

# Blending Multiple Genres in Theme Baskets

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One may wish that reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Great Expectations* will become our students' favorite pastime, but then we get real. More likely, our students say they loved reading *Charlotte's Web* in fourth grade, and they remember with fondness their teachers reading *Bridge to Terabithia* to them after lunch. In fact, regardless of their literacy skills or motivation to read, most students do not come easily to the core literature selections taught across many districts. Yet, they do talk about reading teen-zines, Webzines, CD inserts, and e-mail. So how do we incorporate the interest and

skills teens already have in reading both print and nonprint text into the classroom? And how do we accommodate the needs of marginalized readers when we have so little time for individualized instruction and possibly thin background in literacy acquisition? We, as English teachers and teacher educators, propose using theme baskets as a progression of texts to scaffold core literature, capitalizing on our students' strengths and at the same time broadening their experiences and mediating their weaknesses.

The theme basket concept is a combination of several approaches we know to work in isolation: (1) using a thematic approach to teaching literature; (2) using children's books in secondary classrooms; (3) coupling young adult books with the classics; and (4) capitalizing on young adults' background knowledge, interests, and skills in "reading" multiple genres. Combining all of these effective classroom practices in an approach that maximizes the strengths of each makes perfect sense.

## Theory and Research

Why would our marginalized readers participate enthusiastically in the use of a theme basket? Tra-

ditional views of literary genres alone will not serve our young people in what James Gee calls the "new Capitalism" (16–17). We need to provide students with multiple forms of representation. Often readers with learning disabilities or second language issues become frustrated with traditional texts and give up. Such negative experiences cause them to develop a resistance to reading. Adolescent literacy is being nurtured in a complex and uncertain set of social and discourse systems, and we must choose texts that adolescents value. Today's students read pop culture and media texts with ease and embrace alternative representations such as drawings, film, cartoons, newspapers, and photographs (Gee; Heath & Dewitt; Moje, et al.). By frontloading a core literature unit with children's picture books, beginning and intermediate level chapter books, and nonfiction and other popular cultural and media texts, including videos, Internet Web sites, and newspapers, we increase students' prior knowledge and the likelihood that they will be less resistant to the reading of core literature selections.

The introduction of many thematically linked pieces of text from a variety of genres presents the opportunity for all students to participate in the act

of visualization. Jeffrey Wilhelm summarizes several studies by stating:

Visual imaging encourages students of all backgrounds to access and apply their prior knowledge as they read, increases comprehension, and improves the ability to predict, infer, and remember what has been read. [Researchers] have also shown that the use of visual imagery while reading helps students to monitor their comprehension. (117–18)

The ability to use imagery is a central difference between good and poor readers. By beginning with concrete visualization in picture books and using progressively more complex texts, less engaged readers' use of insufficient strategies serves as a springboard to richer and more reflective response. At the same time, strong readers are introduced to the metacognitive processes used by readers, are reintroduced to books they may have loved as children, and are allowed to move through the basket at their own speed, culminating with the reading of books from the canon.

Because students need books that reflect their own experiences and those of their peers, teachers can include multicultural literature—that is “literature by and about those members of groups considered to be outside the socio-political mainstream of the U.S.” (Sims Bishop 39). Multicultural literature reinforces and dignifies individual and group background experiences. Literature acts both as a mirror and a window into students' own experiences, as well as those of their peers and society (Sims Bishop 41). If the theme basket includes multicultural texts, English language learners demonstrate greater comprehension because the ideas in the stories are consistent with their own background knowledge.

The theoretical background, then, supports the use of a multigenre theme basket approach for two purposes: the improvement of student motivation through the use of texts adolescents value, and the improvement of comprehension through visualization and accessing of students' prior knowledge. If teachers embrace the concept of theme basket methodology, they then need to develop activities that advance the success their students will have through improved motivation and comprehension.

Using theme baskets encourages a variety of activities and assessment tools to meet the needs of students with diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds and abilities. In *Multiple Intelligences: The*

*Theory in Practice*, Howard Gardner affirms that intellect is pluralistic in nature (53). His central tenet revolves around the powerful notion of separate human capacities or intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and intra- and interpersonal. Teachers who give traditional pen-and-paper assignments or essays to measure students' understanding of a literary unit are utilizing only the foundational language competency, the linguistic intelligence, perhaps forfeiting the potential of those who possess an alternate intellectual strength.

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In reality, Gardner asserts the linguistic path may be the vehicle for the mathematically intellectual task of a word problem or the spatially demanding interpretation of a chart or graph. It can provide those with bodily-kinesthetic intelligence a way to interpret say, theme, in a dance, just as the musically able can see that same theme in the nuance of sound. Discussing the various interpretations will require the interpersonal skills of a student who can negotiate the strong opinions that literature evokes among collaborative partners. Similarly, the focus of a response to literature may also come from the intrapersonal ability to connect an interior monologue with a published literary piece.

### **Theme Basket Methodology**

Theme baskets can be used in two general ways: using different theme baskets in each of several literature circle groups, or using one theme basket with the entire class to support one core literature selection. When we originally tested the use of theme baskets in a ninth grade classroom, we used a different basket in each of five four-member literature circles for an experimental independent reading unit.

Some of our theme basket topics were sports, utopia/dystopia, and friendship. In using the theme basket approach with the teaching of core literature, students are still divided into groups of four, but all groups receive the same books in their baskets.

While any container large enough to hold the books will work, a sturdy stackable plastic or rubber container with a lid works best. Each of our “baskets” contained

- one copy of each picture book
- one copy of each children’s chapter book
- four copies of each young adult book
- one copy of each advanced reading selection
- one copy of each nonfiction or nontraditional text

(If using with the whole class, include four copies of the core literature selection.) Every member of the group read each picture book. Some groups chose to read them aloud; others selected a book apiece, read their selection, and passed it to the next person in the group. Most baskets contained four or five picture books, the reading of which may be completed in one class period. Students then individually selected one children’s chapter book, which was read at their own pace, and followed that with one of the young adult books. Everyone read the core selection, and some especially skillful readers chose to supplement the unit with one of the more challenging texts. Less proficient readers particularly enjoyed the nontraditional, multigenre selections and interacted with those in lieu of reading an advanced text.

Group and whole class activities were structured around the theme, using plot, character, or setting details from the basket selections. Activities throughout the reading as well as summative assessment options were focused on addressing Gardner’s multiple intelligences. Not only did we want to provide an active and aesthetic experience for all readers, but we also wanted to ensure that we could accurately assess our students’ reading comprehension and thematic understanding. Use of Gardner’s theory ensures a multigenre approach both in the learning and assessing of what the students have learned.

### Sample Theme Basket

Most teachers undertake the task of teaching core literature selections throughout the year. The following is a sample theme basket approach, using

multiple genres, to one such selection, John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, beginning with children’s picture books and progressing through the core text and beyond.

### Picture Books Ages 4–8

- Ada, Alma Flor. *Gathering the Sun: An Alphabet in Spanish and English*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1997.
- Altman, Linda Jacobs. *Amelia’s Road*. New York: Lee and Low, 1993.
- Bunting, Eve. *A Day’s Work*. New York: Clarion, 1994.
- . *Going Home*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Calling the Doves*. Emeryville, CA: Children’s Book Press, 1995.
- Mora, Pat. *Tomás and the Library Lady*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- Thomas, Jane Resh. *Lights on the River*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. *Working Cotton*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

### Fiction and Nonfiction Chapter Books Ages 9–12

- Ashabanner, Brent. *Dark Harvest: Migrant Farmworkers in America*. New York: Putnam, 1985.
- Atkin, Beth. *Voices from the Fields: Children of Migrant Farmworkers Tell Their Stories*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993.
- Brimmer, Larry Dane. *A Migrant Family*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1992.
- Goodwin, David. *Cesar Chavez: Hope for the People*. New York: Ballantine, 1991.
- Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.
- Jimenez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Press, 1997.
- Rivera, Tomás. *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*. Dir. Severo Perez. Videocassette. 1994.
- . *Y no se lo Trago la Tierra / . . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Publishers, 1995.
- Stanley, Jerry. *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1992.

## High School—Adult

- Barrio, Raymond. *The Plum Plum Pickers*. New York: Bilingual Review Publishers, 1984.
- The Grapes of Wrath*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. Henry Fonda and Jane Darnell. Videocassette. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.
- Morgan, Dan. *Rising in the West*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Soto, Gary. “Red Palm.” *Who Will Know Us? New Poems*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking, 1967.

## Using *The Grapes of Wrath* Theme Basket

A teacher can make any number of connections to the core literature book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Several literary themes add to the richness of the basket. We provide examples of three connecting themes: language, hard work, and class conflict.

### Language

The Southern rural vernacular English used in the conversations in *The Grapes of Wrath* is an important feature that carries the reader into the lives of the Joads and other families migrating west. In *Working Cotton*, the author uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to portray an authentic story of a Black family’s experience picking cotton.

A teacher can use the vernacular in *Working Cotton* to discuss language variation between standard English and stigmatized varieties (Southern vernacular English and AAVE) by studying a few of the phonological, lexical, and syntactical features of Southern vernacular English (Labov 113). For example, the phonological feature of reducing two consonants to one at the end of a word is common (e.g., the deletion of /d/ in “nd” words, “an’ [and],” “lan’ [land];” the deletion of /d/ in “ld” words, “tol’ [told],” and the reduction of “ing” to “in” in verbs such as *fishin’* and *goin’*). One common lexical feature is the use of *ain’t*, and syntactically Southern vernacular English makes more frequent use of the double negative in such expressions as, “There ain’t nobody can tell you different” (Steinbeck 43) than does the standard (Labov 14).

### Hard Work

The picture books show the routine of beginning work at dawn and finishing at dusk. In *Amelia’s Road*,

Amelia picks apples from dawn until she heads for school. In all the picture books, we see how the family works together as a unit. In *Lights on the River*, *Working Cotton*, and *The Circuit*, the protagonists are not old enough to pick and, thus, are caretakers for the babies and the very young children in their families. However, in other families when there are no younger children to care for, the children help the family earn more money. In *Amelia’s Road*, Amelia harvests carrots and lettuce alongside her parents.

### Class Conflict

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck depicts the tension between the men of property and the migrants. The landowners worry about their property and protect themselves by burning the camps where any tension exists between the grower and the laborers. Additionally, the growers form armed squads of clerks and local workers for protection. In *A Migrant Family*, Brimmer discusses the tension that is created when migrant families set up shacks in the vicinity of expensive housing. A tension builds for the families who live in the red-tiled roof homes with security gates. These families complain to the health department about the danger of fire when the trees and chaparral become dry. The health department is obligated to bring in bulldozers to eliminate the camp. Another example of this tension occurs in *Lights on the River*, when Teresa Martinez returns the bowl that the farmer’s wife had brought over containing fruit and milk. Teresa gets a firsthand look at the luxuries of the farmer’s family and compares them to her own, noticing a big difference in the amount of food.

While *The Grapes of Wrath* was written in 1939, teachers can tie into current issues such as the conflict in the tomato fields in Immokalee, Florida. Currently farmworkers in Immokalee are involved in a nationwide information campaign about their working conditions and pay. The Immokalee tomato pickers earn forty cents for picking and filling a thirty-two-pound bucket of tomatoes—the same rate they earned in 1978. To earn \$50.00, the workers must pick two tons or 4,000 pounds of tomatoes. The Immokalee farmworkers are campaigning to show how the fast food restaurant industry pressures growers to grow produce cheaply year round.

### Milepost Activities

In addition to the themes and issues that the teacher and students can explore within the books in the

theme basket, we offer several milepost activities that simulate a journey from Oklahoma to California as they read *The Grapes of Wrath*, stopping along the way to participate in all or some of the milepost activities (Hughes 2002) suggested below. Students will be working in a multigenre mode, using Gardner's multiple intelligences. The particular intelligences highlighted are parenthetically referenced at the end of each milepost activity.

As students are reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, we recommend the teacher divide them into groups of four and give them a map of old Route 66 (Interstate 40 today), which includes Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. While the activities for each milepost listed below may be done individually, they are best completed within a group of four. Each milepost is to be completed while the groups are "traveling" on Route 66 from Oklahoma to California, and though there are no specific sites, they are representative of places migrant families worked and experienced during the Dust Bowl years. As a last note, for purposes of conserving space, Milepost 1 is the only one that we detail. All other mileposts are outlined.

### **Milepost 1**

Leaving a place that is the only refuge you have ever known can be traumatic. When you lose your home, personal items become "home." In *Going Home*, Carlos's parents revisit their long-time home in Mexico with him in tow. He sees his parents' emotional reacquaintance with their long-ago residence. The Joad family has to experience leaving a long-time family home as well.

Individually, visualize your home. You are going to make selections of items that you simply cannot leave behind should you have to leave everything else in a household move like that of the Joads and Carlos's parents.

1. Select the one item that most represents your family. Then select the item your family uses the most. Next, choose the one item that your family is most proud of. Finally, select the item that you think has the most value to your parent(s), grandparent(s), or any other caretaker(s) with whom you live.
2. In writing, explain the reason behind each choice.
3. Design and construct a container that will hold the items. Create a symbolic or realis-

tic representation of the items. Place those items in a container and share them.

4. Discuss with your group how you think the family in *The Grapes of Wrath* feel in making the selection of items that had to be left behind. (Linguistic, Spatial, Interpersonal, Logical-mathematical)

### **Milepost 2**

Using pictures of migrant workers such as Dorothea Lange's famed picture taken in Nipomo, California (Stanley 27) as an example, find other pictures. Use the Internet or *Children of the Dustbowl* to research pictures of the Dust Bowl migrant families. Create a word bank that describes what you see in the pictures. Categorize the words into groups, and use those groups to recaption the pictures. (Linguistic, Spatial, Environmental)

### **Milepost 3**

To get some background on the music of the 1930s, go to the following Web sites to read and listen to this music:

[www.blues.about.com/cs/songcollections](http://www.blues.about.com/cs/songcollections)

[www.music.utk.edu/mccollough/notes/folkrevival/html](http://www.music.utk.edu/mccollough/notes/folkrevival/html)

[www.bozeman.k12.mt.us/bhslib/music.html](http://www.bozeman.k12.mt.us/bhslib/music.html)

After reading the information and listening to the sample of the music, capture the flavor of the 1930s by creating the lyrics to a song that any of the characters in one of the Dust Bowl-era books would have sung. (Musical, Linguistic, Logical-mathematical)

### **Milepost 4**

The landowners and the big agricultural businesses in *The Grapes of Wrath* and in *Cesar Chavez: Hope for the People* fear the migrant workers' solidarity because it will force them to pay higher wages for labor which will, in the minds of the owners, drive down their business profits. Yet, intense hunger and need unite all the migrant families in their common misery. In a choral reading, demonstrate a scene where this problem is evident. (Linguistic, Interpersonal, Bodily-kinesthetic)

### **Milepost 5**

Living conditions have always been primitive for migrant workers. Using what you read in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Circuit*, *Lights on the River*, *Calling*

*the Doves*, *Amelia's Road*, and *Children of the Dust Bowl*, create a scene of a type of migrant housing, add a caption or go to a scene in the book source and select a quote. Use poster boards for scenes. Prepare the product for a "gallery walk," a display of all posters. Select a member from each group to be a docent to discuss the scene on the poster, while others view the posters produced by other groups. (Spatial, Linguistic, Bodily-kinesthetic)

### Milepost 6

In many of the books, the children dread leaving their school friends and teachers every time they have to migrate; for example, this is true in *The Circuit* and in *Amelia's Road*. Using a Socratic seminar, discuss the following statements:

- (a) The only way out of poverty is to gain an education.
- (b) People who share a common direction and a sense of community can get where they are going more quickly because they are traveling on each other's trust.
- (c) "Even if I knew the world would go to pieces tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree." —Martin Luther King Jr. (Linguistic)

### Milepost 7

To gain a clearer picture of American migrant workers, use the categories of "food," "transportation," "hard work," "living conditions," "diversions," and "seasons" to describe the life of a migrant family. Use quotations, pictures, examples, maps, and graphics. Create a migrant family Life Box in which you place the evidence of your description. On the outside of the box, post your one-sentence statement on migrant life. A Life Box is any container that holds symbolic or accurate representations of a group of persons sharing common experiences. (Linguistic, Spatial, Intrapersonal)

### Concluding Thoughts

The use of theme baskets transcends reading levels in the secondary classroom, and their use promises to engage all young readers in quality reading and thought that supplements core literature and broadens experiences. Including multigenre selections in the supplemental literature assists those less proficient readers in accessing the ideas and themes we expect all students in our classes to understand.

Theme baskets also provide a natural progression to the themes and issues in more sophisticated adult literature, and young readers are able to bridge that gap, thus enabling them to actually enjoy their reading as more mature readers.

The use of theme baskets increases motivation to read and provides the means for students to understand complex issues through visualization and accessing prior knowledge. Moreover, activities designed to appeal to the multiple intelligences and presented in a multigenre frame guarantee that readers can enter, create, and participate in the story world more correctly than with a more traditional approach. Students who offer their own planned responses in less formal expressions tend to generate not only an interested audience, but an informed one as well. Truly, the old adage applies: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." A theme basket is a multigenre answer to the old problems of willing participation and whole class inclusion in literature's big ideas.

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