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Lucinda M. Juarez

Texas A & M University, Corpus Christi, TX, lucinda.juarez@tamucc.edu

Regina C. Rodriguez

West Texas A&M University, Canyon, TX, reginachanel@gmail.com

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The Global Leaders of Tomorrow: Shaping Critical Thinking and Social Justice Through Literacy

Lucinda M. Juarez & Regina C. Rodriguez
Texas A&M University—Corpus Christi

Abstract — The relatively new Common Core Standards seem threatening to educators at first, but with careful planning and the assistance of seasoned English language arts teachers, the Core Standards become manageable. This article presents a variety of literature and informational texts, suitable for the K-12 grade levels, which focus on social justice and global thinking. Each text listed has an activity that was designed to meet at least one of the Common Core Standards and also includes the integration of technology and creativity in literacy instruction. With resources like the ones discussed in this article, teachers can easily tackle the Common Core and work towards creating global, critical thinkers.

The four walls of a classroom no longer exist as technology and the Internet have made the world our classrooms. Our roles as teachers have been forever altered. No longer able to take the sage on the stage route, we must be facilitators of great learning by directing what our students can read and write about to shape their own global thinking. We can do this every month by providing our students with great reads, teaching them to navigate multi-media and traditional genres, and by using Bram Stoker, Caldecott, and Newberry medal-winning books, as well as popular e-books to spark flames of interest and create lifelong global citizens who not only care about our world, but also take action to make it a better place, all while meeting the demands of the [Common Core State Standards](#) (CCSS).

Lucinda M. Juarez, Ph.D. is a co-director of the Summer Institute of the Coastal Bend Writer's Project at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi and a writing/ESL coach at the School of Science and Technology-Corpus Christi. lucinda.juarez@tamucc.edu.

Regina C. Rodriguez is an Assistant Professor of education at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, TX. reginachanel@gmail.com.

TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice literacy instruction can develop the democratic citizenship skills students need to challenge unjust and unfair conditions both within the neighborhoods they live to the vast world. Social justice has been defined as the fair and equitable treatment of individuals and groups within a society with particular regard to the distribution of resources and allocation of rights (Barry, 2005). Teaching for social justice through literacy requires conscious explicit instruction throughout everyday K-12 educational curriculum utilizing well-written, beautifully illustrated picture books, audio books, and complex texts. In this article we advocate the use of literary texts to encourage the teaching for social justice for the wide array of critical thinking processes and social actions students can learn and practice. By providing both non-fiction and fiction texts as the basis for instruction, students can develop their knowledge, compassion, and critical literacy on such topics as how diverse populations can learn to peacefully co-exist, how people cope with terrorism and disasters, celebrate cultural diversity, to thinking critically about how to save our environment, its animals and inhabitants and ultimately to recognize the common threads global communities share and practice.

COMMON CORE READING AND WRITING EXPECTATIONS

While each state has its own demands adapting to the CCSS curriculum, the overall change from old state standards to the new CCSS revolve around three areas: (a) read more complex texts and read them closely, (b) include more non-fiction texts and writing, and (c) be able to discuss and write about texts using evidence. (Old Standards, 2010; Riddile, 2012; Shifts for Students, 2012). Old state standards required students to answer basic comprehension questions about the texts they read, such as identifying the main events, characters, and settings. With CCSS students are expected to demonstrate

a deeper understanding by completing tasks such as explaining why each character has their own respective point of view and citing evidence from the text that explains the chosen perspectives (Old Standards, 2010). In addition to increasing text complexity and text comprehension, the CCSS requires language arts students to write, listen, speak, research, present, and even collaborate at a more in-depth level than before (Old Standards, 2010; Riddile, 2012).

Since CCSS tasks require a more in-depth comprehension of texts, it is important to remember what tools help students understand a text better. Nine key comprehension strategies that help students become stronger readers will be a focus of this article: (a) schema connections, (b) predicting, (c) questioning/clarifying, (d) vocabulary instruction, (e) inference making, (f) visualizing, (g) synthesizing, (h) evaluating, and (i) creating. Four of the reading comprehension strategies originally developed by Palinscar and Brown (1984), and explored and expanded upon by Ozzyus (2003) of questioning, predicting, summarizing, and clarifying, most often form the ingredients for many comprehension instruction programs as these strategies have demonstrated good reading comprehension (De Koning & Van Der Schoot, 2013). A growing number of recent empirical studies emphasize that the strategies of visualization (De Koning & Van Der Schoot, 2013), vocabulary instruction (Stygles, 2012); inference making (Boudah, 2013), evaluating (Keene & Zimmerman, 2013), synthesizing (McGregor, 2007), and creativity (Ritchie, et al., 2013; Wilhelm, 2014) play significant roles in comprehending language and reading. By connecting to what students know through their own life experiences, media, other texts and interaction in the world, students develop a rich foundation from which to draw from. Their writing, then, becomes a more detailed record of schematic connections shared with their readers. In addition to the strength in learning caused by tapping into students' prior knowledge, teacher led strategies of visualizing, vocabulary instruction, inference making, evaluating, synthesizing and creating, provide students with the additionally needed pillars of support that help them to build robust written communication with the reading and writing comprehension tools to put social justice into practice.

INTERACTING WITH FICTION AND NON-FICTION TEXTS

Educators can more efficiently prepare their students for the advanced writing tasks listed in the CCSS by ensuring their students' comprehension and analysis skills are strengthened through interaction with both fiction and non-fiction texts. By building the skill of analysis, teachers lay the groundwork for their students to be able to write analytical texts that use evidence to demonstrate student understanding of the literature. The skills required for reading and writing are interwoven and often cannot be separated. After all, "better writers tend to be better readers, and better readers produce better writing" (Writing and Reading, 2014).

The shift in CCSS curriculum not only requires more writing, but it requires that writing to be authentic. In Mel Riddile's 2012 interview with, Susan, Gendron, a policy coordinator at SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, stated, "I want to leave teachers with the message that we should be linking students' knowledge and helping them talk about applying what they learn to their lives and how different perspectives develop." *In this article, texts are paired with activities that are designed to do just that. The literature selected for this article corresponds with seasonal celebrations and world issues that promote social justice and encourage students to connect the literature to their own lives. Each book is paired with an activity that requires critical thinking through either writing, presenting, collaborating, and/or using technology.*

Advocating Peaceful Co-Existence

In August students can begin their school year listening to a read-aloud of [Martin's Big Words: The Life of Martin Luther King](#), a picture book by Doreen Rappaport, and illustrated by Brian Collier, that will help kindergarten through 12th grade students can begin by identifying and analyzing literary elements such as point of view and conflict by citing evidence from the text ([CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1](#)) to support their answers. They can then analyze the illustrations to determine how those drawings convey the culture MLK was raised in (CCSS.ELA.Literacy.[RL.3.2](#) & [RL.3.7](#)) and discuss how MLK's culture differs from their own. Students can explore the concept of peaceful co-existence with all people of the world through free writes and collaborative discussions tied to themes found in the book.

Playing the [I Have a Dream](#) CD that is paired with the illustrated book of the same title aloud on August 28th, the anniversary of its deliverance, will allow your classroom to continue the discussion of peaceful co-existence amidst a world of conflict. This powerful 17-minute speech given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is iconic rhetoric and older students can analyze how King's diction and connotation contribute to the overall development of ideas (CCSS-ELA.Literacy.[RI.9-10.9](#)). They can also connect their own opinions to MLK's speech by finding points in his speech they agree or disagree with and then discussing why (CCSS-ELA.Literacy.[SL.9-10.1.D](#)). High school students can then use their creativity to predict what MLK would seek to change in modern day society and collaborate to write a copy-change (copy the mentor-text's structure and change the words to fit the new topic) (ELA.Literacy.[SL.9-10.6](#)).

Younger students can ask questions about unknown words/phrases (ELA-Literacy.[L.4.4.C](#)) and make connections between what King is saying in the speech and the conflicts that occurred in [Martin's Big Words](#) (ELA.Literacy.[RI.4.9](#)). Younger students could figurative language from the speech as a mentor text, choosing the most powerful phrases to imitate and write lines of their own after free writing to questions such as, "Who or what group is treated unfairly in the world today?"

and “If you could change one thing about the world to make it a better place, what would that change be?” By recording audio of their own speeches or figurative language, students can practice adapting their speech to a more formal setting (ELA.Literacy.SL.4.5).

Students can deepen their understanding of the conflicts that arise between diverse groups by finding modern scenes in which violence has caused harm to a group of people through a YouTube search. Discussion of these videos alongside articles or headlines from the [Rodney King beating](#) in Los Angeles, the [OJ Simpson](#) case, and [Trayvon Martin](#) and Michael Brown case analyses and synthesis will help students make sense of the impact stereotypes and assumptions can have on individuals and the country as a whole and how having a different global outlook can be used to turn the tide on this violence (ELA.Literacy.SL.11-12.1.D).

Coping With Terrorism And Disasters

In [September 12th: We Knew Everything Would Be All Right](#) (collaboratively written by first grade Masterson Elementary Students) the first graders talk about how their lives carried on after the horrific events of 9/11, a heart-warming story of American resilience in the face of disaster. The young artists illustrate the book with simple, yet powerful images that could be used to start a discussion about how the theme of resilience develops over the course of the story.

Students can begin to compare and contrast elements of different characters, places, and times in literary stories with real-life people and events and continue this discussion by reading [Prip'Yat: The Beast of Chernobyl](#) [Kindle Edition], written by Mike Kraus (CCSS.Literacy.RL.5.9). This story, about the ghostly, mutated beings that walk the streets after the darkest disaster on Earth, grabs middle school students and keeps them reading in one sitting. By incorporating newspaper articles, scenes from documentaries such as [The Battle of Chernobyl](#) on YouTube, and teacher-selected scenes from fictional movies such as [The Chernobyl Diaries](#), middle and high-school level students can analyze the effects of film medium and compare that to the written story and [articles](#) to determine how authors and filmmakers change history for dramatic effect (CCSS.Literacy.RI.5.5).

Students can then mimic the twisting of historical facts for dramatic effect by journaling about local, state, national, and world events or disasters that may impact their own lives using the free application [Flipsnack](#), and app that let's you create your own flipbook, complete with graphics, text, and an eye-pleasing layout. After collecting a myriad assortment of events, students can then choose one that interests them the most and create their own fictional narrative spinoff by using their Flipsnack journals to set the context of the story (CCSS.Literacy.W.5.3 & SL.5.5).

Connecting Cultural Diversity To Celebrations

[Room on the Broom](#) by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, a rhyming poem about a witch zooming down to

earth, provides a delightful way for elementary students to become excited about the witch, moon and other Halloween themes that fascinate young children. The website of the same name has a [finger puppet sheet](#) students can print out and use to practice their reading fluency—a role-playing activity that also develops critical thinking and problem solving skills (CCSS.Literacy.RF.K.4). Older students can identify and analyze the cultural icons present in both *Room on the Broom* and the spooky, non-fiction [Halloween Nation: Behind the Scenes of America's Fright Night](#) by Lesley Bannatyne. The book was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award, the genre of fiction associated with dark fantasy and horror writing and looks into the traditions associated with the day after Halloween, dia de los muertos—or Day of the Dead, a time-honored Mexican tradition. Students can celebrate their own cultural traditions by writing expository essays about their favorite family celebration and collecting their favorite family recipes. Students can work collaboratively to develop a digital cookbook for the class using a free app such as [Paprika](#) and could include introductory and concluding paragraphs that support the recipes presented (CCSS.Literacy.W.11-12.6).

Thinking Critically About Our World

For Thanksgiving, the book, [Thank You, Sarah: The Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving](#) by Laurie Halse Anderson and Matt Faulkner—a biography about Sarah Hale and her letter campaign to presidents that lasted 28 years— could be used to foster an awareness of how powerful the pen and mighty words can be. After using this book as an example of what one person's words and perseverance can do for others, students can get on [My Hero](#), the online largest international network of children helping children at <http://myhero.com> were more than 100,000 kids from 90 countries share essays, art, music, and film to honor those working for change. Focusing on social justice, reading of literary classical texts, as well as non-fiction informational works aligns with the Common Core State Standards by providing forums for students to handle increasingly more difficult texts of complexity, express their critical thinking skills, and gain deep understanding of global problems and initiatives.

Having students thinking critically about our world can begin with a read aloud of a strikingly beautiful picture book titled [Pi-shu, The Little Panda](#) (2001) by John Butler. Butler captures heartwarming scenes of the endangered panda cub and his mother and provides a backdrop for students to closely encounter how mankind has encroached upon and narrowed the world's habitats from the very inhabitants that need them. Instead of being able to eat their fill, the pandas have to move as forests are bulldozed to make way for fields of corn and rice. Similarly, in [Polar Bears: The Natural History of a Threatened Species](#) (2011), Ian Stirling unpacks thought-provoking, ice-capped photos brimming over with noteworthy information for students to critically evaluate the global warming problem that may endanger us all. Polar bear research scientist Stirling's conclusion that the overall effects on polar bears will be devastating “mainly because of human- induced

climate warning” (p.304) is also a hopeful call for the future generations’ researchers to find ways to stem the tide of global warming’s potential for destruction and acquire new ways to make it a planet of survival and sustenance for all species.

After reading these powerful texts, teachers can present their students with a local, national, or global environmental problem. Students can then role-play like they are political entity (city-council, state board, EPA, WWF) and search for the best solution to the problem (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7). For instance, students who live around the Gulf of Mexico could focus on the issue of bringing back tourism or cleaning up three years after the explosion on the Deep Horizon drilling rig. Students could then create a presentation and present their findings using diverse media to the rest of the class, who would vote on the best option after evaluating each group’s arguments and logic (CCSS.Literacy.W.11-12.7).

Common Threads That Bind Us

A time when humanity takes a good look at their practices and examines their own lives is New Year’s Day. Amidst the differences that separate people, helping to highlight that more things in our cultural world unite us than divide is *Happy New Year, Everywhere!* (2000) by Erlbach and Holm. The book provides a brief description of the worldwide celebrations of 20 countries worldwide, together with games and craft projects in a festive array of colors and activities for students to focus and think on the similarities among peoples. Paired with *Exploring Cultures through Art: China and Japan* (2002) by Diana Granat which displays the ways in which the Chinese celebrate 15 days of the Chinese New Year with a Lantern Festival and how to make them, along with 24 other related fascinating art projects and activities, these books will your students’ enhance deeper understanding and critical thinking through creativity.

Thinking, Creating, Doing

Like celebrations of the New Year around the world, joy in welcoming the Spring Equinox occurs worldwide as the animal kingdom awakens from hibernation and humankind turns to ways to create, whether heading to the outdoors for planting of the Spring crops or just deciding to make things. *Made Co.*, an initiative from Honey Maid, is a unique contest series in which kids can have a chance to have their creative projects brought to life by industry experts. It is a stimulus to develop and encourage our students to cultivate their minds, imaginations, creativity and to get inspired to invent and make things. Whether your students are interested in writing comic books, making backyard games or creating video game characters, this website: <http://madeco.honeymaid.com/projects/> can provide more information and contest rules to help your students embark on their journey to change the world.

Along the way, the well-read critical thinker will want to read the e-book likely to increase their growing understanding of our circular world and spark problem solving discussion on how to eradicate world hunger. Patricia Reilly Giff’s e-book, *Nory Ryan’s Song*, a Newberry award -inning book, chronicles

a family’s starvation/potato blight struggle and survival during the Great Hunger of Ireland. Students can use this book to analyze how cultural experience is reflected in literature.

For Arbor Day, Friday, April 26, 2013, and the 4-H Million Trees Project, <http://www.4hmilliontrees.org>, partners with the Arbor Day Foundation by advancing their mission with the planting of trees, and aiding in the fight against global climate change. When 4-H affiliates and families register on the webpage for a special \$12 Arbor Day Foundation membership, 12 trees indigenous to their area will be delivered. A way to target the effort is to read the book by Daniel Butler titled *How to Plant a Tree: A Simple Celebration of Trees and Tree-Planting Ceremonies*. Students can then research the species of trees that will be sent to them, learn about the species’ optimal growth conditions, and evaluate a location to plant their trees (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7). Students can then plan a ceremony, advertise it through a student-made commercial, and invite the community to help celebrate Arbor Day by planting trees around the community (CCSS.ELA.Literacy.SL.8.4).

What It Means to be Free

Freedom celebrations can be the focus from May 5th to July 4th. Cinco De Mayo, and Independence Day provide the global theme of all of humanity’s need to live free from dictatorship. Excerpts from *El Cinco de Mayo: An American Tradition* by David E. Hayes-Bautista, a book which chronicles how the holiday of Mexican origin has shifted over time into an American celebration, can be read by older students to use as a starting point for discussing how propaganda in the United States and the facts in this book provide conflicting information (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.3). *Give Me Liberty: The Story of the Declaration of Independence Day* by Russell Freedman, a narrative that documents the journey to American independence from Great Britain, could be paired with the text from the *Pledge of Allegiance, The Star Spangled Banner*, and the picture book *Happy Birthday America*, authored by Mary Pope Osborn and illustrated by Peter Catalanatto, so students could discuss and analyze what the word “American” means to them. This discussion could lead to a personal essay under the topic of “what it means to be American” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2).

CONCLUSION

Students reading and writing throughout their lives about themes such as: peacefully existing with others, dealing with terrorism and disasters, connecting culture to our holidays, solving world problems, finding similarities, and understanding freedom makes them global, caring citizens. By using nine key comprehensions—schema connections, predicting, clarifying, vocabulary instruction, making inferences, visualizing, synthesizing, evaluating, and creating—in tandem with both fiction and non-fiction texts, like the ones mentioned above that spark critical thinking, teachers become mindful of

their craft and are able to connect their students to the outside world to create the critical thinkers of today who will become the critical leaders of tomorrow, all while keeping up with the demands of the CCSS.

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