

YA Fiction and Intermediate Composition

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I taught college writing for the first time in the fall of 2009. That semester we teaching assistants had to follow an assigned syllabus, but the following spring we were could experiment. Like many writing teachers before me I tried to figure out what kind of curriculum to adopt. Stephen North gives voice to debates I was unknowingly entering when he writes, “Again and again, and then again and again—as close to ad infinitum as any pedagogical project in the history of U.S. higher education—we have tried to devise the fifteen or thirty week [writing] course” (94). As the date to put in textbook orders approached, I paced around the second floor of the building talking to friends and, really, whoever was around about my upcoming course. I happened to discuss it with a senior literature professor. “What are you thinking of doing?” he asked. Before I could answer, he went on, “Whatever it is, stick a novel in it.” I reported this conversation to the writing program administer, who emphatically responded that every writing class doesn’t require a novel. “We aren’t teaching literature,” she reminded me.

To talk about the relation of literature to composition, write Judith Anderson and Christine Farris, “is to trigger larger issues in the politics of English studies” (1). Many scholars want to distance themselves from literature and argue it has no place in a composition course (ie, Lindemann; see also Crowley). Yet many prominent compositionists have PhDs in literature (for

a list, see Ede, 54) and many graduate students teaching composition are rooted in literature (see Bergman, 1; Maid, 104). That's why, Gary Tate points out, the topic of the role of literature in composition seems to constantly resurrect itself, an unquiet ghost. Six years after the conversation with the literature professor, when I taught advanced composition for the second time as a doctoral student, I found myself again pacing the floor again as I pondered curriculum decisions. This time, for the first time, I did opt to "stick a novel" in one of my classes.

I want to press on this "tale of two classes" here and to discuss why I see the novel as useful for my pedagogical aims, just as others in our field have found novels to be useful for theirs.¹ As Mary Segall reminds us, students seem to like imaginative literature to be part of a composition course, and, as I'll shortly argue, the usefulness of novels could extend to courses well beyond the English department.² Edith Baker speculates students like novels because they can relate to it better.³ The idea that students perceive literature as relatable helps me better understand why Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) was more useful than scholarship in setting up a classroom discussion that explored intersections of literacy, class, and race.

A Tale of Two Classes

The first time that I taught Advanced Composition I was simultaneously finishing my own doctoral coursework requirements. The world of rhetoric and composition was increasingly familiar—through readings, class discussions, seminar papers, conferences, and so forth—and I wanted to bring that scholarship into my teaching. Like the graduate students featured in a recent

study (see Obermark et al.), I was wholly convinced of the value of theoretical ideas from rhetoric and composition for teaching. But also like those graduate students—and like my first time choosing curriculum as a Masters student—I was largely free, perhaps underprepared, to devise my own curriculum. Once again, I was running around the office talking to people. How did they teach our advanced composition course, which was comprised of units about literacy, genre, and discourse? I ultimately decided to integrate a number of scholarly essays in each unit. What didn't account for—since I hadn't taught a scholarship-heavy course in the five years that I'd been teaching—was the student resistance to the readings, almost from the first days of the literacy unit.

Scholarship about student approaches to assigned readings describes the tension well. Jolliffe and Harl's qualitative study found that students at the University of Arkansas rarely spent long, focused periods engaged with their reading, perceiving it as incomprehensible and irrelevant to their lives. Several miles north and a few years later, I recognized a similar problem as I struggled to make Shirley Brice Heath's "What No Bedtime Story Means" relevant. I spent hours planning a lesson that involved various literacy objects (a Curious George stuffed toy, a board book, a Curious George DVD) and asked the students to work in small groups and map the literacy practices associated with their object to the practices of the community Heath studied. By the time we got to the piece I regarded as the theoretical center of the unit, Barton and Hamilton's "A Social Theory of Literacy," the students seemed to vary from resistant to disinterested. None made the leap I'd been hoping for, which was from the scholarship back to their own lives through their literacy narratives. As our drafting period drew near, I found myself

trying to develop creative ways to show how the scholarship connected to the published literacy narratives we were reading. But as I reviewed their drafts, I ruefully felt that we may as well not have read the scholarship at all, so little did these narratives appear to be informed by it. All of this prompted me to wonder, “What is going on here?”

To adopt Jay Dolmage’s approach to access, I came to perceive many of these readings as having “steep steps.” As I prepared to teach the course again, I came upon the idea of integrating one young adult novel into each of the three units, almost as case studies for seeing how scholarly ideas about the various topics played out in particular texts (see Gamer, who recommends this approach to literature in the general education classroom). But I wasn’t prepared for how fully the integration of the novel would shift the dynamic of the classroom.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is the story of Arnold Spirit Jr. (also known as Junior), a Spokane teen who chooses to leave his reservation to get a better education at a nearby predominantly white school. While the book is written for middle-schoolers, the topics it addresses—including bullying, sexuality, racism, poverty, alcoholism, depression, disability, cultural appropriation, and death—have led parents and school boards from North Carolina to Washington to attempt censorship, sometimes successfully. These attempts are not rare; the National Coalition Against Censorship has indicated the book is among its most frequently defended titles (Flood). So the book is a depressingly familiar paradox: at once a National Book Award winner, a recipient of critical accolades and a bestseller and one of the most frequently banned books in the country.

In a response to the censorship controversy, Alexie, who has publicly discussed the autobiographical elements of the book (which began as a memoir), wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, “Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood.” *Absolutely True Diary* is also a book about literacy. Junior expresses himself in drawings. He says, “I draw all the time. I draw cartoons of my mother and father; my sister and grandmother; my best friend Rowdy; and everybody else on the rez. I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited” (5). Devastating cartoons from the artist Ellen Forney supplement the text. In addition to appreciating Junior’s unique experiences with literacy, I like how this novel features a non-white character and is written by a non-white author, although Alexie himself has since been critiqued for his disrespect toward Native American women authors.

I placed the novel in the first unit of my course, replacing the Shirley Brice Heath essay but retaining the focus on childhood reading and writing experiences and the literacy narrative assignment. This time, my aim was to get students interested in the novel, and then to position it as a case study to explore how certain scholarly ideas—in this case, about the slipperiness of defining of literacy, the importance of self-sponsored literacy, and the role of home communities in literate practice—played out within it. While I expected students to relate to the novel and to enjoy it (see Segall), I was surprised by how useful Alexie’s novel turned out to be.

“I cannot remember the last time I sat down and spent a Saturday afternoon reading,” one student wrote in our class discussion forum. “Alexie made me want to skip work and continue reading, knowing that once I got to the end I’d probably want more.” Of the twenty-two students enrolled, eleven mentioned *enjoyment* of or admiration for the novel in one or more of

their written responses (each student wrote three pieces—an initial discussion post, and two replies to classmates’ posts). Likewise, half made statements in writing that explicitly identified or sympathized with Alexie’s protagonist.⁴ One titled his BlackBoard post “How I Related to Junior,” while another discussed how he’d felt as a racial minority in a large, local private boy’s school. He explained:

[At my new school] I often had to deal with individuals making “black jokes”. Like Junior, there eventually came a moment when someone goes too far. My situation did not turn physical but I definitely made my presence felt. That night the kid texted me apologizing, and after that I heard a lot less of these distasteful jokes. I guess you could say that I earned my respect in a sense. The difference is that this was not a proud moment for me like it was for Junior.

Another nonwhite student in the room chose to respond to this post, writing:

That was tough for me growing up the majority of my friends was white and due to that the other students felt as if I didn't belong. I was too white, or didn't seem black enough. I didn't realize that the way I talked or dressed showed what race I was . . . I felt like I was always in an inbetween state.

This second student was Aminata. Though her family hails from west Africa, she grew up in Ohio and goes by the name “Amy” to her white friends. I mention this because she told me, her white instructor, to call her Amy on the first day of class, yet she signed the letter to her classmate by her full name, Aminata. As I read through these posts, I felt a small thrill to see the student performing her identity in this way, to see her presentation of self “reworked in its

enunciation,” as Elsbeth Probyn would have it (qtd Lu 439). I want to make room for the Aminatas in my room, for the shift between Amy and Aminata to be something on the table for discussion during a unit about literacy. “The task facing a teacher,” Min Zahn Lu writes, “is to help students rethink ways of using personal experience so that reading through the personal will not be at the expense of other stories and selves” (439).

This aim came more fully to fruition as another student in the class foregrounded the concept of intersectional identities as it related to Alexie’s protagonist. After describing the “Big Eight” factors in identity and how they relate to privilege, the student concluded, “by examining how these identities shape our society, we can better tackle topics such as racism.” (These factors include ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status; see Collins). The conversation in class the following period was rich, as students talked about how their own privilege (or lack of it) shaped their reading and writing experiences in school. The piece by Barton and Hamilton fit more smoothly into this discussion. And the writing, when the drafting period came, seemed more self-aware and risky.

Students selected a range of topics, such as: how flirtatious notes exchanged between female friends became treasured possessions and beacons for future identifications; how playing school with younger siblings was a precursor for a deep identification with teachers and desire to become one; how casual talk with track teammates enabled anxiety over a lisp to be dealt with and empowered successful classroom participation, and so forth. Amy, in a final example, chose to develop her thoughts on her “inbetween feeling” in a piece about racial literacy.

Conclusion: Identification and Connection

Of course, the inclusion of the novel was not the only reason the class was better the second time around. I did a better job putting the readings, including the theoretical ones, into conversation with each other, facilitating what Joliffe and Harl call the “text to text” relationship. Undoubtedly, too, the course also improved because I had student model papers that I thought were terrific and I could explain why, providing precisely the kind of reading-to-writing instruction Michael Bunn endorses. I had also completed my comprehensive exams, which included a module on literacy scholarship. Ironically as I moved away from using the scholarship in the classroom, my facility with it improved thus enabling me to bring it in as a response to what the students were doing, rather than asking the students to relate to the scholarship first. In short, the reason that I’m telling a tale of two classes isn’t simply because I “stuck a novel in it,” and yet the role of the novel in the class was crucial.

“Why teach literature in composition?” Gary Tate asked. He writes that old answers about how literature enhances students’ style are inadequate because they are imprecise (see also Crowley, 13). I want to provide another answer here, which is that I think students’ ease in moving from the story to their own lives, what Stephanie Moody in a recent article on romance readers calls the “identificatory posture” of the reader, is helpful for certain kinds of units. This is not to say, however, that all identifications are unproblematic. Min Zahn Lu notes that how students identify with a character often says more about the student than it does about the piece—and I certainly agree. Some students’ identifications with Junior were much less salient than the one I quoted above (one student, for instance, identified with Junior because he, like

Junior, was one of the shorter kids in his class). However, for my particular purpose, the identificatory posture itself is useful. By identifying first with Junior and thinking about how his privilege, his culture, and his social practices impacted his literacy development, students were more prepared to think through their own.

A recent collection about reading in rhetoric and composition emphasizes that reductive understandings of the activity of reading—such as those that inform standardized testing—need to be set aside in favor of a more capacious view that considers reading’s social, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau). Janice Radway’s study of the Book of the Month Club, titled *A Feeling for Books* (emphasis mine), was infused with her own nostalgia for the pleasure-driven way that she approached reading as a young adult. As her analytical acuity increased, she writes, her emphasis on pleasure as a criteria for assessing a good book decreased. We may be more like Radway and less like our students in this regard. But it is important to remember that many of our students have had deep and gratifying reading experiences before they arrive in our classrooms—and that we can capitalize on these experiences to make our own pedagogy more vibrant and relevant. Kathleen Yancey has helped us see the power of harnessing the self-sponsored writing that students do for our pedagogy purposes; so, too, we should consider the value of harnessing the motivation and energy that comes from engaging with students’ self-sponsored reading.

Additionally, the question of *access* is one we should continue to think about in relation to the reading we assign. In *Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education*, Jay Dolmage points out that academic language itself can be exclusionary. Thinking through our own

selections of readings and aiming for a mix of genres and texts is a small way we can encourage more students to find room for themselves in our curriculum.

Still as I think back to “stick a novel in it” advice from the literature professor to, I am inclined to agree with my then-WPA’s cautious response. Every general education course doesn’t need a novel. But sometimes, as I hope this essay shows, a piece of provocative and inviting fiction can be a perfectly welcome and useful addition to the syllabus.

Notes

¹During a presentation by Jonathan Alexander, I learned how he framed a series of YA novels that he taught in his composition course using scholarship about multimodality. See also Lu (2003), Gamer (1995), and Farris and Anderson’s collection *Integrating Composition and Literature* (2007).

²Her survey of students revealed that 83% thought literature should be included in a composition course (202).

³“Students explore their inner worlds,” Baker writes, even as they as they are exposed to “other worlds” (177).

⁴Identification with literature is a typical first move, as Min Zahn Lu discusses (2003, 438).

Some responses seemed to acknowledge this convention, such as the student who wrote: “While not every single person can connect with all of the problems that Arnold goes through (ie, being the only native kid in school, having brain issues, a lisp, and a stutter), I think that *there is something within Arnold that anyone can also find within their self and connect with*” (emphasis added).

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