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Eng 112B

3 December 2019

Making Life Choices and Facing Violence or Abuse:

Utilizing Exeter Qualities and YA Literature

**Rationale**

For my unit of study, I would like to further explore the content presented in *Adolescents in Search for Meaning* on making life choices and facing violence or abuse through Young Adult Literature and by implementing the Exeter Qualities from *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*. The goal in this unit is to expose young adult students to as many experiences and perspectives as possible (Exeter Quality 1), while remaining affective in the continual development of reading skills (Exeter Quality 8.) The purpose of presenting and studying the literature chosen for this unit and engaging the students in creative writing assignments and activities, is to aim for allowing the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engaging with personal issues (Exeter Quality 7.) Growth is supposed to indicate change taking place, in which case I would like to help my students explore that by instructing them to do work that requires opening the doors to new conversations and developmental thinking.

As explained in Chapter 4 of *Adolescents in Search for Meaning*, the ability to see different points of views is an important skill for young adults. It was also mentioned that teens like to explore ideas about fate versus miracles. Using various forms of literature, such as the fiction novels “Speak” by Laurie Halse Anderson and “Whale Talk” by Chris Crutcher, the films “Dead Poet’s Society” and “Freedom Writers,” and student song and poem choices can be a form of seeing alternate points of view.

**Centerpiece Novel**

For the centerpiece of my unit, I have chosen Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank. The category of books that this novel fits from *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* are Chapter 4: Real Life Experiences, Chapter 6: Identity, Discrimination, Struggles with Decisions, and Chapter 7: Courage, Survival.

To introduce the novel to students, I would play the song, “Freedom” by the Isley Brothers. This song directly states what freedom is. “When you can do what you wanna do… love who you wanna love… write what you wanna write… eat… cry… dress… shake…[etc.] I would provide a hard copy of the song lyrics, and have the students highlight the lines that they believe represent true freedom. Next, I would provide a list of the characters and their roles in Anne Frank’s diary. Right away, the idea of freedom is taken away at the introduction of these characters, and beginning the novel will be the first step to understanding why.

To monitor the students as they read, I would use an idea given to me from my Field Experience, which was the use of a “Combo Notes Packet.” The assignment is to write in complete sentences, either a summary or significant quote from the section that is read that day. There will also be a right-hand column which is for a standard image representation such as a drawing or symbol to make a correlation with the text. The teacher I observed assigned sections to complete by a specific date for a stamp. To be eligible for full credit, the student would have to have all stamps.

This packet teaches the students how to summarize after they read (section by section) and how to give themselves visual representations or other forms of remembering and note taking. I like this tactic because it gives the students opportunities to capture information and details that are received or learned.

After each assigned reading section, there will be open class discussions about what each student chose to include in their packet and why. The open discussion is another form of seeing alternate perspectives.

Rather than showing the film for the novel, I would show “The Freedom Writers.” In this particular film, students of all backgrounds (race, culture, social class) gain new perspectives and experiences on the world around them, past and present, through their high school English class. They, too, are reading Anne Frank’s novel for the first time. And like the category of books that the novel falls into, this film also represents Chapter 4, 6, and 7 as previously mentioned. It is also a film based on true events.

The English teacher from the film has suggested that, “Memoir writing is the best way to reach struggling students.” As an additional and on-going assignment throughout this unit, the students will be keeping a journal to write in daily. Like the film suggests, they can write about anything they want, as long as they write *something*, credit will be earned.

**Companion Novel**

I would like the companion novel to be a choice made by each individual student, since we are exploring decision making and life choices. The options given to choose from will be “Speak” by Laurie Halse Anderson and “Whale Talk” by Chris Crutcher.

A summary and brief description will be presented to the students to aid in their decision. In addition to that, as a class, we will read the poem written by Laurie Halse Anderson provided in the beginning of the book, which sets the tone for the themes of universal experiences, having courage, and facing violence. For the sake of “Whale Talk” the first chapter will be read aloud to the class, which introduces the character and the on-going themes in the book.

Using these specific YA novels contribute to the Exeter Qualities about characters who reflect experiences of teen readers (#3) and characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives (#4).

Students will also continue to writing their daily journal entries and have a “Combo Notes Packet” for their selected companion novel.

The idea of this unit is to grow from personal experience for the sake of making life choices, while having exposure to other young adult experiences that are different or alike. Both novels work in unison with that idea, and contribute to the themes of identity, discrimination, struggles with decisions, forgiveness, courage, and survival.

To close the companion novel, a standard compare and contrast essay will be assigned to be written based on any of these themes that resonate with the student while reading the story. They are to pick at least one personal experience that connects with a character and compare and contrast the experience, decisions made, or outcomes of the shared experience.

**Bringing the Unit to a Close**

In an effort to focus on different forms of expression after overcoming various life experiences, I would like to briefly touch on poetry to close this unit by using Carpe Diem poems.

Introducing this segment will be prompted by the “Carpe diem. Seize the day” scene from the film, “Dead Poet’s Society.” In this scene, a student reads out loud the first stanza to Robert Herrick’s poem, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.” The teacher expresses his interpreted meaning of the poem to his students, saying, “Make your lives extraordinary.” Furthermore, he explains the universal human experience of death and the importance of making the most of time because it is limited.

The final assignment will be to write a Carpe Diem poem, or find one, and accompany this poem with an inspirational song to share with the class. The purpose of this assignment is to create positive thinking, forms of expression, and create the opportunity for learning from Exeter Quality 5: lively, varied, and imaginative language through lexical density or complexity.

Outcome

From this unit, I hope to have accomplished engaging students with characters who reflect shared experiences to learn and develop from in their own lives, difficult and challenging issues relating to making life choices and facing violence or abuse, themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues, and varied levels of sophistication that will lead to the continual development of reading skills.