

Inquiry For Social Responsibility Using Young Adult Literature + Prosocial Twists

Adapted from sources cited and prosocial twists suggested by Beth Breneman, Ph.D., Consultant (ret.), California Department of Education; recommended for grades seven through twelve.

Inquiry-based teaching is a broad approach in which students and their teacher—together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences—grapple with complex questions which have no one right answer and create the “living curriculum” as a true community of learners.

Two prosocial twists that are consistent with the theory of inquiry-based teaching involve inviting students to: 1) provide input into classroom content and processes as a way of gathering additional ideas for strengthening the curriculum, and 2) suggest some criteria for evaluating their projects.

Goals

1. Give students opportunities to read literature for pleasure, develop intellectual curiosity,

think for themselves, listen to multiple perspectives, and become engaged in important issues.

2. Help students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to participate in a democracy.

3. Help students see that inside provocative books are stories that can help us better understand ourselves—who we are and who we want to become.

Teacher Preparation

1. Consider: 1) Berman’s (1997) concise definition of social responsibility: “A personal investment in the well-being of people and the planet,” and 2) the following themes with brief commentaries--as content proposed by Wolk (2009) as part of teaching for social responsibility:

Caring and Empathy

“Caring” should be the foundation of our curriculums, including caring for ideas, friends, family, the earth and its ecosystems, human-made objects, and “strangers and distant others” (Noddings, 1991). The very heart of teaching for social

responsibility is teaching for caring.

Social Problems and Social Justice

Living a socially responsible life means understanding and acting to improve the many problems confronting the United States, especially involving culture, gender, economic class, and sexual orientation. Teaching for social responsibility means being honest about our problems and injustices, and literature can help us to confront these truths.

Government and the Constitution

Social responsibility requires knowledge and understanding of the U.S. Constitution and government systems (as well as those in other countries). Young adult literature can bring constitutional issues—and the lack of constitutional rights—to life.

Power and Propaganda

Teaching about power is the fundamental aspect of teaching for critical

literacy: who has power and who is denied it; how is power used and how is it abused. Young adult fiction can be a powerful way to teach for critical literacy. Social Responsibility not only requires an understanding of the abuse of power but also commands the consciousness to see it and the ethical commitment to stop it.

Social Imagination

The capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our society, on the streets where we live, and in our schools is social imagination. Teaching for social imagination is helping students to question the world we have and envision a better one.

Historical Consciousness and Historical Empathy

Historical consciousness involves knowing what people did in the past, and historical empathy involves understanding why they did it. Knowledge of the past should help shape our opinions in the present and

our vision of the future. Citizens cannot make informed and critical decisions on civic matters without an understanding of past people and events.

Multicultural Community

Multicultural education encourages interest in many cultures rather than only a single mainstream culture and should tap into the political and moral issues of race and culture in the United States and around the world—going beyond superficial teaching about various cultures' holidays. The growing body of young adult literature with multicultural themes opens up bold opportunities to engage students in exploring issues of culture and prejudice.

Global Awareness

Global awareness is knowledge about the world beyond U. S. borders. Good books, either as part of literature curriculum or integrated into the social sciences, help to humanize other countries and cultures for young Americans and connect across oceans.

War, Peace, and Nonviolence

Informed decisions on going to war cannot be made without critical understandings of past wars and the devastating psychologies of war. Nonviolence is the practice of being harmless to self and others and comes from the belief that you do not have to hurt people, animals, or the environment. There is growing attention for using literature to help young adults investigate violence and war and to inspire students to promote peace.

Environmental Literacy

Social responsibility requires consciousness of environmental issues and the ability to critique the American way of life in terms of its effects on the environment, people, and wildlife. Beyond simply studying recycling and pollution, this would include exploring issues such as: energy, natural resources, and rampant consumerism.

2. Young adult books are books marketed to adolescents, roughly between the ages of 12 and 17

or 18, and usually feature characters in that age range. Begin by identifying a book drawn from young adult literature from which a set of inquiry questions can be derived as the basis for reading and teaching; or begin with several inquiry questions that students connect to one or more books. For examples of inquiry questions, see Instructional Procedures 2. For examples of books that can be used to provoke discussions involving social responsibility, see Annotated Young Adult Literature by Themes beginning on page 5 of this document.

3. Identify other shorter texts that connect to the book and to questions likely to be under investigation. These can be written texts such as newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, short stories, and poetry or unwritten “texts,” such as artwork, photographs, music, and films (Ibid., 666).

Instructional Procedures

1. Provide students with the opportunity to read wonderful stories drawn from young adult literature. Give students the necessary space to interact and make connections with the text in their unique ways.

2. Move beyond simple plot-based comprehension questions and ask students questions that do not have single correct answers, such as: Where is the line between loyalty to friends and responsibility to society? How do race, culture, and class affect our criminal justice system? Where is the line between freedom and security?

3. Have students address these questions in journal writing or whole-class or small-group discussions.

4. Create mini-lessons on vital, related background knowledge, such as facts about state juvenile justice systems that are relevant to the literary selection and discussion.

5. As the novel is taught through inquiry, engage students in a variety of small-group activities, including drama and role-play. Such activities are done in an hour or less and involve some form of discussion and debate.

6. Give students authentic writing assignments in response to the book as they read it (e.g., essays, letters, speeches, poetry, and monologues) that will serve as a way for them to develop new understandings as they confront political and moral complexities.

7. As students read a book through inquiry, have them interact with other texts that connect to the book and to questions under investigation. These can be written texts such as newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, short stories, and poetry or unwritten “texts,” such as artwork, photographs, music, and films.

8. Once students finish reading a book, have them delve into a final inquiry project. Create project ideas that are authentic and help students take their reading of the book into their own lives and out into the real world. *Example:* In small groups, survey people on their knowledge and opinions of our criminal justice system. Create graphs showing the results of your survey and include a written response by each group member (1-8, *Ibid.*, 670-672).

Prosocial Twists

1. Give students opportunities to provide 1) their thoughts and feelings about the effectiveness of classroom content and processes and 2) ideas for improvement and revision. This on-going process can be a powerful way to strengthen the curriculum.

2. Have students identify some or all criteria for evaluating their final inquiry (and other) projects.

Annotated Young Adult Literature by Themes

The following are examples of books suggested and annotated by Wolk (*Ibid.*, 666-673) from young adult literature and organized by his proposed themes. Collectively these represent a substantive body of literature that can be used to provoke discussions about themes and other questions pertaining to social responsibility.

Caring and Empathy

- Cole, B. (1987). *The Goats*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A boy and girl away at camp are chosen to be the “goats,” stripped naked, and stranded on an island by campmates.

- Fleischman, P. (1998). *Whirligig*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

After 15-year-old Brett is embarrassed at a party and purposely drives into another car, killing the teenage driver, he agrees to

travel the country to build four whirligigs in the girl's memory.

- Trueman, T. (2000). *Stuck in Neutral*. New York: HarperTempest.

This story is told from the perspective of a boy with severe cerebral palsy, who cannot move a single muscle to communicate, but his mind is perfect.

Social Problems and Social Justice

- Alexie, S. (2007). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown.

This is an autobiographical novel of 15-year-old Junior trying to cope with the modern plight on his Spokane Indian Reservation.

- Soto, G. (1997). *Buried Onions*. New York: Harper Collins.

Buried Onions tells the story of 19-year-old Eddie, a Mexican American struggling to find a way out of the

hopelessness of his barrio in California.

- Volponi, P. (2005). *Black and White*. New York: Speak.

Best friends Marcus, African American, and Eddie, Caucasian, are basketball stars. The two participate in a crime, but only Marcus is arrested, leaving both with tough decisions.

- Wolff, V.E. (1993). *Make Lemonade*. New York: Scholastic.

In *Make Lemonade* the lives of two urban teenagers, Jolly and LaVaughn, become entangled when LaVaughn becomes the babysitter for Jolly's young children.

Government and the Constitution

- Compestine, Y.C. (2007). *Revolution is Not a Dinner Party*. New York: Henry Holt.

This autobiographical novel tells the story of Ling, a young girl growing up in China

during the Cultural Revolution.

- Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.

Satrapi's graphic memoir is her story of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution.

- Krisher, T. (1997). *Spite Fences*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

Spite Fences—a book that explores when the United States ignored its own Constitution and had systemic racism—is the story of a 13-year-old Caucasian girl in Georgia in 1960 who must confront the brutality of racism and her own abusive mother.

Power and Propaganda

- Chotjewitz, D. (2005). *Daniel Half Human*. New York: Simon Pulse.

In *Daniel Half Human* two 15-year-old German boys are enamored with Hitler until one of them is told his mother is Jewish.

- Cushman, K. (2006). *The Loud Silence of*

Francine Green. New York: Clarion.

This involves two girls—one politically outspoken and the other silent—who become best friends during the “red scare” of McCarthyism.

- Anderson, M. T. (2002). *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

Feed is set in the future when people have microchips implanted in their brains so they receive media—the “feed”—literally into their heads.

Social Imagination

- Westerfeld, S. (2005). *Uglies*. New York: Simon Pulse.

In the popular *Uglies* teenagers get surgery when they turn 16 to transform them from an “ugly” into a “pretty,” but when 15-year-old Tally meets Shay, she sees the ugly side of being “pretty.”

- Reeve, P. (2001). *Mortal Engines*. New York: HarperCollins

The Hungry City quartet of books begins with *Mortal Engines* when, in the distant future, entire cities practice “Municipal Darwinism,”—where they roam the land like colossal tractors, eating other cities.

- DuPrau, J. (2003). *The City of Ember*. New York: Random House.

The City of Ember takes place in a dying city underground that no longer knows there is an above ground world, but two characters, Leena and Dune, believe there is a way out of Ember.

- Hautman, P. (2006). *Rash*. New York: Simon Pulse.

This dystopian novel takes place in 2076 in the USSA (the United Safer States of America) where anything potentially dangerous (football, French fries, large dogs) have been outlawed and a quarter of the country is in prison.

Historical Consciousness and Historical Empathy

- Engle, M. (2006). *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*. New York: Henry Holt.

The brutality of slavery--and the passionate force of poetry—is explored in *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, a biography (written in verse) about Juan Francisco Manzano.

- Sharenow, R. (2007). *My Mother the Cheerleader*. New York: HarperCollins.

This novel is about 13-year-old Louise, whose mother is one of the “cheerleaders” who stands outside the school of Ruby Bridges (one of the first African-American students to attend an integrated U.S. school) each day, screaming racist epithets.

- Alvarez, J. (2002). *Before We Were Free*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

In Before We Were Free a family is involved in a plan to topple the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic in the 1960’s.

- Mikaelson, B. (2004). *Tree Girl*. New York: HarperTempest.

Tree Girl takes place in Guatemala in the 1980's during the country's devastating civil wars.

Multicultural Community

- Fogelin, A. (2000). *Crossing Jordan*. Atlanta: Peachtree.

Crossing Jordan is about two girls: one African American and the other Caucasian, who become best friends in spite of the Caucasian girl's father's racism.

- Yang, G.L. (2006). *American Born Chinese*. New York: First Second.

This graphic novel tells three stories that connect the themes of cultural identity and intolerance.

- Levithan, D. (2003). *Boy Meets Boy*. New York: Knopf.

Levithan uses magical realism to tell the story of a gay high school boy whose community and school celebrate

homosexuality rather than repress it.

Global Awareness

- Holtwijk, I. (1995). *Asphalt Angels*. Ashville, NC: Front Street.

Asphalt Angels explores the brutal life of the homeless "street children" of Brazil.

- Stratton, A. (2002). *Chandra's Secret*. Toronto: Annick.

In *Chandra's Secret* a girl struggles to deal with the AIDS epidemic in her African country.

- McCormick, P. (2006). *Sold*. New York: Hyperion.

Written in verse, McCormick's *Sold* is about 13-year-old Lakshmi who has been sold into prostitution and taken from her home in India to Nepal.

War, Peace, and Nonviolence

- Vaughan, B. K., & Henrichon, N. (2006). *Pride of Baghdad*. New York: DC Comics.

In this graphic novel the devastation of the war in Iraq and the country's cultural conflicts are told by a group of lions that escaped from the Baghdad Zoo.

- Lawrence, I. (2001). *The Lord of the Nutcracker Men*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

The intoxicating yet destructive power of war is a theme in Lawrence's book, which takes place on the brutal battlefield of World War I as a father writes home to his son about life in the trenches.

- Myers, W.D. (1988). *Fallen Angels*. New York: Point.
- Myers, W.D. (2008). *Sunrise Over Fallujah*. New York: Scholastic.

Myers' *Fallen Angels* takes the reader into the jungle of the Vietnam War and in *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, to the desert of the Iraq War.

- Collins, S. (2008). *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic.

In this book the United States is now called Panem, and the government holds an annual lottery to choose two 12--18-year-olds from each of Panem's 12 districts to participate in a reality television show where the contestants must fight until just one remains.

- Kass, P.M. (2004). *Real Time*. Boston: Graphia.

Real Time tells the simultaneous stories of multiple characters as they converge on a terrorist attack on a bus in Israel.

Environmental Literacy

- Klass, D. (2006). *Firestorm: The Caretaker Trilogy Book 1*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

In *Firestorm* Jack thinks he is a normal high school kid until he finds out he has been sent from 1,000 years in the future to save the earth

from our own environmental destruction.

- Klass, D. (1994). *California Blue*. New York: Scholastic.

This book tells about a high school student living in the U.S. Northwest who discovers a new butterfly species on land owned by the local lumber mill where his father works.

- Tashjian, J. (2001). *The Gospel According to Larry*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

Seventeen-year-old Josh creates an alter ego (Larry) on a website who espouses the dangers of consumerism.

- Bertagna, J. (2008). *Exodus*. New York: Walker.

In Bertagna's *Exodus* it is 2099 and global warming is melting Earth's polar ice caps).

Relevant Common Core State Standards

Visit:

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy> to see the K-12 English language arts standards for various grade levels which correspond by number to the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR). The CCR and grade-specific standards are complements—the former providing broad standards, the latter, additional specificity. (There are additional standards that can be addressed through the use of Inquiry + Prosocial Twists.)

Anchor Standards for Reading: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

R.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

*Anchor Standards for Reading:
Range of Reading and Level of
Text Complexity*

R.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

*Anchor Standards for Speaking
and Listening: Comprehension
& Collaboration*

SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

*Anchor Standards for Speaking
and Listening: Presentation of
Knowledge and Ideas*

SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

References and Further Resources

Wolk, S. (2009). Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility With Young Adult Literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8), 664-673.

Berman, S. (1997). *Children's Social Consciousness and the Development of Social Responsibility*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Noddings, N. (1991) *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wilhelm, J.D. (2007). *Engaging Readers & Writers with Inquiry: Promoting Deep Understandings in Language Arts and the Content Areas with Guiding Questions*. New York: Scholastic.