Alison Heron-Hruby, Brandie Trent, Samantha Haas, and Zachary Cole Allen

Using a Youth Lens to Facilitate Literary Interpretation for "Struggling" Readers

This article details the authors' success in using youth as a construct to facilitate literary analysis skills among high school students who claimed not to like reading and who demonstrated difficulty with reading comprehension. The authors provide descriptions of the analysis activities in which the students participated.

This past school year we (a high school English teacher, a teacher educator, and two teacher candidates in English education) worked with tenth-grade students at a high school in rural, eastern Kentucky whom we might call "struggling" readers. They had not performed well on the reading section of the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) standardized test at the end of ninth grade, and as a result, the school administrators placed them in Level D English, the lowest track of four class levels, so that they could receive targeted instruction based on their low MAP scores. Not surprisingly, perhaps, many of these students told us at the beginning of the school year that they despised reading. Several more told us that they were not good readers; their stated evidence for such: "I don't understand what I read." Yet all of them, as so many "struggling" students we had met in the past, had strong interests and opinions that led us to believe that they had what it takes to be skilled, confident readers, if they would only apply those interests and opinions to texts.

We sought to create a classroom where reading was a pleasurable, thought-provoking activity for these students. Our primary evidence of success would be, we decided, not their test scores, but their improved orientation toward reading and their increased engagement in literary interpretation. Although literary interpretation can involve many different practices, we focused particularly on having readers go "beyond the particular situation, using their text understandings to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of others, or on human situations and conditions in general" (Langer 2). We wanted the students to use the fiction they were reading to reflect on their experiences and the characters' experiences in the novel, who (we hoped) would offer them alternative ways of looking at the world.

This article details our success in using *youth* as a construct to open up these students' interest in and skill for interpreting literature, what the editors of this themed issue refer to as a youth lens. Specifically, a youth lens challenges students and teachers to think about adolescence as a debatable construct, open to varied interpretations (Sarigianides, Lewis, and Petrone). Adolescence is represented in a host of texts that students read for high school English, from young adult literature to texts from the canon. The lens gave us a way to connect the students' class reading to an issue personal to them, namely, what it means to be an adolescent.

Our definition of *adolescence* going into these activities was flexible; we thought of the term as a label traditionally applied to people in their teen years, though we knew that the term is laden with assumptions about teenagers (e.g., they are ruled by hormones or not ready to make serious decisions) and applies now to younger children (e.g., the term *tween* implies that children as young as eleven are in adolescence). A youth lens involves questioning these assumptions and boundaries.

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Setting the Context for Youth Lens Activities

Our first step in engaging these students in reading for pleasure was to fill the classroom library with high-interest reading materials, including young adult fiction, magazines, and informational texts related to the students' interests and hobbies. We set aside time each day for the students to select and read materials from the library. By early spring, many of the students had gone from reluctant and antsy to interested and focused during reading time, attending to reading for longer periods, going from an average of 10 minutes at first to an average of 30 minutes by the beginning of March. All of the students had found at least one book they enjoyed, each a work of contemporary young adult fiction, including novels such as *Unwind* (Shusterman) and *Every Day* (Levithan), which address exciting and controversial situations. We were thrilled with these results, given their earlier resistance to reading.

At the same time, we noticed that the students were either reluctant to or having trouble generating comments about what they read. Our attempts to use conventional prompts for interpretation, such as having the students annotate their novels to make predictions, identify confusing vocabulary, and generate questions for discussion, yielded little written or oral comment from them. We thought that perhaps they needed something a bit more pertinent to get them going, much the same way that provocative, contemporary fiction had turned them on to reading.

Introducing the Youth Lens

We decided to use a youth lens to show the students that reading for enjoyment can also involve interpretation and analysis. The youth lens allowed us to address enjoyment and critical thinking at the same time—to teach literary analysis while touching on an issue in which the students were presumably already interested: what it is like to be a teenager. As mentioned earlier, a youth lens encourages readers to disrupt categorical assumptions of what it means to be a teenager, a particularly important activity for high school students, who are often a subject of authors and other content-creators who aim for a teenage audience in novels, film, advertising, and so on. Specifically, we wanted the students to question how writers represent people their age across a variety of text types, such as novels, television shows, and films.

In the following sections, we summarize the youth lens activity sequence that we implemented to engage the students in literary interpretation. Brandie, the classroom teacher among us, and Alison, the university researcher working with her, cotaught the first two activities. Samantha and Cole, who were studying to become high school English teachers at the time, designed and led the third activity.

Activity One: What Does It Mean to Be a Teenager on Television?

The objective of this activity was to have the students turn a "critical eye" on how adolescents are represented on television, as a way of preparing them to discuss the teenage characters in the novels they were reading. Our intent was to have them think about pop culture texts using a cultural studies approach, underscoring pop culture as "an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interest of dominant groups [in our case, adult content-creators] and the interests of subordinate groups [in this case, youth audiences for that content]" (Storey 4). Applying a critical eye would mean getting involved in such negotiation.

Alison and Brandie opened the class by introducing the idea of reading with a critical eye, emphasizing that reading can be about pleasure and entertainment but also about analyzing how people are represented in texts, including people at or about their age. Specifically, they told the students that they wanted to hear their opinions about how adult television writers represent teenagers and posed the question, Are teenagers on television realistic, like the people your age that you know in real life, or are they stereotypes of teenagers? After Alison reviewed the definition of *stereotype*, she asked them to list examples of stereotypical teenagers they had seen on television. Brandie recorded their answers on the interactive whiteboard. The

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list included the following descriptions: *they party, disrespectful, unrealistic (do things real teenagers don't do), two-faced, want to have sex all the time*. Though these responses were compelling, she held off discussing them until the students had a chance to add further ideas.

Next, Alison showed them the first ten minutes of the pilot episode of the television show *Friday Night Lights* (*FNL*), about a group of high school football players and their coach, and asked them to think about whether the characters fit the stereotypes of teenagers they had just listed on the board. She had chosen *FNL* as a sample text because she believed the students would connect with its rural setting and similarly aged characters. During the opening ten minutes of the pilot episode, the writers and director introduce the teen characters with a series of fast-paced shots of them in their homes.

After the class watched the clip, Alison and Brandie led the students in a discussion of whether the characters from the show fit the stereotypes of teenagers on television that they had listed already. They asked the students, specifically, to choose terms of resistance in describing the characters, if they could—ones that pushed back against the stereotypes of teenagers they had listed at the start of the lesson. For example, they might list the words "just friends" to counteract the representation of sexual obsession among teens.

Brandie recorded the students' responses on the board. The students' comments were varied and demonstrated that they were attuned to some of the ways that adolescents are represented in popular media and how those representations compare to a wider scope of how young people think and act. For example, some of the students noted that the teen characters in the clip of *FNL* acted responsibly and had strong family ties, which they saw as atypical for teens on television. One student noted that some of the teens on *FNL* were possibly racist (based on a scene in which a television reporter asks a white player, Tim Riggins, if his dislike for his teammate Brian Williams has to do with Williams being black). Other students nodded in agreement, and Brandie added a question mark to the list to acknowledge the word "possibly" in the student's comment. While we did not see "racist" as a term of resistance, we did see "possibly" as a space for negotiation, since the students did not automatically believe Riggins's declaration that Brian's skin color did not matter to him.

To close the discussion, Alison and Brandie asked the students to choose a teenaged character from the novel they were reading and to write in their reading journals about whether or not this character defied or fit the stereotypes they had listed at the beginning of the discussion. They could also compare the character from their novel to a character they had seen in the *FNL* clip. It was at this point that the students' understanding of stereotypes broke down a bit. One student wrote in her journal, "I think my character really is realistic, she does more natural things. But also, in the same way, she is, she worries alot [*sic*] about a guy, and not all girls do. She isn't stereotypically because she just goes through the motion of her day, some small actions may be stereotyped, but not all." This example illustrates a wider trend among the class: the students were able to identify a character in their respective novels that they thought was more complex than a stereotypical adolescent, but they did not aptly articulate why these characters went beyond stereotype. Based on this difficulty, Alison and Brandie decided to plan a subsequent activity that would help the students put their thoughts into more coherent form.

Activity Two: Constructing "Visual Paragraphs" to Represent Adolescents

Alison and Brandie opened this activity by having the students consider how surface characteristics, such as what a person is wearing or a person's physical features, can foster particular assumptions about that person. This activity related to the youth lens because it prompted students to think about, and attempt to disrupt, the assumptions people sometimes make about young adults based on clothing and other visual cues. The activity also underscored the process of getting to know a character in fiction: what a reader expects of a young adult character can be much different from who that character actually turns out to be, especially given the constraints of the narrative world they must navigate.

Alison and Brandie showed the students four slides, each with one or more young adults situated in clothes or a setting they thought would likely lead the students to stereotypical assumptions (e.g., that a thin, beautiful young adult girl showing skin is most likely popular and shallow). They had also chosen the slides with the students' list of stereotypes in mind, the one they had generated after watching the clip of *Friday Night Lights* during the previous youth lens activity.

Slide 1 showed a young adult male at a rodeo, wearing a cowboy hat, jeans, and a button-up shirt. He is standing in front of a horse pen, with a lariat hanging behind him. The second and third slides came from an online children's Abercrombie & Fitch catalog. Slide 2 displayed a girl of about 16 in playful, youthful clothes that showed her midriff and much of her tan legs. She had long, blonde hair and a smile of bright, white teeth. The other catalog slide (Slide 3) showed a young man wearing what Alison perceived to be "preppy" clothes—Kelly-green shorts and a striped polo shirt. Slide 4 depicted one of the party scenes from the film *Sixteen Candles*, showing sports cars lined up outside a Tudor mansion at night, with teens sitting on the hood of one of the cars, drinking beer. Toilet paper hangs from the trees.

As they showed the slides, Alison and Brandie had the students write in their reading journals, finishing the prompt, "I assume . . ." in response to what came to their minds about the featured teens, based only on what they saw. The students did well with this activity, coming up with a variety of descriptors that demonstrated they understood potential connections between appearances and expectations for behavior. Following is an example from one of the students' journals:

> I assume this person is . . .
>
> Slide 1. country, strong
> Slide 2. false, preppy, thinks she is better then [*sic*] everyone
> Slide 3. fake, preppy, snob, thinks is better than everyone
> Slide 4. rebels, adventurous, drunk, wild

Next, Alison and Brandie had the students turn the youth lens on themselves to show them how their complex identities might compare with the identities of young adult characters in media images and popular fiction. Because the students had previously had difficulty providing written or oral support when making a claim, Alison and Brandie provided the following heuristic to help them make connections between their stated identity and the experiences that led them to that statement:

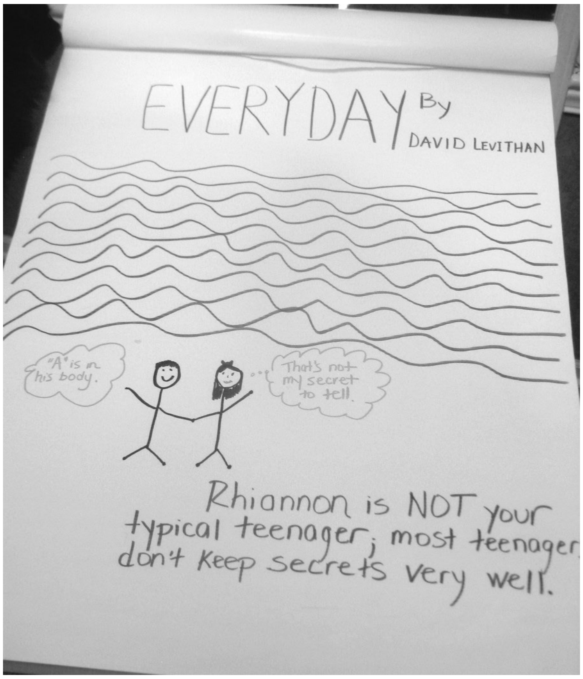
> People who don't know me may assume that I am ________________ because ____________, but I am actually ______________________.

One student who did an excellent job with the heuristic wrote, "People who don't know me assume that I am a stupid redneck because of the way I talk, but actually, I am really smart," touching on a common stereotype about Kentucky, namely that an Appalachian dialect signals a lack of education. The heuristic helped him use adequate reasoning to demonstrate how assumptions obscure complexity, a skill we hoped the students would then apply to characters from the novels they were reading.

Next, Alison and Brandie had the students work in small groups with peers who were reading the same novel. They directed the students to choose and illustrate a scene from their novel that demonstrated a way that a character in the novel surprised them by defying their expectations for a young adult character in fiction. The students used the scene they drew to compose a claim about their character. What they had, then, was a sort of a visual paragraph, with the claim at the bottom and the illustrations serving as the evidence for their claim.

Figure 1 shows an example of how the group reading the novel *Every Day* (Levithan) was able to demonstrate that a main character defied their expectations by promising to keep a secret they thought that most teenagers would not be able keep. Kara, one of the members of the group, told Alison and Brandie that she didn't think teenagers were usually able to keep exciting secrets because they always wanted to share what they knew. The scene that Kara and her group members chose to draw depicts a character with special powers (named A) telling a beloved friend (named Rhiannon) that he or she is able to inhabit a different person's body every day. In the scene, A asks Rhiannon to keep this information a secret, and she agrees. In this way, Kara's group had identified one way that young adult characters in fiction could defy a reader's expectations of people their own age, what we

FIGURE 1. The Secret in *Every Day*


EVERYDAY By DAVID LEVITHAN
"A" is in his body.
That's not my secret to tell.
Rhiannon is NOT your typical teenager; most teenager don't Keep secrets very well.

saw as a gain in the group's understanding of what a youth lens involves.

Activity Three: Young People in Extraordinary Situations

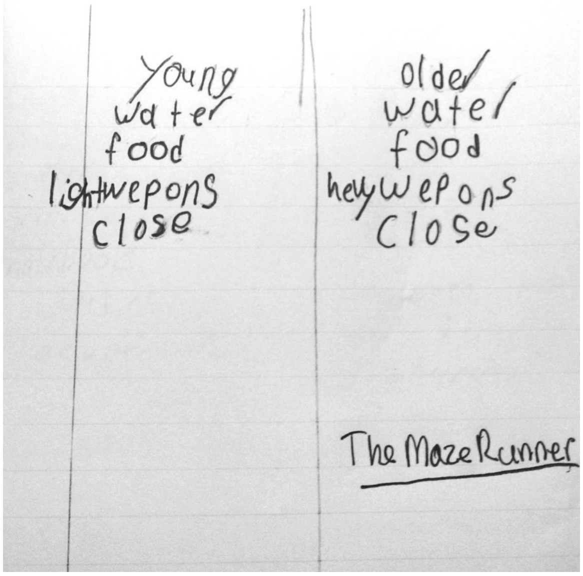
Because most of the students had chosen to read science fiction young adult novels, we knew we had a good opportunity to call their attention to how young characters handle extraordinary situations, such as surviving in post-apocalyptic dystopian societies. For us, this meant a discussion of how young adults act and look in novels wherein they confront particularly challenging situations. For the small number of students who were not reading science fiction, they would benefit by considering whether young adult characters in realistic situations still confronted extraordinary challenges. These students were reading *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green), a novel about young adults experiencing terminal illness.

The objective for Activity Three was to have the students debate whether young adults and adults react to difficult situations differently. To begin, Samantha and Cole posed questions such as, "What sort of obstacles are posed in a work like this?" and "How might characters' reactions be influenced by the genre?" They also asked the students to contemplate the influence of the age of their characters with questions like, "What obstacles do your characters face that an older character might not?" and "What obstacles do they not have to worry about that an older character would?"

Because these students often needed an activity to help them generate ideas for discussion, Samantha and Cole supplemented the discussion with a concrete activity, requesting that the students make a list of items their characters needed for an adventure trip. They asked for a companion list that included items the characters would need if they were adults instead of young adults. See Figure 2 for a sample list.

Paul's list in Figure 2 was similar to the other students' lists in that he did not distinguish between the physical needs of teens and adults, an interesting pattern to us since we knew that one objective of a youth lens is to challenge the idea that adolescence is a predetermined life stage (Sarigianides). In Paul's estimation, adolescence and adulthood do not look different when it comes to basic survival needs, indicating to us that he did not perceive adolescence as its own life stage, at

FIGURE 2. Paul's Adventure List



Young	older
water	water
food	food
lightwepons	heywepons
close	Close

The Maze Runner

least when it came to physical demands. He did mention one notable difference between young adult and adult characters, however: young adults would carry lighter weapons than adults. His mention could inspire a discussion of whether teens can handle the same types of weapons as adults.

Next Samantha and Cole brought up concepts of friendship or bravery, asking whether these concepts are different for teens and adults. The students were quick to engage in a debate over whether such things were easier to call upon or acquire in youth, leading to a discussion about how they as teens might have many friendships born of seeing one another each day in school while an adult is apt to have fewer, though deeper, friendships that require more effort to maintain. We noted that the students were more fluent in identifying differences between adults and teens during this discussion than when Samantha and Cole asked them the genre-specific questions. The reason might be that genre was still an unfamiliar frame of analysis for these students, while concepts such as bravery and friendship were something they could recognize from their everyday social interactions.

Conclusion

The weighty ideas the students proffered during the three activities indicated to us that they could participate astutely in literary interpretation: they brought up teen racism and hypersexuality, for example, two compelling frames for discussing what it means to be a young adult in media and in literature. Their participation also resembled what John Storey recognized as the negotiation between subordinate and dominant groups. That is, these students opened spaces for resistance, talking back to or questioning representations of youth that they did not think were fair. In some cases they uncovered their own limited assumptions about youth, such as when Kara and her group realized they expected young adult females always to have difficulty keeping secrets. Most exciting to us was that the students became enthusiastic about discussing literature during the youth lens activities, after having previously shown little interest in discussing what they were reading.

We know we only scratched the surface, however. The students brought up complex ideas, but the three activities, about an hour each, did not give them enough time to explore these ideas in depth. In the future, we would like to expand our use of a youth lens, making it the focus of at least a unit of study. Furthermore, we would extend our use of writing heuristics. As demonstrated in Activity Two, a heuristic helped these students capture the complexity of young adult characters, after they had difficulty doing so during Activity One. Overall, a youth lens gave us a way to stretch the possibilities for writing and talking about literature, an important accomplishment when working with students who have yet to find a niche that showcases their reading acuity. EJ

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Alison Heron-Hruby is an assistant professor of English education at Morehead State University. Email: a.hruby@moreheadstate.edu. **Brandie Trent** is a high school English teacher and co-director of the Morehead Writing Project. Email: brandie.trent@fleming.ky.schools.us. **Samantha Haas** is a teacher candidate in the English education program at Morehead State University. Email: slhaas@moreheadstate.edu. **Zachary Cole Allen** is a teacher candidate in the English education program at Morehead State University. Email: zcallen@moreheadstate.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

Stereotyped images create false ideals that real people can't hope to live up to, foster low self-esteem for those who don't fit in, and restrict people's ideas of what they're capable of. In this lesson from ReadWriteThink, students explore representations of race, class, ethnicity, and gender by analyzing comics over a two-week period and then reenvisioning them with a “comic character makeover.” This activity leads to greater awareness of stereotypes in the media and urges students to form more realistic visions of these images as they perform their makeovers. http://bit.ly/1wglDec.

Hymn Sung at the Completion of the Lesson Plan, 11/12/13

Tomorrow I teach
Emerson, individuality
And nonconformity
To teenagers
Who all have iPhones,
Sperry's, and a Twitter.
How to tell them
“that envy is ignorance”
When Instagram insists
“My iced latte is photo worthy.
Envy me.”?
How to teach
“that imitation is suicide”
When everyone's mall
Looks like everyone else's mall,
Down to the quirky cool art inside
The Applebee's?
“Society everywhere is in conspiracy
Against the manhood of every one
Of its members—”
Members of my class,
My school,
The company I keep
In the teacher's lounge.
“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.”
Thank God Ralph Waldo still satisfies the Common Core.

—Maria Fischer

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Maria Fischer is a doctoral candidate in Stewardship, Leadership and Learning at the University of St. Francis. She currently teaches American literature at Joliet Catholic Academy in Joliet, Illinois. Her first poetry collection, *“There Is No One Better,” The Seamstress Says*, is available through Bellowing Ark Press. Email: mariafischer@stfrancis.edu.