Second Reaction: What Curriculum Misses by Teaching to the Test


*Anonymous*

According to Alfie Kohn, “Standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole . . . Our children are tested to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world...never have the tests been given so frequently, and never have they played such a prominent role in schooling”. For those of us who teach at Program Improvement Schools where the majority of the students qualify for the Federal Meal Program, and just as many have failed to meet “proficiency” status, we now find ourselves teaching to the test.

Upon receiving my copy of *Americus*, along with the guidelines to consider while sharing the book with my students, I realized that my students would be entering the Expository Unit, and we are not allowed to read novels or plays during that eight week block of time. We are only allowed to read newspaper and magazine articles. I had to come up with a way to get the book to the kids, so I started an after school book club. In spite of the fact that I offered extra credit, only six students took advantage of the opportunity.

I gave them the book on a Monday morning, and by the next day nearly everyone had finished it. They were very excited about the fact that it was a graphic novel, and they enjoyed the story and the illustrations. One student was wary about reading a graphic novel because she didn’t know how to read one. However, that concern was short-lived.
after the other students showed her how. They worked together to create a chart in which they mapped out the plot of the main story, and they compared it to the subplot in *The Adventures of Apathea Ravenchilde*, the series that the main character, Neil Barton, is fighting to keep from being banned from the public library. They also used Cornell Notes to analyze the setting, conflict, main characters, and theme.

After finding out what the students already knew about the main theme, we went on the internet and found articles that outlined the advantages and disadvantages of censorship. Most of the students were able to come up with ways in which censorship affects their lives in terms of movies they’re allowed to see, music they can buy, and the kind of language they can use. I was also able to relate to the topic because of the way standardized testing censors the kinds of lessons I can teach.

I gave the students a variety of outlines with sentence starters, and I allowed each one to select the format he or she felt most comfortable using for this assignment. Most chose to use the book review format. However, one chose to analyze the book using her Cornell notes, and another chose to write about the way the theme of censorship relates to her life. Overall, it was a great opportunity, and the students enjoyed the experience. They’ve already begun asking me what’s next on the agenda. One of my former students sent me a copy of *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs, and I think that would be a good lead-in to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which we can read during our Response to Literature Unit. In spite of the fact that standardized testing sucks the fun out of education, it’s a relief to know that a good book can still breathe life into the classroom, even if we have to sneak it in after school!

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

We are pleased that this high school teacher was willing to take a certain risk by sharing the book with a group of her students. Unfortunately, because her West Coast school does not allow “book sharing” in classroom time, she asked to remain anonymous. How ironic that a book on censorship should face that very issue in an American twenty-first-century class!