Challenging Traditional Classroom Spaces with YA Literature

Students in Community as Course Co-Designers

Ricki Ginsberg

Principles in Practice

Children’s and YA Literature
Challenging traditional classroom spaces with YA literature: students in community as course co-designers

Ricki Ginsberg, Colorado State University

Explores how high school ELA teachers, using communities of practice as a guiding framework, can work with students to build a community that defines their purposes together, harnessing the potential of YA literature and critical freedom to co-develop YA electives and lead literate lives together as a community of practice that is engaged with their local and global communities.

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Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Young Adult Literature

*This statement, formerly known as Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Adolescent Literature, was updated in July 2018 with the new title, Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Young Adult Literature.*

*Originally created by NCTE Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA), 2004; revised July 2018.*

Overview

**Purpose:** Given increased calls for diversity in the English language arts curriculum and growing awareness of the need for young people to see themselves in the books they read, NCTE has commissioned an updated statement on preparing teachers with knowledge of children’s and young adult literature.

**Key Message:** Research shows that when students are given the chance to read books that respect the questions, challenges, and emotions of childhood and adolescence, they read with greater interest and investment (Buehler, 2016; Mueller, 2001). Research also shows that teachers who are readers themselves do a better job of engaging their students in reading (Morrison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999). Thus, teacher educators must support preservice teachers as they build rich and deep knowledge of children’s and young adult literature over the course of their certification programs. Then teachers must invest in their own continued growth, learning, and development as children’s and young adult literature advocates throughout their professional lives.

**Context:** A committee of English educators has updated NCTE’s 2004 statement *Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Adolescent Literature* by calling teachers at all stages of their careers to cultivate knowledge of books for young people, be readers of these books themselves, affirm diversity in book selection, and teach children’s and young adult literature in ways that honor the books’ literary quality as well as their potential to spark personal and social transformation.

Statement

Evidence indicates that teachers’ knowledge of children’s and young adult literature is inconsistent and uneven from community to community, school to school, and classroom to classroom. Preservice teachers do not read any more than the general population (McKool & Gespass, 2009). Many of today’s teachers have never taken a class in children’s and young adult literature, and some states have eliminated the requirement for a dedicated course in children’s and/or young adult literature for teaching certification. A growing number of schools no longer employ a librarian, who may be the only professional in the building who has formal training in children’s and young adult literature, collection development, and
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matching young readers with books. Without librarians, the burden for reading advisory and material selection falls to classroom teachers, who often lack the training needed to perform these tasks.

Therefore, teacher education programs have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to

• introduce preservice teachers to books for children and teens;

• develop preservice teachers’ understanding of the inherent value of these books for both general reading and classroom use;

• raise preservice teachers’ awareness of the power of these books to affirm lived experience, create empathy, catalyze conversations, and respect the questions, challenges, and emotions of childhood and adolescence;

• call preservice teachers to embrace the roles of reading advocate and book matchmaker alongside their work as implementers of curriculum;

• inspire preservice teachers to commit to reading these books throughout their professional lives;

• cultivate in preservice teachers a commitment to teaching these books in ways that honor their literary quality as well as their potential to spark personal and social transformation;

• build preservice teachers’ capacity for continued growth, learning, and development as advocates of children’s and young adult literature.

As an organization, NCTE compels teachers at all stages of their careers to invest in books for young people—as readers of those books and as advocates for their worth in the classroom.

Recommendations

NCTE recommends that teacher educators and teachers commit to the following four principles in the service of increasing their ability to teach and advocate for children’s and young adult literature.

1. Know the literature.

Preservice teachers should cultivate book knowledge throughout various methods courses and across their entire teacher preparation program, regardless of state certification requirements. They should develop broad and sustained knowledge of quality books in the fields of children’s and young adult literature, including fiction, nonfiction, and multimodal texts.

At the same time, they should build knowledge of resources—including review journals, websites and blogs, social media discussions, book awards, and author appearances at local libraries and bookstores—that can provide them with information about quality new books and their potential for classroom use and reading advisory.

They should also invest in relationships with librarians and organizations such as NCTE and ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) that can help them build
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capacity to discuss and recommend books, evaluate literature, remain current, and discover new ways to teach children’s and young adult literature effectively.

2. Be readers.
Teachers who are engaged readers do a better job of engaging students as readers. According to Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999), “perhaps the most influential teacher behavior to influence students’ literacy development is personal reading, both in and out of school” (p. 81). Teachers should commit to leading literate lives and becoming connected to reading communities—whether in person or through social media—that support them as readers and literacy professionals. Teachers should understand the value of different modes and platforms for reading (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015) and build their capacity to read with a critical, discerning eye (Newkirk, 2011).

3. Affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy.
In alignment with NCTE’s Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children’s and Young Adult Books (2015), NCTE challenges teachers and teacher educators to assume a transformative activist stance (Stetsenko, 2016) that supports a future of equality for all youth by engaging students with diverse books, which offer readers what scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) calls windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. It is essential that youth have access to books in which they can see themselves and engage with the lives of others (see, for example, platforms created by the current and former National Ambassadors for Young People’s Literature, including Jacqueline Woodson, Gene Luen Yang, and Walter Dean Myers). NCTE believes that books help readers transform their lives and expand their visions of the world.

Nevertheless, there is a dearth of diverse books for youth in the United States as seen in yearly statistics about trends in multicultural children’s book publishing prepared by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #ReadInColor social media campaigns have illuminated the paucity of diverse books in the marketplace. Although the CCBC recently observed that children’s picture books feature an increased number of characters with “brown skin . . . of unspecified race or ethnicity, with no visible culturally specific markers in either the story or the art,” the CCBC questions whether books with racially ambiguous characters provide actual windows, mirrors, and sliding doors for today’s readers (Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, & Tyner, 2018, n.p.). NCTE joins the CCBC in urging educators to not only advocate for more authentically diverse children’s and young adult books from US publishers, but also to support authors, illustrators, publishers, and booksellers whose work represents multiple perspectives and cultural diversity in the lives of all children.

In addition to being advocates and supporters of diverse literature for youth, educators who assume a transformative activist stance must build their capacities for discernment and critical evaluation so they are prepared to choose children’s and YA books wisely and strategically from the books available to them. Simply because a book features diverse
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characters does not mean that the book endorses equality and/or cultural understanding (Apol, Sakuma, Reynolds, & Rop, 2003; Dávila, 2012). For example, some popular works of contemporary, “multicultural” realistic fiction privilege the assumption that all residents of the United States should embrace dominant mainstream culture [e.g., My Name is Yoon (Recorvitis, 2003); One Green Apple (Bunting, 2006)]. Some of these books reinforce assimilation social narratives (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010) and/or endorse monocultural language and identity (Ghiso & Campano, 2013). Educators and students should collectively cultivate critical literacy practices to critique the social narratives that are endorsed by the books they select (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2012; Morrell, 2007) and talk back to the literature (Enciso, 1997).

Educators who affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy as part of a transformative activist stance recognize that they are always learning and expanding their capacities for transformation. They are open to guiding difficult discussions about inequality with students and are willing to tolerate the possibilities of “wobbling” while they explore uncharted territories with students (e.g., Fecho, 2005; Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015). They recognize that children’s books are political (Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 1992) and are the artifacts of the authors’, illustrators’, and/or publishers’ views of the world (Willis & Harris, 2003) and/or US history (Thomas, Reese, & Horning, 2016). Moreover, these educators follow national conversations via media and blogs about diverse books, especially related to issues of power and representation (e.g., Reading While White; American Indians in Children’s Books).

4. Use appropriate pedagogy.
Teaching children’s and young adult literature is about more than getting students to fall in love with reading. Preservice teachers also need to learn appropriate and effective strategies for helping students find books that will engage them as readers and as participants in critical, significant conversations about their lives (NCTE, 2006; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). This requires a deep knowledge of excellent books and the willingness to carefully curate a classroom library that provides appropriate choices for all students (Crisp, Knezek, Quinn, Bingham, Girardeau, & Starks, 2016; NCTE, 2017). Preservice teachers also need to know evidence-based strategies for supporting student knowledge of literary crafting—that is, how authors develop characters, construct plots, and employ other literary elements to create an exemplary work. Examining literary craft does not mean that the focus is on dissecting a book’s structure or meaning. Rather, teachers should be skilled at helping students develop a common language for determining what makes a book excellent literature. Finally, teachers need to know how to advocate for the freedom and autonomy to create classrooms that support research-based pedagogical strategies for teaching children’s and young adult literature (Mathis et al., 2014; NCTE Children’s Literature Assembly, 2004).
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What is the first unit you taught for each of your classes this year? How did that unit fit into the design for the overall course? When we design courses, we typically think about units based on a whole-class focal text (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*), overarching theme (e.g., What does it mean to be an American?), or standards (e.g., fulfilling a Common Core State Standard about writing arguments with supportive claims). In this book, I seek to disrupt the traditional ways in which we design courses to foster more ethical, community-based approaches to curricular design and instruction, to allow students to become the designers of their course experiences in ways that are meaningful to their lives and their communities.

Our classrooms are not authentically student-centered spaces when we, the teachers, design unit plans before we meet our students. Students are not centered in instruction if they walk into a school or a classroom that is already built for them. This text offers approaches that position our students as the architects of their own learning, as we learn alongside them. Not doing so results in impoverished discourse that isn’t considering student voice and isn’t situated
within local communities and the global context. I have intentionally included the voices of middle and high school teachers who work in our teacher and librarian communities and are doing this work of centering students as architects of their learning, engaging students as partners in their communities. Their course design choices position students as critically conscious agents and motivated citizens who are invited to sit at the decision-making table of their own education and encouraged to think about how this table can invite others from their community in conversation.

Rethinking Text-Based Practices

I focus on young adult literature specifically in this text because of its dynamic, contemporary applications and its ability to offer classroom communities powerful, relevant opportunities to engage in a co-constructed course design process that centers students’ lives and real-world issues. Canonical texts (along with often accompanying traditional pedagogical approaches) simply aren’t working in schools. For a variety of historical, societal, and systemic reasons, certain titles are valued highly in the culture of most US schools—to the point that they drive course design and instruction. In a typical classroom, a yearlong plan for American Literature begins with the texts first: *The Crucible* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Great Gatsby* or *The Catcher in the Rye* or [insert canonical text here]. Or ninth grade revolves around reading *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Odyssey* or [insert canonical title here]. Occasionally, in the name of relevance, a more contemporary title makes its way into the mix, yet the texts consistently seem to drive the learning, and units are often designed around a central text.

We know that schools were built to teach and promulgate white, Protestant beliefs (Goldstein, 2015), and critical scholars and theorists have long claimed there is a hidden curriculum that serves to reproduce inequities in schools and society (see, for instance, Apple, 1971, 1980). It’s been over forty years since some of these texts exposing the hidden curriculum were published, yet the canonical texts we use in classrooms are the same books (sometimes literally the exact same books) as those used in our (grand)parents’ classrooms.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Classrooms should be just as dynamic as the world around us. We have to acknowledge that we exist in spaces that were not designed to support all students, but that doesn’t mean we can’t work with students to intentionally interrupt and disrupt hegemonic structures.

Classic texts are not typically relevant or engaging for our students, which is not surprising since they were never intended to be read and appreciated by teens. In other words, we are teaching texts that weren’t written for our students. Conversations with students repeatedly reveal that, even when these titles are assigned,
they are not regularly read. In fact, a good portion of our students (one in three twelfth graders in one study) report that they don’t read at all (Twenge et al., 2019). (Most of those surveyed are likely thinking about reading in reference to book-length texts, which is a more traditional conception of reading . . . but that’s a topic for another book.) Although many variables likely contribute to the fact that a sizeable number of students don’t read, we have to recognize that some of the major contributions to this disappointing statistic are not only the texts we’re assigning but also the ways we’re approaching reading in schools—how we design courses, select texts, and think about literacy. We seek to create lifelong readers, yet we often focus more on the texts than we do on the readers. If students are not even reading the texts we assign (a looming turquoise giraffe in the room), then the text-centered, canonical-worshipping focus in many English language arts classrooms is obviously not working. The student who simply can’t go to college without having read *The Great Gatsby*? Most likely, the student never even read the book when we assigned it.

In acknowledgment of this issue, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has published the position statement *Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2018; the statement is reprinted in full in the front matter), which calls for more equitable approaches to text selection, instruction, and curriculum by introducing texts and instructional practices that allow adolescents to experience “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” through their reading (Bishop, 1990). With more diverse texts, students can see aspects and reflections of themselves and their own worlds, look into worlds unfamiliar to them, and step into the worlds that authors create. Stephanie Toliver (2021) recently expanded on Bishop’s metaphor by calling for “telescopes.” She writes, “Through telescopes, children—especially those whose access to futures and fantasies has been distorted by violence and oppression—will be able to see that those futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be” (p. 30). Having access to diverse texts gives students opportunities to explore their own worlds, explore other worlds, and imagine futures as they connect to their own realities.

**Why YA Literature?**

Before delving into how we can co-design courses with students, I want to share more about why young adult literature is so central to this approach. Although I recognize that texts should be one of the last elements of the course design process (we should first consider enduring understandings, essential questions, and assessment), the right texts can naturally inspire meaningful course design. YA literature in particular offers powerful opportunities for co-designed courses because it often
forwards topics and social issues that are meaningful to students’ lives, communities, and world. It offers opportunities for centering community within the classroom and leveraging community outside of the classroom.

Traditionally, the intended audience for young adult literature is adolescents in the secondary grades, or ages twelve to eighteen (Crowe, 1998). Since the inception of the field, however, the definition of young adults has expanded in both directions, to an age as low as ten and as high as twenty-five. Partly, this is because publishers might be stretching the target audience demographic to increase sales. In addition, due to the publication of books in the 1990s that were not easily classified and could serve as “crossovers” into adult fiction, the age boundaries extended even further (Cart, 2001, p. 95). Some researchers limit the category of YA titles to those books originally intended for an adolescent audience, but the issue is more complex than that: many preteens and teens are drawn to contemporary adult titles, and not all YA authors set out to write for this age of reader (Stephens, 2007). Although for convenience and a common understanding I am operating here under the traditional concept of a YA audience, we must acknowledge there are readers younger than twelve and older than eighteen who are drawn to YA literature, you and me included. Thinking about the age span for YA literature is important, though, because there is value in connecting students to books that feature protagonists who are similar to them in age. As readers inhabit worlds that reflect shared experiences or times in life, an iterative process of looking in to look out is set into motion.

Those who regularly read young adult literature understand that it holds the same potential for literary analysis as the best of adult literature and features complex, literary themes comparable to those revered in canonical texts. It offers opportunities for students to respond just as deeply and critically to strong YA literature as with classic literature (Buehler, 2016; Groenke & Scherff, 2010). Just because books are enjoyable or accessible to readers doesn’t mean their content is neither difficult nor challenging (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Many YA books are indeed complex, and they have the advantage of offering both an accessibility that canonical literature often fails to provide (Brown & Mitchell, 2014) and the ability to “spark personal and social transformation” (NCTE 2018). In other words, a canonically based curriculum is not superior academically. Many adults buy novels intended for young adult readers and are pleasantly surprised to learn that these books have universal themes, include complex subject matter, and are genuinely engaging (Benedetti, 2011). Young adult texts can be powerfully transformative and thought-provoking. And as the field is exploding (or has already exploded, given the increasing aisle space dedicated to YA literature in bookstores), the public is beginning to (if it hasn’t already) recognize its merit.
The incorporation of YA literature into the curriculum has the potential to transform classroom communities. The NCTE position statement (2018) reminds us that these books have great power to “affirm lived experience, create empathy, catalyze conversations, and respect the questions, challenges, and emotions of childhood and adolescence” (xii; page numbers map to the statement reprinted in the front matter). The inclusion of YA literature through participatory pedagogical approaches can significantly shape the ways in which we connect readers in English language arts instruction with a variety of communities. Further, for my standardized test–focused audience, the students are actually reading the books, which improves reading skills and supports the development of lifelong readers who approach texts with care and joy.

Young adult literature can be used in the English classroom to foster rich and deep analyses of literary texts in a process that parallels the instruction students experience through a classics-based curriculum. By reading and reflecting on a YA title, students can, for instance, examine theme and character and the arc of the story, define an author’s audience and purpose, and evaluate how well figurative language, narrative structure, and symbolic reference create particular effects, just as they would in response to any other text. Because the field offers educators high-quality titles that attend to matters of consequence for preteen and teen readers, using these engaging texts to teach analytical skills has the potential to make lessons and assessment more memorable, authentic, and meaningful. The rewards of this kind of teaching are significant because students interact deeply with text. Young adult literature offers powerful potential for young people, who deserve to engage with texts intended specifically for them.

High-quality YA titles offer ample opportunity to teach analytical skills in the examination of literature. The best YA authors trust in their readers’ willingness and ability to think beyond the words on the page and to craft interpretations grounded in careful examination of technique. If our goal is to help students learn to understand, contemplate, and question what they read, drawing on texts that appeal to these students is more likely to deliver the desired results.

Research repeatedly demonstrates that giving adolescents access to relatable texts that respect the experiences and challenges they will face leads to greater reader investment and interest (Buehler, 2016). From realistic fiction to fantasy, poetry to short stories, humor to mystery, traditional forms to more experimental forms, young adult fiction offers a wide array of reading options. These books allow us to think about how we craft our stories and how we share truth. Inviting readers to self-select at least some texts increases engagement in reading, and the more students read, the better readers they become (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Kelley et al., 2012; Moeller et al., 2011).
In the following chapters, I explore how courses that are co-designed with students and focused on community engagement can leverage young adult literature. The examples of assessment are authentic because they are connected to the students’ school, local, and global communities. Students are positioned as lifelong readers and thinkers, and they are treated as real readers who use texts to engage in meaningful interactions as active members of their communities. These meaningful connections inspired by texts will simultaneously encourage persistence, stamina, and rich meaning-making as students read—much more so than an open-ended test or an essay designed by the teacher.

**Limitations of YA Literature**

Although I believe strongly in the power of young adult literature, I also recognize its limitations: particularly that it is most often written by adults and grounded in assumptions about adolescence/ts. For a deep discussion about this topic, I recommend exploring Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis’s (2015) theory related to the Youth Lens, which will allow you and your students to scrutinize how adolescence/ts are portrayed in young adult literature. When we do use YA lit in our classrooms, it’s important to analyze how adolescence/ts are represented, what the dominant ideas about adolescence are, and the ways in which the text reinforces and/or subverts these ideas (p. 511).

Ideally, we would be able to feature texts written for adolescents by adolescents in our classrooms. Students would design their learning experiences using texts written by other teens who are able to share experiences and perspectives. However, students can work toward subverting the reality that most YA books are written by adults, both by using the Youth Lens to analyze texts and elevating and amplifying their own and one another’s voices in their practice. They can consider how YA literature, as a tool, comes with its own limitations.

As a theory, the Youth Lens aligns in many ways with the major thrust of this book as I work to complicate assumptions about adolescents’ place in the course design process and trust them to guide their own educational experiences. Through this empowerment and liberation from traditional curricula, they might choose to critique the dominant ways in which they are positioned, first in young adult literature and then within schools and other institutions.

**It’s Bigger Than Texts: Well-Read Students, Well-Informed Acts as Community Members**

Offering a wide selection of texts can be transformative for students, but we must also consider how we are teaching these texts. Young adult texts shouldn’t, for instance, be relegated to classroom libraries or taught in ways that perpetuate ste-
reotypes. The NCTE position statement (2018) addresses issues critical to education—not just how we prepare to integrate YA lit but also how we think about the skills and strategies we value and the ways we “affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy” (xv). Which texts we are using is an important consideration, but the pedagogical strategies and approaches we implement require perhaps a more critical conversation.

But before we can even think about which texts we are using or the pedagogical approaches to instruction, we must first consider the epistemologies that inform how we view teaching and schools and how we demonstrate our trust in students to be agents of their own learning experiences. The ways we think about how knowledge is produced in classrooms and our framing of education, thinking, and learning drive everything we do as teachers, including our text selection processes and pedagogical approaches. If we believe that young adult literature is a meaningful factor that can engage students in reading and improving their reading habits, practices, and/or skills and allow for connections with our school, local, and global communities, we must first think about how our classrooms and courses are designed to center students’ and communities’ thinking, interests, and needs before we even think about which specific texts we will use. So let’s pause to consider how our epistemological beliefs can guide us to leverage student voices, expertise, experiences, and interests in order to position them as knowledge producers who have a part to play in the course design process.

Rethinking Conceptions of Community and Inquiry in the Classroom

As a child, I quickly came to understand that schools were not aligned with my own cultural beliefs and lifeways. My community and relatives valued consensus building, a concept that is largely ignored in the ways schools are structured and courses are designed. In my years as a teacher, I have worked to imagine how schools and classrooms could be consensus-building spaces in which student and community interests are central to course design.

Here’s what grounds my own teaching: Students aren’t empty piggy banks to be filled with the teachers’ coins of knowledge through lectures and teacher-directed instruction (Freire, 2000). Engaged learning requires active participation in social communities and a focus on maximizing our learning about ourselves, in community and with community. For us as educators to truly integrate students’ funds of knowledge into our classrooms (Moll et al., 1992), we must design courses with students, and problem-posing inquiry should be at the forefront of curricular design (Freire, 2000). In other words, classrooms committed to engagement with school, local, and global communities must place students’ funds of knowledge, passions, interests, and goals at the center of course design. Without a co-designed
format, too often we are focused on our own personal interests and goals rather than those of our students.

Community shouldn’t merely be the result or end goal of a valued class experience—community should exist as action. It should be repositioned as a verb—an actively driving principle that influences everything that occurs in a classroom. Students shouldn’t merely be heard in the process—they should be trusted as curriculum designers and instructional architects. One of the epistemological perspectives that drives my thinking is Wenger’s (1999) conception of communities of practice. Wenger reminds us that, although we are social beings, classrooms and schools are currently designed under the assumption that we learn best as individuals rather than in community and through collaboration. The knowledge taught in schools too often seems to exist as pieces of information that we store in our individual brains. A “smart” individual is one who can spew back Jeopardy-style facts as disconnected bits of information. When we examine a curriculum, these bits and pieces of knowledge are divided into disparate instructional units or matched with standards to be housed among instructional units.

These assumptions, Wenger (1999) points out, are then accompanied with behavioral-based grading systems and classroom management strategies that attempt to remove distractions from a student’s individual intake of information. High-stakes tests, which currently matter most in the vast majority of districts, are individualized, proctored, and silent, and in most testing situations, collaboration is penalized as cheating.

Even when we consider building communities in classrooms, we usually think about how community emerges as the result or at the end of a powerful learning space, rather than positioning community as the starting place for course design. We might, for example, see some echoes of Wenger’s communities of practice dotting classrooms in end-of-semester group or civic engagement projects. In contrast, I envision secondary English classroom communities of practice differently—as privileged at the very beginning of a school experience in both course design and structures. I envision classroom spaces where we trust students to craft their curriculum from the very first day.

But I want to step back for a moment to really define and explain communities of practice and connect the concept to classrooms. A community of practice is a group of people who seek to deepen their understanding, knowledge, and expertise about a shared concern, problem, or passion. More specifically, they meet on an ongoing basis to hold discussions, share information and aspirations, explore ideas, and offer insight and advice (Wenger et al., 2002). We see and participate in communities all the time, but not all of them can be classified as communities of practice. As Wenger (1999) describes, a neighborhood is a community but not (typically) a community of practice. Or sometimes individuals come together briefly or
temporarily to draft a document, as practice, but they are not a community. A true community of practice is a group of people who engage in both participation and reification (practice).

Communities of practice are not a new concept to the literacy space. For instance, Skerrett et al. (2018) used Wenger's conception of communities of practice to identify and theorize professional learning opportunities and professional development for their teacher participants that “promoted or constrained their development as equity-oriented teachers” (p. 120). Here, I apply the theory not to teachers, but instead to the group of students in a classroom setting.

Each member of the community brings different experiences from previous settings and different values, so everyone doesn’t have to hold identical ideals; instead, each member brings a set of experiences that help work toward “sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (Wenger, 1999, p. 45). A community of practice evolves with each shared pursuit. Students find mutuality with one another and are also able to recognize themselves within each other. Participation enables all members of the community to learn, and this learning will change each member of the community. The experience of community alone can allow for learning beyond what might be expected in a particular setting—in other words, students might learn literacy skills, as expected, but they might also gain knowledge about how to be stronger activists and how to engage more powerfully in their communities.

As a community of practice engages in participation, it is also critical to their purpose and membership that they engage in reification, or practice (Wenger, 1999). A classroom isn’t a community of practice if students are just forming positive relationships, encouraging each other, and building bridges together. Their work must extend beyond the classroom. The reification process might include “making, designing, representing, naming, encoding and describing as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding and recasting” (Wenger, 1999, pp. 58–59). There must be a balance—community members must have time to “share experience and interactive negotiation” (p. 65) (participation), but they must also produce artifacts in some form to engage with the world outside of the classroom and situate themselves within authentic spaces (reification). A classroom community of practice can’t just hang out and discuss and make meaning together, and alternatively, they can’t be solely focused on external output. Both participation and reification must occur and be valued. In Chapters 3 and 4, I offer examples from real classrooms that demonstrate participation, reification, and the ways in which the two interact.

Communities of practice concepts are parallel to contemporary, equity-oriented, youth-centered, and community-centered theories and approaches within education, such as youth participatory action research (see, for instance,
Cammarota & Fine, 2008; McIntyre, 2000) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017, appendix). By a strict definition of Wenger’s concept, true communities of practice would loop within the school, as some former students would continue in the community when new members were integrated in the school. In the real world, however, school semesters are typically divided into distinct points of time and the school year is traditionally nine months long. Therefore, although it would be powerful to design a school that breaks away from the traditional semester structure to support a true definition of an evolving, more indefinite community of practice, in this book I share approaches that are a bit closer to our current reality. The major goal of this approach—purposeful spaces for participation and reification—is the core of this book, mining the pedagogical opportunities of connected, student-designed spaces.

What to Expect in This Book
This book is designed to move away from teacher-directed curricula and instead move toward curricular design that is community-based and co-facilitated with students. It includes approaches that I and other teachers have used to frame these discussions with students in order to develop community-based, student-generated classroom design. We use young adult literature as a potential tool (but not a magic ticket) for engaging in social issues and designing experiences and practice that create and leverage community. Chapter 2 offers further background on communities of practice and provides a heuristic for enacting a co-designed community of practice model. Specifically, I outline the general steps for building a community of practice: developing a domain, building and maintaining a community, and establishing practice. The concepts of this chapter are then threaded through the remaining chapters with specific classroom examples.

Chapters 3 and 4 respond directly to the NCTE (2018) position statement’s call for teachers to use appropriate pedagogy. Both describe explicitly how the ideas in Chapter 2 might be enacted in the classroom—through student-designed, co-generated communities of practice. In Chapter 3, I use the metaphor of rattling a cage to think about how we might break down the bars of existing, often hegemonic and rigid course structures to infuse young adult literature into existing courses. This chapter attends to the curricular and organizational limitations often found in schools and provides multiple models of how we can co-generate spaces and how YA literature might be incorporated into all communities—regardless of the setting in which you and your students work. Chapter 4 uses the metaphor of hands to describe how students and others can help harness the potential of young adult literature to (re)design a stand-alone course. This chapter posits that course design and instruction should include and involve students to allow for critical free-
dom and voice. I share several approaches to thinking about these courses, along with ideas that are adaptable to both teacher and student needs. I detail the process from start to finish, beginning with a description of how to draft a course proposal and how to introduce and justify the idea to colleagues and leaders within a school community. Additionally, I address logistical concerns that come with the creation of a new course, such as getting the necessary books and other materials, setting up the classroom and classroom library, soliciting students for the course, and assessing student progress.

In Chapter 5, I offer suggestions for how we can lead literate lives and join the community of readers in our classrooms. Included are suggestions about how to better know the literature and what’s behind the books (e.g., scholarship, reviews) and how to connect with authors, colleagues, and others in the field. With this knowledge, we can engage in the participatory practices described in this chapter to create community in our classrooms and leverage community locally, globally, and with technology.

Finally, the annotated bibliography offers suggestions of texts that have framed my own thinking and that I recommend if you’re interested in gathering a holistic conception of how, why, and what we teach and with which framings, approaches, and practices we might use as we envision ourselves as co-designers with students. I recommend sharing these resources with students, too, as they engage in course design. This book cannot exist alone, and it exists only because of the work of others who came before me. And for their work, I am grateful.