



## Why High-Quality Content Matters in K-12 Instruction

*with*

- **Marjorie McKeown**, Founder/CEO, [ALEE, the Alexandria Learning Ecosystem for Educators](#)
- **Ellen Brooks**, K-12 School Improvement Coach and Educator, [Monroe Public Schools](#)
- **Kimberly Andersen**, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, [Twin Valley School District](#)
- **Roy Kaufman**, Managing Director, Business Development & Government Relations, CCC

**For podcast release  
Wednesday, January 17, 2024**

KENNEALLY: Welcome, everyone, to Why High-Quality Content Matters in K-12 Instruction. I'm Chris Kenneally, and I host CCC's podcast series Velocity of Content.

We are here to learn more about why high-quality, authentic content can deepen engagement with students and advance literacy achievement. Standards-aligned curriculum may prevail in K-12 classrooms around the country, yet teachers still look for culturally responsive, individualized, and timely content to meet the learning needs of diverse student populations.

My guests have extensive classroom experience and have developed innovative uses of authentic content that support state and district ELA standards as well as helped to address learning loss associated with pandemic-related school closures. The discussion over the next hour will look at the state of K-12 literacy in public schools. We will contrast the value of high-quality, authentic content in curriculum with the challenges of using synthetic text and freely available resources from online. We will also cover best practices for the use of copyrighted content.

Let's get started. I want to welcome the panel and introduce each one of them. Joining me today is Marjorie McKeown. Marjorie is founder and CEO of ALEE, the Alexandria Learning Ecosystem for Educators. She has worked in education as a teacher, principal, and school leader and has served as president of Matterlab Enrollment, where she partnered with more than 100 schools and districts to achieve enrollment goals. Welcome to the program, Marjorie.



McKEOWN: Thanks so much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Ellen Brooks is K-12 school improvement coach and educator at Monroe Public Schools in Monroe, Michigan. Ellen brings classroom experience as a teacher in both lower and upper elementary classrooms to her role as a school improvement coach, specializing in professional development. As a digital learning expert and then as a webinar coordinator with the Teacher Quality Department of the National Education Association, Ellen helped to create, schedule, and develop educator-led sessions supporting more than 35,000 school educators during the pandemic. Welcome, Ellen Brooks.

BROOKS: Thank you so much.

KENNEALLY: And Kimberly Andersen is director of curriculum and instruction at Twin Valley School District in Pennsylvania. She has previously taught at the elementary and college level for over 30 years and has served in school administration for 10 years as a principal. Welcome again to you, Kimberly Andersen.

ANDERSEN: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: I want to start the discussion with a round-robin sort of examination of the definitions here that we're talking about when we mean authentic content and how you would define it and why it has real value in instruction. Marjorie, I guess I'd ask you first to help us get your sense of authentic content and why you feel it's so important.

McKEOWN: I think I'll sort of flip your question upside down and answer the second part first. I think that high-quality instruction and high-quality content or authentic content are actually one and the same thing. Of course, there's more to good instruction than high-quality materials, but I do think it's an absolute prerequisite. I don't think you can have good instruction without high-quality material.

So in terms of defining high-quality content, first and foremost, it has to be authentic, right? What I mean by that is it was not created with instruction in mind. It was created to persuade, to entertain – all of those other reasons why people write text in the real world. When thinking about ALEE, when we're deciding what we consider high-quality content, there are a handful of questions we ask ourselves to determine what's high-quality and what's kind of a beach read. The questions we ask ourselves are, first, does the text demand and facilitate critical thinking? Does the text cultivate a love of reading? People often think it can either be rigorous or it can be engaging, and I think there's a lot out there that is both. The third question is does the text build and enrich foundational knowledge? And the fourth is does the text expand or affirm personal experiences? For us, those are



the questions that we ask, and that's the criteria that needs to be met for something to be considered high-quality.

**KENNEALLY:** Kimberly Andersen, it sounds to me like you are pretty much in agreement with Marjorie there, because I know you've told me that you feel that what's really important about authentic content is that it's based in research. It is rigorous, but it's also engaging, because it really sort of brings the readers in.

**ANDERSEN:** Yeah, definitely. I would add to what Marjorie said that we want that content to be fully engaging. In the curriculum side, we definitely look for it to be tied to the standards – not just that it's connected, but that the rigor is there in that authentic content and information. We also look for – that it has the ability that we can provide the supports so that we can reach all of the students and give them that opportunity to fully engage with it. As Marjorie said, we want that high-quality content to be engaging and that the students will be able to develop stronger critical thinking skills as they are engaging with the resources that we're using in the instruction.

**KENNEALLY:** And I guess we should point out, Kimberly, that you think this is true not just in the classroom with young children, but it's really been proven to you to be successful in your work facilitating professional development with teachers.

**ANDERSEN:** Absolutely, yes. We need to engage our adult learners as well as the students. They need to be engaged with that authentic and strong content when they are having professional development as well so that they can be thinking at that higher level and really expanding their knowledge.

**KENNEALLY:** Ellen Brooks, tell us your thoughts around authentic content and maybe help us understand better how it contrasts with what we will call synthetic content.

**BROOKS:** I could listen to these two women talk about that all day. Such good points. I think for me, as I'm listening to this conversation, I'm thinking about from that classroom perspective and working with teachers every day, the whole act of teaching is not to stand and lecture anymore, but to facilitate the process of learning and growing your understanding and making connections. So our educators – they're making connections with students, and they're doing this with these high-quality, authentic sources. It's the idea of having accessible, engaging, motivating content that no matter if a student is performing at level, above level, below level expectations, they can come into that experience, own it, be excited about it, and grow their understanding wherever you might meet them at, so that differentiated component.



I think that historically as educators, when we've been handed that textbook, and it's like this is what you're doing, and you follow the steps, and you read this one thing out loud, we don't get that buy-in and that engagement and that motivation and that purpose. And the minute it's written, it's outdated, right?

So for me, when we are talking about the difference between a synthetic learning environment, which to me is forced and outside that connection that you can make with that content, versus this high-quality, authentic conversation we're having, it's really that ability for everyone involved to find some joy and differentiation and excitement and that multiple entry points into that learning subject, that standard, and really get to grow with it.

**KENNEALLY:** Thank you all for helping us sort of set the table here for our discussion. But I wanted to zero in on each of you and learn more about your work and about your experience on this area.

So we'll start with Marjorie McKeown. Marjorie, again, welcome to the program. We mentioned in the introduction that you're the founder and CEO of ALEE, which is the Alexandria Learning Ecosystem for Educators. You've had a really varied experience in the classroom in very different classrooms than, say, Kimberly, who's in a rural area. You've worked in urban school districts. I guess I want to start by asking you about how you feel that the products that are offered today in the market really address the interests and needs of current students.

**McKEOWN:** I think that on a positive note, there's been a real shift in the market to focus on individualized needs and content that is relevant for students. So I think that's a really positive trend in current offerings. On the other hand, I think there's really an overreliance on synthetic texts. I think there's an overreliance on gamification and an overreliance on screens in general in terms of products that are out there.

I think we've all talked a little bit about the drawbacks of synthetic texts – basically what Ellen just spoke about – so I'm happy to speak to the other two points. The gamification, which starts with points and badges and leaderboards in order to engage and motivate students – but many students were actually demotivated by this. Now, the concept of gamification is actually reverting back to concepts that are just mimicking traditional classroom ideas, like group work, co-creation. And I believe wholeheartedly that texts in and of themselves – books, novels, stories for kids – are inherently engaging if we teach them right and if we pick the right ones. So I do think there's a lot of that out there that's not necessarily contributing to students' learning.

The focus on screens – I do think that there's a huge opportunity here to use one-to-one technology to provide individualized instruction, but I do think in a lot of places, it's



become the norm, and students are spending their entire school day in so-called student-centered learning. I think that's really where we need to scale back, especially when it comes to reading instruction.

You and I had talked previously about an article in the *MIT Technology Review* by Holly Korbey, and I like to bring this up a lot, because she makes some really important points that I think get overlooked these days in the market, which is that all the research is starting to come out about the effectiveness of learning to read on screens. She mentions in the article that teaching with print actually advantages the slower, deeper process in the brain that's required to read complex text, which is the goal. The article also explicitly states that we should be using screens to complement reading instruction but that children really shouldn't be learning to read through a screen.

There's a study that's mentioned about how students across the world who are spending most of their time on screens are performing on assessments a year below students who are actually engaging with printed text. And then I think a surprising point – it may not be surprising to the people on the call, but to a lot of people around the world – students are actually self-reporting that they learn more and they have a better reading experience when they read from a paper book. So I think there are some good things happening in terms of focusing on individual instruction and relevant text, but these other things I think are a detraction from reading, unfortunately.

**KENNEALLY:** Marjorie, does working with authentic content help to support state and district ELA standards? Where does that come together? Is authentic content really an alternative – a successful alternative to other materials?

**McKEOWN:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that there's really a pervasive misunderstanding about the purpose of ELA standards. Standards were developed with authentic text in mind. They're the skills and the strategies that allow students to conquer complex texts. They're a means to an end. They're not the end. Over time, I think that idea and that intent has really gotten lost somehow, and the standards have sort of become the goal, which is why I think that all of this synthetic text has become so commonplace and so common in different curricula. Because if the goal is to master the standard in isolation, then what better tool than really a simple text that allows for repeated opportunities to practice a standard? But that type of reading doesn't prepare kids to read out in the wild. That experience doesn't really mirror the actual reading experience, where all of those skills and strategies are simultaneously running in the background. So I do think if we can find a way to change the mindset of planning, if we start with the text – an authentic text that is complex both in vocabulary, in language structure, in concepts, and we say what are the challenges of this text, and what skills will help students overcome those challenges, and then we revolve all our instruction around that, I do think we'll be in a better place.



KENNEALLY: Well, Marjorie McKeown, thank you very much. I want to turn now to Kimberly Andersen. Kimberly, welcome back.

ANDERSEN: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Tell us yourself about this important point that Marjorie was discussing, which is around the support of state and district ELA standards. What are your reflections on that and the role that authentic content can play?

ANDERSEN: I could really echo a lot of what she said – that having a rich text and that authentic text is important to address the standards for the teachers to be able to know what they're doing as well as for the students. But the value in those connections that they make – I've been in places where it has been you teach this unit just on how to understand what a noun is, and you have this isolated work around the standard of understanding nouns or verbs, and then you take them into a piece of a story, because you're teaching about characters. When with good, strong authentic texts, we can merge really that standard and that understanding.

We know that they need to develop an understanding of the critical skills at each level, because it can scaffold and it builds into the next grade level. But when it's in a text that they're engaged in, then the students are able to make connections – make relevant connections to their life and also start to make connections of – oh, yeah, that is a noun because of this and this, and they start to see and understand why a noun is important and how it plays a role within that text feature.

So when teachers have the strong, high-quality materials that they're using within their instruction, they're able to build those scaffolds in as needed. But when they are teaching the skill in isolation, what I have seen occur in the past – not my current role, but in previous positions – is they often water down and go down to really a much lower level of understanding of that standard, because they don't have a connection to that high-quality content. So they're printing just a worksheet related to a particular skill, and it doesn't have any relevance to the child or to the student, so they're not engaged.

You go back to what Ellen had said earlier, even, just about that teacher not standing up there and just giving the students information, but they're facilitating and they're guiding the learning. High-quality content really, truly enables that much more. Students are engaged and they want to know more, so they're almost facilitating, asking more and deeper questions when they're learning with that content.



KENNEALLY: Kimberly Andersen at the Twin Valley School District, it's largely a rural area. Mountains and farms, you told me, are just out the window there. Tell me about the state of the literacy experience in those classrooms today. Are you still seeing the social and emotional gaps that came from the COVID hiatus?

ANDERSEN: We are still seeing it some, which does in and of itself present unique challenges. But because of that shift of really trying to draw in much stronger literature for the students to be engaged in, it really facilitates that they're building this common ground and they're able to work together and even sometimes problem-solve some of those social-emotional aspects of it. So it definitely facilitates a better opportunity for the students to continue to overcome, because from students who didn't have the social opportunities of preschools or play groups before they started school, or even the students who stayed virtual instead of maybe coming back in – you know, we came back in person right after COVID, but some families still chose to do more of a virtual, remote-type learning. So those students didn't have the opportunity to interact with their peers face to face. This is definitely important in bringing them back and engaging with each other.

KENNEALLY: Right. So there's a lot of pressure on teachers to really help to close those gaps. Let's talk about the use of the materials – the supplemental curriculum and other content that's found online, most of it free. How do you rate the quality of that material, and do they ever get aligned to state standards?

ANDERSEN: They say they're aligned to state standards. You will find that they'll say, oh, this is related to this, whether it's a national standard, the Common Core standards. Then they'll even sometimes relate it directly to your state standards. While it does often appear related on the surface, very often the rigor and the depth and even the connections in it are not where they need to be for that particular grade level. So it's something that we definitely don't encourage teachers to just go out and purchase these off-section ones. We want products that have been well researched, that show that they're going to give the students that opportunity, that really have been vetted as high-quality materials. It's important. So it's an ongoing, continuing professional development piece that you have to visit very frequently, because you see something, and it looks flashy, and it looks really cute, but then when you really get into the meat of it, you realize that it's just that surface-level cuteness, and it's not the high quality that we need it to be.

KENNEALLY: Kimberly Andersen, thank you for that.

Now, I want to bring Ellen Brooks back to the discussion. Ellen, welcome again. How are you?



BROOKS: I'm enjoying myself immensely. It's so good to hear other professionals just voicing these really critical ideas. It's lovely.

KENNEALLY: I want to hear from you about something – when we chatted about the program in advance, you told me, I'm an ELA person. What does that mean to you, Ellen?

BROOKS: I think that even when you're undergoing your preparation courses as an educator, you get put into lanes of things that are interesting. I think general education of the elementary setting spoke to me, because I love all the subjects. But for me, my passion was always reading independently. I'm just a reader. I'm someone who loves that. So the processes of reading and those scaffolded skills and reading across disciplines – if you're someone who derives joy from that, I think ELA wraps that up. It's that ability to communicate your thinking in writing, to understand someone else's thinking, to make those connections. So as an ELA person, I'm just someone who – I get a lot of gratification and joy out of interacting with texts like the ones we've been talking about.

KENNEALLY: And you worked this year – it's your first year outside of the classroom, and you've been helping develop some new curriculum that include books and online resources. But can you address the point that we raised with Kimberly, which is about the online materials and how well or not they actually work in the classroom?

BROOKS: Yeah, it is definitely ongoing, and it's a conversation that we have constantly in my building and in my district. We are a one-to-one district, so students are provided with a device. There's a lot of scaffolding of skills that's required to have those devices and use them in meaningful ways. The excitement, I think, that comes from these wonderful places where you can get free reading opportunities – like Epic Books is really popular – is that it affords a certain level of accessibility right away. They have many levels of texts. Some of the books are read aloud to students. Some are audiobooks. Some are just the text. There are quizzes. You can favorite things. It's like a very exciting virtual library.

But I think that as we've kind of spoken about that modality of text, it's a different process to go in your own classroom and look at those bins of books and evaluate a book. Whether it's an ebook or whether it's a physical book in your hands, you look at that cover, you look at the summary, you try to build some background knowledge about what this could be about. There's a lot of processes that mirror one another, but they each take their own experience and support from our educators who are there to say this is what readers do.

I think that it's never been easier to jump on Google and look for that thing that you need. Like you're talking about fossils, and you just really need that fossils thing, and you just Google it real quick, and you come up with an article, and it's like, this will probably work. I think there's a lot of that gap filling, where there's that excellent intention of





meeting the diverse needs of your students and their different levels, and you're kind of just grabbing everything, and then there's a lot, and you're not really getting that in-depth, gorgeous time with that thing that you know is the highest-quality tool.

KENNEALLY: Let's be sympathetic to teachers. You told me that there's just such incredible time burdens on teachers. We all know that they have very little time. They're working so hard. They have to do the prep work. They have to be in the classroom. They've got to correct papers – all of that. So as you say, moving towards this material that's freely available is perhaps – it's an inclination we can understand.

BROOKS: And it's there. Part of growing up in this time is being able to find those things and then do some evaluating. So I think with our educators and with our students, we do a lot of talking around like how do we know that this is good? How do we know it's a credible source? We're trying to not just click that first link and assume that it's the best, but really have an understanding of where some of these materials are coming from, who authored them, all of those things that we've always done as researchers. But it's just so fast and easy, and it's one click away. So I think that it's a huge element in our education and society is that evaluative aspect of how do I know that this is what my students need, and it's meeting all of those standards, and it's not just that quick, easy thing that might fill that gap?

KENNEALLY: So that kind of care that you're taking in choosing the materials that you're going to use in instruction really extends a lot to different areas. You're worried about the source of the material, whether it's trustworthy, and perhaps as well worried about permission and copyright and whether you have the right to use that material – whether the author, the creator, the publisher of that material wants it used in that way.

BROOKS: I think that that's something that we've talked about a lot this year especially. We have tons of teachers that are starting with a brand-new, revised curriculum that includes more phonics instruction, so they're looking for more materials. And it's not hard to go on TeachersPayTeachers and find a slideshow that someone put together that matches session one. And if you're like, oh, great, that's one less thing for me to do, but there's not the time to evaluate that source and really see, is this more for the teacher? Is it more for the student? Because what I need as the teacher is different than the visual my student needs. But if your district is paying for that curriculum, it's sort of a gray area, and it's one that I think we're still learning how to talk about in my district, where you can find that thing and use it, and it's probably fine, but how do we be sure? (laughter)

KENNEALLY: Well, Ellen, thank you so much for discussing that with me.

BROOKS: Of course.



KENNEALLY: I want to now turn to a colleague of mine. I want to welcome Roy Kaufman, who is managing director, business development and government relations, at CCC. Roy previously was legal director for the academic and instructional publisher John Wiley & Sons. Roy, welcome.

KAUFMAN: Thank you, Chris. Thanks for having me. It's been a great panel so far.

KENNEALLY: You've been listening to the discussion about authentic content, so I want to ask you about your interest in the subject and what first drew your attention and CCC's attention to the importance of it.

KAUFMAN: Yeah, I was thinking about something Marjorie said, which was standards were developed with authentic texts in mind. And as the non-educator and lawyer in the room, I first heard the phrase authentic text about 10 years ago, when we were approached by the SmarterBalanced Assessment Consortium, because they were looking to create personalized, adaptive assessments using large amounts of authentic content, which is the way you create personalized education. So we partnered with them to create a license that would enable that, which has then expanded out into state educational standards and is used by most of the assessment developers assessing most students.

Very quickly, then we went to, well, the goal isn't to assess students. The goal is to teach them. And the question then became, how do you get – just as a matter of equity and fairness, the types of materials on which students are going to be assessed, how do you get them into the classroom? That's why we started working more deeply on curriculum and instruction. We actually hired a teacher into our team to sort of help us with these concepts and really wanted to advance it, because again, education's the primary thing. The standards require authentic texts. We need to make it easy, because teachers and curriculum developers are not expected to be lawyers. They're expected to know how to teach, not expected to know these other concepts. So we just wanted to make it easy and possible to bring these materials into the classroom.

KENNEALLY: And, Roy Kaufman, we heard something from the earlier discussion about the challenges with using online instructional materials. What have you learned about why teachers should approach that kind of material with caution?

KAUFMAN: Of course, just because something is online doesn't mean it isn't good, and just because something is online doesn't mean it is. A few years back, a colleague of mine, Andrew Campana, and I – we actually wrote an article in the context of open educational resources. One of the many things we talked about was teachers were trying to find authentic content by linking online, and then sometimes they'd link to something online



and it would no longer be active. That's link rot. That's pretty common. Sometimes, there'd be some other content next to it. If it's obviously an ad, that's one thing. But sometimes, the students would be – is that part of the assignment. Sometimes, that content might not be appropriate. Define content however you want, but it might just not be appropriate for that instruction or for that school district's philosophy. Then, of course, as a copyright lawyer, is this material infringing? Are you creating a liability issue? Again, teachers shouldn't be experts in this. They shouldn't have to worry about that.

So we created a license that enables print and digital use, but within the environments – the learning management systems. In a one-to-one district, you probably have an LMS, to use the abbreviation, where you can put the content or it can be used, and then you don't have to worry what's sitting next to it. Is it inappropriate? Is this website going to take the privacy rights of my students? Because students probably can't even give their rights, but we know websites sometimes do the wrong thing with information that they gather. These were the kinds of concepts we were really trying to simplify for instructors, for curriculum developers, and for, frankly, education technology providers.

KENNEALLY: And the risks are real, Roy Kaufman. This is not just theoretical. The risks of being sent to inappropriate contexts, the risks of privacy being violated, but also the risks are real as far as copyright infringement. Districts have paid significant fines.

KAUFMAN: Yeah, these are all things that one needs to worry about. These are all things that have been documented and all things that we frankly don't want people to have to worry about. Compliance should be easy, and that's why we're trying to create easy solutions. But compliance isn't the goal. Instruction is the goal. So you have to get the right materials – the great, authentic publications, the great, authentic materials in, and then compliance just becomes part of the use of those materials.

KENNEALLY: Well, Roy Kaufman with CCC, thank you for that.

I want to thank our panelists – Marjorie McKeown, founder and CEO of ALEE, the Alexandria Learning Ecosystem for Educators, Ellen Brooks, K-12 school improvement coach and educator at Monroe Public Schools in Monroe, Michigan, Kimberly Andersen, director of curriculum and instruction at Twin Valley School District in Pennsylvania, and my colleague Roy Kaufman, managing director, business development and government relations, for CCC. Thank you all.

I'm Christopher Kenneally. For me and everyone at CCC, goodbye for now.

END OF FILE