Multiple Selves and Multiple Sites of Influence: Perceptions of Young Adult Literature in the Classroom

Young adult literature (YAL) is one of the most engaging and effective tools to promote the goal of lifelong literacy for middle and high school students. This article addresses the stakes of exploring—or failing to explore—common perceptions and misperceptions of YAL. Readers’ lives as family members, consumers, and students play roles in their judgment of the validity of YAL and in turn its validity for classroom study. Similarly, perceptions of YAL can depend on the various settings, or sites, of learning, including libraries, homes, and school settings. This article encourages all educators—those of preservice teachers as well as pre-K–12 teachers—to be aware of how their students’ and their own perceptions of classroom materials are influenced by multiple selves as well as multiple sites of influence.

My fifth-grade daughter had just finished reading A Wrinkle in Time by renowned Newbery winner Madeleine L’Engle (2007), then jumped into the 2010 Newbery winner, When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead (2009). Many things have influenced my daughter’s reading habits and tastes: her book-loving teachers and school assignments, our habits of reading at home, frequent library visits both at home and at school, browsing bookstores, and talking books with her friends. “It takes a village to raise a child” also applies to raising a reader. My daughter is fortunate to have her reading—in particular of young adult literature (YAL)—reinforced by many people in many places.

For teens and tweens, YAL plays a major role in encouraging the habit and enjoyment of lifelong reading. Students receive explicit
and implicit messages about the value of YAL from teachers’ book recommendations (or lack thereof) and inclusion or exclusion of YAL in the classroom. Teachers risk losing readers if stereotypes of YAL prevent them from introducing this fine literature to their students. Thus springs the question: How do preservice secondary English teachers form their perceptions about young adult literature? How, for that matter, do any students form perceptions about any classroom materials? Although this study pertains specifically to perceptions of YAL, how students and teachers shape their perceptions of value is a critical question for teacher education programs and for teachers’ own classrooms.

After listening carefully to my students’ comments, I was reminded that people are multifaceted, with diverse influences based on multiple roles in life—multiple selves. Similarly, the different places in which we find ourselves—school, home, libraries, and even bookstores—can impact our perceptions about what should and should not be included in the classroom. Sometimes our various selves and contexts fall nicely into alignment, reinforcing one another and thus our beliefs stemming from those situations. At other times, our roles or contexts compete with one another, contradicting each other and leaving us confused as to our own beliefs about teaching (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Considering multiple selves and sites can help teachers examine how they shape their perceptions of classroom materials. Through examining perceptions of YAL, I argue the importance of considering students’ selves and sites as a key aspect of their learning.

Surveying the Landscape: Initial Perceptions and Surprising Conclusions

How do we determine the impact of students’ varied selves and sites of interaction upon their perceptions of classroom materials? To begin, a simple survey can be very informative. At the beginning of our YAL class, comprised primarily of preservice secondary English teachers, students completed an anonymous survey with open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of YAL. Students completed a similar survey at the end of the course. Even though I learned about my students’ perceptions in other ways and with other classes, in this article I address only the comments and ideas exhibited in the introductory and concluding surveys from one typical class.

Nilsen and Donelson (2001) defined young adult literature as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 18 choose to read” (p. 3). For my YAL class and in this article, however, I define YAL as those works written by authors specifically for a young adult audience. Using my definition, more than one-third (36%) of the students held misperceptions of YAL. For example, when asked if they had read any YAL, some students listed classics such as Great Expectations, The Catcher in the Rye, and authors such as Toni Morrison, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, and even T. S. Eliot. About one-fourth (24%) listed books by authors who lean more toward classic children’s literature, such as C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, and Lewis Carroll. One student questioned whether future high school teachers should be in the YAL class, implying that YAL is not appropriate material for high school students. Understanding that my students held major misconceptions of YAL, we worked to address their concerns and begin to widen their views of a vastly diverse field.

Comments on the concluding surveys suggest growth in students’ understanding of the variety and quality of YAL by the end of the course. Perhaps most striking with an open-ended prompt, over half of the students (55%) used similar language to describe the change in their perceptions: They were surprised at or impressed with the depth, quality, and variety of YAL. When asked if YAL was what they’d expected, one student replied, “No—I was happily surprised! I was not extremely familiar with YAL, and I was impressed with the way it addressed important issues.” On the other hand, even students who had a sense of the field were surprised: “I was very pleasantly surprised by all of the books I read this quarter. I had high expectations to begin with, and they were almost all exceeded.”
A few (14%) made comments reflecting a major shift in attitudes about YAL: They had, in essence, been won over. For instance, one student commented that YAL “never had an appeal, but now it does.” Students’ initial misconceptions about YAL were replaced as a result of reading excellent YA books and discussing the teaching of YAL in classrooms. Had this not been the case, a remarkably valuable resource to creating lifelong readers could have remained untapped.

**Who We Are and Where We Are:**
**Multiple Selves and Multiple Sites of Influence**

We need to consider how our students—whether preservice teachers or younger students—develop their views regarding the importance not only of YAL in classrooms, but also of any materials. Again, the comments from the surveys led me to consider what contexts, or sites, and what aspects of themselves, of their identities, are at play in shaping perceptions about the appropriateness of classroom materials. For preservice teachers, the idea of possible selves—the future envisioned teachers they want to become—is key to their thinking about classroom choices (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Considering possible selves helps future teachers “in the crafting of professional identity,” which is closely linked to integrating their personal and professional selves (p. 42). As my experiences as a parent, teacher, and reader have taught me, we are all multifaceted, and our various selves impact our beliefs about teaching. Further, both veteran teachers and pre-K–12 students hold tacit beliefs about classroom materials. Simply being students in classrooms enculturates us into the accepted world of teaching materials (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) noted that identity-shaping is a major factor in learning to teach, and that different sites play a role in encouraging or discouraging certain mindsets, behaviors, and methods. For example, sites for my preservice teachers included the usual sites—schools where they participated in field experiences and universities where they took coursework preparing them to teach. In addition to these sites, we are all affected to some degree by the more personal contexts of home, stores, and sites relating to our hobbies—possibly libraries and bookstores for future English teachers. For instance, if future teachers, as consumers, browse bookstores’ YA sections and see shelf upon shelf of only series books, not surprisingly, many believe the entire field of YAL to be limited. In addition, some sites may engage more than one aspect of our identities. For example, the university calls upon different aspects of the self, depending on the courses students are required to take: English courses call upon the content specialist self, and education courses call upon the teacher self, with overlaps occurring all the while.

The site of school, in general, calls upon a set of student expectations of more or less traditional schooling. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) has warned that often the art of literature is lost in the context of school. Rosenblatt described two stances readers take toward literary texts: aesthetic and efferent. From an aesthetic stance, readers are completely involved in the literary event—engrossed in that particular moment in time during reading. From an efferent stance, readers seek to gain information or knowledge to be used at a later time, and are not particularly living in the literary moment, swept along with characters and plot. Rosenblatt voiced her concern that, oftentimes, schools treat literature as efferent texts simply to be tested, rather than aesthetic literary moments. After reading my preservice teachers’ surveys, clearly their perceptions of YAL relate to their personal and school experiences of reading literature and the stances they take while reading. According to the surveys, students thought works they read aesthetically (such as YA books) were not valid for classroom study in which literature is often approached from an efferent stance. Ironically, the very stance that may encourage lifelong reading is rejected as inappropriate for school.

According to Grossman et al. (1999), sites often interact, reinforcing or contradicting one another. In addition, different “selves” can over-
lap contexts. For instance, parents taking YAL courses (the site of university English education classes) might be considering books to recommend to their children (their family selves), pondering ways to incorporate YAL into their curriculum (their future teacher selves), or savoring a passage from a book (their aesthetic reader selves). The selves and sites for secondary English preservice teachers converge as they learn about YAL, as shown in Table 1. As data come from my YAL course, the majority of my findings stem from this site.

### Possible Selves

According to Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008), “possible selves serve as incentives for change and as touchstones for evaluating current selves” (p. 42). If teachers seek to change students’ initial negative perceptions about classroom materials, they must offer them in-depth, repeated experiences that contradict their misconceptions. For future teachers, we provide that incentive for change by modeling manifestations of their possible teacher selves, including those aspects they previously rejected. The university site of my YAL course served as a space for students to foreground their possible teacher selves. For instance, one student commented, “The way the class was taught, more than anything else, impacted me this quarter. I already knew I’d like to incorporate YA lit into a curriculum; this class provided good ideas/examples of how to do that,” implying that she or he had not previously considered how to bring YAL into the classroom. (Students experienced response-based methods of discussion and varieties of written and artistic response in order to encourage aesthetic reading, and to demonstrate that YAL was both worthy and complex enough to merit attention in a classroom setting.)

On the survey, I had asked students if they thought YAL would be beneficial for middle school, high school, struggling readers, or all readers, but I did not ask them to comment specifically on YAL and its relationship to secondary English classes—or even if they would consider incorporating it into their literacy instruction. Their possible teacher selves came forward of their own accord. Repeated exposure and experiences can widen the views of our students regarding those materials that may have been rejected based on initial perceptions.

### Reality Check: Challenging Superior Notions of Self

Sometimes students, as well as teachers, reject classroom materials based on deeply held perceptions of their own superior identities and intellect. They may write off whole categories of materials such as YAL as beneath their level, which, depending on selection, may be true. Perhaps a bigger problem occurs when teachers rely on impressions of their own experiences and abilities to judge classroom appropriateness, for-

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Family, friend, aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Preservice teacher, former secondary student, aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University English content courses</td>
<td>English major, aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University young adult literature course</td>
<td>Preservice/future teacher, aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School and public libraries</td>
<td>Aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookstores</td>
<td>Consumer, aesthetic and efferent reader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
getting that their students are not yet adults with similar life and academic experiences. In light of their other upper-level literature classes they take as English majors, my students sometimes enter the YAL course doubting the value of YAL, presumably due to its lack of depth and literary quality. One student’s initial derogatory opinions about YAL became clear with the comment, “I was amazed at how much is out there and how much isn’t agonizing to read.” Perhaps the term agonizing referred to reading in general—sadly indicating that this student found texts in other courses agonizing. Noting a change of opinion, one student directly compared YAL to canonical texts: “I was surprised by the quality of the novels that we read. It has been a while since I read any YA lit, and I think I was beginning to think maybe it was not as worthwhile to read as some of the works in the canon.” In contrast, one of these upper-level English majors confessed to having difficulty comprehending some of the YAL: “Hearing what others think really helped me understand concepts that went over my head.” (Cormier’s *I Am the Cheese* elicited many questions from confused students.)

The site of the YAL course, as well as mandatory experience of reading YA literature, demonstrated that the field encompasses layered, sophisticated literature. Although, initially, some students looked condescendingly upon YAL, concluding surveys showed that by the end of the course, approximately one-third (32%) of the students commented specifically on the sophistication, maturity, and complexity of high-quality YAL. Sites that offer complex experiences can challenge negative perceptions based on beliefs that materials may be beneath students’ intellectual abilities.

The Big Picture: The Aesthetic Reader Self and Encouragement of Lifelong Reading

Although Rosenblatt (1978) emphasized that readers continuously shuttle back and forth on a continuum of aesthetic and efferent stances, the pace and stress of serious study of complex literature can become a drain on students’ (and teachers’) aesthetic experiences of literary works. Teachers and students often lead time-crunches, frazzled lives. Mandated tests, homework, or grading, and other daily obligations compete with the time and stance necessary to create a lifelong habit and love of reading. What happens when teachers and students neglect their own leisure reading? Nancie Atwell (1991) provides one solution to the problem:

What if my teacher friend who is having such a difficult time with literature [instruction] became a reader too, not just of professional books, which she reads efferently in search of information about teaching and learning, but of novels, poetry, history, and essays, to which she might turn for the satisfactions of an aesthetic experience? (p. 69)

She answers her own question. Through our own experiences, we come to “break free of the old misconceptions of what reading is and how teachers are supposed to talk about it” (p. 69). Could breaking free of old misconceptions be as simple as returning to a core goal of lifelong reading, affording ourselves this same right to time for reading for enjoyment? Atwell seems to think so.

For my students, the site of the YAL course seemed to help these preservice teachers revive their aesthetic reader selves, and students wrote of their reclaimed enjoyment of reading. Every single student completing the concluding survey directly stated (86%) or suggested (14%) that she or he enjoyed reading YAL. One student wrote, “I think my private time with the books themselves, as well as with other YA lit, really shaped my thinking.” The use of the phrase private time implies that this student is not often afforded the opportunity to intimately enjoy literature. As our various selves and sites overlap, this student linked the aesthetic experience of connecting with texts to the possible teacher self, arguing that YAL “would give them [secondary students] something to relate to.” It seems that these preservice teachers want aesthetic reading experiences for themselves as well as their students, which brings us back to a core goal of school literature
instruction: to create a lifelong love and habit of reading.

**When Selves and Sites Conflict**

Exposure to materials that students have initially perceived negatively does not necessarily guarantee acceptance for classroom use by either teachers or students. For example, on the concluding survey, one student commented, “I thought it [YAL] would not fit with my curriculum, but I’ve changed my mind.” Although the surveys were nameless, I know which student made this comment; her physical challenges make her handwriting unique. I could pretend that I address a nameless student, but in this case it is significant that I know which student stated that previously she had not considered YA texts appropriate for literature instruction. This particular student came into the class with positive attitudes regarding YAL and had praised her high school librarian for feeding her appetite for reading with wonderful YA books, when her English classes dulled that appetite. How, then, would a student with previous experience with YAL and its quality not consider it appropriate for classroom use?

This student’s experience highlights the impact of multiple sites of influence. Perhaps because her reading of YAL was not sanctioned in her previous English classes, she did not consider its potential benefits in a classroom setting. Or perhaps, as an avid reader, she identified her aesthetic reader self with YAL, but due to highly efferent school literature instruction, had associated “real” English classroom literature as void of the aesthetic power of her YA readings. Initially, my student’s former high school English student self had a more powerful impact than her aesthetic reader self in the setting of a library. Her English teachers, not librarians, were her models for her future classes’ texts.

To what extent have my students internalized the value and effectiveness of YAL in classrooms? Will they lose sight of the experiences they had in our class when they are student teaching, or in their first years of teaching, when the sheer pace of planning new lessons for new courses can become overwhelming? Will my students have to continually defend YAL, and if so, will they, or will they “perpetuate the status quo” (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008, p. 42)? School settings often override what students learn in teacher education programs (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

After reading my students’ comments, I am reminded that any site could have either a positive or negative impact on students’ and teachers’ thinking about materials used in classrooms. Not all bookstores carry primarily low-quality YAL, and some excellent teachers model the impact of YAL in classrooms. Multiple selves and sites interact to shape our perceptions. We are also affected by time—our past, present, and future selves. Learning to integrate future selves into their personal selves could help students consciously decide what sites they want to shape their identities. When I share my personal experiences as an aesthetic reader, when I share the books I recommend to my children, I model the integration of my selves. When I share my personal experiences with YAL both in and out of the classroom, when I share my current experiences team-teaching YA works in public schools, I testify to the quality of YA lit in many contexts.

**A Tale of Two Teachers:**

**Multiple Reinforcements**

Following up on the surveys, interviews with two students suggest that positive experiences with YAL in multiple sites encourage an advocacy and use of YAL in schools. The first student had, like many, assumed that YAL included only formulaic, series novels. After a positive experience in the YAL course and a fortuitous student teaching placement in a middle school steeped in YAL, with a cooperating teacher who herself was a YAL advocate, this student teacher went on to incorporate a unit on a YA novel early in her first year of teaching, and plans to continue to use YAL in her middle school classroom.

The second student teacher grew up reading many high-quality YA books at home, and even
worked at a public library as an assistant to a YA librarian. This student was fully aware of the range and quality of YAL upon entering my course. However, during his student teaching he was required to teach only canonical works. In an interview, he bemoaned this limitation and spoke of plans to incorporate YAL into his curriculum during his first year of teaching. Had the two students’ placements for student teaching been reversed, would the first have remained as committed to YAL as she had been at the conclusion of our YA lit course? Or would her previous stereotypes and her valuing of “real” teachers’ experiences have encouraged her to dismiss the power of YAL? Did the second student teacher’s reading at home as a youth and his library/work experience help him remain solid in his advocacy for YAL? Perhaps the challenge, then, is to seek ways for students to experience multiple sites that reinforce materials that might initially be rejected and to help students integrate their positive, personal experiences with their classroom selves.

Questions Yet Unanswered . . .

Many questions remain about the impact of societal judgments on classroom materials and the sites one typically does not associate with school, including sites such as libraries and retail stores, and selves influenced by casual interactions in those sites. For example, one student remarked that the library had a significant influence on thoughts on YAL. The student noted, “Going to the library and hanging in the teen section . . . I got some great books there.” Identity also plays a role here, as some libraries place a casual restriction on adults hanging out in designated teen sections. Young undergraduates, as opposed to older adults, would feel much more comfortable hanging out in the teen sections, and would be less likely to alienate the teens who are there to read and browse.

Another point of interest includes the social stigmas attached to reading YAL in society in general. Negative perceptions are perpetuated when teens or adults raise eyebrows at adults checking out the latest YAL. I have had students comment that they were embarrassed buying YA books in bookstores, feeling like they needed to explain themselves to the cashier, or to browsing teenagers who glanced at them oddly. It is not surprising that the casual judgments of others could cause some teachers and students to doubt the value of materials.

Further inquiry into the sites of retail stores and the consumer self would be an interesting study in marketing. The Twilight series, Percy Jackson series, and Harry Potter series have generated much publicity, and much stuff to buy—T-shirts, journals, and posters, to name a few examples. How do these popular culture sites influence teachers’ and students’ perceptions of materials? Do they perceive YAL as synonymous with consumerism, and thus literary fluff? The consumer self as related to ideas and beliefs remains another area of investigation.

How do social networks influence perceptions of YAL and other classroom materials? ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) now has a Facebook page, and goodreads.com keeps my colleague’s YAL classes connected and enthusiastic about the power of YAL. Could wider, virtual communities support those who seek to incorporate materials that might often be derided?

The intersections of these sites and selves provide rich soil for exploring the complexities of how teachers and students come to think about YAL and its teaching, as well as how any students and teachers form perceptions of the materials presented in classrooms. If teachers ignore their own and their students’ lives—their sites of influence and their multiple selves—they run the risk of leaving untapped resources for their students. In the creation of lifelong readers, we cannot afford this risk.

References


