Tackling the Redesigned SAT by Returning to the Classics

By Kim McCready

As high school teachers, we want to prepare our students for success on the SAT and their postsecondary lives in college and the work force. Solid SAT scores can help students earn scholarships, and for some, provide a gateway to their dreams: entry into their desired academic institutions and opportunities to climb the income ladder.

College Board, relying on input from a vast range of educators, developed its new test using research with a strong empirical backbone. This body of research indicates the knowledge, skills, and understandings essential for college and career readiness. With so much riding on this newly redesigned test, many of us are shifting our practices to better prepare students for the SAT’s content and structure.

Here, based on my experience as in English teacher, are two primary principles embracing the change:

1) Revisiting the Classics and Text Complexity

One of the hallmarks of the test is its increased emphasis on text complexity. All of the SAT reading passages are from previously published high-quality sources. Just to name drop a few authors who appear on the released practice tests: Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martin Luther King, Jr. No lightweights here! Their diction and syntax alone can prove challenging. Asking students to decipher these authors’ meanings and messages takes guided instruction with lots of practice. This revelation triggered our reevaluation of content in our English courses to allow students sufficient preparation in wrestling with these types of texts.

In recent years, we had begun replacing a few classics with high-interest Young Adult novels, hoping to capture reluctant readers. However, we discovered it actually shorthchanged kids. They didn’t understand many common literary allusions, and engaging in an in-depth discussion with popular fiction was a farcical struggle. We knew we had to change. We wanted to build a strong
foundation centered on the best texts available. We wanted students to share a common cultural literacy. We wanted students to participate in what College Board calls the “Great Global Conversation.” Ignorance is not bliss; it is a missed opportunity.

The SAT’s text complexity focus led us to an awakening: a rediscovery of classics. Literary giants—such as Homer, Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and Bradbury—speak to universal struggles, truths, and concerns across humanity. These works have withstood the test of time because they offer more value and deeper insight than popular recreational reading. While we still encourage students to read for pleasure at home, class time is spent with a knowledgeable teacher expertly guiding students through these works of literary merit. It takes more teacher preparation and effort, but we know our content is rigorous, relevant, and meaningful.

2) Reading Texts as a Whole Class Community

In order to promote a rich and stimulating classroom community, the entire class must read the same title. In doing so, students benefit from compelling conversations among peers, insightful debate, and concentrated reflection. Again, all this is led by an expert teacher who knows the classic content and how to engage students with difficult tasks.

This means leaving behind the workshop structure (where teacher gives a mini lesson, then confers with students who are reading different books) and activities such as poster projects and personal response logs. While these assignments may work well in the lower grades, for our purposes they lack rigor. It is our strong conviction that students will not be equipped to handle challenging texts and tasks if they are allowed to read random books of their choosing. Therefore, we aligned our classroom organization and coursework to better prepare kids for postsecondary demands.

How We Do It

• Center whole-class texts around guiding questions. These questions drive our inquiry and serve as a focus. Take Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, for example: How did the colonists’ moral code create a culture of fear? How did beliefs, religion, and politics lead to persecution? Who determines who is powerful and who is powerless in a society?

• Determine major concepts/ideas to explore. For The Crucible: persecution, insecurity, irrational fear, mob mentality, conformity

• Decide on connecting texts, visuals/graphics, and challenging tasks. With the SAT’s emphasis on analyzing argument, we aim to include at least one. In this case, it’s Barbara Ehrenreich’s New York Times column “All Together Now” (on the dangers of "groupthink.") Students mark where Ehrenreich makes her points and label as evidence, reasoning, or appeals. They also summarize her argument in one sentence using mature voice and style. Naturally, teachers model this before asking kids to practice on their own.

To give students experience with visuals, we study Herb Block’s editorial cartoons chronicling McCarthyism, which requires background knowledge. We also tie in carefully selected excerpts from a modern nonfiction text, Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter by Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie). For difficult literary study that mirrors the SAT, students read and analyze Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker.” In addition, students examine multiple sources and write a synthesis essay responding to one of the guiding questions in #1 above. No easy task, but teachers guide, model, and support students as they engage in these efforts.

Shared Literacy = Opportunity
The compelling force behind the whole-class study is that the teacher and students are embarking on the journey together. The added connections to recent events render the classic text relevant for students. The study is cohesive and focused. The single text community of readers makes discussion deeper, more robust. How many times have we, as adults, gleaned insight by talking about a book with others who are also reading it?

Although these works may have been written decades or even centuries ago, they remain applicable to today’s culture and society, and consequently, to our students. Working within this framework provides shared intellectual and cultural knowledge so we, as educated people, can better understand and communicate with each other. It is our duty to prepare our students for the difficult and complex tasks they will confront after high school, whether it’s immediate entry into the work force, community college, or university. The world they inherit isn’t reserved for the Pre-AP/AP kids: it’s for all of them.

The SAT is one tool students can use to better position themselves for a productive future. We believe employing whole-class classic texts with current connections and challenging tasks will equip students to fully participate in society as more informed, more learned individuals.

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