Connected Learning
Linking Academics, Popular Culture, and Digital Literacy in a Young Urban Scholars Book Club

“H”e doesn’t have time to waste,” said Jamal’s mother as she arrived early to pick her son up from the after-school book club program that I was cofacilitating.

“He needs to get more tutoring in English and math—he needs to get ready for college.” Her words stayed with me. I began to contemplate what significance, if any, my work was having on Jamal and the other thirty-some students who frequented the after-school Young Urban Scholars (YUS) book club program.

Beneath the surface of her remarks, I sensed that Ms. Stevenson (pseudonym) was skeptical about the academic merits of the book program. I could relate to her sentiments, having been a former teacher and school librarian in an inner-city public school system and also as a parent of two school-aged children. I have felt the sense of urgency that stems from witnessing countless reforms initiatives sweep through inner-city school districts under the guise of “improvement” only to result in teacher lay-offs, school closings, and a crippling label of a “failing” school.

This article is an open response to Jamal’s mother that seeks to put her concerns about the book club to rest. It might also benefit youth services professionals interested in learning about the theories and practices behind a book club program that was designed for urban youth like Jamal. Jamal represents an entire swath of urban youth who are full of potential yet can easily become disconnected from school and life if the right kind of learning opportunities are not available to them.

CONNECTED LEARNING

The notion of connected learning is central to the experiences I hoped to foster while working with the teens in the book club. A connected learning approach draws on the three major spheres of influence in a teens’ life: academics, interests, and peer culture. Caring adults and youth services professionals alike can use those areas as a foundation for guided inquiry and engagement with teens. As stated in a report on the connected learning framework, its purpose is to advocate for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement. (Ito, Gutierrez, Livingstone, & Penuel, 2013)

This connected learning framework has recently become part of the mainstream discourse among library and information science professionals, particularly those who work with teens. For example, a recent report on the future of library service for teens cites the connected learning model as central to the shift that youth services professionals need to make in order to become more socially relevant and culturally responsive to the information habits and literacy practices of teens today (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-Hassell, Kumasi, in press).

This framework also seeks to help close the historic gaps that exist between libraries and underserved teens by tapping into their primary spheres of influence (see Figure 1).

For a student like Jamal, the connected learning framework laid the foundation to connect with other people who share his interest in graphic novels. Social media sites are also a popular way for individuals with similar interests to connect and collaborate. One positive byproduct of this kind of online interaction could be the creation of different kinds of academically oriented content, such as blog essays or multime-
NEW LITERACIES

Inherent to this connected learning approach is a new and expanded understanding of literacy. This new perspective recognizes literacy as much more than a cognitive ability to read and write, but also as a social act that involves basic modes of participating in the world. This view represents a shift from the more narrow definition of literacy (e.g., information literacy) that has previously been associated with library and information science scholarship and teaching practices. Instead, connected learning reflects a multiple literacies stance toward learning that is ripe for the kind of flexible and independent learning that often takes place in library spaces.

The concept of multiple literacies encompasses a range of other types of literacies that teens practice in their everyday lives, including media literacy, digital literacy, and critical literacy. Emerging from the New Literacies Studies (NLS) movement, multiple literacies provide teens with a repertoire of ways for accessing, acquiring, constructing, expressing, sharing, and using knowledge, as well as collaborating with others for mutual benefit and collective good (Bloome & Enciso, 2006). Similarly, the concept of critical literacies involves learning how to formulate difficult questions concerning societal inequities and investigating real-life issues with the goal of transformative social action (Street, 1995).

Finally, digital literacies play a quintessential role in the technology-rich environment that twenty-first-century teens navigate on a daily basis (Carrington & Robinson, 2009). Today’s teens use their digital devices (smart phones, tablets, laptops, etc.) and social networks (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) in a twenty-four-hour cycle to connect to their friends, family, and others. A 2013 study done by Pew found that 81 percent of teens use social networks, and 95 percent are on the Internet (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013). The connections that today’s teens make with others online and via their devices creates a participatory and collaborative culture that surpasses the connections they previously had access to in formal learning.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES

Academic literacies refer to the dominant language, literacies, and cultural practices that are sanctioned and taught in mainstream American educational institutions. These literacies are often codified on standardized tests and become the canon of knowledge for educational advancement. It is generally accepted that academic literacies are important skills that all students need for success. Yet, increasingly, scholars recognize the importance of infusing other kinds of literacies (e.g., new, urban vernacular, or hip hop) into instruction to support and affirm the literacy abilities of students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds fall outside the mainstream (aka, white normative) framework (see, e.g., Akom, 2009; Alim, 2011; Chang, 2013).
HISTORICAL EVENTS


Hunter, Nick. Women in World War 1. (Remembering World War I). Heinemann, 2014. 48p. LB $16.20. 9781-4329-8084-9. Grades 5-10. With primary sources of diaries and photographs, the high/low examination of World War I, in addition to be curriculum driven, the series will make for interesting reading as well. This title contains how women’s lives were forever changed by WWI. A timeline, glossary, additional information and an index complete the work.

This is not to say that all teens have equal access to technology. To the contrary, research suggests that there is a growing gap between ownership of technology devices across socioeconomic and racial demographics. For example, teens from white, suburban backgrounds with highly educated and/or affluent parents are more likely than their teen counterparts from black urban or rural backgrounds to own a computer, tablet, or smart phone. Moreover, in terms of overall Internet use, teens ages twelve to seventeen living in households with lower income and lower education rates are somewhat less likely to use the Internet in any capacity, mobile or wired (Pew Internet, 2013). This increasing digital divide has exacerbated the cycle of disconnect among teens from nondominant backgrounds who lack the skills and experience to find employment in an age where technology is ever present. Even the seemingly basic task of filling out a job application is now done primarily online. A recent report on youth disconnection in America’s cities provides a data-rich portrait that maps the breadth and scope of this epidemic (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2013).

CONTEXTUALIZING THE BOOK CLUB

The YUS book club was an after-school program housed at a local high school near our university campus. The high school sits a few miles from the midtown university corridor going into a city that is one of most culturally diverse in the metro area. In particular, the city is known as a hub for immigrant populations. As of the 2000 census, the city’s foreign born population stood at 41.1 percent, making it the state’s most internationally diverse city (City of Hamtramck, 2010). Similar to its neighboring city Detroit, there is a substantial African American student population in the in Hamtramck School District, which is the second largest minority population after Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

The book club also served as a field site for my graduate students who were enrolled in a course I taught, Social and Cultural Competencies for Library and Information Science (LIS) Professionals. One of my goals for this course was to “help prepare the next generation of LIS professionals to become culturally sensitive, reflective practitioners who can effectively serve the literacy needs of urban library communities” (Kumasi, 2010). In the first half of the semester, my graduate students gained theoretical and sociological knowledge about the intersections of race, class, literacy. We used our own urban locale as a case study for unpacking broader issues related to urban librarianship, such as the demographic population shifts in the metro Detroit area (Booza, 2005). During the second half of the semester, we held class at the local high school described above, where we also cofacilitated the YUS book club.

The field experience gave my graduate students an opportunity to put the principles of critical inquiry into practice. The basic premise behind critical inquiry is learning how to question the status quo of oppression through consciousness-raising and social action. It also means learning how to think, not what to think (Kumasi-Johnson, 2007). Figure 2 illustrates how critical inquiry was woven into the conceptual design of the graduate course I taught, and consequently informed the book club field experience. The idea of exploration was at the center of the model because we were exploring the ideas and concepts together as a class from a stance of curious and meaningful engagement. The three main concepts were critical inquiry, racial identity development, and urban librarianship.

One of my graduate students explained quite cogently how these different conceptual elements in the course came together for her in a meaningful way. In a reflective class essay she wrote:

For the first several weeks of the class, I thought it was all about us, as students, learning about cultural competency and then using our “newfound” understandings in the real world by hosting a book club for a diverse group of urban teens. It seemed that it was very nice of the teens, and the high school, to let us come in and
practice what we had learned in class. We had learned about whiteness, identity, cultural competency, critical inquiry, and much more. A book club sounded like a good place to put what we had learned to use, and, to a future librarian at least, it sounded like a lot of fun.

One casual discussion after a class meeting, however, made me realize that we were doing much more than this. Someone brought up the idea of critical inquiry yet again, and suddenly everything clicked for me. As librarians, we are trained in the reference interview, in which patrons come to us with a question, often only partially formed. It is our job to ask the right questions of the patrons in order to clarify their inquiry and help them find the resources they need to solve the problem. In this class, we were not simply creating a book club to practice our cultural competencies. We were creating a forum in which teens would be encouraged to formulate questions about their own identities and their place in society, in which we could provide a safe space to help them answer those questions through the examination of short stories, music, poetry, videos, and more. Through introducing and discussing these works, the teens are able to practice critical inquiry, applying what they learn to the real-world situations in which they find themselves. In turn, as future LIS professionals, we learned how to bring the critical inquiry model out from theory and into practice.

**NAMING THE BOOK CLUB**

In naming the book club, I intentionally juxtaposed the words young, urban, and scholar as a way to disrupt the negative association that is often affixed to urban youth in our twenty-first-century popular-culture milieu. Positioning the youth as scholars was also a way to foreground the unique knowledge that they bring from home into school (Hull & Schultz, 2001). This naming also positioned the youth as knowledge constructors capable of generating robust dialogue, questions, and critique of the societal dilemmas they see in their community and that link back to the themes from the book club readings.

**BOOK CLUB FORMAT**

One of the first design decisions I made was to anchor the book club readings around short stories instead of full-length novels. This choice was made based on the recognition that there would likely be some transience from week to week among the students due to competing demands on their time. By reading different short stories from week to week, students could gain a sense of mastery after completing a single text in one book club session. This free-style format also helped build a sense of community within the group in that new students were welcomed each week, and their contributions to the discussions and inquiry activities were sought as much as any other members of the group.

**SELECTING THE STORIES**

My graduate students and I identified a number of short stories that could be read over the ten-week course of book club. Having my students search for culturally relevant short stories was a pedagogical strategy I used to help them develop both their information seeking and their reader’s advisory skills. I instructed them to seek out stories that featured characters of color and dealt with issues that might appeal to teens in general. However, I also emphasized that we should be careful not to limit our search to those kinds of materials. I was attempting to help my students develop a sense of balance in their approach to the selection and evaluation of multicultural materials (Cai, 2002). One the one hand, I wanted to impart the importance of youth of color having “mirrors” in the literature that positively reflects their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. On the other hand, it was important to help student recognize the potential for literature not only to be...
a mirror but also to be what Sims Bishop (1990) describes as “sliding doors and windows”:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.

Too often educators and librarians inadvertently overlook opportunities to connect youth of color with books that do more than merely mirror their own cultural experiences. This is one of the challenges with such genres as street literature and other works that foreground the main characters’ demographic traits. Although librarians need to be familiar with the best works within the street lit genre, they should not limit their reader’s advisory to that genre when working with youth of color (Morris, 2012).

As a class, we discussed the challenges of searching different library catalogs for short stories that might appeal to the young urban scholars in the book club. One of the first issues that arose was that short stories are not always cataloged or shelved uniformly across library systems. For example, the Library of Congress subject headings used to classify stories written by people of color were inconsistent or had naming conventions that were unintuitive. To find short stories written by black authors, one might need to conduct separate subject heading searches for “short stories, African Americans” or “short stories, blacks.” Similarly, the term minority might not be an intuitive or accurate search term for a person of color who is looking for an item. However, searches using “minority authors” returned relevant hits.

Another issue we encountered was that short stories written specifically for young adult audiences were so few that they were often integrated into the adult fiction area in many library catalogs and shelves. Although it was a bit trial and error, we ultimately came up with a dynamic list of short stories that we thought would appeal to the young scholars. One of the class readings I assigned to help my graduate students think about how to avoid choosing stories that contained bias and stereotypes was written by Mitali (2009). This reading was designed to help students avoid choosing books that contained biases or stereotypical representations of racial minorities and their lived experiences. Each of the short stories that were chosen incorporated one or more of the following criteria:

- Featured a young person of color as a central character
- Involved a compelling theme that connected to a social justice issue
- Contained references to popular culture that could be used for critical media literacy
- Included age-appropriate language and challenging vocabulary

**CONNECTED LEARNING IN ACTION**

One illustrative example of how the connected learning framework was brought to life can be seen through the discussion and inquiry that occurred surrounding a short story titled “BLACKout” (Robinson, 2004). This example demonstrates how literature can be used as an anchor for guided activities that weave together academics, popular culture, and digital literacies.

“BLACKout” falls within the speculative fiction genre. It explores a hypothetical scenario of a U.S. bill that was passed giving African Americans reparations for slavery. The main characters, Nigel and Alana, are teenage love interests of African ancestry. The climax of the story comes when Nigel, who was born and raised in America, learns that he does not meet the stipulations of the reparations bill because his parents are immigrants from Jamaica. Meanwhile, his girlfriend, Alana, who is biracial, qualifies for the reparations even though her mother is white and her father is African American. This story teases out the inherent problems of any attempt to compensate the ancestors of those enslaved. Furthermore, it illuminates the complicated and socially constructed nature of race. It also demonstrates how divisive the system of racial classification can be and how it can cause tension and conflict within minority groups.

**LINKING ACADEMICS, POPULAR CULTURE, AND DIGITAL LITERACY**

The young scholars were first asked to locate and critically analyze the literary elements and key cultural concepts in “BLACKout.” Then they were asked to think about and discuss connections between those concepts and the real world. The literary elements that were explored included hyperbole, satire, and allegory. The cultural concepts included reparations, interracial conflict, community, religion, and self-determination. For each literary term, the young scholars were asked to come up with their own personal example of how that term is represented in another piece of text that they either consume or produce in their everyday life. The notion of “text” was broadly conceived as any form of communication that carries a message and can be analyzed. Some examples the young scholars chose to analyze were poems, YouTube video clips, cartoons, and rap lyrics. They used the school library resources, including books and the computer lab, to gather textual resources.

The purpose of this exercise was twofold. First, it allowed students to develop a sense of community in the book club by sharing the music and popular culture they consume on a regular basis. Secondly, it elicited a higher level of thinking that the young scholars will need in their academic careers, particularly on the writing portion of standardized tests. These tests often require students to be able to make abstract ideas concrete and to understand the style and tone of a piece of writing along with literary texts.

To help model what we were looking for, we shared a video clip from *The Dave Chappelle Show*. This video features a comedy sketch that deals with the issue of reparations in a similar, yet more come-
dic, fashion than “BLACkout.” Chappelle imitates a white news anchor (played by Chappelle himself, who is African American) reporting on how different recipients were spending their newfound reparation monies. The scene pokes fun at some of the classic stereotypes associated with black people, such as eating watermelon and fried chicken and the conspicuous consumption of name brands like Cadillac.

From this clip, the young scholars were able to glean firsthand what the concept of hyperbole and satire meant. They were also able to have serious conversations about some of the more grave issues alluded to in the video, such as the collective buying power of African Americans juxtaposed to their spending habits and investment choices. Once the discussion of this short story was complete, the young scholars began to understand that the readings served merely as an anchor for the kinds of learning that was taking place in the book club. The stories were more of a springboard to help brainstorm ideas and engage in critical inquiry related to the themes and literary elements found in the text. The culminating activity that was coordinated for the young scholars was a visit to our university library.

This campus-based activity is a prime example of how digital literacies were woven into the book club design. In the final week, the young scholars ate lunch at the student center and were given brief tour of the undergraduate library before heading to the computer lab on the first floor. Part of our rationale for bringing the youth to the university to use the computer lab instead of their own school library was to familiarize them with the college environment. A secondary aim was to help them see libraries as spaces where they could explore various digital media outside the classroom. Too often teens see libraries as no-frills spaces where they must quietly read and check out books. This campus visit was an attempt to dispel any myths they might have that libraries as spaces do not encourage free-form learning and exploration of new technologies.

The young scholars kept folders throughout the book club with copies of the short stories and handouts that were prepared for the various inquiry activities. The handouts also contained links to different web resources and social media sites that were discussed prior to the campus visit. One of the main Internet resources that the young scholars would be using the final day was a social bookmarking site called Delicious (delicious.com). This site allows Internet users to save, organize, and discover interesting links on the web. Theoretically, this website could be used by the young scholars to bookmark their favorite websites long after the book club ended since they had the account username and password. We also discussed the potential and importance of social tagging and likened it to the hash tag that many use on Twitter and other social media sites. The young scholars were encouraged to use and create their own social tags on Delicious and consider creating social tags for content found via online library catalogs.

As they entered the computer lab, the young scholars were paired with a graduate student who was responsible for helping them choose a popular culture artifact that would represent their connection between the text and real life. Once they found one or more online resources, they were instructed to bookmark the website on the group account for Delicious. Using the annotation field on the website, the young scholars were then instructed to write a brief summary of how their artifact connected to a theme discussed in the text and in real life.

Jamal demonstrated a keen ability to think critically about what was being asked of him in this digital literacy activity. Jamal’s choice of a popular culture artifact was the adult cartoon series Boondocks. This cartoon series was created by Aaron McGruder, an African American cartoonist from Chicago, Illinois. McGruder’s cartoon is about two young African American brothers from inner-city Chicago now living with their grandfather in a sedate suburb (“Aaron McGruder,” 2013). Jamal’s choice was savvy in the sense that this political cartoon not only embodied satire but also offered a ripe ground for him to branch off into inquiry about any number of hot-button topics, such as the use of the “N” word. Many of the young scholars engaged in passionate debates about the use of this controversial word. In his online annotation, Jamal noted that he chose Boondocks because he wanted to explore the life works of McGruder by browsing the social tags related to him, cartoons, comic screenwriters, and animation. Later on, after conducting his research, Jamal expressed an interest in becoming a cartoonist and/or screenwriter.

OUTCOMES AND SUCCESSES

As with any diverse group of learners, the young scholars met the intended learning outcomes of the book club with varying degrees of success. Not all of the students put forth the same amount of effort or produced the same high quality of work as Jamal, and a few others did. Jamal exhibited a great deal of intrinsic motivation, higher-level thinking, and reading fluency. On the other hand, for some of the young scholars there were language barriers (high ESL) and reading fluency issues that came to the forefront. This brings up the idea of what constitutes “success” in a semistructured after-school learning setting. Unlike traditional classroom learning outcomes, where success is measured by every student’s ability to master a specific skill or recall discrete facts, the book club had broader aims. The overarching learning outcome for the book club was for the young scholars to make connections between their academics, peer culture, and personal interests. With that broad aim, success could be measured in a number of nuanced and incremental ways.

Take Natasha, for example, who by traditional academic measures might be labeled as a struggling reader. She seemed to find her voice toward the very end of the book club, writing a stream of consciousness piece after we discussed a short story called “Human Mathematics” (Kabu, 2006). This story dealt with issues of prejudice and stereotyping among female college roommates from different racial backgrounds. Although there were a number of grammatical issues in Natasha’s text, the more important learning outcome was an ability to make a connection between the readings, her lived
experiences, and her burgeoning interest in becoming a spoken word artist. In our graduate seminar debriefings, we agreed that it was more important for us to encourage Natasha's interest in creative writing than to edit her piece for punctuation and spelling. She used the computer lab to type up her piece and began working on finding different online and social media outlets to showcase her writing. For us, helping Natasha bring out this form expression was a "success." Yet someone looking in from the outside might not realize it by judging on her artifact alone. By reading deeply into her text (copied below with her permission), one can sense her pain and passion regarding prejudice and racial discrimination.

HIGH HOPES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS BY NATASHA FORBES

Me being an African American is a struggle it leads to pain stress and much suffer me being an African American cause me to go thru a lot it cause my mother an American women to also struggle it's hard to get a job or should I say a good job it's easy for her to get a job at Coney island or Wendy's because it's a lower class job. But hard for her to become a doctor or lawyer because she's an African American .is it fair I ask myself is it fair to be judge by your skin color is it fair to be judge by who your ancestors are. NO. No it isn't. People think that just because I'm black that I'm not smart that I steal that I'm ghetto it isn't hardly fun. It hurts. It brings tears to my eyes and pain to my heart but I don't question god for it because at the end there will be no more pain stress or suffer or heart-ache. Just happiness, love, and every race will come together and become one. Proud to be black not ashamed of what I stand for. Not scared to stand up for what I believe. Because god made me how he wanted to be and when it's my time to stand up for what I believe I'm going to shine like no other African American women has ever shined before. im going to go down in history and as my kids grow older they will know not to let anyone or anything get them down...They will know that being an African American is a wonderful thing.

Her raw expression on this topic could be honed and channeled into more formal types of writing that she could use for academic purposes. Still, I count it a major success that she was able to write this first draft from her heart. Not to mention that she seemed to come to life from all of the positive attention she received, as well as realizing her promise as a creative writer or artist. She expressed numerous times how excited she was about the book club and the idea of having her work featured in print or online.

By contrast, another group of young scholars was less vocal and admittedly harder to reach. In particular, there were around five females who speak Bengali as their primary language outside of school. Their limited proficiency in standard English presented somewhat of a barrier to their participation in the whole-group discussions. They kept to themselves a lot and were not asked to read aloud to prevent them from potential feelings of embarrassment or ostracism by their peers. Yet a breakthrough moment came when they were asked to share songs from their homeland that represent the concepts we were discussing in the text. One of them shared an Indian anthem called "Lead India." The song is accompanied by an inspiring YouTube video, which we all watched together during a book club session ("Lead India," 2010). The video shows the power than one person can have in making a positive change in society through individual acts of heroism.

Excited about the connection that we made with this group of young scholars around music, we later allowed them to explore a popular audio software called Garageband. When they were left alone to explore this software, we heard laughter and chatter from them or the first time. They seemed to enjoy listening to the playback recordings of their voices. Unfortunately, due to the time and language barriers, they were unable to complete the audiobook recording project that they started.

This is an example of the more nuanced measure of success we had. There were no artifacts created by this group of young scholars that could be quantifiably evaluated. However, the fact that they began to attend the sessions on a more regular basis after the music-based activities were introduced seems to suggest that they had a desire to be a part of the community of learning that was unfolding.

CONCLUSION

Jamal, Natasha, and the young scholars from Bangladesh deserve to have school and public librarians who understand how to create connected learning opportunities that keep them culturally engaged, academically adept, and digitally fluent. Libraries are natural workshops for teens to engage in activities that weave these kinds of learning experiences together in meaningful ways. Given the disconnects that many youth experience from mainstream educational institutions, we have a moral and professional imperative to use our knowledge and experience do more unconventional things (Agosto, 2013).

Perhaps I could relate to the concern that Jamal's mother expressed on a deeper cultural level that I do not have space to fully articulate here. Suffice it to say that I have had to negotiate urban public schools on behalf of my own two children with some degree of tension and skepticism toward the educational establishment. No doubt our shared racial background as black females gives me an even greater sense of connectedness to her. In other words, I felt a sense of social responsibility to create a book club that was more than a traditional leisure reading space. While that type of reading has its place, I understood the importance of infusing academic and digital literacy components into this program. For me, this impetus stemmed from knowing that more and more students, particularly students from urban communities, are disengaged from school because traditional modes of teaching do not connect their out-of-school interests, experiences, and literacy practices to the academic subjects being taught in school. To Ms. Stevenson and the youth services professionals of today, I hope this modest attempt to articulate the theory and practices of a book club dem-
onstruates its merits and shows the possibilities for engaging youth in ways that lead to their success in- and outside of school.

REFERENCES


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