

## Challenging Adolescence through Hybrid Learning Spaces

I was tired of hearing my name. After four years of teaching middle school language arts, I was becoming wary of just how reliant students were on me to give them explicit directions about what to read, what to think about the reading, what to remember about the text, and how to respond. Yet, in the hallways and during lunch, I was overhearing rich conversations among students where they referenced their self-selected out of school texts (i.e., TV shows, music, movies, and novels) as if they were part of their lives. Why weren't these robust conversations making their way into my classroom? Why did the lunch monitors get to overhear conversations about Nick's impetus for quitting law school and the long-lasting effects of that choice in *New Girl*, while I was stuck with "Will the test be multiple choice?" during language arts?

In an effort to slow my progression toward a mental breakdown and also to break down the barriers between students' "real" and "school" worlds, I decided to overhaul my literature curriculum and allow students to select all of their own reading material and subsequent response methods in my class. This emphasis on student choice was not groundbreaking in a middle school literature classroom. For years, I, like so many other language arts teachers, crafted reading instruction around literature circles (Daniels, 2002) and reading workshops (Atwell, 1998). I worked diligently to select a variety of books from a range of reading levels so that I could best group students around appropriate texts. I gave students time on Fridays to read their books in class, and I provided them with creative opportunities to reflect on their reading.

The implementation of literature circles and workshop model approaches to literacy instruction is often lauded for ushering in a shift from the more traditional text-centered literature classroom, with its emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of text analysis, toward a more student-centered one where student choice and student response are made central. Adult reading groups often serve as the template for literature circles in the middle school classroom (Atwell, 1998; Daniels, 2002). Teachers use their own experiences with reading, drawing upon their casual discussions about texts around glasses of wine in the living room with friends, as they try to provide students with space for meaningful discussions of books during class.

Atwell (1998) goes so far as to suggest that "Reading workshop becomes an invitation to grow up into an adult world that's cool" (p. 48). Such literacy instruction relies on an underlying theme of "treating students as adults" that I find admirable and worth emulation in my own teaching. But there is also an undercurrent that adolescents aren't quite whole yet, that their experiences aren't quite as important because they aren't the experiences of adulthood. Instead, I wanted to encourage students to look at their experiences for their merit in that moment, rather than for some imagined future potential. I learned that I wanted to push my students to do more. I wanted literacy to serve as a tool for critique and for students to see literacy as a vehicle for challenging and changing dominant power structures (Moje, 2002; Powell, 1999), rather than simply practicing for and imitating adulthood.

Adolescents exist in a world that demands them to construct complex and hybrid identities daily (Moje, 2002). These hybrid identities represent a borderland where myriad forces—technology; mass media; popular culture; multiple disciplines; personal interests; and a variety of cultural, racial, sexual, and economic backgrounds and considerations collide and

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inform what it means to be “literate” and what counts as “text.” As a middle school teacher eager to engage students meaningfully and critically with each other and with a variety of self-selected young adult texts, I worked with my students to create a hybrid space that recognized their literacy practices outside of the school walls. What I found was that issues of adolescent identity and portrayal became central to the classroom. As they began to analyze text more critically, students at once recognized their differences and similarities to one another and ultimately developed deeper notions of solidarity, individuality, and agency in the learning process.

### **Confident Characterizations**

At any given point, adolescents are navigating a large number of spaces and experiences, all of which intersect and interact to construct their identities (Moje, 2002). As a result, adolescent identity is in constant flux—it is fluid, context-dependent, and socially and linguistically mediated (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Vygotsky (1934/1987) recognized this fluidity as a ripe space for learning, as thinking becomes a social activity informed by social practices, contexts, experiences, and interactions, rather than an isolated endeavor (Wertsch, 1991).

Instead of entering classrooms recognizing the fluid nature of identity—and adolescent identity in particular—many novice teachers enter middle and high school classrooms armed with confident characterizations (Lesko, 2012) of their students and prepared to

make instructional and content-based choices that align with these narrow understandings. Lesko identifies four “confident characterizations” commonly used to define adolescents: coming of age, controlled by raging hormones, peer-oriented, and represented by age. Viewing adolescents as coming of age adopts a deficit approach to identity, as youth are defined in terms of adulthood and positioned as ever-dependent on and striving for that adulthood (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Lesko, 2012). An emphasis on hormones defines adolescents as emotional, unpredictable, confused, and sexual. Peer-oriented characterizations of adolescents remove individuality and reinforce youth dependence on peers and adults, alike. Finally, representing adolescents by age alone draws forth stereotypes about youth as “developing bodies, strange music, [and] moody distancing” (Lesko, 2012, p. 4). These characterizations encourage teachers to adopt behaviors and make pedagogical choices built on stereotypes alone.

Considered by many to be a social construction in itself, the recognition of adolescence as an age group was “spurred by industrialization and the concomitant need to prepare children via schooling for a particular kind of workplace” (Moje, 2002, p. 112). This emphasis on adolescence as a perpetual state of *becoming* and *in preparation* has become pervasive throughout the media, as well as teacher education programs. As Lewis and Petrone (2010) found in their work with preservice teachers, literature selection is often based on titles that teachers believe include “real” characters, i.e., characters who fulfill or somehow reflect their conception of adolescence—often replicating Lesko’s (2012) confident characterizations. These preservice teachers then enter middle and high school classrooms and apply this same method of text selection.

Such behaviors are not only based on assumptions and stereotyping, but also encourage a superficial connection with and understanding of individual students. Thus, teachers become guilty of “othering” their students by “creating and maintaining distances between them in the service of holding to sources of authority embedded in stereotyped views of adolescence” (Sarigianides, 2012, p. 228). By viewing adolescents as a homogenized group and “holding to sources of authority,” teachers unintentionally diminish opportunity for students to develop individual agency in the classroom. When teachers make text

selections based on a socially constructed view of adolescence, there is less chance that the varied individual experiences and lives of students will be sought after and discussed in the classroom.

In addition to removing both individual and collective student agency and power, teachers indoctrinated into a deficit model of adolescence through teacher education programs and/or media socialization become so engrossed in gaining and maintaining *control* (Atwell, 1998; Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Finder, 1998/1999; Moje, 2002) that they fail to recognize the individuality of students in their classrooms. When individual student identities replace preoccupations with control, *hybrid learning spaces* can be imagined where students can construct their own learning environment within the confines and affordances of the classroom, the school, and curricular expectations. Specifically, I drew from Moll and Whitmore (1993) to identify the following as essential for creating hybrid learning spaces that challenge the confident characterizations of adolescents in my classroom: 1) student choice in multiple aspects of the learning experience, 2) student-generated questions, and 3) shared power between teacher and student where the student is trusted as a learner.

## Context

I implemented a critical student choice approach to literature instruction in a middle school language arts curriculum over a period of three years and was able to move almost completely away from traditional literature circles by my fifth year of teaching. Located in the capital city of a Southeastern state, the K-8 charter school where I worked as a 7th- and 8th-grade literature teacher enrolled a maximum of 57 students at each grade level at the time of my teaching. Of these students, the overwhelming majority were European American, with approximately 10% of students identifying as African American, Latin@, or Asian American. Like many charter schools, this school did not provide transportation or lunch to students. Instead, parents were responsible for finding transportation for their children and providing all meals. While the majority of students enrolled in the school were from middle or upper-class families, many were not. For these students, the school did work hard to diminish financial barriers to field trips, transportation, meals, and participation in afterschool events and sports.

The conservative values of the parent population at this school are worth noting and were evident in a number of ways. First, parents organized a Bible study for students each Thursday morning before school. While the study did not take place directly on school grounds, it was held at a local fast-food restaurant within walking distance of the school and attended by about 60% of the middle school students. Further, the parents often requested book lists from me ahead of my teaching so that they could pre-read books to ensure that they were appropriate for their children. I was told repeatedly that fantasy as a genre should not be taught because it would confuse students' Christian values.

The parents at the charter school were especially active in their children's education and the maintenance of traditional pedagogical practices and conservative values. In addition to their physical presence in the school, these parents worked diligently to stay abreast of the curriculum, texts, and class assignments. Because of parents' wariness toward what could be seen as "progressive" teaching practices, I find my success with a critical student-centered approach to literacy instruction to have great potential for educators in school settings with less parent involvement and oversight in academic choices.

## The Essentials

*What's the right answer?*

*When's this due?*

*Why do we have to do this?*

As teachers, especially those who have taught middle school, we've all heard these questions. Not only was I tired of them, I was frustrated by what they represented: my students' absolute dependence on adult direction. I wanted to give my students agency in the classroom and make them more active participants in their own education, but their reliance on traditional, teacher-centered classroom practices was getting in the way of this. In addition, I wanted the

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material, to provide student choice in reading and assignments, and to make reading time a priority during school hours.

### **Establishing Common Ground**

As a teacher, I have learned that people in education are wary of change. Leading this charge against change, surprisingly, were the students and their parents. At the mere mention of “student choice,” there was uproar. Students wanted to know exactly how many books they should read and how long each book should be; parents were concerned with the level of text their child should read and how they would find these books. To put their minds at ease, I created reading contracts for both students and their parents and regularly used anchor texts throughout the year.

### **READING CONTRACTS**

For the purposes of my class, I drew upon Donalyn Miller’s (2009) work as I created reading contracts that included information about the genres from which students should draw their book choices, the number of books to be read for the year, and how students would respond to their books. Perhaps the most daunting task for both students and me was determining the number of books to be read. Rather than providing a set number for all students, I gathered information about students’ reading habits from previous teachers and their parents and then met individually with each student to determine an appropriate goal for the year.

Most of my 7th graders chose to read around 25 books for the year. Before students went home for winter break, I met individually with students to

content and assignments of my course to challenge traditional notions of adolescence and for students to develop solidarity, individuality, and agency around self-selected texts.

To shift the power dynamics in my classroom so that the voices and interests of students were present, I needed to establish common ground in terms of expectations and reading

check-in on their reading goal, and to renegotiate their number, if necessary. These meetings, as well as my one-on-one meetings with students during reading time throughout the semester, helped me keep students on track, learn more about their reading habits, experiences, and preferences, and make appropriate book recommendations to them.

### **GENRE-BASED ANCHOR TEXTS**

Finding common literary ground with students (and between students) was essential for cultivating classroom community while also addressing curricular standards. Over the course of the school year, I found many ways to create conversation around shared texts. Like many literature teachers, I organized my school year around genre studies. For instance, I began the year with a science fiction unit. During this time, students selected science fiction books as their independent reading material, while I led them in mini-lessons, seminars, and discussions that encouraged critical analysis of real-world technological advances during instructional time. I was able to establish common ground for my students and incorporate high-interest nonfiction texts into my curriculum by including articles about such topics as Google glass and electronic skin.

### **Supported Student Choice**

Student choice became the bedrock of my teaching. After three years of teaching 12- and 13-year-olds, I was starting to see the truth behind Finders’s (1998/1999) frustration that “adolescence is denied diversity” and that popular discourse around adolescence is driven by an assumed homogeneity (Finder, 1998/1999, p. 255). I knew my students had valuable stories to tell; they had unique experiences, interests, backgrounds, and identities that influenced their lives on a minute-to-minute basis outside of the classroom. Why should these stories be checked at my door?

I decided to provide student choice in book selection and response method, but I realized that these wide-open spaces could be overwhelming and counterproductive for some students. To allay those potential concerns, I provided resources that *could* aid them (if necessary) in book searches and project choices. At the beginning of each new genre study, I provided a list of recommended books to students, shared book trailers, invited other teachers and administrators into

the class to give book talks, and met individually with students to help them make appropriate choices.

Upon completing a book, students were expected to choose from eight assignment options. In addition, students could propose their own idea—an option that many students selected. I created assignment options that encouraged students to showcase their strengths, while also considering the myriad interests, talents, and out-of-school resources available to them. For instance, one option for students was to create a storybook (or children’s book) version of their novel. A few students discovered an online tool called *Storybird* and used this, rather than traditional paper and pencil, to create their book. Other response options included filmed book trailers, character journals or blogs, poems/songs, and (my personal favorite) lunch with me where we could discuss the book together, casually. The point was to encourage students to find the best way to respond to or represent their novel—to feel a sense of ownership over their text and subsequent work.

### Accountable Reading Time in Class

In his book, *Reading Reasons*, Kelly Gallagher (2003) shares that students who scored in the 98th percentile on standardized reading tests read an average of 90 minutes per day, or 4.7 million words each year. Conversely, students who scored in the 10th percentile on standardized reading tests read an average of 1.6 minutes per day, or 51,000 words each year. I will admit that I’m certainly wary of the perception that test scores provide a valid and definitive representation of students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. However, I couldn’t help but read this information in Gallagher’s book and examine my own classroom. At the time, I was providing almost no in-class reading time to students. Instead, I was using class time for test prep, grammar drills, and teacher-centered discussions. What message was I sending to my students? I certainly wasn’t suggesting that reading was a valuable use of their school time, let alone their limited out-of-school time.

I decided that *showing* students what I believed was important would be much more effective than simply telling them. Each day at the beginning of class, I set a timer for 20 minutes, turned on jazz music, turned off the overhead fluorescent lights, and pulled out the pillows and yoga mats. Students spread out across the room, sitting under desks or near win-

dows, lying down on the yoga mats—and together, we read. Most days, I met individually with students to read with them and to discuss their text. But some days, I modeled. I read the books they were recommending to me in rapid-fire succession.

After 20 minutes, students moved back to their desks and pulled out their reading journals. Each day, they started a new entry in which they recorded their book title, pages read, and the date. Then, they chose one question from a list of 20 to answer about the section of the book they read that day. We often used these questions as the jumping off point for our mini-lesson or class discussion for the day. I collected students’ journals weekly and responded to their questions, focusing exclusively on content and building connections through my feedback.

### Working within (and against) Constraints

It is important to note that I was not teaching without consideration of mandated curricular standards and administrative expectations and demands. In fact, the first year that I implemented this model of literacy instruction, I wrote a proposal and gave a presentation to my administration in which I detailed my plans for text selection and instruction. During that year, I also met regularly with my administration to share my work and review student progress. I will also mention that, in the first year of this student-centered model, I was only able to give students 20 minutes of in-class reading time each *week*, and I had to fight for those 20 minutes. However, as I developed more strategic systems for documentation and student accountability (through reading journals, my notes from student discussions, student responses to readings, etc.), I was able to convince my administration that more reading time in class was an essential component of the language arts classroom. Each year, I worked my way up until finally, in its third year, I had students reading for at least 20 minutes *every day* in class. We had come a long way from our mere 20 minutes a week!

As the students and I worked to create this hybrid space of student-led text selection and response, we simultaneously worked to merge unofficial and official realms of education, rather than replacing one with the other. That is, students were given the agency and power to make their own young adult text selections,

while I supplemented their in-class work with texts, discussions, and assignments that were, perhaps, more traditional in the eyes of my administration and parents and certainly more directly guided by stan-

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dards. In this way, learning was applicable and meaningful to students, stakeholders, and myself and did not eliminate the role of district- and state-mandated curricular goals. In other words, rather than placing curriculum (or the teacher) at the center of the class, the personal experiences and interests of students were *negotiated* into the educational context.

After a few months spent actively building common ground, student choice, and in-class reading time into the curriculum, students' interactions with me and their peers began to change. Rather than spending class time discussing directions and expectations, students wanted to discuss their books. Class discussions became richer because students were drawing connections between their own novels and the supplemental readings we did together in class; they were building connections between their personal lives and the lives of characters; and they were building connections with one another by using story to find common ground. As students gained a greater sense of control and agency in the classroom and felt trusted as learners, they were able to move toward a *hybrid* space where their interests, experiences, and connections guided classroom practices and traditional boundaries blurred.

### **Solidarity, Individuality, and Agency**

Not only did the format of the course, with its emphasis on student choice and reading time, challenge normative roles of teachers and students, the content of the young adult literature and subsequent discussions pushed students to critique these traditional roles as well. Through self-selected texts and response methods, students were able to examine the dominant

discourse and portrayals of their age group and then challenge these assumptions, find common ground, and learn more about the diversity that exists not only within the classroom, but within the concept and construct of adolescence, as well. Over the course of the school year, students were able to use texts to develop a sense of solidarity defined by their age rather than class, race, and gender, while also developing as individuals with agency in various contexts.

### **Solidarity**

While, like Lewis and Petrone (2010) suggest, many teachers make text selections based on characters with whom they believe students will most closely identify, the solidarity that can be formed between diverse students when reading about and discussing these characters is equally important. In Carolyn Mackler's (2003) novel, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, 15-year-old Virginia Shreves lives in the shadow of her athletic, attractive, and intelligent college-age brother, Byron. In stark contrast to Byron, Virginia is overweight, an average student, and introverted. When Byron is accused of raping a fellow college student, Virginia learns that the only way to live her life is to stop defining herself in terms of those around her and to find and be true to herself.

*The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* confronts head-on Lesko's (2012) confident characterization of adolescents as "coming of age"—a stance that defines adolescence in terms of adulthood—as Virginia learns to accept her family members and herself for who they are as individuals, rather than as a collective. Further, while Virginia maintains a close relationship with her distant friend through the Internet and develops a sexual relationship with Froggy, she does not depend on these relationships alone as she deals with her body image and the allegations against her brother.

In his video book review, 7th-grade student Wilson (all names are pseudonyms) was careful to mention that *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* is "not just for girls, also for boys." As Wilson and a few friends read and discussed the novel, they openly challenged Virginia's mother, finding Virginia, instead, to embody a more mature reaction to Byron's misconduct. Students built a sense of unity as they began to recognize "adult" characteristics in Virginia

and traditionally held stereotypes of adolescence in the behavior and thought processes of her mother.

### Individuality

Similar to the sense of solidarity that developed around Mackler's novel, students evinced a growing comfort with and recognition of their own individuality as they read *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2002). In the novel, 18 high school students challenge the concept of adolescence as a time of "coming of age" as they use poetry to tell their individual stories of fear, friendship, family, and, ultimately, hope. Characters like Gloria Martinez struggle through the balancing act of having a baby while also completing school and trying to keep a job. Porscha Johnson works through her anger issues to forgive her mother for drug abuse. Devon Hope decides to stop hiding his love of books and poetry and to break the stereotype, or what he refers to as *box*, of the high school jock. While the students in my classroom lived very different lives from those of the students in *Bronx Masquerade*, they found in each of the characters something they could relate to. Something they deeply understood.

During a class seminar, many students expressed deep connections that they had built with characters. When asked if the book was realistic, Ansley replied, "Yes, because how the people feel in the book. And how different people can appear one way and actually be very different. I feel self-conscious like Diondra." After this comment, Ansley went on to tearfully explain how she always felt very unattractive compared to her friends and how she was trying to worry about her appearance less after having read Diondra's story. Wade had a similar experience, noting that he felt a connection to Devon "because he likes playing sports, but he wants to be known for other things as well." Ned finished the discussion with the following: "We have so many boxes—it's hard to fit into certain boxes—you may strive to be in certain boxes, but you'll never get to that box. You'll always stay in your own box." At age 13, these seventh graders in a small suburban charter school were building connections to and learning from characters in a high school in the Bronx. They challenged the concept of adolescence as a time of becoming, as a time ruled by hormones, and made themselves vulnerable in front of a classroom of

their peers as they recognized and struggled with their own individuality.

### Agency

As students read Patricia McCormick's (2006) novel, *Sold*, they were empowered by the main character's acts of strength and independence and began to see themselves as agents for change both in and outside of the classroom. Written in a series of vignettes, *Sold* follows 13-year-old Lakshmi as she leaves the comfort of her family home in Nepal, India, to find work to support her impoverished family. Lakshmi is sold into prostitution where her earnings are stolen from her, her body is given to others, and her family, left behind in the mountains of Nepal, is but a memory of a past life. After a year, Lakshmi chooses to risk it all for the hope of escape and a life of freedom.

While Lakshmi's story is wrought with sexuality, confusion, and emotion, her behaviors are not hormone-induced, as is the common perception of her age. Just as Lesko (2012) challenges traditional notions of adolescence as a process or journey toward adulthood, Lakshmi is not sheltered by a label that views her as *becoming*. Instead, she is removed from humanity entirely—viewed as a pawn to be used, rather than as a person in need of nurture and guidance.

Lakshmi's story is a challenging one for students. Not only are many of them shocked by her experiences, but they also express frustration as they try to navigate her development as a person and to understand her life on their own terms. During a small-group discussion, Caleb asked his group if bullying could ever be compared to the physical and mental harassment that define slavery. After a few minutes' thought, Shay replied: "Slavery has a very long affect on people, similar to how bullying can lead to suicide." Marianne, not one to participate in discussion, and especially reluctant to disagree with others, replied that she believed "Bullying could definitely lead to long-standing negativity, but not as bad as slavery." Renee jumped in at this point, agreeing with Marianne that "Bullying is a big problem today, but slavery is more severe. Slavery had more of an impact on future opinions of people; it is a type of bullying, but has had more consequences than bullying." Without guidance from me, students established themselves as the leaders in the classroom and agentive in their

own education as they began drawing their own connections between the story of a girl in India and their experiences in a US middle school.

By critically analyzing narratives like those of Virginia, the students of the Bronx, and Lakshmi, students challenged common portrayals of adolescents in young adult literature. Through collaboration and discussion surrounding such texts, students began to see the ways that these confident characterizations of adolescence manifest in their “real” worlds. Ultimately, students were able to use their self-selected texts and response methods to develop senses of solidarity, individuality, and agency that extended beyond the classroom walls.

## Conclusion

There’s a delicious Italian restaurant in my neighborhood called *Baraonda*. When I asked the owner about the meaning of the name, he informed me that it translates most clearly to the English word for *chaos*. But he was quick to add that *baraonda* suggests an *organized* chaos, not a complete shambles. Classrooms where adolescents are constantly calling the teacher’s name, questioning due dates and expectations, and soliciting direction at every turn can feel like chaos. Teachers must begin the work of turning these teacher-centered places of chaos into student-centered hybrid learning places of *baraonda*.

When students are given agency, when they’re treated as individuals, and their language practices, experiences, and interests are moved to the forefront of curriculum, the classroom can feel like a place of chaos. Students are reading different books, they’re responding in different ways, they’re challenging the social norms and perceptions of their age group, and it is often the case that, at any given time, no two students are completing the same work. But if we, as teachers, can begin to shift our perceptions (and those of parents and administrators) of these hybrid learning spaces from that of chaos to *baraonda*, of *organized* chaos, we can start to see the positive benefits of student-directed instruction. By having the freedom to select texts that sometimes match and sometimes challenge their own identities as adolescents, students can cultivate stronger appreciations for and connections to literature as they develop a sense of solidarity around their age identification, as well as a sense of individuality and agency in learning.

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