

Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 3

7-1-2007

Art and Design: Teaching Siddhartha in a Secondary Urban High School

David Lee Carlson
Hunter College-CUNY., dcarlson@hunter.cuny.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/networks>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carlson, David Lee (2008) "Art and Design: Teaching Siddhartha in a Secondary Urban High School," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1120>

This Full Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



An On-line Journal
for Teacher Research

Art and Design: Teaching *Siddhartha* in a Secondary Urban High School

David Lee Carlson

Assistant Professor, Arizona State University
Correspondence: dcarlson@hunter.cuny.edu

Currere is a reflexive cycle in which thought bends back upon itself and thus recovers its volition. (Grumet, 1976, pp. 130-131)

By building bridges or a scaffolding that meets students where they are (intellectually and functionally), culturally relevant teaching helps them to be where they need to be to participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 96)

Introduction

One day in the hallway of an urban secondary school, I was stopped in my tracks. One of my colleagues in the English department, who was experiencing difficulties in her classroom, asked me, “Mr. Carlson, which texts do you use to teach these students? What works of literature do you think these students can relate to?” As an “experienced” teacher of five years at the time, I replied to this new, inexperienced, struggling teacher, that she could teach any literary work as long as she continually linked the thematic elements of the text to the materials of the students’ lives. This particular view is certainly easier said than done; to engage urban secondary students with seemingly culturally disparate literary works involves careful planning, and in my experience, involves using a variety of teaching strategies to bring the work of literature to life.

This paper describes, in detail, the process I followed to plan a unit on Hermann Hesse’s novel, *Siddhartha*. The primary argument of this paper is that inner-city, undereducated

students can understand and relate to culturally disparate literary works when teachers plan backwards, develop art projects, and design thematically-based writing assignments. This article has been divided into three sections: a summary of the novel, a brief review of professional theories and research on teaching literature to secondary students, and an in-depth look at the student assignments.

One Size Does Not Fit All

The school where I taught this unit was known throughout the city as an “alternative high school” based on its emphasis on alternative (portfolio) assessment, elimination of s to signal class changes, and individual advisory program. Influenced by the seminal work of Deborah Meier (2000, 2002) and TheodoreSizer ((1992, 1996, Sizer & Sizer, 1999), the school sought to provide poor, underprivileged students with a “private school” experience (Meier, 2000). Located in the poorest part of a northeastern city, of the more than 500 students, 98% were African-American and Hispanic; 69% qualified for the free-lunch program in a state where the average is 28%. The school was divided into Division One, which housed grades 9-10, and Division Two, which housed grades 11-12. I was a faculty member in Division II and taught one 12th grade section and two 11th grade sections, to which I taught *Siddhartha*. The eleventh and twelfth graders were required to complete portfolios in order to graduate. For each portfolio, students had to complete several short papers and one “Master” project, which

usually consisted of a longer, 10-page paper. The student-teacher ratio was 16 to 1 (state average was 14 to 1); the majority of the faculty held only Bachelor's Degrees (the state average for Master's Degrees is 79%). The faculty, however, possessed the belief that "one size does not fit all," and worked diligently to give individual attention to each student. The teachers enhanced what the students knew, using the students' cultural "repertoire" (McCormack, 1994) to develop their skills to prepare them for college or the workforce. This particular unit on *Siddhartha* was intended to provide the students with a short piece for their portfolios; however, I wanted them to know it well enough to complete the longer paper that was required at the end of the semester which was to reference other works of literature that the students had read during the semester.

Summary of the Novel

Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse is a coming of age story of a young man, who yearns to develop his own understanding of wisdom. Growing up in an Elysian environment, revered by his parents, desired by all the young girls in his village, and learned in the Hindu religion, but feeling discontented, Siddhartha leaves his village with his best friend Govinda, to live in poverty with the Samanas, the ascetics. Sacrificing his opulent clothes and wealth, learning to live without food and water, and practicing meditation, the goal for Siddhartha among the Samanas was to deny the self or "to become empty" (p. 13). Since the self and its ephemeral pleasures produce pain and suffering, the Samanas believed that by denying the self, controlling desires, including those for food and water, an individual could find wisdom. It was the continual reoccurrence of the new thirst that propelled Siddhartha into leaving the Samanas, and to follow Gotama, the Buddha, where he realized that the self remained regardless of how much one struggled to separate oneself from it.

After leaving the Samanas, Siddhartha and his best friend, Govinda, follow the Buddha, Gotama. Here, Siddhartha learns that he cannot follow the same path someone else does to find truth and knowledge; he must find his

own path. After leaving Buddha and Govinda behind, Siddhartha surrenders to his physical desires. Here he learns the differences between love and lust, commerce and wealth, and separation and unity.

Once Siddhartha realizes that denying the self is useless and that one must create his/her own path to truth, the rest of the book describes Siddhartha's struggle with his desires and his quest to find his own way to wisdom. Along the way, he falls in love with a beautiful courtesan, Kamala, who later gives birth to his child. Siddhartha becomes a brilliant, wealthy, merchant and indulges in drinking, gambling, and excessive lovemaking. He finally comes to feel revulsion at his own excesses and almost commits suicide. At this point, Siddhartha again encounters Govinda, who at first, doesn't recognize him. Siddhartha then notices a reflection of himself in the river, which reminds him of his innocent youth. He leaves Kamala and his indulgent ways forever and decides to live by the river with Vesudeva the ferryman.

Here, Siddhartha finds the wisdom he was searching for. It was only through his experiences of denying the self, then living indulgently for many years, that he realized that life is a reoccurring cycle, where the self is not an isolated entity, but is part of a collective whole, and that individuals cannot follow a path to wisdom, but must develop it through trial and error. Siddhartha puts this new found wisdom to use when he learns that he has fathered a child with Kamala; the son rejects Siddhartha's river life. Although despondent that his son has left him and will have to experience his own "growing" pains, Siddhartha realizes that his son must find his own truth. By letting his son go, Siddhartha finds peace and understands the unity of the world. In the end, Govinda returns to be Siddhartha's friend and is astonished at how Siddhartha was able to find wisdom without following someone else. The main point of the novel is that discovering wisdom is an individual journey, where one must make choices, experience the consequences of those choices, and develop the understanding that individual choices are part of a larger whole.

Literature Review: Framing the Unit

Although Hermann Hesse's novels have been explored extensively in college literature courses, very little has been written about his works in secondary English education. In fact, none of his works are mentioned or listed in any of the three major textbooks commonly used in English methods courses (Tchudi and Mitchell, 1999; Maxwell and Meiser, 2005; Milner and Milner, 2003). Regardless, some educators have recognized the potential of this book. Dennis F. Brestensky (1973) states that teachers can use Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* to develop valuable teaching strategies, such as helping students "arrive at self-awareness" (p. 380), by placing more emphasis on the "concrete... with... less reliance on words" (p. 381). Although very few scholars have written about how to teach this novel, I argue that there are pedagogical strategies that can shape how one teaches *Siddhartha* to inner-city, undereducated secondary students.

The next section of this paper describes in detail the scholarship that influenced my unit on *Siddhartha*. These writers helped me to frame my curriculum, to determine effective pedagogical strategies, and to establish appropriate performance assessments for my students.

Several writers helped me shape my unit on *Siddhartha*. Jeffrey Wilhelm's work (2001, 1996) illustrates the importance of frontloading and having students visualize texts. Frontloading is any "pre-reading strategy" that "prepare[s], protect[s], and support[s] students into the acquisition of new content and new ways of doing things" (Wilhelm, 1996, p. 92). Frontloading prepares students to engage successfully with a text. Activities may include building vocabulary, providing historical background, and identifying formal features (i.e., literary terms). Frontloading can also be used to prepare students to connect to the characters in the novel by identifying an analogous situation between the characters in the novel and the students. Wilhelm's work (1996) also demonstrates the importance of using art to allow students to visualize what

they read in order to enter the "story world" (p. 121). He explains that art provides a bridge between the literary work and the student's prior experiences, and permits students from different backgrounds to have authentic or "natural" experiences of the text (pp. 138-139).

Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) seminal work on curricular design informed this unit. Their main contribution to curriculum studies is their emphasis on "backward planning," meaning planning what students will learn and how they will demonstrate their learning via performance assessments--before determining what teachers will do. This is a student-centered approach to curriculum design. As Wiggins and McTighe state, "Good design, then, is not so much about gaining a few new technical skills as it is about learning to be thoughtful and specific about our purposes and what they imply" (p. 14). They outline a three-step process for planning backwards. They include: "1. Identify desired results, 2. Determine acceptable evidence, 3. Plan learning experiences and instruction" (pp. 17-18). Thus, understanding does not merely involve the demonstration of skills or content knowledge (commonly part of standardized exams), but is shown by the ability to adjust and adapt the skills and knowledge to a variety of situations. It is important to note that there are many ways into these three principles of backward design (see Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 257), and their six facets of understanding: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge influenced my development of the student activities and performance assessments for this unit. The following section describes the activities the students were assigned throughout the unit. I found the following activities to be instrumental in the successful presentation of this unit:

- Frontloading Collages
- Chapter Reading Logs
- A Road Map of Siddhartha's Life
- A Final 3-5 Page Essay

Frontloading: Collages

Frontloading allows the student to use what they already know and connect to the novel before they begin to read it (Wilhelm, 2001). For *Siddhartha*, students completed a collage, or a collection of images of their personal paradises. Once students completed their collages, they were ready to read the first chapter of the novel because they had made a connection to Siddhartha's paradise. This activity "hooks" the student in the first chapter of the novel because, as we learn in the opening scene, Siddhartha "bathed" near a "riverbank" of a "mango grove," where, "joy leaped in his father's heart about the son," (p. 3), "bliss leaped in his mother's breast," (p. 3) and, "love stirred in the hearts of the young Brahmin daughters." (p. 4) Siddhartha possesses the love of his parents, enjoys the admiration of his peers, and lives in a paradise. In short, he lives the adolescent dream, which makes the irony of why he becomes "discontent with himself" (p. 5) even more compelling. Students must ponder why someone would leave or abandon a personal paradise. Students confront their own attachments to their collages and consider abandoning them to pursue wisdom and truth. The students' textual interpretations occur through a transaction between the text, the collage, and the reader. In short, the assignment connects social and academic skills (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Some students empathize with Siddhartha, while others do not; yet each interpretation of Siddhartha's choice shapes how students continue to read the novel. In many ways, students become characters in the novel. As they empathize with Siddhartha, students honor his choice to leave his home and search for wisdom; as his father, they recognize Siddhartha's resolve to leave. They continue to engage in the text, and relate to the characters as they read the book.

Chapter Reading Logs

The reading logs consist of ten yes or no questions and two short-answer questions, initiated by a quote from the text that the students complete after they have read each chapter. For every "no" response, students were asked to mark the correct answer in the space underneath the question. For example,

the reading log for the chapter entitled "The Ferryman" requires students to answer questions such as "Does Siddhartha meet the Ferryman?" and "Does Siddhartha learn that all voices lead to Om?" The purpose of the ten questions is to assess comprehension, encourage students to read closely, and provide a resource for reviewing the novel for the later performance assessments (i.e., road map and essay activities).

Students also analyze a quote from the novel and explain its significance to a particular chapter or to the full novel. The purpose of responding to the quote is to encourage students to think critically about the events in the novel, to understand the perspective of the characters, and to demonstrate their abilities to interpret literary texts. For the chapter entitled "The Ferryman," I asked the students to read and respond to the following quote:

For a long time he [Siddhartha] knew that he was not separated from Gotama, although he could not accept his teachings. No, a true seeker could not accept any teachings, not if he sincerely wished to find something. But he who had found, could find his approval to every path, every goal; nothing separated him from all the other thousands who live in eternity, who breathed the Divine. (Hesse, 1999, p. 90)

One student wrote the following response to this quote:

Even though he didn't except [sic] Gotama's teachings, he was not separate from him. No true seeker could accept anyone's teachings. But the person who found what he seeked [sic] lead him on the right path and to his goal. He was like all the others who searched and breathed the divine. This quote is important to the story because here he realizes that even though he and Gotama don't believe the same teachers that there [sic] still close and, there are a lot of people in search of the same thing his is.

The student both interprets and explains this particular moment in the story. Based on the student's response, I can assess how well the student has understood the story. These reading logs are designed to have students

demonstrate that they can comprehend the main events in the novel and think critically about the themes and conflicts within the story. They must be able to understand the story and make connections to other parts of the novel so that they can complete the road maps and write the final essay.

A Road Map of Siddhartha's Life

This particular art project is most effective when assigned three-quarters of the way through the novel. I adapted this project from Kirby et al. (2004) "Road of Life" (p. 36), where students "make a map of their lives from birth to present," and "illustrate the hills and valleys, the thrills and conflicts" (p. 36). Rather than focusing on their own lives, I asked the students to create a life-map of Siddhartha's journey. This proved to be an important assignment because it allowed students to revisit earlier parts of the book using their chapter reading logs to help them to visualize the characters and to illustrate Siddhartha's emotional journey. A dip in the road, for instance, reflected Siddhartha's disgust with himself after he left Samsara. Although I set very few limits for this assignment, students needed to use at least ten images. The students complete their road maps after they finished the novel, at which time we have an important discussion about how the activity reflects the main themes of the book.

While we made the map, I assigned various writing assignments to encourage the students to experience the characters' perspectives and engage the students in using multiple genres. For example, after Siddhartha leaves his best friend Govinda with Gotama, the students wrote a letter to Siddhartha's father explaining why he left his home and describing what has occurred in his life since his departure. One student wrote:

"Dear Father, when I left home I thought my place was with the Samanas. Although, I might have learned alot [sic], I never achieved Nirvana, nor did the eldest Samana there. This is why I decided to leave. When I left, I went...to hear the teachings of the great Buddha. There Govinda pledged his allegiance to Buddha but I however continued on my pilgrimage. I feel like what I am

looking for can not [sic] be taught to me. What I am looking for must be experienced. I must experience myself. Now I am a merchant and have met a beautiful girl named Kamala. From your former son, Siddhartha."

Here we see that the student can recount specific events in the novel. It is important for her to understand the plot to complete the upcoming activities. The student assumes the voice of Siddhartha, which allows her to empathize with his life and view his choices from his perspective. This activity engages the student's academic and emotional literacies (Tatum, 2005).

In addition, prior to reading the chapter where Siddhartha confronts the excesses of his desires for love, power, and wealth, I engage the students in short writing activities to explore Siddhartha's struggles with various personal characteristics including love, power and wealth. Again, I had students write about each topic before they selected the one they thought was the most important to them.

For *love*, I asked the students: "What is love, and how do you know you're in love?" I chose these two questions because I wanted to prepare them for Siddhartha's statement to Kamala later in the novel that "love is for common people."

For *fame*, I asked: "What is fame, and how do you know you're famous? And, "If you could be famous, who would you be and why?"

For *money*, I asked: "What is money?" and, "If you could have one billion dollars, what would you do with it?"

And finally, for *family*, I asked, "What is a family?" I selected this question, because I wanted them to refer back to it when we got to the end of the novel when Siddhartha is living with the Ferryman and his son leaves him.

The students completed a three-minute free-write on each of these; I then asked them to answer the following question: "Given the choice of one, and only one, of these things, which one would you choose? Money, Fame,

Friends, Love. Why?" One student wrote the following regarding *love*:

I know I'm in love when I think about a certain person all day and night;" about *fame*, she wrote: "Fame is to be popular. If I could be a famous person, I would be J. Lo [Jennifer Lopez] because she's pretty and Puerto Rican and you don't see many Latina "stars;" about *money*, she wrote, "Money is power. If I had one billion dollars I would treat my family to everything they ever wanted because I love them;" and, finally, for *family*, she wrote: "Family is a group of people who love you, stand by you and cherish you through everything."

To the final question, this same student selected "*family*" because "[they] are always standing by me. (I'm always going to put my family first)."

This activity opened up a rich discussion, not only about the students' priorities in life, but it also raised commentary about the choices Siddhartha had made throughout his life. Students described Siddhartha's departure from his parents, how he left his best friend, and how Siddhartha's son eventually leaves him. It also forces them to question whether Siddhartha loved Kamala, and helps them to analyze Siddhartha's claim that love is only for "common folks" because it requires sacrifice. The discussion allowed the students to: describe incidents in the novel, express their personal opinions, and relate to specific passages in the text. They also had to reconsider their individual choices, reevaluate their understanding of Siddhartha, and to choose their own paths. The students begin to view Siddhartha and the other characters in the novel as human beings who make mistakes and live with the consequences of those mistakes. In doing so, they travel with Siddhartha, experience similar emotional journeys, and reflect on what is important to them. The assignment also allows me to get to know my students and learn about their families and communities (Delpit, 1995). I can use this information to make additional connections between them, their worlds, and literary texts. Doing so bridges culturally foreign texts with

students' lives and promotes culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

A Final Essay

The final essay is structured around understanding Siddhartha as a *quest romance*. I do this for two reasons: it provides a good way to correlate the structure of the essay form to the structure of the novel and it provides students with an interesting way to interpret the novel.

There are four stages of the *quest romance*. They include: innocence and ignorance, self-denial, desire, and understanding the continuity and unity of all things. To help students with the essay, I provided a graphic organizer with each characteristic of the *quest romance* as a heading. Students used evidence from the text that exemplified each characteristic. For example, for the second phase of the *quest romance* (self-denial in the hope of attaining salvation) students describe how Siddhartha engaged in self-denial and how he fell short. Completing this graphic organizer provided students with a basic structure for their essay. They present evidence from the text prior to writing the essay so that when they actually write the essay, the evidence is available and organized. The exercise requires them to return to their reading logs and their road maps to locate details. In so doing they debated important themes in the novel with each other. The essay reinforced the students' understanding of the content of the novel and provided students with an opportunity to produce a solid piece of writing. As the first paper for the semester, the graphic organizer activity helped the students write other essays later in the semester.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the novel, Siddhartha is reunited with his best friend Govinda, and kisses him on the forehead. Govinda understands, for the first time in his life, the unity of things. Reviewing and revisiting the events of the novel, imagining a contemporary Siddhartha through the road map, and interpreting his journey as a quest to understand himself, allowed the students to question their own beliefs about important

matters and produce an essay that reflected their understandings of the novel.

This teaching experience helped me learn that texts provide clues about how to teach. If I can help students relate to the characters in a novel by identifying analogous situations in their own lives, they will be able to appreciate and comprehend the text and in the process they will develop better critical thinking skills. I also learned a set of pedagogical strategies that could not be applied to literary texts and discovered that art can be a powerful medium for students to visualize the events, characters, and settings in novels. This bridges the distance between the reader and the literary work.

If I re-taught this unit, I would include a role-playing skit or a dramatic interpretation of the novel. In other classes I have taught, students enjoyed rewriting texts by placing them in contemporary contexts such as their neighborhoods or the school. For the Siddhartha unit, I believe my students would have enjoyed developing a contemporary script from the novel and performing it. This activity would have been useful prior to writing the paper because it would have illustrated the elements of the *quest romance*. Perhaps if curriculum design encourages self-reflection and propels the student to consider important personal choices, I can play the role of Govinda in a room full of young Siddharthas!

References

- Brestensky, D. F. (1973). Siddhartha: A casebook on teaching methods. *The English Journal*, 62(3), 379-382.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Grumet, M. R. (1976). Psychoanalytic foundations. In William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet (Eds.), *Toward a poor curriculum* (pp. 111-146). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Hesse, H. (1999). *Siddhartha*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Kirby, D., Kirby, D.L., and Liner, T. (2004). *Inside out: Strategies for teaching writing (3rd ed.)*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Maxwell, R.J. and Meiser, M.J. (2005). *Teaching English in middle and secondary schools (fourth edition)*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.
- McCormick, K. (1994). *The culture of reading and the teaching of English*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Meier, D. (2000). Educating a democracy. In Deborah Meier (Ed.), *Will standards save public education?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meier, D. (2002). *The power of their ideas: Lessons from a small school in Harlem*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Milner, J. O. and Milner, L.F. M. (2003). *Bridging English (3rd ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Sizer, T. (1992). *Horace's school: Redesigning the american high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sizer, T. (1996). *Horace's hope: What works for the american high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sizer, T. and Sizer, N. F. (1999). *The students are watching: Schools and the moral contract*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Tatum, A. (2005). *Teaching reading to black adolescent males: Closing the achievement gap*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Tchudi, S. and Mitchell, D. (1999). *Exploring and teaching the English language arts (fourth edition)*. New York: Longman.
- Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*, Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wilhelm, J.D. (1996). *"You gotta BE the book": Teaching engage and reflective reading with adolescents.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Wilhelm, J.D. (2001). *Strategic reading: Guiding students to lifelong literacy, 6-12,* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.