

Carol Jago

Building Bridges with Books



Bridges allow us to travel from where we are to where we want to go. They help us traverse troubled waters and span deep chasms. In the case of the Brooklyn and Golden Gate Bridges, they stand as monuments to man's ingenuity. The same is true of books. Books take us from where we are and help us explore new landscapes, geographic and psychological. They allow us to experience vicariously things one hopes never to have to face first-hand. They bring us into contact with remarkable thinkers and magical storytelling. Books provide bridges to other times, other worlds, other selves.

With all this to offer, why is it so hard to get kids to read books?

How Today's Young People Spend Their Time

Maybe one reason that books are such a hard sell is that today's teenagers are losing the habit of reading anything that doesn't fit on their cell phone screen. A recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation reports that young people ages 8–18 years spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day using entertainment media—games, social networks, television, and the Internet. Because these young people are often plugged in to more than one device simultaneously, they actually consume a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes of media daily. These numbers do not include the 1 hour and 35 minutes a day

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young people spend sending and reading text messages. This is more time than students spend in school. Given that their hand-held devices are on seven days a week, this is more than a full-time job. And these are the same teenagers who say they don't have time for homework.

While some celebrate the fact that today's youngsters are reading and writing more than ever before, status updates and tweets have little in common with books. Short bursts of personal information, most often written by individuals much like themselves, rarely offer a bridge to understanding the wider world. Teenagers aren't using the World Wide Web as a virtual portal to the globe; they're shopping. I'm not such a fool to think that we are ever going anywhere but forward technologically. Nor do I long fondly for the good old days. If there ever were any, I missed them. I love my laptop and have a Facebook page. You can follow me on Twitter. What concerns me is not the technology but teenagers' addiction to it. Their penchant for constant communication seems to be resulting in an ever more fleeting attention span. Where's the time for reflection?

Of course teenagers will argue that they are multi-tasking and able to do it all. We have scientific evidence demonstrating that they are wrong. Eyal Ophir, a researcher in Stanford University's Communication Between Humans and Interactive Media Lab, explained the results of a Stanford study: "Multi-taskers couldn't help thinking about the task they weren't doing. The high multi-taskers are always drawing from all the information in front of them. They can't keep things separate in their minds." This Stanford study makes clear that multi-taskers are not working as well as they could. Teachers need to help students turn off their phones, step away from their computers, and carve out time in their day for sustained reading. When arguing

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with students who insist that they read better while listening to their iPods, I am often reminded of a time when my two sisters and I were all in high school, and my father posted a sign on our refrigerator door: “Hire a teenager while they still know everything.”

Turning 21st Century Students Into Readers

A considered argument takes time to develop and patience to ponder. According to researchers Small and Vorgan (2008), the average person spends two seconds on each Web site when searching for information. I worry that the habit of skimming and scanning that is the norm for online reading is replacing the habit of sustained attention that reading books requires. In our rush through the 21st century we seem to be burning behind us the very bridges we most need to help us on our journey toward a civil and civilized future. What can a classroom teacher do to make reading books a habit in 21st century students' lives?

1. Expect students to read 30 minutes a day, seven days a week, outside of class. When they say they don't have time, show them the data on teenage media use. If parents complain, suggest that they check their phone bills to see how many minutes a month their child is spending on a cell phone. Communicate with parents about the importance of reading books. Work toward making this expectation a school-wide effort. The more that reading books is integrated into the culture of your school, the more likely students are to get into the habit of reading.
2. Every three weeks have students meet in mini book clubs to talk about what they are reading. The more authentic the tasks you ask students to complete after reading, the more likely they will be to pick up another book. When was the last time you finished a great book and thought, “I know what I want to do. I'll fill in a wishbone/fishbone graphic organizer”?

3. Create a summer reading program at your school where everyone — administrators, office workers, teachers, and students—reads the same books. Titles we have used with success at Santa Monica High School include *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon, *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas, *Fast Food Nation* and *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know about Fast Food* by Eric Schlosser, and *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario. Students need to see the adults around them reading.
4. Help students have easy access to books. Do whatever it takes to have an extensive classroom library. Ask for donations, write grants, pester publishers, haunt library sales. Support your school and local public libraries. Consider setting up displays of free books around the school. We give away condoms in the nurses' office, why not books in the counseling office?

Be Prepared for Setbacks

Lest you think I believe that the work described above is easy, number 5 on my To Do list is “Be prepared for setbacks.” When the girls' bathroom down the hall from my classroom was plagued by graffiti, I decided that instead of starting every day cleaning black marker off the mirrors I would try to make the restroom a place students would choose not to tag. I hung art prints on the walls and brought in a bookshelf. I set a plastic plant on top and next to it a sign that read, “Free Books: Help Yourself.” It delighted me to see books disappear. Every morning I refilled the shelves, marveling at this simple method for supplying young readers with the food they need. Visitors to the restroom could choose from harlequin romances, the history of the film industry, Patricia Cornwall murder mysteries, or the classics. Over time every type of book appeared on the shelves. Over time everything was consumed. And for months the graffiti stopped.

Then one day I walked into the bathroom after school to check whether the bookshelves needed restocking. A donation of young adult novels that I thought students were likely to gobble up had just come my way, and I was keen to get them out. Pushing open the door, my arms piled high with books, I gasped. The bookcase was shattered, broken into splinters, and books were strewn across the bathroom floor. I didn't know what to think. Maybe it was an accident. A group of girls could have been horsing around in the restroom and knocked over the bookcase. Maybe somebody sat on it. Maybe several somebodies stood on it. Maybe they didn't tell anyone because they were afraid of getting in trouble. But how could wooden shelves get smashed to a million little pieces? This wasn't a delicate piece of French furniture but a standard issue school bookcase. The resultant mess seemed willful and malicious. I know many students are angry, but why take it out on something as humble as a book display? Could the vandalism suggest a rejection of school and all its trappings? Or, could I just be making much too much of this?

I suppose what hurt was that I believed the bookshelf made a difference—a tiny difference to be sure—but this island of literacy stood for something to me. Those shelves with their free books demonstrated that reading for pleasure was alive and well at Santa Monica High School. We were a public school that lent evidence to the National Endowment for the Arts’ “Reading on the Rise” report. We were a community that was beating the odds. Seeing the bookshelf turned to rubble made me feel as though barbarians were at the gates. I took a deep breath and started over.

Know Good Books to Recommend

Will Rogers once said, “You can’t teach what you don’t know any more than you can come back from where you ain’t been.” It’s hard to be an effective proponent of the reading habit without being a reader yourself. I find my energy for this mission most often restored not by a reading research study but by reading books. The latest volume I’m looking forward to putting in the hands of students is *Tales from Outer Suburbia* by Shaun Tan. You may remember Tan from his astounding picture book/graphic novel without words, *Arrival*. His new book is quite different. A collection of short stories with strong graphic elements, the book felt like a poem to me. (Not sure I’d say that to students when I’m trying to sell them on it.) The characters are young people exploring what it feels like to be a stranger in a strange land both geographically—Tan’s parents emigrated to Australia from China—and emotionally as they make their journey through adolescence. One of the most remarkable aspects of the book is the way the text itself teaches you how to read it. Nominated for a *Los Angeles Times* book award in the young adult category, I thought it a book for all ages.

If there is one area where many English teachers have a blind spot, it is in nonfiction. So many of us are avid readers of fiction that we don’t have nonfiction titles on the tip of our tongues the way we should. Here are some titles my students have found compelling:

- *Long Way Gone: Memoir of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah
- *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan
- *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer
- *Cod: The Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* by Mark Kurlansky
- *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich
- *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathebane
- *Black Like Me* by John Griffin
- *Dispatches* by Michael Herr
- *Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell
- *John Adams* by David McCullough
- *Collapse* by Jared Diamond
- *Blood Done Sign My Name* by Timothy Tyson
- *Anatomy of a Face* by Lucy Greely
- *The Secret Life of Lobsters* by Trevor Corson
- *The Soloist* by Steve Lopez

- *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* by Thomas Lynch
- *The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins
- *Strength in What Remains* by Tracy Kidder
- *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers

The recent flurry of news stories about shortening high school to three or fewer years overlooks the opportunity senior year offers young people to do a lot of reading. I always love being able to recommend adult books to students hungry for stories of the world outside the boundaries of their currently circumscribed lives. Here are my suggestions for a senior reading curriculum:

- For kids who think their lives are hard - *American Salvage* by Bonnie Jo Campbell
- Following the Haiti disaster - *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder
- For their health - *Food Rules* by Michael Pollan
- For animal lovers – *Animals in Translation* by Temple Grandin
- For math lovers tired of studying for calculus - *The Professor and the Housekeeper* by Yoko Ogawa
- For students thinking of majoring in psychology - *Letters to a Young Therapist* by Mary Pipher (author of *Reviving Ophelia*)
- *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks
- For seniors seeking answers to life’s difficult questions: *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* by Michael J. Sandel

I want students to read books not just to pass exams or to succeed in college. I want them to read for their lives. Books have been my bridges to the wider world, and I believe with every fiber of my being that they can do the same for others.

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