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Melissa Fleming
Bronzeville High School, Chicago, IL

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Through Their Eyes

Melissa Fleming
Bronzeville High School
Chicago, IL

On January 24th, 2009, fourteen-year-old Vincent Richardson walked into a police station in Chicago and reported for duty. Donning a regulation police uniform, a fake badge, and a newspaper-stuffed shirt resembling a bulletproof vest, he was able to pass himself off as an officer from a neighboring district. His physical appearance was not the whole of his impersonation; he was also fluent in police lingo and codes. He signed out a radio and a ticket book and spent the next five hours on traffic duty with a veteran Chicago police officer. When the police officer finally became suspicious and asked him to produce some credentials, which he was unable to produce, he was arrested and taken into juvenile custody. It turns out that he had been arrested at least once before for the same crime. He was reportedly infatuated with police work and had expressed interest in becoming a police officer since he was five-years old. It is likely that as a result of this particular crime, he will have a difficult time gaining entry into the criminal justice profession. It is unfortunate that this young man's efforts towards pursuing his dreams were so misdirected.

Vincent Richardson is not a student at my school, but I encounter students every day who have a great deal in common with him. I work at Bronzeville High School, a small alternative school on the South Side of Chicago that enrolls students aged sixteen to twenty-one who are returning to high school after leaving their neighborhood schools. They leave these schools due to various challenges, such as pregnancy, incarceration, and family hardships. One hundred percent of our students are African American, and over ninety percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Like Vincent Richardson, Bronzeville students have dreams and goals for their futures. While some of them doubt that they can escape the world of crime and poverty that surrounds them in their neighborhoods,

they still have some sliver of hope for their futures that keep them coming to school every day. As a teacher, my challenges include not only keeping students engaged in school long enough so that they can finish high school, but also helping them to identify their goals for life after high school. Addressing these motivational needs and my state standards simultaneously is often difficult, so I seek out texts that contain relevant themes that both challenge and engage students.

Providing Opportunities

When I taught *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho in my World Literature class in the fall of 2007, I had big hopes. I thought my students, many of whom are in their senior year and will soon be making their transitions into post-secondary life, would be able to relate well to the story. The narrator, Santiago, is a humble young shepherd whose journey in pursuit of his "personal legend" is inspiring and enlightening. While the setting and time period of the novel can be foreign and unrealistic to modern-day, urban students, the relevance of Santiago's story to their lives is powerful, as are the possibilities for opening their eyes to living their lives to their fullest capacities. Many of my students were seniors who were about to enter college or the workforce, so I felt the novel would be perfect for them to read at this pivotal time in their lives.

When teaching a novel for the first time with students, the results are never stellar, and I often consider abandoning a text after a failed first run. My first year teaching *The Alchemist* was no exception. I had about five students out of thirty-five who thoroughly connected with, understood, and enjoyed the novel. I had about ten more who made it about halfway to that point, demonstrating occasional displays of interest and mediocre results on the unit test. The remaining majority made just enough effort to "get through" the book. It was their day-to-day comments about the book that led me to believe they wouldn't be running out to a bookstore to pick up any of Paulo Coelho's other novels. Exclamations such as, "this book is boring," and "this

book ain't got nothin' to do with me," were all too common. I decided to teach the novel again in the fall of 2008, but I knew I had to make some major changes: I had to somehow provide the students with opportunities to apply the story and its themes to their lives in meaningful ways.

Fortunately, I had help with my second attempt at *The Alchemist*. In 2008, my school began a partnership with an organization called Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) to bring artists into classrooms to co-teach arts integrated units of study with classroom teachers. I was introduced to a brilliant video artist, Saya Hillman, who would work in my two World Literature classes twice per week for five weeks. We decided to create student-driven films based on the themes in the novel. Neither of us had done this before—she had never worked on a literature-based project with high school students; I had never attempted a project that involved this much creativity and risk.

Guiding Questions

Before we began our work together, Saya and I identified initial questions that we sought to answer in our work on the project. We identified questions that we could return to and reflect on after the completion of the project. Some of the questions included the following:

- *Engagement*: Many of my students have a very difficult time engaging in texts (especially fiction texts) that are seemingly foreign to their lives and cultural backgrounds. Will a video project help my students better understand and more easily connect with a piece of literature like *The Alchemist*, which is a fable written by a Brazilian author about a shepherd from Spain in search of a treasure?
- *Buy-in*: Will giving students a voice and choice in developing their own ideas for the project strengthen their learning experiences?
- *Participation*: Will all of the students want to participate in the production of the films?
- *Collaboration*: Will the students work collaboratively?
- *Understanding of Literary Elements*: Will creating films about or related to the novel

strengthen the students' understanding of literary elements?

- *Meeting the Needs of All Students*: Will the project be an appropriate challenge for all of my students—those who struggle academically, those who are functioning at grade level, and those who are functioning above grade level?

Inviting Students' Participation

We had ideas about what kinds of films we wanted the two classes to create, but instead of feeding those ideas to them or just giving them a format, we encouraged the students to decide. Before Saya began her work with the students, both classes had brainstorming sessions to develop ideas for the films. Both classes listed several ideas on the board and then voted to determine the format they would use for the project. One class decided that they wanted to interview each other, and possibly interview other students in the school, about their dreams and their paths to following those dreams. So their choice was a documentary. My other class, on the other hand, wanted to create something a little flashier. They decided that they wanted to portray an updated, "hip hop" version of *The Alchemist*. Once it was determined that we didn't have enough time to shoot a feature-length presentation, they settled on a movie trailer that would include the most important scenes in the novel.

As an introduction to Saya's work, and as a springboard to talk about the videos the two classes were going to make, we watched a variety of short films, from other student-produced works to movie trailers, from public service announcements to political videos. Students shared their likes and dislikes and discussed the types of choices made by the filmmakers. Since most students had not used video cameras before, we had a day of Video 101, where students played around with the cameras and learned new vocabulary like *pan*, *tilt*, *zoom*, *tripod*, and *cutaway*. To start outlining how they would shape their documentary, the documentary group discussed themes from the book that they could turn into interview questions to ask one another.

Identifying themes allowed students in both groups to find ways to connect the novel to their own lives and

to the lives of their audience (their fellow students)—they were very concerned about making their films interesting and relatable to other students in the school. Some of the themes the documentary group identified included: “Never give up, don’t be afraid of failure; try harder;” “Dreams make life worth living;” “Believe in what you want to achieve;” “Your heart drives you to do passionate things;” and “Challenges will make you stronger.” The identification of these themes helped the students to collaboratively develop interview questions such as “What dreams make your life worth living?” and “What inspires you in life?”

Learning the process professional filmmakers use deepened students’ engagement in the project.

The movie trailer group also pulled out themes that they thought should be highlighted and then made a chart of the important parts of the story, with the left column being what actually happened and the right column an updated version of the events. Some of the themes this group identified included: “Follow your dreams;” “Success doesn’t come easy;” “The biggest treasure is finding yourself;” “Stay focused even if it involves making sacrifices;” “Trust your intuition;” and “When you’re destined for something big, you’ll be tested.” The identification of the themes helped this group to develop their modern-day version of *The Alchemist* that would be shortened into a movie trailer. The students then learned how to create storyboards for their trailer, and each student chose a scene to draw out and complement with instructions for the director, i.e., “VWS of park,” which means, “very wide shot of park.” Learning the process professional filmmakers use deepened students’ engagement in the project.

The documentary group broke up into two groups for the bulk of shooting and shot at different neighborhood locations. Students rotated through roles, each taking turns being the interviewer, photographer, cameraman, and interviewee. Students in the movie trailer group chose who would play what role (actor or crew member) and then traveled to various parts of the school and neighborhood to shoot their scenes. After all the scenes were shot, the group

created a script for the voiceover.

After Saya and I informed the students that they would not be able to use copyrighted music if they wanted to post their videos online, both classes provided original music for their films. At that point, the students’ work on the film was almost complete. We didn’t have enough time to allow the students to edit their films, so Saya brought in clips of the film that the students had shot so that they could provide input during the editing. This activity gave students some insight into the editing process and allowed them to view some of the film before the finished products were shared with the audience.

About a month after we finished shooting, both classes were able to see their finished products in a school-wide assembly on the last day before the holiday break in December. Historically a low attendance day because many students often begin their vacations early, I was elated to see nearly all of my students’ faces in the audience. They were nervous and excited to see their work come to life. Before we screened the film, I awarded two of the students (one from each class) faux “Oscar” trophies for demonstration of leadership throughout the project. Brittany (all student names are pseudonyms), a bright student who was previously failing my class, was one of the “Oscar” recipients. At one point during the filming of the documentary, she took charge of the project and started to direct it. “This is what we’re going to do,” she started,

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and proceeded to instruct her peers on what they should be doing in the next shot and to explain what kind of effect it would have on the audience. I have to admit that I was a little nervous letting a student take over and direct her peers, but the students listened and respected her vision.

Another student, Chris, who was usually actively

participated in class discussions but often didn't complete his assignments, thrived in class during this project. It was his idea to create a movie trailer and, subsequently, many of his ideas provided the foundation for the modern-day story that was portrayed in the trailer. In the movie trailer, he played the role of the main character, Santiago, and it was very clear to everyone who saw his performance that he put his heart into the role. Leadership was an unintended outcome of this project. While these two students showed exceptional leadership, I witnessed all of my students stepping into leadership roles at various points throughout the project. I was amazed to see students who normally sulked in the back of the room providing ideas for interesting shots and camera angles.

Reflection on My Initial Questions

After the project came to a close, it was time for me to revisit my initial questions and determine the impact this project had on my students' learning. This process helped me to identify what specific aspects of the project impacted students most positively, and what, if anything, impacted the students' learning negatively.

- *Engagement:* I taught this book last year, with no video project. The difference between student engagement in the novel between last year and this year was astounding. We started the video project toward the end of the novel, and that's when I started to see the level of engagement increase dramatically. Students were challenged to understand the novel at deeper levels. In planning the video projects, the students had to sequence events, identify themes, analyze characters, and draw conclusions about the author's purpose. With a paper and pencil test given at the end of a novel, students may be asked questions about these aspects, and when they don't know the answers they just give up. With the video project, students desperately wanted to get it right, so they probed deeper into the novel to find answers and develop their own interpretations of the novel.
- *Buy-in:* The students were quite surprised to hear that they would be developing the ideas for the films from start to finish. I think the surprise was a result of the students' prior experiences in school—opportunities for student autonomy, choice, and creativity are scarce. I was thoroughly impressed with the thoughtful, creative ideas the students came up with. The students were motivated to see the project through to the finished product because they were proud to have their ideas represented.
- *Participation:* I had no problem getting students to participate. In fact, I saw the highest level of participation from my students that I've seen in five years working at Bronzeville. Frequently, I heard comments such as, "I love this class!" Students who missed school on video days were regretful upon returning to class the next day and hearing about the work that they had missed. Even students who struggled with attendance jumped right back into the project when they returned. There were no behavioral issues during the course of the project, and I don't remember having to issue one bathroom pass during any of the artist sessions; the students didn't want to miss what was happening.
- *Collaboration:* From my experience, many teachers who work with students who struggle academically and/or socially shy away from group work and collaborative projects; however, my students worked amazingly well together. There were some differences in opinion at times, but those issues were always resolved democratically, usually amongst the students. The students seemed to play on each other's strengths, even when weaknesses were evident. What I enjoyed seeing the most was when students who weren't likely to interact with each other in class did so when working on the films. After seeing their work on this film, I'm much more confident that my students (most of whom are graduating this year) are ready to function in a working environment

where they may have to interact with people they wouldn't normally interact with.

- *Understanding of Literary Elements:* While this was evident with some students more than with others, there were key concepts that I felt the students easily grasped through this project. One major concept that the students grasped well was *theme*. At the beginning of the unit, many students defined theme as “plot” or “the main idea.” Through this project, they learned that themes in a piece of literature are not just answers to the questions on a test: themes bring a story to life. The themes became chunks of meaning that they could relate to and apply to their lives. Once understood, the themes became a source of inspiration for many of them.
- *Meeting the Needs of All Students:* I was afraid that my struggling students would get frustrated because they couldn't work the equipment right, or my higher-level students would get bored. I was dead wrong with both of these worries. All students were able to not only function but to flourish. They were challenged and engaged because the project pushed students to keep thinking about how they could make it better, or more interesting, or more true to the novel. Students who struggled academically became more confident when they were able to experience success in filming, interviewing, or being in front of the camera. All students became leaders when they discovered their strengths and realized the power of their ideas.

Implications for Future Work

Many teens growing up in high-poverty environments have big dreams for their futures but often have a difficult time navigating the terrain necessary to fulfill them. Additionally, many of them feel that society places obstacles in their way instead of making it possible for them to succeed. After the students read *The Alchemist*, I knew that the story and themes in the novel would inspire them to think more positively about the futures ahead of them; they would realize that if

they don't let obstacles slow them down, they'll eventually achieve their goals. What I learned through this project was that traditional teaching strategies often don't require students to interact intimately with texts. This project did just that, and it allowed my students to express themselves in a familiar, relevant format.

Teachers in all classrooms, regardless of the socioeconomic status of their students, should seek ways to challenge their students to apply aspects of the literature they read to their own lives and to engage students in texts that are critical to their understanding of the world around them. Students should not only be able to apply their understanding of texts to their own lives; they should be able to apply their lives to the text. When students realize that their lives and experiences can play an important role in a classroom, magical things will occur.

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About the Author

Melissa Fleming (melissa_fleming2@yahoo.com) is the Lead Teacher at Bronzeville High School in Chicago, where she teaches World Literature. She received her BA in English and American Language and Literature from Eastern Michigan University and her MS in Instruction from Northeastern Illinois University. This is her sixth year of teaching.