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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume I: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

Reading Between the Lines: The Secret Lives of Characters

Curriculum Unit 11.01.09, published September 2011

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Introduction

Have you ever been shocked to discover that you have totally misunderstood another's actions or intentions? Or wrestled with the notion that someone is lying to you? Unfortunately, there is no *Mind Reading for Dummies* to assist us in these situations. Despite this potential for error, we must perform this trick every day as we interact with others of all ages and in a variety of situations. We must rely on our own past experiences, along with social and visual clues to help us unlock the mysteries of the inner selves of others. Truthfully, we can only know ourselves in this private way and must rely on our skills of observation and speculation to make conclusions regarding another person's thoughts, motivations, and intentions. Depending on how well we know the other person, our accuracy may be quite good. On the other hand, our assumptions can end up being absolutely false. This ability to read character in print and everyday life along with the inner-workings of this process is the focus of this unit.

I have chosen to use a variety of literature in this unit. In order to consider the way that we use nonverbal cues in our communication, the unit will study silent film clips such as Charlie Chaplin and contemporary situation comedies (without the sound) from the Nickelodeon channel. The Langston Hughes poem "Mother to Son" ¹ will provide the text for a Socratic Seminar ² about narrative voice. Two pieces of literature will focus on character and in particular, the way in which characters may change over the course of a story. The first is "Shells", by Cynthia Rylant ³, a short story about a young teen who is forced to live with his older, single aunt after the death of his parents. Students will examine the change that takes place in the two main characters through a collaborative activity. In the novel *Indigo*, by Alice Hoffman ⁴, the notion of change is experienced by three young friends, their families, and the very town in which they live. Students will take a more personal approach to looking at these characters, as they write journals from the perspective of a chosen character. The final activity in the unit has students "walking a day in the shoes" of another, as they imagine themselves the owner of a real pair of shoes and they write from that perspective.

Background

I teach at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School. It is a large suburban school in Newark, Delaware. Our demographics are diverse, with approximately 42% of students reporting their race as African American, 41% as White, 12% as Asian American, and 6% as Hispanic (DE Department of Education, 2010). Other characteristics include 7% of students that are English Language Learners, 40% from low income families, and 8% identified as Special Education students. Ours is the largest district in the state of Delaware and it encompasses both urban and suburban populations.

I am responsible for challenging our top academic students as Thurgood Marshall's Enrichment Teacher. This means that I work with the students who perform in the highest 10% in the areas of Math and Reading. My groups are representative of the school's diverse population in terms of race and socioeconomic status. Although being in the program one year does not guarantee that a student will be eligible the next, many of my students qualify for my program year after year. Data used in the eligibility criteria include Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (Delaware's State Test) and Terra Nova (norm referenced) scores in each subject area, along with teacher recommendation. The program begins in the first few weeks of school and students may enter the program at any time after a review by myself, the classroom teacher and the principal.

This unit has been created for my fifth- grade Reading Enrichment students. They are seen each day for a period of 45 minutes during an intervention time. Therefore, my students continue to have access to the regular classroom curriculum, in addition to the Enrichment program.

Rationale

My fifth- grade students are at a unique time in their lives. They are the oldest students in our school, and therefore hold a somewhat privileged position. Many assist teachers in roles of responsibility, such as safety patrol and office and library helpers. Others help out in the kindergarten or in classrooms where children have special needs. One can easily see that they are "trying on" a variety of roles. Developmentally, these students are moving on from what Piaget characterized as the concrete stage of development to the cusp of the formal operational stage. They are capable of thinking in more abstract ways. Logical thought and the ability to draw conclusions are becoming more evident. It is the beginning of a very vulnerable time, as they will be leaving the comfort of their longtime elementary school for the wider world of adolescence and the middle school years.

The purpose of this unit is to explore the ways that we connect to fiction and characters in literature. In particular, it will focus on the way in which characters change throughout a piece of literature. We will examine the brain science behind this ability to immerse oneself in a fictional world and explore its extension to evaluating character and attributing motives in our own. Activities in this unit will provide students with the opportunity to delve deeply into the fictional world of characters with the focus on understanding how and why we connect with fiction and the very real implications it can have in their own lives.

The Science Behind Connecting to Literature

Just what is it that makes us laugh, cry, and identify with characters in a piece of fictional literature? Many of us have looked forward to the next installment in a beloved series, or grieved when a favorite author decides to "kill off" a character that we enjoyed. One needs only to consider the world- wide phenomenon of *Harry Potter* to see that the same is true for many young readers. We know the characters and the worlds in which they exist are not real, yet the emotional connection certainly is!

In "Didactic Narratives: Literary Characters and Human Learning Processes", Isabel Jaen Portillo says that literature is "a symbolic fictional parallel of the human domain, modeled after humankind's perspective on the world, and thus populated by beings that closely resemble us." ⁵ She puts forth the notion that the real and the fictional worlds can both be important components of human cognitive development. Just as my students experiment with roles of responsibility at school, literature can also provide a rich learning environment, in which they can safely participate and study behavior and the ensuing consequences. Indeed, Jaen Portillo refers to fiction as a practical tool that provides a "showcase of social behavior." Being absorbed in the fictional life of someone who is involved in risk taking behavior, for instance, gives the reader the opportunity to safely experience it (and its consequences!) through the eyes of the character. The careful selection of literature for specific purposes can be an excellent tool for helping students navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence. Difficult issues such as substance abuse, sexuality, violence, and family conflicts can be addressed with the guided use of specific fictional literature.

Theory of Mind (ToM)

When readers "get lost in a great book", they are actually exercising the fundamental property of our human consciousness that enables us to exhibit a wide range of mental states. Much like a fantasy, it is an immersion into the world of a fictional environment. We breathe life into characters and make them real to us. In a sense, we read the characters' minds in an attempt to determine their motives and intentions. Even though we know that the events are fictional, we still feel a connection. This cognition is mediated by an essentially emotional process, which is an important component in recent research into the science of "Theory of Mind".

Theory of Mind (ToM) can be described as a type of mind- reading that describes our skill at explaining human behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and desires. In our careers, each time that we prepare a presentation, write a speech, or conduct research for a paper, we are doing so with a specific audience in mind. We worry about the way our words will be received and make a kind of educated guess about a response. By imagining the motivations for the behavior of others, it helps us make sense of our social environments. The same may be true when we read fiction: when we humanize fictional characters, it seems possible that we are making use of this same mechanism. There are often many things that an author may not fully explain, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions about characters in fiction. Instead of just identifying the elements (including character) of a given piece of literature, active engagement by the reader seems to be key in identifying and drawing meaning from the characters.

Current brain research now provides us with some concrete evidence that when we immerse ourselves in fiction, our brains are cognitively attempting to mimic or impersonate the mental state of a character. The reader has then created a "pretend state", thus enabling him to experience the joys and pitfalls of the character. ⁶ Using fMRI neuroimaging techniques, scientists have found that mirror neurons in the brain (once thought to only have motor functions) are clearly activated when we mentally follow the actions and activities

of a fictional character. By making sense of a character's situational actions we are able to imitate them. This mimicry then sets off a mechanism that allows us to truly "feel" along with the character. Therefore, Theory of Mind can facilitate empathy, which is essentially emotional imitation. This mimicry is referred to as "Simulation Theory" ⁷. In the action of trying to understand the behavior of others, real or imagined, we place ourselves in the other person's circumstances and thus emotionally imitate what they might be feeling.

ToM: Do We All Think This Way?

In *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, author Lisa Zunshine ⁸ explores the ability to activate this Theory of Mind. In her quest to understand why we read fiction, she begins with the notion that we perceive character motivation and action by virtue of our past experiences in life and as readers. However, there are indications that all humans are not able to connect to fiction in this way, even if they are capable readers. Rather, it seems that the ability to "mind-read" (and thus empathize with a fictional character), is often not available to people with cognitive differences such as autism. By studying individuals affected by autism, cognitive scientists now see that our mind-reading ability is actually a unique cognitive ability. For the average person, interpreting motive and assigning attributes to others may seem fairly automatic (although not always accurate!), but for individuals with cognitive deficits such as autism, this ToM seems to be impaired.

Autism is a condition that is now often diagnosed in the first few years of life and includes impaired development of communication and socialization skills, and a lack of flexibility and imagination. It is also often characterized by a lack of interest in fiction and storytelling. One reason for this might be a low tolerance for things that are out of the ordinary. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, ⁹ Christopher (the narrator, who is affected by autism) explains this by saying that he does not like novels because "they are lies about things which didn't happen and they make me feel shaky and scared"(Chapter 37). If individuals with autism find comfort in routine, rigidly-ordered environments, then it is understandable that fantasy is quite difficult and uncomfortable for them.

Personally, I have had several students who have a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. Often very bright, these students have had difficulty in social situations and often prefer to work alone. This presents difficulty in the regular classroom, where their behavior can be misinterpreted by others. A fascinating glimpse into the thinking processes of someone with autism is provided by a woman named Temple Grandin. ¹⁰ Having autism herself, she is a brilliant engineer and published author. She gives us a "window" into her world as she can explain the way in which she sees and interprets things. Grandin says that school was very difficult for her as a young child because she simply could not interpret the cues and nonverbal forms of communication used so readily by her peers. She is able to explain that she has an extremely strong visual memory, actually creating her own mental library of "videos" that help her to function socially. When confronted with an unfamiliar situation, she calls up a "video" from her memory to help her to interact appropriately. When asked about her ability to comprehend fictional narratives, she seems to agree with the fictional Christopher, when she admits that it gives her great difficulty and that she could not understand texts such as *Romeo and Juliet*. However, one must keep in mind that Temple Grandin is an extraordinary individual, despite the fact that she happens to have autism. It does not mean that all individuals who face this challenge do not enjoy fiction. The degree of severity and individual differences in experience certainly are important. Despite this, her insights are not to be discounted in this field of research. They remind us of the absolute complexity of the issues involved and provide significant insight into the brain mechanics of the ways in which we perceive and attribute traits to others.

The ability to read the signals of others is in no way an exact science, even for people not affected by autism. We make errors in our assessment of social situations every day. When we see our supervisor frowning as we enter the building, we may mistakenly think it is directed at us, while the truth may be that he is not feeling well and is wondering if he should go home. The student who repeatedly asks to go to the bathroom may not be avoiding our class, but actually has a medical reason for doing so. The appearance of tears is another classic example of an opportunity to misread a situation. Tears may be caused by joy, fear, or pain. An inability to read additional clues in a given situation might make the situation difficult to decipher. The question then becomes: *How can active participation in literature encourage the development of self-identity and help us read other people more effectively?*

Opening Up the Character Analysis Toolkit

Helping our students develop their mind-reading skills will benefit them both as readers and as social creatures. My students are in fifth grade and will soon be off to middle school. There, the ability to perceive the motivation of other adolescents could serve them well as they begin to define themselves and search out their place in the social hierarchy. Analyzing character in a variety of texts will not only make them more critical and insightful readers, but it will hopefully bring a deeper understanding of the text and themselves.

Narrative Voice, Focalization, and Dialogue

Let us begin with Narrative Voice. This narration itself can characterize the protagonist. When stories are told in the first person, the reader must evaluate the state of mind of the character. In Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*¹¹, for instance, the tale is told in the first person, in the voice of the main character. This gives the reader an authentic and very raw experience of this young man who is incarcerated for the first time. When Steve describes the sounds and scenes of violence in the prison, the reader feels the fear and desperation that he experiences, first-hand. However, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart"¹² provides quite another perspective. We quickly get the feeling that this character is unstable and that his account of the events may be unreliable. The perceptions and views that he shares with the reader are obviously irrational, as he contradicts himself and reacts in very strange ways.

The third person point of view allows the writer to share information and the perspectives of many different characters and settings. A classic example of this is found in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*¹³. It is clear that Austen is writing Elizabeth Bennett's own story, but Elizabeth is not the narrator. Also known as the omniscient point of view, it provides many opportunities for reader reflection on character flaws and traits that can be demonstrated through actions and consequences. A good example of a strong use of this type of narration can be found as we consider the character of Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*¹⁴. Edmund's weaknesses cause him to make choices that are none too savory, yet the reader follows his journey as he reflects on his poor choices and struggles to redeem himself. The writer's ability to provide insights into the other central characters' feelings and interactions with Edmund create a fuller portrait of who he really is.

Focalization is a term that was coined by a French narrative theorist named Gerard Genette¹⁵. It is the narrative technique that allows the story to be told from a given perspective. Essentially it is the "who sees" rather than the "who tells" a given story: the perspective through which the story is presented. If the narrative

is said to be "externally focalized", the narrator tells only of visible, external aspects of the story and characters. In contrast, "internally focalized" narratives provide information about the feelings and inner thoughts of characters in a story.

Dialogue is another literary device that can be a very clear way in which the author can reveal character traits and emotions. It is the quoted lines of give and take of conversations between individuals in the story. It is often up to the reader to determine whether or not the conversations are reliable indications of the feelings and motivations of a character(s). In this instance, the setting and circumstances surrounding the conversation are crucial to the reader's ability to analyze a character's behavior and intentions. This notion of *setting* includes not only the time and place, but on a deeper level, the environment and the context in which it occurs. For example, in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" ¹⁶, the setting changes several times, as the narrator and his victim navigate their way from the streets to the catacombs, and the dialogue changes with it. The racing mind of the narrator is reflected in his speech, as is the victim's, as he is plied with wine and compliments. There is great depth of feeling that is conveyed, and not just because of the words uttered by the characters. Indeed, it is the way in which they are said, and the way that they are received.

The *Dramatic Monologue* is a first- person example of the way in which an individual character can be revealed. This type of dialogue is like a private conversation directed at the reader, often clarifying a specific situation or event and the character's emotional reaction to it. In the poem "Mother to Son" ¹⁷, the conversation is clearly a mother speaking to her son as she attempts to give him advice about the journey that is life. Her dialect and word choice speak loudly about her own background and life experiences, her intent, and her message. However, in other monologues, such as "My Last Duchess" ¹⁸, the poet's word choice and the language of the time period make it more difficult to glean meaning. The reader may know who is speaking, but his message, intent, and audience require more careful study.

Static and Dynamic Characters

In encountering characters in literature, the reader will recognize that some characters can be categorized as static characters. These characters do not seem to change much during the course of the story, despite the events. We see this in the classic children's story by Heinrich Hoffman, "Phoebe Ann, the Proud Girl". ¹⁹ In this illustrated series of cautionary tales directed at children, a young girl continues with her prideful behavior, refusing to change, despite the drastic physical consequences, and reactions of others. Contemporary examples of static characters include James Bond, Joey from *Friends*, and children's TV characters such as Dora the Explorer.

On the other hand, dynamic characters are characters that are indeed changed by the events and circumstances that befall them in the course of a tale. These alterations are not merely physical, but reflect a change from within the character. In the case of "Slovenly Betsy" ²⁰, when she was laughed at and shamed for her sloppy and disheveled ways, it caused a major change in her character. This change is evident to the reader in text and visually, because the story is illustrated and the exterior change in her appearance is clear. A more common example is Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.²¹ The character we meet in the beginning of the story is significantly affected by his experience with the three different spirits, and is a very different character at the end.

Many qualities and changes in people and characters are extremely difficult to determine. In fact, today we have experts who make their living by sharing their expertise as people- readers in real life, in very serious situations. Jury selection experts and behavioral psychologists can help to determine when people are being

truthful and when they are not. One such expert is Dr. Paul Ekman ²² , whose groundbreaking work actually was the basis of a television series called *Lie to Me*. His research began with the Darwinian theory that there are seven basic human emotions that are universal: anger, disgust, contempt, fear, surprise, happiness, and sadness. Through his research around the world (including very isolated regions in Tibet) he began to realize that when we experience powerful emotions, it is unconsciously demonstrated on our faces with micro-expressions. Micro-expressions are very brief (1/25th to 1/15th of a second) facial effects that momentarily reveal our innermost feelings. This work then led to the development of a system called the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). In it, every human facial expression is classified by virtue of its use of one or more of the 43 human facial muscles. Although Ekman has worked with a wide variety of law enforcement agencies and private companies, even he is cautious about the use of his work. His techniques only prove when someone is lying. It does not reveal the reason(s) behind the untruth. Context and situational components are still important to be included in the assessment of human behavior, just as it is in literature. Dr. Ekman has published several books and maintains a website (www.ekmaninternational.com) that is easily accessible and is filled with resources about his techniques.

Technology: The Merging of Character and Cyberspace

Now that we have explored the devices of reading people in literature and real life, let us also consider a merging of the two: the world of technology. Whether we are proponents of it or not, the young people of today are permanently submerged in the culture of cyberspace. Even the youngest children are "plugged in", so to speak, playing and interacting with computers. The advent of social networking and online gaming has given a whole new meaning to the word "friend". Games that allow custom personalization of characters provide an interesting way for young people to participate in role playing and interacting. In most interactive games, the narrative perspective is provided by the camera: it does the seeing for the player. Aside from gaming, adolescents can email and instant message, or work on a project collaboratively with an online friend anywhere in the world. This type of simulated interaction has opened a world of issues for research in social and cognitive psychology, as well as questions about internet safety.

While many adults seem to feel that teens are spending too much time online, there is evidence that there are many positive outcomes. In their report of a three- year study at the University of Southern California, ²³ researchers found that the youth of today use technology to open doors to new social realms, self-paced online learning, and independence. This long- term study investigated the media habits of teens and the way in which they used technology such as social networking and video sharing sites (such as YouTube), online games, and mobile phones. Results showed that the vast majority of users were not interacting with strangers, but were actually extending already existing friendships. Some used it to delve more deeply into personal interests or to add to their own repertoire of media skills, and some to learn independently from others. The opportunity to put their work "out there" for others to see, to add to, and to receive feedback upon was instrumental to the development of their strengths and projects. This seems to be a strong argument that using technology in the adolescent years might just be another avenue for searching for identity and "trying on" roles in a fictional world.

Taking the above discussion into account, I would also like to respond to the critics in Gillespie's article entitled "Why Literature Matters" ²⁴ . Literature matters a great deal because it serves a myriad of purposes for us all. As we immerse ourselves in the world of fiction and fictional characters, we can escape and imagine life in places very different from our own. We can learn from the experiences and consequences of a character's actions and then reflect upon our own values and motivations. This activity happens as early as opening our first books. Children's books teach values and lifelong skills such as sharing, making decisions,

and how to get along with others in a difficult world. For my fifth- grade students, by studying character in coming of age stories and poems, they can experiment with their own identities and ask themselves an extremely important question: "Who Am I?"

Strategies

The purpose of this unit is to move my students beyond the lower level types of questioning that they might encounter in their grade level anthologies. Rather than relying on literal and shallow responses, I want them to analyze characters and behavior from a variety of texts, consider cause and effect, hypothesize, and make predictions. Activities will be intentionally open ended, requiring reflection and clear communication of their ideas.

One way that I plan to do this is by assigning a project that will be introduced at the beginning of the unit. After an introduction and discussion about the nonverbal ways that we communicate, students will keep a record of their observations about the nonverbal communication that they may encounter in their everyday lives. They may choose to create this log in written or artistic form, using photographs, drawings, or video. Entries will be accompanied with a reflection that includes the character, situation and the student's perceptions about the event.

Character Journals will be used in the novel study. Students will assume the role of a main character and write entries from the first person perspective after each chapter, focusing on at least one event. This allows for students to think more deeply about the literature, reflect on the events in the story and make personal connections to the character. This will provide the opportunity to integrate technology as well, as students will create their entries on the computer. Using the technology will encourage personal expression (available software includes Inspiration and clipart) and will facilitate sharing amongst the group.

A Socratic Seminar is included for students to respond to the assigned poem "Mother to Son". I like to use this strategy because it helps students gain a deeper understanding of complex ideas in a text through dialogue with each other. It fosters clear communication, requires mutual respect of all participants, and encourages flexible thinking. It really encourages students to use metacognition as they respond to, visualize, relate the text to personal experiences, and hopefully identify with the speaker. In addition, given the smaller class size, it gives everyone the opportunity to share their viewpoints, in an accepting, nonjudgmental atmosphere. Several performance versions of this poem are available on YouTube. Showing a dramatization allows students the opportunity to hear the difference that a reader's voice can make in the interpretation of a given text. This activity can lead to further activities that incorporate voice and drama, as students may choose this or other poetry to perform. These could be videotaped and shared with other groups of students, either within or outside their own school. A "coffee house" activity would be a wonderful way for students to share this learning experience, since the performance is a demonstration of their connection with the character in the literature.

The culminating activity will be called "Walk in These Shoes". This activity will require students to pull together all the prior learning from this unit and to demonstrate the development of a multi-dimensional capacity, both for identity formulation and for empathy. It incorporates imagination, writing, and making a strong connection with a fictional character, based on a concrete object: shoes. Students will choose a pair of

shoes from a large collection: flip flops, work boots, children's shoes, high heels, sneakers, athletic shoes, etc. Their challenge will be to write "A Day in the Life" in the voice of the person who belongs to the shoes. Several opportunities to share and discuss their work with partners will be provided during the writing process. Further extensions of this activity might include allowing students to illustrate or dress up as their character, thereby demonstrating their vision of him/her. Photos will be taken of the student in the shoes (if possible) to go with their writing for display.

Introduction to the Unit

Since this unit focuses on the concept of change in literature and in students themselves, the first activity will begin with brainstorming and categorizing the students' ideas about change. Students will be broken into small groups and given markers and chart paper. Plan to guide their discussion by posting the following questions on the board:

- What words come to mind when you hear the word "change"? What kinds of things change? How can you tell if something has changed?

After a whole class discussion of responses, have groups brainstorm and write examples of things that change on sticky notes. Encourage them to think of as many examples as possible.

Next, have students begin to put their sticky note examples into groups and giving each group a title. Guiding questions might include:

- How can you categorize your ideas into groups?
- Do all your changes fall into your groups? Might some fall into more than one group?
- Based on your ideas, what are some characteristics of change?

Now, have students brainstorm about things that do NOT change:

- What are some things that don't change?
- How do you know that they haven't changed?
- Can you group these things that don't change?
- How are these things different from your brainstormed list of things that do change?

Close with a whole class discussion and create a display of their brainstorming work. Looking at the various ideas, ask students if they can begin to make some generalizations about change. Use a good definition of generalization, which could also be posted, such as "a generalization is something that is always or almost always true". Possible generalizations might focus on the following:

- There is often a link between change and time

- Change can be viewed as positive or negative
- Some changes follow an expected pattern, while some happen randomly

Given these generalizations, students will then take another look at their sticky-note responses, placing them where they think they fit the best.

This activity was adapted from Kendall Hunt's *Autobiographies and Memoirs*²⁵ .

Activity: Nonverbal Communication

In this lesson, students will become more aware of the way that our bodies and mannerisms can communicate just as loudly as our tongues. Begin the class with displaying some nonverbal signals of displeasure—frowning, slamming books, etc. Open a discussion in this regard. What was this type of behavior "saying"? How did they know? Encourage personal connections and examples.

Next, use video clips from YouTube (silent movies such as Charlie Chaplin) or silenced clips from older children's programs or films. The following are some clips that might be helpful:

- http://youtu.be/QTFI5-_4D1Y ("Even Stevens")
- <http://youtu.be/RAcEU09e748> ("Clarissa Explains It All").
- <http://youtu.be/GRKS1hbsPDg> (Charlie Chaplin clips)

I chose these examples because these shows are not current, and the students may not be familiar with them. Have students individually jot down their ideas regarding what is occurring in the clips. Open up to a whole class discussion about what they saw and ideas about what was happening in the clip. If desired, you repeat the clips with sound, to see if their conclusions were correct. Any misconceptions will provide for great discussion about how difficult it is to interpret the minds and intentions of others.

Next, tell students that this reading of nonverbal cues is actually a science. Explain the work of Paul Ekman and his research on the universality of facial expressions. If possible, access (or have students access) his website: www.paulekman.com. The opening of the television show *Lie to Me* could be used. It clearly demonstrates and isolates the facial muscles that are used in various expressions. Allow time for students to share their thoughts and connections to the topic.

Introduce the following assignment: Students will document their encounters with situations that involve nonverbal communication in their daily lives. For one week, they will keep track of at least one situation per day that involved nonverbal communication and body language. Students may choose to record their situations in writing, by drawing, or by taking a photo or video. Each event must be accompanied by a reflection on the situation, including characters, setting and their personal interpretation of what happened. These projects will then be shared.

Socratic Seminar: Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son"

Socratic Seminars provide a perfect opportunity for students to construct deep conceptual understandings of texts and to actively participate in their own learning. Participation in this type of activity promotes critical and creative thinking as students build on others' ideas, refer to the given text, ask questions, and give their own opinions.

Even though this type of activity is more common in middle and high schools, I have begun training my fourth and fifth-grade Enrichment students in the process with very positive results. Students have let me know in their reflections that they enjoyed the opportunity to really talk about the literature in a meaningful way. Even if they come to the discussion with difficulty understanding all of the text, participation in the seminar has often really clarified things for them.

I have chosen to use the Langston Hughes poem "Mother to Son" for a Socratic Seminar. In order to prepare for the seminar, give out copies of the poem the day before. In addition, provide some open ended question guidelines that may help get the discussion flowing, such as:

- What puzzles me is...
- I'd like to talk about...
- I'm confused about...
- This makes me think of...
- Do you agree that the poet is trying to say...
- What might have happened if...?

Students should come to class prepared with the text and five open-ended questions for the seminar.

After the seminar, you might focus on the poet and his character. If possible, access clips from YouTube of various people performing the poem. Discuss how seeing and hearing the reader speak, and his/her personal interpretation of the words on the page might change the way they feel and think about the poem. Extend this to other examples of different mediums for storytelling, such as movie/television versions of books.

In closing, students will reflect on the seminar before they leave, completing a "3-2-1 Exit Ticket", asking them 3 things they learned, 2 things that they see differently than before they participated in the seminar, and 1 thing they still wonder about.

Collaborative Activity: Interpreting Character Change in the Short Story "Shells"

This activity makes use of a "Numbered Heads" strategy and a short story by Cynthia Rylant. The objective is for students to apply what they have learned about reading character to trace the change in two main characters in this short story. Part of the activity is independent and part requires collaboration with a partner.

Begin by "numbering heads", having students count off "one, two, one, two", etc. All the ones will read the

first part of the story, analyzing the characters, while the twos will read the second part of the story, also analyzing the characters. After everyone has had time to read and analyze, the ones and twos will get back together to discuss the differences in the characters. As a whole class, discuss these changes and the possible reasons for them, focusing on evidence from the text.

My students have access to computers, so they will organize their thoughts using the software program *Inspiration*. For each character, students will focus on four things: thoughts/dreams, words (things the character might say), feelings (what does the character love or feel strongly about?) and future (where does the character appear to be headed?). Figurative language, symbols, and images are also encouraged to be included. This work will facilitate the discussion when the two "halves" of the story get back together.

Character Journals and the Novel *Indigo*

The use of character journals encourages the active participation of the reader in a novel. Instead of just passively consuming the words on the page, character journals require students to reflect upon the character's motives and feelings, and then judge and evaluate whether or not they are similar to his own. I have chosen this activity because in trying to acquire a deeper understanding of the literature, it might also provide a greater understanding of themselves.

In this assignment, students will take on the persona of a main character as they create a record of their thoughts, feelings, and reflections through the character's voice. They will choose at least one episode from each chapter to write about. Encourage students to go beyond the words on the page about the character, and to really imagine that they are living through the events as their character—truly putting themselves into the mind and heart of another. Though the majority of this assignment is written, students may also choose to illustrate their entries. Since I have access to a computer lab, students will be free to use software such as *Microsoft Word*, *Inspiration* and clipart as well.

An extension of this activity might involve writing back and forth between students in the roles of their characters, providing further practice in writing in the first person. Some students might like to act out passages from the story.

I chose this novel because it is brief but also because it contains many elements that are attractive to young readers. It deals with loss, the search for identity, the struggles of family, and decision making. There are many coming of age novels that could easily be substituted (see Teacher Resources Section for a link to a comprehensive and searchable list of literature).

Culminating Activity: Take a Walk in My Shoes

This is a fun activity that will require students to use their imaginations to create a character of their own, not from experience with a text, but from a physical item. I will collect a wide variety of footwear, different in size, function, and quality. Students will choose a pair of shoes from my collection and write a summary for a day in

the life of the person who might be the owner of the shoes. For instance, a pair of men's work-boots will provide for very different experiences than a pair of high heels. Someone who wears a child's flip-flops will have a very different day from someone who wears large soccer cleats. Again, the product may be created using a variety of mediums, including technology and art. If the student is comfortable with the idea, I will take a picture of the student wearing the shoes to add to a display at the completion of the unit.

This unit was designed to be used with a group of fifth- grade Reading Enrichment students. However, it is easily adaptable to other grade levels by varying the literature used. The unit begins with a discussion about change in general but as the unit progresses, this notion becomes more refined and personalized, as the students make connections and empathize with the literary characters encountered. Through discussion and collaboration with their peers, my students will develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the fictional world and the experiences that literature can provide. At the conclusion of the unit, students will have had significant experience with reading beyond the words presented on the pages and be able to reveal the *secret lives of characters*.

Notes

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5. 5 Jaen Portillo, Isabel. 2006. Didactic narratives: Literary characters and human learning processes. Paper presented at the Modern Language Association of Philadelphia, December 2006 in Philadelphia, PA.
6. 6 Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State UP, 2006.
7. 7 Gallese, Vittorio and Alvin Goldman. "Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind Reading." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2, no. 12 (1998): 493-501.
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10. 10 Grandin, Temple. *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports From My Life With Autism*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2006.
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15. 15 Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1979.
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20. 20 Hoffman, Heinrich, *Slovenly Betsy*. Bedford, Massachusetts: Applewoods Books, 1999.
21. 21 Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. United Kingdom: Chapman and Hall, 1843.
22. 22 Ekman, Paul and Wallace Friesen. *FACS: A Technique for the Measurement of Facial Movement*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1978.

23. 23 Lyman, Peter, Mizuko Ito, Michael Carter, and Barrie Thorne. DIGITAL YOUTH RESEARCH | Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media. <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/> (accessed July 29, 2011).
24. 24 Gillespie, Tim. "Why Literature Matters". *The English Journal* 83, no. 8, Literature, Queen of the Curriculum (Dec., 1994): pp. 16-21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/820324>.
25. 25 *Literary Reflections*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1999.

Common Core Standards for Fifth Grade

The activities in this unit apply to the following standards from the English Language Arts Common Core:

Reading: Literature

1. Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
3. Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
6. Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

Writing

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
 - a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.
 - b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

Speaking and Listening /Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
 - a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation and other information known about the topic to explore ideas under discussion.
 - b. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.
 - c. Pose and respond to specific questions by making comments that contribute to the discussion and elaborate on the remarks of others.
 - d. Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from the discussions.

2. Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

3. Summarize the points a speaker makes and explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence.

In addition, the following are the English Language Arts standards for my state:

n DE ELA #1 Use written and oral English appropriate for various purposes and audiences.

n DE ELA #2 Construct, examine, and extend the meaning of literary, informative, and technical texts through listening, reading, and viewing.

n DE ELA #3 Access, organize, and evaluate information gained through listening, reading, and viewing.

n DE ELA #4 Use literary knowledge accessed through print and visual media to connect self to society and culture.

Resources on the Web for Teachers

Activities for Character:

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/inferring-characters-change-858.html>

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/graphing-plot-character-novel-869.html>

http://www.inspiration.com/Examples/Kidspiration#Reading_and_Writing

www.lauracandler.com

www.carolhurst.com

Use of Computer Games and Learning:

This site is linked to Prensky's and will take you to the social impact games site where you can peruse a menu of education and learning games:

<http://www.socialimpactgames.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=index&catid=2&topic=&allstories=1>

Socratic Seminars:

<http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/lessonplan.jsp?id=698>

<http://www.nwabr.org/education/pdfs/PRIMER/PrimerPieces/SocSem.pdf>

Searchable Book Lists by category:

This is a wonderful list that lets you search for literature by topic:

<http://readingandwritingproject.com/resources/classroom-libraries.html>

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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