Making Reading Relevant for Adolescents

Recreational reading can help adolescents achieve in school, but teachers must provide students with books that both address the curriculum and meet their needs and interests.

Thomas W. Bean

Maria Sanchez is a high school sophomore in a large city. Her parents came to the United States from Mexico and she is the first member of her family to have career possibilities that extend beyond low-wage manufacturing jobs (Valle & Torres, 2000). Maria is a star student. She earns top grades, belongs to the pep squad, and holds down a part-time job to earn spending money. Maria achieves in school but has little time for recreational reading.

Dustin Rawlins, a middle school student living with a single parent in a small agricultural town, could not care less about school. He sees little connection between his classroom activities and his interest in becoming a professional skateboarder. Dustin earns low grades and daydreams about skateboarding near the California beaches. Recreational reading is not a part of Dustin’s life, and few books are present at home. Dustin struggles in his classes and regards reading as a labor-intensive task to be avoided.

Should educators care that recreational reading plays a nearly nonexistent role in Maria and Dustin’s lives?

At a time when adolescents are deeply engrossed in discovering their identities and life pathways, many students consider the middle and secondary school curriculums to be irrelevant. In a study of 1,700 6th grade students, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that it was difficult to identify in-school reading that students enjoyed. Students said that time to read and captivating material that reflected and suited their interests were important elements for motivating them to read, but that they did not view the classroom as a source of good reading materials. And, contrary to many homogenized views of teens, these students’ interests were wide-ranging.

Despite a proliferation of excellent young adult novels that explore issues in adolescents’ lives, schools often cling to badly outdated reading lists that convince adolescents that reading is boring and disconnected from their lives. Recreational reading among adolescents is in decline, with serious consequences for the development of a literate citizenry. Promising solutions to this problem and useful resources exist, however, that can help educators encourage adolescent reading.

Recreational Reading in Decline

Educators often consider recreational reading to be an effective method of connecting to students’ emotional and developmental needs. This “warm and fuzzy” conception of reading has been recently overshadowed by the realization that recreational reading has a number of other benefits. For example, time spent reading correlates with academic success, vocabulary development, standardized-test performance, attitudes toward additional reading, and the development of world knowledge (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Unfortunately, the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 13-year-old students, such as Dustin, who never read for fun often
have low reading ability and avoid recreational reading (National Institute for Literacy, 2002). Only 25 percent of 17-year-old students reported reading for enjoyment. Unfortunately, a decline in voluntary reading among struggling readers further aggravates their problems (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002).

In an era of high-stakes testing, there is an even greater danger that the curriculum is becoming more narrowly focused than in the past. Jessica, a 6th-grader, is bored by the highly structured and teacher-centered routines of her language arts class (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002). Jessica experiences a curriculum that is largely divorced from her real interests, instead of one that treats reading as a valuable, lifelong social practice with direct connections to her life outside of school. She defines herself through connections with friends and family, not school, despite being able to follow the classroom routines and earn good grades. Outside of school, Jessica regularly writes in her personal journal to help her deal with her parents’ divorce and her own depression. Jessica learned about the value of journal-writing from a cartoon character on television, however, and not in school. She also avidly reads young adult books on her own. In school, however, she feigns attention and completes tasks that are disconnected from her emotional needs.

Jessica’s experience is hardly an isolated case. Fostering a lifelong love of reading will not happen if we simply allow high-stakes testing to drive curriculum design:

> Teachers need to study the webs they have learned to create and in which they are suspended not only because they may differ from the webs of their students, but also because, as webs, they both support and ensnare. (Florio-Ruane, 2001, p. 29)

Recognizing that teenage literacy has been largely ignored in this country, the International Reading Association formed the Adolescent Literacy Commission in 1998. The commission produced a position statement that advances key principles, one of which calls for attention to recreational reading: “Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read” (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 4).

### Ideas for the Classroom

One way in which educators can foster teenage literacy is to use young adult novels in the content areas. Teachers can pair classics, which typically center on adult issues, with the more accessible prose found in adolescent literature. For example, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet might be paired with Marie Lee’s young adult novel Finding My Voice (Houghton Mifflin, 1992). Thematically, both works deal with

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The only two elements common in the classics that some contemporary young adult novels lack are plot complexity and dull, lengthy descriptions. (p. 342)

A growing number of young adult novels span content-area topics in science, social studies, and physical education (Bean, 2000). Get to know these works by seeking out appropriate books and building a classroom library of young adult novels that relate to the curriculum. Although building a library sounds simple, teachers cannot simply visit their local chain bookstore and browse the young adult section for good novels; many of the best books must be ordered. Reviews in the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, The English Journal, and In the Middle, and on the Internet—including the readers’ comments on booksellers’ Web sites—are good sources for finding books. Such major publishers of young adult materials as Scholastic and Harper-Collins and such esoteric multicultural publishing houses as Arte Publico Press are excellent resources. Including international young adult literature lets students see their peers in other countries grappling with such familiar issues as identity development, displacement, eating disorders, drugs, and suicide.

Once books are chosen, students need the opportunity to study them. Quiet time for extended reading and time for talking about books are both crucial elements in incorporating young adult novels in the classroom. Sustained silent reading is widely recommended, but depends on books that capture students’ interests. If students do not connect to books, they become adept at staring blindly at the pages during the reading time or surreptitiously writing notes to friends (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002). When sustained silent reading works, its impact is substantial. High school English teacher Steve Gardiner conducted action research on sustained silent reading for more than 20 years (Gardiner, 2001). He surveyed his students about their reading habits and learned that those students who read frequently had better literacy skills and earned higher grades in his classes. In addition, the central intent of sustained silent reading is to develop a lifelong love of reading for pleasure. Similar results have been apparent in international assessments of literacy. Higher-achieving students are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward
reading, borrow library books at least once a month, and engage in moderate amounts of leisure reading:

Variables such as attitude toward reading and frequency of leisure reading explained performance in reading literacy, even after school and student socioeconomic status had been accounted for. (Shiel & Cosgrove, 2002, p. 692)

Literature response journals give students a foundation for discussing novels that are connected to content-area concepts or are part of a sustained reading program (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2001). Simply give students some time after their sustained reading period to record in their journals how they might deal with the situation that a fictional character is experiencing and provide time for follow-up discussion in small groups. My graduate students and I have been collaborating with a professor of English education and her preservice teachers in Australia to read and discuss online U.S. and Australian novels. Such a project allows the participants to challenge simple cultural interpretations and bring a fresh perspective to their reading and the discussion.

Venn diagrams can help students compare and contrast novel and text portrayals of events to be used in content areas. For example, in Walter Dean Meyer's Monster (Scholastic, 2000), readers experience the world of a county jail through the voice of Steve, a 16-year-old incarcerated for a robbery in which a storeowner was killed. A Venn diagram of Steve's view of his plight and society's view illuminates social justice and ethical issues that can be explored in a social studies class, for example.

Book clubs in content classrooms offer another means to engage students in reading and sharing their views about events in young adult literature related to concepts that they are studying (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Create open-ended discussions that prompt questions to get the process rolling. In a social studies classroom, students might consider the older Korean cultural values expressed in Marie Lee's Necessary Roughness (HarperCollins, 1997), and how those values clash in the main character's life as a teenage football player in a small, largely white Minnesota town.

Readers' theater (Young & Vardell, 1993) and dinner party (Vogt, 2000) are two approaches to help students interpret and discuss young adult novels. In readers' theater, key passages that propel the novel are selected and noncritical lines are eliminated so that it may be read aloud effectively. Two or more readers deliver a dramatic reading of the passages to be followed by group discussion.

Dinner party involves a group of six to eight students who are interviewed by a commentator. Each student plays a character from a novel that they have all read. For example, in Gary Soto's Buried Orions (Scholastic, 1997), Eddie is a Latino community college student who is down on his luck. His former athletic coach helps him plot a more promising future against a backdrop of gang vendettas and violence. The novel's characters help or hinder Eddie's quest for a better future, and students can role-play the different characters as though they are attending a dinner together. Dinner party is a culminating activity following reading, journal-writing, and book club responses to sections of a young adult novel.

Keeping It Real
Throughout the classroom activities used to explore young adult literature, it is important to avoid superficial student responses. Students are so accustomed to trying to figure out what the teacher thinks is the correct interpretation that in-depth responding may take some time (Lewis, 2001). In a 5-year observational study of 25 high schools and related English classes, Langer (2001) found striking contrasts between effective and superficial literature instruction. In highly orchestrated discussions with a high degree of teacher control, student responses were often predetermined and shallow. In contrast, during effective in-depth literature discussions, teachers provided a framework for students' creativity and rich responses. In one class, for example, when students were preparing to read Elie Wiesel's Night (Bantam Books, 1982), they first looked at photos from concentration camps and jotted down words or phrases the photos called to mind. Students used these words and phrases to create poems. While they were studying the novel, students visited the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, California, and wrote letters from different points of view. As a result, the reading of Night became not merely an understanding and critique of the work itself (though this was done), but rather an integrated opportunity to contemplate historical, ethical, political, and personal
issues raised by the reading. (Langer, p. 871)

Students were challenged to go beyond pat responses to create rich mosaics of interpretation and understanding in their reading.

If educators are serious about developing students' lifelong love of reading, they need to incorporate in the curriculum literature that is captivating and issue-based. The extensive and evolving genre of young adult literature offers an array of books that appeal to adolescents' interests and experiences. To exclude this literature from the classroom is to do a disservice to our youth. Young adults struggle, often in isolation, with postmodern identity issues, family displacement, globalization, cultural and ethnic issues, job losses, and other problems that schools need to address.

As the examples of Jessica, Maria, and Dustin suggest, the disconnect between adolescents' lives in school and outside of school is too often the norm. Educators need to disrupt this status quo, using both high-powered young adult literature linked to content-area concepts and interpretive activities and discussions that engage students. Until educators stem the tide of adolescents' declining recreational reading, we will continue to produce a nation of people who can read but choose not to.

References

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Thomas W. Bean is a professor of reading and literacy and Coordinator of the Doctoral Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; beant1@nevada.edu.