

Teaching Controversial Young Adult Literature with the Common Core

By focusing on three current young adult novels, the authors provide ideas for teachers to support students' reading of controversial topics.

Introduction

Students are forced to deal with difficult issues in their lives in and out of school. They are growing up in an increasingly complex world where they will need to be able to work with others, solve problems, and communicate well (Windschitt, 2002). Young Adult Literature (YAL) is an ideal way to engage students with real-life issues and problems and teach social justice and tolerance. Teachers are being called upon to teach more and more content knowledge through curricular reforms such as the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core requires students to learn to be literate and to use literacy skills to learn content and real world skills (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2010). Teachers can use the motivational benefits of YAL to both accommodate standards, discuss contemporary issues, and teach social justice.

Young Adult Literature vs. the Canon

If an educator surveyed what students read, as Wolk (2010) did, he would find that the canonical texts featured in the curriculum decades ago are the same texts that one would find in English classes today. Of the top ten books read in secondary schools nationwide, Shakespearean plays make up 30%, and of the top ten texts, one was written by a White woman; all other texts were written by White males (Wolk, 2010). The most recent book that

students read out of the canon is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960 (Wolk, 2010). Wolk (2010) hypothesizes that current young adult literature is seen as taboo in the classroom nowadays because of the number one reason given by teachers not to teach them: young adult literature books do not have the literary merit that the canon does. Samuels (1983) notes in her study over twenty years ago similar reasons for not teaching young adult literature, and she points out additional factors that still hold true today, such as teachers' unfamiliarity with the YAL genre and the need to expose students to time-tested classics. The lack of change between the 1980s and the 21st century motivates us to promote teaching YAL in the classroom. Young adult literature continues to grow in popularity outside of school, becoming more and more critically acclaimed literature, and yet it continues to be controversial material in school (Cart, 2003).

The demographics of YAL changed in 1996, and this change led to crossover appeal that would target both teenagers and people in their early twenties (Cart, 2003). The official target ages for YAL became 15-25, the same demographics of MTV (Cart, 2003). Cart (2003) found that people under twenty-five buy books for leisure at three times the rate of the overall market.

Both marketing strategies and the growing critical acclaim of YAL sparked controversy when teachers began including YAL

in classes (Cassidy, Montalvo Valadez, Garrett, & Barrera, 2010). Educators looking to help struggling readers turned to YAL. The major problems that Cassidy et al. (2010) note through their research in regards to struggling readers were their issues with fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. Motivation, Cassidy et al. (2010) found, predicted late elementary school reading level (2010). Miller (2005) found that reading controversial violent texts in his classroom that were labeled as young adult literature profoundly raised the motivation of reluctant readers in the classroom.

Young adult literature in the classroom is still controversial and is still the second choice after canonical texts, but recent scholarship in reading and literacy shows the benefits of building student motivation, and the clear connection between heightened motivation and young adult literature.

YAL and Motivation

Reading is a social experience, and studies of adolescent readers using surveys and interviews show that family and friends motivate students to read (Arthur & Burch, 1993). Students choose to read literature based on recommendations they get from friends, family, and even teachers. Moreover, students tend to become more interested and engaged with texts when they talk about them, orally or in writing. Using literary theory lenses such as reader response is one way to get students to discuss texts both canonical and contemporary (Appleman, 2009). Teachers can implement other collaborative methods such as reading aloud, games that involve cooperation between groups or classes of students, chats or readings hosted by the author, dramatizations, teacher-student dialogue journals, letters to the author, and other purposeful writing assignments to conjure student motivation to read (Arthur & Burch, 1993).

The consensus among researchers is that students benefit when they can choose to read texts that they can relate to, texts about topics that they have some interest in. For years there

has been a gap between what is taught in classroom (traditional print-based, often canonical texts) and evolving literacy practices among young adult readers. Burns & Botzakis (2012) note:

The International Reading Association has highlighted the fact that ‘traditional definitions of reading, writing, and communication, and traditional definitions of best practice instruction—derived from a long tradition of book and other print media—are insufficient in the 21st century. (p. 23)

Not only is the definition of reading changing, but the reader of the 21st century has evolved.

Literacy & the Common Core

It is possible for instructors to motivate students to read while aligning instruction to the Common Core Standards. Indeed, the standards afford instructors the opportunity to include in their classrooms YA texts that students find interesting and relatable. The overall goal and mission of the Common Core Standards initiative is to prepare students for a global economy (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012). In order to prepare students for such an economy, students will engage in robust curriculum that is relevant to the real world. In literature courses, such curriculum includes students reading complex texts, analyzing and synthesizing information presented in various media, and teachers incorporating informational text, literary text, print text, visual text, and technology. Authors of the Common Core seek to level the field for all students, meaning that regardless of where a student lives and regardless of his or her socioeconomic status, each student will be prepared to succeed in college and careers (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). They also seek to “assure that a high school diploma across state lines could be interpreted as having similar

educational value” (Bomer & Maloch, 2011).

Because the Common Core requires teachers to expose students to different genres and forms of text, students can build cumulative background knowledge (Moss, 2012). Teachers can allow students to engage in “intentional, purposeful reading experiences that contribute to their reservoir of knowledge” (Moss, 2012). Moss (2012) surmises, “by effectively supporting students as they engage with [exemplar] texts, teachers can ensure [students] successful mastery of the Common Core and the development of literacy skills that will last a lifetime” (p. 65). The real world skills educators are asked to teach can be taught through the use of YAL, which allows teachers to expose students to different genres as the Common Core requires.

Teaching Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature often depicts emotionally difficult topics such as racism, sexism, abuse and assault, even genocide. What possible reason could teachers have for teaching books about such topics? We teach literature because “a good story allows us to see people as individuals in all their complexity. Once we see someone as a person in all their humanity, then we’ve reached beyond the stereotype” (Glasgow, 2001, p. 54). Literature allows us to see people as they truly are: complex, good, evil, and sometimes contradictory in their words and actions. Through literature, we can see the world through another person’s eyes, expanding our perspective on the world. Because it deals with social problems, YAL is an effective way to teach social justice.

Controversial young adult topics increase student’s motivation to read. Teaching controversial topics also affords adolescents and their teachers the opportunity to grapple with the complex issues they encounter in their daily lives (Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010). Students learn how to voice their opinions as well as listen to and consider others’ points of

view on important issues (Groenke, et. al., 2010). Shying away from difficult issues and the people perceived to represent them contribute to the stigmatization of those issues in society (Groenke, et. al., 2010). Literature instruction is supposed to dispel ideologies, not impose them. The goal for raising hard topics in the classroom via YAL is for students to recognize injustice, question the status quo, develop their own opinions about others, and learn how to overcome the angst and pains of adolescence.

Theory to Practice: Using Three Controversial Novels to Teach Common Core

Considering the motivational benefits of controversial YAL, we encourage teachers to include it, whether in conjunction with the canon or not, into the classroom. It is, however, at times hard to justify the use of such texts. We have decided upon three novels that give a unique perspective on emotionally difficult subjects that relate to social justice. *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Septetys (2011) was chosen because the novel deals primarily with global injustice during World War II. *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2009) was chosen because the novel deals with the individual and self in the context of suicide and teen angst, as well as for the journaling style in which the novel is written that appeals to reluctant readers. Finally, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Bender (2010) was chosen because of the array of emotionally difficult issues portrayed in the novel that deals with a primarily social context. By choosing these three novels, the students are able to read about emotional difficulties on a global, social, and individual level. Each novel is accompanied by a summary, further rationale, and ideas for lesson plans.

Violent and Disturbing Images Related to Genocide

Why should a teacher take on a unit about genocide? Why teach a unit on the Holocaust or another historical genocide? Literature is way to

learn about and understand important, even if disturbing, events in human history. Students need literature because “its stories illuminate human nature and provide adolescent readers with models of dignity and heroism. At the same time, it compels them to confront the reality of the human capacity for evil” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001, p. 14). To truly help our students develop an understanding of the world, we must read literature that shows the good, the bad, and the ugly of humanity. We cannot know what it felt like to be sent to Auschwitz, be run out of a village in the Sudan, or deported to Siberia, but we can get the most complete understanding possible from literature.

Understanding terrible events in history can also inform our response to terrible events going on today. Donnelly (2006) points out that Holocaust education “inevitably leads to questions of not only how and why this event occurred in the modern era, but, more importantly, how the legacy of the Holocaust can continue to raise international awareness of human rights abuses” (pg. 51). Learning about how past genocides have happened through literature allows students to understand current genocides such as the tragedy in Sudan. Students can also use what they have learned to speak against human rights abuses and to advocate for a more just world.

Theory to Practice: Teaching *Between Shades of Gray*

Between Shades of Gray by Ruta Sepetys (2011) shows the struggle of a teenage girl who tries to survive the Soviet deportations of citizens of the Baltic States during World War II. The novel is a winner of the Golden Kite Award for Fiction, the IRA Children’s and Young Adult’s Book Award, and was named an ALA Notable Book (“Ruta Sepetys,” n.d.). Additionally, it was a finalist for the William C. Morris Award, and a nominee for a Carnegie Medal (“Ruta Sepetys,” n.d.). It is also a New York Times Bestseller (“Ruta Sepetys,” n.d.).

The novel’s protagonist is fifteen year old Lina. She lives a comfortable life with her family in Lithuania until one June night in 1941. Lina, her mother, and her brother Jonas are arrested and forced from their home by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD. After being separated from Lina’s father, the family is packed with other Lithuanians onto a railroad car and sent to Siberia. In Siberia, Lina, Jonas, and their mother must endure forced labor and the cruelty of the NKVD officers. Lina must find the will to survive amidst starvation, hardship, and death. She finds solace in art, and she creates pieces of art to send to her father in hopes that they will guide her father to the rest of the family.

Any unit on *Between Shades of Gray* must begin with historical background on the Soviet deportations in the Baltic States. When asked why she wrote *Between Shades of Gray*, Sepetys (2011) points out that “many people aren’t familiar with this part of history. I wanted to write a story that explained what happened in the Baltics and also bring attention to the crimes of Stalin” (p. 349). Students must understand the context of the events in this novel, and non-fiction texts on World War II, Stalin, and the deportations can help. With that context, students can connect Lina’s story with other commonly taught literature about the Holocaust, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. It can also be paired with texts dealing with social injustice. It fits into any discussion of genocide, human rights, or resistance to oppression.

In discussions of genocide, it is important to differentiate the roles of perpetrator, victim, bystander, and helper (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001). *Between Shades of Gray* offers characters who fit all of these roles. Notable is the character of Kretzsky, one of the NKVD officers. He is one of the perpetrators, but the reader sees how being part of terrible atrocities affects him. This can be a source of rich discussion about how human rights violations hurt both victim and perpetrator.

There is a discussion guide posted on the novel's official website, www.betweenshadesofgray.com. This discussion guide is a valuable source of questions that can be raised in class discussion and themes that can serve as springboards for class blogs and research projects. A teacher's guide created in alignment with the Common Core is available on Sepetys' website, www.rutasepetys.com. Especially helpful are the anticipation guide and discussion of art as a form of resistance. These activities are aligned with the Common Core Standards in Table 1.

Table 1. *Addressing Common Core Standards with Between Shades of Gray (Adapted from Penguin's Classroom Classics, 2012).*

Applicable Common Core Standards	SL. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 9-10.3 W.7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 9-10.3
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Between Shades of Gray is a powerful addition to classrooms in grades 8-12. It depicts many disturbing deaths, and opens up a little-known yet important part of history. It can serve as a way to discuss human rights, social injustice, and how injustice can be resisted. Teachers interested in critical literacy will find much to discuss in this novel. The novel also shows how hope and a will to survive can carry one through terrible times. It can also be paired with novels that discuss more contemporary social problems.

Suicide & Sexual Harassment

Every two hours and eleven minutes a person under the age of twenty five commits suicide (Pearson Education, 2012). Suicide is the third leading cause of death for teens, and almost nine percent of students in high school reported a suicide attempt in the past year (Pearson Education, 2012). Teen suicide is very real, and a subject, however taboo, that students in secondary school as early as ten years old deal with. Bullying is one of the largest contributing

factors to suicide, and sexual harassment is another factor that remains prominent. The novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2009) deals primarily with suicide and bullying, along with instances of sexual harassment (Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012).

By shying away from such material, teachers are denying students an education that will allow them to be critical consumers and productive citizens. Suicide is part of a secondary level student's reality in the 21st century, and the multimodality of bullying that crosses school boundaries into the home with cyber bullying makes incorporating in the classroom novels that promote suicide prevention and awareness timely and relevant. Researchers have found that controversial young adult literature that focuses on violence promotes lifelong readership and allows students to make connections across multiple levels, such as text to self, text to text, and text to world (Bull, 2011; Glasgow, 2011; Miller, 2005).

Theory to Practice: Teaching *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher (2009) deals with controversial issues such as suicide, underage drinking, bullying, and sexual molestation and harassment, and these provide both controversial content and educational benefits. The novel has won numerous awards, including popularity awards among young adults, such as Florida Teens Read Award in 2008-2009, as well as literary awards and reluctant reader awards, such as the ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers (Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012; Razorbill, n.d.).

The novel's main characters are Clay and Hannah; Clay is listening to Hannah's tapes that she has left for certain peers to listen to after her suicide (Asher, 2009). The harrowing events of Hannah's life include underage drinking at parties where she is bullied and manipulated, sexual molestation that she encounters with a young man in her high school (Asher, 2009, p. 262-266), as well as the final moments of her

life, where she goes to reach out to one of her teachers who tells her to move on instead of helping her (Asher, 2009). The novel has been a bestseller in young adult fiction, and the inclusion of Hannah’s tapes online through the book’s website, thirteenreasonswhy.com, allows educators to provide both audio and text to students for a multimodal text experience.

Not only is suicide the third leading reason of teen death in the 21st century, but scholarship also points to the benefit of using controversial texts in the classroom to promote social justice and to use for students learning text to self, text to text, and text to world connections (Glasgow, 2011; Miller, 2005; Pearson Education, 2012). Additionally, the Common Core Standards that the novel can incorporate are included in Table 2. These standards, including major benchmark standards, can be incorporated through the discussion of mood in the text, using text such as poetry to analyze the novel, class discussion, and creating informational texts such as maps (Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012).

Table 2. *Addressing Common Core Standards with Thirteen Reasons Why (Adapted from Penguin Young Adult Readers Group, 2012).*

Applicable Common Core Standards	R.L.CCR.4, R.L.9-10.7, W.CCR.4, W.9-10.4, SL.9-10.1, R.L.CCR.7, R.H.CCR.8
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Pertinent discussion questions that can address the common core standards listed in Table 2 include (Razorbill, n.d.):

- Are the rules Hannah discusses in the novel worth following? What are the consequences of following such rules?
- Will the truth “always set you free”?

In addition to rich and thought-provoking discussion questions, the novel can be paired with suicide prevention nonfictional pamphlets, which encourage students to make connections across texts, and allows educators to incorporate

Common Core emphasized informational texts into the classroom. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam that many states will take instead of state standardized tests stress the ability to read and connect across texts and into writing (Achieve, 2012).

There is no doubt that this novel would make a deep impact on students and their ideas of teenage suicide. Written from the individual perspective, students are able to connect on a personal level to the novel and to the content. Students will be able to promote suicide awareness and prevention instead of seeing it as a taboo subject. Even for students who are not struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, this book allows them to see how they may affect a person’s life without knowing it. On the novel’s website, multiple readers mentioned the powerful effect the book made on them, including that the book “brings light to how we affect people every day without realizing it” (Razorbill, n.d).

Family Issues & Identity Construction

Some teachers may find exposing students to literature depicting less than perfect families to be controversial. Therefore, teaching a novel about a cheating wife, a disconnected son, a distant and ostracized grandmother, or the honest painful truth of broken families in general may meet with some resistance or disapproval. When teens read about real-life issues, they can better understand what is happening to them and the world around them. Imagine what can happen if a student reads a novel like *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (Bender, 2010) and analyzes his or her own familial interactions and assumes, either rightfully or wrongly, that one parent—if not both—is not happy, or even worse, is having an affair. Imagine a student realizing that his or her relationship with his or her mother or father is just as abnormal as Rose’s relationship with her parents in the beginning of the novel.

Theory to Practice: Teaching *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*

In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Aimee Bender (2010) weaves the reality of family, familial issues, and fantasy, allowing students to evaluate family relations as well as the everyday experiences and choices young adults encounter at various stages of their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. The main character is Rose—whose unique ability to taste people’s feelings in the food they prepare, and whose journey into adulthood, self-discovery, and self-acceptance is the focus of the novel. Joseph, Rose’s super intellectual brother, and his unique ability is as equally important.

The family dynamics within the novel are not picture perfect. The main characters of the story include Rose, Joseph, and Lane. Amongst the issues touched on are eating disorders, sibling rivalry, marriage affairs, and the complex relationships within a dysfunctional family (Bender, 2010).

According to Gold, Caillouet, Holland, and Fick (2009), literature is equipment for living, helping readers—students—to develop strategies for coping with difficult situations. Because the book has an array of topics for inquiry and investigation, the text can be used to discuss a number of difficult situations that students encounter in their everyday lives, but the text is deeply rooted in family and family relationships, so the following classroom activities are connected to the theme of family. The activities allow for differentiating instruction, creative expression, understanding and discovery of family and, indirectly, the self. It is also a good book for appealing to diversity, diversity among students and knowledge of diversity of family structures, relationships—and the different issues families face.

For more advanced classrooms, students can use critical lenses (i.e., gender, social class) when reading the poems and the novel. Appleman (2009) provides many sample handouts and worksheets that can be implemented in the classroom to achieve this

end. Reading a poem about family can also be completed before reading the novel in order to get students engaged in the theme of family.

Pairing poetry with the novel and using a reader response lens leads to differentiating instruction, student choice, and shared governance in the classroom, which all promote motivation. It also indirectly addresses students’ self-identity through the discovery of family, background, and history. More importantly, students who may be grappling with certain family situations or who will grapple with family issues in the future become aware of literature as equipment for learning and living. The book lends itself to a discussion of diversity in families, the importance of family, and difficult or controversial issues that many dysfunctional and broken families encounter. Students can respond to the novel by composing creative texts themselves (i.e., PowerPoint presentations, picture sketches, YouTube videos), a skill included in the Common Core (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012).

Ultimately, students will gain knowledge that within families, closeness leads to the possibility of hatred and estrangement; they will know that maintaining positive relationships with family members does not come easily or naturally for everyone and, therefore, is a tremendous challenge. By focusing on the social interactions in this novel, students become well rounded in both their knowledge of their own identity as well as the role they play in their own social relationships.

Conclusion

The Common Core encourages combining fiction, non-fiction, canonical texts, and contemporary texts to make literature instruction relevant (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012). Young adult literature is an effective way to make connections and motivate readers. Young adult literature that deals with controversial topics can be used to teach social justice and inspire positive action in our schools and communities. Taking on subjects relating to

social justice such as genocide, bullying and suicide, and dysfunctional families makes students the problem solvers our democracy needs.

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