
Engaging Text for Dynamic Discussion: Student Discussion of The Hunger Games in the Secondary ELA Classroom

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Abstract

This study took place at a sizeable northeastern suburban public high school. The study participants were enrolled in a college credit-bearing textual studies course taught in a high school, replacing a more traditional senior-level English course. The focus of the course was analyzing the role of texts in culture, with challenging theoretical texts as the analytical lens for current popular texts, like The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008). Data consisted of participant observation fieldnotes, student written reflections, student formal papers and practitioner observations and critical reflections. Fieldnotes were collected and transcribed to record student discussion and subsequent teacher reflections. The analysis yielded several categories related to dynamic interactions with texts, both in oral and in written responses, chief among them was evidence of gendered interpretations of the text, a previously unseen depth of analysis, both for fictional and academic texts, extreme fluidity in making connections between texts and a demonstration of ownership and agency with both the texts and the class discussions.
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Adolescent literacy and concerns over skills and shortcomings is arguably a hot topic in the realm of education on all planes, ranging from public, private to government concerns, and many opinions abound over possible solutions and best pedagogical practices. One of the repeating tropes of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010) is to increase student exposure to rigorous, challenging, complex texts, measured qualitatively and quantitatively in literature through complex layers of meaning, complex or unconventional structure, increased use of nonconventional or figurative language, and the exploration of sophisticated cultural and literary themes (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The quick, or rather common and core answer to this increased demand for text complexity is to turn to the canon, to the tried and tested classics of history, ranging from Sophocles to Shakespeare, Twain to Fitzgerald. While these texts certainly rate high on the text complexity scale, are they truly the only answer to supporting and increasing adolescent literacy abilities? As schooling becomes more challenging and sophisticated, so does the literature adolescents are expected to read, and many students are lost, either through lack of interest, ability, or both. One of the many prevailing arguments about how to best help teen readers is to meet them at their current level—with literature designed to meet their motivational, emotional and developmental needs. Young adult literature, an ever-growing genre devoted to literature for and about adolescents, is part of the discussion, yet seemingly is not yet fully embraced in schools by any group other than teens themselves.

Perspectives and Related Literature

This study is conceived through a social constructivist lens, drawing from Vygotsky’s (1978) construct that emphasizes the importance of the social construction of knowledge. Dynamic text discussions prompt more individual meaning-making amongst adolescents, prompting them to focus on their own thoughts and opinions rather than simply anticipating the “right” answer or the response the teacher is looking for (Lapp & Fisher, 2009; Ruzich & Canan, 2010). Further, such discussions engender emotional responses and allow students to make self to text connections that encourage reflection on one’s identity and can provide opportunities for adolescents to explore issues of agency (Polleck, 2010; Smith, 2000; Twomey, 2007; Vyas, 2004).

Arguing that secondary students are ready to become more critical and to examine the historical, social and political framework through which texts are created, Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) advocate teaching young adult novels through the framework of critical literacy in order to help middle and high school students explore their own developing identities, roles, and moral direction. Unlike much traditional literature, contemporary adolescent novels are comprised of a wider array of social and cultural issues, especially race, culture and class, which make these texts more viable vehicles for the guided reflection, discussion and writing that a critical framework requires.
Another recommendation for incorporating engaging literature in the ELA classroom comes from Knickerbocker and Brueggeman (2008), who argue that as postmodern novels become more central in contemporary literature, they have a rightful place in the secondary curriculum through the means of a variety of postmodern adolescent literature. Postmodernism, with its defining themes being those of “distrust and disbelief” is a natural companion to young adult literature and its intended audience, as teens are notoriously suspicious and wary, especially of information that doesn’t fit into their developing worldview and realm of experience (p. 66). Furthermore, the authors argue that a thorough investigation and understanding of the divergent and challenging characteristics of postmodernism will make for an easier transition to understanding other literary time periods and genres. Also, postmodern literature and young adult literature are a natural connection in that they both “engage the ‘multiple literacies’ that are expected to characterize the 21st century” (p. 71).

Bean and Harper (2006) advocate using contemporary young adult literature, especially those works set in sites of international war or conflict, to provide students with an avenue to critically question not only issues of global importance but also of ideological importance, like the true definition and complexities of freedom. Reading these young adult novels through a critical literacy framework allows teachers the opportunity to scaffold critical discussion that moves beyond a traditional discussion of stereotypes and conflict and instead really challenges the historical and social context of the text and the situation it describes, the positioning of both the author and reader, and further questions agency and power as it exists in the text and in the context in which the text is being read and discussed. Using globally positioned young adult texts in this critical manner encourages students to become more involved in questioning the geopolitics of our global society.

Gender and sex, along with all of their attached connotations, expectations and limitations, are an integral part of the adolescent search for identity. Harper (2007) argues that young adult literature, due to its popularity with adolescents and focus on teen issues, is a better starting point for critical discussion of gender expectations and masculinity than traditional canonical texts as adolescent literature allows students a better opportunity to “think through the ways in which masculinity (and indeed femininity) is, and might yet be ‘storied’ and ‘performed’ in texts, and in life” (p. 512). Harper (2007) argues that, “recognizing and acknowledging a diversity of masculinities, including female masculinities, in text and in life challenges norms and expectations associated with traditional masculinity, destabilizing gender hierarchies that limit human potential” (p. 511).

Her study analyzed a selection of contemporary young adult novels featuring female protagonists for their overt and covert portrayal of masculinity as it is displayed by males and females alike. She found that young adult novels, at least the selection that she studied, discuss and in many cases champion alternative or unconventional masculinities, ranging from a rejection of traditional definitions of gender roles to cross-dressing. Thus, the author advocates studying such texts with teens as a way to “open spaces for students to read against the grain of traditional masculinity” (p. 526).

Disrupting traditional curriculum and pedagogy allows both the teachers and students the potential to view the content through a different lens, to engage in a literacy-rich examination of
content by engaging in a shared reading of a text. This purposeful, literacy-focused text selection can be seen as “negotiated-hybridity” (Christianakis, 2011, p. 1154): it meets the literacy needs of the students, the demands of school reform and content demands, and makes cross-curricular connections to language arts, a seemingly successful negotiation. Secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms are the meeting points at which the needs of students and the expectations of external and internal standards (local, state, and national) converge. What better site, then, for an exploration of how students navigate, through reading, writing and discussion, a variety of texts, those championed by the CCSS and those overlooked? The study seeks to explore the connection between engaging texts and dynamic discussion.

**Purpose and Method**

This study is conceptualized as engaged scholarship through teacher research (Christianakis, 2008; Klehr, 2012; Shagoury & Power, 2012) using the author’s classroom as the primary research site. The study took place at a sizeable northeastern suburban public high school (approximately 2,265 students). The school is comprised of predominantly white students, with non-white students making up about 15% of the population. Eighty-three percent of graduating students go on to college (43% go to four-year colleges, 40% go to two-year colleges). The study participants were enrolled in a college credit-bearing textual studies course taught in a high school, replacing a more traditional senior-level English course. The focus of the course was analyzing the role of texts in culture, with challenging theoretical texts, such as selections from Foucault’s (1979) *Discipline and Punish*, or Althusser’s (1971) “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses” as the analytical lens for current popular texts, like films and advertisements. In this study, the anchor text was *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), a bestselling young adult novel set in a futuristic, post-apocalyptic Panem, featuring a debased society in which the government encourages the annual slaughter of children, in the form of the hunger games, as penance for a previous rebellion.

The study centered on the following research questions:

1. What is the connection between engaging texts, defined in this study as contemporary young adult texts, and dynamic discussion in the secondary ELA classroom?
2. How do secondary honors ELA students, enrolled in a college-level course, engage with contemporary Young Adult texts, namely *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins, 2008, 2009, 2010) in conjunction with more traditional academic texts and theories (Althusser, 1971; Foucault, 1979; Hegel, 1977) as evidenced through student-led class discussion?

Data consists of participant observation fieldnotes in the author’s secondary ELA classroom (2 classes, N = 47 students) of discussions centering around Collins’ (2008) young adult novel *The Hunger Games*, student written reflections, student formal papers and practitioner observations and critical reflections. Fieldnotes were collected and transcribed to record student discussion and subsequent teacher reflections. The data was gathered and analyzed for common themes, outstanding and underlying characteristics, then coded using discourse and content analysis into themes reflective of both the topics and characteristics of the discussion and subsequent writing. The topical codes included discussion of romance or love in the text, application of course theories (psychoanalytic theory, Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, the
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panopticon), and real world/cross-curricular application either to other subjects in school or to the world outside of school. The characteristic codes included student interaction, both with each other in the discussion and interaction with the text in writing, demonstration of agency, student engagement and fluidity of discussion and/or writing.

Findings

The analysis yielded several categories related to dynamic interactions with texts, both in oral and in written responses, chief among them was evidence of gendered interpretations of the text, a previously unseen depth of analysis, both for fictional and academic texts, extreme fluidity in making connections between texts and a demonstration of ownership and agency with both the texts and the class discussions.

Gendered interpretations

The discussion yielded some significant gendered interpretations—yet another set of ideologies for students to confront. Though it was not the first subject broached in the class dialogue about the text, once the romantic aspects of The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008) was broached, gender lines were drawn reasonably quickly. The consensus among many of the female participants is that the love story (the Team Peeta versus Team Gale, the central romantic choice of the text) was a necessary aspect of the series. While many female participants acknowledged that the love story made the text more appealing overall, several were quite adamant that the text acknowledges the female “desire to be desired,” making Peeta, and his love for Katniss, that much more endearing.

The general male perspective was that the romantic aspects of the story were far from essential, and many expressed a preference for having the two star-crossed lovers simply be pitted against each other, especially given the violent overtones of the novel, effectively ending any romantic intentions. Interestingly though, there was also a clear division amongst males who felt that the “author did a poor job” in creating the love story, for it was “painfully obvious” that Peeta’s love, however true, was unrequited, while others argued that, like Katniss, they too were unsure of Peeta’s true intentions, which “was pretty cool.”

While the differing perspectives were by no means clearly divided on the basis of gender alone, there were moments in the discussion that when a “female” reading of the text was pitted against a “male” one, many students who hadn’t spoken up previously were suddenly vocal, seemingly urged on by the safety in numbers concept, wanting to champion their view. Further, given the increased volume of discussion when gendered perspectives arose, both in number of speakers entering the conversation and in the actual volume of noise generated as students talked over one another, laughed, and engaged in small side conversations, the gendered perspectives garnered the most engaged participation in discussion.

Increased Depth of Analysis

In their application of theory, the students demonstrated a previously unseen depth of analysis, both for fictional and academic texts. Their use of key academic vocabulary from the
text was one of the best indicators of their nuanced understanding as the students seamlessly integrated the theoretical terms from their challenging texts, applying them both to the shared young adult text (*The Hunger Games*) and to real world examples. Taking on Althusser’s conception of what it means to be a “subject,” and to experience “subjectivity” in her writing, Kate aptly observes that “Gale and Katniss, of course, understood this from the beginning, it was woven into their subjectivity, they didn’t help the fleeing girl because they knew the consequences – *that* is created out of a social context, a paralyzing social fear, out of a culture, not out of an individual belief, and that’s what makes it subjectivity.” Likewise, during the class discussion, Luke asserts that Kantiss and Peeta “are dually subjects and objects – subject to the power of the capital, but subjects with identities that are spotlighted by the capital through the parades and interviews.”

In conjunction with subjectivity, the students also read a variety of core psychoanalytical texts, especially from Freud and Lacan. Their psychoanalytic criticism of *The Hunger Games* is clear in their use of the term “unconscious,” or other related terminology, such as this observation about Peeta’s unique approach to the Hunger Games: “Peeta says he doesn't want to lose his identity, his superego speaking – even when he had to kill to stay alive, he can’t change his moral values.” While discussing the range of power present in the novel, Laura asserts that, Katniss had power in her family, power to defy the rules of her district, she goes into the games knowing she has that power/potential to break the rules – unconsciously. She has the desire for power – connected to Lacan – which is why she hunts and provides for her family, and this desire for power prompts her to volunteer and take Prim’s place.

Nodding in agreement, Steve adds that “Katniss inspires the desire/possibility for rebellion in others – her unconscious realizes she has some power,” a clear demonstration of a true psychoanalytical critique that goes far beyond a simple understanding of the plot of the novel and its use of characterization.

The most repeated theoretical lens through which the students analyzed *The Hunger Games* was that of the “panopticon,” demonstrating a clear understanding of Althusser’s (1979) chapter from *Discipline and Punish*. Kate again offers that

Our individuality is stripped away from us, not only by the idea of a panopticon but by the virtue of subjectivity itself. We are not one of a kind, but one of a million who share the same culture, the same beliefs, fears, and morals. We are all subject to the same laws, the same judgments, we are all mostly the same at the core, no matter how profusely we deny it. The more strongly we feel the presence of a panopticon, the more clearly we are stripped of our individuality.

Kate’s classmate Steve, however, offers an equally powerful counterargument, demonstrating just as strong, though different-minded application of Althusser.

People cling to privacy in the modern world because they associate it with power over oneself… This fails to account for the power of being observed… it is difficult to objectively state whether the pros outweigh the cons of being under observation, of
existing within a panopticon, but it is equally impossible to reach an objective decision on the topic without considering that there are benefits of being the subject of a gaze. As in *The Hunger Games* the subject of the gaze could easily find that they hold a great deal of power simply by being labeled important enough to be its subject.

Perhaps the most impressive application of theory to the novel, in writing and in discussion, was the frequent reference to the “master/slave dialectic.” Arguably challenging for the average well-read college student, Hegel’s (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit* discusses the power dynamic present in any master and slave relationship. Olivia’s nuanced application of Hegel demonstrates her understanding as she muses, “It’s funny how a small spark can set a whole society on a rebellious fire to take over the people they were once so terrified of.”

Incorporating other psychoanalytic terms as well in her analysis of the end of the first novel, she goes on to explain that

With a handful of berries comes the symbolized realization that there is, in fact, something to be done and the possibility put out that the Capitol may in fact need to be taken over. The suppressed ego of Panem pushes on their conscious masters to receive total control. The struggle for power is endless, but in the end the true master reveals itself: the people.

**Increased Fluidity**

Students demonstrated incredible fluidity in making connections between the central young adult text (*The Hunger Games*, Collins, 2008), the challenging theoretical texts (Althusser, 1971; Foucault, 1979; Hegel, 1977), and real world examples as well, both in discussion and in writing. The introduction to Kate’s paper perhaps reveals this the best:

Think about your secrets. Think about who you tell them to. Think about how mortified you would feel if you weren’t allowed secrets, if every emotion you felt was broadcast on a loudspeaker, a television screen, a marquee – how would that change you? In a way, this is how our society is set up, to remind us that someone is always watching. Why do we cover our mouths with our hands as we whisper a secret to a friend? Why do we feel so threatened by the idea of a security camera when their job is only to ‘keep us safe’? Why do we feel no shame dancing in our room only to turn bright red when we realize our blinds are open and the neighbors might have seen? We all want our privacy because we are afraid of what we will become subject to otherwise, whether it’s shock, imprisonment or ridicule. Our subjectivity is then formed by how freely we give in to these panopticons, how accepting we are of the fact that we are indeed always being watched, and that is how individuality is formed. There is no text that demonstrates this more clearly than *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, a book in which a hierarchy of panopticism changes the subjectivity of its characters.

Just as any discussion naturally has it ebbs and flows, the class seminar discussion spanned a great range, starting with some valid, though reasonably simple analysis, like Aaron’s observation that “Each district is socially separated, almost like the upper, middle and lower classes of today’s current society in America,” and McKenna’s connection that “Today people are subject to a society that finds reality television entertaining, much like the tributes are subject
to a society ruled by the Capitol that finds the Hunger Games entertaining.” This application of theoretical texts, namely Althusser’s (1971) take on ideology, to our current society and to Panem, our futuristic fictional counterpart in Collins’ (2008) *The Hunger Games*, resulted in some increasingly complex assertions as well, including this interjection from Kevin:

> By giving an institution, such as a church or school the power to inject a specific mindset of ideology, immense power is given to them. And because this power is so great, it makes the followers believe that their ideas and beliefs are justified and morally correct, when clearly they’re not. This can be seen in the case of Panem, as civilians are dying of starvation; not being given the necessary requirements to live.

At the end of her paper, Emily takes on the current (and historical) Ideological State Apparatuses of heterosexuality and religion, and the strong interpellative pull they often have on adolescents. Using Katniss as an example of adolescent rebellion, she yields an excellent conclusion,

> Therefore, it is possible for one to have some control in their fate because they are not forced to conform to the ideologies that they are subject to. Despite the fact that a person is born already subject to ideologies, they have the power to go against them. While peer pressure hinders this reality, a person will be the most content when they are cooperating with their inner panopticon and holding the ideologies that they personally wish to hold.

**Engaging texts, Engaged Students**

Student engagement and comfort with the young adult core text fostered willingness to engage with the more demanding theoretical texts, as it gave them a malleable canvas on which to work with challenging ideas. The culminating class discussion was fluid, academic and entirely dynamic, as were the resulting papers. As a result of their comfort with and affinity for *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), the students demonstrated ownership of and engagement with both the texts and the class discussions. In their end-of-unit reflections, many of the students praised the relative ease of reading *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), as it aided their application of the already challenging theoretical texts: “Had it been a ‘higher level’ book, I think I would’ve focused less on the concepts and more on trying to understand the book,” and “because I enjoyed the book, I was much more excited to analyze it.” Several students also admitted to continuing on to read the remaining two books in the series (*Catching Fire*, 2009, *Mockingjay*, 2010), which was proven in class, for when given time to work on their formal papers, more than half the class instead pulled out copies of the sequels from their bags and read intently instead.

> Just as the engaging text led to engaged students, so, too, did student engagement lead to a more dynamic discussion. Students again revealed in their reflections that their enjoyment of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) actually led to their enjoyment of the “complex,” and “interesting” class discussion and even the ever elusive comment for English teachers: “This was honestly the most fun I’ve ever had writing a paper.”

Given the far-reaching nature of the theoretical and thematic concepts from each of the texts in this unit of study, it is no surprise that students’ analysis reached beyond the scope of
English class alone. Using engaging texts to engage students in discussion, to make them active participants in their own learning (teaching students as opposed to “teaching” a book) also has the potential to motivate them to actively critique and discuss their own education outside the ELA classroom. As Steve proudly bragged, “Not only did *The Hunger Games* spawn useful discussion in this class, but also in other classes. In AP European History and Current World classes, we used your use of *The Hunger Games* as the launching point for a discussion of education and how reading (and at what level of books) should play a part in it.”

Likewise, the following list of reflective comments is perhaps the best illustration of the power of a dynamic young adult text in a secondary classroom:

The Hunger Games shows…
- “how having a powerful elite can destroy a country”
- “to stand up for what you believe in”
- “the struggle of poorer people in society”
- “thinking about ideology in *The Hunger Games* helped me to understand how ideology takes its form (through interpellation, ideological state apparatuses etc.) in real life”
- “Ever since *The Hunger Games* I’ve been noticing aspects of panopticism in real life.”
- “*The Hunger Games* is applicable to oppressive regimes in today’s society and attempts to break free from them (i.e. Arab Spring).”
- “It is also an interesting case study in the increased acceptance of violence in media targeted at children and teenagers.”

Cross-curricular connections that the students make themselves allow them to draw on prior knowledge, in and out of school literacies and use this expertise in the classroom to make further meaning. Their expertise is valued in discussion. The text allows for multiple threads – all equally important – instead of being constrained by literary devices or authorial choices in a text.

**Discussion**

These findings suggest the need for students to read engaging texts, that student interest and engagement is a crucial component of dynamic discussion and that engaging texts facilitate opportunities for students to enact agency, to make connections not only across the curriculum, but to make necessary and beneficial social connections with each other through discussion.

The reliance on teacher-selected classic texts meant to challenge students may arguably doing more harm than good, as it often creates teacher-centered classrooms rather than student-centered spaces that take into account the interests and needs of the students. Just because the content demands become heavier after middle school does not mean that the high school student is any less deserving of relevant, responsive literature. Nor does it mean that high school teachers are absolved from student-centered curriculum decisions.

Especially with the advent of the CCSS and the push for “rigorous” titles, it is essential for researchers and practitioners alike to keep students at the center of curriculum planning and
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instructional design (and related research), without sacrificing student interest and engagement to historical documents and canonical texts. Combining the teaching of critical literacy skills with the reading of an issues-based adolescent novel allows teachers to broaden the scope of traditional literature instruction to both motivate, interest and support student needs while helping students to cultivate a more open worldview.

Offering opportunities for secondary students to read engaging texts provides multiple ways to enact agency; agency for students to take ownership of their course material and to make connections drawing on background knowledge, out-of-school literacies and cross-curricular learning. This is not only empowers students, but teachers alike, as reading engaging texts can help breathe new life into standardized curriculum, all the while promoting critical literacy through dynamic discussion.

For as stand-out student Kate will tell you, the importance of awareness and engagement in one’s society cannot be understated.

Even in the safest places we are subject to others; even our thoughts are tainted by the ideas of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal.’ As we grow up, we learn what is acceptable in our culture, what we should and shouldn’t do-believe-think-say-want-need-feel, we learn that our slightest moves are under the close watch of something or someone. In some lives that may be that’s God, in others perhaps it’s the idea of Karma, for Katniss, it was the ever-present Capitol power. We are never really safe to be individuals, we are all these socially constructed creatures who know that a wrong move can land us in isolation, metaphorically or literally. Think about some of those secrets again, how do you choose who to tell them to, which ones to tell, and which shouldn’t even be acknowledged as true thoughts? How do you know when the watchful eye of the panopticon is upon you? And when you think the eye didn’t catch you, how do you know it’s not just holding back its power to enforce?

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References

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