From *Gossip Girl* to the Classics: Choosing the Best Young Adult Literature for an English Classroom

By Kimberly Reikow

In a perfect world, every book a teacher chooses to read in his or her classroom is well liked by all their students. Discussions are enriching, and both the teacher and the students feel like they have taken something meaningful away from the text. In reality, a time in which every student is satisfied with a text is slim-to-none. We as teachers can do our best, however, to make the most educated choices when it comes to the texts we teach in our classrooms. When choosing Young Adult literature, it may not be possible to please every one of our students, but at least finding a book that sparks interest with the majority is something we can all shoot for. Once interest in a text is there, we can use that to have great class discussions, and guide our students toward a love of reading.

We as teachers need to be aware that the classic Young Adult literature we read when we were students, is not necessarily relevant to students then or today. In order to have the best discussions and interest in the selected readings, literature must have some sort of connection to our students’ lives. This could be from underlying themes in the text, poems that deal with struggles of a teen, or political events that encompass the news. When students are personally interested in the topic they are reading or learning about, they are going to be more likely to engage in discussion and feel like they’re taking something from the literature.
An encouraging thought about finding literature that will spark interest in our students, is from Sheridan Blau, who writes that we should be, “helping students see how it [the text] speaks to them as human beings rather than as test takers and technical analysts” (Blau 102). If we approach literature with the thought that we need to teach to the test and not worry about our students being able to connect to the text, we will produce no book lovers. Students will begin to view English class as a boring part of their school day where they listen to their teacher hammer out interpretations of texts without any personal meaning behind them. Taking Blau’s advice into consideration, we as teachers of English must help our students find literature that speaks to them and allows them to connect with it personally.

Choosing young adult literature for the classroom can be difficult when you are trying to find a book that will have good discussion and an outcome that encourages your students to want to read more. If we chose to let our students read and discuss the popular young adult literary series, *Gossip Girl*, in the class, we would have a lot of angry parents asking for explanation. Taking *Gossip Girl* and applying it to the following criteria, those who have read the series may argue that it lacks the fourth and fifth arguments Carol Jago makes. Not to say that these books should not be in the school library, as they are great page-turners that spark interest in teens and keep them wanting to read more, however, they definitely do not have the sort of richness other literary works have. We must find literature that is both enriching and interesting for our students. Carol Jago states in her book, *Classics in the Classroom*, “There is an art to choosing books for students. First I look at literary merit. Without this, the novel will not stand up to close scrutiny or be worth the investment of classroom time” (Jago 47). Jago also lists six things she looks at before choosing texts for her classroom:

1. Are written in language that is perfectly suited to the author’s purpose;
2. Expose readers to complex human dilemmas;
3. Include compelling, disconcerting characters;
4. Explore universal themes that combine different periods and cultures;
5. Challenge readers to reexamine their beliefs; and
6. Tell a good story with places for laughing and places for crying (Jago 47)

Jago gives excellent criteria for choosing literature or our classrooms. We should not feel as though we need to read only classics in our courses, hoping that these books will inspire our students to read outside of the class. Although classics are excellent pieces of literature, it might be difficult for students to feel connection to some of the characters. *Romeo and Juliet* is an admirable piece that should definitely be read in the classroom, however, if we go about it with an attitude that our students are not going to understand it because of the time it was written, or that we’re not able to find themes our students can relate to, we will have no luck teaching literature to our students.

Looking for identifiable themes in the story is simple if you look at it with a “big picture” perspective. A student may be able to feel the same way as Juliet or Romeo because they are dealing with parents that don’t seem to want to listen. It will definitely be difficult, however, for our students to relate to living as royalty in Italy (unless of course we find a job teaching for royal children in Italy). The biggest issue teachers may face when teaching literature like *Romeo and Juliet* is that their students will look at the time period it is set in, and throw the book to the side. We as teachers need to encourage our students to look past these issues for any novel and show them issues they can relate to.

Literature Circles Resource Center online has suggestions for finding books to read in small groups, which could easily translate to classroom wide reading. It’s important, they write, to find out what is available at your school (we all know that school budgets are not very substantial). Converse with librarians and other teachers you know to see if they have book suggestions that they have found to be successfully taught in a class (Noe).

Finding enriching literature for students to read inside and outside the classroom can be as easy as walking around the Young Adult section in Barnes and Nobel. Other resources provide hundreds of suggestions for literature to teach in classrooms of all grades and can be found online and in professional education books; here are just a few:

- Websites:
  - The Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework ([www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html))
  - American Library Association ([http://www.alा.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsa wards/booklistsbook.cfm](http://www.alा.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsa wards/booklistsbook.cfm))
Talking it Out: Facilitating Discussions in the Secondary English Classroom

By Melissa Nichols

Facilitating classroom middle or high class may discussion in a school English sound like a daunting task; there is nothing more awkward than an attempt at a class discussion that results in blank stares and “pulled-teeth” responses. We know, however, that engagement in a thoughtful classroom discussion is essential for many reasons—students learn how to communicate, propose and share ideas, and thinking deeply. It is (hopefully) easy to recall various discussions you’ve had when you were a student in a classroom that left you feeling somehow changed—whether your feelings on the subject grew more solidified or you changed your view on a give subject completely.

While this may not happen in every classroom class may “stands out” to them in a particularly interesting textual passage and allowing students to simply say that sentence allowed in the classroom, “popcorn style”. Students need not explain why they are drawn to the particular sentence(s) they choose. Rather, simply letting students’ voices be heard allowed amongst their peers in the classroom can boost self-esteem. They are still providing a response; it is just without the anxiety of providing a “right” or “wrong” answer, because there simply isn’t one! (Blau 128).

Other types classroom discussion that can spark productive conversation is debate. Many students love debate and can easily find a way to engage in doing so. It is important, however, to have a purposeful debate (because debate always has the potential of losing students’ focus on purpose and ends up becoming debating for the sake of debating), which requires planning ahead of time.

In Kahn’s article, “Building Fires: Raising Achievement Through Class Discussion”, she suggests: “When my ninth graders are reading Greek mythology I have used the following question: Who is the greatest hero—Perseus, Theseus, Atalanta, or Odysseus? This question sparks quite a bit of disagreement among students. On one level, it may seem like a meaningless debate—how important is it in the long run whether Perseus or Theseus is a greater hero? Yet, in debating this

Works Cited:
issue, students focus on issues, have to define what makes a significant. They define "great hero" and defend their definition. Is the character of the hero more important than the deed accomplished?" (Kahn 16). Creating debate questions that are interesting and fun for students while still ensuring that the questions are worth debating are of utmost importance. Kahn’s example demonstrates a debate that is both, and students must use textual evidence and ideas they’ve learned to debate their position on a given topic, rather than randomly argue over something of no value.

Perhaps the most natural type of classroom discussion is just that: a simple discussion. Ideally, all (or at least most) students will volunteer questions and comments in a group discussion. This type of free-flowing classroom discussion, at least in the secondary classroom, requires much careful planning, involving how to phrase questions in meaningful ways and then deciding how to best evaluate students’ knowledge of a subject based on said discussion.

In Shoemaker’s article, he suggests in regard to organizing and planning a meaningful classroom discussion: “This would involve (1) proper phrasing of the topic, (2) organizing the discussion procedure, (3) gathering and testing the facts, (4) interpreting the meaning of those facts, (5) appointing a good leader, and (6) setting up a basis of evaluation that will best work for all-around individual and group performance” (Shoemaker 509). It is important, as Shoemaker suggests, to set up “ground rules” for classroom discussion, as well as providing thought-provoking questions that students can actually find themselves engaged in.

Classroom discussion of this type can happen in small groups, where the teacher walks around to each group to observe and ask more interesting questions that further challenge students if the discussion seems to be dying down. Or, the discussion can happen with the whole class, where students are free to share their thoughts with the entire group, and the teacher simply facilitates, rather than giving her own opinion on the subject in order to let students actively examine ideas for themselves.

Has Reading Become Over-rated?
By Staci Hofer

Groans. Sighs. The muttered comments, “I hate reading” and “Man, this is so stupid.” This reality is a far cry from the whispers of excitement and surge of energy most teachers envision when introducing a new novel to their students. Every teacher has observed those students who daydream, read with no effort to comprehend, fidget, or purposely distract others. Why do certain students detest reading while many others find such an activity pleasurable and rewarding? What can we do to increase our students’ motivation to not only read literature, but to actually enjoy it? To help answer these questions, I’ve put together some easy, proven strategies which will give your students the nudge they need to get out of their reading rut.

The Problem: Many students, while reading, become frustrated with the text. Often times students may feel this frustration is a sign of incompetence and, rather than asking for help or clarification, they will attempt to deflect any attention to these struggles by shutting down and refusing to continue with the reading.

The Solution: As Sheridan Blau states, frustration can be an advanced level of understanding. It’s extremely important that we stay attentive to our student’s progress and offer guidance throughout the reading process. Letting students know that some degree of frustration can be expected helps them understand that they’re not the only one facing some challenges. Take time to discuss these difficulties with each student; at times teachers assume students have mastered all skills needed to be proficient readers and this is rarely the case. You may need to review basic reading processes and encourage students to jot down notes of interesting details or questions that arise while reading. Most importantly, always take time to discuss the literature as a class; your students may surprise you with their ability to explain difficult material to their peers in simplistic terms. If, however, a student’s frustration is due to a below-grade reading ability, additional reading interventions should be put into place.

The Problem: The reading materials available to students can also have an impact on their reading. One study found, not surprisingly, that students dislike textbooks because they feel textbooks use vocabulary that is too sophisticated; however, they also believe that comic books are too “babyish” to read (Fauvel, 10).

The Solution: In order to get students interested in reading, they have to have time to read. Many students have overloaded schedules filled with extracurricular activities and jobs, which eat up what little free time they do have to read. We can help with this problem by setting aside 10-15 minutes dedicated to reading each day. It’s important that students are able to choose what they read.

Works Cited:
during this free time; researchers firmly believe that “self-selection enhances motivation to read” (Fauvel, 25). You might consider creating your own library in the classroom to provide alternative choices in case students are unable to find something interesting in the school library. You can also get parents involved by asking them to donate books to the in-class library or organizing a book drive at the school (Fauvel, 27).

The Problem: There has been a trend in recent years toward giving students worksheets, vocabulary lists and simple comprehension questions at the end of assigned readings as a way to measure what they’ve learned (Carr, 76). Research has also shown that students tend to look to teachers as reading role models and many of us may be failing in this role (Carr, 77).

The Solution: It’s more than fair to say that studies have proven the detrimental effects these skill-and-drill assignments have on students, and they also clearly state the necessity of incorporating Bloom’s higher levels of thinking (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) (Ediger, 4). We can achieve these higher levels of thinking about literature by facilitating conversations with our students and asking thought-provoking questions about what they’ve read (See Nichols “Talking it Out: Facilitating Discussions in the Secondary English Classroom”). Dorothy Carr expresses the need for teachers to “become an ‘advertisement’ for the reading process” (77). The enthusiasm we display can be contagious. We should strive to be consistent with the excitement we exhibit towards reading by purposely placing books where students can see them, allowing students to catch us reading, and sharing our personal connections with the literature (Fauvel, 29).

There are many more wonderful ideas that can help entice your students to read with greater frequency. Some other suggestions are:

- Inviting guest speakers from local libraries to talk about new Young Adult literature releases
- Asking students to share with the class a synopsis about the book they’re currently reading for fun – ask them to try and “sell” it to their classmates
- Allow students a choice in what projects and activities they’re involved with (making posters, dioramas, articles for the school paper, etc.)
- Since today’s generations can’t live without smart phones, iPads, and thousands of other electronic gadgets, you might also try grabbing their attention by incorporating a few forms of technology in the classroom. Such items as “films, slides, photos, videos and ethnic music tapes [can be] used to set the tone for in-class readings” (Fauvel, 28)
- Try reading out loud to your students. Studies have shown that, “if correctly practiced, the process [of reading out loud] can enhance motivation and improve overall attitude of students toward the reading process.” There is a long list of benefits to reading out loud to students, such as improved comprehension, increases in vocabulary, and an increase in independent reading (Carr, 73).

Improving your students’ motivation to read can be as simple as allowing more student-selected literature, creating engaging discussions, modeling an appropriate reading attitude and being attentive to your students’ progress. Whether you chose to implement just one of these strategies or a combination of them, you’re helping to encourage students to pick up a book, rather than a game controller, a bit more frequently. Be patient and stick with it; the positive, lasting effects it will have on your students will be an amazing reward!