

AP Gatekeeping:

Exploring the Myths of Using YAL in an AP English Classroom

For the past six years, I have been collecting data on the myths and realities about AP and pre-AP English literature teachers' inclusion (or lack thereof) of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in their classrooms. The data demonstrates the ever-present power that these myths have in shutting the gates against the inclusion of YAL in AP literature classrooms. More specifically, it focuses on teachers' attitudes, both pre- and post-introduction to YAL through a weeklong study of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*¹ (Herz & Gallo, 2005) paired with an AP English literature and composition curriculum at different AP Summer Institutes (APSI).

The significance of the study reveals how teachers' predispositions toward using YAL in an AP classroom influence students' decisions on the texts they select when writing on question 3 of the AP English Literature and Composition exam. More specifically, AP literature teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches from diverse teaching contexts who work with youth who are ethnically and linguisti-

cally diverse are asked to share what kinds of reading materials they use in their classrooms, what their attitudes are about literary value or merit, and about how their attitudes toward YAL affect student choice on the AP English Literature and Composition exam.

Findings thus far reveal that participants had mixed attitudes about using YAL that influence why students are *not* using YAL on question 3 of the exam. This gives rise to the following questions: What influences AP teachers to recognize the larger sociopolitical context in which their students are being tested? What leads them to make the choice to include YAL in their AP classrooms? Why are so many AP English literature teachers *still* teaching from the canon? How can these findings impact other teachers to merge YAL into and with the canon?

Based on my former experience as a high school AP literature and composition teacher, I was selected to work for the College Board in a variety of capacities over 12 years: as a consultant, teaching best

practices for both pre-advanced placement and AP English literature and composition teachers in diverse settings across the country; as vertical team coordinator; as an AP auditor for the AP English literature and composition syllabus; as an AP Diversity grant mentor; and as a reader and now table leader for the AP English literature and composition exam. Needless to say, I enjoy my work with teachers, but more important, I enjoy watching their burgeoning agency through the rewards that emerge when they find the links that connect students' personal experiences to their pre-AP and AP English literature classroom. While the rewards are abundant, many of the AP teachers I work with also feel that their hands are bound to the expectations and pressures—placed upon them by the College Board, school district mandates, and school administrators—to prepare their students to use only canonical writings on the AP exam. This column explores those dichotomous myths and provides paired realities about using YAL in an AP English classroom.

Identifying and Debunking the Myths

While the APSI are not prescribed by the College Board, there are specific expectations that guide my time during the weeklong institutes. I have a contractual obligation to accurately represent the vision of the College Board, to disseminate College Board materials, and to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in activities that will prepare them to teach AP literature and composition classes. I therefore have *some* latitude in how to conduct the day-to-day activities and can draw from current best practices and research in education.

In my work with teachers during the APSI, I proclaim from the onset that I do not believe in teaching to the test, but that I will provide tools that help students make links not only to the test but to life beyond it. In other words, during the institutes, I engage teachers with the tools that challenge their own beliefs about what good literature is and provide myriad opportunities for them to have agency and voice during our work together. Throughout our week, I scaffold in theories (reader-response, critical pedagogy, social constructivism, sociocultural theory) and pedagogies as they *link* to AP curriculum so as to build a context for not teaching to a test but rather, as previously said, teaching *beyond* the test. I try to provide a space where they can develop a consciousness about their role as gatekeepers around privileging the canon over YAL, and then invite them to explore possibilities for including YAL in their AP lit classrooms. Regardless of my intentions, the prevailing myths have

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generated great resistance to using YAL in an AP English classroom, so let's explore some of the common myths.

Myth #1: The AP Composition and Literature Exam Is Prescriptive

The suggested AP Curriculum is somewhat diverse, and contrary to popular belief, it is not prescriptive. The College Board suggests that teachers use diverse authors who represent different time periods from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century and who write about myriad topics, such as but not limited to “[i]ssues that might, from a specific cultural viewpoint, be considered controversial, including references to ethnicities, nationalities, religions, races, dialects, gender, or class [that] are often represented artistically in works of literature” (College Board, 2008, p. 52).

The College Board (2008) describes the English course this way: “The course includes intensive study of representative works from various genres and periods, concentrating on works of recognized literary quality. . . . The pieces chosen invite and reward rereading and do not, like ephemeral works in such popular genres as detective or romance fiction, yield all (or nearly all) of their pleasures of

thought and feeling the first time through” (p. 51). While the course description suggests that “An AP English Literature and Composition course engages students in the careful reading and critical analysis of imaginative literature” (p. 51), the College Board does not specifically name or endorse YAL or graphic novels, or even multigenre pieces. If teachers utilize or promote such types of readings in their classrooms, they have probably done their own research, attended workshops, discovered its merit in teacher education courses, and/or learned first-hand from readers at the exam that students can choose to write about a genre/author who falls outside of the canon.

Myth #2: “Similar Literary Quality” on the AP Literature Exam Includes YAL

Question 3 on the exam is the open question. After the prompt, students are asked to “Choose a text below or another of similar literary quality.” The exam however, fails to acknowledge what is meant by similar literary quality (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). This current lack of clarity about the literary quality of noncanonical readings and genres has generated a long-standing misconception that classroom teachers (and the College Board) are the gatekeepers about what genres or YAL texts constitute literary value or quality. While policies and the like (i.e., AP workshops, AP memos, College Board conferences, and AP initiatives, which are set forth by the College Board) certainly affect teachers’ decisions and attitudes about what constitutes AP-level materials and curriculum, teachers often blindly adopt Col-

lege Board materials as sacred or canonical in nature, and students are concomitantly influenced by these materials and inherit ensuing attitudes toward what texts are deemed worthy of the AP stamp, “similar literary quality.”

On this, Nieto (2006) suggests that “Unless [teachers] have access to texts that challenge conventional knowledge, and unless they engage in deep reflection and serious dialogue (Freire, 1970) about their own knowledge and the curriculum they will teach (Apple, 1993), most teachers do not develop the practice of questioning mainstream knowledge” (p. 58). Foregrounding a key finding from my own study, a participant wrote that until the College Board makes a statement clarifying “similar literary quality,” she wouldn’t discourage students from using YAL, but she *would* explain the risk of using it. One teacher wrote, “I see the value in YAL but am concerned that some of the readers don’t.”

The College Board claims that AP English students should be able to read and write about materials that are worthy of college level, yet many secondary English teachers don’t recognize the numbers of English education professors who teach and endorse the merit of YAL in their college classrooms (Applebee, 1996; Bloom, 1994; Christenbury, 2000; Gallo, 2001; Gillis, 2002; Herz & Gallo, 2005; Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Schwarz, 2006; Spencer, 1989; Vogel & Zancanella, 1991; Weiner, 2002). While on one hand the College Board claims that issues of “access and diversity” are among their top priorities (*6th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, College Board, 2010) and that “more

low-income students are participating and experiencing success in AP than ever before,” the data fails to reveal the grade levels and types of genres that students are reading successfully. This reality does not imply that students who come from low-income homes or who are non-white are drawn exclusively to any particular genres *per se*, but it is important to recognize that not all students who are in AP English classrooms have benefited from prior courses or culturally and linguistically relevant materials and resources that set them up for success in ways that many of their white peers have experienced. These realities actually argue more strongly for the inclusion of YAL on the exam.

Myth #3: Teachers and AP Readers Are Not Gatekeepers: YAL Is Not “Similar Literary Quality”

In their course description, the College Board states that close reading should involve “analyzing and interpreting the material,” “learning how to make careful observations of textual detail,” “establish[ing] connections among their observations,” and “draw[ing] from those connections a series of inferences leading to an interpretive conclusion about a piece of writing’s meaning and value” (College Board, 2008, p. 51). Many AP lit teachers, on the other hand, do not seem to extend the College Board’s statement to the inclusion of YAL.

Teachers have tremendous power as gatekeepers; they hold passkeys and attitudes about curriculum and materials for students that often stay with students in the next level of their academic

lives. One teacher who did not and would not use YA lit in her AP literature classroom said, “I am not convinced by the quality, layering, or complexity of its literary merit or for its richness in meaning of literary artistry in an AP lit classroom, but I would use it in a non-AP classroom, especially with reluctant readers.” Other common attitudes reinforce this cluster of dominant beliefs: YAL is for struggling and marginalized readers; it is not layered enough for mature audiences; it is far too accessible and below reading level; it is better to introduce students to texts that they would not otherwise read on their own, i.e., canonical works. Such sentiments implicitly privilege the canon, imbuing it with more literary value and quality over YAL and other genres of reading.

This is commonly echoed by many AP lit teachers and readers at the exam. Teachers are indeed quite vulnerable to the power that resides in the hands of the College Board as to what constitutes “similar literary quality,” and I offer the following as factual evidence. At the 2010 reading event, the question leader on the open question said aloud to the reading room of well over 330 readers and table leaders that no student should be scored higher than a four (anything below a five is considered a failing paper) if s/he writes using a YAL text. The power of her statement skewed the entire room’s readings of essays. She sent a clear message that not only was YAL *not* deemed “similar literary quality,” but that the students’ essays could not possibly be strong.

This person did not have the authority to make such a statement

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and was demoted to table leader status the following year. Since then, both the question leader and the chief reader have come forward to state that readers should judge the quality of the *essay* as a whole and not the text the student writes about. Regardless, it is little wonder that teachers are hesitant to encourage students to use YAL, graphic novels, or anything outside of the canon on the exam. Even though there are measures in place at the reading to assure that essays are scored on the quality of the writing, there are still readers who dismiss YAL and who judge the source text, not the essay.

Myth #4: Teachers Feel Competent about the Literary Merits of YAL

A trope that emerged from the teachers in my study suggests that there should be tiers that could differentiate the overall quality of YAL. All of my participants expressed concern regarding their lack of ability to differenti-

ate between the complex layering in some YAL and weaker YAL. One participant stated, “YAL texts should be evaluated on their own merits; some have high-level storytelling while others are lesser developed.” I do think she has an excellent point. After all, we say the same about fiction in general.

When asked what kept teachers from using YAL in their classrooms, many teachers were quite expressive. One teacher wrote, “Students need to read from the canon to be introduced to challenging language.” Another teacher said that her lack of knowledge about the genre kept her from introducing YAL. Yet another said, “My colleagues say that YAL belongs in the elementary and middle schools, not in the high school where they use more complex texts.” One offered, “There are too many YAL texts so it waters down the good ones.” Still another teacher wrote (and was echoed by two-thirds of the teachers), “I am concerned that a student would be judged by a reader at the exam and would be scored poorly.” When asked through a follow-up question about the potential effect of a College Board statement that endorsed YAL as “similar literary quality” on the exam, all teachers said they would include YAL in their classrooms, though they would tell the students to select a YAL text that they had studied as a class. And finally, a teacher from upstate New York said that until she’d established herself as an AP lit teacher, she would not use YAL because of its stigma as a less-valuable genre.

When asked how they would research the merits of YAL texts, answers included: the Internet, *Eng-*

lish Journal, school librarians, the ALA, *The Library Journal*, NCTE, colleagues, students, and *New York Times Book Reviews*. Although many of the APSI teachers said they would use YAL in an AP classroom, we asked, “What would still keep you from using YA lit or graphic novels in your classrooms?” Three teachers responded that they felt they lacked knowledge about what other texts were out there; one teacher said that he felt the reading level was too low and not representative of college-level reading; three teachers said there would likely be a lack of departmental or administrative support; many said they just simply lacked time; one teacher even said that the school had a book ban on YAL.

YAL Deserves Its Due

YAL as a tool for student agency is important because it is “a personal narrative in which the self is a protagonist who confronts and solves problems, with associated motives and affect” (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006, p. 12), and when affirmed and validated, it can be a catalyst for intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social change (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel, 2009). Teachers can be instruments of social change and creators of agents (often students) who can become ambassadors for social change, as their identities are affirmed (Hagood, 2002). Young adult literature can empower students to experience the world around them in ways that authenticate their own life experiences. When students see their realities mirrored in text, they

can negotiate toward or against the experience of the characters therein (Hagood, 2002), and come to terms with pieces of their own identities. Students benefit and gain in cultural capital when teachers choose texts wisely, because texts can be catalysts for particularized knowledge and human experience, and as students transact with the world around them, change can happen.

Based on what we know about the influence that YAL has in youth culture, the College Board, along with college professors and high school AP English teachers, need to form consensus around the issues of using YAL on the AP literature and composition open question and the definition of “similar literary quality” on the exam. The College Board is a main gatekeeper in this struggle for YAL inclusivity on the exam, and for that matter, a stakeholder that lends itself to a larger social acceptance about its literary merit. As long as the College Board ignores the power and merit of the research on YAL in English AP classrooms, YAL will continue to remain marginalized, not only by the canon but also by AP lit teachers.

The College Board’s history stems back to 1900 and has no doubt influenced numerous educators about what texts and genres are privileged over others. Those who govern the College Board have an opportunity to greatly change teachers’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions about YAL worldwide. In fact, they hold such great power that they can influence other testing communities’ attitudes about the merit of YAL, such as with state and federal exams con-

nected to NCLB. The College Board would be remiss if they do not clarify the meaning of “similar literary quality,” because at the AP English literature reading, readers are supposed to make evaluative decisions (on the open question) on students’ abilities to draft an analytical essay, *not* about students’ abilities to select a text of literary merit or, for that matter, what constitutes literary merit in specific texts. In other words, *they should be evaluating student writing*.

Rose (2009) said, “A good education helps us make sense of the world and find our way in it” (p. 31). As a teaching community, when we don’t prepare students for the lives they might lead by offering them opportunities to read stories that provide tools and agency, we are guilty of re-indoctrinating the status quo. Students need to be armed with the tools and confidence to navigate the demands placed upon them by the 21st century and, for that matter, a new economy. The data from this study suggests that it is less important today that a student can read a canonical text than that they are able to read widely, shift and apply literary lenses depending on context, unpack meaning, critique ideas, and make sense of literature in a way that is useful and applicable in their lives. As a teaching community, we will grow stronger along with our youth as we ask tough questions about what it is we truly value for all of our futures.

One teacher noted that if YAL were integrated across all classrooms, its stigma might subside. NCTE/IRA Standard 1 makes just this point:

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works . . .

But with the emphasis on the Common Core Reading Standard 11 for grades 11–12 and its emphasis on nonfiction/informational texts, I wonder if it will once again have an even stronger hold than the College Board as a gatekeeper impacting teachers’ decisions.

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Note

- 1 See prior research on the power and meaning of teaching *Speak* in an adolescent literature course (Miller, 2008).

Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant's teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Proposals on which two or more K–12 classroom educators have collaborated are also welcome.

Applications for the Moffett Award must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the project (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the applicant and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2013 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project. Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2013**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.
