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Characters in the Classroom

Jennifer Ochoa

Recently Kevin Avery and Maxwell Kane transferred into my ninth grade classroom. Those of you who are familiar with Rodman Philbrick's excellent novel, *Freak the Mighty*, may be acquainted with Kevin and Max. They are the main characters of Philbrick's novel and they really are new students in my classroom. They join my class roster along with Jonas, from Lois Lowery's, *The Giver*, Charlotte Doyle, from Avi's, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, and a host of other characters we have read about this year. Soon, my students will welcome Angus Bethune, from Chris Crutcher's story, "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune," as the new student.

The Importance of Relating to Characters

One of the ways that I have found to engage the students I teach in the literature, especially those who consider themselves non-readers, is through intensive work with the characters. When the readers I teach find themselves in the middle of a friendship with a character, they are much more excited about "hurrying-up and reading so we can find out what happens." One of my major teaching goals and biggest challenges is to get kids not only to think of themselves as readers but also to help them start to make reading a lifelong habit. Helping students engage on a personal level with the characters they meet in my class is

one way I began to reach the goal and overcome the challenge.

Jeff Wilhelm's "*You Gotta BE the Book*" was instrumental in helping me figure out how to begin to engage students in reading and how to help students become lifelong readers. As part of this work Wilhelm describes ten dimensions of reader response which includes "Relating to Characters." In this dimension, readers become "a presence in the story" themselves and often make contact with the different characters. Reading his book helped me know that I am on the right track in involving my students in reading by getting them involved with the characters.

In addition to helping students "get into reading," work with characters serves several other purposes. First, as I said, it helps students "get into" the reading that we are doing. Secondly, working with fourteen and fifteen-year olds, it is easy to see that developmentally, their biggest concern is how they personally fit into any given situation. I firmly believe, as their teacher, it is my job to help them begin to mature and move beyond themselves and to become more empathetic of other people and their situations. Meeting characters is a really good way for them to develop this empathy. Also, becoming acquainted with characters is helpful in getting students to connect with the literature in a more personal way. When we begin to talk about all of the things a character says and does and thinks

and feels, students begin to see the similarities between these fictional people and themselves. Students often talk or write about how they have been through the same situations as the characters we read about. This gives students validation for their feelings and responses to a world that is often confusing for them. Lastly, when reading about a variety of characters from different time periods, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels, the students develop a broader world-view, a skill they sometimes have trouble developing within their limited realm of experiences.

Journal Writing

I have several strategies that I use to help the kids tap into the stories through the characters. The simplest way to get kids to enter characters' lives is to ask the students to imagine they are in situations similar to the characters, or to recall a time in their own lives when they encountered the same feelings, thoughts, or scenarios. I usually do this by using a journal topic or short, directed timed writing.

Writing Invitations

If I want the students to become involved by walking in the characters' shoes, I pose questions in the form of a "writing invitation." Writing invitations are short pieces of writing, perhaps one to two pages, that my students complete once or twice per week. Since the purpose of writing invitations is, quite simply, to get kids writing, I grade them solely on content. In a writing invitation, students do not need to feel hampered by mechanical devices they may not understand or have not yet mastered. We use their writing invitation "mistakes in mechanics" to work on grammatical correctness together on the overhead a few times a week. Because students feel really comfortable responding to writing invitations, they are often much more authentic in their identification with characters.

When designing writing invitations for kids to respond to, I try to think of ways to bring my students' lives and societies closer to those of the characters we are reading about. One book my students got very involved in was *The Giver*, a

young adult novel about a pseudo-utopian society in which the people are completely safe from any of the negative aspects of our world. They are however completely controlled by the absence of any knowledge beyond their present lives in the community, including awareness of basic human feelings and emotions. Jonas, the main character, is chosen to be the new "Receiver of Memory," and finds out about history, real feelings, and emotions. He realizes the exceptional harm the community's system creates for its citizens, and the danger that lack of real knowledge holds. My students felt strongly about him and what he ended up doing in the novel. When they were finished with the novel they were asked to respond to this writing invitation: "If you were a parent, which society would you rather raise your child in—Jonas' society from *The Giver* or Lafayette's society from "There Are no Children Here" (a movie we watched in juxtaposition to *The Giver*. It chronicles Lafayette's adolescence trying to grow up in the present-day projects of the south side of Chicago). Students knew the downfalls of living in Jonas' community but they also clearly saw the perils in trying to raise a child in a community like Lafayette's which was riddled with violence and poverty. One student wrote:

I would not want to live in Jonas' community because I would feel smothered there. The reason I picked the poorer and worse off society is because, to me, when you go through the worst of things, you know the value of your life.

Another student who has cerebral palsy replied to the question like this:

I don't want to die. If I lived in either society I would have been killed. I would have been killed because I am different. I have a physical disability. It is not right to kill someone because they are different. Everyone deserves a fair chance at life. People don't understand differences so they get scared and treat them badly.

Both of these students skipped right by the issue of raising children and immediately discussed how they would be affected by living in either society. Many students, in responding to this question, did write in terms of being a parent, and surprisingly, not all students vetoed Jonas'

community. Several students, especially those who live in the rougher neighborhoods of our own city, wanted to live and raise children where Jonas lived because the issue of safety was more important to them than being able to make choices on their own. As one student said:

If I was a parent, I would want a place where I know my children would be safe and would never starve, a place that if my children was to go outside and play that I would know that they would be safe. That's Jonas' community.

This writing invitation caused students to delve deeply into how they would feel living someplace drastically different from Lansing, MI. It connected their lives to the book, by placing them in that lifestyle.

In another recent writing invitation, when we began to read *Freak the Mighty*, I asked kids what they would tell Freak and Max about survival at our school if they transferred to it. Their responses were funny and very authentic. They talked about the "wonderful ninth grade English teachers" (an obvious ploy to win my affections), the horrible cafeteria food, and what kinds of kids the characters would find to hang out with. A few offered their own friendship, one student even wrote, "You guys can sit with me and my friends at lunch because sometimes it's hard to find a seat, our cafeteria is small." With this writing invitation, instead of placing the kids into the characters' worlds, I asked them to place the characters into their world. From that point on, kids talked about these two characters as if they DID go to our school. After seeing the characters as students like themselves, it was easy for my students to relate to Max and Freak and they were eager to hear more of their story.

Letter Writing

In addition to writing invitations, I get kids to connect to characters through the use of letter writing. My students are frequently asked to write letters to characters in the books we read. The letters are usually written from student to character. We work on empathy with this strategy since students have to understand something about how the character feels before they can

write meaningful letters. Also, letters are written from character to character, a strategy which helps students understand different points of view.

At the end of *Freak the Mighty*, Kevin dies, leaving his best friend Max behind to deal with the grief and to tell the story of their friendship. In my classroom, students were appalled by this ending, some actually crying as we read the last chapters. In response to this tragic turn of events, I asked students to write a letter of condolence to Max and to give him advice for dealing with the pain of losing someone they love. Their letters were heartfelt and beautiful. Many students related stories from their own lives when they had lost someone through death. One student, who was never moved to write anything before this, and who was usually a very angry young man wrote this:

Dear Max,

I'm sorry about what happened to your friend. I know that you might not want to talk to anyone right now, but I can help you get over his death. Slowly, but surely. You can start going to this place called Ele's Place (an organization in our community for grieving children and teenagers).

At Ele's Place there's also a lot of people that went through the same thing that you are going through now, death. It will help you out a lot cause I went there for about 3 1/2 years and it helped me out."

After writing this letter, this student told everyone how death had affected him. His father had died when he was seven and his grandfather, who had taken over a fatherly role in his life, had passed away when he was 13. Later in the year when we had two students lose a close friend to a violent drug-related death, the student who wrote the letter became their "grief expert." He referred these students to Ele's Place and told them what to expect when they went there. Without this letter writing assignment, he never would have talked about his own losses and would never have been able to feel free to share his experiences at Ele's Place with the other grieving students.

Other letters students have been asked to write were in response to *The True Confession of*

Charlotte Doyle, by Avi. In this book set in the 1830s, Charlotte, a prim and proper 13-year old girl, has to travel by ship on her own from England to the United States to join her family. The ship she is on is the site of a murder and a mutiny. Charlotte quickly learns she must abandon her proper ways in order to survive as the only female and only person from her class on the ship.

I asked students to write letters from Charlotte Doyle to her parents asking them to rescue her from the ship she was stuck on and then from her parents to Charlotte at the end of the book imploring her to come home and give up life on the ship. These letters helped students take a look at different perspectives and also helped students realize the differences in the lifestyles of the 1830s and the lifestyles of today.

Students also wrote letters to Jonas from someone who was left behind in the community after he escapes to find a better life at the end of the book. The letters were supposed to talk about what happened to the community, and more specifically, that letter writer, after Jonas' departure. The letters were then turned into monologues that students later turned into a play with several characters joining their voices to share what their community had become without Jonas.

Letter writing was a writing activity that students really enjoyed, perhaps because they are so familiar with the genre and often write letters/notes to their own friends. Students would frequently ask if they could turn another writing assignment into a letter and sometimes addressed their work to me in letter form, starting a journal entry, or writing invitation "Dear Ms. Ochoa."

Dialogue Writing

Having students talk to characters through dialogue writing is another way to acquaint students and characters. Sometimes, I ask students to write dialogues between different characters which helps them define and realize varying perspectives. Other times, I ask students to write dialogues between themselves and characters. In one assignment, I asked students to write a dialogue between themselves, Jonas, and Lafayette. The purpose of the dialogue was to convince the other two participants that the

student's community was the best one to live in (this assignment was a precursor to the writing invitation in which students had to pick a society to raise children).

These dialogues accomplished several things. First, they helped students define the strengths and weaknesses of each community more clearly. Second, it helped them see that someone else might think that where they lived was the best place to grow-up, thus broadening their world views. Third, it helped students connect the very different texts we were experiencing with each other. They were asked to write in the style and voice of the characters they used in the dialogue. They did an excellent job maintaining Jonas' precise language and developing an exaggerated street slang for Lafayette. These dialogues allowed students to become the characters themselves, therefore helping them enter the story world completely.

One of the reasons my students like dialogue writing so well is that it also allows them to move the characters around in ways they feel should have been included in the actual story. For instance, at the end of *Freak the Mighty*, Max does not attend Freak's funeral because his grief is too great. Because the story is told from Max's point of view, we don't know what happened at the funeral. This was very disconcerting for the students. First, they were appalled that Max didn't go to the funeral to pay his respects. But also, they felt Max should have been a speaker at the funeral in order to tell everyone about his great friendship with Freak and to tell everyone what a great person Freak was. Writing the dialogues that could have taken place at the funeral helped students fill in the gaps the author had left and allowed them to have Max say the things they thought he should have said. These dialogues helped the students mold the story to fit their own experiences and wishes.

Diaries and Talk

Other strategies I use that help students interact with the characters are diary writing from the character's perspective and general talk in class about "what would you do if you were..." For example, as we read the novels, students make

diary entries as if they were the character and react to what is happening to the character. This helps them think like the character from the character's perspective. Also when we talk in class students discuss how they would have handled a situation if they had been a character in the book. Would they have mouthed off to Tony the way Kevin did? Would they have escaped from the community like Jonas did? Would they have defied their family like Charlotte did?

Characters as Friends

Every time we begin a book or story, I begin to figure out ways to help my students meet the characters. I know that this will enhance their engagement with the story. I know that when they meet a character, it is my job to help them meet a friend. And I know that meeting new friends in the pages of a book is one of the greatest pleasures and perks of being a lifelong reader.

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