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Getting Into Character: Finding Voice in Realistic Fiction

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Introduction

A good writer can write in the voice of someone unlike himself. This is what professional authors do all the time. They take a fictional character and give him voice and thought and sell it to the reader as something believable. Middle school students can do this very task, if given the right instruction and right models. This unit is designed to exemplify uses of voice in young adult contemporary realistic fiction. Realistic fiction offers a voice that is similar to someone you might have as a friend. This genre imitates the way people speak and often uses first-person point of view. This is a voice that a student can relate to and therefore model in his writing. Creating a character in realistic fiction requires that the author use a technique that mirrors human nature. This is not so if the author is writing fantasy, in which case he could create a completely unique and non-human speech pattern and thought. Realistic fiction style of writing provides a wealth of models for professional writing using voice. This curriculum unit is designed for an eighth grade literacy classroom that is implementing the readers/writers workshop. By introducing and discussing various use of voice in young adult novels, students will be able to apply that knowledge to their own writing strategies and write from different voices/different character voices. The goal is for these middle school students to use voice as a means of writing fiction through the perspective of characters unlike themselves.

The voice a student knows best is his own. Asking a student to write an autobiography or personal narrative is generally not too difficult. After all, the subject matter is one with which he is familiar. This unit proposes to teach students to write in the voice of a fictional character different from their own. To do this, students must be willing to step outside of themselves and use imagination. In using this imagination they must also, however, be consistent not only with the makeup of the character but also with the makeup of human behavior. Writing from this outside voice allows students to strengthen themselves as writers.

Novels That Exemplify the Voices of Fictional Characters

What is voice and how can we teach it to our students? Voice in literature is an expression in written words. It is an utterance and a sound, though silent, that comes through from the pages of a book. The way a character voice is interpreted has everything to do with the way an author presents that character to the reader. Voice is shaped by action, thought, and environment. For students to understand voice they must look at all the factors that create the one character. In the examples that follow we will see that voices are molded by situation, history, family, neighborhood, and personal challenge. I think the best way to teach students how to interpret voice is to give them multiple examples and ask them to compare and contrast what they "hear" from the reading. Once distinctions can be observed, then a whole picture of voice can be understood. It is this distinctness of voice that we want students to experiment with in their own writing.

The variety of cultures in the literature gives students a plethora of voices from which to model. The following is a list of the novels that will be used in this unit. A thorough description of each book is given later in the unit. The novels are: *Becoming Naomi León* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, *Heat* by Mike Lupica, *Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman, *The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems* by Mel Glenn, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *Don't Call Me Ishmael* by Michael Bauer, *Notes From the Midnight Driver* by Jordan Sonnenblick, and *I'd Tell You I Love You But Then I'd Have to Kill You* by Ally Carter.

Each of the novels mentioned above uses teenagers as the main character. When looking at these book choices you will find several similarities. Each book was published within the last twenty years. The purpose of this is to keep current, fresh novels in the hands of students. Many required school readings include novels that are considered classics. These classics, although certainly good literature, usually involve situations, language and characters that are out of touch with today's teen readers. For this unit it was important to me to keep the stories in the genre of realistic fiction. The reason for this is to keep the stories and characters more relevant to teen readers. If we are looking at voice in literature and how to express it in our own writing, then it is important that students have a good collection of human voices from which to draw inspiration. This can give a more clear voice model than perhaps the voice of mythical or fantasy creatures. The final commonality with most of the above mentioned books is humor and light-heartedness. There are tons of books out right now that deal with the harsh issues young people are facing. Although those books certainly have a place in any teenage classroom or bedroom, I wanted to focus less on the troubles and struggles of teenagers and more on the optimistic outcomes and high-spirited books. If I included many books that deal with teenage use of drugs, gang involvement and teenage sex, then the focus would become more on the issues and less on the voice. In addition, students tend to pick up these raw or gritty books on their own. Using the books listed above gives the students another perspective on teenage life. This unit is specifically looking at voice and how authors use fictional voice to portray real teenagers.

The purpose of these books is to give students examples of how voice is used in writing. Each of the following books focuses on one aspect of how the author used technique to get a point across. The writing goals I have for students are ultimately for them to be able to write a short story in the genre of realistic fiction. Additionally, I'd like the story to be good-quality. Using various techniques to jazz up the language, using humor appropriately, giving insight into the character, and overall making the story believable and enjoyable are my ideal goals for these eighth grade students. I feel that the best way for these young writers to become better is by analyzing professional writing and deciding how the author used words to create a story. These examples would be given after a few lessons of voice have been completed in the classroom. It is also

important for students to understand why we are looking only at realistic fiction. Again, as mentioned above realistic fiction is the closest we have to mirroring the actions and thoughts of humans. To prepare students to write a realistic fiction short story, they need examples. A unit on other genres would certainly be taught at a different time in the school year. As stated in the lesson plans below each of these novels would be presented separately. Comparisons can be made as each new novel is presented, but the idea is to give very distinct examples of voice focusing on separate writing techniques.

Becoming Naomi León by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Naomi Soledad León Outlaw's life drastically changes during her fifth grade year because her mother re-appears in her life. When her mother shows up, her life is turned upside down by the events that follow. Naomi is suddenly faced with the reality that her mother may very well take her to Las Vegas to live with her new boyfriend and step-daughter. Now, all the uncertainties that have been unspoken are now arising in her mind. All of these questions are answered through a first-person account of Naomi's thoughts. She is truly an insightful girl, and the reader is invited into her world as a friend. Naomi's voice is not one of a babbling eleven-year old, but rather a young girl who is quite perceptive to the actions surrounding her and who, unknowingly, has a strong tie to her once-unknown heritage.

The following quote illustrates Naomi's voice as it begins to come out in a way she had never experienced before. Here the reader can see that Naomi is describing a part of herself she did not know existed, yet one that she was willing to own. Her voice is stuttering and her sentence structure shows hesitation and timidity, yet she forces through to get her voice across to her mother. Her mother has just slapped her and insisted that she was a brat and would need much training once she came to live with her.

A mean, stomp-my-foot feeling rose from a place I didn't know existed in my mind. I wished I could throw my anger at Skyla and yell, but my voice came out a shaky whimper. "Gram takes care of us. She does...*everything* for us. Not like you. You *left* us. You didn't...*want*...us and then you didn't even let our father see us. Now we're supposed to do what you s-s-say? I...I...I'm...n-n-not...going."¹

The next quote shows Naomi in a reflective tone. She is looking back at the whirlwind of actions that have taken place over the last several days. Again, this reflection doesn't mirror the typical thoughts of a young girl, but rather one of a young lady on the verge truly finding herself and appreciating what she has become. The students learning various styles of voice can see Naomi using words that she has clearly thought through. Words such as, "vinegar-shined, forward-thinking, and prophecy" give this quote depth and believability in the honest thoughts of this character. Students should try to model the style of writing in ways that go beyond simple, straight-forward language. Descriptive phrases make writing more interesting and that is what students should take from this quote.

Even though my life was a fog of the good and the bad, one thing was clear as a vinegar-shined window in my mind. I belonged with Gram and Owen. I wanted no part of living with Skyla, Clive, and Sapphire. If finding my father was my only hope, then I was going to latch on to every positive, forward-thinking, universe-tilting notion to fulfill that prophecy.²

Heat by Mike Lupica

This novel gives us a peek into the life of a young Cuban boy who has dreams of taking his team to the little league world series. Michael lives with his older brother Carlos in the Bronx, New York. Although the majority

of the book is about little league baseball, the underlying theme is Michael's fear of being found out that he and his seventeen-year-old brother are orphans. Of course, if they are found out, they will be taken into child protective services and possibly split up. Michael is constantly keeping his family life a secret and the reader can feel what a burden it is for this twelve-year-old boy. Culture plays a big part in forming the voice of Michael. His dad, who was raised in Cuba instilled strong family values in his boys. Michael many times reflects on the teachings of his father and most of his decisions, especially the one regarding the family secret truly comes down to cultural values and expectations. The following quote illustrates the fear that Michael is having as the author reveals only to the reader.

Baseball made Michael feel normal. It made him feel as if he had turned back the clock, that things were the way they used to be, before Papi died. Before Carlos became the man of the house, before they both had to live in fear of all these Official Persons, whether they worked for the Bronx borough president or the Administration for Children's Services.

Before. ³

The above quote shows the fear Michael is having. It also takes us to a time in which he wishes he was. Nostalgic in its tone, it also reveals a sense of hope, even though there is no way to turn back the clock and go to that time in which Michael feels safest. The author has managed to give us a reflection without using the common words of "I remember" or "remember when". Students can see that the tone can be conveyed without using the most obvious words. The strongest word he uses is "before", which is very powerful in this passage.

The majority of the novel is a very detailed description of baseball plays. To a reader who is unfamiliar with baseball, the story could be a turn-off because of the intricate details of the game. However, one thing that is good about the story is the ability of the author to be very detailed and give a reader, who enjoys baseball, a play-by-play of the action. This can be very difficult to do without losing the majority of readers. It is a risky technique to use such detail but it can be very effective when used properly. Students wishing to try this technique can refer to the quote below as a guide.

But the play of the game came from Maria, a game-saver with two outs in the bottom of the last inning, runners on second and third. There was a slow roller to her at second, a ball past the pitcher's mound that Kel just barely missed. Maria had stopped for a moment, thinking Kel was going to get it. Then she came hard. Too late, Michael thought from where he was standing in front of the Clippers' bench. The Hilltoppers were going to tie the game at least, and have the winning run on third. But Maria Cuellar wasn't thinking that way. She was about to make the play of her life, barehanding the ball the way a big-league third baseman does with a bunt, dipping her body to the right, underhanding it in almost the same motion to Anthony, who was finishing the game at first base. ⁴

Stuck in Neutral by Terry Trueman

This compelling novel portrays voice in a way that no other novel does. This is the story of fourteen-year-old Shawn McDaniel. Shawn has an incredible ability to remember everything he hears. Since he was four, he has been able to remember everything he heard on television, heard in conversation or was told. As Shawn states, although this sounds like an amazing ability, it's only amazing if he could do something with it. Shawn has cerebral palsy and has no ability to control any of his muscles. So although he can remember everything he hears, no one knows this because he does not have the ability to speak or communicate in any way. We are

told the story of Shawn's life through Shawn's own voice. We are the only ones that know he has this mental capacity. The rest of the world only sees a paralyzed, drooling, person with mental retardation. To experience voice in this manner is an amazing occurrence. Instantly the reader is captivated by Shawn and simultaneously sympathizes and fears for him. In the following quote Shawn describes himself the way he knows others see him.

Most of the rest of the strangers surrounded me and talked about me as though I weren't there, and for them I actually wasn't. The me they talked about, the Shawn in the poem, is not the real me, not even the me my family knows. The kid in the poem is just some cute little redheaded retard named Shawn from my dad's imagination. The Shawn in the poem, my father's version of me, is a paper-thin, imaginary Shawn, a two-dimensional version of Dad's worst fears. It's one thing not to be known for who I actually am, but to be known for who I've never been by a roomful of strangers was the worst. ⁵

The analysis of voice in this case is that this is mostly a monologue because he can't communicate and has never learned the give and take of conversation. His stream-of-consciousness thought and expression are what make this voice spectacular. Students should look at a novel like this and model the interesting and unique scenario. This novel is compelling and captivating and you should encourage students to attempt to reach this level in their own writing.

The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems by Mel Glenn

The style of this book is unique in that it is written entirely in poems. A teacher has taken his senior history class hostage and the story of each student is told through four poems: one poem for each year of high school and one poem for the events of the day of the hostage-taking. The teacher also submits four notes in poem format describing his thoughts that have led to the present encounter. This book is a quick read so the more reluctant readers will find that 182 pages can go by in a flash. This book is a good resource to show students a variety of voice through fictional characters that are all experiencing the same drama. In addition, it shows the different perspectives of students' experience at the same high school.

The first poem I want to discuss in this book represents two distinct voices. These are the voices of Lynette Kincaid and Patti Bennett, two students at the high school. This poem shows how a conversation can take place between two characters without the cumbersomeness of quotes and commas, the way it would appear if it was in narrative form.

Can you believe this? Like everything else 'round here, slow. You call this breakfast? Better than what you'd get inside. Patti, this bagel's a rock. I bought it, I didn't bake it. How long do we have to wait out here? 'Til they give out *The Talisman*. What's a talisman, anyway? You know, the yearbook, duh. I know *that*, but what is it? Beats me. I'm thinkin' of splitting, wanna come? But Wiedermeyer's giving a test. Like I care? The term's over. He can still flunk us. Who keeps a senior back? I don't know. Well, Wiedermeyer won't, he's too nice. Yeah, he's pretty cool for an old guy. How long we gotta wait? ⁶

This poem invites the reader into a dialogue between two students. Each voice is heard and the conversation is easy to follow. For the students' benefit it may be worthwhile to ask about the variation of the two voices. For instance the first voice seems to be the dominant voice not only in the conversation, but perhaps in the friendship. The first voice asks all the questions and expects an answer from the second voice. The second

voice does not ask any questions but provides a reasonable answer to each question asked. The second voice also appears more cautious because she is unwilling to skip the class because of the consequences of the proposed actions. Voice two is perhaps more responsible and more mindful than voice one.

The next poem is told through only one voice, but it is clear there is a conversation taking place. This is from Roger Dunlap, assistant principal:

Listen, young man, what's your name? Well, Eddie Kellerman, You can't park yourself in the middle of the hallways. You're blocking traffic and causing major congestion. People have to detour around you. I must keep these lanes clear, you understand. I know you want to get your book autographed, But what if I let everyone cut class To get their yearbook signed? Kids would be backed up for miles. What would that be like? "Fun"? You can't have fun here; this is school. Hurry up now, get back to class. What is it, Ms. Messenger? You should know better than to run in the halls. Did I see what note? From whom? What do you mean he won't open the door? ⁷

Although there is only one speaker in this poem, it is clear that he has two different conversations with two people. The first conversation is with a male student, obviously named Eddie Kellerman. We can see that the assistant principal is speaking to this student and because of the reaction we can also fill in what the student must have said. As you read it you can visualize the two characters in a dialogue. The second conversation is with the school secretary who is informing him about the hostage situation. Again, we can hear the annoyance and confusion in Mr. Dunlap's voice at the same time that we can visualize the meek but urgent Ms. Messenger. The author does a stellar job of showing multiple voices through the responses of just one character. Teaching this style of writing is difficult; however when you have a solid example such as the one above, students can model this writing style and create something that is interesting.

Both quotes above demonstrate to students how using the correct word choice and punctuation can bring a character to life. For example line 12 of the second poem is "'Fun'?" and here we see the assistant principal repeating, somewhat mockingly, the response of the student. There doesn't have to be extensive background given to the reader if the author uses precise words to lay out the scene. The above quotes, along with the other poems in *The Taking of Room 114*, provide good examples of first person voice that excludes unnecessary detail or background.

Monster by Walter Dean Myers

As Mr. Harmon's attorney all I ask of you, the jury, is that you look at Steve Harmon now and remember that at this moment the American system of justice demands that you consider him innocent. He is innocent until proven guilty. If you consider him innocent now, and by law you must, if you have not prejudged him, then I don't believe we will have a problem convincing you that nothing the State will produce will challenge that innocence. Thank you. ⁸

The above quote does something very interesting with describing the main character, Steve. The prosecutor relies more on the law stating that he must be thought of as innocent, rather than claim that he actually is innocent. This quote gives a description of Steve from another character's perspective, one who is supposed to be defending him. This story, about a 16-year-old boy on trial for murder, is told through the lens of several perspectives. You have the diary entries and reflections of Steve. These are first person accounts of his feelings about being in jail. You also have the courtroom scenes of the trial being told through script format

where each character's lines are revealed in real-time as they are happening.

Using this novel will give students the opportunity to see voice revealed not through narrative of thought or third-person narration, but rather through matter-of-fact actions that take place much the way a screenplay is laid out. Although the scenes in the courtroom could be thought of as Steve Harmon's thoughts, the reader experiences the drama for himself as a courtroom visitor. We feel as though it is Steve's voice only because we are intermittently given a first-person diary entry by Steve. It is a very interesting way to tell a story and certainly one that deserves attention in a classroom attempting to discover various means of revealing character voice. This is a great example for lessons in point-of-view. Adapting this technique could truly enhance the writing of students in a classroom.

Don't Call Me Ishmael by Michael Bauer

Anyone who has read or even is familiar with *Moby Dick* will see the humor in the title of this novel. The remainder of the novel is equally as humorous. This novel gives students a strong example of how to use humor in writing that is appealing across a wide audience. For students to attempt humor in their writing, they need to see what type of situations and words are funny. The following quote could be one such example.

"Ishmael? What kind of a wussy-crap name is that?" What could I say? Up to this point of my life I hadn't even known it was a wussy-crap name. No one had warned me that I had a wussy-crap name. Why would my parents give me a wussy-crap name in the first place? Was Herman Melville aware it was a wussy-crap name? All I could do was smile stupidly while Barry Bagsley and his friends laughed and pushed past me, like I was a revolving door. I stood there like a wuss. I felt like crap. ⁹

This above quote is funny, mainly because of the use of the word "wussy-crap". This word, continually repeated, becomes funnier and funnier. The author has managed to create a humorous situation out of something that many of us have experienced. Although we might not all have a funny name, we certainly have been made fun of for one thing or another. This puts the reader in a sympathetic and understanding mode, all-the-while finding the way Ishmael handles the situation quite comical. So what students can take from this quote is a way to use humor that is both appealing to a wide audience and also non-offensive.

Another way to use humor is through the use of a punch-line. In the following quote, the description given by the teacher is very meticulous in its wording. The author seems to go to great length to have the teacher say exact words that will be precise and overly particular. It is then Ishmael's punch-line that brings the passage to a humorous ending.

"Well, then, tell me, Mr. Scobie, is it just possible—and I realize that this is a bit out of left field—that maybe, just maybe, someone *else*, perhaps even someone in this very room, *put* all those insects, and other creatures that might appear to be insects but aren't really insects, into your desk because his disturbed and peanutlike brain perceived it to be something akin to a joke?"

Have I mentioned that Mr. Barker had a black belt in sarcasm? ¹⁰

Both of the above quotes give students two examples of humorous use of writing. This can be a difficult task for students but they should at least try it in their writing. A story can be so much more engaging when the author has the proper technique of using humor.

Notes From the Midnight Driver by Jordan Sonnenblick

As stated above in reference to *Don't Call Me Ishmael*, the use of humor is a good technique to captivate a reader. There are, of course, many ways of addressing humor. In *Notes From the Midnight Driver* one such way of using humor is to appeal to young teenage boys. By this I mean humor about situations that might be considered foul or gross. However, if the audience the author is trying to reach is, in fact, young teenage boys, then the following quote would certainly be a direct-market appeal.

I began to laugh like an idiot, but my relief came too late to halt my barf, which came out mostly through my nose—and landed on the officer's left side, all over his walkie-talkie. This was even more of a crack-up. I started mumbling, "Walkie-talkie-barfie, walkie-talkie-barfie," which amused me almost all the way to the police station. ¹¹

The above quote can give students an example of how to use humor in a direct way. This piece does not use sarcasm or political humor or even a punch line. It is the situation and the description of said situation from the mouth of a sixteen-year-old that makes it funny.

Another technique that Sonnenblick uses to represent Alex is a stream-of-consciousness thought. The author has an ability to be the voice of a sixteen-year-old boy who has random thoughts about everything in his life that he experiences. The following quote is just one example of getting into the head of this young boy. It is believable and draws the reader into Alex's mind.

You wake up in the morning on your court date, and it's Showtime. You shower and shave the nine faint peach-fuzz follicles that may or may not yet exist on your face even though you tell your friends you have 'em. You brush, floss, brush again, gargle mouthwash, and still worry that you might get sent to jail due to bad breath. Your mom supervises you as you garb yourself for the battle in your only suit. Then you have to lean all the way forward as you eat your cornflakes so that no milk gets on your lovely baby-blue silk tie. Last spring's band-concert shoes go on; the blisters start. ¹²

I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You by Ally Carter

The Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women is an all-girls private school. What makes this school unique is that it is a school for young spies. Cammie is the narrator of this novel and we, the reader, are given an inside view of what it is like to be a teenage girl being trained for a spy career at the school where your mother is headmistress. Cammie uses sarcasm as a communication technique. For an author, this can be a difficult task because you don't want your character to appear rude or offensive. Another technique Carter uses is allowing the main character to talk directly to the reader. This can give the reader the feeling that he is in the story with the character. The following quote is just such an example.

Okay, from this point on, if you are related to me or in a position to add things to my "permanent record" (which I'm assuming at the Gallagher Academy is a little more detailed than what they keep at Roseville High), you might want to stop reading. Seriously. Go ahead and skip the next hundred pages. It won't hurt my feelings *at all*. In other words, I'm not proud of what comes next, but I'm not exactly ashamed of it either, if that makes any sense. Sometimes I think my whole life has been that kind of contradiction. ¹³

Carter does not use this technique throughout the novel, but in the cases where she does, it certainly brings the reader right into the story. This novel is also a good choice for comparison because the lead character is female. But in addition to being female, she is also a strong-minded character who accomplishes many tasks in her training.

The majority of the story is told through first-person narrative. This allows the reader to go directly into the mind of Cammie, the main character. As students are deciding on the style and technique of story to write, looking at various points of view is a good lesson. Various styles create various outcomes.

Using Voice in Student Writing

You want the students to be exposed to these resources so they will find a variety of technique and style of how to portray voice in fiction writing. The above references and quotes should serve two purposes. One is to give students a variety of examples of good writing that characterize voice. The second purpose is to get students interested in these books enough so that they want to pick them up from the shelf and read the story for themselves. These quotes, or any you use from books you are particularly fond of, should captivate the students and entice them to read the story on their own. "When readers hear a voice in a piece of writing, they are often more drawn to read it—and that audible voice often makes the words easier to understand." ¹⁴

There are many writing assignments that can come from a unit on voice. As I begin to explore the venue of teaching writing I know that getting students to write in a voice other than their own is a worthwhile and fundamental task. That's not to say that writing assignments where students write from their own voice are not going to happen in my classroom. Of course it will. However, in this unit I wanted to ask students to put themselves in someone else's shoes and write from that perspective. Not a new concept, I know, but one that needs to be present in a Language Arts class if we want our students to become stronger and more diversified writers.

Allowing the student to place himself into the mind of a character is the first step he needs to take. One way of doing this is to ask the student to react to various situations as if he were the character. For instance, ask the student to put himself into the situation described in *The Taking of Room 114*, one in which he is being held hostage by the teacher. Just like the students in the novel he can only write in poem form. Ask the student to write a brief poem about what he is experiencing right at that moment he is taken hostage. The poem will probably be very revealing.

Another way of exploring voice in writing is through dialogue. Asking students to put themselves into the shoes of a fictional character and then take it further and write a dialogue between two fictional characters is a challenging but gratifying task. Once students can nurture the imagination and creativeness it takes to be a writer, the writing will become so much more rich and appealing. Take for instance a writing assignment in which Steve McDaniel (*Stuck in Neutral*) and Naomi León (*Becoming Naomi León*) have a conversation about parents. This can lead to a variety of paths the student could take. It gives the student a starting place; however, there is no one avenue in which the conversation is destined to go. That would be up to the creative imagination of the student. In addition, it would also be up to the interpretation of the character through the eyes of the student as to where the conversation travels.

A further writing strategy would be to fill in the missing dialogue of a text. For instance, the second poem presented above for *The Taking of Room 114* give the reader the voice of just one character. However, it is clear there is more than one character present in the conversation. A student could be asked to write the voice of the unheard character. There are several ways for this assignment to create itself using various texts. Even stories in which both voices are heard, the student could be given a copy of a portion of the text with just one voice presented and another student could be given the text with the other voice. Separately each student could begin to fill in the missing voice. Afterward they could compare their dialogues and see if there were any commonalities.

Reading Writing Workshop

Our school will be moving into the Reading/Writing Workshop style of teaching. This means that all Reading teachers and English teachers will now be teaching both subjects. The philosophy of Workshop is different from the traditional way of teaching. It is very much centered on independent choice in reading and independent choice of writing. There are three basic components to a workshop lesson. These components are a mini-lesson in which all students are gathered in the meeting area, independent reading or independent writing also referred to as activity time, and gathering to close the lesson and share work that has been done. Although the students have choice of independent reading, they still need guidance on book choice. The above referenced books provide for a variety of stories in which each student should find at least one, if not more, books of interest. In addition each of the stories and the subsequent lesson regarding writing can be placed into a mini-lesson. The idea of the mini-lesson is that just one strategy or topic is addressed at a time in the form of a ten minute lesson. The students then take that one strategy or concept and go off to do the independent reading or independent writing and apply that concept to their own work. In alignment with this change, I believe this curriculum unit will be ideal for teaching readers and writers as one entity.

Conclusion

These novels are some suggestions of possible uses of voice in contemporary literature. Students learning this unit will also learn to create their own voice as a writer. The above novels will act as a guide of how to creatively use the voice of character to relate to the reader. Each of these novels will not be read to the class in its entirety. This is not a unit on novel study. More simply, excerpts and portions of the writing will be used to study voice and how professional authors use different types of technique, dialect and dialogue to portray the main character. Students will learn to use their own experiences to create a personal voice and will also use their imagination and their knowledge of the method of professional authors to create a fictional voice that is appealing and believable to readers.

Lesson Plans

Note: The following lessons are planned on a schedule of meeting students every day for 90 minutes. 45 minutes is dedicated to each subject of reading and writing. An approximate breakdown of the 45 minutes would be: 10 minute mini-lesson, 30 minute independent work time with conferences, 5 minutes of closure and sharing. Students should have two notebooks. The literacy notebook is where students will take lesson notes, keep dialectic notes from the novels they read and maintain the reading log. The writer's notebook is used for creative writing, free writing ideas and journals.

Lesson 1 - Reading

Objective: Define character voice and discuss interpretations of author's style.

Estimated Time: 2 lessons

Materials: Literacy notebook.

Activity: Discuss with students what "voice" means when referring to a character in a novel. Discuss various ways an author can present a character through voice. For example: first-person narrative, third-person narrative, diary entries and dialogue. Students should determine what style of voice is used in the novel they are currently reading.

Lesson 2 - Reading and Writing

Objective: Define character voice and look at examples from various texts. Focus on revealing character through first-person narrative.

Estimated Time: 5 lessons

Materials: Literacy notebook and writer's notebook. Copies of *Becoming Naomi Leon*, *Monster*, *Heat*, *Stuck in Neutral*, *Notes from the Midnight Driver*.

Activity: To look at detailed aspects of revealing character, each book can be used for a specific purpose and example. Some suggestions follow. Each of the novels would be discussed in a separate mini-lesson.

Becoming Naomi Leon - reflective tone, precise word choice, evolution of a character

Monster - diary entry of main character

Heat - reflective tone, providing detail without losing the interest of the reader

Stuck in Neutral - describing a character through first-person narrative, stream-of-consciousness thought

Notes From the Midnight Driver - stream-of-consciousness thought

In conference time and dialectic notes, students can determine what style is used in their current novel and also reflect on styles they have read in the past and which one they prefer. With the above examples students can return to their writer's notebooks and begin a short piece on developing a fictional character. This is the

first step in the final project which is to create a fictional short story in the genre of realistic fiction, making sure that the main character is different from the writer. The on-going project of writing a fictional short story can be a partner assignment, which for some students may be preferable. For simplicity in these lessons I will continue to refer to the project as an individual student activity.

Lesson 3 - Reading and Writing

Objective: Define various forms of humor and how it is presented in realistic fiction.

Estimated Time: 2-3 lessons

Materials: Literacy notebook and writer's notebook. Copies of *Don't Call Me Ishmael* and *Notes From the Midnight Driver*.

Activity: Discuss with students the use of humor in writing, giving examples from the above resources. Allow students to model this humor writing in their own work on the short story project.

Don't Call Me Ishmael - situational humor, punch-line humor

Notes From the Midnight Driver - specific audience humor

Lesson 4 - Reading and Writing

Objective: Develop character voice through means other than a narrative.

Estimated Time: 2-3 lessons

Materials: Literacy notebook and writer's notebook. Copies of *The Taking of Room 114* and *Monster*.

Activity: Discuss with students alternative ways to develop and present a character to the reader. Give examples of the above novels as references of these various techniques. Guide students in their writing to offer a different style of presenting their fictional character than they have used previously to see if they can improve their writing technique.

The Taking of Room 114 - story through poetic form, multiple voices through the response of one character, two voices in dialogue

Monster - describing a character through the words of another character, screenplay of actions

Lesson 5 - Reading and Writing

Objective: Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of speaking directly to the reader.

Estimated Time: 1 lesson

Materials: Literacy notebook and writer's notebook. Copy of *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*.

Activity: Show/read to students the quote given previously where the character speaks directly to the reader. Ask students to react to this style of writing. As students read their independent novels they can reflect on

how the novel would change if some parts were written this way. As students return to the short story, conference with them on this technique and decide if it would benefit the project to include this style.

Lesson 6 - Writing

Objective: Bring all that students have learned about character voice into one cohesive realistic fiction short story.

Estimated Time: Two weeks

Materials: Writers notebook, copies of novels mentioned above as well as any other novels that are good references for learning about voice.

Activity: Throughout this time students have been learning different ways to express a character through writing. Various techniques have been addressed and students should have been writing each day using these various techniques. Now students will bring together what they have been doing and begin to write and complete an original short story in the genre of realistic fiction. The length and specifications will be up to teacher discretion. The goal is to strengthen student writing by expanding student imagination as well as offering multiple models of good writing provided by professional authors.

Resources

Student Resources

Bauer, Michael. *Don't Call Me Ishmael*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2006. It's a first-person account of the trials and tribulations of Ishmael Leseur, and his horde of very colorful friends and enemies. Through the school year, they have to face debating debacles, girls, and bugs. The writing is excellent and the dialogue is laugh-out-loud hilarious in a lot of places.

Carter, Ally. *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*. New York: Hyperion, 2006. A humorous look at the life of a teenage girl who attends a school for spies but tries to lead a normal life in order to impress a boy.

Glenn, Mel. *The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems*. New York: Lodestar Books, 1997. The poems—five from each student, one for each year of high school, and the last composed on the day of the crisis—reveal the thoughts, dreams, and fears of contemporary teens in an urban classroom.

Lupica, Mike. *Heat*. New York: Puffin Books, 2006. Pitching prodigy Michael Arroyo, an immigrant from Cuba, is on the run from social services after being banned from playing Little League baseball because rival coaches doubt he is only twelve years old and he has no parents to offer them proof.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. A novel told through a movie screenplay about a sixteen year old boy on trial for murder.

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Becoming Naomi León*. New York: Scholastic, 2004. When Naomi's absent mother resurfaces to claim her, Naomi runs away to Mexico with her great-grandmother and younger brother in search of her father.

Sonnenblick, Jordan. *Notes From the Midnight Driver*. New York: Scholastic, 2006. After being assigned to perform community service

at a nursing home, sixteen-year-old Alex befriends a bad tempered old man who has some lessons to impart about jazz guitar playing, love, and forgiveness.

Trueman, Terry. *Stuck in Neutral*. New York: HarperTempest, 2000. An outstanding look at voice comes from the thoughts of a fourteen year old boy who has cerebral palsy and can't actually speak or communicate outside his own head.

Teacher Resources

Allen, Janet and Kyle Gonzalez. *There's Room for Me Here: Literacy Workshop in the Middle School*. Portland, MA: Stenhouse, 1998. A resource for understanding the use of workshop for middle school students.

Deeds, Sharon, and Catherine Chastain, eds. *The New Books Kids Like*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2001. A great reference book for answering the common questions students ask, such as "Where are your funny books?" or "What are some good fantasy books?" The book is organized by these very questions and offer many references to books that kids will like. Includes a brief description of each recommended book.

Elbow, Peter. "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Controversy" In *College English* 70.2 Nov 2007 168-188 on http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=peter_elbow (accessed July 11, 2008). Essay reopening the debate about teaching voice and not teaching voice.

Odean, Kathleen. *Great Books for Girls*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997. The first reference of its kind, an invaluable list of more than six hundred titles covering all genres. In these books, girls and women are creative, capable, articulate and intelligent.

Reynolds, Tom K. *Teen Reading Connections*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2005. Reynolds offers strategies, programs, and tools to use to connect teen patrons, books, and reading. Tip-filled sections cover every genre and format. Proven strategies for linking teens and reading

Santman, Donna. *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005. This is a guide for using workshop in the middle school classroom. It gives overviews and philosophy regarding this teaching strategy and its effectiveness for older students.

Schall, Lucy. *Booktalks and More: Motivating Teens to Read*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003. More than 100 booktalks for titles published between 1997 and 2001. Most are fiction, but there is a good selection of nonfiction as well. Schall introduces each one with a clear, concise summary, followed by a short booktalk with just enough information to get teens what they need. The "Related Activities" section is most useful to teachers of English.

Silvey, Anita. *500 Great Books for Teens*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. This absolutely fabulous reference is one that you'll want to have in your classroom. Not only does it categorize the books by type such as fantasy, graphic novels, plays, and humor, it also gives a very descriptive passage about each book. The passage is in-depth enough to let the reader really know if they would like the book. I think it's a great reference for teachers and students. The recent publication allows for contemporary books to be the focus.

Appendix A - Implementing District Standards

Writing

ELA.8.15D - Write to entertain such as to compose humorous poems or short stories.

ELA.8.15F - Write in personal, creative, and academic forms to address specific audiences.

ELA.8.15E - Write compositions in which he/she consistently engages the reader with a natural and distinctive voice by employing controlled use of compositional risk elements active voice, and stylistic elements to develop unique or individual perspectives.

ELA.8.15H - Produce well-organized, focused and coherent compositions using effective transitions, voice, sentence fluency, and appropriate word choice.

ELA.8.18F - Refine and publish selected work in accepted formats for general and student audiences using traditional and technological methods.

Reading

ELA.8.7A - Read daily in independent-level materials; or appropriate lexile reading level.

ELA.8.10B - Establish and adjust purposes for reading.

ELA.8.8C - Read both assigned and self-selected texts to accomplish a variety of purposes such as to be informed, entertained, inspired, appreciate the writer's craft, and discover models for his/her own writing.

ELA.8.14B - Determine distinctive and common characteristics of elements of culture including communication, customs, and community through wide reading.

ELA.8.10I - Find similarities and differences across texts such as in treatment (the author's approach), scope (depth of information about the topic), and/or organization.

ELA.8.12F - Identify, describe, and analyze important characters, including their traits, points of view, causes of feelings and motivations, relationships, conflicts and their solutions, and the changes they undergo.

Notes

1. Ryan, *Becoming Naomi León*, 119-120.

2. Ibid., 137-138.

3. Lupica, *Heat*, 92.

4. Ibid., 94-95.

5. Trueman, *Stuck in Neutral*, 18-19.
6. Glenn, *The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems*, 1.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Myers, *Monster*, 26-27.
9. Bauer, *Don't Call Me Ishmael*, 16.
10. Ibid., 84.
11. Sonnenblick, *Notes From the Midnight Driver*, 6-7.
12. Ibid., 33.
13. Carter, *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*, 103.
14. Elbow, "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Controversy," 7.

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