

## ***GTIP Nugget: Global Issues through Literary Lenses: Integrating Fiction in Social Studies Education by Kristen Erickson***

### **Background**

As a Social Studies educator with a major in English, I often find myself seasoning my lessons in history and citizenship education with short stories or poems to selfishly satiate my fiction cravings. Thankfully, my tendencies are supported by both scholars who urge the importance of pairing fiction and fact in Social Studies education and my school through its creation of a year-long Grade 12 dual credit Global Issues and ELA: Literary Focus course. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the class, the two sections were taught in teams with both an ELA and a Social Studies specialist in the room, allowing myself the unique opportunity to not only collaborate with my ELA partner, but also two other colleagues who were participating in the same team-teaching experience with another class. Between the four of us, we each contributed our own unique talents and expertise while trying to create a truly integrated experience marrying these two subjects together, facing both challenges and triumphs along the way.

### **Process**

We began our integration with a thematic approach by introducing students to the ten Areas of Inquiry as described in the Grade 12 Global Issues curriculum which served as the grounding lenses through which students would view and engage with literature.<sup>1</sup> For example, through our exploration of *Death of a Salesman*, we framed our questions using multiple Areas of Inquiry, such as consumerism, gender, poverty, wealth and power, all of which enriched student discussions and journaling when considering characters and themes in the play and how they relate to current events. The Areas of Inquiry were also integral to the two major projects students were required to produce along with their weekly commitments. The first was a major paper where students chose two novels (one of which had to be fiction) and discussed their relationship to one or multiple Areas of Inquiry, a skill we had by that time practiced in class with two other mandatory texts, *Oedipus the King* and *Hamlet*. The second was the experiential Take Action Project that required students to recognize the Areas of Inquiry that impacted their own communities and design an experience to engage with or address the challenges of their communities in a genuine and meaningful way. I believe our focus on exploring Global Issues through fiction allowed for students to stimulate their senses of empathy and reflective skills necessary for a project of this nature. “Fiction offers a safe entry point into questions of identity, agency and ethics that students also confront in their own lives,”<sup>2</sup> and in reading about characters and their responses to the norms and conflicts in their own societies alongside discussions about current events, students were able to make meaningful connections as well as recognize and challenge their own perspectives on global issues.

Throughout our course, we also integrated ELA and Social Studies by expanding our definition of setting to not only include the literary understanding of time and place, but also the historical and societal context embedded in the portrayal and construction of period texts.<sup>3</sup> For example, before reading *Hamlet*, we introduced students to the hierarchical ordering inherent in Elizabethan understandings of their world, from God to minerals, by discussing the Great Chain of Being.<sup>4</sup> This allowed students to understand the cultural context in which *Hamlet* was written, where maintaining God’s intended order secured harmony and where any departure (such as killing one’s brother) meant anarchy and chaos and perhaps the visit of a certain vengeful ghost. We would often ask students to take historical perspectives using their content knowledge, again flexing their empathetic abilities, to better understand these time periods and their relationship to modern contexts. These historical details “build empathy and help students understand why characters in historical novels make certain decisions, thus humanizing historical periods and events.”<sup>5</sup> To further this historical empathy, we asked students to create a list of personal and societal values, rank them, and compare them to both each other and other societies. This activity was revealing to students in highlighting how society still maintains a sense of

ordering and also how cultural groups have differing values and ways in which they organize their worlds. I believe this methodology also aided students in preparing for their Grade 12 English Language Arts Standards Test, where the responses that received the highest marks were elevated by contextual connections to literary works that included insights and references to historical and cultural understandings.

## Findings

The greatest and most essential benefit to this integrated style of course is the collaborative opportunity it allowed us as educators. “One of the strengths of collaborating rests with the social studies teacher’s ability to help contextualize the historical event and/or period in the literary work while the ELA teacher focuses on elements of literature and/or writing tasks,”<sup>6</sup> and while we lived this advantage, I found the Social Studies teachers in our approach were as involved in the writing process as our English counterparts. Often, when we would conference with students on their writing, the ELA teachers focused on mechanics and organization while my Social Studies colleague and I helped with research and applying what they read to their own ideas. This organic collaboration was also reflected in our rubric, which merged the language of the English curricular outcomes into the reporting categories of Social Studies. It is important to note that despite these successes, integration was not always fluid.

The greatest challenge for us was one identified in previous attempts at merging these two subjects, as there was an attitude among students and at times, ourselves, where English instruction took priority and “integration trivialized the social studies content”.<sup>7</sup> Upon reflection, we felt that this could have been due to our particular class profile, where students needed to build writing and reading skills first before engaging with complex themes in Global Issues. We also found that some texts worked more effectively in blending the two subjects, such as *Death of a Salesman* which overlapped more naturally with more Areas of Inquiry than a text such as *Hamlet*. To address this and to integrate the Global Issues curriculum more naturally into the themes discussed in our texts, we will be building a unit next year around *The Break* by Katherina Vermette, a fictional novel set in Winnipeg that explores multiple narratives around issues of poverty, violence, relationships, indigenous perspectives, trauma and healing. We hope that not only these themes, but also the relevancy of this text in our community, will help students understand that the challenges and struggles we often associate in a global context are also present locally, which may inspire meaningful Take Action Projects. In the same way that our unit plan is a work in progress, so too is this interdisciplinary journey. I hope to move forward with this style of teaching with more intention and thoughtfulness next year, as I have seen the benefits that this marriage of subjects can have for students and their engagement, as well as for myself as an educator.

## Notes

1. Turk, D. B., Klein, E., & Dickstein, S. (2007). *Mingling “Fact” with “Fiction” : Strategies for Integrating Literature into History and Social Studies Classrooms*. *History Teacher*, 40(3), p. 398.
2. Tavares, L. (2017). *Looking at CITIZENSHIP through a Literary Lens*. *Educational Leadership*, 75(3), p. 77.
3. *Ibid*, p. 76.
4. Tillyard, E. M. W. (1972). *The Elizabethan world picture*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto & Windus.

5. Hinton, K., Suh, Y., Colón-Brown, L., & O'Hearn, M. (2014). *Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?* *The English Journal*, 103(3), p. 24.

6. Ibid, p. 23.

7. McCall, A. (2010). *Teaching Powerful Social Studies Ideas Through Literature Circles*. *Social Studies*, 101(4), p. 153.