four ways, which I saw at work in those six classrooms and numerous classrooms I have visited since, and which are described in so many texts about teaching reading.

First, give students choices, lots of choices (Miller, 2009), so that they can read a lot because reading volume is linked to students' growth as readers (Allington, 2014). Thankfully, English language arts teachers now have academic standards that require this kind of independent reading (e.g., Texas fluency TEKS, strand 4, Independent reading from the ELAR standards adopted in 2017). A quick note, too, about the need for a huge range of real choices, including books that are “too easy.” Confession time: Who among us does not have a reading love that we probably do not share because we are English teachers and we are supposed to read things “of literary merit”? That feeling of success, of being able to tear through a book and enjoy it, that is what grows readers because “it



is the high-accuracy, fluent, and easily comprehended reading that provides the opportunities to integrate complex skills and strategies into an automatic, independent reading process” (Allington, 2002, p. 743). These are my Nancy Drew books, my children’s love of the *Warrior* series, and perhaps the reason romance is one of the most circulated genres in public libraries.

Second, teachers should to be readers too (Zancanella, 1991). There is not one kind of reader (Brooks, 2007), so teacher should dig into their reading lives to figure out and give voice to the kind of reader they are. I love to read three to four books at once. Some people might hate that. It matters less what or how a teacher reads, just that they are reading. Read not-for-school, and read what the students are reading, and read to develop as a professional, and read to make a cake. Be ecumenical and share that experience with students. Read with them, and read to them. I engage my preservice teachers as readers by assigning them choice reading around professional development. When I do this, I share with them my own professional reading, engage in think alouds as I select texts to read and as I reflect on how professional texts have changed my teaching. It is through this sharing of my reading life that my students come to see what a rich, professional reading life can be—whether they are reading blogs about teaching differential equations or theories of music instruction.

Third, read things that are hard. Students spend a lot of time reading things that are hard and empathy is essential for the work of teaching (Brown, 2018). Reading hard things also grows readers through desirable difficulty (Bjork & Bjork, 2015). Experiences with difficulty give teachers credibility when they talk to their readers struggling to find the just-right book or struggling through the just-right book. Students need to see that this work can be hard, and rewarding, and teachers are perfectly positioned to model this particular kind of hard.

Finally, read in lots of different ways. Read for plot, and read for characters. Read a second or third time. Read as a reader, then read as a writer. Deconstruct the just-right sentence and skim the boring parts. Live a full reading life, and do not worry as much how to teach this one book listed in the curriculum that no one in the department remembers how it got there.

Conclusion

I now teach preservice teachers across the discipline, which does not lend itself to teaching reading in these ways. I do it anyway. In my disciplinary literacy class, I start with a book flood of young adult novels, and I explain that we will spend the first ten minutes of class reading, all semester. The initial disbelief is palpable, but the focused silence that has descended by minute five is priceless. And those ten minutes become sacred across the semester, so much so that most students in their final evaluations thank me for making

that time to read. In other classes I find other ways to encourage choice, to read different kinds of things, and to share my reading life.

We read in class because I am an English teacher to my core. And I made a promise to myself to teach readers, not books—to offer my students a window into what is possible in their reading lives. Because in classrooms like this, students and teachers are readers, books become friends, and conversations are about the love of the written word.

References

- Allington, R. (2002). What I’ve learned about effective reading instruction: From a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(10), 740-747.
- Allington, R. (2014). How reading volume affects both reading fluency and reading achievement. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 7(1), 13-26.
- Bjork, E. L., & Bjork, R. (2015). Making things hard on yourself, but in a good way: Creating desirable difficulties to enhance learning. In M.A. Gernsbacher & J. R. Pomerantz (Eds.), *Psychology in the real world: Essays illustrating fundamental contributions to society* (2nd ed., pp. 55-64). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Brooks, G. (2007). Teachers as readers and writers and as teachers of reading and writing. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100(3), 177-191.
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Collins, B. (1996). Introduction to poetry. *The apple that astonished Paris*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry>
- David, A., Consalvo, A., & Vetter, A. (2019). Crafting communities of writers: Advice from teens. *English Journal*, 109(1), 67-73.
- David, A., & Jansky, K. (2017). No need to reinvent the wheel: Reading instruction in a time of change. *English in Texas*, 47(1), 32-36.
- Miller, D. (2010). *The book whisperer: Awakening the inner reader in every child*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Zancanella, D. (1991). Teachers reading/readers teaching: Five teachers’ personal approaches to literature and their teaching of literature. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 25(1), 5-32.