

# Using Jennifer Buehler's *Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives* with Preservice Teachers

English educators are always looking for ways to help preservice teachers both learn the research surrounding the teaching of reading *and* discover successful practices for teaching reading so that their students can become lifelong readers—who both enjoy reading and read thoughtfully and critically. One way to do this, Jennifer Buehler suggests, is through young adult literature and a young adult pedagogy.

*Teaching Reading with Young Adult Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives* is a wonderful introduction to research-based ways of teaching reading that help students learn to read with passion and purpose. As a text for a college methods class, this book provides a way into talking about issues of text complexity, strategies for literature instruction, and approaches to assessment—all through a YA lens.

What follows are some ideas for how you might use the book in a methods class.

1. *What does research say about teaching reading?* The book opens with NCTE's Policy Research Brief entitled *Reading Instruction for All Students*. Ask your preservice teachers to read the policy statement and raise questions about it. Specifically, you might invite them to share examples of how their own histories as students are reflected in this policy brief:
  - How were they introduced to complex texts?
  - What did close reading look like for them?
  - Did their teachers ever use some of the instructional strategies for reading laid out on pages xii and xiii?

You might also ask them to think about other texts they've read for your and other classes and how the ideas in those books are reflected in this policy brief.

2. *How is reading generally taught in schools?* Chapter 1 talks about how reading is taught in schools, with a focus on the binaries or opposing camps that surround the teaching of literature: i.e., classic vs. young adult; stand-and-deliver pedagogies vs. student inquiry, etc. Asking preservice teachers to think about their own experiences as readers and in school observations can help ground the ideas of this chapter.
  - If your students are observing in schools:
    - Ask them to focus a few of their observations on the idea of the binary: Is it at work in the classroom where they're observing? How do they see it play out? What are some of the consequences of the binary? (see pp. 18–19).
    - Ask them to interview a teacher about *why* and *how* she teaches reading. Share these interviews with the class and think together about the teachers' rationales. How do those rationales fit with the brief? How do they fit with the ideas Buehler raises in the chapter?
    - Ask them to interview some students about their reading lives: what they read and why they read. Again, share these interviews with the class and think together about the idea of the binary. Does it apply to these students' experiences with reading?
  - Ask your students to think carefully about their own reading in and out of school. You might try some of these invitations:
    - Freewrite about a time in which you lost yourself in a book. What were you reading? Why were you reading it? Why did reading this book matter to you?
    - Share with the class the book that most influenced you as you were growing up. Why this book? Why did it matter?

Based in these invitations, make a class chart about reading:

What we read	Why we read it	Why it mattered

3. *What is young adult literature?*

- Ask students to read some of the articles Buehler cites in her complex discussion of what constitutes YA literature (derogatory ones like Meghan Cox Gurdon’s “[Darkness Too Visible](#)” and Ruth Graham’s “[Against YA](#),” as well as more celebratory ones like Patty Campbell’s “Middle Muddle” and “Our Side of the Fence”). How do those articles help them understand YA literature?
- Ask students to go to a library or bookstore and look through the YA section. What do they notice about the books shelved there? Have them ask a librarian or bookstore employee about why these books are shelved in this way.
- Ask students to read some articles about the culture of teens and teen bashing: A. S. King’s “[How Are You Listening](#)” and Sarigianides, Lewis, and Petrone’s “[How Re-thinking Adolescence Helps Re-imagine the Teaching of English](#).” What do they think is the connection between how teens are viewed and how YA lit is viewed?

4. *Is YA lit complex? Finding complexity in the texts themselves.*

Buehler suggests that the term *complexity* is more complicated than it seems at first, posing two ways of thinking about text complexity that apply to YA books: finding complexity and making complexity.

Starting with finding complexity:

- Ask students to pick their favorite YA and classic texts and run Lexile searches on them as Buehler does. What do they notice from that? Then ask them to analyze the YA text as Buehler does with *We Were Here* and *Ask the Passengers*: in terms of style and substance.
- After students share their work with one another, ask them to think about this question: are YA books complex?

5. *Making complexity through a YA pedagogy.* Buehler describes three elements at the heart of a YA pedagogy, elements that help us *make* these texts complex. Ask students to explore each of these elements:

Element 1: Classroom Community

Many pedagogies suggest the importance of building classroom community. In this book, Buehler points to how YA texts allow for a unique way to do this.

- Ask students to work in teams to imagine how they might create this kind of classroom community in their future classrooms. (They can build on the examples offered in this chapter, their observations of classrooms, or their own memories.)
- Share the scenarios they have created and think together: how might we build classroom community through YA lit in a variety of pedagogical approaches: reading and writing workshop, traditional whole-class reads and discussion, literature circles and book clubs, etc. How might we draw on these ideas as we create a unit plan?

## Element 2: Teacher as Matchmaker

How can we help our preservice teachers learn enough about YA literature to become matchmakers with their future students? You might try some or all of these:

- Do weekly book talks of YA books.
  - Create booklists connected to thematic units to share with the class.
  - Create genre-based booklists based in the list of genres and formats on page 78.
  - Interview teens about their favorite YA books.
  - Research book awards (including those mentioned on p. 85).
  - Select a professional journal, listserv, or blog and report on the books mentioned there.
- (For specifics on all these, see Buehler's Annotated Bibliography, beginning on p. 155.)

## Element 3: Tasks That Promote Complexity, Agency, and Autonomy

Once teachers have created classroom community and feel comfortable in their knowledge of YA books, they can turn their attention to curriculum matters: how to use YA books as part of a rigorous and inviting approach to teaching.

- Create a multiweek project in which preservice teachers select one of the kinds of work described in the chart on page 93. They can focus on Buehler's explanation of that work and the teaching ideas that follow. What additional teaching ideas can they imagine?
- Turn one of those ideas into a series of lesson or unit plans.

## 6. *Assessment in YA Pedagogy*

Buehler suggests that assessment as part of a YA pedagogy should be personal, social, analytical, and flexible.

- As your class reads through the examples of assessment, talk together about how these examples each exemplify those four characteristics. Ask preservice teachers to imagine other kinds of assessment that work well.
- Use one of these assessments (or an adaptation of it) in your class. Ask your preservice teachers to write a reflective piece in response to the assessment: What was their experience like? Was it useful? How could they imagine using it with their own students?
- Ask them to create or adapt one of these assessments to their lesson or unit plans described above. Ask them to reflect on why this assessment might work for the plan they've written.