

(Re)Shaping the High School Curriculum: Using Young Adult Literature to Teach Social Issues

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I am a 30-year-old English teacher in the small, rural school district of Oakfield, where approximately 150 students matriculate in grade 9-12. The view from my classroom is the sheep farm across the street, and our student parking lot pushes up against a corn field. Oakfield is a small farming community where pretty much everybody knows everybody. Franzak, Porter, and Harned (2019) point out that “rural schools span the gamut from well-funded to under-resourced, from high-achieving to those in danger of being taken over by state departments of education” (p. 3). Oakfield fits into that spectrum as a high-achieving district, earning a Significantly Exceeds Expectations or Exceeds Expectations rating from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) since the 2016-17 school year. Funding for the district is supported by the community through the passing of operational referendums.

An advantage of working in a school of this size is the opportunity to get to know students really well by the time they are seniors and gearing up to graduate, and I’ve discovered that many have not experienced and understood issues outside of our own small community. In the words of Crowe (1998), they are “typical teenagers: egocentric, unfamiliar with many of the ugly realities of the world, and prone to simplistic notions of right and wrong, good and evil” (p. 124). I want to use the literature in my class to expose them to issues and cultures outside of only what they find in their neighborhood. I also want to stretch their critical thinking skills to perhaps experience being in “someone else’s skin and help them see the world from a different point of view” (Crowe, p. 124). Luckily, young adult literature allows us to do just that.

Background of Unit

This unit came to be after some shifts and changes in course requirements and offerings for our seniors. What was once one required semester of English 4 and one of Communications became either AP English or Senior English as a year-long course. When Senior English was created, I had the freedom to make curricular choices, so my goal became to choose “culturally responsive” units relevant to my students, units “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2018, p. 36). In fact, the DPI promotes diversity by using “culturally responsive standards, instruction, and assessment” (“Culturally Responsive Education”).

Creating such units that my students would find interesting and relevant was no simple task! In an attempt to get students to read more, especially when motivation to read was lacking, I came up with a unit that incorporates choice in reading, research skills, and communication. My choice to focus on young adult literature specifically was driven by my belief that teens respond well to books about characters similar in age and dealing with problems common to teenagers in general. Moreover, as Glasgow (2001) argues, “Young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating worldview and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (p. 54).

Organization of Unit

When I have taught this unit, I have offered the option of a number of topics for groups including mental illness, drug use/abuse, modern slavery, and crime/justice (see Appendix A). Based on what students have already read and learned through other classes, I am adapting the offerings to also include immigration and war/conflict. Olan and Richmond (2016) argue that even preservice teachers must learn to “consider and (de)construct their own identities as readers while preparing to teach literature in secondary schools across the United States and beyond” (p. 11). What's more, as mental illness is estimated to affect one in five Americans (NIMH, 2019), the importance of discussing issues such as depression, substance use disorder, and suicide through young

adult novels is especially necessary, as Richmond (2019) argues. Allowing students to choose a topic to read about and study helps to invest them in the topic and its importance.

I divide the students into groups of three to five, and each group chooses a social issue topic to read about and discuss. From there, they have the freedom to choose any book that incorporates or connects to the topic. They are encouraged to choose from lists that I have created but are welcome to find other titles as well.

Class time is used for reading, discussion, and working on the research project. Attendance is sometimes a concern, especially in the spring when sports teams travel and tend to miss class more often. As a result, I do not assign specific discussion days, but I allow each group to create a calendar and plan ahead for when they want to discuss their books and topic, as long as they meet a certain number of times. Plus, the skills of planning ahead and time management are important to practice before they are out of high school. I expect them to come prepared by having read and prepared questions or connections to discuss. Each author treats the social issue subject differently in each novel, which lends itself well to discussion regarding authors' choices and attitudes toward the subject.

The Final Project

In addition to reading and discussing a variety of novels, the groups conduct research and present it to the class. Rather than write a research paper, they create an extensive research outline. Essentially, they are doing all of the research and organization required in a research paper without having to write the information into complete paragraphs. I find that finding relevant research and organizing ideas is important for all students, regardless of their plans for the future.

The research outline must include 1) an overview of the issue including its history and background both globally and within the United States, 2) different perspectives of the issue, 3) connections with the reading, 4) possible existing solutions, 5) barriers to the solutions, and 6) what can be done. I require them to evaluate multiple sources for

credibility and create an outline including citations formatted in MLA style and a works cited page. They must then present their information using effective speaking skills. The assignment sheet for their research and presentation outlines the required elements of the assessment (see Appendix B).

Challenges

In creating and implementing this unit, I faced a number of challenges. One that I imagine is similar for many teachers is obtaining enough books. The organization of this unit helps with that challenge, as I am not looking for an entire class set or even a small group set of one text. In order to get the titles that I wanted to offer or add to my master list, I raided our school library, my colleagues' libraries, and our local public library. I was also lucky to have the support to order a few more as needed. I recommend starting small and with only a few topic groups to limit the number of different titles needed at once.

The first year that I taught this, I borrowed titles and copies from my fellow English teacher, who usually assigns them for a modern slavery unit in English 10. The seniors that year had come through before the modern slavery unit was created, so I could use the same texts. I have since phased that option out, but at the time it gave me enough options and books and bought me time to figure out additional topics and lists for future years.

Of course, content can certainly be a challenge. I rarely have any pushback from parents of seniors regarding what novels they should read. If I completed this unit with a younger grade, I would likely send a proactive email to parents regarding content possibilities. Another barrier may be the administration's attitude towards teaching young adult literature. Olan and Richmond (2016) found that preservice teachers can reduce the concerns of administrators by providing research on the number of other rural schools in the area reading and teaching young adult literature.

Another challenge during the first couple years was classroom and time management. I encouraged my students to read and work on this project, expecting them to use the class time provided. Maybe it was senioritis. Maybe it was other classes taking priority. Maybe it was laziness. No matter the cause, I struggled to get them to read, research, or work on

their project during class, so many fell behind. After that first year, I tried to structure class a bit more effectively by including mini-lessons more often on topics pertaining to research or certain social issues. I would print out articles or have students search for articles connected to the issue they were focusing on in order to practice or assess certain reading skills, to serve as a prompt for writing assignments, or simply to discuss.

Another challenge is to invest students enough to act on their issue. Each year I talk to them about getting involved and volunteering or raising money locally to help mitigate the issues they researched. Unfortunately, because of a number of reasons, very few have taken that active role outside of class and am hoping this changes over time.

Outcomes

Through the texts that they read and the research they completed, they had an opportunity to see beyond the walls of our high school and outside of the edges of our small town. They learned about issues extending far beyond their everyday experiences. In some cases, those who had rarely, if ever, read an entire novel found themselves finishing more than one novel in this unit. The social issue topics are very real and relatable, and students engage with them. Reshaping my curriculum has led to an increase in reading of young adult literature and relevant research. This unit has become one of my favorites to teach and is a unit that will continue to be taught in my Senior English classes.

References

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Appendix A

Sample Booklist Organized by Issue

Drug Use/Abuse

Dope Sick by Walter Dean Myers
A Piece of Cake: A Memoir by Cupcake Brown
Far From You by Tess Sharpe
Lifeline by Abbey Lee Nash
Crank by Ellen Hopkins
Go Ask Alice by Beatrice Sparks
Smack by Melvin Burgess
Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines by Nic Sheff
Beneath a Meth Moon by Jacqueline Woodson
I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter by Erika L Sanchez
The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
American Street by Ibi Zoboi
The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky
On the Come Up by Angie Thomas

Mental Illness

Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson
Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher
Will Grayson, Will Grayson by John Green
Turtles All the Way Down by John Green
Challenger Deep by Neal Shusterman
Cut by Patricia McCormick
Burn Journals by Brent Runyon
The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky
Lisa, Bright and Dark by John Neufeld
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey
Starved by Michael Somers

It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizzini

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter by Erika L Sanchez

Dear Evan Hanson by Val Emmich

Crime and Justice

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

Dear Martin by Nic Stone

How It Went Down by Kekla Magoon

When I was the Greatest by Jason Reynolds

Always Running by Luis Rodriguez

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

Monster by Walter Dean Myers

Scorpions by Walter Dean Myers

The Juvie Three by Gordon Korman

Lockdown by Walter Dean Myers

Snitch by Allison Van Diepen

Modern Slavery

Sold by Patricia McCormick

Diamond Boy by Michael Williams

Stolen by Katariina Rosenblatt

Bitter Side of Sweet by Tara Sullivan

War and Conflict

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Refugee by Alan Gratz

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys

And the Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hosseini

Little Bee by Chris Cleave

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

I Am Malala by Malala Yousafzai

Fountains of Silence by Ruta Sepetys
Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick

Immigration

American Street by Ibi Zoboi
Americanized: Rebel Without a Green Card by Sara Saedi
The Border by Steve Schafer
Denied, Detained, Deported: The Dark Side of American Immigration by Ann Bausum
Disappeared by Francisco X Stork
The Distance Between Us by Reyna Grande
The Good Braider by Terry Farish
La Linea by Ann Jaramillo
Love, Hate, and Other Filters by Samira Ahmed
Out of Nowhere by Maria Padian
The Radius of Us by Marie Marquardt
Something in Between by Melissa de la Cruz
The Sun is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon
You Bring the Distant Near by Mitali Perkins
Funny in Farsi by Firoozeh Dumas

Appendix B

Global/Social Issues Project (Semester 1 Final Project)

Objective: To analyze a global issue by describing the details, comparing perspectives, determining realistic solutions, and supporting your thoughts about the issue.

1. Research a specific social justice issue to understand the history, progress, and future of the issue
2. Write a properly cited research outline
3. Give a presentation to inform and inspire to take action

Background: You have already begun your research on a social issue by reading novels based on that topic or theme. You will continue to do more research on the larger issue, beyond your specific book, and also the specific details surrounding the topic of your novel.

Part 1 - Written Research Outline: As you complete your research, you are to create a detailed outline of the information that you find that is relevant to your topic. Consider this the first step to a longer research paper, but we will not take the next step of writing the actual paper. Much, if not all, of the information included in this outline will become part of your presentation.

Part 2 - Presentation: Groups have some choice as to how the information will be presented. The presentation will be based on the contents of the written outline. The presentations must be at least 7 minutes long.

Ideas on how to present material:

1. Slide show/digital presentation (Slides, Prezi, etc)
2. Write a play script/present it
3. Give an oral presentation with handouts or posters
4. Make a video on the issue

5. Conduct/record an interview with someone that works/ is affected by the issue (this option would be along with a shorter version of one of the other options depending on the situation)

Topics to be Addressed: Numerous topics should be addressed in researching and presenting on your topic:

1. An overview of the problem/issue
 - a. What is the problem? Where does it exist? When did it begin? What people or groups are directly involved? Specific names, dates, and locations are expected, if available.
 - b. Why does (or should) this matter to us?
2. Different perspectives (views) about the problem
 - a. What are the causes of the problem? Does everyone see it as a problem? Historical sources may be used to determine facts and opinions about the problem.
 - b. What seems to be society's perception or attitude toward the subject? How is the attitude similar or different in the US compared to other countries? Different groups of people (politically, socioeconomically, culturally, for example)?
3. Connection with readings
 - a. How was the subject treated in the novels you read or by different authors? What seems to be the author's attitude toward the subject? How integrated was the topic into the novel (main focus? Side story? Background?)
 - b. Are there other articles or news stories written about the topic? Read some as a group and discuss. This could connect to the perspectives mentioned above.

4. Possible existing solutions

- a. What has been tried so far in an effort to resolve the issue?
- b. How have experts/others associated with the issue suggested fixing the problem? What makes the suggestions different? Based on the background of this issue, what do you predict will happen in the future?

5. Barriers to existing solutions

- a. What human, environmental, and/or geographical barriers stand in the way of fixing the problem?
- b. What can be done to address these barriers in order to move along on solving the problem?
- c. Given what you have learned, what do you think would be the best solution to the problem?

6. What to do

- a. What can we do to help raise awareness or play a role in solving this issue? Are there organizations already that help with this issue? Are there any local organizations, businesses, fundraisers, etc that address the issue?
- b. In our school, what can be done? How could you raise awareness? I encourage you to do some of these things!

Documentation of Sources: All sources must be documented using MLA Format. In your outline, include in-text citations along with the information or quotes and a Works Cited page at the end of the outline. Every source that you use must have its own citation. www.easybib.com or www.citationmachine.com are fantastic and easy tools that assist in creating citations for the sources you use while writing your outline and presentation.

Plagiarism: Not citing the sources you used or directly copying and pasting information will result in completion of an additional alternative assignment and a disciplinary report to the office. It is a serious offense to pretend others' ideas are your own.

Scoring

Research outline will be scored on:

- **Inclusion of information** - enough information, variety of information, validity of information
- **Organization of information** - maintains logical format/organization
- **Use of paraphrased and quoted information**
- **Sources** - use of multiple sources to support information, correct citations (in-text)
- **Works Cited** - correctly cited sources, *at least 5 sources (not including novels)*

Presentation will be scored on:

- **Voice** - volume and projection; pronunciation and enunciation; intonation and emotion; speed, pacing, and pauses
- **Body language** - Facing audience, posture, eye contact, gestures, placement of notes (use of notecards)
- **Introduction** - provides clear, strong beginning to presentation; grabs attention, previews main points
- **Organization** - main points are organized, clear, and supported; includes all required information
- **Clarity** - clearly shares information with class, explains necessary information
- **Conclusion** - clear, strong closure; reviews main points, offers solution or call to action, has clear ending
- **Audience considerations** - utilizes words, images, audio, video, and interactive elements to engage audience interest and deepen understanding; addresses what the audience should think, feel, see, and do during and after; prepare for questions and answers
- **Professionalism** - prepared, practiced, professional, and polished

Division of work within groups: I will discuss with each group their plan for “dividing and conquering” this project. That being said, I expect all students to put forth equal effort and pull their weight within the group. I reserve the right to score students differently based on their involvement and the work each individual completes. Ultimately, though, this is a **group** assignment and I expect that you work well as a team.