

# ENGLISH IN TEXAS

A JOURNAL OF THE TEXAS COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS • SPRING/SUMMER 2018 • VOLUME 48.1



## Fueling Our Fires to Thrive as Teachers: An Energy Exploration



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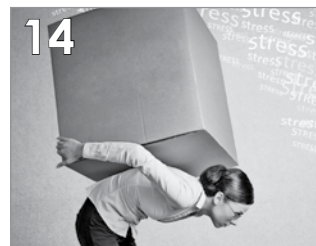
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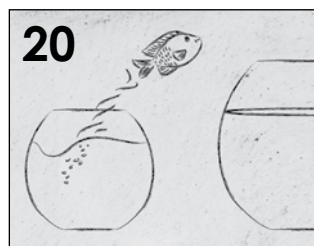
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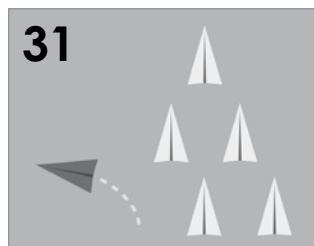
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# "This I Believe"

## LANGUAGE ARTS STRAND INTEGRATION PRODUCES POWERFUL RESULTS

By Honor Moorman

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It all started with a "driveway moment." I was listening to *All Things Considered* on the way home from school when I first heard an episode of "This I Believe." As I pulled into my driveway, Isabel Allende began reading "In Giving I Connect With Others," a personal essay that was so open and honest, so compelling and powerful, I couldn't bring myself to turn off the radio or get out of the car. I just sat there, frozen, as she described how her life experiences had taught her: "You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich" (Allende, 2005). I was not only moved by the beauty of her essay, I was also struck by the power of this short form, a carefully-chosen collection of anecdotes and examples woven around a single personal belief. As I turned off the engine and opened the door, I set my mind on introducing the "This I Believe" essay to my students.

### Writing Inspired by Mentor Texts

The unit started as a genre study in the context of the writing workshop (Lattimer, 2002; Kropp and Rog, 2003). I chose three mentor texts, essays that would resonate with students and demonstrate a range of topics and writing techniques (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015). Students listened to the writers read their "This I Believe" essays aloud, and we talked about what struck us. Then we

reread each essay to identify the writer's craft and created anchor charts of possible writing moves inspired by the mentor texts.

At this point, most students were ready to embark on writing their own "This I Believe" essays. For students who needed more support, I provided additional examples they could listen to and read, guiding questions to help them identify their beliefs, and opportunities to confer with me or with a classmate to develop their ideas. Once students were ready to publish, we collected their essays in an anthology and held an open mic session for students to read their essays aloud in class.

That first year, the students' essays were pretty good, but I knew there was potential for them to be much better. There was more to be learned from the mentor texts. I wanted my students' essays to be more distinctive, and I wanted them to achieve the caliber of those on the radio.

### Speaking and Listening to Support the Writing Process

The next year, our classroom was flooded with mentor texts. I selected dozens of "This I Believe" essays to show students a broad range of possibilities and to ensure every student could find an essay that spoke to his or her lived experiences. I created a stations activity that enabled students to move around the room, reading and listening to the different examples and discussing two focus questions: "What do these pieces have in common?" and "What makes them different?" As they shared their observations, students constructed a list of characteristics that mirrored the guidelines from *This I Believe*: tell a story, be brief, name your belief, be positive, be personal (Willis, 2008, p. 38). They also discovered that beliefs could be about many things: human nature, the meaning of life, the way the world works, what is true, what is important, and so on.

Next, we explored a variety of belief statements. Using the list of beliefs provided in the *This I Believe High School Writing Curriculum* (Willis, 2008, p. 15), I asked students to “take a stand” on the Likert scale that stretched from one end of the classroom to the other. After I read aloud each belief, students moved to a place on the continuum that represented how they felt about that statement. They shared their thinking with others around them before expressing their opinions and explaining their reasoning to the class. Now, they were ready to write.

After examining many examples in the stations activity, students chose their favorites to use as mentors for the rest of the project. I guided students to revisit those mentor texts numerous times, focusing on each of the six traits of good writing (Culham, 2003; Spandel, 2012). First, we studied expression of ideas and organization. Then, we considered how each writer’s voice (Romano, 2004) came through in his or her piece. Finally, we focused on word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. With each lesson, students gained deeper insights as readers, discovered new aspects of their mentor texts, and developed greater skills as writers.

Before publishing, students read their pieces out loud for peer feedback. Small groups created a safe space for students to read their essays aloud to one another. As students listened to their classmates’ essays, they jotted down feedback for the writer: “I liked . . .” “I noticed . . .” “I wondered . . .” This gave students the chance to revise their essays based on their peers’ responses and on hearing themselves read their work aloud. Their final drafts were stronger, and students were also much more confident and effective at the open mic.

### Strengthening the Reading/Writing Connection

With this new and improved unit plan, students were reading, rereading, and discussing mentor texts more thoughtfully as well as revising and conversing about their own writing in greater depth than before. I decided the next step was to capitalize on the reading, writing, speaking, and listening connections inherent in this writing assignment.

I began using some of the “This I Believe” essays to help students explore literary themes and engage in metacognitive meaning-making. For example, when we were reading *The Alchemist* (Coehlo, 2006), I introduced “The Universe Is Conspiring to Help Us” (Kelly, 2008) as a companion text.

I started by giving each student a notecard with a phrase from the essay (see Table 1). Students participated in a “Quotation Café” (Zwiers, 2004), sharing their quotes with one another to draw connections, make inferences, and predict what they thought the text would be about. As we listened to Kelly (2008) read his essay on the podcast, students underlined the phrases they remembered from their discussions. Then, I modeled how to annotate the text, writing a gist statement next to each paragraph and focusing on the main idea of the piece by connecting the underlined phrases to the title. A few weeks later, when students were writing their own “This I Believe” essays, I was thrilled to observe that they were paying very careful attention to their word choice and taking great care in crafting their titles.

### Integrated Language Arts Leads to Powerful Student Learning

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening all play an integral role in our meaning-making processes. Reading not only gives us access to ideas and techniques we can apply in our own writing, it also informs and strengthens our critical thinking and conversational skills. Writing not only allows us to express our ideas, it also helps us listen well, speak thoughtfully, and read with deeper understanding. As James Britton (1983) puts it, “Reading and writing float on a sea of talk” (p. 11). Speaking and listening not only help us comprehend texts as we read, they also help us clarify our thinking through our own compositions.

Through refinement, my “This I Believe” unit came to fully utilize the purposeful weaving together of these four aspects of literacy in an integrated series of learning experiences. Students thought about the texts they were reading more deeply. They read closely



for writer’s craft and carefully considered how the author’s choices created particular effects. They conversed about the ideas in essays they read and discussed the nuance of those ideas conveyed in the syntax and word choice the authors had used to express them. Students’ writing became more effective. Their ideas were clearer, their organization was more purposeful, their sentences flowed better, and their word choice was sharper. Students supported one another by discussing their writing and sharing their drafts with one another throughout the process.

Thus, “I Believe” that because reading, writing, speaking, and listening are all complex acts of critical thinking and meaning making, teaching them together through integrated lessons achieves powerful results.

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