



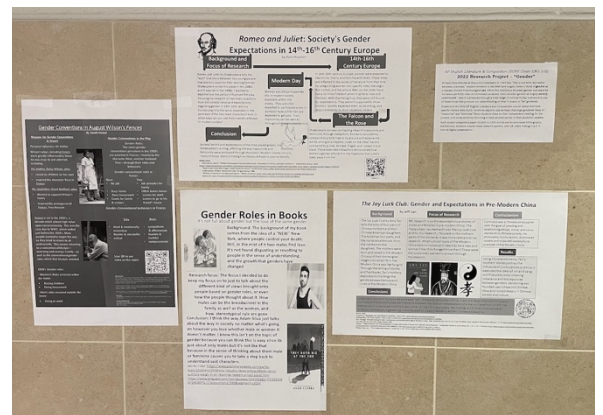
**Ted Leach**  
Kingston High School  
Kingston, NY

Over the last four years my teaching practice has changed dramatically. I've shifted from making space for independent reading to organizing my course around it. Independent reading and writing don't supplement the course – they drive it. This reading practice has invigorated my teaching and allowed me to support and challenge a wide range of students and their needs, both those traditionally considered “at risk” and the high achieving but non-reading students I often see entering my honors and AP level courses.

This change began several years ago, in my twentieth year of teaching. At the time, I'd sensed something in my classroom wasn't quite right. Perhaps it was the formulaic responses on writing pieces. The polite but token interest in core texts I'd successfully taught for years. Or the students who were clearly “readers” yet only moderately succeeding in class. No matter what book I chose, it wouldn't “fit” for some of the students. I already knew there was no “perfect” lesson based on *my* choice of activity, and that students worked best when they had choices in how they showed their learning. I needed to take the next step and let students exercise more agency in choosing their own books.

Four years later, I'm convinced of the power of choice. As I've decentered core texts and emphasized independent reading, students read more. They have more to say about what they read. And there's a palpable energy in the classroom when students discuss their reading. It's complicated and challenging teaching, but it really did begin with the simple steps of letting students choose books and giving them time to read.

Since I teach primarily upper-level honors and AP courses, some might question whether “choice” is compatible with “challenge.” In fact, the course is *more* challenging now than years ago when I chose all the texts! Each year my seniors complete a research project, writing a major paper and then exhibiting their work publicly in the high school and community with a research poster and a video. This year students explored literature's role in the social construction of gender. Projects on classic texts like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Romeo and Juliet* sit alongside equally rigorous work on contemporary texts like *The Poet X* and *The Poppy Wars*. The passion students annually bring to this project testifies to the power of choice. The college-bound students are better prepared for the rigors of college-level work, and they leave my classroom with an authentic passion for reading – not just for school, but for life.



This grant from The Book Love Foundation allows me to dramatically refresh my classroom library, adding more of the contemporary texts that engage and challenge students. We have a great school library, but it's not the same as having a classroom full of books. Having a high-quality classroom library is integral to building a true culture of reading in the classroom – one that authentically challenges students to grow as readers.