

## Using Young Adult Literature with First-Generation College Students in an Introductory Literature College Course

Some perceive young adult literature (YAL) as lacking in scholarly merit and being “non-literary” in comparison with more traditional canonical texts (Beumer Johnson, 2011). This could not be further from the truth. Scholars and educators alike have written articles identifying how YAL is used in their classrooms to the benefit of their students (Beumer Johnson, 2011; Cook, 2016; Robbins, 2015; Wolk, 2010). In a college level literature class, however, as opposed to a class geared toward exposing preservice teachers to YAL, the emphasis on the canon can perpetuate students’ reading experiences from traditional high school reading curricula (Amicucci, Williamson, DeCapua, & Hrebik, 2015). Typically, this means that those who never identified themselves as readers in high school repeat prior experiences with canonical texts; that is, they find little relevance to their own lives and conclude that reading is insignificant with respect to their future careers in general (Amicucci, Williamson, DeCapua, & Hrebik, 2015).

First-generation college students, particularly those from rural environments (Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2016), begin as college freshmen disproportionately underprepared as readers and writers in comparison with their non-first-generation peers (The Council for Opportunity in Education, 2016). These readers, prime examples of students described by Amicucci et al. (2015), are in need of a curriculum that utilizes scaffolding for encouragement and motivation, draws upon YAL in a way that connects to their own lives,

and employs strategies that honor their voices rather than dictating how they analyze texts. Essentially, first-generation college students from rural environments are in need of differentiated text choices rather than strictly traditional canonical texts.

The purpose of this study and resulting narrative is to showcase the ways in which first-generation college students perceive the use of YAL in an Introduction to Literature college course, specifically as a scaffold into more complex texts, some of which are canonical. Furthermore, our results support the need for instructors to facilitate conversations rather than dictate which texts have (or do not have) literary merit. Ultimately, this essay serves as a justification for strong and intentional incorporation of YAL at the college level—whether it be in a class geared toward preservice teachers or not—as a component that stands alongside the canon and includes texts worthy of being read and discussed in an academic environment.

We are moving into an educational paradigm in which academic achievement and personal success are outweighed by the need to be able to collaborate and function effectively in team environments (Prensky, 2016). Prensky’s discussion of this new paradigm also emphasizes the need to break away from the traditional vacuum in which we teach content; our world no longer needs emphasis on intellectual development but rather on students working together to improve the global condition. To transfer this to a literature

classroom would mean that students are not simply reading and discussing texts, but using the texts to improve themselves and the world around them.

Furthermore, an expansion of what we expose students to in terms of the types of texts they read is necessary for us to become more inclusive of different authors, genres, and relevant topics. This requires an emphasis on critical literacy practices, an ideology that positions language as a power construct and inherently lacking in neutrality (Behrman, 2006). But before students engage in rhetorical analysis and other forms of critical analysis, they need to be able to *finish* the texts, identify and analyze themes, and then apply the analysis to real-world problems; in other words, they need to find personal and professional relevance in these scholarly discussions. In many ways, the new paradigm that Prensky (2016) suggests requires additional rigor, in that students move from appreciating literature to using it.

Young adult literature, or texts that have a readership of those who are as young as 10 and as old as 25 (Cart, 2008), provides one avenue for exposing students to the canon more accessibly. This is where the typically fast-paced, current, and relevant content of YAL—content that is crafted in ways that deserve literary praise—can be used as a scaffold to identify how the canon demonstrates timeless, relevant themes. While YAL can and should be used in every college classroom, here I explore how this practice is beneficial for an underserved and understudied population: first-generation college students from a rural environment.

## Literature Review

### Teaching with Young Adult Literature

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) regards young adult literature as “valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers” (Cart, 2008, para. 9). Incorporating relevant and accessible texts into classroom spaces in order to begin building skills with other complex texts is not a novel idea. Scholars such as Lesesne (2010) emphasize the need for scaffolding, not only to meet students where they are, but also to continually build students’ lifelong readership through the use of reading ladders—texts that are combined into a module or unit of study that build upon each other and are

grouped in various ways, perhaps by theme or by author. Witte and Rybakova (2017) discussed the use of reading ladders in teaching canonical texts, such as *1984* (Orwell, 1950), by 1) using Lesesne’s (2010) reading ladder teaching application; 2) scaffolding YAL such as *Delirium* (Oliver, 2011) and considering elements such as common theme, required and elective texts, and multimodality; and 3) analyzing how the texts situate themselves with respect to text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. Rybakova and Roccanti (2016) addressed the connections between YAL and the canon and discussed how the two work together to help students develop both aesthetic and efferent reading skills (Rosenblatt, 1995). To accentuate the value of utilizing YAL as a scaffold holistically in the classroom, Serafini and Blasingame (2012) described the changing ways in which novels are written, particularly in the sense that children’s literature is now perceived as being more aligned with mainstream literature and that “as the novel evolves, so too should the strategies and instructional approaches we use” (p. 148).

In the college environment, scholars and practitioners note the ways in which they have used accessible texts to scaffold more complex texts or skills. Scott (2012) used fairytales to scaffold complex archetypal narratives in an Introduction to Literature course at the college level. Amicucci, Williamson, DeCapua, and Hrebik (2015) identified how they used students’ preferences for contemporary texts, such as novels written by James Patterson, to suggest their next, more traditional text, such as work by Edgar Allen Poe (p. 14). Others, while not specifying the use of young adult or contemporary literature as a scaffold, attended to the need to “stop thinking that American and British

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Literature could be ‘covered’ and that our students could be ‘filled’ with these texts” (Kalata, 2016, pp. 54–55). Curiously, while significant scholarship exists about scaffolds in the high school English classroom, little is written about using YAL as a scaffold in the college level literature classroom, and the literature is silent around such work with first-generation college students, despite a noted decline in their reading and English college readiness on ACT scores in the last five years (The Council for Opportunity in Education, 2016).

### What Works for First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students (FGCS) are classified as those whose parents have earned a high school

diploma or less (McFadden, 2016). In general, FGCS research focuses on student retention and persistence rather than pedagogical applications that have been used with this population (Tinto, 2006). Factors such as emotional well-being, academic performance, and engagement have been identified as influences on the academic performance and retention of FGCS (McFadden, 2016; Tinto, 1993). FGCS are also more likely to drop out of college compared to their peers (Tinto, 1993; Wiggins, 2011).

In addition to being considered FGCS, the participants in this study were also from a rural environment and attended a college in a rural area. Researchers such as Beasley (2016) and Scott, Miller, and Morris (2016) point to additional barriers for FGCS from rural environments, such as the lack of a college-going tradition, both within the family and within secondary institutions. Furthermore, Beasley (2016) discussed the level of influence that cultural legacies have on college-going decisions and behaviors of FGCS in rural communities. Scott, Miller, and Morris (2016) identified that, in addition to general college costs, some of the barriers for these students include the costs of

travel and low-performing secondary schools. It is essential, then, specifically for FGCS from rural environments, that parents are highly involved and continually encourage college participation.

Unfortunately, few articles identify specific pedagogical techniques for this population. There are, however, generalized articles about what works for first-generation college students. Ku, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek’s (2006) literature review identified engaging, student-centric, and active pedagogical applications—problem solving, peer-to-peer tutoring, and class collaborations—as effective strategies for marginalized communities and first-generation college students. This information both accentuates Prensky’s (2016) ideas of a classroom that focuses on collaboration, not academic achievement, and provides a holistic conceptualization of pedagogical approaches that require students to begin critically analyzing literature at an accessible level to develop a growth mindset.

### Pedagogical Choices: YAL versus The Canon

The pedagogical approaches in the class described in this study included research-driven practices. Traditionally, academic literacies involve the teaching of conventions, structure, and style; as Miller stated (2005), “Pedagogy retains common topics applied to and by the ancients—for instance, rigor, discipline, coverage, originality, moral improvement, developmental progress and the installation of eloquence that marks both power and status” (p. 457). In the eyes of a traditionalist literature professor, Miller’s (2005) statement acts as a justification for teaching *only* texts that are considered canonical and considering *only* the canon as worthy of study (Wolk, 2010). However, these justifications, in addition to being outdated, do not hold up in scholarship. Knowing the literary canon, as opposed to having technical and professional knowledge, is no longer seen as the main avenue to success and is at best culturally marginal (Guillory, 1993).

The canon has never been something “other than an imaginary list; it never appears as a complete and uncontested list in any time and place” (Guillory, 1993, p. 30). In essence, this means that the literary canon is socially constructed. Furthermore, creating a non-canonical category that functions in opposition to a binary category of “great” canonical literature is not useful because literature (and the study of it) is

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personal and thus subjective (Templin, 1995). Consider, along with the quotes from these scholars, the dates of publication for these arguments. While many scholars and academics recognize these considerations as self-evident, we continue to have to justify our curricula (i.e., the inclusion of YAL) to the gatekeepers of tradition, whose arguments often start with “We have always done it this way” or “I have been teaching this class for twenty years.” When I use canonical texts in my course, the aim is not to juxtapose their literary merit with YAL but rather to investigate a particular genre or theme in depth through different forms of writing (the very definition of scaffolding). The texts that students read are perhaps less important than the academic literacies and conversations they engage in.

## Context and Methods

### Role of the Researcher

Prior to discussing my data collection and analysis strategies, it is critical that I outline my own subjectivities as a qualitative researcher. First, the participants in this study were also my students at the time that data were collected. This serves as a limitation in that I already had an established relationship with the participants. I attended to this limitation by reiterating to participants that completing the interview would in no way impact their grade in the course. Additionally, I believe in the effectiveness of using YAL in the classroom, regardless of the age level of the learner. As an instructor who considers herself within the paradigm of social constructivism, I also believe that learning is inherently social and that people learn through conversation, not lecture.

My interests in studying first-generation college students peaked when I moved to a school where I taught many first-generation college students, and I wanted to know more about how to best attend to their learning needs. Furthermore, I believe there is an absence of voice from first-generation college students in the current literature, especially from rural environments. I attended to my own biases and interests by including all of the relevant participant comments. My goals were to share all commentary in response to the themes outlined in the narrative, regardless of whether it situated positively or negatively within my paradigm of thinking.

### Course Readings and Context

Prior to describing the methodologies of this qualitative inquiry, I outline the course readings and context. Because many of the participants referenced the specific texts we read and attended to questions about how I scaffolded related texts, it is imperative that I briefly summarize my selections as well as my intent in selecting and utilizing them. The course was set up so that students read three different modules: dystopian, bildungsroman (coming-of-age stories about psychological and/or moral growth), and existentialist, where we also identified major literary time periods. Within each module, I used Lesesne’s (2010) pedagogical approach of reading ladders, where each text acted as a scaffold for the next text.

We began with the dystopian module, which included (in sequential order) *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), and *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1951). Because all three texts represent themes of silence and elements of totalitarian government/control common in dystopian literature, each acted as a scaffold to continually extrapolate on these themes in class discussions. We then moved into the bildungsroman module, where we discussed *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2013), and *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1945). These texts allowed us to focus on common coming-of-age themes among people in different marginalized communities (e.g., people suffering with mental health issues and those with disabilities). We finished with *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005), *The Call of the Wild* (London, 1903), and *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka, 1915) as existential texts that deal explicitly with questions of life and death. We took a step back during this module to consider how philosophical questions and philosophy intersect with literature.

The nine texts represent titles across the range of canonical, contemporary adult, and young adult literature. The canonical texts selected for this course

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mirrored those often taught in AP Literature and were chosen with the assumption that students may have

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read or at least heard of these texts before. Because the skills that students would hone during this semester included critical analysis and academic discourse, both of which students had indicated were familiar during an informal pretest from the first week of class, the choice to incorporate YAL scaffolds and texts that students may have been familiar with was intentional.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative data were collected during a spring college semester from a private college in the Northeast where the majority of students are first-generation college students. The participants were taking the 15-week, college-level Introduction to Literature course (of which I was the instructor) and were purposefully selected to ensure that 1) both first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students participated and 2) gender was accurately represented. Consent forms were distributed in the second month of the spring semester; out of 19 total students, 10 returned consent forms to be a part of the data collection.

Although data sources included both interviews and one-page written responses generated by students, in this article, we focus exclusively on the interview data. I successfully conducted eight participant interviews. (Two participants were unable to attend the interview session due to personal emergencies.) Interviews were conducted in an office on campus after all warnings for the semester were distributed and before official final grades were released. (As part of a college policy, the instructor issues “warnings” over the course of the semester that indicate concerns and/or the current grade in the course.) The interviews were open-ended in structure and included 12 opinion-based questions. On average, the interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The questions were centered on themes from the novels in the course, teach-

ing methods and styles, students’ first-generation college student status, and literacy practices in general. All data from the interviews were reviewed, analyzed, and then coded into emerging themes, including perceptions of YAL, the canon, reading identity, FGCS, interest, and learning.

Because the focus of this study was on first-generation college students (as opposed to the larger study that included both FGCS and non-FGCS), data on the participants who were not classified as FGCS were omitted, leaving six participants for this study. By focusing only on first-generation college students, I am able to speak explicitly to their needs. The participants included in this narrative (all identified by pseudonyms) are Murphy (sophomore), Larry (sophomore), Connor (junior), Alexandra (freshman), John (sophomore), and Rebecca (freshman).

Although I was instructing an Introduction to Literature class, not all of these students were freshmen in college. Four self-identify as male, and two self-identify as female. All except Murphy were traditional-age college students. Larry was a Secondary English Education major, Alexandra was an Elementary Education major, Murphy was a Management major, Connor was a Security and Cyber Defense major, John was a Sports Management major, and Rebecca was a Criminal Justice major. All six considered themselves to be “non-readers” in the academic sense. Interestingly, Rebecca and Connor commented that they had read books outside of school and enjoyed reading those texts but did not identify themselves as readers. All of the participants had grown up in the area or near the area where they went to school. Murphy, Larry, Connor, and Rebecca all commented that they did not do well in high school academically, while Alexandra and John commented that they “did what they needed to” to graduate high school.

## **Findings**

### **Perceptions of the Texts**

The findings highlight participant perceptions of their favorite texts from the course, as well as their perceptions of the instructional use of scaffolding with YAL. I begin with Table 1, which contains a list of the participants’ favorite and least favorite texts. The answers vary greatly, and several participants chose canonical texts as their favorite texts. Most reasons for selec-

tion do not go far beyond “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it.” However, according to Miller (2010), showcasing preferences for a particular kind of text is the starting point in building lifelong readers.

Because many of these participants did not identify themselves as avid readers (or readers at all) at the outset of the study, these preferences were a sign that they had at least begun to develop preferences for what they read. It was clear that participants had read the texts assigned because of the multiple assessments associated with each text, including a quiz, Socratic Circle participation, and a one-page analysis. In her interview, Alexandra said:

I’ve never read so many books in a semester! But I like it! I mean the books we are reading are good, and I would not have thought to read them, so now I want to, like, start reading more. Like it kind of caught my attention, like wow I should start reading more books.

Others echoed this sentiment. Murphy mentioned in his interview that he is able to “connect things and see things [he] didn’t necessarily see before,” and John said that he couldn’t believe that I had managed to get him not only to read a book but to like it.

Most participants chose *Lord of the Flies* as their least favorite text. The participants who expanded on this decision talked about how the text is dry or unrealistic. Some, like Rebecca, mentioned that they couldn’t “connect to it.” Connor said, “. . . because he’s talking about each blade of grass individually, in one sentence, and I’m like, ‘Please stop. I can’t possibly process all of that.’” The texts cited as least favorites also seemed the least relevant to the participants. Sandra pointed out that her least favorite texts were selected due to their writing style and lack of relevance to the themes.

Larry was the one participant who chose *Lord of the Flies* as his favorite text, which was interesting because he equated his favorite text with the one that he did the best with academically. While in most discussions he would refer to other texts when discussing the specifics of each book, during the discussion on *Lord of the Flies*, Larry initiated conversation more often and pointed out several times that he “didn’t catch this the first time” or “now that I read it, I get why . . .” Since he had been exposed to *Lord of the Flies* in high school (but admitted that he had just read the Sparknotes version), he felt confident talking about the book in class. *Unwind* topped the list three times,

even though *Unwind* was Murphy’s least favorite because it was “gloomy.”

None of the participants mentioned *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, or *The Metamorphosis* as a favorite title, and only Murphy discussed *The Call of the Wild*, with which he had a specific, personal connection. Interestingly, out of the texts used in the class, these four texts that go unmentioned are categorized as adult rather than young adult texts. Aside from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, they are also more traditional texts. The books that participants had the most extreme reactions to were mostly YAL, with a mix of both contemporary and canonical. The readability concerns discussed by participants (i.e., dry, hard to digest) were exclusive to the canon, despite the multiple prereading strategies leading up to the reading of the texts.

### Perceptions of Scaffolding

In addition to asking participants what they thought of the texts, I also asked them whether they were aware of the scaffolding that occurred in the class and whether they felt like it was effective or successful. In the question itself, I identified different texts that were used to scaffold with each other, mentioning how *Unwind* served as a scaffold for *Lord of the Flies* and *Fahrenheit 451*.

Most of the participants mentioned the positives of this scaffolding. Murphy said, “I think that if it was just a text from the canon, it would be a little bit more difficult to tease out the themes and stuff like that.” Alexandra mentioned that *Unwind* “felt like it kind of set up the stage . . . like what am I going to be reading next, what am I going to be learning about?” These two quotes, although both positive, specify different aspects of scaffolding. Murphy mentioned how scaffolding made textual analysis easier because he had already been exposed to the themes in the canon. Alexandra, on the other hand, talked about motivational factors. Asking “What am I going to be reading next?” spoke to her interest following her reading of *Unwind*. She wondered how we would continue analyzing themes of silence and power through totalitarian government structures in dystopian literature.

John also reacted positively, saying:

I definitely liked the mix. . . . having a variety of reading is definitely important for a lot of students because you

**Table 1.** Favorite and least favorite books

Participant	Favorite Book/Least Favorite Book	Reason(s)
Murphy	<i>The Call of the Wild</i> [London, 1903] / <i>Unwind</i> [Shusterman, 2007]	Well, my favorite is <i>The Call of the Wild</i> , the one I am reading now, and I think it's because I have such a strong personal connection to it, and um, my least favorite . . . I think I'm going to have to say <i>Unwind</i> , only because it was, for me it kinda was a gloomy start (laughs).  The times that I did read a lot was when I was in jail, especially when you are in your jail cell, and there is nothing else to do, and there is books, it makes the time pass. (laughs)
Larry	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> [Golding, 1954]/ <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> [Chbosky, 1999]	My favorite one is <i>Lord of the Flies</i> , definitely, just because I had that book as an assignment in class before in high school, my sophomore year, which is why I killed the quiz on it. Least favorite, I'd have to say, <i>Unwind</i> or <i>Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> . I don't know why, just wasn't attractive to me.
Alexandra	<i>Looking for Alaska</i> [Green, 2005] and <i>Unwind/Lord of the Flies</i>	Favorite would be . . . right now I like <i>Looking for Alaska</i> . I don't know if it will be my favorite but I like it right now. I really liked <i>Unwind</i> . It was so interesting and the whole time I was like wondering what would happen. My least favorite was probably <i>Lord of the Flies</i> . It was just . . . I don't know, I didn't really like it. It was kind of weird, and I was like what is going on right now? Why are people killing each other?!
John	<i>Unwind/Lord of the Flies</i>	Favorite definitely had to be <i>Unwind</i> . Actually, I wanna read the rest of that series. Not going to lie, it was a great book. Had me guessing the whole time. I would set a mark—I'm going to stop at this chapter—and then I'd get to that chapter, and go no, no, no, I need to keep going, one more. And then least favorite— <i>Lord of the Flies</i> . It's just so dry. I just couldn't do it. I did it once in high school . . . and I skimmed it. Definitely better skimming it than reading it. I just couldn't do it.
Rebecca	<i>Unwind</i> and <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower/Lord of the Flies</i>	I really didn't like <i>Lord of the Flies</i> . I didn't connect to it, I didn't understand—like, I did understand it, I knew what was going on, but I didn't understand the actions, like how you could just turn that way. I don't know, I didn't like the idea of it. I don't like reading books that have that kind of killing in it and stuff. That's why I chose not to read <i>Call of the Wild</i> . I tried reading it in high school and I refused to finish it. I thought <i>Unwind</i> was really interesting. It was definitely a new look at everything. It kind of gave me more ways of looking at things. I really liked <i>Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> . I had already seen the movie so I was already expecting to like it. So to me that one was really good. And I already liked <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> , so I think reading it again was like, good for me. So I kind of like all of them. (laughs)
Connor	<i>Unwind/Lord of the Flies</i>	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> . . . a little bit drier. Are they [the canon] older books, though? They are definitely older books. So, not that it's literally old English, but some of it is a little bit different in terms of the structure of sentences, especially <i>Lord of the Flies</i> . The author uses way too many <i>ands</i> to join sentences. I was about to stroke out reading it. Like "Stop feeding information!" Cause when you read a sentence, you're kind of like storing it in your working memory, and he just kept adding things! I'm like, "I can't possibly get a vision," and then I started to appreciate that that must be a great movie, because of all those descriptors. They could have plotted that scene perfectly, because he's talking about each blade of grass individually, in one sentence, and I'm like, "Please stop. I can't possibly process all of that." And then <i>Unwind</i> was just a breeze in comparison. It read like you were telling a story to a friend. Kind of like, "This is what happened." So that was pretty cool. I'm going to say <i>Unwind</i> was my favorite. I most hell-bently read through [that one]. I enjoyed it. It was good. And then, I don't know. I liked <i>Lord of the Flies</i> ; it wasn't horrible, it was just my least favorite to read.

could ask any one of us in the class and we'll each have a different opinion on every book. So having a variety keeps everyone engaged, most of the time.

This quote offers another perceived benefit of scaffolding, engagement, which is different from analysis and motivation. John liked the Socratic circle discussions and thought that because there was a variety, everyone was able to make a connection to the book they really liked and felt like they understood well.

Rebecca's reaction to this question was positive, and she used the opportunity to compare this course to other classes she took before:

It was definitely much more of an interesting mix than, like, when I took US History/English in high school, because they combined it. It was all or almost all books from the canon, and it's kind of dry. It's not as relatable. But like, *Perks of Being a Wallflower* and, like, *Unwind*, those kinds of books give you more, like, teenager things that we can relate to more. They kind of go into our time more. So it wasn't all, like, *Huck Finn*, from a time frame we weren't in so we don't personally connect with it as much. And we don't experience that time frame. Like we can only read about it or hear about it.

The participants mentioned analysis, motivation, engagement, and, through Rebecca's quote, the relatability of the texts. Rebecca was the only participant to mention explicitly the age of the characters in the texts. This was discussed in a positive way, as evidenced by the reference to "teenager things we can relate to more." None of the participants talked about the YAL in a negative light in comparison to the canonical titles.

One participant, Larry, used a more holistic approach to answer the original question:

I think it's interesting because we almost have this perception of the canon as bad, but in actuality it was these guys who wrote these books that almost looked into the future and saw, how, how, I don't want to say twisted, but how different society is going to be from where they are to where we are now, so you see *Unwind*, which is, you know, in the future, so it kind of makes me wonder if *Unwind* is almost like a future canonical text. So these guys that wrote *Lord of the Flies* and *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and you know, all of these books that we've read, *Catcher in the Rye*, these are 60-, 70-year-old books, you know, so sitting here now in 2017 saying hey, these are texts that are in the canon, but these guys [authors], there was no way that they would have known that, what our life is going to come to, so it almost scares me to think that *Unwind* could be the future of society.

Larry's comments showcase the way that he rationalized the canonical texts in comparison with contemporary texts (although he did misrepresent *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as canonical). In class earlier that week, we discussed the canon and whether it would ever change. He was particularly interested in how contemporary texts would be read in the future and whether they would have the same "timeless" quality as the canon as it stands. We also discussed how the lasting value of some of the texts that we read, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, was hotly contested and that some literary scholars do not consider some of these titles to be canonical. This comment showed that Larry had considered the holistic nature of literature and perhaps the importance of reading contemporary texts.

The majority of the participants wanted me to explain further what I meant when I said I had intentionally used the texts as scaffolds so that they would get a variety of contemporary and canonical text exposure. Others had not considered this mix until I pointed it out. These quotes, taken together, show how the participants ultimately interpreted the use of contemporary YAL as a scaffold for reading the canonical works in the course. The participants pointed out the value of this mix from multiple perspectives, such as engagement, text analysis, motivation, and relatedness.

## Implications

This research begins to add to scholarship about using YAL in the entry-level literature college classroom, specifically in classrooms that serve first-generation college students in rural environments. From the stated perceptions of the first-generation college students interviewed in this study, it is clear that they have a preference for contemporary YAL; they also indicated that using YAL as a scaffold is beneficial. More important, no participant indicated that the contemporary YAL read in the course was in any way childish or non-literary in nature. Many of the participants made

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text-to-text connections between the contemporary YAL and the canonical literature. Their comments implied that they viewed these texts as having similar themes, but not as differing in literary merit. Furthermore, their preferences for contemporary texts over canonical texts support the value of including relevant

texts in curricula in order to allow students to become invested in the literary themes and analyses.

For a literature class to be successful, an instructor must create a curriculum that suits students' needs and interests. Using contemporary YAL motivates students to read because it is accessible and relevant to them. Many of these participants did not identify as readers prior to taking this class. After the class, many recognized that they had been exposed to different forms of

texts, acknowledged their new abilities in reading and analysis, and expressed their motivation to continue to read. YAL allows students to practice new and/or more challenging skills, such as critical analysis, with accessible and relevant texts before they are challenged to apply the same techniques to texts that require additional reading skills. The scaffolding strategy that worked in this particular setting was based on Lesesne's (2010) concept of reading ladders, where students studied an increasingly challenging set of novels within a particular scope and/or genre, such as dystopian literature or existentialist literature.

While the canon is important as a point of exposure and as a way to view a genre or theme holistically through different texts, we need to move away from an emphasis on academic content and move toward an emphasis on skill development that is grounded first in students' text preferences. We need to facilitate aesthetic reading before we can move into efferent reading—reading with the purpose of analyzing a text (Rosenblatt, 1995). Many instructors of literature are already incorporating these scaffolding techniques, but we need to be able to utilize this practice without

having to rationalize it to those who have a more traditionalist view of teaching literature; scaffolding texts and using YAL in a classroom is not a practice meant only for secondary education and teacher preparation programs.

Scaffolding in teacher education and through the lens of pedagogical application is an explicit choice the instructor makes. In addition to text selection, it is important that instructors create space for readers to engage more actively in reading and discussion. Particularly important in the unique rural context in which I worked was continually asking questions like, "What do you think and why?" and "How does this pertain or relate to your life, future career, or our society now?" Surprisingly, a number of my students had never been asked these questions in the classroom setting.

What was particularly interesting in the data was that students were not aware that the YAL was used as a scaffold. When examples of scaffolding were given to students during the interview, however, they acknowledged this practice and the potential benefits—from academic to motivational—they saw from its use. Perhaps this speaks to the need to be more intentional and explicit about scaffolding with learners so that they are aware that many texts can be compared. While we did discuss overarching themes, being more intentional about comparing the texts in the module may have improved the students' learning. Holistically, this result further accentuates the implication that readers must first "buy into" reading a particular text and that enjoyment is a strong motivator in doing so.

This research incorporated a variety of participants, and the participants showcased here were first-generation college students in a rural environment. Their responses made it clear to me that they were seeking an education that was relevant to them and their future careers. With the exception of Larry, they viewed their favorite books as those that they deemed to be most relevant to their own personal and professional lives. This is a finding that fits with previous research on how to get students reading (Lesesne, 2010; Rosenblatt, 1995; Wolk, 2010) and applies to college students as much as it applies to students at other academic levels. While these findings are important in that they contribute to the research on specific pedagogical applications used with first-generation

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**After the class, many recognized that they had been exposed to different forms of texts, acknowledged their new abilities in reading and analysis, and expressed their motivation to continue to read.**

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college students in rural environments, they may also be relevant to reluctant readers, alliterate readers, and fake readers as well (Miller, 2010).

While strategies are important to help with practical applications of research, my intent in sharing these participant voices is to ensure that their voices are heard and honored, because while there are many statistics that attempt to describe FGCS, there are not many studies that allow the participants to speak for themselves.

## Conclusions

YAL can serve as an access point to develop a rich conceptualization of a particular genre or theme for first-generation college students as well as others in a college classroom. Because YAL is easy to relate to, helps students engage in aesthetic reading, and is current and relevant to students, it helps students recognize themselves as readers and connect the same themes across different texts, whether those texts are canonical or not. It can and should be used for appropriate audiences, not only in secondary education but for entry-level literature courses in college as well. It is essential for scholars to continue to research different pedagogical methods and uses of YAL in the college literature classroom, particularly as they relate to first-generation college students in rural settings.

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