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Kia Jane Richmond
Northern Michigan University

Johanna Delorey
Northern Michigan University

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Multiple Intelligences and Young Adult Literature: An Extended Conversation

Kia Jane Richmond and Johanna Delorey
Northern Michigan University

Kia Jane Richmond

The impetus for this essay came from two conversations. The first took place while I was standing near the copy machine, where a colleague said, "I see you're teaching Literature for Young Adults next term – about time we get to teach it again (the course is cross-listed by two departments). Which books are you going to use?"

In response, I half-joked, "Only things I haven't read yet! I want to choose all novels that were published in the last decade or so; that way, I'll be able to read some new material myself!"

"I'm assuming you'll do reader-response, right?" he continued. "Louise Rosenblatt. Nancy Atwell. All that?"

I agreed and added, "You know, I really want to make this course different. I've been toying with the idea of asking them to respond in a variety of ways, bringing in Gardner's multiple intelligence theory, which we've been discussing in my methods course. I want to make the class interactive. No tests. No quizzes. No lectures. Just conversations about the texts themselves and strategies for teaching them."

My co-worker nodded approvingly and then, after clearing his personal code from the copier, went back to stacking his quizzes into a neat pile. I moved in and began copying Diana Mitchell's "Fifty Alternatives to the Book Report" (English Journal 1998, 92-95) to hand out to my students in EN/ED 462 – Literature for Young Adults.

The other conversation was with a student, Johanna Delorey, who was enrolled in two of my courses in the same semester. We talked at one point about how much we each enjoyed the various writings/projects that people were creating in

response to texts in the YA literature class, and I invited Hanna to co-author an article on our experiences with young adult literature and multiple intelligences.

"For publication? That would be awesome!" Hanna immediately began gathering and examining her materials, taking time to reflect by writing, drawing, and talking while ideas were still fresh in her mind. I chose to do the same kinds of things: listing, drawing, charting, and contacting editors of publications that might be interested in this subject. Later in the summer, Hanna and I met at a local bagel shop and began drafting out the conversations we wanted to have about the class, types of response, and multiple intelligences, and teaching English in Michigan.

Hanna Delorey

As an English and French Education major I have become acutely aware of the seemingly ever-present importance on written word in my life. Fall semester of 2003 was particularly demanding and I was beginning to wonder if I was ever going to be able to do something other than write papers. After having written and re-written endless amounts of papers in French, lesson plans, and evaluations, I began to grow weary at the sight of my laptop. This feeling of dread to write was disconcerting to me because I love to write! Writing has always been my passion and a way to express myself. However, the fact remained: I was beginning to feel stale and unoriginal every time I sat down to write.

During this challenging semester I had the privilege of taking Kia's Young Adult Literature class (EN 462). On the first day of class Kia told us that we could respond to the books we read in any way that we wished. Written projects, power point presentations, drawings: it didn't matter as long as we were engaged with the text and we were inspiring others to think. I leapt at the chance to be able to do something new and to explore different ways to express myself besides the usual paper. This did not mean that I eliminated writing for the class all together; I simply explored more options in my writing. I wrote poetry, letters to characters, journal

entries in the point of view of characters, and even a few non-written projects such as a wood carving and a photo collection. It was with an amazing amount of flexibility and project choice that I was able to revive my creative and artistic passion for literature.

When I was given the opportunity to teach this course (Literature for Young Adults), I immediately wanted to find ways for students to be interactive in their analyses and discussions of texts. I wanted first to position myself as a fellow reader and not necessarily as an “expert.” To accomplish this goal, I selected the following texts, all of which were published in the nineties and none of which I had read before selecting them:

Spite Fences (1994) by Trudy Krisher (NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell)

Make Lemonade (1993) by Virginia Euwer Wolff (NY: Henry Holt)

Am I Blue? (1994) by Marion Dane Bauer, Editor (NY: HarperCollins Children’s Books)

Lakota Woman (1990) by Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes (NY: Harper Perennial)

A Lesson Before Dying (1993) by Ernest J. Gaines (NY: Alfred A. Knopf)

Out of Control (1993) by Norma Fox Mazer (NY: Avon Books)

Rats Saw God (1996) by Rob Thomas (NY: Aladdin)

For English 462, I selected and adapted a series of response techniques from Leila Christenbury’s Making the Journey (Boynton/Cook, 2000). These techniques offered students more than six different ways to respond to each of the seven YA lit books I had selected for the course (See Appendix for a syllabus excerpt). Students were invited to experiment with various types of responses rather than choosing just one or two to stick with throughout the term. Asking them to respond in multiple ways allowed me to challenge students to think critically and to be engaged actively in class discussions. This choice also encouraged me to de-center the classroom and encourage students to be risk-takers. Lad Tobin argues that the position of teacher is saturated with institutionally-sanctioned power, power that can be wielded or withheld at the

teacher’s discretion (What Really Happens). One of the choices we can make as teachers is to share the power of choice with our students. Students in this course and subsequent ones said that they felt empowered to choose, to respond from a variety of positions (knower, young adult, future teacher, experienced reader, etc.).

The classroom environment for EN 462 was established early on as a comfortable, safe, and creative space where we students could speak our minds. As the class progressed we had all created a trusting relationship where we could share very personal experiences and ideas without feeling judged. We also worked in different small groups throughout the class period, which helped all of us get to know each other in a more comfortable setting.

Being able to respond to literature in ways other than the “usual paper” pushed me to delve deeper into the characters and themes of the book at hand so that my responses could bring something new to the table. The first project that really pushed me to connect with a book in a unique way was a photography collection in response to the book Spite Fences by Trudy Krisher. The main character of the book is a teenage girl who is talented in photography and is ultimately able to find courage behind her camera. Being an avid photographer myself, I set out to try to create a collection of photographs that captured the themes of the book, and also the spirit of the main character. For example, I compiled a collection of black and white photographs that illustrated the racial and personal issues affecting the main character of the book. I arranged to have two friends (one African and one white) model for me; however, I only shot images of their hands to emphasize the unification of the black and the white that was so vivid in the novel. In another group of photos, I shot a series of fences — wooden, chain link, and black iron. These images illustrated the barriers, physical and emotional, that were prominent throughout the book and even fixed in the title, Spite Fences. In doing this project I was able to explore my own talents while connecting and relating with the main character’s feelings she experienced behind the camera. I was able to gain insight into her mind/

world that I would not have been able to discover otherwise.

I admit that when I turned in my photo project I was a bit nervous about how it would be received by the class. I thought people would think that because I chose to do a project that was a bit unconventional, they would view me as a “slacker.” This idea goes back to my conception that writing is the only way to respond to literature. I had never explored my multiple intelligences to this extent and was inspired by my own ability to *feel* so much more through alternative methods of learning.

It seemed as though my project encouraged others in the class to explore their own creativity and to produce projects that were above and beyond anyone’s expectations. With each passing week the projects became more and more creative. I enjoyed being able to share our projects with the class because the entire class benefited from the risks we took on our own. For example: my photo project helped the class to understand how the character must have felt behind the camera, and it sparked a conversation of how this was important to the book.

Hanna’s projects did indeed open up discussion of what types of projects were invited (or acceptable) in response to the young adult texts we were reading. Students were excited by her photo project and began asking specifically about doing projects with music, drawing, and sculpture. They were encouraged to be creative and to use in their responses the form/media that allowed them to best explore their reactions to or arguments about the texts. Here is a short list of some of the responses they chose to turn in as journals:

- *A one-sided phone conversation with a character in response to Rats Saw God*
- *A list of casting notes for Rats Saw God and pictures of those who would best portray certain roles in a future movie*
- *A Dadaist representation/sculpture (created with small toys and objects) in response to Rats Saw God*

- *A personal letter to me about an individual’s experience with sexual harassment in response to Out of Control*
- *A CD with songs that seem to fit with specific scenes in A Lesson Before Dying*
- *A wood carving of character’s torso from A Lesson Before Dying (This was a spur of the moment idea that came to a student while she was watching the logs burn in a fireplace; the student grabbed the log when she realized it was the perfect shape of a character’s head from the text)*
- *A collage of magazine pictures and words in response to Am I Blue?*

Colleen Ruggieri reminds us in a recent English Journal article that we English teachers want our students to love to read and talk about literature. She writes,

[...] We also want all of our students to be able to understand the material covered in class, as well as to see its relevance in the real world. Through including a wide range of genres, activities, and assessments that incorporate the principles of the theory of multiple intelligences, I have found that this is possible.” (“Multigenre, Multiple Intelligences, and Transcendentalism” November 2002, 68)

I agree with Ruggieri and have tried to marry theory and practice in my English Education courses as well as others that I teach. For instance, in a recent methods course, one student wrote a song to a character in a YA novel, then composed the music and recorded himself playing the guitar and singing the piece. Another student in one of my composition courses decided to create a web site in response to an essay we read during a study of creative nonfiction. Additionally, another student in my Good Books class (humanities) created a web site (with

music, pictures, and text) in response to a young adult novel addressing the issue of suicide (*Ordinary People*). Students' choices to take chances with texts encouraged me to do the same. I sometimes responded to them using pictures or short phrases with emoticons (if on the computer).

I always liked Kia's responses to my pieces because I never felt out of the ordinary for turning in a project that was a bit out of the ordinary. It didn't feel like I was actually being graded, it was more like my work was being observed by someone who wanted to learn from me. She simply made a comment on how it touched her, made her think, intrigued her, and sometimes she just wrote "thanks," which came to mean more to me than any letter grade ever could.

I discovered after Hanna and I reviewed her portfolios from both EN 462 and EN 309 (this class, focused on the teaching of writing, was the other class that Hanna was in) that my responses to her work – written and non-written – were very not different. That is, whether I was responding to her journal or a lesson plan project for EN 309 or responding to Hanna's response to a young adult novel, my feedback was similar in length, tone, and style. I tended to write letters or notes to students, frequently expressing my own connection to the issue/text raised by the student. My responses to certain pieces in Hanna's portfolio for the EN 309 writing class did include revision strategies as well as personal responses, but overall, I would say that my responses to her written and non-written responses were comparable in both courses.

Integrating multiple intelligence theory into the English classroom has many benefits for students and their teachers. It creates multi-dimensional students/writers. More creative writing has the potential to emerge from projects that encourage thinking on the topic at hand. Journal entries or response papers could easily follow or accompany any response project. For *Make Lemonade*, for instance, I reflected on the book first, and then found that I was drawn to the idea of writing a poem in the style of the author of the book. I wanted to make it fit with the rhythms and patterns of Virginia Euwer

Wolff, so that if it had been included in the book, my poem would have gracefully meshed with the author's style and voice.

Group projects and discussions are helpful in unifying the class and in encouraging collaboration. When students bring their particular responses to share in a group setting, they inspire each other to do their personal best. Much like a cross-country runner gains respect and motivation from her teammates, the students in EN 462 gathered together to run their own race but to cheer one another on in the interpreting of literature. Students also brought their individual talents to bear on cooperative projects in the classroom. For example, at one point we were asked to dialogue in partners as characters from *Lakota Woman*. We talked and wrote and drew questions and answers with one another, drawing upon our individual interpretations of the book and creating a quilt of sorts of information and emotion related to the various points of view being studied. This activity allowed us to use our interpersonal intelligence and to validate one another's interpretations.

Another benefit of MI theory in the YA Lit classroom is that it allows students to explore an area that is interesting or inspiring for them as individuals rather than only connecting as a member of a group. What tends to happen is that teachers often create assignments to meet the needs/talents of the majority of their students, which is wonderful in itself. However, there are always those students who are left out, or who feel disconnected from a book because they learn by a different method. Asking students to create projects in response to texts, projects that they find individually engaging or intriguing, helps them to develop self-confidence in their multiple abilities and initiates in them a sense of purpose that might not have been triggered through a more traditional assignment.

Finally, for me, every project was a chance to self-reflect. Being encouraged to use my multiple intelligences, especially the ones I hadn't been tapping into regularly in college (such as spatial, intrapersonal, and kinesthetic), made me think about reading and learning and teaching differently. I had

the opportunity to get out of my head in a sense, to reach into other parts of myself. By doing that, I always went back into my head to create, to reflect, and to engage more deeply with the subjects, characters, and themes.

Conclusion

Hanna and I are each going into the next part of our teaching lives more informed and ready to try new strategies in our classrooms. We feel that adding multiple intelligence lead to multiple opportunities for growth. For instance, in my courses in English education (EN 309, EN 350, etc.), I have begun to assign in-class activities based on multiple intelligences, including the following: drawing or sketching in response to settings or certain themes; acting out specific scenes through pantomime or dance; creating songs for individual characters or chapters; creating collages on the computer or on paper, etc. Students are taking more risks in my classes because they are encouraged to think beyond page. I've also begun inviting future English teachers to design lessons that integrate art, dance, / movement, sculpture, and music with writing and the study of literature or grammar. My goal is to convince our colleagues in English to explore what possibilities exist with the help of multiple intelligences in the area of assignment design.

Being a future English teacher, I have always known that I want to inspire students to think beyond the page and to be able to incorporate literature into their lives. My experiences in EN 462 helped me to realize that images, themes, characters, and ideas from books can be explored through so many different methods. My students will become active participants with what they are reading. Passive readers will be given a chance to connect with the text in a way that is comfortable and fun for them, and my students will then spread their enthusiasm to the rest of the class.

Our hope is that in making our conversation public, we will encourage teachers in Michigan – and across the United States – to reflect on how multiple intelligence theory could help countless students to connect, relate, and communicate more

effectively in response to Young Adult Literature as well as other subjects. Using multiple intelligences allows us to be versatile, to embrace the diverse layers of knowing that come during the reading of and responding to books, stories, and poetry. Often, we English teachers are too connected to WORDS. While it is important for Language Arts educators to acknowledge and embrace our commitment to language and to the wonderful literature that can be created through its use, we should also remember that words are only one way to think, to create, to respond to or to make sense of texts. The other intelligences give us complementary ways to use our minds as we read and discuss literature written for young adults. Thinking outside the box is a great way to explore how to teach!

Appendix

Excerpt from Kia Jane Richmond's EN/ED 462 Syllabus (Fall 2003)

Assignments:

Undergraduate students:

Journals (7 X 5) =	35 points (5 points each)
Book review =	20 points
Lesson plan/rsh paper =	25 points
Web site review =	10 points
Attendance/participation=	10 points
	100 points total

A. Reader response journals: For each book we read (there are 7 total), you are asked to choose one of the prompts below to write up and turn in on the night we are discussing the text. Journals/responses may be typed or handwritten, but should be 3-4 pages each.

You should try at least three different types of responses.

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- 1. Reader response journals:** You should write a response in which you discuss specific passages or incidents in the text, focusing on making connections with things we've talked about in class, ideas you've read about or heard somewhere else, or thoughts you have on the subject. The goal is to respond – to extend the dialogue the author began – and NOT to summarize the text. Summaries will be handed back to be redone.
 - 2. Letter to character/author:** Write a letter to one of the characters or the author of the text. In that letter, discuss issues that you are confused about, issues that you'd like to know more about, or issues that you connect with as a reader. You may ask questions, describe scenes from the book, or theorize about the character's or author's decisions.
 - 3. What it (the reading) made me think of/remember:** Write a note to me (Kia) about what this reading made you think of or remember. Be specific and try to figure out why/when your memory was triggered. If you are describing a personal experience, you may want to let me know that.
 - 4. Dialogue journal with a partner:** Write another person in class – via email. Discuss the book, asking questions and offering insights. Print the email conversation and turn in to me (must include 2 exchanges).
 - 5. Point of view response** – Write a piece in which you talk about what happened from another person's point of view in the text. For instance, in *Ordinary People*, you could write from the mother's point of view or the psychiatrist's point of view. Your goal is to

imagine what it's like to be in the text but not the main character or the author.

- 6. Choose one of the following non-written projects:** illustrations, sketches, maps, songs, fabric or place mats, quilts, architecture, models, etc. Could be connected with a character or the author, with the issue, or a related one.

- B. Web site review** – choose a web site related to the issue of young adult literature. You will write an analysis/evaluation of the web site as it relates to the teaching or reading of literature for young adults. Be sure to list the http address as well as the name of the site, the date accessed, and the sponsor (if known). 2-3 pages.

Here are a few ideas: gender, sexuality, feminism, spirituality, history, mental illness, body image, siblings, race, technology, sports, music, film, art, family, divorce, suicide, media, abuse, alcohol, science, nature, animals, peer pressure, identity, law, crime, etc.

Readers can see Tom Hyslop's web site for ideas.
http://www-instruct.nmu.edu/english/thyslop/THE_WEB.html

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- C. Book review** – You will select a young adult literature book written in the past 13 years (1990 or after) to review. Your review should include a summary (brief overview), response (your thoughts and insights), and critique (why should others read/not read this book?) Compare/contrast to other works we've read or to films/TV you've seen. Recommend for specific age/type of reader. You might also include ways this book fits into a specific category of YA lit. This essay should be 5-7 pages in length.

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- D. Lesson plan or research paper** – You will write a 2-3 week lesson/unit plan or an 8-10

page research paper based on something related to YA lit. It can be about one text or several. It can be driven by theory or by practice. Lessons can be for either pre-teens or teens (MS or HS). You can adapt existing lessons but must alter them significantly (put your own stamp on them). You should address issues of culture, diversity, and/or gender wherever possible. Must include works cited or bibliography.

E. Attendance/Participation – Your attendance is required at all class meetings. You will be allowed one absence. After that, you must consult with me in person about how your absences will affect your grade. Students with more than two absences may receive a failing grade. Active participation is also required; this can be in both individual and group activities – talking and writing are equally valued. You will be asked to be prepared for all class meetings, and to treat other students respectfully whether you are acting as class participants or discussion leaders. You are invited to critique the class and give input as to how the class might be improved.

Graduate students:

Discussion leader =	25 points
Book review =	25 points
Annotated bib on issue =	15 points
Theory paper on book/genre=	25 points
Attendance/participation/email =	10 points
	100 points total

1. Discussion Leader- You will be asked to lead the class in a one-hour discussion of an issue related to young adult literature. Handouts required (1 for each student in the class). You may use small groups, large groups, partners, etc. You may include writing, speaking, listening, and reading/viewing. If a

VCR or computer is used, be sure you have a back-up plan in case of technical problems.

2. Book review – You will choose a book that is related to young adult literature to review. You may choose an actual piece of YA lit or a book about YA lit – your choice. The expectation for your review is that it will be an analysis and evaluation of the text. You will summarize, respond, question, and judge the arguments presented in the book, based on personal experience and research on the issue. Works cited required. Length should be 10-12 pages.

3. Annotated Bibliography – You will be asked to write a bibliographical essay in which you describe/evaluate sources related to a single theme/issue in young adult literature. See list below. You may organize texts alphabetically, chronologically, or in another suitable way. An argumentative introduction and conclusion are necessary. This should include 15-20 sources.

Assorted Issues: Gender, sexuality, spirituality, history, mental illness, body image, siblings, race, technology, sports, music, film, art, family, divorce, suicide, media, abuse, alcohol, science, nature, animals, peer pressure, identity, law, crime, etc.

Selected Theories: Feminism, New Criticism, Historicism, Ecological, African-American, Marxist, Gaylesbi, Freudian, etc.

4. Theory paper on book/genre – You will write an extended essay on a particular text or specific genre in young adult literature, and that essay should be based on a specific literary theory or perspective. Appropriate documentation is required. You will be asked to seek approval of topics before writing (see Kia). Expected length of this essay is 15-20 pages.

5. Journal Email – Email both Kia and the other grad students with your response to the assigned readings from Blau and/or Stringer. Please try to make connections to what we're talking about in class or to your own experiences as a reader or teacher of literature.

About the Authors:

Kia Jane Richmond is an assistant professor of English at Northern Michigan University. She's in her fourth year as the co-director of the English Education program at NMU (with Tom Hyslop). Kia is enjoying teaching writing, methods, young adult lit, and supervising student teachers in the upper peninsula of Michigan. Her recent publications can be found in the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, *Composition Studies*, *JAEPL*, and *Issues in Writing*.

Johanna Delorey is a senior at Northern Michigan University and is majoring in English and French Secondary Education. She plans to teach overseas after obtaining her degree from NMU. Hanna has always loved literature and language; she hopes to spread her enthusiasm of spoken and written word to future students.