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Engaging Young Adults in Literacy PaLA Annual Conference 26 September 2004

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Engaging Young Adults in Literacy

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In today's world librarians seem to be overwhelmed with "information- seeking" rather than "readers." Under those conditions, it is easy to forget that a major goal of a good librarian is to help the young move up the ladder to become lifelong adult learners." (Broderick, 1996, 252).

What do we know about young adults and reading?

“Do you happen to have any books for a highly, sophisticated pre-teen? My interests are Shakespeare, the classics/older books, and boys.”

-Teenage Girl, Free Library of Philadelphia



Young adults do read

- Mellon Poll (1987)
 - 362 ninth graders rural NC
 - 1/3 below poverty level
 - 82% said they read in their spare time
 - Favorites included teenage series books, sports and sports biographies, newspapers, magazines & comic books



Young adults do read

- Moffitt & Wartella (1992)
 - 414 high school students in central Illinois
 - 78% claimed to read books for pleasure
 - Upward trend in reading from freshman to senior year (76% freshmen to 86% senior)
 - Favorites: romance novel for females; males varied but included fantasy/myth, science fiction, & sports



Young adults do read

- SmartGirl Poll (1999)
 - SmartGirl website and YALSA
 - 3,000 teenagers (11-18)
 - 26% “I read constantly for my own personal satisfaction”
 - 46% “I don’t have much time to read for pleasure but I like to when I get the chance”
 - 30% said they read a book or more per week
 - 2/3rds said they read a book a month or more



Young adults do read

- READ California Poll (1999)
 - California Opinion Research
 - 201 teens (10-17)
 - 64% rated reading 7 or better on a scale of 1-10
 - 30% agreed reading is “really cool”; 55% agreed reading is “kind of cool”
 - 85% said they read on their own outside of school



Young adults do read

- Reading Habits of Adolescents (Feb. 2001)
 - National Education Association
 - 509 teens (12-18)
 - Teens rated reading higher in importance in terms of its impact on future success than math, science, & computers
 - 85% view as rewarding
 - 79% view as stimulating and exciting
 - Minority youth most enthusiastic & prolific readers
 - Favorites: stories about people their own age, sports, athletes



Young adults view reading as a social activity

- Zirinsky & Rau (2001), as well as Issacs (1992), found that teens talked with enthusiasm about reading with family members and exchanging book recommendations with friends



From Stephen King to Edgar Allen Poe

- Tastes vary widely
- Read for escape, solace, information, entertainment, and “food for thought”
- What young adults read is determined by their purpose for reading, the amount of time they have to spend, what friends are reading, what their family is reading & what kind of reading material is available




Gender plays a role in reading preferences

- Broad generalization:
 - Females tend to prefer fiction
 - Realistic fiction, mystery & fantasy, especially stories with romance
 - Males tend to prefer nonfiction
 - Sports magazines, biographies of athletes, the newspaper, science fiction & horror



For many young adults books can be best friends


- Zirinsky & Rau (2001) found that many adolescent readers describe the “pull of particular books that make them ‘feel at home’ or fictional characters that become best friends”



Young adults who choose not to read have different reasons for opting out

Dormant readers: “I’m too busy right now.”


- Like to read
- Consider themselves readers
- Take an aesthetic stance towards reading
- Read when they have the opportunity (summer, school breaks, weekends, after major project completed)
- Talk about books
- Had literature rich backgrounds



Young adults who choose not to read have different reasons for opting out

Uncommitted Readers: “I might be a reader, someday.”


- Don't enjoy reading
- Define reading as “looking at a lot of words and understanding them”
- Believe reading is boring because only see it as a skill
- Take an efferent stance towards reading
- React positively toward students who read
- Literature not a part of their backgrounds



Young adults who choose not to read have different reasons for opting out

Unmotivated Readers: “I’m never gonna like it.”

- Don’t enjoy reading
- Define reading as “looking at a lot of words and understanding them”
- Believe reading is boring because only see it as a skill
- Take an efferent stance towards reading
- Express negative feelings about those who enjoy reading
- Do not plan to read in the future
- Often unable to “picture” the action or characters in their minds



Many young adults experience difficulty reading academic texts

- Schoenbach & her colleagues (2000) explain that many young adults hit the “literacy ceiling” when they reach middle and high school
- Unable to independently access the knowledge & information embedded in books & other printed materials that are part of the curriculum

What do we know about young adults and writing?

“I have been writing stories for as long as I can remember. I have always had an interest in writing, and probably always will. I probably never would have done anything with my writing without the Internet.”

--Teenage Girl (Flench 1999)



Young adults need audiences for their writing

- Teenagers write with purpose and passion when they know that people they care about reaching will read what they have to say.



Young adults like publishing to the Internet

- Internet is “fertile soil for the imaginative writing of teenagers” (Flench 1999)
- World Wide Web provides student writers with complete control over creation, from inspiration to publication (Nellen 2000)
- Internet gives student writers a wider, more democratic audience & a venue for peer review (Nellen 2000)



Young adults write for a variety of purposes

- Reflection
- Self-expression
- Communication
- Therapy
- Escape



Few young adults use writing in their everyday lives

- Instead of understanding how to use writing to influence others and to clarify their own thinking, teenagers (and adults) view writing as a school-related task—“the idea of initiating writing on [their] own behalf is far from [their] thoughts” (Graves 1994).

What can young adult librarians do to promote young adult literacy?

“Those of us who have written within a community of writers and read within a community of readers know that these communities have a different feel. They have a sense of intimacy and adventure.”

--Calkins & Hawthorne (1990)



Strategies for promoting YA literacy

- Create a library space that draws teens
- Advocate for free reading time during the school day
- Extend the reading community
- Invite teenagers to read
- Provide young adults with strategies for understanding academic texts
- Invite young adults to write



Websites

YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association)

(www.ala.org/yalsa)

Teen Ink (<http://www.teenink.com/>)

Teen Voices (<http://teenvoices.com/>)

Merlyn's Pen (<http://www.merlynspen.com/>)

Engaging Young Adults in Literacy Strategies

Create a Library Space That Draws Teens

Take a tour of the library seeing it through the eyes of young adults. Does it look like a place teens would want to visit or “hang out?” Is there a drawing card—something to attract teens to the library? Are there plenty of comfortable places to sit? Is popular teen culture reflected? Is student artwork on display? Are materials in displays available for immediate check out? Is conversation encouraged in the library? Is the library open to teens before school begins, throughout the day, and after school? If not, form a young adult advisory committee to help you create an environment that will encourage teenagers to read and write.

Advocate for Free Reading Time During the School Day

Work with teachers, parents, and administrators to support school-wide reading programs like Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading (SSR).

Extend the Reading Community

To sustain the reading habits of teenage readers, librarians must help extend the reading community. As Zirinsky and Rau (2001), point out “although some committed readers do develop strategies of their own to find books that will be meaningful, many readers fall away from reading without the support of a mentor or a community of readers” (19).

- ◆ Include multiple copies of as many titles as possible.
- ◆ Establish teenage reading groups or clubs to encourage students to talk to students in other classes or grade levels, and, even at other schools, who are reading the same book. Many different formats for literature discussion groups exist; find one you like and invite students to join you.
- ◆ Develop a threaded chat for book discussions. Students who do not feel comfortable contributing in a face-to-face discussion, or who cannot commit to a weekly meeting at a specific time, might enjoy participating in an online discussion.
- ◆ Encourage students to explore websites related to novels.
- ◆ Display books you are currently reading--share with students your “*real* story as a reader” (Campbell 1997, 53)
- ◆ Establish a paperback swapshop in the library.

Invite Teenagers to Read

As we invite teenagers to read, we must remain open to their reading interests, promoting the reading materials they request. It is also important to remember that different strategies work for different types of readers.

- ◆ Face out as many books as possible.
- ◆ Create a “Good Books” box in the library (Beers 1996b). Gather together about 30 books that you consider “drop-dead-great-books” and place them in a box labeled “Good Books.” Beers found that uncommitted and unmotivated readers often feel overwhelmed by the choices available in the library. The “Good Books” box narrows their choices but still allows them to feel independent in their selection. Be sure to include nonfiction, short stories, and poetry in the box, as well as novels.
- ◆ Purchase “thin” books and promote them.

- ◆ Post reading lists and book reviews as resources for students. Dedicate a bulletin board to book lists and book reviews. Add to the bulletin board frequently and encourage students and teachers to do so as well.
- ◆ Pair contemporary works with parallel classic texts. Possible pairings include: *Lord of the Flies* and *The Chocolate War*; *Lyddie* and *Oliver Twist*; *Speak* and *Member of the Wedding*.
- ◆ Give students a balance. Include popular, contemporary, and classical works, works by women and men, young adult and adult works, nonfiction, short stories, and poetry in the collection. Provide diversity by including works written by both ethnic-American and foreign authors.
- ◆ Furnish audio books or dramatizations of plays.
- ◆ Provide magazines, comic books, and graphic novels. Teens are drawn to the visual.
- ◆ Provide movie versions. Beers found that unmotivated and uncommitted readers prefer to see the movie first and then read the book.
- ◆ Promote nonfiction. Showcase popular nonfiction titles like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (1993), *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (1997), *Into Thin Air* (1997), *Perfect Storm* (1997), and *Dead Man Walking* (1996).

Invite Young Adults to Write

One of our roles is to help teenagers “go public” with their writing. As Nancie Atwell (1998) points out, students write better if they know their writing will be read by “real” audiences. We need to look for, create, and provide opportunities for writers to be read and heard.

- ◆ Encourage teenagers to publish their writing on existing websites.
- ◆ Sponsor a “cafe” or poetry “rant” for teen writers to share their writing (short stories, poetry, and even songs) with other teens and adults from the community.
- ◆ Create a writing center in the library. Include different kinds of paper; cans of markers, calligraphy pens, pencils, ballpoint pens, and rulers; cups of clips, tacks, and staples; a stapler and stapler remover; scissors and tape; boxes of stationary and envelopes; computer software; collections of writers’ resources and references including dictionaries, thesauri, usage handbooks, bookbinding materials—everything a writer might need (Atwell 1998).
- ◆ Connect teenagers with other writers—both adults and young adults. Web sites like *TeenLit.com*, *Inkspot: For Young Writers* (<http://www.inkspot.com>) and the *ABC’s of the Writing Process* (<http://www.angelfire.com/wi/writingprocess/>) offer a forum for teens to talk about their writing with others. In addition, invite local authors, journalists, and editors to talk about their writing.
- ◆ Include student writing—individually bound books of short stories, poems, and content area research; school newspapers and literary magazines—in the library collection.
- ◆ Include picture books in the YA library collection as models of various writing structures and language patterns.
- ◆ Share your writing with students.
- ◆ Team up with your local school or public librarian to establish a teen writing workshop in the library.
- ◆ Create an online literary magazine. See *Write Here, Write Now*, an online literary magazine developed by two Pittsburgh librarians (one public and one school) for ideas (<http://imls-train.cis.drexel.edu/pitt2/>).

Engaging Young Adults in Literacy Selected Resources

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