



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2010 Volume II: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

Character Investigations

Curriculum Unit 10.02.11
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Main Objectives

I am writing this unit because of the need for children to become more aware of what is going on inside their heads while they read or their own thinking processes. Many children read books without being aware of their own processes of thought or able to express how they form impressions or come to the conclusions they do. I want students to become aware of what is going on inside of their heads while they read a particular sentence, look at a character in a book, and/or watch a character on T.V. I have heard one too many times from my students, "because" as a means to an end but with that I reply, "But why? How do you know?" Students need to develop certain comprehension strategies, such as inferring, to become better readers. Teaching comprehension strategies effectively have developed over time. As teachers, we no longer have the entire class read the same book and answer the same questions to check for comprehension. A lot of students can read words, and decode their phonetic meaning, but they cannot comprehend the actual story. One of the most frustrating parts about teaching is when a student can read the words on a level fourteen text and a level sixteen and a level eighteen but cannot for the life of them understand what they just read. In the book, *Mosaic of Thought*, Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman discuss the importance of teaching comprehension strategies effectively. They state, "that instruction that actively engages students in asking questions, summarizing and synthesizing text, and identifying important ideas improves comprehension, and that proficient reading involves using more than one strategy at a time" (Keene, p. 27) ¹ This unit will embrace this thinking because there will be a lot of questions asked daily and the students will be very engaged with the Arthur stories by Marc Brown.

This unit will focus on character analysis of characters in the popular series of children's books, *Arthur*, by Marc Brown. This unit is designed for a second grade class but it could be adapted to first through fourth grade with slight alterations. The students will read stories, listen to the stories on tape, and watch Arthur films. Inferring is a comprehension strategy that is crucial for students to learn. The students will search for clues as to how the character is feeling considering clues ranging from plot events, word choices, dialogue, facial expressions in illustrations, tone of voice in recordings, and facial and body language in video tape adaptations. The students will also be able to use stated or implied evidence to back up their inference.

Arthur stories are terrific for early elementary students to read. Every book teaches the students a lesson, and the characters Marc Brown created, I have noticed, are easy for students to connect to. At the age of seven,

students like reading stories with characters that have experiences that they have shared or can "relate" to. Arthur is a boy in the second grade who deals with anxiety from spelling tests, teasing/bullying from other classmates, and an annoying younger sister who always wants to be a part of Arthur's life. The events that happen in these books are easily relatable to by any child in elementary school.

Background

I teach second grade at Roberto Clemente Leadership Academy. Second grade reading levels range anywhere from between one to thirty-eight as measured by the DRA2 reading assessment. It is crucial to teach several comprehension strategies alongside phonics to increase their reading abilities. In my current classroom, my students' reading levels range from a three to a thirty-eight; to be reading on grade level in the spring of second grade, he/she must be independently at a twenty-eight. Currently, I have three students reading at a DRA2 level of a three and two other students reading at a DRA2 level of a six. Many students in the early elementary grades have proved they can decode words and have all the phonics abilities, but when it comes to understanding what they have read, many of the students can not communicate the overall theme of the story, or even summarize what the story was about. Strategies to help students understand what they are reading include: visualizing, connecting, wondering and questioning, determining importance (synthesizing), monitoring and noticing, and finally inferring and "figuring out". This higher-level activity of inferring and figuring out will be my focus and goal for this unit.

In planning for comprehension instruction I will first choose a focus within inferring, such as inferring the characters' feelings about the problem in the story. I will ask myself, "What specific skill/activity supports my strategy?" I will then choose the Arthur book that provides the best opportunity for my students to apply the focus. During the lesson I will have pre-planned questions that promote higher intellectual level thinking to improve the students' understanding and promote discussion. Seven year olds have reached a stage in which reading comprehension assignments include more written responses. Typical seven year olds need clear boundaries, which is why my objectives for this unit will be clear every day (Wood, 1997). Every day the students will understand what their focus is by looking at the chart labeled, "My Job As A Reader" located in the reading corner of the classroom.

Inferring is a wonderful tool to use and be aware of as you read. Students will enjoy searching for clues and being detectives as they read, watch and listen to stories. When a student can infer meaning without it being explicitly stated that in and of itself proves that the hard work of a teacher is powerful and rewarding.

My students will be grouped based on their reading level as well as their comprehension level. The groups will not stay the same throughout the unit since some students will advance genuinely while others will need more specific instruction.

Inferring/Figuring out

Inferring is such a powerful tool when reading. We as adults do it all the time and aren't aware of it anymore, but for students at an early age, this tool can be very exciting once they are aware of it. I myself never thought about it until a few years ago, and now I know it has only made me an even better reader than I once was. Being so very aware of your thinking is astounding. When you infer, you are using what you already know and applying it to the text and drawing a conclusion. According to Debbie Miller, inferring is not about being right or wrong or having the exact reasoning behind your thinking; rather inferring is about noticing your thinking behind your prediction, or your thinking behind the decision you made on how the character was feeling and/or reacting (Miller, 2002). When the students realize what is going on inside of their brains, their understanding of the book will deepen, and they will have all the more reasons to love reading.

As an adult reader, we constantly read characters minds without realizing we do it. Lisa Zunshine relates mind reading to theory of mind stating that bodies are animated minds. Mind reading can also be explained by a mental state and an action seen (Zunshine, 2006). For example, when we see someone with their eyes squinted and the arms straight by the sides and their fists tight in a grip, we would say that the character is angry. We have learned how to read emotions and now as an adult it is effortless and automatic. My students will be able to realize this sense of "mind reading" as well as to understand what is going on inside their heads. I want my students to see social signals and be able to perceive them. Fiction books are great tools to teach this comprehension strategy. The characters in the book call for mind reading because the students will have to infer mental state from the behavior. A great comparison for this sense of theory of mind is comparing a student with certain types of autism, which Zunshine also does in her book. A student with autism can't read facial expressions unless they are taught them. A boy might see a teacher give him a look that reads, "cut it out before I kick you out of here." A boy with autistic behaviors might have the same behavior as the boy I just referred to and when the teacher shoots that same look, the autistic boy won't be able to read the face thus leading the autistic boy to get into trouble. People with types of autism can't read faces to determine emotion based solely on looks; they have an impaired theory of mind (Zunshine, 2006). However, my students have the ability to read faces and determine a character's feelings and emotions.

According to Zunshine, mind reading is a form of successful communication. We constantly explain behavior through mental state and even though it is not observable we are people who live based on our minds. This is important for students to learn because communication between people is never only verbal. When talking with someone, we intuitively read peoples thoughts and behavior based on their mental states (Zunshine, 2006).

I will have my students practice this strategy by searching for clues that led to their decision on the characters' feeling/emotion. I will ask questions such as, "Well, how do you know he is feeling excited? What made you decide that even though it doesn't say it in the story?" The student will have to tackle his/her brain to figure out how he or she decided the character was feeling that way. Was it in his face? Was it what he said or how he said it?

Is it something that reminded you of a time when.... (It is important to note that there will be a lesson specifically on determining the difference between a character's feelings and a character trait. This lesson will be crucial in the beginning of the unit to clarify any confusion.) In the beginning of the unit, I will ask the class to give me examples of character traits and I will record the traits on the left side of a piece of chart paper. (For example a character trait could be friendly, sweet, respectable, and athletic.) Next, I will ask the students

to volunteer character feelings and I will record the feelings words on the right side of the chart paper. (For example, thrilled, excited, angry, and worried.) This piece of chart paper will remain hung up in the reading corner throughout the unit to help clarify any confusions between character traits and characters' feelings.

I have high expectations for my students and understand that not all students have the same learning styles. Inferring is a great strategy to differentiate because you can teach it on all different levels. To begin the lesson, I will create a pre-assessment for my students to take to measure what they already know and what they don't (See appendix). From there I will group my students based on their DRA comprehension level as well as their pre-assessment data. My lessons will have a specific focus so I can challenge all of my students based on their abilities. This unit will be conducted during the reading block of my schedule. I teach a reading workshop style-reading block, which means fifteen minutes of whole group shared reading and thirty minutes of group work, followed by a five-minute share to close the block and reflect on the strategy. During the shared reading time, I will use several different Arthur books by Marc Brown.

I chose Arthur books for this unit because the characters are easy to relate to for this age group. Audiotapes and video versions of the stories will also be used in this unit. Arthur is the main character in all of the Arthur stories. He is a student at an elementary school and has a younger sister D.W. who loves to pester Arthur. I believe this in and of itself is an experience many students can recognize and identify with because siblings and/or friends bother many seven year olds. During the unit the students will first watch me model how to identify a character's feeling and emotion without the author explicitly stating it. I will use sections of a book we had read previously (so the students understand out of context the sections I picked) and model for them how I infer a characters feelings and emotions. The unit will progress from identifying the feeling and emotion, to acting it out and illustrating it. The students will be on "searches" and "hunts" to find emotions.

The use of audiotapes and video versions of the stories will assist the students to visually see social cues and hear different tones in voices that may lead to the characters feelings. In a book by Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Zunshine refers to an episode of *Friends*, "The One Where Everybody Finds Out". In the episode the main characters are playing with each other's minds, which leads to a character Joey to be confused as to what they are doing. I have seen this episode and like most viewers found it entertaining and humorous. But in reading the synopsis of the episode in Zunshine's book, I got confused even though I have seen the episode and was not confused watching it. This relates a lot to my unit and my students. Some of my students are more visual learners and would understand inferring feelings better if they were able to watch a film version of the book. I want to target all learning styles throughout this unit, which is why I have not only books but audio and film versions.

Reading comprehension is the reason we read. If students cannot understand what they are reading, then they are not reading. When teaching students comprehension strategies it is important that we, as teachers, understand what should be taught and how it should be taught. According to Zimmerman and Keene, "When you monitor for meaning, it means that you have to continually attend to your understanding as you read. You need to know what our purpose is as you read. You need to know how to solve problems and change your thinking when meaning breaks down" (Keene, 2007). ²

According to Piaget's theory, people construct their own understanding of situations differently. Assimilation and accommodation are two ways we as people adapt. Throughout a child's life, he or she will use these two processes to adapt to a complex world of learning how to understand what he or she is seeing (Huiit, 2003). Learning how to comprehend stories and books and pictures can be a difficult task, which is why it is so important to teach students how it is done using several different techniques and skills.

Strategies: Week 1 Day 1 & 2

This unit will begin with a pre-assessment. This will be administered to the entire class prior to any instruction on the unit. Once I have the data from the pre-assessment, I will be able to group the students according to their needs. (This will be not only based on their pre-assessment score, but also with their comprehension level, which is measured by the DRA2.)

The next day, I will gather the class for a whole group lesson to introduce the unit. I will point their attention to a chart displayed in the front of the carpet. The chart will have two columns: a positive and a negative side. A positive character feeling could be excited, or thrilled. A negative character feeling could be ashamed, disrespected. I will ask for some volunteers to help me fill in my chart of character traits, feelings and emotions that they know of based on their prior knowledge. (I will have already posted an example for each.) After every trait/feeling is spoken, I will ask students what it looks like and how it feels. This will open up their minds into thinking more deeply about each one. After the list has grown, I will explain to the class that we will be searching through Arthur books for clues on how the character is feeling. What sort of trait does the character have? I will explain to them that they will be detectives working on a great case on character investigations!

Week 1 Day 3, 4, 5

Now that the students all have some background on character traits and feelings of characters, we will start looking at scenarios of characters' actions. I want to start with scenarios within a story before approaching an entire book to really scaffold their thinking and my teaching. I will pre-plan Arthur scenarios that happened in different Arthur books and write them on one side of chart paper. In the middle of the chart paper I will write Characters' feelings. I am not yet going to chart their "thinking behind it" or the "clues" found yet because this will be a model lesson. I want to model for them how I inferred the feeling by thinking aloud. I don't want to write too many things on the chart paper, in fear of distraction and confusion. An example of an Arthur scenario would be, Arthur won a writing contest. The prize for first place was a trip to Washington D.C. where Arthur would read his story to the president. Arthur and his family get on the plane tomorrow morning. (Brown, 1992) I would stop after I read the scenario, and show the class that I am thinking in my head by looking up. I would then look down at the class and say, "Hmmm, Arthur is probably feeling nervous and worried. I think this because meeting the President is a huge deal and reading a story that he wrote for him would behmmmm scary. Plus if you notice his face, he doesn't have a happy face, right? He looks worried to me. He might not be able to sleep tonight. Yes, I think he is feeling nervous and scared. Did you notice what I just did there?" This last question is to check for understanding. I will know if twenty hands fly up that my thinking aloud was successful and move on, but on the other hand if I see twenty blank stares then I know I should ask some more questions. Depending on their understanding, I will go through at least five or six different scenarios. When I release my students into their independent reading books, I will give them an inferring slip and if they notice a character is feeling a certain way, I would ask that they write down the page number and a feeling word. Before they leave I will tell them that I will ask for volunteers to share their thoughts! While the class goes back to their seats to practice the focus, I will take two reading groups to focus in more closely at the skills/strategies groups need to work on. The reading groups will be a group of four to

five students reading at or around the same DRA level.

By day five of this week I will start putting on my chart, "My thinking behind it." This column will go next to the characters' feelings and it will be the column I am most concerned with. If a student is able to clearly explain the "clues" that helped display the characters' feelings, and then the student understands the focus. Some examples for the thinking behind could be: "I know this by looking at his face." "I know this because I would feel this way."

What happened in the story:	Character's feelings:	My thinking behind it:

Week 2, Day 1

During the second week of this unit, I will introduce an Arthur book for the week. The first book I will start with is Arthur's Birthday, (Brown, 1991). We will discuss the cover and some connections the students have to birthday parties. As the students share their experiences with birthday parties, I will chime in and ask how they felt at their birthday parties. We will read the first few pages together. The beginning of this book provides the reader with background on what Arthur usually enjoys doing around his birthday. He enjoys writing out his invitations, bringing them to school to pass out to his friends, eating pancakes in the morning with his family and of course, having a birthday party with all of his friends (Brown, 1991). This book is a wonderful example of connecting to a book for a seven year old. What seven years old doesn't love having a birthday party? As we read the first few pages, I will ask my "detectives" to notice how the character is feeling. We will chart these feelings on the chart paper as well as their thinking behind it. After charting a few examples, I will ask the class to go in their independent reading books and search for clues that prove the character is feeling a certain way and write down how they know.

During share time, I will have a few students share their independent reading slips with the class and I will post them on the wall in the reading corner. After share, I will then ask the class, "How did we infer how the characters were feeling? What did inferring look like? What types of things went on inside our heads?" This chart will grow throughout the unit and will be posted also in the reading corner.

What does inferring.....

Look like	Sound like

Underneath the column look like, the students might come up with "eyes on the picture of the character." Or, "Heads looking up in to the sky while we think in our heads." For sounds like, the students might say, "students starting with, he is feeling because," or "I know I would react that way." The "because" part of the students response is an important step for them because it forces the students to back up their thinking.

Week 2, Day 2-5

We will read the book in sections throughout the entire week, and by day four we will have finished the story. The students will have been working every day in their independent reading books to search for clues that indicate how the character is feeling as well as noticing Arthur's feelings throughout the story. As a formative assessment I will be checking their independent reading slips, as well as meeting with guided reading groups.

On day five, the students will re-read the entire story and discuss how Arthur handled the problem in the story. (The problem in the story is that Arthur and Muffy planned their birthday parties on the same day and all of their friends don't know which party to go to.) I will ask the class to connect to the problem first and ask, "What would you do if your friend planned a birthday party on the same day as yours?" And then I will also ask the class, "How did Arthur handle the problem? How did Arthur react? What does that say about Arthur as a boy?" I will have a drawing of Arthur on a piece of chart paper and start writing down words around his face that describe Arthur as a character. For example, words like responsible, good friend, and kind. (Note to label this chart Arthur TRAITS and not feelings. The lesson in the beginning of the unit might need to be revisited.) This chart will also remain on the wall throughout the unit.

Week 3--Week 4

The students will be grouped in a book group, listening group, or a video group. The book group will be my higher reading leveled students who can independently read the Arthur series. These students will have a bin of Arthur books that they will work with and a bag full of post its and highlighters. Their jobs will be to search for clues within the books on how Arthur is feeling and how they know. They will write the feeling word on the sticky and stick it on the page. Once they have gone through the book, they will chart their findings on chart paper in the same format we had been writing during shared reading the previous weeks.

What's happening....	His feeling/Reaction....	How I know...

Each student will have his or her own color to indicate which student did what work.

The listening group will meet in the listening center during the reading block. This group will be made up of mid to high levels of students. Their job will be to listen to Arthur stories and notice when Arthur's feelings change. How do they know he is feeling differently? They will write down what is happening at that point of the story. (His feeling and then how they know, as charted below.) The students may stop the tape when they notice a change in Arthur's feeling and discuss amongst the group what their thinking is.

What's happening....	His feeling/Reaction....	How I know...

This work will be displayed on the bulletin board underneath the title of the book the group listened to.

The film group will be my lower level group who will watch Arthur books on VHS during the reading block. Here, they will watch Arthur and notice if his face changes, or his body changes when he feels a certain way.

(For example, when Arthur feels worried, he sometimes has a "worried look." Which means his eyes get bigger, his mouth is open in an O shape and he sometimes slouches.) This group will have additional work to go along with noticing the character's feelings; they will have to write down the scene in the movie, and the characters' reaction/feeling to the situation in a two-column chart set up the same way as the other groups.

I will be meeting a lot with this group and stop the tape at times to ask the group, "How is Arthur feeling here? How do you know?" If I am not able to meet with this group, the special education teacher will take over for me. This group will be assessed by an oral description of the character and participation as well as their final drawings.

To close the unit, this group will take a feeling card from a basket, and draw Arthur looking that way. The feeling cards will be pre planned and will be "feelings" and "reactions" Arthur had experienced in the films they have viewed. Each student will take a card and draw Arthur's face and body according to that feeling/reaction. To challenge this group I will also ask each one of them, "When do you remember Arthur feeling this way? What was happening? What story was it?" I will do the recording of these answers for them. I will write it down under their picture. The pictures will be displayed on a bulletin board along with everyone else's work that was done throughout the unit.

*At the end of the unit, the groups will present all of their hard work to the class, as well as to other students from other classes who would like to see what being a good reading detective looks like. Each group will get an allotted time to present what they worked on, what they noticed about Arthur, and how inferring helped them to become better readers. This will be another form of assessment for me along with their post test that they will complete after the presentation. *

Appendix

Connecticut Literacy Standards

Reading and Responding

1.1 Students use appropriate strategies before, during and after reading in order to construct meaning

A: Forming a General Understanding

The reader will demonstrate understanding of the text's general content by:

A-2: identifying or inferring important characters, setting, problems, events, relationships and details.

B. Developing Interpretation

The reader will interpret and/or explain the text by:

B.1 identifying or inferring the author's use of structure/organization patterns;

B-3: using stated or implied evidence from the text to draw and/or support a conclusion

C. Making Reader/Text Connections

The reader will connect or associate the text with one's own life by:

C-1: Making connections between text and outside experiences and knowledge

C-2: selecting, synthesizing and/or using relevant information within the text to write a personal response to the text.

Reading Behaviors:

48. Select "just right" books of different genres for independent reading and explain why the book choice was appropriate

49. Independently read for a variety of purposes, including literacy experience, to gain information, to perform a task, for enjoyment and to build fluency.

Name: pre/post test

Date:

Inferring character traits:

Objective: Students will be able to identify an appropriate character trait to describe a character and support their decision with proof.

Directions: Read the descriptions below. Figure out what character trait would best match the description. How do you know? What were the clues in the description that helped you?

Examples of character traits:

Tricky	Imaginative	Responsible
Bossy	Honest	Lazy
Considerate	Mean	Selfish

1. Arthur created a pet business. He took care of dogs in his basement all by himself.

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

2. D.W. put powder all over her face and colored in red dots to make it look like she had chicken pox just like Arthur.

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

3. D.W. asked one of her friends to go to the circus right in front of Arthur. Arthur really wanted to go to the circus but he was sick with the chicken pox.

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

4. Buster threw all of his school stuff on the floor and played video games all night! He even ate his dinner in front of the T.V.

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

5. Francine loves to take charge during recess and makes the teams herself and won't change them. Arthur doesn't like the team he's on and asks her to switch and she says NO!

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

6. The Brain always helps out his friends with schoolwork and science projects.

Character trait: _____

Clue: _____

* *Note: I wrote a few character traits on the top of the test. I will encourage all of my students only to use this as a guide if they are stuck on a word. If they have a trait that is not listed, I will highly encourage them to use the one they believe best fits. (This is mostly geared for my higher students, but I address this to the whole class.)

Resources:

Bibliography for Teachers

Wood, Chip. Yardsticks, GREENFIELD, MA: Northeast foundation for children, 1997. This book is a great tool to use when you want to understand your student based in their age.

Miller, Debbie, Reading with Meaning, Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 2002.

Debbie Miller is a terrific elementary teacher with great lessons and tips on how to teach different comprehension strategies.

Research Based Instruction in Reading, Oct 2002 <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/read/rb/edlite-slide002.html>

This website helped me out in finding out the research on why we teach what we teach.

Huitt, W., & Hummel, J. (2003). Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Educational Psychology Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved [date] from

<http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/cogsys/piaget.html>

Piaget has an interesting theory on the stages of development.

Kenne, E, Zimmerman, S, Mosaic of thought, Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann, 2007.

Mosaic of thought is another great tool to have when teaching comprehension strategies.

Zunshine, L, Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel, Columbus, Ohio State U P, (2006)

This book really helped me understand theory of mind and how we effortlessly read peoples minds.

Reading List for students

Brown, Marc, Arthur's Birthday, Little brown books for young readers, 1991.

Brown, Marc, Arthur Meets the President, Little brown books for young readers, 1992.

Brown, Marc, Arthur's Underwear, Little brown books for young readers, 2001.

Brown, Marc, Arthur's Teacher Moves In, Little brown books for young readers, 2000.

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