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INTERVIEW

Can Reading Be Saved?

***Readicide* author Kelly Gallagher says schools need to stop focusing on tests and let kids immerse themselves in books.**

*Kelly Gallagher is a veteran high school English teacher in Anaheim, Calif., and the author of four books on teaching reading and writing. He is best known for his 2009 book **Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It** (Stenhouse), in which he argues that the widespread lack of interest in reading among adolescents can be traced in part to “inane, mind-numbing” instructional practices found in today’s schools. We recently spoke to Gallagher about the state of student literacy today and what educators can do to help students become more fluent and engaged readers.*

In your 25 years as a teacher, have you noticed a change in students’ reading habits or abilities? If so, what do you think accounts for it?

I’ve noticed a very large change, especially in the last 10 years. Students are reading a lot less. And here’s the compounding problem: That lack of reading has created a gaping hole in students’ prior knowledge and background, which is very, very important to bring to the page. A lot of times my kids can read the words on the page, but they can’t comprehend the text because they don’t have requisite prior knowledge and background information.

I think our kids are much more likely nowadays to find other things to do rather than read. They sort of encapsulate themselves in an entertainment bubble when they go home. A lot of Facebook, a lot of texting, instant messaging, and so on. They do a lot of entertaining themselves, but I’m not sure they do a whole lot of informing themselves.

Kids today really struggle with difficult texts. They don’t do a very good job of monitoring their comprehension. They don’t know how to fix their comprehension when it falters. And I’ve found that their ability to really focus in on their reading seems to lessen with each year.

So you see electronic entertainment media as the cause of this?

Well, I think there are a number of causes. Yes, it’s all the electronic entertainment—which really consumes their lives on many levels. Where I teach, in Anaheim, Calif., there’s also a huge issue with kids coming from print-poor environments at home. And a lot of students today are hurried children, in that they go to school and then have to

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go to work or football practice and then they go home and watch their little brother or sister. They don't have time just to sit with a book.

In your books, you also lay at least part of the blame on trends in education.

Yeah, I think schools have unwittingly exacerbated the problem. And it's ironic because school should be the place where kids go to learn to love reading. But school has become a place where kids go to hate reading. A lot of this, of course, is driven by the testing pressures. Those kids sitting in my 9th grade class today were in 1st grade when No Child Left Behind was enacted, so they have reached high school with a belief that the real reason you should read is to pass a test or respond to multiple-choice questions. As an adult who loves to read, I would say that if I learned to read in that context, I probably wouldn't like reading either.

Schools have put all of their emphasis on academic reading and functional reading and completely abandoned the idea of trying to turn kids on to the kinds of reading we want them to do 10 and 20 and 30 years from now—and that's recreational reading. We have forgotten that we want them to be readers, not just people who can pass a test. There are studies showing that adults who read regularly are much more involved in their communities and civic life generally, so I don't think this is just a curriculum issue. I think it's a cultural issue.

In *Readicide*, you write that “students need to be reintroduced to the notion that we read for enjoyment.” What steps can an individual teacher take to begin that process?

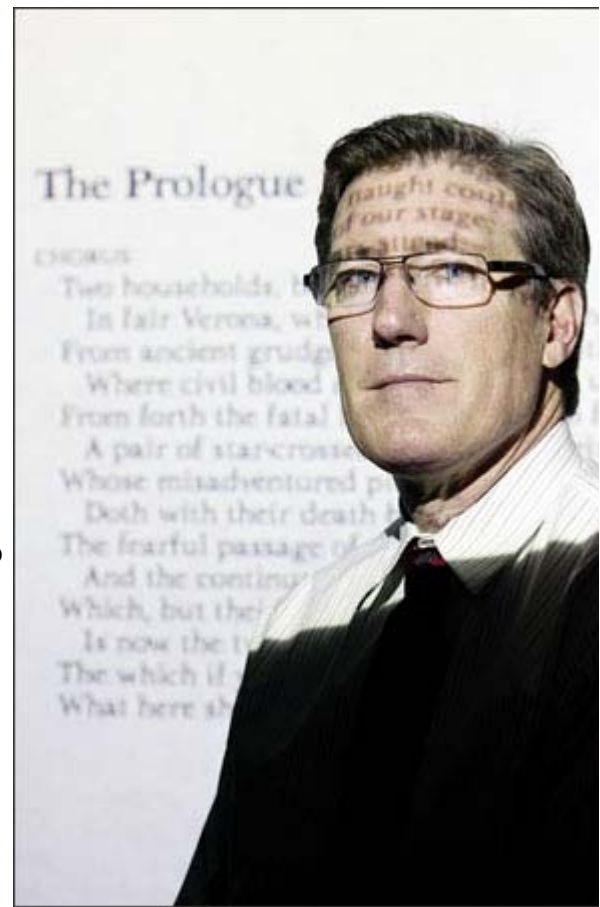
It's all about surrounding kids with high-interest reading materials—books! You gotta have water in a pool if you're going to be a swimmer, and you have to have really good books, particularly around reluctant readers, if you want kids to be good readers. And when I say books, I don't mean only the classics. I mean high-interest recreational texts. Kids should be reading [Suzanne Collins'] *The Hunger Games* alongside *Romeo and Juliet*. I advocate a 50/50 approach. I think half the reading kids should be doing in K-12 should be recreational in nature. That's what draws them in and makes them excited about reading.

I've been in a lot of schools across the country, and I ask teachers frequently, “How many of you actually have substantive discussions in your faculty meetings on whether your kids are surrounded with high-interest books?” That question draws laughs from some teachers, because schools are so completely focused on tests, tests, tests. No one is talking about just getting kids to enjoy reading, to immerse themselves in books they like.

As a result, I think what we are doing is selling out the long-term prospects of our kids becoming readers for the short-term pressures of raising test scores. And the sad thing is, I don't think those two things are mutually exclusive. The kids who read the most actually end up testing the best anyway.

Let's talk about struggling or reluctant readers. In your books, you don't put a lot of emphasis on teaching decoding skills or basic reading skills. Is there a reason for that?

Very rarely do I find a high school kid who cannot decode. High school kids have phonemic awareness for the most part. Now, if I have a kid in the 9th grade who truly does not have phonemic awareness, that student will be referred into services where he can be taught that. But for the kids that sit in my classroom, the problem is not



Author-Educator Kelly Gallagher
—Melissa Golden

that they can't decode words. For these kids, there are generally two main problems. One is that they don't have enough fluency, so they read very slowly. They can pronounce the words, and they know the words, most of them but they read incredibly slowly, so that it's difficult for them to comprehend or mentally analyze a text.

The second issue is, again, just this whole problem of lack of prior knowledge and background information. Kids today are very smart, but they don't know a whole lot about what's happening outside their own worlds. So how can you have a kid read an article on, say, what Joe Biden said last night when they don't even know who Joe Biden is? Seriously, you'd be amazed at what high school kids today don't know. There's a book called *The Dumbest Generation* by Mark Bauerlein, an English professor. I don't agree with his title—I think kids today are really smart. But he's right on the money when he talks about them existing in a kind of self-referential bubble—o living, as he puts it, for the “thrill of peer attention.” That environment is just not conducive to creating really strong and reflective readers.

How do you improve a student's reading fluency?

Well, I think if you have a high school kid reading at the 4th grade level, he or she should be reading a lot of books at the 4th grade level. And once he gets better at that, then he should be reading books at the 5th grade level. It's really, really important that teachers not only surround kids with high-interest texts, but they surround them with high-interest texts that the kids can handle, particularly if they are behind grade level.

But you also say that kids need to be exposed to the standard—and sometimes very difficult—classic works.

Very much so. I'm a big proponent of the classics.

And yet you warn against over-teaching or slowing down books too much. How do you avoid that when you've got a student who's reading at the 4th grade level and he's really struggling with the meaning and the language?

I get what you're saying. I have to come back to the reason why I think all kids should be exposed to the classics, and that's that the classics offer wisdom. They offer what the philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke calls “imaginative rehearsals for the real world.” I don't have my kids read *Romeo and Juliet* just because it's a love story. If that were the case, I'd bust out *Sweet Valley High* and get it over with. I have them read *Romeo and Juliet* because there are issues in it—for example, what are the effects of long-term feuds in your neighborhood?—that are still relevant to my kids today and that are still worth thinking about and reading about and writing about and arguing about.

So I'm going to have all my students read *Romeo and Juliet*. cause I teach a classroom that has a wide range of abilities, they're going to comprehend it at much different levels. But they're all going to be exposed to it. I don't think that the best literature should just be only for some kids. With the kids who struggle, I have to do a lot of things to help them along—hopefully without turning it into just an academic chore for them. I have to scaffold the text in various ways to help them understand what's going on. I have to give them guidance on the vocabulary and syntax as we're working through the text. I also play a lot of recordings and show film clips. But somehow, through various forms of scaffolding, all of my kids walk out the door with a strong understanding of the text, and can even do some literary analysis of it. And almost all of them walk out the door understanding what the imaginative rehearsals were in that text—that is, how the book or play might apply to their lives. And, on top of that, exposure to these classic works also helps build their prior knowledge and cultural literacy, so that when they're out in the world somewhere and they hear the phrase “Elizabethan tragedy” or “Orwellian,” they understand that reference.



Given your concerns about the digital entertainment bubble some kids live in, what role do you think technology and the Web should play in language arts classes?

Well, it depends on your definition of technology. I think the greatest technological advance in my 25 years of teaching, practically speaking, is my being able to hook my laptop and my document camera up to the LCD projector. This allows me to compose in front of my kids. They can watch me as I go through my writing or reading processes. In my classroom, I have sort of an I-go-we-go rhythm. I model, model, model. So if I want them to write something, I'm going to write first, or show them a way they can write it, and then we're going to sort of write it together for a little bit, and then they're going to be on their own for writing it. So this kind of technology is wonderful. Being able to bring the Internet into my classroom, and project it up onto the screen has also been invaluable—that helps me to bring in new resources and new ideas. There's also a lot teachers can do with blogs, in terms of sharing and commenting on students' work. And I expect that Kindle- or iPad-type devices will become increasingly common in classrooms, likely replacing textbooks. So technology is really opening a lot of avenues for teachers to model for kids and to interact with them in the process of reading and writing. I think it's a really exciting time.

Do you think advances in technology and communication have changed the kinds of reading and writing skills students today need?

Yes and no. I make the argument in *Deeper Reading* that if you really teach a kid how to read, which is to say to infer, the student can then take that critical reading lense he's developed and apply it in important ways to other kinds of materials. He'll be able to analyze a ballot proposition or a politician's speech. So in teaching kids to read deeply, you're really sharpening their ability to read the world. So in that sense, I don't think the imperatives of a good English teacher have changed.

But having said that, I do think that not enough time in schools is spent on getting kids to read critically in the one area we know they're going to read for the rest of their lives—and that's websites. I think there should be more attention on getting kids to ask questions when they read on the Internet. What's the source for this? What's this author's purpose? Who's the intended audience? People tend to read differently on the Web—it's more of a skimming kind of method. Kids need to be able do that without giving up their critical reading skills. I don't think we always do a good job of teaching that now.

What concerns do you have about the way reading is taught in schools today?

My concern is first and foremost that teachers are really under the gun because they are being forced to pursue an unrealistic number of unobtainable standards, and as a result that instruction is sped up. It skims over the surface. There's no time to stop and go deep. We've become the sorts of classrooms where coverage trumps depth. So my first piece of advice to teachers is to do less and do it better—let students really immerse themselves in projects or books. That may mean you're going to have to consciously not teach all the standards that your school system wants you to. But in this case, what your school system wants you to do is not in the best interest of the kids. What good does it do if a kid gets a good grade, or gets a good test score, but at the end of the year can't really read deeply or can't really write with deep thought?

Writing in particular has been put on the back burner, because teaching writing takes a lot of time and dedication. Teaching writing is really hard, and it takes time—time that teachers don't have when they have to cover an ungodly amount of standards in X amount of days.

The irony, as I said, is that if you teach kids to read and write well, they'll do fine on the test. But if you teach kids only to take tests, they'll grow up and they'll never read and write well. So my advice is to try to get into some authentic reading, some authentic writing. The book I'm writing now is about trying to get kids to go beyond what I would call "fake" school writing and into the kinds of writing we actually want them to do in their lives, now and in the future.

Are there specific ways teachers can develop those kinds of instructional skills?

Well, probably the best thing I did in my entire teaching career was to spend a July with the **National Writing Project**, which has sites sprinkled throughout the country. I can't think of anything else that helps teachers become better teachers of writing than enrolling in the NWP. I've found that the best writing teachers I know are teachers who have gone through the Writing Project, who continue to read the professional books and journals, and who are plugged in to the conversation. To some extent, it's about engagement.

What changes do you expect in language arts instruction in the next five to 10 years? Are there trends you're seeing that you think will affect the field?

Well, there was an article recently in *The New York Times* on how the College Board is completely revamping both the social science and the science AP exams. They're basically coming into what I think is a much better sphere, in the sense that they're going to hack out much of the content and require the teachers to slow down and teach in a way that's richer and deeper. And I think that's what's going to happen in English and language arts, too. I think the pendulum is going to swing back into richer, deeper instruction—away from the inch-deep, mile-wide curriculum created to meet testing mandates. Just this week in the *L.A. Times*, there was an article about how even the Chinese are beginning to rethink their heavy emphasis on test preparation and making kids cram in massive volumes of information. They're finding that many of their students, even the top ones, have lost their creative capacity. And that capacity becomes incredibly important when you become an adult, of course. So, maybe I'm an optimist, but I'm thinking that is the direction things are going to go in our reading and writing instruction as well: More than ever, we need to reintroduce kids to the richness and creative play of our subject.

—Anthony Reboria

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