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Social Justice and Language Arts

The language arts curriculum offers unlimited opportunities for teachers and students to make connections with current social and global issues

by **Christopher Greenslate**

HIGH SCHOOL CAN BE a time of extreme complexity and anxiety for many of the students who traverse our halls and campuses. It is a time when teens are navigating relationships with friends and family, worrying about appearances and grades, coming to terms with their changing bodies, learning to drive, and in some cases getting that first paying job. However, it is also the time when young people are developing a moral compass, falling in love with new ideas, overtly challenging perceptions, and in many instances shirking the status quo for a new brand of lifestyle and identity. At this point in their lives, teens are truly starting to think for themselves and to expand their radius of inquiry beyond home and school to

social and environmental issues in the wider world.

Educators who wish to teach about these larger issues often find themselves on the philosophical and political fringe, and may even ask themselves whether they are taking advantage of students by introducing ideas that in some way validate their own world view. However, clean water and air, human rights, animal protection, and problems of world hunger, racism, sexism, and homophobia are not partisan issues. These are the concerns of our era and will not find resolution unless our youth are educated and empowered toward that end. If we avoid these topics in high school in the belief that our students will be introduced to them in college or later in life, we are being naïve and irresponsible. It's because we aren't teaching our youth about these issues that we continue to see racism, sexism, speciesism, and alarming rates of environmental destruction.

Of the various high school disciplines, it is the language arts curriculum that typically extends itself most readily to these very real and serious subjects, and with good reason. Finding an author's purpose and discovering what comment on life an author is making are at the heart of studying literature, poetry, essays, and speeches. This puts the language arts teacher in an excellent position to help students explore these issues. Whereas math and science teachers find themselves teaching about how things work in an objective environment, English teachers are constantly immersed in exploring the subjective ideas that are central to who we are and what we believe. This article looks at some of the many ways of extending issues of social justice into the language arts curriculum through literature, poetry, expository texts, and writing.

Fiction and social justice

In most areas, high schools have a set of texts for English classes that are pre-selected and placed in the curriculum by grade level. Whether these are textbooks that include a variety of selections or individual novels and plays, they offer literally an infinite number of possibilities for making connections to larger issues of social justice. While it is best to let students choose the books they'd like to read for class credit, and develop assignments that are flexible enough to accommodate that choice, by and large the majority of English classrooms will have books that all students will read together in a more structured environment. If you teach in a school that works hard at aligning curricula to state or provincial standards, the case can usually be made that the standards or skills are what is most important, not the books used to teach to those standards. So, for those of you who believe in student choice, standards-based education may be a blessing in disguise.

With such works as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* there are a number of ways to connect to social justice issues. A primary theme, as well as the conflict in this work, is "civilization versus savagery." This theme explores the idea that we live by two competing impulses as human beings: the instinct to live by rules, act peacefully, follow moral commands, and value the good of the group, against the instinct to gratify one's immediate desires, act violently to obtain supremacy over others, and enforce one's will. First and foremost, a theme of this size poses questions: *What does it mean to be civilized? How can we build a society that is fair and just for all? Are humans inherently evil?* The boys on the island are at first peaceful and respectful, doing their very best to work together for a common goal: to survive and to be rescued. In the course of the novel we watch this cooperation, respect, and peace deteriorate to the point of murder. While reading this novel, I assign pre-selected groups (the boys in the novel didn't have choice about who was on the island) of four or five students to work through a number of steps and activities to try to determine whether they would survive outside the

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confines of civilization. First they get to know each of their group members in depth by sharing answers to reflective questions such as the following.

What are you good at?
 What are your weaknesses?
 What makes someone a good person?

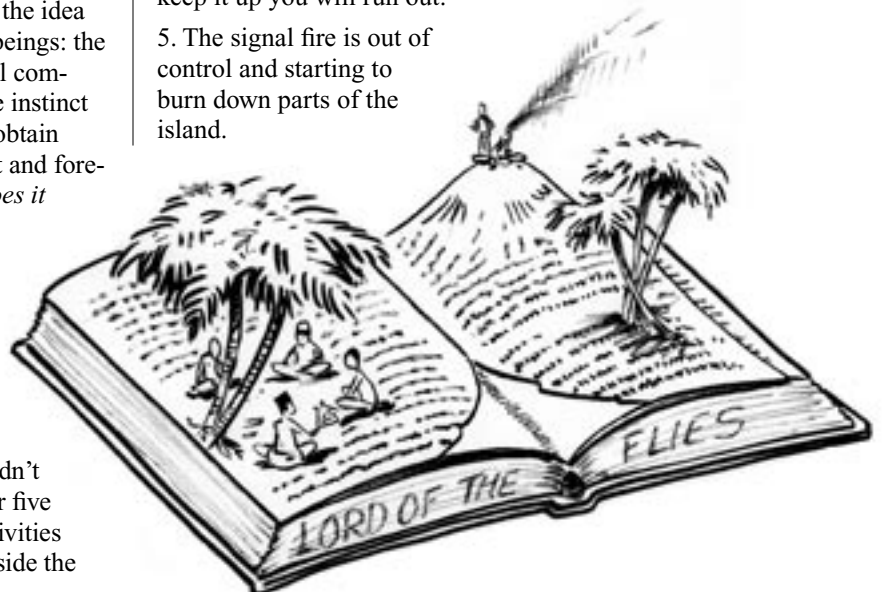
How do you react when someone is being aggressive?
 Do you consider yourself a leader? Why or why not?
 What makes you really mad?
 How do you react when you have to take orders?
 Do you work better by yourself or in groups? Explain.
 What does community mean to you?
 Do you believe that working together helps a group to survive? Explain.

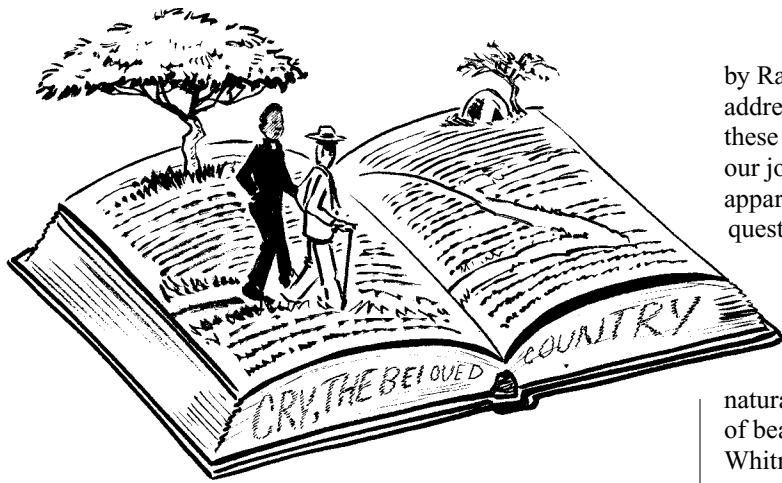
Next, students decide what tasks and responsibilities must be undertaken on their island and who is going to do what. While I do give suggestions to groups who are struggling, it is a great learning experience for students to have to decide what they will need to do in order to survive.

The responsibilities that students commonly come up with include building shelters, finding food, finding fresh water, harvesting coconuts for milk, exploring the island to see what is there, keeping a signal fire going for rescue, writing a large message in the sand that would be visible to planes, making sure that people are working, maintaining community relations, facilitating meetings, and organizing events.

About twice each week during our study of the novel, I give the students a problem that they have to solve in their "survivor" groups. Problems like the following are common.

1. It has been raining for two weeks and the storm is destroying your huts.
2. Someone in your group is stealing food while the others sleep.
3. The place that you decided would be the restroom is starting to smell and is attracting bugs and other creatures.
4. You're harvesting food faster than it is growing. If you keep it up you will run out.
5. The signal fire is out of control and starting to burn down parts of the island.





6. The water supply that you've been using has made two of you very sick.

7. You started fishing (or hunting) to survive, but you're finding that the animals are fewer in number and harder to find. You haven't found any animals in two days.

8. The weather has become so hot that you've left the beaches and can't come out of the forest without being severely burned or suffering from heat exhaustion.

I then have students use the library or Internet to find out how their problem is similar to current environmental problems or other challenges that humans are facing. Specifically, they have to look for ways in which these problems could be solved or may have been prevented. Groups then give presentations to the class about what they discovered and the solutions they have come up with.

While the foundation is being laid for a fundamental understanding of how communities cohere or dissolve and how human needs are directly connected to the environment, it is also possible to pick up on tangentially related issues. For example, early in the novel, the boys on the island forage for food from plants that grow around them, and it is a time of peace and cooperation. When they start hunting, the boys become violent, going beyond killing a pig for food to abusing it as well. This scene lends itself to discussion of the connection between animal abuse and human violence and to reading and discussing some of the many articles that have been written about this connection.¹

Exploration of the perceived dichotomy between civilization and tribal life is also explored in such works as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. Like *Lord of the Flies*, these novels present other issues that can be tapped as well, such as racism, poverty, violence, and colonialism. The environment and human anthropocentrism are addressed in *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn, in which commonly held ideas such as "the world was created for man" are discussed and debunked in favor of the idea that humans are part of nature and are dependent on the Earth in ways that we are aware of, but carelessly continue to ignore. Quinn also debunks the belief by modern "civilized" societies that theirs is the only right way to live and that tribal societies should adhere to the same rules.

In addition to novels, there are many short stories that give voice to concepts and themes that are connected to social justice issues. Such stories as "A Sound of Thunder"

by Ray Bradbury and "The Turtle" by John Steinbeck address issues of the environment explicitly. Whether or not these issues are explicit in a work (oftentimes they are not), our job as language arts teachers is to make the connections apparent to our students, or, better yet, ask them guiding questions so that they may find the links on their own.

Poetry and social justice

There is great opportunity and power in poetry.

Poetry is the one place where we often see the natural world described in luscious detail and with a level of beauty that competes with the environment itself. Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz are just a few examples of poets whose works directly illuminate the beauty of the natural world. As with novels and stories, the themes, images, and motifs in poems can be drawn out and connected to larger issues. Poems that express a love of nature and sense of stewardship toward the natural world, such as this one by Emily Dickinson, are great springboards into reflection on one's own feelings concerning the Earth and other species:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again, I shall not live in vain.

Richard Wright's haikus are also good examples of the way one's life and feelings are connected to and expressed through elements of the natural world:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away.

In the falling snow
A laughing boy holds out his palms
Until they are white.



Students can extend their reading and writing of poetry beyond the classroom by publishing a book of their own poems, in which they speak out on issues of social justice or reflect on their personal connections to the natural world. This project could include a class discussion of environmentally friendly ways to reproduce the book: what type of paper to use, what “post-consumer content” is, how many books to print, and so on. Students could sell the books to raise funds for a local community project or nonprofit organization. If your administrators are open to it, they could also use sidewalk chalk to display their poetry across the campus, thereby piquing interest in both poetry and global concerns. In my classroom, each student chooses a poem (or a song with literary quality) to present to the class as a vehicle for teaching us about an issue and about a poetic device such as alliteration, allusion, or onomatopoeia.

Expository articles and social justice

Reading expository articles is a great way for students to improve their reading skills as well as prepare for discussions of how issues raised in a work of literature are connected to the real world. For example, if your students are studying *Romeo and Juliet*, you may wish to have them read articles that discuss teen suicide, teen relationships, pressures on young people to preserve family traditions, or the challenges faced by gay and lesbian youth when their relationships are viewed by others as incendiary. If your class is reading Orwell’s *1984*, you might consider having your students read selections from Noam Chomsky’s book *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. As noted earlier, articles about the link between animal abuse and violence could be used to explore that theme in *Lord of the Flies*.

Students may also select expository articles for sharing with the class. Once a theme or issue has been introduced in a poem or work of literature, ask students “How does this theme connect to our lives or to the world today?” This requires them to think critically and make personal and real-world connections on their own. From there, students can search for articles and use the Socratic seminar method to raise questions and initiate class discussion. In this way, expository articles not only complement the study of literature, but also provide a basis for explicit discussions of things happening in the world today.

Poetry can bring new realities into being, and reading a well-developed research paper can change the way we eat or where we shop.

Writing and social justice

Encouraging students to explore social justice issues through commonly taught modes of writing, such as research, evaluative, persuasive,

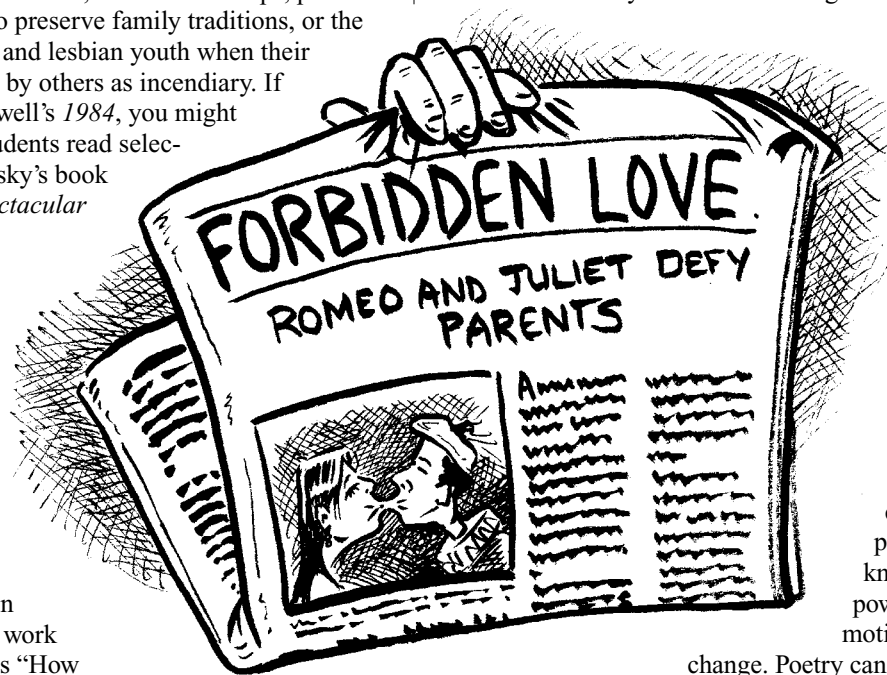
autobiographical, and reflective essays, is another way to engage them in deeper thinking about important global concerns. For example, if your class is reading *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, students could be assigned a research paper that explores a controversial topic related to scientific and technological “advancements,” such as cloning, genetic modification, and stem cell research. Similarly, in a study of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, students might research and explore such topics as women’s suffrage, gender roles, reproductive health and its connection to women’s issues, abortion rights, and repressive governments.

Other modes of written expression, such as speeches and business letters, also afford opportunities to write about themes and issues studied in class. Students could write business letters to elected officials or to the heads of corporations and other organizations to express opinions or ask questions about controversial issues or perceived injustices. While teachers might share with students some examples of letters they’ve written, they can avoid manipulation by letting students choose what to write about and to whom. If students are struggling, ask them what issue is important to them and who they think could change that.

Literature, poetry, essays, letters, and speeches are means by which humans communicate with each other about life-changing experiences and they help us to see the world anew. A work of literature can validate a part of us we never knew existed, and a powerful speech can motivate us to make

change. Poetry can bring new realities

into being, and reading a well-developed research paper can change the way we eat or where we shop. Introducing students to these global concerns should not be a peripheral issue or afterthought in education; it should be the core of how and what we teach. If you teach English and choose to stay focused on the surface level of forms, themes, and historical context, you are robbing your students of a chance to make their own education more meaningful. Every poem or work of literature can be connected to present day social



justice issues. Our job as educators is to find these connections, let students explore them, answer questions, and provide support. If you do this, you will be amazed as you watch your students leap to new levels of engagement and meaningful learning.

Christopher Greenslate teaches English, Social Justice, and Journalism at La Costa Canyon High School in Carlsbad, California. Teaching materials for these courses are posted at his website <www.cmgreenslate.com>.

Note

1. See, for example, the resources concerning this connection at the websites of Teach Kind <www.teachkind.org> and the Humane Society of the United States <www.hsus.org>.



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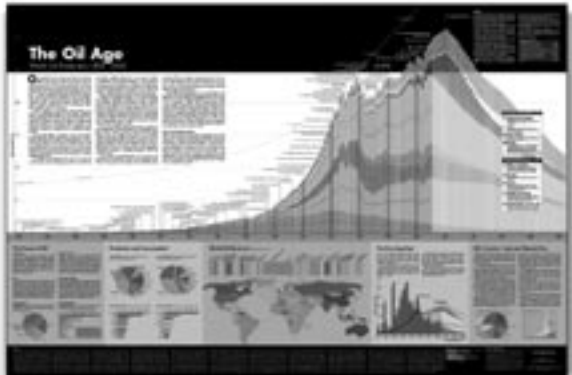




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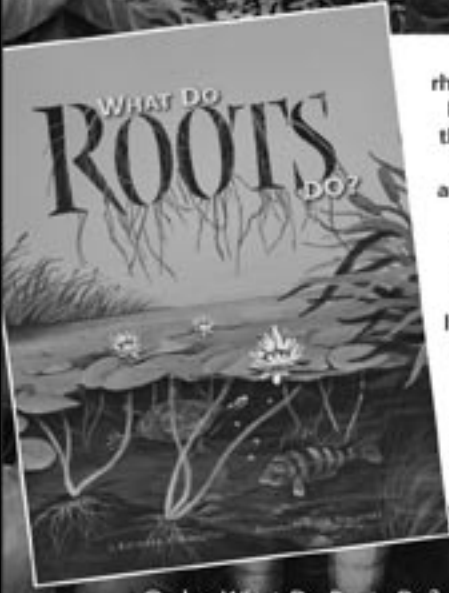
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