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A Case Study: Incorporating Young Adult Literature
into General Education to Improve Intellectual
and Emotional Intelligence

Katherine Ann Irion

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

A Case Study: Incorporating Young Adult Literature into General Education to Improve Intellectual and Emotional Intelligence

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Institutions of higher learning have required students to take general education courses since such courses were conceived and implemented in the 1940s. Requirements vary widely across institutions, but there is a broad consensus that a literature course be required in order to graduate. While these courses feature many types of literature, one literary field is overwhelmingly overlooked: young adult literature. Brigham Young University has recently implemented a young adult literature course that will fulfill a general education requirement. This case study examines the question, “What might be the rationale for including a course in young adult literature as part of the general education curriculum?” The findings of this case study suggest teaching YA literature as a GE course benefits students’ emotional and intellectual intelligence. Drawing on observations, interviews, students’ work, and students’ reflections, analysis concludes that young adult literature has the ability to be used in a university general education class to successfully teach intellectual abilities and to impart and improve emotional intelligence.

Keywords: young adult literature, general education, empathy, case study

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Introduction

“Rather than seeing young adult literature as a bunch of dramatic, annoying vampires running around, I see it now as true literature that can have a great value to the person that is reading it. Young adult literature provides a great deal of life lessons while creating connections to the reader superior to that of any other forms of literature that I have read.” Nelson, English 230 student, written in his final reflective essay.

For the past two years, Brigham Young University has implemented into its general education curriculum an arts and letters requirement that situates young adult literature as one option to be studied as literature in institutions of higher education. By doing so, it has implicitly identified YA literature as a subject worthy of serious academic study. Like Nelson, the student quoted in my epigraph, many universities and colleges have preconceived notions about young adult literature, with many viewing it as a lesser form of literature, and therefore not utilizing it in general education literature requirements. Nelson’s preconceived idea, however, that young adult literature is only filled with dramatic teenagers trying to figure out their lives, closes off the possibility of young adult literature being given the chance to educate students both intellectually and emotionally and closes the door to literature that has potential to teach and inspire intelligence. Teaching young adult literature in a general education course has the potential to transform preconceived notions about YA literature and teach life lessons, much as it did for Nelson.

The rationale of many general education programs hinges on educating students to not only repeat facts and figures, but also educating them to become well-rounded people. Young adult literature has the potential to be a two-fold improvement course: one that improves students’ intellectual capacity while also improving students’ emotional capacity, both general

education objectives. This thesis hopes to reveal the benefits of incorporating young adult literature into general education and to answer the question: What might be the rationale for including a course in young adult literature as part of the general education curriculum?

This thesis examines the value of a GE young adult literature class in achieving the academic and emotional aims, specifically empathy, of a GE course. It begins with an exploration and explanation of general education, the science behind cultivating empathy through literature, and the impact young adult literature can have in a classroom. It then explains the methods used to conduct this research. Using a case study approach, it explores observations of the course, student work samples, and students' reflections thematically to yield answers about the validity of a young adult literature course at the university level.

Background and Review of the Literature

University General Education: A Historical Overview.

The purpose of general education courses often varies from one institution to another, but the same basic tenets have existed since their implementation into college and university curricula. While general education courses were initially offered at Columbia University in 1919, it was not until the 1940s that the general education movement was truly on its way. As colleges and universities established their general education curricula, many opinions, reports, and articles were written about what should be included as general education for undergraduate students. Institutions were figuring out exactly what it meant to have a "general education" and what courses and classes would be, as Earl McGarth, an early key player in the establishment of general education said, "the unifying element of a culture" (O'Banion 9). McGarth is also credited with, according O'Banion, creating "one of the most quoted definitions of general

education as ‘a common core of learning for the common man’” (329). McGarth’s ideas continue to influence universities as general education courses evolve.

Theoretically, general education courses impart knowledge, facts, and information to students. While the knowledge is vital to a students’ university success, there is another aspect as to why general education courses are offered and required by universities. In 1946, the first issue of *The Journal of General Education* was published. This journal, established to inform the academic world about the purpose, uses, and benefits of general education, clearly states that there is a need for general education classes to impart knowledge, but there is also a responsibility for general education classes to impart an emotional education. In one of its first articles, Robert J. Havighurst writes of the “two basic processes of general education” and states that they are “knowing and loving” (39). Havighurst defines knowing as consisting “of a range of intellectual activities, such as observing, remembering, forming concepts, generalizing, and reasoning” (39). This is what many people consider when they ponder the idea of general education classes. This is not everything that is required of a GE class, however. Loving, in the opinion of Havighurst, is defined as consisting of “a range of emotional activities, such as desiring, appreciating, liking, admiring, enjoying, tolerating, and sympathizing” (39).

The concept that general education courses are taught not only to impart intellectual knowledge but emotional knowledge as well is not an outdated one. In 2016, Whitehall et al., argued that “being successful in college and beyond requires more than just being smart and richly skilled in the content base of a discipline” (241); it also requires that higher education “reach beyond discipline-specific knowledge” in order to help “the development of the individual as a whole person” (241). These authors echo the idea initially posited by their scholarly partners in 1946: that general education courses must address the intellectual self in

tandem with the emotional self in order for students to reach their full potential as people and graduates.

An ongoing debate, however, exists concerning just how to help students achieve greater emotional knowledge and increased empathy. Emotional knowledge can be taught throughout all disciplines, but one such discipline that aligns itself quite well with emotional knowledge is the study of humankind through literature. In 1943, the Modern Language Association's Commission on Trends in Education published a report entitled *Literature in American Education*. Worried about the increased pressure on institutions to include more scientific classes in students' education, this report, compiled by a special committee, is an impassioned plea to include literature in education. The majority of the report focuses on the benefits of literature and makes claims about the value of studying literature. Among the claims are the ideas that literature is a servant to both the individual and society, that literature enlarges a person's life and increases human understanding and quickens people's hearts. While these claims may seem archaic and not answerable to data, the ideas behind these statements are still the results that literature teachers are hoping to impress upon their students today, 73 years later. Teachers, professors, librarians, are still hoping that literature does what this report claims it does that it "makes men and women live more, it in turn makes society live more" (9), and that literature is "certainly not regarded as an embroidery upon life but as a revelation of life itself" (10), and that it helps readers feel "the genuine brotherhood of man" (13), and that literature "helps us, not merely to find our way among the intricacies of social and business life, but also to enter so completely into the thoughts and feelings of others that our perception and understanding contribute powerfully to the unity of civilization" (14). These goals, claims, ideas, are not measurable by facts and numbers, and that may be why we no longer talk about such lofty ideals,

but they do express the hope that teachers feel as they teach literature. Teachers want students to live life more fully, be more tolerant, understand more abundantly, simply because of what they read, and we believe it is possible.

Literature and Empathy.

One well documented emotion that is strengthened through reading literature is empathy. In its limited definition, empathy is the ability to know how others feel and motivates and encourages action. Thomas R. Hoerr, in his book *The Formative Five*, quotes Roman Krznaric who said that empathy is “the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of [other people], understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions” (34). Empathy not only yields compassion, but also yields and motivates change. It is one emotion that drives people to help and understand others.

In a recent study, Kidd and Castano “found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader’s capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling”, and that “understanding others’ mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies. . . [This skill] is known as Theory of Mind (ToM). . . We present five experiments showing that reading literary fiction led to better performances on tests of affective ToM and cognitive ToM” (377). Similarly, Bal and Veltkamp presented research that corroborated earlier evidence that reading fiction can increase a reader’s empathy. They summarized a portion of their research by declaring that “increased empathy is important for people because empathy is positively related to creativity, performance at work, and prosocial and cooperative behaviors.” Other social scientists have drawn a similar conclusion: exposure to literature cultivates empathy.

This principle also applies to children and young adults. In 2011, Vezzali et al., examined the idea of whether reading can improve adolescents' attitudes towards immigrants. In this study they placed eleven 13-year-old Italian pupils into two groups. The first group was asked to "read books that dealt with people belonging to different cultures, their daily interactions and their difficulties" (150), while the second group of pupils were "advised to not read any books" over the summer (151). Their "results consistently showed that indirect contact through book reading reduced prejudice. Overall, Italian adolescents who read a book on intercultural topics, and therefore exposed themselves to vicarious contact with other cultures, had more positive intergroup attitudes, endorsed less negative intergroup stereotypes, compared to participants in the control conditions" (151). As they read, these children's' hearts and minds were opened to people seen as "different" from themselves. These readers developed empathy.

In her landmark article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Bishop discusses the importance of literature that showcases people of all cultures, races, and creeds. She mentions that books can fall into three different categories. They can be mirrors, which show readers their own reflection where they can "see [their] own lives and experiences" (ix). Books can also be windows, where readers are given a glimpse of a different life, one that they do not inhabit but can learn and gain new insight from. Sliding glass door books, however, incite the most change because those books help readers look into another world, one they may not identify with, but which invites them in and begs them not to look away. They do not pretend they do not see; they open the door and walk in. Sliding glass door books cultivate empathy. The books where readers not only see themselves but also see others and feel for others and walk in and "live" with others and where they are empowered and incited to act. These are the books that echo Scout Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "Atticus was right. One

time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them” (279). It is only by walking through these literary sliding glass doors that action and change can happen, but first, the sliding glass door must be presented and available to readers.

Young Adult Literature. One branch of literature that adds a dimension to the cultivation of empathy is young adult literature. As previously stated, there is a strong connection between acquiring empathy and literature, and while there are many books that can help readers develop intellectual and emotional improvement, young adult literature is uniquely situated to help develop an empathy that may help to improve our world and our global community. Young adult literature helps readers cultivate a modern empathy, one that deals with modern circumstances, situations, and difficulties that may not otherwise be found in general education’s class canon: a genre of books that address current situations like refugees, autism, mental health, drug use, LGQTB issues, foster care, bullying, suicide, and other pressing concerns that up and coming generations will face. In an effort to help this generation cultivate empathy that is relevant to this modern day and age, the literature this generation reads needs to reflect current problems. Young adult literature is filled with novels that reflect the current trends and situations in this world, and it has the ability to influence and help young people, not just teenagers, cultivate a modern empathy for a modern world. It can be an anchor for teachers, parents, students, and future leaders. While classic literature also has the potential to teach empathy, there is a lack of contemporaneousness that does not allow for aspects of our culture to be discussed. Modern empathy is empathy for modern problems and issues that young people, including university students, face.

The cultivation of this dimension of empathy is desired but not available at most universities. Institutions, even if they are not aware, are certainly hoping that literature can

educate students intellectually and emotionally. Most, if not all, post-secondary institutions require all students to take an English class as a requirement for graduation. While it certainly is a forgone conclusion that a general education arts and letters course should be offered, there is an ongoing debate about what literature should be taught in those courses as evidenced by the multiple arts and letters literature courses offered. The following is a sampling of literature courses offered by Brigham Young University that fulfill an arts and letter general education requirement: Danish Literature, Bible as Literature, Masterpieces of World Literature, Shakespeare, etc. Most people agree with R. Baird Shuman when he says that, “we all have our favorite writers; we all can make convincing cases for their inclusion on any reading list for college students” (230). His statement, while true in many regards, is not true for a growing and flourishing genre of literature that is conspicuously absent in curricula that seek to inform students and teach empathy as a part of the “common core of learning.”

Although it is the “fastest growing market for publishers” (CBSnews.com), young adult literature has been vastly overlooked in general education programs. Over 200 universities (Bickmore) currently offer young adult literature classes. Unfortunately, however, most are not directly and specifically taught to non-English majors. The YA literature classes that are offered at the university level are almost equally divided among English majors and/or education majors with a modicum of YA literature classes offered to students of library science. The focus for these courses within the English and education departments is not using YA literature to educate and enlighten, but instead on how to teach YA literature to others. Shuman points out that

The study of literature, particularly as it pertains to general education rather than to the training of literature majors, is usually regarded as a means to help students understand themselves, their society, their world, and their cultural heritage. . . The study of literature

is one vital means by which our students, restricted to a limited geographical and social compass, can reach out and touch the whole of human existence. . . The world is at the command of those who will read. (234)

The study of literature is not up for debate. Institutions and academics agree that literature should be studied; however, the inclusion of young adult literature specifically as a general education course remains worthy of discussion.

Methods

In order to explore my research question: Is a young adult literature general education course worthy of study at institutions of higher education?, I chose to conduct a case study. Case studies, according to Yin, “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events,” (4). This case study researched the real-life events of English 230 and the corresponding data that accompanied the study. As part of the case study, I researched the creation of the course, wrote and submitted an IRB that granted permission to study students and their work in English 230, gathered participants, and collected and analyzed data.

Context of Study.

In the fall of 2016, the English department at Brigham Young University created a young adult literature class that fulfilled a general education arts and letters requirement. Three professors, Chris Crowe, Jon Ostenson, and Dawan Coombs, proposed the course because they believe that young adult literature can contribute in a significant way to students’ general education. The course itself teaches young adult literature as literature, and it is offered to any student regardless of major, minor, or year in school.

Since its approval, English 230 has been taught five semesters at BYU. Each class has had 24-30 students enrolled with many students left on the waiting list once classes started. The data included in this case study represents two English 230 classes taught in winter of 2017 and 2018. These classes were selected because I was the teaching assistant for both courses and received IRB approval to collect data in these specific classes.

Participants.

The participants in each class included a broad range of majors, ages, and year in school. The class taught in 2017 had 24 students with 18 participating in the research. Of the 18 participants, five were men and 13 were women, with 14 identifying as white, three identified as Latina and one identified as Latina and black. The range of majors in the 2017 course varied, with 11 undeclared or open and one of each of the following majors: nursing, choral education, exercise and wellness, mechanical engineering, public relations, English, and economics. No students were freshman, ten students were sophomores, four were juniors, and four were seniors. Twenty-five students took the class in 2018 with 13 participating in the research. Of those 13 participants, 11 were women and two were men and all identified as white. Their progress in school varied with no freshman, seven sophomores, four juniors, and two seniors. Seven of these students had open or undeclared majors, and the others majoring in photography, human development, exercise science, English, and graphic design. This variety of participants lends itself to interesting and insightful discussion with students bringing in their varied majors and backgrounds to make thoughtful comments and enlighten the other students.

Instructional Overview.

To help students gain a broad understanding of the possibilities that YA literature offers, the course was structured around 11 key texts that showcased a variety of genres within YA

literature. From one semester to the next, the books varied slightly. During the two semesters, texts used included the following:

All-American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Strapi

Death Coming Up the Hill by Chris Crowe

The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer

Monster by Walter Dean Myers

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly

Once Was Lost by Sara Zarr

Paper Towns by John Greene

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys

When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead

The Boys Who Challenged Hitler: Knud Pedersen and the Churchill Club by Philip Hoose

The Serpent King by Jeff Zener

A Monster Calls: Inspired by an idea from Siobhan Down by Patrick Ness

They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of an American Terrorist Group by Susan

Campbell Bartoletti

Along with the above books, several short stories and articles about YA literature, were also assigned to students. The reading list included a graphic novel, non-fiction, historical fiction, contemporary realism, novels in verse, and a post-modern screenplay in novel form to showcase the variety of text available in young adult literature.

Over the course of the semester, each book was read, analyzed, discussed, and written about by the students. Each week a new book, and accompanying articles, were expected to be read and discussed in the classroom. Instead of quizzes, on the day the books were due to be read, the instructor required each student to take a reading check. The checks really could not be completed without having read the book.

The majority of the class was structured around the idea of questions. Students were asked to continually be wondering what questions about life, culture, society, existence, and adolescence arose in the assigned reading. An ongoing assignment in the class was called the “Enduring Question Response.” This assignment was assigned to five different novels and required students to identify an enduring question that lived at the heart of the text. The instructor defined an enduring question as “one that humans have pondered for ages. For instance, ‘Why are humans beings cruel to each other?’ or ‘Where does evil come from?’”. Students were asked to identify an enduring question of their choice, write about it, and select passages from the text that analyzed how that particular question was addressed in that text. The purpose of this assignment was to teach students how to think and write critically about a text, support their ideas from a text, analyze a text in terms of a specific question, and how literature answers enduring questions. In order to model the assignment, to ensure that the first book of the semester was read, and in preparation for a successful initial discussion, each student was required to complete this assignment for the first book read.

Role of Researcher and Data Collection.

I was the primary researcher in this case study, with Dr. Dawn coombs as the co-researcher, and was a graduate student serving as a teaching assistant in these classes. I attended class, observed students, and took notes.

The data for this study came from four sources: observations, personal interviews with students, student work, and end-of-semester student reflections in the form of two essays and short answers which allowed students to articulate through writing their understanding, observations, and insights about the course and young adult literature. Robert Yin states that “any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information” (116), which is the intention of the triangulation of the data collected in this case study.

Observations.

The data I collected from direct observations came a result of the time I spent in class observing the students. As I observed, I took notes in real time in an attempt to be insightful about behavior and motives of students. I was specifically watching for discussions where students were engaged. Observations are valid because they cover events in real time and in the context of the case (Yin 102).

Interviews.

Along with observations, in the winter of 2017 I interviewed each participant. Each participant signed up for a specific time and answered questions. I recorded each interview with a handheld recorder and then hired a transcriber to transcribe each interview, which I then saved into Word documents. The benefits of interviews allow for a target experience. The interviews focused directly on case study topics and provided extended answers as the students were willing to talk for 10-15 minutes. Only one class, winter 2017, was interviewed for this research. At that point the data collected was sufficient and students in winter 2018 wrote more in their personal reflections and short answer that allowed for loss of interviews.

Written Work.

Students' written responses were also used as data. I collected all the participants' assignments, and at the end of the course, each student wrote two reflective essays and answered 12 questions. Responses to the short answers varied in length from one sentence to one paragraph, with most being 2-3 sentences. The reflective essay posed several questions to the students to spark thought and contemplation and asked them to write one-page responses. Documentation analysis allows for stable, unobtrusive, and exact evidence (Yin 102). Two types of student work were used in this research. Their enduring question responses were used in order to track literature analysis and intellectual improvement, but the short reflective answers were used to document students' attitude and response to the class and to young adult literature in general. Documentation also covers the course of the semester allowing evidence to be used from the beginning of the class to the end of semester.

Data Analysis.

Observations, student work, and interviews from each class were then analyzed thematically. According to Braun and Clark, thematic analysis asks the researcher to identify themes within the data across a data set (77). These themes represent patterns within the data that lead to researcher being able to "interpret various aspect of the research topic" (79). After studying the data, I identified the themes of intellectual and emotional improvement within the case study, then reviewed the data, and coded for these themes. I coded for portions of the data that are suggestive for intellectual component, or lack thereof, and emotional component or lack thereof. After the initial coding, I added the following codes to account for all the responses: improved literature analysis and specific empathy.

Findings and Discussion of the Data

Intellectual Improvement.

The analysis revealed that one of the most prevalent themes in the data centers on an improvement in intellectual development. One of the objectives of BYU's general education program is to "facilitate the ability and desire for lifelong learning" (byu.edu). BYU hopes that students graduate from the university having increased their desire to learn forever. Over the course of English 230, all the students who participated in the survey wrote in their reflective essay that their desire to read had increased. One student wrote that at "the beginning of this class, [she] did not consider [herself] to be an active reader." At the end of the semester she wrote that she started to remember "how much [she] enjoyed reading and [that she] was able to learn a lot of new things from those books that [she] read." Another student responded that at the beginning of class he felt like "college had taken the joy out of reading" and that he did not consider himself a reader any longer. After taking the course and reading the books this same student wrote that the class had "simultaneously helped [him] realize that [he] hadn't abandoned reading outright and that [he] could be a good reader again." As a result of this class, these students wanted to become lifelong learners and, more importantly, felt like they could. One student wrote the following:

Since taking this class I no longer have a problem committing to reading longer texts. We read so many books in class that I have been reminded that I *am* capable of committing and reading long texts. It sounds silly, but that is how it feels. In addition to reading books in class, I have still found time to read other books for my enjoyment. I am really glad I took this class for multiple reasons, but especially because it has helped me become a "reader" again.

This student wrote about an outcome from the young adult literature class that many students also reflected upon in their work. She did not consider herself a reader when she started this class but gained confidence throughout the semester and upon reflection at the end of the semester, labeled herself a “reader.” While not all students considered themselves ardent readers when the semester ended, all the participants in the research did consider themselves more of a reader than they did when they started the class, even if the change in them was minimal. That is an objective of a general education class, that the study of a particular subject will result in students wanting to continue their education outside of a formal education. The data from this case study illustrates that the incorporation of a young adult literature class in general education will influence and inspire students to be lifelong learners.

It was evident from observing the class that many students did not initially consider themselves to be readers. On the first day of class when it was revealed that they would be asked to read eleven different texts, many students groaned or acted shocked. Many students commented that they could not remember reading eleven books in such a limited amount of time. They were not entirely prepared for the amount of reading and openly discussed how nervous it made them. It was interesting, however, to observe that students proved themselves wrong and read the books. They were able to talk about characters and themes and other literary devices that impacted the narrative. The discussions that were facilitated in English 230 were not possible to participate in without having read the books. The instructor often asked students to find evidence from the text to back up their comment, and students were consistently able to find textual evidence. As an observer in the classroom, it was evident to me that almost all, if not all, the students read the books. The eleven texts may have started out as a seemingly insurmountable task, but once the students started reading the books and discovering their enjoyment and

engagement with the texts, they began to enjoy their “homework.” One student mentioned that because of the homework for this particular class, she started to think that “reading was not homework, rather something I did for fun and to relax.” Another one wrote that “this has been one of the busiest semesters in my life and I read eleven books and loved it.” One student said he did not consider himself a reader when class started but, at the end of semester, while he “still wouldn’t consider himself an avid reader, [he] would say that [he] has grown to enjoy reading much more and am actually reading a book on [his] own outside of class right now!” Students came to class and enjoyed discussing the books because they had read them. By the end of the semester, they came with insightful insights and observations because they had read the books and cared about them.

Along with pursuing a desire for lifelong learning, BYU hopes that their general education courses “improve student’s ability to think clearly [and] communicate effectively” (byu.edu). English 230 not only helped students to become lifelong readers and learners, but it also taught students how to become better readers. At the end of the winter 2017 semester, all the students who participated in the research were interviewed. Those interviews revealed that students were aware that their capacity and skills regarding reading had improved. One student said that the class “definitely helped [my] reading skills, because I am looking for things throughout the book and for continuing ideas.” Another student mentioned that this helped her “learn to analyze literature and take meaning from it.” Another student remarked that his skills to analyze a text and “to understand over-arching themes and progressions in books” improved. This student was a senior economics major. He did not have a background in literature but saw intellectual value in reading and writing about young adult literature. He remarked in his interview that “whatever profession you go into, you are probably going to have to do some level

of reading, and if you are not, you know, necessarily reading every day, it is an analysis. So, I think, if anything, this class helps point toward kind of a method of analysis over things.” He was able to make a connection between a young adult literature class and his intended professional life. The two classes in this case study had students with a variety of different majors. Between the two classes, only two students were declared English majors, which means the other 31 students had declared majors that did not focus on text analysis that did not mean they would not enter a profession that does not require it of them.

Earlier in this case study, the “Enduring Question” assignment was explained. Data from students’ work and interview suggest that this assignment and discussions within class taught students to formulate questions and analyze texts. One student, in her reflective essay, wrote that at the beginning of the semester she had hoped that her ability to think deeper about books improved, and at the end of the semester she remarked that she “did learn how to think deeper about books and look at them in new ways.” Another student wrote that over the course of the semester she “improved in [her] ability to read and understand the themes.” The enduring question assignment was one reason these students were able to improve their reading and that their ability to think deeper about books improved. This assignment required students to question and analyze text, thus teaching them to think more critically.

At the beginning of the semester many students had difficulty formulating well-thought out questions. The assignment asked them to come up with a question that could be analyzed using evidence from the text.

Over the course of the semester, students learned to formulate questions and to think critically in order to analyze important aspects of the text. One student, writing in her enduring question response to *Monster*, asked the following question: “How can other people’s perception

of us shape how we see ourselves?” Her evaluative question encouraged her to think critically about the text and to analyze aspects of the text that may or may not answer the question. She went on to discuss the conflict, external and internal, that Steve, the main character, has within himself. She wrote: “The fact that he struggles with this, points to the idea that his own perception of himself is not yet established thus, the situation Steve is in, influences how he defines himself. He really comes to believe that he is in fact a monster because this idea [is] repeatedly stated in his mind.” This student was able to get past summary and analyze Steve’s character. She read between the lines and found evidence to indicate that Steve was having an internal struggle that never was resolved. This student was able to analyze why Steve felt the way he did.

In another response paper, a student wrote about *Persepolis*. This text is a graphic novel and the student did an effective job of analyzing not only the text but also the illustrations and how the illustrations and pictures work together to show multiple emotions and tell various narratives. The question this student formulated for her assignment was: “How much do adults really have figured out and what are the consequences of growing up?” In response to this question the student the student wrote:

One interesting aspect of this book is the juxtaposition between the written words and the pictures. In the beginning of the book, Marjane is confident in her parents’ intelligence, and her own. Later . . . there is a picture of Marjane’s father, with the words ‘everything will be alright.’ From his dejected expression and downcast eyes, readers are given the impression that no, it won’t be. This also signified how Marjane picked up on his uncertainties, even as a young child. She begins to understand that maybe adulthood is a lot more pretending than she once realized.

This student quite effectively analyzed not only the written words in this text but also analyzed how the pictures effected the text and the narrative. She was able to identify an ongoing theme within the text and analyze what the characters learns and understands about it throughout the entire text.

Empathy: A Natural Byproduct.

Along with teaching intellectual improvement, general education courses are intended to teach emotional knowledge as well. One of BYU's reasons for requiring general education courses is so "students' perspectives about themselves and the world around them are deepened" and that students should pursue "all truth." It was not surprising to find the intellectual aspects that resulted from English 230, but intellectual knowledge was not the only knowledge that the data revealed. There was strong correlation between English 230 and an increase in emotional intellect. The instructor did not structure the course around teaching empathy, but the final analysis from participants revealed a strong correlation between the texts that were read for class and an increase in empathy.

Understanding Multiple Perspectives.

Students in 230 had a lot to say when asked if "young adult books have the ability to help readers become better people." In response, one student wrote that YA books "put us in people's shoes. They allow us to feel their emotions, experience, and so much more. We can better understand other people around us when we read more. . . We can become kinder people." Another student wrote that YA novels "provide perspective on the situations of others. It is really hard for us to understand and relate to people when we haven't experienced what they have, but when we read, we get a least a small look into the struggles other people go through. . . This can hopefully help us be more compassionate towards everyone, even people we may

have previously judged.” Similarly, another student wrote that she hopes the books “have prepared me for helping or comforting others in the future.” With another student writing that she has “learned to have a little more sympathy with people and goes on to say that young adult literature made her “want to reach out to more people in need.” While these emotional outcomes are not necessarily quantifiable, they are reflective of how these students treat others and view the world and how young adult literature helped to shape their emotional and empathetic intelligence.

One student recognized the way that YA literature can help in understanding others when she wrote in her final exam that YA literature “focuses heavily on the way people are treated and the effect that we can have on how others feel. Negative emotions and difficult circumstances are prevalent themes in young adult literature that makes the reader feel a heightened sense of awareness for how they treat others. Seeing things from someone else’s perspective opens up a readers’ eyes to their own reality and can help them change for the better.” She was able to summarize the power that a young adult literature course can have on general education. It can help students “change for the better” and give them tools to improve their life. In an interview with a student, she mentioned that one book, *Paper Towns*, taught her that “the way we perceive people is not always the way that they are.” Both of these examples reflect a positive change in how students viewed other people.

Another student mentioned that she “learned more about humanity and about [herself] from young adult literature this semester than I ever learned from reading adult literature in my AP Literature class” and that it “helps expand our view and experience things we might not otherwise experience. In essence, I think it helps us become more empathetic people.” Another student said that young adult literature “makes the reader feel a heightened sense of awareness

for how they are treating others. . . . Seeing things from someone else's perspective opens up a readers' eyes to their own reality and can help them change for the better." It is important to reiterate that the instructor for this course did not choose books with the intention of teaching empathy. The students were not instructed to look for empathy in the novels or asked how they can gain empathy from what they were reading. These responses were honest reactions from students who read young adult novels and recognized that there is power in them to change hearts and increase empathy.

Specific Empathy: Poverty.

The data from this case study also suggests that students not only experienced an increase of empathy towards others, but also an increase in specific empathy as well, specific empathy meaning that students wrote and responded that they not only had an increase of an empathy towards humankind, but they also had an increase in empathy towards a specific circumstance. The situations that the characters face in different novels, influenced students to increase their empathy for certain individuals, groups, or situations.

One novel that many students reflected about was *The Serpent King*. This novel focuses on a small, rural community where many people live in abject poverty. Students read this book and recognized that poverty is a crippling experience that can debilitate people. Dill's situation is bleak, and students recognized that there are many people suffering situations similar to his. One student wrote that *The Serpent King* made her "more empathetic toward all people" and made her "realize that everyone struggles, and many people have terrible struggles." This student, because of a young adult novel, was able to see outside of her own situation and consider the hardships of another which increased her empathy, especially to those who live in poverty and struggle to survive economically.

A Northern Light also highlighted a character with terrible struggles who lived in poverty. One student recognized that Maddie's poverty was one reason she was "trapped" and wrote that "it helped [her] to feel empathy for people who are trapped by their poverty today." That is a remarkable insight and one, if cultivated and remembered, will help this student improve herself. The characters in *The Serpent King* and *A Northern Light* had terrible struggles because they did not have the means to better their lives, and many students recognized that and empathized with them. One student wrote in her short response that "we live in a narrow-minded world and young adult literature helps us expand our view and experience things we might not otherwise experience." These novels, and others, had the ability to force students out of their narrow-mindedness and look outside of themselves for a time.

Different Cultures.

Students found that by reading about the hardships another had to endure because of different cultural practices, they were enlightened and empathetic. One student wrote that "*Persepolis* taught me a lot about a part of the world I didn't know hardly anything about. I'm so used to European and American historical books, but it was really interesting to learn about people in Iran." While another said that her "perception of Iran was completely changed after seeing Satrapi's story." This echoes a fellow student who also was changed by *Persepolis* and wrote that it "taught me about life in Iran for the average citizen. My perception of Iran was completely changed after seeing Satrapi's story. Even though they live under a very different political and social climate, the people there are no different from us." Another student said that she had no "idea that there were so many people opposed to wearing the 'veils' and how hard it would be to live in that circumstance." These particular students, from reading *Persepolis*, were given a window into a culture that was completely foreign to them and taught them of the shared

humanity we have but also a window into the far-reaching differences that make life for Marjane extremely difficult. Reading about Marjane's struggles cultivated an increase in empathy for people that do not have all the freedoms that most Americans enjoy. Each of these students were impacted by reading about this particular culture. Their perceptions were changed and that is the first step in developing empathy. One must be willing to invest in another person's perception and not be limited to one idea in order to feel empathy.

Grief.

Many of the books that were read in English 230 dealt with some aspect of grief, whether it be a loss of a homeland, a loved one, or a part of oneself, several novels touched upon how grief impacts a life. *A Monster Calls* is one of the books that several students mentioned in their final exam. One student said that she "remembers finishing it, sitting back and just feeling so human." For her, this text connected her to a greater sense of humanity and even though the novel was fiction and the characters imagined, her connection to humanity was real. She went on to say that she "connected to it even though [she had] never been in a situation similar to Conor" and that is the power of the written word. Even though this student had not watched her mother die from cancer, she understood Conor's grief and connected to that emotion within him and wanted to help him. She experienced an increase in empathy for others dealing with grief.

Another student wrote about *A Monster Calls* and mentioned a friend of hers who lost a parent to cancer. She wrote that this particular book made her "feel more empathetic" towards this friend and that the "author helped [her] convey empathy [and] put [herself] in [her] friend's shoes and try to understand what she was going through as well. Not many stories can do that, but I find that YA literature does a fine job of it." The ability to feel for others and reach out to help them is one trait that is currently lacking in our country. A University of Michigan study

about empathy concluded that “college kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago.” The ability to grieve with another simply because you are able to feel a portion of their grief and empathize with them is an aspect of the emotional intelligence that general education courses aspire to cultivate. *A Monster Calls* encouraged many students to think outside of themselves and connect them to person’s grief.

Race. All American Boys and *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.*, forced a lot of students to pause and consider their views on race relations in this country. In response to the question, “What book taught you something?” one student wrote, “Believe it or not, I think the book that taught me the most was *All American Boys*. . . Normally I try to shy away from that sort of news and media, but by forcing me to read a book where I had an inside view on the racial tensions around a police brutality, forced me to see the situation from different points of view. This helped me to see that there are always multiple sides to each situation and maybe these events aren’t as straightforward as the media would have them seen.” It is quite a discerning insight this student had, and the quality of his media view will improve if he remembers what he learned from this particular novel.

Many students mentioned how impactful *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.* was on their view of race, in the past and up to modern day. The fact that this book was nonfiction also played a part in students’ reception of the text. One student mentioned this particular book “created an emotional response” within him because he was horrified that the author was “simply conveying facts which is why it was so heart-tearing. It wasn’t a fiction novel that was made up, but real things that happened to real people.” This novel struck a chord with many students simply by being a nonfiction book and, as one student describes, by “simply telling the facts as they were, the author was able to portray the absolute brutality without making it seem overdone or

exaggerated.” The discussion that students participated in, in connection to this book, remained in several students’ minds. A third of the students who participated in the research, wrote that the discussion surrounding *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.*, was the most memorable day in class. One student mentioned that the class had some “really wonderful discussions” regarding “race, which is as complex today as it was post-Civil War.” She was impressed with the “many insights and often differing insights” but felt like they had an “honest discussion.” Another student wrote that the “discussion went very deep and was meaningful to [her.]” She mentioned a student in the class, who grew up in the south, and how his experiences changed “a lot of people’s perceptions.” English 230 provided a text that influenced these students and offered a safe forum in which to discuss a controversial subject. Race, and racism, have been, and continue to be an ongoing issue in this country. Reading books that enlighten students on modern issues, that will cultivate a modern empathy, is one of the results of a young adult general education course.

Conclusion

English 230 has demonstrated that a young adult literature course has the potential to influence, change, and motivate students to not only gain intellectual knowledge but also emotional knowledge, exactly the purpose and hope of a general education program. The data indicated a wide range of answers about students’ interaction with young adult literature, but an overwhelming thread that goes through all is that young adult literature is valuable in students’ intellectual and emotional improvement.

More than ever, there is a need for students to leave universities with an increased awareness and understanding of empathy. It is only through feeling for others and acting for others that change happens. Literature, specifically young adult literature, has the ability to teach

and increase empathy in its readers. Advocates for education and improving young adults' lives have been proponents of literature in the general education curriculum in order to help students think outside of their lives. Literature, according to Tim Gillespie, has a "calling" and it is "to explore human experience in all its dimensions and possibilities. Literature deals with our most pressing concerns—family, death, religion, love, good and evil, destiny, will, justice, character, courage—issues not often covered in an Applied Communications or Business Writing unit" (200). Young adult literature can do this, and more importantly, it can teach modern empathy, empathy for social issues that are relevant now. It can influence and inspire, and it should be given the right to stand with other general education literature courses in order to help students grow, expand, and increase their horizons.

It is possible to offer a young adult literature course that fulfills a general education credit. BYU's English 230 is the beginning of a hopeful change that can happen in institutions across the nation, a change that recognizes young adult literature as a credible source of enlightenment and education for all students, not just English majors, a change that can implement literature that focuses on current social situations that inspire discussion and hopefully increase intelligence, enlightenment, tolerance, and modern empathy.

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Appendices

Survey/Short Answer:

Instructions: Please complete the following questions to reflect your opinions as accurately as possible and to answer factual questions to the best of your knowledge. Your information will be kept strictly confidential.

1. What was your favorite book you read this semester and why?
2. What was your least favorite book and why?
3. What book taught you something new and what was it?
4. What was the most memorable day in class for you and why?
5. Do you think young adult literature should be considered “literature?” Why or why not?
6. What was your overall opinion about young adult literature before you entered this class?
7. Do you think young adult literature is worthwhile to read? Yes and/or no and why?
8. Is there value in reading young adult literature? Why or why not?
9. Why did you decided to take this class?
10. Has your opinion on young adult literature changed because of this class? Yes, and/or no and how?
11. Which book made you feel more empathetic towards a community, person, or situation?
How did that author make you feel empathy or conveyed empathy?
12. Do you think young adult books have the ability help readers become better people?
Why or why not?

Reflective Essays:

Essay #1: Consider your overall opinion about young adult literature before you entered this class. What were your expectations? After taking the class, has your opinion on young adult literature changed? How? Do you think young adult literature should be considered “literature?” Is there value in reading young adult literature? Why or why not?

Essay #2: Compare your own perceptions of yourself as a reader previous to taking this course with your perception now at the end of the semester. Did you consider yourself a reader at the beginning of class? Has that changed? What have you learned and how did you learn this? This back to the goals you made at the very beginning of class and describe how well you think you met your goals?

Enduring Question Assignment:

For this assignment, you will identify an enduring question that resides at the heart of five texts we are studying in class. An enduring question is one that humans have pondered for ages. For instance, “Why are human beings cruel to each other?” or “Where does evil come from?” Enduring questions are the kind raised in literature, film, drama, and other arts throughout the millennia.

Once you identify an enduring question, you will select 3-5 elements of the text (character, conflict, setting, description, dialogue, symbol, etc.) and corresponding passages of the text that provide insight into your reasons for identifying this question as essential to the text. You should also hazard a guess (or an interpretation, if you will) of the answer the text (and/or its author) suggests for this question; that answer should also be connected to the textual elements you cite. Finally, you will offer up at least one other text (book, short story, poem, play, film, comic book, video game, etc.) that also poses this question and make some connections between the exploration of the question in the two texts.

You will prepare notes for this assignment that you will submitted as a Word document with the requirements listed above clearly identifiable. Please submit it before the class discussion of the text you choose to respond to. You will complete five responses over the course of the semester, including the notes you will use for your work as discussion leader.

Interview Guide:

General Background and History:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What words would you use to describe yourself?
2. What is your major and why?
3. What year are you in school?
4. What do you hope to do when you finish your degree?
5. What has been your favorite subject in school? Why?
6. What are the subjects that you disliked in school? Why?
7. What subjects were your strongest? Why?

Reading and Young Adult Literature:

1. Do you read for fun?
2. Do you consider yourself a reader? Why or why not?
3. How did you describe yourself as a reader when we started class?
4. Did your opinion of yourself as a reader change in the course of this class? Why or why not?
5. Do you remember the goal you set for yourself at the beginning of class? The one you wrote about in your first assignment? If yes, what was it and did you accomplish it?
6. Before you started this class, what was your opinion about young adult literature?
7. What is your opinion now?
8. Did any books we read this semester teach you anything new? If yes, what?
9. Did any discussions we had during the course of the semester influence or impact you? If yes, which ones and why?
10. Do you think studying young adult literature is worthwhile? Why or why not?
11. Do you consider young adult books to be “literature?” Why or why not?

12. Did your perception or attitude about anything change or alter because of something we read or discussed in class? What and how?
13. What is your opinion about the value of this class at a university level?
14. Would you recommend this class to your friends?
15. What type of students do you think would enjoy taking this class?
16. Would you take this class if it did not fulfill a general education requirement?
17. As a non-English major, taking a literature course, did you feel you were educated about the merits of literature and given a better understanding of it? How so?
18. What did you enjoy about this class?
19. What did you not enjoy about this class?
20. Do you think you will read another young adult literature books? Why and when?