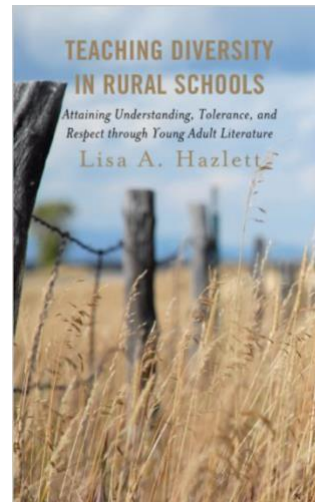
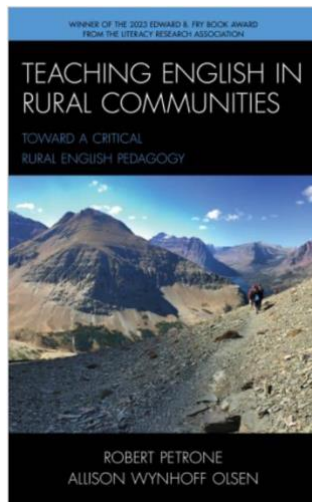


Reading, Writing, and Rurality: A Review of *Teaching of English in Rural Communities and Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools*



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*This review examines two recent scholarly books on teaching English language arts in rural areas. Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen's *Teaching English in Rural Communities: Toward a Critical Rural English Pedagogy* offers strategies and research-based rationales on how to teach students to think critically about depictions of rurality in texts. *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools* by Lisa Hazlett focuses on using young adult literature to teach students in rural schools about diversity. The review evaluates the texts' contents and examines how both books contribute to educators' understanding of rurality and the specific needs of rural schools.*

As we start a presidential election year, discourse about voting will inevitably turn to voting in different parts of the country. Points will be made about the interests of those in rural, suburban, and urban areas, with maps showing how different districts lean. Pundits will debate on which

candidates are best poised to win over certain voters and which candidate is more likely to win the beer test (aka, which candidate voters would rather have a beer with).

These conversations often encourage people to think about rural areas, perhaps for the first time since the last national election. What is it that inhabitants in these areas want? What do they value? What are their concerns and challenges? If asked these questions, people might rely on depictions of rurality in popular culture and the media, picturing two-lane roads lined with cornfields and small towns populated with a stereotypical cast of characters.

As someone who grew up in a rural area and continues to visit it regularly to see family, having people immediately picture these characteristics when it comes to rural America is both frustrating and understandable. The frustration comes because rural areas and their inhabitants are not monoliths. This is tempered with understanding. In 2020, 46 million U.S. residents lived in rural areas (USDA, 2021). While this might seem like a large number, it was only 14% of the country's population. Many people have not experienced rurality except for what they have seen in television shows, movies, or the news, and these depictions are limited at best. While the clichéd rural denizen might relish the idea of being an unknown quantity (a popular stereotype of rural inhabits is an innate distrust of outsiders), this presents significant challenges. Lack of knowledge can lead to reliance on stereotypes as well as fear and prejudice. From an educational standpoint, this unfamiliarity can create a vicious cycle. Teachers who are unaware of rural areas are unlikely to go there to teach, and those who do teach in rural schools without understanding the communities, their students, or rurality in general might become frustrated and leave for other prospects. Given that turnover is one the main factors contributing to the growing teacher shortage in rural areas (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023), having teachers who are prepared for working in these schools is paramount. Furthermore, while there are elements of good teaching that transcend location, different locations present different opportunities, benefits, and challenges. Consequently, having knowledge not just of rural places in general but how to teach in them is vital.

Fortunately, two recent books are here to help teachers and teacher educators get a better understanding of teaching English language arts in rural schools. While these books offer different perspectives and approaches, they offer sound rationales and strategies as well as insight into rural communities. Together they make for powerful and valuable reading for any educator who is seeking information on teaching in rural schools.

TEACHING ENGLISH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: TOWARD A CRITICAL RURAL ENGLISH PEDAGOGY BY ROBERT PETRONE AND ALLISON WYNHOFF OLSEN

The acknowledgement of the specificities that come with teaching in rural spaces is at the heart of Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) *Teaching English in Rural Communities: Toward a Critical Rural English Pedagogy*. To offer English teachers in these areas "professional literature for them to read about the intersection of rurality and English curriculum and instruction" (p.3), the book provides not just actionable strategies but also research and rationales to support their use. The importance of this is manifold; besides redressing "a lack of attention to rurality and join a mounting body of scholarship that recognizes the unique challenges" (p.3). English teachers in rural places face, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen also note the isolation that these teachers have because of geography and small school and department size. The authors see this book as being an opportunity for professional learning and growth for teachers who might not have school colleagues in their discipline.

Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) proposed Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP) framework centers equity, critical thinking, and examinations of rurality. This approach directly responds to the limited depictions of rurality, particularly those often created by non-rural residents. Besides reinforcing the "anti-rural prejudice...[that] deems rural people as ignorant, backward, and sheltered with their ways of knowing as undesirable and unnecessary" (p.5) to people outside of rural settings, these portrayals can also perpetuate a deficit mindset about rurality and rural people in both outsiders and rural citizens alike, potentially leading to stereotype threat. To combat these depictions, CREP builds upon the critical literacy work of Paulo Freire by seeking to help students better read, analyze, and critique depictions of and discourse around rurality. It also wants students to grow in their "abilities to create and disseminate texts that re-present more comprehensive, accurate, and socially just renderings and notions of rurality, and rural people and places" (p.7).

To provide teachers with sound reasoning and ideas for enacting CREP, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen divide *Teaching English in Rural Communities* into three parts. Part I consists of a single but vital chapter that introduces the book's premise, explains CREP, and presents an overview of the book. The three chapters in Part II examine different classroom teachers who have integrated CREP into their teaching. Each chapter is co-authored by the classroom teachers in question, thus providing further insight into the teaching experience. Part III takes a more wide-ranging view of the

issues related to CREP, with one chapter examining issues of race in rurality and the last chapter providing a conclusion for the book as well as strategies for incorporating CREP into the curriculum.

Teaching English in Rural Communities provides a thought-provoking and meaningful way of thinking about the rural ELA pedagogy, and having the specific goal of helping students in rural schools become more adept at understanding depictions of rurality and communicating about rurality creates a strong sense of focus. The section detailing classroom teachers' use of CREP was especially helpful in illustrating how the framework can be used in different settings and with different texts. Besides explaining the way that the framework was applied and the ideas from the unit of study, the classroom-specific chapters also include information on each school's milieu and the students who were in the class. Given the importance of place in CREP, this context is invaluable. This information, along with the description of students' responses and the teachers' reflections and commentary on their approaches, reinforce that these practices have been utilized and underscore their value. As a result, part II can serve different purposes and audiences. Instructors looking for practical strategies and assignments in CREP are well served, as are people who are interested in examining the dynamics of how CREP was used and received in these particular instances.

The two final chapters depart from the previous ones. Rather than focusing on specific teachers' approaches to and use of CREP, they take a broader perspective. Chapter five, "Re-Thinking Race/ism and Rurality in English Education," examines race in rural areas and challenges some popular beliefs regarding race in these places. Specifically, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021), along with Melissa Horner, seek to disrupt the notion that rural equals white. They do this by looking at intersections of rurality and Native American, African American, and Latinx communities, using data to show these communities' presence in rural areas and studies to provide a better sense of their experiences in these areas. The final chapter offers both a summation of the book and a look ahead for CREP, with advice for teachers looking to integrate CREP into the curriculum.

Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) book provides meaningful and thoughtful ways for teachers and scholars to think about and approach rural ELA education. The concentration on CREP guides the chapters and prevents the text from losing focus. Additionally, the authors do an impressive job of finding the balance between theory, pedagogy, and research, thus making the book useful to a number of constituencies. This balance also shows how the three areas can work together and enhance each other. The theory provides the groundwork for classroom use, and the

combination of pedagogy and classroom research show not only how to use the framework but also the outcomes that come from using it.

Teaching English in Rural Communities has the potential to benefit a number of stakeholders due to the authors' ability to integrate pedagogy and research. For teachers looking for ideas they can implement, this book provides actionable strategies and resources. Besides the description of the teachers' implementation of CREP, the book also includes appendices with an assignment sheet for one of the projects as well as a sample of student work. For those who have more time and want to think of different ways of implementing the CREP framework into their teaching, this text gives them a foundation they can use. This flexibility makes *Teaching English in Rural Communities* a valuable resource for teachers since it allows them to return to it repeatedly as they refine and rethink their ideas. Similarly, teacher educators could assign the book in English methods courses or use it to teach future teachers about CREP. The chapters describing the teachers' experiences using CREP and the analysis of the teaching could act as case studies, where future teachers could examine and analyze the situations presented and envision how they might use these ideas and what adaptations they might need to make.

In terms of scholarship, this text could give researchers a great deal to examine. Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) posit that the CREP framework can help rural students better understand their communities, develop critical thinking skills, and consider issues of diversity in relation to rurality. Scholars could use this book as a starting point for examining the CREP framework and its impact and implications for rural education. Additionally, for those interested in educating students about diversity, there is potential to expand upon Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's points regarding the framework and diversity.

In short, *Teaching English in Rural Communities* provides a convincing and thoughtful look at the CREP framework and its use in teaching. Furthermore, it does it in a way that highlights CREP's possibilities, making this book more of a starting point than a complete examination.

TEACHING DIVERSITY IN RURAL SCHOOLS: ATTAINING UNDERSTANDING, TOLERANCE, AND RESPECT THROUGH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

BY LISA. A. HAZLETT

Lisa Hazlett's (2023) *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools* similarly addresses teaching English to rural students and, in many ways, complements *Teaching English in Rural Communities*. Rather than focusing on a single pedagogical framework, it takes a much more expansive approach than Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) text. The two books share the purpose of helping rural students gain a better understanding of rurality and be better equipped to dispel stereotypes about rural places. However, Hazlett (2023) has an additional aim of "assisting secondary English Language Arts (ELA) rural educators and students... regarding diversity education, with the awareness that rurality is also a minority" (Hazlett, 2023, p. xvii), through the use of young adult literature. Furthermore, Hazlett, who is a professor of secondary education at the University of South Dakota, includes numerous best practices for teaching ELA in general, making much of this book helpful to aspiring teachers regardless of where they hope to teach.

Hazlett (2023) accomplishes her goals in eight chapters. The first five offer information on rural areas and schools as well as the value that young adult literature has for rural students. While this might seem like background information, these chapters are invaluable. Since this book focuses on teaching English in rural settings, and specifically the Upper Midwest (UM) - Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Wyoming - it is vital for readers to have a good sense of those areas. As Hazlett notes, "there are particular concerns, issues and situations" (p. 3), such as those related to weather, distance, and entertainment, that are more applicable to rural areas. The chapters on young adult literature, which consider the differences between canonical books and adolescent literature as well as the importance of YAL that features Upper Midwestern settings, are equally vital. Having a robust rationale for young adult literature can help aspiring and current educators in the face of ongoing censorship battles. Furthermore, since one of the strengths of YAL is that it provides adolescent readers with the opportunity to see themselves as well as others in books, finding quality titles that depict the UM should be a primary focus for teachers in this region.

Chapters six through eight focus on different populations and issues in rural places, with chapter six describing LGBTQ+ students and chapter seven centering on exceptional, undocumented, and homeless students. The final chapter examines the impact that death and grief can have on adolescents. While these situations are found in all areas, Hazlett (2023) provides

research and commentary on how rurality adds another level of complexity. For instance, she uses studies from GLSEN when noting that “rural schools are the least safe [for LGBTQ+ adolescents] (and have the fewest GAS and other school supports) compared to suburban/urban ones, with these teens most likely to face various serious and ongoing harassments” (p. 123).

As mentioned earlier, *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools* features numerous pedagogical strategies and activities, with tables of suggestions for discussions on diversity, rurality as a location, rural self-esteem, and more. In addition to the rurality-focused ideas, Hazlett (2023) also includes practices that are applicable to all ELA teachers regardless of location. Such instructions include approaches for creating educator discussion guides, complete with an example for Robert Cormier’s (2001) *The Rag and Bone Shop*, and readers theater scripts. The book also features hundreds of YAL titles set in rural areas. In addition to integrating some in the various chapters, Hazlett also includes two appendices dedicated to book titles: Appendix A lists titles that feature a single state while Appendix B has titles that feature multiple states. Given the difficulty of finding quality YAL with rural settings, these lists are invaluable to ELA teachers, librarians, and scholars.

Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools is an important addition to the growing scholarly discourse on young adult literature. Besides providing robust ideas for teaching ELA and YAL in general, it also fills a significant gap in the literature, since there is not a lot of scholarship on rural YAL. Hazlett’s (2023) focus on using YAL to teach rural students about diversity is a particularly intriguing and necessary one, and she makes a convincing argument about YAL’s usefulness in this regard. In short, the books serve multiple purposes. Hazlett notes that “statistics show the UM’s uniqueness of overwhelmingly and nearly exclusively once race, White” (p. xi), which limits students’ opportunities to encounter some types of diversity. Consequently, YAL can offer students the chance to develop empathy as they learn about other’s perspectives. For diverse students who live in the UM, these books can help them see themselves, making them feel less alone. Finally, YAL books about rural areas give rural readers the chance to see themselves in different ways, counteracting the limited, and often negative, portrayals and stereotypes of rural areas and their citizens.

The book’s other notable strength is the pedagogical content. Throughout the book, Hazlett (2023) shows that she is a teacher’s teacher, offering practical advice that educators can use the next day in their classes and acknowledging the challenges that teaching, particularly in rural areas, can present. The plethora of ideas is especially welcome, though the tables occasionally can be

overwhelming and difficult to follow. However, this minor shortcoming does not lie with the author but instead with the limitations of printing and formatting.

This book has the potential to benefit different stakeholders. The most obvious audience for this book is preservice and classroom teachers as well as teacher educators. This text, either as a whole or in excerpts, would be very beneficial in an ELA methods or young adult literature class. Hazlett's (2023) general strategies can be used in any setting, and the more place-specific questions and ideas could be adapted to apply to other settings or could be used in any community to help students there consider rurality in a thoughtful way. Additionally, this book could be helpful for scholars who are researching rural YAL. Besides the aforementioned booklists, the data Hazlett includes provides a snapshot of the rural UM and offers a lived perspective on the challenges and opportunities that people in the area face.

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