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Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports: A Guide for the English Classroom

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26 Promoting Democracy through Sports, Community, and Dialogue with *The Crossover*

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Overview

The purpose of this lesson is to encourage dialogue between individuals, including English language learners, with dialogue booklets (Probst, 2007). In the lesson, students are provided an array of questions to promote conversation and to foster critical thinking skills. Dialogue booklets adhere to a premise valued within critical youth studies (Ibrahim, 2014), which is to promote activities done *with* youth rather than *to* them. Here, dialogue booklets created by the teacher to support Kwame Alexander's (2014) *The Crossover* are highlighted.

Rationale

Morrell (2008) has argued that critical literacy "can be about repositioning oneself with oneself" (p. 167) because it "opens up spaces for students to be inspired to a fuller humanity" (p. 172). Critical literacy can promote care for the self and for others in the democratic conversations located within our classrooms, particularly at a time when urban American schools are more diverse and enroll higher numbers of immigrant students than ever (Oh & Cooc, 2011), including English language learners with limited and interrupted formal education (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

Dialogue booklets adhere to the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, with emphasis on teamwork and collaboration (Caracciolo & Mungai, 2009). *Ubuntu* translates as "I am me because of who we are

together." With the right questions and deliberate objectives in mind, teachers can create dialogue booklets to help students from a variety of lived experiences engage in a conversation about humanity that requires listening, sharing, and becoming part of a dialogic, ever evolving literate community.

Allen and Alexander (2013) have also suggested that the articles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are a useful platform for encouraging critical inquiry within diverse classrooms:

Teachers who take a critical perspective encourage students to go beyond the words on the page (or the Internet). As students inquire into topics and read, view, or write texts, critical educators equip them to question and evaluate, pushing toward deeper levels of understanding. (p. 8)

I too have found the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child helpful in creating dialogue booklets because it can help foster conversation among students about what it means to be a human being in a global society. Further, teachers who work in today's urban environments are charged with fostering democracy even when students arrive in US classrooms with a plethora of worldviews. Connecting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child with dialogue booklets has the potential to encourage students from heterogeneous backgrounds to communicate democratically and respectfully about text, life, and vision. They encourage young people to learn from themselves and one another as they make connections between their in-school and out-of-school worlds.

Objectives and Standards

Students will be able to . . .

- participate in a collaborative conversation
- respond to questions that relate to broader themes and larger ideas
- justify their own views and opinions in light of textual evidence

Relevant NCTE/IRA Standards: 1, 3, 11, 12

Relevant Common Core Anchor Standards: CCSS.SL.1; CCSS.R.2

Materials

- Copies of Kwame Alexander's (2014) *The Crossover*
 - Space for students to work in groups of four or five
 - Prepared questions put together in a dialogue booklet
 - *Skills4Life* heuristic (Hoops4Hope, n.d.)
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Description of Lesson

Creating Dialogue Booklets

The purpose of creating dialogue booklets is to engage individuals in a relevant conversation and therefore require deliberate questions, texts, topics, and themes depending on the focus. Probst (2007) suggests that questions in a dialogue booklet should be open-ended and balanced between those specific to a particular text and those welcoming students to make textual connections to life outside of school. You can use dialogue booklets when introducing a new text or after students have read a common text. In either case, you will need to preplan questions that allow students to share their worlds with one another as well as their thoughts about the text.

For the purpose of this lesson, I have provided two dialogue booklets as models (see Appendixes 26.1 and 26.2), one focusing more generally on students' lives in and out of school and one more specifically on the central text. These two dialogue booklets were created to guide students toward text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Like most booklets, they provide ten to twelve open-ended questions organized in a two-column Word document, usually five to six questions per column. When creating the booklets, I printed out multiple copies of the document, cut out the questions, and assembled them into tiny booklets that I then distributed to the class. I stapled the questions in the order I wanted students to discuss them. Once everyone had a dialogue booklet, I divided students into groups of four to five, each arranged in a circle or with desks facing one another.

Working with a dialogue booklet requires fifty to sixty minutes of class time. I suggest encouraging students to follow the question prompts and move to the next page only after everyone has had a chance to respond orally. Students sometimes stray from the booklet questions, although it's acceptable to allow a conversation to leave the pages for a brief time if the conversation is related and fruitful. You may need to remind students to return to the booklet before they get off-topic. While students talk, circulate the room and listen to what is shared. Your priorities are taking notes on students' conversations and acting as timekeeper.

Probst (2007) recommends mixing up the types of questions in a dialogue booklet. So, for example, you might prompt students to go around the circle and make funny faces. Such a prompt lightens the mood and helps students relax. Or leave a blank page in the dialogue booklet for students to design questions of their own. This opportunity gives students ownership of the activity and allows them to discuss what

matters to them. You can also compose a final question with the aim of having students report back to others in a final, whole-class conversation. For example, the final question in Appendix 26.2 requires students to “Go around the group and make a statement to summarize your thinking about the conversation you just had. Think of one or two questions you can ask others when we come back together. What else does your group have to say?”

Developing Each Child’s Personality, Talents, and Mental/Physical Abilities

Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child encourages students and teachers to respect human rights, both their own and those of people from other cultures (Allen & Alexander, 2013). With this in mind, I selected Alexander’s (2014) *The Crossover* as the central text for this lesson plan. Alexander’s award-winning novel is told in poetic verse and rhythmically details a coming-of-age story in which Josh Bell, a young man, wrestles with his place on a team, with his roles as brother and son, and with the life skills it takes to find success as a student and athlete. When first introducing *The Crossover*, I created a dialogue booklet for students to discuss life skills as outlined by Hoops4Hope, a nonprofit global organization empowering children through sports. Their *Skills4Life* heuristic uses seven tools for positive decision making and emphasizes (1) self-awareness, (2) sense of humor, (3) integrity, (4) respect, (5) responsibility, (6) self-esteem, and (7) focus. I added these skills to the vocabulary words I highlight while reading *The Crossover* with students.

Dialogue booklets are written to help students respect democracy and to provide a means for them to bring out-of-school literacies into classroom spaces. When creating questions, think about a text’s larger themes and how they coincide with the lives your students lead. For example, while reading *The Crossover*, I wanted to highlight Josh Bell’s relationship with his brother, his talents as a basketball player, his passion for language, and the ongoing mentorship of his parents. The book chronicles Josh’s journey of “crossing over” into adolescence, a journey that requires him to be mature, to learn his role on a team, and to think about success on and off the court. For these reasons, I designed the first dialogue book (Appendix 26.1) to encourage students to think about their own successes and challenges before they experience Josh’s story.

Freedom of Expression and the Right to Play

Article 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the importance for children to express their own views and includes the right to share information in any form they choose. In addition, Article 31 emphasizes the importance of play and relaxation in a variety of cultural, artistic, and recreational activities (Allen & Alexander, 2013). Therefore, my second dialogue booklet merges academics with playfulness.

When students have finished reading Alexander's (2014) text, introduce a dialogue book that asks students to provide evidence from the text as they offer interpretations. My second dialogue book (Appendix 26.2) evolves from the first, but it requires students to reference a written text specifically. Here, students connect with the wisdom that Josh Bell has gained by the end of *The Crossover*. The booklet questions should also help students to articulate text-to-self connections. For example, highlight the "Basketball Rule" poems and ask students to discuss how they relate to *The Crossover* (question 5). A student might draw from "Basketball Rule #7" (p. 146) to discuss how Josh made a rebound in his own life after he was suspended from the basketball team.

Assessment

Teachers should print a class list and create a graphic organizer to record student contributions. One approach is to carry a notepad to record specific "quotes" from students and to place checkmarks next to the names of contributors; see Frey and Fisher (2013) for a discussion of collaborative conversations. Collect as many diverse viewpoints as possible from students to demonstrate multiple perspectives within a democratic environment. Ask students which of the questions engaged them most and where they made connections to their own humanity. When relevant, share insights about what you learned from listening to students' conversations.

Connections and Adaptations

As Allen and Alexander (2013) note, "[L]iteracy must be meaningful to students and serve a purpose in their lives" (p. 7). Dialogue booklets are one way to accomplish this goal because they have the power to unite groups from various backgrounds. For example, Fairfield University's men's basketball team participated in a dialogue booklet exercise with refugee and immigrant youth attending a summer program through the

Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield alongside teachers participating in a National Writing Project institute (Whitney et al., 2008). Student athletes, teachers, and youth came together to discuss learning, literacy, mental and physical achievement, and how to be successful in and out of school. The result was an opportunity for strangers from diverse backgrounds to share ideas in a safe and engaging way.

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Appendix 26.1. Dialogue Book: Sports, Books, and Skills

Tell everyone in your group your name, where you're from, and what you like to do outside of school.

Question: Does playing a sport or being involved in extracurricular activities make you a better student and human being? Why?

Describe the place where you lived while growing up. Is it similar to where you live now? What did you and your friends like to play?

Free question: Make one up for your group. Ask a question that will interest everyone in your group.

How do you define *success*? Who are individuals you think are successful? What skills do they have to make them this way?

What *Skills4Life* skill did you write about? Which of these skills are most important to you?

Comic relief: Go around and make the funniest face you can. It's okay to be silly.

Is there a relationship between being athletic, being academic, and doing more for the world we live in?

What's your relationship to sports? Like them? Hate them? Why?

Last one: Decide on one thing you want to share with everyone about your group's conversation. Decide who will say it and what they will say.

What's your relationship with school? Love it? Hate It? Why? Any books you really like? Which ones?

Appendix 26.2. Dialogue Book: A Conversation After Reading Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*

Introduce yourself to the group. Offer a statement about yourself and your world. Share any nicknames you have (like Josh Bell's *Filthy McNasty*).

Time to do some rating (10 is high, 1 is low). On a scale of 1–10, what is your relationship to poetry? To vocabulary? On a scale of 1–10, how do you rate *The Crossover*? Why?

(Reread pp. 16–17) Josh and Jordan Bell's parents have different careers. What are these careers and how do they impact Josh's thinking and writing? Do you feel one influences Josh more than the other?

(Reread pp. 20, 51, 66, 71, 93, 129, 146, 191, 214, 230). These are the basketball rules learned by Josh Bell. Which of these rules makes the most sense to you? Can you relate it to your world? How does Josh Bell learn this rule off the basketball court, too?

Someone in the group, model what a "crossover" looks like in a basketball game. In what ways do characters "cross over" within Alexander's text? How does a "crossover" work as a metaphor? Are sports in general a metaphor for life? Why or why not?

Reread "Filthy McNasty" (p. 10). Think about a basketball game. Discuss what you notice about this

poem's layout, spacing, fonts, etc. Is it like a game?

(Reread "Dear Jordan," p. 159). Why does Josh write this letter? What does it say about his character? Do you have such a character in your own life? Who?

Share with the group your favorite word (it can be slang or fancy). Look at *The Crossover* and locate slang and fancy words used by the author. Why do you think Alexander chooses such words?

Challenges. Love them? Hate them? Or something else? Share a challenge you've faced in your life and explain what happened with the choices you made. Can you relate this to Josh Bell's story in *The Crossover*?

(Reread "Free Throws," pp. 234–237). What is a free throw? When do players make them in a game? Why do you think Kwame Alexander ends the book with this poem? In what ways does it bring closure to Josh and Jordan Bell?

Final thoughts. Go around the group and make a statement to summarize your thinking about the conversation you just had. Think of one or two questions you can ask others when we come back together. What else does your group have to say?