1997

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Recommended Citation

Leonard, Carol T. (1997) "Designing an Evaluation to Promote Student Learning," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1448>

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Designing An Evaluation To Promote Student Learning

Carol T. Leonard

I wanted to develop a reading assessment for the book, *Friedrich*, by Hans Peter Richter that would allow my eighth grade students to demonstrate their knowledge of how the policies and laws implemented by the Nazis created moral dilemmas for the citizens of once-democratic Germany. As a teacher my question was—how do I develop a testing instrument that allows individual interpretations of the text to manifest themselves while tapping the different learning styles contained within the classroom?

At the time of the assessment I was reading Adrienne Kennedy's autobiography, *People Who Led To My Plays*. The book is written in the form of an annotated scrapbook. In the work Kennedy discusses the people, places, objects, films, songs, composers, and cultures that led to the creation of her characters. In one section of the text she has included an entry entitled, "Hitler." In the entry she writes with specificity about the ways that Hitler affected her life and the lives of her family and friends in Cleveland, Ohio. Kennedy expresses her fear that Hitler would come to her home in America.

Writing in the *Kenyon Review*, Elin Diamond comments upon Kennedy's work in "Rethinking Identification: Kennedy, Freud, and Brecht." Diamond argues, "her [Kennedy's] ability to weave identification, history, psyche, and the social suggests that identifications have histories and thus permit access to subjective, cultural, and

political readings" (87 Diamond). I wondered what identifications my students made with the character Friedrich. How well did they understand the historic, social, and political readings of the text?

Friedrich is a book about a friendship between two young German boys. The main characters in *Friedrich* are Friedrich—a German, Jewish boy—and his best friend simply known as the narrator—a German, Christian boy. As Hitler passed more and more restrictive laws, their relationship changed. The economic conditions faced by the narrator and his family are similar to those faced by thousands of German families before and during Hitler's reign. At the conclusion of the book the narrator's family must live with the deaths of Friedrich and his family because they refused to act to prevent them for fear of their own safety.

Connecting the Learning

I adopted the idea of creating an annotated scrapbook as a valid way to assess student reading. I crafted the assignment by describing the purpose of a scrapbook and discussing the kinds of entries and objects which are contained within it. With the advent of the video-camcorder, many of my students no longer keep scrapbooks to record their memories but instead film them. It seemed necessary to build a firm understanding of the form if the assessment was to succeed.

I photocopied what I considered to be several key entries in Kennedy's text. Together the students and I read the entries. We closely examined the entry about Hitler. We noted the types of things that Kennedy commented upon. We looked at the picture she included with the text and discussed where students could go to find images of World War II in Germany. Students also had the option of drawing their own illustrations. We talked about how Kennedy divided her life into sections. We examined the index to each section and wondered why only some of the entries were included in the index.

The assessment asked students to prepare their scrapbooks from one of three specific narrative stances—two being those of the narrator or Friedrich. The students could also write from the third person omniscient point of view if they wished to comment upon the thoughts and actions of multiple characters and the social policies of the time. The third person omniscient narrative stance created more opportunities to graphically represent their questions, observations, and comments about all facets of the text, but it was the most difficult narrative stance for students to develop.

Students Facilitate Their Learning

In the early classroom discussions students puzzled over what kinds of things they would have to include to create empathy for their character. Students discussed the clothing, colors, and symbols worn by Germans, Nazis, and Jewish-Germans. They wanted their books to be historically accurate. Students knew that they would have to combine quotations, symbols, color, and commentary to give shape to their ideas.

I divided the text into what seemed to be three logical historic divisions. Each division corresponded to a week of assigned reading. Within the student packet I included a rubric that detailed the categories for grading and specified the characteristics of each category. Depending upon the amount of time the teacher can devote to the project, I would suggest having students develop the rubric. In class I assigned the due date for the first section of the scrapbook and the index. At this time I introduced the last section of the

assignment that required students to write an essay that reflected how they went about making their choices of what to include and what to exclude in the book and why they made those choices.

On the assigned day students brought the first section of their work to class and shared them with one another. They discussed why they chose to create their projects as they did. Students commented upon how they wanted the readers to feel while reading their books. These discussions gave other students ideas. Many students spontaneously revised their first attempts. Students who did not complete their work were also included in the discussion. We followed this procedure for every section of the scrapbook.

Other discussions revolved around how to make the books authentic. Since their books would be at least fifty years old, many students stained their pages to give them an antique look. Some students burned the edges of the pages to suggest the fires of the Holocaust. The students who assumed Friedrich's narrative stance discussed how they could conclude their writing since Friedrich died and could not possibly comment upon his own death. In addition, students discussed where his scrapbook could be found and whether or not another character should complete the final entry of the book.

After the final section of the scrapbook was complete, we specifically discussed how to create a written record of the choices students made while creating their books. What people, places, events, ideas, and objects did they choose to include in their work and why? What things did they choose to omit and why? In their essays students were to give specific reasons for their choices.

Learning Continues for the Teacher and the Students

On the day that the scrapbooks were due, students were invited to form small groups with other members of their class. Students talked excitedly about their projects. They frequently reformed their groups to share with other members of the class. Finally, I asked students to return to their seats to write a letter about what

they liked and what they disliked about the project. They were asked to include any comments for improving the project next year. Most of the improvement comments focused upon the reflective essay. Many students felt that it would be easier to comment upon their thinking on the back of each page that they created rather than comment in a formal essay.

While reading the essays I was amazed by the variety of comments made by my eighth grade readers. They discussed their anger and sadness over the events in Germany during World War II. They commented upon the reverence Friedrich felt for his religion. They commented about the power of stereotypes when supported by the power and authority of government. They discussed how Nazis, who regarded themselves as superior people, were really inferior to those people they persecuted. They wondered how the course of history would have changed if Hitler were not such a failure in his personal life. They rallied to the support of Germans who did not accept Hitler's views. They noted how economic conditions influenced political events. They praised those people who found ways to help their Jewish friends. They noted the corrupting power of wanting to belong to a group and be like everyone else. They also noted the huge risks that Friedrich took to be like other teenagers.

In their letters students noted how the project enabled them to express their thoughts more easily through the eyes of the character. The project allowed them to think more than they would have to answer test questions. One student commented, "Plus with being able to draw and think of neat ideas for symbols and representations, (it) makes it a lot easier to work than if it was all writing." Another student wrote, "This was really fun to do. I loved finding and creating the pictures. I enjoyed being the narrator, . . . I think I learned much better this way." Students commented that they loved writing "things" that they thought Friedrich would have written. One boy commented, "Generally, I think that this project

was a great, compact way to express thoughts about Friedrich." An unusually high percentage of students completed this project. Most students said that they continued to learn throughout the process of creating the scrapbook. They were proud of their work.

Other Applications

While I used this evaluation format to assess student reading of a historical fiction novel, this instrument of assessment has many literary and historical applications. Each book has its own history and set of social circumstances within which the characters must react.

Many of these projects were of superior quality. Each scrapbook represented the student's unique identifications with the character. I found it amazing how the scrapbooks represented the myriad of ways that students read and reflected upon what they found to be significant in a text. No two projects were alike.

With modifications this assignment would be a successful evaluation tool for both younger and older readers.

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About the Author

Carol Leonard formerly conducted reading and writing workshops at Plymouth Community Intermediate School. She currently teaches literature and writing at Plymouth South Intermediate School, Plymouth, MA.