

INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS IN READING:

A READING WORKSHOP UNIT FOR GRADE 7 ELA

by

Megan Wilson

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

December 2020

Capstone Project Facilitator: Trish Harvey
Content Expert: Jon Warnert

Project Description

The goal of this project is to design and implement a digital reading workshop unit that is based on the *Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Wischow, 2018), which is a curriculum recently adopted by my current district. The seventh grade ELA team, representing two district middle schools, will need to implement this unit plan while teaching students in an online format as students learn from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, and perhaps beyond, as our schools are likely to offer online learning as an option for the foreseeable future.

The overall teaching goal for this project is to show students how authors use different writing techniques to create their characters, to make them lifelike, to characterize them—and to use those characters to develop themes in their written works. Students will learn about perspective as well as how and why readers sympathize with characters. Additionally, students will learn how authors employ a variety of literary strategies as they develop characters and themes; among these are symbolism, imagery, and multiple perspectives. Finally, students will learn the structure of a story's plot and strategies authors often use as they construct connections between the reader and the text.

This project seeks to answer the question *Can student-selected texts and the use of a reading workshop model improve student reading engagement and success?* It is designed to provide seventh grade ELA teachers with a digital reading workshop unit that will allow students to grow as independent readers and improve their academic engagement in reading, even through distance learning.

In designing this unit of study, I sought to provide a clear and supportive method of conducting a reading unit that would encourage and build both engagement in, and

appreciation for, independent success in reading in my seventh-grade students. While working on this project, the school district where I am employed chose to pilot the *Units of Study for Reading and Writing*, which fit well with my understanding of and desire for student-centered learning in my classroom. After spending considerable time with the unit's guided lessons and curriculum, I sought to design a unit with greater accessibility for my students as newer middle schoolers as well as for myself, as a beginning teacher. Additionally, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a growing demand for high-quality, online curriculum materials. Almost immediately there was a desperate need for a curriculum that could be used in a digital (or mostly digital) format as schools everywhere rushed to transition to hybrid or online teaching. As school districts nationwide have been forced to offer online learning, it is a certainty that the demand for easily adaptable online curriculum options will continue. This unit project will address that need as it relates to the team of teachers with whom I work in my current position.

Designed and implemented in a digital format using Google Slides, this project uses the Schoology course platform and a number of other digital tools to meet the needs of a middle school ELA course operating in a hybrid or online only/distance learning environment. Furthermore, the unit will focus on student-selected texts within author-study book clubs, teaching comprehension and analytical skills through short mini-lessons on characterization and author technique, and checking for understanding while guiding learning through student-teacher conferring. Included in the unit are formative assessment checks, a final summative assessment, and suggestions for a number of texts teachers might offer to students for their book-club reading as they study characterization and author techniques throughout the unit.

In this unit, students will study character perspectives, “particularly how readers sympathize with certain characters, what shapes characters’ and readers’ perspectives, and distinguishing between characters with differing perspectives” (Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Reading Curricular Calendar, 2020). The first section of the unit will include five lessons about character perspectives and development and how authors create these. Next, students will closely study authors’ techniques in creating moments of insight into a particular character and how he/she views his/her world. The second section of the unit will include another five lessons about author techniques and goals in the development of their characters. Finally, students will build on what they know about author techniques to develop an understanding of how authors craft a character-reader relationship and use this relationship to reflect a theme. The last section of the unit will include five lessons that focus on identifying authors’ methods for building a relationship between the reader and the characters to show how their experiences and perspectives signal a theme or lesson to the reader. As a final summative assessment of student learning, student author-study book clubs will culminate in presentations that demonstrate students’ knowledge and understanding of authors’ techniques for developing characterization.

Included below is a link to this unit in Google Slides as well as a document containing links to various unit materials. The first twelve slides provide an overview and unit guide for teachers. The remaining slides contain lesson plans for teaching the three-week (15 school days) unit.

[*Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs - A 3-Week Online Reading Workshop Unit for 7th Grade ELA*](#)

[*Investigating Characterization Unit: Materials*](#)

REFERENCES

Calkins, L., Ehrenworth, M., & Wischow, K. (2018). *Investigating Characterization: Author-Study Book Clubs*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Reading Curricular Calendar, Eighth Grade, 2017-2018, Characterization and Author's Craft. (2020). Retrieved from: http://connect.readingandwritingproject.org/file/download?google_drive_document_id=0B7BccMltK6LqdVZWN19NanY1WW8&user_id=NTk1MDM=&user_email=Q0xvd2Vuc3RlaW5Ac2Nob29scy5ueWMuZ292&user_name=Q2xhaXJlIExvd2Vuc3RlaW4=