

# ***Choice and Voice: Democracy, Participation, and Critical Literacy in the English Classroom***

by Barry Gilmore

**A** recent class I taught read Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, in which we came across this passage:

Winning an election—that was Belgium's idea of fair play, but to people here it was peculiar. To the Congolese (including Anatole himself, he confessed) it seems odd that if one man gets fifty votes and the other gets forty-nine, the first wins altogether and the second one plumb loses. That means almost half the people will be unhappy, and according to Anatole, in a village that's left halfway unhappy you haven't heard the end of it. There is sure to be trouble somewhere down the line. (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 265)

The discussion of the passage brought up a recent election we'd had for homeroom representation—you know the kind: a heads-down, hands-up, blind vote between about six candidates, and the winner received maybe two more votes than the first runner-up. That's democracy in action, right?

Yes and no. The class wasn't at all certain that the Congolese approach described later in the novel—total consensus, no matter how long it takes to get there—would have worked in our election, though it's also democratic. The discussion that followed was one of the most engaging we'd had in class; it balanced methods of voting, participating, and making decisions together. It explored democracy.

It's not every day that a passage of literature has such an immediate effect on the choices we make in school and life. Yet that sort of effect is often exactly what language arts teachers aim to achieve. Using literature, we attempt daily to

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immerse students in discussions about moral choice, to offer narratives that promote active participation and standing on principle. Ask any student who ever wrote about the themes of *To Kill A Mockingbird* or *The Scarlet Letter*; English classrooms resound with examples of the difference between the bystander and the “upstander.”

Practicing critical literacy and critical thinking of the sort that we, as English teachers, encourage ought to lead students toward reflection on their own choices and the choices of their society. What’s more, it ultimately ought to offer students access to alternate points of view and belief systems, empowering them to evaluate the merits and deficiencies of either system or both. This critical stance should enable students to find new ways to approach a problem and even to initiate new paths of action.

These outcomes are desirable for any teacher. We should also be aware, however, that encouraging this kind of critical questioning can often reveal some of the deep ironies of American schooling: as much as we assert the value of democracy and civic participation, many schools and many teachers shy away from actually including them in policies or classrooms. A new type of election for homeroom representative may be a start but should not be the end of this line of questioning; ultimately, the study of civic participation in literature may demand of us the reevaluation of participation in our schools and even our syllabi. Learning about freedom and voice is not the same as being free or using a voice; our students deserve to participate as well as to read about participation, and a literature class is a natural place for the discussion and choice that participation demands to begin.

### **The Ongoing Debate**

To illustrate the disparity between what we typically teach and traditional classroom techniques, here’s an exercise to try on your own or with students: list as many works of fiction as you can that include models of abusive or oppressive governance. Several dystopian novels ought to spring to mind fairly quickly:

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Lowry's *The Giver*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; the list goes on. Historical novels and plays—Wiesel's *Night*, Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Miller's *The Crucible*—might follow. And because I asked for governance, not government, novels in which positions of leadership are abused in a systematic fashion also count—Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for instance, or even Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. (If your students haven't read a wide range of works, try this with movies—anything from *The Lion King* to *Star Wars* will work.)

Got your list? Now ask a couple of quick questions:

*What do the protagonists have in common?*

*What's the message of these works?*

Unless you've got a lot of oddballs (*Macbeth*, for instance) on your list, your answers will probably run something along these lines: the protagonists are the ones who resist oppression; the message is that one must stand up for what is right. It's a positive message, one English teachers tend to reinforce again and again.

Now ask this question:

*Which of these works most closely mirrors the school in which you teach?*

Or, if you're willing:

*Which most closely mirrors your classroom?*

Schools and classrooms, no matter how they operate, are by nature little dystopias. In theory, teachers, students, and parents (and even administrators, politicians, and other rule-makers) share a common goal—for students to learn; and the classroom should be organized in an optimum manner to help everyone reach that group goal. The reality, of course, is far different—not just because students don't always necessarily share an instructor's goals but also because of numerous exterior forces and limitations. As a result, far too many of our

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classrooms (I include my own) tend to resemble the very systems we encourage students to resist. “Implicitly,” write Becker and Couto in their 1996 book *Teaching Democracy by Being Democratic*, “teaching democracy also entails encouraging students to question authority, including the teacher’s, and to dissent appropriately, that is, as a citizen of the classroom” (p. 4). Alfie Kohn, as quoted by Susan Dunn, agrees: “Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have a chance to live in one today” (Dunn, 2007, p. 1).

American educators have for decades been debating what it means to teach democratically and to teach for democracy; no one has yet perfected the model. At one end of the spectrum reside educators like Joanne Yatvin, the current president of the National Council of Teachers of English, who wrote in 1971 that, in education, “one problem is the philosophical shift in our society to a demand for democratic process where it was never meant to apply and to an exaltation of individuality and personal taste” (p. 1,080); education, in other words, is meant to exist in a non-democratic system. At the other extreme one might find schools that incorporate democracy so fully that students have no required classes, subjects, or assignments, and are given an equal vote in every matter involving school life and policy, from punitive measures to operational and financial allocation. The Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts is a good example: “students initiate all their own activities and create their own environments” so that they “are exposed to the complexities of life in the framework of a participatory democracy.” The Sudbury School remains a radical model despite the fact that educators have been proposing this level of student involvement for decades. In a 1939 article the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, for instance, New York University professor S. R. Slavson proposed much the same model:

It is necessary. . . that in view of the challenge to democracy, the school become a training ground for democracy. This can best be accomplished

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through participation on the part of the students, not only in classroom learning, but actually in the conduct of the schools themselves. (p. 226)

If the nature of the democratic classroom is a recurring theme in discussions about American education, it is also one tied clearly to historical context. Numerous articles on the subject appear in the early forties; more crop up in the early seventies; an entire volume of *The English Journal* was devoted to the subject in 2005. If critical literacy is a tool our students should use, it's one that we, as educators, should also value. What is it about war and threats to America that cause us to reflect on the nature of our pedagogy? Is teaching for civic participation more important at some times, for some audiences of students, than at others?

In the end, many of us find ourselves stranded somewhere in between those who believe that classrooms should include noiseless rows of student desks where pupils do what they're told and those who advocate systems without structure. We wish to value students' voices but know that democracy in a classroom means time, noise, and, sometimes, failure. We live within the confines of mandated curricula and high-stakes testing that limits choice for teachers and students. We also know that our schools, if dystopian, are not always tyrannical and do not always perfectly mirror the oppression portrayed in the fiction we assign.

Teachers of literature, I believe, are uniquely suited to teach for, about, and through democratic processes in ways that balance student participation, subject matter, and high standards. That's because literature itself is well suited to discussions about achieving just such balances.

### **Text and Context: Literature and Participation in the Classroom**

One might argue that the very nature of a literature class promotes the basic freedoms on which democracy relies. Literacy itself is a basic requirement

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for free and fair elections as are an informed world view and the ability to express opinions. The difference, though, between mere literacy and *critical* literacy is an important one: a voter who can simply read the ballot cannot replace one who understands the philosophies and histories of the candidates on it.

It is my belief that students learn citizenship—critical participation, one might call it—in multiple ways simultaneously: through *what* they read, through *how* they read it, and also through *how* they discuss and approach that material, as well as the course as a whole, in the classroom. In each of three sections below, I'll address all three of these aspects of instruction for bodies of literature that might prove useful to classroom teachers concerned about participation and democracy both in theory and practice.

### **Oppressors And The Oppressed: The Literature of Injustice and Rebellion**

The texts often used to teach about democracy and participation are not necessarily texts *about* democracy and participation; more often, they're about rebellion, non-conformity, and principled stands against oppression. Acts of revolution are admittedly important in the development of democracy and civil liberties; American history, in particular, is full of revolutionaries, from Pocahontas to Rosa Parks. The dystopian, historical, and other political fiction I've listed already in this article is not only commonplace in the classroom, but is also integral to many instructors' courses.

There's something incongruous, though, about *instructing* students to shrug off tyranny. And, too, there's the questions that a work like Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* raises: Is it enough simply to rid a society of tyranny? With what does one replace it, if not just tyranny of a different sort?

The answer, I believe, is pluralism—the structuring of society in such a way that diverse and disparate points of view may be expressed freely and equally. Fortunately, helping students to understand the value of a forum for the

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expression of diverse opinions does not equate to an enormous leap for English teachers, who generally value discussion and classroom participation in the first place. It's worth asking, however, how effective our classroom discussions are and how clearly we're sending the message that a range of viewpoints matters. Think of it this way: in his article "The Art of Teaching Democracy," Richard Cuoto describes an activity requiring a group of educators simply to illustrate "teaching democracy." i.e. to depict an image of the concept of teaching democracy in any manner—abstract or concrete, detailed or general. More than two-thirds of these teachers included some sort of circle in their images of "teaching democracy," about a third depicted multiple learning environments, and several included numerous bonds or links between the participants. Such symbolic pictures, taken metaphorically or literally as depictions of a classroom, unanimously move away from the notion of a single lecturer depositing vital information into the minds of silent, note-scribbling learners.

That's not to say that every teacher reading this article should suddenly rush back into his or her room and start hauling desks around into different configurations (though sometimes that's not a bad approach to improving the quality of discussions). It's also not to say that lectures are never worthwhile. But to demonstrate real pluralism, one must organize classroom discussions in such a way as to maximize interaction between students and the willingness of those with minority opinions to voice them.

Here's an example: during a recent class discussion of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*—a novel the students had already suggested might be compared to other works describing abusive governments—I asked groups of students, working in pairs, to suggest some of the "big questions" posed by the work. Two of these in particular became topics of conversation: the first was, "Are some of the means of control used in the novel actually legitimate and reasonable?" and the second, "Are some of the means of control more effective than others?" The problem with the discussion, I quickly noticed, was that it was being conducted

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mainly between the two students who posed these questions, while I was serving as moderator--the rest of the class had not yet weighed in.

I decided to reorganize the discussion as a grid activity. The prep was easy. On each of four pieces of paper, one of which I then taped to each wall, I wrote one of the following: “means of control are effective and legitimate,” “means of control are effective and illegitimate,” “means of control are ineffective and legitimate,” “means of control are ineffective and illegitimate.” Then, as I cited (or allowed students to cite, if they wished) scenes and actions from the novel, every participant (to make the exercise even more democratic, I included myself) moved to the quadrant of the room that corresponded to his or her individual feelings about each scene or action. One student, for instance, brought up a scene in which the patients are allowed to vote about watching baseball on television but are defeated because the “Chronics” are included in the vote:

McMurphy is on his feet.

“Well, I’ll be a sonofabitch. You mean to tell me that’s how you’re gonna pull it? Count the votes of those old birds over there too??”

“Didn’t you explain the voting procedure to him Doctor?”

“I’m afraid--a majority *<i>is</i> called for, McMurphy. She’s right, she’s right.”*

“A majority, Mr. McMurphy; it’s in the ward constitution.”

“And I suppose the way to change the constitution is with a majority vote.”

(Kesey, 1962, pp. 124-125)

The students and I split up, at least one person standing at each wall of the room. Some thought a vote that includes everyone was legitimate, some didn’t. Others thought the vote was effective because no one could argue the point; others disagreed. Other scenes and actions from the novel raised similar debate—the practice of group therapy, for instance, which the narrator describes in this way: “the goal of the Therapeutic Community is a democratic ward, run

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completely by the patients and their votes” (p. 48). And then, at the suggestion of a student, we used the same categories to discuss aspects of our own political system such as the electoral college and nationally televised debates. Finally, we moved on to issues of school governance, such as the way students choose their courses each fall.

The great benefit of an exercise like the grid is that it encourages students to speak out and defend their positions; it also encourages them to think about other possible positions. If no one is standing in one quadrant of the room, students will usually work to figure out what the argument for that position might be. In such an exercise, where various points of view are visually clear before discussion even begins, students become eager to speak and eager to listen. And at the end of such a discussion, I always ask students how the discussion model itself relates to the work we’re studying. Generally, they pretty quickly realize that we’re putting pluralism into practice—that we are, in short, doing what the oppressive systems in our texts refuse to. This technique can be used alongside many novels, including *Fahrenheit 451* and several newer works like *We*, *The Last Town on Earth*, and *American Youth*.

### **Decision-Makers: Texts about Choice and Conflict Resolution**

Still, democracy and citizenship are not only about nonconformity and disagreement; civic participation in a democratic society does not require constant revolutionary acts, only a constant willingness to challenge assumptions and engage in decision-making. Take this passage from *Lord of the Flies*, shortly after the boys are stranded on the island:

The dark boy, Roger, stirred at last and spoke up.

“Let’s have a vote.”

“Yes!”

“Vote for chief!”

“Let’s vote—”

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This toy of voting was almost as pleasing as the conch. Jack started to protest but the clamor changed from the general wish for a chief to an election by acclaim of Ralph himself. None of the boys could have found good reason for this; what intelligence had been shown was traceable to Piggy while the most obvious leader was Jack. But there was a stillness about Ralph that marked him out: there was his size, and attractive appearance; and most obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch. (Golding, 1954, p. 22)

A few pages later, Ralph begins to institute laws, the first of which is a fundamental sort of parliamentary procedure in which the speaker must hold a symbolic conch. “We’ll have rules!” Jack shouts in response, “Lots of rules! And when anyone breaks ’em—” (p. 33). Unlike the passage from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* above, there is no pre-existing authority in this group decision; the boys are creating their social order from scratch. Other instances of such group decision-making crop up fairly frequently in high school literature: there’s a vote taken by a group of soldiers in O’Brien’s *Going Aafter Cacciato*, a town meeting in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, a civic meeting of a gated community in Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain*.

Such scenes serve as interesting focal points for a discussion of how and why we read and work as we do in the classroom.

“Imagine,” I say to my classes, “that you enter a three week unit in a literature class with no prescribed syllabus, reading list, assignments, or grading system. Imagine that I left it entirely up to you to tell me what we would read, how we’d study it, and how the grades—if any—would be assigned. What would you do?”

The first responses are predictable: we’d read nothing, or almost nothing, and do nothing. It’s not long, though, before the class agrees that the consequences of such a course might not be worth it. (What if an administrator

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decided he or she needed to fire me, take over the class, and assign a research paper in light of the failure of the class to produce any work?) The next reaction, generally, is a feeling of unease about how the students would come up with a worthwhile curriculum plan. This is the same reaction described by Jeffrey Wilhelm (1997), who recreates two students in a discussion about choice in reading:

“Hey, when you go to a restaurant, you can choose a dessert, but only from the desserts they have.” Another student joined in with, “Yeah, if you could choose any dessert in the whole wide world you might never make up your mind. . . .” (p. 47)

In the end, students often come up with a plan that I put into action—I provide options, and they choose between them. Sometimes this results in group work where each group chooses its own reading, creates assignments and a timetable of when those assignments are due, and constructs a rubric for self-assessment. Sometimes it results in independent reading and work by individual students. Sometimes we enter a class project with elements of student design. Usually, I get where I wanted to go anyway, but with a much higher level of investment from the class.

Again, I often employ such tactics when the work we’ll study includes models of self-governance (or a lack of it) to begin with; thus, the process of the classroom either directly reflects or refutes the processes portrayed in our novel, opening up another dimension for discussion and connection.

### **Outside Observers: Texts That Examine Democracy from the Outside In**

In *Veil of Roses*, a recent novel that works well with young adult readers (especially with young female readers), author Laura Fitzgerald’s narrator is an Iranian woman residing in the United States on a three-month visa who frequently carries her camera with her:

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I snap a picture of our three coffee cups, their round rims on the round table, the lack of hard edges. The rim of Eva's cardboard cup is splashed with sheer red lipstick; she has made her mark. I take a picture of Eva from the waist down—the thigh-high black boots and the leather miniskirt. Then I take one of my new white running shoes, chaste and cheery.  
(p. 133)

A page later, a new acquaintance of the narrator attempts to understand her choice of subject matter:

“You are looking for freedom in all its often overlooked details. You want to document some of the little choices that free people make. . . you are photographing tiny acts of everyday rebellion.” (p. 134)

Fiction in which outsiders observe democracy and participation with a fresh perspective can be profitable vehicles for classroom discussion; the passage from Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* at the start of this article is a good example. Others I've taught include LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and Allende's *Eva Luna*.

Such works get to the heart of an approach involving critical literacy. It's important, of course, for students to ask critical questions about authorship and readership in any work that's being used to examine governance--students may develop greater insight if they investigate Huxley's stance on eugenics or Conrad's views on British imperialism as opposed to Belgian—but reading a work like Laura Fitzgerald's makes students into critical questioners by necessity, examining decision-making and citizenship through other lenses even as they read.

We practice participation in our classrooms every day. Sometimes it's as obvious as an election; sometimes it's implicit in the way we make an assignment. Helping students to read about participation is a first step in helping them to

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become active participants in society, but it's not the only step. Students also need to be critical readers and critical learners. We, their teachers, must in turn, be critical *educators*. We must question our own pedagogy, our own modeling, and our own motives. In so doing, we do not just instill students with a fervor for a democratic society—we help them to construct one they can actually exist in every day.

***About The Writer***

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## Suggested Reading

### **Eva Luna**

by Isabel Allende

*Eva Luna* traces the life of an orphan from her impoverished beginnings to her rise to fame and fortune.

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-28058-6, 320 pp., \$7.99

Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-38382-9, 320 pp., \$14.00

### **Fahrenheit 451**

by Ray Bradbury

Winner of The National Book Foundation

Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

This classic novel poses enduring questions about the role of government: Should it reflect the will of the people? Should government do the people's thinking for them?

Teacher's Guide Available

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-41001-6, 192 pp., \$13.95

Del Rey, MM, 978-0-345-34296-6, 208 pp., \$6.99

### **A Tale Of Two Cities**

by Charles Dickens

One of Charles Dickens' most exciting books, this historical novel has given generations of readers access to the profound human dramas that lie behind cataclysmic social and political events.

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21176-4, 416 pp., \$4.95

### **Veil Of Roses**

by Llaura Fitzgerald

This compelling debut follows one spirited young woman from the confines of Iran to the intoxicating freedom of America—where she discovers not only an enticing new country but the roots of her own independence.

Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38388-1, 320 pp., \$12.00

### **The Scarlet Letter**

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne's exploration of the dichotomy between the public and private self, internal passion and external convention, gives us the unforgettable Hester Prynne, who discovers strength in the face of ostracism and emerges as a heroine ahead of her time.

Modern TR, 978-0-679-78338-1, 304 pp., \$6.95

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21009-5, 256 pp., \$3.95

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**American Youth**

by Phil LaMarche

Set in a town riven by social and ideological tensions—an old rural culture in conflict with newcomers—this is a classic portrait of a young man struggling with the idea of identity and responsibility in an America ill at ease with itself.

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6605-6, 240 pp., \$21.95

Paperback coming January 2008. Do not order before 1/8/2008.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7740-0, 240 pp., \$13.95

**Un Lun Dun**

by China Miéville

Setting philosophical questions within the context of a magical world that is inextricably connected to our own, Miéville's novel poses thought-provoking questions about the nature of personal and social progress.

Teacher's Guide Available

Del Rey, HC, 978-0-345-49516-7, 448 pp., \$17.95

Paperback coming January 2008. Do not order before 1/29/2008.

Del Rey, TR, 978-0-345-45844-5, 528 pp., \$10.95

**Going After Cacciato**

by Tim O'Brien

Winner of the 1979 National Book Award, the now classic novel of Vietnam, *Going After Cacciato*, captures the peculiar blend of horror and hallucinatory comedy that marked the war.

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-0442-1, 352 pp., \$14.95

**The Last Town On Earth**

by Thomas Mullen

Winner 2007: James Fenimore Cooper Prize

Set against the backdrop of one of the most virulent epidemics that America ever experienced—the 1918 flu epidemic—Thomas Mullen's powerful, sweeping first novel is a tale of morality in a time of upheaval and a challenge to the assumptions behind the usual critiques of capitalism and democracy.

Teacher's Guide Available

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7592-5, 432 pp., \$13.95

**We**

by Yevgeny Zamyatin

Translated by Natasha Randall

"Two of the most iconic novels in the English language—*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *1984* by George Orwell—owe an enormous debt to Zamyatin. . . . We is the ur-text of science-fiction dystopias: it [describes] an Orwellian society almost three decades before Orwell invented his own version." —*The Wall Street Journal*

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7462-1, 240 pp., \$12.95

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