In Other Words…

Harnessing the Participatory Nature of Adolescents Today:

New Literacies and Young Adult Literature

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New Literacies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) means a change in dispositions of young adult readers today. While text is generally accessible on mobile tools, it is not the tools that can be used to encourage reading but instead the cultural vibe that can encourage an attitudinal shift toward books. Books can be hip, and if we harness their inherent social capital by capturing and extending the buzz about hot new young adult literature, then that discourse can motivate students to read. While we know that students who read get better at reading, we need to explore ways to harness the participatory nature of today's students in order to reach aliterate students, those who can read but choose not to.

Athletes not in training fail to increase muscle mass, stamina, or flexibility. Likewise, students who aren't reading allow their reading skills to atrophy. The most important thing students can do to prepare for reading comprehension tests is to engage in texts. Engagement happens when readers connect with stories. Teens know that teachers can make students look at words, that teachers can give reading quizzes, that teachers can gush about great books, but teachers cannot *MAKE* students engage. Adolescents choose aliteracy by not reading, even when a text is accessible and at an appropriate level. Aliteracy is defined as the state of being able to read but choosing not to (Harris & Hodges, 1995), and this is routinely the situation in academic contexts. Aliterate is different than aliterate, yet often mistaken (e.g. Baron, 1985; Borsuk, 1997; Vanslyke-Briggs, 2011). Aliterate, an adjective describes a person who can read but chooses not to and the word can also be used as a noun (e.g. The aliterate finally picked up a book); whereas, aliterate is a verb that shows the action of a writer repeatedly beginning with the same sound or letter (e.g. The author chose to aliterate to create a rhythmic sound). Here, we consider aliteracy and the roots therein.

Adolescents *choose* to read when adults offer books that resonate with teens' lives and times. In 2008 the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) board of directors adopted a position paper entitled "The Value of Young Adult Literature" (Clark, 2008). Within the paper, the background of young adult (YA) literature is explored, as well as the present

understanding of the term, which now can encompass ages 10 to 25. Clark notes that how narrow or how broad a person defines the term YA literature is not all that important, rather, understanding that the term is ever changing is important: "The term 'young adult literature' is inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms 'young adult' and 'literature' are dynamic, changing as culture and society—which provide their context—change" (Clark, 2008). For the purpose of this article, we are defining current YA literature as narrative fiction that appeals to students ranging from 4th grade–college, and published in the previous five years. As is true for adults, great books have resonated in different ways for different readers. In times of common core standards, classroom teachers who move away from accepted canonical literature take risks. Because of this, sharing opposing philosophies on what is considered worthy of study and what encourages teens to read is more important than ever.

In a recent post on Slate.com's Book Review, Ruth Graham (2014) suggests that canonical literature is filled with "moral and emotional ambiguity," "unlikable main characters," and endings that are not "satisfying." She goes on to argue that literature that has stood the test of time is more likely to ask the reader to think critically about life. She also suggests that the urge to reread current young adult fiction is, for her absent. Others argue that teaching the great stories of our culture, like *Romeo & Juliet*, give us shared experience and vocabulary about love and rebellion and offer cultural capital needed in academic and social situations. Many scholars suggest that canonical literature challenges readers with varied syntax, style, diction, and ambiguous meaning (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2011). While we suggest that seeking balance in any reading diet is necessary, and that exposure and good wrestling with challenging texts is a part of what we need to do as readers, we must first encourage the act of reading (Broz, 2011).

Literature is a reflection of one's era; literature can be social capital. Literature can be seen as social action and engagement. By redefining literature in today's classrooms, we encourage reading and empower students to bring in their out-of-school literacies to make our classrooms a place where teachers are learning with their students. When we encourage students to evaluate literature and to engage in conversations centered on their identities as people and as citizens, we make learning about the students and the world in which they live, rather than about the books that teachers feel the need to cover. Focusing on the transactional possibilities of literature, both in and out of the classroom, is what Wilhelm and Novak (2011) advise in Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom when they say, "In our concern for outside efferent effects, we tend to overlook the aesthetic, affective, internal dimensions of our experience" (p. 15).

Literature as a Reflection of an Era

To adolescents, adults just don't understand, and this gulf in understanding which lies between adolescents and adults seems unbridgeable. While adolescents understand intellectually that their parents and teachers were once teenagers, they cannot imagine that adults ever had the same strong emotional ties to friends, that we ever wanted to die because of the pain of embarrassment, or that our first love was approached with the same fervor that they feel. They can't imagine that we craved constant connection with our peers, or that we struggled with issues in leaving behind our childhood and growing into our adult selves. They are right; we just don't understand. Today's adolescents face issues we could not have imagined as we sat in our classrooms, passed artfully folded notes, gathered at parties, talked endlessly on the phone, and fought with our parents. English teachers today need to teach differently because of these issues. While there are plenty of universal themes that resonate in classic literature that can spark the imaginations of students, we do a disservice when we teach as if the universal themes of love, power, prejudice, and pain are not manifested in today's world differently than illustrated in the classics. The leap to understanding is narrowed when we talk about love with Green's *The Fault in our Stars,* perhaps, instead of with *Romeo and Juliet.* Especially when students long to read the book, because the buzz is that the movie will be released in the summer. Any teacher who has the courage to swap a current novel in place of Shakespeare might be scorned by their more traditionally minded colleagues. If, however, we ask ourselves to reflect upon what our vocation calls for today; if we remember what motivated us to be teachers, perhaps we will redefine the field as one which views YA literature as bridge to student engagement and motivation, and not simply a bridge to tried-and-true classics. Motivation and learning requires teachers to *empower* students, create *useful* lessons, support students in *success*, focus on what *interests* them, and show *caring* for the students' well-being, both academic and personal (Jones, 2009). YA literature can serve as a gateway for a plethora of learning experiences, including a "rush of energy, a thrill of excitement—a frisson" (Culham, 2014, p. 46) as readers begin to read like writers and appreciate the text before them.

New Literacies are defined by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) as dispositional shifts that students today have made in their learning styles; it is not about the tools that they use. As such, New Literacies theory posits that students today are interested in participating instead of observing and in sharing instead of owning. They are positioned to consult multiple experts on any given topic, and to experiment and innovate with the tools that are available. Current popular literature written for adolescents encourages students to engage in deep reading. In no other time have students so easily been able to participate in timely discussions of

author's craft as they can today on internet discussion forums like Goodreads and Booktube.

Our profession is noble, fluid, multifaceted, and unwieldy. If we, as professionals, encourage our students and new teachers to contribute to this conversation, we must ground our dialogue in the notion that we are not the experts in our students' world. We need to allow for the most current titles in YA literature in the classroom despite the traditional arguments against it. When aligning themselves on either side of this debate, traditional canon vs. YA literature, the age of the teacher and the age of the author does not seem to be a factor. Why is it that some teachers stay in tune to the current world of youth while others carry a torch that privileges only the classics that they learned to love? While it may be a simplifying dichotomy, seeing student preferences as more important than adults' opinions may be the key to the dispositional shift that occurs when adults honor the knowings of the adolescents. Accepting student preferences as equal to adult-created curriculum may be the key to a dispositional shift, which occurs when adults honor the lives of adolescents. Cutting edge trendiness may motivate students to read. In order to take advantage of this motivation, we need to teach the book *before* the movie is produced. We need to give adolescents safe places to confront issues that they are facing within their modern worlds.

Anyone who has studied philosophy knows there is a progressive element to the field. The prevailing philosophy of every time period is, in some measure, a response to the generation before. Thus, postmodernism is in some ways a response to modernism, which is a response to romanticism, which is a response to the industrial revolution. Literature by and large reflects the philosophy of its time either as a progression of that philosophy or a dissident response to the era. Either way, literature is written in a time, for a time. When our students read classics, they immediately perceive that they are not of the time of the original audience, no matter how universal and important the themes may be. However interesting and relevant the characters are to the readers, the philosophical situation they are engaged in is fundamentally different and distant from the philosophical world of our students. Current literature has the advantage of adding a fresh voice to the present philosophical conversation. By reading current literature, our students are able to participate in this ongoing conversation and see the effect of various modes of thinking on their lives. Even if they don't understand or articulate it in this manner, they are fully capable of perceiving when a philosophy is outdated—answered by the prevailing philosophy of the day—and when it meshes and engages their current worldview.

Literature as Social Capital

Our argument here is not that reading current literature is a guilty pleasure, akin to finishing an entire chocolate cake. Broz (2011) made a clear

argument that students are not reading the classics that are assigned to them. Teachers of adolescents know that students avoid reading too often. If students don't read, they aren't learning from the content in the text. Finding internet summaries is no substitute for following the characters and plots of a book. Current book titles have social capital in the classroom. Adolescents want to be cool, and current is cool. One of the great joys of teaching middle school is watching what becomes social capital. Sometimes it is collectable penguins, pants made out of parachute material, or the fragrance of affordable cologne. Sometimes it is a book, and when it is a book, what a phenomenon that book becomes. In much the same way, there is no such thing as a "classic hip" wardrobe for secondary students, as much as some parents may want to pretend there is. While there is always vintage, adults don't decide what is vintage, the youth do. Likewise, the youth ultimately made Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* a book worth the buzz, regardless of the number of adults who touted the book as a worthwhile read.

I was teaching eighth grade developmental reading in 1999 when the Harry Potter series was in some of my better reader's hands during silent reading times. I rewarded my students on Fridays by reading aloud to them from the series and this reward *worked.* At the time, I knew that my students who couldn't quite access the text based on their reading ability and who wanted to know these wonderful characters, appreciated my introducing them to the world of Hogwarts that they heard other students gushing about. On the day that Riordan's *The House of Hades* came out last month, my tween daughter came home incensed that a boy in her class already had the hard copy in his hands while he shared that he hadn't even read all of the earlier books in the series. When she did get her hands on the book, stayed up in the wee hours reading, and then loaned the book to her 13-year-old cousin, I heard my niece squeal, "Ooo! I can't wait to text all of my friends that I have a copy of *House of Hades*!" This kind of social capital comes with new books and we can harness this excitement over books in our classrooms.

As teachers, we frequently see our role as mentors who empower students in social situations. We teach mainstream dialects and code switching so students can be effective in their future academic and business careers. We work to improve writing because of the clear social benefits that accompany good writers in the workforce. We teach classic literature because we believe it is important content knowledge for effective citizens in a democratic society and in order to study an author's craft. All these goals, however, may be chronologically distant to most of our students. By enabling students to keep abreast of current, even fad-based, YA literature, and thus affecting their immediate social capital, we build reliability in their eyes. They may trust the genuineness of our long-term educational goals because of the relevance of our short-term understanding.

Encouraging reading engagement does not mean that the classics are jettisoned from our instructional plan. Occasionally, students discover all over again Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye.* Grandmothers continue to buy Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* for their preteen bookworms, and while these readers enjoy the classic, they choose to strike up conversations about current, not classic, books with friends. They don't prognosticate through personal Twitter feeds, for example, on whether Romeo and Juliet will succeed in running away together like they post quotations from *The Fault in Our Stars* on Instagram: "I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once" (Green, 2012, p. 125). These current texts are what make adolescent space distinct for each generation (Dredger, Woods, Beach, & Sagstetter, 2010).

Adolescents are motivated to read the book *before* the movie is produced. While observing in a ninth-grade classroom last spring, I had a satisfactory chuckle at a young woman's t-shirt that read, "Movies: Ruining the book since 1920." It matters to students that we teach and share books with them before there is a visual representation of the setting, the character, and movement of the plot. Suddenly, students who did not catch *Divergent* the first time around are picking up the book, because the trilogy will be the content of the hot movies in the foreseeable future. In some cases, maybe the movie won't ever be made, but knowing those characters and that story is like being a hipster fan of a band that hasn't yet hit the big time. Students love to be a part of movement, and to see something that matters to them make it big. Like the 2,218 backers of Lillard's bid to make Going's *Fat Kid Rules the World* into a movie (Lillard, 2012), students today expect to have their voices inserted into our larger social media enhanced, visual world. And once the movie is made, students today use social media to evaluate the effectiveness of the visuals, to examine their own biases, and to join the greater conversation about books and the world. These are the critical thinking skills that teachers of adolescents and texts work to nurture and encourage in today's classrooms.

In March of 2012, fans of *The Hunger Games* called surprised movie-goers to task when they tweeted negatively about the 12-year-old tribute Rue's dark brown skin color (Cooper, 2012). Even in a small way, the social activism of the fans who called out the racist Tweets made a difference to those curiously watching as the dialogue unfolded and, hopefully, to the authors of the negative sentiments as well. Much like an effective Socratic seminar in the classroom, the adolescent readers themselves who tweeted in response made more of a difference than any of us probably do on any given day in the classroom. While the use of literature circles and seminars support comprehension, it is authenticity and engaged response that supports readers today (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). If we want students to read, if we want students

to be a part of the current events of their world, we must acknowledge that it is their choice that matters. By allowing youth to follow their interests we let them "experience texts that make sense to them" (Ivey & Fisher, 2005, p. 3). If students are afforded the opportunity to enjoy reading vicariously, which happens more readily when given a choice, then they will be motivated to return for more (Jones, 2009). In education, we are in the business of creating life-long learners and therefore life-long readers. To encourage this internal motivation to digest text, adolescents must know that we respect, at least some of the time, that they can choose what will best inform them.

Literature as Social Action and Engagement

Some issues are NEW to this generation, and we can't pretend as adults that they are not. The Cosby's are not reflected in the television parents of today's world. *Gong Show* of yesteryear has been replaced effectively by *American Idol* and *Duck Dynasty* is the new *Beverly Hillbillies*. There are few predecessors, other than the traveling carnival, to today's *Survivor* and other reality shows that routinely exploit, sexualize, and humiliate participants for audience amusement and producer's financial gain. The immense popularity of *The Hunger Games* reflects this reality. The heroine Katniss must navigate social expectations of grooming, primping, sexualization, and faux romance that she neither welcomes nor understands in order to survive. Children are exploited for power. Adolescent characters consider and then engage in revolution in an unfair society. Katniss portrays a female in combat, an ongoing current discussion of our time (Sprague, 2014). Some themes are distinctly related to a time, while some are new. YA novels give students a safe place to consider taking risks with their opinions on social media, loneliness, politics, independence, war, rebellion, all both modern and perennial issues (Godbey, 2014; Kaywell, 2007).

While themes of being different are universal and timeless, youth of any time period need to be honored for the struggles that are truly their own, as we have already survived our own teen years. New books, like fashions, movies, music, t.v. shows, and technologies make adolescent space unique to each group of students that we may teach. Creating a space for these texts in our classrooms means making a cultural third space (Soja, 1996; Moll, 1992) that welcomes varied out of school literacies that include current YA titles. R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* (2011) takes the reader straight into the world of Auggie, a fifth grade boy with an extremely severe facial deformity, who is entering school for the first time. Auggie's journey through the trials and terrors of middle school bullying are never exaggerated, but Palacio gives us a long, hard, unflinching look at the struggle to fit in, to find a place in the social hierarchy of middle school and what that longing to be part of a group means for someone who cannot "pass" as "normal," as the rest of us try to do. Auggie is both constrained and

freed by his deformity; he is unchangeably, unavoidably different in ways which cannot be denied or hidden. Yet this very difference frees him to move outside the social structures of middle school and to find friendships, which might have been unavailable to him otherwise. For middle schoolers, who struggle daily with the agony and ecstasy of swiftly-changing social landscapes, Auggie's struggle serves as both a beacon of hope and a warning.

Empowering Students to Comprehend and Evaluate Literature

When we teach texts, reading and comprehension come before evaluation and critique of the texts. Too often, teachers may teach the myriad skills that are needed to truly understand a text in isolation, focusing on main idea, language, and sequence of events instead of using a holistic approach to passage comprehension. Construction of meaning happens on the cognitive, emotional, and imaginative level and we know that comprehension cannot be separated from context (Irvin, 2006). A reader must bring background knowledge and prior experience within a situational model in order to render a mental representation of text. These processes of reading comprehension hinge on student engagement with the text and with active mental attention. Irwin explains:

> Obviously, the cultural background of the reader exerts a powerful influence on what is comprehended. Culture affects whether the reader feels that the text and task reflect his or her interests (see Finn, 1999; Kohl, 1994; Ogbu, 1991), whether the text requires unknown prior knowledge, whether the reader believes that the reading involves him- or herself (Heath, 1983, and others), and so on. (p. 9)

Only after students have read text do they move to the transactional (Harste, 1985) space of comprehension and personal response.

We need to allow *our students* to define what quality is for themselves rather than continuing to sanction and limit what defines canonical classic texts. What defines quality? Preference alone? Some other literary criteria? Rather than letting students define in a vacuum, based on their preferences, current literature gives us a good opportunity to develop their opinions about what makes quality when the setting is predetermined. Teri Lesesne debunks the myth that kids should not be allowed to "wallow in popular fiction" (2006, p. 3) in *Naked Reading*. Instead, we all must be encouraged to indulge in a balanced diet of reading that includes novels with current themes and situations.

Are there any classics? Sure, but that's not the point. Kids want to think they discovered the new genre. And: does having to read a "cool" book at school RUIN it? Can we as teachers even support the reading of "cool" books at school, given politics, policies, fear of community backlash, etc.? While not all of these novels are well-written, enough of them are so that we can

confidently move forward, balancing better the classics with the current in a differentiated classroom (Groenke & Scherff, 2010; Miller, 2014). In the idea of differentiation and in the move away from working exclusively from a whole-class novel, there is a sentiment in which change is challenging to the status quo, to the system that controls through mandated and tightly watched curricula and assessments, and to the classroom teachers who must plan, instruct and then defend choices for differentiation. “The role, then, of the classroom teacher is to walk that fine line between having students read for the pleasurable act that it is and having them read to increase their powers of literary analysis and, thus, become members of an educated, literate society" (Bushman & Haas, 2005, p. 30). When a teacher places a book in a student’s hand and says, “I know you like dirt biking, and so when I saw this book I thought of you. Tell me what you think of it,” the adolescent experiences academic and personal caring. Pair that experience with 20 minutes of silent reading in class, and if the author’s words connect to the reader, continued reading will likely happen outside of the classroom walls.

Any course in literature is a guided journey designed to both familiarize the students with quality literature and train students to appreciate, analyze, critique, and evaluate literature on their own. Our aim should be a student capable of making valuable insights and critical text choice independently of our opinions. Current YA literature provides a superb opportunity in this light. When presented with a known classic—often a book of some age with ragged edges and numerous names written on the inside cover from years of classroom use—students already know this book is “good.” They might not like it themselves, but they know the masses have affirmed it as a classic and any dissenting opinion will be viewed as wrong or unenlightened. Rather than being an active, valued participant in the analysis, they have become receivers of another fact, and there is no motivation in this. Worse, it may cause students to view their dislike of a book not as a legitimate personal opinion but as a wrong answer, resulting in a view of self as someone who “doesn’t get” literature or “isn’t good at English.” Perceived failure is a short stop from becoming a disengaged reader.

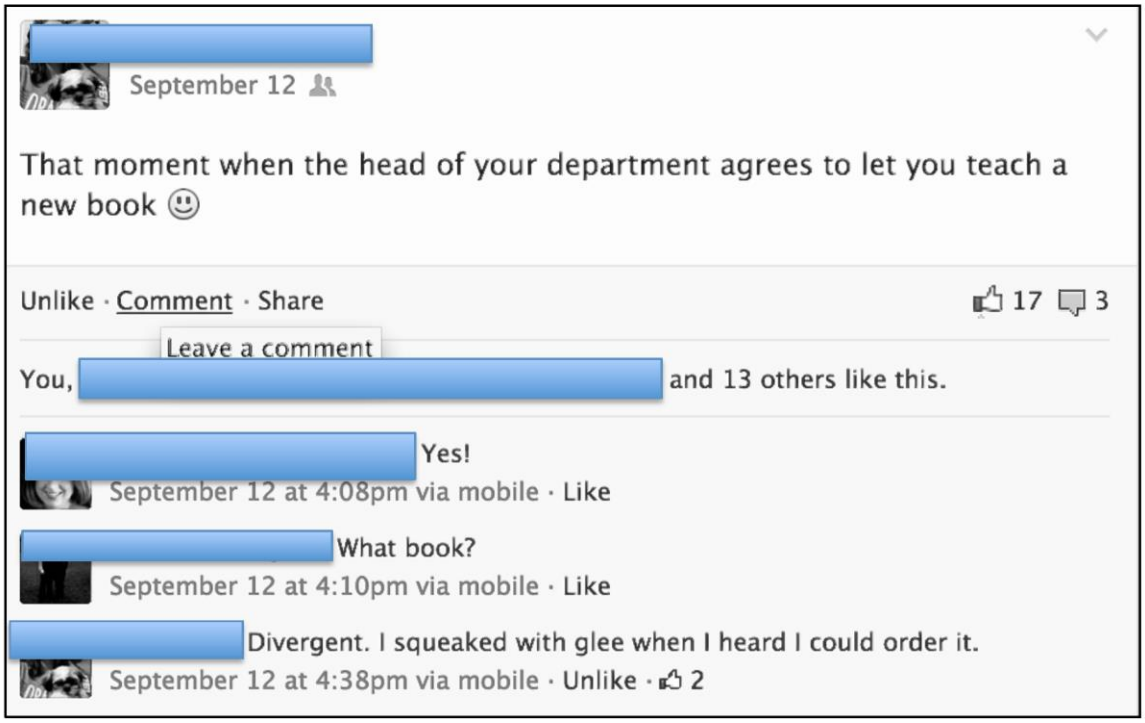
If, however, students’ interest is piqued with a book trailer clip or a booktuber’s review of current YA literature, then the game plan changes (Author, 2014; Kate, 2014). They read, and instead of trying to discover the right answer, students participate in the conversation. Rather than pointing to the “award-winner” sticker on the front, teachers can return the question “Is it good?” with “What do you think?” or with “I enjoyed it when I was your age, but things may be different now.” Some YA literature is timeless in that way. Take for example, Cole’s (1987) *The Goats*. While students impatiently waited for a copy to become available in my classroom in the 1990’s, the movie just hit the Redbox this

year, 26 years after publication. The bullying issue is timeless, and producers are aware of what's hot with teens, as should teachers of adolescents, who are also in the business of sales. It can be validating to consider the worth of a book before it is named an award winner or turned into a movie production. In the absence of an established opinion, student thinking can thrive. Suddenly the conversation shifts from instructing in facts to real analysis (Lesesne, 2006; Miller, 2014). We are not saying there are no measures of quality, but that students can become the critics, looking for and evaluating that criterion. We can discuss with students what makes some books worth reading and others not, and help develop their tastes in a context that is safe—in a context where it is okay for the student to decide a book is not, in fact, worth reading, and safe for the teacher to affirm the student's opinion without having to defend the canon.

Taking Risks to Encourage Reading

Encouraging reading takes risks on the part of classroom teachers, but these risks can keep passionate neophytes in the profession. After taking a course in YA literature, a first-year teacher wanted to light a reading fire in her classroom by teaching Roth's *Divergent*. Instead of rejecting her request as trivial, this department chair encouraged and supported a fellow colleague when she saw that a promising young teacher was excited about having her students read (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: New Teacher's Facebook Post



Choosing current YA literature is not without risks. Miller (2014) discusses how AP Literature teachers take risks in "calling into question . . . literary gatekeeping monopolies that continue to have great social power institutionally to reinforce and sustain hierarchies of literary textual choices" (p. 50). Challenging these gatekeepers, despite strong support from national organizations like NCTE and IRA, can put teachers in difficult positions. In 2009, a Virginia principal "took appropriate personnel" action, without further comment, against an English teacher who shared Chobsky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with a student (Statement). According to the local newspaper, the book is now only allowed in the school library, and can only be checked out by 11th and 12th graders, or 9th and 10th graders with parental signature (Perks, 2009). It is no wonder that teachers today feel the need to tread carefully when discussing current literature. We can't wait for the mass public approval that we'll never get to have support for our teaching choices. Can't we, as educators, be given the tools and the support to balance the approved classics with emerging modern texts? We take risks with each one of our students when we don't offer appropriate texts in our classrooms. We risk that they will become aliterate, choosing not to read because of disinterest even when they are capable of reading (Gallo, 2001). Aliteracy is important for many reasons, but in this discussion, chiefly because when readers choose NOT to read, they are not moving toward college or career readiness. Beers (2003) encourages "sometimes choosing young adult literature over classics" because "[it] offers students the chance to read about characters, conflicts, and situations they relate to more quickly" (p. 275). In districts that minimize current YA literature, new teachers especially risk scorn in advocating what the leaders of our field already espouse. Janet Alsup (2010) asks the following:

> If young adult literature has a unique tendency . . . to assist teen readers in positive identity growth, the teacher is led to ask some hard questions about its classroom use. To what extent is the job of the literature teacher to effect personal change among students? Are English teachers qualified to elicit, purposefully, the identity change or growth of their students? Is it ethical to teach a book because a teacher believes it will make her student 'better,' 'more real,' or 'more sympathetic' people? If literature can result in such deep, personal change, doesn't that make it especially dangerous, as many censors already argue? (p. 4-5).

This is NOT a new conversation. This argument is made semester after semester in teacher preparation courses where teacher candidates are taught the pedagogy

of “young adult literature.” And still, new teachers enter schools and classrooms and are silenced, coerced, and slowly entrenched in the “real world” of teaching. Those of us mentoring these new teachers have stories of great young colleagues who left the profession, disillusioned by the realities that squelch passion for reform. It’s time to listen. English is a language that grows and changes, a course that encompasses written and oral expression and philosophical meditation. It is the perfect playground that can evolve to a place where we, the stalwart English teachers, can be open to new learning and change. Nilsen and Donelson (2009) share that our classrooms “must be a center of intellectual ferment . . . that schools should be . . . one place where freedom to think and inquire is protected, where ideas of all sorts can be considered, analyzed, investigated, and discussed, and their consequences thought through” (p. 426). The persistent paradox of YA literature and the classics is a healthy tension for our profession. Jago’s practitioner text *Classics in the Classroom: Designing Accessible Literature Lessons* coupled with McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, and Meyer’s (2012) results on a U.S. survey of middle school students’ reading attitudes, should partially inform our practice in the English Language Arts classroom. Some students may choose the classics, and we can lead them. Some may choose YA literature, and here too, we can lead them. The bottom line for students is WIIFM (What’s In It For Me?), and teachers do have the responsibility of holding students accountable and setting a stage in the classroom that exhibits the high expectation for each student, whatever that expectation may be. We know about differentiation. Based on empirical research (e.g. McKenna. et. al., 2012), attitudinal factors affect reading, and the relationship with the teacher contributes to students’ attitude toward reading. Are the affective dimensions of reading being fostered in the classroom? Is a lifelong love of reading a priority?

If we accept that the purpose of English Language Arts as a discipline is to facilitate effective language use in today’s society, then we need to infuse the discipline with current literature. Science updates its curriculum with current theories and models. Likewise, ELA teachers are not primarily history teachers who should focus solely on canonical texts from long ago, but language teachers. While the history of language use is important and has shaped our understanding today, these texts should be a small fraction of the curriculum. If it is our responsibility to prepare students to read, speak, compose, and understand the multiple modes of communication in today’s society, we must use today’s models.

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