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Unit of Study

Dr. Warner

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Journey of Empathy

Rationale

Most of the powerful media I've experienced over the course of my life involve stories where the consumer is forced to connect to the character or characters as they progress through the story. Their decisions, their flaws, and their successes become magnified because the creators have seduced the consumers into believing that what's on the page matters. Every time I read *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, I find myself wishing that there exists a way to rewrite the ending so that George, Lennie, and Candy get their happy ending, and some of my favorite moments across any platform are slow moments where the consumer is shown the characters in their most human: making small talk, worrying about each other and their lives, and just overall quiet moments where there's a connection to the characters on stage and they show off their personalities.

I believe that this focus on characters and their situations is the key to increasing interest in literature and reading in younger readers at the middle school and high school level. The literature that they are presented in those classes should elicit some type of connection between the characters and the readers and be relevant to the

students' lives and interests. There's no denying the literary merit of works that aren't thematically important to high schoolers yet still taught in high school, but they don't encourage lifelong reading habits in students nor do they impart the importance they're supposed to impart because the student readers often don't care about the characters.

If the readers can be made to care about the fate of the character on the page they might be more inclined to understand how they can learn from the journeys that the characters experience and how they can improve, or at least reflect on, their own lives through a literary osmosis. Skills that'll doubtless come in handy throughout their lives.

More importantly, if students can understand characters, their motivations, their goals, and their humanity then they can learn to understand people who they might not normally give a second thought about. Understanding people and recognizing their humanity, even if the reader may never meet them in person or experience their plight, is the key to societal cohesion and improving the lives of as many people as possible.

Trying to develop empathy is important during any time period, but it seems to be especially timely considering the importance being given to national origin and income level and the barriers being caused by political discord.

To this end, I've developed three different "journeys" for students to go through: a "Journey of Difference" that focuses on developing empathy along racial lines, a "Journey of Discovery" that focuses on developing empathy towards people who've had traumatic or downright terrible experiences, and a "Journey of a Dream" that focuses on developing empathy for the goals that people have.

For “Difference,” it might be best to compare *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Witness* by Karen Hesse. For “Discovery,” students should be allowed to choose between *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, or *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña; whichever best relates to them and can show them how people can grow and survive life-altering events.. For “A Dream,” the best novel may be *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck to show the students the importance of understanding what people want from life and why sometimes they may not get it, through no fault of their own at times, but the students could chose to focus on another novel (more on that later).

Introducing the Unit

Each leg of the journey begins with a few smaller pieces that connect to its theme and that start a conversation about what the students already understand or think about said theme. Extra material could be interspersed throughout the journeys for breaks and opportunities to reflect on new ideas.

“Difference” will be kicked off with the poem “Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes, the essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” by Zora Neale Hurston, and scenes from the movie 42 (dealing with Jackie Robinson’s historic first season and breaking the color line in Major League Baseball). These serve to set a background for the historical context of the two centerpieces without being a strict history lesson and focus on the individual people’s response to racism, as opposed to the communal focus of *Witness* and the distant POV of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“Discovery” will be introduced by the song “Weight of Living Part 1” performed by Bastille, the short story “The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck, and the poem “America” by Claude McKay. These serve as starting points for discussions about the various hardships in life that people can go through (for example, an unhappy homelife from “The Chrysanthemums”) and ways to cope (like the voice of “Weight of Living” encouraging the object to move on). These voices tend to be more mature than the teen protagonists of the three novels and thus speak from a more experienced and finished position, an interesting contrast.

“A Dream” will be opened up with the song “My Way” performed by Frank Sinatra, the song “Blowin’ Smoke” performed by Kacey Musgraves, and the short story “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allan Poe. The goal with these three pieces is to show different types of dreams and to reinforce that dreams don’t necessarily have to come true before diving into any of the novels. The Sinatra song provides a clear success, the Musgraves song provides a murkier number about some dreams that aren’t meant to be, and the Poe story shows a selfish dream that leads to the destruction of all parties involved.

The Unit: Goals and Classwork

Each leg of the journey also corresponds to a different type of essay that high school students will be expected to know how to write. I picked this up from Mr. Christian’s Latino Literature class where he used the text *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez as a catalyst for an argumentative essay that could focus on the themes of the

work or tying the work into a larger societal issues such as problems with the criminal justice system, institutional racism, and the effects of racism on an individual.

In this case, “Difference” corresponds with a straightforward compare-and-contrast/ explanatory essay. Students will be expected to be able to write an essay detailing the differences between the two works and offering commentary on what the different texts accomplish as a result. As they read *To Kill a Mockingbird* at home and as the class performs *Witness* over the course of several class periods, they’ll keep track of the novels through the use of “Quote Logs” where they’ll record quotes that they find important in the aforementioned detailing and commentating.

“Discovery” corresponds to the personal narrative essay. The in-class popcorn readings of whichever novel the class choses will be punctuated with discussions about characterization and plot structures to prepare students to write essays about their own lives or, if they’re not comfortable with that, writing an application-style personal narrative essay from the POV of one of the main characters from the work. Quote Logs will remain in use to find important character moments and stages on the plot arcs.

“A Dream” aims to teach students how to produce an argumentative essay that’ll argue on the nature of the dream, whether or not the characters could have or did accomplish their dreams, or whichever point they want to argue as long as it fits the overall “dream” theme. The novel that we’ll read in class is going to be *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, but ambitious students will be given a choice from any of the novels in the “Book Pair” section of this paper. In either case they will collect evidence from the text to support their claim via Quote Log.

Common assignments throughout the journeys will include quizzes on reading comprehension and analysis, in-class discussions, and time to ask questions about the text.

Book Pairs: Or, Follow Your Own Dream

The only journey that doesn't have a YA novel attached to it is the "Journey of a Dream," but that's because students can choose to, on their own initiative, read any of the following texts and write their papers on them. Because the reading would be done on the students' own time (for the most part at least, in-class reading of *Of Mice and Men* takes priority for classroom time) and there is a larger degree of independent analysis and thought, any student who chooses this path gets an additional ten percent extra credit to whatever their essay scores.

The first choice is *The Last True Love Story* by Brendan Kiely. This story provides the students the chance to talk about Gpa's dream of returning to the sight of his first kiss with the love of his life or the chance to focus on the teenage characters who take him on his quest illegally and what they hope to get from the journey (Cabello).

The second choice is *Refugee* by Alan Gratz. For this essay students would need to use at least one quote from each of the three POV characters' stories to write about the hopes that they have for themselves and their families as they try to escape their hostile environments (Sosa).

The three remaining choices are the fantasy novel *The Horse and His Boy* by CS Lewis, the autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by

Frederick Douglass, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston.. *The Horse and His Boy* offers a chance to explore the dreams of freedom and returning to a homeland in a more broad sense than *Refugee* and a fantasy novel as opposed to the realist novels that dominate the assignments, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* provides a more historically based version of a dream and the means that a person can utilize in order to accomplish them, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides a personal quest for love and companionship. It makes the choices more varied and more attractive to someone on the fence by offering something they can find more relevant or interesting.

Works Cited

Cabello, Jonathon. "*The Last True Love Story* Book Talk." English 112B. 23 October 2018.

Sosa, Jesse. "*Refugee* Book Talk." English 112B. 30 October 2018.