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# Teaching Teachers

Pamela Waterbury

## *Library Fair Night: A Thematic Unit Celebrating the Magic of Books*

**J**une 1997, one month after the semester has ended. Six project notebooks out of twenty-six remain in a box outside my Aquinas College office from the spring semester of Youth Literature. I have no doubt that at least three of the six will be picked up fall semester when students come back to campus. I'm delighted that I've finally hit on a final project that means enough to my students that they come back to collect their work. Too many semesters, I've returned to my office to discover the

box for completed projects, papers, and notebooks—even for English Education classes—overflowing.

The Thematic Unit Library Fair works not only for my students but for me as well. It captures the essence of the semester-long study of young adult literature we've embarked on and culminates in a celebration of their work on Library Fair Night. Each student decorates and sets up a booth (a table with a backdrop, usually a three-sided poster board) which advertises the thematic unit he or she has researched and developed. The tables are covered with memorabilia connected to the theme and the books used in the unit. Notebooks containing theoretic explanations and practical and detailed teaching activities and lessons, including student models of the assignments, are available for review by fellow students and interested visitors. Copies of annotated thematic bibliographies are also arranged on the table for students to pick up as they wander through the fair booths. The aesthetics of the booth itself depend on the students' creativity and willingness to experiment artistically; however, the guidelines for the unit and the lessons are clearly designed and emerge out of the work done throughout the semester.

At the end of the semester on Library Fair Night, I've come to expect the unexpected: Vietnam anti-war music blaring from one booth, Southern fried chicken cooking in a fry pan in

another, a three-foot oil painting of the ship featured in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, and a vine-rimmed wooden backdrop with detachable shelves for displaying books advertises the theme of Conservation. A carnival with all its wonders invites me to celebrate good literature.

### ***Background to the Project***

Aquinas College is a small college, and Library Fair Night is no secret among education students. I'm no longer surprised when students nod their heads knowingly or exchange meaningful glances with each other during the first class when I discuss the syllabus and announce the Library Fair Project. A mixture of fear and excitement is written on their faces as they realize at least one aspect of Youth Literature hasn't changed since last semester. Over the four years I've been teaching Youth Literature, my students and I have developed a course that culminates in the Library Fair Project. At the end of each semester, as I read their final reflections about what worked and didn't work in the project, I design my new semester incorporating many of their suggestions. Thus, the Library Fair Project has evolved through a process of collaborative learning involving a succession of classes.

I believe it is critical for my students to be readers before they can be teachers of readers.

Consequently, the first half of the semester is designed to spark or rekindle the joy of reading in college students who have been reading primarily for information for tests, research papers, or analytical literary papers. At first, I believed this response aspect of the course would merely reintroduce students to remembered pleasures of reading. Unfortunately, few of my students spent summer afternoons curled up in hidden spots reading or read with flashlights under the bed covers long into the night as I had. Many of my students are the “alliterates”—students who are capable of reading but don’t. They are the products of English classes where they’ve had a steady “classics” diet followed by tests or analytical papers or exposure to “safe” anthologies followed by short-answer questions or trivial worksheets. They’ve learned to be successful at parroting back what their teachers have said the critics have said about literature that meant little to them as sixteen-year-olds. I knew that if my students didn’t experience something different in my class, they would only pass on to their students the same arid experience their secondary teachers had provided for them. Knowing that only passionate readers create readers, I needed to create a course that produced readers first and then trained them in how to inspire and teach readers. I needed to create a course where students would describe staying up all night to finish *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* or begin arguing with classmates about Sgt. Locke’s change or lack of change in *The Crossing* or laugh aloud at Celine’s adolescent angst and antics in *Celine*.

So in Youth Literature we curl up, surrounded by books before we put on our teacher hats and pick up our chalk and red pens. As a class, in small groups, and as individuals we begin our reading journeys reading novels by young adult authors like Gary Paulsen, Cynthia Voigt, Katherine Paterson, Chris Crutcher, and Mildred Taylor. We respond to the literature in informal journals, discussions, role plays, and art projects. Occasionally an adventuresome student might write a rap song or ballad. Students work at becoming better readers, better responders to their reading, and better articulators of that response. For the mid-term project, students create

file boxes of independent reading, present a book talk to the class, and write a book review to publish for freshman students enrolled in the reading lab (a support course for the first-year writing course at Aquinas College).

The mid-term project directly feeds into the final thematic unit by providing exposure to the vast array of young adult literature authors and themes from which students can develop their projects. As they listen to book talks, they keep a list of books that fit into the theme they’ve chosen for the Library Fair Project.

### **Launching the Project**

The Library Fair Project is formally “kicked off” the first week after mid-term projects are completed: guidelines to the library fair are distributed, and students from the previous semester return to share their projects with the class. Last semester, students shared units on Finding a Place in the World using *The Mid-Wife’s Apprentice* as a focus novel. *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli provided the focus book for the themes of the Holocaust, Overcoming the Odds, Celebrating Diversity, and Ordinary People and Extraordinary Lives. Their excitement, creativity, and practical suggestions for approaching the project do much to allay the fear of my current students and pique their enthusiasm about the creativity involved in unit planning. Their booths inspire my students to bigger and better productions.

In this initial class session, we carefully walk through the notebook requirements for the project. Once the ground work for the project is firmly established, my exhortation to them as they leave the room goes something like this:

- Create a unit that inspires you to read.
- Create a unit you want to experience as a student or have your children experience.
- Create a unit you passionately want to teach.
- Create a unit that entices students to write, talk, create, and read even more.
- Create a unit display that invites students to stop and sign up for your mini-session of Youth Literature.

It is at this point in the semester that students leave the room mentally wearing their teacher uniforms.

Students then submit a written project proposal which identifies their audience for the unit, the theme, and a possible focus book and further outside reading possibilities. I cancel one session of class to conference individually with students for fifteen minutes. While they wait outside my office—the meetings frequently take longer—they leaf through past students' notebooks I have available. During the conference, we might focus on finding a theme more suited to their interests or more appropriate for their intended audience, or students may need help in selecting a richer focus book for the unit. My job at this conference is to help students connect their reading passions to their professional interests. For the students with an artistic bent, I need only cheer them on, urging them to "have fun and be creative." For students intimidated by the arts and crafts aspect of the project, I need to reassure them "bulletin boards" skills don't make a meaningful unit. Most of all at this point in the project, I'm validating their excitement about literature and encouraging them to be creative in expressing that enthusiasm. Most students leave my office with hands filled with young adult novels and heads filled with new ideas for locating other resources. They are swimming with unit possibilities.

While students are researching their projects, I model each aspect of the notebooks' requirements using the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee as a focus book (the whole class novel). The project requires them to develop lessons around a whole class book rather than independent or group reading books because as beginning teachers they need to know how to successfully teach a novel to a whole class. Expressive and analytical writing assignments, worksheet and learning log assignments, discussion topics, and creative project ideas are provided for the novel as examples. As a class, we test out their effectiveness and develop criteria for successful assignments. Students continue to practice designing assignments for the novels we read through the end of the semester. The specific comments they receive on the quality of their assignments

from me and their classmates give them an opportunity to hone their assignment-making skills.

### **The Project Notebook**

The actual project notebook is comprised of the following: 1) a theoretical and philosophical discussion of the theme and focus book's appropriateness for the intended student audience; 2) a listing of goals and objectives for the unit; 3) an overview of the unit; 4) the lessons designed around the focus book; 5) the models for two writing assignments and an example of a creative project; and 6) the annotated bibliography handout for other students and any additional bibliographic information.

- Parts 1 and 2 of the project require the students to draw from the text materials and handouts used in the first half of the class; they link reading they have done by Carlsen, Rosenblatt, Purvis, and other experts in the field to the pedagogical ideas they are developing for their students.
- The goals and objectives for the unit are identified in Part 2. In this section students need to be reminded to include skill goals as well as content goals. Often, they are so fascinated by the ideas of the unit (*The Cry for Freedom* in the Civil Rights Movement) they forget their primary purpose as language arts teachers is to have students developing reading, writing, and discussion skills, not just mastering information.

In Part 3, students provide an overview of the unit by describing the prereading activities they would use to draw their students into the theme and focus novel and the post-reading activities they would use to culminate the unit. In this section, they describe how the additional reading will be used: as independent reading or group work. They are not expected to create day-to-day lesson plans. Few of them have had enough concrete experience in the classroom to realistically pace a unit. Besides, I know from my own experiences in an urban high school in Lansing, Michigan and a suburban high school in Melrose, Massachusetts, and even at Aquinas College where I'm familiar with the student culture, how difficult

it is to realistically map out a unit until I live with my students and their work for a few weeks.

In Part 4 of the project, students develop their own activities for the focus book: vocabulary lessons, discussion topics, worksheet questions or learning log prompts, expressive writing assignments, analytical writing assignments, and creative projects for the focus book and outside reading required of students. It is vital that future teachers realize how much more effective their lessons are than generic lessons developed by publishing companies.

A model (an example they've written themselves) for one of the expressive and one of the analytical writing assignments and a sample creative project is required in Part 5. I ask them to model an assignment because I firmly believe students need models to help them understand what is expected of them in assignments. Further, too often teachers design assignments that don't work because they never test them out first.

Finally, in Part 6 students create a handout for their classmates of a one- or two-page annotated bibliography of approximately six novels, short stories, poems, or plays on the same theme that could be used as additional reading for students, individually or in small groups.

### **The End Result**

The Library Fair is a project that intrigues most students and inspires many to become passionately involved with some aspect of the project. Even those students who don't excel on academic papers shine when they present their projects. One student who complained vociferously about the amount of work required for the course was calling the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C. and the Holocaust Memorial Center in West Bloomfield to find out the most current materials for her project on the Holocaust and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Each time she returns to present her project to my class, she has added new reading material and memorabilia for the display. Another student created interactive visual windows on a display board she had built for her unit on Choice Making using *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* as the focus book. To advertise the theme of Coming Home, another student

superimposed colored copies of the book jackets on symbols for each of the novels: a painted tree was the background for *Walk Two Moons* and a crown shadows the cover of *The Whipping Boy*. Found objects for each of the survival symbols in a Stories of Survival unit highlighted the tabletop of another student's booth. In a unit on Creating is Everything You Do: Make Something, the backdrop was filled with painted symbols of creativity for each of the novels: an essay for *The Outsiders*; a record for *The Jazz Kid*; a painting for *Celine*; and dried wild flowers behind a picket fence in a garden scene for *The Color Purple*.

While students groan about the amount of work the Library Fair entails, almost all acknowledge its worth for them as readers and more importantly as future teachers. "The Library Fair project most of all taught me I was capable of finding the wealth of resources out in my community—books, music, other teachers, art" says a student who created a collage of diverse American music to use as background material for her booth.

Another student tells me, "This project is different than other lesson plans I've done for education classes because it taught me to put it all together. It taught me to think more richly about the unit. Before this project I only thought in terms of teaching novels. Now I realize that for some students it's the short stories, plays, and poetry that brings the unit together. Besides I read all that?" she says with a hint of surprise in her voice.

"It's the student models that you required us to do that makes this project unique and more meaningful than the other units I'm asked to do," acknowledges a student with previous teaching experience.

Another student claims, "This is a project I can actually use in my classroom. I envision my students doing it."

My belief in the "real" world-beyond-the-walls-of-Aquinas-College value of this project was realized when a student returned to tell me she had used her thematic notebook on Moral Responsibility using *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* as a focus novel in an interview for a student teaching position. The teacher interviewing the

student, who generally prefers not to supervise student teachers, was so impressed with the project she offered to let my student teach the unit in the fall as a student teacher.

That the project works, really works, was reflected by the enthusiasm of sixth grade students at Oakdale, an inner-city school in Grand Rapids. Their teacher took her assignment to them and developed a unit on *Dying is Easy, Surviving is Hard* for reluctant readers. As a class they read Juwanza Kunjufu's *Up Against the Wall* and poems from *The Inner City Mother Goose* by Eve Merriam. In reacting to the reading, they created a graffiti wall where they wrote individual responses with fabric paint on muslin. When their teacher modeled the unit for my class, she explained, "Because the protagonist in Kunjufu's novel lived in a dangerous world similar to their own and confronted the same difficult choices they do, they continued to talk about the novel throughout the year." The Unit produced literature behavior in students who were repeating sixth grade because it addressed issues of survival they encountered on a daily basis. They were talking, writing, creating about literature that spoke to their lives. In response to the question "How did the kids feel about the project?" she answered without hesitation, "They loved it!"

### **Library Fair Night**

I know this December during final exam week, I'll approach Library Fair night, as I have in the past, with a director's opening night stomach jitters—a mixture of fear and anticipation. Will the students come through? Will the project flop? Will the magic of reading be made visible? But in

my heart I know when I enter the Loutit Room on Library Fair Night, the room will be alive: I'll encounter future teachers hawking their units at booths using music, food, art, and most of all wonderful books to lure future readers into thematic worlds. The contagion of reading good literature will transform an ordinary lecture room into a multi-colored fairground vibrating with the voices of students talking about the wonders of books. Once again, I'll be wowed and my students will be doubly wowed!

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### **About the Author**

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### **Editor's Note:**

Final Project Guidelines and Evaluation Form follow this article in Appendix A and B.

## Appendix A

### YOUTH LITERATURE FINAL PROJECT

#### LIBRARY FAIR: A THEMATIC READING UNIT

Choose a theme of your choice appropriate for a particular group of students (middle school, junior high, or high school students). Select a focus book to teach as a whole class book. Investigate and read other materials on the same theme to incorporate as outside reading for your students. The materials should include a range of genres (poetry, non-fiction, drama, and short stories as well as other novels) that address a variety of reading levels, ethnic backgrounds, and genders. Consider bringing in non-print information that appropriately enhances the theme—resource people, films, music, art, food, etc.

This project draws on reading from our texts and handouts, class discussions, activities, and assignments—in short, you are asked to make use of everything we have done this semester. As you read for this assignment, make notes on how you can actively involve students in reading, writing, listening, talking, and creating in response to the theme. The assignments you develop to go with the focus book and the outside reading should reflect our focus reading response theories and whole language activities.

#### STEPS TO FOLLOW:

1. Decide on your age group, theme, and focus book.
2. Begin investigating additional reading resources through the library. I'll suggest books to use as well when we conference regarding your project.
3. Read the materials—making notes for your annotated bibliography and listing ideas for projects and assignments.
4. Reread the focus book from a teacher's perspective and develop assignment ideas.
5. Work on the project in sections. The order in which you begin typing this assignment can vary—I don't put together lesson plans like I do an academic paper.
6. Start early, work in stages, have a place where you can collect ideas and materials.
7. Make the final product professional, so you're proud to display it in your portfolio.
8. Have fun—this is the creative part of teaching!

## PROJECT REQUIREMENTS

**DISPLAY BOOTH**—Use a display board and the table provided to set up your advertisement for your unit theme. Be creative and informative. Your models for the creative project and the writing assignments can be part of your display. Your books, along with your notebook, and copies of your annotated bibliography should be available on the table for us to look through.

## NOTEBOOK

### I. Introduction of the Unit

- Briefly Identify the Student Population:** For whom is this unit intended? What should we know about their backgrounds?
- Fully Discuss the Theme:** Why is this an important and rich theme for students of this level to explore through literature? Why is it developmentally appropriate and how is it relevant to their lives and interests? How do you justify to parents and administrators why this theme is educationally appropriate? Are there any potential problems or disadvantages in exploring the theme? How will you solve them?
- Discuss the Focus Book:** Give a brief overview of the novel. Explain why you selected this book to use for the whole class. What makes it rich reading for the students? Will most students connect to it in some way? How does it develop and relate to your theme? Why is it good literature? Are there any potential problems with the novel? How will you handle them?
- Describe Your Objectives for the Students:** What language arts and content objectives do you have? What do you want your students to do, experience, and learn in response to their reading? How will they be different as learners at the end of this unit?
- Give an Overview of the Unit:** How will you sequence activities and assignments? How will you introduce the unit and how will you conclude the unit? Will the additional reading be independent reading or group reading?
- Describe Assessment:** How will you evaluate student work and assess the unit?

### II. Explanation and Description of Activities for the Focus Book

- Introduction:** How will you introduce the book? What prereading activities will you use to prepare them for reading the novel?
- Vocabulary Work:** What vocabulary words could be used from the novel for vocabulary building and how will you approach the vocabulary study?
- Discussion Questions:** What discussion questions will you use with the novel?
- Worksheet or Learning Log Questions:** Create seven or ten worksheet questions or learning log questions for the novel. You may organize this by chapters or sections of the book.



## EACH OF THE FOLLOWING NEEDS A MODEL FOR YOUR DISPLAY

- Expressionistic Writing Assignments: Develop five through seven paper writing assignments. Choose one to model for us.
- Analytical Writing Assignments: Structure three to five analytical essay writing assignments for the novel. Choose one to model for us.
- Creative Projects: Develop a list of at least seven creative projects your students could do in response to the focus novel or the outside or group reading they do. Provide a range of options—oral, visual art, music, a computer game, etc. Model one for us.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Identify your name, the theme, title and grade level at the top of the bibliography.
- Create a one page handout for class members describing the five through seven best selections or reading material for your unit. Include bibliographic information. Give a brief synopsis of the literature and explain how it contributes to the theme. To whom would it appeal? List additional reading materials or non-print resources in a separate bibliography in your notebook.
- Use at least three different genres—fiction (realistic, historical, fantasy, or science fiction), non-fiction, poetry, short stories, or folklore (even a children's book.). Make sure you use multicultural materials and books that appeal to both males and females with a range of reading skills.

## EVALUATION FORM

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Project Title \_\_\_\_\_

### Thematic Unit Evaluation

1. **Booth Display**—Your booth is inviting and attractive. The theme is clearly demonstrated in a pleasing and creative way. Time, effort, thought, and professionalism are evident in the display.

weak                      ok                      strong

2. **Resource Materials**—The reading material you've selected shows awareness of the best young adult authors and titles. The material is developmentally appropriate and takes into account a range of reading abilities, interests, and genres. You clarify how the outside reading will be integrated. You've tried to incorporate other media—film, music, art—to enhance the theme.

weak                      ok                      strong

3. **Annotated Bibliography**—Your bibliography for the class is informative and useful. It reflects thorough research on your theme. The handout is well-written and professional.

weak                      ok                      strong

4. **Explanation of the Unit and the Focus Book**—Your theme reflects adolescents' interests and addresses their needs as readers. You've describe it effectively so that students, parents, and administrators would be convinced of its importance. You explain why the focus book is worthy of whole class reading. Your enthusiasm for the theme and its richness for the reading is evident.

weak                      ok                      strong

5. **Objectives and Overview of the Unit**—The objectives are appropriate for your students' developmental level. You've built in skill objectives (reading, writing, talking, etc.) as well as knowledge objectives. The pacing of the unit makes use of pre-reading and post-reading activities.

weak                      ok                      strong

6. **Assignments**—The activities reflect a clear understanding of the response approach to literature developed in our class work and text reading. The assignments both challenge and allow for success for all students. Students can use their talents as well as work on their language skill weaknesses in these lessons. Your assignments are well-designed and professional.

weak                      ok                      strong

Discussion Questions

Worksheet or Learning Log Questions

Analytical Writing Assignments

Expressive Writing Assignments

Creative Projects

7. **Models**—The models you've produced reflect effort, thought, and creativity. These models effectively show students how to do your assignment successfully. You've taken this aspect of the project seriously and produced high quality examples.

weak                  ok                  strong

Expressive Writing

Analytical Writing

Creative Project

8. **Professionalism**—Your writing was clear, interesting, and technically correct. You've created a unit that would be useful to your colleagues and important for students to experience.

weak                  ok                  strong

9. **My Evaluation**—This project reflects time and effort. You've taken it seriously and made use of what you've learned in class. I'd love to experience this unit as a teacher and student. Wow!

## Appendix B

### STUDENT EVALUATION FORM

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

UNIT TITLE \_\_\_\_\_

1. **Booth Display**—Describe the booth fully. Does the booth reflect time, effort, thought, and attention to details and neatness? Why or why not? Is the theme clearly demonstrated in a pleasing and creative way? Why or why not? Do you think the display would catch the attention of young adults? What most and least impresses you?

2. **Introduction and Explanation of Unit and Focus Book**—Did the introduction clearly explain why this unit and focus book would be valuable for the intended audience? Explain. Did the objectives for the unit involve appropriate language arts goals as well as content goals? Was there anything missing in the explanation of the unit?

3. **Activities**—Look carefully over the activities and comment on the effectiveness of the assignments? Would the assignments elicit good work from students? To what extent did they reflect time and thought?

Discussion Questions—

Worksheet Questions—

Expressive Writing Assignments—

Analytical Writing Assignments—

Creative Projects—

4. **Models**—To what extent did the models reflect good effort, creativity and time. Are these models you would feel comfortable using with your students to demonstrate assignments?

Expressive Writing—

Analytical Writing—

Creative Project—

5. **Resource Materials and Annotated Bibliography**—Is this a useful resource for another teacher and is it professionally presented?

6. **Professionalism**—Is this a unit you would like to experience as a student and teach from as an instructor? Why or why not?

7. What most impressed you about this project? Was there anything that disappointed you?