
Creating A Community of Readers, Writers, and Thinkers

Subject: English Language Arts

Grade: 7

Teacher: June Eressy, UPCS Principal & National Board Certified English Teacher

Introduction

As a founding faculty member of University Park Campus School (UPCS), I have had the opportunity to watch our shared vision of preparing each young person who entered our doors for college come to fruition. The challenges have been great, but the rewards have been greater. What follows is a blueprint for building a classroom community that values reading, writing, and thinking. The strategies provided in this document are designed to engage students by helping them make connections to their own lives through literature.

Early on, we knew that if our students were to be well-prepared to handle the challenges of a rigorous high school academic curriculum, then literacy must be the focus of grades 7 and 8. With the majority of our students arriving with skills substantially below grade level, this was an awesome task.

What the Learning-Centered Classroom Looks Like

The physical configuration of the classroom is a simple, yet critical way to inspire community. I require that my students and I sit in a circle, rather than a more traditional arrangement for several reasons. First of all, this configuration removes the temptation for the less-engaged student to languish in the back of the class. It likewise removes the traditional “alphabetical order” type of seating, which sometimes thrusts the same students together in class after class. Most importantly, it allows all students equal access to discussion, and is instrumental in fostering student-to-student conversations around literature. Reading is a transactional process and it is essential that students feel that they are stakeholders in the discussion. By removing myself from the “head of the class” position, it is easier to facilitate the conversation among students; they feel more free to express their own opinions and I am not seen as the definitive “last word” in discussions.

Perhaps the most crucial part of creating a learning-centered classroom is sharing our love of literature with our students. The ability to match texts to students is a key component of helping students to become life-long readers. In order to engage fledgling readers, it is incumbent upon us as teachers to keep abreast of the growing body of young adult literature, and to be familiar with the vast existing body. If we want students to read, write, and think creatively about books, we need to provide them with access to engaging materials. For your information, I have included a list of books that my students like to read.

How We Start The Year

All of our classes are heterogeneously grouped and all feature a broad range of ethnic backgrounds. This presents some unique challenges in the quest for classroom community. Because our expectations are the same for all students, regardless of their background, we must implement a range of strategies to address particular students’ strengths and weaknesses.

Even before the students arrive in August, I make certain to review their cumulative records in order to gain insight regarding any special education services they may receive, their language proficiency, test scores, etc. I am then able to use this information to inform my classroom practice. The August Academy, which you will be observing this week, is an opportunity for the students to essentially begin school one month earlier than their peers. It is during this time that we begin to establish a sense of community and begin reinforcing the message that they will hear over and over again: that they will succeed and that they are capable of going on to college.

As we all know, seventh graders are a breed unto themselves. They are leaving the nurturing environment of elementary school and entering the terrifying world of middle school. Our role is to ease this transition for them, while simultaneously challenging them academically. Routine is essential—for many of the students, their lives are chaotic and school is often the only place where they find respite. In order to ensure that their entry to middle school is as smooth as possible, I make certain that my students know what to expect.

When they arrive in my classroom, I introduce myself, describe what we are going to do over the course of the year (become readers, writers, and thinkers), and establish ground rules for behavior. I underscore the fact that our classroom is a place of mutual respect—for themselves, for their classmates, and for me. I make it crystal clear that all opinions are valued, but they must be offered in a respectful manner. I emphasize the importance of being a good listener, not just a good talker, in order to reinforce the belief that everyone in the class has something special to offer. During this time, I also take care of “housekeeping” tasks—when they can use the bathroom is often a major concern.

In keeping with my belief that routine is essential to effective classroom practice, I begin every class by telling them what is “on the agenda” for the day. I let them know what we need to accomplish and why we need to accomplish it. Each class begins with journal writing for fifteen minutes. At the beginning of the year, students are assigned topics, which may or may not lead into the day’s reading. This is an “A” or “F” assignment, with the only stipulation being that they must fill one full page in their journal. I tell them that I will read and respond to their work, but it will not be graded on spelling, punctuation, grammar, or mechanics. I also promise them that I will not reveal the contents of their journal to anyone else, unless they write about hurting themselves or someone else. The reason that I choose to assess the journals in this way is that it forces the students to give more in-depth responses by focusing on filling the page. Many of these young people have never been asked to respond to a writing prompt in this way, and initially it is a struggle for them. However, it is an integral part of the classroom regimen, and they grow to accept it. Even the most reluctant of writers is filling a page by the end of the first quarter—and most are actually going beyond the required minimum.

Learning to Talk About Books

For the past several years, I have begun my first quarter by implementing literature circles in my classroom. I consider this one of the most effective ways to support students as they begin to think critically about books. Literature circles enhance the belief that the text is subject to a variety of interpretations, and allow readers the opportunity to explore and discuss within a community of readers.

When I initially introduce literature circles in my classroom, I do it in a very prescribed way. This is because in addition to being a way to teach my students to talk productively about books, it is also instrumental in building a community that allows risk-taking with regards to literary interpretation. The fact that in literature circles students are responsible for assuming specific roles in the discussion allows me to group them according to their particular strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly effective in helping to support English language learners, because it offers them access to the discussion of literature in a small group setting, which is much less intimidating. It also offers these students the opportunity to express their feelings about the text through art work and to investigate the meanings of unfamiliar words.

At the beginning of the class, I provide each student with a handout which describes the various roles they will be assuming as they participate in the circles. It is important that each student receive a copy of the roles sheet prior to the reading of the story to assist him/her in the reading/responding process. This is another way to enhance their stance as critical readers.

Figure 1: Roles for Literature Circles



SUMMARIZER – Gives a brief summary of the day’s reading, including the highlights and main idea.

DISCUSSION DIRECTOR – Asks three open response questions about the day’s reading. Why? How? If?

PASSAGE MASTER – Locates three sections of the text to revisit. Cites the specific passage and page number, and explains the choice.

LITERARY LUMINARY – Finds three single words that are unfamiliar. Cite the word and page on which it is located and then define the word, using a dictionary.

CONNECTOR – Makes three connections between the story and the world outside.

ARTFUL ARTIST– Draws a picture of a meaningful part of the day’s reading and explains the choice.

It is important to note that there a variety of ways to use literature circles in the classroom. Although this is a method that works well for me, it is possible to modify this strategy in any way that best fits the needs of your individual classroom. For this reason, I have included a list of web sites and articles regarding this practice in the bibliography.

One variable in the success of the literature circles never changes, and that is the responsibility of the teacher to circulate among the groups in order to ensure that the group stays on track and completes their assigned tasks. After each group completes their assignments, I ask them to report out to the whole group, who then is able to comment on the discoveries of their peers.

I should note here that during the regular school year, I implement the circles somewhat differently. During that time, I assign three groups of students to the six roles on the handout, with the ultimate goal being that every student has the opportunity to become familiar with every role, and are therefore comfortable viewing the story from any of these perspectives. We then move to the next level, which is having three circles functioning in the classroom simultaneously. However, due to the time constraints, I have modified the process.

August Academy Overview

During the three weeks of the August Academy, I will be trading my principal hat in and putting on my teacher hat once again. I am looking forward to getting to know the youngest members of the UPCS family, and having them get to know me. This is a golden opportunity for me to acquire firsthand knowledge of the students’ skill levels, which will certainly assist me in making administrative decisions. Possessing this baseline assessment will be invaluable in designing and implementing curriculum.

Once again, I must emphasize the importance of routine in the middle school classroom. We will begin each day with journaling, and I will instill the practice of writing one full page. For the three week academy, I have chosen to work with the short novel *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischmann. (Grade 9 will be reading Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*). There are several reasons for this choice. From a purely practical point of view, the book is short enough to complete during our limited time together. However, in spite of its brevity, the story is rich in detail and relevant to the lives of my students. Also, the story focuses on community building, which is, of course, one of my primary goals for the institute.

We will read the entire book aloud. I will ask each student to read a portion of the text so that I am able to

gain a sense of their fluency and of their decoding skills. I will also read a large portion of the text to the students, in order to model for them what proficient reading sounds like. Shared reading also allows me to control the level of comprehension of the students to some extent. That is, if I sense that they do not understand what we are reading, I can stop and ask some questions to clarify any confusion that they may have. On many days, we will then divide into literature circles for an in-depth discussion of *Seedfolks*. In addition, we will participate in a variety of activities that will support student mastery of the text. Two of these engagements are described below.

Figure 2: Found Poetry

“Found” poems are built from bits of broken text. The poems are taken directly from the text, but their themes and their orderings are invented. Their sentences are not. Words can be dropped but not added. You will create your own poem taken from *Seedfolks*. Use words, characters, and descriptions to paint your own picture for me.

Figure 3: Graffiti Board

Students work in small groups to create a graffiti board that reflects their reading of *Seedfolks*. They can write their observations on the paper in the form of graffiti. Students can sketch or write any words, images, or phrases that come to mind. Students then share their findings with the whole class.

These types of engagements are designed to support students in their efforts to become readers, writers, and thinkers. Please note that all of these strategies involve revisiting the text in order to deepen understanding. When students learn the importance of this strategy, they take their first steps in forming a community of readers.

Assessment

During the August Academy, assessment is more informal than formal. That is, by observation, I am able to establish a baseline for my students’ skills. For example, when students read out loud, I am able to take a mental “running record” of the individual’s fluency and miscues. Through my observation of literature circles, I am able to determine if a particular student struggles with comprehension or language issues. Daily journaling provides me with writing samples, which reflect particular strengths or weaknesses.

Portfolio assessment is a huge piece of our evaluation of ELA students and the writing that is completed during the summer provides the starting point for our writing folders. At the end of the school year, students are truly amazed when they look back and see all that they have achieved.