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Disrupt Texts – A Necessary Form of Classroom Disruption

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#DISTRUPTTEXTS

#DisruptTexts:
Dismantling and
Reimagining the
Literary Canon



Disrupt Texts – A Necessary Form of Classroom Disruption

I recently attended the introductory webinar for a seminar series called “[Disrupting the Canon: Moving Towards Anti-Racist Teaching with Text Selection and Preparation](#)” put on by [Achieve the Core](#). As a lifelong lover of literature, the title caught my eye. This was the first time I had heard of the [#Disrupt Texts](#) movement and I wanted to learn more.

The movement was founded by [Tricia Ebarvia](#), [Lorena German](#), [Dr. Kim Parker](#), and [Julia Torres](#). The website describes the movement as a “crowdsourced, grass roots effort *by teachers for teachers* to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve.”

The idea isn’t that all canonical texts are “bad” and must therefore be eliminated. Educators just need to recognize whose story is being told (and therefore validated) by the books they choose to include in their curricula. The founders of the movement want educators to “think carefully about the message their current curriculum sends to students about whose voices and stories are worthy of academic study” ([Schwartz](#)). In doing so, they can balance the narrative of the predominantly white male canon with counternarratives and texts that complement the canonical classics.

In her article, [We Teach Who We Are: Unpacking Our Identities](#), Tricia Ebarvia really hits the point home:

To me, #DisruptTexts means applying a critical, anti-bias, anti-racist pedagogy to all texts—and yes, in many cases, that will mean confronting, directly, the problematic issues inherent in traditionally canonical texts (and in some cases, removing those texts to amplify the voices of others). That said, a frequent line of reasoning from those who defend the “canon” is that there are certain “literary” works that are rich and rigorous that all kids should have to be “educated,” that they’re missing out on something critical without [fill in the blank]. But here’s the thing: Most teachers, especially secondary English teachers, were educated in a system and in a “canon” of texts that included some voices but excluded many more others. To call into question the validity of the “canon” means that we have to acknowledge our complicity in this exclusion. I think we need to recognize that when we defend the “canon,” we might also be defending our own perceived expertise. And when that expertise is challenged, it feels personal.

In addition to providing complimentary texts to fill in the gaps of the dominant narrative, educators should also teach students how to think critically about any text with which they are engaging. Julia Torres explains that a “core part of this work is recognizing that every text has a particular perspective and was written at a particular time” and that teachers “must recognize that context, and help students to interrogate what it could mean for the text” ([Schwartz](#)). It is essential for educators to help students consume texts through a critical lens that takes these factors into account, since “literature cannot be divorced from the social, political and cultural context in which it was made” ([Schwartz](#)).

The four pillars of the movement are:

- Pillar #1: Continuously interrogate our own biases to understand how they inform our teaching.
- Pillar #2: Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.
- Pillar #3: Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.
- Pillar #4: Work in community with others, especially BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color).

More information about the movement can be found in this article, [How the #Disrupt Texts Movement Can Help English Teachers Be More Inclusive](#), by Katrina Schwartz.

Project-Based Learning – An Interview with Resident PBL Expert, Kyle Anderson

Whenever questions come in from the field, such as “*How can I _____?*” or “*What’s the best way to _____?*,” the response from the Agency of Education’s Arts Specialist, [Kyle Anderson](#), is always the same: “Project-Based Learning.” Though this may be a bit of an exaggeration, it is true that the tenets of Project-Based Learning (PBL) have many applications that result in benefits to students and teachers alike. So, what exactly is Project-Based Learning and how can its implementation help educators in their current learning model?

“Project-based learning is an instructional approach that provides ample opportunity to construct and apply knowledge to a student-developed solution to a standards-based challenge,” Anderson explained when I asked him to sum up PBL in one sentence, but he didn’t stop there. He wanted to clarify that PBL units are not the same thing as “passion projects” in which students are doing “whatever they want,” but rather “determining *how* and *why* they are learning key knowledge and skills from school disciplines and beyond.” He also explained that the “most powerful units are the ones that aim to reach an audience outside the classroom with the student-developed public product. This requires students to take part in authentic processes (e.g., action research).”

Among many other benefits, Anderson cited PBL as his “primary engagement and behavior management tool” because “the more ownership students had in their learning, the more invested they were in it.” Having students invested in their learning may be more important now than ever, so any strategy to boost that is worth exploring.

Recognizing the current challenges teachers are facing and the incredible time constraints imposed on them, I asked Anderson point blank why teachers should take the time to learn about PBL right now. He replied that PBL gives students the “opportunity to engage in authentic performance assessments, demonstrate multiple ways of learning, learn asynchronously, and expand upon their strengths and interests through school learning.” He continued by highlighting the fact that these are all “critical components in our unexplored contexts (i.e., in a remote, hybrid, or socially distanced in-person model). With Project-Based Learning, students gain a better sense of metacognitive processes, allowing them to independently apply their own way of learning and understanding to a unit.”

Considering that the needs of teachers span the continuum of learning models, he went on to explain how PBL can help teachers facilitate different iterations of hybrid learning:

The simplest way to explain how PBL can work well in hybrid learning models would be as a “catch and release” approach. With all of the [appropriate design elements](#) in place and key phases planned, teachers can “reel” the students in (i.e., engage and instruct), then release (i.e., send students on their self-determined inquiry path). Then “reel” them in again (i.e., critique and revise, provide formative assessments, engage and instruct), then release (i.e., refine and inquire, develop their product). This process helps keep students productive when on their own inquiry path. It also ensures that students are hitting the appropriate milestones and developing their public product in a timely manner.

Out of respect for the hard work of Vermont educators and acknowledging all the uncharted territory they are being asked to navigate, my final question for Anderson involved soliciting his advice for teachers who are interested in PBL but don’t know where to begin. His answer was consistent with everything I have read on the topic: start small. Additionally, he suggested teachers consider the readiness of their students to engage in PBL. “If student-driven lessons are not the norm in your class, students might not be able to self-manage a sustained Project-Based Learning unit yet.” He suggests “adding voice and choice and a product in your current class objectives so that planning an idea is essential if students are to meet that objective.”

The bottom line is for teachers to get students into the habit of planning, producing, and reflecting. Students should practice writing out a plan for their product; experimenting with different kinds of graphic organizers can help. Then, students need to “produce something in response to your challenge. It’s important that students apply their plan and their learning to a product or action.” The final step is offering students the opportunity to reflect on their learning process as well as their product. “Planning, producing, and reflecting,” Anderson reminds us, “are embedded throughout key phases of Project-Based Learning, so structuring short lessons in these three key phases can support student and teacher readiness to engage in a [Gold Standard PBL](#) unit.”

For more information about Project-Based Learning and its implementation, visit [PBL Works](#) or see the resources below.

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Resources

Read more about this month's topics here:

Disrupt Texts:

- [How the #Disrupt Texts Movement Can Help English Teachers Be More Inclusive](#), by Katrina Schwartz.

Project-Based Learning:

- [Project-Based Learning: A Path to Proficiency](#)
- [Project-Based Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach in Blended Environments](#)
- [Essential Components for Implementing Project-Based Learning](#)

Professional Offerings and Activities

#Disrupt Texts Slow Chat: The weekly [#DisruptTexts](#) slow chat on Twitter provides teachers with an opportunity to discuss ways to “disrupt traditional pedagogies by suggesting alternative titles and approaches through thoughtful pairings, counter-narratives, and inclusive, diverse texts sets” ([Disrupt Texts](#)). For more information about the #Disrupt Texts movement, visit [their website](#).

Poetry Out Loud School Registration: [Vermont Poetry Out Loud](#) (POL) provides pathways for high school students to explore, memorize, and recite great works of poetry and enhance presentation techniques. [Registration is open](#) and more information is available on the [Vermont Arts Council](#) website. Visit the [POL website](#) for resources. For more information, contact [Troy Hickman via email](#) or at (802) 402-4496.

Profile in Courage Essay Contest: The [JFK Library Foundation](#) is accepting submissions for the 2021 contest. High school students may submit an essay about an elected official's political courage. Deadline for submissions is January 15, 2021. Visit the [contest's webpage for more information](#).

\$1000 for 1000 Words Contest: The Leyla Beban Young Authors Foundation is accepting submissions from students in grades 6-12 for their [2021 creative writing contest](#). Each entrant may submit a fiction piece consisting of exactly 1,000 words on any topic. More information and a printable flyer can be found on the [Foundation's website](#).

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