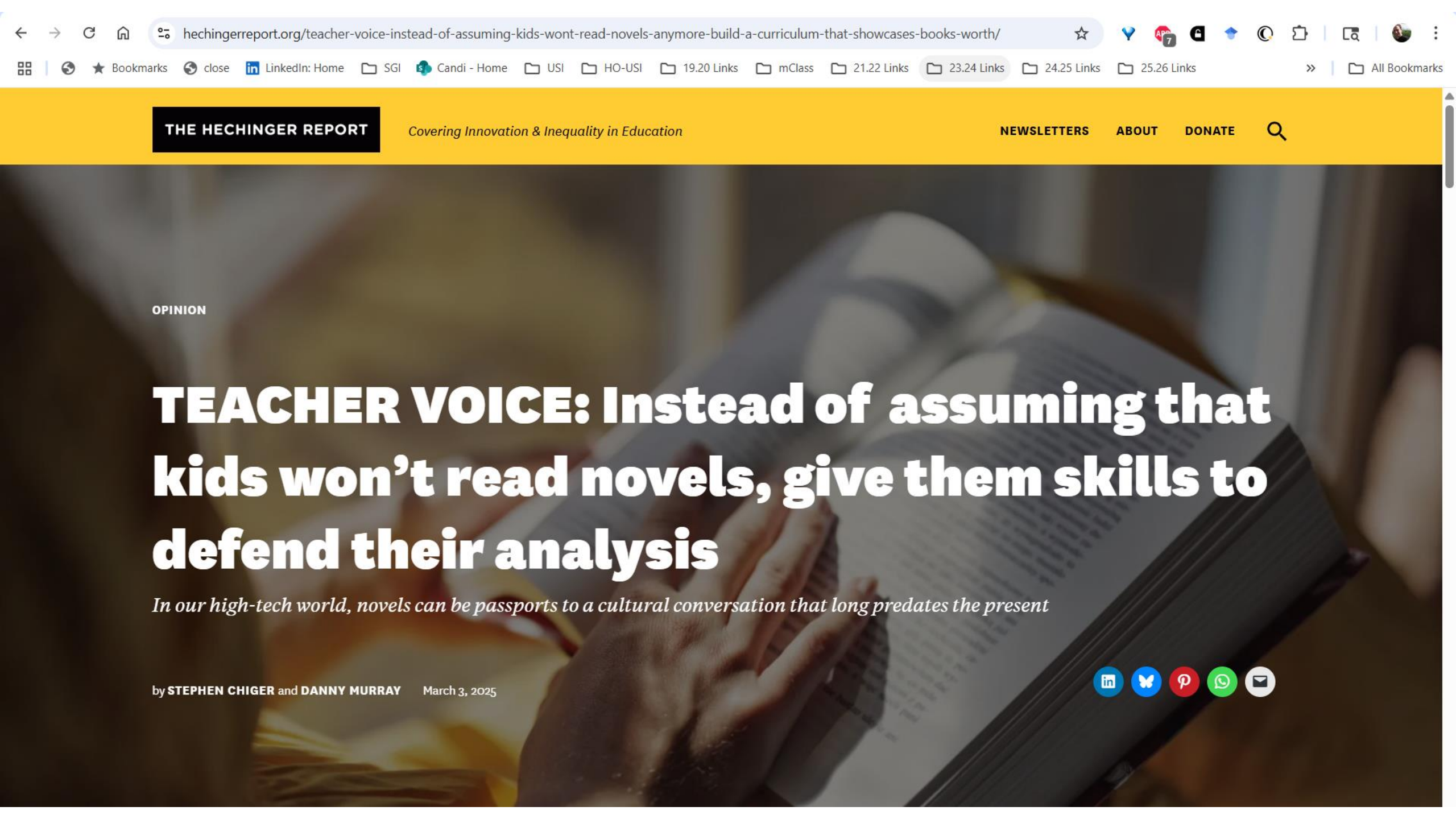




OPINION

# TEACHER VOICE: Instead of assuming that kids won't read novels, give them skills to defend their analysis

*In our high-tech world, novels can be passports to a cultural conversation that long predates the present*

by **STEPHEN CHIGER** and **DANNY MURRAY** March 3, 2025



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**B**y now, you may have seen the recent spate of articles bemoaning the plight of the novel, that outdated 18th-century technology that adults have [long forsaken](#) and that some schools are beginning to shrug off.

The best case against novels goes something like this: They're long, students don't read them outside of class, and they [should make way for other aspects of instruction](#).

As educators, we feel differently. The question to us is less about whether we should teach novels than it is about how to make reading them work for students.

Reading novels puts students in community with complex ideas they can explore across weeks — in ways that simply cannot be recreated by skimming a two-sentence Instagram caption, no matter how well-phrased it may be. Novels are powerful pedagogy because they are hard and time-consuming to teach.

That means a good curriculum rises to the level of its book choices: These should be windows and mirrors that open up varied, challenging conversations.

At our secondary schools, we build our lists of novels and memoirs by setting some parameters and then talking to teachers and students about what they find powerful and what they don't. The results can be edifying.

You might think a middle schooler would find "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" intimidating, or a high schooler would see the plot of "The Great Gatsby" as too foreign. Instead, our students wind up loving these books in ways that often surprise us.

One of our seniors told us that "Gatsby" impacted him more than any other book he had read because it reminded him that people "will go to any lengths possible for 'status,' and that seems to be the reality of our past and present."

That's a far cry from the dustbin of irrelevance.

Of course, it's one thing for people who have read a book to value it in retrospect — and quite another to convince the uninitiated. It's too limiting and laissez-faire to rely on a snappy plot or trendy genre to do this work for us. If we want students to invest in the great, global conversation of the humanities, it's going to take a bit of salespersonship.

What we mean is that the success of novel instruction hinges not just on the

quality of the books we teach but on the intellectual culture we surround them with.

Teaching novels only works if students can defend their analyses, which requires strong academic habits — for example, maintaining reading notes as they process text or using good habits of discourse as they interact with each other.

We don't wait for these habits to develop naturally; instead, we teach them throughout the school year and across subjects, helping students develop intellectual self-concepts as readers and thinkers.

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What else might teachers do? We have a few approaches that we've seen help:

1. Organize units around questions that matter to kids. ("How can we tell our own stories?" "What does it mean to control our own narratives?") The old cliché applies: The questions we ask are more important than the answers.
2. Devote some time in units to explicitly explore the connections between what students read and their world — for example, "What does 'Animal Farm' say about social media?" This builds relevance and connects to what students already know, which helps them remember the things we teach.

**3.** Pepper lessons with prompts that ask students to weigh in personally as well as analytically. (“What would *you* do in this moment?” “How would James Baldwin, author of ‘Another Country,’ respond to our protagonist’s actions?”)

**4.** Hold novel discourse as a sacred space. Making novel discussion special goes a long way. In our schools, students who’ve missed a pre-class reading must complete it before being granted a “seat at the table.” The messaging to students is clear: Your voice matters, but you need to have something to say.

**5.** Join our friendly skepticism of claims that kids should not be expected to read outside of the school day. If we rob students of independence and struggle, what are we communicating to them about our belief in their abilities? We know that having kids read at home poses problems that require whole-school solutions, like a homework planner system to help kids stay on top of assignments or the provision of after-school spaces that allow students to focus in sustained ways. Some read maintaining these systems as a question of accountability; we see it as equity.

Novels offer something unique that other, shorter forms do not: an ability to co-create an extended experience and a passport to a cultural conversation that long predates the present.

Despite this, books are facing curricular extinction as other technology threatens to crowd them out. If novels are to survive, it will be because schools believe in their power and put in the work to keep them fresh.