Combining Classic Literature with Creative Teaching for Essay Building in an Inclusive Urban High School Classroom

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Abstract

The urban inclusive high school classroom is a challenge for both students with disabilities and their teachers. Pressure is intensified when a year long course of study ends in a mandated state examination in English Language Arts, required for student graduation. This article highlights the experiences of two teachers in a New York City inclusive high school serving a very diverse student body. Both teachers work collaboratively with special educators and share ways in which they successfully engage all of their students in a multicultural curriculum featuring both traditional and "modern classic" texts. Three important inter-connected topics addressed include: (1) discussing examples of classic traditional and multicultural literature; (2) creatively teaching classic literature to stimulate student engagement and original thinking; and, (3) using student knowledge about classic literature to teach sub-skills necessary for writing a strong essay that will serve them well for the state mandated exam, and ultimately, in college.

Keywords

High School, Inclusion, Strategies, Examinations, Learning Disabilities

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Introduction: The Challenge of the Inclusive Urban High School

Urban high schools are often depicted as overcrowded, under funded, and marked by severe economic disparities. They also have a higher rate of ethnic, racial, linguistic, national, and religious diversity than their suburban and rural counterparts (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007). Many high schools in New York City, for example, are attended by a bustling, diverse body of students, largely African-American and Hispanic-American, with a sizeable number of Asian-American and European-American adolescents, many of whom are second generation or immigrants. When we add disability to the mix, this further diversifies what is already one of the most varied student populations in the world. Adolescents with learning problems, attention difficulties, behavioral challenges, and in need of speech and language services, constitute over 75% of students with disabilities, and are the most likely students to be educated in inclusive settings (Hehir et al., 2005). It is worth noting that these students may also be English Language Learners (ELLs), considered "Gifted," or "At Risk" for dropping out. Such endless potential for student diversity means that most urban high schools are largely comprised of students who fit one or multiple categories mentioned above.

The shift over the last decade to increase standards, bolstered by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, means that all students must pass required state examinations to obtain a high school diploma. To prepare students for mandated exams, teachers are under great pressure to provide rigorous courses that increase student literacy skills while providing rich, relevant content. Although most students face significant challenges in navigating the statewide eleventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) examination, known as "The Regents," those with disabilities that impact the process of learning face an even more formidable task.

Manhattan Village Academy is one such school that faces the challenges of the inclusive urban high school. Every year the school admits 9th grade students who vary greatly in their abilities, including students with learning disabilities (LD), Attention Deficit Disorders (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), behavior disorders (BD), as well as low incidence categories such as hearing and speech impairments. At all grade levels teachers strive to ensure that students are meaningfully engaged in an interesting, academically demanding curriculum. In English Language Arts classes, teachers introduce students to classic and multicultural literature with a view toward giving them a good grounding for college, a place they are assumed to attend. The ELA curriculum is perhaps no more challenging than in eleventh grade, where teachers are called upon to teach great literature and simultaneously instruct students in specific skills of the essay-based, mandated state examination taken by students at the end of the year. Students must pass this exam in order to graduate from high school.

This article focuses on the work of two teachers working in Manhattan Village Academy who face these many challenges, and successfully engage their diverse student body in a multicultural curriculum featuring both traditional and modern classic texts. The teachers recognize that, as students move from adolescence into young adulthood, literature gives them a greater sense of history, provides them with increased knowledge of the world, and allows them an opportunity to reflect upon their place within it. Both teachers collaborate with the special educators at the school to make sure students with indi-

vidualized education programs (IEPs) receive additional support both inside and outside of their classes. This model is seen as integral to the success of students with disabilities (see Figure 1).

In subsequent sections, three important inter-connected topics are addressed: (1) discussing examples of classic traditional and multicultural literature; (2) creatively teaching classic literature to stimulate student engagement and original thinking; and, (3) using student knowledge about classic literature to teach sub-skills necessary for writing a strong essay that will serve them well for the state mandated exam, and ultimately, in college.

Figure 1: General and Special Educator Collaboration.

The model to include students with disabilities at the school has several interlocking components that ensure their maximum support. Two special educators each work with two of the four high school grade levels. While roles and responsibilities are extensive for both general and special educators, several important highlights are listed below:

Special Educator
- Knows all curriculum being taught across ELA, history, math, and science
- Prioritizes which students need most assistance in general education classes, and works with certain students in those classes
- Ensures that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are implemented
- Works daily one-on-one and in small groups with students who have IEPs when students without IEPs provide community service and/or have job experiences

General Educator
- Provides students with a rich curriculum
- Considers all students' strengths and limitations in lesson planning
- Teaches using differentiated instruction
- Teaches an after school literary club that focuses on advanced texts
- Provides extra help classes after school to help all low performing students in reading comprehension and essay writing

Both
- Communicate information about specific students in an ongoing relationship with each other
- Problem solve around actual or anticipated issues
- Participate in grade level meetings to discuss progress of all students
- Participate in content area meetings, discussing core concepts and effective teaching strategies for whole class, small group, and individual students
- Communicate with parents of students
- Participate in after school support for students, including homework help

Selecting Classic and Multicultural Literature

The value of multicultural literature has been long established (Banks, 1977, 1993; Delpit, 1992; Gay, 1988; Nieto, 1992, 1995). It serves to pluralize what has largely been a European-American Canon, offering readers a chance to vicariously experience and learn from perspectives of people that differ from their own cultural, social, and historical understanding of the world. In turn, previously marginalized or ignored groups are now present and represented within the curriculum. However, counter arguments by cul-

tural theorists such as E.D. Hirsch (1988; 1998) maintains that there *is* a traditional canon of literature that should be taught with view to providing citizens with common cultural referents. Our stance in this article is that both viewpoints can be accommodated because the United States has been, and in all likelihood will remain, culturally diverse. Two texts in the eleventh grade American Literature course are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1945). These books are chosen, in part, because they are particularly well suited to teaching the content, skills, and writing needed to excel on the ELA Regents Examination. While classics and creativity may seem antithetical to the nature of high stakes testing, the engaging yet challenging nature of these novels motivates students as they strive to master the test. Moreover, teaching classics creatively ensures that English class does not become simply a "test prep" factory.

The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby is a classic American novel that centers around Jay Gatsby, a wealthy and mysterious man living in Long Island in the early 1920s. Gatsby's secrets are revealed through his neighbor, and the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway. Nick's subjective point of view uncovers Jay's dark past and helps divulge Gatsby's inner conflict. The melodramatic climax of the novel always spikes students' interest and helps to crystallize the novel's major themes.

In its rather short 200 pages, *The Great Gatsby* brims with imagery and symbolism. A tale of the excesses and the corruption of wealth, this classic often initially intimidates high-schoolers and their teachers as they attempt to find relevance in Jazz Age romanticism and flowery language. However, questions of identity and the power of love–

two issues with which nearly all teens struggle– lie below the surface of Gatsby's lavish parties and Daisy's superficial giggle. When rooted in these universalities, students quickly make connections with the text and, with teacher guidance, learn to build their appreciation of the poetic descriptions.

Native Son

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is the story of Bigger Thomas, a young man who struggles with racial oppression in 1930s Chicago. Bigger finally gets an opportunity for a better future when he is hired as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, the Daltons. However, this opportunity is destroyed through an altercation with Mary, the Daltons' college age daughter, during his first evening on the job. For the remainder of the novel, Bigger must run from his mistakes and attempt to both understand and justify his actions to himself and to society.

Native Son is a gargantuan text, both thematically and in actual size. It tackles issues of race, violence, and poverty in 1930's America over the course of almost 500 pages. As the first novel written by an African-American to be selected by the Book of the Month club in the 1940's, it is both a Classic text and a work of ground-breaking multicultural literature. Despite its size and weighty place in literary history, this text is a favorite of students. Many urban teens experience first-hand the conflicts of racism and the pain of powerlessness and immediately identifying with the struggles of Bigger Thomas. Even for those students who may initially feel removed from the larger issues of race and power, scenes of violence and the drama of a murder mystery told in approachable language quickly draw readers of varying abilities into the story.

Providing Access to Texts by Teaching Literature Creatively

In this section we focus on broadly-defined creative approaches to teaching *The Great Gatsby* and *Native Son* and view these methods as providing "access" to these texts for students with a range of abilities and disabilities. By providing "access," we do not mean literal physical entrée into classrooms (while obviously recognizing the importance of that), but rather the figurative challenge of providing multiple intellectual entry points into the architecture of the curriculum. The methodology described in this section engages multiple intelligences, skill levels, and attitudes towards schooling and, in doing so, allows for a broader and more authentic "access" to learning than in a more traditional classroom. While some suggestions may appear text-specific, all of these are generalizable to other texts (see Figure 2 for a selection of other possible traditional and multi-cultural classics). We acknowledge that teachers should always strive toward providing engaging activities within literature lessons in order to maximize student "buy-in," and at the same time recognize the unrealistic ideal of teachers as entertainers in a perpetually fun environment. Providing all students with access to a text adheres to the tenets of universal design in education, namely creating lessons with all students in mind, and therefore minimizing the need to make accommodations retroactively (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002). This can be done in many ways, including incorporating at least two or three multiple intelligences within every lesson (Gardner, 1983), and always providing several opportunities and choices for students to read, write, listen, and speak (Kagan & Kagan, 1998) (see Figure 10). By including a variety of entry points into a task, classroom activities allow all students to participate from their position of strength. For students who have significant difficulties in reading, the special educator has the option of working with abridged texts and recorded versions.

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When beginning any of these new teaching and learning activities in a classroom, a teacher should strive to introduce them effectively in a way that supports the growth of student knowledge and skills. It is important to note that instructional effectiveness is maximized when teachers: (1) explain the purpose of a strategy; (2) model the strategy, preferably "thinking aloud" to reveal their own personal thought process; (3) practice the strategy, leading the students; (4) have students practice the strategy, with teacher support as needed; (5) provide students with the time to practice (Robb, 2000). In terms of introducing a group activity, teachers can prepare a group of students ahead of time so they can demonstrate in a "fish-bowl" format, with their peers looking on.

Framing Essential Questions

Utilizing the notion of "Backward Planning" developed by Wiggins and McTighe (1998), teachers can formulate essential questions (EQs) that are used to frame each novel-based unit and help ground lessons in "real-world" issues, answering the common student mantra, "Why are we learning this?" Good EQs help adolescents with LD, ADD/ADHD, and other academically struggling students to remain focused on larger themes and not get lost in minutia.

When considering *The Great Gatsby,* questions could include: What is the American Dream? Is it possible to attain for everyone? What values were apparent in post World War I America? In addition to these broad, overarching socio-historical issues, EQs can also be used to help promote deeper understandings of the nature of literature, such as: How does the bias of a narrator influence a novel's story? or, How do relationships among characters contribute to the development of themes and plot? Oftentimes, the EQ can combine *both* socio-historical and literary craft, such as *Native Son* being taught within the EQ: Can literature fight injustice? Throughout the text, students debate issues of justice and injustice as they pertain to poverty, race, crime, urbanity, racism, and power, then debate this question after completing the novel.

Accountable Talk

When reading any literature students must be required to hold their ideas accountable to the specific text; in other words, they must prove their claims through textual support (Huss, 2007). Moreover, students are encouraged to closely read key sections of the text and consider the alternative or deeper interpretations that can come with careful literary analysis of symbols, metaphors, characterization, and imagery. These following techniques often have a creative hook or require hands-on participation, engaging students as they-- perhaps unknowingly at first--perform serious literary work.

Marking up the text using Post-Its

The "marking up" of texts is a simple and valuable skill for students to master. For state exams and the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), reading passages can be more ef-

ficiently and effectively dissected when students are taught to underline main ideas, star important points, circle key dates and places, and write question marks near points of confusion (Connor & Lagares, 2007). This approach is particularly helpful for students who have difficulty in comprehending a layered text as these symbols help them to focus on key information. One way to encourage this process without writing in a text is to have students use post-its to indicate important, surprising, or unclear information. This can then be transferred to a graphic organizer designed to support claims in group discussions or be used as evidence in writing essays.

Small Group Work for Super Close Reading

It is worth pointing out that many of the suggestions in this article are rooted in the value of group learning, a supportive process that is sadly underutilized at the secondary level, considering the value and appeal of socialization to adolescents. For example, in reading texts, students can participate in several group activities that merit revisiting the text to investigate symbols, imagery, or characterization. In these groups, students focus on a portion of a paragraph typically with a creative (and sometimes contrived) task in mind. For instance, each group member analyzes one small portion of the text, before the group comes together to use each person's contribution to reach a final conclusion founded in textual support. This type of group work automatically allows for differentiation as readers are allowed to self-select the sections of texts that they best understand to analyze. As the group shares their work, struggling readers are able to learn from modeling by more advanced peers (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2005).

Figure 10: Connecting Suggested Strategies with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences

Strategy	Verbal-Lingusitic	Visual-Spatial	Logical-Mathematic	Bodily-Kinesthetic	Musical	Intra-personal	Inter-personal	Naturalist
Essential Questions	X					X	X	
Accountable Talk	X					X	X	
Marking the Text	X	X		X		X	X	
Small Group/Close Read	X	X	X			X	X	
Bio Poem	X	X	X		X	X		
Forging Historical Connections	X		X			X	X	
Imagery/Creating Visuals	X	X		X		X	X	X
Exploring Media Bias	X	X	X			X		
Using the Crime Scene	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Creating New Beginnings	X					X		
Psychological Make Up	X	X				X		
Graphic Org: Characteristics	X	X					X	
Creative Culmination	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Skill Building Routines	X	X	X		X			
Critical Lens	X					X	X	
Basic Structure	X	X	X			X		
Intro to Essay	X					X		
Mnemonics	X		X		X	X		
Essay Packets	X		X			X		
Rubrics	X	X	X			X	X	
Opportunity to Revise/Rewrite	X		X			X		
Group Essay	X	X				X	X	
Removal of Scaffolding	X		X			X		
Supportive School Rituals	X		X			X	X	
Modern Versions	X	X		X	X		X	
Trials	X		X	X			X	
Town Council Meeting	X		X	X		X	X	
Talk Show	X	X		X		X	X	
Pre-Reading: Historical Debate	X	X	X			X		X
Magazines/Newspapers	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Silent Debates	X					X	X	
Acting Scenes/Lines	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Peer Feedback	X	X					X	

Character analysis: bio poem

Students can work in pairs or groups of three and reread a small section of the text in which a character is first introduced. Afterwards, they create a bio-poem to describe the character (For example, one model may contain: three adjectives/I am…/I think … /I feel…/statement or question, and so on). For each poem line, students pick out a quotation from the text that demonstrates their claim

about the character. When they finish, groups can "act out" their poem as their character, being sure to reflect traits revealed in a close reading of the text (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Character Analysis: Bio Poem

First name

Resident of…
Child of…
Brother/Sister of…
3 adjectives to describe appearance
I look like….
3 adjectives to describe personality

Key quotation that shows personality

I feel…
I hate…
I love…
I dream…
I give…
Some day I will be…
3 different adjectives to describe character
Last Name

Daisy

Resident of East Egg
Child of privilege
Sister of wealth
Airy, shining, blonde
I look like an expensive piece of jewelry
Superficial, humorous, flippant

Her voice had "promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour" (14).

I feel exhausted
I hate poverty
I love to laugh
I dream that my life will never change
I give my allure to those around me
Some day I will be sorry
Careless, self-absorbed, addictive
Buchanan

The setting: forging historical connections

Students simultaneously studying United States history, or who have a previous background in American history, benefit from engaging with the context of the novel (Marzano, 2004). However, for those who lack sufficient prior knowledge, an effort should be made to help define the specific time period to aid in students' understanding of the text. For example, before beginning *Native Son,* students can participate in a jigsaw activity where different groups read and analyze information about Richard Wright's own family, Wright's philosophy, the creation of Big-

ger, and Bigger's place in society, can help set up students for the role of setting in the novel. During Bigger's first night on the job, the historical Scottsboro case is mentioned, offering the opportunity to use actual articles about the case and discuss other controversial trials that occurred during the time period. A closing debate can tie together much of past history with the present by posing questions such as: Is Bigger's crime justified? What kind of discrimination still separates different groups into unfair roles in society? Which cases in contemporary society remind you of Bigger's?

Imagery analysis: creating a visual

Oftentimes, the sheer amount of detail in novels such as *The Great Gatsby* overwhelms students. However, a close reading can "slow down" teens and allow them to revel in the beauty of Fitzgerald's language. Pairs of students can be assigned a paragraph, such as the description of Gatsby's party. Working together, they draw the scene, incorporating as many details as possible. For each detail, the students include a line or words from the text that "inspired" their artistic interpretation. As students draw and label the scene, they begin to realize how the imagery and figurative language used by Fitzgerald works to paint a picture within the reader's head (Levine, 1994). Students can then share their pictures with the class, explaining how their interpretation of the text allowed them to arrive at their final visual representation. After pairs complete this work, the pictures can be arranged in the order they appear in the novel, thus creating a detailed visual "timeline" for the story.

Exploring media bias

Many students are already well aware of how the media influences public opinion,

and discussions about how the media works may bring fresh angles to understanding any story (Gorham, 2006). In depicting public reaction to the murder of a white heiress by a poor black man, Wright includes newspaper headlines and articles covering Bigger's flight from the law. The bias in this reporting is obvious; Bigger is up against a societal racism much larger than himself. One small group activity requires students to explore how the media within the novel expresses bias, as well as making connections to ways in which bias can be detected in contemporary reporting. In this activity, students also practice using terms such as *diction* and *tone* as they analyze language to find bias within it. First, small groups re-read a section of the reporting of the murder and flight. Second, they record the word choice that may indicate bias and decide upon a tone for the scene. Third, using actual quotations from their close reading, students present a nightly news report of the Bigger Thomas "Flight from Justice." While this activity must be closely monitored to prevent offensiveness, it forces students to examine a passage on the "word level" in detail and consider the implications of diction chosen by the media. Finally, students look at modern newspaper headlines and article biases they see existing today.

Using a crime scene investigation to make predictions

This activity asks students to consider the many details and plot twists included in a crime scene, often a pivotal part of a novel. In *Native Son,* for example, Bigger Thomas carelessly disposes of the evidence from his murder. Students work in groups to take on the role of crime scene investigators and re-read the description of the cover-up from this perspective. Then, using textual evidence, the student detectives draw conclusions from the
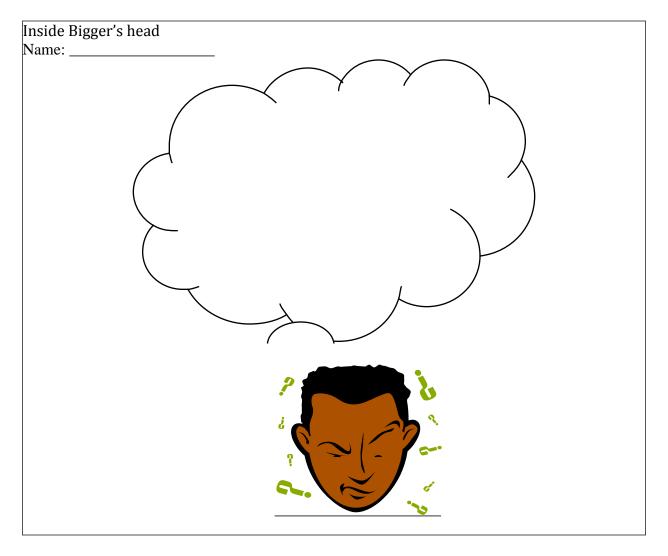
scene, predicting how Bigger's crime will be discovered. The analogy of the crime scene investigator reminds students of the need to notice small details in the text, and then use their predicting skills to anticipate future plot action (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

Creating new beginnings

Working in small groups, students can choose a character to reinvent, and create an escape plan from the novel's setting that would allow the character to be free and alive at the close of the book. For example, in *Native Son,* Bigger or Bessie are characters whose fates can be reinvented. A worksheet may guide students with useful questions such as: Where should he/she go? What should he/she do? How will he/she get there? How will he/she do this? How will he/she support him/herself when he/she gets there? What should Bigger do about Bessie? What should Bessie do about Bigger? What events could happen that would ruin this plan?

Figure 4: Basic Organizer: Focusing on a Character's Psychological Make Up

Inside Bigger's head
Name: _____

Basic Organizers: Focusing on a Character's Psychological Make Up

In a very demanding curriculum, sometimes a simple basic organizer is the key to helping students temporarily focus on specific incidents within the book (DiCecco & Gleason, 2002). By providing students with a worksheet containing a physical image of Bigger with a thought bubble, they can be encouraged to write draw or write what they believe to be the major conflicts and thoughts going through his head (see Figure 4).

Using graphic organizers for logs: characterization and conflict

Conflict, characterization and theme are inextricably tied together within *Native Son* and can all be addressed together. Through the use of logs, students can chart Bigger's emotions in conjunction with the events in the plot, and see the specific conflicts in his life (Andersen, Yilmaz, & Washburn-Moses, 2004). For each major choice Bigger is forced to make, both sides of the conflict must be addressed--as well as the rationale for why Bigger makes his decision. The logs should help guide students to engage with the change in Bigger's character, evident within his action and the consequences of those actions (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Using Graphic Organizers for Logs: Character Evolver

Bigger Thomas

Event	Quote / Page #	Characterized as…	Change?
Bigger wakes up in his family's apartment and kills a rat.	"Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically" (6).	Violent, aggressive, powerful, psychological problems?	Bigger woke up sleepy, but when threatened sprang into violent action.
Bigger has hopes and dreams. He wishes to be a pilot.	"Let's play 'white,'" Bigger said, referring to a game. "It don't help none," Gus said (17).	Sad that his world is so limited. Angry?	He fantasizes, but in the end knows he cannot achieve his dreams in the society of that time.
Bigger meets the Dalton family.	"This was not his world. He was foolish in thinking he would have liked it … His jaw clamped tight … He wanted to strike something with his fist" (44).	Confused, naïve, segregated, powerless, tense, angry.	Bigger seems weaker in the "white world;" However, his weakness brings out anger/violence seen before.

Creative Culminations

After finishing a novel, there should be a cumulative activity or project. Students can work in groups with a choice of several roles and, as in other group work, this structure allows for a differentiation of tasks. In

addition to reviewing skills and content in a differentiated fashion, these creative culminations are often simply enjoyable, funny, and exciting as students get to act, laugh, and argue. As a result, participating in these activities makes the novels "stick" with students; the more students remember books, the more likely they will be able to use these books on state exams and as guidance for life (See Figure 6 for several examples).

Figure 6: Creative Culminations

Example #1: The Great Gatsby – A Parallel Project

The story of Gatsby--a man who came from nothing and constructed a life to win over the woman he loved--has been referenced throughout literature and in modern pop culture as the quintessential American Dream. For this project students work in pairs to create a modern Gatsby: a man (or woman) with a dream who creates a version of himself but, when faced with an antagonist and defeat ultimately fails. As students write a Gatsby story, they review and then borrow from Fitzgerald's tropes. Students create a symbol of the dream (their own "green light"), an antagonist (their own Tom Buchanan), a symbol of the dream's failure (their own "valley of ashes"), and a tragic ending (their own version of Gatsby's empty funeral). After creating their story, students then write a small scene in which their "Gatsby" and the antagonist clash. This scene is performed for the class who, in turn, attempt to identify the allusions to Fitzgerald's novel.

Example #2: Native Son – Literature as Fishbowl on Injustice

Students are usually enthralled by the drama of Bigger's murder and flight, but sometimes fail to see the larger social commentary Wright was trying to make through his use of violence. In being called upon to participate in a fishbowl, students must consider the broader messages of the text by examining Wright's claim that his novel is a "weapon against injustice." In preparation for the discussion, students looking back throughout the book for examples of injustice being exposed. They then consider how discussion of issues like racism could have inspired change in Wright's readers from the 1940s. Once prepared, the class divides into two, with one half sitting in an inner circle to discuss their findings. The other half sits in an outer circle to listen and takes notes. In order the hold observers accountable for participating, each student in the outer circle is matched to assesses a peer in the inner circle on his or her contributions and engagement in the larger discussion (See Figure 7 for evaluation). Part way through the class, groups switch to continue the discussion, and roles of speaker/observer are reversed. This switch allows more more voices to be heard and usually results in a natural flow of ideas that contrast with a formal debate or whole class discussion. The fishbowl format also forces students to concentrate on simply listening while on the outside. In this fashion, students are more able to hear and understand viewpoints divergent from their own. When this activity concludes, students write a letter to Wright, either praising him on the novel's effectiveness in fighting injustice or suggesting how he could have done a better job.

Nuts and Bolts: Skill Building Routines

Although creativity is valued in teaching these novels, routines must also be in place to ensure that the "nuts and bolts" of literacy skills are being more explicitly taught and assessed. It can be all too easy for teachers to get carried away with creative activities and projects and forget that students will never be able to progress to advanced literary understanding without fully comprehending basics such as vocabulary, grammar, identifying components of literature, and note-taking. Slowing down and allowing time to strengthen general literacy makes certain that all students receive the foundation upon which they can build future work in literary analysis, either in the upper grades or at a college level. While the information learned through these routines is fairly traditional, it is necessary to maintain building good habits for students working through the ELA curriculum. Although the explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and components of literature are not directly addressed here due to length limitations of the article, all are incorporated within both mini-lessons for the

whole class and for individuals during student-teacher conferences. In addition, all three areas are frequently assessed via homework, weekly quizzes, and larger in-class tests.

Using Literature to Build Essays

First and foremost, in the spirit of "Backwards Planning," the state examination must be carefully analyzed to determine what skills and sub skills are needed to pass. One of the most efficient ways to prepare students for test-taking is to infuse small, "digestible" tidbits of test prep when teaching each text. Such activities can explicitly guide students through the test-taking process, supporting an academically diverse body of learners in building test-related skills.   In order to adhere to the length restrictions of this article, we will focus on the "critical lens" essay, one of the four types of essay that students are expected to complete as part of the state examination. Almost all our recommendations are generalizable in some shape or form to other essay structures. The "critical lens" essay involves students being given a famous quotation that they must interpret as true or false, and then support their assertion with evidence and literary analysis from two books they have read. This format is similar to those found on the SAT and writing section and on Advanced Placement (AP) English exams.

Figure 7: Peer Feedback Form

My Name:_____   I am evaluating:_____

Assess the person assigned to you by giving them a number rating in each category.
0 = did not do it   1 = did it a little   2= did it very well, saw several instances

_____ **Behavior.** The person was alert. S/he paid attention to the conversation, sat up, and looked at the person speaking. The person was constructive and did not say anything mean to a speaker.

_____ **Asking Questions**. The person posed questions to the group that were thoughtful and provoked interesting discussion.

_____ **Responding.** The person responded to others' comments. The response was supported by *correct evidence* from the novel or real life (rather than simply saying "You're wrong!")

Starting Small: The Critical Lens

One way practice articulating student thoughts about the critical lens is to have them weekly explain the meaning of a quotation, and link the ideas in the "critical lens" to their reading. For example, when students are studying *The Great Gatsby,* they can respond to "One's happiness is limited only by how one defines happiness" (adapted from Charles Dickens). In analyzing this quote, they may consider the American Dream, Gatsby's emotional state, and Tom and Daisy's decision to remain married. For *Native Son*, students can respond the quotation, "All literature is protest" (Richard Wright), and contemplate the symbolic implications of characters and the larger social commentary of Wright's novel. While the essays themselves are created with test prep in mind, the responses that quotations ignite are simply the stuff of good liter-

ary analysis. Analyzing a quotation works particularly well as a class starter, but can equally be used as a summary at the end of class or as group work, with each competing to see who can best explain the largest number of quotes provided. Students can even evaluate the day's reading of the text, and create their own insightful statement that relates to the text.

A Basic Structure

It is imperative that teachers provide a basic outline of what needs to be in a standard essay, along with various strategies that help students complete that outline (Deshler, Schumaker, Harris, & Graham, 1999). As students write different types of essays, slight variations can be easily achieved if the basic formula is already understood. By using the same formula repeatedly, students learn how to "break down" what components are needed to assemble each paragraph. Deconstructing the essay into specific types of paragraphs, students begin to see the relationship between the parts to the whole, and vice versa.

Although activities related to the essay writing task can be creative, the actual teaching of essay writing is necessarily formulaic. However, a clear structure, repeated over time, helps many urban students, with and without disabilities, who entered high school with reading and writing skills well below grade level expectations. Giving students explicit steps for writing, from beginning to end, can assuage a large portion of their anxiety and lack of confidence.

Introducing Students to the Essay

It is necessary to introduce the essay so that students are provided with clear expectations about their responsibility. Student "buy-in" comes from two fronts: humor and practicality. On the humorous and theatrical side, an actual pair of "critical" eye glasses can be used to introduce the idea of analyzing literature through the "lens" of a quotation. In this situation, students are encouraged to think of the required task akin to putting on a pair of glasses that enables them to see literature through the perspective of a given quotation. In practical terms, links are made between this state exam essay and those within AP and SAT tests, as well as in college courses. Students must be able to comprehend how learning what may initially seem like a narrowly-focused task can prepare them for success later on.

Providing Steps, Using Mnemonics

All students learn a set of acronyms relating to the parts of any persuasive essay. Being able to chant, sing, and draw these steps aids in imprinting the formula into their memory, one that can be used in other disciplines for the entirety of their high school career (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992). The three parts of an essay can be summed up in OTP, TELEC, and RRF. These letters are used as triggers for writing prompts:

Introduction:
    O (opening statement)
    T (thesis statement)
    P (preview of supporting evidence)

Body Paragraphs:
    T (topic sentence)
    E (example illustrating topic sentence)
    L (literary device – for English essays only)
    E (explanation of how the example proves the thesis correct)
    C (concluding sentence)

Conclusion:

    R (restate thesis)
    R (restate examples used)
    F (make a final comment)

Essay Packets

When students begin to write the critical lens essay, they receive a packet. The cover sheet replicates the format of the exam, including the layout, font, and language. Students are taught how to dissect this cover page, underlining and circling key ideas, and return to the bulleted requirements as a "post-essay check" (see Figure 8). This helps them make certain to use the test's format. Underneath the coversheet is a page for each of the four paragraphs required in this essay. The introduction is broken into the three steps with "lead-in" sentences next to each. In this fashion, a student sees the words "opening sentence," reads a prompt or sentence starter to help begin their idea, and then writes the remaining portion of the paragraph on lines provided (see Figure 9). This sentence-by-sentence de/construction continues for the body paragraphs and conclusion. Note that teachers explicitly teach students how to write each part of every paragraph, reducing the likelihood of forgetting necessary steps. In addition, students are provided with exemplary essays to help them keep their "eyes on the prize" of well-crafted essay.

Rubrics

Crafting an essay does not come easily to many students, particularly those who have disabilities in the areas organization, memory, and the act of writing. To aid students who need support in these and other areas, explicit rubrics must be used. Rubrics are multipurpose, providing a clear picture of what is expected, while allowing students' self-awareness regarding their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to the task (see Figure 1). During the process, as well as at the end of the work, rubrics help students to see what is still or missing or underdeveloped with a complex, layered assignment.

Opportunities to Revise / Rewrite

When possible, students should always be given the opportunity to rewrite essays so they can eventually achieve mastery of essay writing. Without the opportunity to revise, it is difficult to judge whether a student understands the errors s/he has previously made. Revision can take many forms, including working with peers (Muschla, 2006). Students also keep a portfolio of their Regents essays, and periodically return to their past writing, select one from the past to revise, and then reflect on their improved skills.

Figure 8: Sample Cover from Essay Packet

TEXT: *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

SELECT <u>ONE</u> OF THE CRITICAL LENSES BELOW.

Critical Lens:

> "Defeat is the greatest teacher…"
> - Sarah Bickens

Critical Lens:

> "All literature shows us the power of emotion. It is emotion, not reason that motivates characters in literature."
> - Duff Brenna

GUIDELINES:
Be sure to
- Provide a valid interpretation of the critical lens that clearly establishes the criteria for analysis
- Indicate whether you agree *or* disagree with the quote as you have interpreted it
- Use Their Eyes Were Watching God to support your opinion
- Use the criteria suggested by the critical lens to analyze the novel
- Avoid plot summary. Instead, use specific references to appropriate literary elements (for example: theme, characterization, setting, point of view) to develop your analysis
- Organize your ideas in a unified and coherent manner
- Specify the author and title of Their Eyes Were Watching God
- Follow the conventions of standard written English

* Be sure to have FOUR paragraphs – introduction, body paragraph 1, body paragraph 2, and a conclusion
* Be sure to use at least one LITERARY TERM per body paragraph
* Be sure to EXPLAIN how your example(s) prove the critical lens true or false

* DO NOT use quotations. Instead, describe SPECIFIC examples and IDENTIFY each example as a LITERARY TERM.
*Although the real Regents exam will ask you to write about TWO texts, for this essay write BOTH body paragraphs about *Eyes*

Figure 9: Sample Page of Essay Packet

Name:_____ Section:_____ Date:_____

English 5 – Writing BODY PARAGRAPH 1 worksheet – CRITICAL LENS

REMEMBER: T E L E C

1. **T**OPIC SENTENCE [The first example that proves the quote true/false is…]

_____

2. **E**XAMPLE(S) [One event that shows this is when …]

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. **L** ITERARY TERM [This is an example of _____.]

_____

_____

4. **E**XPLAIN [This proves the CL true because…]

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. **C**ONCLUDE YOUR PARAGRAPH [Restate TS using different words.]

_____

_____

Group Essay Writing

By using packets described earlier, each student writes numerous essays with a view to internalizing these steps through repeated practice. However, another productive way to work is group essay writing. As students write more and more, they remember the steps created to help them recall important information. It is important to note that, for teachers, managing the sheer quantity of papers can be overwhelming. To counter this, group essay writing allows students to practice their writing while minimizing the number of final products to grade. In pairs or

groups of four, students come to a consensus about the task at hand. Then, using the steps for writing each paragraph, each student takes a "step" (person one: topic sentence; person two: examples and literary device; person three: explanation; and person four: concluding sentence). Students then collaborate, putting these pieces together and constructing a coherent essay. This activity helps maximize learning in heterogeneous groups. Stronger writers can support and serve as examples for struggling writers, while reinforcing their own skills. Providing students with opportunities to become familiar with the test format and practice specific, related skills is a critical element for their development of the overall skills necessary to meet high standards.

Removing the Scaffolding: Real Test Writing

Students must begin to eventually move away from these "training wheels" if they are ultimately to be independently successful on the state exam. Thus, as the first quarter comes to an end in eleventh grade, students move away from using the packets. While students are still encouraged to use the steps, they must begin to do so independently, with less prompting from worksheets or peers. In preparation for the examination, students are taught how to use the steps as pre-writing preparation for their essay under actual testing conditions, using scratch paper to set up an outline based on the mnemonic steps for each paragraph. In brief, the reduction of teacher-provided cues and the expectation of self-generated prompts is a key component toward students meeting identified expectations on outcome tests.

Figure 1: Critical Lens Essay Rubric

Student Name: _____   **CRITICAL LENS RUBRIC**

Step 1 – Introductory Paragraph
- ☐ You *explain* what the critical lens means (5).
- ☐ You *agree or disagree* with the critical lens (5).
- ☐ You *preview literary evidence* from the text(s) that supports OR disproves the critical lens (10). You discuss this evidence in each body paragraph.

Total Points – Introduction: _____ /20

Step 2 – Body Paragraph That Supports Thesis
- ☐ You begin with a *topic sentence* that introduces *specific evidence* (3).
- ☐ You present 1-2 specific *examples from the text* (not plot summary) that support the topic sentence of the paragraph. You include a **quotation** and **literary terms** (10).
- ☐ You *explain* how your example connects to the critical lens (10).
- ☐ You end with a *concluding sentence* that summarizes the main idea(s) of your body paragraph (2).

Total Points – Body Paragraph I: _____ /25

Step 3 – Body Paragraph That Supports Thesis
- ☐ You begin with a *topic sentence* that introduces *specific evidence* (3).
- ☐ You present 1-2 specific *examples from the text* that support the topic sentence of the paragraph. You include a **quotation** and **literary terms** (10).
- ☐ You *explain* how your evidence connects to the critical lens (10).
- ☐ You end with a *concluding sentence* that summarizes the main idea(s) of your body paragraph (2).

Total Points – Body Paragraph II: _____ /25

Step 4 – Conclusion
- ☐ You *restate* your interpretation of the critical lens (5).
- ☐ You *summarize the evidence* from each BP that supports OR disproves the critical lens (5).
- ☐ You make a final comment that does one of the following:
  - ✓ You connect the thesis to a *larger life lesson or statement* or
  - ✓ You *synthesize* the evidence to draw a larger conclusion about the topic (5).

Total Points – Conclusion: _____ /15

Step 5 – Proofreading: Mechanics, Vocabulary, & Tone
- ☐ You have used effective *proofreading* to eliminate typographical, spelling, and/or grammatical errors in your writing (5).
- ☐ Your paper is *formal* and uses *grade-level vocabulary*. You do not use *slang*, *contractions*, or *personal pronouns* (5).
- ☐ Your paper meets the *presentation standard* outlined for this assignment (5).

Total Points – Proofreading: _____ /15

One Thing You Did Well:
_____

One Thing You Should Work to Improve:
_____

GRADE: _____ / 100 = _____

Supportive School Rituals

In order to be successful, students need strong retention skills. Statewide examinations sometimes expect students to retain information one, two, or even three years later. If many of the strategies and methods are used for each unit, teachers can collect all logs, major projects and essay assessments to be stored in student portfolios. At the end of each year, completed work can be placed in the portfolio for next year. By the end of Junior year when students take the required state exam and the SAT exam, they have a full portfolio of previously read literature. Providing a semester or yearly review of the literature covered, the seemingly enormous task set before students becomes more manageable. Although test-taking skills are also infused into the eleventh grade English curriculum, as the state English exam approaches in June, teachers intensify test preparation. Students play review games, go over texts in groups, and take smaller assessments to ensure they thoroughly know the content and skills they need to excel on the test.

Conclusion

High school teachers working in inclusive classrooms face many challenges on a daily basis, particularly those in urban contexts. This article has described selected approaches of two teachers who work collaboratively with special educators in supporting students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. Regardless of disability labels such as LD, ADD, ADHA, BD, and Speech and Language Disorders, all students except those with severe and multiple disabilities are required to partake in academically rigorous courses resulting in state determined exit examinations. In choosing classic traditional and multicultural literature and teaching it in innovative ways tied to the nonnegotiable

exam, these teachers demonstrate the difference between "teaching to the test" and creative teaching *toward* the test (Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk, 1998). In course evaluations, students consistently state how prepared they feel not only for the actual state exam, but also for the demands of the college classroom. One student states, "Since English is a second language, I feel much more confident in writing," while another notes, "I was really unable to write a structured essay before this course," and yet another remarks, "I am now able to write a four paragraph essay in one hour without stopping." Recent annual passing rates on the ELA exit exam range between 88 - 98% for all students, with and without disabilities, indicating that the use of motivating texts and creative approaches to teaching and learning has been successful in this context. In this article we have featured urban high school classrooms because we believe they pose significant challenges to teachers and the students who inhabit them and wanted to offer ways in which challenges could be met. At the same time, we respectfully acknowledge that a similar breadth of diversity (of dis/ability, race, ethnicity, language, etc.) often exists in suburban and rural communities and all methods suggested here are equally applicable to enrich the ELA classroom in a wide range of settings. Furthermore, while these successful methods are rooted in evidence-based practice, their effectiveness is due, in large part, to the ongoing collaboration between special and general education teachers. Ultimately, while meeting mandates and providing test preparation are reasons for using the approaches suggested, we must not forget the basic, grounded, caring approach of providing all students the differentiation they need in order to learn in school, and beyond.

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Figure 2: A Selection of Classic and Multicultural Texts with Potential Activities Related to Skill Building for State Assessment, and Essential Questions

Activity	Examples of Use	Skills Addressed	Possible Essential Question
Alternative Ending: Students write, either individually or in groups, a new ending to a text. Students must use similar narrative techniques as the author. Students perform the ending to the class.	*Of Mice and Men (1937),* John Steinbeck: Change the shocking ending and perform to class.	Plot and character review; use of dialect; making predictions and examining cause and effect.	How can all people find happiness in a society? Is the outcome of one's life pre-determined?
Modern Versions: Students write a modern version of a text, using some of the basic plot, characters, and narrative techniques, but adapting them to a modern story-line. Students may also work in groups and act out these versions if desired.	*The Odyssey (7th century B.C.),* Homer: Write a modern version of the classic story. *Romeo and Juliet (1623)* William Shakespeare: Students write and perform a modern version of the balcony scene.	Plot review; use of literary devices such as metaphor and Homeric epithet, hyperbole, natural metaphors, review of themes in the scene.	Why have "classics" stood the test of time? How do we still "live" the "classics" today?
Trials: The antagonist is put on trial for his transgressions during the book. Characters are called as witnesses and present evidence from the text to support their attacks on the antagonist. A judge or panel of judges reaches a decision at the end.	*The Odyssey*: Put Odysseus on trial; call his deceased men to cast blame on his leadership.	Themes such as heroism, fate, circumstances; review of plot events.	What makes a hero? Why is no one ever truly perfect? Is to err human?
Town council meetings: Similar to trials, but instead of prosecuting a "villain," all of the characters come together to answer a question or solve the central problem of the text.	*The Bluest Eye (1970),* Toni Morrison: The town of Lorain, Ohio meets after Pecola's rape and decides who is to blame and how to prevent this from happening in the future.	Plot and character review; analysis of larger themes such as the effect of society on an individual.	Does society create the individual, or does the individual create society? Can a person escape her environment?

The "Talk Show": Inspired by Jerry Springer or Oprah, character meet on stage to "explore" their problems. This may include students acting as characters and being "interviewed."	*A Raisin in the Sun (1959),* Lorraine Hansberry: Facilitate therapy sessions between family members with some students acting as therapists. Analyze the relationship and suggest tips to help better it. *Fences (1985),* August Wilson: Characters from the play meet "on stage" and present their problems as "Jerry" tries to "save" the family.	Plot review; acting through a text-based review of characterization.	What defines a family? How can "dysfunction" become "function"?
Pre-reading historical debates: Students read the background behind controversial books and debate issues of racism or sexism behind them. Students can then return to these debates after having finished the book.	*The Crucible (1953),* Arthur Miller: Research into more modern witch hunts, debate the role of aggressive pursuit of a principle. *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn (1884),* Mark Twain: Readings on the banning of the book; debate use of the "n-word."	Reading factual/historical documents; debating a thesis using supporting evidence; detecting bias in writing. Introduction of the text in a historical and cultural context.	Are censorship and democracy able to coexist? How can literature be a tool for protest?
Diary or journal entries: Students keep a diary as a character, reacting to events in the story as they happen to the character.	*Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937),* Students keep a diary as Janie, reacting to events in her life and revealing her inner thoughts	Character and plot review; use of perspective; writing using literary devices.	Can a person really change? If something doesn't kill you, will it make you stronger?
Magazine and newspaper reporting: Students report what happens in a section of a text by writing newspaper headlines, gossip magazine pages, or editorials.	*Romeo and Juliet*: Gossip Magazine analysis of Act I in which students report plot action using the tone and narrative techniques of this genre. *The Color Purple (1982),* Alice Walker: students write newspaper editorials about Sophia's crime. Have half the class write from an African-American newspaper and the other half from a mainstream "White" newspaper.	Plot and character review; use of tone and perspective; connecting text to self. Plot and character review; use of tone and perspective; understanding bias in writing; exploring themes of racism and sexism.	How does who we are shape what we believe? How does bias affect one's writing? Is any source truly objective?

Silent debates: Students debate one or several topics by responding silently on paper and then passing their response to another student who responds. After papers are passed several times, students may share a summary of all opinions. This can also be done as a "carousel" where students move around the room.	*The Bluest Eye*: Following Pecola's rape, students silently react to what happened and debate if Cholly is fully to blame.	Plot and character review; creating a thesis and supporting with evidence; debating skills.	How can there be multiple answers to the same problem? Are people always responsible for their actions?
Acting scenes or lines: Students act out a key scene in a text for their peers. For more challenging texts, students may even act out a line or two of great significance.	*A Raisin in the Sun:* Have each group perform one scene for the class and "teach" it, explaining the significance of the scene and its relation to the overall theme of the play.	Plot, character, and theme review; synthesis of the ending of the play; examining tone and conflict.	How can both good and bad things come out of conflict?

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