

# Confronting Concerns, Navigating Politics: Teaching Young Adult Literature in High School English Departments

Henry “Cody” Miller, *SUNY Brockport*; joined NCTE in 2018, member of CEL

Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, *SUNY Brockport*; joined NCTE in 2019

Shelby Boehm, *University of Florida*; joined NCTE in 2016

*What instructional resources effectively support curriculum that reaches and represents all learners? Young adult literature can be incorporated into any classroom to engage all students in rigorous critical thinking.*

THE BENEFITS OF folding young adult (YA) literature into secondary English language arts (ELA) curriculum have been widely

## YA LITERATURE AND CRITICAL THINKING

**Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature, S. Wolk, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, May 2009**

**Young Adult Literature in the College Classroom: A Reminder of Why We Love Literature, ALAN**

**Young Adult Literature in Today’s Classroom (entire issue) in ELQ, April 2009**

documented. YA literature has been argued as a resolution for perennial problems faced by classroom teachers, such as providing quality differentiated instruction (Groenke & Scherff, 2010), supporting the development of foundational reading skills (Gibbons et al., 2006), and acting

as a bridge between students’ lived experiences and the school’s curriculum (Flores et al., 2016).

**Additionally, YA literature has been seen as a vehicle for helping students become more critical and justice-oriented**

**citizens** by supporting students’ understanding of critical theory (Jones, 2015; Latrobe & Drury, 2009; Webb, 2012, 2015), promoting perspective-taking capacities (Thein et al., 2007), addressing issues of social power and identity (Beach et al., 2015; Garcia, 2013; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Linville & Carlson, 2015), and supporting the cultivation of global perspectives (Durand, 2012; Holmes, 2019). In short, YA literature can be seen as satisfying the increasingly steep demands of

state education departments while still supporting the aims of a quality, critical ELA curriculum.

Despite the various benefits of incorporating YA literature into secondary ELA curriculum, there remains significant hesitation about using YA literature in the classroom from teachers. Some hesitation comes from incorporating multicultural YA literature. The definition of “multicultural” has expanded in recent years to encompass not just ethnic and racial minorities, but also religious and sexual minorities along with people living outside of the United States and people with disabilities (Temple et al., 2014). Concerns about using multicultural YA literature range from self-identified “pro-LGBTQ+” teachers afraid to use LGBTQ+ YA literature in classroom (Thein et al., 2013) to teachers worried they don’t know enough about other cultures to use multicultural YA literature (Kuo & Alsup, 2010). Other hesitations about the use of YA literature include the belief that YA literature will not align with mandated state standards (Kuo & Alsup, 2010) and a fear that YA literature does not meet “literary merit” for rigorous courses like Advanced Placement (AP) Literature (Miller, 2013; Miller & Slifkin, 2010).

These concerns are very real, and in a time when tenure for practitioners is being eviscerated in state legislatures and standardized testing composes a bulk of a teacher’s annual evaluation (Boldt & Ayers, 2012; Kumashiro, 2008, 2012), these concerns cannot be dismissed. Hartman’s (2016) study of secondary English teachers found that teachers are able to “comply with the mandates set forth” by educational governing bodies while simultaneously resisting “those parts that interfere” with their beliefs as educators (p. 19). In this article, we will address how we

implemented YA literature across our school’s department in a manner that attended to the aforementioned concerns. In doing so, we illuminate how teachers can satisfy state standards while implementing effective YA literature instruction.

## Our Positionalities and Contexts

We all taught at a K–12 public school affiliated with the local college of education. Per the



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bylaws of the school, our student demographic reflected the racial, economic, and ability diversity of the state. Our school set limits at 125 students per grade level and each secondary content area was allotted one teacher per grade level. Additionally, the school had detracked their honors courses for middle and high school, resulting in all students enrolling in English I Honors and English II Honors during their ninth and tenth grade years. The state standardized the tests that served as a graduation requirement.

Cody Miller taught ninth grade English from 2013–2019. Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko taught tenth grade English from 2011–2016. Shelby Boehm taught tenth grade English from 2016–2019. Cody identifies as a white cisgender queer able-bodied man. Kathleen and Shelby identify as white cisgender straight able-bodied women. Our own dominant social identities as white, cisgender, able-bodied teachers provided privilege that aided our navigation of the departmental and administrative politics.

Similar to the research outlined earlier, our zeal for making YA literature a prominent part of the English experience was met with some trepidation from fellow teachers, community members, and administrators. All students were enrolled in honors courses during ninth and tenth grade, but students could opt to take AP English in eleventh and twelfth grade. Questions like, “How does YA literature prepare students for AP?” and “What about the standardized tests?” were frequent. Additionally, teachers worried how to develop the knowledge to teach narratives outside of their own dominant identities. Finally, content material in many YA literature titles was considered controversial by some educators and faced pushback. These concerns are very real within both our own contexts and the broader scholarship. To heed these concerns, we spend the following section outlining how we explicitly addressed them in order to make YA literature an integral part of our secondary ELA department.

### Amending Former AP prompts to Address Concerns about “Rigor”

When we increased our use of YA literature across ninth and tenth grade levels, a constellation of stakeholders, including parents, administrators, and other English teachers, expressed concern about the rigor and **complexity** of the texts.

These stakeholders often questioned YA literature potential for preparing students for AP Literature, which was a course offered the senior year of high school. Jennifer Buehler (2016) reminds us that arguments about text complexity are always “ideologically loaded” and too often, calls for text complexity are actually “code for keeping classic literature at the center of the curriculum” (p.

### HOW IS TEXT COMPLEXITY MEASURED?

▶ **Measuring Text Complexity: Three Factors, CCSS Initiative**

**Close Look at Close Reading: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts, Grades K–5, ASCD**

**The Complex Matter of Text Complexity, Harvard Education Letter**

AP book list in book clubs as well as YA literature. Additionally, we provided options for students to engage with AP-based prompts using YA literature texts. In using AP prompts as our aegis against the criticism that YA literature isn’t “rigorous,” we were working “within the system to meet the mandate, but doing so on our own terms” (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015, p. 9). We have a multitude of

### COLLEGE BOARD RESOURCES

▶ **AP English Language & Composition Free-Response Questions**

**AP English Language & Composition Free-Response Questions**

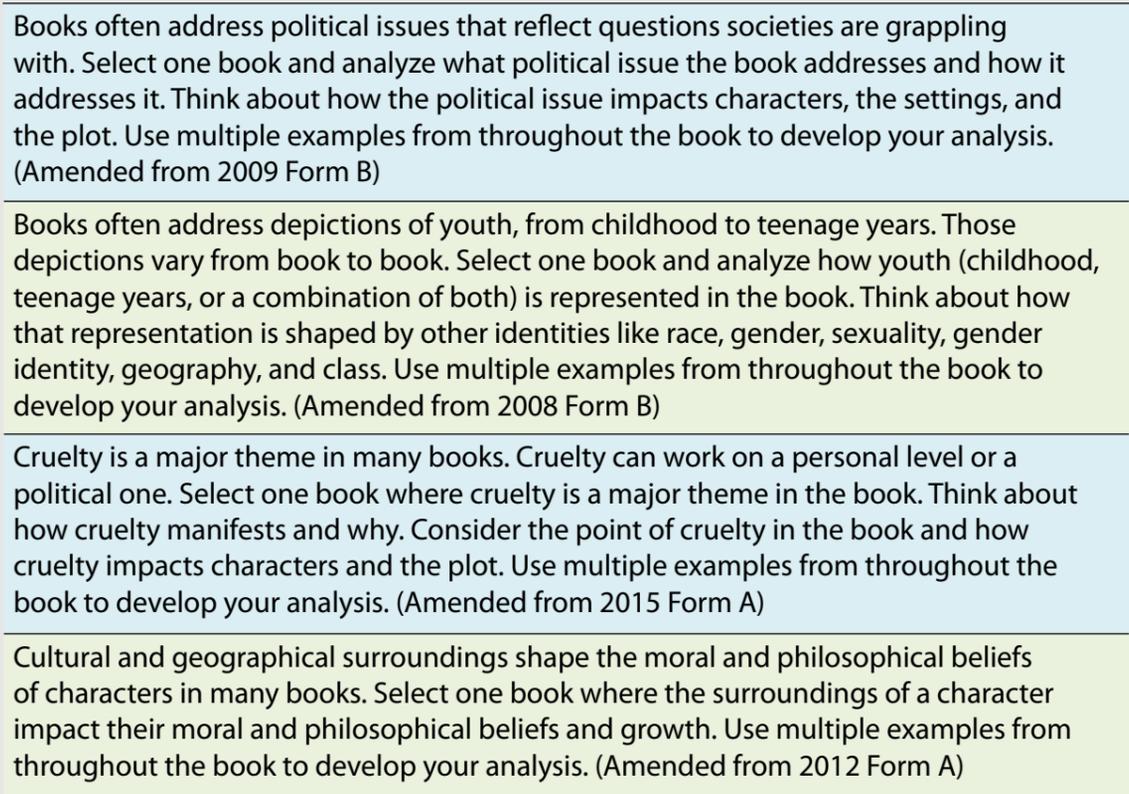
Literature prompts are available for free on the **College Board’s website**. We found that selecting some prompts and amending the language to meet our students’ needs was an effective way to provide both choice and rigor for our students. AP Literature was not offered until students’ senior year at our school, which could not be dismissed when amending the language of the AP prompts. We do not suggest selecting just any prompt. Instead, we looked for prompts that focused on issues and topics we believed fit our curricular goals. For instance, we typically avoided prompts that were rooted in New Criticism. Instead, we selected prompts that touched on themes of culture, identity, and power (see Figure 1).

We also wanted to ensure that our students could find common themes and ideas across texts and compare how different texts and perspectives represent a similar idea. The Common Core State Standards, and state facsimiles of the standards, require students to write across texts as well. Therefore, our amended prompts could

28). This analysis spoke to our own contexts as critiques of YA literature were often conflated with defense of canonical books. However, we used the concern of AP preparation to our benefit. As a result, the team sought avenues to include novels listed on the

critiques of AP as an institution. However, we also knew that AP held capital within our school, so we used that capital to advance our call for YA literature curriculum.

Previous AP



**FIGURE 1. AMENDED ESSAY PROMPTS**

## (RE)DEFINING RIGOR

**A New Definition of Rigor, *Edutopia*  
How to Combine Rigor with  
Engagement, *Educational  
Leadership***

ask students to write about an idea across multiple books. We often expanded “book” to “books” in the prompts during the end of semester writing assignments.

We used student essays and work samples to justify the “**rigor**” of YA literature curriculum to the stakeholders who expressed concern.

### Critically Reflecting to Address Our Biases and Points of Growth

In discussing curricular violence, Jones (2020) informs us that as teachers we must “do the right thing by our students, even if that means we have to struggle to learn more and seek feedback from students about the impact of our curricular choices,” which includes that we constantly “review and revise our existing lessons to ensure we’re not wreaking havoc on our students’ emotional and intellectual lives” (p. 50). Although teachers are continuously evaluated by administrators, feedback from students is rarely part of performance evaluations unless initiated by the teachers themselves. We believe a key aspect of rethinking curriculum begins with frequent and candid input from students as part of a class culture that values all voices.



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Despite many calls to make curriculum relevant to students’ interests and lives (Berhman, 2006; Martinez, 2017; Morrell, 2008; Vasquez, 2000), the idea of relevance is vague and often elusive because of the teacher’s positionality. Giroux (1987) argues that when designing curriculum, “the issue here is not merely one of relevance but one of power,” emphasizing that the narratives we choose to center ultimately convey much about the stories we view as worth studying (p. 177). Additionally, the way we label or present narratives matters. Introducing a story as “controversial” often presents a covert ideology that certain identities are up for debate. We critically reflected on curriculum choices using resources such as Teaching Tolerance’s Reading Diversity tools (2016). We also viewed students as co-collaborators in the creation of curriculum. Because of the established class culture, students frequently shared graphic novels they were excited about or TV shows they were binge watching. These texts became access points for us as teachers to both share commonalities with students while also critically considering how our identities might position these works or similar narratives in the curriculum.

While unknown cultural content did cause occasional hesitations or tensions, we believe positioning ourselves as learners alongside students was advantageous for continuing to cultivate class culture. Additionally, these moments promoted discussion of movements such as #ownvoices (Duyvis, 2015), which seeks to center stories and characters authored by groups that have been marginalized. Like Jones (2020), we believe that curricular choices are never neutral and thus must be considered constantly as possible sites of violence. As literacy practices in the classroom and out of school continue to blur, constant reflection and authentic feedback is necessary for teachers considering curricular and pedagogical choices as spaces to reposition power and thus dismantle textual hierarchies.

### Creating Policies to Address Potential Pushback

Key elements of our work as a group of ELA teachers included collaboration. Our collaboration, like most teachers’, was a deep and thoughtful approach to considering how we implement different topics across grade bands and courses. As ninth and tenth grade teachers, we had an opportunity to craft a unique experience for students ensuring that students build on their previous learning and continue to grow and expand their competencies and understandings. A key strength of this collaboration was creating a united front and systematic approach to content and ideas.

An important result of our collaboration included crafting a department-wide policy that addressed and shared the multitude of novels students would read throughout the year. Many of the YA literature titles used in our curriculum address topics such as sexuality, drugs, abuse, and various representations of teenage rebellion. It is unsurprising that some caregivers voiced their contention with our choices to administration. By outlining our beliefs and reasoning for the selection of each text, we not only informed parents of the texts we would be reading, but also made a statement about diversity and inclusion within our classrooms. Once endorsed by administration, our policy became the “go-to” document when caregivers raised concern about “what’s happening in English class.”

A second important result of our work together was fulfilling our desire to include administration and the curriculum coordinator in our work. We discussed what was going on in our courses during English Department meetings. We also shared our curriculum, parent newsletters, and text choices with administration and the curriculum coordinator. This allowed them to be involved in our thinking about what was going on in our courses, and more specifically, how our content and approaches enriched our students’ learning. This involvement was helpful when caregivers wanted to meet to discuss curricular and text choices. As a result, many individuals at the table had a solid understanding of how the courses build upon one another and why we were making certain instructional decisions.

## Conclusion

YA literature has potential to be transformative in high school English classrooms. Yet, concerns and barriers from multiple sources exist and cannot be ignored. We were able to make YA literature a crucial part of our curriculum in our own experiences as high school English teachers. As a result of this work, our students were able to engage in meaningful class readings that permitted them to read stories that are oftentimes not included in curriculum. Additionally, we were able to ask students what types of books they wanted to read and create multiple opportunities for co-constructed curricula. We continue to hear from former students about how important these choices were for their ELA learning and literacy growth. Yet, we were also able to work within the system that favors AP-focused choices to ensure that students were gaining the skills and practice needed to begin preparing for success in the AP classroom. It is our belief that teachers should work together across grade



*It is our belief that teachers should work together across grade levels to ensure students have access to texts . . . that honor their experiences and interests.*

levels to ensure students have access to texts and experiences that give them the power to read and engage with novels that honor their experiences and interests.

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*"Dynamic Leadership: Inspiring Literacy Leaders to Imagine, Innovate, and Invent"*

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The work of literacy leaders is essential to school transformation. Sparks become flames. Ideas gain momentum. Strong leadership can shift the status quo.

This lesson plan for teachers of teenage and adult students at Intermediate level and above is based on the theme of politics. Students will develop reading and speaking skills and revise language of politics. Introduction. This lesson gives students the opportunity to find out about the political system in the UK and to discuss the attitude of many young people towards politics. Topic. Politics. Confronting Concerns, Navigating Politics: Teaching Young Adult Literature in High School English Departments. Article. Apr 2020.Â The benefits of folding young adult literature (YAL) into secondary English language arts (ELA) curriculum have been widely documented. Indeed, YAL is able to satisfy the increasingly steep demands of state education departments while still supporting the aims of a quality, critical ELA curriculum. Despite the various benefits of incorporating YAL into secondary ELA curriculum, there remains significant hesitation, some of which comes from teachers regarding incorporating multicultural YAL in their classrooms, the belief that YAL will not align with mandated state.