

more students indicate that they do not understand widely used historical references and literary allusions on television, in books, and in films and what is worse, do not even *know* that there are cultural and historical references in “texts” that deepen their meaning.

Many teachers hoped that the Common Core “curriculum” adopted by Arkansas in 2010 would assuage their anxieties about having to create something out of thin air again, to “fill” some of those “holes” in our students’ educations. Most school districts created task forces to analyze the Common Core Standards and have held many meetings. A lot of energy has gone into the process of analysis, but the Fayetteville school district still does not have a real K–12 curriculum sequence fleshed out.

Anxiety is again up, and the age-old “resistance” is rearing its ugly head because information is being “doled” out to the faculty in small pieces without an overview of the big picture. “What is it going to look like?” is the question that keeps coming up. It’s a good question because the new standards are also mostly skill sets, without direction to a coherent curriculum in which to practice the skills.

Hirsch said that “[p]reschool is not too early for starting earnest instruction in literate national culture. Fifth grade is almost too late. Tenth grade usually *is* too late.”<sup>5</sup> And he’s right. My grade 8 students will soon be in high school, and I can only begin to fill some of the holes in their background knowledge. The huge diversity of educational experiences most students have had makes it easy to understand why many teachers who love the subject they majored in and teach do not stay in the profession. Their task is overwhelming.

## BACKGROUND TO A COHERENT GRADE 8 LITERATURE CURRICULUM

I was hired to teach at Woodland Junior High School in Fall 2002 with funding from a Classroom Size Reduction Grant that had been awarded to the school district. I began in the middle of November, after the school had pulled students from the other grade 8 English classes to make up my class. The chair of the department sent the lesson plans she had taught since the beginning of the school year so that I could see what the students

had already been exposed to. I was expected to develop my own curriculum for the rest of the school year.

Like all new teachers, I struggled to find ways to build a community of readers and writers and made my share of mistakes. But over the course of almost ten years, my classroom literature curriculum developed chiefly to fill in the missing pieces I perceived in my students’ background knowledge. I teach what I believe will be essential to my students’ success not only in high school Pre-AP and AP courses and any post-secondary educational institution they enroll in but also in assimilating into the civic culture in which they will live.

To start to lay some foundational knowledge for my students, I borrowed ideas from colleagues in the Northwest Arkansas Writing project, incorporated reading strategies from the Smart Step Literacy Lab Classroom project at Harding University, selected texts from reading lists for college-intending students, and drew on a copy of the Core Knowledge Sequence to identify grade appropriateness. I would have liked to collaborate with departmental colleagues, but most of them did not indicate a consistent interest in planning together. Therefore, I forged my calendar and my literature curriculum alone.

One of the big gaps in students’ background knowledge related to understanding political satire and comedy in literature. My perception of this gap arose from the effort to help young students understand the cultural references behind cartoons. Other kinds of humorous texts soon came to mind, especially “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” also an excellent text with which to teach close reading because his character is revealed through detailed analysis of his “jargon.” T. S. Eliot is quoted as saying about James Thurber’s work:

It is a form of humor which is also a way of saying something. There is a criticism of life at the bottom of it. It is serious and even somber. Unlike so much of humor, it is not merely a criticism of manners—that is, of the superficial aspects of society at a given moment—but something more profound.<sup>6</sup>

The elements of comedy in literature thus became one focus in my classroom curriculum.