Literature is *always* relevant: Increasing secondary students’ social emotional skills through novel reading in the age of nonfiction

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**Description:** In this session, I will share how I introduced a social-cultural theory to my AP English Language and Composition students within the context of an independent novel analysis unit. Students chose a novel of YA fiction, traditional/modern fiction, or creative nonfiction which they read independently and then analyzed using social identity development theory. The students’ novel selections represented a wide range of youth protagonists who experienced a change or growth in identity within the plot of the novel.

As ELA teachers, we recognize the value in providing students a pathway to understanding the world around them. We also want them to know that their identity and those of all of their peers is recognized and respected in the classroom. Recent research in social emotional learning illustrates the value of fiction in helping students understand other cultures and empathize with those in their communities. Reading fiction and creative nonfiction pieces that celebrate identity can empower them in many ways. Additionally, since students can choose books that interest them, they are more engaged readers. The protagonists in the chosen novels reflect a wide perspective in terms of the characters’ identity intersections in race, gender, religion, sexuality, age, language, dis/ability or nationality.

Social Identity Development Theory (Tajfel, Turner) is a theory that students can apply to the protagonists of their novels to understand the character’s reaction to social injustice or oppression and how the character changes and/or adapts to the conflict or situation. Applying theory to novel analysis at the high school level meets the CCSS reading and writing standards in a unique way while also increasing students’ social and emotional abilities.

Students prepared for the novel analysis by viewing TED Talks (“The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie), examining social identity development theory, reading a short story (“Indian Education,” S. Alexie) and applying Social Identity Development Theory to the protagonist and discussing their novels in student-organized book clubs. Students also wrote reflections on the reading and writing processes during the project.

Students also practiced identifying literature theories such as Reader-Response Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Marxist Criticism, and Structuralist Criticism when they read reviews of their chosen novel on websites such as Amazon and Goodreads. Also, the written portion of this assignment required students to rhetorically analyze the prose in the novel, in addition to performing other tasks such as evaluation, synthesis, revision, publication in a digital format and informal presentation (book talk) to the class.
The time required for project completion was 8 weeks including preparation activities, reading time, writing, and revising the final product. Students worked on some parts of the project in class while other portions were assigned as homework.

Sample list of student book choices:

- The Hate You Give--Angie Thomas
- All American Boys--Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
- Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass -- Meg Medina
- Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets to the Universe -- Benjamin Alire Saenz
- The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian -- Sherman Alexie
- Shadowshaper -- Daniel Jose Older
- Gabi, A Girl in Pieces -- Isabel Quintero
- Purple Hibiscus -- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- Akata Witch -- NNedi Okorafor
- American Born Chinese -- Gene Luen Yang
- All the Light We Cannot See -- Anthony Doerr
- Between the World and Me -- Ta-Nehisi Coates
- A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier -- Ishmael Beah

**Results:** Students appreciated a new way to look at literature and applied the theory successfully in most cases. They were able to choose books that depicted characters and cultures that differed from their own which helps them develop social and emotional skills. Did every student read all of his or her chosen book? Probably not--I suspect some students relied on outside source materials. Nevertheless, I consider the opportunity to read based on choice and the suggested analysis activities to be worthwhile for my students. In particular, students wrote about how they were now able to empathize with people and situations that they were previously unaware of; in their reflections and final analyses they were able to put this to words using the lens of Social Identity Development Theory. Many students made personal connections to the experiences of the main characters in the novels that they read; this cannot be said of many novels in the canon.

**Suggestions:** This project can be adapted for various secondary ELA grade and ability levels to meet the needs of individual learners. Additionally, the project can be adapted to focus on a particular genre (contemporary Young Adult, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Historical, etc.) or assigned more than once in a school year.
A few student reflection responses:

“I finished the book and I loved it….Something that I took from the book is that your view on things can change and this is directly affected by those who you come in contact with.” (The Sun is Also a Star)

“The book I chose was Flight by Sherman Alexie. I loved this book so much. He made a book a book that finally wasn’t cliche, a book that showed reality of the world. ...I would recommend it to teens in foster care to show they are not the only ones in this world with this feeling.”

“Overall, though, I think both main characters are easy to find common ground with or make those simple connections that really make a book much better. I also think that in the end people will realize from the events that’ve happened so far that it is so easy to stereotype people and to have just one opinion of a race or ethnicity, but that’s never the way it’s supposed to be with anything.” (All-American Boys)

“I enjoy the writer’s inclusion of Spanish phrases within the story, as well as the diction and imagery she uses. Piedad is very much relatable to teens, since she exemplifies the struggle of identity most teens face. Medina depicts Piedad making decisions that impact her life in both positive and negative ways. The author presents Piedad as neither perfect nor broken, but as human.” (Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass)

“I chose The Hate You Give. It is a wonderful book on how to use your voice even in the worst situations possible….The entire book was an eye opener to the injustices in the world. It also helped me to get rid of my single story and gain a new perspective on situations and living conditions that I would never have learned about otherwise.”

“The novel that I chose to read was The Hate You Give, and it just may be the best book I’ve ever had to read for an English class. It not only has an amazing plot, but offers insight on the perspectives of the main character, Starr….I have never read a book like this and because of that, I was surprised at how relevant and relatable it is to someone like me.”

References:


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*Social identity theory (tajfel, turner).* (2016). Retrieved 04/25, 2016, from 
