It is no secret that more teens are connecting with one another online than ever before through online gaming, social networking sites, blogs, YouTube, and a variety of other social media tools. These teens have grown up with video games and the Internet not just as tools for entertainment, but also as platforms for learning, creating, collaborating, and effecting social change. Therefore, it only makes sense that if you want to reach out to this community and forge relationships that foster cooperation, collaboration, understanding, and lifelong learning between the generations, the way to do it is through the Internet. These connections have the potential to become communities within communities that encourage teens to discuss books, gaming, or even their favorite technologies while simultaneously teaching them how to create and maintain blogs, wikis, and so on.

The Internet is brimming with blogs and web sites about YA literature, but something is missing: teen voices. Successful Online Book Communities Readergirlz (readergirlz.com) and its blog (http://readergirlz.blogspot.com) are perfect examples of successful online book communities that offer young adults a place to go to read book reviews and so much more. With each book review posted, the site contributors include sections on facts about the author such as his or her inspiration, songs picked by the author to accompany the book, questions to reflect on and discuss after reading the book, suggestions for hosting an event to discuss the book, and so much more.

Guys Lit Wire (http://guyslitwire.blogspot.com) exists to provide teen boys with a place to discover books that they want to read. What is great about this blog is that the books reviewed are from a variety of genres and are both old and new. The reviews are then given labels that enable site visitors to search for books based on categories like “dystopian” or “books that kick ass.”

The one thing that seems to be absent from these sites, however, is the teen voice. Not that there is not the opportunity for teens to express their opinions or join in discussions on these sites, but that the focus is not the teens’ voice. This is where public and school librarians and even teachers have the opportunity to fill a gap. Some public libraries, like the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, have already begun to fill this gap. The Cincinnati library’s Teenspace is a great example of how a library can work with its young adult community to meet their needs. As part of the library’s web site, Teenspace is home to all things related to teens, including a section dedicated to book reviews written by teens. The reviews are typically brief, a few paragraphs at most, and include the name, age, and the general geographic location of the reviewer (no home addresses here) as well as a rating of one, two, or three stars. The one-star rating has an exceptionally fun tag line that says, “more fun than throwing up, but not much.”

Who has not read a book like that before? Who is actually using this site, you ask? The answer is young adults, and lots of them. The contributors seem to range in age from approximately 11 through 25. It looks like most of the reviews come from teens who genuinely want to contribute,

Laura Peowski resides in Connecticut and is an MLS student at Simmons College. She is focusing on YA librarianship in public libraries and is currently a member of YALSA’s Teen Tech Week Committee.
but there is also at least one school using the site as an educational tool. One of the titles was reviewed by thirty-eight students from the same school of the same age; looks like a class assignment to me. What a great way to engage students in reading while teaching them how to write for a web site. Overall, this portion of the Teenspace web site seems to be very successful.

Another public library that seems to be successfully bridging this gap is the Hennepin County Library of Minnesota. The Teen Links section, like Cincinnati’s Teenspace, is dedicated to all things teen. From the main Teen Links page, teens can choose from things like “At Your Library,” “Do Your Homework,” or “Read On.” From the Read On link, teens can find teen book reviews, book lists to help them decide what to read next, and information on organizing book clubs. Teens between the ages of 12 and 18 are welcome to submit book reviews that are then posted to the teen book review page of the web site. The book reviews are brief and come with a one- to five-star rating given by the reviewer.

The library also has a link to a list of book club kits, which each contain enough books for up to eight to ten members as well as a list of possible discussion questions. I sat down with my 14-year-old sister and a few of her friends last year to interview them about reading habits and preferences. Through our conversation I discovered that all of the girls were avid readers (except when required by a teacher) and had even tried to organize their own book club, but they did not know where to turn for book suggestions. When they were able to find a book they wanted to read, they could not find enough copies at the library or the bookstore for all of them. These book club kits would have been perfect for them; they would have all been able to read the same title and then either get together in person or online to discuss what they had read.

The key to creating successful sites like Hennepin’s Teen Links or Cincinnati’s Teenspace is starting the process by communicating with teens in the community. If you log on to Facebook and do a search for teens and library, you will find a number of groups that are sponsored by libraries and run by librarians. These are often used to get information to the teen community but usually have a relatively low number of fans or followers. Maybe this is a result of the fact that a number of teens in the given communities are not online, but it is much more likely that these teens do not know their library has a group on Facebook. Simply deciding to create a group and then doing it is not enough; the same goes for blogs, wikis, and the like. If the teens do not know you are out there, chances are they are not going to find you.

So before you even create a site, talk to your community. Form a TAB or TAG for the project. Go to your local schools and talk to the students. Ask them what they want. Is it a blog where they can just discuss books and submit reviews or do they want a place where they can discuss books, gaming, and their favorite technologies? Getting teens to share their ideas can be akin to pulling teeth at times so it may be a good idea to go into your discussions armed with ideas or examples of what can be created. Once you determine the purpose of the site, it is time to figure out what kind of site will work best. Is it a Facebook fan page, a blog, or maybe a wiki? Again, talk to the teens. What are they most familiar with or what do they want to learn? Maybe they are most familiar with Facebook but would love to learn how to create and manage a blog.

Of course, another very important aspect to take into consideration when choosing a format is safety. Blogs, wikis, and Facebook are all very public in nature, but there are ways to ensure privacy if it is a concern for your library or classroom.

With Facebook, a group can be created that is closed, which means that people may only join the group by submitting a request to the group’s moderator. Having a closed group also hides the identity of the members from those who are not members. For instance, the Saline County Library has a closed Facebook group with 31 members, but I cannot see who they are because I am not a member of the group. Wikis and blogs can be protected so that no unauthorized individual may add content to the site. Wikis used in educational settings can also be protected so that very little information is public-facing and the majority of the content is located behind a password. Blog hosts like Blogger also offer the option of making your blog private. If a blog is set as private only people allowed by the creator would be able to view the site.

Creating an online community for teens is also a great opportunity for librarians, teachers, and other community leaders to meet with one another and share ideas and stories. Librarians are not the only ones who can engage with teens online and empower them to create publishable content. Here are some ideas for engaging with and empowering your young adult community to communicate, collaborate, and create online.

- Work with teens to create online book groups so they can get together and talk about books with their friends and even peers they might not normally interact with. A major obstacle for young adults is transportation and this would definitely help alleviate that issue.
- This one is a bit more involved, but what about creating a school wiki or blog much like the school newspaper? A teacher or the school librarian can oversee the project but allow the students to manage it. This could be an after-school club that is strictly voluntary or it could
be a for-credit course that students sign up for each term and get graded on. It could be a place for students to discuss books, technology, gaming, and anything else they may be into.

- Create a blog with young adults in the community that would give them a safe place to discuss books they have read that they have taken out of the library, suggest titles the library should purchase, and anything else they want.

The blog could have separate pages for different genres and teens with varying reading interests could be involved.

- As an assignment, have students join an online book group that matches their interests on GoodReads (www.goodreads.com), LibraryThing (www.librarything.com), Facebook (www.facebook.com), or another site and submit a required number of posts that can be graded or give students the option to create their own online book groups as a class project.

- Work with young adults to create a blog or wiki based on technology. They could discuss things they own like iPods or game consoles, video games they love or hate, free web-based tools they use, or they could even help organize a group of teens who would enjoy a gaming night or afternoon at the library.

YALS