

Mixing It Up:
A Multilevel Book Room and Flexible Literature Circles
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Abstract:

This article explores the use of multi-level young adult literature to investigate history through fiction. It explains how to use text sets comprised of historical young adult literature written on varying reading levels to allow for student choice and discussion on a specific book. It discusses how to engage students in a jigsaw strategy reflecting differentiated instruction so that new literature circles can allow a representative from each book to contribute to the discussion. The new technique can be described as "**flexogeneous grouping**," being that it allows for homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings, using a multiple perspectives approach. This is followed by the ways in which teachers help to establish their own young adult literature book room for the Social Studies.



Literature Circles

Recently, the District #2 Office in New York City mandated that all children at the middle school level should read 25 books per year. While the burden of this mandate fell most heavily on the shoulders of the Language Arts department, we at Wagner Middle School in Manhattan began to discuss ways the social studies department could help to increase literacy, a goal important to all subject areas. As we talked, we agreed that it was misguided to assume that the language arts department should bear all the responsibility. In addition, we lamented the fact that students were not reading anything but the textbook in the social studies classroom and that interesting trade books were often overlooked. So, we decided to do something about this sorrowful lack of interesting young adult literature in the social studies classroom.

There were a few obstacles that we could perceive at the outset of our project. First, social studies classrooms were heterogeneous with regard to student abilities and achievement levels. Naturally, we would have to consider these differences. Second, the literature would have to engage students and bring meaning to the topics being studied; this was no small task. To respond to these concerns, we decided to create a book room that would house what Stover calls the “heart of the middle school curriculum”: young adult literature.¹

The first thing we needed to do was determine what constitutes young adult literature. Nielsen and Donnelson define it broadly as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and twenty choose to read (as opposed to what they may be coerced to read for class assignments).”² Stover further narrows this definition indicating, “Contemporary young adult literature is written for and about young people from the age of eleven...through the age of eighteen.”³ Young adult literature, she continues, has several characteristics including a young adult protagonist, realistic young adult language, and themes and issues of importance and relevance to young adults.

We were aware of the tremendous scholarly support for using young adult literature in the middle school social studies classroom. Young adult literature is highly recommended by teachers⁴, scholars⁵, and national educational organizations.⁶ Further, Hipple states, “Literature written for young adults is fine literature, about themes that are universal, with quality that is stunning. Such literature merits, and rewards, attention.”⁷ Don Gallo, who urges educators to listen to students when selecting literature for classroom study, suggests that “young adult novels are valuable tools for helping teenagers to understand themselves and to see their place in the world...”⁸

While traditional textbooks serve an important purpose in social studies classrooms, most simply do not interest or motivate students on any level.⁹ Many researchers, in fact, have concluded that social studies textbooks are overwhelming or “encyclopedic”¹⁰ and offer a comprehensive yet flat, linear approach to a subject that is textured and multi-faceted. So, while we could not advocate the complete annihilation of the textbooks, we did feel that integrating young adult literature, which could accommodate a variety of reading levels, would complement the textbook, providing texture and relevance to the material, making it more meaningful to middle school students. More importantly, however, young adult literature highlights the cultural, geographical, and economic concepts that comprise the social studies curriculum;¹¹ it brings the material to life in a way that textbooks are unable to do.

Smith and Johnson suggest that, “Literature can become the lens through which content is viewed...[holding] the young reader’s attention while connecting content with the variety of human experiences.”¹² Historical fiction can bring historical figures alive for readers and allow them to explore the realities of life, culture, and society during a given period. Adolescent students can relate to the characters in the books as they read fictionalized accounts of the events and circumstances they are learning about in class. Even when the setting of a novel is far removed from the reader’s own experience, adolescents through time and place share many universal characteristics, including the pains of growing up and exploring one’s identity. And adolescents enjoy reading about other adolescents because they can identify with the protagonists. Further, the use of literature in the social studies classroom may help nurture children’s creativity and imaginations, leading to the use of higher level thinking skills. Jarolimek states:

Literature and literary materials should play an important part in social studies instruction because they convey so well the affective dimension of human experience. The realism achieved through vivid portrayals in works of literature stirs the imagination of the young reader and helps a develop a feeling for and an identification with the topic being studied.¹³

While researchers such as Savage and Savage advocate the inclusion of literature in the social studies classroom for the purpose of making the material more relevant and meaningful to students,¹⁴ Alverman and Phelps name several additional benefits of using literature in content areas, including the following:

1. Reading increases vocabulary, including content-specific terms.

2. Literature is often more up-to-date than textbooks.
3. Trade books may be more appealing than textbooks.
4. Literature goes beyond the facts.
5. Literature allows readers to experience other times, other places, other people, and other cultures with empathy.
6. Literature can be a powerful catalyst for thoughtful analysis and critical thinking.¹⁵

With all of this in mind, we decided that it was not only appropriate for us to incorporate young adult literature into the social studies classroom, but necessary to do so in order to capture the imaginations of our students and encourage various modes of reading and thinking. But we had to find a way to incorporate the books into the classroom in a non-threatening and equitable way. Taking the various reading levels into account, we decided we could offer a variety of titles in the book room from which the students could select their own work, allowing them a sense of ownership over their own reading.

Nancie Atwell insists that, “Allowing readers to select their own books has a major impact on students’ fluency, reading rate, and comprehension.”¹⁶ When teachers use the text set approach, allowing students the freedom to choose which texts they will read, they give students a sense of ownership of the curriculum, and students are more likely to take responsibility for reading literature they have selected on their own. Tasha, a student in one of the social studies classes that used the book room approach, said it best when she declared, “I was surprised when [our teacher] told us we could pick which book we wanted to read. Since I was the one that picked it, I made sure I finished it on time.” Students realize they have the freedom to choose the work they will read, but they also realize that having this freedom makes them more responsible to themselves, their teacher, and the class as a whole for reading the book. This freedom is also a motivating factor for students, who often have more interest in the subject matter being studied in the classroom if they are supplementing their textbook reading with interesting and relevant young adult literature.

Establishing a book room also serves another very important purpose. Our social studies classrooms consist of students with various reading abilities. “Teaching to the middle,” using only grade level materials, may be boring for students who read above grade level and frustrating for those students who are not up to speed. So teachers are always challenged to meet the needs of all students, and including young adult literature written at varying levels of difficulty helps to

accommodate those needs while accomplishing the content area objectives they have set for their students. In our experience, when books are given a good introduction by the teacher, and are available for perusal, students usually select books they are capable of reading. Melissa, a seventh grader, said, “I’ve never been asked what I wanted to read for class before. When [my teacher] told us to choose one of six books, I took it really serious[ly] and took my time picking the one I thought I would like best.” Allowing students to switch books after the first day or two if they feel the one they chose is too difficult or not of interest to them is also important, as this allows students a trial period to determine if they have selected an appropriate book.

Once the book room is successfully designed and stocked, teachers will find that a significant change takes place. Discussions of historical periods and the people who shaped them become more vibrant, students are more eager to participate, and a greater level of understanding is achieved by all students. Reading and discussing the different stories allows for more meaningful student involvement and increased motivation and interest in discovering the past and its connection to our lives today. The multi-level book room evens the playing field, so to speak, as the needs of all students are met, and each child has the opportunity to contribute to the conversation.

Cooperative groups are an integral part of the book room approach to incorporating young adult literature into the middle school social studies classroom. Cooperative learning has been popular for the last ten to fifteen years, particularly at the middle school level. Stover defines cooperative strategies as “those that involve students in clarifying existing knowledge and constructing new knowledge together through talk.”¹⁷ She believes that collaborative learning strategies require structured organization in which students “work together as teams toward a common objective and team reward while demonstrating individual accountability within the team structure.”¹⁸ Indeed, meaningful interaction with peers can be a powerful motivator for middle school students.

Cooperative learning helps to clarify the content matter, but it also encourages the practice and development of social skills and cooperation. Students, especially middle school students, love to work and communicate together. Daniels states that, “Small groups can be efficient, energizing, sometimes almost magical structures for learning. Why are they so powerful? The limited size invites—almost compels—every individual to be an active participant in sharing ideas and constructing interpretations.”¹⁹ Indeed, the arguments for cooperative learning are strong, and the use of literature circles is an excellent way to integrate literature and cooperative learning into the curriculum. Finally, the use of cooperative learning allows teachers to equalize instruction, meeting

the needs of all students rather than teaching to the majority but boring those at the higher end of the curve and frustrating those at the lower end.

Designing a Flexogeneous Group Strategy

Once the teachers at Wagner understood the importance of incorporating young adult literature into the social studies classroom, I had my work cut out for me in designing a strategy that they could use to easily implement a differentiated approach to teaching young adult literature in the social studies classroom. I met with Marshall George at Fordham University, and he was very enthusiastic about the use of literature circles, especially for same book discussions. I, on the other hand, wanted to accommodate both same-book groups and different-book groups, as this approach would offer teachers the opportunity to incorporate many titles at various reading levels into their heterogeneous classrooms, thereby meeting the needs of all students.

Therefore, I designed a “flexogeneous” group strategy, which allows for more flexibility in the group work approach to young adult literature. Specifically, this strategy requires using two different group settings: one homogenous, the other heterogeneous. In other words, the first round of group discussions takes place among students reading the same book, while the second round of group discussions takes place among students reading different books.

Implementing this approach is rather easy. Let’s say there are 24 students in the class, and four different young adult books of various difficulty levels from which to choose. Students browse these books in the book room and rank their choices. The teacher then assigns six students to each book. Students are asked to read a given number of pages by, for instance, the end of a given week. At the same time, the teacher poses an open-ended question, one that is applicable to all the books, and asks students to consider this question as they read. They should then be informed that they will be required to write up their responses to the question and be prepared to discuss them in a group setting. The importance of coming to class prepared should be emphasized.

When the end of the assigned week arrives, students should be arranged in homogenous “Same-Book Literature Circle Groups.” Every student in these groups should have read the same number of pages of the same book while considering the same open-ended questions. Together, students are asked to discuss their responses to the question and become “experts” on various approaches and reactions. The teacher, meanwhile, should be circulating from group to group, ensuring that all students are participating and that discussion is flowing. When all opinions have

been aired, and students feel comfortable with their enhanced responses to the question, discussion should be brought to an end and students in each group should count off one through six (in this example).

Next, the teacher jigsaws students into their new groups, seating all ones together, all twos together, etc. Now, however, there will be six groups of four students each, representing each of the four books. Students are asked to discuss the same open-ended question, but now they must help the other students become acquainted with their own books, offering multiple perspectives on the same historical period. In addition, the new group members will have to listen very carefully, asking key questions, in order to learn more about the other three books. This second grouping strategy accomplishes several goals. First, the same high standard of instruction is used for all students regardless of the reading level of their chosen book. Second, this high level of instruction is also individualized, as students read books that are appropriate to their own reading level, and they do not feel frustrated or bored by work that is too difficult or too easy. Third, each student, again regardless of the reading level of his or her book, is an important member of the group, as he or she is the only spokesperson for a given title. Finally, this type of discussion often piques students' interest in other books, compelling them in some instances to read additional books on their own.

Working with the Teachers

Now that the strategy had been carefully developed, it was important to train the teachers in implementing it. During a lunch time workshop, I used excerpts from four different young adult literature books set during the American Revolution to demonstrate: *April Morning* by Howard Fast, *My Brother Sam* by James Lincoln Collier, *The Fifth of March* by Ann Rinaldi, and *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes. Teachers immediately became actively involved in the group work, discussing the works themselves, and then discussing the strengths of this type of class work. The practicalities of the approach were evident to them as they modeled the strategy and talked about how their own students would respond.

At our next training session, I asked teachers to generate a list of those topic areas in history that they wanted to cover at each grade level. Each teacher was then asked to prioritize his or her list, choosing the five most important areas. Looking at a descriptive list of young adult literature corresponding to the various topic areas, teachers then highlighted the books that interested them the most. Later, samples of each highlighted book were brought to the meeting, and teachers were

then asked to choose three of their top five topic areas to concentrate on. Over the next several weeks, teachers read and reviewed young adult literature titles corresponding to their areas of interest and recommended four titles per area (for a total of twelve titles per teacher). Some teachers consulted amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com for reviews, others relied on other resources, such as an index of good young adult literature I had put together (to be published later this year) or published annotated bibliographies. They were specifically asked to choose titles that represented the various reading levels as well as different perspectives on the topic area. We made a master list of the chosen books and ordered 45 copies of each—ten for each classroom and five for the teacher to make up for lost or forgotten books. Wherever possible, we ordered the hard cover edition, as, of course, they last longer. We now had everything we needed to set up the book room.

Setting up the Book Room

In order to accommodate the three grade levels that would be using the book room, we first had to design a way to separate the books according to grade level. So, we ordered three different colored bins: yellow for sixth grade, blue for seventh grade, and red for eighth grade. When a new book arrived, we created a tag for it, which included the title, the author, the date of publication, the reading level (E: easy, A: average, D: difficult), and a brief description of the book. This information was then typed out, laminated, and attached to the appropriate bin through two holes punched at the top of the laminated sheet and tied to the bin. Here are three samples of the book tags:

<i>A Light in the Storm: The Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin, Fenwick Island, Delaware, 1861</i>	Karen Hesse 1999	RL: E 169pp.	While assisting her father who is the lighthouse keeper at Fenwick Island, 15-year-old Amelia describes the tension between her father who sides with the Union and her mother who favors the Confederates during the Civil War .
<i>Natchez: Under-the-Hill</i>	Stan Applegate 1999	RL: A 186pp.	In search of his father, 14-year-old Zeb encounters outlaws and horse thieves as he travels the dangerous Natchez in 1811.
<i>The Heart Calls Home</i>	Joyce Hansen 1999	RL: D 175pp.	After serving in a black regiment, much danger is described during the reconstruction period as Obi learns to be a carpenter and who finds Easter who moved north to become a teacher.

We stamped and numbered all the books, so that when they were checked out we could determine what was there and what was missing. Leaking pens, fruit juice boxes, peanut butter and jelly, all stuffed in one cramped book bag often conspire to destroy school books. Therefore, we provided plastic bags for students to store the books in when they checked them out, so that the books would be easily preserved for future use. The bins were then placed on shelves, with one display book propped in front of each bin for a more appealing display. On the wall next to the bins, we posted a master list of the books arranged by topic area; teachers were also given their own copies of these lists. Sign out sheets were placed next to the bins, so teachers and students could be aware of who had which book at any given time. In order that books would not be borrowed for great lengths of time, we established a one month limit for borrowing books.

Of course, despite our best efforts there were some obstacles in the early stages of implementing the book room and literature group strategy. First, some teachers felt they would benefit from additional coaching. In these instances, I would model the lesson early in the day, discuss the model with the teacher, and observe as he or she delivered the lesson later in the day. This additional coaching helped some teachers feel more comfortable with the approach and more adept at implementing it. Second, as the book room system began to move forward, teachers realized they were often vying for the limited number of books at the same time. Some of the teachers suggested they teach a few of the areas from a thematic approach, while others suggested we order more books to accommodate the high demand. After long discussions to remedy this problem, we decided that rather than order additional copies of the existing titles, we would instead add additional titles to the existing list; in other words, instead of having 90 copies of four books, we would shoot for 45 copies of eight books per topic area. This solution also provided teachers and students with a wider range of reading options and a broader representation of reading levels.

The process was successful. New books were added to the book room whenever possible, and teachers started to incorporate their own class sets of books into the book room rather than keep them separate for their own class use. Students loved the new freedom they were awarded in choosing their own reading materials and taking ownership of their own work. Groups ran smoothly, and no one felt left out, frustrated, or bored.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to offer a rationale and practical teaching ideas for integrating literature, specifically young adult literature and historical fiction, into the social studies classroom.

By using literature written for and about adolescents, teachers provide students with substantial motivation for learning about the culture, history, and geography of people and places during various times in history. Giving students the opportunity to make decisions about what they read, and providing them with activities that rely on cooperative learning groups, enables social studies teachers to assist students in taking ownership of their learning and to show respect for the various reading abilities that exist in all classrooms through heterogeneous grouping practices. Incorporating literature into the social studies curriculum and cooperative learning into instruction makes the social studies classroom a more interesting, more pleasurable, and more productive learning environment for both students and teachers.

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