

Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives

Book Club Guide

If you're a middle or high school teacher, this book will both challenge your thinking about YA literature *and* support your journey toward using YA literature in creative and thoughtful ways.

One way to get the most out of this book is to read and discuss it with others: colleagues in your school through a book club or PLC or friends across the country in an online conversation. The following Book Club Guide offers some questions grounded in the book even as it calls on you to share your own thoughts, challenges, and experiences.

Chapter 1: Reading with Passion and Purpose

1. Jennifer begins the chapter by contrasting the books she read as a teen that truly mattered to her with some of her school reading. What books did you read as a teen outside of school settings? How did they impact you? How did they contrast with the books you read in school settings?
2. Jennifer describes in some detail what she calls “the binary paradigm” that surrounds teaching literature and how that binary has impacted her own teaching. Have you experienced this binary—either in your own teaching or within your department or school? What has contributed to that binary?
3. On pages 18–19, Jennifer suggests we think about “what our stance toward books, and our corresponding methods, communicate” to students. Think about your own teaching of literature. What do you think your stance and methods communicate to the students in your classes?

Chapter 2: Young Adult Literature and Text Complexity

1. How do you define *YA literature*? How do you think others define it? Try asking some others what they think of it: colleagues, students, friends.
2. On page 28, Jennifer suggests, “Sometimes calls for increasingly complex texts are really code for keeping classic literature at the center of the curriculum.” What do you think about that statement? How do you define *text complexity*?
3. Jennifer cites YA author A. S. King’s belief that we live in a “teen-bashing culture” and then connects that dismissive attitude to the dismissive attitude some have with YA texts: What do you think about that argument? Do we live in a teen-bashing culture? How might that impact how YA texts are valued?
4. After studying the Lexile levels of several YA and classic texts, Jennifer asks, “How are we to make sense of Lexile levels?” How do *you* make sense of them? How are Lexile levels used in your school?
5. Jennifer calls for a different kind of framework for complexity: beginning with *finding* complexity in texts beyond Lexile levels through style and substance. Think of some of the texts you teach. What kind of complexity do you find in those texts using those measures (and the elements she summarizes on p. 37)?

Chapter 3: YA Pedagogy Element 1: Classroom Community

1. On page 52, Jennifer suggests that “conversations about who we are and what that might mean should sit at the center of what we do in English class.” What do you think about this statement? Is this something you think about when you teach?
2. Jennifer names four qualities that distinguish classroom community in YA pedagogy: (1) belief that the work is important; (2) discussions that blend personal response and literary analysis; (3) a sense among students that they are known and valued; and (4) collective investment in a shared experience. Think about those four in terms of your own classroom. Which of those qualities do you try to focus on? Which ones are challenging for you?
3. Throughout the book (but especially in this chapter), Jennifer argues that “the mere act of reading YA lit” doesn’t turn students into readers; rather, it’s *how* students experience YA lit in a school setting. What do you think of this argument?
4. Jennifer describes in great detail a single day in three very different classrooms in the chapter. What do you notice about these classrooms? What ideas do you take from these descriptions that you might adapt in your own classroom?
5. Each of the three teachers offers a rationale for why they teach young adult literature in the way they do. On pages 70–71, Jennifer invites us to consider our own rationales as she challenges us with questions about our beliefs, goals, and expectations. How might you answer those?

Chapter 4: YA Pedagogy Element 2: Teacher as Matchmaker

1. How would you rate your knowledge of YA titles? Where might you turn to learn even more? What might you do, as a community of teachers, to increase your knowledge?
2. Jennifer describes readalikes as “books that are connected in some way— often through topic, style, or theme—to an earlier title that a reader has enjoyed.” Working together as a team, create your own list of readalikes to share with students in your school.
3. Do you use YA titles as whole-class reads? Small-group reads? Independent reading? How do you select books for each? What titles have worked particularly well in your context for each of these categories?
4. We get a small glimpse into the ways teacher Carrie Melnychenko increased her knowledge of YA books and how she decides which books to use in her classroom. What in her story resonates for you? How have you made decisions about what books to use in your classroom?

Chapter 5: YA Pedagogy Element 3: Tasks That Promote Complexity, Agency, and Autonomy

1. Jennifer suggests that too often as teachers we assign tasks that “engage students in *either* personal work (such as journal entries focused on connections between their lives and the text) *or* analytical work (such as five-paragraph essays.” We don’t ask them to do tasks that blend the two. Think about some of the tasks that you ask students to do. Do they fall into one of those two camps?
2. Given some of the suggestions found in the chapter, how might you recast those tasks into something that blends both elements? Think of a particular assignment you use. How could you adapt it to blend personal response with analytic work?

3. Look carefully at Table 5.1 and explore the differences between traditional pedagogy and YA pedagogy in terms of the six kinds of work Jennifer names. What do you notice across these classrooms tasks?
4. Make your own chart that identifies how these kinds of work (or others) apply to your own curriculum. How might you use YA pedagogy to teach the kinds of work you see as important?

Chapter 6: New Approaches to Assessment in YA Pedagogy

1. Ask students to respond in a journal entry to this question that Daria Plumb uses (p. 111): Have you ever read a book that changed the way you thought about something? What themes do you notice across their answers? What do you learn about students and literature from your study of their responses?
2. Jennifer talks about four characteristics of assessment in YA pedagogy: personal, social, analytical, and flexible (see the sidebar on p. 114). How do those characteristics play out in the assessments you use? How can you imagine reshaping your assessments to account for these?
3. Jennifer offers us three innovative ways to assess students' understanding: Themed Reading Lists, Brown Bag Exam, and Meeting of Minds performance. How might you use or adapt one of those in your own classes?
4. What challenges go along with developing these kinds of assessments? What might you do to overcome those challenges?

Chapter 7: Being Proactive: Helping Others Understand YA Lit and YA Pedagogy

1. This chapter begins with a discussion about how challenging it can be to get others on board with YA literature. What is the situation in your context? How is YA lit viewed by others in your school community: other teachers, administrators, parents and families?
2. Beginning on page 135, Jennifer suggests a number of ways to *share information* on YA literature. Which of those suggestions seem doable? Which could you institute immediately? Have you tried other ways that have been successful?
3. Later in the chapter (beginning on page 139), Jennifer shares ways of *inviting others to read YA*. Which of those suggestions seem doable? Which could you institute? What other ideas do you have for inviting others to read these books?
4. Jennifer names five criticisms she hears leveled against YA lit and offers talking points for how we might respond to each. Are these criticisms you too have heard? How have you responded? Are there other criticisms you have heard? How have you responded to those, or how might you respond?
5. Who do you most need to educate about YA literature: other teachers, administrators, parents and families? What can you do to help them understand differently?