

Jennifer E. Polidoro. Choosing Their Own Adventure: Student-Selected Reading in Secondary English Classes. A Master's Project for the M.S. in L.S. degree. July, 2013. 17 pages. Advisor: Sandra Hughes-Hassell

This paper provides a discussion of the process involved in creating a professional development website for educators. *Choosing their own adventure: Student-selected reading in secondary English classes* is a free online resource that provides teachers and school librarians with professional development and instructional materials related to self-selected reading instruction.

The website can be accessed at the following address:

<https://sites.google.com/site/choosingtheirownadventure/home>

Headings:

Reading

Reading and books

Reading, Choice of

Literacy—teenagers

CHOOSING THEIR OWN ADVENTURE: STUDENT-SELECTED READING IN
SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSES

by
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I. Introduction

Problem

In this age of assessment and accountability, English teachers are so hemmed in by rigid school and county teaching guidelines that they often lack the freedom to be innovative. Many are afraid to stray from the prescribed curriculum, which typically focuses on whole-class instruction of a prescribed set of classic novels. Most high school English teachers staunchly push students through these classics of yore, though it may take weeks or even months to finish a book, often losing many readers along the way...

Our current approach to secondary reading instruction in the United States is not working. We alienate too many young readers over the course of their high school careers, and we are not adequately preparing them for the literacy demands of college and life after graduation. In a 2007 report on reading by the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia broke it down this way, "The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years." The facts speak for themselves:

- While today's 9-and 13-year-old students scored higher in reading than their 1970's counterparts, according to The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012, today's 17-year-olds did not show similar gains (National, 2012).

- According to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, 38% of high school seniors performed at or above the proficient level in reading. An alarming 27% of twelfth grade students scored below the "basic" level in reading. (National, 2010).
- Although African American and Hispanic students made gains in reading scores, a racial/ethnic achievement gap persists (National, 2012).
- Only 52% of ACT-tested high school graduates in 2011 met ACT's College Readiness Benchmark for Reading and were deemed ready for college-level reading (ACT, 2011). In fact, more students are on track to being ready for college-level reading in eighth and tenth grade than they are by the time they reach their senior year (ACT, 2006).
- Approximately 40% of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek (Achieve, Inc., 2005).

While many factors are likely contributing to the deplorable state of literacy in our nation, one of the main problems is very simple: adolescents are not reading enough. According to the 2012 NEA report, the percentage of 13-17-year olds who read for pleasure has decreased since 1984 (National, 2012). In fact, a 2007 study found that 15-24 year-olds spend only 7-10 minutes per day on voluntary reading— about 60% less time than the average American (National, 2007). This is detrimental to students' academic success and their preparation for life after school, since voluntary reading is strongly correlated with achievement and workplace readiness. According to *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*, students of all ages who read for fun outside of class daily, or a couple times a week, scored higher on standardized

tests than those who reported reading for fun a few times a year or less (National, 2012). Indeed, research suggests that voluntary reading is not only correlated with better test scores in reading, it is also linked to higher scores in writing, listening, vocabulary, and grammar (Krashen, 2005).

Solution

Whole-class, teacher selected novel instruction should not be the only form of reading in a high school English classroom. Educators can better support the intellectual and developmental needs of adolescent readers by providing them with opportunities to choose their own reading materials. English teachers and school librarians, as natural partners in this process, should work together to plan structured student-selected literature units. By allowing students to choose their own books as part of a structured literature unit, we can inspire them to actually read. The more they read, the better they will read. Not only will students be prepared for any standardized assessment we have to throw at them, they will be prepared for life. If we can successfully (re)kindle students' love of reading, we will create a more literate and intellectually curious generation of *readers*.

My Approach & Research Interest

As a former high school English teacher, future librarian, and life-long reader, I am eager to foster the love of reading and literature in others. I also consider it incredibly important that we equip adolescents with the literacies they will need in order to be informed and thoughtful 21st century citizens. To that end, I designed *Choosing their own adventure: Student selected reading in high school English classes*, a free online resource that provides teachers and school librarians with professional development and

instructional materials related to self-selected reading instruction. My hope is that educators will apply this information and these resources towards the implementation of student-selected reading units in their own classrooms. I want teachers and school librarians to see that there is certainly space (and reason!) for including student choice in their approach to reading instruction. Educators can provide adolescents with engaging, meaningful lessons, while preparing them for the demands of Common Core standardized tests and the realities of modern literacy.

To access *Choosing their own adventure: Student selected reading in high school English classes*, please click on the following link:

<https://sites.google.com/site/choosingtheirownadventure/home>

II. Considerations

Target Audience

Secondary English teachers and school librarians are my target audience for this website. My rationale for this decision is that the majority of direct instruction in reading and literacy occurs in English classrooms and school libraries. Furthermore, my dual backgrounds in secondary English instruction and library science made me more naturally inclined to approach this topic from those angles. I do firmly believe that content area literacy instruction is very important, so if my website also assists teachers in other disciplines, even better.

Since I wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible with my resource, I decided to make it an entirely free, open-source website. To ensure ease of access for all users, I needed to make sure that all of the videos, podcasts, articles, lesson plans, and other resources that I used would be freely accessible to everyone. Thus, in creating my website I had to limit myself to using other open-source materials. I do not think that this was ultimately that much of a limitation in terms of my finished product, but it did make my search for appropriate materials more arduous. It was often challenging to find current scholarly articles that were freely available.

Scope & Definition of Terms

Prior to embarking on this project, I needed to determine the nature and scope of my website. Since adolescent literacy is an extremely broad topic with many associated

strands, I had to figure out a way to narrow my focus. I decided to concentrate on “self-selected reading,” since, as I mentioned, this is my particular area of interest. Self-selected reading is not to be confused with “sustained silent reading” (seemingly also SSR), though the latter is certainly related to the former. It broadened my topic too much to do fair justice to sustained silent reading in my website. I decided that my focus would be on the *act* of choosing one’s own books, not on *where* students were actually doing their reading (at school, at home, etc.). I soon discovered that self-selected reading was only one way of describing the phenomenon that I was striving to research. Other names for this concept include “free voluntary reading,” “student-selected reading,” and “independent reading.” I indubitably use many of these words interchangeably throughout my website, but I am most partial to “student-selected reading,” since it puts the emphasis on *students*. I named my website “Choosing their own adventure: Student-choice reading in secondary English classrooms” because I wanted to underscore this importance. Also, I firmly believe that reading is a great adventure, and it should be treated as such. Adolescents are far more likely to become life-long readers if they find joy in the activity.

Approach & Organization

My goals in approaching the website were twofold: to provide English teachers and school librarians with professional development materials and activities related to self-selected reading; and, to offer English teachers and school librarians a variety of relevant lesson plans and resources to help them implement some variation of self-selected reading in their own classrooms. To that end, I needed to figure out not only what sort of content to include in the site, but how to organize it. This was not always a

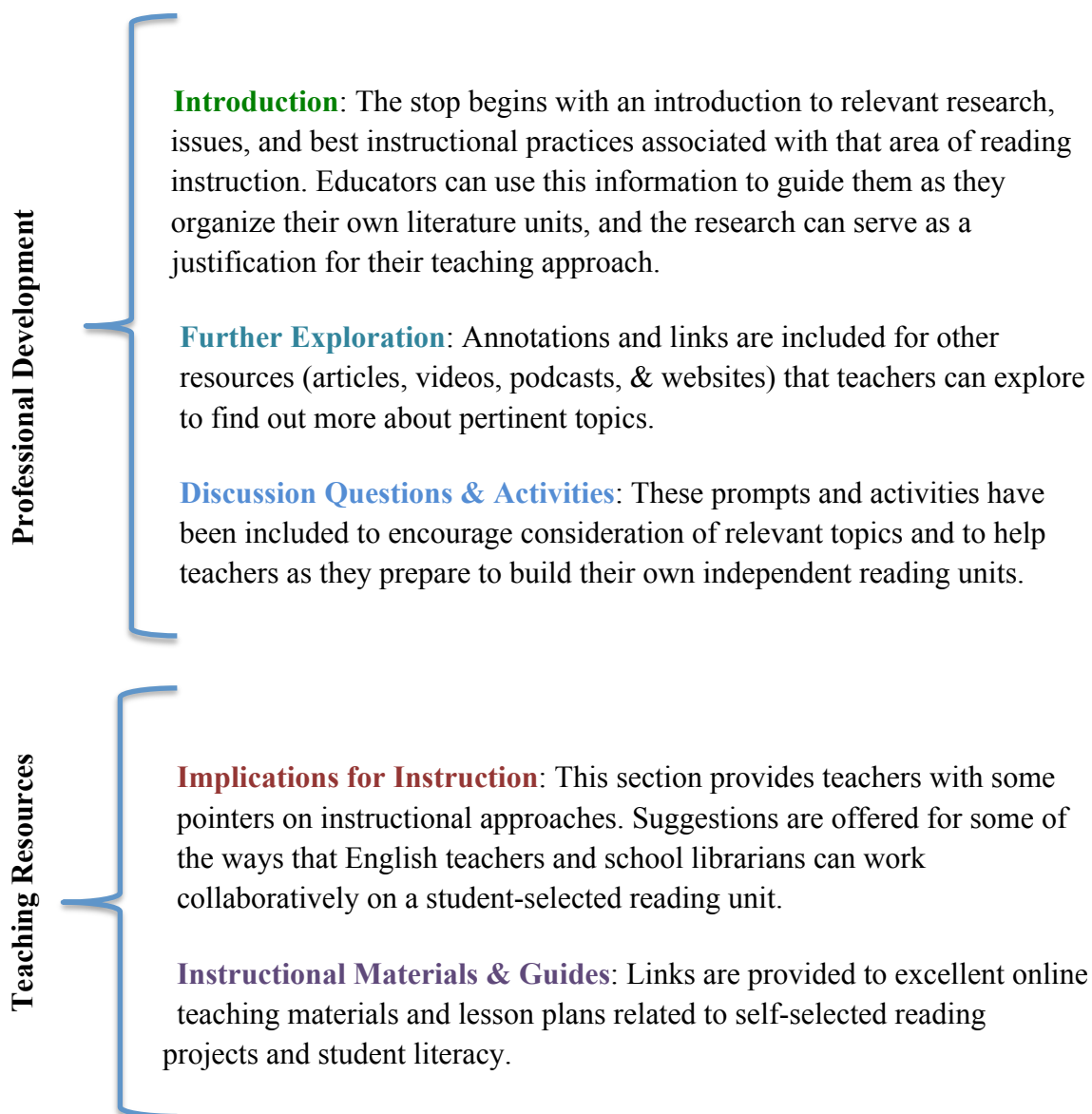
clear-cut matter, since some of the information and resources I ended up finding could feasibly fit into more than one of my sections.

I decided to break my topic into seven different sections, or "stops," based on the logical steps involved in planning a student-selected reading unit: "Stop 1: Knowing Readers," "Stop 2: Motivating Readers," "Stop 3: Assessing Reading," "Stop 4: Selecting Books," "Stop 5: Supporting Readers," "Stop 6: Encouraging Community," and "Stop 7: Beyond Books." I used this terminology to stick with my "choose your own adventure" theme, and in selecting my general categories, I was inspired by the approach of Nancy Hobbs, Kristen Sacco, and Myra R. Oleynik in their book, *Personalized Reading: It's a Piece of PIE*. While this book focuses on self-selected reading with younger students and is geared towards elementary school teachers, I thought the authors took a very practical, progressive approach. I liked that they included school librarians in the equation, and that they discussed how school librarians and English teachers could partner up for the planning and implementation of self-selected reading programs. In fact, I decided to do the same thing on my website. For each of my Stops, I included tips for collaboration between English teachers and school librarians. Case in point, for Stop 1: Knowing Readers, I offer ideas for ways that educators can work together to get to know their students better. Since English teachers see their students on a regular basis, they have ample opportunity to discover their students' literacy levels, reading habits, and book preferences. School librarians can glean useful information from their routine interactions with students, circulation statistics of library materials, and student reading interest surveys. Thus, together, English teachers and school librarians can develop a more complete understanding of the needs of their students.

It makes sense to peruse the Stops of this website in order, since they have been arranged in a natural progression, and as some of the ideas included in the later sections do build upon those mentioned earlier. However, teachers and school librarians will be free to use these resources in whatever ways they deem most useful. I included a “Using this Site” page in order to make the website more organized and easy to navigate.

Usability and design issues will be discussed in more depth further on in this paper.

In order to create a sense of consistency across the Stops, I organized each of them in the same general manner:



Like their students, teachers and school librarians appreciate a livelier, more interactive approach to instruction. In order to make my site both informative and engaging, I included videos, podcasts, discussion questions, and activities along with the research summaries and articles for the professional development segment. By taking this more dynamic approach to professional development, I was also trying to model the sort of instruction that I am hoping to inspire.


This screen shot provides a sense of the sort of media that I included in my website.

Further Exploration

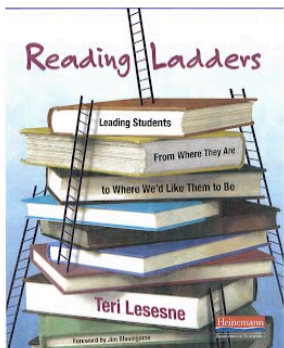
Podcast

[Ladders and Scaffolds for Teens and Tweens](#) This Choice Literacy podcast features an interview of Terry Lesesne, the author of *Reading Ladders* and *Naked Reading*. Lesene explains the concept of reading ladders and offers tips for implementing them in the classroom. She also discusses the importance of keeping up with excellent young adult literature, and she recommends a variety of titles and authors. Click [here](#) to access a free sample chapter of her book. Terry Lesesne's [website](#) provides more information about her work, and her blog, [The Goddess of YA Literature](#), offers an ongoing commentary on all things related to YA and reading instruction.

Video



In this short film clip, an English Language Learner teacher, Amber Prentice, discusses the importance of helping students find independent reading books that are interesting and just challenging enough. According to Prentice, students should be able to read with about a 95% accuracy. She shares her method for determining whether a text is at a student's reading level.



Design Decisions

I am most familiar with Google Sites, so I decided to make my website using that application. Since, as Watzman (2003) asserts, information design should be conducted purposefully, and design should never be merely a “decorative afterthought” (264), I made sure that my decisions were based on the principles of effective web design. For example, I decided to use a horizontal navigation bar at the top of my website with distinct navigational buttons for each of the Stops, because I know that information

seekers are naturally attracted to information that is the most prominent in terms of location, size, and general appearance.

Since best practices in web design involve consistency in organization, navigation, typeface, and design, I endeavored to maintain a uniform approach to organization and design throughout the website (Lynch, 2009). Nielsen (2003), asserts that consistency is one of the most important usability principles, saying, “The more users' expectations prove right, the more they will feel in control of the system and the more they will like it. And the more the system breaks users' expectations, the more they will feel insecure” (9). To keep each of the individual pages more consistent, organized, and clear, I color-coded all of the titles to the different sections (shown above), and I made sure that all of my links were noticeable. I also used the same banner image at the top of every page, and I included uniformly formatted quotes that were unique and relevant to the content of each Stop.

This screen shot provides a better sense of the layout and design of my website.



Information-Seeking Process

While my approach to this website focuses more specifically on self-selected reading, in order to provide comprehensive coverage of that topic, I needed to research a variety of other related subjects. As mentioned previously, I discovered very early on in my research process that adolescent literacy is a broad and incredibly complex field. My argument for student-choice in reading instruction rested on a variety of factors. For example, I had to find evidence that there is indeed an adolescent literacy/reading crisis, and I also needed proof that self-selected reading is the solution to the problem. Neither of these goals proved difficult to accomplish, since there is plenty of information to support both claims. I discovered a plethora of useful websites, articles, and books on the topics. For example, the test score statistics I found on the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that there is a problem with adolescent literacy. The research of Stephen Krashen proves that self-selected reading increases students' motivation to read, promotes greater literacy, and even improves their scores on standardized tests (Krashen, 2005). The classroom experiences of such educators as Dr. Alfred Tatum, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, and Cris Tovani, as discussed on their websites and in their various publications, provide further corroboration to these claims. Since I had so many information sources, it was fairly straightforward to compose the research overviews that I included in the introductions to each of the Stops.

Finding relevant lesson plans and teaching resources related to self-selected reading, while time-consuming, was not difficult. I referred primarily to such sites and organizations as Scholastic, ReadWriteThink, LEARN NC, Adlit.org, the Young Adult

Library Services Association (YALSA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Ultimately, the vast majority of the lesson plans I included in my website came from ReadWriteThink's Thinkfinity initiative, an amazingly comprehensive and diverse collection of materials. In selecting my lessons and learning tools, I gave preference to resources that incorporated modern technology and that took a more student-centered approach to instruction.

My most significant challenge was in selecting which information sources to use for the professional development piece of my website. For one thing, as explained earlier, I was determined to only include resources that were freely available to everyone. This meant that I was not able to provide links to some of the latest articles published by such sources as *School Library Journal*, *American Journal of Education*, or ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). Also, since I am recommending these materials to other professional educators, I wanted to be certain to choose materials that are relevant, useful, and accurate. To help me make these selection decisions, I investigated the broader topic of adolescent literacy in greater depth, and I tried to find materials that had been written, recorded, and filmed by big names in the field. It was also important for me to ensure that my website was an accurate representation of our diverse community. To that end, I tried to select resources that reflected a multiplicity of perspectives. Whenever possible, I also strove to include current and timely content.

III. Conclusion

While I feel confident about my website, I am curious to know what other teachers and school librarians will make of it, since I have not had the opportunity to test the site on many people. I provided educators with the information and resources that I thought would prove most helpful, based on my research, and based on my own classroom experiences teaching high school English and working in school libraries. My approach to this project was also influenced by my time spent as a graduate research assistant at LEARN NC, since that is where I gained most of my background knowledge in web design and teacher outreach. In fact, one of my goals is to solicit LEARN NC's help for spreading the word about *Choosing their own adventure: Student selected reading in high school English classes*. In order to reach the widest audience possible, it will also be important to reach out to other, similar channels, such as YALSA and AASL.

I am hoping that English teachers and school librarians will find my website informative and useful, and that *Choosing their own adventure: Student selected reading in high school English classes* will encourage educators to implement self-selected reading units in their own classrooms. I truly believe that adolescents will be more inspired to read if they are allowed to choose their own materials from time to time as part of a balanced curriculum. Research has indicated that it can take as little as one "home run" book to turn a student on to reading (Von Sprecken, 2000). It is our duty as educators to help teens find their "home run" books.

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