

## "When Reading is Stupid; the Why, How and What to Do About It"

by Kate Marie Ryan JOURNAL ENTRY 3 As we are about to embark on a teaching career we as English teachers need to be aware that our students will not always share the same enthusiasm and passion we have for reading. Jeffrey Wilhelm's article "When Reading is Stupid; the Why, How and What to Do About It" is therefore of particular relevance as it discusses the issue of how teachers can motivate their students to read more. Wilhelm conducted research surrounding various students and adults' reading experiences, both meaningful and frustrating. After interviewing over five hundred participants Wilhelm confirmed that relevance, competence and agency were the key factors that entice people, especially students, to read. Using these key factors, he devised the notion of "contact zones". Reading need not be seen merely as homework or a set task, yet so often teachers present reading material in such a way. "Read pages 40 - 70 before next Tuesday" or "Write ten lines describing the themes explored in this novel". According to the Chief Review Officer for ERO certain students, in particular Pacific Islanders, Maori and another group referred to as 'the tail' are currently unsuccessful within the educational system. They say that the percentage could be as high as 25%. Many leave school without a formal qualification and usually this also means that a number of them will be fairly illiterate. From the time they leave school, these students therefore have a disadvantage in the world as they do not have access to the vast amount of knowledge that can be found within literature. Their knowledge of the world will be limited to their own life experiences and cultural boundaries. Whether these experiences are positive or negative will influence a student's opinion about what they have to read. If the material does not fit their own experiences or culture, they will probably fail to understand the relevance or point of being 'forced' to read it. According to Wilhelm the key to encouraging the students, in particular those that are having difficulties with reading, is therefore about making connections. Their life experience and culture should be the very foundation from which teachers should be choosing material to read. Wilhelm states that reading should be seen as a choice that is 'personally relevant and socially significant'. Students should therefore, under close guidance, with a clear purpose and carefully explained procedures, be given increased responsibility in what and how they read in order to develop an understanding of themselves and the world outside of their own life and cultural experiences. Wilhelm suggests that teachers should use the technique of 'contact zones'. This is where each student feels connected to learning the material in some way. They need to be able to see the relevance of committing their own precious time on something they do not necessarily deem important. With the increasing competition of computer games, films, DVDs, music and so much more, ensuring that texts are 'relevant' becomes more important than ever before. As there is so much information and choice available to our students we need to be able to recreate the same amount of choice and connection for them within the classroom, especially when it comes to the context of getting them to read! Reading has to be as exciting as the next episode of the Simpsons or Missy Elliot video or as action charged as winning the first fifteen game. Over my two-week observation period on placement I noticed the concept of contact zones being put into practice. My year 9 English class had just completed reading the Duncan Stuart's novel *Whole of the Moon*. The female and male characters in the book are about the same age as the students in the class. "He's smart, good-looking, rich - he's just won the speed-skating champs and has a terrific girlfriend. Kirk Mead has it all...including cancer. Now he has to tough it out in the biggest battle of his life." Although *The Whole of the Moon* is about fictional characters the students were encouraged to close read the novel in such a way as to imagine that they themselves could be one of the Kirk Meads of the world. It turned out that one of the students had actually battled two years of chemotherapy himself. The student was very open about the experience and his perspective on Kirk's story in relation to his own made reading could possibly have made the text more relevant and socially significant for the rest of the class. Discussing common elements about the characters in relation to themselves, such as a love for skateboarding, helped them to connect to the story in a way that recognized its parallels within their own world. An after reading activity encouraged the students to find their own quote from the book which they thought conveyed a theme and were then asked to do a static image. Although this was not linking the story to direct personal experience the students were able to convey visually their own interpretation of the characters of the story. Following that the students were then asked to do a speech as if they were one of the characters that had lost their leg. Becoming the character like this encouraged the students to step outside of their comfort zone and be disabled for a moment. They were able to describe how they felt both physically and psychologically. The students themselves brought up discussions about how the school was equipped for wheelchairs and extra-curricular activities for the disabled. In comparison my year 13 class had been studying short stories in a way that resonated from my bursary days. They were the same stories and the same themes regurgitated - bullying, relationships, death and so forth. Although wonderful stories, of which I had great pleasure in studying I wonder just how the students see any relevance of the stories other than to learn the quotes and write the essay. In comparison to the Year 9 novel study the short stories required much more in-depth analysis and discussion with little time to find personal connections. Perhaps it may have been useful for the students themselves to vote on their own themes at the beginning of the year and then the teacher to ensure that material studied, including the short stories, incorporated those themes? Short stories written by fellow secondary school students such as 'Surrender' by Maria Belich could possibly be good to use as it may reflect their own personalities and encourages them to see attitudes from a different perspective. So when faced with the importance of relevance, competence and agency we would need to address the following questions before implementing Wilhelm's 'contact zones'. Firstly we would need to take into the account the nature and personalities of the classroom. What issues interest them? What are their favorite hobbies? Sports? Crafts? Once these have been identified then areas of literature that has relevance can be investigated. Inquiry also need not be fake. A teacher should not be hesitant of leaving it up to the students to find out the answers for themselves. Once students are using their own knowledge to make useful and intelligent connections, they will feel a sense of accomplishment. This sense of achievement and call to action will then lead to increased self esteem and competency in reading. Through making texts accessible to students in a way that is relevant students will understand that knowledge is created and that in all things in life, a position must be taken. Time is precious in a teenager's world, as it is in ours. Potential topics worth exploring would then need to be around

things that would be topical for them. Perhaps for the boys it may be cars, music or girls. Maybe they have a favourite actor or actress? A favourite sport or sportsperson? For the girls it may be fashion and boys. If I look back my interests were probably in the narrow realms of boys, music, theatre and photography. Maybe we could look at the impact of technology or media on our lives utilizing materials such as video games, films, mp3 players which could then be connected to relevant texts or literature. Topics that could be interesting in exploring could be about artificial intelligence or genetically modified foods. In fact one book that has been recommended to me is Daniel Keyes's novel 'Flowers for Algernon', about a mentally retarded boy who is used for an experiment where he and a mouse become mentally superior. The book has an opportunity to tackle all sorts of everyday issues such as bullying, the ethics scientific research or the lengths people go to for popularity. The overall theme could be 'acceptance'. By using varying texts such as newspapers, magazines, World Wide Web, radio interviews, video clips and so forth we can explore these issues in depth in relation to how it could affect the students. E.g. the ear grown on the mouse, girls in Asia lengthening their legs or operating on their eyes to become 'more western', recent infant killing milk powder in china. If the literature they read is linked to things that could have potential consequences within their own lives, then the reading will become that much more interesting for them. Another interesting topic could be that of the body beautiful. How women and men are portrayed in the media and within certain literature. Further opportunities could exist to explore eating fads historically and to date, such as the Aitkens diet. The everyday realities can be drawn into classroom teaching and the literature that we expose them to should have similar themes or connections to these realities.

### About the Author

Kate Marie Ryan is a Secondary School Teacher of English and Drama. Born in New Zealand, she has lived in Australia, America, Italy and the United Kingdom. She holds a degree in Communication Studies and after working several years in the UK within Theatre, Journalism and Public Relations industries, she returned to New Zealand to complete a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary). She currently teaches and resides in Sydney, Australia.

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