

In This Bitchin' Issue

Everything that is Awesome in YA Literature

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This Book Has Nothing to Do With Me! Using YA Literature to Create Lifelong Reading Habits in Secondary Classrooms

By Christine Hamman

Every teacher who teaches a typical English or Language Arts class in which students are required to read texts from a prescribed list of classics will eventually hear the complaint "Why do we have to read this? It's not like anything in this book applies to me!" Now, we know that this is untrue. Most of these time-honored texts provide students with literary experiences that deepen and enrich their understanding and appreciation of English and literature, ideas that should help them come to better comprehend the world around them, and important life-long lessons.

Forcing a student to get all of these things solely from texts that most would admit were written for an adult audience may end

up having the opposite effect of what we try to do as English educators. John T. Bushman points out this practice may be preventing students from becoming lifelong readers by denying them the crucial connections that make literature meaningful to any reader (38). In order to provide our adolescent students with opportunities to make connections to great literature and to foster lifelong reading habits, our responsibilities as educators of English is threefold. We must offer: 1) literature that speaks to adolescents on their level, addressing the problems and concerns they face in their everyday lives (Bushman 39), 2) literature that will help students navigate

their way through not only their adolescence, but all the way into and through the journey of adulthood (Carroll 33), and 3) literature that addresses curricular demands and provides all the important literary experiences and insights of the classics (Lesesne 67). With these responsibilities in mind, we can begin to choose literature for our classrooms that are relevant to our curriculum as well as engaging and meaningful for our students as they progress through adolescence.

Part of reading will always be a personal experience, in which the reader engages with the text in some way that is influenced by his own identity. As students enter into secondary classrooms, they find not only that their individual identity is in flux, but that there is increasing pressure to engage with texts that speak less and less to and about them (Pennac qtd. in Hipple 17). Our disgruntled student is right: many of these texts have nothing to say for or about modern adolescents. Even those that do, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, may give students the impression that the only way for literature to

address adolescent concerns is to hide it behind difficult language and "adult writing." In other words, adults control what is written about adolescents.

The reality is simply that some literature speaks on a more personal level to young adults than others. While it is important for students to be exposed to classics like Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Salinger, we must also acknowledge that many secondary students are at a stage in their lives where they are being asked more frequently to behave like adults, and yet are treated less and less like they are capable of doing so, being given less information to guide them along this journey. As

our first responsibility dictates, we owe it to our students to supply them with texts that portray their world realistically, with a voice not of an adult, but of a fellow adolescent. We must provide them with texts that, as Bushman states, "offer hope to the young reader...to be able to cope with all that seems wrong with being a young adult" (39).

But what we hope for our students is that the practice of reading, whatever the purpose, does not end the moment they leave the classroom. We want our students to take what they learn in our classes into their adult lives. If our goal as English educators is to provide our students of any age with skills that will help them, as Paulo Freire (1987) states, "read both the world and the word" (qtd. in Appelman 2), then it is our responsibility to read the world of our students in return and provide them with literature that helps them maneuver the confusing, chaotic world of adolescence to "successfully emerge as adults" (Carroll 26).

G. Robert Carlsen provided three categories of tasks in which adolescents engage to prepare for life as an adult: human relations, inner self, and vocation (qtd. in Carroll 26). If we offer students only those texts which they sometimes struggle to connect with personally, we unintentionally deprive them of the opportunities to engage in these tasks. When we select texts that speak to students on a personal level, we are choosing literature that students can make connections with, that they are invested in because they feel a sense of personal connection to the characters and the events portrayed (Bushman 39). These texts become a representation of the real world for them, become a guide for how to operate in society, how to handle problems, and how to build and develop one's sense of self.

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The final challenge, then, is one of balance. How do we choose literature that realistically addresses the issues commonly facing adolescent students, but also produces meaningful lessons and important literary experiences (Blau 203)? While many educators may be inclined to write off adolescent literature as lacking in literary merit, the genre is just as capable of teaching students about complex literary topics as the classics (Hipple 16), and may sometimes do so in a more organic, meaningful way. When we select literature based on the first two responsibilities already covered, we find texts that are written with "rich language, three-dimensional characters, and themes that explore rough territory with honesty" (Lesesne 66). Perhaps just as valuable is the fact that we do not have to cut corners in order to adequately support students to understand a text for its context. Instead of working to deliver slideshows and lecturing on Shakespeare's time only to present a watered-down, abridged version of a text, we can give students the time and opportunity to thoroughly read a text that is just as valuable, in which our students already understand most, if not all, of its context. I am not suggesting that we replace all of our classics with young adult literature. There is a great deal of knowledge in canonical texts that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily with young adult literature, but if one can do with a single young adult text that another can do with a shortened, summarized version of Shakespeare, why would we even consider denying our students the chance to experience literature in its full form? Many classrooms would benefit from the substitution of a few traditional titles for a young adult book, one that gives students a foundation of connections to literature to which they can add as they continue on in life and in their reading.

We do not expect our toddlers to learn the value of money by asking them to balance a checkbook, nor should we expect students to view reading as an important and meaningful skill by asking them to read only those texts which have seemingly no

relevance to their lives and their personal issues. As our students grow and find themselves a place in the world of readers and literature, then they will develop a confidence and a maturity to take on more difficult tasks, more varied texts.

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Making Meaning Matter How to Get Students Engaged in Discussions on Literature

By Ariel Thebert-Wright

The all too familiar moment of panic palpating in the classroom, reverberating off of the institutionally yellow painted walls, "What did you guys think of this passage?"

Silence. "Anyone? Did anyone think anything about this passage, how about something that stuck out to you? Something that you thought when you were reading?"

Students looking at the floor, avoiding eye contact at all costs, hoping to be canvassed over by the firing eyes of the instructor.

This situation is a naturally occurring phenomenon in most English classrooms when literature is to be discussed. Most students approach this subject not with open minds and critical eyes, but perhaps most debilitating, too reticent to share due to this overwhelming fear of being criticized. Students are merely reacting to the most commonly accepted (read standardized) method of literature instruction. This main focus of most literature classrooms involves an instructor fishing for "answers" in the front of the classroom or perhaps, my personal favorite, while writing on the overhead projector as students fall asleep in all rows of desks. "..., but they seem not to know what else there is to say in an academic context that isn't plot summary or else the predictable pseudoacademic observations encouraged by study guides and, unfortunately, but some typical school assignments (Blau 2003, 102).

What teachers, administrators, and theologians alike disregard, is the fact that no one enjoys endless stacks of worksheets outlining why Hester Prehn is an adulteress, or word searches of terms from *The Odyssey*, or even the "connect the vocabulary words to their definitions" from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Just like the Kid's Bop versions of modern songs tend to abandon the originals, students want to read important material for the important content, not the watered down "less offensive" contexts and meanings approved by most administrations. What students are craving is the raunchy reasonings about how Hester Prehn is known as an adulteress, what makes a hero and is Odysseus one of them, and heaven forbid our stu-

dents understand why our society feels it is appropriate to ban books and what that says about us as a culture.

The question most enthusiastic instructors have about these issues is how to get students to interact with a text to ignite the passion of learning that this type of meaningful classroom discussion requires. There is the added difficulty of acknowledging that all students are at different stages of experience and skill in different areas of literature; but when students are "appropriately challenged, engaged, and interested in what is being taught on an individual level" no student will fall between the "cracks of the system" (Tomlinson 1999). There are several ways to create this type of passion. The first of which is to actually engage students in the material by making it relevant to their lives.

When a student is left to decide why material is important to her outside the realm of the classroom, the simplest of all solutions still remains out in the open; it isn't relevant at all. A diligent teacher is one who is able to connect characters and situations to student experience and the "buy-in" has to be important to the student. I would not attempt to "sell" the text of *Anna Karenina* to a group of teenagers without first relating it to something that they actually cared about, say for example, the Jersey Shore. Even though it is quite a stretch, students will be more eager to interact with a text with which they are invested, even more so when there is a potential debauchery of character and ethics.

The question of what material to cover with in-class discussions can be difficult to come up with. Good teachers engage students in any subject matter by making it relevant. One of the most significant and applicable ways to demonstrate this relationship in your classroom is to get students to do "readers theatre" activities. In order to break down the text, students can choose to interview any character with the mock "Jerry Springer" or "Maury Povich" shows. This requires students to apply the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy by having students support or refute the actions of characters while also identifying genre, audience, and purpose within the context of the assignment. Furst describes his critique of this concept "the taxonomy treating objectives brings out logical interrelations- the central objectives

of education as 'elements within integrated developing structures of understanding'" (Furst). Because students will be engaged from all angles of these assignments they will not only be able to discuss their thoughts on relevant literature, but they will be able to write critically about the material. Effective teachers of literature will facilitate meaningful discussions to create a "vault" for ideas to incorporate into students' writing. This activity can be incorporated into any classroom as long as two or more opposing sides of a problem are represented in the text. This classroom is vibrant and full of students relating to literature that would

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ordinarily not have this striking relevance to their lives.

Education in relation to literature discussion continues to prove a difficult concept and process for most classrooms. But as teachers we know that in order to create meaning to the individual student, we must promote the interest on behalf of the student to intrigue the focus to the literature to begin with. We must also make the information uncovered by students applicable and significant to them by meaningful parallelisms and similarities in pop culture with the literature itself. Then to promote the formulation and creation of new perspectives and ideas about this literature, we need to have students openly question and defend the literature in a group discussion which is facilitated by the genre and purpose uncovered from within any given text. If teachers adopt this method within their classrooms, there is little to keep students from actively engaging in meaningful discussions about literature in class.

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You Have the Write to Remain... Creating Engaging Writing Assignments About Literature

By Ryan Bacon

Students in a high school English course are beginning a series of reading and studying famous poems, playwrights, and literature. Thus begins the daunting task of the teacher grasping, holding and expanding the student's attention of the chosen literature. All too often lessons on literature are started under the expectations that students will appreciate and understand the literature and be ready and willing to read, discuss, and report on the material. However, the reality is often that of boredom, confusion, and reluctance to write about the literature. Teachers must develop creative approaches to prompt students to write about the literature they encounter in their English courses. Once students are introduced to various creative avenues of how to encounter literature, the freedom of writing can be discovered and shared without fear.

Easier said than done right? Even with carefully thought out lesson plans, prompting students to write about literature can be like pulling teeth. It's so simple and dull just to use the traditional ancient methods of read and write a summary or essay about what you have read, but what about deeper thoughts and expressions that may be bottled up inside a typically quiet student who is just ready to explode with vibrant rays of expression? I would like to offer some methods and mock assignments that may assist teachers who are seeking different alleys to help their students explore through their own creativity.

"If we can overcome our students' reluctance to write, we can give them great power and freedom: we can enable them to create" (McVey, 2008, p. 289)



So, how does a teacher provide these engaging methods of writing? Let's look at a famous poem in literary history, Langston Hughes, "A Dream Deferred". After reading this poem, student most likely will consider the obvious interpretation, that being of a poem about wasted dreams perhaps. However, if we were to visit Blau's methods and beliefs of promoting and allowing open interpretation, we may stumble upon other abstract interpretations from other students. According to Blau, student's who are allowed to offer their own interpretation of works in literature gain confidence and courage in deciphering literature as opposed to keeping their feelings bottled up in fear of being misunderstood if they go against the

authoritative interpretation, "It is the position that if there is no single or authoritative interpretation for a literary text, then the discipline of literary study is one in which any and all interpretations have equal authority. Or, as many students put the case, a poem (or any other

literary work) can mean anything you want it to mean". (Blau, 60.)

Next, students should also be allowed to agree, challenge and add-on to other student interpretations in a respectable manner. This method of class discussion allows the different views of the poem to be shared amongst peers and sought after as an important opinion in the literary world. After a period of open discussion and interpretations of the poem, the teacher should then encourage the students to read the poem again and reflect on each line of the poem paying attention to the literary device of rhetoric, similes, and metaphors. Blau calls this method, "Writing about a Line", where students pick a line that stood out most to them and they write their thoughts about that particular line only. Once students in class have chosen their line, and of course there will be multiple thoughts about different lines, students will be able to share amongst

each other different ideas about the line they chose.

Again, the poem, "A Dream Deferred", is just an example of what can be used to facilitate this assignment, but it is fitting in that,

"The Dream is a goal in life, not just dreams experienced during sleep. The dream is important to the dreamer's life. But what dream is it exactly?" (Grimes, 38).

The poem does not choose the dream but leaves it up to the reader, hence; the student becomes the dreamer and not allowing the student to express their dream may have negative effects on their writing ability. The last stage to this assignment is having students create another line in the poem to support their own interpretations that they have offered thus far. Having them write one line would be the requirement, but if a student chooses to express more, by all means allow them to. Having the students write their own addition to the poem will introduce them to the freedom, or the DREAM of writing.

Of course, some poems can be easy, but a literary work such as a play by Shakespeare can be even more challenging. For this assignment, let's venture into the realm of Shakespeare's, Othello, an epic tale of romance, social war, race, and tragedy. As in most of Shakespeare's plays, the language used in the plays immediately turns students away. A most common aide is to take students to an actual play of Othello so that students can visualize the subjects in the play. However, in our world, we must also WRITE, and write they will about Othello and what they think should have happened in the end of the story. That's right! Teachers will allow

their students to write their own alternate endings to the tragedy. Students should form study/discussion groups of 4-5 and stay in these groups throughout the reading. At the end of the play, students should discuss possible alternate endings and

agree on one as a group. Once this decision is made they will write and report it to the class. This method of reporting is introduced and supported by Sheridan D. Blau in his book, *The Literature Workshop, Teaching Texts and Their Readers*,

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"Now that you have all heard each other's pieces, I'd like to hear from groups about what you found people writing about, how much agreement you noted in how different members of the group saw the story, and so on. I would also like to hear some sample pieces, if some of you will volunteer to read them." (Blau, 133).

Their ideas should be shared with other English classes where each will then be voted on. Whichever group receives the highest vote, that alternate ending will be re-enacted at an actual school play! This type of incentive will encourage an aggressive attitude amongst students who want their idea brought to life on stage. A helpful tip for this assignment will be letting the students make it as modern as possible through speech, setting, and costume. This approach places the time frame of the play in their world and they will have fun making it current with their own ideas.

These types of engaging ideas will assist in getting rid of the constant drab and drag approach to reading and writing about literature. When students are introduced to topics that value their ideas

and opinions, they will always seem more interested in the assignment. Teachers should continue to build on these bags of tricks because when the time arrives when the classic structured lesson plan hits a brick wall, that teacher can remove the clouds from their classroom and allow the rainbow of ideas and creativity. Writing is not designed to have regulations and constraints, rather it should be designed to be open, spontaneous, and most of all, FREE!!!

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Q&A with the RAC

<p>What are the State Standards on incorporating class discussion in our classrooms?</p>	<p><i>If you visit the Michigan Department of Education website under Michigan Curriculum Framework, You will note that Standards 4-Language, 6-Voice and 7-Skills and Processes all deal with the importance of having students recognize the significance of being able to express their ideas and opinions verbally in the presence of an audience while using effective and meaningful language.</i></p>
<p>I am in search of some unique innovative ways to prompt students to write outside of the classroom, any suggestions?</p>	<p><i>Hopefully, you can try this on a lovely spring, summer or even fall day, but in the midst of winter, BUNDLE UP! You can have your students go on a nature observation walk around the school's campus, neighborhood, or local museums. Just tell them to record everything that they found interesting. Upon arrival back to class, announce their homework. Ask them to start to draft an essay about what they saw, why, they chose it, and how it applies to their life. PRESTO! you just used an ancient old Jedi mind trick to facilitate creative writing in and outside of class!</i></p>
<p>This is my second year teaching high school literature. Last year, I bombed in peaking their interest with selected readings, can you say..BORED!?! I am in search of some fresh, up to date and hip readings for my students, where can I look?</p>	<p><i>I would offer a few websites that I use quite frequently in my Literature courses. Try www.multcolib.org, www.owlsweb.info and www.amazon.com. Type in the key words, "High-Interest for Low Interest Readers, young adults/teens". A variety of new-wave funky literature for high school students should appear. Be sure to pre-screen them first for appropriate content.</i></p>