

# Reading Strategies for Social Themes in Young Adult Literature

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## Foreword

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A leading cognitive researcher whom I know well was recently bending my ear with a loud and lengthy lament.

“Schools are typically 30 to 50 years behind what we know about cognition and learning,” he complained, “but now we’re moving backwards from there! Now we are nearly 100 years behind the curve! We are using theories and methods that were discredited back in the 1920s. Teaching is getting more standardized and simple instead of more diverse and complex. It’s becoming more disconnected from kids instead of more connected! It’s like the last 100 years of research in learning never happened!”

Yes, indeed. Although no one can argue with the goal that we should be engaging and assisting all of our students to ensure their successful learning, the way recent legislation has been leveraged across the United States has moved us away from those goals. It’s as if the field of medicine had gone back to using leeches and bleeding patients in an effort to make them healthier. We test instead of teach. Models and standards of learning and teaching become impoverished as learning is equated with standardized test scores and as successful teaching is defined as raising these scores. This is a dangerous trend.

In Michael Pollan’s best selling book *The Botany of Desire*, he takes on a different dangerous trend, arguing that we are endangering the future of much plant life—and of our own survival—through our promotion of botanical monocultures. As just one example, Pollan posits that our promotion of the Russet Burbank potato (because we like big stuffed baked potatoes and long french fries) works against the evolution of more than 500 other species of potato and is destroying our soil (caused by a lack of crop rotation and because Burbanks spot without chemical treatment). Monocultures keep plants from helping each other coevolve with pests and lead to disasters like the Irish potato famine. A tenet of botany, Pollan tells us, is that biodiversity is essential to the survival of individual species and the overall ecosystem.

This argument can be applied to education. We currently have a trend of educational monoculturalism that Susan Ohanian (1999) critiques in her book *One Size Fits Few*. Not only does one size fit few, it also serves few. One of many problems with educational monocultures and a single measure of success is that basic human needs for motivation cannot be met. Another problem is that it has long been established that individuals must learn the new based on what they already know, and that new interests are developed by building on old ones. Standardized curricula cannot meet these educational imperatives.

However, educational monoculturalism and regressive information-driven curricula aren’t the only game in town. High standards and the requirements placed on schools can be met in creative ways supported by cognitive research. The text you hold in your hands is refreshing proof of that very fact. As I read this very smart book, I was excited and impressed by many features, but particularly with how the various chapters work together to illustrate and apply the best of what is currently thought and known about motivation, engagement, cognition, and literacy learning. The units show how curricula can be organized in various and innovative ways that meet the learning needs of students. Perhaps best of all, I had fun reading this book, and I could see the fun and energy that flowed throughout the teaching that was described. I can also imagine and anticipate the fun of teaching the kinds of units described here. They are motivating, interesting, and important. They provide diverse ways of starting where kids are and helping them to move to where they might go.

An implicit emphasis on motivation runs through every page. It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of motivation and engagement for literacy learning. Every chapter here not only addresses these issues with intelligence and grace but also resounds with data-driven ideas for working with students in ways that will motivate and engage them.

We know that situations motivate and co-produce learning (Brown, Collins, & DuGuid, 1989), and that inquiry is the most powerful context for literacy learning (Hillocks, 1986, 1995, 1999). The units presented here meet the demands of the research base in “situated cognition” by being problem-based and close to kids’ lived experience—even as the instructional activities guide them to critically evaluate that experience and grow into deeper understandings by building on it. Each unit presents an angle on “inquiry and design”

curricula as kids explore socially significant issues and take a stand, create a knowledge artifact, or undertake social action to demonstrate and further their understanding. The guiding concerns of each unit certainly meet the demands for relevance, currency, and reality that were articulated by the boys in a recent study on the literate lives of young men (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and that run through reviews of motivation and self-efficacy research (Pajares, 1996).

Much of the ground that is required by school curricula is covered in the described units, but in ways that will make sense to kids, as the units are organized around social issues and questions. The issues are substantive; the learning that students undertake will make a difference in their immediate lived experience. What students learn in one activity is elaborated on, used, and refined in later activities, so kids learn text by text and activity by activity instead of simply doing one thing after another, as so often happens in school in our headlong rush for “coverage.” This book describes teaching that does not cover, it uncovers. Best of all, transferable procedures of learning, reading, writing, and problem-solving are meaningfully situated in the work students will want to do as they explore, discuss, read, respond, and write about these issues.

As I read through the units, my excitement was increased by the incredible text choices. The highlighted texts include classic young adult novels, nonfiction, poetry, film, and even multigenre texts like Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster*, which makes use of narrative, diary, visuals, and scripts. The texts represent the best of young adult literature: challenging, edgy, well-written, rewarding, and conceptually rich in ways that will catapult students to new understandings and give them a profound sense of literate accomplishment. Students engaged in the work presented here will have the opportunity to exercise multiple literacies as they read various genres and respond in various forms of making and expressing meaning.

On a meta-level, the units offer teachers transferable tools for teaching thematically, highlighting various interventions for teaching strategies of reading, responding, sharing, and writing in contextualized ways that lead to immediate use and amplification. The chapters are model units that could be used exactly as they are presented. Much more interesting to me is how they provide adaptable models for unit design and offer inspiration for doing integrated, research-based, and compelling work with students. The presented ideas go beyond stimulating response to encouraging deep reflection and analysis; students are asked to construct meanings and to articulate and use critical standards about literacy and about social issues.

Another treat the book offers is the use of rich bibliographies that will promote knowledge of young adult literature and its uses. Implicit throughout the text is the theme of democracy and democratic teaching. The units are models of students doing important work together that helps them to practice critical literacies, see new perspectives, and work for justice.

I can’t wait to use this book with my young adult literature classes, as well as in my standard methods classes. I’ll use this text for its examples of how to create thematic inquiry units and to provide examples of how the teaching of literacy processes and of powerful ideas can go hand in hand when organized and implemented by a humane teacher using an enlightened model of curricular design.

Once you’ve read and started using the ideas in this text, you can bend the ears of your friends with new ideas about how to really assist all your students to reach their potential. That reminds me, I must call the cognitive researcher I quoted above. This book might be just what the doctor ordered for him. Not all teaching is moving backwards; this book proves that some pedagogy is moving forwards, full-tilt, with eyes wide open. He’ll be very, very happy to hear that. I know I was!

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