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Star Books Café: An Invitation to Dine in an English Language Arts Setting

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“I think I’ll order an espresso. While I was reading, I made several text-to-self connections...” I listen with curious ears to my student ordering off her menu as I move around and offer more refreshments to students. I feel like I am back in college, busily waiting tables and listening to the conversations of happy customers. However, I am no longer serving small-town locals at *Clem’s* in Kearney, Missouri; I am celebrating reading with my fifth grade students at Star Books Café.

I have always loved celebrations. When I became a teacher, I found many reasons to rejoice. My students and I celebrate birthdays with “magic fairy dust” (glitter confetti), we commemorate March is Reading Month with songs and Dr. Seuss stories, and most importantly, we celebrate book club reading by gathering at our favorite hang-out, Star Books Café, at least once a month.

Having learned from mentor writers/teachers like Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell in their book *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3-6*, I use guided reading strategies in my classroom. My district also asks that I teach specific genres and use leveled texts. I accomplish this by creating new book clubs about once a month in which groups of four or five students read a common text and meet with me on a scheduled basis for conversations about that particular book. During book club sessions, I share mini-lessons, monitor comprehension while taking anecdotal notes about our dialogue, and I confer with students one-on-one to monitor fluency while the rest of the group silently reads a passage. I also meet with the entire class as a large group several times through the month to teach the

comprehension strategies found in Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis’ book *Strategies That Work*.

My students and I enjoy diving into books together and discussing how they affect our feelings and ideas. We become so close to texts and their authors that sometimes it feels like we are discussing the work of a beloved relative or a next-door neighbor.

Two years ago, as we ended book clubs around *Morning Girl*, *Sign of the Beaver*, and *What’s the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?*, I sensed that we all felt like we were leaving good friends without proper goodbyes. My students had created projects to reflect their learning from the texts, and as usual, we were getting ready to present the projects and move on to new books. However, at a time when we should have been celebrating our learning, the enthusiasm I had witnessed during book club meetings waned.

One night as I lay awake thinking about how to recharge my students’ verve, a solution came to me: Star Books Café! I thought about how my own friends and I enjoy getting together for coffee to discuss books we’ve read, our jobs, and our significant others. Knowing that my students respond well to learning experiences in which they are able to take on adult-like roles, I decided to try out the notion of having them engage in “coffee talk.”

The next morning, I issued an all-call to my students for coffee mugs. They were each to bring in one by Friday, along with their final presentations (which happened to be posters). I also called my room mother and alerted her that we would need some sort of breakfast food that might be found in a coffee house and asked whether she could find volunteers. I received an immediate response from a mother who wanted to send bagels and cream cheese. Perfect! I completed the refreshment line-up by purchasing our imaginary coffee: milk and orange juice.

Next, I created a sign to hang on our white board, complete with the name “Star Books Café and a hand-drawn coffee mug logo. I also drafted a menu that accompanied my plan for running my “business.” Each student would receive a published

menu with names of typical coffee house items. Under each item in lieu of a description would be a topic of conversation to help guide students in sharing with one another. A very helpful parent who was familiar with Microsoft Word Publisher created the final menu, made copies, and laminated each one for durability. We were nearly ready to open shop!

On the morning of the big day, I moved chairs together to face one another in several groups to accommodate four to five students each. I also created groups of students on paper, keeping in mind behaviors, personalities, and the book that each student had read. My main goal was to place at least one person from each book club in every group so that students would get to hear about the other books that had been read in class during the last month and be probed for information about their books by curious peers.

Students proudly showed me their mugs as I greeted them at the door that morning. Some brought their mothers' tea cups wrapped in hand towels or linen napkins, a few brought mugs with parents' work place logos, and others brought unique mugs with special sayings or those in the shape of a favorite character. I'll never forget one boy who excitedly said, "I didn't forget my mug, Mrs. Autrey! This is Data from Star Trek." He then proceeded to tell me details about the vacation during which he had purchased the souvenir. I couldn't get him to take that mug home all year: "I want to be ready for the next Star Books!" he claimed. In the meantime, he would use the ceramic cup to hold pencils, pens, and bookmarks.

Anxious fifth graders shared lots of animated whispers I asked them to move into assigned groups with their posters, book club books, and reading response journals. The intensity of their excitement surged when I passed out menus. "What is a cappuccino?" or "What's a latte?" a few of them asked. So began my introduction to the activity and a conversation about how adults act in real coffee shop settings. Several students were eager to talk about various coffee-inspired places they had been to: "Starbuck's," "Beaner's," and Grand Ledge's "Perk Up." I was glad there were enough

knowledgeable students to describe their café experiences to kids who had not previously encountered a caffeine purveyor.

After I felt we had built sufficient background knowledge, I referred my students to our lesson from earlier in the year, "How to Buzz With Each Other" (Fountas and Pinnell 148). I displayed our chart, "How to Buzz Effectively," that we had created during the first week of school. This chart reminded us of how we could "listen to each other and share effectively as partners or in small groups" (143). We practiced "buzzing" a few times, just as we had when I originally introduced the lesson. This activity reinforced essential behaviors for engaging in a small group, like remembering to take turns talking and to share thoughts or questions each time a speaker is finished (148).

The rest of the troops—my principal, one of our secretaries, a teacher's assistant, and a parent volunteer—arrived, and we were ready to begin official coffee talk! My teacher's assistant and I began "serving" students orange juice and milk (depending on students' orders) and fresh bagels with cold cream cheese. Meanwhile, the other adults each found a group to join and assist in keeping the groups a-buzz.

Students took turns within their lively groups "ordering" topics and sharing. Their menus incorporated making connections, the comprehension strategy we had worked on that month. For example, if a student ordered a latte, then she was to tell what text-text connections she had made during her reading. Other menu items encouraged students to analyze the elements and style of their texts, discuss their authors' messages, and employ conversations about many other language arts curriculum-related characteristics. Students were encouraged to refer to their posters, reading notebooks, and "tracks" they had left on sticky notes throughout their texts to support their responses to menu items.

I was both pleased and surprised as I eavesdropped on my fifth grade diners. While the refreshments were motivators in this activity, I did not see any students excessively focusing on their

treats or going overboard in pretending that their mugs were full of coffee. For the most part, students collaborated well and stayed on track throughout their Star Books stay. I was extremely pleased to see them supporting their thoughts with evidence found in posters, notebooks, and texts. I also felt affirmed to hear them use our book club language, words like “I inferred” or “I think the author’s purpose was...” with one another.

The biggest surprise that resulted from this activity was students’ immediate motivation to read texts that had been described to them by students from other book clubs. In essence, students were selling one another on quality texts that I had chosen for book clubs in the interest of curriculum! Moreover, this continues to occur every time I hold a Star Books session. For example, last year I had one of my book clubs read *House on Hackman’s Hill* by Joan Lowery-Nixon. After that particular group of students described their experiences with this text during Star Books Café, I continuously lent out all of my ten copies of the text for the rest of the year to kids who had not read it as an assignment. In addition, several students liked Lowery-Nixon’s work so much that they checked out copies of her other books from the local library and brought them to class to share with their peers.

What began as an alternative to a typical book club wrap-up lead to a valuable tradition in which we dedicate an hour each month to celebrating our learning. Yet Star Books Café enables students to do so much more than celebrate and pretend to drink coffee. These coffee house diners are intrinsically motivated to step inside English Language Arts content standards and engage in the discourse of benchmarks that will make them stronger readers, writers, and ultimately, learners. In addition, as my students and I heed to the revised Michigan standards for grades K-12 this fall that now include listening, viewing, and speaking, we will be a confident learning community knowing that we have Star Books Café to continue to grow in these areas.

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About the Author:

Tara Autrey is a 2004 Red Cedar Writing Project fellow and a 5th grade teacher at Greenwood Elementary in Grand Ledge. She is currently participating in a Michigan State University research project titled “Digital Portfolios as a Space for Inquiry.”