

The Transforming Power of Young Adult Literature

In total silence (save for the occasional flutter of a turning page), Daisy (all student names have been changed), one of my 9th-grade English Language Learners (ELL) who began the year reading at a 3rd-grade level, eagerly works through Stephenie Meyer’s *Breaking Dawn*, her fourth book in the *Twilight* series. Meanwhile Juan, a football player with straight Ds except for his A in English, is on the edge of his seat, flipping between *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes) and his newly acquired pocket dictionary. Ty, who prior to this year had “never finished a book” but has now completed every Sharon Draper novel I own, is actually poring over the latest issue of *The ALAN Review*; when I whispered to him that it features an interview with Draper, he snatched the magazine from my hand, cut me off with a rushed “Sssshh!” and impatiently waved me away from his desk. In the back of the room, Kelly, possibly my toughest case—a frighteningly mature and, dare I say, *malicious* freshman—takes out her headphones and tears herself away from texting her latest love interest in order to concentrate fully on reading Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* . . . for the second time around.

An outsider looking in on my sixth-period freshman English class as they voraciously read their self-selected books would never

believe what I walked into on the first day of school: a chaotic classroom exploding with some of the most unmotivated, disengaged, out-of-control nonreaders an English teacher could ever hope *not* to encounter. By mid-September, rumors had surfaced claiming, “Ms. Featherston’s sixth period is where they put all the bad kids—she got stuck with them because she’s new.” At the time, I considered the possibility that the kids knew something I didn’t, but eight months later, I drive to school each morning happily looking forward to period six. So, what happened?

At the start of this year, I was stunned by the seemingly insurmountable classroom management challenges I faced, as well my 9th- and 10th-grade students’ abysmal reading levels and utter lack of reading experience. In an effort to address both of these problems and stay loyal to the very progressive English teacher training I received, I decided to implement an independent reading program centered on high-interest young adult literature (YAL). The idea was to a) focus and engage my students with a structured, silent activity at the start of each lesson, b) provide them with an opportunity to develop and practice much-needed reading skills, and c) encourage them to recognize the inherent

Ty, who prior to this year had “never finished a book” but has now completed every Sharon Draper novel I own, is actually poring over the latest issue of *The ALAN Review*.

value of reading books. My most optimistic expectation was to make some sort of progress on engaged silent reading; now, toward the end of the year, each of my three original goals has been reached beyond my most naïve, starry-eyed hopes.

Steps to Success

Step 1: Instruction

Although I was extremely eager to put books in my reluctant students' hands, a quick diagnostic assessment based on Beers's (2003) advice revealed they did not possess the skills to comprehend or enjoy even the most interesting, self-selected book. Although the majority of my students were able to decode words and could technically "read," they were incapable of meaningful engagement with text, so I spent a couple of weeks on whole-class mini-lessons using fast-paced, relatable short stories and other rapport-building read-alouds to introduce and practice basic reading strategies. Once several simple benchmark assessments suggested my students' near-mastery of questioning, predicting, visualizing, summarizing, and responding, they were ready to start reading on their own.

Step 2: Motivation

I understood that in order to get my students to read anything, I would have to provide them with some kind of extrinsic motivation—but I refused to resort to the boring assessments students usually dread, such as book reports and reading quizzes. Amid engaging and valuable mini-lessons provided in Gallagher's motivation-building book *Reading Reasons*, I put into practice a simple and obvious point system: every day at the start of class, my students are required to come in, sit down, and read whatever book they've selected until I say, "Time's up." If they do this, they receive a five-point classwork grade; if they fail to do this, they receive a zero.

It took about a week for the entire class to catch on that zeroes every day really do a number on your grade, and sitting in silence pretending to read is actually more boring than reading. Before I knew it, I had 10–15 minutes of genuine, page-turning silence at the start of each class. Best of all, this system reinforced what I was trying to prove to my students: reading, in

I reminded my students that it's okay to "abandon" a book if it's not enjoyable (after all—this is what grown-ups do).

and of itself, is a worthwhile and important activity—not merely a means to an end (Wilhelm). As the days passed, it became very easy for me to recognize when a student had chosen a book that wasn't interesting him or her, because that student would stand out as part of the fidgety, clock-watching minority. To remedy these instances, I reminded my students that it's okay

to "abandon" a book if it's not enjoyable (after all—this is what grown-ups do); then I set out to provide them with as many reading options as possible.

Thanks (again) to my excellent Secondary English Teaching program, I began my career with a working knowledge and growing collection of young adult literature (YAL), as well as memberships to The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). As I observed my students reading each day, I became better and better at recognizing which students appreciated which authors, which authors I needed to add to my book cabinet, which reader demographics I had inadvertently neglected, and so on. Despite these small successes, it didn't take long for me to realize that I was running out of money and my students were running out of books, so I employed the strategies below to foster independent book selection and further development of students' personal preferences.

1. **Book Talks & Passes:** Each time I purchase a small selection of new books, I present enthusiastic book talks followed by a whole-class book pass. During a book pass, every student must have a book in his or her hand; each student gets about 2 minutes to examine the book and record comments about it before passing it up or down the row. I replace some students' worn-out books with my shiny new ones, and other students pass whatever they're currently reading.
2. **Amazon.com:** I took my students to the computer lab for an Amazon.com Wish List tutorial. Each kid set up an account and a wish list (no credit card required), which taps into students' inherent teenage materialism and recasts books as *objects* to actually *covet*. Additionally, once Amazon.com gets an idea of a person's "taste," it will actually make recommendations, which took quite a bit of the burden

off of me to keep track of every student's individual interests.

3. **Public Libraries:** On an LCD projector, I took my students through an Internet tour of the local libraries, showing them how it's possible to find and reserve books in advance. Many of them had never even been to a public library, nor did they realize the wide selection of YA titles that are typically available. Once they saw that titles from authors whose work they'd actually read and liked were available "for free" at the library, they were much more interested in giving it a try.
4. **Parent Contact:** I've found that parents can be very valuable allies in keeping kids reading, so I never hesitate to make a positive phone call when a student has discovered a favorite author. Referring parents to a student's personal Amazon.com wish list is an especially successful strategy; most parents are more than willing to encourage their child's reading by granting this kind of "wish."
5. **Personal Recommendations:** Sometimes, all it takes is handing a book to one of my students and saying, "I think you'll really enjoy this." Students are usually so curious about *why* Ms. Featherston thinks this book will be appealing, they just have to give it a chance.

Step 3: Maintenance

The following strategies have been instrumental in *keeping* my kids reading from mid-September through the end of this school year.

1. **Patience:** When I first attempted to have my students read at the start of every class, I was met with what bordered on mutiny; however, as the students recognized that I was clearly *not* going to give up on the idea, and their grades were *not* going to survive daily zeroes, even the most stubborn and outspoken ringleaders came around. I'll never forget the day when, in plain view of the entire class, the much-respected Ty refused to put down his book at the end of silent reading, protesting, "I just got to the good part!" From that point onward, I had no trouble convincing anybody that reading can be cool.
2. **More patience:** That said, there will be a few kids who seem to reject every reading option you offer—fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, drama; it all "sucks." I had my share of tough cases this year,

but after a few probing conversations and many admittedly time-consuming one-on-one trips to the school library, I've managed to get every one of my students to read *something* contentedly, whether it be Walter Dean Myers or Viktor E. Frankl. I've learned a great deal about YAL (and plain old literature) in the process, and the more I learn, the easier reader-book matchmaking becomes.

3. **Reading logs:** My students keep reading logs in the back of their English notebooks (right next to the page where they record their Book Pass notes for future reading choices), and I make it a point to check these for a completion grade at least once every two weeks. I don't require them to literally "log" their reading time or pages—just the title, author, genre, and a personal rating for each book that they complete *or* abandon. This helps them to develop a strong understanding of their personal tastes (for instance: they consistently dislike science fiction, or love Laurie Halse Anderson), and also gives each student a sense of accomplishment as the page fills up.
4. **Regular independent reading skills practice and assessments:** Roughly once a week, my students spend an entire class period reading the books they have chosen. As they do this, they are required to complete some type of assignment that reinforces and assesses one or more of the reading strategies I introduced at the start of the year. These allow me to keep tabs on which skills I still need to teach or review, and they remind students that we're not just reading—we're getting *better* at reading. Atwell (*In the Middle; The Reading Zone*), Allen (*Yellow Brick Roads*), Tovani (*I Read It, but I Don't Get It*) and Beers (*When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*) all provide excellent resources for creating these types of assessments.
5. **Impromptu reading conferences:** Any time I find myself in a personal conversation with one of my

I'll never forget the day when, in plain view of the entire class, the much-respected Ty refused to put down his book at the end of silent reading, protesting, "I just got to the good part!"

students (in the hall, in the office, a few minutes before or after class), I make it a point to discuss what he or she is reading, as well as how that reading is going. This simple action serves to build our classroom community, highlight concepts I should address in class, and provide students with an informal opportunity to discuss what they are reading on friendly terms. I've found that individualized instruction (such as my often-repeated suggestion for improving vocabulary and, thus, reading ability: choose books that contain at least one unfamiliar word in the first two pages) tends to resonate with a student whereas whole-class reminders are often brushed off or forgotten.

The Payoff

As I mentioned earlier, I never expected my desperate attempt at an independent reading program to *work*, let alone *change* anything—but in spite of my own skepticism, the outcome has been inspiring.

First, there are the small, individual successes, several of which I've already detailed. One of my often-suspended students, Manny, has actually had his books confiscated several times because he's gotten into the habit of reading under his desk when he's supposed to be taking notes in geometry, biology, or French. While I don't approve of his disrespect for other subjects, I can't help but appreciate just how *engaged* he is with these texts, and I always smile guiltily to myself when another of his books shows up with an angry note in my mailbox.

Two of my most notoriously troublesome students, Anita and Jenny, now burst into my classroom each day chattering excitedly about their latest favorite books. A few weeks ago, Jenny screamed across the class during independent reading time to ask Anita, "Hey, you got the list?" When it materialized, the list was entitled, "Good Books You Have to Read: By Jenny and Anita," and was apparently composed at a sleepover. Jenny had just finished *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brashares), and couldn't wait to add it to the list. It's worth mentioning that prior to this year,

neither girl had ever read a book—for school or otherwise.

These types of stories add up to an even bigger payoff—the tiny but real effect this program has had on the school community as a whole. Thanks to the support of our content supervisor, a number of veteran teachers in the English department have embraced young adult literature and independent reading, and have been rejuvenated by the enthusiasm they're finally seeing from previously disaffected students. Teachers of other subjects have approached me to express their amazement at how I've "got the whole school reading, even in the cafeteria." Walking through the halls, I catch students discussing books at their lockers; a glimpse into detention reveals the usual suspects uncharacteristically reading up a storm.

Another unanticipated benefit of this program is an expanded cultural literacy for many of my students. As it turns out, if you can get a kid to like reading through high-interest, accessible YA titles, that same kid might just wander to cultural touchstones such as classic literature, adult bestsellers and contemporary nonfiction. For a surprising list of titles my students have passed around, see the sidebar on p. 11.

Additionally, many of my kids have picked up (on their own!) classics that they previously scorned in middle school, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank), and *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck), and still others that they probably *would* have scorned later on in high school, such as *The Color Purple* (Walker) and *Native Son* (Wright). Of course, I never intended for this to happen, but it provides a nice "Well, actually . . ." when closed-minded skeptics claim that reading YAL deprives our children

of cultural awareness and exposure to canonical texts.

The anecdotal evidence is compelling. For instance, Alex, one of my struggling students, excitedly shared with me how "easy" and "not scary" the state-mandated standardized test seemed this year; it seems that for the first time, he was able to "read all that stuff" he usually couldn't finish. Then there were the choked-up "thank you" voicemails from elated parents whose children were reading for

"Hey, you got the list?"
When it materialized, the list was entitled, "Good Books You Have to Read: By Jenny and Anita," and was apparently composed at a sleepover.

the first time. But the evidence is not all anecdotal. In fact, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the clearly measurable effects of this experiment: most of my students' instructional reading scores have improved considerably this year, according to computer-normed electronic testing, and several have leapt up five or six grade levels. All of my kids have written records of the books they have read this year, and many of those lists span two notebook pages. Best of all (in my book-loving opinion, at least), if asked, nearly every one of my kids can enthusiastically name his or her favorite author, when at the start of the year, many of them would not have been able to name an author at all.

I want to emphasize that what I implemented this year was far from perfect, and I absolutely expect to improve upon this system in the future; for instance, next year I would like to cultivate stronger connections between writing instruction and the students' reading, and I also plan to implement activities and assessments that will actively expand each student's "range" in terms of genre. What I have done here, however, is to share my "starting point" with others in an effort to save them from repeating my process of trial and error. By all measures, this unlikely YA Lit experiment was a success—one that I hope will inspire those who have felt unsure about the practicality of such a program. If I could make it work as a first-year teacher rumored to be "stuck with the bad kids," anyone can.

Kate Featherston is a second-year English teacher at Hightstown High School in central New Jersey's East Windsor Regional School District. She received her Bachelor's degree in English and Secondary Education from The College of New Jersey, where she discovered her interest in Young Adult Literature and independent reading. In addition to teaching her ninth and tenth graders, Kate enjoys writing YA book reviews for publications such as The ALAN Review.

Works Cited

- Allen, Janet. *Yellow Brick Roads*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.
- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998.
- Atwell, Nancie. *The Reading Zone*. New York: Scholastic, 2007.
- Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003.
- Gallagher, Kelly. *Reading Reasons*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2003.

Captivating Titles for Young Adults

- Albom, Mitch. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. New York: Hyperion, 2003.
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- Alvarez, Julia. *¡Yo!* New York: Plume, 1997.
- Anderson, Laurie R. *Catalyst*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of Anne Frank*. New York: Doubleday, 1952.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.
- Keyes, Daniel. *Flowers for Algernon*. Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, 1966.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperCollins, 1960.
- Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. *Freakonomics*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- Sebold, Alice. *The Almost Moon*. New York: Little, Brown, 2007.
- Sebold, Alice. *The Lovely Bones*. New York: Little, Brown, 2002.
- Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin, 1937/1993.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Mass Market Paperback, 1982.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: HarperCollins, 1940.

- Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2000.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *You Gotta BE the Book*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2008.

Young Adult Literature Cited

- Brashares, Anne. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Breaking Dawn*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2008.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005.
- Peters, Julie Anne. *Luna*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2004.