

## SYNTHESIS ESSAY

by Tammi Simpson

*"And the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." – Anais Nin*

### **The Act of Blossoming**

It was during my high school years that I knew I wanted to teach Language Arts. I loved everything about it – the reading, the writing, and the grammar. I wanted to find a magical tool to make students fall in love with it just like I had done. During my undergraduate studies at Southeastern University, I became convinced that there would remain a void in students' abilities if they did not understand how reading and writing could transform them into careful and reflective thinkers. There is great power in the written word (whether one is the observer or the author) and I wanted to challenge my students to take the time to cogitate it. When I finally stepped into my own classroom, I felt a great responsibility to expose my students to a variety of great literature and somehow help them connect to this literature in a meaningful way. I also wanted to give them multiple opportunities to write creatively and reflectively. I was not, however, prepared for the daily challenges that would stand between me and my goals. I began to see how easy it was for teachers to become immovable rocks stuck fast where they had landed. I did not want to become one of these rocks!

When I decided to break from teaching in a classroom setting to stay home and focus on raising my own children, I began to see a prime opportunity for me to breathe in some fresh ideas. I had toyed with the notion of furthering my education and the window of opportunity was wide open. I searched high and low for just the right program that would help me achieve my goal of learning how to decipher quality literature and use it effectively in my classroom. Instantly, I was intrigued by MSU's Literacy Education concentration in their online master's program; it focused on addressing the essential skills of reading, writing, reasoning and thinking for which I had been searching. I can, without hesitation, say that what I have gained from this program has been more valuable than I could have predicted and more extensive than I could express in one brief essay. Each course has prompted me to escape my tight little bud and to begin to blossom not only as a teacher, but also as a learner of literature.

### **Pick of the Litter-ature**

Two courses that had a significant influence on how I choose literature were TE836: Awards and Classics of Children's Literature and TE 849: Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature. I have learned that while literature can be seen as subjective in terms of what we as readers bring to it, there are significant qualities that literature brings to us, and they are very real and very tangible. My ability to recognize these qualities has improved tremendously through the training I received from these courses and I feel better equipped to pick quality literature, better equipped to "read" literature, and better equipped to teach literature.

The very act of picking literature indicates that choices will be made, and if we are picking that literature from premade book lists or even off the shelf of our school library, choices have already been made about its value. Awards and Classics of Children's Literature forced me to look closely at how these choices are made. How do we discern if a book is "good" enough that we should consider it in greater depth? What characteristics do selected "classics" and award winners have that place them in the spotlight? These are critical questions for me to consider as I make choices about the literature I will use in my classroom. For example, many readers have loved Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* because of its authentic voice and sense of realness in relation to the characters and plot, but can young twenty-first century girls relate to it, and can we still extract value and meaning from it that will cause readers to have a genuine learning experience even today? My conclusions must take into account that literature speaks not only of a given author's viewpoint, but it also carries with it lessons of history, morality, society, humanity and so much more that if neglected will only diminish our perspectives.

In a sense, I found that by paying attention to both awards and "classics", the choices I make for literature in my classroom will represent a variety of eras and cultures that I may otherwise have overlooked. It is difficult sometimes to step out of our literary comfort zones and venture into unknown territories, but when we happen across award winners such as Carmen Lomas Garza's *Magic Windows/Ventanas Magicas* where Mexican history and culture is presented in such a rich way, it is easy to see the importance of exposing our students to it. Of course there is more literature than we can possibly cover in one year and that is precisely the reason I appreciated the expertise I gained from this course. Teachers cannot begin to expose their students to rich literature if they are not first exposed to it themselves and until we get excited about exploring literary treasures beyond what we are familiar with, we cannot get our students excited to read and keep reading even when they leave our classrooms.

Another class that challenged me professionally was Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature. In this class, Bevin Roue really stretched the way I think about and interpret literature. He helped me think about literature in terms of what it can do for readers in both a positive and negative manner, showing me the tremendous responsibility that teachers have in making careful and educated choices regarding the literature they add to their curriculum. He also challenged my once casual and uninformed philosophy about multicultural literature and forced me to evaluate and take a stronger stand on my definition of "multicultural", which stemmed from intense readings and passionate group conversations, resulting in this eight page reflection paper.

One of the toughest questions we considered during the module on multicultural literature was, "Can one culture be authentic enough to be the voice of another culture?" We uncovered just how controversial this question was in our back-to-back readings of non-Native American author Beth Kanell's, *The Darkness Under the Water* and Native American author Joseph Bruchac's, *Hidden Roots*. While both novels touched on the similar topic of the 1930s Eugenics Project. They did not both leave readers with a strong sense of pride for the Native-American heritage. We looked at how books such as Kanell's can strike a devastating blow on

whole cultures and how critical it is for teachers to access reviews and scholarly advice in their endeavors to incorporate authentic multicultural literature into their class literary canon.

The reading from TE849 opened my eyes to just how easy it is to marginalize certain cultures and promote stereotypes without even realizing it. I now pay closer attention to these details in my own reading and especially when choosing books for young readers.

### **Technology: From Antagonist to Protagonist**

Before beginning this master's program, I was intimidated by technology. For this reason, enrolling in a totally online program was a somewhat scary task, but I knew that the only way I would get over my fear was to face it head on. I literally, began my MAED experience with a clean slate for knowing how to incorporate educational technology. I had minimal understanding of the vast technologies available and how such technologies could enhance a student's learning experience if used properly. After dabbling in a few of the educational technology classes, I knew I did not want to neglect this rich teaching resource any longer.

My first experience with educational technology was during TE831: Teaching Subject Matter with Technology. The title was enticing and I knew that stepping back into any twenty-first century classroom without this knowledge would be detrimental to my proficiency as a teacher and to my students' abilities to learn and comprehend the subject matter. During this course, Professor Erik Byker introduced me to Dr. Punya Mishra and Dr. Matthew Koehler's TPACK framework which places the value of technology alongside the values of both pedagogy and content knowledge. He emphasized that the highest success for using this framework is achieved when there is a consistent balance between all three components. At first this was a discouraging concept because of my limited knowledge of educational technologies, but in just a few short months I had explored such a variety of technologies that I not only began to see the TPACK format as possible, but also as a valuable addition to my professional career.

Thanks to TE831, I was seizing the opportunity, for the first time, to explore and play with an array of available technologies, such as Wiki, Wordle, Digital Storytelling, Voicethread, Dipity, etc., and I quickly came to an understanding of how pedagogy and content knowledge are enriched when the right technology is properly used. By experimenting with different technologies I learned that I was able to cover more content in less time and that the right technology has the potential to strengthen any lesson plan and connect students in a way that not only makes learning engaging, but also makes it fun!

Now that my feet were wet, I felt brave enough to dive in. By far, the project that stretched me the most was creating an online course in CEP 820: Teaching K-12 Students Online. The assignment was clearly out of my comfort zone, which is probably why I hold on to the success of its outcome with such affection. With so many content management systems (CMS) to choose from, I learned how important it is to have a vision that will direct my pedagogical choices so that they will not be overpowered and manipulated by the design and structure of the CMS. Just as in TE831, I was learning to make technology work for me. With the guidance and expertise I received in CEP 820 I was able to create a course that displayed my

expectations to students both clearly and logically, assessed students work in a variety of ways, and displayed their work to an expanded audience. Through the course I created, students are able to have online discussions, have access to lectures and tutorials that would allow them multiple viewings to ensure their understanding of the course concepts, express their personal learning goals, assess their own progress, and feel that they were not only co-learners in their online environment, but that they were also co-teachers. I learned how to create rubrics using Google Drive, how to create opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous online discussions, and how to accommodate different learning styles under the policies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Finally, I learned that online learning has tremendous potential in how we do education, and I am extremely excited about my future with educational technology!

### **Dénouement**

By far, one of the richest elements of this program was exactly what I had expected it to be, the expertise I received in regards to elements of literature and elements of writing. I have come to appreciate award books, not for their ability to please all young readers, but for their ability to better them; I have learned to not just trust my first impressions of a book, but to read it carefully and thoughtfully from various perspectives; I have learned new elements of effective writing and have been asked to share them with other teachers during in-service training; finally, above and beyond my expectations, I have developed ways to use technology to enhance each of these aspects.

In completing this program, I have come to appreciate technology rather than fear it, I have received expert advice and guidance on how to begin building the bridge between students' abilities to reason and think and their abilities to express and articulate those thoughts, and I have had the opportunity to learn from and alongside of teachers who are on the front lines of education every day – for it is through them that theories and ideologies are tested and proven as they become embedded in practice. I can honestly say that here, at the end of my MAED journey, I can reflect and see moment after moment that has shaped me and challenged me professionally – the mark of ultimate progress – and I can look ahead and see moment after moment where my students will be engaged in genuine learning experiences – the mark of ultimate success.