

# Teacher Round Table—A Conversation Inspired by Ashley Dallacqua’s “Reading When the World Is on Fire: Teaching with Comics and Other Multimodal Text Sets”

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*Study and Scrutiny has focused on the publication of critical and empirical studies surrounding the scholarship and critical merits of Young Adult Literature. Because other journals provide a space for pedagogical practices concerning YA, the editors have intentionally shied away from explaining to teachers how to teach a particular title in a particular way. Still, the intention of the journal has been, in part, to support the learning of secondary students as readers and the classroom practices of their teachers. Teacher Round Table hopes to serve as a space to open the conversation surrounding YA literature, its critical merits, and ways that the research might serve teachers as they make curriculum choices about both texts and strategies. The idea is to bring teachers, as intellectuals, into conversation surrounding the scholarship of a featured study.*

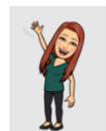
*For this round table, five secondary teachers joined Shelly Unsicker-Durham via Zoom to focus on Ashley Dallacqua’s article “Reading When the World Is on Fire: Teaching with Comics and Other Multimodal Text Sets” from S & S Issue: 5.2, Image and Text. Jason DeHart, special editor, invited three of his Tennessee colleagues and Shelly invited two of hers from Oklahoma, for a conversation that included graphic novels, classroom instruction, and censorship. Words and images provided by the teachers, along with the following conversation, have been edited for clarity, style, and organization.*

## ROUND TABLE INTRODUCTIONS

Let’s begin by introducing ourselves. I’m **SHELLY UNSICKER-DURHAM**, and I’ve spent most of my life in the eighth grade, but I’ve taught other grades along with teaching a methods course, *The Teaching of English*, at OU. I’ve been in education for about 26 years now. A recent graphic novel: I had a past student recommend Octavia Butler to me. Her novel *Kindred* has recently been turned into a graphic novel, making it easier for me to do a quick reading. So, I loved *Kindred* by Octavia Butler.

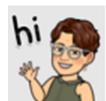


SHELLY



KAMRIN

Hi Guys, I’m **KAMRIN GREEN**. I teach currently in Oklahoma City downtown at a charter school—this will be my fifth year. I spent 10 years in Moore Public Schools. A recent graphic novel I’ve read. Okay... so, I had to look up my Good Reads because I couldn’t even remember which one was the last. But a graphic novel just came out called *Swim Team*. It’s by Johnny Christmas. It’s about a swim... team... but there’s a lot of [historical] background. The main character is Black, and she learns a lot about why she never learned to swim. It was more of a systematic thing than just... Black people don’t know how to swim. There was a lot of background that I was unaware of. So, I thought that it was really good. It was really sweet story, too.



BROOKE

I’m **BROOKE BIANCHI-PENNINGTON**. I am in Knoxville, Tennessee at Hardin Valley Academy, and I have taught every high school grade, at every level at this point. I spend a lot of my time with sophomores, though. This will be my thirteenth-year teaching. I don’t know the most recent [graphic novel] I’ve read. So, I just went to my go-to graphic novel, recommendation, which is a *100 Nights of Hero* by Isabel Greenberg. It’s one I recommend to students a lot—a really good one. She also recently [wrote] a halfway fictional, half-way non-fictional graphic novel about the Brontë’s. That’s actually the most recent one I’ve read of hers, *Glasstown* by Isabel Greenberg.



RAY

My name is **RAY ROBINSON**. I am the Title I Literacy Coach at Highland West Junior High School in Moore, Oklahoma. I’m getting ready to start my thirteenth year of teaching. This would be my sixth year at the junior high level. I taught sixth grade for seven years before that, before making the leap to Junior High, which I absolutely love. As far as a graphic novel that I’ve recently read, Kwame Alexander’s *Crossover*. I know *Crossover* is one of my favorites—the novel in verse, but his graphic novel of *Crossover* was really good, as well. And it’s one of those where even if I can’t get kiddos to enjoy a novel in verse, I can get them usually hooked on the graphic novel. It’s really a great story.



SCOTT

I’ll jump in next. My name’s **SCOTT BEVILL**. I’m also in Knoxville, Tennessee. I’m at the L & N STEM Academy downtown—it’s a magnet school. This is my... just finished my first year there, after three years at the University of South Florida. And then finishing and going through my PhD at the University of Tennessee, and also Hardin Valley Academy. So, I think all told, I’ve taught since 2004. So, what is that—18 years(!)... at the high school and college level. I’m back in high school and kind of enjoying it. Most recent graphic novel, I think...

most recent new read for me was Gene Luen Yang’s *Boxers and Saints* which I read just a month or so ago, but I also read *Kindred* over the summer—that graphic novel adaptation is amazing! And I’ve been slowly gathering my collection of the kind of *The Absolute Sandman* editions that are along my wall, which are just another beautiful set of graphic novels that have so much literary interest for me.



PAUL

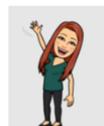
Alright, I’ll jump in. I’m **PAUL SAUSVILLE**. I’m teaching at Walker Valley High School, in Cleveland, Tennessee, just north of Chattanooga. I teach US History for eleventh graders, and I teach Journalism I and II for freshmen through seniors. I’ve been teaching for 20 years—14 at the middle school, 6 at the high school. I’m also an adjunct professor over at Lee University here in town. I get to teach the Teaching History and Business Methods class. I absolutely love that because I just get to experiment with those about to step into what *we* are doing full-time. Graphic novel? So, after watching *Black Messiah* and learning a little bit more about Fred Hampton, I picked up a graphic novel on the History of the Black Panther Party, and it’s pretty fantastic. And I had a student of mine, just this semester pick that book up, as well. We do what’s called a Panoply Project. We do a festival with our whole Humanities Academy, and she just ran with this whole project, that was very personal to her, but very relevant to what we were doing. And so, it was a very cool connect.

## THE CONVERSATION

So let’s jump into the Dallacqua article—what were your first impressions?



SHELLY



KAMRIN

I... really enjoyed reading the article. Um.... It gave me affirmation for my own teaching, like, *Oh, okay, I’m doing... I’m doing a good job*. Because so much of it was about giving kids books with characters that look like them. And that’s my number one priority. Always. I even wrote down some of the graphic novels that she used, so I could look them up later. But I really enjoyed it. I thought it was really relevant for today, especially with all the legislators trying to ban books—banning books with Brown and Black kids. So, it’s really relevant for the times, as well. Which makes sense. I think it was 2020 when the research was done.



BROOKE

I enjoyed reading it as well. But I definitely was thinking about it in my context and thinking about exactly, as you were saying, the legislation that’s coming out. So, I think what I really wanted was a little bit, maybe more of an emphasis on some of the instructional opportunities that are present within these, because it was really focused on the importance of representation and how that affected students, which I’m sure all of us here agree that that’s super important. But those are the exact kind of things being banned, as Kamrin said. So, when I need to justify the use of graphic novels, especially graphic novels like these, I definitely want a really heavy, instructional reason.

I think that’s an additional thing I’d like to see. Like, I love, exactly as you said, like it validates—this article validates a lot of the reasons I do things and helps me feeling not alone in that. But also, I want that instructional pull, because graphic novels are really helpful instructionally for lots of different reasons. Like for teaching multimodal literacy and meeting a lot of our standards,

like looking at things in different media or different depictions in one media or another. And I would really like to see the instructional pull to help in justifying the use of graphic novels.

One of the things I probably should explain is my connection to *Study and Scrutiny*. I've been Dr. Crag Hill's graduate assistant for a couple of years now: helping out with the journal and learning about academic reads and learning the difference between empirical research and critical studies. I've been asking, *What about the classroom teacher? How does this apply to the classroom teacher?* because that's where I have spent most of my life. But the intention with the journal has been to make sure that there is space for those empirical and critical studies. They've always pared back on the instructional pieces, on the pedagogy, because there are other spaces for those.



SHELLY

However, Brook, can you expand a little more? Like what would you like to have seen for the instructional piece?



BROOKE

Well, obviously the purpose of this article wasn't that. It was for showing how the students reacted. The question was, *What happens when you teach these?* I would have liked to see what happens when you teach these on an instructional level: *How does comprehension improve? How does writing improve?* Things like that. So those are not the only important things in the classroom, but they are a very helpful thing when you're trying to do something like this for your students.

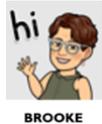


PAUL

Yeah, I appreciate what you're saying... I think there was a legitimacy or an attempt to legitimize graphic novels. Like those anchor texts where I could pull out the one about the Black Panther Party. Or there's another one on the Vietnam War that I could actually use as a centerpiece in a kind of a study about the Vietnam War, one I read that comes to the Tet Offensive, and I shared something with my father-in-law. And he was like *Oh, that's not how that happened! That's just a just a comic book you're reading.* And I was like, *Well, hold on just a second.*

He remembered living that day, you know, having friends down the street who were in the Vietnam War. But this graphic novel, as you continue to turn another page or two or three gave more context. And the Tet Offensive, like philosophically and just publicly we lost the war right there. But militarily, American troops took all that was lost in the next month or so—next, maybe six weeks or so. And so, having that conversation with my father-in-law—for him to go, *Huh!* [Paul shrugging his shoulders] as I was reading, for him, a comic book in his house. It made this conversation where... I know we're talking about the classroom... But for me, my goal is anything we have in the classroom, I would love for them to take it home, take it to their parents, take it to... you know, some conversation at work.

It was a different conversation from when I was in the middle school—of what the expectations were to take it outside the classroom—to now hanging out with high school students and college students. Like, some of them—I mean, this is this is their world. This is how they have a community of conversation. And I just kind of want to contribute to that in some sort of way. And in the last four or five semesters as I've collected—especially from my used bookstore—as many graphic novels that I could find, it's been a really fun connect. So, I appreciate that about the article, of being able to say, *There are people out there, making this matter.*



Well, that kind of engagement is what leads to instruction and education, right? You want to be that invested in it. So, I think everything in here leads to all that stuff we want to see, for sure.



Yeah. I think I was having some similar reactions to the to the article in that I really appreciate the layering of text, in terms of building the units. That's one of the first things that I noticed. You've got, especially the hero's journey unit in the second example, with the *Poet X* as perhaps one of the main texts. *Spider-Verse* is kind of like a film supplement. *Miss Marvel* and the various other kind of graphic anthologies kind of tie in and bring lots of different perspectives onto this, onto similar themes and similar approaches. And that's something that I do always try to bring in with any unit—there's the main text, there are the supplements, and these things are all in conversation with each other. And it's a way of engaging.

I think, one of the things that I was struggling with is reading articles that the kind of ending point of the article is also often where I start in planning... in terms of *Hey, this is going to be relatable, or this is going to be relevant to my students.* And the thing that I was wondering and looking for was, *Well, what are they going to be writing about after this?* Is there a project-based component to this? Is there a research or a public writing or an advocacy component that's coming into it next? And I'd be interested to see how they were taking this beyond the class discussions that get talked about in the article, as something that provides students with that kind of voice that they were able to use, because they've actually grown in confidence through these kinds of texts afterwards.

The second thing I was looking with this was, because the texts are so kind of layered, which is, again the thing that I really want to do in the classroom, is wondering how... just practically that's done in the class. And then there was one moment when she talked about kind of the *always accessible* reading where the books are on the table at the front of the room. I think that was the teacher discussing this. But I'm wondering about the cost of class sets, or whether students are able to take the books home, or anything along those lines, in terms of making sure that is actually accessible and equitable for our student bodies.

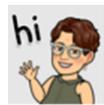
That's a great point. Thank you, Scott. Ray, do you want to chime in?



Yeah, absolutely. I really enjoyed the article as well. I remember teaching probably my third or fourth year, when it was not necessarily brought to my attention, but I realized that the majority of the books that we were reading in my class were people that *I* related to or things that *I* related to—not so much my kiddos. You know, the main characters were always a male white character for some reason, and that really made me start thinking about different types of texts that I needed to use in my classroom. So, I really like the way that the article brought about the diversity of the class. I know, that at Highland West Junior High, our student population is becoming more and more diverse all the time. And getting books in front of kids right now that they can relate to and see themselves in is very important.

I liked the part in the article where they were talking about the *Poet X* cover, and they were referencing the girl on the cover, looking like somebody from their family. I think the article, in general, gave a great jumping off point for starting conversations, and I'm kind of like everybody else.

Okay, great. We've got conversations going, but what are they going to do in the end with it? But it all starts with the engaging part and getting them talking about things, before we can ever move into the writing and the research and the project-based end result of a unit.



BROOKE

Yeah, Ray, you talked about having a lot of text that reflected *your* interests, and I think it kind of mentions that in here—that teachers often teach off of their own educational experience, which are usually based in these classic texts. So, this was a great opportunity for this teacher to have some additional support from a researcher to be able to change that. And that goes to Scott's point about how this is actually feasible. How can we get teachers these resources, because obviously it's possible. But this article mentions how this teacher was doing it alone in her school, like the other teachers in her grade level were not doing the same thing. And it was a lot with the support from this researcher that this was able to happen. So, I'd be interested to see how we can... you know, create experiences like this for students on a larger scale, when it's not a researcher paired with the teacher.

It's also interesting—the idea of wanting to represent our students. And I thought about this—I think it's also important, even if you don't have that diverse of a classroom, or even if you have a majority white class—it is still important to have diverse characters in your literature, so that they're not getting the same story. So, if they end up becoming teachers, they're not repeating the same cycle and having to go through this. I thought that was another thing to keep in mind—we don't just need to represent the students in our classes, but just *everyone*.

Were there any surprises that came to mind as you were reading the article?



SHELLY



KAMRIN

I teach middle school. So, when the authors wrote about the Netflix series they watched, *When They See Us*, I was like, *Oh, that was hard for me to watch*. I can't imagine walking students through that experience, so I was like [sighs], *Whoa, that's a lot*. But I also teach seventh and eighth graders. I do think that whole unit... I was like *This is amazing. I would love to do something like this*. Just on that aspect, as a middle school teacher, I think that we do a good job of paring those kinds of things down for middle school kids. So, it always shocks me—everything that people in high school use [laughing].



PAUL

Yeah, I remember those days as a middle school teacher. You find something at home or you find something from somebody else that you're like, *Oh, I would love to...* And then you just pause because of age appropriateness. Then it was just that task of *What can I slice?* I don't want to take it out of context, by any means. And so, I'll supplement whatever film clip I could find with something else to build the context back around it. And I just... I don't know... Sometimes I just it became a mission to try to figure out how to do that, because it was just so good, so relevant, so relatable, so... fill in any blank that you want to, to be able to do that. It's extra work for sure, but I think in the end, a lot of times, it's certainly worth it. But it's... I'm with you—it's hard. That's why... the six years I've been at the high school it's been like, *Yeah, I can definitely use it and not even hesitate*.

When you think about using any of this in your classrooms, were there any concepts that seemed unrealistic or uncomfortable, whether you're at the high school or middle school level?



I think it seems like a lot of the same questions that you are grappling with as middle school educators are something that... I'm just looking around our Zoom room—we're based in Tennessee and Oklahoma—and as high school educators, we are also very concerned with that sort of thing because of the directions our various state legislators are going with the use of curriculum and materials in the classroom. And so, I don't really... Well, I don't know—we had a parent who complained about *American Born Chinese* last year. So, it's something that we often just have to wonder about. It's not always the texts that we assume are going to be controversial that will be the one you have to answer emails about. But it's something that I think is in the back of all of our minds right now, or at the forefront of our minds, now that it's getting close to planning for the next year.

So, while I definitely feel the texts in these units work really well, because they're building towards that thematic goal within each of them, I'd be, again, interested in seeing how we can develop the kind of instructional support that's necessary, in order to make our case for why this sort of challenging text is appropriate if we're discussing issues of identity. And *why* we are using these particular texts instead of the hundreds of copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the district gives us every year. It's that kind of question that I think we're looking for. But yeah, I feel like these kinds of ideas, and seeing that other people are using them and seeing them being used to success is something that's very beneficial for us.



I think that's that notion of challenging the canon—*Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What can *we*, at least, introduce into our department and our academy and our district into, you know, and you're the first one that brings up that idea, that notion, that change. It's hard. That was alluded to in in the article as well. But you find like-minded people whether it's in a Zoom room, whether it's in an article. or... You know I have to get out of Bradley County and make sure that I go to conferences, and I meet people out in Portland, in D.C., from Columbus, Ohio. I meet people that are already doing what I want to be doing. Or you become that person—you're already doing some things that other people are aspiring to do. So, I think that challenging the canon is necessary, and somebody has to start that conversation. Somebody has to introduce it. Somebody has to, I think, take that healthy risk. And I think we're on that same page, right now.



English teachers love them some canon [laughing]! I think, parents too. At my middle school, I'm very anti-canon. I've always been. But my parents are the ones who push back for me, because they think I'm not giving them the hard-enough literature, that they think that they are the experts in knowing about. But I think it challenges viewpoints on... *Okay, what is a good piece of literature?* Is a good piece of literature... written by some old, dead, white guy? You know what I mean? So, it's a hot topic in English classes, I know. There's a whole movement to get rid of the canon. But I'm not sure that all English teachers ever will [laughing], but this is a start.



I think what made me nervous about this with our current political climate, especially where I am in Tennessee, wasn't necessarily a text. Although, certainly, some of these texts would be challenged. I think what was interesting for me was looking at the *listing out*, like on page 11 with their text set table—listing out the themes and the foci of the unit. And I was like *Oh, I could never list that, anywhere*. I could never say that was what I was focusing on. I could hit all of those topics, but I would have to do them obliquely and that could not be the focus. Which maybe ties back into my desire for an instructional focus, like something I could point to as *This is what I'm doing in this unit*, and all those other things would also be present and also be able to be discussed, but not as the central focus. That would be the only way I could get away with talking about stuff like this.



Well, and that's just you, being creative. And creative is just you're being diligent, you're being hard working, you're persevering, you're taking anything that may be in the canon—*Hey! Let's use it*. I'm being told to. I have 95 history standards. When you break it down, I actually have 315 history standards and 90 days. *Are you kidding me?* I mean. *Come on!* So, I do have to select, and I do have to choose. But no matter what, someone, certainly outside the classroom, outside the district, sometimes even outside of education, is setting a particular direction. We can't deny the reality in the trench that we live in. Which is every day we show up.

I've got kids, you know, bringing in their baggage and bringing in their brilliance. And so am I. So, when those start to collide, that's not necessarily a bad thing. If there's some collision going on with anything within the canon, *Hey, let's embrace that tension*. Let us look at this. Let us read this. This has been here for a while so that means it's part of the storyline that we are investigating. So, now let us do our due diligence of bringing in that other text, this next text, this more recent text, this relevant text. And I think that's our job. That due diligence—I just totally appreciate you saying that. I appreciate the words of challenge. If it's here, that means somebody wants it to be here, and I'm going to respect them as a person, and go *Okay, you've laid this on the table for us. We'll look at it*. But I'm also going to lay out six other things on the table, as well to create a richer context for us to be able to connect. Even if I teach at a 95 plus percent white high school. That diversity of ideas and just preparing them for the workplaces around here that are not 95% white. That enters into our conversation a bunch, you know, *How powerful is reading!?* It can take us to those places before we ever leave the campus.



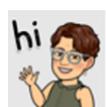
I like what you said about creativity, and I think that could be another helpful support for teachers—examples of how to creatively incorporate these things. Even if it can't be as direct as this study is, that could be a good support.



I, also, especially like the idea of using texts like this as ways to play around with the canon and comment on the canon, in some respects. I think at one point in my planning stage for my English IV class last year—which is traditionally kind of a Brit Lit course, and that's still how I taught it this past time around—I discovered that I was planning to spend a good portion of the second semester, covering about five years of the South of England, because it was going to be Mary Shelley, and then Jane Austen side by side. What can I

do to split this up and bring in other things that are going to broaden their entry points and writing about it, and working on the text, and making sure that this is not just about the city of Bath in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It's got to be something a little bit more engaging for everybody else, that works with it. And so that's bringing in multimodal texts as additional resources, bringing in comics, bringing in clips, and bringing in research opportunities that lead students down different directions. It does take a lot of creativity to do something like that and have it work. I'm not always sure my plans worked last semester. But it was an effort, and it was something to strive to continually improve, and to be creative in ways that say: All right, there's the canon that we're expected to teach, but there are ways to comment on and change and adjust and show how even modern writers and modern critics are engaging with those same ideas today, in the same context that our students live in.



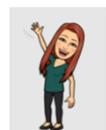
BROOKE

I think graphic novels can be a really key part of that, because of the format. You can tell a traditional story, but if you have an image—let's say it's the same story—but the image represents someone who doesn't look like someone in your classroom. Even if the story is not about diversity or about a specific experience, just having that character there that looks like it, without the story being about that, can make a huge difference. And you can teach the exact same thing and have more representation than maybe you would, if you were reading it in a different format. So that can be one of those ways to be creative.

I think it was Scott who said, the ending point of the articles is where he begins. I'm thinking that ties into what Brooke saying about instructional support. What possibilities do you see for creating instruction from this point forward? Dallacqua is not handing it to you, largely because the journal would not allow her to hand those to you. But if you started from where she left off, what are your ideas for your own classrooms?

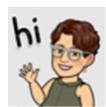


SHELLY



KAMRIN

I used *Miss Marvel* this last year. It was my very first time using that in class. It was probably the best text I think I've ever used to have a conversation about structure and authors purpose and symbolism. And I think when you focus on those *skills*, that a lot can be said for graphic novels in that way. I saw with my students... normally, when we would read a piece of text, and I would be like, *Why did the author do this?* They're like, *I don't know.* But with the graphic novel it was right in front of their face. I could be like, *Why would they have a picture of this?* Or, *Why would she think that instead of say it out loud?* So, you could visually... there are visual cues that helped them with higher-level thinking for middle school. That made it more accessible for them, to go deeper with the text. That might not have happened with a print novel.



BROOKE

I agree. I love teaching structure with graphic novels because... like the pacing, for instance, is visual from panel to panel. So, students can see when something is speeding up or slowing down. And you can compare that to what happens in a novel with normal text. It also helps with understanding point of view. So, one thing I've done is when teaching *Persepolis*—I'll have students research a revolution besides the Iranian Revolution, which is what *Persepolis* is about. Then I'll have them create a graphic novel from the perspective of a child at that time, just like in *Persepolis*. So, they'll have to use all those pacing skills and those structure skills and research skills, but also from the point of view of a specific type of person at that time. So, that

was a helpful kind of final product. And with these text sets I think that would be another thing that would go well if they're creating their own story, with a focus on point of view—as a lot of these focused on point of view, whether it was about a hero or identity or whatever else it is.



You know, it works really well using *Maus* to talk about the structural components of the narrative, of the text—and how the visual layout of each page reflects the same kind of changes that an author would typically make in a fiction book. In terms of product with these text sets—the individual hero story that they talked about in the Hero's Journey Unit—it seems like a good creative writing prompt to get things moving.

I teach, right now, mostly AP Lang and the English IV. Because a lot of the writing in AP Lang is argumentative or synthesis research-based, one thing I try to work with my students on in the last semester is writing for a public audience and thinking about how they can take multiple sources and multiple types of sources and put them together as a whole for a wide range of potential readers. Graphic novels are a great starting point for that. So, what their ultimate genre might look like when they put together their final product—whether it's a traditional op-ed or an essay or a video essay or a podcast or something along those lines—can take *not just* the experience of real-world connections to the characters in the text as they're reading it, but also as they're writing about it. And that seems in line with the theoretical underpinnings of this article, too. Dallacqua was citing Paulo Freire early on as one of those theories in looking for student ownership of their learning. And I think carrying that through to the final product students are working on at the same time is useful.



The structure of those text sets helps with that too. Because with such diverse formats of text that they're studying, it's a really good opportunity to talk about author, audience, and purpose. So, when they produce something for an audience, we could ask: *Which of these formats would fit this purpose?* And, *Why is this medium helpful for this purpose?* That could be a strength of this.



Yeah, and it gives [students] practice with being able to talk about how those different types of modalities intersect with each other. So, if we're looking at the visual elements of something like this, and the textual elements of something like that... or a documentary, they each have their strong points. And being able to write about it is the big skill of the synthesis units in AP Lang.



It's those intersections—I mean, *Gosh, what huge word that is*. Because you meet right there at that place, no matter what we're talking about. There's that tension of *How do you navigate this moment?* *How do you discern?* *Do you have those skills?* Again, teaching at the high school is different than teaching at the middle school, because I have so many kids who have a job. Some of them have already been fired. Some of them are the assistant manager who wants to fire people but who doesn't have the power to do so. You know, they have developed some skills already. And so, when we talk about labor unions, I've got kids who could meet those folks in that place.

The intersection, that tension... for me, sociology and history go hand in my classroom. Kind of like, *You can't teach social studies without teaching language arts, and you can't teach language*

*arts without social studies.* Everything goes hand in hand, and my endgame is *Okay, you've got to develop or produce some sort of product that goes in our class museum*—my classroom is the museum with little themes, and students have to put something somewhere on a bookcase, on a bookshelf, paint my piano... There's always something to [produce, related to what we are learning]. Students present or compete or teach. At some point, a couple of times in the semester, we just pause and go, *All right, make something, teach us something, present something to us. Or create some sort of competition for us*—to put it into students' hands. So how are we going to get them there—develop that skill set?

There was a “literacy toolkit.” I think that was a phrase that I wrote down in my notes, after reading that article. And also, that phrase of “Reading the world. Reading the word.” And then “reading the word” and back to “reading the world.” That cycle of all of that. I just believe so much in the power of words and the power of the page, the power of the spoken word. Then how does that find its way into something tangible or relational, something outside of ourselves? We're always thinking about that as teachers. You know, it's got to be more than the test, right? It's got to be more than the quiz, more than the assignment, more than the grade. Yet, we still have to take grades, and we have to give assignments and quizzes and tests. But somewhere along the way, we've got to create that space that has to be more meaningful. And it has to connect to the next thing we learn. I just, I think everything that we're talking about hits along those lines. It also reminds us of how hard our job is, and that we have stepped into this willingly. And may we continue to keep stepping.



You know, for a long time, anytime you mentioned graphic novels or anything along those lines, the first thing that everybody says about graphic novels is *Well, if you have a reluctant reader, this is what you need to use to help them kick-start their reading, to help with vocabulary, to help with comprehension—with those skills that we all want them to have.*

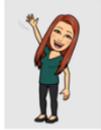
But as a literacy coach, the article really helped reinforce for me, what a teacher and I worked on during the last half of the second semester, where she incorporated lit circles into her classroom. It was just a way to get kids reading and talking, but it went into more than that. It went into really deep conversations, and I think that's where I would love to work with my teacher this next year, using graphic novels in her circles.

I don't mean to make this sound in a bad way towards elementary school teachers at all. But you know the kids coming up to junior high have always read just the cute little stories where there's a happy ending, following the plot diagram right to a T. We need to get literacy in front of them or literature in front of them, where they do some deeper thinking, and where they think about real-world problems that are going on right now. Besides, you know what they see on social media or anything like that. The article really struck me as a jumping off point, a way to get started this next year. As I was reading, I was already thinking about August and September. *Okay, how can we implement this into a classroom? How can we get this started?* I think it would be something that would take some time, with the current situation that we're all in, bringing in some more questionable texts would definitely be something that we'd have to kind of tiptoe around a little bit. But if we have a good reason on why we're doing it, I think it should be okay.

In our last ten minutes, I'd like to tie together something Paul said with what Ray was talking about—that need for so many teachers tiptoeing, trying to avoid conflict in their classrooms, with whatever laws and such that are happening. I'd like to read a sentence from the article that Paul was referencing earlier—a sentence that caught my own attention umpteen times:



“As we engaged with diverse texts together, the students’ teacher and I moved in and out of word and world spaces, critically thinking about our places, power, and possibilities” (Dallacqua, 2022, pg. 40). As you all think about moving toward next year, with all of the political banning and legislature shenanigans that are going on, how do you see yourselves tiptoeing or pushing back or embracing, or whatever it is that you will be doing this fall?



KAMRIN

If it's my time to go, it's my time to go [grinning and laughing].

So what does that mean? You're just going to boldly go forth and continue?



SHELLY



KAMRIN

Yeah. Our school is relatively small. I stay in good contact with my parents and build a good relationship with them. And my principal has my back. Sometimes, I have to tiptoe around those kinds of things. But... I'm just going keep doing what's good for kids. What are they going to do? Not hire me somewhere else? So, that's kind of my thing—I just don't care. And I know that I have the luxury of saying stuff like that and the privilege of saying things like that. But it's just that important to me.



PAUL

I think... If it's good for kids, it's good for adults. And if it's good for adults, it's good for our community. And if it's good for our community, it's good for our society. So, I don't know... If they wanted to start recording our conversations in class, I would volunteer for such a thing. How to navigate tension, how to navigate conflict, how to get to reconciliation... I mean, these are all skills. We either develop them or we do not. We get married, and we find out whether we have developed them or not. We have kids, and we learn how, as parents, to navigate that well or not. There are so many things that are *not* within our control when it comes to human relationships. And there are so many things that *are* in our control. So, anything that is controversial just makes it human. And that means if it's human, I want to be a part of it.

You know, I still get scared, meaning nervous, even if I have to have a conversation with my wife, or have a conversation with my principal or with a parent. I'm a coach as well, so I navigate that world. There's just always tension. We are in that business—that profession—that space. Twenty years in, I have developed, not only skills, but a desire, maybe even a hunger to just invite people into this space. I don't want to challenge people. I just want to *invite* them. Because when someone accepts the invitation, then that's going to go a totally different direction, at a totally different pace. If they're challenged, then that's a different direction and a different pace. I just think we have to set ourselves up to do something significant for the communities that we are planted in. I want to be a part of that. And sometimes it goes really, really well—and sometimes, it doesn't. And that just brings us full circle back to our humanity.



Yeah, so the sentiment that *If it's my time to go, it's my time to go* is one I've heard a lot recently from my fellow teachers. So that's kind of my attitude, as well. My intention is always to do things for students and to support my students. That's always the reasoning, so whenever I've encountered any issues, I've been able to communicate that pretty well. And so far, that has kept me fine where I'm at. I hope and I think that it will continue to keep me safe, even through these times—just very much communicating with everyone possible, the intention behind all of my choices. But if it ever comes to a time where that does not keep me safe, then that is what it is. That's not something I can let go.



Yeah, I think that makes sense. I want to echo a lot of the sentiments here. I think in my particular situation, this is a conversation that we have a lot. My wife is a school librarian, as well. So, she faces the same kind of things that we're talking about. She's at the elementary level in terms of book selection and content that's available for the students. But there is always that question of what the student body is and what those students need at that particular point in time. And so, when developing a sense of what my students are going to want to research or write about, or what my suggested topics for them to explore might be, it's a question of how this ties in with their own individual contexts and the place that they find themselves within our classroom.

In the AP class, it's actually a combined class so I'm in with the US History teacher. We are both dovetailing around a lot of the topics that are the prime focus of a lot of the issues that are currently under the microscope. One of the things that I think we have in common is how we're approaching them. We provide source texts that give the students additional voices to be heard, that they may not have heard in their own traditional settings, and then, we set the students loose to do their own investigation and their own research and writing and development that goes with it. I think that's where I continue to pin a lot of my hopes—on the kids, because they really have that sense of curiosity about a lot of these questions. If it's not something that we can necessarily answer as an assigned text in the class, it's something that we can point them towards. And we can give them the critical tools they need to find and research and work towards on their own, because it's something they're passionate about. That's something that I don't think we can ever be in a position to totally close down. It's like Paulo Freire *reading the world and reading the word*. Their worlds are different from ours. So, giving them the opportunities to have the language to explore that and have the tools they need to explore that—it should be one of our goals.



I've always asked myself, when deciding on texts, *Would I want my own child to read this*. You know, my own personal kid. *If my kid was in my classroom, would I be offended?* That sort of thinking is how I approach a lot of decisions about teaching. I'm really good with building relationships with my students. I'm really good with building relationships with parents. And I think having those skills helps. Should a problem come up because of something that we read in my classroom, I should have some sort of reasoning and some sort of *why* we did it and be ready for that conversation when comes about.

I like what Paul said a while ago, *If it's good for students, it's good for parents and parents into community and into society*. That's where we need to be heading. When I said *tiptoeing*, you know, that's one way to look at it. But it's to that point, and I'm like, *I don't see anybody else standing in line for this job, right now*. So, push the boundaries. Do the best that you can. Be ready for any

kickback that comes. Be able to explain yourself and walk by. That's how I'm going to keep on pushing forward.

I feel like I am in the presence of greatness right now. I so appreciate all of you taking time out of your summer. Before we go, do you have any questions of me?



PAUL

Can we do something like this again? I'm legitimately asking. Three months from now, when we get into the fall... I mean, I teach in Tennessee. It is a funny place to teach, you know. I don't know what's going to come from Nashville. I don't know what's going to happen from the central office. But whatever does come, we'll navigate it, because for most of us, we've been doing this for years and years and years and years and years. And I've got a few more years. I was really wanting to have this conversation. When we get with like-minded people, it's encouraging. This has been encouraging. I'm planning to use this as a springboard. Here comes August, and I'm never, ever fully ready for August. I get excited about August, but I love summer, but *this* is good. And it would be good in October, and it would be good in February. Because this is truly what professional development is—when you get into each other's spaces and truly bounce some legitimate ideas off of each other. So, thank you for making this happen.

## CONCLUSION

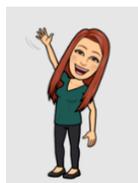
Our conversation left me with hope for the coming school year. While acknowledging the uncertainty ahead, each teacher expressed a passion for serving their students and approaching curriculum choices intentionally, with the best interests of their students in mind. It's been a year since our conversation ended. My co-contributors finished teaching a year while consequences of the book-banning and censorship laws played out in their states and others.

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**SCOTT BEVILL**, with 18 years’ experience in both high school and college instruction, holds a B.A. and M.A. in English from Clemson University and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Tennessee. He credits the National Writing Project for opening up the possibility of pursuing graduate school and constantly seeking ways to grow as a teacher and learner. After taking time to explore various positions as university lecturer and high school teacher, Scott has settled into a great spot, currently teaching AP Language and English IV at a STEM-designated magnet school in Knoxville, Tennessee. His research interests have included medieval literature, history of the book, critical digital pedagogy, and digital humanities. Scott has enjoyed including comics and different media as a great way to provoke new angles for thinking and writing about classroom texts.



**KAMRIN GREEN** has taught middle school English for 15 years—10 years with Moore Public Schools in Oklahoma and five years at a downtown charter school, her current position, where she helped open grades 6-8. Both her Bachelor’s in English Education and her Master’s in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum are with the University of Oklahoma. Kamrin’s main curricular focuses are diverse literature and connecting students with books they love and characters who look like them.



**BROOKE BIANCHI-PENNINGTON** has served for the last five years as chair for the English department, at a suburban high school in Tennessee. In her ten years of teaching at the same school, she has taught every high school grade at every level from inclusion to AP. In 2019, she earned her PhD in Literacy Studies with a concentration in Children’s and Young Adult Literature. For Brooke, including comics has been an essential instructional tool that moves beyond motivation and engagement with multimodal literacy. Comics have also proven helpful when working with students learning English as a second language.



**RAY ROBINSON**, a Title I Literacy Coach at a suburban, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>-grade junior high in Oklahoma recently began his 13<sup>th</sup> year as an educator. After teaching 6<sup>th</sup>-grade ELA for 7 years and achieving a master’s degree in Reading, he made the leap to junior high, where he has found a good fit. Early on Ray noticed that the joy and love for reading he had witnessed in the elementary grades, seemed to wane in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. His curricular focus is to reignite that joy and love for reading.



**Paul Sausville** has 20 years’ experience from middle school to high school, with 5 semesters overlap as an adjunct professor at a local university. As a MS Related Arts Teacher, he created curriculum for public speaking, teen leadership, communications, social science, chess education, and community garden classes. He’s also taught Colonial America, as a core standards-based curriculum, Recent American History, and Journalism I & II. Learning alongside his students, he is ever learning greater reading, researching, writing, publishing, podcasting, and creative nonfiction skills, referring to his educational journey as a “fantastic voyage.” Paul’s research interests focus on thematic storylines that stretch across the post-Civil War generations: music that matters; significant social, political, economic movements; presidential powers and personalities; congress, the courts, the constitution, and conflict resolution; war and money; the resonating voices in each era, just to name a few.

**SHELLY UNSICKER-DURHAM** After 23 years of teaching English Language Arts, Shelly is a PhD candidate with the University of Oklahoma in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum, where she has also served as graduate instructor, researcher, and co-editor of *Study & Scrutiny*. Her favorite research pursuits include expressive writing pedagogy, teacher conversations, and young adult literature.

