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What **Should** Students Read?

When looking at what students are required to read in school in 2010, it might as well be 1960. We need visionary educators who see bold purposes for school and who understand that what students read in school has profound, lifelong effects, both good and bad.

By Steven Wolk

For three months, I asked students: *What does school have you read?* I've chatted with kids at family parties, in the park near my house, in cafes and restaurants, at friends' homes, and inside schools. Most of these talks have been with middle and high school students. They are caught off-guard by the question. After months of these talks, I'm not sure what is more disturbing, that what schools are having students read is astoundingly similar and ordinary or that students don't question what they're told to read.

I've also asked my question of friends, family, my college students, and other adults. At one get-together, my question resulted in eight adults heatedly debating the merits of such "classic" literature as *The Scarlet Letter* versus such young adult literature as *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

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I've heard the same answers to my question again and again. The same books, same genres, same texts. Sure, there are differences, but they're trivial. When looking at what students are required to read in school in 2010, it might as well be 1960. Imagine if schools applied the same thinking to technology. Their televisions would be black-and-white with three channels. Computers would be only science fiction. Students wouldn't have calculators. Welcome to school reading in the 21st century!

If we don't question what we have students read and what we read to them, if we don't bring new and invigorating texts into our classrooms, can we call ourselves professional educators?

When I ask what students should read, I'm not referring to just middle and high school or to the texts assigned in language arts, reading, and literature classes. My question is directed at all grades and subjects. When kindergartners are on the rug, what picture books should their teachers read aloud? When 4th graders are studying Native Americans, what should they read? What should 6th graders read in art class? What literature should students read? Why don't students read novels or nonfiction literature in science class? If we don't question what we have students read and what we read to them, if we don't bring new and invigorating texts into our classrooms, can we call ourselves professional educators? How can we claim that we're educating children for the 21st century when students today are reading the same texts — and the same kinds of texts — that students read 50 years ago?

WHY READ?

What students read should be determined by *why* they read in school. If we want students with functional literacy, high scores on reading tests, and decent comprehension skills — students who are capable of reading a corporate manual as a future worker — then perhaps the status quo is adequate. Textbooks, the *Weekly Reader*, and a dose of Shakespeare and Steinbeck will get most students to functional literacy.

If we want to nurture lifelong readers and thinkers, to cultivate social responsibility, to make reading relevant to the 21st century, and to bring joy to reading, then the status quo will not suffice. The status quo will only continue to teach kids to hate reading and to see education as irrelevant. When seen cumulatively, the reading students do in school

appears to be designed to make reading painful, tedious, and irrelevant.

Saying we want to nurture children to be lifelong readers has become a cliché. While most educators do want their students to fall in love with reading, and especially with reading books, it would be naive to believe that we're practicing what we preach. If anything, school is turning kids off to the wonders of books. Walk into a 1st-grade classroom, and you're surrounded by voracious readers. Walk into a 6th-grade classroom, and you're surrounded by children who desperately avoid books, especially the boys. What do schools do — and not do — to turn reading and books into such drudgery?

In one study, researchers surveyed and interviewed 151 6th and 9th graders and determined that only 12 were actual readers outside of school (Strommen and Mates 2004). A National Endowment for the Arts (2007) study reported that nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds never read a single book for pleasure and that just 30% of 13-year-olds read "almost every day for fun." Newspaper readership is in freefall, and our country faces the prospect of having major cities without a local newspaper (Pérez-Peña 2009). If we want an engaged citizenry, then we need engaged readers.

Students often told me that they did little of the required reading in school, especially in high school. We all know how the school reading game is played: Read only what you need to get by. The game starts early — in the elementary grades — and the older we get, the more we play. We ignore the textbook, skim a novel, watch the movie, read the Cliff Notes. Today, it's all so easy. Don't want to read *The Great Gatsby*? You can read the Cliff Notes free online. Or for 99¢, you can download the Cliff Notes app to your iPod and read it while sitting in class. Better yet, you can *listen* to their "cramcast," and then you don't have to read a single word of anything.

And simply reading a text doesn't mean students are intellectually engaged. Much of their school reading is done with little thought. They read to get the assignment done as quickly as possible. Why do we perpetuate this school culture of fake reading when our world is filled with so many astonishing things to read?

ARE YOU ON FACEBOOK?

With 300 million users, Facebook is just the tip of a digital information revolution that is transforming not just what we read, but how we read. Look at your watch. By this time tomorrow, you will have consumed 34 gigabytes of information. In 1960, 26% of our information was from print, primarily books, newspapers, and magazines. Today, we're reading more words, but only 9% are from print and

30% from computers (Bohn and Short 2009). We have blogs, tweets, and e-mails, instant messaging and text messaging. We have wikis and apps. We have Kindles, Nooks, and iPads. In 2007, five of the 10 best-selling novels in Japan were “cell phone novels” written by text-messaging. This is hardly a Dickens world.

Soon, we all will have vooks, which combine an e-book with videos. As we read a novel, we can click on videos that are part of the story, or as we read a history book, we can instantly watch historical videos. I have two short-story vooks on my iPod. I also have reference apps for trees, works of art, a world factbook, and the periodic table of the elements. Who needs to memorize a textbook when I can pull out my iPod and know in seconds that zirconium has 40 protons and 50 neutrons? As Peter Cookson writes:

We are at the threshold of a worldwide revolution in learning. Just as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the wall of conventional schooling is collapsing before our eyes. A new electronic learning environment is replacing the linear, text-bound culture of conventional schooling. This will be the proving ground of the 21st-century mind. (2009: 12)

Outside of school, many adolescents do read. They love magazines on sports, celebrities, fashion, and videogames (Hughes-Hassell and Rodge 2007; Ivey and Broaddus 2001; Worthy, Moorman, and

Walk through a bookstore, explore a library, peruse a good newsstand, and surf cyberspace. Just about all of those texts — millions of books, thousands of newspapers and magazines, 100 million web sites with billions of web pages — are not read for school.

Turner 1999). They read e-mails, text messages, and endless web sites. They read manga, vampire novels, graphic novels, romance novels, comic books, “Harry Potter,” and dystopian fiction. They read fantasy, sci-fi, steam punk, and sports stories. They read informational texts they’re interested in, from skateboarding to animals.

Why are none of these texts assigned in school? Schools should challenge students to read outside their comfort zones and more complex texts, but we can teach literacy skills from books and other texts that students are interested in reading.

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

The reading assigned to students today is almost identical to what students were assigned a generation ago. This is true not only for English classes, which see the same classic titles that earlier students avoided, but also for science, social studies, and other classes. The result? Students are turned off to reading.

When they are outside of school, young people read a wide variety of texts in many different media. But none of these texts are assigned in schools. When schools deny students access to so many kinds of texts, they impose a form of censorship and constrain students’ opportunities to learn.

If we want students to become lifelong readers, they must be surrounded with high-quality books they want to read. Schools should assign readings from magazines, graphic novels, newspapers, songs, and other forms of text. When schools broaden the types of reading they assign, they will bring immediacy and spontaneity to students learning.

WHAT ARE STUDENTS ASSIGNED TO READ?

Textbooks are the single biggest source of reading students do in school, especially in science and social studies. In my talks with students, it was impossible to find someone who regularly read any other kind of text in these classes. Yet, surveys have shown that these are the books students least like to read (Ivey and Broaddus 2001; Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999). Children are not born hating science or social studies or even reading. We create that dislike by how we teach and what we make students read.

Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman (2003) argue that textbooks are *reference* books, like encyclopedias. They should not be read from cover to cover, or even on a regular basis. They should be on the shelf with other reference books and used sparingly when needed.

Schools also are still stuck in the classics. I spoke with three high school boys who attended the school from which I graduated 31 years ago. I asked what they read for school, and the boys answered: *Of Mice and Men*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lord of the Flies*, 1984, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. When I mentioned that all of these books were written by white authors, one of the boys said, “I never really thought about that.” The most recent book they read was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in 1960.

My old high school apparently can’t find a book from the last 50 years worthy of required reading. That eliminates many celebrated, diverse, and more contemporary writers, such as Octavia Butler, Dave Eggers, Edwidge Danticant, Julia Alvarez, Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth, Russell Banks, Jhumpa

Lahiri, Annie Dillard, Sherman Alexie, Wendell Berry, and Toni Morrison.

I also surveyed my undergraduate “Young Adult Fiction” class on their school reading. This was a very geographically and culturally diverse group, and they ranged in age from 20 to 49. These 22 students had attended 19 different high schools; nearly all of them graduated within the

In 1960, 26% of our information

was from print, primarily books, newspapers, and magazines. Today, we’re reading more words, but only 9% are from print and 30% from computers (Bohn and Short 2009).

past 10 years. They listed 86 texts. If I eliminate those mentioned only once or twice, that leaves just 23 titles. Of these, Shakespeare is the leading author. Here are the top 10 (with a three-way tie for 10th place):

The Great Gatsby
To Kill a Mockingbird
The Catcher in the Rye
Lord of the Flies
Romeo and Juliet
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Macbeth
Animal Farm
Of Mice and Men
Hamlet, 1984, The Things They Carried

In 1988, Arthur Applebee surveyed 7th- through 12th-grade teachers in nearly 500 schools on what books they assigned students. How does the book list from my college class compare with Applebee’s top 10 from a generation ago? Well, it’s nearly *identical*. How much has high school reading evolved in more than 20 years? About zero. Applebee wrote, “It is noteworthy that in all three samples [public, Catholic, and independent schools], the ‘top 10’ include only one title by a female author (Harper Lee) and none by members of minority groups” (1992: 27).

We can write the same sentence in 2010. Of the 86 titles mentioned by my students, women wrote just 12, only eight have a minority main character, and just two are set in Asia, Africa, or South America. I asked my students if they had ever been assigned a book with a gay protagonist. The room was silent. Not one. What happened to our celebrated multicultural society? What happened to the endless

calls to “educate children for 21st-century globalization”? Students see more diversity watching baseball on TV than they do in their school reading.

By far, most of the books mentioned by my class and by the students I interviewed are about adult characters. Donald Gallo (2001) argues that schools perpetuate an “aliterate” society and turn kids off to



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reading when they force students to read “classics” about adults, rather than stories about people their own age confronting issues they’re actually dealing with. When I read *The Scarlet Letter*, I really liked it, but I was 32 at the time.

This is not to say that every “classic” should be eliminated, especially in the later high school years. As my friend, Chuck Cole, argued, “some of these — like *Catcher in the Rye* — are major, watershed books, dealing with, and even themselves being, cultural events of seismic proportions.” And many teachers craft thoughtful, creative, and relevant learning experiences for these books. But we do have the responsibility to question everything we have students read, to create truly diverse and captivating reading experiences, and to teach in ways that don’t turn a good book into a lifeless, mind-numbing exercise.

One of my students is about 40 years old. He was doing clinical hours in a high school and stumbled upon the school’s lending library. Sitting on those shelves were the exact same books he had read in his own high school more than 20 years before. He told our class, “I stood there thinking, do I really want to become a teacher and end up having to teach the exact same books I had to read when I was in high school?”

FROM PRIMARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Walk into a K-8 classroom, and there’s a good chance you’ll see a classroom library, something that didn’t exist when I was in school. When books are available for students to freely choose, they often will read independently (Pflaum and Bishop 2004).

However, what books are included and excluded in classroom libraries is a vital question. These libraries should be brimming with a wide variety of current books and genres students want to read. Unfortunately, that is so often not the case (Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999).

Textbooks still dominate the reading for these students, and the range of readings can be so thin it's invisible. While there certainly are teachers who go beyond traditional reading materials, most elementary and middle school classrooms have a de facto "canon" of children's literature, ruled by a select list of authors — such as Lois Lowry, Jerry Spinelli, Judy Blume, and Roald Dahl — and a narrow list of award-winning books.

It's rare for K-8 students to read a newspaper, magazine, online article, or other authentic text for school (Albright and Ariail 2005). Reading informational texts in the primary grades is practically nonexistent. Nell Duke (2000) studied 1st-grade classrooms and found that students interacted with nonfiction texts for just 3.6 minutes a day. And we wonder why children — especially lower-income children — struggle with these texts as they get older.

WHAT COULD STUDENTS BE READING?

Elliot Eisner coined the phrase the "null curriculum." That's the knowledge that is *not* taught in school. He wrote:

What schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. Ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems. (1994: 97)

A large part of the null curriculum is what students don't read. Want to see that textual null curriculum? Walk through a bookstore, explore a library, peruse a good newsstand, and surf cyberspace. Just about all of those texts — millions of books, thousands of newspapers and magazines, 100 million web sites with billions of web pages — are not read for school. Most of it is not worth reading, and students have time to read only a tiny fraction of what is worth reading. But we have 13 years of school and 180 days each year. That is a lot of time to read. By limiting texts to such a narrow range, we constrain students' opportunities to learn (Scherff and Piazza 2008). When schools deny students access to so many kinds of texts, they impose a form of censorship, a silencing of ideas and perspectives (Fine 1987).

What we choose to have students read is a value statement. When we read aloud a novel, assign a poem, pass out an essay, and crack open the text-

books, we are implicitly saying that these texts are the most essential for students to read. They are the *best texts* for their education. Do we really believe that? Of all of the possible texts students could read for school, are the ones they are reading now the most valuable?

Much of what students read in school should be interesting, global, provocative, critical, relevant, diverse, creative, emotional, and imaginative. Those are hardly the adjectives students use to describe most of what they read for school. Ask a kid to list the "bold" and "fascinating" readings they have done in school. That is, texts that

Schools should challenge students to read more

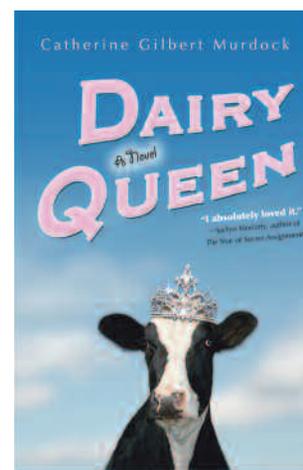
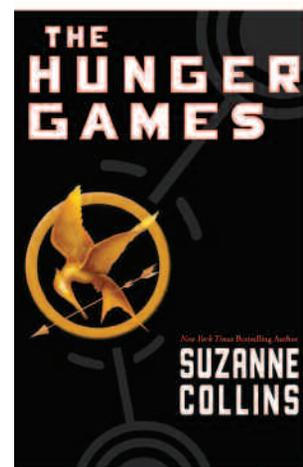
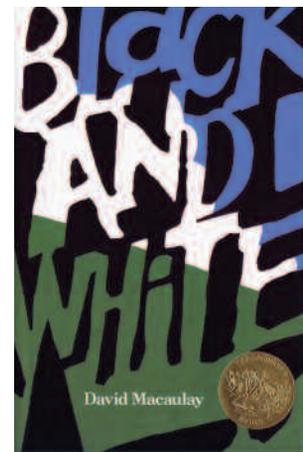
complex texts, but we can teach literacy skills from books and other texts that students are interested in reading.

have encouraged them to question their assumptions and opened their minds to stimulating ideas. That will be a very short list indeed.

Of course, some of these texts are too difficult for students to read on their own. However, when the teacher uses "shared reading" — reading aloud while students follow along in their own copies — an endless stream of texts and ideas are opened for students. They're immersed in a richer vocabulary and see a model of good reading and thinking, all of which will help immensely with standardized testing.

Children's and Young Adult Literature. While kids drudge through their assigned books, the books they really want to read are ignored. If we want students who are readers, not just students who can read, we must surround them with high-quality books they want to read. And these books should not be just for independent reading. They should be assigned and taught.

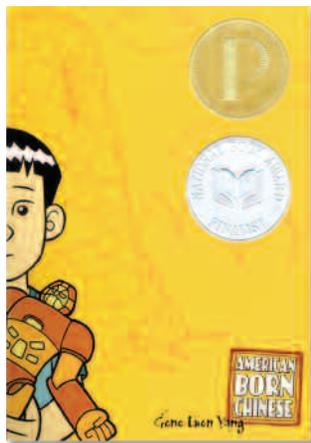
Do you really want to get students reading? Assign *The Hunger Games*, *Unwind*, or *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. Have them read *Mexican Whiteboy*,



The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, or *Dairy Queen*. Teach *Little Brother*, *Elsewhere*, *Flipped*, *The Graveyard Book*, *Heat*, or *Leepike Ridge*. And we're living in a new world of picture books with *Home*, *Voices in the Park*, and *Planting the Trees of Kenya*.

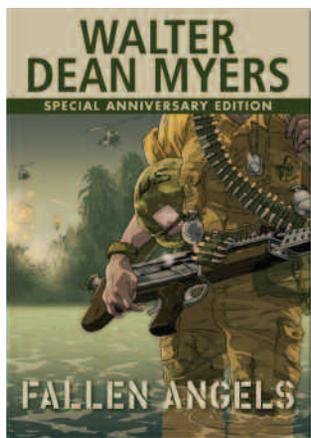
Graphic Novels and Graphic Memoirs. It's

easy to dismiss graphic novels as "comic books," rather than see them as the literature genre they are. Anyone who says graphic novels lack intellectual weight has not read many graphic nov-



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els. *American Born Chinese* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2006 and won the Michael L. Printz Award for young adult writing in 2007. Shaun Tan's masterful *The Arrival* tells the universal story of immigration without a single word. Students would be enthralled by *I Kill Giants* and surprised by its humanity and grace. Graphic memoirs include *Persepolis* and Guy Delisle's stories of his travels in China, North Korea, and Burma. *A.D. New Orleans* is about six survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Joe Sacco is famous for graphic journalism, such as *Safe Area Gorazde* about the Bosnian War.

Newspapers. Do you want active and caring citizens with critical knowledge of the world? Do you want your students to vote? If you do, get them reading newspapers. It's never too early. When I was a teacher, I brought *The New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*

to my classroom every day and did shared reading of articles in every grade from 3rd to 8th.

Today, most of my college students don't read a newspaper, and they have little understanding of ed-

itorial pages. The editorial pages contain the ideological tug-of-war of American life and politics — across the country and across the globe — and should be required reading in school. With the Internet, teachers have easy access to newspapers from around the world.

Magazines. We all know *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, and most of us know the publications designed specifically for schools: *Upfront*, *The Weekly Reader*, and *Junior Scholastic*. All of these have good articles, but they just begin to tap the vast collection of periodicals students could be reading, such as *Orion*, *Good*, *Wired*, *Seed*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *In Character*, *Boston Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Smithsonian*, *Utne Reader*, *Discover*, and *The New Yorker*. There also are hundreds of independently published "zines," as well as magazines written for children and young adults, such as *Ask* (on art and science), *New Moon Girls* (edited by girls), and *Muse* (which has the tagline, "The Magazine of Life, the Universe, and Pie Throwing").

Literary Magazines. If we want students to be good writers, then why aren't they reading literary magazines, which contain some of the best current writing available? Such publications as *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Antioch Review*, *Granta*, and dozens of others (print and online) contain some of the most innovative fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in the country. Each issue of *The Paris Review* has an interview with a writer, and decades of these are available as books in which students can read the wisdom of Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, Kurt Vonnegut, and Stephen King. There are also literary magazines written for kids and by kids, such as *Cicada* and *Stone Soup*.

Studies and Reports. I taught an inquiry-based unit with Ron, a 7th-grade teacher, centered on reading three novels, *Make Lemonade*, *Monster*, and *La Linea*. We used these books to study teenage pregnancy, criminal justice, and immigration. But the books were just one form of authentic text the students read. One of the richest resources were reports available online. Students read excerpts from "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008" (Pew Center on the States 2008), and reports from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Thousands of organizations post reports online.

Songs. Ron's class also read the lyrics of Lupe Fiasco's song, "He Say, She Say," which is about absent fathers, and then watched the video. As part of her unit on South America, Leslie's class read Gloria Whelan's *The Disappeared*, a novel about the thousands of people who disappeared during Argentina's "Dirty War," aloud to her 6th graders. Her class then read the lyrics to the U2 song, "Mothers of the Disappeared." And I've watched 7th graders share

lyrics to songs with thematic connections to the novel *The Skin I'm In*. While one student brought in Alicia Keys, another chose Linkin Park.

Social Studies and History. Want to teach World War I? Students could first read Scott Westfeld's *Leviathan*, which tells an alternative story of the war as a steampunk novel. Britain (the "Darwinists") relies on fabricated animals, such as a flying whale, to fight. Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the "Clankers") use machines.

Historical fiction humanizes the past and situates historical fact within stories. For example, *Fallen Angels* takes older readers into the jungles of the Vietnam War, *Chains* lets elementary students see a life in slavery, and the picture book *Nasreen's Secret School* takes children to a secret school for girls in Afghanistan.

There's a vast body of high-quality children's and young-adult nonfiction for social studies, from a history of the Civil Rights Movement, *A Dream of Freedom*, to *Tasting the Sky*, Ibtisam Barakat's memoir of her Palestinian childhood, from *No Choirboy*, Diane Kuklin's interviews with teenagers on death row, to a young reader's edition of Michael Pollan's best-selling book about the food we eat, *An Omnivore's Dilemma*.

There are graphic biographies of Malcolm X and Gautama Siddhartha. *Alan's War* is about an everyday G.I. in World War II. There are graphic histories, such as *Age of Bronze: A Thousand Ships* on the Trojan War and *Barefoot Gen* on Hiroshima. *The Photographer* tells the story in photographs, drawings, and writing of a photojournalist in war-torn Afghanistan.

There also are many good books written for adults that are accessible to students, such as *Banana, Slaves in the Family, Gang Leader for a Day, Nickel and Dimed*, and *Enrique's Journey*. If we want high school students to understand real war — as opposed to textbook war — they should read *A Rumor of War*, *Long Way Gone*, or David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers*.

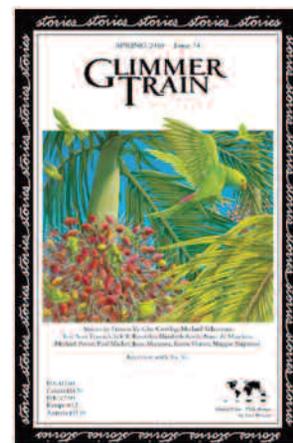
Science. A former student asked for an interesting read for her 5th graders, who were studying insects. I suggested Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson's essay, "The Little Things That Run the World." Wilson says, in short, that our lives depend on bugs. Her students were so enthralled by Wilson's ideas that they read his essay twice.

There are exceptional nonfiction books for younger students, such as a series by Simon Basher on physics, biology, the periodic table, and astronomy. The "Scientists at Work" series includes *The Frog Scientist*, which tells the life story of Tyrone Hayes, an African-American biologist who studies frogs. There are nature and environmental books by Rick Bass, Annie Dillard, Rachel Carson, Michael Pollan, John McPhee, Bill McKibben, Jane Goodall,

and Terry Tempest Williams. There are books, articles, and essays by science journalists and scientists, such as David Quammen, Bernd Heinrich, and Natalie Angier.

I've never met a student who read a novel in science class, but fiction can place science in narrative contexts and raise provocative questions. A good example is the young adult novel, *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*, which deals with bioengineering and medical ethics.

Online resources, such as scienceblogs.com, also are useful for science classes. Each year, the web site edge.org asks scientists a question, such as, "What's your dangerous idea?" or "What



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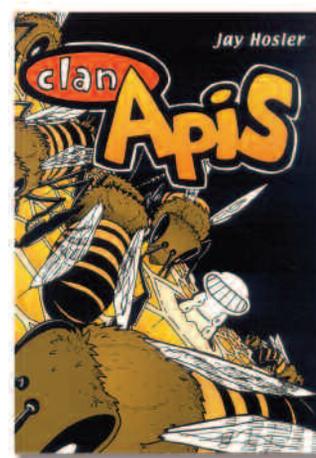
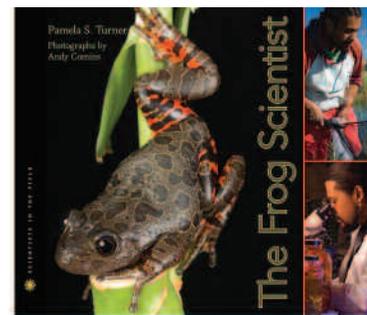
future discovery will change everything?" Their stimulating responses are online and in books.

Finally, there is also a growing body of graphic books on science, such as *Clan Apis* about bees, *The Manga Guide to Physics*, *Howtoons*, and *The Secret Science Alliance*.

Other Texts. These are just a small sample of the limitless array of texts students could be reading for school. To this we can add the endless resources available online, poetry, essays, letters, speeches, oral histories, primary sources, and published compilations with a wide variety of short texts, such as the annual *Best American Nonrequired Reading* series, edited by Dave Eggers with a group of high school students.

LIVING READING

As I was completing this article, a devastating earthquake struck Haiti. The country lay in ruins. Tens of thousands are known dead, hundreds of thousands are homeless. Texts appeared instantly. George Packer, who travels the planet as a writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote a short piece about Haiti's tragic history. Tunku Varadarajan wrote a brief essay on the web site The



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Daily Beast, arguing that France, a former colonizer of Haiti, should write the country a check for \$22 billion. Newspapers across the country and around the world had articles about the disaster and the politics of Haiti's poverty. *The New York Times* had eight short pieces by a variety of experts on its editorial pages, titled "Eight Ways to Rebuild Haiti."

This is what rethinking school reading can do. By making substantive changes to what students read, we can bring immediacy and spontaneity to their learning. We can make their schooling a living experience, as if it is truly relevant to life.

One of the most disheartening things about the reading students do in school is that it is so *predictable*. As students enter their classrooms each day, they already know what they'll be reading: another novel similar to the last novel, another story out of their literature anthology, another chapter in the social studies textbook, another five-paragraph essay. When they leave school at the end of the day, they know the texts they'll be reading the following day and the following year. How often are students genuinely and happily surprised by a new assigned reading?

We can change this. And we can do it without spending large sums of money. We need visionary educators who see bold purposes for school and who understand that what students read in school has profound, lifelong effects, both good and bad. The world is brimming with marvelous writing. It's time to bring it to our students. **K**

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